



JSTOR

JSTOR Access in Prison Second Chance Month Submission:

Danny Thomas

Prompt: How has education helped you to discover or redefine who you are?

1.

Danmy Thomas

In 2002, I was 26 years old, recently sentenced to life in prison with my earliest opportunity for release at 60. Needless to say I felt as if I was trapped in the eye of a storm. I was entering a new world and absolutely clueless to what may lie ahead, one thing was certain; I was determined to make something of my life.

In my youth, I was always considered to be a smart kid, a well read kid if you will; sometimes my friends would tell me "you think you know everything!" For reasons I cannot accurately explain, learning became my coping mechanism in prison. I didn't have any academic education beyond high school so I struggled to establish some sense of formal instruction. Nonetheless I'd read and sporadically move from one subject to the next at times leaving one book half read, jumping to another only to return to it when I felt inspired.

If you'd asked back then what my goal was I'd simply respond "to learn." Most times I had no clue who the authors were, either the title or subject matter would reel me in. I'll never forget the first time I read a Michael Eric Dyson book titled "Open Mike." As I read the reviews on the back of the book I can vividly remember one referring to Dr. Dyson as a "rhetorical acrobat." In a single page I would have to research the meaning and context of several terms and phrases.

Inadvertently I had begun the journey of what I call my formal - informal education. Attending college was my goal and I found an opportunity to pursue a degree in criminal justice through what is now a delinquent career education program.

Unfortunately I was unable to complete the program for financial reasons, yet this did not deter me. In 2004 my career as a jailhouse lawyer evolved with my hiring as the prison's law clerk. Studying social issues such as free speech, mass incarceration and human rights through the legal lens offered me the depth to my education I'd been searching for. As my reading and legal studies evolved so did my writings. I was fully invested in the realm of social science and the ability to weave the information into a central theme were empowering to say the least. Fast forward to the present my prison education matured me for the physical and psychological rigors of the prison.



I was often told by older prisoners, "If they can detain you, they will confine you. My refusal to be detained by the state was reinforced by my willingness to accept my role as an activist in the pursuit of justice against a system that views an educated prisoner as a threat. A system that fears intellectually assertive prisoners and fears the influence we may have on those who're recognized themselves as helpless and defeated, leaving them lethargic, passive and dependent. Moreover this newfound identity became the first step towards true rehabilitation as Malcolm X proclaimed in his autobiography, "I was amazed at how my past life slid away from me like snow off a roof!"

The self-determination that evolved from educational journey influenced my decision to not only challenge the system, to change the system and change the prosecutor's description of me as deplorable and evil. Thus I became not only a "freedom fighter" but also a "freedom writer." The desire to be educated defied the systems effort to dismiss my humanity. The more I read and write, the greater understanding I gain regarding what's required of me. In the Qur'an, the holy text of Muslims, a passage of scripture poses the question, "Are those who know equal to those who do not know?" For obvious reasons the answer is no. Those who know are obligated to use the knowledge we obtain in service of ourselves and others. We may not be able to guarantee that we will succeed but our effort will guarantee that we are not willing to accept not trying.

As reflected by Antonio Gramsci in his prison notebooks, "Prison life can shatter the soul and will of anyone who experiences it, it destroys thought utterly. Just as Gramsci struggled fiercely to maintain his sense of purpose while confined to Mussolini's prison for over a decade, he eventually realized that only through a dedicated program of intellectual engagement could he endure this hardship. With this plan of self-determination he further wrote, "I want, following a fixed plan to devote myself intensely and systematically to some subject that will absorb me and give a focus to my inner life."



Everyday prison reminds me that I took the life of another young man, his family still grieves and my own is still healing. The weight of this knowledge can feel insurmountable at times yet I strive valiantly and look forward to taking responsibility for my actions inspired by my self-directed education which allows me to be of service to my community in whatever manner is necessary to assist. As I look back over this 23 years of incarceration, now 50 years old I am now an integral part of my son's life who happens to be 26, the same age I was entering prison. My obligation as a father, mentor (peer recovery specialist) and self-determined person could have not been possible if it were not for the love and support of family and friends. Equally important is the fact that my desire to be educated in this environment gave people a reason to believe in me and my potential. I am certain that my pursuit of education saved my life and will hopefully save others!!!

In Solidarity,

D. Roy Thomas

BIO

Danmy Thomas 1054249, Greenville Correctional (Virginia)

I currently work as a peer recovery specialist for the Residential Illicit Drug Use Program (RIDUP) at Greenville Correctional Center in Virginia. I am a jailhouse lawyer and active member of NYU's / Beruskin Institute for Human Rights Jailhouse Lawyers Initiative. I've also published writing with NYU's review of law and social change, Virginia Prison Justice Network, Virginia Defender, The Unlocked Project and currently a reporter for The Spotlight Newsletter at Greenville Correctional. I have an amazing son Devin Roy Thomas and two grandchildren Nolawi and Jaden. I am also a veteran of The United States ARMY. Also work as a student-teacher for The Henry George Academy





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dave rich

## **Relativity:**

### **The Speed of Opportunity & the Black Hole of Carceral Spaces**

By dave rich

At what point, I wonder, did Dr. King dismiss integration as unrealizable idealism and settle for desegregation as a less desirable, albeit, more practical solution to the problems of the segregated South? Often, I ponder this question as I attempt to stave off my own shift from the idealism that infuses my hope to the willingness to settle that pragmatism breeds. Education, oddly enough, has played a malignant role in this exchange. I thought education would make life more tolerable. It has not.

