

LARRY BRENT, "Captured Potential"



WRITING FOR A CHANGE

SPRING 2009

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS • EDUCATION JUSTICE PROJECT • <http://www.educationjustice.net/>
AN ANTHOLOGY PRODUCED BY STUDENTS IN THE WRITING FOR A CHANGE COURSE
DANVILLE CORRECTIONAL CENTER

WRITING FOR A CHANGE

SPRING 2009

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Writing Back

Patrick W. Berry

What follows is a collection of work by writers who are currently in prison, writers who aim to rewrite themselves back into an ever-changing world. In the spring of 2009, I designed and taught “Writing for a Change: For Business, for Life,” a course that attended to how we listen to the ideas of others and respond to the world around us as we write. Inspired by the Ethnography of the University Initiative (EUI) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the course invited writers to research prison life and craft a wide range of responses—from personal narratives to business proposals—all of which imagined new ways of seeing and understanding the world.

The contributions that follow have rich histories. Some pieces were carried around by the authors for some time just waiting for an audience. Others were presented at a student-led symposium, attended by university faculty and students, at the Danville Correctional Center. This journal extends that effort.

I know that I speak for the writers whose work is included in this journal when I say that we are grateful to the many who have helped make a space for the Education Justice Project. We applaud Mary Nichols and thank the administrators and staff at the Danville Correctional Center for their ongoing support. Big thanks to Rebecca Ginsburg, our director, and to the other committed teachers including William Sullivan, Dan Colson, and Dede Fairchild Ruggles. And, of course, we cannot forget the dedicated tutors whose intelligence and compassion are evident on the pages of this journal and off the page as well: Andy Bruno, Sarah Frohardt-Lane, Jason Derman, Anna Kurhajec, Rachel Rasmussen, Vanessa Rouillon, and Katie Walkiewicz. Special thanks also to Tracy Dace, Rob Scott, and those behind-the-scenes folks who do so much, and to my colleagues and friends at the University of Illinois, Cory Holding and John O’Connor, who helped me ready these pages for publication. Last but not least, we are extremely grateful to the donors and contributors to the Education Justice Project.

Enjoy! •

Our Hope for the Better

David D. Todd

*“The stone which the builders rejected has become
the chief cornerstone.” —Matthew 21:42*

There continue to be heated debates over whether prisoners should be granted the opportunity to receive post-secondary education during their imprisonment. In 1994, Congress passed legislation denying Pell Grants to prisoners, the primary source of funding for post-secondary correctional education (Page 359). Whether this verdict was equitable or inequitable is not the matter. The matter is that the decision denied prisoners an avenue for change. It also denied possibility and hope.

In one way or another, most if not all of us have been negatively affected by a prisoner prior to his or her incarceration... as a family member, a victim, an officer, a teacher, a counselor, a daughter or son, a wife or husband...as a citizen. Unsurprisingly, prisoners are often relentlessly rejected. Any hope for reform has been buried in the mantle beneath the earth's surface. Is there any hope for the better?

Our president coined it best in the title of his autobiography *The Audacity of Hope*. Without hope America would not have reached this new plateau in history of having its first African-American president. Yes, there is hope. A moment should come when the horrific images and perceptions of prisoners will be washed away. I proclaim that moment to be now. The word of action that will be the forerunner of this moment is... change. Just as the night transitions to day, illiteracy evolves to literacy, a boy grows to become a man and a girl grows to become a woman, and a caterpillar transforms into a graceful butterfly, a prisoner can change from a criminal to a productive law-abiding citizen.

Malcolm X, one of our most profound and revered leaders, changed from a wretched illiterate to a remarkable orator and an unwavering advocate of justice. He acquired his talent and passion in prison during the darkest times of his life, through self-erudition, determination, and a desire to change. This happened by the tire-

less effort of one individual. Imagine what will come about by the collective efforts of a community. We will only know the results by initiative and action. The first step to change is... *hope*.

As a student-prisoner of the Educational Justice Project at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, I am a manifestation of change. I think it, I breathe it, I feel it, and I did it. Without hope, there is no change, and without change, there is no hope. This is what has sustained me through my years of incarceration and through the process of my educational development. Hope is what helps me to challenge and defeat the beast known as ignorance.

It is an honor and privilege to introduce you to the artistic and intellectual work of thirteen other student-prisoners. We feature the mesmerizing art and writing of Larry Brent. Socially aware poems are offered by Johnny Page, Pierre Nero, Haneef Lurry, Javon Grimes, and Larry Brent. We also share moving stories of struggle, hope, change, and redemption by Otis Williams, Robert Garite, Johnny Page, Christopher Garner, Fabian Harty, Javon Grimes, Terry Berry, Joseph Mingarelli, Tremain Leggans, and Jose Cabrales. Ultimately, this publication reflects the minds of educated men who were once ignorant boys, who no longer want to be involved in the destruction of their communities, who urgently want to be involved in the growth, rise, and building of the spaces around them. Not only do we hope for change, but we also write for change. I hope that you will join us in hoping for the better. I hope that you will support college-in-prison programs. •

Selected Works

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Obama, Barack. *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream*. New York: Crown, 2006.

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State of Depression

Johnny Page

If a picture speaks a thousand words, then tell me,
why is no one listening?

I know you hear me because you see me clearly, so tell me,
why aren't you listening?

My words are vivid, a painted picture as descriptive as I can give it.
Yet you sit there looking like you don't get it. Damn it,
why aren't you listening?

My pain is obvious, my smiles are tears, and I frown to hide my fears.

I wear a mask that grins and lies, praying that someone hears.
Hears the cries of a tortured soul, the suffering of a fallen angel,
who has walked the rope between good and evil, but now
just merely dangles.

Whose search for purpose almost seems worthless,
unable to identify a mission.
So I wander blindly with hope behind me begging
for someone to listen.

To listen as I speak these words, when words escape my grasp.

A cry for help when I myself can't find the words to ask.

In this portrait lie the words unheard, symbols of true confession,
but no one listens and until they do,
I'll remain in this state of depression.

Captured Potential

Larry Brent

Life is about making mistakes and learning from them. We are all different people with different circumstances, so we will make different mistakes. There is always present the potential to learn from our mistakes. But sometimes, sometimes, it takes prison to capture this potential.

Higher education in prison makes sense, for it is in prison that one has the opportunity of time to thoroughly reflect on his or her past, present, and future. This time is a period in which an individual has the chance to actually make a conscious decision about his or her life—for better or worse. While offering the opportunity of time, prison also imposes a heavy element of emotional despair. The emotional despair experienced while in prison derives from having too much time to think and reflect on one's past actions that led to prison, often causing one to feel regret and shame. It is in this sense (of emotional despair) that higher education in prison is costly, not only in a monetary way.

When first entering prison, I was sent to a maximum-security facility that did not offer higher education, so the initial years in prison were depressing and discouraging. I scrambled for mental stability and stimulation to occupy my mind away from the aggravating conditions of my life. Initially, I picked up a childhood hobby of drawing and then developed a flair for writing poetry. Those creative moments offered me emotional escape from my circumstances. They helped me to get through some dark times.

Then, after spending some years in maximum-security facilities, I was transferred to a medium-high security correctional center: the first thing I inquired about was its college program. To say that I hit the ground running with school would be an understatement. The experience of higher education overwhelmingly blew my mind and totally shifted my focus and ambitions into high gear and far beyond the boundaries of the prison. Studying psychology, sociology, and child development taught me about human behavior and the difference between natural instincts and learned behavior, as well as how

to deal with personal psychological obstacles. Most importantly I learned that you may have come into this world by yourself, but you did not make it here on your own. You are not in this world alone, so it is not all about you; what you do can have lasting effects on many. The subjects of literature, ethics, world religion, philosophy, and economics gave me a more mature perspective on the world, race, and diversity of thought. The enlightenment of higher education showed me that I did not enter prison uneducated, just immaturely aware. Many parents encourage their children towards college for the benefits of mature mental development that often results in rational decision-making abilities. Higher education can have the same effects on someone in prison; at least it did for me.

This nation is said to be founded on Christian values: a couple of those values are forgiveness and mercy. Being realistic, not all people who enter prison will take advantage of higher education programs or try to better themselves, just as not every drug addict in society will take advantage of the (free of cost) rehab centers. But this does not mean that the opportunity for change should be altogether removed. Many people fall victim to drug abuse, just as people go to prison, but many (due to vital programs) find their way back on the right path in life. What would our society be like today if it were not for the opportunity to change?

What we do as individuals impacts those around us, whether we do good or bad. For those in prison who want to exit as better, smarter people, why not offer them the opportunity to become contributing citizens upon release and not (again) a financially burdening inmate? Higher education in prison elevated my way of thinking, showed me the mistakes I made and how not to repeat those mistakes again.

About Our Cover

The cover image, “Captured Potential,” represents more than I had intended. Initially, I just thought it would be a good painting—for practice—as I learned how to paint (and am still learning). But as it neared completion, it became evident that this creation represented so much more. “Captured Potential” breaks down like this:

Observe the bold, rugged lock hanging about the child's mind. Consider the rusted steel latch and plate that holds the heavy lock in place. Take a deep breath to inhale the stench of the rusted metal. Carry your sights around the ragged rim of the peeping hole of which the child looks through. Then, take a deep, deep slow breath as you venture into the eyes of the child that stare back at you. The eyes are said to be the windows to the soul. What do you see through these windows? Consider the single tear that escapes the eye. What could this mean? What does it mean to you? As that bold, ugly rusted lock hangs about the child's mind, simultaneously darkness strives to consume the baby's head with the exception of the face. The face is where the light is shining. This light represents a chance, the enlightenment of higher education. And the tear, the tear is a symbol of what this situation has forced out of me, my "Captured Potential." •

LARRY BRENT, "Captured Potential"



We All Want the Same Things

Joseph Mingarelli

There seems to be a rather short list of things that most of society wants from the penal system. It doesn't matter if you speak to the average law-abiding American citizen or if your target audience is a room full of convicted criminals. I polled a number of offenders regarding what they hoped to get from their incarceration. I always received some variation of "I don't ever want to come back" or "I want to learn something that will help me stay out of jail." The law-abiding public has similar experiences when their voices are actually heard over the roaring agendas of our election-conscious politicians. They want their communities safe from criminals, and they want released ex-offenders to become contributing taxpayers who can pay their own share of the burden of supporting our society.

If we are all in basic agreement over what we want, how do our objectives get so clouded? Why is it so difficult for us to agree on how to accomplish what we want? There have been a plethora of studies conducted, all spouting similar statistics, that show success in accomplishing the very goals we all seek simply by providing post-secondary education to our nation's prisoners. One researcher points to some noteworthy criticism that can distract people from the big picture. Page uses the term "self-selection bias" to define those "prisoners who take college courses [as] determined to stay out of prison upon release with or without a college education" (362). I can firmly attest to the fact that there are divergent schools of thought among inmates.

