

Back to Life

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It was the first week of June, 2005. The early morning sun beamed through the window directly onto my face, waking me from my rest. I glanced at the clock on the desk; it was just after 9 a.m. I yawned, rolled over on my back, stretched, then folded my hands beneath my head. *Here we go again.* Still half asleep, I stared at the bottom of the top bunk blemished with a few rust spots, peeled paint, and tags of different names of people, places, affiliations, and professions of love.

My cellie lay on his bunk quietly listening to his small Sony radio. I tuned in to the music to keep my mind off my new reality and the seriousness of the charges I was being accused of. I closed my eyes and tried to relax. I could barely hear the beat and voice squealing through the small earbuds my cellie used for his radio. I listened more intently and was able to make out a few words: "This can't be life ... this can't be love ... it's gotta be more ... " The song's lyrics instantly brought back unwanted memories from the last time I was in prison four years earlier, in this very same unit, only a few cells down. Although the circumstances were different, I was listening to the same song, thinking the exact same thing... *This can't be life*

Suddenly I was looking at different scenes of my life – both good and bad – in kaleidoscopic pictures. Tuning out the music, I observed the images intently, hoping they held some message or sign that would lead to my freedom; freedom from not only the place I was physically imprisoned but freedom from the mindset that led to what my life had become. After several minutes, my eyes opened, and my body jerked as if I had awakened from a nightmare. My heart was pounding. I sat up quickly, took a deep breath, and exhaled to calm my heart and steady my breathing. Full of anxiety, I snatched the sheets from over me, sat up, placed my feet on the floor, rested my elbows on my thighs. My forehead rested in the palm of my left hand as I gazed at the floor, contemplating. I thought about my kaleidoscopic vision and took that as a sign that I needed to change my life. However, given the many times I've tried and failed to do just that, I thought it would be impossible.

"Cellie, you straight?" my cellmate asked, interrupting my thoughts.

"I'm good. I just got up," I said groggily, a little annoyed. I sat up and leaned back underneath the bunk, out of his sight. I pushed the mental images out of my mind, laid back down and started listening to the music. As I listened to the song, the chorus kept resounding and repeating. "*This can't be life. This can't be love. It's gotta be more*". It seemed like this was all I could hear.

My emotions began stirring inside of me. Old internal wounds reopened; wounds from lost love, opportunities, hope, and dreams deferred. Fear. I usually masked these wounds and treated them with drugs, alcohol, sex, money, material objects, or some other vice. But today, I was forced to face myself unmasked. Nowhere to run, no place to hide. I closed my eyes and tried to use my imagination to escape. But all I could see was my grandmother. She looked sad, full of pain, disappointed. I fought hard to hold back the tears. Men aren't supposed to cry. I felt angry and ashamed because I had let

myself down. I'd also let down the people who loved and cared about me the most and made so many sacrifices to give me a better life and future. My grandmothers, my mother, aunts, uncles, two older cousins, surrogate mothers and fathers, and two of my junior high school teachers. They all wanted nothing but the best of everything good for me. They expected nothing but for me to be true to myself, do my very best, and add to the good of the world in any way that I could. I thought of my little brothers and sisters, my nieces, nephews, and a host of younger cousins, friends, and admirers who all looked up to me. I thought of the harm I was not only causing myself but the harm I was causing the people I love and my community by my actions and negative example. I thought of the man I was accused of killing, his family, especially his children. I thought of my life when things were all so simple. The times when my life was filled with love, peace, and true happiness. *How could I get back there?*

"This can't be life... this can't be love... it's gotta be more..." I recited the lyrics to myself and let the tears fall. It felt like they washed away all of my fear, worry, pain, anger, shame, and hopelessness. Restored was my faith and courage to start a new journey to become the great and honorable man who lives his life with love, integrity, dignity, and respect for self as well as for others, just like my mother, grandmothers, and aunts raised me to be.