

## A Freedom That Comes From Within

This is a book about finding your own freedom. Freedom in the midst of any circumstance or situation. Freedom, no matter what your life looks like right now. Freedom, regardless of how limited and powerless you may currently perceive yourself to be.

I'm talking about an intensely personal freedom that comes from within. An ever-present, inexhaustible wellspring of freedom that lives inside each one of us, waiting to be discovered and tapped into, irrespective of anything external in our lives. And I do mean anything.

If I could find freedom in the depths of prison, knowing that I would continue to wake up in a cell every morning possibly for the rest of my life, then you can find your freedom, too. I really believe that. With every part of my being, I believe that anyone, anywhere, can find their way to a powerful inner freedom. The kind of freedom that can inspire more conscious, positive choices and establish a strong, quiet center from which to live a more fulfilling and meaningful life.

Within each one of us lies the key to our own freedom. I offer this book, these thoughts, in the hope that something here might help you find your own key. And in finding that key, that you will open the door to a new world of deeper questions, deeper self-examination and deeper engagement with the world.

This book is intended as a journey of self-discovery. The questions it contains are meant as a launch point for your own questions and answers. In posing these questions to yourself and finding your own unique answers, I hope you will get closer to discovering within yourself, if you haven't already, the power to experience a freedom that comes from within.

*When I finally understood  
that my thoughts and values  
were the source of my imprisonment,  
then I was free.*

## My Own Search for Inner Freedom

In order to provide a context for the thoughts in this book, I would like to share a little about my story and my search for inner freedom.

Growing up in an African American family in a middle-class, mostly white neighborhood in Ohio during the Civil Rights Movement, I enjoyed a relatively stable home and went to a good school. But my cousins were living a quite different life just a short drive across town. In the community where they lived, there were signs of struggle and injustice all around, and anger was simmering throughout the community.

I felt out of place in their world; even the proper English and grammatical correctness my mother insisted on differentiated me, and my cousins taunted me for it. I could see how privileged my life was compared to theirs, and increasingly, I found myself torn between our two worlds.

One world had the trappings of peace and prosperity. In the other was the harsh reality of a people struggling with the scars and pain of discrimination and injustice. I began to feel like a sell-out and a fraud. I started questioning the rightness of trying to assimilate into a world I no longer identified with – a world where the American dream seemed to be available only to a certain category of people; a category that largely excluded my cousins and people like them. Confused and angry, I wrestled with where exactly I fit in and how I could somehow make a difference.

Into this vacuum came the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, a revolutionary black nationalist and social movement promoting equality in education, housing, employment and civil rights. They emphasized justice over fitting in, and that message not only resonated with me, it forced me to look at the life I'd been living. And when, in one of their political education classes, a youth organizer singled me out and asked me point-blank what I was doing to make a difference for our people, it weighed on me like you wouldn't believe. Because not only was I not doing anything to help, I'd begun to see myself as part of the problem. Here I was, living this privileged, all-American life, when so many people, particularly people of color, were suffering. That dichotomy, that contradiction, struck me so forcefully that I determined to start making a difference. And so, at age thirteen, I joined our local Chapter of the Black Panther Party. I felt I had found my purpose, my home. And I was all in.

The more I studied the ideology of the Party, the angrier I became about the conditions around me and the inequality and injustice of it all. It didn't take long for me to go from being this nice, soft-spoken, super-assimilated kid to becoming a teenager whose anger turned to delinquency and, ultimately, to criminal behavior. I absolutely believed I was justified in my actions because, as my newfound ideology

explained, the American system itself was criminal in its injustices. Of course, I later realized that at the age of thirteen I lacked the maturity to understand revolutionary ideology and how to apply its principles of social transformation. But back then, I was caught up in my anger and my heartfelt rebelliousness. My ego and rage undermined the integrity of my cause, and my small acts of rebelliousness escalated into acts of crime.

I ended up in prison at the age of seventeen, serving a five to twenty-five year sentence for armed robbery. Prison was beyond anything I could have imagined. It was war, with every day a battle to survive. Fear and violence were ever present. It was like gladiator training, with each person reduced to full-on survival mode. In one incident, I was stabbed by members of a white supremacist group, which enjoyed the protection of the guards. As I was lying on the floor in my own blood, I heard the guard gleefully say, "That nigger is going to die."

What I saw and experienced in prison totally changed me. I'd never witnessed that kind of brutality. And even though I was not a violent person by temperament, I quickly learned to become extremely violent in order to survive. To show weakness of any kind, to give even a hint of a gentler human side, was to become a target. And so, I spent five years in this ruthless, racist environment. And whatever I'd been when I entered prison, I was someone far different, far worse, when I got out at age twenty-two, having served the minimum five years. I'd become a hardened criminal.

Within three years I was back in prison, this time with a fifteen to seventy-five year sentence (of which I served fifteen) for, once again, robbery. By now, I had two sons. I'd become a young father when I was sixteen and had another child between incarcerations. It was sobering to know I wouldn't be there for my children through so many important years in their lives. The first time I heard my youngest son's voice over the phone, asking me where I was, something broke in me. And when he realized I wasn't coming home and he started screaming, something deep within me shifted. I knew that no matter who or what I blamed for my situation, I was responsible for changing it.