As critics suspect, there are a number of inmates who will never willingly put themselves in the position to return to prison once their current sentence is completed. The presence of post-secondary educational opportunities is seen by many of these individuals as a way to make good use of the time they owe society for their mistakes, and a way to prepare themselves for a better chance of success upon reentry to what they dub as "the world." Then there are other types of inmates: those who still have not learned their lesson. These inmates can be readily identified throughout the institution by their at-

titude, by the company they keep and the conversations they engage in, and by any number of other activities they take part in that prevent them from taking control of their own future. The reason for their lack of growth is beyond the scope of my thoughts here, but there is a very clear difference in their actions (or inactions) and the actions of offenders who plan for a successful reentry into society.

Contrary to what appears to be popular belief, participating in school in the penitentiary does not add to—but instead takes away from—any comforts that may be had inside, in a number of ways. Mason brings forth an excellent point to ponder when she says, “[w]hat we didn’t count on was the opposition we would get from the staff” (136). This opposition is manifested in many passive-aggressive actions by certain staff members, and can seriously degrade the morale and performance of all but the most focused of inmate-students. These actions can take the shape of denying basic privileges like showers to school participants when the scheduled time conflicts with a class, or speaking in a (more than usually) demeaning manner to the participants to try to lure them into doing or saying something in violation of institutional rules, thereby creating grounds to remove them from the program. Even more overt activities exist, such as seeking union support to oppose inmate educational programs at the legislative level in an attempt to have them completely discontinued. This means that an inmate-student restricts his own chances for any peace or comfort within the prison in exchange for a better chance at peace and comfort upon release. For those inmates committed to the pursuit of education from within the penal system even after coping with the increased hardship, Taylor nicely sums up their thoughts about learning with his comment that “maintaining my remaining tenuous sanity required a long-term goal, a quest to strive for, a reason to live” (125). Pursuit of education inside prison poses all the challenges necessary to ensure that anyone seeking it in that environment must seek it in earnest. What more could society want from a convicted offender than for him to learn to work and sacrifice to attain goals that will transform him or her into a productive member of society?

Marable uses the term “prison industrial complex” to describe what I see as the swelling criminal justice system that has begun to grow into such a large animal that it perhaps needs recidivism

rates to remain high to keep from starving itself (qtd. in Torre and Fine 571). It has become an industry that supports a significant workforce—a workforce that is as intent on self-preservation as any other in these trying economic times. So, when I read the “Return-to-Custody Rates within 36 Months of Release” table provided by Torre and Fine, I understand the resistance inmate-students receive from corrections staff (580).

According to Torre and Fine, the rate of return drops from 29.9 percent to 7.7 percent when an inmate participates in any form of post-secondary education while incarcerated (580). Page purports that “[t]he recidivism rate for...participants is as much as 55 percent lower than that of non-participants” (362). These findings, along with the findings of Tracy & Johnson and Travis support the need for post-secondary education programs. Right now “our tax dollars are paying the equivalent of an elite private college education for women and men in prison to be uneducated”; this would seem to point to a logical need for increased attention by society’s decision-makers in finding funding for inmates willing to participate in post-secondary education programs now, instead of later on (qtd. in Torre and Fine 589).

If we accept the findings of the studies performed as truth, we are left to question the motives of a Congress that “eliminated inmate eligibility for Pell Grants” in 1994 under a provision of the “Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act” (Torre and Fine 572). Why would our leaders dedicate themselves so fervently to a move that makes such poor social and fiscal sense? On a basic level we know, as Collins writes, that “literacy is an essential aspect of social order and disorder” (qtd. in Yagelski 46-47). Graff points out that “the desire [of policymakers] was to control the lower class, not assist their advancement” (qtd. in Yagelski 49). Apparently, once basic literacy skills are obtained by a member of the lower class, especially by an inmate, any further effort by the government to educate them would just disrupt the control they maintain with the established social order that most people already accept.

The answers to the problem of the growing “prison industrial complex” are clear (qtd. in Torre and Fine 571). We must provide post-secondary educational opportunities to our prisoners. We must also question our elected leaders and any others who, for whatever

reason, do not see the swelling of our prison system as a problem. It is easy to come up with reasons why we should not spend money to educate criminals. But I would like to leave you with this to think about. Almost all inmates will eventually be released into your neighborhoods. Do you want the ones using their newfound education, and thinking about what good they can do in your community—or, do you want the ones that never learned a new way to exist and survive in society? The sentences that offenders receive are finite. What they can accomplish with a post-secondary education is infinite. •

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Educational Freedom

Javon Grimes

Caged by an unyielding authority, I seek freedom.

Surrounded by unspoken frustrations, I seek escape.

Trapped with regret, I seek serenity.

Lost by my own fears, I seek guidance.

Encircled by ignorance, I seek knowledge.

On my quest for change,

I found communities with teachers and peers,

places that held fruitful debates and lessons.

I found experiences that presented keys for the doors I had locked,
combinations for the locks I had never attempted to open.

I found vision that explored things beyond my physical captivity.

I found the ability to understand myself and the struggles I face daily.

In knowledge, I find maturity.

In serenity, I find myself.

In guidance, I find leadership.

In escape, I find purpose.

In education, I found freedom!

Can Education Change the Criminal Mind?

Jose R. Cabrales

He who opens a school door closes a prison. —Victor Hugo

While there has been plenty of controversy whether prisoners should have access to higher education in prison, nobody can deny the positive effects said programs have on those incarcerated and their surroundings.

Take Danville Correctional Center (DCC), for instance. DCC is a medium-high security prison located midway between Chicago and St. Louis that houses some 1,800 inmates. Currently it has a 21-3 format, that is, 21 hours of the day inmates are locked in their cells, and the other three can be used for personal things such as showers, phone calls, etc. This can be a very depressing environment. All those hours locked up and the limited movement can really take a toll on the prisoner, especially those who don't have a job or don't go to school. One way to cope is by getting a job, but jobs are limited. The other is by getting an education, but this is very hard for those who don't understand the language well.

When I first got here nine years ago, I was elated to find out that DCC offered an associate's degree program from Lake Land College and a bachelor's degree program from Roosevelt University. I immediately enrolled in Lake Land, but before I had the required number of credits, the state terminated the bachelor's program. Undaunted, I continued my college education and eventually obtained the Associate's in Science degree from Lake Land College. Not long ago, a visionary group from the Education Justice Project (EJP) brought back the upper-level coursework, this time from the University of Illinois (U of I). As far as school goes, there was nothing else after the associate's program, so for many of us, the U of I is the best thing that could've happened here.

Anybody who is able to obtain higher education while incarcerated will testify that it does something to you. You are not the

same person anymore; you want to help others to attain what you've accomplished because you know that that's going to help them tremendously upon release. That is probably why I started to look around me and realized that there is a great need here that could be easily met. Among the Latino population, especially those born and raised in Latin American countries, there are those who don't know how to read English well. Many came here as adolescents and for whatever reason could not finish—or even start—high school. The result is that while they can speak English fairly well, when it comes to the written language, they find themselves lacking. The problem has only been exacerbated because there has not been an English as a Second Language (ESL) class here in years.

The great majority of these inmates have the desire to go to school, but when they try it, they get discouraged because there are some things they cannot understand. They need someone to help them with this issue, someone whom they can identify with and who understands both languages well. Keep in mind that there are plenty of bilingual Lake Land College and U of I students here who have the necessary qualifications to help those in need. Those who have already benefited from higher education have the best disposition to support others, so it was just a matter of putting a program together and they would surely help.

In my desire to help those discouraged students get back in school, and with the knowledge gained from a U of I class I am currently enrolled in, I developed a proposal for the administration. The proposal calls for the establishment of a tutorship program where bilingual students from Lake Land College and the U of I will get together with ABE or pre-GED students—or even those who dropped out—and will help them in those specific areas where they most need help to advance academically.

The proposal benefits the institution and the inmate. It benefits the inmate in that he will finally be able to get an education that without a doubt is going to help him stay out when released, and it benefits the institution in that educated students follow rules better and don't get in trouble as often. All of this comes at absolutely no cost to the administration.

In addition, the program also benefits the tutors. Helping someone by applying everything they learned from their higher edu-

cation is a very fulfilling and rewarding experience. If you want to think even bigger and outside these prison walls, this proposal benefits society as a whole. The great majority of inmates here will one day be released into society, and I cannot think of a better way to change the criminal mind into a law-abiding one than with education.

At the time of this writing the proposal was still in its developmental stages,* but I am confident that it will come into fruition. Perhaps I am a dreamer, but I believe that those guys we are helping now will one day help others themselves, thereby making this world a little better through education. And all because somebody believed in us.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”
—Margaret Mead

**In 2010, at the time of this reprinting, the Language Partners program has become a reality.*

Support the Education Justice Project

Higher education in prison reduces recidivism, improves life prospects for the families of incarcerated people, creates safer prison environments, and restores hope. All contributions, from the smallest to the largest, will help.

Please send your donations to:

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CHRISTOPHER GARNER, "Miles Davis"

Options

Pierre Nero

Society doesn't ask a failure how he failed, but may ask, "Why?" However, a success is often asked how he succeeded, because everyone wants to succeed and, in order to do the same, one must know the recipe that can only be discovered through inquiry.

Incarceration is meant to correct one from his or her wrongs committed against others and society. But is the judicial system lying to you about me? Somehow there is something missing, for my rehabilitation was extremely limited or basically nonexistent until EJP, which was someone's brainchild, came to fruition. It increased my options by allowing me the opportunity to gain accredited knowledge while incarcerated and not to sit idle while locked up, fading into obscurity. It provided a level of security to my chances once released. I am already "FREE" mentally because gaining knowledge does bring about peace. Through my yearning for higher learning, the "American Dream"—I now have a piece.

You can know a lot but not understand anything. However, to acquire the knowledge of higher learning and understand the possible pitfalls of life that could lead to incarceration is privileged information that I'm gaining by getting my education and my training for life. I know to have a life is a given but to make something of that life is truly living, which is the reality that I'm facing and it's a lot easier to see with a higher education. Thank you EJP. •

Universities

Haneef Lurry

Imagine being in a university where you are held against your will,
an environment in which, to the captive, it seems surreal.

Imagine being in a university that is surrounded by walls and gates,
the walls and gates are topped with barbed wires to minimize escapes.

Imagine being in a university in which there are several gun towers,
people inside of them, bearing arms, to maintain order and display power.

Imagine being in a university in which you are told when to eat,
sometimes you are even told when to talk and when not to speak.

Imagine being in a university in which you constantly build-up stress,
majority of the times you lie down at night you never sleep, only rest.

