RICKEY CUMMINGS & TEDDRICK BATISTE

A CONVERSATION IN KITES

KITE: *a note/letter exchanged between individuals incarcerated on Texas Death Row and other restrictive housing buildings within carceral spaces.*

IN NOVEMBER OF 2024, we discussed our desire to produce a project where we would both share our journeys toward healing in hopes of planting transformative seeds that would spark growth beyond the barriers that poverty, poor guidance, neglect, and trauma have placed on the minds, eyes, and hearts of youth who are deemed "at risk." Before we could go outside to discuss things further the unit went on lockdown, which lasted fifty-two days (that's fifty-two days straight in a small cage for twenty-four hours a day). Not to be deterred by the lockdown, we exchanged ideas and questions in a series of kites.

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Peace, Bro! Is there anything you'd like to say before we take off, possibly a prayer?

RICKEY CUMMINGS: Peace! I pray that everyone who will read these words will do so with the understanding that the way we were raised, and where, as well as our earlier experiences in those areas, laid the foundation that we stood on and set the tone for how we navigated life; which, admittedly, wasn't always the best. However, through the grace of the Most High, unwavering love and support of others (and each other), and our own intentionality, we were able to break the molds we were once mentally, emotionally, and spiritually bound to.

TEDDRICK BATISTE: Indeed, I speak the same energy, bro. I have this saying in one of my songs, "God took my freedom but spared my life." I've felt my strongest when I was able to say I'm sorry, and ask for forgiveness. I understand now how people can turn their backs on the actions of the broken and simply think that person is supposed to know better or that person's a horrible person. I, too, catch myself at times

thinking that same thing, but I pray we'll reach one that can teach one or further expand the love for the broken ones raised by the broken.

Let's introduce ourselves. For those who don't know, who are you?

RC: I am Rickey Cummings. I'm a son, a father, a brother, a friend, a mentor, and a creator. I'm a practitioner of peace and a seeker of understanding and love, which are the tools I use to find the common thread that connects us all as humans. I'm a man who stands firm on my morals and principles. A man who's far from perfect, but very persistent in my growth. I am evolution in progress. I am also a hostage of a corporation known as the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

TB: And I'm Teddrick Batiste. A son, a brother, a father, a friend, a poet, an artist, a changed man, and a symbol. I'm a tough thinker and a demolition ball to our broken foundation. I'm a victimizer and a victim. I'm also a believer in my faith and the understanding of the value of human life and the work it takes to teach it. I'm strong on moral code, accountability, and knowing the pros and cons of our decisions. I'm a proud student and a growing teacher and, sadly, to the system, my strongest label is a death row prisoner.

How long have you been here on the Row?

RC: Too damn long! I pulled up to the unit on November 12, 2012, so a lil' over twelve years now. That's a long time to be trapped in a small cage in complete solitude.

TB: I've been detached from my freedom for a little over fifteen calendar years. Thirteen and a half of those years here on planet Polunsky.

So, obviously, there was a life before Death Row. Where are you from?

RC: I'm from Waco, Texas, which, because of its location, is commonly known as "The Heart of Texas." I was born and raised on the East Side, which was the predominantly Black side of town.

TB: And I am from the Nawf Side — lol ;) —of Houston, Texas. I can also say that, due to my instability, I've lived on every side of the city.

What was the culture like when you were coming up in relation to gangs and all that comes with that lifestyle?

RC: Bro, back then, my city wasn't how it was in cities like Houston, Dallas, San Antonio, and Ft. Worth, where boys were bangin' in the '90s. Yeah, we had people who represented their set (especially those who had come home from prison or had moved from California), but in Waco, before the gang culture took off, it was more so about family, cliques, getting money, the side of town you were from, and WHERE you were from on that side. For example, the East had four housing projects, and unless you had status or wanted some smoke, you'd mostly stay out of the apartments you weren't from. It was the same for certain blocks. Because of this, it was common to see groups of friends put each other and their side of town over their affiliations, which came with a set of problems on its own.

