

I'm honored by this opportunity to be able to explore & expand inborn creative writing talents. When it comes to writing style, I'd admit many imprisoned persons, especially much older ones, have developed by dint of habit, tendencies in writing grandiloquently. Truth be told, prison often takes on the form of highly advanced universities. The ponderous times we study greatly influence our perceptions & thus one's ornate writing methods. There are many great minds languishing in these exiled precincts. I'd even venture in humbly proclaiming that there's major scholarship here of every kind, planting seeds of great change all around us. Knowledge & application indwells in this lowly place. However, I've observed in the last decade many of those belonging to this noble assembly are dying off due to debilitating health & old age. Ailing health exacerbated by bizarre cruelties associated with oppression. The younger generation aren't as apt in undergoing rigorous processes in developing themselves in ways that produce transformation. This isn't meant to imply that younger prisoners aren't engaged in this enterprise. For certainly many do undergird themselves with fastidious qualities necessary for deep cultivation of self. More than anything else the principal difference I suppose is more zeitgeistic in nature.

In 1990 when entering Philadelphia's adult county prisons as a teenage Black man, I encountered men of every ilk. Some were toxic, but many in spite of terrain were highly positive influences. These examples eventually altered the trajectory of my life. I've learned over time that jail didn't do anything to me that the treacherous & illicit criminalizing landscape of society failed to do already. It merely accelerated the callusing process. The ethos of penology is criminogenic by nature. Waste Centers are hypercriminalizing environs due to inherent prison survival politics. However as is the case with waste-finding utility when transformed into mulch & fertilizer, so citizen-waste-dumping sites. Oppressive conditions potentially become de facto nascent grounds for revolutionary thought. Truth crushed to the ground eventually rises up! And although prison revolts are tools used by the beleaguered, it's positive transformative ideas that personify a true coup de grace. At 19 such ideas made me confront myself in ways I never did or had to before. At the time I was charged with first-degree murder, I lacked knowledge of the legal system. I also lacked substantive wealth that would have afforded me access to the best defense attorneys.

I recall the absolute bewilderment I dealt with upon entering Holmesburg prison. Seconds after the prison transport van pulled inside the closed-in sally port, the huge iron castle doors slammed impenetrably behind us. I thought, "Shit, I'm going to be here until White folks let me go!" While sitting in the reception-area holding pens, I could hear the bedlam echoing from

further inside the jail. Fear of the unknown crept up inside me. But I didn't let it paralyze me. I couldn't fathom exactly how I'd survive the ordeal, but I knew I had to.

I felt like a lion in the middle of the ocean. The only qualifying factor guaranteeing lockup at Holmesburg prison was a person being given a ransom bail of \$50,000 or more. First-degree murder automatically meant a defendant wasn't afforded a bail. You'd have to sit in prison on pretrial detainment until disposition of the charges. First-degree murder carries an automatic life sentence & hefty court cost & fines. When my jailers were done processing me, I was fitted with a set of county blue pants & shirt. Guards eventually came to get me. They escorted me to the housing unit. Holmesburg prison was designed like Eastern State Penitentiary. An aerial view of the prison resembles the anatomy of a spider: an oval center (the main Control Center) with six cell blocks the length of a city street, thus spider legs. When entering A-Block I heard a familiar voice call out my name! Nothing is more comforting when in a hostile & alien place than seeing faces & hearing voices of familiar people.

Prisons are very tribal. Geopolitics are prominent inside here & are organized & operated by zip codes, no different than the U.S. Postal Services in the various parts of Philadelphia: South, North, East, & West. Further subdivisions occur in each of these neighborhoods. A matter of one or two blocks in any direction could very well change communities, squads, friends, & nuances in cultural dispensations. Even usage of prison phones are organized & run by geography. The prison terrain magnifies these idiosyncrasies, & stepping outside of prospective lanes can carry heavy penalties. Geopolitics dictate the whole respective street corner gets involved in scrimmages &/or bloodbaths. Even if the individual aggrieved parties decide to duke it out, respective communities attend these battles on standby. Respect & fear is currency in jail. It's worth more than the English pound. After greeting my homie, he escorted me to the area where other prisoners from Saigon Projects could be located. Even among lions, some have sharper & longer teeth.