Imagine being in a university in which people sometimes lose their mind,
a society in which the weak lose their heart, strength, and sanity, all combined.

Imagine being in a university in which graduation can be as short as a day or as
long as a lifetime away, a graduation in which you change for the
better, receive freedom, and view life in another way.

Most would not refer to these institutions as universities, but only as prisons.

I refer to them as universities because in here my knowledge has risen.

In here, you have all the time in world to contemplate and seek knowledge,
read, write, think, and observe as if you were in college.

Please don't mistake this, though, to mean that everything in here is fine,
because though I refer to these institutions as universities,
we are still doing time.

But, while most refer to these institutions as jails, prisons, and penitentiaries,
those who are truly conscious in mind will understand why

I refer to them as universities.

The Identity and Legacy Is Disappearing in the African-American Family

Fabian Harty

I remember it like it happened today, the day I was baptized. I was a scrawny little eight-year old who was scared half to death. I had two choices back then, either follow through with the baptism or face the wrath of the switch that would be unleashed by my great-grandmother. I went through with the baptism, and thankfully I lived. This was the mid-1970s, and indicative of the black family tradition, Christianity, which of course is shared by other groups as well. The church was the engine that united the black family. I remember the great respect it garnered—the field trips, family picnics, and music festivals it sponsored. This was a time when the black family had an identity, a value significant in the stabilization of the black family. The social conditions, however, of poverty, drugs, and violence, have eaten away at the fabric of identity. As a result, this loss has threatened the future of its people, its children, and its community.

Nothing is more valuable than the well-being and future of our children. I remember the times I was caught doing something wrong by my neighbors, and they disciplined me for it and sent me home only to be disciplined again by my parents. I remember not paying attention in class in school, and my teacher struck me with a ruler and threatened to call my parents, which I did not want to happen. I feared being disciplined again, which became the case more often than not. I remember career day in school, where doctors, lawyers, engineers, firemen, and policemen visited the classroom. I had dreams of being a safety engineer at the time. There were several after-school programs for kids: basketball, baseball, and softball. There were summer jobs available to the students, and boys' and girls' clubs always provided something for us to do.

In our community there were also a lot of black-owned establishments, as well as game rooms for activities in the winter. Though we had our little street gangs, they protected the community and

were less violent. In the household there was always a male presence, whether it was your dad, uncle, or grandfather. Though there was drug activity, it was never in public. There were many community healthcare centers, and family block clubs. Then Reaganomics took action and all social programs were cut by the late 1980s. Then, drugs, guns, and violence took hold of the black family, sacrificing children in its midst. First went the black-owned stores, as other groups entered the community and took hold. Our schools lost their after-school programs and there was nothing left to offer kids but the local street gangs who began controlling the drug market. The children's parents began using drugs themselves and lost their sense of self-respect and control.

I often wonder who is to blame. Is it our government that has enacted policies to exploit, oppress, and disenfranchise the African-American family, the Christian church that has lost its purpose, or the African-American male who lost his will to be the leader of his family, culture, and community? The pendulum moves in many directions on this matter. However, the disheartening fact is that we have lost our sense of belonging. I am speaking from a prison cell and this issue causes great concern for me because I have played a pivotal part in not being the influential leader and role model for my children, family, and community. This is something I aim to correct. The question remains, how will the identity and legacy of the African-American family be perceived in the near future? Hopefully it will be a future that displays strength, unity, love, and stability. It will be a future that keeps the family together, rooted in the customs and values that have been handed down from generation to generation and thereby passing an everlasting positive and constructive influence on the world through history. •

Time Served Me

Johnny Page

It was an unusually cold morning in January of 1993 when I boarded the bluebird (prison bus) for a one-hour ride to the Illinois Department of Corrections. Just barely twenty-one, I'd spent the last two years in what I think is one of the most dangerous places on earth: the Cook County jail. In the Cook County jail everyday is a fight for your life, be it with the courts or with people in the often volatile jail environment. As I sat shackled and cuffed on that bus ride from Chicago to Joliet, I wondered what was next. Would prison be worse? I'd heard stories of what prison could be like and now I was about to experience it firsthand. Was I ready? I thought I was.

"Don't serve time, make time serve you."

These are the words that were written over the entrance to the school building at Joliet Correctional Center. Joliet Correctional Center was a maximum-security prison that served as an intake and classification center for the Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC). As part of an inmate's classification, a basic skills test is required. This test is to assess what an inmate's educational needs are and as you can imagine, those needs are often great. The basic skills test or TABE test, as it's called, is a mandatory test. Thousands of inmates have passed through the doors of that school building and read that sign. Looking back, I now understand the significance of the placement of such a sign. Because where else in prison can you make time serve you other than the school building?

As a longtime resident of IDOC, I have witnessed firsthand the impact that higher education has on inmates who participate in higher education programs. I've not only seen the smiles and sense of pride that accompany that feeling of accomplishment when handed a college diploma, but I've experienced it. Post-secondary education in prison transforms what seems to be a hopeless situation into a hopeful one. It gives inmates an opportunity to beat the odds despite the circumstances by allowing them to see the true value of their

lives. What I don't understand is why anyone would want to do away with such a valuable program.

Those who oppose post-secondary education for the incarcerated argue that by allowing inmates to receive college degrees, the wrong message is being sent to those in society who cannot afford to go to college. According to ex-Massachusetts Governor William Weld, "We've got to stop giving a free college education to prison inmates, or else the people who can't afford to go to college are going to start committing crimes so they can get sent to prison to get a free education." (qtd. in Page 358). Based on ex-Governor Weld's logic, the message being sent is that if you can't afford college, prison is a viable option because education is free for inmates. Such an assertion is ridiculous. The mere suggestion that anyone will see prison as an alternative way to gain education is absurd.

For me, the message being sent is *get up when you fall*. Everyone makes mistakes. What's important are the lessons learned from those mistakes. Those of us who seek to obtain a college education while incarcerated are on the road to correcting our mistakes. The great Frederick Douglass believed that we must not measure people by the heights they reach but rather by the depths from which they have come, and some of us have come from some deep, dark places.

The man who writes today is a far cry from the young man who sat on that bus so long ago, and that's due in part to education. When I entered prison, college was the furthest thing from my mind. I hit the system running, like so many who came before me and like many who would come after. I went about the business of serving time. It wasn't until I enrolled in the prison's college program that my prison experience and my life changed. As a youth I had every intention of attending college. I was even given the opportunity to walk the campuses of such universities as Chicago State, Southern Illinois, The University of Chicago, and the University of Illinois; because of this I was somewhat reluctant to participate in a college program in prison, where guard towers and prison guards are the norm. Today, I'm glad I enrolled, and although the social dynamics weren't that of a typical college campus, I still feel as if I had the college experience—as crazy as that may sound. Not only that, twenty-something years after considering the University of Illinois as a potential school in which to become a student, I received the

opportunity through the Education Justice Project to actually become one. Enrolling in that first college class so many years ago has had a profound effect on my life. Not only did it open the door to a whole new world, it allowed me to stop serving time and start making time serve me.

Prison is often a dark, lonely, and dangerous place, and that's not to say that I expect it to be a sunny day at the beach. I believe that if you commit a crime and prison happens to be the consequence of your actions, then so be it. However, what also should be considered is that the majority of prison inmates will someday be released. According to U.S. Congress bill H1892, "ninety-seven percent of all prisoners will be released back to society" (qtd. in Page 368)—that's an astounding number. Such a number begs the question, *Who does society want returning?* There are only two options: someone who simply served time in an environment known to breed antisocial behavior, or someone who has made their time serve them by awakening their mind through education and learning the lesson to be learned.

This prison sentence for me is coming to an end and as I find myself moving closer to being free, I often think back to that bus ride so long ago. Was I ready? Probably not! Now that my release is fast approaching this question arises: *Am I ready?* With the help of the college education that I've received while incarcerated, my answer is an emphatic *Yes*. •

Selected Work

Page, Joshua. "Eliminating the Enemy: The Import of Denying Prisoners Access to Higher Education in Clinton's America." *Punishment and Society* 6.4 (2004): 357-78.

Working Together to Build a Community

Robert Garite

During our past few student meetings, there were many who spoke about a desire to establish meaningful connections with their fellow students, connections that would ultimately lead to the development of a “sense of community.” Having read of the positive impact such an atmosphere had on the participants involved with the college-in-prison program at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, I felt inspired to draw up a proposal that encourages students to participate in a student-designed workshop, a workshop whose agenda is organized and maintained by the student body and that is supervised by a member of the EJP staff.

Although the resource room does provide us an opportunity to see one another, oftentimes those who are in attendance must also utilize the resources there, and so the amount of time students can actually spend working together is limited. Having this in mind, I will discuss the benefits of student interaction and suggest an activity that could be added to our schedules that would provide an atmosphere for students to experience this educational opportunity on a deeper level than ever before. I will also discuss some technical considerations that must be addressed in order to accommodate this activity.

How are students impacted by sharing information?

I recently had the privilege of sharing a unique experience with a fellow EJP student. He and I had bumped into each other while I was heading back to my cell from commissary. When we saw one another, we were in our housing unit’s busy foyer. He happened to have the paper that he intended to submit to Professor Sullivan with him, and he asked me if I could look it over quickly and tell him what I thought about it. So, as we stood there, under the watchful eyes of prison guards, with numerous people shuffling by, I reviewed his paper. While I was reading, I realized he would benefit from knowing a few writing strategies that I had learned and found

helpful. As I began sharing this information with him, I saw his eyes begin to brighten with inspiration, and he was excited about revising his paper. Once Professor Sullivan had graded and returned the paper to him, I received a big thank you because his was one of the few papers that did not require a mandatory revision. I was very glad I was able to help, but something else happened as well, something I was very encouraged by. I realized that by helping him I was also improving my own understanding of the writing process, and I briefly experienced the benefit teachers must feel as they increase their expertise by teaching others.

How can we provide an opportunity for more student interaction?

A regularly held student workshop will help strengthen the bond within the student body and provide a place for us to share what we are learning with our fellow classmates. By strategically utilizing the time available and participating in activities that emphasize communication, we will be able to experience this college experience on a deeper level than before. Two activities that are very useful and could be made into a staple of this workshop are 1) participating in writing workgroups; and 2) allowing students to give brief presentations.

Writing workgroups

Participation in a writing workgroup is a valuable tool used by writers to improve the strengths found within their work as well as to identify areas that may need improvement. Mimi Schwartz and Sondra Perl, in their book *Writing True*, offer excellent guidelines to follow in writing groups, including the most fundamental practice of listening. Writing workgroups serve to increase student interaction and to provide students with valuable input from other students about how their writing affects others.

