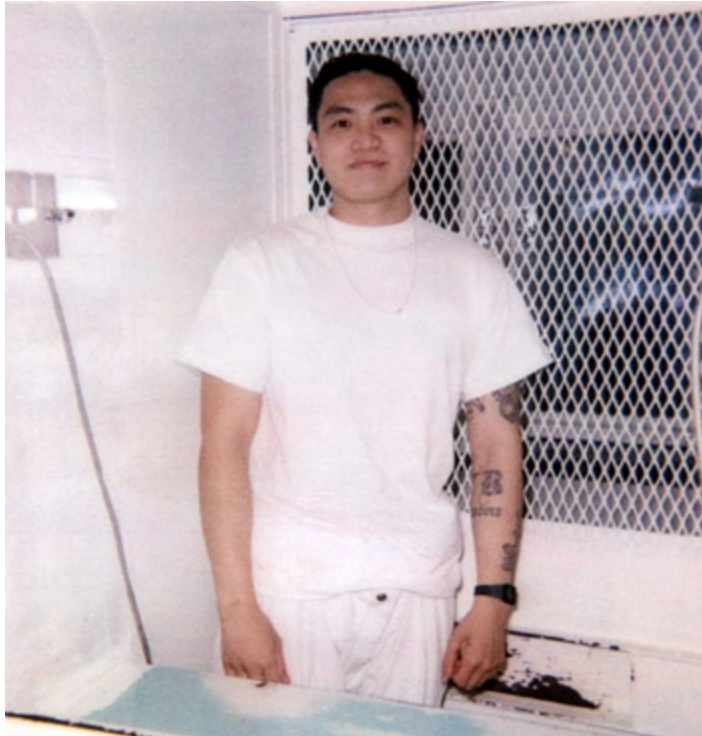


A Life of Significance



by Son Tran



Son Tran is a 27-year-old Vietnamese-American who has been incarcerated in Texas for the past ten years. A former gang member, he was sentenced to death at the age of 17 after he signed a confession which he alleges was extracted from him illegally and under duress. In 2005, when the United States Supreme Court outlawed the death penalty for offenders who had been minors at the time of their crimes, Son was moved from Death Row and resented to a minimum of 40 years before the chance of parole.

During a lengthy correspondence with him, I encouraged him to write his story in his words. Although I suggested some additions to the first draft, I have not interfered with the final text editorially. I am presenting it without making any judgment or representations regarding its content.

—Charles Platt, December, 2008

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Time and again, vivid dreams of freedom captivate my mind as I slumber restlessly. A teasing sense of reality haunts me in my dreams, tempting me to believe that freedom is again mine—until suddenly I reawaken to the cold world of the Texas Penitentiary.

Within a moment, the truth becomes apparent. I fight to regain sleep, but to no avail. I lie motionless for a time, trying to gather my thoughts to begin another day. Each waking moment is a physical and mental strain. Life behind these merciless walls will tax one's essence with impunity and with no regard for one's well being. Mustering all my strength, I get up to begin a new day.

Even after washing up, I cannot shake off the vivid scenes from dreams that replay in my head. An urge in me becomes almost a panic attack, as my Great Spirit cries out to me with such urgency, expressing a need to speak to someone beyond my prison. And so, I sit down at the rusty steel desk. Feeling the familiar cold metal on my skin, I begin to pen the song of my Great Spirit. Will you stop long enough to listen?

* * *

I will never forget the time I entered the Harris County Jail, in Houston, Texas, and was quickly thrown into an empty prison cell. My senses were immediately assaulted by the reek of stale, musty

air, urine, feces, and human sweat. The odor was unbearable. I was sick to my stomach. Even after I swept the cell the smells continued to linger. There was no telling how many men had been devoured by the emptiness of that cell. It consisted of a stainless steel sink and toilet unit, a small concrete slab for a desk protruding from the wall, a circular concrete stump serving as a stool in place before the desk, very uncomfortable to use, and a large slab of concrete about four feet above the floor, connected to the back wall, to be used as a cot, with a thin, beaten-down blue mattress.