TB: I grew up listening to the group known as The Hot Boys. They were known to wear all colors of bandanas. I wasn't wearing them, but that's when I recall first catching wind of it. Prior to that, I didn't really see any gang culture. When I first started to recognize the colors and the bandanas, it was my stepcousins that were already into it. That was around the year 2000. It's like it happened overnight, the gang culture just took off like wildfire. It was like everywhere you went, there were Bounty Hunters and Hoovas, known as Bloods and Crips. I know friends now that were in love with the structure.There were so many so-called OGs that were just misleading kids and getting them to crash out. I can name a childhood friend on every finger and start over at least once that's lost their life or got more than twenty years in prison by the age of fifteen to eighteen years old. That shit broke every bond there could have possibly been. It turned childhood friends against each other. I personally got friends I used to share popsicles with as a kid that back in the day if they could they would have taken me out. I've seen families fall apart, brothers kill one another, putting gangs over family. The level of confusion it caused, it turned a lot of us into monsters. I've watched the destruction, as well as watched it bring some strong brothers together here.

Prime example, look at me and you. Two different sides but the same ground. We were talking about gang culture within the first hour of us having our first conversation, and, in a way, it was relieving.

What led to you getting active in the streets?

RC: Bro, for a lot of people, it's the neighborhood and what they see outside that pulls them off the porch and into "the game." For me, I didn't have to look out my window or down the street to see the lure of the lifestyle. That shit was inside my house and in my backyard for as long as I can remember. My pops was a hustler, and all of the males who filled his void after he was sent to the Feds lived the same lifestyle. It was those individuals who REALLY introduced me to the game when I was still in elementary school.

Though I was just nine years old, while my Queen worked the night shift, the individuals who were supposed to watch after my brothers and I would wake me in the middle of the night and have me count and stash their drug money throughout the early morning. And I'm not talking petty cash, either! I can recall counting $15–20k at a time, multiple times a week. Crack cocaine was real destructive and lucrative in my city. Though I was exposed to the money and other perks that came with having it—flashy cars, jewelry, and women—it wasn't any of those things that led to my decision to sell drugs when I was fourteen years old. It was hunger.

I had moved out of town to live with my grandpa right before my freshman year in high school began. The reasons behind the move was to help him, to take some financial strain off my Queen, and to play basketball. I never wanted to sell drugs because, by that time, I didn't want to be anything like my pops, who had recently been released after serving eight and a half years in prison. My grandpa was supposed to look after me, but outside of providing a place for me to stay, he ultimately left me to fend for myself.

When it comes to teens who grew up around the drug trade, there's only so many times you can send him to school hungry and have him return hungry because he couldn't pay for lunch at school. Before he says "fuck it" and tries to make something shake on his own. During a weekend visit to Waco, I went to an older relative's trap house, the one whose money I used to count, hoping he would put some ones in my pocket after hearing what was going on; I was offered a slab of crack and a quick lesson on how to cut and sell it instead. After that, I said "fuck it" and went for what I knew.

TB: You know what bro? I can honestly say it was a number of things that not even the people who raised me could control. First off, structure of my grandma's house. I came into this world on the floor in the

bathroom of a house that was literally the center of the block, where everything happened. If there was any dope sold, or ANY crime committed, it was right in front of the door to our house. So being in a crib of young adults that were forced to take care of me if they slept late, I was crawling out the door and into the grass toward all the people I knew. All my uncles were deep in the game.

Secondly, the type of men my mother desired. We moved in with the first father figure I ever felt when I was three years old. My momma went to night school, and her man at that time was older and far more devoted to the streets. I watched him be treated like a king. He talked to me all the time as we navigated his daily duties and saw all kinds of people stuck and mentally trapped in the forms of their vices. I spent all night in the streets with him, and, at his peak, he never taught me any wrong.

Lastly, I was one of those kids who loved being outside. I was ready to take a real navigation every day. I just wanted to see the streets, whether it be for the good of a child or just to see who, what, when, where, and how. From a young age, everything I wanted, I had to go to the streets to either get it or get the person who could get it for me.

We both know the weight that comes with that lifestyle, shit isn't always as good as it looks on the outside. Can you recall a moment when you felt the most lost in that lifestyle, as if everything was spiraling out of control, and you could've used some positive male reinforcement and guidance?

RC: It's crazy, bro, because when I look back, hell, I knew it back then! I DID have a singular positive male I could've turned to. My issue was that I didn't know how to talk about what I was dealing with. You know, when we were coming up, our culture and environments didn't give us the freedom to talk about our feelings. In fact, we—or at least I—was taught to keep my feelings under my feet and walk on them. As a kid, I would get my ass beat for crying or complaining about something, and as a teen I was shown that I was expected to fix my problems on my own. These experiences and other "lessons" on what it meant to "be a man," and on how to survive within the culture, handicapped my ability to express my feelings and my willingness to seek help.

