



Writing from Death Row: *An Interview with Jarvis Jay Masters*

Editor's Introduction: This past year, after having read Jarvis Jay Masters' moving, heartfelt book, Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row, I knew that, in some way, Paths of Learning had to feature the work of this compassionate, insightful resident of San Quentin's death row. When we decided that this present issue of the magazine would feature the theme "Educating in a World of Violence," I knew that we would have to include an interview with Jarvis in order for this issue to be complete. With the help of some board members, I thus put together a number of interview questions, which I sent to Jarvis and to which he responded in writing.

Besides helping us to see more clearly the unfortunately all too common circumstances of an inmate who had grown up amid abuse and neglect, Jarvis' responses give us deep insight into the soulful, human presence of a man who found a way, on death row, to practice understanding and compassion. In his words, we also catch glimpses of the happy childhood he occasionally but too rarely had, a childhood in which he had dreams and wonder but in which his innocence was ultimately crushed in the brutality of his upbringing.

It should be noted that nothing that Jarvis writes is meant to nullify the severity of his past violence; indeed, he himself would be the first to say as much. Rather, touching us deeply in our hearts and souls, his words help us to understand the conditions of possibility in which violence can manifest itself, as well as the conditions of possibility in which love and compassion can radiate. Let us therefore reflect on his words as we go about our work as parents, teachers, and citizens. Ultimately, let us ask ourselves, "Have I behaved today in such a way that I contributed to the building of prisons or to the flowering of love?" And, "how can I act tomorrow so that my deeds will be as honorable as my intentions are noble?"

In an ideal world — which is, of course, the sort of world that we ought to strive to create — there would be no prisons, no death rows, no deaths of childhood dreams and innocence. Instead, there would be universal love and peace. As Jarvis himself might well ask, even if we never achieve this end, isn't the path along the way worthy of our efforts?

— Richard J. Prystowsky

Born in 1962, Jarvis Jay Masters grew up primarily in Southern California. Though from time to time he enjoyed a childhood of happiness, for the most part he endured a childhood filled with neglect and despair. As he grew, he became more and more filled with rage and began living a life of violence and crime. In 1981, when he was nineteen years old, he ended up in San Quentin, where, several years later, he was implicated in the murder of an officer there. A jury sentenced Jarvis “to death in the gas chamber, partly because of his violent background” (from the Foreword to *Finding Freedom*). He remains on death row, pending the outcome of his appeal.

While on death row, Jarvis became a Buddhist, studying with renowned Buddhist teacher Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche. A talented writer whose words resonate with immediacy and poignancy, he has written pieces that have appeared in numerous venues, including *Brotherman: The Odyssey of Black Men in America — An Anthology*, *The Awakened Warrior: Living with Courage, Compassion and Discipline*; and *The Turning Wheel: Journal of the Buddhist Peace Fellowship*. His book, *Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row*, testifies to the strength and authenticity of Jarvis’ courage, compassion, and sense of integrity.

Growing Up

Paths: Where did you grow up? Would you please describe your experiences in growing up with family, friends, and community?

Masters: I grew up mostly in Southern California. At an early age in my life, sometime between the age of 5 or 6, my siblings and I were taken away from my parents and placed into the custody of the state. The reason for this had not been known to me as a child. Even so, by this age I had known that my mother and stepfather were heavily involved with drugs, heroin. This addiction kept my parents away from home, sometimes lasting for days, other times just over night. We never knew if or when our parents would come home, only that we were all alone, mostly very hungry and dirty — but sometimes fed by one or two very caring neighbors who had known we were being neglected and abandoned, that my parents were in the streets, on heroin.

I can vaguely remember going to school at this time. But it occurred once, maybe even twice, before no longer attending school. My guess as to why is, my sisters and I had become so malnourished, without any clothes to wear, that attending school would have certainly brought up serious questions as to what was going on, or what else? You know? And indeed, this

and more became realized when the state decided to place my sisters and me into their care.

