

TEACHING AND TRUTH

Education Is Improvisation

Improvisation Is Art

Jerome Morgan

*My very first love
during my childhood
was the sport of American football.
However, my early talent in creating art was the primary characteristic
that enabled me to deeply imagine a hope and faith that result in a
balance of efficient physical capabilities.
This I had to master
during all encounters
as a maturing male human being
What is activism?
Provide and Protect was identified as my most basic creative
foundation . . .
Reservation, observation, and compassion acted as my personality
very early in life . . . growing from an infant in places housed by
state-paid parents, with a house full of nonrelated children, who
had no other parent.
At least I would see my biological son from time to time. . . .*

*Once I felt that a person was positive people it was easy to create a
genuine line of communication from that point on in the art of getting to know
one another. My main intentions are no more than that my goodness is not
dishonest and my limitations are not faults but merely human imperfections.*

Jerome Morgan was wrongly convicted and served a total of twenty years in Angola Prison before being found innocent. While in prison he made a pact with fellow prisoners Robert Jones and Daniel Rideau to someday reunite and go into business together as free men. They enrolled in prison education programs, learned trades, and studied the law. Today, through their work with Free-Dem Foundations, a nonprofit community-based youth organization in New Orleans, they are realizing the vision they created while unjustly incarcerated.

Kalfou, Volume 6, Issue 2 (Fall 2019). © 2019 by the Regents of the University of California. ISSN 2151-4712 (print). ISSN 2372-0751 (online). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15367/kf.v6i1.194>. All rights reserved

My pain resulted from being born in an oppressed life. No excuses; human imperfection creates spiritual perfection. My way of living resulted in me doing unto others as I would want them to do unto me. Some people take their hurt out on others. And good people share their goodness with others.

Education Is Improvisation. Improvisation Is Art. Art Is Truth. Truth Is Caring. Caring Is Love and Love Is Humans Being Free!

My imperfections birthed my imagination. I've always been small in stature, but big at the core of my dignity. As a young maturing Male, I figured if I couldn't Provide and Protect due to my obvious lack of mass force, I still found myself to be richly blessed enough with the ability to use more of a psychological force to be the best example of the Male that I discovered in my ancestors, who have forever made my soul their community. Being an artist meant channeling the negative into a positive beauty.

Oh Heavenly Mother. . . . Being creative meant shaping Play-Doh into dinosaurs or, at age four, into the 1936 Olympics track and field medalist. It meant being one of the wise men bearing frankincense and myrrh during the winter solstice holiday play at my church school. It meant having a job at an elementary age to create a practice of earning income. It also meant drawing headshots of all of my closest friends, and drawing full figures of my favorite athletes at that time—Mike Tyson, Dominique Wilkins, and Bobby Hebert. It meant as an eleven-year-old, drawing and painting images on jeans for a price per image. It meant winning lip-syncing contests with my group of friends. Being creative meant figuring it out, imagining, growing, improvising, and transitioning.

It meant taking on the challenges of being wrongfully imprisoned at the age of seventeen, leaving the jungle in the Orleans Parish jail, going to the largest prison/plantation in America, sentenced to live there until my natural life expires, losing loved ones, some of which didn't pass away but instead turned their back. Being creative meant holding on to faith and exercising my Godly force of principles and prayers.

Being an activist meant that you never compromise to better yourself only with instant gratification. Leaders never eat first, we always eat last. Activism meant creating a way with my hands, to earn a meaningful living behind bars, in the belly of the beast.

I taught myself how to cut hair, using only a small pocket comb and an exposed disposable razor. Who would know that barbering has its history in the priesthood? Hair is a part of your body, and nobody wants anybody altering their God-given features if the person doing the cutting is not experienced or gifted. Hair is sacred. Hair is our first line of personal Protection, and barbering Provides you with a means to personally be your own boss. The motto is "Know Thyself, Own Thyself."

Cutting the guys' hair in prison made them feel comfortable opening up in earnest about their thoughts, after helping them look and feel good despite such a dire, traumatic predicament. Not being judgmental helped with my patience. In Art, you have to have patience. No creation ever happened without patience. Now I often say, "Be patient, don't be a patient." I paid attention to every instinct and learned a lot about life around me. I was able to help just as much as I learned from anything and everyone. Simple, meaning I learned how not to be negative with myself and others.

Graphic design resurrected me from giving up on my talents. It was quite a battle every day to find channels to create for myself. Once I was able to maneuver being placed in Graphic Communications, purely through scoring high on the acceptance test, I fell in love with creating ambigrams, which are word images that read the same (or different) when turning the word image upside down. Thank you, Ebony Hawkins and Patrick Joseph!!!

