

THE PATHOLOGY OF LABELING:
WHEN WORDS BECOME PROPHECY

by

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I graduated from high school, with a 2.85 GPA, then graduated from undergraduate school, Suma Cum Laude, with a 3.93 -- in prison. I earned both GPAs. In high school I was a class clown, I did anything to avoid academics, or the trauma they engendered. I was bullied for being slow in math and reading early on, called names like dummy. School was an immense challenge for me. I hated it! Little did I know then, but I was distracted by the traumatizing effects of domestic violence occurring at home. These early adverse childhood experiences affected my entire education process, ironically, until I was incarcerated.

In high school, I approached my counselor and explained that, on the verge of graduating, I was at a crossroads. I wanted to explore college opportunities. With wire-rimmed spectacles assisting his hard-blue eyes, Mr. Franklin* promptly reviewed my file while I sat opposite his mahogany desk. As his eyes streamed down the first page he looked taken aback. He abruptly peered toward me and declared, "You aren't college material." I felt small, rejected. It was 1984, the newest drug craze, crack cocaine, promised

illusions of ghetto fame and riches. I bit! Large sums of fast money flowed through my young hands, coupled with immaturity, arrogance, and a culture of violence. Within five years I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole, labeled incorrigible and thrown away. This is how the school-to-prison pipeline became my reality.

These were the first labels I self-fulfilled as a young boy. It all started at home. As young boys tend to do, I often angered my dad by making mistakes, not following his directions. He would respond by calling me stupid, or asking me if I was stupid, for which I would affirm out of duress. Though I was too young to know the exact definition of the word, the negative connotation and tone, from my primary authority figure penetrated. I felt the label and thus experienced it. The label stung, tingled, and made me feel small -- just like when my dad would hit me or my mom. I felt powerless, either way.

When I struggled to absorb the concepts of math and reading, my peers noticed and pounced. They labeled me retarded, and stupid, reinforcing the labeling I was already enduring at home. I felt ostracized, and came to believe something was wrong with me. Frustrated, I began to lash out, violently. My peers would respond by recoiling -- just like I did at my dad's hand. The response of my peers validated violence as an acceptable social tool. This was the beginning of my warped perspective. Yet with my negative peers at bay, clowning around became my way of avoiding class work and making friends. I earned my crown as the class clown, a label I was proud of.

As a teen, my noteriety increased as my father modeled selling weed and fencing stolen goods. Not only was I good at it, I was adept. I didn't know it

then, but I was so successful because I was unwittingly employing the tenets of tried and true capitalism: buying low and selling high; compounding profits, and practicing engaging marketing techniques. I had an aptitude for negotiating and closing deals.

Idleness and sheer boredom in the infamous Los Angeles County Jail drove me to read anything I could get my hands on. The Autobiography of Malcolm X was floating around and I devoured it. Malcolm offered me a caustic mirror of what we young Blacks were doing to ourselves, to our families, and to our communities; he demonstrated how to do better, even locked up. I adopted his autodidactic approach to doing time. The Bible gave me a desperately needed sense of morality.

A few years later, in the vast California prison system, Ms. Townsend*, a teacher of diminutive stature, an effervescent spirit, and a staunch political junkie, took a liking to me. Over time she would challenge my warped thinking, helping me to see the wider, mainstream perspective. She would encourage me to read a wider array of topics, and to add the newspaper to my reading repertoire. Ms. Townsend taught me how to debate, and the real meaning of disinterested argumentation. Unlike Mr. Franklin, she focused on my potential, not my past. That was probably the most humane thing she could have done for me. Then she recognized my need for guidance and filled the void, remolding and reshaping me into a healed, dynamic and transformed adult. Her tutelage prepared me for a paralegal correspondence course some dear friends had subsidized. I completed the course with honors! It was around this time that my self-esteem turned positive. Ms. Townsend then encouraged me to publish various writings I'd shared with her, figuring I'd be received well by the

public. She was right.

Through those publications, my reputation preceded me when transferred to the state prison in Lancaster. It was a reputation that countered the traditional toxic masculinity that generally expresses itself on the yards and inside the housing units of our nation's penitentiaries; it was a reputation I could be proud of; finally, a label me and my family could take pride in. My new-found peers wasted no time seeking my help to get published -- they had a room in education already carved out. And at the end of the day, about 15 of the 20 succeeded.

As I gained proficiency in peer instruction, I continued to formally pursue my own education, earning four associate of arts degrees, a doctorate in ministries, and most recently a BA from Cal State Los Angeles. Following the writers class, I digested and then taught victim sensitivity class, then victim orientation, and parenting. Course curricula I developed from various college courses to apply specifically to my peers. Victim sensitivity revealed the ripple effects of my wrongs -- negative social reverberations I'd never considered. And it was parenting class that offered me the contrast I needed to recognize my childhood was abusive.

Education has been the catalyst for my transformation and self-concept. Now I don't see myself as slow or retarded, incorrigible or a throw away. Today I don't define myself as just a prisoner, and I am certainly not stupid or incorrigible. I am a father, a student, and a teacher. I am a writer, a mentor, and organizer. I am a social scientist, a narrative therapist, and a life coach. I am a change-maker, a trend-setter, and a pro-social leader. Yes, I am all of that, and if you're gonna label me, please, pick one of the latter. Thank you!

* The name of the teacher and counselor were changed to protect their identities.