

**ANTHONY GRAVES**  
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For almost two decades, I endured the grueling struggle of facing my own mortality while incarcerated on Texas death row. I was there during hundreds of executions, multiple suicide attempts by men using razors to cut their throats or wrists, hangings, and insane outbursts by men going through extreme mental anguish. The good days were horrible, while the bad were unbearable and some couldn't survive it. I was in the worst place on earth.

**Can a person at the lowest point in their life, condemned to exist amidst abusive and rancid sub-human conditions, do anything but die?**

What happened to me? Many days I can't believe it happened at all. It was anyone's worst nightmare. It was 1992 – and I was living my somewhat meager existence, but I was happy enough and carried a good spirit. I was a poor black man in a small town in Texas, and that had its inherent challenges, but I also had good friends, my three young sons, and my family who loved me. I was good at baseball. I worked at various jobs and managed to put it all together – it was my life. I was a man with his dreams like any other man.

Until it was all snatched away in a second. I was 26 years old. I came home to get a message that the police had stopped by looking for me. Why? My immediate reaction was to go to the police station to find out what it was about. I didn't get the chance – a police officer came to me and changed my life forever. I had no idea I was about to spend the next eighteen-and-a-half years behind bars, including twelve years on death row, trying to prove my innocence.

Does that sound impossible to you? It's not. Does it sound exaggerated or ripped from the headlines of the news? It happened. It's my life. Or a big part of it. You see, I didn't let it define me. It easily could have – I saw it consume men I thought were stronger than me, and kill them one way or another. I watched men lose hope, crumble, and die. In fact, it was

commonplace – it even felt on some days like it was the DESIGN of death row to have that happen.

Why did misery, solitude, and despair not kill me?

My innocence is the very thing I relied on after my arrest. It's what initially gave me hope. I cooperated with law enforcement 110 percent, so sure was I that the whole thing was some crazy mistake. I did everything they asked of me – but quickly came to understand that what the officers wanted more than anything was an indictment, then a conviction. They told me that another man who was arrested for the murder of six innocent people by burning down their house and stabbing them had named ME as his accomplice. That's it. He said my name. There was no other evidence to support his claim. I had a full alibi – I was home with my girlfriend that night long before the hour of the murders. There was no physical evidence to connect me to it (fingerprints, footprints, blood on my clothes or traces of embers). No skin cells or hair follicles from the victims.. No eyewitnesses, except the man who said my name, and he had burns on his body when he showed up to the victims' funeral, a bitter relationship with the mother of a child in that house, and a great deal of difficulty meeting his child support obligations.

Soon, I would be subjected to a lie-detector test that did nothing to seek the truth, or get closer to it. I was told I failed the test. Next, a woman would vaguely recall she saw two men putting gas in a container at the local filling station – and she would point her finger at me in a line-up arranged by the Texas Rangers, despite the fact that I looked nothing like the description she gave to the police. This woman years later would say she made a mistake, and that she picked me because of all the hints that I'm the guilty one, not because she had ever seen me before (I was in the center spot a.k.a. the "guilty spot", I was of a much different age than all the other suspects in the line-up, and I was the one that law enforcement wanted her to pick from the secret room behind the one-way mirror. You do the math).

Throughout the process since the day of my arrest, I witnessed the nearly unchecked power of the district attorney's office and how one individual can have so much impact on our lives. I

witnessed how law enforcement can get tunnel-vision once they have a murder suspect in custody. I witnessed the role of the media in shaping opinions around cases before trial. I also witnessed how judges give wide leeway to prosecutors, instead of heeding the actual facts or some notion of “justice for all.” All of these things eventually led to my wrongful conviction over the course of years, and the many appeals to follow. The day I was convicted felt like a death knell, and it was. It was just crazy.

But because I knew that I was innocent, I did not give up. I did not let my mind go to the dark places I knew so many others had visited. Yes, the physical conditions in prison were harsh. But it was the mental abuse that was the hardest part. We were not allowed ANY human contact, and we barely saw another person on a day to day basis. It was a campaign to extinguish my light. I held on. Day after day, I held on. For what? I was on a methodical track to be killed.

