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## PRELUDE

# *Education: Life or Death*

HE DROVE TO OUR MEETING. It seems mundane, a daily detail we take for granted, but for a formerly incarcerated person, it was a significant passage. The keys to the battered black Honda lay proudly on the restaurant table, an announcement of his complete liberation.

“Willie gave me this car.” Willie served time with Eli in prison and has been out long enough to have upgraded his beater.

As Eli sat across from me, I noticed all the tokens of freedom he seemed to have amassed in such a short time: well-polished dress shoes, a smartphone, an iPad, a fashion-forward watch, even a business card. I couldn't help but flash back to the baby-faced man in prison grays who sat in the very front of the first class I ever taught in a prison. It was an Introduction to Literature class, replete with a Norton anthology and literary criticism cards. Eli sat in front, next to Willie, devouring each literary text and its analysis. It was in that class that I first realized the power of teaching and learning behind bars for the incarcerated students and for the teacher. It was Eli, then serving a life sentence with seemingly no out date, who pushed me to consider the pure, nonpragmatic, nonvocational value of learning for learning's sake.

What is the value of liberal education? he once asked me.

To liberate, I replied automatically and unthinkingly, blushing at the insensitivity of the response to someone who had spent nearly

twenty years behind bars and had a lifetime of incarceration stretching in front of him.

Yes, he said, I knew you would say that. This learning will make us free.

Back at the restaurant, his manners were almost exaggeratingly proper, eating fish and chips with a knife and fork, making up for all those hurriedly and unceremoniously ingested prison meals. We talked about the different building blocks that comprised his slowly reconstructed life: good: work, plenty of successful networking, mastery of social media, and ambitious plans for the future; not so good: a precarious marriage to someone who had befriended him in prison.

When we began talking about the possibility of him visiting a school in the urban center of the city we now share, to work with black adolescent males, his eyes lit up.

That's what it's all about: education. How can I let them see what I learned without them having to go to prison to learn it? My life changed when I started learning; it shifted my paradigm. *Educare*: to bring out, to bring forth. That's what you taught me and it made all the difference. I realized that there was something of value inside me, living beside the regret, the recriminations, the broken promises.

I have to learn to do it, to do for them what you and others have done for me.

We can work both ends of the pipeline—right? Move backward so that the guys who are still inside can see what education can do for them. It ain't over, maybe they can all get out someday. And then for those young brothers, let's try to capture them together—with learning. Maybe they don't need to do time to learn my hard lessons. But we gotta do it—it's a matter of life and death.

This was Eli, the autodidact—given a life sentence at fifteen, barely able to read and write. He became his own teacher and his own lawyer and eventually was able to get his sentenced overturned.

I watched my student turning into a teacher, the incarcerated becoming free, and I began to realize that I will never do anything more important than be a teacher to men like Eli.

It isn't what we teach that matters; it's who we teach that does.

## Words No Bars Can Hold