

"Amen-Ra: An Example of the Doubt Most Prisoners Struggle With"
by Dayon Neal

A good dude. Unassuming. Sociable. Intelligent.

Those were the first impressions that I got from observing him. Everyone in the hole called him Amen-Ra, which was Egyptian for "God".

With such a dominating presence, he could've controlled the unit's criminal activity, but he wasn't into that. He uplifted people. Everyone not only respected Ra, they looked up to him.

"What joint you come from?" he asked one day. His deep raspy voice scratched the air around my head.

"Oaks," I said.

"You here for something serious?"

"Assault on staff."

"Were you from, bro?"

"Detroit."

"Where 'bout?"

"East side."

We talked for the whole recreation period, then every day for the next few weeks afterwards. I learned that he grew up in my neighborhood. At 34 years old, he was seven years older than me, but we knew the same people. We swapped stories and fished books and family pictures back and forth to each other.

He was doing long-term seg time for serious assault on staff, like me. He exercised supernaturally and studied religion faithfully like me. He spoke Swahili fluently and I spoke it well enough; we communicated in our own language. I was too headstong to admit it at the time, but Ra took me under his wing.

He challenged me at everything, not out of ego, but to bring the best out of me. I hated sit-ups and crunches, so he made me do seven hundred of them in fifteen minutes every day. He hated leg squats, so I made us do a thousand of them straight and penalized us one extra for every half-done squat we did. Together we maximized our strengths and built each other up until we eliminated our weaknesses.

Our religious and philosophical debates lasted for hours. Ra was an adamant Kemetic Scientist by religion, the most unorthodox believer I had ever met.

Kemetic Science is an ancient Egyptian theology as taught by the original Egyptians. He taught me the truth of how our ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) ancestors founded civilization, and how all other religious teachings were born out of the Kemetic Science. He demonstrated with actual facts how the Kemetic religion had been mischaracterized as a cult of polytheistic heathens in spite of teaching the Oneness of God like everything else, and he convinced me.

Speaking with Ra not only revealed to me how close-minded I really was, but it opened my mind up to a whole world of truth that I didn't know existed. I learned more from Ra about myself, my culture, and my heritage than anyone else in this world, including my religious leader at the time.

Ra was multilingual with the English vocabulary of a scholar. He

could hold a discussion with college professors about chemistry and physics, then turn right around and communicate with street people in street lingo about street matters. The mathematical formulas that professors wrote on chalkboards—the ones containing all the mystic letters and symbols—Ra could read them. He invented his own language (Coriander) and often explained the universe's geometry with the exact numerical measurements of the precession of the equinoxes in one breath, like he had written the equations himself.

He knew business like he had gotten degrees for it. When he shared his great plans, he explained everything in great detail, from his LLC's operating agreement and start-up costs to insurance fees and tax codes.

Ra was the truth.

For eighteen months we trained extensively. We even flirted with the idea of doing entrepreneurial and social activist work together in our community. I always thought we were training for the world.

Ra got released from the hole in his sixth year. It was the worst time to part ways, because we had just had a disagreement. He called down to tell me he was leaving soon. We spoke briefly about his plans. But, since he said his release would occur later after shift change, I took a nap thinking he would still be there when I awoke.

He left before shift change, without either of us saying good-bye. We never settled our differences.

I imagined he took it personal. We had forged a strong bond, but I hadn't even wished him well. If anyone knew how much he struggled over the years for release, I did. I should've showed that I was happy for him. It could've been misinterpreted as jealousy.

Ra did eleven months in GP with no problems, then got a parole! I was happiest when other prisoners told me they called or received money from him. Everyone said he was doing great: married with a job and a couple houses. It hurt a bit that he hadn't written me, or sent me a phone number to call, but I understood even if those other guys weren't as close with him. Things hadn't ended on the best note with us.

A couple years later, someone ambushed me with unexpected news: "Hey, you know Amen-Ra back in the county jail, right?" the guy said.

"Yeah, right." I felt my countenance drop. People shouldn't joke like that.

"I ain't lyin'," the guy said. "He caught another armed robbery case."

My heart dropped to my gut and pounded there as the guy related the details of Ra's trouble. Nine months later, I heard another story of Amen-Ra getting into a big brawl at another prison; that he was somewhere in the hole again.

I waited until I got out of the hole and checked the court information through my sources. A search on the name Antonio Lacey turned up two armed robbery cases; one from 1996, which was Amen-Ra's first. The second case was only a couple years old. The rumors were true. Amen-Ra had come back to prison with a basketball score for a sentence.

My insides felt hollowed out. Above the disappointment, however, I experienced a tremendous amount of fear. Amen-Ra was a borderline genius with a detailed master plan. He taught me more than anyone else ever had. If he couldn't make it out there in society, how would I?

The question echoed in my head, as I began to train again, alone. Even harder than ~~before~~ before.