

The Lesson by Karter Kane Reed

Allow me to tell you a little about myself. Like any human being, I am a unique individual with my own eccentricities and idiosyncrasies while also sharing in common with you—and everyone else—many traits, characteristics, and quirks. I am very much different from you... and very much the same.

Growing up, I was a pretty smart kid and learned readily, something I carried with me into adulthood. I like to think of myself as complex and multi-faceted with diverse, if not incongruous, interests. I am an electrician by trade, or a computer repair technician, depending on whether you go by my first or most recent trade. Along the way I have been a mechanic, carpenter, welder, computer programmer, network administrator, electronics repair technician, laborer, furniture mover, chemical engineer, clerk, tutor, graphic designer, prep cook, poet, dishwasher, barber, janitor, personal trainer, and public speaker. Today, of course, I am the author of this essay.

I am, however, far more than the things I have done or been, so let me offer a bit more insight into myself. I am a reader—to call myself an avid reader would at times be a colossal understatement. My room is littered with a veritable hodgepodge of books; an eclectic mishmash of literature, history, science, mathematics, grammar, even commercial fiction. I have a fondness for the poetry of Rumi, Hafiz, and Rilke; share philosophical beliefs with Socrates, Nietzsche, and Voltaire, and am captivated by molecular biology and quantum physics. But I am more too than the things I have read.

I am an athlete. Football, baseball, basketball, soccer, handball, snowboarding, weightlifting, running, rowing. I am a musician. A guitar player really, but I also play the bass and can play the drums, piano, and violin. Still though, I am more than my hobbies and recreation.

I am talented, smart, funny, fit, handsome, sweet, kind, caring, honest, loyal, understanding, generous, magnanimous, thoughtful, and hard-working. I am the kind of person people want to meet, or to be; the kind that leaves an indelible impression. A good friend, good brother, good son, and someday, a good husband and father. I am an asset to the company, benefit to the community, a shining example. I am all of these things and more, yet nothing you would expect.

I am a prisoner, inmate, convict, felon, criminal... murderer. You probably didn't see that coming—I know I didn't. And that's the funny thing about life: it never fits the pre-existing cookie-cutter molds that we expect it to. It is much more convenient to see life as black and white and easily predictable, even when we have seen time and again that it's not. It is so much less frightening when everything makes sense and we understand it; when logic and reason are as transparent as a pane of glass. But life is far more complicated than that. As a quote I am wont to repeat says: "The truth is rarely pure and never simple."

Today, I would like you to think about why; why is it that you are sitting in the comfort of your home or relative peace of a classroom and I am sitting in a prison cell? What is it that allowed me, or pushed me, to cross the line from citizen to criminal? And what does it mean that I am not alone, that there are 2.4 million Americans incarcerated across the country, and millions more who have *been* incarcerated or *will be* incarcerated in the future? What does it say about our society? What does it say about me, and you, about our differences, and our similarities? These are questions that I have been asking myself for sixteen years, and yet I still have far more questions than answers.

Prison is not like anything you have seen on television or read about in books, with perhaps the rare exception, because on television, and in those books, the prison population is composed of two types: heroes and anti-heroes. The latter are the stereotypical sociopathic, maniacal, predatory monsters bent on raping and pillaging without remorse, gladiators who live for the arena, who have never possessed, or otherwise been dispossessed of, any trait that might resemble human. They are something else, something foreign, something no “normal” person could ever relate to or conceive of. Then there are the Atticus Finch-like paragons of virtue who have been framed or set-up, who have never done a single wrong, and in the end will narrowly escape total destruction at the hands of their nemesis. And that is the version of prison that people are exposed to, an imaginative fairy tale full of *characters*. Not fallible, empathetic, *normal* human beings like you and I, because people like us don’t go to prison... or do we?

I wasn’t always destined for prison—at one point, I was on the fast track to college, probably with a scholarship. And not just any college, but the kind of prestigious institution that would never ever produce a “criminal.” Thankfully for that school I trod down this lamentable path long before I could tarnish their pristine name, but the fact remains that I was not born a criminal. In fact, despite having spent more than half of my life in prison for a crime that I admittedly committed, and to which there are no mitigating factors which would absolve me of guilt, I don’t consider myself a criminal. I do not commit crimes, do not have any intention of or desire to commit crimes, and do not condone or support the committing of crimes. I say emphatically, therefore, that I am *not* a criminal. I am simply a human being; a person who made a horrible, tragic choice to harm someone in retaliation for one of my friends being harmed. That’s it, *one* terrible choice that turned on me and everyone else and became a word incomprehensible to nearly everyone, a word more red than any scarlet letter, more foul than any albatross, a word beyond explanation, and for far too many, a word beyond redemption—murder. A word that catches in my throat and reaches the world as a barely inaudible whisper, choked with shame and self-loathing, a word I want to erase from my lips and tongue, scrub from my brain’s synapses never to be recalled, but which will live as long as I do, in and around me, extracting from me infinitely the pound of flesh I owe.

In what some would say was a controversial decision, I was granted parole this year, which means that I will be going home soon, returning to the society that I so long ago left. And perhaps I will stop my car to let you cross the street, help you put *your* groceries in your trunk at the local supermarket, hold the elevator door for you, or offer you my umbrella in the rain, and you will think, “What a nice young man,” not suspecting for a moment that I am one of *them*, *one* of the 2.4 million “others” who you are certain are not like you. I will smile at the irony of this because I used to be you, used to be all of you, in as many ways as anyone who is not you *could* be. We are the same you and I. Different, of course, but the same.

That we are alike in more ways than *you* can imagine is the first and most important *lesson* I would like you to learn, but there is another, just as simple, and nearly as important—to succeed in life, you have to be yourself. This means pursuing your dreams, putting your best foot forward, leaving nothing to chance, and never giving up. It means living with no regrets; it means trying and doing, not wishing and wanting. It means being honest, not just with others (after all that’s easy), but with yourself. Unfortunately, it took another young man’s life and my coming to prison for me to learn these things. It is my hope that it will not take the same, or some equally traumatic, experience for your eyes to be opened as mine have.