

Marshall Law: Excerpts from a Memoir
Eddie Conway

The Court: Mr. Conway, I'm going to warn you right now on the record that unless you behave yourself...

(The remainder of the Court's remarks inaudible because of the defendant's interruption.)

The Defendant: Behave myself? I want an attorney of my choice. What you mean, why don't you behave yourself? You said I could have an attorney of my choice. I give you a name and you're going to tell me behave myself and give me somebody who you hope to participate in the railroad job.

The Court: Mr. Conway, would you allow me to make one statement? That is this—I'm formally advising you and warning you that if you persist in this conduct, the trial will go forward without you. You will remain outside of the courtroom.

The Defendant: The trial will go forward without me if you don't let me have an attorney of my choice. If you're going to give me an attorney that I don't desire to have on a homicide charge, then the trial will go forward without me, because I'm not going to participate in it, because I have an attorney of my choice, and you will not allow him to be here. So it's your trial.

The Court: All right. Now would you care to be seated, or do you wish to leave the court room?

The Defendant: Right. I wish to leave the courtroom. (Holds hands up to be cuffed) Look, the man asked me did I want to go. I want to go.

The Court: All right.

The Defendant: Look, I'm not going to be taking part in this madness.

CHILDHOOD

My earliest memories are from 1951, and they are the typical remembrances of a boy growing up in America at that time ... like my first train set ... or the little red wagon which was a gift from my favorite uncle. Yet some recollections are less typical; one in particular still burns in my memory as the quintessential experience of oppressed people in this country. I can remember being very, very thirsty one afternoon, and this thirst led me into the house looking for something to quench it. My family members were out in the backyard doing summertime things, but I needed a drink badly. Too short to reach the faucet, I spotted a glass of water sitting on the sink counter top, and I knew if I tried real hard I could just reach it. I did, and I got it.

Looking back upon that incident years later makes me wonder if this wasn't some sort of omen, a terrible portent warning me of things to come. For, that glass of clear liquid that had sat there above my head on that counter calling out my thirst, soon had me choking and clinching my throat in both pain and agony. In my quest for relief I had drunk nearly half a glass of bleach. My first memorable adventures in America had begun and they were caustic!

The forced acceptance of White supremacy in every aspect of life in this country is akin to that drink. It began with the myth of superiority that has been perpetuated by whites to justify the theft of resources, conquest, genocide and enslavement of other groups and has resulted in an internalized belief by African descended people that we are somehow inferior. Therefore many of us accept the lie that conformity to the dominant culture will make us better. Yet those pieces of the spirit that remain untouched by the lies and mythology force us to choke on this toxic truth.

During those years we lived in Cherry Hill, a neighborhood on the outskirts of Baltimore proper. The community was an all Black development with mostly low and middle income residents. Although it would soon become one of the largest housing projects on the east coast, it was still under construction when I became aware of my surroundings. We were a rather large family living under one roof. There was my grandfather and grandmother, my mother and father, two aunts and uncle and my sister and me. My grandmother had come to Baltimore from Virginia and my grandfather was thought to have come to America from the West Indies. I later learned that it was more likely that he was mixed race, probably Black

and Pacific Islander. Together my grandparents had three girls, my mother and her two sisters. My sister and I were the only grandchildren from this union at that time. There would be more children to come. Although my sister Cookie was a year older than I, she was always so small that it looked and felt as if I was her big brother.

We eventually moved to a house in a West Baltimore neighborhood that was set for demolition in order to build a new police station, and so we were given 90 days to move. After a while we settled in East Baltimore near the intersection of Preston Street and Milton Avenue. The formerly all White community was just becoming an integrated neighborhood, and ours was only the second black family to live in the area.

I was getting older and like many of my friends I was into riding bikes and traveling into the surrounding communities. There, we would get into scrapes with the white kids whose families hadn't moved further away yet. The blistering Baltimore summer presented the backdrop for an on-going battle with these kids. It was as if we had discovered a new land, and conquest presented the possibility of an abundant treasure trove. We would take their radios when we could, and their baseball gloves and bikes if the opportunity presented itself. There has always been this expectation of aggression where the Black male is concerned, and we were simply living up to it like a child who inherits the legacy attached to a nickname, misnomer though it may be.

Our childhood excursions had evolved into real raids and forays into the nearby White neighborhoods for larger and more needed material goods. No property was safe from confiscation, neither was any person invulnerable to shake down. Whites in cars in our community, those riding through on buses, their stores were all fair game. The older brothers in the community had set the pace and some of us younger brothers were trying to live up to their examples. Somehow we all knew, or at least believed, that our stuff had been stolen by them, and we were just getting it back using similar methods.

The varying shades of African descended people, the lack of a connection to a language, a culture, and land can only suggest like a whispered threat the depth of the true larceny.

Soon I had a summer job with some of the older brothers from the community who peddled goods from horse-drawn carts; in Baltimore this phenomena is referred to as "Arabbing". We went from neighborhood to

neighborhood selling fruits, vegetables, and fish. I was finally making a few dollars and in the process seeing more of the city, and I took everything in with the interest of someone waking up to a new environment. In my observations I became aware of some things that had never before entered into my consciousness; many of the older brothers who worked on these wagons had heroin habits, and the difference between Black and White neighborhoods was stark.

*Once riding in old Baltimore
Heart filled, head-filled with glee
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.*

*Now I was eight and very small
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger".*

*I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember.*

It was as clear in what it stated about wealth and affluence as was the difference between white marble steps and rotting wooden ones. The contrast between clean and dirty streets, and blocks lined with trees and well-tended lawns compared to block after block of cement sidewalks with bars and liquor stores dispersed throughout, said more to me than all of the stories of inequality and injustice that I had heard growing up. On the one hand there were few, if any YMCAs, Lion's Clubs, parks, and swimming pools, while the other neighborhoods had far too many. This all demonstrated the difference between Black and White, poverty and wealth in Baltimore during that time. I was aware of all of this, but didn't fully understand it nor would I really begin to question the cause of such disparity for some years.

My own community was always full of people hanging on the street corners and police cars patrolling the blocks. It all seemed so normal, since there were so many fights. I soon found myself hanging on these same street

corners with everyone else until all hours of the night. There just was not anywhere else to go or anything else to do that didn't require money, and it wasn't long before I started to run with a group of brothers who were into stealing cars and joy riding in the outlying communities. We would go to dances in our *new* cars and pick up girls to ride around with us. Drinking and partying became a way to duck the reality that nothing else was happening for us.