We were all soon placed into foster homes. I was placed with an elderly couple in the Watts area of Los Angeles, as were my sisters, who were all placed in a home together. I also had an infant baby brother placed into foster care in this same general area, but without our knowledge, at least for several of those first few years. But all of us had been placed in homes not more than 10 miles apart. It was a whole world apart for us, though.

My foster parents opened their home to me with unconditional love and affection. They nourished me with love. As their only child, they did so in ways that still fill my memories like no other time in my childhood. It is not possible to fully explain the positive effect they had on me. They were the only adults in my life who cuddled me into their arms and held me whenever I had nightmares, or who had ever tried to understand me when I sometimes needed for them to stay awake with me at night, to help me, in my child’s mind, protect my mother from being hit or beaten up — as so many scenes of horror from my earlier childhood, with my parents, began to surface and gave me cold, shaking chills, almost as if seeing a heroin addict kicking his drug addiction. My foster parents were always there for me, in much the way that all loving parents provide for their children.

Being there, I went to school, first grade to fifth grade. I got very good grades, played and loved all sports, and had very few problems outside the normalcy of childhood.

I had the whole community as parents. The entire neighborhood had acted as my parents, especially when I would run across their lawns, jump over into their backyards, sometimes borrowing fruit from their trees. This was an elderly community with very few children, no thought of crime, and just a lot of love and care for me.

My dreams of wanting to someday be an astronaut found their aspirations in these almost awakened early years, as I, too, wanted to fly to the moon like I had seen on television, the Apollo 11 spaceship in 1969.

It was not long after I started to dream of being an astronaut, a firefighter, or anything I wanted that my dreams suddenly came to an abrupt end.

My foster parents were too old to keep me. (They were both very old, almost in their eighties.) And the mere rumor of this filled my heart with so much hurt and pain, confusion and loss, that I fought all my fears of being rejected by crying and crying, and then in my own displeasure of ever wanting to be there, I angrily said as much to my parents and caseworker.

Soon after, I was placed into another foster home. It didn’t last long. I did not like it there. Not only did I feel like a sardine, bunched up with 9 or 10 other foster children, five of us to a room, sleeping on bunk beds, but also I was constantly whipped with telephone cords and repeatedly slapped across the face for such things as forgetting to wash my hands. At 10 or 11 years old, I ran away. I lived mostly on greyhound buses, sneaking on bus to bus, riding from one end of the state to the next, begging for food along the way. I did this until I would get caught by the authorities. I would then be brought back to

the foster home, or then to another new foster home. Another boy's home ... boy's ranch ... boy's town, and run away again, again, and again. It was all I could do to escape my distrust in others. *[Editor's Note: throughout, the use of ellipses is the author's, not the editor's.]*

My trust in people, particularly adult or authority figures, had given me such bitter experiences that now, today, when I get letters from kids all over the country who have run away or tried several times to commit suicide — who just want to disappear or die, to kill or be killed — I know where, exactly where, their hearts voice this pain from ... and there is no uniform response I give to these kids. They are all very different, all unique, and special. But what is the same — and I say as much — is that life is with pain; that all human beings suffer, and whatever they are going through — what matters the most is that they NEVER, ever see themselves alone in their pain, their suffering. I share with them my own similar experiences; that I do care, that they do matter.

Whenever I have the chance to say these things to our young people, I am reminded about myself, in all that I had experienced or felt in not trusting anyone — as a 10-year-old run-away, then as a teenager who was later placed with my aunts and uncles — becoming involved with drugs, gangs, crime, and violence — as a way to co-exist in my own right, to be as feared and dangerous by the same kind of fear and danger inflicted on me — and on so many other kids in so many neighborhoods, juvenile institutions, and prisons all across this country.

