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From : GARY FIELDS ID: M05398  
To : Patrick Smith, Customer ID: 21218815  
Date : 5/19/2019 10:02:20 AM EST, Letter ID: 592956956  
Location : 401  
Housing : D2203L

**My Journey of Personal Growth  
For TED Talk 6/15**

The tallest oak in the forest is not tallest because it came from the hardest acorn-It's tallest because no other trees blocked its sunlight, soil was rich and deep, no rabbits chewed its bark as a sapling, and no lumberjack cut it down. Likewise, the trajectory of a man's life often depends on many cultural, social, and economic forces.

My Journey of Personal Growth began in a place where some pockets of poverty were so deep that change was hard to find. No rabbit chewed my bark, but I risked being bitten by rats a few times. I was one of 18 brothers and sisters, and while there were no lumberjacks to worry about in the "hood," 6 of my siblings were cut, down much too soon, by drugs and alcohol, poor choices, and gang related gun violence.

However, mine is not a tale of woe. This is not a sob story. My journey has been about finding light in the midst of the darkness, and hope in the midst of despair. Where most people saw obstacles, I looked for opportunities to overcome. Today, I can say, without a doubt, that it is the tree which withstands the fiercest winds, that has roots which grow the deepest. When the winds of adversity blew, I didn't look for excuses, I adjusted my sails and charted a course for distant shores.

I escaped, not into drugs or alcohol, but books! There was a new adventure on every page, and I caught a glimpse of a world that could exist beyond the limitations of the hood. I discovered a world where poverty couldn't cast its shadow, and my dreams had room to grow. The more I read, the more I learned, and the more I learned, the luckier I got. I was blessed to earn a scholarship to a New England Prep School. Going from the "hood" to a country club environment was only the beginning.

Between stimulus and response, there is a space- In that space is our power to choose a response. In our response lies our personal growth and freedom. I was fortunate to have I made the right choices more often than not, and my journey led to an Ivy League College, adventures in Europe and North Africa, and later, professional and business successes.

Not long after the Towers fell on 9/11, I went from a 2 and 1/2 acre ranch with horses, to a 2 man cell in "Gated Community" of a different kind. My fall was not as sudden, but for me it seemed just as devastating as the fall of those Towers. The ground zero of my life was a holding cell, and it seemed as if all of my dreams had gone up in smoke.

In the epic poem, Dante's "Inferno," there's a sign over the entrance to hell which says, "Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here." As I've walked within the confines of the razor wire, I've looked into the eyes of far too many men for whom, it seemed, that "hope" was a candle that burned out long ago.

It's been said that when you remove hope from the hearts of men, what you have left are beasts of prey. Webster's defines the word prey as either a "victim," when used as a noun, or a "predator" when used as a verb. Whether as a noun or a verb, both share the hell of those who have given up hope. The more I watched people die inside, the more I guarded that which was most precious within me: Hope! I don't know if I pray because I have hope, or I have hope because I pray, but I praise God for both.

As it turns out, I also thank God for the many obstacles I'd faced, and the challenges I had to overcome as a child. It gave me the strength to endure, the faith to hold on, and the confidence to believe I could rise above the rubble that my life had become like a Phoenix, I could be reborn from the ashes.

When the winds of adversity blew in the past, my roots went deep, not as a weeping willow, but a sturdy oak and just as a tree whose roots remain intact will continue to grow, I remained rooted in faith and anchored in the hope that prison would only be a "pit stop" in my continuing Journey of Personal Growth.

Although I once attended Columbia University, since being in prison I have earned a Graduate of Theology, and Bachelor's of Biblical Studies. I have completed the course work for a Masters degree, and hope to finish my thesis soon. If it may be God's will, I'll begin work on a Ph.D in Theology before the year is out. I may have entered the system as inmate #M05398, but I hope to leave as Dr. Field.

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After 15 years spent behind the razor wire, the same way that I once believed that no pocket of poverty could hold me back, I know that a D.C.# will not define me. It's not what I've done, but what I've overcome that keeps me pressing on.

As I look back upon my journey thus far, I can say, with assurance, that it has been the light of God's love that has guided me through. To paraphrase A. W. Tozer, my fire may not be large, but it is at least real, and many there may be who can light their candles at it flame.

The end of this sentence will begin a new chapter in my life, and I still believe in happy endings. The Journey continues, and I praise God that I will continue to "grow." Once, as a student at Columbia University, I had dinner at Windows on the World. It was a beautiful restaurant atop One World Trade Center. The future that stretched out before me seemed as spectacular as the view. Perhaps one day, God willing, I'll dine in the new restaurant atop Freedom Tower, and I'll look back upon my journey thus far. When I do, I hope to find that I've left behind more light than I found when I first passed through.

#### I PRAY

I pray that through my writing,  
I might touch the hearts if men-  
To plant a seed that may lead,  
Perhaps, to being Born Again.

I pray the Spirit guides me,  
Not just to amuse, or entertain-  
But to open eyes to the prize,  
For which the Lamb of God was slain.

I pray my words may comfort,  
Those who are feeling pain-  
And helps them to know the joys,  
Of counting loss as gain.

And then when my pen falls silent,  
If any man should tell my story-  
Let this stand out, without a doubt,  
He wrote to bring God Glory!