I was sliding down a slope that so many others have descended before me. The criminal justice system had stolen my freedom, and now Texas wanted to take my life. It is not a system that holds high the values I expected it to – facts, truth, careful and thorough investigation, leave no stone unturned to find out who is really responsible for these awful acts and sweet lives extinguished too early. The courts are complicit, too. The judges didn’t care. They all rubber-stamped the blind march toward my conviction. The DA’s office certainly didn’t care – they all got their stats – another conviction of another black man for another senseless murder. That was the goal – get the indictment, get the conviction, put away a disposable man and make the community feel ok about law enforcement doing their job. But it isn’t their job – and conviction is not the goal. Isn’t justice the goal? Justice is hard. It is elusive. But isn’t that the high standard we want to believe in? That we can’t allow an innocent man to be executed? It was enlightening, and sad, to burst the bubble on all of those high concepts. They are myths in practice, despite what they tell you in law school, or on the news. “*We do justice.*” No, those are words. I lived the reality, and in practice, our criminal justice system is deeply biased, careless, and more than willing to march to a goal that should be an embarrassment, an intolerable result.

Over the next 12 1/2 years, I witness over 350 men, young and old, some of them my friends, being murdered at the hands of the state. I was locked in tiny spaces arranged like dog kennels, without access to family, other than two hours per week through a transparent divider—and with zero access to human contact at any time at all. I was just existing behind steel doors. My world felt and smelled like death and inhumanity, with men trying to live under the worst conditions, short of slavery. I knew that I was innocent and therefore, I still remained hopeful.

I was convicted after a sham of a trial replete with mistakes, bias and tunnel-vision. Whatever was said by law enforcement was gospel. Lack of facts to support their conclusion was tolerated. Exculpatory evidence was hidden from me and my lawyers. I was expendable. After my trial I was sentenced to die and sent to death row. My son pleaded for my life at the sentencing hearing. My mother cried... I was numb.

I existed on death row, where I was held in solitary confinement since I was deemed a danger to myself and others. My execution date was set twice. I remember the first time I was told what day I was going to die. I was escorted to the Major's office in handcuffs. He sat me down and told me that the state had set a date for my execution.

In fact, having a date with death was a catalyst for me. I'll never forget that moment. On the outside, I merely existed. But inside, in my mind, that's where I lived. And when I was told by the officer they had set the day they planned to kill me, it had the effect of motivating me to live fully. That may sound strange to you. But it was my saving grace – it was my complete defense to this unjust and careless nightmare. I dug in. Hope grew within me, it rushed through me. **I'M GOING TO LIVE UNTIL I DIE, I TOLD MYSELF IN THAT MOMENT.**

From that time forward, I was on the way up instead of sliding further down. I was buoyant at times – which seems impossible given the conditions I was in – but it's true. I was confident, with really no reason to be. Now, my task was daunting, there's no way around that. My task

was to continue to believe that living until I die was enough, it was a kernel of hope upon which I could build. So I did. I immediately discovered within myself how I would live for the rest of my life. I would be hopeful no matter what because it was my choice. How would you react to extreme injustice? This happened to me and I discovered who I am. When you suffer a severe wrong, how you respond will tell you a lot about who you are. I spent nearly two decades in prison for something I didn't do; I didn't get angry. I not only survived, I thrived.

### **I asked myself – Where Do I Go From Here?**

You learn about yourself in these moments. It feels like the walls are closing in on you. And you are going to be crushed. But I had my inner strength born of the resolve that I found. And I built on that. I pushed the walls out. I found space for myself – mostly inside my mind – but I found a path. Writing had a lot to do with it. I began to cultivate pen pals all around the world. I told my story to them, and they responded by returning my letters, and their care. They wanted me to survive, and that helped me. I no longer felt so alone, even though I was totally isolated.