I get the greatest feeling when I can encourage young people, particularly at-risk youths — who are contemplating such things as running away from home, committing suicide, or to kill or be killed in gang violence — that to really co-exist in their own right, is to stay home, **BE HOME**, when others would run away; to live, **BE ALIVE**, instead of being like those who they could see, that may want to end their lives; to be non-violent, **WITH NO HATE FOR ANYONE**, instead of being like others they would know carrying guns, filled with rage and hatred.

Whenever I can be a voice that can reflect on my own experiences — in growing up with all that I have — I am truly able to see how my own human imperfections are not lost, but that they are, in so many ways, what real credential I have to best benefit others in giving that true measure of hope to those that can only feel their own real pain of hopelessness....

The Roots and Nature of Violence

Paths: Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hahn teaches that, according to Buddhist psychology, all of us have many seeds in us: seeds of love, seeds of hatred, seeds of anger, seeds of calm, seeds of violence, seeds of peace. He urges us to plant and water nourishing, healthy seeds and helps us to understand what happens when we plant and water unhealthy seeds, such as the seeds of anger and violence.

In your life, what seeds have been watered, and how have they been watered? How have you been helped to water healthy,

nourishing seeds? How can we help youth — especially at-risk youth — to water such seeds?

Masters: As a Buddhist, I have been very fortunate to read many of Thich Nhat Hanh's books. A lot of his teachings speak so passionately about what you mention, the many seeds within us, that we all have them. And for all of us to be that constantly observant of what fills our hearts — whether it is love and compassion or anger and hatred — is something that I always take to heart, that even while I am living on San Quentin's death row, I am no more or no less capable of cultivating the same level of love and peace than anyone else, than I am capable of harvesting things like resentment and hatred — this is where I find the center of my spiritual practice. I really work with this ... because it allows me to look inwardly, to try to water those healthy seeds, to be with peace inside rather than with hatred, to cultivate more human compassion instead of anger... But to look at all the unhealthy stuff as well. Those weeds, so-to-speak, that without doubt will and do come up and how they, too, need to be constantly worked on.

The way we can always help youth, especially those at-risk youth, to water and nourish all the best seeds within them, is for us to always be a very trusting presence to these seeds, and for us to provide them with all the endless encouragement; that they are with those qualities that are able to make a real difference for what path they're paving for their lives.

Paths: In your opinion, is violence a necessary part of all cultures? Is violence ever justified?

Masters: Well, I am not exactly sure I am able to speak directly to these questions.... But I do believe that all throughout our worldly existence there is suffering, that rich or poor, all human beings suffer — the world over — and that it is out of such human suffering that the very nature of violence has been the result of so much misery, to all the pains and hurts of people all throughout our world.

Paths: What do you see as the roots of violence among young people?

Masters: I really see the roots of violence in young people stemming from the conditions in which they were brought up. Certainly, there are other factors. But environment, early child abuse, neglect, abandonment, drugs, fear — these are what I believe are the most common factors that are the roots of violence among young people.

Paths: What is the single most important thing that parents, or other adults, can do to decrease the likelihood of violence among youth?

Masters: What I see as the most important is for all parents and adults to see every youth, not just their own, as being just as very important as if they were their own. I really believe that all parents and adults need to understand, to really know in their hearts, that violence among youth is not something that, in a word, shoots straight; that more often than not, the intended victim of youth violence is mistaken for another youth, etc.

So the single most important thing parents, or other adults, can do is to work hand-in-hand together, to work together with that

true understanding that violence among youth is a serious threat to every parent's child.

Experiences in School

Paths: What kinds of experiences did you have in school? Did you enjoy school? Why or why not?

Masters: I had my best experiences in school in grades 1st through 5th, while I was living with my first foster parents. I did really well. Those moments in school gave me the fun in learning, you know? To be constantly hugged by my teachers for doing well meant the world to me.

