

Freedom from the Cave

Pluto and Betts imagine the liberatory potential of education as the beginning of an awakening or transformation. They both tell of how exposure to "light", which is often associated with knowledge, and books were life changing. Things were never the same for the character in *The Cave* or Betts once they were turned from darkness or ignorance. In my experience it takes more than seeing the light, having an awakening, or reading books to be liberated. Instead of education as a practice of freedom, I suggest the practice of education to lead to freedom.

I relate to Betts and the character in *The Cave*. My ninth grade English teacher, Mr. Bayz, made the class check out a book from the library to read. I picked up *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison. The opening scene was shocking and captured my attention. I wanted to read to see what happened with this character. Reading, *Invisible Man*, exposed me to another world. Prior to this, I didn't read outside of school work. After that, I knew that I could completely read a novel, and there were black authors who wrote content which interested me. I was eager to find more of this literature. I read books suggested to me by the owner of a black bookstore near Howard University. Books like, *From Superman to Man*, and *The Spook Who Sat by the Door*, made major impacts on me just as *Invisible Man* had.

Amiri Baraka wrote a poem that would forever change the way I viewed poetry. I recall a line where he made reference in a simile to the shudder after a piss in a radical poem which expressed his views. I had chosen this poem to critique in an English class at Prince George's Community College and received a lot of push back. I later understood what I experienced after reading Robin DiAngelo's book, *White Fragility*. While incarcerated, I've read the *Autobiography of Leroi Jones* (Amiri Baraka), a biography of Gwendolyn Brooks, and Nikki Giovanni's collection of poetry. I saw Nikki Giovanni speak at Duke University. I had no idea of how powerful her poetry was. It inspired a poem that I wrote in my book, *J.S. Russell, The Prison Poet, Live from the Pen*.

Exposure has allowed me to see what's possible. Education has equipped me with the knowledge of how to accomplish those things. Before I started having run ins with the criminal justice system, I read some amazing books. I read the *Autobiographies of Frederick Douglas and Malcolm X*, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and *The Browder Files*. Thanks to my participation in NSBE (National Society of Black Engineers) I saw Dr. Naim Akbar speak and read several of his books. Still, I didn't know what to do with all of this information that I was gathering. It took life experience, maturity, and reflection to get me to a point of understanding.

I felt set apart from being exposed to both light and darkness. I've experienced ostracism throughout school and even now. Earlier, I wasn't prudent and encountered many

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challenges. This is what Pluto mentions about a man being amongst “perpetual prisoners” who’d become “the source of laughter.” Initially, with all the learning and reading books that I was doing, I didn’t know how it would get me to where I wanted to be. Even the education that I was receiving at school wasn’t helpful with the direction I wanted to go, or becoming who I wanted to be. It took the journey, to meet people who would introduce me to the right books. Yet still, I had to mature to gain the understanding of what to do with it all.

Much of the time that I was in school and reading these books, I was involved in the drug trade. So even when, John Raye, introduced me to the book, *Think and Grow Rich*, I wasn’t ready to take heed to this “greater brightness”. It took being faced with Life in prison and analyzing how I got to that point to commit to my growth. I applied the success philosophies that I would continue to read. It was also at this point in my life, I surrendered to God. With a great amount of scripture reading, prayer, and meditation, I began to see another light. This was a spiritual enlightenment that showed me my connection to God. I learned a truth that transcended my formal education, and led to me discovering my purpose.

My journey led me to where I was ready to join the immortals. After writing a large number of poems and a children’s story, I sought out how I could be published. This led me to taking a self-publishing class taught by another inmate and incarcerated author Shawn Gardner. Six years later and after publishing eight books, I’m creating a blueprint for others to free themselves from prison and poverty. I’m using my talent, writing, to form my own business, build a career, and provide a message as to how others can do the same.

My goal is to earn my Bachelor’s Degree through the Georgetown Prison and Justice Initiative. This will enable me to empower people to assess the issues of their region, culture, or social group and organize their resources to meet their needs. I’m making sure I accomplish this myself so I am teaching from experience. I want to effectively and efficiently use the light to brighten the world that I live in so that people can see how to move from darkness to light.

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I have been participating in PEN America's National Poetry Writing Month. April 22, 2022, Prompt # 22, Origin Story, came from Reginald Dwayne Betts "Shahid Reads His Own Palm", where the writer writes a poem about his/her origin that repeats the words, "I come from". This poem I'm including with this essay is *The Cave* that I came from.

I came from grandma's house on the 4400 block of Georgia Avenue
The only boy in a house full of women and girls
I loved that house and the small radius that made up that world
None of the things that I later learned to be wrong were off to me
I came from a place where having a father in the home wasn't normal
I came from a time when the crack epidemic caused City Under Siege in D.C.
PCP usage is known in my area and someone on it stabbed my Uncle Mike
I remember his funeral
I came from the place where police frisked guys on the corner
I came from two doors down from where they killed Eric King and I learned things can happen
so that you won't be here any longer
I came from playing with Harvey and Toe-Toe on a make shift basketball court in the alley
I came from seeing how crack had its effect on their mother and my aunt Cathy
I came from seeing moving to Hyattsville, around Chillum as an improvement
I came from thinking moms mismanagement of funds ruined it
I came from summers in Camden and Sicklerville, New Jersey
I came from watching my older cousins and brother, learning to be a G
I came from having my self-esteem drop once my gear fell off and seeing yellow and pink slips
on the door
I came from accepting that I had an addict for a Pops and I shouldn't expect more
I came from seeing my mother struggle and deciding to hustle
I came from Honor Roll and thriving in school to being on the fence about what to do
I came from seeing others have better who weren't better and asking why?
I came from not seeing how I could succeed with the things I tried
I came from getting high and drunk to escape and selling drugs
I came from wondering if I would see 18 once I had my first gun, loading it with slugs
I came from being in the dorm of North Carolina A&T thinking I made it
I came from a series of ups and downs, good and bad experiences that made me
I came from having the sun chase me home being out all night selling hard
I came from carrying a pistol because I'd been robbed
I came from being in them hotels watching the pipe burn clean to ensure the product was good
I came from working several jobs without being able to sustain or have a pocket full
I came from a couple of small stints and pissing in a cup
I came from fear, paranoia, frustration, ignorance, pain, and anger that led me to cuffs