

Walk In Those Shoes

February 2024 Newsletter – ISSUE 7

Choosing Otherwise

My First Lesson in Cognitive Reconstruction

By Larry Dynell Fuller, Jr.

The year was 2007, and I was a twenty-year-old active gang member serving a thirty-year prison term for a murder I'd committed as a teen. In October of that year, I was found guilty of attempting to assault staff, placed on Intensive Control status and locked inside an isolation cell that would be my home for the next six months; a cell stripped bare of every creature comfort except one - a copy of Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* left lying on the floor, no doubt by a previous occupant. After reading the synopsis, I promptly tossed it aside. *Just a bunch of self-help garbage*, I surmised. Self-help literature was like religion, just without all the 'eternal life' jazz. They both sought to dupe people into believing the world wasn't irreparably broken. I knew better. The world was broken, and there existed neither a book nor a God mighty enough to fix it.

I contented myself for the first couple months in solitary by numbing my mind with trivialities. I trifled away my days listening to the radio, lusting after girlie magazines, trading gossip with guys in neighboring cells, and sleeping as much as humanly possible. That routine, however, soon grew stale, and I craved a new stimulus – anything to breathe fresh air into my painfully mundane reality. Then I remembered the book. It lay neglected in a dark corner underneath my bed, caked in dust. I retrieved it, cleaned it off, and started to read.

What I first read had me both deeply intrigued and slightly offended. Covey disagreed with clinical professionals who argued that we are who we are because of our DNA, upbringing and environment. Instead, he suggested human nature was primarily linked to the choices we make in response to those things. *"Until a person can say deeply and honestly, 'I am what I am today because of the choices I made yesterday', that person cannot say, 'I choose otherwise' (Covey, p 80)."*

That I was solely responsible for my life outcomes struck me as a wholly novel idea, yet it also undermined the long-held paradigms I'd created to help justify my behavior. What about the severe physical and emotional abuse I'd suffered as a child or the prevalence of drugs and violence in my home and community? Had I not been fundamentally shaped, conditioned

In Recognition

WITS writer, Geoff Martin, organized & facilitated a writing contest at Columbus Correctional in North Carolina.

Our featured essay, *Choosing Otherwise*, is the winner of that contest.

There are WITS writers and others committed to supporting reform in communities within prison walls all over the United States. If you know anyone who goes above and beyond, please let us know at:

**Walk In Those Shoes
P.O. Box 70092
Henrico, VA 23255**

If you would like to support WITS, 501c(3) please donate at
www.walkinthoseshoes.com
or P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255



Artist, Cerron T. Hooks

and victimized by those things? How often had my relatives told me that I inherited my father's hot temper, that I was just like him? Clearly, I was just a chip off the old block! How was that my fault? It angered me to think that Mr. Covey would dare to mitigate those experiences. *Who the hell is he to judge? He has no idea what I've been through!*

Yet, I continued to read. I returned to that theme of proactive choice over and over again, each time thinking about it more and more critically. In fact, sixteen years later, I'm still returning to it, and this life-changing concept now comprises the foundation of my core philosophy.

In time, I'd learn that Covey's teachings, though no less eminent, were far from groundbreaking. For centuries other well-known writers and educators stood firm on this belief: We have the unique ability to cognitively reframe our experiences in ways that assuage suffering and enhance wisdom, growth and resilience. That same ability also affords us the option to interpret life in not so helpful ways and with far less favorable results.

I now understand that there is a significant difference between being victimized and choosing to play the victim. The former is an event, while the latter is a decision to identify with the event from a demoralized perspective. A victim, therefore, must inevitably fall short of empowerment, since to be empowered is to necessarily disallow helplessness and assume responsibility for one's own narrative despite having every occasion to point the finger.

My history of recurrent abuse and the harsh realities of my incarceration do not define me, nor do they determine what's possible for my future. My thinking and my choices do. Developing the habit of proactive decision-making has empowered me to renounce my gang affiliation, restore broken relationships, improve my health, prioritize my education, and make a renewed commitment each day to subordinate outward circumstances to inner purpose. I accept that my current situation is the immediate result of poor choices I made in the past, and for that reason, I can now cry out with full conviction my undying resolve – *I choose otherwise!*

Covey, Stephen R. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*. Simon & Schuster.



