

Life Transformation by **Conscious** Choice and **POSITIVE** Action

A FREED MAN

An Emancipation Proclamation

"Not only must we raise our voices for positive change, but our positive actions and attitudes—toward ourselves and each other—must support them."

ADAM ABRAHAM

Author

I Am My Body, NOT!

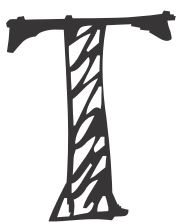


PHAELOS BOOKS

“Hatred will
always be
unrequited.
There is no
way to hold
on to it and
be satisfied,
even in death.
The only real
‘cure’ for
hatred is
letting it go.”

The Cry of Conscience

Gangs, Terrorism, Oklahoma City, and September 11, 2001



here is an ongoing debate as to how “free” one can ever be in a free society. It is likely that this question can never really be answered to everyone’s full satisfaction. Nonetheless, in complex social systems such as ours, limits to certain types of behavior are not only desirable, but necessary in order to protect the best interests of all citizens. Speech is one such instance where the question of how much restriction is “good,” is frequently being assessed.

The right of free speech, as guaranteed under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, technically allows us to do such things as yell “fire!” in a crowded theater, and produce misogynistic music videos, or others that appear to glorify shooting police officers. The Second Amendment grants each citizen the right to bear arms. And yet, the improper use of said arms can quickly place an individual on the wrong side of the law.

Though free speech and other rights are protected under the law, guidelines relative to the individual’s responsibility for the *effect* of actions normally protected by these same laws, are often missing.

Given the amount of repression that the people of the revolutionary era had experienced in England, which led to the formation of the colonies into a nation, it may be that they wanted to

make it clear that this nation would indeed sanction, allow, encourage, and protect the voice and will of its people.

In the ensuing years, some citizens have come to assume that free speech grants us the right to say anything, regardless of its effect, and be protected under the law. They have come to believe that they can bear arms of practically any size and killing potential. However, such thinking must have reasonable limits.

The absence of specific constitutional stipulations on individual rights does not exempt us from the responsibility to express ourselves without doing or perpetuating harm. Furthermore, we are not exempted from paying a price for the harm that we create, even if it is inadvertent.

Therefore, we must rely on the code of a different constitution to monitor and guide our behavior. It can be referred to as the code of our *conscience*, sometimes known as the voice of reason. It is the soul of our humanity.

Outrageous Rage Replaces Courage

Though sex has always sold well as a “door opener” for new ideas, outrageousness has long maintained a solid second position. It is doing good business these days, with particular emphasis being placed on “rage.” In today’s social climate, free speech has generally taken on a decidedly hard edge. It’s no longer a question that others might be shocked, offended, or even harmed. Certain expressions of what is believed to be free speech are designed to insult, if not incite. It is increasingly without rational reason that responsible people are called to absorb the costs of irresponsible reaction.

One possible contributor to this trend is that the roles that men and women play within society have become more homogeneous. Fashion trends is one example. Earrings have become fashionable for many “masculine” men, particularly amongst “bad boys.” A few men are even wearing kilt-like skirts. Some really avant-garde guys of the New Millennium have been spotted wearing colored

nail polish! For numerous reasons ranging from discomfort to thinking that they promote sexism, some women consider it definitely *uncool* to wear high heels, much to men's dismay.

Some women have taken up smoking cigars. They want to have freedom and "fun" just like guys. In increasing numbers, women are gaining access to some of the trappings—or perhaps traps—of "guyhood;" high blood pressure, ulcers, and cancers of various types and varieties. We tend to think of these ailments as occurring randomly, or due to genetic factors when, in actuality, they are most often caused by diet, attitude, toxin buildups in our bodies, stress, and behavior. Yet, as women are adopting more traditional "male" attitudes and behaviors among other things, they are beginning to pay a high price in sacrificing their good health.

Motherhood has been in danger of losing its regard as a vital, even sacred social role. Women are looking to *in vitro* procedures and surrogates, and some will jokingly wish that *men* could take over the "burden" of childbearing. The rise of feminism and sexual freedom in the late 20th Century led to a decline in the perceived importance of marriage and fathers in family dynamics beyond being more than sperm donors and check providers. Indeed, some women actually believe they can bear and raise children on their own, save for the minor detail of a life catalyzing seed. We see this idea hammered home time after time in that sometimes skewed social "mirror" of our times, the television.

On an episode of the television drama *The Practice* that aired in 2001, the character played by actress Camryn Manheim, signs a contract with a long time male friend, who agreed to provide his sperm to conceive a child. Then, he has a change of heart and wishes to be actively involved in the child's life. Unhappy with his change in sentiment, she steadfastly refuses to consider it. He takes her to court, and pleads his case. She fights it, and ultimately "wins." Yet, a self-serving scenario such as this one has no victors.

Through Manheim's character, the writers attempted to suggest, albeit without saying it directly, that a woman who earns enough money to get a nanny and good day care, would be an adequate substitute for a loving father. With all due respect to actresses Rosie O'Donnell and Calista Flockart (*Allie McBeal*), the message is repeated that healthy relationships between parents are not necessary if you make enough money. We think of the children as lucky if money is present rather than their father. The kids know better. But how in the world did the parents forget? My guess is that they never knew.

Far too many women these days don't have or value loving relationships with men, nor do they make enough money to care for the children that they bear. They use men to help them create babies, then cast them off, except for the ties to their checkbooks. Heaven help the children.

It's no small wonder that women who think they don't need a man around in order to be good mothers have never had kids before. But after the child comes it's too late.

As far as trends go, people are looking, dressing, and behaving uglier. It has become fashionable for men and women to mutilate themselves in the name of self-expression, and expect others to understand and accept them unconditionally. Some of the more extreme individuals stick pins and various rings on other parts of the body, challenging the less adventurous (or masochistic) of us to bear the discomfort of simply *looking* at them.

These trends are, of themselves, not evil, nor inherently harmful. I'm not trying to single this group out. Though I would prefer he didn't wear them at all, my son Adam, who was almost 18 when I started writing this book, wears earrings. I once commented, thankfully, that he hadn't pierced his nose, or anything else that I could tell. So much for that. Six years later, at age 24, the nose is still virgin, but not the tongue.

He also wears the fashion signature of his generation, the oversized pants and shirts that many adults love to hate. This is also free speech. There is nothing inherently “wrong” with it either.

What is distressing are the ugly actions that tend to occur around some of those who have made the “hard look” of the times cool, for actions are our real expressions of speech. By way of first impression, the reputation tends to “spread,” applying to all who assume “the look.” It has become “good” to *look* bad, and “cool” to act dumb. However, for those who hold on to this model of attitude and behavior, where is life to go on the quality scale, but down?

