2/12/2025

Dear JSTOR,

Enclosed is my submission for the JSTOR Second Chance Month. It is an essay on my own journey with education. I am hoping this will get to you on time.

Our institution just allowed access to JSTOR so it has been amazing just at the volume of resources available now! Thank you!

Sincerely,

Vy Thang

How Getting an Education Became My Purpose

I think my educational journey began when I entered the prison system. It was going through that process was where I began to really discover who I am and what my purpose was.

I remember hearing the story of Malala. The Afghan girl who was given the Noble Peace Prize for her advocacy in giving young girls like her the right to an education. I appreciated her story and was inspired by it. She was nearly killed for advocating the right for her education. Her family, especially her father, risked their lives by supporting her education. It makes me wonder about the things we take for granted. I definitely did. Malala's story got me thinking of my own education. At 17 years old, Malala was given the Noble Peace Prize. At that same age, I was given a mandatory life without parole sentence for the terrible decisions I made.

Before I got locked up, the last grade I completed was the eighth. I came from a family who didn't think that education was necessary to get through life. My parents believed that all a person needed was a "strong back and strong hands". They didn't find any importance in education, so I never took school seriously myself. I remember almost every free time I had outside of school was spent working with my parents at the floral shop. The shop ran by a greedy couple that often take advantage of my parents BECAUSE they were uneducated. During school breaks, while other kids were going relaxing and having fun with their friends, I was in the forest working - picking bear grass, salal, or any other floral plants growing that particular season.

It wasn't until my incarceration that I began opening my mind a little. It was also the first time I finished reading a book. I remember it was *Goosebumps*, by R.L. Stine. Yes, it was a simple kid's book, but being able to read and visualize the scene in my mind was something new. It activated my imagination and made me want to read more. I began reading a lot. I even started reading educational books. My knowledge started to expand, and I was actually excited. However, that excitement didn't last long. A few years into my sentence, I went into a period of depression. I felt a deep sense of hopelessness. My thinking at that time was "what's the point." Why bother learning and studying if I'm never going to get out of prison anyway. This period lasted for several years.

I'm not sure when the shift in my thinking began exactly, maybe seeing and holding my niece for the first time, but I do know I wanted to better myself. I have several nieces and nephews now - age ranging from 8 to 25. They inspired me to be good, because they didn't saw my past choices. All they saw was their uncle. And they wanted me to be good. And I promised them I will. I wanted to be a positive influence on them even if I'm in prison. Education was one of the first step towards that. It was still a challenge because the length of my sentence. However, I didn't let it stop me this time. I kept asking until they gave me an opportunity. And they eventually did.

There were other reasons that motivated me to change -- my parents. I wanted to try to change my parents view on education. In the 27 years of my incarceration, I have not once gotten a letter from my mom or dad. My mom once told me in my Khmer, "Son, if I knew how to write, I would write everyday." I remember being frustrated, but at the same time sadden. It was sad to think that she wouldn't take time to learn how to read or write - even after being in the US since 1984. My parents don't have ANY formal education. They don't know how to read or write in either English OR Khmer. Their unwillingness to learn frustrated me. Remembering the sadness in her voice, it made me wonder if my parent's belief came from something deeper? You see, my parents lived during a time when our country, Cambodia, was taken over by the Khmer Rouge. A communist party ruled by Pol Pot. His idea of a society was to have nothing more than docile working peasants. Any Cambodians that had an education would have been killed. Whether it be lawyers, doctors, teachers, or musicians - they were all killed. So, I wondered If my parents may still, subconsciously - have it in their mind that education somehow equals danger or death? But for me, this realization made me even more determined to become something that the Khmer Rouge tried to eradicate -- an educated Cambodian man.

Fortunately, I no longer have a life without parole sentence because changes in the law 2012 concerning adolescent brain science. Having an ERD now makes it less challenging to get into school. Here I am now, with several certificates and a degree in Business Administration, and pursuing my Bachelor Degree in Liberal Arts and Science. I am driven to educate myself and learning new things. Shakuntala Devi said "Education is not just about going to school and getting a degree. It's about widening your knowledge and absorbing the truth about life." I agree. Education to me is not just about the degree, but I know through its challenges, it had definitely widened knowledge of my own self.

Today parents still don't know how to read and write. But it was through my journey with education that I began to understand them more...and their unwillingness to educate themselves. I know they are still dealing with the trauma of their past. I hope that one day they will come around and talk about it. They will do when they are ready. However, they HAVE come around in their support of my education They actually attended my last graduation at the prison. I know they are proud of me. I'm going to continue on with my education - for the three of us. That has become my purpose.

Vy Thang [redacted]