Looking For WRITER CONTRIBUTIONS

INTERESTED IN CONTRIBUTING TO A WITS CREATED 'BEGINNING WRITING' CURRICULUM?
WE ARE LOOKING FOR INPUT TO BE INCLUDED IN A WRITING GUIDE & WORKBOOK
CREATED BY RESIDENTS FOR RESIDENTS.

IF INTERESTED, SEND YOUR IDEAS TO WITS, MARKED '**BOOK PROJECT**'. WE ARE LOOKING FOR:

- Short essays sharing how writing, regardless of type, has impacted you.
- Writing tips you have learned along the way.
- Letter writing inspiration, from personal to writing a legislator.
- All genres of writing guidance.
- Proposed workbook chapters.

All submissions must be original and not previously published.

Submission is permission to edit & publish.

If your work is chosen for inclusion, you will be contacted.

Please send proposed material to WITS, BOOK PROJECT, P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, Virginia 23255

**WITS writer and artist, Jarod Lee
Wesenberg,
AKA Kareem Tha J.R.E.A.M.,
is changing the narrative in
Texas.**

**While hosting a Radio Show
from the Micheal Unit, he also
shared a little bit of himself.**



“I have two ‘whys’, and my first ‘why’ is that when I first caught this time, man, I made a promise to God, right? And I said, man, if you help me out of this situation, not only will I change my life, but I’ll help others.

“And then I got all that time, and I forgot about that promise. But then, over time, He was showing me certain things, like, ‘Man, I am helping you out of this situation.’

“See, I was looking for the microwave gratification, and I didn’t realize that He was putting me in the oven, right? And so, He was showing me these things, and I started to remember. Like, you know what, He helped me out of this mental penitentiary I was in.

“And I have to stay in tune with that because not only has He already delivered his part, and I changed, I’m changing my life – but to help others, He gave me a platform to do it. Like, how I make a promise to you, and then you give me the platform to fulfill my promise I made to you?

“And my second ‘why’, man, is my son, right? And he don’t know this yet, but when I was sitting in that cell in the beginning of that time, man, I really, I was suicidal, and I was really right ready to cash out, you know what I mean? From life.

“And I thought, I said, man, but what if my son needs an organ or something later on in life, and I was the only one that could give it to him? Now, in my mind, it was a childish thought, but it, it helped.

“And I try to stay in that ‘why’ on a daily basis. But sometimes, man, you get boggled down with the everyday life things, man. And you’ll forget. But I say that because I want us to stay in tune with our ‘why’, man. That is with everybody who listening to this right now. ‘Cause I’m talking collectively but individually as well, to those that have their earbuds or their headphones on, man, I’m talking to you, man.

“Find your ‘why’. And as soon as you find your ‘why’, you’ll find your purpose.”

The Gallery



'Why The Lone Wolf Howls' – Jarod Lee Wesenberg

'WHY THE LONE WOLF HOWLS'

by Jarod Lee Wesenberg

In all its ferociousness and intensity to survive, when the wolf finds himself alone... it is not the pack he howls for... It is not the moon he howls at... No. It is the memory of his mate for which he howls! His alpha female that knew him best, the one he could let his fur down around.

In his loneliness it is her that he misses the most. This is why the lone wolf howls.

If you would like to donate art for use in *The Gallery*, please mail to P.O. Box 70092, Henrico, VA 23255 for consideration & include a brief narrative about what inspired the piece.

WITS tries to communicate issues in a way that lends itself to producing positive change and revealing the limitless potential behind bars.

If you would like to submit your writing for consideration on our website at www.walkinthoseshoes.com or for inclusion in upcoming newsletters, please submit only unpublished work to:

Walk In Those Shoes
P.O. Box 70092
Henrico, VA 23255

Unfortunately, we do not pay for general submissions, although we have frequent contests and also currently pay \$25 for First Page newsletter essays.

We consider a submission permission to edit and post. Length is flexible, although 1,500 words or less is a typical post. Poetry is considered.

We also accept donations of art for the Gallery.

THE SHOW UP: Preparation Is a Requirement for Making Change

By Terry Robinson

NC Death Row is once again alive with excitement, the men here scrambling about to make good on an opportunity. Although it's not as news breaking as having our death sentences vacated, it is a step in the right direction. The reason being, if death sentences ever were vacated, then some Death Row men would be eligible for parole and could possibly return to society where they would face a whole new struggle given a lack of education. The required use of today's technology and heightened job qualifications are impediments to men locked away for 20+ years, crippling effects that would greatly increase the likelihood of returning to prison without adequate, modern-day learning. But opportunity has arrived for the men on Death Row to lessen those odds by taking a crucial step in their rehabilitative process; that's right, the men here are pursuing their education by eagerly embracing the challenge of attaining their G.E.D.

