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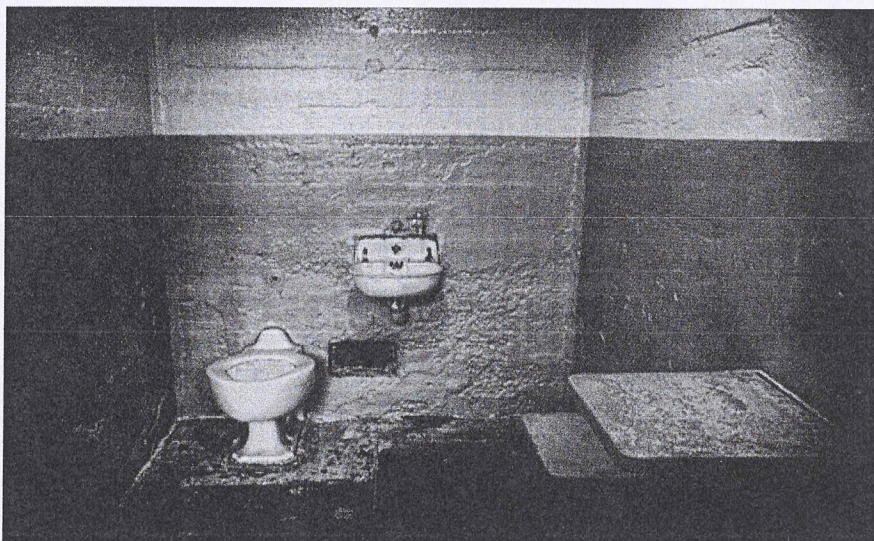
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Letter From an Old Prisoner

JANUARY 20, 2014 BY KENNETH HARTMAN LEAVE A COMMENT

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Don't surrender to the darkness of these places. Don't surrender to the darkness of any place.

I've often wondered what I would say to myself, back 34 years ago, right after I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. I'm sure it would start with an encouragement to focus on the possibilities of my life, even a life inside. Perhaps then, the life I traveled might have been a little less painful, and a little less frustrating.

"I've come to believe a few things about this process of serving time and surviving and, possibly, prospering. So, in the interest of helping others benefit off of my many mistakes, I offer up the following reflections and thoughts."

Early on, I decided I was going to be a tough guy. I succeeded because that's not really a challenge. I fell prey to the idea that my life was meaningless in any way that could be measured, so I set out to prove "they" were right - I deserved to be in prison for the rest of my life.

Prison is full of guys who believe this is where they belong. Guys that are filled with remorse and shame, but because these are feelings too hard to deal with they revert to posturing and posing. I know this because that's what I did. Prison is also filled with guys who've turned their brains off because thinking about all of

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this that surrounds us can be overwhelming. I was overwhelmed.

I've come to believe a few things about this process of serving time and surviving and, possibly, prospering. So, in the interest of helping others benefit off of my many mistakes, I offer up the following reflections and thoughts.

Leverage what's against you into an advantage. In our case, time itself is against us, which means we have more than enough time, too much. We can turn this around by undertaking long-term projects most people never have the time to accomplish. We can completely remake ourselves over the long haul of our imprisonment.

Number one on any list of self-improvement goals is education. Through education the world becomes something that can be understood. Prison is a backwater of ignorance and superstition. We live in a world dominated by small ideas – racism, drugs, misplaced loyalties to misbegotten groupings and discredited ideologies. To free ourselves from these misconceptions about the reality of life, we have to educate ourselves.

Education can be had through any number of channels. Get your G.E.D. if you need to; take college classes if they're available. Read books, and by that I mean real books, substantial books. Ask your friends and family to order you used college textbooks on everything. Check out the classics. I did all of these things over the years. The key is to open your mind to ideas bigger than the prison yard.

For me, writing is the method through which I discovered how to reconnect to the other side of the fences and to myself. I began with letter writing to girls, which led to writing letters to the world. Through it all, I unearthed who I am and in what I believe.

