

**Prison Education:
My Piece of Resistance**
Shebuel Bel

In fact, there is no human being of any race who, if he finds a guide,
cannot attain virtue.

– Cicero, 2000

Without question, “bittersweet” is the word that best describes the indelible moment I was able to grasp the absolute enormity of my grandfather’s (James Milton, 1926-2005) words: “You need it [education]; it doesn’t need you”. Of all my aspirations, I found education the most elusive. Indeed, his insight was never so clear to me from within the embittering belly of the criminal justice system. “For your transgressions”, said society, “into my belly you shall go”.

Deep inside the bulging “belly of the beast” (Abbott, 1981), I subsist on a criminal’s ration of regret, banishment and dehumanization. My penance is the hellish reality of a time-locked sarcophagus, where I eagerly await my return to the dystopia that exiled me to this vexing necropolis. Meanwhile, Father Time ticks slowly and unaffectedly by my loathsome existence, adamant in his refusal to grant me the refreshing kindness of a sympathetic glance. Rather, he multiplies my misery by chafing the countenance of my memory and by vanquishing the vestiges of my legend. Ergo, as I forget, so, too, I am forgotten.

I am forgotten by those whom I cherish most, haunted by the post-captivity specter of unrequited love and devotion. As a reward for my efforts to maintain family bonds, loved ones fail to reciprocate interests, they insincerely apologize for their absenteeism and their unexcused neglect is a tacit truth. These cruelties impale me to the innermost marrow of my soul.

Compounding the woes of my abandonments, the darkness of Cimmerian contempt for academic endeavours to engulf me, relentlessly assailing me for the majority control of my animus (the source of my resistance). In preparation of an epic standoff, I summon my fiercest triad of war generals: Mind, Body and Spirit. But Cimmerian illiteracy envelopes me and proves itself as an indomitable force. In the throes of defeat, I beckon Cicero (2000) for guidance. However, his counsel is paradoxical amidst the untimeliness of battle: *Nosce the ipsum, facta non verba* (Cicero 2000) – the most difficult of all things is to know yourself. The nature of Cicero’s charge to me is unfamiliar to say the least.

While death rages at my doorstep, Cicero advises I embrace war as a means of attaining utter clarity of character, which will, in turn, ensure me victory over my stupor of Cimmerian illiteracy. Although wrought with peril, I am nonetheless compelled to embark upon such a journey of introspection and liberation. *Libe action*, which Paulo Freire (2000, p. 79) characterizes as praxis, “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it”.

But how do I fashion remedy from malady, nourishment from within the bowels of this monolithic monstrosity called “prison”? Carceral shades of psychological warfare designed to crush my public and self-image mimic the ethnic hijackings (of religion, culture, honour, etc.) perpetuated against my African ancestors. *Atque ipsa men sea, que future videt, praeterita meminit*. The same mind that foresees the future also remembers the past. However, in this instance of cultural illiteracy repeating itself, my ability to develop my power to perceive critically the way I exist in the world with which and in which I find myself; I come to see the world as a reality in process in transformation (Freire, 2000, p. 83).

My portending gaze is rudely interrupted by the discourtesy of obstructive prison walls with razor sharp trimmings. Academic ignorance not only renders me near-sighted, it also terrorizes me in my dreams.

Thirsting for a respite of understanding, I reconsider Cicero’s (2000) admonishment to search within. There, victory will be found. So I surmise: to affect that which is beyond my being, I must first affect that which is within. I must somehow come to know the duality of myself.

Therefore, I diligently dispensed with the business of knowing both versions of myself: the self who led me to my undoing and the new self who can – by resistance – repent for what my old self has done. But terribly unsettling, my old self and new self are mutually ambitious – both are determined to win. Perhaps they are one in the same, which would confirm that it was my old self all along who has been waging war against me. However, “if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers” (Freire, 2000, p. 87)

The origin of this inner conflict, however, predates my life as a belly dweller. I was a delinquent hell-bent on sabotaging my elementary school education when my grandfather told me I needed an education, it does not need me. In retrospect, I now realize that my old self resisted education, it resisted guidance and it resisted previous discipline from the criminal justice

system. And most regrettably, to my ensuing demise, it inconsiderately resisted a plea deal from the State.

All the while, my emergent new self-struggled for control of my animus, realizing that in regard to legal education and training it was drastically outgunned in a battle with the State. Nevertheless, in futility my fledgling new self desperately studied, learned and painstakingly endeavoured to alter the outcome of the climactic event that my old self heralded into actuality – proceeding to trial. The efforts of my new self dreadfully resulted in defeat.

It was then that my new self was able to perceive the level of self-destruction my old self was capable of. Nonetheless, *fas est et ab hoste doceri* – it is right to learn even from an enemy. And what I learned from my old self was that the time for parting ways had come and gone, and I needed to take back majority control of my volition.

My new self is committed to reading, writing and learning. The more I read, the more I learned and grew aware of how much of my life my old self had ruined. More importantly, I grew even more aware of a world I previously did not know existed, a world my old self had resisted to partake in. This world is one of family appreciation, accountability to society and of academic enlightenment that I had foolishly taken for granted.

By resisting my old self, my new self was able to experience an increase in power and awareness by completing several college courses, gradually ascending well beyond the influential reaches of my old self. I was proud of my new self; I was proud of resisting my old self. My educational growth and steadfast resistance to my old self ultimately led to my victory over darkness of mind and over the beast.

Thank you, Grandfather. Thank you, Cicero, for guiding me to the virtue of education. And now, although I feast in the belly of the beast, I will succumb to no evil because I know evil. I know it within and without. In the face of both, I shall resist.

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