To your question, it was at the tender age of twenty that I was drowning mentally and emotionally and was in desperate need of help. At that point, I was feeling conflicted about selling drugs and depressed about

not being as active as I wanted to be in my son's life, due to his mom moving to another city. I never had a model for co-parenting from a distance, and viewed not being able to see my son daily as a failure on my part. While at the proverbial fork in the road, I had decided that I would stop selling drugs after I ran through my last pack and get a job, hoping that would bring me closer to my son.

I had sold half of my pack and landed a job interview for the next day. On April 8, 2010, I got the job and had the orientation the same day. I was supposed to have met with my bro to sell him what I had left after orientation; instead I went to link up with my uncle. Thirty minutes later I ended up finding my bro murdered in his car.

This sent me spiraling faster, and I began to sink deeper into depression, because I couldn't help but feel that it was my fault that he was murdered, being that I wasn't with him as I should have been, and I couldn't shake the vision of his lifeless eyes or the sounds of his mom and then girlfriend's screams from my mind.

The next day, I said fuck that job and dove deeper into the streets.

TB: Bro, I can say this shit with pride, because I really loved this man. But the time I felt the most lost in the world, I was about four years old. Like I said, I spent a lot of time with my momma's man when she was at night school. But he started to fall victim to his own product. I'm talking about a man that dressed casual every day. Man was sharper than Dapper Dan, in anything from wheat or cream-colored to tan. He had always talked to me about anything, and always pointed out to me the people who were on drugs. "If you drink, that's how you gonna look. If you smoke crack, that's how you gonna look. If you shoot up that's how you gonna look."

So at an early age, I developed the gift of reading pain in people. Bro, he started to put off a different energy. He stopped communicating as much with me. The people who treated him like a king started talking bad about him. I was four years old when I walked into his room and saw him with a needle in his arm. His new habit turned him inside out.

It's like instantly I felt lost and let down. It got so bad that all the things he taught me, I sought on my own. I started to walk those same streets on my own. He was somewhere getting high, and my momma was at school. That's the answer, at the age of four the first father figure I could understand to love also exposed me to the start of my understanding of hurt and loss.

I think the age I recognized I was spiraling out of control is different from when I first felt lost or needed positive male guidance. I've always embraced positive male guidance and I always need it. I gravitated toward my friends who had fathers in their lives. As for when I felt I spiraled out of control, bro, the shit that society makes us feel is okay, it clouded me from literally seeing my exact down moment. I was always UP as we say in the hood. I mean, the bads wasn't so bad, given the conditions we were living in. So I say the moment I knew it was when I completely lost my freedom. I'm not one of those men that it takes time after time to teach me a lesson, so as soon as all that shit was stripped from my mind, body, and soul, I saw that Allah had taken my freedom rather than take my life.

So, what forced you to change your values? Was your transformation overnight?

RC: Bro, I wouldn't say that my values changed; it was perspective on life, people, myself, and the way I wanted to occupy space in the world that changed. As for my transformation, no it wasn't overnight, and it definitely hasn't been an easy process. Here I am nine years into my journey, and there are still things that I wrestle with today.

My transition began while I was still in the county jail, but it was on a micro level. I never thought that I would get convicted of this crime, and I've never feared that I would be murdered by the state of Texas, so my goal was to step out of those walls a better version than the man who got arrested. My problem, though, was that I held on to that street mentality, and I saw everything through the lenses that were placed over my eyes as a young un. I was extremely guarded with my emotions. The only work I was really doing revolved around my case, so I could get back to the house, being that my freedom and my family were the only things I truly cared about.

It wasn't until early 2015, after receiving and reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, that my transformation really began; it's as if that book watered the seed I had planted years prior, and as it began to germinate, I became more conscious of how I moved. I went through a phase of introspection that really forced me to evaluate myself and the stains I had left in the world, the stains I had left on those I had encountered. It also revealed a lot of shit I was not happy with and areas I was lacking in. That book forced me on to the painstaking journey I'm now on to shed my old skin and to allow my dark spaces to be filled with love.

TB: My values didn't change, they just reshaped. I still value the same things I did as a blinded teenager. The thing is that I now know HOW to value them correctly, and that comes with the ability to know how effective they will be to others. Example: I valued the streets, but the value was to get money and remain active in leading the gang that surrounded me, by all means. Now I still value the streets, but I'm never gonna do anything that will ever harm or misguide a soul.