Give students an opportunity to hear how their classmates are approaching their assignments

These workgroups can be formed by having the student either work with people in the same class or simply with those whom he is most comfortable with. This would provide an atmosphere more favorable for student communication and encourage classmates to interact with one another in an appropriate setting.

Presentations

Another activity we could participate in is allowing time for students to give brief presentations that cover the assignments they have been responsible for and any ideas they have learned from their professors they would like to share with the other students. Participation would of course be voluntary, and we could use a signup sheet to indicate who would be interested in speaking in front of the group.

Presentations will serve to improve the understanding between students involved in the same class, and to assist students in improving their oratorical skills.

If there is time, maybe a short question-and-answer period could follow. Also, those who are a little shy about getting up and speaking in front of others may begin to gain some confidence by watching their classmates succeed, and may decide to participate in the future.

Technical considerations

There are two issues that have to be discussed in order for students to have the opportunity to participate in these activities. The first is coordination with Mary Nichols, and the second is the availability of at least one member of the EJP staff who would be willing to supervise our workshop. Access to the school building would be similar to the procedures we follow to attend the resource room, and a classroom would have to be available. Depending on the number of interested students, we may have to rotate people so everyone has an opportunity to attend.

As for the other issue, a member of EJP willing to volunteer, we are all very thankful for the time given to us already, but we hope that a discussion amongst the current tutors will yield someone willing to supervise our workshop. We do need someone from the EJP to be present to ensure we are utilizing our time in the interests of the university.

Conclusion

Other than these issues, it will be left up to the student body to prove we are capable and trustworthy enough to design and maintain a workshop dedicated to the advancement of our higher education. It is not often that we as inmates have the opportunity to establish

a model for future inmates to follow, and the creation of a student-oriented workshop will provide a positive legacy by which others can remember the first group of students who did all they could to make the most of this amazing educational opportunity not only for themselves, but also for those who would follow. As a sense of community grows within the student body and we set a good example of prisoners productively working together as students, there will also be a more far-reaching effect: the positive habits we develop while helping each other will remain with us during our transition into the communities we will be released into, ultimately causing us to become better brothers, mentors, and neighbors as we rebuild our lives out there. Thank you for all of your efforts aimed at bringing hope into our futures, and I look forward to working with you while we try to make the EJP a permanent fixture here in Danville. In the meantime, I will continue to do all I can do to contribute to the success of this amazing educational opportunity. •

Selected Works

Perl, Sondra. *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004.

Schwartz, Mimi, and Sondra Perl. *Writing True: The Art and Craft of Creative Nonfiction*. Boston: Houghton, 2005.

I Was Never Alone

Otis Carl Williams

It was the fall of 1966 in Sledge, Mississippi, slightly past noon. Autumn's kisses were beginning to tinge the tips of the cottonwood and ash trees that dotted the outer banks of the Coldwater River, a major tributary of the great Mississippi. If I took the farmer's road along the far side of the river, I could walk the two-mile distance to Ms. Cat's and be back well before dinner—or so I thought.

While my family and neighboring friends were all gathered in the backyard, eating barbeque and fried catfish and celebrating, I sat alone on the edge of the front porch, head in hands, legs dangling, lost in thought. We were moving the next day. Uncle Jack and Cousin L.V. had arrived early that morning with the moving trucks that would take my parents, sister, three brothers, and me to the big city of Chicago. But I wasn't ready to leave.

Dropping to the ground and making my way along a small path, I quickly covered two hundred yards or so to the river's meandering waterside trail. Turning left onto the trail, I traveled until I reached the trunk of the giant oak tree that had fallen across the river's narrowest point. Reaching up for one of its large roots to pull myself up, I snatched my hand back, startled, as my dog Red leaped onto the trunk and confidently made his way to the other side. He dismounted and disappeared into a patch of tall reed cane. Though much less confident, I followed Red to the other side and up the steep bank, with only a few minor scratches from the cane's sharp leaves.

Red was my dog and constant companion. I'd raised him from a pup to the full-grown Irish setter he'd become, and wherever I went he would follow. When I went to school in the morning, he would come with me to the bus stop, and he would meet me there in the afternoon when I returned. And today was no different as far as Red was concerned; he was playful and happy as always, so I let him come along.

Nearing Ms. Cat's house, the faint sound of her neighbor's mongrel pack disrupted the silence I'd been enjoying. Remembering the last time I'd brought Red and how he'd bloodied up a couple of

them, I knew the first chance they got, they'd gang up on him. So to protect my dog, I knew I had to send Red home. I stopped and patted him on the shoulders a couple of times while he nervously wagged his tail, sensing the bad news; he barked a few times. As hard as it was telling him to go home, it was even harder for him to finally obey.

Red had turned the bend in the road before I saw the mongrels that scurried under the porch yapping as I passed them by. Reaching out, I let my hand rub the length of the old Ford in which Geraldine and I had spent the greater part of many nights, kissing and acting grown up. And there she was waiting in the doorway, arms folded, pouting as she often did when she was upset.

Opening the gate I walked up to the house. "Hi Jewel," I whispered while kissing her on the cheek. Ms. Cat was sitting on the couch shelling peas and watching TV.

"Hi Ms. Cat, how are you doing?" I asked.

"I'm doing fine baby, how's Coot?" she replied
(Coot is my mother's nickname).

"She's okay, ma'am; everyone's packing for the move tomorrow! I just came to say goodbye," I responded.

"Then give your aunt Cat a hug. I'm going to miss you, baby," she said.

"I'm going to miss you, too, Ms. Cat," I said, returning the hug. "Can me and Geraldine sit in the Ford for awhile?"

"Sure, baby, go ahead," she said. Ms. Cat was my mother's closest friend and could easily pass for her twin. She favored me and I adored her—perhaps because she had my mother's high cheekbones, warm almond-colored eyes, and disarming smile. But I hadn't really come to see Ms. Cat. I'd come to see her daughter Geraldine. And so, taking her, Geraldine, by the hand, I walked slowly with her down to the Ford.

"O.C., O.C., wake up it's getting dark!" I had fallen asleep and now Geraldine's voice was calling me back, back to her plea for me to stay the night and to the cuddliness of her plump waist. As much as I wanted to stay, I knew I had to get home.

"Jewel, you know I can't, I can't stay because I shouldn't even be here," I explained but she persisted.

"You can stay if you want to, O.C., you see it's too late!" I

pulled her close and held her tightly for a few minutes while she cried; then I gave her a quick kiss and got out of the car.

Looking around, I could see it was even later than I had thought. “I’ve got to go, Jewel. Mama will probably come by in the morning to see Ms. Cat and when she does, I’ll try to come with her.”

The sun was setting; in thirty minutes, it would be dark. Already the trees were casting their shadows over the farmer’s road, which meant I had to take the long way back, five miles by way of the highway, but maybe there was still time enough for me to take the path through the bean field; that would cut the distance in half. But I had to leave now. Leaning into the car, I gave Geraldine another kiss and then sprinted up to the next road and the sunlit side of the river. With a final goodbye, I waved and ran around the river’s bend, arriving at the path in the bean field in ten minutes, and in another ten I stood frozen in dismay—the light was now completely gone!

In the pitch darkness of night, I reached out until the tips of my fingers touched the beans’ leaves, allowing them to become my guide. I continued on towards the faint glow in the near distance. The bridge had four floodlights, two on either side. If I reached them, they would give me safety.

“Maama, Maama!” Immediately I stopped and began to listen closely, thinking fearfully That can’t be what I think it is. Then in a minute or so it called out again, “Maama, Maama,” this time with heightened stress; I turned back in the direction I’d come. A baby had gotten lost and was crying out for its mother; I picked up my pace.

Within a matter of minutes it had gotten so dark I couldn’t see my own hand in front of my face. What was a baby doing out in this? I asked myself; in fact, what was I doing out in this? I was only eleven. Eleven, alone and out in the midst of the darkest night of my youthful life, heading down towards the banks of the Coldwater River. Suddenly I stopped again: Was I going crazy? There was no baby out here, only me. How many times had I heard the stories about bobcats and panthers walking the banks of the river, crying out like injured frogs and lost babies to lure their prey?

I remained motionless, knowing that something much bigger than a baby had come onto the path with me. When I was moving through the path only the leaves rustled; now I was listening to something brushing against the stalks and rattling the dried beans in

their pods, and it was coming towards me. When the noise grew loud enough to cover my movement, I turned back towards the highway and began to move whenever it moved; when it stopped, I stopped! I knew not to run; my eldest brother, Lewis, had taught me that. Whenever we walked along the river he would say, “Don’t run when you see a wild animal because they can tell when you’re afraid.”

Twice again I had stopped; whenever the noise stopped, I paused. Now, upon seeing the faint glow of the bridge’s lights I was moving with haste when the touch of the bean leaves fell away from the tips of my fingers and the ground from beneath my feet. Down into the drainage ditch I tumbled, landing face-first in the dry bed, then leaping to my feet and scampering up the other bank and onto the cool surface of the blacktopped highway.

Glad to finally be out of the pitch darkness, I rose to my feet and cautiously began to move towards the flood of the bridge’s light. Keeping my eyes on the mouth of the path, knowing that something would emerge at any moment and that when it did I wanted to be as far away from it as possible. Only after I’d actually walked onto the bridge did I dare look away, and then only for an instant, to glance across the bridge’s length, (which was maybe a hundred yards or more) and when I looked back I glimpsed something sliding down into the ditch into which I’d fallen only moments before. I kept walking until I reached the middle of the bridge, then quickly knelt and slipped out of my shoes and socks—stuffing each sock back into its shoe. I prepared myself for running, just in case.

If I stayed on the bridge, sooner or later a car or truck would come along and take me home, and maybe the bridge’s bright lights wouldn’t go out while I waited. I couldn’t take that chance, I had to keep moving. So I moved to the bridge’s edge and onto the blacktopped highway, occasionally looking back. I’d decided not to wait for the stalker to charge onto the bridge and snatch me up. I had a head start of at least two hundred yards and I planned to keep it.

I’d walked another hundred yards or so when I finally saw it on the bridge, swaying from side to side as it moved along the bridge’s wall, using the shadows. It was a little too far for me to make out clearly how large it was, but it was big, very big. My mind began to race; the next light was at my bus stop, at least a mile and a half away. If I ran all-out nothing could catch me, not even a panther, given the

head start I had. Plus, if I had to, there were a few houses near the bus stop that I could run to for help.

But for now the darkness was my cover and as long as it stayed in the light it would not be able to see me. I began to run, slowly gaining more and more speed, more distance. Soon I'd be far enough ahead of it to outrun whatever it was. With only the voice of my Uncle Big Boy ringing in my head I raced blindly through the night. Uncle Big Boy was the elder of my mother's identical twin brothers. He would often boast about my speed whenever he'd see me running while playing softball. "Look at that boy run, he's so fast he turned that base almost laying down; steal another base boy! Ha, Ha, Ha!" he would laugh.

