

A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison

by R. Dwayne Betts

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Reviewed by:

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The book, *A Question of Freedom*, is the story of a young man, Dwayne Betts, whose decision to break the law at age 16 changed his life forever. As the reader follows Dwayne's story, it flows like a series of discoveries about the man he might have been, the prisoner he becomes, and a vision of how he will spend the rest of his life. The 30 minutes it took for Dwayne to hold a gun to a man's head in a shopping mall parking lot were long enough to earn him eight years in prison. In this coming-of-age story, one that truly takes place behind bars, Dwayne discusses choices and the consequences of those choices.

On my lips and in my head was the start of a new language defined by the way words changed meaning, all because I'd decided to make a man a victim. New words like inmate, state number and juvenile certification had crept into my vocabulary. An inmate is what I'd become as soon as the deputies picked me up from the juvenile detention center...the most important thing anyone needed to know about me was my state number. It was a five-digit number I soon learned meant more than my name. It said I was who I said I was whenever I walked around the jail with the band they attached to my arm. (Betts, p. 6)

Dwayne reflects not only on what happened prior to his incarceration, but also on the choices he makes while in prison related to furthering his education, interacting with other prisoners, and his behavior within the walls of prison. He also describes what the judicial process was like for him as a young Black male, which he explains to be fairly consistent with other young Black men who have been convicted of crimes. Dwayne talks about his conscious effort to not cause trouble in the prisons where he serves his sentence to prevent additional punishment or time to his prison term and avoid conflict with other prisoners. The fear of being attacked in any way by other prisoners is always on Dwayne's mind.

The author gives credit to other prisoners who helped him learn what to do and not do in jail. These men were friends as much as they could be in a place described as dehumanizing the inhabitants who make up the population. Their inmate friends were protectors, faith mentors, sounding boards, or just warm bodies that shared cell space, and they impacted his experience in ways he would never forget.

Throughout the text, the judicial and prison systems are described in a less than positive manner. As much as it happens on the outside, drug dealing, assault, gang practice, and more takes place regularly behind the jail walls. In an interesting analogy Dwayne compares prison life to *Lord of the Flies*.

The only thing that saved me for all the years were all the people I met who were good dudes and steered me in the direction I wanted to go. There was nothing in the system that was guiding us. We were the adult version of *Lord of the Flies*, with the

COs most of the time little more than the backdrops who witnessed the rage some folks couldn't handle. (Betts, p. 227)

While in prison, Dwayne explores faith and religion—as a form of power, redemption, or solidarity for some of the prisoners. As part of this exploration, he considers Islamic practices and beliefs and searches for a way to connect with other men in the prison for friendship and/or protection.

The struggle to further his education was also a battle for Dwayne while in prison. He described resources available to prisoners as being inadequate unless they sought ways to get new and additional materials. For several of the incarcerated men, reading book after book and learning new skills like languages were ways to escape their reality. Fiction and nonfiction books, personal biographies, and history texts were avenues for daydreaming about what was happening in the world around the prisons. Before prison, the author had been a good student with potential to do well in school. Once in prison, Dwayne's educational abilities became irrelevant to anyone around him. Perhaps in an effort to find a mental escape or because he knew that at some point he would no longer be in prison, Dwayne focused on reading everything he could get his hands on. He also wrote about his experiences in prison, his thoughts about society and the system that convicted him, the choices that led him to prison, and the lessons he hoped someone reading his work would see and understand. He states that:

[his book is] about hoping that there can be more moments when people who have scarred themselves, their families and society can be given the space to redeem themselves. It is the story of the thirty minutes it took for me to shatter my life into the memory of one cell after another and the cost of walking away from a bad idea a minute too late. (Betts, p. 237)

A Question of Freedom is a good book to spearhead discussions about personal choices and consequences. Specifically for first-year college students, this text has some great themes for instructors or book discussion leaders to pose challenging questions about how decisions that are made in and out of the classroom, or on and off campus, can have a dramatic impact on their lives. Discussions about choices don't need to be limited to things related to breaking the law, but can include topics about social media, service involvement, academic responsibilities, and more. If the book is coupled with an in-person visit, presentation, or follow-up by the author, new students will more likely be able to make the connections between consequences of decisions and overcoming major obstacles in life.

What this book also brings forward are the harsh realities of the judicial and prison systems as described by a formerly incarcerated young Black man. For students interested in social justice, political science, criminal justice, diversity awareness, and victim's rights, this would also be a wonderful cross-over text from a FYE or University 101 course into other disciplines. Additionally, these other topical areas may provide a great partnership for programming with faculty across the campus. The religious exploration in this book is another dynamic that can be examined for first-year students who may be exposed to faith beliefs different than their own for the first time. If their institution has systems and avenues in place, students who have read *A Question of Freedom* may be encouraged to get connected to the local community through service with inner-city schools or programs to educate youth about choices and consequences. Especially for students new to a community, this might be the perfect catalyst to start a collegiate commitment to giving back and service in general.

A final recommendation is to partner with English or literature courses to read some of the books Dwayne read while in prison. Breaking down those additional texts, looking for meaning and

how they influenced the author's life, is another method to understand how one person found solace, patience, and peace for eight years behind bars. *A Question of Freedom* is a good book for use in common reading programs. Students will find it easy to read, interesting to keep up with, and relatable to their ability to make choices and understanding the consequences that come from their decisions.