I was a blessed one to always be the one that just happened to have the juice that attracted people to me, so my values were never simply rooted in just gang culture or the streets; it was about knowledge—who, what, when, where, why, and how. The difference in me now is that I know how effective I am and can be. But hell no, it hasn't been overnight, and I know I still have an uncanny amount of those hard nights ahead of me. But I'm firmly understanding the war has to go all the way through to get to the peace.

There are times in my life that I've failed, and they still hurt me twenty-plus years later. I just can't get over the way I felt so broken, so I'm still on my path. Sometimes, in the position that comes mentally in here, there's nothing overnight but the rise and setting of the sun. I give all thanks to reading material.

That's honestly what changed my life! I read a thousand books in six years. No bullshit, I started with all the trash or not so useful shit, then I ran through my period of urban novels, then I got hold of a book by Sista Souljah and saw how she was going over my head. I asked a question, and that's when the desire in me went from a flame to a wildfire. I got into history and not His-Story, but it all started to fill in all the gaps to my wonders and my emotions that kept me off balance. Then it broke me up, showing me that I was just doing the opposite of everything I stood for. I saw as a Black man, I felt like the ultimate shit, when I really saw that I had caused harm to other Black people that lived exactly like I did, from almost every aspect. I can say that the whole process is simple, but in order to recognize that you are broken, you have to let go of all the values you borrowed from the broken culture and have courage to follow something that's positive.

Bro, I've seen your growth; in fact, we started our journeys around the same time, leaning on each other for strength and counsel when needed. In your own words, what would you say your level of empathy was when you got here compared to where it is now?

RC: On some real shit, bro, I don't think I had a real concept of what empathy meant when I was free; at least not when it came to people outside of family and my circle. I mean, I felt compassion for the elderly, and was moved when I saw women and kids struggling or being abused; I'd even give a few dollars to the homeless, but that was the extent of my feelings for people I deemed to be "outsiders."

Coming from where we are from, we're taught to keep our feelings under our feet and to not concern ourselves with things that don't directly affect or threaten us or ours. This way of thinking and being was taught to me directly and indirectly. For example, when I was around eleven years old, a guy from the neighborhood was murdered while attempting to break up a fight between a man and his girlfriend. In my mind, he did the right thing, being that I had been jumping into my Queen's domestic disputes for as long as I could remember. Everyone knew what happened, witnesses had seen what went down, but the woman ended up testifying that the guy was the aggressor and her boyfriend acted in self-defense. That in itself taught me a lesson, but it was the conversation I overheard my old heads have that stuck with me throughout my early adulthood. It was a lil' after the trial when I heard one of them say, "See, his dumb ass should've minded his business, because now he's dead and that hoe is still fucking with that nigga." There was no empathy in their tones or words. No shared grief or compassion, or conversations about their feelings.

Their words and actions in my formative years taught me that the only emotion that was acceptable was anger.

Today, though, I am an empath. After I attained K.O.S. (knowledge of self), I became aware of our interconnectedness as humans, which in turn caused me to feel one's suffering—mental, emotional, or spiritual—on a level that sometimes feels strange to me. It's like, a person around me don't even have to verbally express what's going on, I can feel a shift of energy in the environment, and within self, to the point that my peace will be disturbed until I do or say something that will help bring that person back into harmony. It took my doing the work to break through my emotional bondage for me to become attuned to others' emotional states.

TB: Say bro, this word *empathy* has stuck with me a LONG time. Remember I told you as a kid I grew up going to those AA/NA meetings with my momma's boyfriend? Bro, I saw, heard, and felt shit that still

challenges me today. I saw people with real issues, levels of pain that tore everything they ever felt or had all the way apart. I don't know a moment that I ever didn't feel sorry for the next person. I was always the one hopping in the middle to end disputes, speaking up to do my best to avoid a conflict. Even in my sports events, I was the one to be the peacekeeper if we were cheated or done wrong; I always felt like it was on me to make a difference, to take over.

Around the year 2003, I was in TYC, the prison system for juveniles. They evaluate you, and I remember this old, out-of-touch white guy ask me, "How does it make you feel when you sell drugs and steal people's cars?" I told him, I don't think about it, because it made me feel bad, and I didn't want anyone stealing my momma's car. He then turned in his report, and I was able to read that he said I had no empathy. Something about that word stuck deep in my soul.