For all the other years, I mostly didn't attend school. Periodically, I went to school for a month here, several months there, other times sitting in school in juvenile detention centers. I spent more time in school in these places than any place else. During these times, the whole classroom did nothing. We just hung out, toying around with books, not very much caring. I, at this point, hated school; the very thought that I could find my life and what I had been through inside these books just spoke very angrily to me. I hated the very smell of a classroom. All my sense of wonder had been snuffed out. And being in those classrooms forced me to feel stupid and just how much my life didn't matter anymore.

Then, by the age of 16, I was housed in the California Youth Authority. In there, attending school was a high requirement for parole. This kind of forced me to take a closer look at the books, even perhaps cheat, if I were to ever go home. I could not just do nothing like I had up to that point.

I can vividly remember a day in CYA when the teacher called me up to his desk — I believing for something I had done wrong — and he saying to me I had enough high school credits to graduate and to get a diploma in a year's time if I got serious. This blew my mind, since I hadn't seriously picked up a book since the 5th grade. But somehow, from all the institutions I'd been in, these places were passing me along, giving me school credits.

When the teacher showed me the credits, what else I needed, it was then that a light flashed in my head. To GRADUATE. To GET A DIPLOMA. Nothing else mattered to me, not my do-nothin' buddies, not anything. My goal was to GRADUATE. To GET A DIPLOMA. I was serious.

It was only then that I really went to school. I knew I could cheat my way to my diploma — but that would've, in my mind, made my diploma a phony. I didn't want that. So I hit the books. I studied and studied, constantly raising my grade levels — from it being a 6th grade average to it reaching 11th grade plus — when I got my diploma and indeed graduated. That was pretty cool.

It was at this time I found my love for history. My passion for history remains true to this day.

Paths: In your opinion, can schools help youngsters who live in poor and dangerous communities? If so, how?

Masters: I personally don't think schools hardly have a choice in this matter. Today, so many teachers are confronted with the

living lives of their classroom children who are so traumatized — often frightened by all the dangers they must cope with outside the classroom — that it seems so natural for the role of these kinds of schools, rightly or wrongly, to try to help those youngsters. I say, "rightly or wrongly" because I am aware of the argument that schools are for learning, not to address the social conditions of their students, etc., etc.... But how can a teacher, any teacher, educate a very frightened, traumatized classroom of 4th, 5th, 6th graders?

The teachers I know are involved. They're very much trying to help these youngsters who live in poor and dangerous communities. They do so with a very big heart. But schools can help.

School Violence

Paths: What do you think is the single most important thing that can be done to decrease the likelihood of violence in schools? Among youth in general?

Masters: It's funny, but I am always asked this very question, and every time my answer is the same: To add to the school curriculum the hazards of violence — not only in the conflict resolution studies — but the hazards of knives, guns — you have it — even school trips to prisons, crime scenes, and morgues and cemeteries. Everything!

I know this is a very unpopular idea, especially among parents. But some schools have already made steps in this direction.

Paths: Regarding youth violence, do you think that schools are now part of the solution or part of the problem — or both?

Masters: Probably both. I really believe in my heart that schools can be part of the solution in decreasing youth violence. But not with half-measures. They have to really step in, working more closely with their surrounding communities, and devote their time and energies, money and training, towards addressing solutions to youth violence. I think that using only half-measures makes schools part of the problem.

The Loss of Innocence, The Death of Wonder

Paths: In your book, you talk about a time when, "walking down the street, ... [you] came across a tree growing in the pavement of a parking lot between cars." You write that your "first reaction was to look at it, study it, wonder." But then you reflect that you weren't in school, and you seem to imply that, because you weren't in school, you would "never learn" such things as how it was possible for a tree to grow in this kind of environment. You end this part of the book by writing, very movingly and sadly, "I smashed the little tree because I knew I'd never go to school. There was no room for wonder in my life."

Would your being in school have helped you to develop your sense of wonder? If so, how? More generally, how can we best protect children so that they can live a life of wonder?

Masters: For sure, I often think of where my life could have been if I had not lost that earlier thirst for learning or had lived out my free-spirited, great sense in life wonders that I once had.

