

My Black Sister

And

Her Blue

Uniform

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This is a letter that is long overdue. It was written as a reminder to my nameless "Black Sister" at a time when such a reminder was needed almost as strongly as it is today. By using loving accounts of past intimacy as a tool to admonish and gently criticize, it speaks cultural truth to blind power and its readers should consider its underlying tone as deeply as they will its obvious message.

Current mailing address:

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My Black Sister,

I have so many issues that I need to address with you, and I'm not sure how I should begin. I guess I should start by reminding you that I am your Black brother. I'm down on my luck, I'm in prison, I'm broke financially and broken emotionally; I'm lonely, I'm angry, and I'm desperate— but I'm still your Black brother.

As your Black brother, I want you to know that I completely understand your decision to become a correctional officer. I get it. You need a consistent and reliable source of income, you need certain benefits, and you need some measure of job security, and working as a prison guard provides all three of these. I know that you have to do what you have to do to take care of yourself and handle your business; I respect that. Even though living as an inmate means that I'm expected to be "anti-officer" sometimes, I still understand why a career in criminal justice's punitive side would appeal to you, and I admire your willingness to handle your responsibilities like an adult.

Going beyond my feelings about your career choice, I also want you to know that I love and support you. You're my Black sister and I honor, value, and adore you like only a genuine and mature Black brother can. I want to see you happy. I want you to be safe. I want you to be well taken care of, all across the board— emotionally, physically, and intellectually. I want you to know that you're beautiful, and that the only way that you could be more beautiful is if you were to comfortably bask in the glorious Black Love that I'm eager to bestow upon you.

With this in mind, I must inform you of a few things. I need to gently criticize some of your actions because these actions have really bothered me over the years. Don't think that I'm attacking you though. Look at it as me protecting and empowering you. Look at it as your Black brother's way of refining you and sharing with you the tools that we'll need to truly guard against and transcend the obstacles that we will encounter as we navigate this life.

You must know that our paths are, and always will be, intertwined, and as a correctional officer you're perfectly poised to contribute to my personal evolution. Because of our interconnectedness, such a contribution would be akin to helping yourself. In other words, the more "evolved" I am, the more I can love, serve, and

uplift you; so making contributions to my evolution is in OUR best interest as unified Black souls. This letter is meant to highlight this fact, and to show you how the absence of such contributions is causing a lot of damage. To begin with, I want to address a major cause behind this absence, a major reason why contributions of this nature are currently nonexistent. This "major" reason stems from how you view me.

As I stated earlier in this letter, I am your Soul Brother. You know me. You know what I've been ~~through~~^{through} ~~though~~. You were right beside me through the troubles, through the pain, through the oppression, and through the financial difficulties. You were even my partner as I looked for ways to relieve the misery that these things caused. At times I neglected and mistreated you, but you stayed by my side because you're my Black sister; you understood my plight and you sympathized with my condition. You knew me inside and outside, and you knew that I was simply playing the hand that I was dealt.

Since becoming a prison guard, however, all of this seems to have changed. You treat me like a stranger now. Worse yet, you treat me like the architects of our past hardships treated me, hardships that I failed to overcome in a societally acceptable manner. You actually seem a little prejudice, to keep it real. What I mean by this is you interact with me in a way that has the three components that constitute a prejudice attitude: beliefs (you believe that your incarcerated Black brother is despicable); emotions (you hate your incarcerated Black brother because he is despicable), and behavioral dispositions (you treat your incarcerated Black brother like despicable people should be treated).

I don't really know why you view me this way. I don't know why you would let a mere change in my place of residence completely negate our past and alter your perception of me. I still love you. I still cherish, worship, and respect you. Yet you refuse to aid in my evolution. As a matter of fact, you treat me like crap now, and I don't get it. You, of all people, should know that being treated like crap doesn't help me. You should know that I'm currently living in this human kennel because I wasn't properly guided, wasn't sufficiently loved, and because I was treated like crap; so why would you continue to treat me like crap when you're completely aware of where this crappy treatment leads?

I think you treat me badly because the “inmate stereotype” (our “despicable” stigma) is stronger than your own personal experiences. I think that in your mind, inmates are despicable, period, end of story. So even though you knew me before I became an inmate, now that I am in fact infected with “inmate-ism” (i.e. now that I’m incarcerated), I’m despicable regardless of what your memory says about me. If a non-inmate treated you EXACTLY the way that I treat you, you would be very kind and pleasant to this non-inmate, but because I’m an active inmate, I deserve the crappy treatment.