Then as juveniles, we would have objectives, and one was to learn about empathy. It was basically the ability to put yourself in another's shoes. I thought, I always do that, and from that point it kind of made me the protector in a way; weird, but I was always the go-to guy, and if I didn't have results, then I knew where to search. This is the fucked-up part: bro, that same guy testified at my trial in 2011. I KNOW for a fact that he knew what he was doing, but he got on the stand and gave the same people that's supposed to be my peers a childhood image of me, and told them people of the court that I had no empathy as a kid and most likely I didn't have any now. That shit broke me down.

How do you, as a man, get past what culture has taught you?

RC: I don't know if there's a universal answer or method to doing so, but for me, it took staring in the metaphorical mirror and being honest with myself. Brutally honest! It took reflecting on my life and analyzing the people who groomed me, as well as the characteristics I had developed because of them and the environment/culture I was raised in. I had to ask myself, "In what ways have I, those who groomed me, and the culture benefited my life, the lives of my loved ones, and the people in my community? Are the lessons I let guide me, the characteristics I reflect, and the mindset I have conducive to the lifestyle I envision for myself and those I hope to help?" I had to be brave enough to trim my edges by letting go of the things and people I felt were/are a detriment to myself and the future I desire, regardless of how hard it may be. And

trust me, the process isn't easy; I'm still working at it because some strongholds, which can be people, things, and characteristics, are deeply rooted. At the end of the day, I realized that if I'm really serious about shedding my old skin, I have to be willing to let go of all things that will hinder my transformation.

TB: You know, we stand on this kind of shit, as well as hold each other accountable. Personally, it's very simple; I treat people how I want to be treated and I want to be treated very well, no matter what I'm going through or what's on my mind. I love being loved and valued, appreciated, and I love that same kind of energy around me. That's why I can't stay upset longer than ten minutes. Shit just don't matter. It's also my son, bro. He's dealt with his share of pain and that hurt ocean deep, so I just stand on positivity and know the pros and cons of all my actions. Culture fucked me up, and now that I know better, I'm not gonna fuck nobody that crosses my path the same way it fucked me. It don't matter what level I'm on, I love myself and what I'm able to give off. Culture don't know the pros and the cons deep enough to teach us that we are going to hurt until we learn how to be productive in better ways. I read that Francis Bacon said, "Chiefly the mold of a man's fortune is in his own hands . . ." I didn't learn that ability from culture, but now I know.

How do you separate your peace when it comes to loving family from a distance, over loving them closer to you, due to their thought processes or lifestyles?

RC: Bro, we're human, I don't know if it's possible to separate our peace from matters of the heart. I know for me, those I love have the ability to disturb my peace the most (LOL). Nah, but one thing I've learned about people, especially loved ones whose lifestyles or thought processes do not align with mine—regardless if they are close to me or not—is that we have to extend grace. You know, bro, as fucked-up as our circumstances are, we're in a unique position that has allowed us to really do the work, day in and out, without having to deal with the many distractions and blows that people on the outside have to deal with (not to say we don't experience our own), especially those who are still trapped in the culture we grew up in. Being that we no longer have blinders over our eyes and barriers around our hearts, when dealing with our people, especially those who are still thuggin' and getting it out the mud, we

have to meet them where they are, with the understanding that they can only give and love within their abilities. That's not to say we shouldn't hold them accountable, or that they aren't required to take the necessary steps to meet us where we are too, because they should. No relationship, of any kind, can thrive if just one person is doing all the work to accommodate and be in harmony with the other.

TB: Lol, yeah this question must come with a magic answer, lol ;) I agree, we're human bro and can only meet people where they are. You know, I've told you about the reflections of my uncles as an example. Everybody won't be able to have had the time and growth that we've had, but still there's a level of desire that burns inside us to see, share, and condone the same growth in yourself, with family. Now, when it don't match up, you know there are times when you want to start the bond but then see that they don't or can't tap into the level of consciousness or vulnerability; then you lose interest in the bond, feeling that it's no bond at all. So to avoid that, that's when you know, how gotta love them for how they are able to love.

BUT with me, I see my uncles in a better place physically, so that's what made me want to be a part of that and see what they possibly had to bring to the table of understanding. Now as a kid, I was their lil' superhero, their go-to kid, lol ;) Then as I got older, I became someone they down-low feared, as they said I was wild or out of control. So when I said that I had the ability to be better and connect with their better selves, that's when I would say that it hurt me. I felt like they were still rejecting me, like at first I was too wild and now I'm too—something they are not yet of—and they can't bring themselves to open up internally.

