

Marlon Peterson was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York City. He is a graduate of New York University and a writer, youth development expert and human justice advocate. Since his release from prison in 2009, after serving 10 years, Peterson has started two youth development programs in New York City. With a focus on gun violence prevention and youth advocacy, both programs have provided help for hundreds of young people.

Marlon Peterson

Am I not human? A call for criminal justice reform

Transcript:

She wrote: “When I become famous, I will tell everyone that I know a hero named Marlon Peterson.”

[00:20] Heroes rarely look like me. In fact, I’m what garbage looks like. No, not the most appealing way to open a talk or start a conversation and perhaps you have some questions going through your head about that. Why would this man say such a thing about himself? What does he mean? How can someone view
5 him as a hero when he sees himself as garbage?

[00:43] I believe we learn more from questions than we do from answers. Because when we’re questioning something, we’re invested in taking in some sort of new information, or grappling¹ with some sort of ignorance that makes us feel uncomfortable. And that’s why I’m here: to push us to question, even when it makes us uncomfortable.

10 [01:02] So, my parents are from Trinidad and Tobago, the southernmost island in the Caribbean. Trinidad is also home to the only acoustic instrument invented in the 20th century: the steel pan. Deriving from² the African drums and evolving from the genius of one of the ghettos in Trinidad, a city called Laventille, and the disregard³ of the American military... Well, I should tell you, America, during WWII, had military bases set up in Trinidad, and when the war ended, they left the island littered with empty oil drums – their trash.
15 So people from Laventille repurposed⁴ the old drums left behind into the full chromatic scale⁵: the steel pan. Playing music now from Beethoven⁶ or Bob Marley⁷ or 50 Cent⁸, those people literally made music out of garbage.

20 [01:54] Twelve days before my 20th birthday, I was arrested for my role in a violent robbery attempt in Lower Manhattan. While people were sitting in a coffee shop, four people were shot. Two were killed. Five of us were arrested. We were all the products of Trinidad and Tobago. We were the “bad immigrants”, or

¹ kæmpe

² *Deriving from*: Beslægtet med

³ foragt

⁴ genbrugte

⁵ *chromatic scale*: kromatisk skala på i alt 12 toner, svarende til de hvide og sorte tangenter på et klaver

⁶ *Ludwig van Beethoven*: tysk komponist (1770-1827)

⁷ *Bob Marley*: jamaicansk sangskriver (1945-1981)

⁸ *50 Cent*: amerikansk rapper (f. 1975)

the “anchor babies⁹” that Trump and millions of Americans easily malign¹⁰. I was discarded¹¹, like waste material – and justifiably so to many. I eventually served 10 years, two months and seven days of a prison sentence. I was sentenced to a decade of punishment in a correctional institution. I was sentenced to irrelevance – the opposite of humanity.

25 [02:45] Interestingly, it was during those years in prison that a series of letters redeemed¹² me, gave me..., helped me move beyond the darkness and the guilt associated with the worst moment of my young life. It gave me a sense that I was useful. She was 13 years old. She had wrote¹³ that she saw me as a hero. I remember reading that, and I remember crying when I read those words.

30 [03:11] She was one of over 50 students and 150 letters that I wrote during a mentoring correspondence¹⁴ program that I co-designed with a friend who was a teacher at a middle school in Brooklyn, my hometown. We called it the Young Scholars Program. Every time those young people shared their stories with me, their struggles, every time they drew a picture of their favorite cartoon character and sent it to me, every time they said they depended on my letters or my words of advice, it boosted my sense of worthiness. It gave me a sense of what I could contribute to this planet. It transformed my life.

35 [03:49] Because of those letters and what they shared with me, their stories of teen life, they gave me the permission, they gave me the courage to admit to myself that there were reasons – not excuses – but that there were reasons for that fateful day in October of 1999; that the trauma associated with living in a community where guns are easier to get than sneakers; that the trauma associated with being raped at gunpoint at the age of 14 – that those are reasons for me why making that decision, that fatal decision, was
40 not an unlikely proposition¹⁵.

[04:28] Because those letters mattered so much to me, because writing and receiving and having that communication with those folks so hugely impacted my life, I decided to share the opportunity with some friends of mine who were also inside with me. My friends Bill and Cory and Arocks, all in prison for violent crimes also, shared their words of wisdom with the young people as well, and received the sense of
45 relevancy in return. We are now published writers and youth program innovators and trauma experts and gun violence prevention advocates¹⁶, and *TED* talkers and –

(Laughter)

[04:59] and good daddies. That’s what I call a positive return of investment¹⁷.

50 [05:04] Above all else, what building that program taught me was that when we sow, when we invest in the humanity of people no matter where they’re at, we can reap amazing rewards.

⁹ *anchor babies*: nedsættende betegnelse for børn af illegale indvandrermodre

¹⁰ sviner til

¹¹ kasseret

¹² frelste

¹³ written

¹⁴ *mentoring correspondence*: mentorordning med brevskrivning

¹⁵ udfald

¹⁶ *gun violence prevention advocates*: fortalere for forebyggelse af vold begået med skydevåben

¹⁷ *return of investment*: investeringsafkast

55 [05:16] In this latest era of criminal justice reform, I often question and wonder why – why is it that so many believe that only those who have been convicted of nonviolent drug offenses merit¹⁸ empathy and recognized humanity? Criminal justice reform is human justice. Am I not human? When we invest in resources that amplify¹⁹ the relevancy of people in communities like Laventille or parts of Brooklyn or a ghetto near you, we can literally create the communities we want.

60 [05:50] We can do better. We can do better than investing solely in law enforcement as a resource, because they don't give us a sense of relevancy that is at the core of why so many of us do so many harmful things in the pursuit of mattering²⁰. See, gun violence is just a visible display of a lot of underlying traumas. When we invest in the redemptive²¹ value of relevancy, we can render²² a return of both personal responsibility and healing. That's the people work I care about, because people work.

[06:23] Family, I'm asking you to do the hard work, the difficult work, the churning²³ work of bestowing²⁴ underserved kindness upon those who we can relegate²⁵ as garbage, who we can disregard and discard easily. I'm asking myself.

65 [06:39] Over the past two months, I've lost two friends to gun violence, both innocent bystanders. One was caught in a drive-by while walking home. The other was sitting in a café while eating breakfast, while on vacation in Miami. I'm asking myself to see the redemptive value of relevancy in the people that murdered them, because of the hard work of seeing the value in me. I'm pushing us to challenge our own capacity to fully experience our humanity, by seeing, by understanding the full biography of people who we can easily choose not to see, because heroes are waiting to be recognized, and music is waiting to be made.

70 Thank you.

(2017)

¹⁸ fortjener

¹⁹ forstærker

²⁰ at være af betydning

²¹ forløsende

²² yde

²³ (her) bestandige

²⁴ give

²⁵ tilsidesætte