Each prisoner gets what fits their mittens. This simply means that even though all corner homies get a place at the table & a piece of the pie, not all get the same size slice. These perks came with conscription & attendant obligations & most certainly had to be repaid. In for a penny, in for a pound! After the ballyhoo welcome to the squad that night, I made my mind up to do everything possible to mind my own business, stay away from unnecessary conflicts, & eventually get acquitted of the lodged charges against me. As my routine outside of D.O.C. mandates such as prisoner head-count time, meal time, et. alia, I visited the prison law library

whenever I was afforded access. I worked on my case daily. I read books, talked to old timers who knew the law. Monday–Friday I went to the prison's gym to spar, train, & fine-tune my pugilistic skills.

The wildest thing happened to me on my very first full day inside the prison. I wasn't a stranger to street fights. I had built a respectable record when it came to fistfights in my community. I decided to check the gym out & work off some frustration. At the time there was an older civilian trainer who came inside the jail to train fighters. When I got there, there was a sea of people in the big gym. Some were lifting weights, some playing basketball. Others stood around shooting the breeze, while others gathered on the stage where sparring matches took place.

The stage was about four feet off the gym floor & was big enough to accommodate several mats, the kind gymnasts flip on. People stood around watching the blood sport. I asked who was in charge. The old wise man was pointed out. I boldly approached him. "Can I get a few rounds of sparring in with someone my weight?" Only after repeatedly pestering him did he finally relent to my eager pandering. He called a short skinny dude from the shadows, who I didn't pay much attention to. In fact, he seemed to appear out of nowhere. We made eye contact. The old man told the ring crew to strap us up, which was boxing lingo signalling for our hands to be wrapped up, 16oz gloves be put on us, & grey electrical tape wrapped around the gloves' laces. Cushioned headgear was tied down on our heads. Vaseline rubbed on our faces & glove surfaces. Trust me, the padded cushion provides little or no shock absorbent from well placed heavy blows to the head & face. We were placed in opposite corners on the mats.

Once the bell rang, we met in the center of the ring for a showdown. Enough of all the waiting, I thought, so I threw a jab. The skinny lightweight slipped my jab & with lightning speed hit me with an at least 10-punch combination! I threw another punch. He slipped it again & unleashed an even more deadly combination. He bust my lip & had my nose dripping with blood. The old man smiled while stopping the slaughter match before the bell rang, bringing the first round to a close. The old man said to me, "Son, you have a heart of a lion. This was your tryout. Welcome to the boxing team." I would learn thereafter the guy who I'd sparred with was a well-known professional prize fighter. The other lesson I learned was that there's a hyena for every lion.

My daily routine while at Holmesburg consisted of boxing training, studying the law relative to my case, & finally, sucker ducking. I was also fighting trumped up drug charges that in September 1991 resulted in a conviction. A 2-5-year state sentence was imposed. Shortly

thereafter, I was freighted away on the Greg Goose State bus up to Graterford & eventually onto Camphill for classification. At 20 I found myself serving a state sentence & still awaiting trial for homicide charges that hung precariously over my head.

My girlfriend at the time was 24. She was a Temple University graduate student working towards her master's degree in psychology. Up to this point, we'd stayed in touch through phone calls, visits & photographs. But state confinement was much more restricted. Camp Hill was several hours away from Philadelphia & unlike county jail, where phone calls were free with direct lines, state prison used only collect calls. Letters via the U.S. Postal service now was the main means of staying in touch. My girlfriend would drop heavy ideas on me. I wanted to impress her with some grand ideas myself, so I solicited the aid of an older Black prisoner to write a letter for me. He agreed to help me but only for a gratuity fee but then added it would be the first & only letter he'd write for me. He confidently told me, "But don't worry about it, little brother. By the time you get out of here, you'll be a good writer." As a manchild growing up in America, I didn't excel in school. Honestly I didn't see any legitimate reasons for it. Teachers mostly punished me. They'd peripherally instruct me in academics. But largely my attitude was to blame.

As an adolescent male, I struggled for a place of belonging. Academics didn't appeal to me, at least not the rote, stale methods used in the public school system. Relative to me, the term "truancy" was used so often that even though I didn't fully understand its meaning, its resounding implications troubled me. The elementary school I attended was Frank Polumbo. It eventually became the precursor for CAPA, the school of the Performing Arts that moved to Broad & Christian street. Ms. Galesppi was the principal at the time. She was an Indian woman who was short in stature. She would find me wandering on the school grounds. I often was brought to her office for disciplinary reasons. There were times when she'd grab me by the ear while walking me all the way to my apartment inside the public housing project, repeatedly admonishing me with the words "You truant!" She was a courageous & caring woman. May God be pleased with her.