I had to think about why I was so hurt and why it bothered my ability to grow in areas. So that's an example, but all I did was pray on it and like I always do, I wished them well and I will forever stay open for family or anybody to connect with. I just know that at the end of the day, when the lights go out, it's just us bro. The walls start to talk back to us and ask us questions, cast doubt and the devil ride our back, when you don't control your peace. So I close the world off and defeat this shit within, come back out and speak my peace and continue to navigate. You know, this shit don't come with a path to some kind of flow of empowering thoughts that drive our actions and emotions. So that shit alone, no matter who a person is, you gotta manifest your own outer circumstances. Say bro, separating your peace from people, places, and things can really elevate

our serotonin levels in our brain. That shit work so good, it feel like you downed a bottle or smoked you a good stick. I know this answer will rotate back, you know we really bond off this kind of building, lol ;)

We've talked about how we were raised and our emotional growth over the years. How do you feel about allowing yourself to be vulnerable with others today? Do you still find it difficult to open up and allow people in?

RC: Do I still find it difficult, yes, but not for the same reasons I struggled with in the past. Back then, it was a matter of not knowing how to open up. I viewed vulnerability as a weakness and potential threat to survival. Today, my struggles revolve around my wanting to protect my loved ones. Granted, when it comes to matters of the heart, grief, confusion of the mind, or internal battles, I'm comfortable leaning into the safe spaces that are available to me on the outside, and I find it liberating and refreshing to be able to do so now.

However, when it comes to dealing with the everyday bullshit and struggles that come with being on Death Row and long-term solitary confinement, I shy away from talking to my loved ones on the outside about those things because I don't want them feeling helpless or inadequate any more than I imagine they already do. When it comes to what I deal with here, I'm more open with you and the bros in our circle and those within the struggle because I know y'all can relate, and y'all will be able to feel my struggle. It's been a blessing to have the spaces needed (inside and outside of these walls) to give voice to my frustrations and to lay bare my pain and struggles. I didn't have that tool when I was free, and I've paid for that in many ways, so I'm grateful to have reached a point where I am comfortable and able to place my baggage on the floor and allow others to help me unpack and sort things out.

TB: I KNOW that vulnerability is one of the strongest tools a man can have. For me, I have needed it and used it when I see the person I was dealing with didn't have the power to relax in it. You know, I never been the person to shy away from that kind of thing. I'll cry, rage, smile, and whatever emotion comes with what I need to say, and not bear a weakness about it at all. I think you have to know how to express yourself and tell people how you feel. Once you can empower it, the right energy will pour off of you at all times. It's nothing short of a power tool.

I also think it's gotta be done. For me, it's the ability to wake up your

intellectual self enough to show the people you navigate around that you are aware just as much as they are, or can be for themselves. Then you start to think like the true person you are, a Black man or any color man. It's what causes strength and allows people to understand you, allowing us to think better. It's super important to know that the mind and the heart can tell different sides, but they both can be struck and start to reject vulnerability.

I don't find it hard to be vulnerable, because I know who I am and I don't fear a person, place, or a thing blowing some kind of hidden motive within myself. I broke all that shit up, and that's when I was able to love with my original heart again and not just the broken heart. Being able to embrace vulnerability is a feeling that we all have knowledge of. When you see a kid and they're all pure vibes, when you see a little puppy, the pureness of that shit is seductive. Same as a relationship, you can hear all kinds of comments, but there's that one person that can tell you the stupidest shit and it mean everything to you, lol. I also think the saddest part about it is, it can't be taught. The circumstances are already rooted, you just have to be the one to submit to what makes you grow and not what only pleases the external. I'd rather be able to embrace vulnerability and be real, loyal, and honest with every breath over being rich, controlling, prideful, and clouded. It all leads to a hurt; you can't pick and choose what hurt you want to embrace and heal from, you feel me?

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ONCE AGAIN, we want to thank everyone who took the time to read this piece. Hopefully, our words will motivate more people—especially those who are privileged and in positions to enact change—to ask important questions that begin with "why" and "what" that will lead to more preventative and restorative, rather than punitive, actions when we see our youth (or anyone) spiraling. And to those who are struggling and may still be trapped in the grips of trauma and pain, know that we extend Peace and love to you all. Nothing is too great to overcome, and it's never too late to break the molds you are mentally, emotionally, and spiritually bound to. We're living witnesses to that.