Psychologists have actually written extensively about this phenomenon. They have a lot to say about the ways in which stereotypical perceptions tend to outweigh reality in an individual’s mind— e.g. your mind says that I’m despicable, therefore I am despicable regardless of what reality reveals.

A man named B. L. Duncan once conducted an experiment pertaining to this issue. He gathered a group of white people into a room and allowed them to view two identical interactions on a television monitor. In these two recorded interactions, he varied the race of one person who gets into an argument and then slightly bumps the person with whom he’s arguing. Clothing, the setting, dialogue, the minor actors, and everything else stayed the exact same in both interactions— the only difference was the race of the major actor who initiates the “bump.” Despite this consistency, seventy-three percent of the white participants coded the bump as violent behavior when the major actor was Black, but only thirteen percent did so when he was white.

Regardless of the consistent realities— the almost identical interactions in the videos— the participants’ perception (or stereotype) of the major actor’s race caused them to interpret and categorize the interactions in two very different ways. Is this what is happening with you? Is your perception of inmates causing you to categorize me as despicable, regardless of the fact that I’m still your Soul brother (a very consistent reality)? I treat you just as nicely as most non-inmates treat you, but you’re pleasant to them and hateful towards me. Is this because of your perception— stereotype— of inmates? It’s likely that many of the previously mentioned white “participants” had past dealings with Blacks that were pleasant, but their perception of Blacks in general made these past experiences meaningless when it came to interpreting the Black person’s behavior in the video and ensuingly categorizing and assigning a violent label to the Black actor.

Is this how you, my Black sister, view our past together? Is it meaningless to you just as many of these whites' past experiences became meaningless to them when they were confronted with the object of their stereotypical views? Is our past too weak to counterbalance your stereotypical vista? Is your perception of inmates in general making our past soulful connection obsolete?

It sure seems like it. It seems like the inmate stereotype has caused you to forget that I'm your Black brother (and that some of my fellow inmates are your cousins, your grandfathers, your friends, your uncles, and your nephews) just like the aforementioned white participants forgot about their pleasant past dealings with Blacks. I'm at my lowest and I need your loving essence and your warm embrace. You're my Black sister and I need your help right now, but it seems like you would rather submerge me in hatred and disgust.

You scream insults at me. You disrespect me without provocation. You threaten me. You desecrate my personal space and defoul my most valuable possessions. You encourage your white male co-workers to harass me, to assault me, to snatch clothes off of my body and debase me. You stand back as they degrade and humiliate me by examining my nakedness like their great great grandparents used to do to our great great grandparents after they purchased them on the auction block as slaves. You use your badge to emasculate me and to discredit my manhood by reminding me of how truly helpless and powerless I am. Every time that I see you, your actions tell me that I'm less than a man— that blue uniforms represent real manhood and real strength and worthy authority in this world (prison). Then you threaten to use the power of these uniforms to punish me if I don't completely submit and happily accept my position beneath these autocratic outfits.

I'm in prison because I was "low" and weak, and I decided to try to climb higher and gain strength via illegal means (and you know this because you were there with me). Now you're consciously forcing me "lower" and sapping me of what little strength I have left without helping me learn how to legally and effectively climb higher and gain strength. Actually your actions tell me that you're adamantly opposed to such learning. Can you see the problem with this, my Black sister? Can you see that you're making OUR problems worse?

As a correctional officer you've never given me encouragement. When I say "good morning" to you, all I get in return is a frown and a rude dismissal. You've never recommended a good self-help book. You've never shown concern for my safety or well-being. As a prison guard, you've never told me that you're proud of me for reading almost 400 nonfiction books and authoring my own book (entitled *A Convict's Perspective*), as well as penning multiple momentous essays, staying out of trouble for years on end, constantly showing you respect and soulful love (even though it's never reciprocated), and earning a variety of scholastic certificates and career diplomas— all since the onset of my imprisonment. You haven't given me the love that I need to become the type of Black man that you and all of my other Black sisters deserve to have by your sides.

I just have one question: why? Is it really because I'm despicable to you? When I really acted despicably, you gave me this valuable love even though back then I was too underdeveloped to honor it; but now that your Black brother has grown up and shunned the despicable lifestyle, am I no longer worthy of it or something? If I sleep in the wrong pajamas, I'm worthy of an escape charge. If I turn the channel on the television, I'm worthy of being punished more severely than I would be if I got into a vicious fist-fight. If I'm caught with a cigarette, I'm worthy of a couple of weeks in solitary confinement.

You readily enforce these stupid rules, but if I change my life for the better, I'm not worthy of a kind word or a smile? Really? If I decide to actively pursue betterment, you, my beautiful Black sister, can't tell me that I'm on the right track, or that things will be okay one day? Am I so despicable to you that you can't give me, your Black brother, the satisfaction of knowing that I'm pleasing you by going in a positive direction with my life?