In the block where I was housed, there were two tiers. Each tier contained twelve men, each in a single-man cell for twenty-three-and-a-half hours per day. Inmates were permitted only 30 minutes out of the cell to shower or to use the phone.

My cell was located in the furthest left corner of the second tier. There was no window for sunlight; my days and nights were entwined as one. There was only a small inspection window in the door, for the guards to view the interior during count time.

Prisoners had no control over the cell lights shining down from the ceiling. The guards controlled the lights from the picket. I would quickly learn that the guards liked to keep the lights off for long stretches of time, because this made the prisoners sleep more, and the more the prisoners slept, the less work the guards had to do. Usually, though, the guards would turn on the lights when the prisoners complained enough.

The runway lights outside the cell were kept dim, barely penetrating the darkness through the small inspection window. When the cell lights were off I would stand next to that little window to get what little light I could. It is hard to imagine a man's existence

in these conditions. But nothing haunted me more than hearing the clash of steel on steel, commanding infinite authority, as if to tell me that I would never leave, as the cell door slammed. I was alone with my thoughts, and the never-ending sound of steel on steel reverberating in my mind. Still, to this day, I cannot recall the face of the guard who slammed my cell door, let alone his name.

* * *

In the Fall of 1997, when this reality would become my living nightmare, I was seventeen years old, still a child, yet old enough to stand trial on a charge of capital murder and face the ultimate punishment of death, which would become my dreadful shadow for the next five years.

I was the youngest of three defendants charged in a gang slaying, and the only one sentenced to death. Both of my codefendants were in their late twenties, and agreed to sign a deal for a life sentence to avoid the death penalty. I was never offered any deals, but it wouldn't have mattered, for I would have refused to sign. A life sentence is little different from a death sentence. In the former you die by yearly instalments, while in the latter you die within a few years. Not much of a choice for a seventeen-year-old to make. So, I waited for my trial.

It was mid-December of 2000—a delay of three years—before I went to trial with court-appointed lawyers, and was found guilty by a jury of twelve, who sentenced me to death by lethal injection. The sole evidence used to convict me was a confession—a confession given under extreme duress without legal representation, after

a lengthy, intensive interrogation by the homicide detectives. They ignored my repeated demands for an attorney, which is a constitutional right of every American citizen. By law, the moment I requested an attorney my interrogation should have stopped until a lawyer was provided. But this did not happen in my case.

Isolated in a small, dark gray interior room, I was interrogated by a series of detectives, because I would not confess to anything or say what they wanted to hear. From the beginning and throughout the interrogation, I was threatened with subtle hints of physical bodily harm, and I was intimidated psychologically until finally I gave in and said what the detectives wanted to hear.

Through lies and intimidation, taking advantage of a juvenile and inducing in me a feeling of despair, they coerced a confession from me against my will. Only later I learned that under Texas Law, when a juvenile is arrested or is taken into custody, a family member must be contacted immediately; and during any interrogation, a lawyer or an adult family member must be present. In my situation, this never happened.

Because of my ongoing appeals, I cannot discuss more details of my case at this time, even though I would like to do so.

When I finally appeared in a court room, I recall vividly that it was crowded, with all eyes on me, waiting to gauge my reaction as the judge read out my death sentence. As his final judgment was pronounced I felt torn to pieces inside. Some observers said later that I showed no emotion. How blind people can be, when they see only what they want to see. I stood refraining from expressing my emotions, from crying out at the injustice. I bottled up everything inside myself, to deal with it alone.

With a stroke of a judge's pen, I went from a young man with a life full of promise, to a young man who had been promised premature death. At the age of twenty I was sacrificed on the altar of that which has been deemed justice.

