

The Art of Proximity

By Rahsaan “New York” Thomas

According to the laws of physics, everything that occupies space is matter, but when you're serving a life sentence, it feels like you defy physics— you occupy a cell but don't matter to society. Framed for your worst moment, you're left out of the conversations about solutions to mass incarceration.

The system continues its removal of individuals without addressing the root causes of crime. Generation after generation face the same systematic issues landing father and son in the same prison cell.

From the scars on your body, you've learned so much that would help stop the tide of bodies flooding into the cesspool. You've had the epiphany moment, changed your whole belief system, and embark on a journey of change. As a new man, your experience, your street and text book education, your passion and sincerity make you an asset to society more valuable than gold. Yet, you get left unmind because society isn't close enough to hear or see your difference. They still remember the newspaper mug-shot photo ran the day you shattered communities.

Driven by a remorse as powerful as the character Will Smith played in the movie *Seven Pounds*, (he donated seven of his organs to make up for killing seven people in a car accident) you seek a way to pay your debt to society, to your sons. You have to, or life and death will serve no purpose.

You don't want the community to continue paying over \$80,000 a year, largely withheld from education, for your decision to take a life rather than be robbed. Over 70 percent of people incarcerated arrived without a GED or diploma, you don't want to continue adding to that statistic. You have the will, so there must be a way.

You go to hear a lecture from the author of *Just Mercy*. You sit in the chapel with Emile DeWeaver, a super talented writer who was incarcerated with you at San Quentin State Prison, racking your brain for a solution. Then Bryan Stevenson takes the podium. In his suit with his head shaved bald, he connects lynching to the death penalty, poverty to injustice and getting proximate to a problem as the first step to the solution.

Those words, get “proximate” to the problem resonated in your ears for weeks. Being proximate to mass incarceration and gun violence gave you insight into the solutions. But with your hands cuffed, how would you make a difference beyond the prison walls? Bryant Stevenson had given you the biggest part of the answer, but you still had more questions. How do you get the public to be proximate with people in prison?

Immediately art comes to mind. Art because it allows you to turn your most painful experiences into something beautiful. Art because even in prison, you still have freedom of speech, freedom of expression. Art because you

see amazing incarcerated painters Bruce Fowler and Lamavis Comundoiwillla and cartoonist Orlando Smith

creates works worthy of huge commissions for free as acts of remorse. Art because it can be mailed past the bars. Art because it's attractive. Art because writing is an art you practice. It has to be art because it has always been art for you.

However, you write for San Quentin News, which has a powerful, but short reach in society. How can you get past the choir and into the crowd?

You brainstorm with others on the yard. One guy comes up with a book club. Someone already planned a TEDx talk that would alternative between incarcerated and outside speakers.

You get chosen for the TEDx talk for a talk on forgiveness. Then Delia Cohen, the sponsor, asks you to pivot to something about writing. In your rough draft, you mention the several incarcerated writers who were published by literary journals and magazines. You call it a renaissance happening at San Quentin. Seeking feedback, you get Emile to read your piece.

You don't make the final cut for the TEDx talk but on a sunny day, Emile walks up to you on the yard and says, let's start a non-profit and call it Prison Renaissance. You said, yes, upon hearing proximity would be its key component.

The website goes up, with the help of a relationship Emile forged with Camila Griep, editor of his Easy Street column. Live shows, with our art on display, recorded playbacks of our voices, and collect calls from prison get planned in visiting room meetings. Our writing gets published in larger and larger venues. You become a contributing writer for The Marshall Project. More and more, people in society want to work with you, like Zinaria Willaims, who you're co-writing a book with tentatively called, Enduring Caduceus.

You meet Taina Vargas-Edmond, founder of *Initiate Justice*, at San Quentin and suggest system impacted people should be able to vote. She makes you a board member and works to get prop 17 on the Nov. 2020 Ballot. (a Yes bote restores voting rights to people on parole) You write about the importance of restoring rights to all Americans.

A chain of proximity from Taina connects you to this *Meet Us Quickly with your Mercy* exhibit. Jo Kreiter, a founder of Flyaway productions, knows Taina from Essie's group. Jo reaches out to you about a collaboration with MoAD, CounterPulse and Bend the Arc Jewish Action.

You're blown away that a woman who choreographs dancing in the air and a prestigious museum of African Diaspora are willing to collaborate through snail mail. You jump at the chance to unite Black and Jewish people in taking action to stop mass incarceration.

You, Jo and MoAD map out the exhibition. You meet Jo and music composer Jewlia Eisenberg in person in the

prison visiting room. You work with Elizabeth Gessel, MoAD director of public programs, via mail.

You nominated Emile, who paroled due to commutation granted Christmas of 2018, for the panel. Jo sends you Rebecca Walker's memoir and a piece by Eric Ward. You love both and agree they should be on the panel too. Ashe Lynette, of the Ella Baker Center, who you also work on social justice issues with, rounds out the group. You feel included and useful — proximity is working.

You share the *Meet Us Quickly* opportunity with artists on the yard. They accept the opportunity to foster change through their art hanging on the walls of MoAD. They paint from their cells and contribute 22 works of humanity that will rival any exhibit. Everything is on schedule.

Then the Coronavirus threatens the prison system. Your board room, aka the visiting room, gets shut down in March. Collect phone access gets limited, so you rely on the mail to work through the distance.

For social distance purposes, San Quentin reduces its dorm population from 200 down to 100 by filling up the cell blocks where you are housed. You wonder if the overcrowding will kill you.

Formerly incarcerated advocates (#stopsanquentinoutbreak) warn packed cell blocks are a bad mix for COVID-19. "Free them all," they demand.

On May 30, the prison system transfers several people with COVID-19 to San Quentin, rather than release them. On June 13th, as the virus spreads throughout San Quentin, health experts recommend releasing 50% of the population to get ahold of the outbreak.

People proximate want you home. Jo marches with an Incarcerated Lives Matter sign. Emile speaks at a protest in front of the prison.

The governor increases the amount of people to be released early from the California Prison system from 3,500 to 8,000. You get nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for your work on the the Ear Hustle podcast but left defenseless to the virus because 20 years ago, you killed an armed man. You wish your changes could change that.

About a hundred people do get released from San Quentin but North Block remains overcrowded and you come down with a pounding headache on June 21. On July 6, your test results arrive in the mail revealing its COVID-19.

You survive along with over 2,400 other infected people but 28 others don't. They only tell you the names of those who died on Death row. Cut off from the rest of the population, you wonder which of your friends are dead.

You speak out in several publications through the launch of a Prison Renaissance Program called Empowerment

Avenue. With the management help of community volunteers Su Kim and Emily Nonko, both of whom you met through proximity relationships, volunteers turned incarcerated writers' snail mailed stories into edited, emailed articles that get pitched to publishers. Empowerment Avenue gets several incarcerated writers published, including pieces in Business Insider, Prism, Mother Jones, and The Marshall Project.

As flu season approaches, The Meet Us Quickly exhibit, more urgent than ever, will still, must still go on— online. You hear news reports that your antibody protections from COVID-19 run out after 3-4 months, just in time for flu season. YOU know that if anyone dies from reinfection or a flu/Coronavirsu mutation, it won't be because of the virus— it will be because your cell block, designed to hold 419 people, has over 700 housed here.

You launch a **campaign** to raise funds to free you and pray that Meet Us Quickly, gets us mercy — and you know it will because the art will bring more proximity.

Prison Renaissance is organizing an art auction of these works. **If you are interested, let them know here.**

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