

Daniel is a real person.

Daniel is the most incredible human being I have ever witnessed. I feel so inadequate to describe him that I must restrain myself from apologizing for the attempt. I was only near him for eleven months. During this time, I heard him say very little and I remember even less. If I saw Daniel today, I can only hope I would recognize him. From my point of view, what made Daniel incredible wasn’t any of his attributes, but rather the environment he was in and how he responded to it – who he was rather than anything specific about him.

Daniel and I were both captive of a cotton ginner who advertised himself as a teacher. The business advertised itself as a special kind of school – a system that could input “high risk” boys and output righteous young men of christian character. “We work on changing the outside, while God changes the heart.” I prefer to call Dennis MacElwrath what he is – a trainer. A child trafficking slave trainer. His role is hardly hidden – both the ‘school’ where the boys sleep and work through GRE self-study guides and the cotton gin where they’re forced to labor are legally registered, separately even. The boys are not locked indoors but are rather plainly visible to all ~300 people that live in the .13 square mile village of Vanduser, in the southeastern ‘boot-heel’ of Missouri. From their own website, “The young men participate in recreational sports, field trips, ministry outreach, *building projects, and seasonal work at a nearby cotton gin. We try to maximize hands on learning through agriculture, building construction, and maintenance.*” [sic; emphasis added]

Daniel arrived before I did, when he was 16-17 years old, and was still there for a few years after I left. Every moment must have been hell for him. The way he was treated was simply barbaric. If he had just followed the rules set, maybe he could have made the experience better for himself – but he never did. It is not a gross exaggeration to claim that he experienced continuous “punishment” every week he was there – there were maybe 1-2 weeks off total the whole time I saw. There were weeks where from the moment he woke up to the moment he went to bed – with a timed shit and a van ride to/from a cotton field in between – he would not be allowed to sit down. There were weeks where he was forced to stand at the end of his bed for a couple more hours while the rest of us went to sleep. He slept on plywood, on alarm blankets so he couldn’t take a piss in the night without direct supervision – sleeping on a mattress was always a treat for him. Almost every day he was forced to write brainwashing sentences hundreds, even thousands of times – *every day*. I can’t remember what the prescribed sentences were exactly but imagine having to write “I will happily and obediently lick master’s boots and I will be glad for the opportunity” thousands of times a week just to be allowed to sit down, for years – you might say that was torture.

All boys that arrive at this place are mandated a period of silence. The assumption is that we are all ‘evil’ in some way, so presumably communication could only serve some fiendish purpose. The rule was enforced as ‘any acknowledgment of the existence of others (except those allowed)’. So imagine there are 40 “students” – 4-6 of them are delegated leaders – and

5-8 staff members. An incoming “student” would be allowed to communicate with the staff members, most of the “student” leaders, and one other “student” who was their “guide” (assuming their “guide” wasn’t a “student” leader). The rule was that wards must stay within 6 feet of their “guides” *at all times*. When you take a shit, he’s outside. When you take your daily 3-minute shower, he’s outside timing. When you sleep, he’s on the bunk bed below you and if you must get off your bed to use the restroom, he must be woken as well. Right next to each other, at all times. I would say 3-4 months is the average length of this “guide” period. Then, you can gain “independent status” without any upgrade to your communication privileges – so no 6 feet rule in exchange for one less person who you can talk to, or make eye contact with, or laugh with when you overhear their joke, or otherwise do anything that would indicate to an observer that you acknowledge their existence (between the staff, “student” leaders, and 5-10 active “guides”, there were sufficient rule-enforcing observers for the task). There was exactly one week I saw where Daniel was not on “orientation status” (the level with the “guide”) and I don’t think it was even a full week.

There was a special diet for boys being punished for this, that, or the other: exactly 12oz of dry oats (unheated) in 6-8oz of milk, a random piece of fruit (an apple, an orange, 2 mandarin oranges, whatever; I got an unpeeled mango once) and water for breakfast, 2 peanut butter sandwiches, a piece of fruit, and water for both lunch and dinner. I did a lot of food prep work during my time there and when I made the peanut butter sandwiches, I always globbed on the peanut butter because I prefer peanut butter over bread and maybe my sadistic side found joy in making the experience extra dry but the average PB sandwich was pretty bready. So maybe 1600 Calories maximum in a day, but probably closer to 1200. No surprise, this diet was normal for Daniel.

Daniel was a good fieldhand. He wasn’t much for learning (or rather, the 800 page GRE self-study guidebook didn’t exactly grab his attention), but he was *strong*. Like really strong. See, every week he was on “punishment” (about every week), he was prescribed a full afternoon of “Character Enhancement Training” or CET. It was simply 4-5 hours of exercises. Imagine a scene from BASIC training and you won’t be far off – just know that the military has a policy framework in place regarding the goals of their training and how far they can push someone, etc. and none of that existed here. The unspoken goal was to break him. If the instructor was feeling froggy, it might be an afternoon of pushups and stress positions or jumping jacks and/or whatever else. Other days it was just running nonstop in a circle. It’s difficult to convey the situation as it existed because we’ve all seen dramatizations and recordings of military training and have our own thoughts regarding that ‘noble venture’ and the enforced pursuit of self-improvement. It’s not easy to articulate the difference between a drill sergeant and a master.

There was a time where I thought that a white boy that exhibited the same behavior as Daniel would have undergone the same um, ‘procedure’... but I’ve met a *lot* of white boys. As a lifetime rebel myself, I don’t think any of us could muster that same ‘defiance of spirit’ that must spring out from centuries of subjugation. It wasn’t until I recognized this that I realized the stark difference between simple brutality and racist brutality.

