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William Roy Barfield

Waupun Correctional Institution, Wisconsin

From a Boy to a Man

I thought it would be easy to write about my experience as a convict, but it's not. I have buried so many painful memories; digging them up is discomfiting. It's hard to find a flow when you're writing about a subject that really stirs your emotions. However, I will attempt this very feat...

My experience began on August 3, 1994. That was the day I turned myself in for 1st degree Intentional Homicide. I pled guilty to a plea bargain for 1st Degree Reckless Homicide. I went from facing life in prison to 45 years. November 21st I was sentenced to thirty years in prison. On October 14th of same year, I turned nineteen years old. I'm now 27 years old and my heart has frozen and unfrozen behind these barbed wires, brick walls and bars. Let me explain...

I never intended to kill anyone. I shot in fear of losing my own life, at no one in particular. The outcome was tragic! History: I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a small, violent city. The same streets Jeffery Dahmer prowled when he searched for his victims raised me. Unlike a lot of people I grew up with, I have a mom and dad that love me with all their hearts. But the streets raised them also. They taught me what the streets taught them. Be tough, hide your emotions, and get yours when the getting is good. Educationally they didn't teach me much. My dad graduated from high school, my mom didn't. But it wasn't their lack of knowledge or parenting skills alone that cleared the pathway down the wrong road. As they say, it takes a village to raise a child.

I was an above average student in school, in both sports and academics. I was also hyperactive as a child so I was diagnosed as hyperactive and emotionally disturbed and placed into special education classes full-time. The work I was given was always 2-3 years behind grade level. As a result, I was constantly praised for finishing my work quickly and doing it correctly.

When I got to high school and was put into classes with normal students, I couldn't do the work. It was beyond my comprehension. I was confused because I thought I was smart enough to breeze through high school, no problem. But I was poorly taught and unprepared. I dropped out of school, got mixed up with the wrong crowd and committed my life to the streets.

Despite my potential to become the first person in my family to really be someone, no one was surprised about my dropping out of school. I did not receive a single “stay in school” lecture. It’s sad, when we as a people become so accustomed to failure that we accept it without blinking an eye. The rest of my life leading up to my incarceration is predictable, a story that has been told by many people with many different voices.

I got mixed up with gangs, sold drugs, had unprotected sex, and smoked a lot of marijuana. When I was 16, I fathered a child. By the time I was sentenced, I had three children and one on the way, all daughters. They are the only beauty out of all of this ugliness.

Wisconsin Penal Statistics and Facts

Let me put my experience in context. Out of every ten inmates released from prison, seven will come back. Out of every sixty-eight minorities arrested for drug offenses, sixty-eight are convicted. Out of every sixty-eight whites arrested for drug offenses, one is convicted. Wisconsin leads the nation in minority (particularly blacks) incarceration, male and female. Blacks make up fifteen percent of Wisconsin’s population, but sixty-five percent of the prison population. Ninety percent of Wisconsin’s convictions are plea bargains, they lead the nation in that also.

I was charged with 1st Degree Intentional Homicide, facing life in prison, with no chance of parole. I took a plea for 1st Degree Reckless Homicide. Let me enlighten you on that. My crime was in broad daylight. The investigating detectives knew the guy had a gun and he pulled it out first. They knew everyone fled the scene including the victim who later passed away. They knew I was shot prior to this incident in my knee by unknown assailants. I turned myself in a few days after the incident when I heard someone died. They had nothing to support Intentional Homicide but this was the charge they immediately gave. The D.A.s in Wisconsin overcharge regularly so the plea will more likely be accepted. They distorted the facts and made the case they way wanted it to be. I was 18, ignorant about the law and afraid to spend the rest of my life in prison. I never intended on killing anyone. But a jury of my peers would have been all white. I’m black and didn’t want to roll the dice on that one, so I took the plea. But now that my 20s are just about gone and I will miss some of my 30s, I wish I would have taken the chance.

By the time I was sentenced, I was prepared for the physical aspects of doing time, but there was more in store for me: the mental, emotional and spiritual pain that was much more painful than physical hurt.