Rather, education has illuminated me to a great many issues I'd rather remain ignorant to. It has provided me with opportunities to defy the expectations placed on me. Yet the vacuum that is the prison industrial complex (PIC) have mostly consumed those opportunities; their light has, thus far, failed to escape its gravitational field. Of a truth, I live in the wake of a collapsed star of dreams that now threatens to add me to its emptiness.

I was granted an audience with the administrators over prison education in the state of my incarceration recently. I left from that meeting mystified from their aloofness. In response to my inquiry about utilizing our degrees to create economic opportunities to combat poverty in prison, one administrator responded, rather blandly, "well, prices *are* going up everywhere." (This statement ignores our (incarcerated persons') reality that while we purchase items from commissary that are equal and, in some cases, more expensive than their free-world counterparts, that the "inmate" pay scale in my state has not changed since, now deceased, President Jimmy Carter left office... but, I digress). My kneejerk reaction would have me be their begrudged Caliban. Their saviorism and hubris would have me be their show pony Phillis Wheatly.



Instead, I will be neither. But I will be the voice of the “celebrated statistics” whose individuality is not recognized; who are lauded for their completion of degree programs but whose photos are forbidden at their graduation ceremony.

I have not yet been moved from the idealism of my prison abolitionist hopes. Neither am I ready to settle for reformist efforts that pad the careers of ambitious administrators while dismissing the solutions presented by the enlightened of the downtrodden. The light of incarcerated persons’ generated opportunities may not escape the gravitational black hole that is the PIC. But one substance will. That of the ink that flows from the atomic pen whose invisible wielder may not be seen, but will be heard... They will be heard.

I thought education would make life more tolerable.

It has not.

But it has equipped me with the skills to make life less intolerable for those who come after me. It has brought me into the knowledge that of the multitude of efforts like mines the paradigm will shift. And now, I employ you, dear reader, to yield your efforts, your energies, your advocacy and your allyship to incarcerated persons led initiatives. Organizations such as Lifers’ Clubs have been and continue to be staples in incarcerated communities that are (unfortunately) overpopulated and underfunded. Inquire of your systems-impacted peers and loved ones of how you may support these grassroot organizations of social change.

Mwisho

# Indomitable, The Movement

Can you see it? Lo, a small but growing speck,  
Over yonder, just near the horizon.  
I see ignorance dispersed; pride put in check.  
But, above all I see consciousness rising.

Among this bunch I see heed being given  
To those who seek to be self-actualized  
The voices of foolish leaders now hidden,  
Or altogether reduced and minimized.

In their absence springs a longing for leaders.  
But I see those gaps being readily filled,  
By a flock of inspirational breeders,  
And by gutsy men unafraid to be real.

*I see striding men still finding room for self-improvement.*

*Thus, it begins, behold, Indomitable the Movement.*

With diligence the crusade enters at last,  
And with it the momentum of generations.  
I see bodies once prepped for the dirt and grass,  
Quickened and primed for such an occasion.

I see a communal education  
Developed entirely from within.  
I see contemplative meditation,  
I see disciplined and weaponized pens.

I see the maturation of great thinkers,  
Strengthened despite of their confined conditions.  
I see minds freed from the forces that tinker,  
And loosed from the noose of industrial prisons.

*I see striding men still finding room for self-improvement.*

*Thus, it begins, behold, Indomitable the Movement.*

And now it is upon us with all of its weight;  
The force of its presence thickening the air;  
Too majestic to be contained by these gates,  
I see prison-intellectuals everywhere.

I see bodies restored to personhood,  
Despite constant attempts to demoralize.  
I see those who were once misunderstood,  
Humanizing those who dehumanize.  
I see wisdom growing in abundance,

Despite attempts to limit literature;  
And before the rise of these thoughtful pundits,  
I see mountains rendered miniature.

*I see striding men still finding room for self-improvement.*

*Thus, it begins, behold, Indomitable the Movement.*

And now I am invited to join their ranks.  
To the cause I yield my energy to expend.  
The motto adopted by this think tank,  
"Eradicating Recidivism from Within."

I hear the cessation of schadenfreude<sup>1</sup>,  
Replaced by awe at the rise of the resilient,  
As those once deemed incorrigibly void,  
Are now widely recognized as brilliant.

I see this movement gaining acceleration,  
Yet, free from "institutional saviorism,"  
And the whitening meant by rehabilitation,  
This movement sees through your fancy euphemisms.

*I see striding men still finding room for self-improvement.*

*Thus, it begins, behold, Indomitable the Movement.*

And now the fiery torch I bear with pride,  
To light the candles of the imprisoned "others".  
And to espouse the change that resides inside  
And restore humanity to my younger brothers.

No longer can gatherings be labeled as "gangs"  
Neither can ill stereotypes prevail.  
For the awareness provoked by this change has  
changed  
Perceptions of men emerging from jail

With these sentiments I bring this tale to an end  
Though the things that you hear are only the half,  
And thus, it goes; and thus, the movement begins;  
Failure behind us, and successes in our path.

*I see striding men still finding room for self-improvement.*

*Thus, it begins, behold, Indomitable the Movement.*

<sup>1</sup> i.e. 'satisfaction felt at someone else's misfortune.'