There is some innocence here, I believe, of that little boy who I remember being, who used to be so filled with life's questions ... questions that I would've at least sought answers to and seen what doors had opened for me.

Earlier I spoke of remembering to be an astronaut ... a firefighter. And I truly believe it is there, like in all children's dreams and aspirations, that I had begun to plant my own seeds, freely. Because these are the times in a tiny child's life when their very innocence doesn't say to them — No, you cannot be this, cannot that — cannot be an astronaut ... a firefighter! No, these are the precious moments in their lives when everything is possible, when they cannot wait to get big enough to be whatever their tallest dreams want them to be....

And it is in this context that, when I came across that tree growing in the pavement and I looked down at it, studied it, wondering — that I then smashed it. Because not only did I know I'd never go to school to learn how it grew, but also that I would never grow into my own heart like it had, you know?

So when I smashed that tree it was me that I was smashing. I smashed out all my curious sense of wonder, my own heart from any more ideas of becoming anyone. There was just no room, only the bitterness inside. And there are so many at-risk youths whose lives are symbolic of this passage from my book. I receive their many letters all the time. And it shouldn't surprise anyone that they aren't writing from some college campus. Their letters are reaching me from our country's jails and prisons and death rows, all over the United States....

Reaching Out to Others

Paths: If you were released from prison and could give public speeches, what advice would you give to parents, children, adolescents, teachers, and others whom you would like to address?

Masters: I have learnt how to not look that far ahead of myself. So I can't possibly know what advice I would give in public speeches or in whatever form I would be sharing all the lessons of my life-experiences, and what advice I would give to people.... But I can say to you that, whatever advice I might have, I hope it would give faith that we can all make a difference; that no cause is greater than to save whole generations of young people and all of our dreams for a more humane and peaceful world.

Paths: We have heard that your book has been used in school classrooms. Could you talk more about that? In particular, what can young people learn from your story, from your experiences?

Masters: When it was first suggested that my book could be used in classrooms, I honestly thought somebody had bumped their head. And I am glad I was not thinking this when I was writing it.

So it never occurred to me that my book would find its way inside so many classrooms across the country ... and quite honestly, I don't know how to speak to this. But it seems like every classroom is getting something different than the next — whether I am sharing those stories about child abuse or spiritual meditation, life on death row, or my personal trans-

formation — there is a full range of topics, subject matters and ideas, that teachers and college professors are using from *Finding Freedom* in their classrooms. I just feel grateful for this.... Truly.

Transformation Behind Bars

Paths: You found a way to involve yourself in deep learning and transformation in prison. What enabled you to do that?

Masters: What enabled me mostly was in seeing an opportunity to begin asking myself questions at a time in my life when I needed answers. The kinds of questions that no child could have ever asked himself about — the nature of child abuse, neglect, and abandonment, and still my unconditional love for my mother and what she suffered; the questions about why or how I had come to feel safer being locked up, only having done things to express what deep-seated hurt and pain, extreme anger and frustration that I had felt and carried like a shield of honor all throughout my teen years; questions about what entered me into the state prison system at the very age I could have been in college; and all the many other questions that confronted my whole life existence — at only 23 years old, then facing execution in the San Quentin gas chamber.

I had all of these kinds of heartfelt questions stirring inside me. And I needed to know their answers. Not for anyone else, only for myself. But it had so happened that these very questions were also being asked by my legal team, who were deeply involved in my capital murder trial, representing me. And a lot of these questions became the job of my investigator, Melody Ermachild, who was responsible for researching my whole life history. This very caring person, who is still my sturdy guide and greatest friend — that even wrote the foreword to my book — had worked tirelessly, digging up every facet about my life. Melody began sharing with me all the information she was discovering — while graciously sending me books. Then I started seeking out other books, lots of them — one in particular was *Life in Relation to Death*, which I'd seen being offered "free" in a spiritual journal magazine. When I received it, little had I ever known that I would find my Buddhist teacher being its author and the most precious being that opened up my spiritual path. My Buddhist teacher, Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, had opened a vast school of Buddhist teachings that taught me I could find FREEDOM, no matter where I was.

