

## **Finding Safety Among Incarcerated Men: Rethinking Leadership, Healing, and Masculinity**

Right off of 730 Road on Highway 50, we arrive at a facility enclosed by barbed-wire fences. A patrol officer slowly circles the perimeter in a state patrol SUV, moving at what appears to be just under ten miles per hour. I think to myself, “This is really happening.” The sight of the maximum-security prison is exactly as I had imagined, influenced by years of faithfully watching television series like *Oz*, *60 Days In*, and *Orange Is the New Black*. A melancholic stillness hangs in the air, mingled with a touch of anxiety as I try to process what the next few hours will entail. As we step out of the car and make our way through the parking lot toward the correctional facility, the gravity of the experience begins to settle in.

Security is efficient, the guards and staff surprisingly calm and welcoming. I did not expect such an air of peace. As we walk through the halls and onto the yard, I begin to witness an unexpectedly humanistic and almost euphoric environment among the incarcerated men. “How you doin’, ma’am?” one asks, followed by another: “Are you here to teach the Black Studies class?” They greet one another with dap, a pull-in, and finally, a hug—gestures of camaraderie and mutual respect as they transition between scheduled activities. I feel safe. I feel an unexplained peace. I feel that this is exactly where I am meant to be.

As my colleague and I prepare to begin our Black History Writing class, I notice men looking through the classroom window, curiosity evident on their faces. Though unable to stop and speak, they smile and wave before continuing on. Those who signed up for the class enter the room, some hesitantly, others with confidence. “Is this the Black Studies class?” one asks. We nod in affirmation, welcoming each participant. One man approaches me and asks where I am from, then proudly states, “You probably know my sister.” When he tells me her name, I am stunned—I know her well, well enough to call her a genuine friend. Yet, I had no idea she had a brother who was incarcerated. Suddenly, the experience takes on an even deeper personal significance.

After allowing time for everyone to settle in, we introduce ourselves and outline what to expect from the session. We begin with poetry—its power, its importance, and the necessity of storytelling to preserve our legacies. As we share writing prompts and engage in activities, the men start to open up. They reveal the complexities of their lives through their words, displaying a unique blend of vulnerability and strength. They affirm one another, offer words of encouragement, and share insights with us.

We write together about favorite foods, loved ones, the places we come from, and those we miss. These topics evolve into four hours of deep conversation, encouragement, and reflection. I find myself holding back tears, overwhelmed by the trust they place in us. They affirm us as women, as Black women. They acknowledge the significance of our work. They share heartfelt memories of grandmothers, children, neighborhoods, and hometowns. It is a deeply moving experience—an intimate display of male vulnerability that I have rarely witnessed before.

In that moment, surrounded by these men, I feel safe. I do not know, nor do I care, what crimes brought them here. Some are serving two-year sentences, others twenty, and some will never

leave. But none of that matters right now. What I see before me is leadership of a kind that is increasingly rare outside these prison walls—leadership not tied to status, dominance, or performance, but to accountability, self-reflection, and authenticity.

Despite their circumstances, these men exhibit a level of maturity and wisdom that I have longed to see in many Black male leaders in my community. Unresolved trauma, toxic masculinity, and societal pressures have stifled the ability of some men to lead effectively, whether at home or in their communities. What I witnessed in this prison classroom was a commitment to healing, self-awareness, and personal growth that I wish more male community leaders embraced. Many of these men demonstrated an emotional intelligence that shocked me. They took full responsibility for their actions and expressed gratitude for the strength they have found through their struggles—not in a spirit of avoidance or resistance, but with pride and acceptance.

As I reflect on the experience, a thought lingers in my mind: “Some of these men could have been some of our strongest community leaders.” But I realize that, despite their confinement, they *are* leaders. Their influence, wisdom, and growth are undeniable. The challenge now is to create spaces where men can develop these qualities without incarceration serving as the catalyst.

As we wrap up the session, every single participant asks us to return. They affirm the importance of our work and express their appreciation. Even in their own moments of despair, they speak life into us. I see in their eyes a yearning for more honest conversations, for accountability, for growth. This is a moment where we must redefine leadership standards among Black men. Must all of our leaders be “free”? Or can leadership also emerge within “confinement”?

I say, yes.