



DOOR OF *No Return*

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I don't think that our Creator sends us anywhere to be silent observers or tourists. Most times we go to learn things that we didn't know, we needed to know, that we didn't know. This was my wife and my experience when returning to Dakar Senegal. We returned to the Door of No Return on Goree Island. Goree Island is off the coast of Senegal, opposite Dakar. From the 15th to the 19th centuries, it was the largest slave-trading center on the African coast. Ruled in succession by the Portuguese, Dutch, English and French, its architecture is characterized by the contrast between the grim slave-quarters and the elegant houses of the slave traders. Today it continues to serve as a reminder of human exploitation and as a sanctuary for reconciliation.

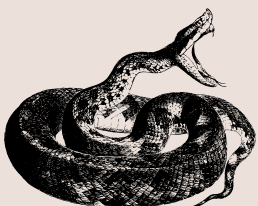
The return of my wife and I to Goree Island was a spiritual journey across the Atlantic ocean. It was a return that millions of our ancestors longed and prayed for during the darkest chapter in human history. My wife and I are thankful for the lifeblood that courses through our veins, because of our ancestors' ability to live and endure through the brutal inhumane conditions of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Millions upon millions of Africans were brutally tortured and uprooted from their ancestral lands and forced into chattel slavery in a foreign land. We returned to pay homage for their sacrifices and endurance. One of the many definitions of return is to bring, send, or put back to a former or proper place. Nothing can erase the history of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and It should never be forgotten. Historical amnesia leads to the repetition of atrocities that we can see happening today, if we only stop and look. Remembering and acknowledging what happened during this time in history brings what we are witnessing today into its proper context.

On Goree Island there were originally over a dozen slave houses and each slave house had a "Door of No Return." Those who were condemned to be transported into slavery had to pass through this door; many never saw their families and homeland again but were to be subjected to the brutal conditions of spiritual, physical and heretical genocide. All the slave houses were torn down, and only one stands today. We were blessed to tour the remaining slave house. My wife and I intentionally stood in the Door of No Return to make a lie of it. We stood in honor of our ancestors and offered a prayer in recognition of their strength and the suffering that they endured. As I walked through the slave chambers, I calmed my emotions and spirit and allowed myself to breathe deeply and slowly, channeling the presence, energy and spirit of our ancestors that still remain. And the totality of my spirit was embraced.

It's been a week since we visited Goree Island and I'm still processing my emotions and staying open to what the Creator wanted me to receive. When talking to my wife, she shared with me some of her emotional and spiritual responses. She pointed out to me that my imprisonment was a "Door of No Return." Her insight became the physical catalyst that opened my eyes to what I didn't know, that I didn't know. When I was 17 years old, I was condemned to die in prison. I was given a life without parole sentence. I remained in bondage for over 27 years not being able to see my family, and not knowing if I would ever see freedom again. I was being subjected to inhumane treatment physically, emotionally and spiritually. When I stood before the judge on September 10th, 1990 and was given the sentence of life without parole in the Arkansas Department of Corrections, I was shackled, handcuffed and pushed onto a bus, having been told by the state of Arkansas that I would never see freedom again. Life Without Parole and Death by Incarceration is a "Door of No Return," and hundreds of thousands of people are going or have gone through it.

Many have died, some have committed suicide because of the conditions. Some are praying that the hearts of their oppressors will soften. Mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers are petitioning the Creator for change. All are actively fighting for freedom by assisting abolitionists in changing the laws that are sanctioning their bondage. The 13th Amendment exception clause, mandatory minimum, three strike, and habitual offender laws all have been codified into law that buttresses mass incarceration. We are witnessing the new iteration of slavery, while people are practicing turning their heads.

Go to any prison in America and you will see the ghostly outline of Goree Island. Look into any cell block and you will see hundreds of "Doors of No Return" that are housing the brothers and sisters that can be assets to their respective communities. Goree Island stands as a sanctuary for reconciliation, and despite the fact that we can never change what happened in the past, we can fight to stop it from happening in the present. Our prisons are slave houses that we must tear down. The current penal system is an extension of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. It's the same slave trade, just a different ship.



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