An uncertain future and a sense of hopelessness came to define the status quo for many young Black men in the urban landscape of 1960s US as industry died and jobs dwindled.

Around this time, a few of my friends and I started talking about going into the army. The more I thought about it the better it looked and I saw it as an opportunity to get out of the ghetto. My girlfriend was getting bigger and bigger with each passing day and I would soon be a father. So I decided to join up and take a new direction.

The process itself took only a few days and before I knew it I was in a basic training camp in Georgia. After many weeks of long hard training in wet, muddy, Georgia backwoods where it seemed like everyday was a rainy day, I was headed to advanced training at Fort Sam in Houston, Texas for training as a medical corpsman. There I would spend another three months that were spiced with trips to Mexico and other points west. I was beginning to see the world, be it only in the western hemisphere at this point. I was rather proud of myself when I finished the school in the top ten of our class.

Fortunately, I had begun to learn my work so well that I was able to operate in a fairly independent manner. Any time something happened or someone got hurt they would send for me or one of the two senior medics, and at this point I was doing jobs that other members of the unit were assigned to do. This led to a promotion that was based in part on my ability to complete assigned tasks, and the fact that I passed every test and training course they gave me. Within 18 months I received another promotion to the rank of sergeant. This would lead to contact with other brothers from different units and battalions.

I was now free to roam wherever I wanted to without reporting to anyone but my unit commander. The knowledge that I began to acquire about the army from this position led to my shock and surprise. I had always been willing to listen to the problems of other brothers and now several Black GIs

who'd heard from others that I was a standup type sergeant started coming to me with all types of reports. They informed me about Klan meetings in their billets at nights, unfair racial promotion policies, and like my own earlier experience, many of them reported that dirty duty details always went to Black GIs. Unfortunately, many of these things were beyond my ability to resolve. I believe it was simply the fact that these men saw me as a peer, even though I was a sergeant, that gave them hope.

The Klan situation was getting out of hand, however, and some of us decided to do something about that. We found out where they would be holding their next meeting. That night we went to the meeting and beat the shit out of them. They had been leaving KKK signs all over the place and we had had enough. We managed to get some other brothers promoted and organized the black GIs a little. No one thought the problem was anything other than a few racists in the armed forces. During this time I still had some White friends and I can remember right before becoming a sergeant my friend Turney, who was White but hung around with the brothers came running into the barracks looking for a few of us guys he hung around because he had gotten into a beef with a few hillbillies at the club we partied in.

We redoubled our efforts after seeing these hillbillies. They were huge. Turney was only about 5 foot 5 and 130 pounds. While the guy he had the beef with was at least 6 feet and close to 200 pounds. Nevertheless, there was no stopping the fight. So he asked me to make sure the guy's buddy did not jump into the fight between them. I really didn't think his buddy was needed, but while we were going outside I saw who his buddy was and I said a little prayer that this dude wouldn't jump in. This was the biggest white man I ever saw. This guy was 6 foot 6 and pushing 270 pounds. The only thing wrong with this guy was that he had two eyes instead of the one I thought should have been in the middle of his forehead. The back of his hands could have been dragging the ground.

So Turney and the other dude squared off. Dumbo was right there beside his friend telling him not to worry about the niggers because he had them covered. I believed him so once Turney and the dude started to fight I decided to get my end of this thing over with. I jumped on Dumbo with both feet, hitting him with a flurry of rights and lefts that I could not count. I must have hit him at least a 100 times before he passed out and toppled over on me. The guy fell on me before I had time to back up off him and it was

all I could do to stay on my feet with 270 pounds of dead weight hanging across my shoulders. I didn't dare try to roll out because I had no desire to end up on the ground with this dude asleep or awake. Finally after a few more punches in the ribs he toppled over in a ditch. Turney had beaten his hillbilly silly and we all left. On the way back to the billets Turney saw a lot of blood on my shirt and thought I got hurt. He wanted to go back and beat the dudes up some more. I was checking myself out too because I knew this guy never got a chance to hit me so we agreed that this dude bled all over me to get even. There were not many people that I would help in fight situations like that one but Turney was one of them and the fact that he was white did not seem in any way important to me at that time. I continued to deal with people on an equal and individual basis until one morning I was forced to a rude awakening.

Getting out of bed in the morning was never very easy for me, and this particular morning was no exception. Any eagerness to leave the comfort of my bunk was being hindered greatly by the after effects of my partying the night before. I'd had a few drinks too many. My assistant brought me breakfast and a newspaper, and the food and coffee was helping to get me ready for the day. The troops had been up and out for at least two hours. Rank having its privileges, I didn't have to show up until I wanted to. I let my assistants alternate duties weekly; more work got done like that, and this seemed more effective than me hovering around.

As I sat there eating, my eyes scanned the morning newspaper. What I saw did more than free me from that hangover, it threw me into a rage. I could not believe that I was actually looking at a photograph of an American soldier aiming a 50 caliber machine gun at a group of unarmed, Black women gathered on a street corner in Newark, New Jersey, as they stood with their arms raised and fists clinched. The women were obviously discontented and angry as hell with the soldier who was perched safely atop the armored personal carrier, his hands planted firmly on the trigger of one of the Army's most sophisticated weapon systems—right in the heart of a Black community.

Although I did not want to accept the realities suggested by the photograph, I was in a mild state of shock. I just stared at the picture until I was able to break away, only to find myself staring into my open locker at the heavily starched olive-green uniforms hanging there. On the sleeves of each were the symbols of my dedication, three neatly sewn yellow stripes.

The morning light reflected its rays off the highly polished boots that stood below the uniforms. The sunlight did not, however, help to illuminate for me the reality of what was happening in the world, nor did it shed any light on the unreal role I had been playing in it all. After all I was an American soldier in Germany doing his part to uphold democracy and the great *American* principles of justice for all, freedom from oppression etc. etc. I was defending the American way of life—the right of all men to be free. Wasn't I???