* * *

Looking back to early memories of my childhood, I can honestly say that it was beautiful. Yes, indeed, beautiful is the right word to describe it. My childhood memories would later serve as my protection against these merciless walls of confinement, when all else in life seemed to have no meaning. Even growing up in poverty, I fondly remember my parents showering me with unconditional love. While money was limited, love was abundant. My parents would be the most influential people in my life, but I didn't realize this until later in my adult years.

My father is a hard-working man who was very strict and stern with me. This was his way of expressing love toward me, but when you're a child, you do not see discipline as anything but being mean. My father raised me deeply in the ways of our Vietnamese heritage, and bestowed upon me a good set of rules for my adult life, for which I am grateful. I now understand and appreciate many of the lessons he taught me as a child. I would become extremely proud of my Vietnamese heritage.

My beautiful mother, in her gentle and caring tenderness toward me, taught me how to love and be loved. Still, she also could be strict and stern. I remember countless whippings I received from my father when my mother, for whatever reason, deemed that it



was necessary for me to be disciplined. Yet the acts of punishment were, in fact, an expression of love from my parents. Disciplining and punishing me were their way of teaching and implanting a sense of responsibility and duty for when I grew into a man.

To raise a child to become a man is not an easy task. Understanding this now, I realize how much my parents sacrificed for me. And this saddens me deeply. Too often, my father and I did not see eye-to-eye, and this is because our personalities are too much alike. Yet, I love and respect my father more than any other man. My mother is a woman I cherish and adore more than life. With my head bowed, I am ashamed to have caused her so much heartache.

The memories of my childhood have not faded. I can see how easy it was for me to rebel against all that was good for me. Raised in poverty, living in a neighborhood infested with gangs, I struggled to satisfy the conflicting cultural imperatives of being Vietnamese and living in America. I was constantly caught up in this cultural battle. At an early age I embraced the American system of forced assimilation and denied my parents' attempts to raise me within the traditions of their Vietnamese heritage.

Often our school teachers would forbid Vietnamese students to speak our native language to each other. The teacher would say, "You're in America now, not Vietnam. You must only speak English." Yet at home, my parents always stressed the importance of speaking Vietnamese. In Vietnamese they would tell me, "Son, you can speak English among your American friends, but you must speak to your parents and to other Vietnamese in our language. You are Vietnamese, never forget this while you live in the land that is not of our ancestors. This is your identity." These simple words would engrave themselves across my soul forever.

Yet throughout my life I would continue to find myself faced with forced American assimilation. On many occasions in prison, I have experienced this. I have been forbidden by guards to speak Vietnamese on occasions when I have been lucky to run across my countrymen, and have been told that English is the only allowed language. Some guards have even gone so far as to threaten me with disciplinary infractions if they catch me speaking Vietnamese.

Are these guards so stupid as to think that I would so easily abandon and deny my cultural identity? I do not hear guards going around telling the Hispanic prison population that they can't



speaking Spanish. No prison guard, no authoritarian system, not even the forced assimilation in American society can make me deny my cultural identity. Simply to imply such a notion is an insult. I am a Vietnamese living in America, who accepts his culture, is proud of his heritage, and loves everything it means to be Vietnamese.

* * *

Beginning in my adolescent years, I felt that my life was unbalanced. I felt a sense of loss, yet was never able to grasp the seriousness of these feelings, as I did not realize that I was physically and psychologically going through the beginning stages of adolescent development. I can almost pinpoint the precise moment when my life took a 180-degree turn. The transformation was so drastic that I went from being an A's and B's honor-roll student to embracing the street life.

To say that this was a conscious decision would be a lie. It was an adolescent hunger, a need to feed my heart's yearnings for life's adventures and make my blood boil with excitement. I gave little thought toward my future. I was only living in the moment.

