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WordsUncaged Submission

Dear Young Man,

I hope this letter finds you happy and healthy. My name is Lashawn but my friends call me Shawn. I'm currently serving a Life sentence in prison. I've been incarcerated for the last 28 years. I came to prison as an 18-year-old; I just turned 47 years old! I have spent nearly every day of my adult life in prison, and make no mistake, existing in prison is existing inside a cage, not unlike the kennels you see at the dog pound! I use the word "existing" as opposed to living because existing without the liberty that comes with freedom, the optimism that comes with hope, and the shared expressions of love and caring that can only come from the day-to-day interactions with family and friends, is an unnatural state for human beings and can never be confused with living. The tragedy of this unnatural state is I did it to myself!

Young man, if you're at a place in your life that will allow you to consider the words and experiences of a man who has travelled down a path you may (or may not) be on, a man who has made decisions you may be on the cusp of making, then I have something to say. I sincerely hope you will, at the very least, be willing to consider them with an open mind. I didn't come to prison all at once. From the time I was 10 years old, I was on a slow roll toward prison. The road that I was slowly rolling down was oiled with lies, ditching school, stealing, and disobedience to my mom. I know, these things seem small. The problem is progression; small things grown into big things. My small things progressed into drug use, then drug sales, then theft, and finally I began committing armed robberies. The criminal lifestyle I was leading eventually led me to prison with a life sentence.

While growing up, I made terrible decisions and I never knew why. The truth is, I was a follower and that means I was lacking the essential ingredients of *self*. Those ingredients were confidence, esteem, and strength of character. Following is an excuse not to lead based on one's deference to one's insecurities. It wasn't until I finally overcame my insecurities that I was able to take control of my own life and make great decisions that benefitted me. This was a time of transformation.

My personal transformation from a selfish, violent, untrustworthy thug began with introspection. Yes, I know it sounds corny as hell. ☺ The truth is I had finally arrived at a place in my life that allowed me to stop blaming others and take responsibility for the lifestyle I'd lived and the poor decisions I'd made. This allowed me to identify some of my defects of character. Once I saw myself for the man I'd become, I knew I had to change. With the help of family and friends, I've been on that journey ever since. I'm still a work-in-progress but I'm better today than I was yesterday and I will be better tomorrow than I am today.

In closing, I wish you nothing but success in your life and I sincerely hope that something I've said will resonate with you and perhaps inspire you to do better, be better, and reach for greatness. Greatness begins with decision-making. The fact is, your life cannot be built with a single great decision but it can be destroyed with a single poor decision! Do whatever you can to stack good decisions on top of more good decision.

I'll close here. I go as I came; with concern, compassion, and great hopes for you!