I just could not fathom what a White soldier, or any soldier for that matter would be doing on *any* corner in *our* country with *that* weaponry pointed at a group of unarmed Black women; *American* women. I couldn't imagine why he was there, or what thoughts were going through his head as he held the possibility of life or death over dozens of Black women. *American women.*

I certainly could not conceive how anyone could require the order of such a show of force, let alone why anyone would follow such a command. But, the one thing I did know was that if that soldier would have sneezed more than half of those fragile Black bodies would have been dead. The faces in the photograph were not unlike the faces of the family and friends I had left behind. In fact, I had a growing sense of awareness that my family, my friends or even my mother could have just as easily been standing on the very same corner in Baltimore facing the same guns. In search of answers to the many questions that flooded my mind, I grabbed my robe and the newspaper and walked out into the hall.

There I stood in the middle of the hall stopping anyone I could find to ask them what they thought of the whole situation. To my dismay I could find no responses that were more than apathetic. My last hope for gaining some understanding and support was in finding my closest friends. I was sure that they, if anyone, could tell me just what the hell was going on and more importantly what we should be doing about it. It was about nine o'clock when I located them on the parade grounds. I was totally out of order to approach them in the middle of the parade ground dressed in my bathrobe, unshaven and with my hair obviously uncombed. To them it was not within the functions of a military encampment and I was looking wild to say the least.

However, at the time I could have cared less what the Army considered normal. In my estimation, that photograph demonstrated that the armed

forces and the government itself were behaving in an abnormal way toward the Black community. At that point I still did not understand that the show of force was actually typical of the government's response to non-conformity on the part of People of color. So I naively posed my questions, but no answers were to be found among my friends. I left there with a feeling of dejection and made my way back to the confines of my quarters. Once again sitting on my bunk, I began to reflect on the past events in my life, the situations that had primed me for this awakening. I had always viewed each incidence of racist violence as an individual thing that was the act of some misguided bigot, or the action of irrational persons. Well suddenly I was being forced to view this as a government supported situation, perhaps even government directed. I sat there reflecting on the past couple of years.

We had all been kids when we signed up for the army; two friends, my future brother-in-law and myself. Having enlisted together, we had planned to stay together. Yet Uncle Sam had a different design; I was sent to Germany, and our two buddies stayed in the States. Unfortunately, my brother-in-law ended up in Vietnam and within 11 months of his arrival his lifeless body lay face down in the middle of a cow pasture where his squad had been ambushed. It took three months for me to receive word of his death. He was one of my closest friends and his death hit me hard. The loss of someone so young and vibrant always strikes at the heart. As youth we were so unprepared for death because we thought we would live forever. None of us could see the shadow of death that hung so heavily over our generation. Yet it was there, Vietnam. Angry and unable to articulate my feelings of loss and grief, I made plans to go.

I signed up for combat duty in Nam, and having less than a year left to serve, found out that I would have to re-enlist for two more years in order to be able to receive the training and serve a full tour. All I wanted was to go to Vietnam and sit behind a 50 caliber machine gun and kill as many Vietnamese as possible to avenge this death that I felt so much guilt about. My guilt stemmed from the fact that Boo had wanted to be like me so much that he had given little thought to joining the army, he had been following my lead. So I had begun to contemplate the best way to get the training and promotion I would need to have some control over my situation once I was in Vietnam.

Boo's death had occurred some months before this newspaper photograph, and suddenly I was confronted with a new reality and I no longer wanted

to go to Vietnam and get my oppressor Jones off by killing people who had not done me any harm. The visions of stars and stripes had faded and I no longer felt that sense of loyalty to the red, white and blue. For me it was time to consider the red blood that was being spilled by Black bodies. My uncle a decade earlier, Boo, and now these women whose defiance made them targets, all represented the various degrees of sacrifice that we, the descendants of enslaved Africans, had made. So I wondered how the United States Army could be in Vietnam under the premise of protecting citizens' rights there, yet standing ready to murder unarmed Black women in Newark.

I posed a question to myself: What was the difference between those Black women standing on that corner in America and the Vietnamese women standing at the edge of their villages? There was less difference and more commonality. The same government that my uncle and Boo had died for was now placing both groups of women in the crosshairs. It was then that I came to the realization that I was in the wrong Army. I would never wear that American uniform again as I had worn it all this time, with pride. I put on some civilian clothes and went to ask for emergency administrative leave.

HOME IS WHERE THE HATRED IS

When I returned to Baltimore I moved in with my mother, stepfather and three younger sisters. We lived on Federal Street, near Greenmount Avenue in what was and remains to this day a very impoverished neighborhood. This area of Baltimore is near the cemetery where Johns Hopkins and John Wilkes Booth are buried. Federal Street runs east to west and ends at the front wall of this cemetery, picking up on the other side. The poverty and despair found there create a literal deadend for a good number of the community's residents, many of whom never get back up once they bump into that wall.

My son's mother, Kay Rogers, moved into this house with us and later we were married and moved into an apartment on 25th Street. These times were to be the best time that I would spend with my son, Ronald, who by then was three years old. By the time I came home I had become motivated to help create changes in the Black community. The fact that Ronald would grow up into this world helped to push me into a more radical position and eventually made groups like the Panthers very appealing.

While we were committed to education, and knew the value of such books as The Wretched of the Earth (1968) by Frantz Fanon, it had long occurred to the party leadership that the best way to advance our communities was to *actively* address the problems that existed.

Every chapter [of the BPP] in the country had developed a free breakfast program in their community to feed hungry children. We started our program after polling the neighborhood for miles around our office to see if such a need existed and if a program would receive support from the family members if in fact we started it. Once we learned the results, which were strongly supportive of such a program, we began by contacting individuals and organizations that might help us locate a site from which to operate.

There was always real pressure on supporters to stop assisting the program. A 1969 memo from J. Edgar Hoover to 24 FBI offices stated:

The free breakfast program represents the best and most influential activity going for the BPP and as such is potentially the greatest threat to efforts by authorities to neutralize the BPP and destroy what it stands for.

Shortly thereafter the now infamous coloring book program was started by the FBI to discredit the breakfast programs across the country. Around this time odd things started to happen around our chapter. A few people would leave the office to go somewhere and they would be arrested en route and kept overnight on an investigation of some supposed crime. Groups of Panthers would go to different places, rallies and speaking engagements; ten members would go yet eight would return.

When finally one of our buildings caught fire, I was put in charge of security for the Baltimore chapter and this included the welfare of our members as well as the buildings. I soon became aware that we had some serious internal problems, and it was likely that they had existed right from the party's inception.