In the beginning of my bit (sentence), I stayed in the box, also known as Segregated Administration (SA), or the Hole. My heart began to freeze. I refused to be told what to do, how to do it and when to do it. Although I was

raised to not trust police or authority figures, prison provided my first real contact with racism. The white people I knew before my incarceration grew up with me. So I thought the racism thing had died out. Little did I know! Most of the C.O.s in Wisconsin prisons are white. And a lot of them are racist. There is no good hate, but a hate without a cause has to be the worst kind. A hate you can feel when you look into the hater's eyes so strongly it touches your spine. Not knowing how to deal with this, I reciprocated hate with hate. The outcome was me being placed in the box a lot of times.

In SA everything ceases to exist and madness runs wild. It's a mental, emotional, physical and spiritual challenge that will either make you stronger or completely break you. In the box you experience being around individuals I sectioned off in these groups: Cell Warriors, Cranks, Prophets, Psychologists and Racists.

The Cell Warriors get their kicks by tormenting others. Most of them can't fight that good, but they'll constantly insult you by calling you every name in the book. They'll talk about your family and describe in detail how they will beat and rape you in G.P. (General Population). They will put collars on you (the worst collars to have are snitch, homosexual, rapist and child molester). You will get no respect with any of these collars on you, with the exception to homosexual. If you're out of the closet willingly and you don't try to solicit every convict you see, you will be respected by most. A Cell Warrior's sole purpose is to break you down with words.

Cranks are the sickest individuals in SA (known to some as Saudi Arabia). They cover themselves in their own feces, they cut themselves, commit suicide, beat on doors a lot, talk to themselves and take a lot of psychotropic drugs. Psychotropic drugs are prescribed by institution psychologists that don't give a damn about our well-being. Tell them you're a little depressed and need someone to talk to and most of them will drug you up. The cranks need clinical help, 24 hour treatment. It's hard for them to function in G.P. because they're mentally unstable.

The False Prophets are individuals who have become religious fanatics. They preach to one another or to anyone who will listen all day long. This would be good if they weren't so hypocritical. It's common for one of these people to recite Scripture and call you "brother," and in the same sentence threaten to break your neck if you interrupt them again.

The Psychologists are the convicts that lie back and listen to everyone talk, explaining everyone's problems and ways to solve them. The sad part is, most of the time they pinpoint a person's flaws accurately and their solutions are very logical. But no one seems to listen because it's too much reality at one time.

Then there are flaming Racists. It's common to hear white men and black men yelling racist slurs at each other. This usually gets everyone involved, and

a verbal battle of racism breaks out. No one is off limits, including the C.O.s.

It was here, in Saudi Arabia, that my eyes were opened and I realized this was real. You sleep on a brick slab with a thin mattress and cushionless pillow. The water tastes like metal. Twice a week, you're given fifteen minutes to shower, shave, and clip your nails. No deodorant, lotion or hair grease. In the summer time the rooms are scorching hot in the winter, they are freezing cold. You have to be standing at your door for meals or you get passed up. The same goes for showers, supplies, and recreation—a one hour trip to what looks exactly like the dog cages in a Humane Society. Despite all this madness, there are times it's so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

It was during these times I would reflect on my life and try to figure out where I went wrong. You'd be surprised at how much you can remember when all you can do is think. I relived my crime so much I can replay it without closing my eyes. This made me so depressed and vulnerable I began thinking about death a lot. I began to bury the memories and harden my heart. If I didn't allow myself to feel emotions, I could do the time easier. I started blaming any and everyone for my shortcomings. My parents, the white man, society, all my old school teachers, the C.O.s, my lawyer, the judge, my old friends, the world. Everybody but myself! I was so bitter and in pain. It was killing me slowly. No one had a clue because I have this habit of smiling, even when I'm hurting. I had no idea how to deal with this pain.

I began reading a lot, vicariously escaping the harshness of my reality. Then I started writing. I felt relieved when I did this. I found a productive, successful remedy to deal with the pain. I got a High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED) the first year of my incarceration but I still felt like a failure.