In early adolescent years I would experience some of the most painful and happiest moments of my young life. Painfully, as I relive the memories of my deteriorating relationship at home with my parents, I see now how easily this could have been prevented. The problems at home made me feel that my parents did not want me anymore, and in my young mind their strict discipline was proof. I ended up running away from home.

From the age of 13 to my incarceration at 17, my home was the streets. I was hardly ever present in my parents' home. My parents became strangers to me. Only many years after my incarceration would my relationship with my parents begin to mend, and now, we are slowly becoming a family again.

It was during my middle school years that I would be exposed and introduced to the Asians, especially the Vietnamese youths living in the area outside my neighborhood. Gradually, as I hung around these youths, a tight bond of friendship formed. Our com-



mon language, our cultural understanding, and the natural instinct to find fellowship among our countrymen would only infuse the friendship with greater strength.

A small number of the Vietnamese youths were from well-to-do, good families, but many were like me, from poor families. Naturally as our friendships grew we came to learn that we faced similar problems at home: The fights with parents, dealing with their strict ways of discipline and feeling unwanted by our families. This led many of us to run away from home. This in turn only solidified our friendship and made it stronger. We found comfort in the fact that we accepted one another "as-is" instead of dealing with the pressure at home to become "what we should be." And so, without ever knowing it, I entered the beginning stages of becoming "bui doi," which is often translated as "the dust of life."

Gangs in my neighborhood were not a new phenomenon. My neighborhood was predominantly African-American and Hispanic, and many of the existing gangs were composed of these ethnic groups. Many of the guys in these gangs were friends, associates, and classmates of mine; I grew up playing with them and going to school with them. Yet I never got involved with gangs until I developed friendships with the Asians outside my neighborhood.

Slowly I learned which Asian gangs existed, which were dominant, and who was with which group. In a short time I would be lured deeper into a whole different world. I came to look up to the older guys in the gang, and soon would emulate their characteristics. The process of becoming involved in gangs is often a subtle, almost casual and innocent process, because the large majority of the gangs consisted of friends and associates. So, naturally the

gang is viewed as a friend rather than something bad.

Over time, you slowly become more involved with the gang, and before you realize it, the gang is a part of you, just as much as you are a part of the gang. The more involved you are, the more peer pressure you feel to represent the gang in all aspects of your life, to the point where the gang mentality will devour your every waking moment. In the world of gangs, one often sees so much drama that it begins to seem normal. A person outside this world will be unable to grasp a reality that is so far from their existence.

To survive the streets one must be willing to call them home, and become ruthless, since this is the nature of the streets. The glamorous street life portrayed on the big screen is false, an illusion. The streets do not discriminate among their victims. They will lead astray the weak-minded and naive, enthrall the strong and cunning, and lead them to destroy and devour.

The few who are fortunate enough to realize that there is no future for them on the streets, and escape before becoming victims, will forever be scarred by their experiences. The illusion of fast money, women, and the excitement of the high life never lasts long and always comes with a cost—a price often higher than you are willing to pay. During the happy time, I was surrounded by friends, the sounds of cheers and laughter, but the day I was sent to Death Row, I was alone. No friends. No cheers. No laughter. Only the sounds of slamming doors echoed behind my every footstep, closing out my past, taking me deeper into a labyrinth of time, the beast's belly of the system.

* * *

My arrival on Death Row in Livingston, Texas was in the spring of 2001. At that time Texas led the nation in carrying out executions, and the rate of expansion of its prison system was just as fast—so fast that within a few years the State of Texas established itself as the largest free-labor prison industry in all of the western hemisphere. It is safe to say that the State of Texas has built more prisons during the last six years than public schools, with more planned for the near future. But to comprehend Texas law makers, one must come to understand their mentality: “Lock ‘em up, throw away the key, and let ‘em rot.” Or in my case, “Execute them and let God sort them out.”

Anyone who enters the system at a young age will be more vulnerable to the threat of negative influences in prison life. There are many traps for the victim. Negative forces assault me daily, but I have been fortunate to hold them at bay and defeat the madness that can easily consume me if I am not on guard. The price I have paid is that rest has become as elusive as yesterday's dreams.

