

My Search for Meaning

By: Dortell Williams (with responses by Shanay Coleman)

Convicted of murder in 1992, at the age of twenty three, I was sentenced to life without the possibility of parole. I was raised in a home where putting on airs was the name of the game. What went on in the home, stayed in the home. I learned later that internalizing only nourishes a volatile combustion that inevitably releases itself -- on its own terms. Later I learned that the paradox of deleterious secrets is that they bar us from the very help we need. Secrets make it impossible to get help because secrets, by their very nature, preclude us from reaching out.

At a tender age I experienced my sour share of domestic infighting and street violence. I was led to feel worthless by influential professionals in my life, such as teachers. I had no meaning in my life nor did I see any meaning for life. I had absolutely no direction. Worst of all, I had no inkling as to my own potential. I would later respond to these formative "models" by projecting my internalized anger on to an undeserving society. I started stealing cars. My criminality progressed to selling drugs and eventually I graduated to calling hits on others I perceived to be a threat to me. I walked the stage a convicted of murder.

I was a misguided, violent and dysfunctional person. I fit perfectly within the confines of a neighborhood that was morally bankrupt. Criminality was my norm. I was completely desensitized to violence. I was never taught to address my "issues," let alone *how* to address my issues, or that I even had issues in the first place.

It was ignorant, narrow-minded and negative people who helped shape me into the destructive person I came to be, such as my high school counselor who told me I "wasn't college material." This, just when I had finally decided to do something with my life. This rejection by society, through the voice of my counselor, sent me straight into the underworld. It was a decision I, and only I, alone made. Admittedly, it was a lifestyle I embraced.

In prison I began to read for the first time. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* had a profound effect on me. Following Malcolm's example taught me how to teach myself. The Bible offered me a moral compass. My new direction led to new associations. These positive associations led me to peer-led

classes such as critical thinking, parenting and creative writing. Eventually I gained enough trust from my peers, and confidence in myself, to teach my own creative writing class. I became chairman of the Men For Honor academic group where I saw the need for and began teaching victim sensitivity. These and other classes helped me to pinpoint my character defects: lack of self-esteem, negative coping mechanisms, blaming and selfishness, among others. Since that time, at the genesis of my turning point, it has been selfless, caring and compassionate people who have helped reshape me into the person I am today; a person who strives daily to make amends, who feels heartfelt empathy toward the suffering of others.

It was because of these, my personal heroes, that I was able to earn a masters degree in theology. When I earned my degree in behavioral science, it came with a personal letter of accolade from the dean acknowledgment I had ever received, defying my high school counselor's disbelief in me.

I am now traveling fast toward a bachelors in communications at the California State University at Los Angeles. I am studying hard and doing the inner work to prevent myself from ever going dark again. I now see the fruits of positively contributing to the world I once victimized are endless, beginning with personal peace and the knowledge that I can impact the lives of others in constructive and transforming ways.

Shanay's Response, September 27, 2016

The search for meaning has taken a toll on mankind; however, reading *your* search for meaning was a tremendous inspiration. It truly touches on emotions, emotions that I have long tried to elude.

I am originally from Iran, from a beautiful city named Shiraz. I was lucky enough to be born into a loving home with my mother and father, as well as two older brothers. After I was born my father began to worry about my future since the regime in Iran had gone from bad to worse. Women are extremely oppressed there. If stopped on the street by the police, an issue such as having a tad bit of her ankle showing underneath the required clothing for women could result in acid being thrown in her face, or worse, being stoned.

My father decided to move us from that barbaric and poverty-stricken life to Sweden. I was three-years-old. While

none of us spoke the language, we were surrounded by the love of each other, a minimum of 25 close-knit family members.

Growing up in Sweden was one of the toughest periods of my life. The Swedes stood out as white, with blonde hair and blue or green eyes. The typical immigrants, the Middle Easterners, Africans and Latinos had darker hues. My physical description fit right into the stereotypical immigrant mold. People like us were automatically judged as criminals. We were viewed as a threat to the Swedish culture. They called us "Black-heads." This is where the process of my search for meaning started.

I began school at six-years-old. I was excited because I wanted to learn. However, it wasn't long before I became discouraged. My positive mindset was turned negative. I was told that I "wasn't good enough," or that my kind could not succeed. Teachers told me this.

From the ages of six through ten I was bullied by Swedish classmates. They made fun of my appearance. They mocked my awkward pronunciation of Swedish words. I had no friends to play with during those years; I was an outcast in a foreign land. I never told my parents. I held my troubles a secret from everyone. I grew angry and angrier.