Another piece of thanks: my son is beginning to discover and express his own artistic and design talents. I am pleased with how he has chosen to respond to his challenges, which have included making me a grandfather to the most endearing boy, Tyler.

Scary Stuff

We are a species that, if not anchored by true faith and hope, will have a predilection toward paranoia. It is ironic, almost paradoxical, that many people who need not only a gun, but an assault weapon to feel “safe,” consider themselves to be God-fearing. I suggest simply that they are fearing people, because a real faith in their God, and real hope in the power of humanity to do good, would cause their paranoia to dissipate, if not melt altogether. They would still be aware of the dangers of life, but unafraid. They would be aware of the potential threats to freedom, but would initiate intelligent ways to “protect and preserve” it instead of sitting around watching TV and waiting for a Savior. This would not involve dismantling the military, for strong nations need a well-equipped and prepared military. However, a level of quality in the relations between nations should be striven for as that would make military action against another nation unthinkable. This proactive spirit would live in communities as well, and be expressed toward people of different cultural backgrounds.

Paranoia is based on a hyper awareness; a heightened sense of the potential dangers that we face each day of our lives. Tune in to the evening news day-in and day-out and you'll be given ample reason to be afraid: very afraid. Perhaps this is due to our desire to feel in control of our lives, knowing that we live in mortal forms and, as much as we are inclined to try, have not solved the mortality problem. Translation: we will all "die" one day, facing an end to life, as we know it. How ironic that some of us are willing to send others to kill others and risk being killed in order to protect someone else's freedom to be self-destructive. We refer to such behaviors as heroism and bravery, but is it smart?

As necessary and natural as it is to the well-being of our world, death is almost universally feared and avoided, for no one knows when it will come, or how. When it is imminent, the process is rarely reversed, and never permanently.

Adding insult to insecurity, death rarely seems to arrive through "natural causes" when we are in a state of peace. Instead, we take final leave of the earth through every imagined way—mostly by succumbing to disease, by way of accident and injury, and also, by the negligent, belligerent, or sometimes evil hand of another.

Though we are vigilant and on guard against death in all forms, we are especially "on the lookout" for signs of the latter possibility. Unfortunately, gang cultures (which includes street gangs and terrorist groups) have gained more attention by the number of people they put into the ground than by the hopes and dreams they have helped lift off the ground to soar. By so doing they have made themselves targets of public wariness. This includes the newly declared War on Terrorism in response to the destruction of the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. Osama bin Laden, a Saudi-born Islamic fundamentalist who has been hiding in Afghanistan, is the suspected mastermind.

With terrorist groups and street gangs, the misfortune index is magnified by the fact that youngsters are impressionable. On

second thought, this also applies to youngsters of groups who speak the language of terror. Their mentors rarely see themselves as terrorists, but “ennoble” themselves by such terms as “freedom fighters,” “patriots,” “revolutionaries,” etc. Children will naturally and innocently emulate the behavior of those who are close to them—who *impress* them—whether it is with love, or fear.

In their formative years, children do not judge the hands that either feed or beat them. They are not born with the ability to discern “good” from “bad,” “right” and “wrong.” Such awareness blooms as the child gains life experiences. Eventually, into each life a choice must fall—a choice of what one will become. Children grow up to become choice makers and action takers that are greatly influenced by the impressions gained in their formative years. Oftentimes, the choice that we make is to be either just like someone we loved, or just the opposite.

A Closer Look at Gangs and Terrorists

Gang and terrorist cultures have raised the role of socialized bullies to an art form, and a science. They are notorious for speaking the language of violence, intimidation, vandalism, murder, and mayhem. They have created their own dialects, attire, and ways of “marking” co-opted territories. They have declared themselves to be members of their respective communities that should be respected. But the operative word for “respect” to them is fear. How wonderful it would be if the collective will that unifies gangs and terrorist groups were channeled toward positive ends. Who says that a gang must be angry and ruthless? Or that it must kill, or threaten to kill in order to be respected? While that is a truth that some have evolved (or devolved) their logic to, it need not be engraved in stone.

Like all citizens, gang members are protected under the First Amendment right of free speech. But speaking is not the sole definer of speech. Our speech is formed from the thoughts we

harbor in our minds, which are formed from the attitudes that we empower by our motives, which subsequently stimulate our actions. Gang members are free to dress the way they do, to talk the way they do, and to think the way they do. But they are not free to act on their harmful impulses. The same truth applies to terrorists.

Unfortunately, their members have too frequently acted through their rage to the extent that they are now seen by some as little more than pests that need to be exterminated. Osama bin Laden is the latest “vermin” to garner world attention by his alleged connection to the WTC disaster. With saber rattling rhetoric, President Bush has declared that he wants to catch bin Laden “dead or alive.” If the terrorist activities that he is believed to have perpetuated would end as a result of his capture, I would agree. But bin Laden is only a symptom of the problem. He is not the problem.

Exterminating people who do evil deeds as though they are insects is wrong thinking, for it does not solve the problem of behavior, which stems from attitudes beliefs, culture, and traditions.

Though their actions sometimes makes the distinction hard to accept, every member of a gang culture is a human being. Yet, what do you do about people who can make more money in a week selling drugs or terrorizing their neighborhoods in some other way than most of us make in a year? They should first be approached as human beings. They are not dumb, but they do have their own code of conscience.

The problem is that their code seems to run parallel and at polar odds to that of the larger human community. This can be quite problematic when we’re talking about religious fundamentalists who believe they can score divine brownie points by killing non-believers or becoming martyrs. This was dramatically brought to head on that otherwise beautiful day in New York City, when two commercial jetliners were flown into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, leading to their eventual implosion, another plane crashed into the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. with a fourth

lost near Pittsburgh. To the horror of the world, three thousand people from over eighty different countries lost their lives.

Suggestions For Dealing With Youth Gangs and Terrorists

Though the net effect of many youth gangs and terrorist groups is the same—the escalation of fear—they should be approached differently. Gangs operate on a neighborhood or community level. They are basically a collection or alliance of thugs, who know only one rule of law; their own. Terrorists on the other hand, tend to operate from an ideological foundation. It could be a great and revered work, such as *The Qur'an* or *Holy Bible*, or the U.S. Constitution. They ennoble themselves by being willing to fight (kill) non-believers for believing differently. But oftentimes, when there are no non-believers around, we see them killing believers as well, as Taliban fanatics have been videotaped doing to women in a soccer field in Afghanistan. The ones who get seduced by the power of guns and weaponry, and who are willing to use them on others, will generally find a “good” reason to do so.

