

Malcolm X: Model of Personal Transformation

Malcolm X often used the concept of prison as a metaphor to describe the situation of New Afrikan people. He implied that just as those in actual prisons are expected to “rehabilitate” themselves as a condition for their release, We must transform ourselves, as a people, as a condition for securing our freedom from oppression.

Malcolm’s autobiography offers evidence of the pivotal role that prison played in his transformation (esp. chapters 10,11,and 12), and provides guidance for imprisoned New Afrikans, who can begin a process of self-transformation similar to that undertaken by Malcolm. We have the added benefit of knowing the general outline of our identity, purpose, and direction.

Although in prison, We are not defined by this condition. We are New Afrikans (identity; nationality), citizens of an oppressed nation. Our purpose is to secure the independence of the nation, and socialist development is the direction.

The time spent in prison should be devoted to our self-transformation...to the further development of our identity, commitment to our purpose, and the pursuit of knowledge and skills needed to aid our people in the realization of the socialist development of our society.

II

While in prison, Malcolm began to think – in a systematic, critical way, about his past life-style, about the world and the society he lived in. He began to question the way things were, and he realized that change – in his life, and in the society – was both possible and necessary.

While in prison, Malcolm began to think – but only after he began to read. Prior to his imprisonment, Malcolm had been enclosed in the world of the hustler, the player, the pimp, the gangster – the parasite – and he couldn’t imagine himself outside of that world. Reading exposed Malcolm to new worlds; it allowed him to see that there were alternatives to the lifestyle and values of the social parasite.

While in prison, Malcolm began to think, and to read – but only after he had been encouraged to do so by someone that he respected and who had taken an unselfish interest in him. Malcolm was later motivated by a new sense of self-worth and identity and purpose, as his family introduced him to the religious and political philosophy of Islam, as taught by Elijah Muhammad, and practiced by the Nation of Islam.

Soon after leaving prison, Malcolm began to effect change upon the world – but he was able to do so because he had first changed himself, while in prison. Many imprisoned New Afrikans can follow his example, change themselves, become new men and women committed to acting upon the world to effect its radical transformation. As with Malcolm, such change would more likely occur if imprisoned New Afrikans are encouraged and assisted by individuals, groups, or a community seeking to make them part of a collective process of redemption and progressive social development.

III

When imprisoned New Afrikans read Malcolm's autobiography, We should reflect upon our own lives, as We can easily identify with Malcolm, and see similarities between his life and our own. In fact, Malcolm charges us to examine our lives when he says, "*...why am i as i am? To understand that of any person, his whole life, from birth, must be reviewed. All of our experiences fuse into our personality. Everything that ever happened to us is an ingredient.*" **(1)**

Critical review of one's own life is the first step in the process of personal transformation. It's also the hardest step to take, because it requires that one be brutally honest and unreserved in the examination and critique of one's fears and shortcomings.

Reading Malcolm can help us to understand how critical self-examination is done. What is there in Malcolm's life that's not in our own? Who was he, if not one of us? What does Malcolm mean to us if not that We, like him, can change? What does his prison experience mean to us if not that We, too, can use the prison as the environment within which We undergo our own metamorphosis?

As Malcolm looked back on his life as a parasite, he acknowledged the degree to which it was a result of the bad choices he had made, due in part to "the wrong kinds of heroes, and the wrong kinds of influences." but those heroes and influences, those bad choices, should be examined within the context of the society that helped to produce them – We are all products of a unique form of colonial oppression.

IV

Most people enter prison thinking only of surviving the experience and returning to their previous way of life. They spend most of their time watching television, listening to music, playing sports or working jobs linked to the operation of the prison (e.g., kitchen or laundry or janitorial services). Educational programs in prison are designed so that only a few prisoners may participate. Rare are the self-motivated prisoners who decide to educate and transform themselves.

