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Q&A WITH FRANK PRUITT

Frank Pruitt[†]

How would you describe your writing process?

My writing process is analytical storytelling. I'm an over-thinker by nature, and my mind analyzes everything. So, when an idea pops into my mind, I write it down. This process doesn't start out with a specific direction or topic I plan to write about. I sometimes have ten pages of notes jotted down before I know what I am going to write about.

What does identifying as a writer mean to you?

It shows that inspiration can come from anything. Life is a big journey of experiences, and whether it's tragedy, encountering people, or situations, there's a story in it.

Is there anything you wanted to put in your article that you didn't?

Why?

No, not really. I wanted to share my perspective about how incarceration does not offer the inner man the essence of one's self—absolutely nothing.

How has the experience of being incarcerated shaped your relationship to writing?

Inside this place, communication is vital to get your point across to the staff. You have to write for a job; certain jobs require you to talk with staff and express your point concisely so that they clearly understand what you need, and what you're talking about. This place has helped me express myself better. It helped broaden my imagination.

[†] Frank Pruitt has been incarcerated for over thirty-two years. He currently resides at Attica Correctional Facility and is a client of the Defenders Clinic at CUNY School of Law. For more information, see Reuven Blau, *Prisoners Hoping for Mercy Place Little Faith in Cuomo*, CITY (Dec. 22, 2020, 10:03 PM), <https://perma.cc/LAT4-Y2DV>.

Despite the failures of the prison system, which you write about in your essay, how have you managed to grow, process, and reflect so much of your own moral sense?

First, I accepted responsibility for the part I played in the crime. Despite inequities and racism against Black and Brown people remaining at the root of much injustice, I recognize when my behavior changed and which decisions, I made that were harmful.

I was sexually abused by my uncle between nine and eleven years old. I started getting into trouble at twelve years old, and that continued up to age eighteen when I committed this horrible offense. In making peace with this fact and forgiving my uncle and seeking forgiveness from the victim's family, I realized that I am not a criminal. I don't relish that lifestyle or desire to hurt and get over on people. I am not the predator that the system labeled me as.

You write about that old person sitting dormant in your head. How do you reckon with him?

As I mentioned, it's a self-reflection process. I wondered in the past: if you met yourself, what would you think of you? Knowing you have those sneaky ways about you, that up and down attitude and selfishness—that can be ugly. An asshole knows he's an asshole. So, I confronted that asshole part of me, and it's an everyday process to keep killing him and letting my compassionate, respectable, loving, and witty side live. It's a conscious choice, and as you live life, the best part of you will manifest itself.

How might we each reckon with this, even if we have not been incarcerated?

It's a conscious choice. Do some introspection, identify those areas you know are ugly, and start the process of eliminating them from your life along with the people who bring out that bad side. I learned to be at peace alone as I took charge of the energy I let into my spirit. Control the energy you want in your life.

Is it difficult to open up about your own experiences in your writing?

It was at first, because I always tried to paint a glamorous picture of my life. But when CUNY helped me submit my clemency application, part of the process was to write a letter to the victims, their mothers, and children, explaining what happened and asking for forgiveness. I also had to write a letter to my mother and children. This was the most therapeutic writing I ever did in my life. It was awesome.

How has being incarcerated impacted your approach to writing and your experience writing?

I have a lot of downtime, and the mind wanders. Being incarcerated is depressing and boring. There's no inspiration here. To be a good writer, you have to read, read, and do more reading. Access to good books, updated books, are very limited.