With the number of incidents that were occurring regularly, it was clear that there were agents operating inside the chapter. There were many times when I reported security violations to the Defense Captain, but all too often no action was taken to deal with the problem or further investigate the situation. We soon discovered that the Defense Captain, who was the highest ranking Panther in the state, was a paid agent of the National Security

Agency (NSC/NSA), and there were others. Several other “members” were working for various law enforcement agencies. These activities created the kind of climate that left our chapter seriously wounded, and this was not a local situation, but rather something that was happening in every chapter around the country.

We couldn't have known it then but it would not be long before it would be revealed that the FBI and other state and local agencies were in fact functioning as a national secret police. Unfortunately, by that time many of us would have already fallen victim to these covert operations.

A FALL INTO THE PIT, A GAIN IN YOUR WIT

The first week of December 1969 brought with it the chilly news of Fred Hampton's murder in Chicago and a day long shootout in California at our LA office. This firefight involved armored cars and helicopters, and launched the inception of the SWAT (Special Weapons and Tactics) team, an ultra-militarized police unit in Los Angeles. This was, of course, a pre-dawn attack which seemed to be the modus operandi for these forces.

The last area of Baltimore to be organized was West Baltimore. This area was having an increasing number of police-related shootings. Human rights were violated all the time in poor communities like Upton. Soon incidents between police and neighborhood youth led to a mini-riot, and then there was a shootout that led to the deaths of a brother from the neighborhood and a policeman. The explanation given for these shootings was that they were the result of a drug raid. When this happened the Panther party was in the middle of negotiating the lease on a building about a block away from the incident site.

The following week there was another shootout a few blocks in the other direction. One police officer was killed and another wounded. The blame for this incident was laid at the feet of the Panthers because we had been working more and more in the area, and by then had become highly visible. Two of our members were arrested; both had been armed, and they were later charged with the shootings. According to the police reports, sometime in the night a patrol car was sent to a house in the area in response to a report of some type of incident. The officers left and were later called back. The shooting occurred soon after their return and one officer was killed and another wounded. Subsequently I was arrested on my job and held for the earlier FBI indictments involving the missing informant. My arrest

occurred two days after the shootings, and within the next few days some 24 members of our chapter would be arrested on various charges.

After being held for two months with no real evidence against me, the judge in the case ordered the State's Attorney to release me or give a better reason for holding me. Coincidentally, the police department transferred one of their old informants into my cell. Charles Reynolds had been shipped from the Jessup, Maryland prison complex, an unusual move for a prisoner who was being sent to another state to serve out time.

I would later learn that the Baltimore City police commissioner, a man named Pommerlau, had been called to Washington D.C. to meet with Attorney General John Mitchell, who, according to the newspaper reports, was under orders to make the charges against us stick, whatever the cost.

I finally went to court on these charges. The trial lasted seven days. I recall very little about it since I spent the entire time in the bull pen (lock up section for the court). I had been fighting a losing battle with the judge and DA about having a lawyer from the Panther Party represent me in this case. We started off having problems in relationship to the lawyer situation. Milton B. Allen, who was one of the best black lawyers in the city at that time, came to see me with the understanding that he was considering representing my case. We talked for about an hour and he left with the understanding that he would get back to me. He never came back to see me and it wasn't a week later that I learnt that he was offered an opportunity to run for State Attorney. In fact, he was the State Attorney during the time I got tried. I always wondered how much of what I discussed with him went to his assistants. Each day the court room was packed with people from the community and this led to a number of threats from the judge about limiting the number of people who would be allowed to watch the trial. I was forced to watch the day proceedings on the local news station at night to find out what happened that day.

During the trial I was held at the City Jail and during this time there was a major riot about the food and visiting conditions. I ended up being tagged as one of the leaders simply because I was there and a number of the young brothers looked up to me for direction and leadership. Any one who had ever seen or been in a riot knows that there are no leaders, only people relieving their frustrations and other people staying out of their way. I ended up in the hold and stayed there until I went down to the court house to be sentenced. I received life in prison plus thirty years to follow that. I was twenty-three years old.

THE POW, 7TH STEPS , BLACK UNITED FRONT CONNECTION

The 1976–77 period was a very active organizing period both inside and outside the Maryland Penitentiary. The prisoners were organizing a number of activities around the need for an inmate advisory committee (IAC) and many other structures like that. First, we should look at the effect and effort centered around the IAC. The administration was trying to maintain control over the many incidents that continued to accrue in the yard. The day after a major fire that killed two prisoners in their cell, there was continued unrest about the fire alarm situation and the door locks that were dangerous to all prisoners at night. The general population was demanding more effective fire prevention systems. The officials were attempting to use the incident as a flash point to attack the collective. The two prisoners who had been burnt up in their cell were in fact the leader of the new family youth gang and one of his lieutenants.

There had been a long standing conflict between that gang and the collective, but that gang in general and its leaders in particular had made so many enemies in the few years that it operated in the prison that any number of factions or individuals could have carried out the hit—it was no doubt a hit, and there was some belief the hit could have been encouraged by the administration for the purpose of creating trouble amongst different groups in the population. This gang was still one of the administration's main tools in the prison, but it had also gotten completely out of hand. They were barely held in check. New members were trying to gain control of the leadership and make the gang move in the direction that they thought the money was in, that of course was the drug area.

Up to that time the gang was involved in wine-making and pill-taking. Now the drug thing was not what the administration wanted them to be doing since that amount of money would be used to corrupt the guard force which was always ready to do anything for a few dollars. Since this gang was aiding in things like stopping the union drive and keeping the youth population in gang wars, the officials turned a blind eye to their activities. Once the drugs started to come in there was pressure put on the faction that was into the drug scene.

The different gangs in the prison made something like fire-bombing very likely. And although the different gangs and the collective had been in conflicts before, very few physical contacts were made simply because

the collective was always working in the interests of the general population and a little gang of youth of a clique of killers didn't stand a chance in the face of the population support we had. We were just too strong for anyone to want any trouble from us and in turn, we never tried to deal with the gangs or cliques on a level other than to educate them. Our members were the bad dudes in the prison long before they became members so we didn't have anything to prove. The members all had spent months and years in training in the arts (martial) and in fact teaching others these skills. The ties and connection we had developed throughout the prison were very strong.

The other organizations in the prison, with the exception of the Black Muslim movement, were basically able to organize and develop because we were very supportive of them when they were getting started, so we had very strong ties to almost all the organizations that had structure and discipline. Finally, the collective was always working in the interest of the population so that won the collective at least 100 active supporters so the numbers were very great in the population of 1,300. For all these reasons, the collective members rarely found themselves in physical combat with any body, gangs or individuals.

