

Shaka Senghor

After nearly two decades behind bars, much of it in solitary confinement, the Detroit author has turned his experience into a lesson of redemption

BY AMANDA WALDROUPE
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Shaka Senghor describes his younger self as a “young drug dealer with a quick temper and a semi-automatic pistol.”

Senghor grew up inner-city Detroit during the 1980s and early 1990s. He lived a rough life as a teenager – he hustled drugs, lived on the street, was beaten, shot at three times, and saw his friends beaten and murdered. When he was 19, in 1991, he shot and murdered a man. He was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to spend between 17 and 40 years in prison.

In prison, he continued living the lifestyle that had gotten him imprisoned in the first place: he ran a black market, got into fights, disobeyed numerous prison rules. That landed him in solitary confinement. Seven of his years in prison were spent in solitary. Four of those years were consecutive.

In solitary, he began transforming his life through reading and writing. He credits Malcolm X's biography, Plato's “Republic” and other books for helping him reflect on his life and atone for his crimes.

He was released in 2010, after spending 19 years in prison, when he was 40. He is now a social activist and works to raise awareness about prison issues. He has been a fellow at MIT's Media Lab and the Kellogg Foundation and he currently works as the director of strategy and innovation with #cut50, an initiative to reduce America's prison population in half by 2025. He also speaks regularly around the country; his TED talk has been viewed more than 1 million times.

His memoir, “Writing My Wrongs: Life, Death and Redemption in an American Prison,” was released earlier this year and details his time in prison and focus on a major theme in his work and life – the capability imprisoned people have to transform their lives.

Amanda Waldroupe: *During your TED talk, you said that the events that led you to commit murder as a teenager were “pretty straightforward” and include events like your parent's divorce. People may not appreciate how significant life-altering things like abuse and*



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parents' divorce are to a teenager and child.

Shaka Senghor: A lot of times parents don't take into account that when they separate or divorce, it destabilizes the family foundation. That has a profound impact on children, depending on how the parents handle it. Sometimes it comes from an unhealthy place. That's what happened with me. My parents split, and there was no longer any stability in the home. My mother was abusive – emotionally, physically, mentally. My mother's reaction to that split wasn't healthy. The antagonism and the abuse became much more pronounced. That's when I decided to runaway. I was 14. I ran away, I was basically in transient homelessness for a couple weeks. I was sleeping in garages and basements, hustling food from the grocery store. Then I was lured into the drug trade and started selling drugs at 14.

A.W.: *To you, as a child, running away must have seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to do.*

S.S.: When you're a child going through traumatic experiences, you think you have everything figured out. In reality, I was naive and very vulnerable. That's how many people get lured into sex trafficking, human trafficking, and all the unhealthy experiences that come with street culture.

A lot of research is being done right now in adolescent brain research, to understand whether juveniles are able to understand their actions, feel remorse after committing a crime, and so on.

A.W.: When did you first feel regret for what you had done?

S.S.: I think the moment the shooting happened. I felt immediate remorse. Unfortunately, I wasn't emotionally evolved enough to process it on a deeper level and... [take] full responsibility. I was still young. I was 19 years old. It's hard to take into the

fullness of everything you've just experienced – this traumatic event, that you've devastated a family, two families. Yours and the victim's family.

A.W.: *You were in solitary confinement for nine years. You said in an interview with NPR that you grew used to the smell of “human despair.”*

S.S.: There's no physical contact. There's no day-to-day interaction at a human level. Even if you get a visit, it's behind a glass window. The only time you get any physical contact is if you're being shaken down and officers transporting you to the yard or the shower, or anything like that. It wasn't healthy contact. It was officers making their rounds, making sure you're alive or not doing anything illegal and you can go to your recreation, which is in a cage.

In solitary confinement, there's a high level of mental illness. Guys get into conflict, they throw feces on each other, they urinate on each other. [Officers] use pepper spray. It smells like desperation.

Solitary confinement is designed to make you worse. In the current model, there are no efforts at rehabilitation, no effort to help you transition to become healthy and whole. It's designed to break your will, break you down, and destroy your humanity.

A.W.: *How were you not broken down?*

S.S.: Reading and writing, mostly. Asking questions to myself, how did I go from being an honor roll student and wanting to be a doctor to shooting someone? Exercising. Anything I could do to take my mind off of solitary confinement.

A.W.: *You credit reading and writing for changing your life. How?*

S.S.: Being able to read was so important in my life. It allowed me to create a pathway for myself. Once I read Malcolm X's autobiography, I knew that anything was possible. That inspired me to read all types

of stuff from political science to world science to theology. Anything you could think of I was reading. It helped me deal with a lot of my personal baggage and gave me a great way to escape from prison with words and pages.

A.W.: *You focus a lot on the idea of atonement and the tools needed to reflect and think about what led you to do what you did. What does atonement mean to you?*

S.S.: It means working toward being one with yourself and the community through real action – like mentoring and working on gun violence issues and working on prison reform in a way that honors and respects victims and families and the communities that [imprisoned] men and women are returning to.

A.W.: *You call for a more empathetic approach to incarceration. You said that “anybody can have a transformation if we create the space for that to happen” and that you “envision a world where men and women aren't held hostage to their paths.” What needs to change? How is that space created?*

S.S.: Our prison is one big warehouse right now. I believe that we can create opportunities for people to come home healthy. We have failed in our efforts to do that. I think it starts with us being honest with ourselves. I don't have much faith that the politicians will make the change on their own. Politicians have been great at convincing the American public that being tough on crime is the best way to go. Every citizen in this country has a responsibility to know what's happening in our prisons. We're paying the taxes and we're footing that bill. It's absolutely crazy that we pay taxes for something so big and not be aware.

A.W.: *What do you hope people learn from “Writing My Wrongs?”*

S.S.: I want people to learn about the power of forgiveness, the power of redemption, second chances, what empathy really looks like. We've been sold the idea that politicians lock people and hide the key until they're ready to come home. The majority of men and women (in prison) will be getting out. Do we want healthy men and women? We have men and women who are coming home, who want to do something meaningful of their lives, and asking (ourselves) a question: how would I feel if I was trying to get a job, being constantly rejected because of my felony, and trying to get an apartment and I was told that I can't because I have this felony?

A.W.: *Recently, in Portland, four teenagers, between the ages of 14 and 16, approached one of their classmates with a knife and demanded that he hand over his money. Under Oregon's mandatory minimum sentencing law, they were initially considered as adults and charged with armed robbery. Do you think that's an appropriate way of dealing with teenagers who commit crimes?*

S.S.: Treating juveniles as adults is absurd. Their brains are still developing. They're still kids who don't fully understand consequences. Getting them counseling, vocational training, peer-to-peer mentoring. Kids don't do random stuff for nothing. If you're bullying somebody, you've probably been bullied. How do you break that cycle? I don't think that school is the only way you break it.