

Billy Johnson #322385

Convicted of First-Degree Murder; serving a Life Sentence

Incarcerated since February 1998

Like many incarcerated individuals, I was the product of a troubled childhood: abuse, neglect, poverty, drug addiction, mental illness, perpetual displacement, and so on. I was locked up for my current charge first-degree murder in 1998, when I was 19. I am 48 years old at the time of this writing.

In the year before my incarceration I was in three separate psychiatric facilities due to the persistent mental illness struggled with at the time. Two weeks before being charged with murder, I attempted suicide and was placed in a mental hospital. After a cursory evaluation I was released. After I came to jail, I continued to suffer from mental issues, and this went on until after I was convicted of first degree murder and given a life sentence.

Early in my incarceration I came to the realization that I had destroyed my life (and other people's lives as well) by my own choices. Though I have since come to understand how my mental illness affected my decisions and behavior, I came to the conclusion that I would have to take responsibility for my own life if I was going to salvage what was left of it. Most of my incarceration has been a journey of self-discovery and education. I discovered that I loved to read and began to study a vast array of subjects, everything from mathematics and quantum physics to philosophy and comparative religion.

Learning to learn gave me a new lease on life. With my current sentence I had very little hope of ever putting my newfound love for learning into practice in the free world, but I didn't allow that to deter me. The last two

decades of my incarceration has been devoted to learning and developing myself, simply because I found pleasure in it and because I was determined to retain my dignity and to take responsibility for my life, against all odds.

I would have to say that this decision has paid off, for me at least. I chose not to join a gang, start doing drugs, or participate in the many predatory behaviors that flourish in this environment. I retained my hope, against all hope, that my life could become something, in spite of my past, in spite of the decisions I made to get me here, and in spite of an environment that is designed to kill out all hope.

During my journey I taught myself to write and I have since published several books. I have also taught myself to paint. For many years I have been dedicated to physical fitness, health, yoga, meditation, and other practices that improve my quality of life and simply make me a better person. In spite of my bleak circumstances, I have cultivated resilience and have been defiant against anything that would devalue my life and my self-worth again, in spite of my past decisions and my environment. To be sure, I have gone through periods of hopelessness and despair, wondering if it is even worth it to keep going, wondering if I really want to die in prison after serving several decades or get out an old man with nothing and no one. But I have always climbed out of these pits, knowing that there is some essential part of myself that remains valuable and remains good, regardless of the decisions I made in my youth. I have held on to this spark and have pushed forward, and it has made all the difference in the world.