During middle school I discovered that my anger was a useful weapon the Swedish kids feared. Recognizing this new-found power, I refused to be anyone's punching bag. I put my foot down and stood up for myself. By high school I earned a "bad-ass" reputation for fighting, girls or boys. People began to respect me tremendously. I know it may sound like I became a bully, but I never disrespected anyone who didn't have it coming or anyone who seemed weak.

When I was about fifteen-years-old I found my way to the 'hood of Gothenburg, Sweden. Gothenburg was where I began to see people who looked more like me. This is where the "black-heads" settled. It began so simple; I had a friend who took me to a rougher part of the 'hood. Before I knew it, I was hanging around the "gangster-elite." As ashamed as I am in retrospect, I have to admit that I was proud to feel so powerful and untouchable. People actually feared me. I felt like I had won the culture war because I finally found a place where I fit in. Just like that, I had lost touch with the higher standards and expectations of my family. I had become part of a world I had no business in.

My older cousin, the Philosopher, a thoughtful and insightful man six years my elder, initially reinforced my adaptation into the criminal way of life. He had already been to prison, was forced on to the streets and knew the game well. He took care of me and always made me feel safe. I loved him with all of my heart. Eventually he urged me to leave Sweden and seek a better life in America. He encouraged me to pursue my life-long dream of becoming a doctor. I wanted to be a corrective surgeon for impoverished youth with facial deformities. My cousin believed in me more than I believed in myself. I followed his direction and at the age of twenty-one, I began my American journey.

Sadly, the Philosopher and I had a huge disagreement just before I left. On September 2, 2016, my cousin was brutally murdered. We never reconciled. I was devastated, Mr. Williams. I don't understand the meaning of life when life can be so brutal. I'm sorry I never got a chance to tell him that I love him before he was killed. How can I move on when I'm carrying this much pain and anger? Since his death a war in Gothenburg has been declared. Vengeance is the talk of the town. Will the cycle ever stop Mr. Williams?

Dortell's Response, October 1, 2016

Dear Shanay,

It is such a pleasure to meet you, and to share with you. I found your story extraordinarily moving, bringing me to tears twice, and requiring a break several times before concluding.

Yes, as you noted in my essay, I lived that same self-destructive lifestyle. Like you, I adopted a pattern of "negative think" and it led to a lot of bad choices. Now I teach "positive think" or what is formally called cognitive behavioral therapy. We teach methods of healing, healthy coping skills and esteem our peers by reversing their negative perspective. We all have an important role in the world, and we all have enormous power to be the change we wish to see in the world.

One of the first things we teach is that all human beings make mistakes. The Bible is full of "heroes" who were every bit as fallible as the rest of us. Have you ever considered that God used three murderers to write some of the most significant portions of the Bible? Yes, Moses wrote the Torah, David was the protagonist of many historical books and Paul, later known as Saul, wrote a third of the New Testament. If these people can

change, and were used as examples for inspiration, then I *am* inspired! As the saying goes, "It's not where we've been that matters, but where we're going." In spite of your hardships and bad decisions, you're well on your way to being a doctor, Shanay. Like your cousin, I too believe in you.

The question is, how do you get past the loss of your cousin? You are angry that you were not afforded the chance to reconcile or tell him that you loved him. Yet I wonder if your goal to overcome the loss is the right mission. You described your cousin as an insightful mentor who guided you and instilled positive insights into your life. Perhaps the goal should be to carry him on, rather than seeking closure. Personally, I was encouraged by some of his philosophies and his spirit. His advice for you to overcome your environment is universal. That could help anyone. His guidance in seeking better things in life, and not being stranded in rotten places is a reminder we all need. Perhaps his talents could continue on through you. He could continue to touch others, as he touched me, through your conveyance of his unique insight.

As for your inability to tell him that you love him, well, I empathize with you. Yet I wonder if we could rephrase the situation. For one, you said you were close. I would imagine that, without question, he knows you love him. No disagreement, no matter how charged, could break the bonds of pure love. I also deeply regret that you missed your opportunity to reconcile, but considering your bond, I think it would be unfair to deny him the benefit of the doubt that he wanted the same. Surely, like you, tragedy melted away any resentment he might have had, even if it was at those last critical seconds. I believe this with all of my heart, simply because of the description of the love you two shared. How does it make you feel to look at the situation from this perspective, Shanay? Please be honest. There are many ways to address trauma and pain and I will gladly work with you to bring the level of healing you need.

