

Community Engagement Seminar

The New York State Literary Center
<http://www.nyslc.org/>

Office of the Sheriff, County of Monroe
Monroe Correctional Facility

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A Testament: My Journey

I am reflecting on what was read along with my own thoughts. Many things come into my mind on how the writing sheds light on today's Black pain, and it reflects my life.

I, too,
was swallowed whole
by
the streets

and

this nightmare repeats.

Black youth continue to be swallowed by the streets. Every night on the Rochester news mothers weep.

They say
Black Lives Matter,
but
the price is cheap.

On the news every night throughout the world,
Black lives are taken in the streets.

Sometimes I am invisible when I am in plain view.
In my mind
no one, not even me, can see inside.
Sometimes
I cry right before your eyes
and you can't see a tear trickle down my eyes.
My tears are all inside,
transparent to the physical eye.
I've become a master of how to hide,
a broken man, depressed, ready to die.
Look right at me
you can't see I died right before your very eyes.
You never took a deep look into my eyes.

Sometimes
It's my pride.

A man is not supposed to cry.
It's a sign of weakness.
Hell no!
They are not going to see my cry!
I'll hide my shame and pride from those who see only my outside
with drugs and alcohol.
I will ever let you see me cry.
Only when I dig deep inside
is it obvious to me I cannot hide
from myself.

Black history, where does it begin?
Is it yours, is it mine,
was it ever mine?
Did we ever exist in the passage of time
or do we exist only on the 6 o'clock news
connected to crime?
400 years of blood, sweat, and tears,
a pimp.
a hoe,
a dopeman selling dreams,
the crack head,
the dope fiend with a needle in an arm
draining
draining all of us, draining our dreams.

In His – Story, were we ever?
I dig it.
I see where we were right there
killing each other in the streets
or getting gunned down by the police.
Don't believe all that you see
because that is all we will ever be
in His – Story.

Pharaohs, kings, queens,
I guess we just dropped on this country in 1619.
It could have been you or me.

Is His – Story what, the sickness of superiority,
same as the media pictures of you killing me.
Was it colonialism?
Was it capitalism?

Put down the blunts.
Put down the dope.
Put down the Hennessy.
Black history, where does it begin?
It begins with our children knowing what Black history is.

I am up early in the morning with my fiancé. We are sharing our thoughts and dreams, our realities and our responsibilities. She is having coffee, and I am having tea before she is off to work.

Lights on!

I wake up to a familiar reality as it dawns on me here, once again, another man holds the key.

No!

What happened, how could it be, jail, the last place I want to be. I am tired of this sick and crazy reality.

Where I am is
in
the home of broken dreams
and thoughts
of what could be
or
what could have been.

I am surrounded by broken women and men. You want to know where I am mentally? Where I am has beaten the Hell out of me. I am doing the same things, expecting a different reality. I guess I really do need recovery because this is what's called insanity. If I keep it up right here is where I will always be. It's a damn shame. I am a victim of my own insanity. I am ashamed of the example I must have been. My two sons locked within as men, three generations, myself, their grandfather, now them. And this journey, God willing, will make better men.

Here I am today.

I
can't
do
this
again.

I shed tears thinking how my children grew up visiting me in the pen. This insanity can never happen again. My grandchildren deserve a better example of a man.

Stop!

I have brought pain to my fiancé, the mother of my children, to family and friends.

This
insanity
must
end

where I'm at, where I'm going, where I've been.

If only I could have seen the journey ahead of me when I was a child, the pain of my childhood imprisonment, addiction, the pain that made me hide what was inside and cry with tears no one could see.

I choose a journey that brought me to highs and lows. I am a living testament to going down the road I choose I did not know it would turn my soul cold. Why did I choose this road? I give you my testimony served as it should be bold and cold, this road where nickels, dimes, and twenties were sold.

My journey is my testament of where I have been and where I am at now.

R. W.

I

I was born in Rockingham, North Carolina. We were very poor. My mom worked three jobs every day. She was very tired when she walked through the door.

I have six sisters and one brother. After my father left there were no others. As *I* got older and stated to have sex, *I* didn't stop until *I* had five kids.

I haven't learned
anything
yet.

I never saw my kids get on the school bus to school. *I* didn't live up to a father's rules. *I* choose the street life over my kids and went to prison and did two bids.

I
was so hurt.
I saw
that *I*
had destroyed my kid's lives.

Now today *I* sit in this jail
and *I* ask myself
am *I*
ever going to get out of this Hell?

