



Maurice Tyree and  
Katie Singer

# THE DARKEST PARTS OF MY BLACKNESS

A Journey of Remorse, Reform,  
Reconciliation, and (R)evolution

Carceral Studies

Collection Editors

IAN CUMMINS

&

LOUIS MENDOZA

LIVED PLACES  
PUBLISHING





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# **Abstract**

**Maurice Tyree went to prison thinking that life was disposable. He came out knowing that he had a story to tell.**

This is his story, told through letters and poems written during and since his time in prison. An honest and reflective narrative, this epistolary autoethnography provides a glimpse into the experience of a person who committed and served time for pre-meditated murder, and used his time incarcerated to reflect on and transform his life.

Ideal reading for students of Incarceration or Carceral Studies, Criminal Justice, Social Work and Family Studies, Sociology, Literature, and related courses, Mr Tyree offers first-hand insight to the experience of the US criminal legal system as an African American man.

## **Key words**

Incarceration; carceral studies; African American; jail; criminal justice; autobiography; epistolary; poetry; transformation; literature

In honor of my fallen comrades,  
for whom's cause I haven't been  
perfect within, though, have  
been faithful unto;

Shirley E. Tyree (Grandma)  
Maybell T. Henderson-Chase (Ma)  
Charles F. Tyree (Dad)  
Tawana R. Harden (Sis)

To you I dedicate this collection  
of letters..

To the destruction of your enemies,  
poverty, drugs, and disease, I  
dedicate my life.

This book is dedicated to the  
victim(s) of my crime.



From the Quran:

"I would desire that you be laden with my sin and with your sin,<sup>50</sup> and thus become among the inmates of the Fire. That indeed is the right recompense of the wrong-doers.

At last his evil soul drove him to the murder of his brother, and he killed him, whereby he himself became one of the losers.

Thereupon Allah sent forth a raven who began to scratch the earth to show him how he might cover the corpse of his brother. So seeing he cried: 'Woe unto me! Was I unable even to be like this raven and find a way to cover the corpse of my brother?'<sup>51</sup> Then he became full of remorse at his doing.<sup>52</sup>

Therefore We ordained for the Children of Israel<sup>53</sup> that he who slays a soul unless it be (in punishment) for murder or for spreading mischief on earth shall be as if he had slain all mankind; and he who saves a life shall be as if he had given life to all mankind.<sup>54</sup> And indeed again and again did Our Messengers come to them with clear directives; yet many of them continued to commit excesses on earth."

-Surah 5:29-32

# Author's Note

At the request of my publisher, I shall state that these writings are my own views, for which some have changed significantly. Transformation, processing in mind, in body, and in spirit subsequently reforms perspectives.

Nonetheless, to my endeared readers, I have attempted to offer you a rare opportunity to view another individuals' quest for social liberation.

# Publisher's Note

The content presented herein is based on the author's perspective and experiences. The views and perspectives of the author are not necessarily those of the publisher. Our role as a publisher is to ensure many and varied voices are heard openly and unfiltered and that diverse life experiences find expression in our books. We support our authors fiercely, but we do not always share their opinions or perspectives.



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# Content warning

This book contains explicit references to, and descriptions of, situations which may cause distress. This includes references to and descriptions of:

- Suicidal thoughts, intentions, and actions
- Drug abuse
- Physical violence

This is the story of prison life; consequently, references to potentially distressing topics will occur frequently throughout the book.

# Learning objectives

1. Readers will gain a nuanced understanding of the American prison system.
2. Readers will gain insight into the role of resiliency in life experience.
3. Readers will understand that varying life perspectives are based on life experiences.
4. Readers will understand the impact of early education experiences on a person's life.
5. Readers will come away with a humanized perspective on prison life.





# Introduction: letter to the court

## FORWARD

Your Honorable Judge Robert I. Richter:

My name is Maurice W. Tyree (Case No. F4311-01), and I was tried and sentenced by this Court for, first degree premeditated murder and related offences. I was 27 years of age then, and I am now 47 years of age.

Amid these many years, I have, with a heavy heart, wanted to write and address this Court with my gratitude for its' impartiality during the entire afore-mentioned proceedings. And, to express my mental and physical progress.

First and foremost, I must acknowledge an atonement. That the act of murder of another human being is unjustifiable. I was wrong. The victimization of this man and the psychological effect it had on his family was senseless and inexcusable.

Although I accepted responsibility in my heart a long time ago, I have learned that remorse

itself is different. It took time for the toxins in the humanistic values and concerns of a hazardous individual to be removed. Thereafter, it required the cooperation of both upright thoughts and actions. In essence it is a transformation...a process.