Unfortunately I was a sixth-grade dropout. I pursued a street life that other youth my age did. In February of 1989 at the age of 17, I was involved in a situation that resulted in three people being shot. One succumbed to their injuries. Charges would eventually be lodged against me in this matter on February 11, 1991. What's interesting about the period between 1986-1992 is that although I dropped out of school & had no formal schooling, I operated proficiently in

various street enterprises. The average person wouldn't think I was a sixth-grade dropout. It was only after my introduction into the PA DOC that the charade came to an end & my house of cards came crumbling down around me.

In 1993 after a week-long trial, I would be acquitted of the most serious charges that would have resulted in a mandatory life sentence without the possibility of parole. After being acquitted of the major murder charges, my elderly Jewish attorney representing me in this matter, Daniel Greene, looked over at me. He then admonished me in a stern, caring voice, "Son, when you get upstate, make sure you get your GED!" The truth of the matter is that it was only until this prison experience that the importance of education crystalized for me. I would frequent prison debates listening to older men who'd been locked up for decades by this time. The debates were spirited, loquacious, & cogently.

Formal education soon became a lightning rod for me. This was well before Pell Grants were stripped away from prisoners. This meant that many of the penitentiary sages I met had acquired college degrees, and some of them were multiple-degree holders. I soaked up like a sponge all that I could fit inside my memory bank & composition books. These forums on the prison yard took on a Socratic-symposium vibe. In fact, many of these wise cats would quote verbatim Socrates, Frederick Nietzsche, Niccolo Machiavelli, & many others off the top of their heads. When I didn't agree with something spoken, figuratively I ate the chicken & spit the bones out. Theological debates were the most common. Waste stations housing discarded members of society became Ivy league universities. Greater still, the Great Pyramids of Giza. Renaissance Compounds.

Before long, I began seriously engaging in education. My reading, writing, & mathematical literacy reflected a fifth-grade level. In public due to my poor grades, lack of interest, truancy issues, & problematic status, I was placed in special education classes. Honestly, this only made me act out more because I felt like teachers didn't care about or perceive value in me as a human being. Even now with the passage of time, I still can hear in my mind the salvo of racist & dehumanizing remarks. Verbal Projectiles! Even while adjudicated & carted off to several juvenile camps for months at a time, I don't recall deriving enjoyment from formal schooling. It took some time & a great deal of hard work, but eventually in 1995 I acquired my GED.

During the periods of 1991–1995, I was in and out of the Restrictive Housing Unit ("RHU") aka The Hole, mainly for minor infractions, but I did get caught up a few times for fighting. The

culture upstate in the mountains reflected hillbillies who behaved like our present-day Rightwing Proud Boys. When new commits arrived on location it was customary for staff to break them in. This implied or entailed establishing boundaries. Staying in one's lane was strictly enforced. Guards operated much like military drill sergeants, foaming threats & racist epithets at will in attempts to rouse contempt in prisoners, especially Black & Brown ones. But White male prisoners who'd resided in big cities, primarily Philadelphia, were treated with similar disdain & bellicosity. All new commits fell victim to verbal & physical assaults. It was considered grooming.

Most misconduct reports were for minor infractions. A popular charge that stuck was "Reckless eyeballing." This consisted of looking too hard or too long at staff. But none of this had to happen for vindictive C/O's or personnel to lie about it. Needless to say, due to my hair-trigger temper, rebellious mindset, & misguided masculinity, I became an easy target. I found myself caught up in it, doing months at a time in the RHU. And since Hearing Examiners are related to or sympathizers with DOC personnel, no matter how frivolous the prima facie evidence was, the charges seemed sufficient to support a guilty verdict. Disciplinary Time ("DC") ranged from 30 days to indefinitely. My RHU stay never was less than 90 days at a time. The most time I served at a time was 13 months.

After getting my balance, I fared well, preoccupying my time with working out, boxing-training in the gym, reading books, and a great deal of diving ponderously within myself. Eventually things took on new colors for me as I evolved, preparing myself for making my exodus within a few years. Because I was found guilty only of involuntary manslaughter, I was serving 7-15 years which included the drug conviction....