

MY DEATH WINDOW

BY NDUME OLATUSHANI

Sitting on death row was all-mental for me. The one thing that I always knew – that the people who held me captive didn't know – was that they only held me physically. The one thing that could not be taken from me, as I sat in a tiny prison cell, was my mind.

Imagine standing in front of a judge and hearing him pronounce: “You are to die by electrocution.” Imagine you are being sentenced for a crime that you did not commit, imagine still this crime took place in a city you had never ever visited, not even in a dream.

My name is Ndume Olatushani. I spent 28 years in prison and 20 of those years were on death row. I was born and raised in St. Louis, Missouri. Though I was tried for a murder that took place in Memphis, Tennessee, I had never been to the state of Tennessee and had certainly never been in Memphis Tennessee committing a murder. I was a young black male accused of killing a “well-respected” white man. It took the all-white jury two hours to come back with a guilty verdict. It took this same jury of my “peers” nearly the same amount of time to come back with its decision to have me executed for the crime. It didn't matter that I was not guilty. That is a story for another time. I want to tell you what it was like living in my valley in the shadow of death for nineteen years, eleven months, seventeen days, some hours, some minutes and some seconds.

Imagine living in a 6 by 10 foot cell with the only natural light of day trying to squeeze through a 3 inch wide and 36 inch tall window, set 4 inches deep into the cold concrete wall. I was permitted an hour of time outside each day, but was restricted to a 10 by 10 foot wire and concrete cage. For 20 years I could see grass within hand's reach but I could not touch it nor walk on it. It was these and many other deprivations that the prison system used to try to demean and rob me of my humanity and lastly my breath. I guess that society could justify its actions against me only by trying to make me over into something less than human.

When I first landed on death row I was trying to figure out how in the hell I was going to get away. I didn't really care if it was through the court process or a hole in the wall. I just knew I had to get away. Despite my desperation to be free again, I maintained a positive attitude during my imprisonment and remained ever hopeful that my freedom would come soon. Had I been able to see in a crystal ball that it would actually take 28 years to gain my freedom back, it would have been much harder to keep a positive attitude. But, day by day, my hope burned bright and I got through one day at a time with my spirit intact.

I refused to be bent or bowed by the circumstances that were not of my choosing. I can say that I did not start the long arduous nightmare the way that I came out the other side, whole. One thing among many that I learned during the long period of my imprisonment, is “whatever fires that we have to go through in life, if we get through to the other side, it is not meant for us it is meant for other people.” I survived it. The one thing that I can say is, as long as we are alive there is hope, we just have to keep getting up and putting our best foot forward. For the first couple of years of my incarceration, I was pretty angry about what was done to me. I had not quite figured out how I was going to stare down my anger giant.

My mind was made up by the worst possible thing that could have happened to me or anyone sitting in prison for that matter. November 7, 1987 nearly two years after I was convicted I was sitting in my cell reading a book when the officer came to my cell "Johnson" you need to get up and come down stairs to make a phone call. His emotions did not give any indication about what he knew, he could have been asking me to go outside. It was almost like he got some sick pleasure out of walking me downstairs knowing that I would be told this thing that would shatter anyone's world. As I shuffled along in handcuffs and leg irons down five flights of a steel staircase chains jangling against the metal steps imagining the worst. The officer dialed the number and passed me the phone when it picked up on the other end, it was my sister's voice. I asked her what was wrong. I was not prepared for the news I got on the phone. I could tell that she struggling with how to break the news to me and I could tell she had been crying. "Moosie is dead" she could not say anything else for a few moments, I am sure in part because of her own pain. As I look back I know she also wanted to see how I was going to handle this devastating news she had just giving me. In fact I was knocked off of my mark in an instant. My world as I knew it was shattered into pieces. I could only say what, what did you say, it was like my brain had not caught up to what I was hearing. I screamed from some where deep within my every being "no, no" I tried to absorb what she was telling me as I kept saying no this can't be true to myself. I fell silent for what seemed like eternity, and then I asked her who told her this, and had she gone to see this for herself. "Johnson I have to take you back to your cell now" the officer said, his voice snapped me back to where I was. For the next three days I was in bed sleeping and crying.

One of the last things my mother said to me as I jokingly said to her as she was leaving the visiting room, old girl I wouldn't know what to do if I didn't have you in my life, her response was "you are going to know exactly what to do when the time comes." It was those words that picked me back up and made it possible for me to move forward, so even in death she made me a strong. I felt like I couldn't be hurt anymore at the point of her death. As I started to pick myself up I had to decide how I was going to look as I stood. I had already been angry at the world for what had been done to me, there I was sitting on death row for a crime that I had not committed. I could have easily spiraled into abyss of more of the same anger. However, I chose to dust myself off and start looking in the direction of freedom. I am talking about mental freedom, because the truth was then I did not know if I would ever be physically free at that point. I just knew that if I was going to be the person that I wanted to be, I was the only one that controlled the outcome of that. Of course this was a process that was not always an easy one my patients and resolved was tested all the time, I was not unlike the thousands of others that was sitting in prison having to deal with life circumstances. Plus, I always knew and had the sense to know that I was fortunate than a lot of the women and men sitting on death row though we were all slated for the same fate.