It did not take me long to realize how much tougher it is to be Vietnamese in the system. Not only am I isolated by these walls; now I am isolated among my peers, due to my race, language, culture, and heritage. At any given time, in any surrounding within the prison, I am usually the only Vietnamese. In a system where Hispanics, African Americans, and Caucasians are the dominant races, I am but a yellow speck in the mass of bodies. Although many of my peers have shown me love and respect, the fact remains: I am still alone. I have had to face and endure many challenges and hurdle life's obstacles to achieve and possess the strength and courage I need to deal with the drama of everyday life—the system,

the racism, and the ignorance of people's immature minds. I have been fortunate to overcome all adversities, with my dignity, determination, and humanity intact.

* * *

My first few years on Death Row passed with no distinction. My days were slow, dull, and boring. It was like living in a never-ending sand storm. My days consisted of a monotonous routine. I was just living in the moment. My life had come a blur. I was confined in isolation for 23 hours each day, with more than enough time to think and reflect. Still, my young mind did not fully grasp the magnitude of the ultimate punishment that I had received. I was still too immature to recognize, consciously, my profound reality.

Understand, I was not living in denial. Some would be quick to pass judgment and say that I had succumbed to my fate, mentally accepting that I would die, and surrendering myself before being defeated. But the truth was, in the deepest corner of my consciousness I held faithfully to the belief that somehow, some way, against impossible odds, I would overcome the Texas killing machine.

* * *

It was some years later when my friendship with Dominique Green was prematurely extinguished by his execution. In his execution the clarity of my own life became more apparent. In his death I became consciously awakened as if I had been living in a dream, not realizing how fragile my own existence truly was, and

how unforgiving this justice system truly was.

I first met Dominique shortly after I was moved from another section of the Death Row population. This is a regular routine, moving prisoners from cell to cell, a psychological maneuver used by the administration to disrupt any sense of comfort, familiarity, or unity among the prisoners.

My friendship with Dominique was unique, especially in an environment where a man's race usually determines the people he will associate with. It takes a strong-willed individual to cross the threshold and go against the norm. Despite Dominique being African-American and I being Vietnamese, we were able to bond, a rare and wonderful thing. The prison setting of Death Row was not designed as a place in which to socialize and make friends, but to house you until your execution can be carried out. Yet, we always made the effort and found time to spend with one another.

Often times we would engage in heated debate ranging from politics to personal beliefs, or simply to discuss a book we had both read. We often talked through "kites"—notes that we passed to one another during rec hour when we were able to get outside in separate cages side by side, or when he was in the dayroom, because my cell was directly in front of the dayroom. It would be during these moments, as we explored ideas on how to bring reform to this oppressive system, that we became brothers in arms.

We both had strong opinions and often didn't see eye to eye. And that was okay, because by being honest our feelings we were able to establish a strong foundation for our friendship. Our individuality was not only refreshing but also taught us the core elements to build our friendship; that we are all unique. Our openness



to explore and accept this was paramount, not only to the friendship but to our self-growth.

And so, our friendship continued to grow forward positively until that day Dominique told me his appeals had run their course and he had exhausted every avenue of hope but one. The United States Supreme Court was all that stood in the way of his execution. As his lawyers began to file the paperwork to save his life, Dominique expected to receive notice of his date of execution any day.

We had always spoken and shared our thoughts with one

another concerning this very moment, should it arrive for us. But there is no preparation that can withstand the moment of truth. Upon receiving the news, the numbness I felt was only the beginning of the stages of emotion that I would go through. I could not begin to relate to what Dominique must deal with physically and mentally.

Yet, Dominique remained hopeful that something would happen in his favor. He had been on Death Row since the mid-1990s and witnessed many of his peers taking the last walk. He understood the odds against a Supreme Court review, and the remote chance of a favorable ruling. All he had left was faith and the indomitable will to fight.