Sincerely,

Dortell

Shanay's Response, October 14, 2016

Dear Dortell,

Thank you! I cannot express with words how honored I felt to hear that my story had moved someone else. The most beautiful part was when you said that you cried with me, *and* for me. I appreciate your empathy and condolences for my cousin. As I read your response; your insights on the Bible; your suggestions that I look at the situation from another perspective, and that I give my cousin the benefit of the doubt, all resonated with me. It all made sense and was easy to follow. I think I'm okay. Your suggestions on alternative perspectives definitely helped me gain a better understanding of the meaning of life. You helped me see a bigger picture. The most important thing to me is that you made me feel comfortable with taking this step.

There were many surprising things I could relate to in your letters. We were both influenced by our surroundings and injured by educators who told us we "weren't good enough," or, in your case, that you weren't "college material." Dortell, I want you to know that I am *SO SO SO* proud of you and your accomplishments. I have read about the Men for Honor classes and the amazing program you guys have created. I see how you are helping others and saving lives. It makes me feel blessed and thankful to know you and learn from you. I am so proud of the **human being** you are; one who puts time and energy into others. I am inspired by your writing and by your unique view of the world, even though you've had such bad experiences. Your humanity still comes through.

I'm proud that we have both proven the negative people wrong. I never thought I could become an "A" student; it seemed impossible. I remember my first semesters at community college. I failed three classes and passed with a "C" on my fourth class. I was so discouraged and humiliated. They put me on probation for three straight semesters. I began to doubt myself. I began to believe I *wasn't* good enough. But I worked hard. As difficult as it was, I managed to turn my grades around. I went from all "F's" to "B's" the following semester. I ended up on the honors list, like you!

I really appreciate you, Dortell. I am looking forward to hearing back from you.

Yours truly,

Shanay

Dortell's Response, October 9, 2016

Dear Shanay,

I hope this extra letter finds you well. I've been thinking about you; wondering how you are. I hope that my approach to your loss offered you some solace, if not complete healing. You know, another thing that helps is action. As reforming perpetrators of crime, we learn through self-help classes that giving back and making amends helps us heal. These activities also give honor to the lives we've injured or destroyed. For instance, if a survivor liked dogs, we might raise funds for a shelter in their honor. As a survivor of gang violence, you might feel a sense of healing through gang prevention. That's how M.A.D.D. or Mothers Against Drunk Driving was started. It all began by a grieving mother who had lost her son to a drunk driver. Many cancer survivors also get in the fight and find solace after they were personally affected.

Youth diversion just happens to be one of my passions. In 2013 we published a book called, *Dark Tales From the Dungeons: Horrors From the 'Hood for Youth to Beware*. We were gratified by our work when the Gardena Juvenile Justice and Intervention Program acknowledged the successful use of our book in their program. Within one year of using our book as their curriculum, they reduced their recidivism rate to just 3 percent. Of 180 participants, just 5 reoffended during that one-year period. Perhaps you and I could team up to do some anti-gang work? I believe you are a fighter; you have it in you to make change. Your nightmarish semester at community college, and your rise from Gothenburg to a successful American student demonstrates that. Think about it; I believe in you. I'm on your team. I look forward to hearing from you.

Bye for now.

Sincerely,

Dortell

Shanay's Response, October 20, 2016

Dear Dortell,

How are you? I had a rough week. Stressful at school. I'm okay, though. What made my week better was to receive a letter from you. Hopefully you got my hand written letter, too. I just felt compelled to send you something. I pray you had a good week. Looking forward to reading your letter.

Yours truly,

Shanay

Dortell Response, October 19, 2016

What's up Twin!

Gawd! This is cra-cra! Sorry. That's just my blown-away response to our series of mystical coincidences. I've never experienced such a continuity of convergence. We've been in sync with this metaphysical thingy since the beginning, with our histories, experiences and challenges. It's like we've been living separate parallel lives that just fused. The same regrets, same challenges and efforts at transformation. Now we've both sent extra letters in the same week. Just because! And both letters expressed appreciation for the others' accomplishments, talents and potential. What really surprised me was that I went to that same community college that you named. That's cra-cra for real. I look forward to your next letter.

Your twin,

Dortell

Shanay's Response, October 20, 2016

My dear Twin,

Today I received your letter and was SUPER excited to get it in my hands. We were allowed to read a few pages in class. I shared your metaphors about God and some lines from your first page about our connection. The class laughed when I told them you wrote "cra-cra." Some were confused because they had never heard that term before. I'm laughing now while I write that. I love that you wrote that; it's so nice to see other sides of my twin. It amazes me that we have so much in common. You feel like family. I would like for you to call so we can talk? I pray for you every night, Dortell.

Yours truly,

Shanay

Dortell calls Shanay, November 13, 2016

Shanay: I'm so happy to hear your voice.

Dortell: I'm so happy to meet you.

Shanay: Me, too.