We should neither turn our back on, nor forgive the crimes that gang members involve themselves in; irrespective of their reasons for promulgating terror. Active steps should be made to stop terrorists. However, using *terror* on others is not the way to stop terror. It increases the likelihood of more terror, for it is the *terror mentality* that will have been adopted, and in essence, kept alive by both parties. This is exemplified by the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians in the Gaza Strip today. Much to our shock, dismay and sadness, terror-filled strikes that the United States has made in such places as Libya, the Sudan, and the Persian Gulf have increased the *desire* for retaliation by a few men with Quixotic dreams of doing like damage, being heroes, getting attention, bringing themselves glory and exchanging *high fives* with Allah. Terrorists can come in all stripes, from all lands, including the United

States of America. They can call themselves Crips, Bloods, Militia, Nazis, or Skinheads. They share a single, separatist mentality.

The use of terror fans the flames of resentment, rage, envy and hatred between *all* participants, resolving nothing. These are toxic emotions and energies that create a sad and sorrowful circle of destructive, fear-laden attitudes, behaviors and experiences.

Fear disconnects the self-righteous men and women—who would reign terror upon innocent others—from the true understanding of their *oneness* with the victims. Stopping terrorism will not happen by creating new terror. However, pacifism should *not* be confused with passivism.

Pacifism involves a dedication to the creation or maintenance of peace, as well as the peaceful, non-destructive resolution of conflict. This does not simply involve lighting candles, holding hands, and singing “*we shall overcome*” while missiles are being launched. Dedicated to the preservation of that which is beautiful and good that humankind has created, pacifism encourages us to *actively* and resolutely pursue effective ways that preserve that which is constructive while extracting the destructive elements from our relationships. The World Trade Center was a vital and very constructive element, not only to the economy of New York City, but to *world trade*. Thousands of people died. Millions of lives were *negatively* impacted—directly and indirectly—by that heinous action.

Example: An Intelligent Response to Terrorism

It would have been an interesting turn of events if President George W. Bush had announced that the troops that arrive in cooperating countries would *not* be wielding deadly force, but would be delivering food and medical provisions, which medical doctors have said are sorely needed. It could have been announced to the world that while they are putting themselves at risk, they are carrying out the United States’ resolve to determine who was

responsible for the September 11 attacks and bring them to justice *without* causing new and undue harm to innocent people. This would have put U.S. policy in stark contrast to the terrorist's disregard for the lives of the victims—who were from over eighty different countries, and of many different faiths, including Islam—in the attack.

The proposed peaceful, non-destructive initiative should further be publicly enumerated to member nations of the U.N., for the strategy reduces the incendiary atmosphere and panic that naturally followed the attack, not only in the target country, but in neighboring nations and throughout the Middle East. It is more likely that U.N. nations would join the mobilization.

It would be announced that U.S./U.N. forces are prepared to defend themselves. They would request entry into Afghanistan and *every* country that those who are believed responsible might be. They will not initiate any harm to any innocent people. If innocent people do not attack our troops, then there will be no need for retaliation or an escalation of mayhem. But we WILL be coming.

The ruling body of Afghanistan, the Taliban, vowed to wage a *jihad* (holy war) against the United States if attacked. This humanitarian approach would neutralize the Taliban threat, for we would come in peace. Our guns would be nearby and our missiles would be in range, but peace would nonetheless be our foremost objective.

With its defiant, self-righteous rhetoric, the Taliban demonstrated its willingness to risk making the entire Afghani population martyrs in order to protect one man—who, after some initial “tough talk,” claimed his innocence—from being apprehended. It's no wonder that before the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan began, Afghani people attempted to flee the country in droves.

As it stands, everyone knows that the United States is going to the Middle East, and anyone who may be at, or near any crossfire, is understandably running for cover. It's nice to have the biggest and baddest guns and the fastest, coolest planes. But it would be

unwise to think that makes us stronger than our opponent. Our true strength comes through the resolution of conflict, not the escalation. It is far wiser to find ways *not* to use destructive means, and still accomplish the desired goal.

The cost estimate of the “War on Terrorism” is a projected \$100 *billion*. I wonder what could the people of any one of those countries do with even \$1 billion in humanitarian relief, or \$10 billion in infrastructure building assistance and education?

What about the thousands of bright, industrious and ingenious American people who have lost their jobs in the fallout from the September 11 attacks? What are they going to do to support their families and earn a living?

Suppose the newly unemployed Americans joined a new *Knowledge Force*, and offered to help these countries devise ways to feed their people better, to get more from their land or reduce the devastating effects of disease? Of course there will be resistance, but the absurd logic of terrorist fanaticism would be exposed for everyone to see, even the believers, for they are humans too. They will understand when their “leaders” do not speak for their own hearts.

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An active, but pacifist approach would not require lethal force. It would minimize the potential harm to innocent people, thereby creating no new reasons for lethal retaliation against other innocent people. This may not end hatred, envy or resentment, but it

would not fuel the illegitimate reasons that fanatics such as Osama bin Laden use to gain support for their particular cause.

Active steps must be taken in order to (1) stop the terrorists' ability to reign terror, (2) stop, or at the very least not perpetuate their reasons for electing terror, and (3a) have them pay restitution for the terror they have caused or (3b) offer the followers of their ideology or *belief set*, an attractive alternative to the familiar destructive behavior circle.

One of the most effective non-terrorist ways to stop a terrorist's ability to wage terror is to cut off access to money. With upwards to a billion dollars or more at his command, Osama bin Laden could give life to a lot of evil. If his conviction were true and honorable enough, he could even have purchased his own jetliners (new or pre-owned) to have flown into to his doomed targets. So having enough money makes him a man who indeed possesses great power. Take away the money, and his power is diminished.

Without ever firing a single shot, risking an innocent life, or taking up so much time saber rattling, a *quiet* assault on the sources and strongholds of bin Laden's money would quickly bring him and any organization that he funds, to their knees.

Unless Osama bin Laden keeps his money in mattresses, rolled up in Oriental rugs, or in a fortified tent or cave somewhere in Afghanistan, he most likely keeps it in banks. This means that he incurs bills, and must pay them. It also means that records of his funds are stored in computers, with purchases most likely done electronic transfer and not by camel caravan. Cutting off access to his money would immediately cut off the flow to his suppliers, wherever they are. President Bush took active measures to do just that.

This might have been done with a new brand of warriors, an *Information Army*, comprised of hackers, crackers, programmers and other information specialists. They would endeavor to use existing intelligence about Osama bin Laden, or any other terrorist, to suddenly make him a poor man. They would also work to identify his

operatives, by harvesting e-mail addresses, tracking voice and data communications, and intelligently analyzing the generated data.

This tactic could be directed against his suppliers, supporters, and sympathizers. Quite simply, they can be given a choice: support ideological repression and tyranny and forfeit access to their assets and their ability to move around. Renounce the terrorist tyranny and, after an appropriate time, regain their rights of planetary citizenship and freedom.