When I arrived on Death Row in the year 2000, there were no educational programs. The place was a catacomb where bodies awaited death by execution, and oftentimes illness. The days and nights were spent frivolously engaging in anything to fend off boredom, while bedtime was when the real justice happened as we lay curled up alongside our sincerest regrets. The threads of our hope were put to the test as years stretched into decades, leaving our futures frayed with the realization our lives were in Limbo. Death Row is a stagnant world, a waste land where aspirations lay barren under despondent soil. That is until 2013, when a lead psychologist planted the seed of humanity and discovered that seed would grow.

For the next few years, classes were introduced, breathing life and accountability into Death Row. Creative Expression, House of Healing, Mindfulness were offerings on which we thrived. Only therapeutic classes were allowed, nothing academic, but still we were schooling the traumas of our minds. There would be no Bachelor's for Speech & Debate, no Ph.D. for Toast Masters or Chess; the men showed up on principle alone, not the expectation of accolades. But those programs would suffer a setback when questions arose concerning ethics. The facilitators were treating Death Row inmates with a hint of dignity, which violated the nefarious terms of our conviction status. A battle ensued between opposing sides, and in the end the programs suffered casualty. For 10 years afterwards, Death Row would cling to the lifeline that was prison reform, doing all we could to better ourselves on our own, many of us without adequate education.

Then, to further his education, Death Row resident Marcus Mitchell petitioned the Governor after having made several requests to prison administrators and hitting a dead end. Mitchell's ambition was to attain his G.E.D., and his determination would not be easily denied. He exercised every option available to reach out to the Governor and after years, he heard back. It seemed the Governor was a firm believer in the necessity of education, even for those condemned to die. The decision was made for the local community college to provide G.E.D. classes for Death Row. Mitchell had done it. When asked why getting his G.E.D. was so important to him, Mitchell stated, "It's the gateway to everything I want to do in life. It's an achievement for myself and my mama. Education is the foundation for rehabilitation."

The aspirations of the other men kicked into high gear as well. Receiving their G.E.D. was permission to dream again. Some have set their sights on life outside Death Row while others just wish not to die without a sense of dignity. One man, Mario Phillips, stated persistently, "I always knew education was important. I love to learn. I've taken the G.E.D. test 4 times already."

William Robinson added, "Getting my G.E.D is needed if I want to be taken serious. I want to prove I'm worthy of a second chance."

Since the announcement, Death Row has been animated with talk of academics. Some men tell tales of their high school days, their eyes glossed over reminiscently as their minds peel back the harsh years spent on Death Row, back to a time when their greatest concern was report cards, not infractions. Some men here turn to the educational programs on the tablet to dust off their academic prowess while some huddle together around the day room tables to unearth problems and solutions in the G.E.D. practice book.

I recently passed by the cell occupied by one Jason Hurst, who'd taken to spending evenings studying with another man, Andrew Ramseur. I wasn't ready for the inspiration such a sight would invoke, but their thoughtful preparation made me feel proud. When asked what the opportunity meant to them, Hurst stated, "I want to make my family proud. My sons, I want to inspire them. Getting my G.E.D. opens up the door to further knowledge, and it's pivotal to possibly reentering society."

Ramseur added, "I'm doing something productive. The G.E.D. is a steppingstone to a degree. Also, it's an act of defiance to those who believed I wasn't worth it."

I realized after talking to these men and others just how vital educational opportunity is for Death Row. I, myself, was a high school dropout who soon after earned my G.E.D, an accomplishment I'd long taken for granted until I was reminded of its importance by the sheer determination of these men. Others have taken the initiative to prepare, one group recruiting the assistance of an inmate tutor, another guy going as far as to order a workbook through the mail. It's not the first time Death Row has risen to the occasion, and it for sure won't be the last as we are proving we're deserving of education and so much more - if given the chance. The men here are doing the work to improve themselves despite the status that says we're irredeemable. Irredeemable? No, just broken men mending themselves everyday with accountability - and now, education.