

"The Value of a Reformed Murderer"

by Michael E. Blackwell, Sr.

In 1991, at twenty-one years old, I murdered two people. It was brutal. Senseless. Inexcusable. During that time, I was trapped in a mindset devoid of feeling. My humaneness had gradually frozen over in years prior. Although I functioned, I was far from actually living. I had learned to mask it well. I could laugh, work, even make love, but inside I was hollow. Disturbed. I was not always this way. I used to be a compassionate, affable, life-of-the-party type of guy. What changed me? Trauma. It enslaved me. Trauma took me to a place where I believed that picking up a baseball bat and beating two people to death was the only way to end the pain I felt. The pain they tried to understand. The pain they wanted to help me get through. Instead, I killed them. I was sentenced to life in prison.

How did I descend into that mindset?

In October of 1984, I came home and found my grandfather murdered. Before the police were called, I was told "Keep your mouth shut," and sent down the street so I wouldn't be interviewed. Then, two years and four months later, a police officer checking abandoned structures noticed feet in the doorway of an outside basement stairwell...those feet belonged to my mother, who had been dumped there two days earlier. Please understand, their deaths are no excuse for the lives I ended four years later. I only share my tragedies to provide insight into what two main components comprised the mind of this killer; how mental and emotional trauma, solely internalized, will destroy the future and birth an Enslaved-to-Pain mindset.

Component One: The initial shock of seeing the blood splatters on the bottom of the TV stand and VCR, the large oak chest and nightstand, became exacerbated when I saw his beaten, bloody, and swollen face. His salt and pepper hair now salt and crimson. I froze.

My mind took a snapshot, and his image became seared in my mind's eye. From that moment on, I wanted to forget what I had seen, but memory has no on/off switch. I wanted to scream, but I was told to remain silent. I internalized it. While awake, I could see his face in other people, so I would close my eyes. When I tried to sleep, I saw him lying in the pool of blood that had saturated the green carpet, so I stayed awake. Sometimes I could hear him ask me for help. This is the headspace I secretly lived in for almost two and a half years. Then, my mother's body was found.

Component Two: Although not visual, the discovery of my mother's body on February 24th had a comparable, if not greater impact, but in a different way. The image of her feet always remained vivid because of my overactive imagination, but it was the details of her time of death that affected me profoundly. When the coroner revealed that she had been there for two days, estimating her death around February 22nd, after 6 pm, two truths instantaneously came to mind: first, I was the last family member to speak to my mom the day she died. Second, I lied to her. My mother asked me to come pick her up on the 22nd at 6 pm so we could discuss our differences of late. I knew when I hung up the phone that I wasn't going to show up. I wanted to punish her one more time for telling me the truth about myself, with the intention of going to see her in the next day or two. Furthermore, when she said, "Michael, Momma loves you, boy," I replied, "Okay," and hung up the phone. In that moment of learning the coroner's details, I knew I would never get to apologize. I knew I would never get to tell her, "I love you too." For twenty years I carried the guilt and shame. Every day I wondered if I had showed up would she still be alive? The answer is always a resounding YES in my mind. Then, in 2007, in the visiting room at the Newton Correctional Facility, I told my sister and stepfather the truth.

These thoughts and visions were an anvil on my existence. No matter what I did, I couldn't remove, or get used to, the weight. It just kept getting heavier and heavier. I spiraled down into this hopeless, bottomless, guilt-filled abyss, where I resented the people who noticed, and those who didn't. In my mind, I created a world where only I mattered. I pretended to

love and care outside of that world because I felt as if everyone pretended to love and care for me. Cynicism turned to anger on its way to madness, and since I couldn't stop hurting, I wanted everyone else to hurt but couldn't tell them why. They were supposed to know automatically. My victims tried to understand, but in my twisted perception, I kept receiving it as if they were only trying to get information to hurt me further. I always believed that everyone was out to hurt me. That is why I didn't seek help. Anything surrounding mental health back then was considered a sign of weakness, especially in the black community. Most black households followed the same creed: "What goes on in this house stays in this house."