Furthermore, for reasons that may be strange to only me, it was not until June 25, 2003, during my sentencing hearing, that I began to question, in full view, my thought process and behaviors. Your Honor allowed me to speak so that I could address the Court. I did. Thereafter, you addressed me directly. I cannot remember much of what was said in general that morning, though, I remember how a few words that you spoke made me feel, as well as, reflect thenceforth.

Here I quote, in rendition, that which you stated;

"Mr. Tyree, I believe that you have a good side to you... however, you also have this bad side as well..."

It yet and still amazes me how much someone that does so much wrong can never realize it. We believe even with all the chaos inflicted by us, that we are rightfully justified. Your statement was not only the beginning of my prison term, but the beginning of

my induction into accepting responsibility and considering the lifetime experiences of remorsefulness after repentance.

### Mental/Education

This conviction was my first major offense as an adult, as well as, my first time doing a lengthy prison term. Prior, I had been committed for 30 days as a juvenile, rendering me completely unprepared for what would be to follow. Obviously, I was afraid, which could be considered normal, yet I was also uneducated. In the world of academia, I would have been classified as; functional illiterate. As such, I could hardly comprehend the reality I was accustomed to, let alone, the paralysis of this new reality. I learned immediately that this new reality had zero offering of a chance to be formally educated. Later I even found out that the penitentiary also was pseudo-equipped to compliment the educational needs of myself. This heightened the anger in which I possessed already.

I am embarrassed to inform you that anger have always punished me. Anger is very difficult to restrain, and is a laborious burden on the heart and mind. Mine was compounded with a stern output of aggression, which I've

equated to my then inability to articulate my feelings and words properly. Organizing my anger, and obtaining my education was a matter of self and social preservation. I realized that I had to save myself, and, possibly others.

I searched and searched. I searched myself and every possible external sign post that resembled a finish line to the marathon that my soul had been running. That finish line that would relieve me from all the layers of circumstantial and factual burdens. Burden, founded by my mother's drug addicted body, which warranted my premature birth. Burden, agitated by her physical abuse on my toddler frame that sent me occasionally to the emergency room to repair my tiny bones. Burden, by having to live with my paternal grandmother, in order to save my life. Burden by, being odd, angry, small, violent, abused, an abuser, orphaned, unloved, uneducated, unskilled, a child-father, a convicted murderer, a junkie, and most immeasurably, burdened, by suffering from all the inarticulate bundle of confusion that plagued my life.

During my own addiction to heroin, which I fell into while incarcerated, I encroached upon a line that administered some authentic

relief. I fell yet again into another habit. I taught myself how to read, comprehend, and to write. First, with auto-biographies, which helped me to unravel the contents of my very own life. The similarity and feats in the lives of others amazed my curiosity. Next, philosophy, aphorisms, and poetry, for which I have not yet encountered one of the other that I find disliking.

The habitual adventure did not end there. Subsequently, I desired to explore writing. I wrote about what I had read. I wrote about my environment. I wrote intimately about my family. Then, I started writing more and more about my thoughts of myself. Each day I flung from my soul those unapologetic and forbidden words against myself. Words filled with accusations and self-hatred. A storm of words that crushed through the padlocked veil that supported and separated me from my very own self-awareness and the rest of society. Your Honor, as I wrote life continued to open up to me. Literature literally transformed me into a better man.

To date, I do not possess a formal education (high school diploma, G.E.D., etc.). The Bureau of Prisons' Education

Department focuses on release dates for their student body as opposed to, first come, first serve, even after me only needing a few points to have a G.E.D. awarded. I am completely auto-didacted.

Nonetheless, since I have written (3) books (Maurice: A Soul In Search of Itself, Freedom's Fight and Faith). A thesis in the psychology field, entitled; The Accumulation of Trauma Upon An African-American Male Within the Federal Bureau of Prisons (which I shared with a member of Congress). An excerpt in a summation written for a provision in the United Kingdom(UK), for at-risk youth, entitled; You Talk One on One(Your Overall Understanding of Talking and Linking Knowledge). And, founder of a start-up therapeutic dialogue re-entry group, here at F.C.I. Butner 2, entitled; Manhood 360: Individual and Cooperative Intervention.

Viktor E. Frankl(Concentration camp survivor), once wrote;

"An active life serves the purpose of giving man the opportunity to realize values in creative work, while a passive life of enjoyment affords him the opportunity to obtain fulfillment in experiencing beauty, art,

or nature. But there is also purpose in that life which is almost barren of both creation and enjoyment and which admits of but one possibility of high moral behavior: Namely, a man's attitude to his existence, an existence restricted by external forces. A creative life and a life of enjoyment are banned to him. But not only creativeness and enjoyment are meaningful. If there is a meaning in life at all, then there must be a meaning in suffering. Suffering is an ineradicable part of life, even as fate and death. Without suffering and death, human life cannot be complete.