At the local community level, gang members should likewise be held responsible for the human laws that they break and the human suffering that they bring. If a gang member murders someone, he or she should be tried in a court of law, and if convicted, punished to the full extent of the governing law.

Before a boy becomes a gang member or terrorist, he is a “wannabe.” There is a certain glamour or seductive quality to gang and terrorist lifestyles that must be understood in order to neutralize individual involvement before it becomes a social problem. The other way to attack is to influence such groups to begin making positive contributions to their communities instead of destroying them.

The elders and leaders of gangs should first be approached with conciliation and not confrontation, by people who are respected in the community. The approach is with the clear desire and intent to cooperatively change the situation with their own commitment and energy.

For example, there is much that can be done to beautify many communities and make them feel safe once again. It wasn't always dangerous to be out at night in the city. You didn't feel that you had to carry a gun. Now, you take your chances, even during the day.

During a six-day visit to Chicago in July, 1994 (which had been my first return visit in ten years), there were afternoon gang-related murders on the city's South Side on three consecutive days. They occurred a few blocks from my parents' homes. This kind of behavior is insane, for the murder victim is only the tip of a large iceberg of people who are affected by crime. Such acts

speak volumes for how public perceptions are molded, for they are reported on the 10 O'clock and 11 O'clock News to frighten other people whose faith and hope are already on shaky ground.

This is "free speech?"

More Ideas For Dealing With Gangs

After you approach gang members like human beings (as I'm sure many have already tried), then what? They've got the guns. What have we got to bargain with? People who have real respect can offer the opportunity to show gang members and interested others, how to gain real respect, assuming they are not already suspected of specific criminal acts.

Respect does not come through the barrel of a gun, irrespective of which "side" of the law the gun holder is on. At best, the respect that might be afforded is artificial, lasting only as long as the barrel is pointed at another, as long as the force of a choke hold is being applied, or as long as the person at whom it is aimed remains living. Anyone using a gun to fulfill a need for respect loses it the moment they point the gun at another human being who does not pose an equal threat.

I have experienced one gun being pointed at me in my life. It was by a man who robbed Stanley Nachenberg's drug store one evening in 1967 at the corner of Seventy-Ninth and Drexel Avenue in Chicago, where I once worked as a teenager. I gave the robber any and everything he wanted while he was in my presence. Fortunately, he did not fire on Stanley or me. But I was not drawn to carrying a gun as a result of this experience. To this day, I cannot forgive, nor stand what he did. He added even greater insult to the emotional injury by saying, as he left, "Take it easy, *brother*."

If thoughts alone could kill, then mine would have burned a hole right through his back like a laser beam. Never before had I been so frightened, dismayed, saddened, and angered. There was simply no *good* reason to do such a thing. But clearly, this man, and

the many others who rob, steal, assault, and murder others, believe they have a valid reason to engage in such activity.

Arming myself—with a bigger, or more powerful gun than any that might ever be pointed at me, and seeking the robber out—was not an option. It is clearly not a way to gain respect, or feel *safe*. Indeed, owning and carrying a gun tends to exacerbate one's fears.

If I had a gun that night, it would have meant that I had little faith in anything; not even myself. The hope and faith of my life would have been in the gun, instead of in myself, or in some Force greater than me, with the power to protect me. I would have been presented with the option of killing or maiming that man, or risking being killed or maimed. I see no win” in either of those options.

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Certain moments of our lives are clearly beyond our control. But they are not beyond our influence. If we stop trying to control others—their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors—then we might become free enough to actually find the best solutions to our own problems.

Even though the man who robbed Stanley Nachenburg's store pulled the gun on us, *something* kept him from pulling the trigger. It doesn't matter what it was. It didn't need to be seen, discernible, or understood. Whatever that something was, I am grateful.

We don't always have to know what the something is that shelters us from harm. All we need to know is that it can be there if we need it. That awareness is more comforting to me than owning or using a gun. It gives me reason to work on achieving real respect: by giving it to others. Real respect comes from reaching achieve-

ments that benefit people beyond ourselves. A few dollars and a pocket full of cigarettes, which is what the robber got that night for the memory that he created, hardly qualifies as a beneficial achievement. Our achievements are the memories that live on after we are gone.

Approaching a gang, or anyone who wishes to affect positive changes, with the opportunity to do something that is truly meaningful and beneficial for their community or people, would provide a great incentive for cooperation. Some degree of retraining would be assumed. If the gang members are willing to make the changes, then assistance should be made available; not for “free,” but in exchange for an agreed upon value. If they don’t have an Osama bin Laden-esque *sugar daddy*, and money is an issue, then other forms of payment should be explored, so that the giver receives due value for their investment and for the risk that they are assuming.

In both gang and mainstream cultures, to be respected is to be accepted. Like love, respect is important to all people. The challenge facing the gang is that of transforming their concept of respect from a fear, ignorance, and rage basis into one that is based on love, intelligence, and courage. We must first ascertain which gang members are interested in creating and experiencing real respect. Though not everyone will be interested at first, some will be.

Fleshing Out a ‘Transformation Program’

As a condition of being admitted into a *transformation program*, the participants must make the following agreement:

While involved in the actual transformation sessions, they commit to doing no harm. They will not carry or use knives, guns, or any other weapon. They will be in a safe environment and must consent to maintaining that throughout their stay.

A voice coach would help them learn to speak English properly. Their speech patterns would be recorded at the program’s beginning, and then periodically evaluated to see how they were chang-

ing. Participants would discover that the ability to speak street dialect is retained, but they would also be able to interact with others on an entirely different level. Able to do both, they would be freer to choose a wider spectrum of friends and associates.

Though many groups engage in their own form of English rebellion, there are costs. For most people, regardless of their race or gender, it can keep the doors of respectable opportunity cloaked, closed, chained, or locked.

A person is truly freed when they are willing to set political agendas aside and speak intelligently and effectively to anyone in virtually any environment. I am not necessarily suggesting that one needs to appear knowledgeable in every subject, for that is impossible. No one “knows” everything or can speak every language. Yet, there are many who come to the United States from foreign countries whose cultures tend to be repressive with regard to individualistic expression. Sometimes they come here not knowing the language or our customs. Yet, with the determination to acquire *relevant* knowledge, both cultural and intellectual, and with hard work to gain valuable experience, they struggle, but eventually thrive.

If an individual cannot speak or understand proper English in an English-speaking society, then he or she increases the likelihood of being a bystander, rather than important contributor to society. Gang membership, involvement, or the appearance of same, will not mitigate this truth. The effects of our actions will last far longer than the fashion and cultural trends of the day.