The Enslaved-to-Pain mentality is conceived in the marriage between unexpected trauma and nonexistent or inadequate therapy. In the life of a child or adolescent who experiences a violent traumatic event, the connection between them and normalcy is drastically altered, and sometimes completely severed. When trauma's impact is left inadequately explored, forcibly suppressed, or completely untreated, it causes periodic detachments from reality, which in turn creates a dependence on contrived therapeutic remedies designed by an immature mind. As we age, the problems we face are common to the age range, but our known survival tactics are grossly limited and inept because we retrieve them from that mentally younger place previously stunted by trauma. Thus, we discover we have developed survival techniques that enslave us to a cycle that is detrimental to healing. For example:

When children are secretly groomed for molestation by a primary love source (mother, father, sister, brother, grandparent, stepparent/sibling, or legal guardian), it is the informal introduction into the world of sex. It is instinctively uncomfortable, but a repetition of soothing words and reassuring touches deceptively eases discomfort, teaches acceptance, and compels participation. The essence of manipulation. The formal introduction is surprisingly violent and brutally painful. Traumatizing. Survival becomes the primary goal

even in a state of confusion. Over time, many children's innate desire to please becomes perverted, and because their primary source of love is also their primary source of pain, they become trapped in the cycle of choosing to please in order to feel loved, even though it hurts. As they grow up, it often evolves into promiscuity, which can lead to willing prostitution and/or being trafficked. Drugs and alcohol become temporary escapes, and help is not easily trusted, or even sought out, because everything started with someone who was supposed to protect them. Someone in whom they trusted. As bad as that world can be, familiarity becomes tantamount to surviving, because the unknown houses the next Boogeyman.

For the child or teen who experiences the violence inherent in the murder of a primary love source, the end result can be the same even if the road travelled to get there is different. It is still a shock. It is still violent to the psyche. It still provokes survival instincts. When left untreated or unexplored, these traumas can enslave someone to a cycle of pain. In my case, the recurrence of the visions, guilt, and shame, kept me retrieving the solution from my fifteen-year-old mind...keep your mouth shut. I had survived by doing so for six years. Had I opened up to someone who could first establish a connection with me (the most powerful connection being relatability) and alerted them to the violence going on in my troubled mind, I would have accepted the guidance and support to nourish and cultivate the development of age-appropriate solutions that would have prevented murder. There are thousands, if not millions, of people who are enduring trauma on diverse levels that are keeping their mouths shut. What I need people to understand is that the deeply troubled, violent, and unremorseful mind plaguing many people today probably originates from trauma. Whether it be racism, police brutality, inequality, an abusive or absentee parent, bullying, or all of the above, the repetition of it is a recurring trauma. So, in society help should begin.

Some may ask, "Isn't the work of changing lives needed in prison?" And "Why do you need to get out to do this work?" The answer to the first question: yes, this work is

needed in here. That's why a few of us do what we can. The answer to the second question is a bit complicated: we have to be completely outside the power of the Iowa Department of Corrections (IDOC). Please allow me to expound.

Various professionals have articulated the crucial role environment plays in the development of the criminal mind, and its subsequent behavior. What is often overlooked, or ignored altogether, is the role prison environments play in the process of rehabilitation. Empirically speaking, many DOC officials and prison administrations intentionally refuse to cultivate environments of healing and rehabilitation. They effectively hinder, if not outright deny, support for the very few prisoners, counselors, administrators, and correctional officers who attempt to inject positivity, or implement meaningful programs, into the prison community. Understanding this, and while under the indirect tutelage of progressive-minded Warden Jim McKinney, I founded a mentoring program called Negative2Positive. This was a three-phase program designed to penetrate that hard exterior common to prisoners, get to those vulnerable places, and commence healing. It was modelled after my own transformation process, which was facilitated by a few of my then fellow gang members who have experienced and/or committed murder (Relatability), and a select few prison administrators and staff who not only understood and operated in a rehabilitative mindset but recognized the good in me I had abandoned. Their unlikely encouragement was the seeds and water that enabled me to accept the growth God provided when I gave my life to Christ in 2006.