Writing became my Best Friend because it rehabilitated me from a natural child into a mature adult. Graphic design resuscitated my Soul's most profound Art, granting me back my faith and imagination. My Resistance.

I was not a good ol' boy at the Angola Plantation in Louisiana. Although my disciplinary record was very lengthy, I was not a troublemaker. As a matter of fact, no matter what, I always remained a real gentleman. However, I stand firm on the truth that I stand on. And those Red-Neck Hillbillies didn't like that. They are super-ignorant. Like the '60s, or the '30s, or the 1860s. They're ignorant and I'm gifted, so the guards would try their best to keep our minds agitated if we were not catering to them. I've seen many give in to this form of pressure. And the prison feeds off abusing their authority in whatever way they can, to make them feel *more than*, despite them showing themselves to be *less than* by taking advantage of an already disadvantaged person. Which is a belief that evil disciplines people of color, not acknowledging our psychological strengths of endurance.

Through common sense, I learned that humans are neither white nor black. The mainstream perception is that our fair-skinned people are more precious than our dark-skinned people. This view is shared in every country on the globe, and finds its measure in our global economics.

Students at the Center (SAC) had taken on my story as a Social Justice subject of what it means to be human.¹ Mass incarceration is the only criminal in our criminal justice system, and impoverishment is our subsequent enslavement and/or inferiority.

In such a purposeful way, a former SAC student and then Innocence Project New Orleans investigator was responsible for making the connection of my continued work. Correspondence was initiated by these students, who were reaching out to someone who they knew would understand whatever they were going through.

This young educator/investigator took on my case as a last resort for having the witnesses feel comfortable coming forth with the truth about my innocence. This was needed only to support the indisputable evidence of the police arriving on the scene in six instead of the thirty minutes jurors were led to believe, a fact that was withheld during the process of my conviction by prosecutors but newly discovered by Innocence Project New Orleans. My brethren was the only male staff member originally from New Orleans at the pro bono office even though he's fair-skinned. Thank you, my brethren! The connections I made with Tareian King, Wesley Alexander, and all the other courageous young leaders from three different high schools were filled with a natural progression of vulnerability with steady love and faith. They taught me just as much as I taught them, and they always believed in the best despite the odds.

Facilitators Kalamu ya Salaam (a dark male) and Jim Randels (a light male) quickly became my elder council while handing over the torch to those of us who could carry it on as the community it is. While in Angola my brethren smuggled me the books: a lot of George Lipsitz's work but also Black authors who exposed the truth about history. One titled *The Long Ride*, written by my mentors' students, taught me about my spirit's history and resistance right in my own hometown in Louisiana.² The information literally freed my soul. Like it's simply said, "The truth shall set you free."

Darker Males, especially those that stand on principles, do not get breaks. Why? Because the world has conformed to a deeply rooted miseducation of fear as their personal system of belief in the Creator. Privileged people of the world are miseducated to subconsciously feel threatened by impoverished people and have indifference with the darkest of the bunch. Popularity treats us as monstrous, powerless objects of control, which puts darker humans in a catch-22 of not expressing any signs of being angry about the discrimination destroying our natural male desire to be equally respected among our differences. Who can remain calm when constantly being attacked with limited or lack of opportunity to be free from harm? It results in a feeling of brutality just the same as a noose, execution, electric chair, or lethal injection—but slower. It strips your dignity day by day. And that's when we become a disgrace by others, but also by your own consciousness in the end.

Michael Long, aka Cali, chose to swallow a mouthful of pills to numb his nerves enough to hang himself to death. We were both on solitary confinement along with thirteen others. It was my fourth time there for no less than a year during the course of my eighteen years at that point. Cali created the cover of Free-Dem Foundations' first publication, *Go to Jail: Confronting Systems of Oppression*, which is a collection of writings from students and their allies about the injustices committed against dark communities, rooted in the lived experiences of youth and their families.³ These essays examine topics such as the connections between policing and privatization, representations of Black lives

in popular media, and the possibilities and promises of inverting lessons taught us by systems designed for oppression. In essays such as these our youth are required to do writing that contributes something new to a field of study while at the same time referencing, analyzing, and discussing what other writers and researchers have produced on their selected topic. The contribution from students comes not only from their own experiences and those of their classmates but also from their unique readings of course materials. This sort of extended discourse is not measured in state or national testing and hence is seldom taught in schools that emphasize teaching to the test.

Youth in Students at the Center classes understand and learn that education should not be for individual achievement but for community development. This philosophy demands more breadth and depth in student learning. The SAC course activities described in *Go to Jail* range from studying and participating in multiple ways with a specific court case such as my very own to mentoring younger students in their high schools. SAC helps students develop the skills of critical reading, extended discourse writing, listening to and learning from voices that often do not make it into the classroom, and in general “owning” themselves and their communities.