Field trips will be conducted in the community, at which time the transformation candidates will dress in traditional business attire: men; wear suits, shirts and ties; women, dresses, heels, etc. Attention would be given to such matters as grooming, language (both oratory and body) diction, attitude and walk. Each candidate will have a chance to personally witness how others change in their responses and behavior towards them. Wariness, fear, and disdain could be replaced by handshakes, genuine interest at get-

ting acquainted, and smiles. Each will have the chance to choose which kind of response they want to turn into their “norm.”

Their purpose would be to meet with business owners and learn about the problems and challenges of keeping a business going. They would hear about the effects of vandalism, theft, and robbery, and the added costs, both social and economic, that are passed on to the community. They would also hear the owners’ ideas on how things could be transformed and be given the opportunity to contribute to and participate in such change.

The transformation candidates would take other field trips to visit people who have been hospitalized for injuries due to violence or are in asylums for drug usage. They would also visit jails to see men and women who have been incarcerated.

The field trip list would include visiting university or college settings where they would sit in on some classes, not about ethnic studies, but economics, math, art, sciences, etc. Though graduating from college is no guarantee of respectable achievement, it provides a very important opportunity for social grounding (not through partying, but through a diverse base of social interaction.)

Witnessing How Others React to Change

Transformation candidates would be perceived far differently in their attire, different body movement, and way of speaking than they would if they were in their normal regalia. Simply experiencing this difference will have an effect, for it will tangibly show them that their respective fates are optional, a product of their own volition, and not engraved in stone.

If gang members would agree to spend 24 hours a day in such a program for 100 days, each would not only come to believe that transformation is possible, they will *know* it, for it will have been experienced directly. Most would also see this as a much more attractive option than being in jail for the same length of time.

This type of program need not be reserved for gang members. It could be incorporated in normal elementary and high school curricula, in large cities, suburbs, and medium to small towns.

Talk about a golden public relations/advertising opportunity! Local and national sponsors could be sought to fund the project (not the government) through the donation of goods and services in exchange for the right to mention the association in their corporate communications.

Nike's legendary *Just do it* ad concept would have been great, for it would have made their customers the real heroes instead of the athletes who their customers try to emulate. Nike might even have created a line of business attire. Though its fashion prominence will ebb and flow, elegance never goes out of style. It would take some time to get a project of this type going, but if enough people are willing to take a gamble on helping themselves, then enough people will appear who would be willing to offer their help.

We cannot change another's thoughts, speech, behavior, or reality. We can be willing to help them create life anew if *they* are willing to try something new. Anyone who gets involved in a transformation project like this may eventually choose to continue their old familiar ways, but it will never make the same kind of sense it had before.

*“If enough people are willing to take
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then enough people will appear who
would be willing to offer their help.”*

The idea outlined would represent “Operation Discover Hope: Phase I.” It constitutes the discovery phase. For those who choose to continue, the second, power phase would begin. “The Power Phase” would involve intensified socialization, including actual work with people on a real project. Its primary purpose is to

develop broader social experience, though it will also help establish vocational preferences and aptitude for the participant.

Examples of power phase activities might include:

- Assisting paramedics on emergency calls
- Walking a beat with a police officer
- Accompanying a letter carrier on his or her rounds
- Planning and implementing a project to make the neighborhood more beautiful, and safe
- Personal computer assembly, repair, refurbishing, and distribution
- Personal computer installation apprentice, for stand-alone and local area network (LAN) projects
- Software development and technology assessment
- Internet-related development and technology assessment
- Computer-based empowerment projects, including graphic arts, design, publishing, etc.

Safety is increased in a community by all parties working together to do more that is constructive. Such cooperation builds camaraderie and hope, reducing fear. Loaded or unloaded, guns are tools of intimidation, separation and fear, not hope. There is no way to either build hope or reduce fear with a gun—or a missile. Fear and rage can only be transferred thereby.

I am not advocating gun control. If anything, I am advocating *self-control* through personal enrichment. I am advocating that we author and create a wonderful, loving life that is worth joyfully *living fully* for, rather than embrace a cause that is significant only because of our willingness to die, or perhaps kill for. This won't mean the end of death, or tragedy. But it will mean a big difference in our ability to become *freed* men and women.

Tragic Parallels: Oklahoma City and The World Trade Center

April 21, 1995

These thoughts were originally written roughly 48 hours after, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma (April 19, 1995), one or more people parked a rented vehicle with an estimated 4,000 pounds of explosives next to the Federal Building, and set it off. The force of the explosion virtually demolished the building, slicing it nearly in two, killing many unsuspecting people inside.

“Et Tu, New York.”

Just as a dismal chapter in American history came to a close with the execution of Timothy McVeigh (June 11, 2001) for bombing the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, the world is shocked when, exactly three months later on the morning of September 11, 2001, a group of terrorists staged a takeover of four commercial airliners, flying two into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City. One of the remaining jetliners crashed into the Pentagon, outside of Washington D.C. Believed to have been headed for the White House or Capital Building. The fourth airplane’s mission was thwarted when a group of passengers wrestled control of the plane from the hijackers, ultimately causing the plane to crash into a field outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

All passengers on the planes were killed. Roughly three thousand people were estimated killed at the World Trade Center and almost two hundred more were killed on the ground at the Pentagon.

What a tragic way to go. Among the victims of this horrifying tragedy were nineteen children who were in a day care center.

Though the perpetrators of this misfortune would likely think differently, these were, and are acts of evil. Evil is the product of an extremely deluded mind, where one’s sense of joy, purpose, or glory are obtained at the expense of innocent people.

When its letters are placed in reverse order, the word “evil” spells *live*. Based on the promulgation of fear and fueled by hatred, evil is

the anti-life, for, as a “solution,” it stops the victim’s opportunity to improve the quality of his life cold, without his or her consent.

Evil is an expression of delusion because it does not, cannot, and will not stop the life of *ideas*, simply by ending the life of the messengers. This truth is a sword that cuts both ways. Evil behavior will not be destroyed by eradicating those who become its instruments. On the other hand, good behavior will not be eradicated by those who believe *it* to be evil. Those who died in Oklahoma City and at the World Trade Center in New York City, were neither evil, nor messengers. The actions that brought them to those locations, and to an ignominious fate, were not evil. Nonetheless, they become noble symbols against evil and hatred, whose memory can never be silenced again.

One whose hatred for others is such that they can even dare entertain the idea of eliminating them is deluding himself. This is tantamount to playing God with another’s will. Actually, killing others, particularly those who are innocent, unassuming, unaware, and unconcerned about a terrorist’s agenda, is the crude and cowardly *antithesis* of the idea of God.

April 24, 1995

There was a major outpouring of grief for the victims of the Oklahoma City tragedy, many of whom were still unaccounted for five days after the event. Where initial indications suggested that it might be the work of Middle East terrorists, evidence began to point to “home brewed” right-wing extremists, who saw themselves as patriots and protectors of Constitutional freedom.