At some point along the highway I stepped off the blacktop and into the rocks that skirted its length, then back on, disregarding the sharp pain that shot through my bare right foot. It was then that the eeriest cry I'd ever heard rang out, filling the air with chills and me with a need to run even faster. Now it knew my fear and was on the hunt; I was its prey! Already I was running as fast as I'd ever run before and was picking up speed, speed that I'd never known I possessed. Bolting down the highway and not daring to look back, I raced through the darkness clutching my shoes, rapt by the pitter-patter rhythmic sound of my bare feet against the blacktopped highway.

Where is that light, where is that light? I kept asking myself. Knowing it had to be near but sensing that I was losing ground, yet with renewed energy, I picked up my pace. Then in the distance I saw a dull glow begin to open a hole in the wall of darkness that held me captive, offering a doorway to hope and freedom. Again the cry rang out, this time much closer, bringing tears to my eyes and renewed strength to my tired and aching legs.

The bus stop was coming up fast. I knew I had to slow down in order to make the turn. "Red! Red!" I cried out. He had to be there. Then, fanning out to the edge of the highway and breaking hard to the left, I made the turn onto the dirt road that ran past my driveway. In about two hundred yards I would be able to see my house. Again I called out for Red, but he couldn't hear me—he wasn't there. Back into the darkness I raced. Where was Red? Faster and faster I ran, hearing the sound of feet pounding and heavy breathing kept my legs moving. Still it was almost upon me; I wasn't going to make it.

Then the light from my kitchen window peeped from around the small hill that had hidden it, the hill me and my brothers had often played on. I had to turn now or bypass my driveway. I was running too fast and my ankle turned; I went sailing into the air—“Redddd!” I cried before letting go of my shoes and covering my face. Tumbling over a few times, then quickly drawing myself into a tight ball, I waited for the attack.

The night exploded with the sound of bodies crashing into one another and then landing in the roadside brush. Fierce fighting broke out, echoing through the night, the growls, hisses, and snarls carrying into the near distance, then fading into silence. Quickly I rose to my feet, now more angry than afraid. Something had killed my dog and now it was coming for me. I heard it come through the brush and instinctively clenched my fist. I wasn’t running anymore.

The feel of thick matted hair rubbed against my arm, causing me to instantly relax. I knew this feel; it was Pup! Pup was the biggest, fiercest fighting dog ever. Once a black bear had jumped onto our front porch and Pup had driven it back down to the river, leaving large clumps of the bear’s fur all over the yard. He used to belong to my sister Lue, but she had moved, leaving Pup with us. He protected the house. He protected us. I was so happy I dropped to one knee and cried as I rested against his shoulder.

When we got to the house I decided to go around to the back door because I was much too tired to answer to my parents. With the last of my strength I crawled up the four steps onto the porch and curled up against the kitchen screen door. Pup jumped up, shaking the porch, and stretched out beside me, letting his massive head rest on his bearlike paws. I was home. As I began to drift off into sleep, the kitchen door opened and I heard my mother ask, “Is O. C. back yet?”

To which my father answered, “Yes, he’s back,” and then closed the door. There I remained until a rooster’s crowing at dawn would wake me and give me a reason to go out again.

Well rested, I awoke and took Pup with me down to the fallen oak tree and called out for Red; he barked in response. Then he appeared on the fallen oak and hurried across, wagging his red bushy tail, to greet and welcome me back as he had always done. I loved Red as much as my brothers and sisters, so why was my father leaving Red and Pup? Families should stay together.

By eight that morning we were on our way to Chicago, and I never saw Red or Pup again, and wouldn't even see Geraldine for three years to come. My mother went by Ms. Cat's as we all knew she would, but I was in another car and we didn't turn when my mother did. However, we did learn that an old panther was found, not far from where we used to live, with his throat mostly ripped out days later by some hunters who knew my family. •



Image by flickr user joseph a., "Sledge, Mississippi"

"A child educated only at school is an uneducated child."

—George Santayana

From Beneath the Porch... I Discovered I Couldn't Hide

Terry Berry

My initial writing experience occurred inadvertently by way of what my family called “the good book.” As a child, I was in awe of this book, and I sensed my parents were in awe of it too. I often heard them say, “The good book said this, the good book said that.” I never heard the good book say anything!

My sister Helen aspired to teach, and I became her prized pupil. She taught me the alphabet, how to count, and how to read using a rickety old blackboard. I recall vividly how meticulously she would draw a picture next to a word like ball or tree using plaster found in the crumbling walls of our rented house.

One night Helen overheard me asking our mother to teach me how to read the good book. Helen quickly pulled me towards her, as if to shield me. “I will teach you,” she said. We both recognized the look of annoyance that appeared on our mother’s face. Helen continued her explanation in a matter-of-fact tone, stating, “Mom and Dad cannot read or write.” Peering back over her shoulder at our mother, she continued in a voice that was poignant, yet poised, “That’s why it’s important that we learn to read and write well.”

The year Helen entered the University of Illinois, I entered the second grade. I recall being elated when the teacher gave me my books. The smell of new books and the illustrations made the words easy to learn. I could barely contain my excitement about learning to read like the older kids.

The problem started when my teacher asked why my parents had named me Terry Berry. She said, “Terry Berry, Terry Berry,” as a rhyme and a joke. The whole class laughed at my expense. I told her my mother named me after her favorite department store, because she wanted me to grow into a businessman.

This teacher’s face turned red, and spittle flew from her mouth as she shrieked, “You’ll never be a businessman—a janitor, maybe!” She continued her tirade, which became a daily occurrence. The

physical and mental abuse was not foreign to me. It was as synonymous with the era of the 1960s as the Cuban Missile Crisis and Malcolm X. However, I had not expected such abuse from my hero. Prior to this second grade encounter with my nemesis, I viewed teachers as superheroes.

I never understood why she made me the focus of her wrath, and I was too young to know how to handle the situation maturely, so I hid. I would pretend to go to school, then quickly dart under the porch of our dilapidated house. When my mother discovered I had pretended to go to school and hidden under the porch for nearly a week, she demanded an explanation. As a child, the only explanation I could muster for my behavior was, “My teacher is mean to me.” My mother never got to the root of that problem, but, sensing I was running from something, she admonished me to face adversity and never hide or run from it.

As an adult, I believe in facing most situations and circumstances head-on. However, once upon a time, as the kid under the porch, hiding seemed like a good idea. Hindsight is like 20/20 vision to a blind man. The thing about hindsight is it only offers an ability, or advantage, after it has happened or developed.

The next best thing to hindsight is maturity and life experience, which most acquire by the time they’re adults. Society doesn’t expect the child to have this ability to make mature choices, which is why guardianship is so important. If the parent or guardian is absent, or fails to participate in a meaningful, effective manner, the child does not receive the training, the preparation, necessary to make healthy choices. The child never establishes the building blocks essential to rational decision-making. In one moving speech during the 2008 presidential campaign, Barack Obama described the role his mother played in his development.

From that Kodak moment snapped during the campaign, the message echoes that if parents want their children to do better, parents/guardians must do better by them. Parents cannot expect the teachers to perform miracles. Parents must be involved in their children’s development in a purposeful way. Obama shared with us a glimpse of such a pivotal moment through a rare and brief exchange of tidbits with his mother during his youth. It was his mother’s response to—and her handling of—his complaints of being awakened

in the wee hours of the morning that resonated with me.

Obama related that his mother would wake him up early, because it was the only time she could go over his lessons with him. Her reply to his complaints was, “It ain’t no picnic for me either, buster.” So as an involved parent, she engaged Obama in meaningful dialogue, instilling purpose and conviction. Obama’s story resonated so deeply, it awakened within me the spirit of the seven-year-old beneath that porch, a kid at a pivotal moment choosing to hide and run from adversity as a good idea, a good choice!

Obama’s story probably means many things to many people, but to me, that particular story emphasized the importance of the choices we make. My traumatic experience with a particular teacher in my estimation affected what began as a very gifted child. Clearly, that child was never the same. However, the fact remains: I made the choices. I own the good and the not-so-good consequences of my choices.

I believe a lot of the good and bad that happens to people has to do with either the choices we have already made or the choices we will make in the future. This grandiose concept of education as something in which the teacher comes in and imparts knowledge to an empty vessel is flawed. We know learning doesn’t happen that way. Teachers are not superheroes, but most are heroes, and students are not empty vessels into which knowledge can be poured. Knowledge must be gained through engagement, and we should never lose sight of the connection between learning and life. Education helps remind us of the value of learning, and that learning is not separated from our lives. •

Travelin'

Larry Brent

I go where I choose
Leave when ready
I can deal with the here & now
OR
escape when it gets too heavy

These talents be my balance
—between
smart and stupid.
The climate is most cool
when the groove is so fluid

I smile as a child
lost within the strokes
engaging different spaces erases potential.
Of pride filled chokes
I blaze within the shades
pace to shape
grow in the flow
exhale and create.

This vibe is ever alive
merely a matter of concentration.
Breathe, believe and receive

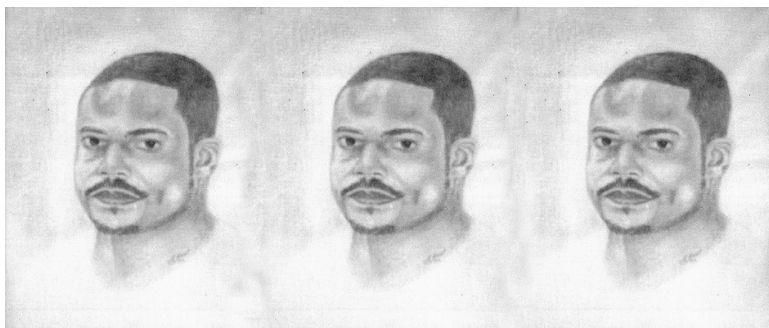
the inspiration
this motivation inspires mileage
that I live
to explore, discover and dabble.
These lines in my mind
This rhyme is my mind
the way that I sway
when I travel.

Strugglin', Strivin' & Survivin'

Brotha Brent

This is my "Captured Potential," something I did not know about me prior to higher education. and I am not alone in this sense. Daily I interact with many like-minded individuals who have made some vital mistakes in their lives, but have diligently worked to better themselves in hopes of receiving forgiveness and mercy from society. "Captured Potential" displays a child's face because everyone in prison is somebody's child and, like any child who has endured punishment for his or her mistakes, sheds a tear to say: "I'm sorry."

LARRY BRENT, self portrait



In Search of a Story

Javon Grimes

“The unnarrated life is not worth living, every life is in search of a narrative....

We all seek, willy-nilly, to introduce some kind of concord into the everyday discord and dispersal we find about us.”