Sadly, in October 2004 Dominique was executed—killed by the State of Texas. His death would affect me in a way that my own death sentence could not. Dominique's life must not be remembered by his death, but honored for his strength in the midst of impossible odds. His perseverance reflects his will to endure, to overcome all life's challenges head on, and not to tuck tail and run.

The day the State of Texas killed Dominique, I lost a friend, a mentor, a brother in arms . . . but the world's loss was greater than mine. The world lost a precious human being. Had Dominique been given a second chance to live, I believe with all my heart he would have proven to be a success story. I saw in him a man with a strong heart, kind soul, a role model that could have been an inspiration to all, especially the troubled youths of today. Had his life been spared, and he had been able to encourage just one person from taking the same path as he, wouldn't that be enough reason to spare his life?

Ironically, the same Supreme Court that had so easily overlooked the value of human life at one moment was persuaded to spare the lives of others at the next moment.

On March 1, 2005, the court ruled 5-4 in the case of *Roper vs. Simmons* to ban the execution of those who had committed an offense while under the age of eighteen. In doing so, the court commuted the death sentences of juveniles across America. The laws of individual states then determined how much time the juveniles would receive. In the State of Texas, the commuted death sentence meant that I received an automatic life sentence. I must serve forty calendar years before I become eligible for parole review. Now instead of death by lethal injection, it's death by the yearly installment plan.

My transition from Death Row to the general prison population was not easy, nor had I expected it to be. After years alone in an isolation cell with little human interaction, simply to be thrown into the general population among other prisoners was a traumatic shock to the psyche. I had to relearn every aspect of human interactions. A simple human gesture such as shaking hands became a new experience. Engaging in conversations with someone face-to-face was hard, because on Death Row conversations often were from behind doors or some kind of partition, making talks brief and to the point.

So, small talk was a skill I had to relearn. Even the ability to walk normally without handcuffs and leg shackles was a skill I needed to relearn. For the first time in years, I had the ability to use my limbs without hindrances. And for the first time I could look toward the future—my unshackled future through the honest eyes of

hope, and see a destiny, knowing that my life has a purpose, whatever it may be, that I must fulfill. I take this next step in the journey of life with purpose, with hope, and with the inspiration to make my second chance to live life one that is worth celebrating.

* * *

Once, my life as a young man only promised a premature death. Because of an authority greater than man, I am under no illusion about how close I came to being another body. By denouncing my past life, I was able to break away from the manacles that bound me. To turn my back and make the decision to walk away from the gang life allowed me the chance to take hold of my own life again. Life, precious life, so dear, makes me want to show that I can be a contributing member of society.

—Son Tran, 2008

Son Tran's legal representation ended when he was moved off death row, and he lacks resources to pursue an appeal at this time.

Texas inmates are not allowed to receive gifts or money sent to them directly. If you wish to assist in any way, I can suggest three possible options:

1. You may donate to his inmate trust fund account. To do this, you should write to him and ask for a form for this purpose.

*Son Tran, #1306208
Robertson Unit
12071 F. M. 3522
Abilene, TX 79601*

Do not enclose money with your letter. *It will be refused. Do not send packages; they will be refused. All mail may be opened and read, and may be withheld from the prisoner if in violation of regulations.*

2. Alternatively, you may go online to PayPal and make a donation to sontranfund@gmail.com. I am the owner of this account and have set it up on my own initiative. I pledge to make a donation to Son Tran's inmate trust fund account equal to all monies that I receive, after the PayPal administrative fee has been deducted.

3. If you prefer not to use PayPal, you may send an email to sontranfund@gmail.com. State how much you are willing to donate, and I will send an invoice through Google Checkout for this amount.

In addition to possible legal representation, donations may be used by Son Tran to further his education within limits allowed by the prison system.

—Charles Platt