I love you so much that even I, the victim of your behavioral venom, try to ignore and sometimes justify the obvious answers to these questions, the answers that your actions continuously shove in my face. Sometimes I find myself almost instinctively giving you the benefit of the doubt by attributing noble motivations to your mistreatment of me. I tell myself that you're often psychologically cruel to me because you think that you're helping me. I convince myself that you don't really see me as despicable— you just believe

that I need more discipline so that I can evolve. I also say that you want to give me this discipline in its rawest form because in your eyes, such rawness would be most effective.

I actually hope that the ways in which I justify your actions are accurate. If ~~no~~^{not}, then that means that you, my Black sister, don't love me at all. Worse yet, if these justifications are inaccurate then that means that you don't love US and our soulful union anymore. This would be a hard pill for me to swallow. If your intention is to discipline me because you think that discipline is what I need, then I think that now is the time to tell you why this is the wrong route of action.

First of all, I don't need discipline. I'm not even speaking as an individual here, because inmates in general don't need discipline either. We don't need to be taught to obey rules better. As a matter of fact, we already adhere to a strict code of conduct. We stick to it and abide by its individual rules with impressive regularity. Our adherence is so strong that this code of conduct doesn't even need to be spoken about or written down. (For example, Rule Number One is "play me, and I'll beat yo' ass.")

Second of all, my Black sister, if you are trying to teach me discipline by treating me like crap, you are doing it all wrong. The psychological abuse that you define as "discipline" is sporadic, random, and very unpredictable. These characteristics don't mesh well with my learning style, and I'm surprised that you don't seem to know this. I learn by a different formula, one known as *operant conditioning*. This means that my actions are deeply influenced by the consequences that follow them. But how can I adjust my actions using sporadic, random, and unpredictable consequences as a guide? Your harsh consequences are extremely inconsistent and spontaneous, so I can't possibly know what I need to do to avoid your wrath. I can't learn from your erratic punishments. I can't equate my actions with your consequences because as a prison guard you don't "discipline" (i.e. abuse) me for my actions— you discipline me because you view me as despicable, regardless of whether or not such a view is accurate, and this discipline is not connected to my behavior in any fashion.

You're pretty much exposing me to a harmful form of what's known as *classical conditioning*. This means that you're teaching me that my actions should be nothing more than responses to certain preceding

stimuli (you act, I react, then the process repeats itself). I don't know how to avoid being disciplined by you; I can't control your allegiance to the inmate stereotype, so I can only react to it when it materializes.

It's very dangerous for me to go through life constantly responding and reacting to bad things that happen (which is what classically conditioned people do), instead of making good things happen (which is what operantly conditioned people do). You, my Black sister, need to be made aware of this danger so that you can stop herding me towards it. You need to start helping me, instead of helping the ideological monster that compels people to oppress me.

Nobody in this prison system can do this but you, my Soul Sister. George Solomon, Frank Perry, and W. David Guice are too disengaged from prison mechanisms to truly help me. Marshall Pike, Nicole Sullivan, James Gorham, and William Darcus are too disconnected from inmate-life to truly uplift any convict. You, however, are on the ground floor. You see me every time that you come to work. You can make a difference simply by treating me like a human.

I'm asking you to make a change here. I'm asking you to stop hurting me and to stop torturing me unnecessarily. I'm asking you to stand beside me as we explore our existences. Please stop making my problems worse and start loving me within the parameters of your job. It's not against the rules for you to treat me as respectfully as I treat you. It's not against the rules for you to remind me of my inner strength instead of waging war on it, for you to tell me that I can make it in life if I work hard enough. You won't get fired if you smile at me when I say "hello" to you. I'm your Black brother and I love you dearly so I would never ask you to do anything that would jeopardize your livelihood— please know that.

I just really want us to be the best that we can be as Soul partners. For this reason, I hope that you take this letter seriously and heed my humble words. I pray that you recognize how much I need you, and that you acknowledge my desperation and respond to it with love, like Black women have been doing since humanity was created. In closing, I would like to address all of the Black women who work amongst incarcerated men, the Black goddesses whose jobs take them behind prison fences on a regular basis. I would like to say a word to all of the female correctional officers who proudly wear ebony skin underneath their blue uniforms,

especially the ones who routinely bless me with their presence and warmly embrace my spirit simply by existing, without ever touching me. If you're reading these words and questioning the identity of my beautiful Black sister, contact me and allow me— your Black brother— to satisfy your curiosity....

....Respectfully Written
With Soulful Love,
An Incarcerated Thinker