The respect for the collective was very high and only from time to time did minor conflicts between individual members develop. These beefs would usually be worked out by a couple of people with working relationships to the principals involved. Very rarely was there an actual fight or the use of physical force. Now it was a known fact that the collective continued to work against what we thought were the disruptive and negative influences of the new family.

The introduction of the newly arriving youth into the drug and bisexual culture of the gang was actively opposed with massive education programs and a lot of individual rap to the new arrivals. Whenever we could, through our youth section, educate the youth away from involvement in this type of activity we would do so actively. On the other hand, because we continued to be the group in the forefront of most of the organizing in the prison we stepped on a lot of toes in the area of drug dealings and what that meant for our community and the future of our youth. The drug dealers and gang members would be used to delay, oppose or stop any kind of progressive activities.

In the midst of this high tension period, someone yells fire in the middle of the night. Several doors up from my cell a cell is on fire. My cell buddy

wakes me up. The guards have been to the cell which is burning out of control, they can't open the door because they are not allowed to have the keys upstairs at night. They have to run downstairs to the guard post to get the keys and by the time they got back with the keys the fire was out of control to such a degree that the door could not even be approached because the fire was jumping out the door. The fire-fighting equipment is so old and unusable that it's not having any real effect on the fire. The cells have been painted hundreds of times in the past 30 years and the build-up on the walls was so heavy that you could dig for hours and never see the steel wall. No one tried to clean the old paint away once they moved into a cell, they would just get some paint and re-do the cell the way they wanted it to look.

This build-up was now burning and the cell was completely involved. The lack of any fire hoses on the housing units was the result of criminal neglect. The fact was that for 1,300 men there were only a handful of hand-held fire extinguishers and no heavy equipment at all. The door locks were old locks from the 1930s and they had to be opened one at a time. This added greatly to the situation since the guards had to come in close contact with the area situation in order to release anyone.

To add to that, the after effect of the 1973 riot was that no guards were allowed to have keys in the housing areas after midnight. All the keys were locked in the guard's post desk and only a lieutenant could give them out. The minutes lost in a fire situation in a tiny cell are very important. Over half the prisoners on the tier were trapped in their cells and starting to panic and even worse the guards were also running around confused as to what action to take. The number of keys seemed to be limited and all the prisoners in the above and below cells wanted to get out at once. By the time everyone did get out they were mad as hell with the administration. The next day the officials were confronted with a number of protests about the door-locking procedures at night and the lack of real fire equipment in the prison. It really had not been noticed before. And about the paint that was built up on the walls of the cells. Everyone knew it was highly flammable and once ablaze almost impossible to put out. And about the fact that the guards had to go all the way back down to the guard station to get the keys to open the cells rather than having a lever throwing device at the end of the tier.

Any automatic opening device would have saved lives and freed other prisoners from their cells from suffering from smoke exhaustion. The fact that so many were trapped in their cells was a serious question begging to be

answered. What would happen if more than one cell was on fire at the same time. We barely got out of our cells an hour later and it was with one fire.

These and other questions were being asked in the yard by hundreds of prisoners the next day. There was a flat refusal to return to these cells until someone told us that the locking devices would be changed. Something else happened at the same time. It was pointed out a number of complaints had been made to the officials in recent months and most had gone unanswered. The fire issue just brought things to the surface.

Once the warden got into the yard there seemed to be a thousand questions being hurled at him at the same time. The end result was a shouting session and nothing was resolved. The warden agreed to meet with a select group of prisoners' representatives. We picked a group that was the regular prison leadership anyway. I think it would have been impossible to send anyone else since each group wanted someone there to represent their interest. If the regular leadership didn't go, the yard would still be in an uproar and nothing would be solved.

The meeting only proved that there was a gross lack of communication between the administration and ourselves. It was agreed that we need an on-going forum to deal with the issues that kept popping up and remained largely unresolved. The way to deal regularly was through something like an inmate advisory committee. The warden agreed to allow such a committee to be set up and promised a regular monthly meeting with such a body of prisoners to deal with agreed upon pre-arranged agendas. The other issues were to be worked on and by the time we met again the administration would have answers to the locking devices question and the other issues. We would have a charter and some by-laws to govern the formulation of any advisory committee.

We went back to the population with the information and things were partly under control. We got started on the paper work for the Inmate Advisory Committee as we knew that it was a delaying tactic because the conditions were that all the paperwork had to be approved by the warden before we would be allowed to officially operate as a body of prison representatives. There would be an election and one year terms. All this would require a six month waiting period.

Well, we got together and after some discussion we agreed that it would still be better if the population had such an organized structure to deal with the administration in future dealings. One thing we wanted to do was to

have more control over the funds and the programs that were coming into the penitentiary. We wanted some method of talking to the administration without going through the “on the yard” act every few months. The situation always held the potential for violence and never resolved anything anyway until we met with the officials so why not just deal with them on a regular basis from jump street.

We got the charter and by-laws approved and set up the election for the coming month. I didn’t run for any of the official positions because of all the double talk and bullshit that was required to deal with the administration and them with us. Nevertheless, we had to continue acting as the unofficial ad hoc advisory community until the six month time period was over and the elected officers could take their positions.

Getting back to the original situation on the yard that day after the fire and the meetings, the tension was still very high and a lot of little beefs were developing between the prisoners and the guards. The officials tried to distract the population from the real situation and use the fire in their own interest. The attention was shifted to the possibility that the fire was started as part of a gang war. The officials went a step further and locked up a number of people from different groups, gangs and organizations. They finally put the word out that the collective was behind this hit and they had already locked up one of our members. He was being held incommunicado.

The rumors that went around the yard ranged from this was a hit that I had ordered to the smoking in bed story. The real problem was that there was a lot of high tension and struggle for leadership in the new family gang with a lot of talk about hitting someone back. At the time I don’t even think they cared who they struck out at so long as they took some action. The leadership of the collective was in spotlight and we had to be very careful how we handled this situation. We had to take some time out and meet with a number of groups and factions of the gang to set the record straight. While this was going on the officials continued to fan the flames of passion and hoped for an incident to get some of the heat off them.

