

"Everything of Value You Must Carry Without Hands" is an aphorism we coin in our book The Sacred Eye of the Falcon. It is a spiritual concept and metaphor for "what is truly valuable is already within you."*

Everything has value according to its time and place. When we lose sight of this, we usually start putting a high premium on superficial and temporal things, like money, power, prestige, possessions and fame. But we know that all the money and power in the world can't buy back one minute of lost time, or be useful to you when you are lost in the middle of the desert, or bring you back from death. Nature shows us our worldly possessions are meaningless and can be reduced to rubble by a single catastrophe. The media shows us that anyone can be catapulted to fame and super-stardom today and rendered passé tomorrow. This is why what we value most must come from within ourselves; only then is it authentic and cannot be taken from us.

The people we love and cherish, including family and friends, must be carried without hands. We don't need hands to carry what we value about the people whom we love and respect, because we carry them in our hearts, mind and spirit. They are a part of us, just like our DNA.

It is comforting to have someone in your life to count on for support. But what happens if the situation changes and that person is no longer there? What if you can't contact or rely on family and friends? What if you have no access to a phone, pencil or paper? What if you find yourself in an alien environment, totally isolated? What if you don't recognize the faces or voices around you, and no one will talk to you? What will you do? Who can you turn to? We pose these questions because we have been there.

We have been incarcerated for twenty-six years and twenty-five of those have been on death row. We know what it feels like to be held in solitary confinement, deprived of our meager possessions, and held incommunicado. We know what it feels like to be in an environment where we don't have comrades around to talk to, or anyone to send us a care package or a book to read. We know what it feels like to be in a hostile environment where we don't know anyone and the people around us hate us and want us dead. What could we do? What did we do? We could either sink or swim. We chose to swim by turning inward.

It was the shock of being tossed into an empty cell, stripped of personal property, with no one to talk to, that became our 'gut check,' our 'wake up call' to take action. Through the absence of things we found our inner sanctuary, got a real glimpse of who we were, and arrived at a sacred place. It didn't matter if we lived in a villa

in Monte Carlo, a hut in Rwanda, a temple in Tibet, or resided inside a prison cell on death row. We had to be the agent responsible for finding our sacred place. *The Tao Te Ching* says, "Those who overcome their opponents are powerful; those who overcome themselves are strong." Our sacred place is where we found strength to carry everything of value without hands. One of the things we learned was that a prison is a place filled with distractions, and if a person isn't careful he can inadvertently be pulled from his character and purpose for being, and can take on the nature of all the negativity around him, like the pursuit of drugs, alcohol and pornography, or numbing himself on a steady diet of television and music. He can also develop an unhealthy attachment to privileges—visiting, phone, packages, canteen and yard. Many prisoners value and organize their lives around these privileges, which abruptly can be canceled, denied, or rescinded by arbitrary institutional policy. We knew our value couldn't come from carrying these things or anything outside of ourselves. It had to come from an awareness of what is inside us and who we are as human beings.

In the Gnostic gospel of Thomas, Jesus says: "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." But how do you bring forth what is within you without turning inward and mentally distancing yourself from distracting objects? You can't. This is why

all the great sages and spiritual teachers, like Moses, Buddha, Lao Tzu, the Prophet Muhammad, and other of the world's shamans and swami's retreated to the mountains or wilderness to bring forth what was within them. We need to do the same.

Once we began to assess our situation and determine that the scanty privileges offered to prisoners had little intrinsic value to us, something began to change in us. We began to have a mental catharsis. There were no privileges, property or favor that could be used to pacify us. We believed anything that could be taken from us wasn't ours to begin with. We adopted an attitude that whatever meager possessions we'd acquired were on loan and could be forfeited at anytime. So whenever our captors confiscated our property or transferred us to the hole, they believed they were punishing us, teaching us a lesson by depriving us of property they thought we valued. In fact, we were being saved. We were learning non-attachment and moving from being to becoming. Solitary confinement was our Bodhi Tree; isolation was our mountain; and doing hole-time is like retreating to the wilderness to bring forth what is within us—spiritual strength, creative power, self-awareness.

Most prisoners who end up in a prison cell believe they are alone, but they are not. They have themselves for company and companionship. They have an internal world to be explored. It is in the very

nature for those inside and outside of prison to resist solitude, and try to fill in time and space with things. But it's during quiet time and stillness of thought that we discover ourselves, awaken our consciousness, and bring our essential nature to the foreground.

Prisoners must begin the psychological process of asking themselves, "so what if my personal property is confiscated?" "so what if I'm thrown in the hole?" and "so what if I'm deprived of certain privileges?" Once prisoners get past this stage and realize they'll survive, then they will stop being mentally imprisoned by their own limitations.

There is a depth in our being that we can tap into, inner strength we can draw on in times of crises. This is how we came to understand the truth in the idea, "Everything of value must be carried without hands." We try to live and move in each minute with the awareness of this truth, and we have written this pamphlet to share it with other prisoners.

Works Cited

Blakney, R.B. The Way of Life: A New Translation of the Tao te ching. New York: American Library, 1955.

The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas.

Available for Purchase

The Sacred Eye of the Falcon: Lessons in Life from Death Row by Steve Champion, Stanley Tookie Williams, and Anthony Ross may be purchased at lulu.com.

Dead to Deliverance: A Death Row Memoir by Steve Champion is available on amazon.com.

Steve Champion is a death row prisoner at San Quentin State Prison. A former Crips gang member, he grew up in South Central Los Angeles. Champion has been incarcerated for 24 years. He is self taught and conversant in African history, philosophy, political science, and comparative religion. His memoir, *From Dead to Deliverance: A Death Row Memoir*, was published by Split Oak Press in 2010.

As an author he has received honorary mention in the short fiction category in the 1995 Pen Prison Writing Contest and in 2004 won first place in nonfiction for his essay, "His Spirit Lives On: George E. Marshall." He is also coauthor of *Afterlife*, a death row anthology published in 2003, and he has poetry featured in the book *Voices From The Inside*. An excerpt from his memoir was published in *Maxim* magazine (May 2005). Steve's memorial poem for Stanley Tookie Williams, "My Brother is Gone," may be found on the Internet and/or obtained by writing the author.

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Anthony Ross (now known as Ajani Addae Kamara) was raised in South Central Los Angeles. A former gang member of the Crips he has been incarcerated for 24 years. While in the hole he began to study metaphysics, psychology, mythology, African and Asian history, and follow a spiritual path. After ten years in the maximum security unit (San Quentin's Adjustment Center), he is now a writer and mentor. In 1995 he won the Pen Prison Writing Award for best short fiction: "Walker's Requiem," a riveting account of a young man's last day before being executed.

Ross has been published in several books and periodicals. He appears in the anthology *Children of the Dream: Growing Up Black in America*. Presently he is completing his memoirs, *The Road to Purgatory*, and his memorial prose poem for Stan Williams, "The Words Would Not Come," also appeared on indybay.org and in other publications.

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Reprint 2013

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