### Physical/Health

In 2013 after a routine chronic care doctor's appointment for hypertension and hyperthyroidism, which I've been battling since 2005, I needed further evaluating because of a constant series of chest pains. The results concluded that I had coronary artery disease, that included (3) severely blocked arteries. In January of 2014, I underwent a triple by-pass open heart surgery at Monongalia General Hospital in Morgantown, West Virginia. I was 42 years of age.

Although I have been clean for over (8) years now, the addiction to heroin had come and went with a price. Physically, I now must ingest (6) different medications a day, for the rest of my life to balance illness preventability and disease stability. Spiritually, I lost both my parents to this drug. My father to an overdose. My mother, from complications related to the H.I.V. Syndrome, contracted through injected drug use.

The singer Lena Horne once said;

"It's not the load that breaks you down, it's the way you carry it."

### In Conclusion

Your Honor, I believe that truth can be observed without a single word uttered or written. I believe that our hearts dictate a chronological order of movements in our lives, unconscious to even ourselves. As I know today that I am incarcerated on account of the dictations of my previous heart. An excessive imbalance of my 'bad side'. Though the carnage that I've left in the wake to enter this point of my life is yet and still inexcusable, therefor I could only seek mercy. In the most humbling entreaty and respect for the lives of my countrymen, I



submit that; I am now ready to rejoin and build our society. To protect and nurture the lives therein. To be the man that I was meant to be that my family and community meant for me to be. Even so, the citizen that you want me to be, because you never sentenced me to the ultimate. Those words were not presented. Your Honor, in fairness, sentenced me to change... and, I did. I have accepted suffering appropriately and embarked on a lifetime journey of remorsefulness.

Saint Dominic once wrote;

"There is a need to overcome yourself. Expect this. If you work in the spirit of obedience to God's will and not your own, it will become easier and easier to overcome yourself and you will move closer and closer to the heart of your God. The closer you come to him, the less you struggle with self-will. The closer you come to him, the less you consider how the world is viewing you. Be content to be small in your spiritual life. Humility comes from an awareness of one's flaws and humility is necessity in your vocation. God is great and you are willing. This is how you are to proceed."

Sincerely,

Maurice W. Tyree

\* \* \*

Mr. Maurice W. Tyree was convicted by Judge Robert I. Richter of first-degree premeditated murder, along with other offenses, on June 25, 2003, in the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. The sentence given was thirty-five years to life. As Mr. Tyree notes in the above Compassionate Release Letter to the presiding judge, Richter “never sentenced me to the ultimate.” The death penalty was off the table. Tyree pled not-guilty, as advised by his counsel, even though there may have been a slight chance he would have received a more lenient sentence had he pled guilty.

By the time Mr. Tyree submitted this plea motion to the judge, almost 20 years after his conviction, Richter had retired. The letter was instead forwarded to the presiding judge at the time, Rainey Ransom Brandt, Associate Judge on the Superior Court of the District of Columbia. Brandt ultimately granted Tyree’s release. This decision was far from a given, and no one can be sure if the letter he wrote contributed positively or not. In fact, there are many in the legal field who recommend against defendants writing these sorts of letters. Sometimes they end up having an “adverse effect,” Tyree explained. Whatever the case may be, Mr. Tyree was eventually released on July 12, 2021.

## **(Not) the beginning**

Maurice was not what one would call a ‘career criminal.’ Until the moment he found himself standing in front of Judge Richter, in fact, Maurice had only been briefly incarcerated once. At age fourteen, attempting to protect his friend, he shot at a man with a 22-caliber handgun. Although convicted of assault with a dangerous weapon and attempted murder, because of his age he

served approximately two weeks and was let out on probation. The presiding judge at the time commented on Maurice's clean record, and how "he was trying to do the right thing" with his life. A judge noting that a fourteen-year-old has a clean record may provide some insight into what was expected of young people like Maurice.

Thirteen years later, when Judge Richter said, "Mr. Tyree I believe that you have a good side to you... however, you also have this bad side as well..."; Maurice was taken aback. It was "like he threw water in my face", Maurice explained to me. Until that moment, he had not really considered himself – or the activities he engaged in – as exceptionally "bad". This may be difficult for some to understand but, simply put, environment shapes us. What we are surrounded with is what we accept as "normal", according to Maurice. In the world in which he grew up, engaging in certain behaviors in order to thrive – or simply to survive – was the norm.