The newspapers were asking the same questions that we had asked about the locking system and no prevention program; heads were going to roll and things were looking bad for the administration. The situation in the yard was rather tight for a few days since the gang leader who died was in fact one of the administration’s key informants. Their other informants were scared to death and were willing to help them move on the collective.

The information being put out by these informants and unofficially by the officials was developing a mind set and creating not a little problem.

There was a lot of debate going on in the yard about the right or wrong of such attacks. There were all these hotheads that were on both sides and many were starting to believe the rumors. The general population knew the real story and refused to be played by the officials through their informants. The potential for violence was very high, but there was not a single incident in the yard among the prisoners. The administration was once again left with egg on their faces and their informants were exposed once they had to release all the prisoners they had locked up in hopes of triggering an incident that would have overshadowed the fire and gave them cover for their ineffectiveness in protecting our lives. Our days were spent pushing the development of the Inmate Advisory Committee and doing whatever maintenance work was needed to control the situation on the yard. This came at an odd time for us since we were working on developing an international hook-up to build a network of prison supporters. There was a world forum scheduled to be held in Africa the following year and we were part of the prison network that was putting together the issues to be raised at that forum.

While the networking was going on there was always training of our members and the martial arts was one of the areas we trained in; mainly in secret, whenever possible. We would have to continue to relocate our training areas for a number of reasons, mainly security and secrecy. We would shift the training from area to area to keep non-collective personnel from observing our tactics and training program. On the other hand, we had to do this to keep from getting locked up since it was illegal to train in self-defense. It was this moving around in out of the way places that caused us to be in the basement of "G" building one morning. We had been using the area for over three weeks and using it three times a week.

In reality we should have changed areas the end of the second week. The location was ideal because you had to get the elevator and go down to the basement. Well everyone knew that the area was all caged up and off limits so no one went into the area. Once we got into the area we could send the elevator back upstairs and really get a good workout. We would be trapped down in the area until one of the comrades brought the elevator back down, but there was no need to worry about anyone getting into the area, at least that's what we thought. That morning we were working out when there was

a power failure. We knew that meant a problem for us, but we had no idea the amount of trouble it would cause.

An electrician came down into the area by a hidden door on the other side of the building. Since we couldn't see what was actually over on that side, it was not possible to know that there was a tunnel. For his part, he thought we were all trying to escape which got us all placed on lock-up. The charges were reduced to being out of bounds since we were not in the tunnel area or for that matter did not even know about it. The officials on the other hand didn't want anyone in the population to believe that there were in fact tunnels under the Maryland Penitentiary so they couldn't charge us with something they denied existed. We did receive four months on lock-up for being out of bounds and that made our future selection of exercise areas much more selective. It wasn't long after we got off lock-up that an even much more serious situation developed. Our membership soon came under attack.

The only other thing Bobby Mach recalled the next morning when he woke up in the hospital, besides seeing the ground rush up at him, was how loud the pipe sounded as it smashed into his head. He was locked up and placed on the administration segregation unit. After 30 days he was released back into the general population. No one knew what had happened to him or why. Early the next morning, as the prisoners poured out the west wing on the way to their job assignments, everything seemed peaceful and quiet for the new day. I walked up the path alone and fairly relaxed. A lone man stood leaning against the railed fence. He called me and since I knew him, I never gave the situation another thought. I did notice that he was carrying a cup in one hand and wearing a heavy jacket during rather warm weather.

Beyond that I really paid no attention to him at that point. It was only after he started talking that I realized right away that something was seriously wrong. Once you spent time in the prison setting, you pick up on the moods of people in seconds or a minute at the most. This brother appeared highly agitated, and scared on top of that. He was saying things like "I haven't done anything to you. Why are you planning this?" and, "I thought we were alright." Well right away I became alert and while shifting from my position I was checking him out now for weapons or any other materials that might be harmful to me. I was really caught off guard because here was a person that really felt threatened by me and I was not aware of any reason that he should be. The brother seemed rather shaky on top of all the other things.

I moved immediately to relax him and put him at ease and then started to question him closely about what he felt was going on and why he came to hold those ideas.

Well I soon learned that the brother had been informed by someone that he would be killed that day down in the music room by someone I had ordered to do it. The first attack was supposed to have been ordered by me also. The brother had been on some type of medication down in the psychology clinic. They had to feed him this story in the hopes of him acting on their information without giving it a second thought. I was really getting warm about this situation. Still, I saw it as an official effort to have me killed in the yard by another prisoner without the least awareness of any threat or provocation. This prisoner had a long history of violence on his record and this would just be another case. He was continuing undergoing treatment in the psychology clinic and was not only isolated from the general population, but also was from out of state. The perfect scapegoat for a murder rap.

The officials made two mistakes in their selection of him, however. First, I had met this brother while he was in the city jail. I had spent some time helping him with his situation and giving him some support since he was out of state. Second, he liked the Black Panther party and that gave me an edge. If I had been someone else, he informed me later, I would have been attacked without a warning or second thought. Recently one of the comrades had been attacked just like that by another out-patient of the psychological clinic. At the time we thought it was an isolated incident. Now a second out patient was telling me that Lieutenant "D" took him around the corner half an hour ago and warned him to be careful and watch out for me because his life was in danger. Well once he understood that he was being used by the administration to attack me he wanted to attack the lieutenant who was at the time somewhere off in the other end of the prison waiting to hear them call a code red. I told him that first we should confront this Lieutenant "D" together and see what he had to say about this before we decided on any course of action.

Well, once we confronted this "pig" together, not only was he surprised, but also he was scared to death. The look on his face told us that we had caught this fish out of water. When we demanded an explanation he told us his reason was that he had received a number of informant's notes stating that something like this was going to happen. I wanted to know what he was doing there last night in the first place since he was a day shift officer.

Secondly, why didn't he offer the brother some protection or if he really thought the brother was in trouble why didn't he lock me up? Or at least why not confront both of us with the situation?

Threats and counter-threats are being made between prisoners all the time and the correct way of dealing with them is to call both parties in and have them body waivers. None of this happened in this case because there just simply were not any notes of threats. I read him the riot act and let him know that if any more attacks or attempts were made on me or any other member of the collective in the near future, he would personally be held responsible and treated accordingly inside or outside or whatever the situation called for. The leadership of the collective decided that the warden and other officials should be made aware of the situation involving Lieutenant "D" who was part of the racist clique that was working night and day to create situations leading to someone's death or critical bodily harm....