There were many things that I had going on in my life that helped save my life, like a loving family and strangers that had extended their hands to me in friendship that made me strong. I spent hours reading every day, I would read anything that I could get my hands on that I felt I could learn something from. During the period of my imprisonment I became a voracious reader, it was my reading that allowed for me to enjoy freedom while sitting in my death cell. Strangely as it may sound, I did not began to live until I was facing the prospect of death, if that makes any sense. Life is such that no one is suppose to know how, where or when we will depart from this earth. When I was put in the position where I was being told exactly where, when and how I was going to die. It forced me to think about life and death on a whole different level. Once I stared death in the face, I began to know the power that we possess within us to overcome whatever life throw at us. The only power that people and things have over us is that which we relinquish unto them or it. I had guards and prisoners alike ask me from time to time why I smiled all the time. I would try to explain the simple truth and concept that it is not people or circumstances that was responsible for my happiness. Other times I would just smile and say, I put my

feet on the floor today so I got up on the right side of the bed. My belief is, if we are mentally and physically able to get up out of bed everything else can be worked out.

Prior to landing on death row I had no interest in art, but while I was on there I taught myself how to paint. I am sure as a child in school I did what ever the other children did in this respect however, beyond this that was it. Art seemed to happen to me by chance, although I tell people all the time that I was an artist before I found myself sitting in prison. I just did not have the opportunity to explore that which was lying dormant in the well of my creative energy. I think that we all possess an untapped well of creativity waiting to be discovered.

There was a guy on death row with me that was an artist that I commissioned to do a portrait of me. To make a long story short, when he finished it, it did not look anything like me. I still had to pay this guy for his time and efforts. Once I had the "portrait" the whole time I was thinking, I could have done a better job myself and kept the cartons of Kool cigarettes that it cost me. It was from those moments of self affirmation that I eventually concluded that the only thing that was stopping me was, myself.

So I started drawing and at some point I began to paint. Painting perhaps, was one of those tools that helped me pick myself up, not only did it give me the ability to create what I wanted to see. It was my artwork that led me to the best thing that has ever happened to me, my wife Anne Marie. My wife is singularly the most responsible person for me alive today. We met six years into my imprisonment and she dedicated her life to saving mine. I will always be eternally grateful for this generous soul that the universe sent to me when I needed love. I proposed to her and presented her with a ring while I was in prison and she laughed and said "silly we are going to get married when you come home", this was twelve years into my incarceration. Neither of us knew that it would be another sixteen years before I would eventually walk out of prison. I walked out of prison June 1, 2012 and we were married July 28, 2012. It was magical as we danced in the summer breeze to "A Change Is Gonna To Come" surrounded by family and friends.

I was always looking forward and trying to prepare for freedom, because I knew that I would one day walk out of prison. I never internalized the belief that I would be executed for a crime that I did not commit, even though I was sitting on death row. When I finally did come home I quickly realized how much things had changed and yet so much was the same. The biggest challenge that I had to face is the technological leap that happened during the nearly three decades that I was away. In 1984 when I was incarcerated the internet did not even exist. While I was in prison I was not allowed any access to the internet. The Tennessee department of Corrections stopped letting prisoners even have type writers during the time I was in the system. In the age of computers, should we not question why would this happen? Can it be that there is a concerted efforts to keep some people technologically ignorant? Why? Can it have anything to do with prisons being big business and the only way it will remain profitable people have to go to jail. With billions being exchange and made in the Prison Industrial Complex, somebody has to go the jail. Right?

In spite of all that was taken from me, I consider myself to be a fortunate man. I don't want to minimize what people face coming out of American prisons. However, my transition has not been as hard as it has for other Freeman. A couple of days after my release I drove a car and it was like I had never being denied the opportunity to drive for the time that I was away. I make this point to say in some ways it is symbolic of what I have experienced since I have been home. I still wake up happy as hell to be free of people telling me when I can eat, shit and sleep.

I am doing good work with the Children's Defense Fund trying to disrupt and eventually dismantle the Cradle to Prison Pipeline that so many depend on for greed of profit. While millions suffer, because there are some devils that would rather see some people on a prison compound instead of a college campus. I work with young people around art trying to educate them about the systems that are operating around them. With the hope that they do not fall prey to the profiteers who are often time the architects of their misery as they are being funneled in the direction of a prison cell. You know it is said that we are the total sum of our experiences. Certainly I would have never chose what happened to me. But one of the things that I think that I came to realize and understand while I was going through the fire. That what ever life puts on us, that if we survive, it is not meant for us, it is meant for others. We have to realize and accept that we are charged with the responsibility to say to others, as long as we are living there is hope of something different.

Dated:

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