Maurice explains that selling drugs was often just a way to take care of one's family, a "good" thing essentially. So if someone were to attempt to rob your business, your "drug store," then you would do what was necessary in order to protect your family's future. Thoughts of who you might be hurting, how someone else's family might instead be affected, does not necessarily enter into the equation. It is a "sick contradiction", concedes Maurice.

## **A human condition**

It should be noted early on that this book will not be about the act that sent Maurice to prison. While there are various legal reasons to avoid going into detail about the situation, he argues that there is an even more important issue at hand. In the forefront,

for him, is the issue of mental illness, a consistent cause and/or result of incarceration. This is a crucial factor, and a distinct disconnection for many outsiders' reactions to the incarcerated. People who have no idea of the circumstances inside are making decisions, literature, and policy based upon a gross lack of knowledge. That is something this book hopes to alleviate.

Maurice contends that along with self-education must come processing. It is not enough to take the time to learn what it might be like to live inside, one must also take the time to process that information, to process the feelings around that imagining. After all, it is uncomfortable to think too long about what it is we are really talking about when we discuss institutions designed to lock up human beings in cages. But if reform is to be enacted – and that is the hope here – then we must be willing to leave the true-crime drama stuff behind and contend with the personalization of the criminal. Maurice believes it is necessary to understand his crime through an illustration of his humanity. This is not to make excuses, nor garner pity. As Maurice says, he was wrong in doing what he did, “humanistically wrong.” But the story is more than the crime.

As an illustration, Maurice references the book *Better, Not Bitter: Living on Purpose in the Pursuit of Racial Justice* by Yusef Salaam, one of the Exonerated Five. In his book, Salaam also chooses to circumvent any great detail of that day in New York's Central Park, which sent him and four others to prison for six years. Salaam writes, “To be clear, my story does not begin with the Central Park jogger case... And just as my story doesn't begin with the Central Park Five trial, it doesn't end with the exoneration...”<sup>1</sup>

In reading Salaam's book, Maurice observed that the writer's 'strategy' was such that the reader "didn't care about those details" of the alleged crime because they were compelled by a bigger story, a human's story. That is how he imagines this book to be received as well.

## **Not somewhere you want to be**

Included in this very straightforward letter written for the Judge, Maurice references his addiction to heroin. This was something that began only once he was incarcerated. Awaiting his sentencing hearing, he was placed in solitary confinement at the Washington D.C. Central Detention Facility. During his time there, he was shuttled back and forth from courthouse to prison, awaiting sentencing and leaning on his Christian faith for support.

In the D.C. Detention Facility's "hole", while awaiting sentencing, Maurice befriended a prisoner on the other side of the wall. Despite not being able to see each other, they held long conversations about religion and the Bible, which provided much-needed encouragement for Maurice. One day, the man offered that he had something "to help him out." Maurice was eager, assuming it would be in the form of an especially pertinent scripture, or perhaps a new theological concept. A Bible was then slid under his door, wherein he was directed to open the book to a particular page. There he found, not a highlighted Bible verse, but a packet of white powder. Heroin. He had never used hard drugs before, but he was feeling incredibly desperate for some relief from the circumstances that he found himself in. At that moment, he truly felt he had "no more answers". He writes about this moment in a letter to one of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange

program instructors. The letter appears in Chapter Five of this book, dated December 5, 2013.

So he tried the dope, even though that was not really how Maurice operated. Never one for “foreign stuff,” he had not been an experimenter, largely in part because he was the one to discover his father dead of a drug overdose in his own home. But the isolation of solitary was getting to him and, as humans do when faced with crisis, he began to rationalize that even if he died from the drugs, at least he would get to see his father in the afterlife. And so, the using began. Maurice went from snorting the powder to injecting the drug into his veins. And, in case the reader is wondering, it was not all that difficult to secure drugs in prison. Maurice was able to sustain his habit for the next ten years.

Apparently, it is common knowledge inside that accessing drugs is fairly easy. Keri Blakinger is a criminal justice reporter who previously served two years for possession of heroin. Blakinger was recently interviewed about her new book, a memoir called *Corrections in ink*. She said, “Prisons are drenched with drugs. When I got to prison, I had someone who in the first week told me they could get me heroin and a needle if I wanted.”<sup>2</sup>

In all, Maurice would serve time in four different carceral institutions. Once sentenced in Washington, he was sent to the United States Penitentiary, Big Sandy, in Kentucky – a high-security United States federal prison. After eight and a half years, for medical reasons, Maurice was moved to the United States Penitentiary, Hazelton, in West Virginia – another high-security federal prison. It was here that he began his participation in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, an international education initiative