In writing to others, I realized something fundamental about myself. I loved the interaction I had with people, even though they were complete strangers to me. We were exchanging elements of our lives, and it felt good. I knew that I could be free, and I knew that if I got there, I had a purpose. I would be in service to others, and engage in volunteer activity in my community. That's what I wanted to do. Along the way I read books, a lot of books. I read *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, and the Autobiographies of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. I read *The Miseducation of the Negro* by Carter G. Woodson. One of my all-time favorite books is by a woman name Harriet Jacobs. She was a slave, and she wrote a book called *Escape to Freedom*. I gained a lot of strength from her words. I also read Sydney Poitier, *The Measure of a Man*, *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver, and *Native Son* by James Baldwin. I lived inside my mind, and I wandered through these pages to grow instead of wilt under the weight of having an execution date. I was on the rise, against all odds.

It may be hard for you to believe – a man condemned to a meager existence on death row in Texas is thinking about how he will one day serve others as a volunteer, and becomes an avid reader and letter writer. When I experienced severe discrimination, I made a choice. My dreams did not die. They changed. I lost my boys in the process – they became men with children of their own while I was incarcerated. I lost baseball. I lost the ability to decide what I eat, or when I step out into the Texas sunshine. I lost everything. ALMOST everything. I did not lose my mind. I held on to my soul. I had infinite hope, born of the moment I was at the lowest point of my life.

My conviction was ultimately overturned, after a wonderful journalist Professor worked hard to uncover all the errors in my case, and the bias that accompanied it. Nicole Casarez did her homework, and eventually it helped pry my case open again, and ultimately my conviction was overturned. Finally, I got my release. I called my Mom from the parking lot of the prison, and with my first breaths of free air in nearly 20 years, I asked her what's for dinner? Cause I was coming home.

Today, I have turned a terrible tragedy into an amazing triumph. I am not only an accomplished public speaker, community advocate, and consultant, but also the founder of a non-profit organization, geared toward getting people out of prison who shouldn't be there. The manager of the ACLU of Texas Smart Justice Initiatives. I serve on the Advisory Board of The Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. I also serve as a board member of the Houston Forensic Science Center where I am able to make sure that the center is producing unbiased science. I have presented my story at several prestigious universities including Yale, The University of Texas, Emory University, Cornell, and the University of Berne in Switzerland., just to name a few. In 2011, I was the keynote speaker at the Amnesty International European Conference in Rome. Later that same year, I was the keynote speaker at the annual conference for the Texas Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty. In 2012, I was the keynote speaker for the American Bar Association Death Penalty Representation Project 25th Anniversary along with retired Supreme

Court Justice John Paul Stevens. That same year, I testified before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Hearing on Solitary Confinement, led by Senator Dick Durbin.

In 2013, I was the keynote speaker at the 50th Anniversary of *Gideon vs. Wainwright* held by the American Bar Association in Marcos Island, Florida. I was honored by the Harris County Criminal Lawyers Association where I received the Torch of Liberty Award. Also in 2013, I decided to put my advocacy for criminal justice reform into action, and I established the Nicole B. Casarez Endowment Scholarship Fund, created for law school students at the University of Texas law School. This scholarship was named after the attorney and law professor who tirelessly committed her time, skill, and resources to seeking justice for me.

In 2015, I filed a grievance with the State of Texas Bar Association against District Attorney Charles Sebesta for prosecutorial misconduct – he’s the one who handled my case. I cited all of his heinous behavior including hiding exculpatory evidence from me, and he was judged by this body. They disbarred him – he would never be able to frame an innocent man again. His trespasses cost years of my life.

I recently published a book about my experiences called “Infinite Hope” - I am proud to say. It was the first time I could really say it all in my own words. The process of writing it was difficult, emotional and cathartic, too.

This book was written to inspire and encourage those who have experienced true hardship in life to never give up. More importantly it is a book that has raised awareness about the urgent need for criminal justice reform. It is my life’s mission, and what fulfills and sustains me to this day. I could never be the man I am standing here now if I didn’t go through hell, and come out of it okay. How I did that, how I kept hope, that is what I want to share. Reform will come if we better understand the people inside the system, and why they are worth fighting for. I am a living example – death row did not take my life, it did not kill my soul, and it gave me my purpose. For that I am grateful.

I hope you too will find a way to get involved. Every person matters, every effort makes a difference. Believe me, I know.

Thank you.