Life in the penitentiary was rapidly draining my energy; much of my time was spent just trying to navigate regular daily activities. By this time, a number of old comrades had been released and were back out in the community. The feedback that I was getting wasn't good. Some of the problems that the brothers faced once they were freed were so overwhelming that they were unable to do any serious community organizing. There were other factors also, such as the daily struggle for survival, the move away from leftist politics in the 1980s and the abrupt swing to the right. These factors made it seem like these brothers were not going to be of any use to the community at large. The times were bad for me as well because I was confronted with the fact that I and others had made sacrifices and participated in struggles that now seemed for naught. I had begun to wonder what it had all been for, especially since these comrades seemed unwilling to struggle to make our community better and progressive in nature.

I spent a lot of time soul searching and talking to people from the community about the comrades and their actions, or lack thereof. These were people who had been struggling in the neighborhoods for the past dozen years or so, and were still continuing to work and struggle. I wondered how these sisters and brothers could continue their efforts year after year, yet the comrades who were just coming out of prison seemed to run out of energy

within the first two years or so. The problem seemed to be that community-based people were established in the area and had credibility with other community institutions and individuals. The just released prisoner is not accepted by the community as a positive role model based on his or her political beliefs. In all too many cases their economic situation was shaky at best. These returning comrades found themselves supporting a lot of beliefs that the community did not agree with or understand at this point. The lack of an infrastructure to accept these returnees added to the problems that they faced.

Needless to say, at the time all I could see was that a number of ex-prisoners who claimed to have serious political convictions were not dealing with the struggle like we from the inside thought they should. Who could we depend upon if the comrades were not able to return to the community and be committed to working for the comrades in prison as well as the community? These things seemed even more depressing when we continually learned that this or that ex-comrade did this or that to the community and that activity was negative in nature. By this time I just became wary of prisoners who for the most part seemed to lose all consciousness upon release from prison. It seemed to me that, after all those years hiding behind the cover of prison oppression to do their time and once their bit was up, they no longer thought the problems existed and simply spent their time partying and trying to forget the hard times that we had experienced over the years together.

The comrades were not the only prisoners who spent hard time in the prison system with organized groups and then returned to society to forget the struggle and their comrades left behind inside. Almost every group was experiencing the same problem and there was a lot discussion on the causes of this new development. The thing that we could not understand was how these brothers could spend years being beaten and oppressed along with the rest of us and then forget all these hard times. The programs and support from the community continued to come from elements in the black community and progressive elements of the white community.

I was nearing a point in my time where I could not put up with a lot of bullshit from people. I wanted to get out of the penitentiary for a number of reasons. This was my 13th year in the prison system and all my friends were going to other prisons or going home. The system itself was overcrowded and I had just finished four years of college. I had done everything humanly possible to do in the penitentiary and the turnover of the population would

require another few years to raise the level of political consciousness to what it had been a few years before all the transfers and the general mood in the US had shifted. I for one was not trying to spend any more time working in a setting where I felt my efforts were a waste of time and energy.

The classification department within the Penitentiary had claimed that they had been instructed to get a number of prisoners out of the prison and into other institutions, so I decided that this was an ideal time for me to make my move. I had been in the prison system for over 13 years and had only been in the classification department a handful of times. The system never worked for the prisoners and basically we understood it to be something the officials used to cover their asses with the public and the budget managers who controlled or questioned where the funds for prisoners' rehabilitation went. The classification system was held up as the tool that reviewed and oversaw all the improvements or the lack of improvements in each prisoner's situation. This system rarely, if ever, gives the prisoner a fair shake. And most people knew that it was pointless to go before these people if you had made enemies within the Penitentiary's administration.

I surely had more than enough enemies to go around. The fact that the classification department didn't work in the average non-political case made it that much more unlikely that I would be given real consideration. After all, I had a lot of time before me and the nature of my case was still very political and very public. The enemies that I had made some years before were now top administration officials and many of them had made it clear that they held grudges from past conflicts. In fact, there were some who refused to speak to me and who only spoke to me through a third party, and I responded to their behavior in kind.

In order to get official approval for a transfer each prisoner had to be deemed a non-security risk. Of course the staff would not mention the personal conflicts, but the bias could have an impact on your case if you were in front of one of the old clique members. The only chance that I had would exist if I could get scheduled to go before the classification team while a Black official was sitting on the team or at least a non-clique white official. Since the classification officials were working to get a number of prisoners out of the penitentiary as a result of a lawsuit that had been filed about the overcrowding and general living conditions at the prison and throughout the system, I thought the time was ripe. They were processing transfers largely because the staff had been scheduling prisoners to go before officials who

would easily approve of the transfer to other institutions. I made a request to be scheduled for a review.

The classification process takes only a few minutes at best. The prisoner is called into a room for an interview with three panel members. Each prisoner's file has been read and discussed before this meeting, and likely the decision has been made in most cases before the prisoner appears in front of them. The interview becomes little more than a verbal stamp of approval and the decision was almost always supported by the administration officials, once it had been made. The key is to get a positive decision from the panel before the interview was conducted. That's done in a number of ways. One of the panel members would be the prisoner's classification counselor, another was likely to be a state employee who worked within the prison compound, and finally there would be a guard officer. So you find the time when the best possible officer is scheduled for the team, and then along with your classification counselor you know there are two possible votes in your favor. The state employee almost always goes with the decision of the other two persons unless there is a personal reason to oppose.

I was before the team and out of the hearing room in less than 13 minutes. They had decided to let me go to another prison with lesser security. The papers had to go before the warden for his approval. That takes only a few days to a few weeks at the most. Once the papers supporting the decision are signed by him then they must go to the commissioner's office at the state headquarters for the Department of Correction. They are supposed to review the files and decide if you should be transferred or not. That takes another month or two. Finally your papers come back all approved and you are assigned for transfer to a new prison. In my case it was the Maryland House of Correction at the Jessup, Maryland prison complex, better known as the "Cut". The next thing that happens is that you have to settle down for a long wait. The waiting part of the process is almost as hard as the classifying part itself. Week after week drags by and the pressure builds as group after group leaves and you wait for your turn to come.

In my case the situation was a little worse since I still had enemies in high places in the administration. They realized that I had got around them by planning the transfer and having it followed up on the commissioner level. They did not want me to leave from under their control but were powerless to stop me at that point. So the major that controlled the list of who was transferring called me in his office one morning and asked me if I

was ready to go and informed me that I would be on the next trip out on the following Tuesday. It was odd, to say the least, because this major had not spoken to me in a number of years, since 1976 and we both knew that we did not like each other and everyone around knew it.