Something important had already started working on me, within me, even before that. It hadn't crystallized yet, but the jolt of awareness I felt from the phone call with my son was a next step in a change that had already started growing within me a short time earlier. I'd experienced a kind of epiphany during my sentencing, when the judge told me that I had no excuse for my criminal behavior. He told me I'd squandered my gifts and had willfully chosen to be a criminal. That I'd probably die in prison because with as many gifts and advantages as I'd been given, I'd still decided to engage in a life of crime. And that his only regret was that he couldn't give me a harsher sentence.

What that judge said challenged me to question why I was on my way back to prison; not simply my crime, but my thinking, my choices, my core beliefs and all that I told myself I valued most in life. His words triggered a deep sense of personal accountability in me. I realized it was not racism or injustice or a mistake that led me back to prison. It was my choices. I was the one who had chosen this path.

I felt broken and healed at the same time. I could hear in the judge's words that it was time for me to wake up and figure out my life's purpose. It went beyond him speaking as a white judge to a young black man he didn't know or care about. I understood that I was being called to account spiritually for my choices and my actions.

So when my son's cries came over the phone line and reached into me with their anguish and pain, I was in a place to respond with something more powerful and constructive than anger at the situation, or guilt over leaving my family. Instead, I felt a new resolve growing deep within me. I didn't know if I would ever get out of prison. But I decided I would live a life in prison that would make my sons proud. That if they one day asked the people who'd known me in prison what I was like, those people would speak about me as a good man, a man of honor and integrity, a man who made a difference in other people's lives. I was twenty-five years old with the prospect of spending the rest of my life behind bars. But I knew I had to turn my life around. And I knew it wasn't too late.

In the next fifteen years, I earned my bachelor's and master's degrees from Boston University. I worked on the manuscript for a book called *The Psychology of Incarceration*, organized book clubs to promote literacy, formed prisoners' study groups, and created programs based on the principles of restorative justice.

I became pen pals with Makaziwe Mandela, the eldest daughter of Nelson Mandela. And through her I wrote a letter to Nelson Mandela at Pollsmoor Prison, in which I pledged to him that I would come to South Africa at some point after my release and work in schools and prisons to honor him and the inspiration he was to me and many others at the bottom of life in American prisons. When I was finally released at the age of forty, I vowed to dedicate my life to helping people stay out of jail – both the physical kind and the jail of misguided thinking. I knew I wanted to use my life to make a difference.

As a formerly incarcerated person, I had no expectations of anyone hiring me. I had no money, but I was rich in faith and unwavering determination. I knew I had to do what I was passionate about, so I volunteered for the Urban League, a civil rights organization. I worked tirelessly, and within two months, I was hired. In the years following, I collaborated with two colleagues to convert the manuscript I'd written in prison into a book and DVD series called *The Psychology of Incarceration*; taught a course based on that material as an adjunct professor at Wright State University; served as director of a city-wide electronic monitoring program designed to alleviate prison overcrowding, reduce recidivism, and save taxpayer money in New Orleans; and developed programming for schools in New Orleans based on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

In 2011 I was able to make good on my promise to Nelson Mandela, traveling to South Africa to do work in schools and prisons. I lived there for six years and, among other things, served as host and life coach on *Each One Teach One*, a weekly television show focused on helping youth, parents and teachers develop effective ways to address challenges such as delinquency, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, depression and suicide.

I currently split my time between South Africa and the United States, speaking in schools, prisons and corporations, and conducting workshops focused on personal transformation and overcoming self-imposed limitations. This is something I believe in passionately. Because here's what it comes down to for me:

*It took being in prison for me to find my freedom.*

*I realized I had never been truly free, and I discovered within myself the keys to unlocking my self-created prison.*

*I saw that I'd created and reinforced my imprisonment by the ways I viewed people and dealt with challenges in my life.*

*It was my misguided thinking that kept me locked away from my deepest inner self, from my greatest potential, and from my ability to connect with others in an authentic way.*

*When I finally understood that my thoughts and values were the source of my imprisonment, then I was free.*

*I understood that if it was true I'd been in prison long before I was sentenced, I could be free long before I was released.*

*I discovered that the only way I could live with dignity was to take responsibility for my actions.*

*To recognize and feel, deeply, the power of love. Not just love from others, but love for myself is redemptive.*

*I learned how important it was to find a way to forgive and trust myself.*

*And, with inner work and soul-searching, I learned that I could have faith in myself again.*

*That I was worth forgiving, having faith in, trusting and loving.*

*And this kind of realization is what I wish for each person, for each one of US, who has ever felt stuck in the prison of self-imposed limitations.*

*First, I want us to see our prison for what it really is: a prison constructed by our doubts and fears and all the limitations we impose upon ourselves.*

*A prison reinforced, year after year, by our lack of trust in ourselves and faith in the basic goodness and rightness of the Source that created us all.*

*A prison that deludes us into thinking nothing more is possible for us than that which we see right now in our own life.*

*A prison that robs us of our dreams, of our belief in possibilities, of the motivation and inspiration to recreate our life and change it for the better.*

*And second, having seen that self-created prison clearly at last, that we can ALL begin to transform our thoughts, our beliefs, our relationships, our dreams, our lives and our world.*

*Little by little, with patience and trust in the process, from the inside out.*