Events that are as tragic as those that occurred in Oklahoma City and New York compel us to search for an answer to the age-old question of how we, as a free society, should respond to evil, given that evil’s perpetrators are functioning in the diametrically opposed belief that *they* are doing “good.” We are nonetheless compelled to ask, “for whom does their ‘good’ toll?”

These events made one factor quite clear; i.e., the predilection to demonstrate a biased attitude, expressed “against” some one, or something else that is deemed to be different from us.

Contrast this approach to one where we are either “for” or “against” another simply because they look a certain way, are of a different heritage, or they symbolize something that the perpetrator judged to be wrong, as were the people who died in the Oklahoma City Federal Building. Under such conditions, it becomes virtually impossible to reconcile behavioral differences, for common ground among attitudes will prove unreachable.

When the rumor mill suggested that the perpetrators of the Oklahoma City bombing were from the Middle East, some Americans were ready to destroy any and all countries in that region. It didn’t matter which one. After the disastrous events of September 11, 2001, evidence was quickly assembled to fan anti-Islamic sentiment again, even to the extent of showing video footage of people cheering for America’s loss in the streets of Palestine. We do not know whether tape had been shot hours or several years prior. All we knew was that they appeared to be happy at our expense.

Americans who were of Middle Eastern heritage and the Islamic faith became targets of death threats, hatred, and ostracism. In the Oklahoma City bombing case, the facts eventually revealed that the terrorists were domestic, carrying their own axe to grind with the Federal Government. Ironically and sadly, the voices of hatred turned dramatically conciliatory; not toward Middle Easterners, but in their attitude toward the domestic terrorists.

After Oklahoma City, people who had spewed venomous hatred toward Middle Easterners, on the radio and in print, curiously began expressing “understanding” as to how someone might do such a thing as bomb a building containing innocent people. I wondered what planet these people grew up on. The deaths that would have been straws that broke the camel’s back for which

some would throw our country into war instantly became “simply the unfortunate casualties of dissent.” What hypocrisy!

Given the bombastic rhetoric of Osama bin Laden over the prior years leading up to the September 11, 2001 disaster, there was no such change of heart in public sentiment. In 1998, former President Clinton authorized missile strikes on one of bin Laden’s guerrilla training camps. During that same period, he authorized a unilateral missile attack on a chemical plant in the Sudan. Curiously, the attack was ordered at a time when Mr. Clinton was in the heat of the Monica Lewinsky investigation, for which impeachment proceedings would later be conducted.

The World Trade Center had been a target of terrorists in 1993, when a bomb blast went off, causing damage at one of the towers. But dabbling in the tactics of terror goes both ways, with a spectre of ever-increasing and more tragic consequences.

It would have been nice to know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, who was responsible for the bombing in Oklahoma City before taking on an “eye for an eye” mentality and retaliating against innocent people. Even with the enormous amount of damage to property and human psyches in the aftermath of the WTC destruction, it is important to refrain from fanaticism in our pursuit and apprehension of fanatics.

A Double Standard?

In the wake of Oklahoma City, the reticence to be as fervent in bringing domestic terrorists to justice because they are “our own,” was mind boggling. All of a sudden, right wing conservatives began sounding quite liberal in their rhetoric.

I have always seen conservatism and liberalism as positions on a circle, and not a straight line. The extreme “right” and “left” wings are actually closest together in their ideology, except that they are back to back.

What do we do about terrorist activity, whether it is “within” or “without?” The worst thing we can do is to fear it, and fear continuing to live progressive, productive lives. Secondly, we must begin judging people by their actions, rather than by their looks.

There is a big difference between being aware of evil’s possibility, and living as though it will actually happen to you. Even in being aware of potential evil, we need not fixate on it. Our awareness should be balanced by other positive, important, meaningful, and helpful activities in which we involve ourselves. What are gangs doing that fall into this category? How about other extremist groups?

It is next to impossible to spend any amount of time truly helping others in harmless ways and yet engage in violent activity. This includes a small faction of people who call themselves “pro life” as well, who rationalize that it is acceptable to bomb, intimidate, or simply kill abortion providers. Fortunately, such acts have been rare in recent years.

Using Murder to ‘Affirm’ Life?

Though they wrap themselves in the swaddling clothes of Divine Authority, Pro-Life *avengers* share the same mentality as Oklahoma City bombers, the Crips and Bloods, the Bosnian Serbs, Al Qaeda, and every other group that believe they will achieve some kind of constructive end through destructive methods. No longer “pro life,” they are “rationalizers” of the first order, for they too have chosen fear as their weapon, instead of true love. Fear is not synonymous with life and living. It is synonymous with stasis; maintaining the status quo.

Those who died in the Oklahoma City bombing, and on that September (2001) day of international infamy, died without seeing the face, nor knowing the cause of their murderers. On a scale of cowardly acts, these rank near the top, for the victims were going about the business of living their lives. They were not assembled in protest. They were not plotting to spy on, persecute, or eliminate any suspected anarchist groups.

Where is the *divine fiat* in such actions? By what crazy logic did they qualify as “enemies?” Where in the Constitution does it say that freedom extends to such extremes? True freedom means that we are free from such worries, not only from the government, which is us, but from our fellow citizens! Where do they get off destroying buildings and ignoring the people who are in them, like they don’t even exist?! It is delusion in its most deluded form.

Yet they can spout eloquently their justification citing the U. S. Constitution and *The Bill of Rights*, *The Holy Bible*, *The Qur’an*, and any other truly respected source that will lend credibility to their chosen brand of evil.

Where does the cycle of injustice and conflict end? How? It may, or may not happen during our lifetime, but it is my sincere belief that the people who victimize others in heinous ways will eventually face each victim, and ultimately, will experience the horror that each of them was put through. In some respects, that experience would be my definition of hell. It would have been *self* created.

I believe that balance is eventually achieved for every action; “good” eventually begets good, and evil begets evil. Though evil does sometimes appear to occur to good people, I don’t believe that the good will actually be harmed by it. By the same token, evil people would not actually experience the gift of true goodness even if they were smacked over the head with it.

Our best protection against the effects of evil is not to fear it, but simply, to be aware, harmless in our own motivation and action, and to both live and *love* life to the best of our ability.

We would later learn that two American men, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Lynn Nichols, were behind the Oklahoma City bombing. As for justice, they should be shown the same “mercy” that they showed their victims. These men were free to voice their dissent with the government, and with any of its people—whether their view was deemed reasonable by the majority of the society, or not. But for them, that was not enough. They were free to be as

extreme as they wanted in word, and even be celebrated for it—but not in deed. *Conscience* is what draws the line between sanity and insanity. What these men did was insane, for it was totally without conscience.