Our youth, just like their friends and family members who may be incarcerated, deserve in their educational experiences self-determination and community determination, liberation not constraint, extended and meaningful discourse and not drop-down menus for quoting texts in standardized test writing prompts.

Although Students at the Center was not in the schools this past school year (2018–2019) after decades of producing positive people and civilized art, Free-Dem Foundations fully intends to carry on the legacy of the SAC pedagogy through the Real Gentleman Program curriculum, which provides the youth with the soft skills they need to make the transition from boyhood to Gentlemen.

Cali's illustration on the cover of *Go to Jail* took into consideration a lot of horror. He also drew me two images that I have yet to get tattooed on each side of my chest: one, an image of a Black man burning down a plantation house with the smoke and flames shaping out the continent of Africa, and two, an image of a younger female standing behind an adult female, machetes raised in their right hands. Cali was in prison only because he had been in institution after institution since the same young age that I went into foster care. He robbed a store of a hundred dollars and then apologized to the cashier as he left, as the cashier later testified. In prison, Cali had skills with art that almost ensured him an ability to provide for himself, but he was not allowed to because of the prison's oppressive policies that dimmed Cali's gifted imagination to death!

So in the heyday of higher education, why is today's society suffering from social stupidity and political pettiness? Where are the wise, not the smart-asses?

Where is the proof that formal education has advanced our society to a more peaceful and secure future? Money is made with no return to the buyer. In the streets we say, “You’ve been ganked!” Remember, it’s about community.

Daniel Rideau, Robert Jones, and I have also coauthored a book: *Unbreakable Resolve: Triumphant Stories of 3 True Gentlemen*.⁴ We wrote this book to give upcoming generations a source of educational motivation overflowing through the stories of three triumphant men coming from impoverished backgrounds and showing how we have come from “way there” to “way here.” To be enlightened and truly educated on the oppression of our humanity through community failure and mass incarceration, *Go to Jail* and *Unbreakable Resolve* really need to be broken down and studied.

The key element in Free-Dem Foundations’ work has been “The G-Course Malehood Curriculum,” which coheres around the slogan “Know Thyself: Own Thyself.” In this endeavor, we impart knowledge we have learned from life lessons in the community, in carceral institutions, and in starting our post-exoneration businesses—a barber shop and a sweet shop. Youths between the ages of seventeen and twenty-four who are eligible to be enrolled in one of the various Louisiana apprenticeship programs or trade programs can participate in this six-month life skills and professional development course and attain a high school diploma or equivalent if not already achieved. The G-Course Malehood Curriculum consists of three main phases and an additional honorary phase. In Phase 1, the Green Course, students learn male etiquette and social management. In Phase 2, the Red Course, students master the skills of peaceful conflict resolution and of observation and participation in public life through engagement with community organizations. In Phase 3, the Black Course, students develop skills of critical writing, business management, and youth leadership. Phase 4, the Gold Phase, comes into play when students become business owners who mentor others to know themselves and own themselves. Each of the three main phases of the G-Course is sixty days in duration and prepares the participant for the next part of the curriculum.

Art, Activism, and Imagination are pillars of our justice, freedom, and peace. Everyone has multiple means to express themselves artfully. In this day and time, if truly educated, everyone should be an activist on issues of equality.

Imagination is the vehicle of knowing oneself, and creating art offers ownership.

NOTES

Acknowledgments: This piece was the keynote address at the Transformative Arts Network’s “Art, Activism, and Imagination” symposium at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), on March 1, 2019. Thanks to George Lipsitz of the UCSB Black Studies Department, Natasha Moore and the Friends of Free-Dem Foundations, my dear friend Zaveeni Khan-Marcus and the UCSB Multicultural Center, Diane Fujino of the UCSB Asian American

Studies Department, Jonathan Gomez of the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department at San Jose State University, and the Transformative Arts Network.

1. Students at the Center is a writing and digital media program in New Orleans public high schools who use storytelling to recover and document narratives about incarceration, unnatural disasters, and the history of racism in the city.

2. Students at the Center, *The Long Ride* (New Orleans: Students at the Center, 2013).

3. Free-Dem Foundations is a nonprofit organization in New Orleans founded by Robert Jones, Jerome Morgan, and Daniel Rideau to help marginalized youth with the transition from childhood to adulthood by focusing on life skills, vocational training, and community engagement. *Go to Jail* is forthcoming.

4. Daniel Rideau, Jerome Morgan, and Robert Jones, *Unbreakable Resolve: Triumphant Stories of 3 True Gentlemen* (n.p.: Zen Magic, 2017).