A prisoner has time that he can put to good use. I'd put prison second to college as the best place for a man to go if he needs to do some thinking. If he's motivated, in prison he can change his life. **(2)**

I don't think anybody ever got more out of going to prison than I did. In fact, prison enabled me to study for more intensively than I would have if my life had gone differently and I had attended some college.... Where else but in prison could I have attacked my ignorance by being able to study intensely sometimes as much as fifteen hours a day? **(3)**

When convicted in 1946, Malcolm was first sent to the prison in Charlestown, Massachusetts, where he initially wasted his time, engaging in aimless rebellion and drug use. He didn't begin to put time to good use until he was encouraged to do so by Bimbi, an older con who'd spent many years in many prisons – but he had not wasted his time. Bimbi was articulate and well-read, and he became a minister to

Malcolm, who'd been drawn to Bimbi because *"he was the first man I had ever seen command total respect... with his words."* (4)

Bimbi reignited within Malcolm the passion for words and the acquisition of knowledge that he'd begun to lose in the 8th grade. He urged Malcolm to take advantage of the prison library, and to enroll in some of the correspondence courses allowed by the prison.

Malcolm admitted that at that point in his life, his working vocabulary may have been only two hundred words which, together with his penmanship, made it impossible for him to write a decent letter. He first took a correspondence course in English. He began to read from the prison library, saying later that:

I have often reflected upon the new vistas that reading opened to me. I knew right there in prison that reading had changed forever the course of my life. As I see it today, the ability to read awoke inside me some long dormant craving to be mentally alive. (5)

However, it would take more time, and a different motivation, for Malcolm to develop the appreciation for reading just described. Initially, his reading was aimless, and he was motivated by little more than the desire to become a more literate hustler – he hadn't transformed that criminal/colonial mentality. It wasn't until Malcolm was transferred to another prison that he moved beyond his mere "book-reading motions":

Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless i had received the motivation that I did. (6)

V

Malcolm was transferred to the Norfolk Prison Colony in Concord, Massachusetts, in 1948. There, he received a letter from his brother, Philbert, who said that he had joined the "Nation of Islam," and he urged Malcolm to "pray for deliverance." Malcolm wasn't ready to hear anything about religion. His attitude changed, however, after he received a letter from another of his brothers, Reginald.

Because Reginald knew how Malcolm's street hustler mind worked, his approach was more effective than Philbert's. Reginald told Malcolm to stop eating pork, to stop smoking cigarettes, and that he would show Malcolm how to get out of prison. Malcolm took the bait. What he initially regarded as probably a con to be worked on the prison authorities, turned out to be the next step in the process of his transformation:

...For the next years, I was the nearest thing to a hermit in the Norfolk Prison Colony. I never have been more busy in my life. I still marvel at how swiftly my previous life's thinking pattern slid away from me... It is as though someone else I knew of had lived by hustling and crime. I would be startled to catch myself thinking in a remote way of my earlier self as another person. (7)

It was at this point in his life that Malcolm began to read selectively and critically, and to develop intellectual discipline to complement his spiritual and moral development.

For New Afrikan women and men held in U.S. prisons, Malcolm stands as an example of the way in which We can free ourselves, even though behind prison walls.

Malcolm attained his freedom long before he was released from prison – when he began to read, to think, to question his old habits and values. If Malcolm had not used his time in prison to change his life, he would not have left us ideas and a life worthy of examination and emulation.

Moreover, if Malcolm had not changed his life while in prison, he would have returned to the life of the “criminal” and the oppressed colonial subject.

The parable of Job, which Elijah Muhammad used in introducing Malcolm to the Nation of Islam soon after Malcolm’s release from prison, is instructive. Mr. Muhammad told the gathering that Malcolm had been strong while in prison. Malcolm reports that he then said:

When God had bragged about how faithful Job was...the devil said only God’s hedge around Job kept Job so faithful. “Remove that protective hedge,” the devil told God, “and I will make Job curse you to your face.”

The devil could claim that, hedged in prison, I had just used Islam, Mr. Muhammad said. But the devil would say that now, out of prison, I would return to my drinking, smoking, dope, and life of crime. (8)

We can go through the motions of changing our lives – while in prison, or otherwise – but the test of the truth comes when the prison doors are opened, or, when otherwise We’re confronted with situations which test our characters.

Nevertheless – before We can remain faithful, We must first **become** faithful. Malcolm’s prison transformation can be a model for our own.

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Notes

- (1) **The Autobiography of Malcolm X: As told to Alex Haley** (Ballantine Books, 1981). p. 173
- (2) Ibid., 450-451
- (3) Ibid., 207
- (4) Ibid., 178
- (5) Ibid., 206
- (6) Ibid., 198
- (7) Ibid., 196
- (8) Ibid., 227