Freedom of speech was not satisfying enough for them. They wanted to make more than a rhetorical statement. Freedom to bear and even brandish enough arms to blow up a small nation was not enough, so great was their fear of tyranny. But when an individual or group acts without conscience, they *become* what they fear. Timothy McVeigh and Terry Lynn Nichols didn't sprout horns,

*“Timothy McVeigh
and Terry Lynn
Nichols didn't sprout
horns, belch fire,
or carry pitchforks,
but through the total
absence of conscience,
they became
embodiments of evil.”*

belch fire, or carry pitchforks, but through the total absence of conscience, they became instruments of evil.

The freedom to assemble, to play war games, and wear regalia was not enough for them. Since the People of the United States—the country they professed to love so much—have staunchly protected their right to express their fear for freedom's demise, they took it out on people.

Retribution cannot be taken out on a government without “taking out” people, for one does not exist without the other. The arguments of extremists, on both sides of the freedom issue, are expressions of delusion. They hide behind a love of country, when in truth, theirs was a lust for power; the power to harm *others*. That kind of “love” is evil.

Their action, and the hatred that it represents, disgusts me. But it will sicken them more, because hatred will always be unrequited. There is no way to hold on to it and be satisfied, even in death. The only real “cure” for hatred is letting it go.

War kills far more innocent people than it does the masterminds of evil. It will neither cure, nor kill hatred. It saddens me when gangs engage in drive-by shootings, for they slowly kill the *hopes* of innocent people. The question we must answer is whether our disdain for “patriots that kill” is as great as it is against “foreigners?” The Oklahoma City tragedy was essentially a “drive-by” *bombing*. One wonders what “freedom” did they think were they were “protecting?”

While hope is extinguished in people who want a better life by heinous acts like these, they do not “kill” hatred. Terrorist activities will continue to “live” as an option for narrow-minded, fear-addicted people, until they learn to respect others, and remove the reasons to fear.

Will “doing unto” the perpetrators of these evil acts as they did unto the victims prevent a similar event from ever occurring again? Not necessarily. But bringing them to justice will prevent those particular people from ever becoming repeat offenders. Am I therefore advocating that we also take the law into our own hand, playing God with a human life? No. I would never *initiate* such an act against

another human being. However, I would vote to complete the circle of an act that was initiated by another. In other words, we all have choices, which of themselves have their own effect.

We are not playing God by allowing the effects of another’s unconscionable thoughts and inhumane actions to return to them. We are trying to play God if we rationalize the injustice, and explain it away; if we protect the rights of the victimizer while forgetting the victims. If there is no realization and acknowledgment of the evil that one has done; if there is no sorrow or willingness to somehow

“The dominos of life travel in circles which can only be broken by their originators if we who observe are wise enough to get out of the way.”

offer retribution for evil actions, then we do ourselves a disservice by concerning ourselves about their fate; a fate *they* created.

Therefore, when the line of conscience is crossed, thereby taking away the freedom of others to feel safe in their own homes, places of business, recreation and worship, then “my” compassion is not at issue. It is the perpetrator’s lack of compassion for others; the absence of conscience that is the danger. The dominos of life travel in circles which can only be broken by their originators if we who observe are wise enough to get out of the way.

April 28, 1995

Due to the profound nature of the recent events in Oklahoma City, this chapter took on a life of its own. It brought out many more thoughts on the issue of freedom, free speech, and a civilized society that linger just below the surface of our minds. The rest of this chapter was written before the actual incident, but I decided to keep it as it was, with occasional contextual modifications.

June 11, 2001

Timothy McVeigh was subsequently convicted of masterminding the Oklahoma City bombing, which killed 168 people, 19 of them children. Today he was put to death by lethal injection. His accomplice, Terry Lynn Nichols, was sentenced to a term of life in prison.

September 11, 2001

While tragedies have occurred somewhere in time on every day of the year, few will have the lasting impact on the consciousness of people all over the world as will the disasters that befell New York City at the World Trade Center, Washington D.C. at the Pentagon, and a rural field outside of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This unprecedented event was actually captured on videotape, and broadcast around the world, revealing the true face of insanity for all to see. While the story of responsibility and justice of the 9-11 events continues to unfold, this day will not be forgotten, nor will the people who lost their lives to insanity.

'Carte Blanche' Free Speech

There are a few points missing in the arguments of those who believe in the blanket right of free speech. Though we are free to offend people for no other reason than to offend, what is it that guides our own self-restraint? The answer is conscience.

If we are guided by conscience, then our expressions will at least be reserved for that which has meaningful and beneficial possibilities, not only for ourselves, but for others as well.

No one wishes to be alarmed for the sake of being alarmed, unless they know, like watching a horror movie, it is not real. No one wishes to be singled out as a target for harm as a vehicle to make someone else rich, famous, “feel good,” or to advance a political, social, or religious agenda. Even terrorists want to feel “safe” while planning and carrying out their terrorism. I’m sure that many of them have enjoyed their time in America while they planned ways of bring it down.

Being freed does not mean saying *anything* you want to say, or doing *anything* you want to do. Instead, you will show a willingness to identify with the position of the person you are talking to, or the people you are talking about. As such, certain forms of speech would be tempered, so as not to distract from the actual message that one wishes to convey.

Irresponsible, Dangerous Messages

Returning to the example of free speech and the once popular rap group Two Live Crew. Even if the message that they wanted to get across did center around the use of unreasonable force by police officers, it did not exempt the performing artists from their moral responsibility to be clear on what is right and wrong. A song that appears to advocate or celebrate black men shooting policemen, with no acknowledgment of any kind—in the lyrics, or else-

where in the video itself—that this is absolutely *wrong* behavior, is morally wrong. “Artistic license” be damned! Where is their social and moral responsibility?

Like hypnotic suggestion, the message of music brings with it its own reality, that the adoring fan is free to “enter.” After the Two Live Crew video was released, a police officer was later killed in Texas by a young black man. Jumping on the insanity bandwagon, the man entered a “not guilty” plea, claiming to have been acting under the influence of the rap group’s music as the reason behind his action.

It is funny how some criminals are “men enough” to do the most heinous things to loved ones, neighbors, friends, and strangers. However, if caught, they are not men enough to accept responsibility and not *repentant* enough to even attempt to offer the victim or survivors restitution. So strident are the guilty with claiming innocence under the law, that truth is determined by proxy. Well, it’s not really funny; it’s pretty sad.

Responsibility goes hand in hand with becoming a freed person. Even if a protest *is* called for, or a person has a reasonable gripe, there is no excuse for ignoring what is wrong. To show one person killing another, for no other apparent reason than they are mad, and carrying no overriding message that acting out on the urge to kill another is wrong, is the height of irresponsibility, even immorality. No intelligent human, of any color, has an excuse.