—Richard Kearney

There are many men and women in prison who search for the path to narrate their story, to give their life meaning and purpose. Most find this path through education. Education becomes the foundation to finding one's self and creating change. That change leads to understanding and consciousness of the value of one's life and others'. Teachers are instrumental in this process because they help to set the value of education by challenging you to open your mind and find your voice for expression.

In the darkest of shadows and in the depths of solitude, when the world seems to drown us out and nobody hears our screams of frustration, pains, sorrows, and regrets, we begin to peel away the multiple layers of our own ignorance. For some this cleansing, if you will, is too harsh to strip away all the layers, so they revert back to the safety of external excuses for their lot in life, never really accepting their own responsibility for their actions. Others forge forward, stripping away the complexities of built-up falsehoods and rancor to see the true reflection of self. During this stage, regardless of the image staring back, a teacher challenges you with a book or a task and in most cases you challenge yourself to never let those layers build up again for fear that they may swallow you alive. At that moment, education becomes your beacon of courage and hope, the courage to travel the untraveled streets and blocks within you and the hope of building a new community in yourself through knowledge and understanding.

I grew up with a drug-addicted single parent, in a household where my older brother, also addicted to drugs, was the closest

example of a man. With this loneliness and uncertainty, I took to the streets for love, protection, and survival for my younger sister and me. I came into the system at the age of 16, freshly expelled from high school, so I had no understanding of the social or economic ills that plagued me and my community. At that immature age, having seen things no human being should see and not being emotionally developed enough to express those pent up frustrations and pains, it was that much easier not to talk about what I experienced.

Back inside my cell, alone, I began to question the validity of what I believed I stood for, only to realize that my life was a small atom in a vast multi-cell system. With this new awareness, I began to shake off the layers, oftentimes afraid—afraid to see what lay beneath the next layer. The more I purged my fears and regrets, the more I questioned the power of my circumstances that encompassed me. I said to myself, “My life has to amount to more than this.”

“everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

—Viktor Frankl

I thought to myself, What could I do and whom could I trust to help me get what I was in need of, the understanding of self? The only people that I’d ever trusted unconditionally in my life were most of my elementary teachers because I felt like they taught from their heart and spirit. They did not have computers, small classes, or the best students, but they were committed to learning and made the best of their students’ potential in their class. Being in a classroom, engaged in things unfamiliar to me but learning them, was wonderful. Even with my desire for education being strong, the needs at home far outweighed the potential of tomorrow. Meaning, I knew I had the potential of tomorrow, but the need to be fed and clothed today could not possibly wait on that potential to flourish. Remembering that sense of trust and the need to replace what I had begun to realize as ignorance, I turned to another teacher whom I got the same feelings from; her name was Ms. Hall.

Ms. Hall was a short, stout African-American in her early 40s.

She spoke with a slight lisp, so her words were slow and deliberate, entrancing you with her dialogue. She possessed the heart, spirit, and loving compassion needed for us to recognize the traps we were setting ourselves up for, traveling down this path as lost boys. During class breaks I would converse with her about the questions I had and how I needed to seek answers because my life had been built on lies and injustices that I did not even understand.

She first encouraged me to start writing in a journal every day and explained that it would help me to find my voice. You can only imagine how hard this was for me, not because I could not write but because I was not used to this form of expression. Up until that point in my life I had been conditioned not to express my feelings and thoughts for fear of what might be exposed. As I began to write daily, she started to bring books that were related to her curriculum and tell me to read two a week. The books might consist of works by authors like Jack London or something more complex like a poem from Edgar Allan Poe, and afterward she would tell me to write about what I read. Her motto: “Reading is not just for pleasure but for knowledge as well. Your future depends more on the latter.” This was a challenge for me—to extract and learn from the experiences of others and use my own voice.

As my journey continued from the Juvenile Detention Center to the Cook County Jail to the Illinois Department of Corrections, I took those lessons with me.

“The ultimate goal of the educational system is to shift to the individual the burden of pursuing his own education.” —John Gardner

When I encountered other teachers or situations that were not ideal, I expanded on those lessons and challenged myself harder to think outside of my circumstances. I learned from different teachers and classes about the social and economic ills that plagued not only my community, but communities all over the world.

That is what higher education is about, the ability to assess a situation by questioning the essence of it and weigh in on the conversation. This model of learning has allowed me to become a student of the Education Justice Project, a program designed to offer higher

education to prisoners so that they may further their knowledge and be productive changers in their communities. Being a student of this program, I have encountered teachers, staff, and tutors who teach with their hearts and spirits. This program has aided many students to further narrate their stories of higher education and change in the hardest of conditions. There are many stories waiting to be heard and many goals to be achieved, and this is the limitless potential that education provides through the guidance of sincere teachers.

“if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

—Henry David Thoreau

We, the students of the Education Justice Project, did not have this program a year ago, but we all imagined the possibilities of it and have met with the unexpected success of its becoming reality. This program has given us the opportunity to forge forward as better-prepared men in life and the chance to share with you our stories of how education has rewarded us with openness and maturity. We all thank every teacher and tutor, and anyone else who ever challenged us to do better and seek more from ourselves and each other. •

Selected Works

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Letter to My Son

Joseph Mingarelli

*“...I’ve learned my lesson...Fairways and greens...
Be humble.”*

—Kevin Costner as Roy McAvoy in *Tin Cup*

Dear Son,

Of all the things in this world that I might find worthy of committing to memory, as silly as it may sound, I have always had this thing about remembering dialogue from film scenes that moved me, or that I somehow felt connected to at the time. Let’s call it a by-product of my own lack of originality or creativity with discourse. I use the words of other people because they tend to fit better than my own would. Over the years, as my collection of memories has grown, there have always been times when the first words to pop into my head in response to some event or someone were the lines of a movie or TV show. I see or hear something happen, and bang... the words come pouring out. They can be whimsical, dark, profound, derogatory, sarcastic, ironic (my personal favorite, and often the most confusing to the listener), or any of a number of other adjectives that fit my immediate need.

The quote I have written above is one that has become somewhat of a mantra for me as I do my time. It certainly befits my unique situation. Today I want to talk to you about the importance of following this simple but great advice as you are leaving your childhood behind in exchange for adulthood. If I had been there for you like a father is supposed to be, I would have begun hammering this point home the first time I ever witnessed you exhibit any inappropriate or egotistical behavior. But I haven’t been there. I haven’t been around to see how you treat others, or how you determine right from wrong. I rely on incomplete information supplied to me by your mother and other family, and also from your report

cards. I cannot complain about or even criticize the way your mother handles things. She is there, at ground zero, making decisions as they are needed. In my opinion, she is doing a great job. I just thought I would supplement her work with what little wisdom I have managed to amass. There is value in the understanding of the words in the above quote. I want to try to explain what I mean in a way that is meaningful to you.

“...*I’ve learned my lesson...*” It sounds so simple, but this is one of those things that, as a parent, I am always worried about. Are you learning from your mistakes? It is obvious by my current mailing address that I didn’t always learn from mine, so I know firsthand how tough it can be to accomplish what sounds so simple. I want to encourage you to always consider the consequences of your actions before acting...consider the price of failing to do so...and try to be one of the few that can actually learn from the mistakes of others without having to make those mistakes for yourself. My experience has shown me that it is unrealistic to expect you to avoid mistakes as a result of what you see others do. Some things you just have to figure out for yourself. I know you are going to make mistakes. It is part of growing up...part of living...even as an adult. There is really no way to avoid it. What I do expect from you is that you learn from them. Make them work for you, not against you. There will always be a lesson that calls out to you with each mistake made. It is up to you to slow down and be silent enough to hear it.

“...*Fairways and greens...*” This is a golf reference. To me it is the most thought-provoking part of the entire quote. To a golfer it means something like “play it safe, smart, and conservative,” “follow the traditional path,” or “do it the accepted way.” I would never want to be the type of father that tried to turn you into someone who doesn’t think for himself. You should always be a free thinker, but you should also be levelheaded enough to know that there is generally a good reason for the existence of an accepted way to accomplish most things. I want you to always consider your options and choose with care. With time, you will come to know when to deviate from the traditional path. Until that day comes, use the wisdom of the ages and stick to the fairways and greens.

“...*Be humble.*” If there were one character flaw that I could point to as having the potential to be the eventual downfall of our

civilization, lack of humility would be the one. I know that sounds extreme, but the bad manners, lack of concern for others, and sense of entitlement that can come from a shortage of humility can create so many of the common problems we deal with in our society. Take a minute to consider that. If humility is not a natural trait for you by now, I have once again failed you, and I highly recommend you learn it. Learning to accept “No” in life was one of my own personal demons. As I look back on nearly every major mistake I have ever made, I can point to where I resisted someone telling me I couldn’t do something. I’m not asking you to become a robot. The very last thing I would ever want for you to become comfortable with is the phrase “I can’t” when you are faced with a challenge. But you must use your head to make good and wise choices, not just to figure out ways to circumvent rules in your path.

Ultimately, as your father, I want what is best for you. I want you to have a good life. I want it to be filled with challenges, happiness, and success. I want you to have the resources and the courage to seek your dreams. But I need to know that you are not doing these things at the expense of others. Don’t just choose what is easy over what is right. Always remember to protect yourself, but always be kind and considerate. I hope this helps you in some way to better understand life, and to better understand me.

With Love,
Dad

Developing a Passion for Writing

Haneef Lurry

I was 17 when my interest in writing began to develop. At that time I was already incarcerated in the Cook County Jail in Chicago. While I was awaiting trial, I was going to school for my GED. We had classes five days a week.

One of my teachers, Ms. Simmons, would have a quote on the board every day when we first walked into the classroom. They were powerful quotes by inspirational people. One of the first quotes that I can remember was “A man not willing to die for something is living for nothing!” by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Another quote that stays with me is “You become the change you wish to see in the world!” by Mahatma Gandhi. We would have to write or strive to write a one-page essay in about ten to fifteen minutes on these quotes. At first, I found the exercise a little intimidating. Up to this point, I had always dreaded writing assignments. I was never confident in my writing skills. It would take me ten minutes just to figure out how to begin the essay, which wouldn’t leave me much time to complete the task. I knew I had to change my approach to the exercise if I were to ever complete an essay.

After a few days I decided only to take about one to two minutes to think about how I wanted to start off the essay and where I wanted it to lead. Basically, I was faking a mental outline. Then, I would begin writing and I wouldn’t stop until the fifteen minutes were up. Because the quotes were so powerful and inspirational to me, they inspired many thoughts as soon as I read them. I would take a few of the key thoughts or ideas and formulate my paragraphs around them. I would also try to conclude the essay as creatively as possible. As the days passed I was becoming more and more comfortable with writing, and I noticed that my essays were improving.

