

May 18, 2018

## "Neuroplasticity inside the Ghetto"

My name is Derrick Starks, I'm currently sentenced to life without the possibility of parole for aiding and abetting a street gang murder on the day of May 11th 2007 in South Central Los Angeles. No physical evidence, no eyewitnesses to place me at the scene of the incident. In fact, one eyewitness who saw the whole crime occur from it's inception to it's completion and was able to identify all perpetrators involved, was adamant in his testimony during trial that I was in no way involved and wasn't present at the scene during the ~~commission~~ commission of the crime I'm convicted of. The vast majority of the evidence presented by the prosecution was proof of my ~~affiliation~~ affiliation with the Rollin 100's Crips street gang, which is a rival street gang. I've never denied being a gang member from a rival gang. The amount of gang evidence presented to the jury was overwhelming, prejudicial, ~~obscure~~ distracting and prolonged.

Criminal convictions and <sup>the</sup> absurdly lengthy sentences that accompany them based on fear of young urban ~~minorities~~ minority gang members are far too common. The

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California correctional industry is bursting at the seams, completely saturated and grossly overpopulated with young urban minority gang members. This epidemic has negative repercussions that affect the state of California in every aspect of its operation. The social and financial impact California endures because of <sup>The</sup> homogenization of extreme justice focuses to severely punish any young urban minority gang-member is finally reaching its culmination. There are <sup>2</sup>countless numbers of families ~~traumatized~~ traumatized by the mis-guided doctrine of the criminal justice complex.

California should redirect and refocus its operations on crime prevention methods and criminal rehabilitation techniques which seeks to address the underlying causes of our character defects. Crime prevention should be an opportunity to invest in educating our young urban minorities. Not only educating them in traditional ways, but educating ~~to~~ them in creative arts. Educating them in vocational skills so they'll be career ready. Educating them in the tech industry or the green energy industry or the manufacturing industry or educating them with ~~entrepreneur~~ entrepreneurial skills. Prisoner rehabilitation should focus on preparing us to be motivated and knowledgeable with the skills to join the workforce.

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California just recently began to focus on rehabilitating prisoners. During this 1 1/2 year stretch, I've had to fight to be able to participate in any rehabilitative program. I have to fight to be able to further my education by obtaining a college degree. I'm constantly denied access or removed from (a) program and placed on a waiting list because of my sentence ~~in~~ of life without the possibility of parole. I'm not able to participate in any vocational classes, when it comes to school, self-help therapy groups, or vocation classes. I'm considered by the state as a very low priority or a wasted space when it comes to rehabilitation opportunities. Numerous inmates are forced to attend these programs under threat of getting wrote up for non-participation. So a majority of the group/class isn't taking the ~~course~~ curriculum serious enough to let it actually make a difference in their lives.

There are better and more efficient ways to rehab criminals. I've come to understand that you can't force someone to change. The desire to change must come from within. I've seen and helped so many conduct ~~the~~ change in their own lives, while simultaneously working on my growth, and ~~at~~ developing emotional and spiritual intelligence. I can honestly say that the person I was when I was convicted no longer

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exist. It was a long and very painful journey from that person to the man I am now. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles during the 80's and 90's played a huge impact on influencing my mindset and shaping my character throughout my adolescence. It's nearly impossible to make the right ~~resistants~~ decisions in an environment where making the right decisions could actually be the wrong decisions and your last decision. Where a 10 year old is one block away from Florence and Normandie in 1992 where people are getting snatched out of vehicles and hit in the face with bricks. A little boy witnessing his city, his home, his neighborhood, everything he knows destroy itself in every direction. The same boy suffering endless asthma attacks for weeks due to the thick black smoke, ash, and soot everywhere. How does it feel not being able to walk to and from school without fear of being assaulted and jumped almost everyday? What about telling you parents and them going to the authorities at school and law enforcement, which makes the situation a thousand times worse. Because in reality they can't protect you at all and now you're labeled a snitch. What is a kid, 10, 11, 12 years old suppose to do that's fed up with being victimized. Being a victim has to stop immediately. This gang

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Down the street seems like it can offer me protections I can't get anywhere else. I feel welcomed amongst these dudes. I feel a comradeship. Most importantly, I finally feel safe. I'll do anything to keep this feeling.

One terrible decision, made by a kid in Jr. High cause a domino effect and created a cascade of terrible decision after terrible decision. Each terrible decision getting progressively worse. Each decision made for the gang continues to feel my self-esteem which is no longer fragile. My status amongst the gang continue to rise, which feeds a perpetual negative cycle that seems unbreakable. The cascade continues into a tidal wave of negative activity. There's only 2 destinations this path leads to. Death or incarceration. Incarceration only fueled the false sense of status that I believed. It reinforced my distorted belief system. I lived in a constant state of chaos. In prison you have to learn how to operate and thrive in a chaotic environment. Going from one ~~traumatic~~ traumatic environment into another isn't difficult to adjust to. Depending on the way you decide to live, prison is an extension of the hood. On the streets you can take a ~~break~~ break from the gang politics. There is no break in prison from the politics. Being engulfed

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in prison politics 24 hours a day can really break you mentally. It can take you over the edge, past the point of no return. It's like falling down a bottomless pit. There's nothing you can do. It's a freefall and gravity forever has you. I stood at the edge of abyss and stared into it. I was in complete submission to the gang-prisoner lifestyle. I was a prisoner in body and mind due to the indoctrination and reinforcement by prisoners and correctional officers alike. I was labeled by my peers. I was labeled by the system. The thing is, I accepted those labels because I allowed others to define me and dictate my actions. In doing so, I had to spend a lot of time in solitary confinement. Going back and forth between the yard and solitary confinement because of the violent acts I continued to commit. While freezing in solitary, I used that time to reflect upon my circumstance at the time. It was as if I suddenly awoke in that cell, trying to figure out how I ended up there. I remember that day clearly because I vowed to undo and fix every mistake I've made. I denounced any and all affiliation and association with the Rollin 100's. I made the ~~decision~~ decision to take back control of my life and ever since I work as hard as I possibly can to create a positive environment for myself and those around me. I've come

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to learn how to unlearn all the disfunctional and distorted beliefs ~~in~~ that were instilled into my brain as a pre-teen and grew and mutated into a mind-set that needed to be destroyed.

I set out to re-learn new, positive, productive, and enriching behaviors. I re-trained my brain through constant repetitions. Steadily reinforcing those positive behaviors, creating new beliefs, creating new habits, creating new mindsets that generate continuous positive energy and positive influences to myself and those around me. My existential awakening has provided me the opportunity to help and guide other men that are searching for genuine change.

The amazing thing is that, if a life long gang member. A life long criminal, and a convicted murderer can make a profound change within his life. Anyone who truly desires change and seeks it wholeheartedly can find it within themselves. I can and have changed. ~~The~~ The system can change. The world can change.

I refuse to let my circumstance of being in prison with a life sentence define me or control me. ~~I~~ I alone define myself! I alone control my circumstances! I alone create my environment!

"Neuroplasticity behind Bars"