

**Name:** Brandon Bellamy

**Title:**

**Organization or Agency:** Incarcerated in CT DOC

**Topic:** Meeting Date Not Listed

NA

**Testimony:**

"Buried Alive"

What does it mean to be sentenced to "life," rather than death, at the age of 22 years old?

At 22, I was taken captive and buried alive by an ambitious and corrupt judicial system. Prosecutors and judges—those at the helm of this system—tried, convicted, and sentenced me to 100 years of confinement, a life sentence. Over the course of that sentence, one experiences a hopeless and never-ending battle with the system, deplorable living conditions, the complete forfeiture of even the smallest liberties, and the ever-present feeling of loss and separation from one's loved ones. The weight of oppression bears down, causing the body to deteriorate, and the mind, overwhelmed by its conditions, to suffocate. It is a type of death, then, and not life, that colors and defines a life sentence. Though their names hint at opposite natures, a death sentence and a life sentence carry the same objective: to take life away.

What does it mean to be sentenced to life rather than death?

To answer that question, one should consider what it means to be alive, how integral freedom and choice are to that experience. To be able to come and go as you please, to access quality healthcare, to eat what you want, when you want, and to see loved ones at will are the luxuries of life missing from a life sentence. The ache that comes from this deprivation kills you from within. In *The Bet* by Anton Chekhov, he writes: "Lifelong imprisonment kills you slowly, capital punishment kills a person at once, which executioner is more the humane, he who kills you in a few or he who drags the life out of you in a course of many years?"

My executioners—judges, attorneys, legislators—are impervious to the lives they destroy. On the day of my sentencing, my life ended. The days, and careers, of those who'd ended it—both directly and by the indirect means of their interests—carried on rather well at my expense. I, on the other hand, received my branding, a bright orange jumpsuit, and was sent, or sold off, to a warden who would be my master, to live out the rest of my life at a prison that would be my plantation. As I embarked on my voyage, its destination was both unknown and known. I did not know where exactly I would end up, but I knew—in an ancestral and historical way—the fate I was to meet. I knew that my feeling of capture, voyage, and unknown destination had been experienced by generations prior. 22-year-old me thought, "Now I know what they felt."

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Before he was hauled off, he inhaled deeply, breathing in the inner city smell he had loved so well. He tried to stitch it into the fabric of his nostrils, store it somewhere deep and untouched within himself. As the bus passed through the countryside, he kept his eyes peeled on the wildlife, hoping to capture and keep that vision of freedom: the trees in full blossom, livestock roaming rich land, stallions running wild and free. What was to come, and how little he knew of it, made his palms sweat. His clothes were drenched as the bus, filled with precious cargo, arrived at its cargo's destination. This bus, though, like a middle passage ship, would make countless more journeys.

Upon arrival, he tried to learn the place where he would live out the rest of his natural life. His home, an

eight feet by 5 feet cell, was enclosed by wall-to-wall concrete. In his cell, there was nothing more than a stainless steel toilet and a small desk with a seat attached. As he lay on his bed, its metal springs invading his back, he took a deep breath, or tried to. On attempting to exhale, the cell began to close in on him and the tiny room, which trapped him and his future, felt indistinguishable from a coffin. Rigor mortis took hold of his body and he fell into a deep sleep.

Days turned into months, months into years, and now, the captive is no longer 22 years old. He who has been renamed (and branded) #310046 has, nevertheless, been molded by his experiences, by other educated prisoners who took him under their wing. They schooled him on jail ethics, respect, and valuing people's time. They taught him how to read and understand the law, helped him get his G.E.D, but most importantly, they taught him how to respect himself.

While under constant siege by prison guards who took away his library time, the captive studied into the night silently. When his gym privileges were revoked, the captive worked out relentlessly in his cell. When programs were not available to him, the captive used his own personal funds to attain the same information. He began to understand that the life sentence that was handed down to him did not need to be a death sentence.

It was never really one to begin with, but a sort of unalive in-between, a burying alive, a burying of life. Despite the packed dirt bearing down on him, though, his desires seeped through. When relatives came to visit, the forced goodbyes after visits cut short gave him an all-over sort of hurt. But they also electrified him with rage. When his executioners put a chokehold around him financially, mentally, and physically, he remembered how important his breath was. His spiritual beliefs, too, were his primary sustenance, affirming that his mind and soul had a home that was not a cell.

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I was sentenced to life when I was 22, but in order that my life sentence not become a death sentence, I had to spend the last 18 years of my incarceration learning how to live by whatever means possible. In truth, there is little difference between a life sentence and a death sentence—to be sentenced to life is more akin to being sentenced to a slow death. But it is all that this sentence deprives you of—smell, touch, intimacy, choice—that reminds you of all you desire, and in that desire, you are unable to forget the meaning, purpose, and value possessed inherently by you and all human beings. You are unable to forget that you are alive.