An HSED, what is that? No one respects that. I should be in college studying for a degree in preparation for a career. Department of Corrections? That's a joke! It should be Department of Convicts. Rehabilitation? Please. Where are the programs to back this up? The hell if I know. The Truth? They don't give a damn if we rehabilitate or not. There used to be funding for inmates to take correspondence courses and get college degrees. This program helped a lot of convicts return to society with hopes and ambitions of becoming productive members of society. It worked so well, Governor Tommy Thompson cut the program as well as a lot of other programs to benefit inmates. And our current Governor, Jim Doyle, is cutting more programs that help inmates.

What part of this experience affects me the most? When the detective pushed a stack of paper in front of me that said, Suspect: William Roy Barfield, 1st Intentional Homicide, my heart dropped. I took a life that I can't give back, and that is something that's been haunting me for nine years.

I had a dream my dad was killed, but I felt it was really about my brother. So I wrote my big brother, lecturing him about responsibility and living a

respectful life. A week later my only brother was killed in the streets. One shot to his heart. I can't help but feel that one of the bullets that came out of the gun I shot never stopped moving. Until it landed in my brother's heart.

My oldest daughter is fighting for her life right now. She has Neuroblastoma, a cancer that forms tumors in the abdomen. She's going through liquid chemotherapy and has one phase left of the treatment. There is a 50/50 chance they'll be able to kill the cancerous cells causing the tumors to develop. It says in the Bible that our children may be punished for our sins, if we don't repent. I've repented and I ask for forgiveness every night before I go to sleep. It doesn't seem like it's working.

So the answer to the question, the entire experience affects me the most.

You have nothing in here. It's like you stop existing. A letter from a caring soul can be the difference between sanity and insanity. Outside support is very hard to get. We're looked at as trash, society's scum. The misery is so thick in the air you can cut it with a knife. If you're fortunate to get outside support, you can come out of this a much better person. But if you don't have it, time seems forever and heavy on the shoulders.

The average convict is doing time alone. They are angry, frustrated, bitter, confused, hateful, depressed, wounded, lost, uneducated, unloved and will return back to society in this condition. During my nine years of incarceration I've witnessed many convicts get out and come back with sentences that won't allow them to get out anymore. They evolved from non-violent offenders to violent offenders. The system did nothing for them but make them better criminals with bigger chips on their shoulders.

I've learned how to correct myself by recognizing my flaws in another man's character. By doing this I start the process of self-rehabilitation. But I'm not much different than the rest. Just like most, I'm wounded, tired and weakening as the days pass, I desire love, affection, support and comfort, but I carry on like I can do without it. After, each negative confrontation I lose strength. I'm aging good on the outside: I'm 5' 10", 185 pounds, with an athletic build, brown complexion, and a youthful appearance. But inside I feel much older than 27. My punishment has been long and sometimes painful to bare, but yet I rise like the sun that kissed my brown skin.

Everybody loves success stories. It makes us believe anything is possible. I don't have one for you. I'm still in prison and can only offer reality.

Men cry in the showers to disguise their tears. No one to trust, every one is suspect. I've witnessed the betrayal of best friends. Watched men turn into medicated zombies right in front of my eyes. Seen pain in its rawest form. I saw a corpse hanging by a sheet attached to a vent. Suicide was his only escape. The strong stand alone! This is why they fall hard.

Can you sleep at night when the lights are off? I can't! Do you know how

to mend emotional and mental wounds? Can you stand the sight of blood? Here, put on these size 11's and pace with me back and forth in this cage. Feel my urgency to be free so I can get home to my daughters and show them what a real Father is before the streets become their Daddy. Feel my shame as I bite my tongue one more time to prevent myself from telling a C.O. how I really feel about them. Step back in time and witness my transformation from a Boy to a Man. Pick up the shattered pieces of my heart and put them back together.

I want people to see prison through my eyes. We're not all bad people. We can be rehabilitated. Society should take a interest in its future members. There is so much more I will like to say but reluctantly, I leave it at that. Thank you for the voice.