My confidence increased after a couple of weeks of doing the exercise. Ms. Simmons had been encouraging me by telling me that my papers were good and that I wrote well. She asked me if I would read one of my essays in front of some of the staff and inmates dur-

ing a Black History Month program. The essay was about remembering and continuing the legacy of our ancestors who struggled for us to have the rights that we have today. I read the essay during the program and received good feedback from the audience. This, too, contributed to an increased confidence in my writing.

Several months later I took the GED test. I was surprised at my test results. I received my highest score on essay writing. This was the first time that I had ever scored higher on a subject dealing with writing than on any other subject. Up to this point, math had always been my best subject and the subject in which I received the highest scores. But now my essay-writing scores surpassed even my math scores. This was completely shocking to me. Not long before that, I couldn't stand writing and I never believed that I would be any good at it. Now I was not only beginning to enjoy writing, but I was actually getting good at it. It was at this point that my interest in writing really sparked.

I began to indulge in different forms of writing. I wrote personal essays, poems, songs, fiction, etc. I even wrote a few articles for newsletters. Whenever I wrote I made sure that I had written about a topic that I was passionate about because, as I look back, I realize that one of the reasons I was into the essays in Ms. Simmons's class was that the quotes, which prompted the essays, were really inspirational and captivated me. I believe that writing becomes easier for us when we write about something that holds our interest.

To me, writing became liberating in a sense. It was a way to just release. Whatever was on my mind or in my heart, I could write it out in some form or another. Whether or not it was actually read by someone else didn't really concern me. Just getting it out was what mattered most.

Today, however, writing also serves another purpose. It has become another vehicle for communication. It's a way to express my thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Writing is a way to be heard and possibly motivate or inspire others. Many lives have been changed or even saved due to the writings of others.

At present, I'm enrolled in a business writing course appropriately titled "Writing for a Change" at the U of I. I say this title is appropriate because writing can really bring about change. An inspirational book can help to change the lives of the readers. A

well-put-together proposal can bring about environmental change. A good business plan can pave the way toward personal prosperity and lead to more financial opportunities within a community. The pen is a simple instrument that should never be underestimated. As the saying goes, “The pen is mightier than the sword!”

Today, I consider myself to be an aspiring author. Of all forms of writing, I enjoy writing fiction the most. Currently, I’m working on a novel, a thriller. I would also like to get into screenwriting eventually. This is a dramatic turnaround for an individual who used to dread writing.

I attribute my passion for writing to the exercises in Ms. Simmons’s class. I believe the reason why many students dread writing and writing assignments is because they’re often given a writing assignment on a topic that does not hold their interest. For this reason, whenever I write an academic paper I always try to begin with a thesis statement that I believe will not only attract the interest of the reader but will be interesting to write about. I feel that if more students come up with creative ways to make their writings interesting to themselves, they, too, will find it easier to complete writing assignments and may even begin to enjoy them.

In the future, I plan to continue to write and, hopefully, publish fiction as well as nonfiction. I wish to communicate to the world through my writings. I also desire to be effective in my business and professional writing skills. I know I will be putting together several business plans, proposals, and letters throughout life. I believe that part of achieving my future goals will come through the use of a pen. A man who once used to be a foe of writing is now a friend. •

The Intimidating Blank Page

Tremain Leggans

Who would have thought that a blank sheet of paper could be so intimidating? Before I started to write, I had a blank sheet of paper lying before me on which I was to write for a publication in my business writing class, but I could not come up with anything meaningful to write. All week I tried to fill this nonthreatening inanimate object with words that would result in a paper that made sense, but each time I would try to write, I would panic and start to feel anxious, causing my mind to blank and become void of thought.

Could that experience be a result of my knowing that the paper I am currently writing will be critiqued, and not so much about a blank sheet of paper? When I consider that question, I realize that I do not want to be judged, period, especially on my personal thoughts and views. However, this is college. It is an environment where people's thoughts and beliefs are shared and critiqued. I am in a college writing class, and in order for my skills to improve as a writer, I must practice writing and allow my work to be reviewed by others. However, to overcome my adverse feelings of anxiety, Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, recommends a technique referred to as freewriting.

Freewriting allows writers to write without the burden or worry of being critiqued. When writers (some writers, not all) know that their work is going to be critiqued, they tend to become distracted with premature editing and other corrections. With freewriting, there is no one to critique your work, and if practiced regularly, freewriting will undo the ingrained habit of editing while writing. The freewriting process will better help writers to employ words and formulate thoughts and ideas onto paper that will eventually culminate in a meaningful subject. For me, freewriting is a difficult process. Writing along with premature editing has been my writing method all of my academic life, but I am slowly learning how to incorporate freewriting into my writing process. For the first time in my academic career, I used freewriting as a part of my writing process for this paper.

The techniques and processes I have learned have enhanced my

ability to write, and I suspect they will continue to do so. I have also learned another method called workshopping, from Mimi Schwartz and Sondra Perl's *Writing True*. Workshops are therapy for writers; they promote and foster ideas, opinions, respect, and encouragement. Workshopping is a process in which writers interact with one another through active listening, critiquing, and editing. With writing workshops, writers do not have to bear the struggle of having to write alone. Writers have the chance to incorporate the opinions and voices of other writers into their works.

These techniques not only helped to improve my writing, but also gave me principles to apply to my life and interpersonal relationships. For example, from the writing workshop techniques, I learned the importance of being able to listen and properly hear what others are saying. Active listening is pragmatic and useful for everyday life. This lesson will help me to better understand other people's views and prevent future conflicts due to misunderstandings. Learning how to use writing techniques has helped me academically and personally.

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LARRY BRENT, Resource Room, 3/23/09



Finding a Process

Robert Garite

Sometimes, when we know we have something we have to write, we get that impending sense of doom that often precedes an unpleasant task. There are also times when a blank piece of paper has an almost intimidating presence, daring us to commit ourselves to an idea. However, as I get closer to finding my own unique writing process, I am starting to look forward to the next time I'll get the opportunity to write. I have even come to appreciate the intrinsic freedom attached to a fresh sheet of paper, a place where the endless potential of my imagination is free to roam. Somewhere the restrictions that currently threaten to close me off from the world do not apply. It is a blank slate that is not prejudiced by the mistakes I have made, and when I write I am only limited by my own boundaries, no one else's. Because of this, I have started to take the profession of writing very seriously, and as I continue to grow as an author, it feels like I am also nearing a realization, a sense that my future will somehow be affected by how well I can capture my thoughts as I engage in the writing process.

So, as I am developing my writing skills, I also like to immerse myself in reading books written by authors who try to achieve high levels of emotion in their work and who cause readers to think critically about the world around them. I try to write with that goal in mind, and there is a definite connection between the things that I read and the professional writer I someday hope to be.

It has always amazed me how words are capable of possessing such great power. They are able to penetrate through centuries of thickheadedness and can inspire people to take action. The turn of a page has the potential to usher in cries of protest from long ago, cries that still echo across battlefields both big and small and whose voices collectively shout out for us to join them in the fight against injustice. We use the written word to transmit the truths we have learned to future generations and hope that they use this knowledge to live their lives in the pursuit of happiness.

I recently read a book written by Viktor Frankl entitled, *Man's Search for Meaning*, in which he vividly recounted his experiences as a

Nazi prisoner during WWII. As I was reading his words I remember feeling this profound sense of appreciation for the strength that he showed by sharing his experience with the world, and in the forceful way in which he related his narrative. What really affected me the most was the intricate way he wove his personal philosophy: “The salvation of man is through love and in love” (49), a philosophy that clearly transcends his hardships, into the fabric of his life story, a fabric that had been brutally trampled on by the boots of a merciless and hateful enemy.

I’m not sure how it is for you, but there is a feeling I get when writing, like Frankl’s, that cuts through my normal perceptions, penetrates so deep that it stirs something inside of me and allows an extraordinary truth to shimmer, a light so bright that it illuminates my soul. My mind narrows its focus, my eyes begin to well with emotion, and I catch a glimpse of the bigger picture. I am reminded of how truly precious a gift life is, and I am thankful for those, like Frankl, who strive to illuminate the world with their observations and who inspire people to want more for themselves.

There are times when we have to make tough choices so that we can move on in life, tough choices such as choosing to forgive someone. Despite the millions of reasons Frankl could have found to foster his bitterness, he did not. He realized that life was too short to be burdened by something he could not change, and despite having lost everything, he put his pen to paper, forgave, and moved on. However, sometimes it is not others who need to be forgiven; sometimes we have to forgive ourselves, which can be one of the hardest things in the whole world to do. I remember a time in my life when the burden of my mistakes weighed heavily upon me—but, like Frankl, I chose to not allow the burden of my past to define my future, and through my writing, I was able to find the strength to change and move on in my life.

About fifteen years ago, when I was eighteen years old, I found myself in a very serious situation. I was sitting in a small holding cell, chained to a steel chair, and my life was no longer in my control. As I awaited punishment for a very serious offense, punishment that would definitely be in the form of an extended prison term, I started to really reflect on my life, something I had not done in a long time. While I was doing so, a voice that I barely recognized started to make itself known again, and as that voice became louder I sensed its famil-

arity as the voice of my youth, which had once served me well, but whose dreams had been washed away in a current of substance abuse.

I began my battle with alcohol and drugs at an early age, thirteen in fact, and as I sat in that tiny cell, it was one of the first complete days that I had been sober in a five-year stretch. But that day I learned that my voice was resilient, and it was time for me to use it to introduce some hope into what seemed like a hopeless situation. I did not know exactly how to put it into words, but I felt like I had learned something important about substance abuse that differed from what the “Just Say No” campaign of the day had failed to teach me. I was beginning to see all of the decisions I had made in defense of the foolish image I had created for myself, the image of someone who lived for the next party. So, during the next session with my lawyer, I asked him about writing something for kids faced with the same issues I was facing. If I were to do so, I wondered, could my words be heard outside of the prison walls? He advised me to do my best, and he would see what he could do.

So I just started writing; I did not have much of a writing process back then. But when I started to write, the words just started flowing from me, and as the days passed, a speech started to take form. As I was immersed in that process, my understanding of what I wanted to say became more evident, the haze started to dissipate, and I started to feel as if I was part of the world again. Up until that moment I’d had a hard time answering the pleas of my friends and family who were entreating me to provide them with an answer to the question: “Why Robert, why?” But as my voice grew in strength, I started to feel a responsibility for my actions, and as I continued to write, a light inside of me started to shine brighter.

