

Daniel Perkins — 9/21/2023

High education has been a true blessing in my life. I can't express the (im)perfect storm that has landed me here. I never really believed in coincidences but, I am not uncertain this was no coincidence. I know my fellow alumni created this program. They'd been a part of the Stateville culture so they knew University without Walls (UWW) was a hot ticket. Hell, I don't know what they went through to get accepted but me, it's like I was dropped off the bus and fell into a classroom. A beautiful miracle.

This education has taken on a role in my life that is not supplementary but a central part of my identity. Of course, it didn't start that way. I live in a cell and I'm always looking for a way to get out of it. I didn't know exactly what I'd find in these classrooms but I do know exactly what's in these cells — no room for that discourse here. Even if the classes were commensurate with my prior education, 18 years prior at that point, it would've still been a huge victory. The pedagogy I walked into was nothing like anything I'd experienced.

See, I had lived my life with my head in the sand. I never questioned myself, those around me, or our conditions. It's just what it was. Racism? It looks and feels like everyone's racist to me. Poverty? We all work shitty jobs, live in shitty apartments, lie, cheat, and steal; don't we? Why would we vote? Our votes don't mean shit. I was part of the problem man. This education has awakened this critical consciousness inside me. The aforementioned are not normal. Not everyone lives like that. I have knowledge of US + global history that was conspicuously absent from my life. I'm aware of social, economic, and political policies that control everything. Capitalism is a zero-sum game. Undo this system, billions of people have to lose for a few to win.

My education has transformed my heart. And I place maximum value on my transformed heart over my transformed brain. I know nothing in this life is about me. When I was able to transcend self, I saw there's something powerful about compassion, love, and empathy. I've absorbed the magnitude and far reaching impacts of slavery, poverty, and all forms of oppression. I'm pissed off and I thank my education for the indignance that now burns in me. I can now join a fight that's worth fighting.

We were also asked to share a meaningful or transformative moment thus far. I could talk about graduation, what a celebration, what a moment with family, friends and staff. I could talk about my internships and the real world application of my study. I could talk about being a

teacher's aid in Astronomy. I could certainly talk about the 115 Peace Collective but instead, I've chosen something else that was very impactful on me. If I've learned anything it's that you have to be the change you're fighting for. You have to be an example of the collective and solidarity we stand for.

Well, 2022 was mostly spent preparing for what I knew was going to be a huge trial with literally everything on the line. Staff was so engaged, always asking about court dates, unfoldings, dates, times, etc. Any space, time, or support I needed, they offered it. They're all from Chicago but they were scrambling and figuring out the logistics on how to get there and support me. This was so humblin, so uplifting. This unselfish showing of support and solidarity showed me I'm more than just a student passing through. They're invested in us. You know what it means to have support in those courtroom pews? The state will weave a nasty narrative about you. It's easier to believe when you don't have support behind you. Trials during business hours. My people work their asses off to eke out a living. It's hard to get off one day, let alone a week, without risking their job and at minimum sacrificing pay. I could ramble on about this for pages so I'll close by saying that willingness and effort they put forth to come support me at the most high stakes moment of my life will never be forgotten. I'm proud and blessed to be a part of this community.