There are whole libraries of books about writing, and most of them are available in paperback versions. Look, especially, for books that teach how to draw on your inner creativity and tap into your unconscious brain. In there, inside the heart of yourself, you'll connect to the truest parts of you. Do the exercises recommended by the authors. Try to write a poem or a song lyric everyday. Describe a color's taste. Estimate how much a musical note weighs. Expand the horizons of your mind.

Most importantly to this process of unleashing the better you, keep a journal. Set aside a regularly scheduled hour everyday, not much considering our abundance of time, and write deeply. Dig down into yourself and turn over the rocks to see what's underneath. Do this until you find the painful stuff and then double your writing time. Get all of the darkness out onto paper. You'll know yourself better after you do this, and bringing it all out into the light will, at least, help to begin the process of healing.

All men crave a purpose in their life. This is the engine behind much of this crazy life of ours. We join gangs looking to belong to something bigger than ourselves, which is the practical definition of purpose. We do drugs to blind ourselves to the vast well of emptiness we feel because of our rudderless lives. A purpose is a direction. A purpose is a reason to continue on the hard work of remaking ourselves.

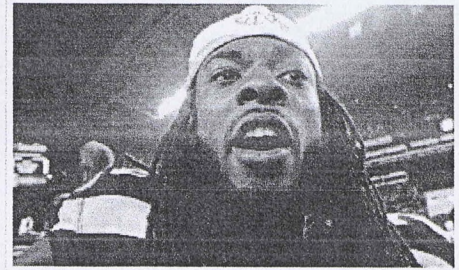
“Read good books. Write from the depths of your being. Involve yourself with positivity and growth. Your purpose will find you, and you will know what to do when that happens, if you're open.”

It's unclear to me how purpose finds us and comes to occupy our hearts and minds. I'm not sure at what point in my journey I stopped trying to prove how bad I was and started trying to become a better man. I'm reminded of my favorite Alcoholics Anonymous aphorism, “You can't think your way to better living; you have to live your way to better thinking.” In other words, be a better man before you're sure about yourself. “Be the change you want to see in the world,” as Thich Nhat Hanh, the world famous Buddhist monk, often says. Be open to positive change. Be willing to change.

Read good books. Write from the depths of your being. Involve yourself with positivity and growth. Your purpose will find you, and you will know what to do when that happens, if you're open.

But if I could actually reach back to my younger self standing in line at the California Institution for Men's Reception & Guidance Center, fresh out of half a harrowing year in Los Angeles County Jail, freshly sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, I'd have a single message: Don't surrender to the darkness of these places. Whatever sense of belonging it provides is transitory. Whatever false sense of glory you think you'll experience is fleeting.

Don't surrender to the darkness of these places.



problem is the way sports fans consume their storylines.



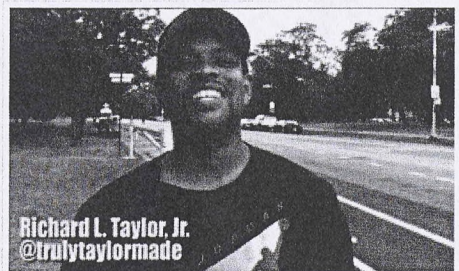
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Six years ago today Chicago native Richard Taylor was recovering from a suicide attempt, today he's a best-selling author and a mentor to countless youth. If you ask him how he did it, he'll tell you: Mentoring works!

The Photographer Knew the Actor's

Don't surrender to the darkness of any place.

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About Kenneth Hartman

Kenneth E. Hartman has served 34 years of a life without the possibility of parole sentence in the California prison system. He is the founder and Executive Director of The Other Death Penalty Project, a national grassroots organization of prisoners seeking to end all forms of the death penalty, including life without the possibility of parole. He is also the editor and a contributor to the new, award-winning anthology, *Too Cruel, Not Unusual Enough*.

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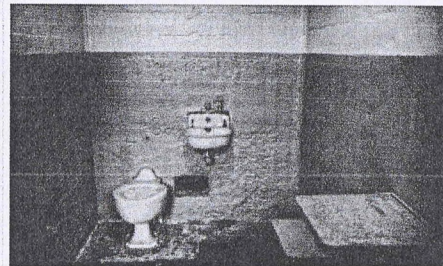
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