Suppose, in response to the Two Live Crew video, a music video was produced that depicted black men who dressed a certain way being shot by gunmen who were positioned off camera? Do you think that civil rights leaders would be up in arms? Of course they would: and rightfully so. Every civilized person would have had the same reaction, for civility is color blind. Thankfully, no such “retaliatory video” was ever produced (or at least, never distributed). Someone is demonstrating responsibility, restraint, and conscience.

The hateful tone of videos like these coupled with total absence of conscience that went into its production is disturbing. It is all the more surprising when so many people, white, black, and brown, broadcast the video on television, bought the video, bought and listened to the CD's, and even tried to rationalize, explain, and justify its relevance as "artistic license." The only true relevance it had was to polarize people who were inclined to be polarized all along. It did nothing to unify, heal, or bridge human relations. Our freedom is actualized through unification made possible through harmonious interactions with others, as we consciously choose to set resentments aside and explore the positive possibilities of cooperation. This is not necessarily a universal goal, yet, it is the way to solve the complaints that videos like these are dramatizing.

Social and Racial Stereotypes

A more profound reality that gets lost in incendiary videos like the Two Live Crew production is: in the past fifty years, blacks have been the targets and victims of violence at the hands of other blacks far more often than they have been targeted by whites in general, or by the police in particular. Where is the sustained outcry against *this* fact? Where are the affirmative action programs to break *this* circle of experience? Are we waiting for the government to pass a law? Or perhaps, are we waiting for *this* form of criminal behavior to be added to a list of cultural or ethnic "entitlements?"

These problems cannot be solved by the government. The police force cannot keep one person "safe," not even if we had a personal officer for every citizen. Safety is, first and foremost, a state of mind, one that requires an active will. It is one effect of becoming freed. When our intentions and motives become truly harmless, then we begin to feel safe. We feel safe because we will have *become* safe, not only to others, but also to ourselves. Being harmless means not needing to cause harm or make one's self a target for harm by another.

'Victims' By Habit and Choice

Though many would debate this point, a habitual victim does not become that way by accident, but by choice. I challenge anyone who believes him or herself to be a victim to consider the choices that they have made in forming their experience. A consistent pattern will reveal itself if we are open to seeing it. If we allow ourselves to acknowledge the pattern, we become better able to make different choices that can change our life dramatically.

There are clearly people in the world who exploit others. They are both opportunists and scoundrels, that come in every shape, size, color, and gender. However, they do not necessarily discriminate along racial, ethnic or gender lines. They do their will on any person who will allow them, for both victim and perpetrator are without an active conscience. We should remember that "advantage" can never be "taken" without at least one, and often many *givers*.

An active conscience would demand that we denounce any form of violence against other humans, without regard to their race, gender, or uniform. Human decency and morality would demand that we refuse to participate in any way; with neither our money, our minds, nor our hearts.

Clearly, conscience is the true endangered species in our world, for it is the epitome of hypocrisy to believe we are entitled to suggest victimizing a particular group for reasons of selfish gain (e.g., Two Live Crew), and not expect that group to take serious offense to the suggestion.

A Personal Account

I have had several encounters with police in my lifetime, few of which were pleasant, even though the nature of a police officer's job is *not* pleasant. It's certainly not to make me, or any person that they have to face, "feel good." While still living in Chicago I was arrested once for outstanding parking tickets and taken to jail. The white arresting officer was very sarcastic and judgmental of me. He made

comments about my apartment and the credit cards in my wallet as if I hadn't rightfully earned the privilege of living the way I lived. It was very demeaning. I knew I was a "good" person, and no one should have treated me that way; or so I thought.

The officers took me to the jail in the township of Schaumburg, Illinois, where my wife and I lived at the time. Fortunately, I was placed in a cell by myself (with Schaumburg being a small suburban community at the time, there was no one else in the jail). I was released several hours later, with the help of my family and friends who posted bond. The experience was humiliating. However, in

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hindsight, it is clear to me that I created it. If I had paid my parking tickets; better yet, if I had simply put the pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters in the meters, or cared enough to walk a little further rather than park in "No Parking Zones," then the experience would have never happened.

The police would not have come to my door that night and I would not have placed *myself* in a position to experience such humiliation. The police officer might still have had a prejudicial attitude against someone "like me," but that would have been his problem, not mine. I made it "my" problem by putting myself in position to cross his path.

However, a funny thing happened after this particular experience. Low and behold, I did begin putting money in the meter and

I did take care, as best I could, not to risk getting any more parking tickets. However, on those rare subsequent occasions that I did get parking tickets, I paid them promptly. I've never had a problem like that since.

I dare say that if I carried a racial "chip" on my shoulder, even that experience might have been quite different. However, in spite of the disrespect that the officer showed me, I showed him respect. I did not protest or resist. I cooperated with him. Then, after it was over, I didn't protest his attitude, I changed my own behavior. *That* change, changed my life.

A few years later, after moving to California, I was stopped for speeding by a Highway Patrol officer. My BMW still displayed license plates from my home state of Illinois. It was a beautiful day as I cruised west on the Santa Monica freeway, past Cloverfield Avenue, toward the ocean, when from the right side, in my blind spot, I heard a voice from a loudspeaker telling me to pull over. Only then did I discover that my wallet with my driver's license, was not in my pocket. Nonetheless, I pulled over right away. I didn't panic, nor did I entertain dire visions of being abused.

The officer (who was white) was quite courteous. I told him, also in a calm, courteous way, that I didn't have my driver's license, but I knew my license number, which he could check on his computer. I could verify the information contained in the record. He took that information and checked it out.

I was given a traffic citation for speeding, which was deserved. But he did not penalize me for driving without a license. We had a cordial, even pleasant conversation, and then went on our way. Again, this could have been different, if I had been.

What am I trying to say here? Do people who take umbrage with "the System" because they have been unjustly accused or humiliated have a point? I'm sure they do. But two points should also be remembered. In some way, like writers, we have a hand in the formation of all our experiences. Whether it is a gesture that we

make, someone we associate with, or a habit that we feel “entitled” to keep, we sometimes tempt, and always form, our “fate.”

In a one-on-one situation, I would never allow myself to be perceived as a threat to someone who has been entrusted by the community in which I live with the use of deadly force. I would not entertain the thought of carrying such force myself. I did not show fear, for true respect has nothing to do with fear. Instead, I showed interest and a willingness to cooperate with my accusers. I’m sure that was a very big relief to the officer as well, given the typical responses that he encounters while doing his job.

Freedom of speech and behavior should be viewed in the domain of meaningful activity, rather than meaningless pursuit. But also, it should be judged by the context of harm that it suggests, incites, or fears that it stimulates. Our fearful thoughts will bind, not liberate us. By not discriminating—by not giving clear favor to expressions of conscience, we have begun giving equal status to meaninglessness and confused the true meaning of freedom.