Many people in society correctly assume that the world of prison is a tsunami of negativity opposed to positive change. However, what society does not grasp is that this wave is generated by both sides—prisoner and staff. It is comprised of some prisoners who seek to control and dominate the weak, and some prison staff and administrators who use their positions of power to inflict pain on, and perpetuate anger in, the prison population. These are mini systems that operate within prisons - gangs or cliques, sexual predators, sadists, etc. - that have no empathy for trauma because they often remain trapped in their

own. An enslaved mind coming into prison for the first time unwittingly exists at the mercy of these mini systems. Once in prison, correcting, rehabilitating, and healing are no longer the primary goals. For the prisoner, it becomes survival. For many staff, it becomes maintaining power by punishing, dehumanizing, demonizing, and oppressing prisoners. Both sides are governed by peer-pressure and comply for acceptance. When the enslaved-to-pain mind becomes intertwined with the mini systems of prisons, the union conceives a recidivist. This is why help before prison is paramount. It has two monumental benefits: first, it prevents people from being hurt or killed. Second, it changes the trajectory of a traumatized life.

As a mentally reformed murderer who has experienced, endured, and learned how to employ constructive techniques to survive the gang life, the prison world, and both sides of murder, I understand how to navigate the barriers and roadblocks, open the right doors, and which walls to climb over, go around, or crash through, to get to the nucleus of pain. I have honed the skill of taking the hand of the hurt and walking them out of their enslavement, with dignity. My story commands their ears and creates an instantaneous connection. Their perverted respect for my past brutality will establish credibility, which authenticates my message of where their enslaved mind is taking them. On the flip side, it also establishes a credibility that authenticates my message of where escaping an enslaved mind could lead them. This generates hope. Many enslaved (like myself at the time) do not know they are enslaved-to-pain. I help them see it, acknowledge it, understand it, and work through it. Once they know that I came from wearing a toilet-paper dress in a padded cell, to speaking before prosecutors, judges, politicians, and some of the most prestigious academic minds from a Division One university, while in prison, then they can believe that a better, more positive life can be realized without the violence that results in prison experience.

After spending almost three and a half decades in prison and gradually escaping the enslaved-to-pain mindset that descended into mental illness, gang participation, and

murder, I have gained a unique insight. An insight that compelled me to become a Certified Mentor with The National Alliance on Mental Illness; work with gang members to see life from a different, more respectable perspective; and create the Negative2Positive program. I love to help people acknowledge, understand, and ultimately escape an enslaved-to-pain lifestyle. My experiences have created a dual understanding - dual citizenship - in both hemispheres of those previously mentioned worlds. From a perpetrator and survivor perspective, I understand how mental and emotional trauma causes physical pain, fills you with emptiness, supplies helplessness, and generates a desire for relief that oftentimes compels desperate, destructive thoughts and actions. It is two sides of the same coin. This dual understanding ushers in the ability to reach the enslaved, violent, destructive mindset, no matter its source. It is a labyrinth I have mastered, and I've accepted the role of a tour guide tasked with leading people through, and out of, a hopeless place. I started with myself. I know the process intimately.

Commuting the sentences of, releasing, and utilizing lifers who demonstrate a positive mental transformation, with a true heart for mentoring, will not only save lives, but also save the taxpayers 32,000 dollars a year. In the Des Moines Register article, "Hearing Set on Lifer's Bid for Release," William Petroski informed us that 224 death or life sentences have been commuted in the State of Iowa since 1949. He wrote: "On average, these prisoners had served 24.5 years... only four of the 224 went on to reoffend... three of the inmates were later paroled again." That is a 1.78% recidivism rate. With support, and permission, from a member of my victims' family, I filed for commutation in 2019. Unfortunately, my efforts were thwarted by a staff set up that Governor Reynolds used (unwittingly, I believe) as her sole reason for denial in 2021.

Today, I am still committed to, and engrossed in, the battle to save more lives than I have taken. I recognize society's need for someone who understands the fabric of the angry, violent, destructive, enslaved-to-pain mindset; who intimately knows how to reach those suffering silently and guide them toward embracing change. If given a second chance at

freedom, I intend to continue building the Negative2Positive brand not only in prisons, but also schools, rehab centers, and in the realm of domestic violence — working with abusers. I would start in Iowa, expand it nationally, and eventually globally.

Commutation by a governor would be the most effective way for this reformed murderer to impact society positively. History confirms I'm not likely to waste the chance.