What started to become clear was that I had incorrectly believed drugs in themselves had something inherently evil contained in them, and that they were to blame for my “bad” thoughts that had led me down the road I was on. That had been the shallow explanation I had given to my loved ones concerning what I had done, but as I engaged in my writing process, I began to think critically about things, something that writing forces one to do. I grasped a deeper understanding of my problem. The complex issue I was able to see was that once I decided to “Say Yes” to drugs, I felt obligated to adopt the lifestyle that I thought fit that decision. “Just Say Yes”

became my answer to all of the other problems that surfaced while I was a teenager fighting to obtain some type of identity. The drugs did not produce some multiple personality I could blame my mistakes on, but what they did do was provide a distraction so my mind no longer thought about what the real issues in my life were, and so the downward spiral began.

The body of my speech described how my expectations were lowered so drastically that I did not pay much attention to how the world was changing around me. Because my mind was distracted by the pleasures drugs and easy money induced, I did not realize my childhood friends were fading away and being replaced by kids who were just as lost as myself. Through the haze it seemed as if my mom, who probably loved me more than anything, was only trying to prevent me from having fun, and as if she just did not know how to party. Gradually, making my mother proud, which was very important to me while growing up in a fatherless home, no longer mattered; my lowered expectations kept sinking, and I did not realize the distance that had grown between myself and the people who had loved me my whole life. As I continued to write, it felt like my pen took on a life of its own, and each stroke helped ease a great burden I had carried with me for too long.

Once I had finished writing I gave the speech to my lawyer, who felt I had written something special and wanted to show it to the prosecutor. Up until then the prosecutor had aggressively pursued the maximum sentence possible, but once he read my speech, he saw in me more than the sum of my mistakes. Together we came up with an idea. We had a video recorder brought into the county jail, something rarely done, so that my speech could be recorded. As I looked into that camera, I spoke to kids whom I did not know personally, but whom I talked to in a familiar voice, a voice that understood what it was like to be a kid faced with making some tough decisions and the consequences of choosing a lifestyle filled with harmful distractions like drugs and alcohol.

My video is still shown to kids where I grew up, and sometimes I even get letters from some of them who have heard what I had to say and learned something from it. When they are offered drugs, I hope they now see more than the substance in front of them. I hope they also see their friends fade, their futures darken, and the sorrow

in their loved ones' eyes due to their inability to help them. In reality, it only matters what life we choose for ourselves, and we alone have to want something different for our lives. In essence, people need to say "No" to more than drugs; they need to say "No" to the whole perceived image they will be trapped into protecting if they begin travelling that very difficult road.

Words cannot bring people back, and they cannot alter the past, but words can inspire people to change, and writing helps us remember that as far as we know this is the only life we will ever have, and no matter how bad things may have gotten, we can choose to transform our lives, and we can make a difference. I am not sure where my writing ability will take me, but what I am sure of is that I feel strongly about helping people avoid the suffering my family, my friends, my victim, his loved ones, and I have endured. I am constantly reminded of the uphill battles I have to fight once I am released, and how difficult it will be for society to ever truly accept me back, but I do believe that there is a clean slate awaiting me, and that somehow my way back is connected to the endless possibility a blank piece of paper provides.

Selected Work

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LARRY BRENT, Students in EJP Resource Room, April 2009

Creating Art Through Writing: My Experiences as a Child

Christopher Garner

As a young child, my mom would take me with her as she attended night school at Malcolm X College in Chicago. I could not sit in the classroom with her during class, so I would have to sit by myself in the second-floor cafeteria with direct instructions to “stay put!” as she would say until she returned three hours later. I would have my homework and a small bagged lunch to eat if I got hungry.

Once I was settled in and my mom was out of sight, I would go on my adventure, but not too far. I would exit the cafeteria, and the halls would seem to go on forever, and the walls towered to the height of the building, as if I were in an indoor city at nighttime. The lighting was dim, like a theater atmosphere, and I could not miss the beautifully framed African art on the walls and throughout the mile-long halls, in sculpture form.

Everything was huge in comparison to my size at the age of ten and immediately demanded my attention and amazement. The chocolate-colored sculptures, so lifelike and intimidating, lured me in for the forbidden touch. After touching the sculpture of the African man squatting downward with a drum between his legs, the cold, hard, surface seemed to be real, but my intellect, even at the age of ten, told me that the sculpture was a work of art, frozen in time forever.

Every fifteen steps, and then to the right, was the temporary abode of another sculpture, with reflective light from the dim bulbs above fluttering over every curve of the chiseled sculptures. On the left across from each sculpture were huge paintings, all different but relevant to the African theme of the entire building. Portraits of Malcolm X, in the prime of his life, on fifty-by-sixty-five-inch stretched canvas, were so realistic that I could feel his eyes watching me as I slowly passed by.

Down a little farther was a landscape of an African village, sev-



CHRISTOPHER GARNER, "Young Robert Nesta Marley"

en feet long and three feet high. As I tried to pass, the depth of the scene pulled me completely in. I felt like I was actually standing in the village with the dark Prussian-blue sky, swallowing up the scene, as the sun, long set behind the yellow ochre straw huts, disappeared far off to the right. A silhouette of a quiver tree stood tall to the left of the scene, like a scarecrow in a cornfield. The only signs of life in the light umber-colored mud village were the few leaves of vegetation at the very top of the quiver tree, out of the reach of everything. I felt alone—as if I were standing right there, in that moment of time. I had to pull myself away, just to stay on schedule, if I was to have a good tour and then make it back to the cafeteria before my mom's class was over

I had no idea that I had spent close to ten minutes observing each piece of art in my path, and I needed to make it back to the cafeteria to eat some of my lunch, just in case my mom wanted to look inside of my paper bag before I tossed it out. I needed to get back in a hurry.

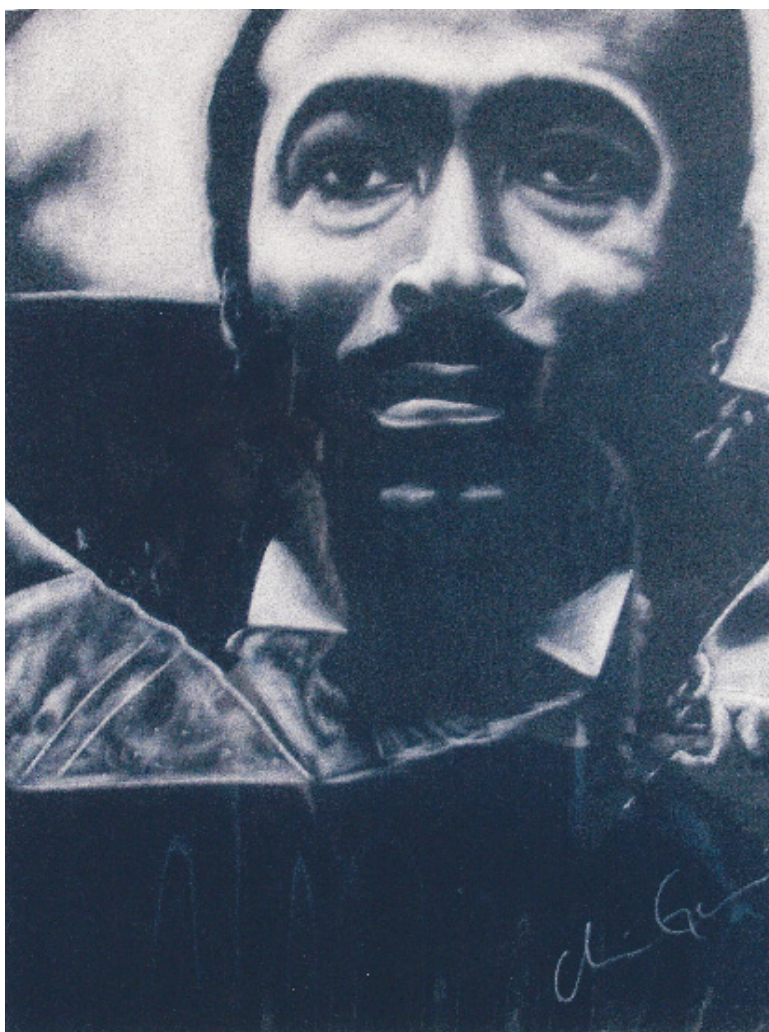
After a couple of turns to the left and one to the right, I made the mistake of going up the stairs. I spent the next fifteen minutes trying to find the cafeteria. At ten years old, it was only natural for me to panic first, which led me to go upstairs, when I knew that I had not gone down any stairs. It took a minute or so to realize that I was already on the second floor, and so I backtracked and found the cafeteria. When my mom finally showed up, I had taken a couple of bites of my cheese sandwich and had eaten the entire peach. I had not done any of my homework, because I was burning inside with the need to talk about what I had just experienced.

On the ride home, I just could not hold it in any longer. I talked to my mom about the feelings I felt after seeing the sculptures, and how I hadn't been able to help myself and had had to touch one of them to assure myself that it was really real. All along, I was really telling her that I had not obeyed her orders and had not sat in the cafeteria, doing my homework. My mom couldn't care less about my not having obeyed her orders; she was proud of me for expressing my excitement and passion for cultural art, and I told her that I wanted to create what I experienced. I was so impressed with what I had experienced that I could not properly tell my mom how or what it was that I was going to create or even what it was that I was

actually feeling.

It was then that it had become clear to me that I needed to write down what I was feeling, because I could not find the descriptive words to convey all of that, which was in me, to my mom.

Thirty years later, I am an artist and a writer, still in love with these two different art forms designed to do the same thing: create a picture.



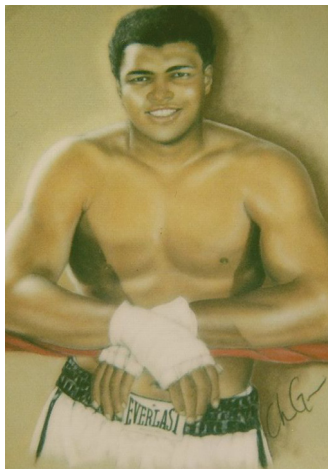
CHRISTOPHER GARNER, "Marvin"

Why Higher Education in Prison?

Research is clear: Prison-based higher education programs reduce arrest, conviction, and reincarceration rates. Evidence has also linked the presence of such programs to fewer disciplinary incidents within prison, finding that they produce safer environments for incarcerated men and women and staff alike. Higher education programs also have benefits for inmates' families and, hence, their communities. The strongest predictor of whether a given person will attend college is whether her or his parents did. In spite of these significant benefits, there has been a precipitous drop in prison-based higher education programs around the country. There were over seven hundred degree-granting programs at such programs' height, in the early 1990s. In 1994 the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act eliminated the use of Pell Grants for incarcerated students, and most prison college programs closed, including Illinois's BA-granting programs. Bachelor's degrees have not been offered in Illinois prisons since 2002.

<http://www.educationjustice.net/>

CHRISTOPHER GARNER, "AF"





CHRISTOPHER GARNER

