

Michael Bell – 9/28/2023

The Importance of Education

Education in a prison environment can be as important as life and death. Personally, when I was at the end of my rope and seconds away from self annihilation, I reached for education as a tactic. It became my counselor and coping mechanism. Education became my friend and strangely, sometimes it felt like my enemy.

The more I read and the more knowledge I acquired, the more I began to be tortured by the hyper awareness of all my faults and shortcomings. I started to understand as a man, and even more importantly as a Black man, I had violated more than just the law. My heart and mind were being opened in ways I never expected. The clarity with which I began to see my own situation and the means by which I'd come to this end was overwhelming and deeply devastating. The profound shame I felt was almost too great to bear and I was plunged into the depths of depression, helplessness, and despair. To be honest, I didn't want to live and education was about to kill me.

I began to crave the blissful days of my ignorance. In ignorance there is freedom. There's no conscience and no accountability. It's a shield and a haven where one can seek refuge from culpability. As safe and secure as that shield is, it's also heavy, cumbersome, and cowardly. Alone, inside a segregation cell, is where I decided to live. In spite of education's attempted murder, I was going to use it not only to change my life, but to give me a new life. It was now education bust. I can't even say I was "uneducated"--that would be a major disservice to the many great educators I've had throughout my life. It would also be disrespectful to my parents who worked hard to ensure I always had high quality educational opportunities.

I needed a different type of education: one that was not only mental, but equally, if not more importantly socially, morally, and spiritually as well!

I started simply by reading--newspapers, magazines, old textbooks, almanacs, dictionaries, and medical/legal journals--anything that I could get my hands on that provided information.

As a lifer, educational opportunities didn't come easy. When I was released from segregation a year later I signed up for every class, program, and trade the facility offered. Due to my sentence I was always pushed further down the waiting list in favor of men who, "would

one day be released”. That’s not to say opportunities existed in abundance even for those future freed men. If I was to do this, it would be without the help of the state with the help of my mother, who sent me every book I’ve ever asked for and my cousin who sent me every book, test, and quiz she had during her college years. I was able to take my education to another level.

It wasn’t until I returned to Stateville in 2017 that I saw an opportunity to get a formal education and possibly even a college degree. When I left the facility 15 years prior there were no educational programs but now there were 3 colleges and something called P-NAP. I applied for P-NAP classes and within 3 months I was allowed to attend.

I’d know some of the men in these classes for over 20 years and I could instantly see and feel a change within. I saw pride, self worth, and self respect. Most importantly, there was an overall sense of brotherhood.

Education has given me an opportunity to prove that my life isn’t worthless and a way to give honor and respect to those I’ve hurt, harmed, and victimized.

If anyone is still confused about the usefulness of education in prison, I’ll use one word to express its importance—transformative. Not only for the life of the individual but also for the facility, which is clearly a safer and less violent environment, has familial relations; as he or she shares their accomplishments and due to almost non-existent recidivism rates for those who earn degrees within prison it will transfer to his or her community and society as a whole upon his release.