As it turned out I did not leave that next Tuesday or the next Tuesday after that, ever. The wait grew into a month and then another month. I was uptight because I knew these people were really trying to fuck with me and get me to blow the transfer. Finally the day came when I was informed that I would be leaving and to bring all my property down to the central storeroom. I was at the point where I did not believe I was going to get out of that place until I left it behind me. The process took hours just to go through all the things that I had gathered over all the years in the pen. I left over half the stuff there and was glad when it was finally packed up and boxes sealed to be transferred out to the bus that would be taking us to the CUT.

They kept us locked in the storeroom for half the day. All day long brothers were coming by to bid us farewell and hope that we would never return to this place again under the same conditions. The bus had arrived and it was time to go. It was a cold, dull, rainy day in late November right after Thanksgiving. The mood was perfect. I have always loved the rain and this day it would seem more meaningful than ever because I found myself standing in the yard of the penitentiary for the last time. The place was full of memories of the last 13 years of my life. Yards away down in the central part of the upper yard many major events had taken place that would shape the lives and history of prisoners and the prison struggle in general. There was a fence between me and bus, the gate opened and we packed our things on the bus. Now all that remained was to drive out the back gate and onto the street behind the prison. One last look at the prison brought something home to me. The yards were empty.

Five of us were seated on the 70 seat bus, and after all these years I was rolling through the back gate. I thought I would feel happiness, but all I felt was the need to never come back this way again. I don't ever want to see the penitentiary again as a prisoner. On to the street we roll, into the traffic and down to the stop light.

Relationships are often the one thing that keep prisoners going, yet they are also the one thing that makes them most vulnerable. This is evidenced by the

prison administration's use of Family Day as a leveraging tool when they want to implement changes. The prisoners buck when told they will no longer be allowed to wear "street" clothes, and the administration pulls out their trump card, no Family Day. The change is implemented without incident. In the last few years I have grown weary of these occasions, although I still look forward to regular visits with my sons and their children.

The day that I walked into the visiting room and saw my father, I knew that something was awry. His presence told me that things were out of sorts because the last time that I had seen him was over 20 years prior. That day would be one that I would never forget because by day's end my life would be further altered, even more than the barriers and prison walls had already done. It was soon after my sentencing; I was in the penitentiary. The day had come just like the rest had been coming for the last two years. The sun rose almost as if it had been a burden, and the weight of it brought an oppressive heat into the prison. For me, this was just another day to get through, knowing full well that I didn't earn this shit that had been heaped on me. Innocence had been of no consequence to the court, however, so I had the rest of my *natural* life *plus* thirty years to profess it.

Not even a blistering sun could be more bothersome, or so I thought, until my father showed up to inform me that he could not visit me there ever again. He assured me of his love and support, but said that he could not bear the weight that came with walking into that place. I had a genuine love for my father and he for me, and I understood how hard my imprisonment was on others. Visiting is hard to do, not only is it hard to leave, but the conditions that loved ones are subjected to can be a strain. At best they are treated with suspicion, and sometimes made to feel like criminals. So this decision was totally acceptable to me and over the years his absence from my life became very understandable.

So when I found myself so many years later sitting across from my father again, I could not be happy because I sensed that there was trouble. His appearance struck me immediately. Never a very big man, he had always been a *thick* man, not this fragile person that my eyes were gazing at. I knew instantaneously that he was dying. Had to be. The surprise visit alone had alerted me in ways that words could not. Nothing else would bring him into the prison visiting room. This was, after all, the place that had put a permanent wall between us, father and son, all those years ago. That is what prisons do; the institutions wall off all normal human relationships and interactions, completely changing family structures and personal behavior.

My father had sat across from me, his face, my face, making me consider my own future. We greeted each other warmly that day, but in the stiff manner of two people who no longer really know one another, yet are connected in ways that are unseen and unspoken. Father and son. I wait, even though I know without the informed knowledge of one who has been close to him, that his very presence represents goodbye. Despite the hopefulness that I felt, and the feeling that so much space was suddenly being filled in, I was looking at a ghost. My father died within the year. I was permitted to attend the funeral. It had been 23 years since I was last uptown, but now I was seeing Baltimore from the grieving eyes of a son whose father had long ago gone missing, from the eyes of a man denied his freedom for two decades. My family buried him, and perhaps a piece of me, for certainly I had lost so much in all that time that we did not see each other.

The Free Agent

... the demands two people make upon each other can be crippling and destructive. No matter how much they love each other, the values of our society conspire to add intolerable pressures to a binding relationship.

(Huey P. Newton, 1973, *Revolutionary Suicide*)

Imprisonment does not end life; it simply makes it much more difficult. The cycles that are a part of life continue as if unaware of the barriers that razor wire presents. Birth, death, and love, all of these things keep occurring because we have no real control over them. While life's joy remains elusive, the pain that most people experience is actually intensified when one resides in a six foot by nine foot steel cage. Not only have I experienced the birth of my grandchildren from this place, but I've watched an entire generation of children be born and grow up since my initial incarceration. Two of my nephews have shared this same address on occasion. The fact is that the complications of life keep right on coming; often it is only the responses that are different. *And sometimes, not.*

Prison has the ability to capture the body, much the same way that slavery did, and it is especially important to emphasize the fact that it is the *black* body that is so often caught within this system. This prison odyssey has given me insight into what it must have been like to be a slave. Separation from

family and community, along with a sense of powerlessness define the last 34 years of my life. Presently in this country there are well over two million people within the prison system who are experiencing this same isolation, and their incarceration is not so much for the purpose of rehabilitation as the profit of others. This system creates the same vulnerability and helplessness that our ancestors experienced, as prisoner, family and community all seem powerless to change what amounts to a truly destructive system. I can't help but wonder what will be the ultimate cost to these communities where the residents are already overcome by the post-traumatic stress caused by slavery and the terror of lynching. And who's going to pay when the bill comes due?

Yet each individual has domain over her or his own mind and spirit as evidenced by the resistance of our ancestors to the system that enslaved them. Brother George Jackson, in the book Soledad Brother (1970), speaks of the individual who is completely unfettered by circumstances, in that spirit I have remained the *free agent*, that individual who refuses to let prison imprison my mind.