R. C. W.

Untitled

The streets,
our brothers and sisters
are subjected to the streets
subjected to the streets each day,
each night
where they look for some type of understanding
love,
or for a place they can lay their restless bodies.

The streets lead us
to where we shouldn't be,
to jail,
to death.

How can we get anywhere
when this system
keeps us down
and gives us food stamps?

Anonymous

Untitled

I've never known a lot about Frederick Douglass or his writing, but from what I have learned so far his writing is very enlightening. I don't read a lot, but I want to read his book.

I found Reginald Dwayne Betts' poem very interesting. I was raised by a Black man who served twenty-five years in Attica. I am White. I learned most of what I do know about racial issues from him. Being as I have grown up here in Rochester I have seen a lot of violence with way too many children dying. I have been in so many positions that I could have been one of them, but thankfully God has watched over me, and I am still here today.

Why?
I do not know.

I have known plenty who were not so fortunate.

I have learned
to cherish my dreams as they come.

I have a fiancé who is sick and in and out of the hospital. I pray for her and her family every day. I have not heard from my fiancé in over a week, and I am worried.

Jail
is
no place
for
anyone
to be.

I can only imagine what slavery was like. I know what it is like to be here.

S. J.

Freedom is Not a Game

I sit here in this chair deeply meditating,
time breaks every man
freedom can't be bought.

As I look at another Black man
I know knowledge can be taught.
I go to court with my head held high.
Can I walk?
I sit here stress out,
and think about my pain.
I'm in my own lane.
When I think about the outside,
I am mentally drained,
traumatized
like when I got shot
all I heard was a bang.
Trays up and "You have court"
are when I hear my name.
I miss my kids everyday.
I miss my girl everyday.
I feel shame.
I am a man of my own actions;
there is no one to blame.
I am a man of my own actions.
Freedom is not a game.

T. Y.

Confused

I drink my life away
and I think it's okay.
I seek, and I don't understand.
Black history has paved my way.
I stare into the judge's eyes
and don't know what to say.
I always remember what my mom said,
"There's a time for serious and a time for play."
I wake up a confused child,
where should I go, I don't know which way.
I pray to the Lord and thank God
for waking up on this day.
Patience is the key.
My heart will stay brave.

T. Y.

Success

My thoughts attach to the paper
as I seek freedom.
We gather together
like men and talk
and say whatever comes to our lips.
Dale teaches us history

as the time ticks.
I respect my elders
and wish I could age with knowledge.
Today I received my G.E.D.
Will I go to college?
Every author has a story and someone to listen.
I wake up and see my reflection.
Negativity I am resisting.
Believe nothing you hear
and half of what you see.
Everyone talks, who knows the truth
you or me?

Free My Thoughts

Lonely and cold nights in my cell
with no one to talk to and a story to tell.
As the days pass I stay to myself
with bottled feelings and no one to help.
When I think too hard
I get a headache.
To resist it, I itch my scalp.
Deep down I thank the Lord for my blessings,
and I understand I am in jail to teach myself a lesson.
Noodles, sausage, and cheese
they will satisfy your dreams.
Be thankful for the wake up and your presence
and stop focusing on the small things.
Let freedom ring so shall it be
as I have a dream.

T. Y.

On Reginald Dwayne Betts' Poem "For The City That Nearly Broke Me"

"Khalif's five-year sentence for possession, for believing there's a pension plan for the pusherman, for Mayfield's hero turned skinny jeans-wearing teen," these words hit home with me. Why? I bought into Mayfield's hero ("ghetto prince is my thing").

I really believed
I could have a better life
by
destroying other lives,
by selling and abusing drugs.

D. S.

Two Poets

We read and talked about two poets who were born on the same day seventy-eight years apart. Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902. He wrote about the American heartbreak,

“The great mistake
That Jamestown made
Long ago”

slavery.

He wrote of only finding freedom in his writing where he could be free to say things that were unspoken because of racial barriers.

Reginald Dwayne Betts was born on February 1, 1980. He wrote of the modern day struggles of inner city brothers, the addictions, lifestyles, the holds of probation and child support, the everyday troubles of a Black man.

J. G.

What We Value

Today
we are losing a lot of Black men
who are getting swiped into the streets,
losing them to violence.
It doesn't make sense,
any sense.

We are losing Black men
to unnecessary things.
We know how the world is treating us,
letting us kill each other every day.

We have to change how society looks at us.
We have to appreciate what we value,
take the time
to know what we value.

S. S.