So it was all of this, and especially that feeling in my heart asking for help and then learning how to ask for help — which was the hardest for me — that so many people did, and still do, that had enabled me to take on such a transformation here, in prison.

Paths: Could you describe what form your spiritual practice and work takes in prison? How has your spiritual practice made a difference in your life? How have other prisoners responded to your work?

Masters: Well, I do have a formal spiritual practice that I do at various times throughout the day. This is all done in my cell. It involves sitting meditation, reciting dharma prayers, and many other contemplations, prostrations, etc.

But outside of this, my spiritual practice and the work that I do can't be described in a way that I can point to this or to that.

This is to say, I don't hold any regular meditation sessions with my fellow prisoners or things like this.

You see, my spiritual practice has become so much a part of who I am that in most cases, the form of my work — if I can call it that — is never something I consciously set out to do.... It may just happen that I find myself talking with someone out on the prison exercise yard, about sports or something, and I can see something heavy on his mind — whether his son is not doing okay in school or he just has been feeling so damned mad he wants to knock a hole in the wall with his fist — and we begin "cutting it up." This is an expression often used in prison to mean — talking about this and working our way through those layers of concern or anger, and finding ways to resolve everything going on inside, that are a lot truer of one's real heart. This form of work is just who I am.

But equally, I need to point out that I have always made a conscious effort to NOT use my spiritual practice to offer or defend who I am or what I might say. It is my perspective that is always there. Most prisoners, although they know I am Buddhist, are more responsive to see I am living my spiritual path — than to be up in their faces, preaching it. I mean, why preach it when you can actually live inside it? This, however, doesn't mean to say I don't sometimes get angry. I do. I sometimes get angry on purpose. To show off my anger so that others won't think theirs is so hopeless that it can't be turned into anything else — I have done this many times. It just never surprises me that some people look for examples closer to who they are, than in the impossibility of ever being someone different.

Paths: How important is having a spiritual perspective to educating for peaceful behavior and conflict resolution? Can we educate for peace without our having a spiritual perspective or grounding?

Masters: It is very important. Having a spiritual practice goes a very long way. I am not as knowledgeable as some who could probably point to someone who is without some sort of spiritual perspective or grounding but who had educated/is educating others for peace.

It is an interesting question.... Perhaps if I search my mind over and over someone may come to mind. But I see no examples of this — people who have educated for peace without a spiritual perspective or grounding.

Prisoners Today, Prisoners Tomorrow?

Paths: Are the prisoners whom you know interested in pursuing an education? Why or why not? And what kind of an education do you think might best help them?

Masters: Yes. Mostly all the prisoners I know are very interested in pursuing an education. But more and more, prisons are treating education as a privilege and not readily available to any prisoner who wants to pursue an education. But this is only what I am able to see. There could be excellent educational courses that I am just not aware of.

My own belief is that every prisoner needs to find what he or she is looking for in pursuing an education. I say this

because I have met a lot of very educated prisoners who, and I don't know why, still cannot stay out of the prison system.

Paths: You talk about how your fellow prisoners are mostly people who grew up around violence — abuse and neglect. How can we as individuals and as a country make a difference in the lives of children who are living with so much fear and distress?

Masters: I am not sure I know. It is much too easy to say one difference is to lift these children out of all the circumstances and conditions that keep them living with so much fear and distress. But we all know the problems are a lot more complicated than this, that there is a huge likelihood that these children's parents and their parents before them have all lived with very similar backgrounds as these very children. This is heavy. Not hopeless, just heavy....

It is these children who I pray daily for the most. And it just saddens me, so much so, to know in my heart, at the very core of my being, that every single time that I hear of other prisons being built, it is these very children, still now babies, that these very prisons are being built for.

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