Daniel's defiance was multi-functional. He served as a sort of 'object lesson' for the rest of us. The more he broke the rules, the more punishments he was prescribed. The more punishments he was prescribed, the more backlogged his punishments became. The more backlogged his punishments became, the more "justified" it was to take undeniably harmful action. Daniel was the only student I saw over which hung a 'green light'. Not a literal green light, but rather a blind eye, or sometimes even an explicit endorsement by staff of physical battery. Daniel when I knew him was 18-19 years old. In an accountable, civil society, that might have meant that Daniel would no longer be compelled by 'parental authority' alone to be subjected to such brutality and enslavement, but for Daniel that simply meant that adults could strike him without the burden of child protection laws. I still find it bizarre that an actual enslavement facility that has gone to such great lengths to conceal itself behind a nonprofit and a flimsy advertisement for a "school" had staff who discussed *out loud* the "legal" particulars of who could batter who under a 'green light' protocol (minors could hit minors and adults but adults could only hit other adults). The only other time I saw this protocol implemented was when a student got riled up and threatened to cut another "student" with the metal filer in a pair of fingernail clippers, but that was a temporary occasion to subdue a 'threat', not break the boy's will.

I hope I never hit him. I don't remember ever hitting him, but that really doesn't mean much here. I was Daniel's "guide" for a few weeks. It didn't work out for long because I was the lone laundryman and Daniel turned out to be more of a burden than I could handle with that responsibility, but those few weeks were enough to bother me to this day. There were afternoons where I was the master of 'Character Enhancement Training' – I was a 'run laps' guy because forcing people to do pushups until they burst didn't resonate with me. I certainly yelled at Daniel enough to know now in my heart that I am a loathsome piece of shit. It's tragic because I've been told I was a "good" "guide", "fair", not especially prone to "power-trips", generally "laid back" in light of the task at hand – yet the fact I held that position at all bothers me. I admire Daniel because he was strong enough to resist what I wasn't and in so doing he laid bare the Academy's system for what it was – the incarnate lesson that the United States exists as a rigid hierarchy. There are those who are given the Freedom to 'fall', and those with the 'virtue' to rise above them. At the end of the day though, I was literally a white boy prodding a black adult down a cotton field. He was entered into this "contract" by his adoption parents as an unwilling child (despite very clear statutes regarding Daniel's right to enter into his own education and labor contracts from the age of 16 onwards), and now as an adult still he couldn't refuse (despite very clear statutes regarding forced labor), and the artificial hierarchy constructed by Dennis for his "lesson" had made me 'responsible' for him. What 'truth' could possibly exist in that other than that the white christians are doing the same ol' same old thing they've been doing (whatever the hell they want) and I'm at least one part 'goddamned coward' for not asking "Brother Mac" (Dennis) earnestly if he was out of his goddamned mind.

Sure, Daniel had the "freedom" to break the rules and some would parse that to mean there was a somehow a distinction from slavery. From their sick point of view, Daniel "chose" to eat cold oats every morning and run half a marathon every week and sleep on wood and have his

every action dictated to him by a constant observer. He. Broke. The. Rules. And he is a child – or... I guess in this case he used to be, so Fuck. Him! He was dropped in the middle of nowhere without a car and he could have maybe bought one in the closest city center (of around 40k people), but his employer which also functioned as his “school” and his legal guardian (or however the two corporations/organizations Dennis owns are choosing to advertise themselves now) wouldn’t give him any money! Either Dennis refused to pay him in the first place, or the money would go into an account that Daniel wouldn’t be allowed to access because he was being punished for being an unwilling employee in the first place!

I don’t know Daniel’s parents. I saw them once from a distance and I’d be blessed if that was the closest we ever will be again. You know that recoiling feeling from when you look into a bucket of something wretched? Daniel came from a large family. His white parents decided to adopt many black children – like, more than 3, probably more than 5, maybe more than 8... one of *those* situations. I gathered that they were Evangelicals on the uh, *right* side of things, and they were very white. Daniel had a picture of his family and the uh, contrast in skin tone alone was ‘captivating’. ~Train up a child in the way it should go, so when it is old, it will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6~ A-fucking-men. Anyway, I don’t know what Daniel did to instigate his enslavement, but I always imagined Daniel was simply never able to memorize enough bible verses to reach his expected ROI. Sometimes I imagine owning a robot and what I would do if the robot stopped acting christian enough and brought me shame. Sometimes I imagine going to a church where the pastor’s robot was able to commit 200 verses to memory every week and being so humiliated that the robot I paid *so much money* for could only memorize 40. Sometimes I imagine the robot technician telling me my robot has a learning disability and hearing that tasking a priest with ‘removing the excess daemons’ wouldn’t fix the problem. What I’m saying is I guess I understand on some level why someone would discard their child into slavery – what value has life anyway in light of ‘OUr eTeRnAL sOuLs’, right.

Goddamn white trash.

As far as I know, Daniel was dropped at a homeless shelter in Chicago a couple years later. I’m not hopeful he’s doing alright. I try to be optimistic, but then I feel like a cretin for not having found him. But *then* I feel like an asshole because I know that no account of “Anchor Academy” could be complete without a record of how it treated its lowest members, which makes Daniel’s memory extremely valuable. I was raised to be a capitalist, that’s just how it is. There are of course dozens of boys I’ve left out, and many I don’t remember at all, much less even think about. The difference is Daniel was an especially vulnerable person, and in a moral world that would have given me some duty to protect him but instead I didn’t refuse to assist in his exploitation. These 2500 words are an expression of my desire to right that wrong, and end the continued exploitation of children in Eastern Missouri and around the United States.

Daniel’s last known location was the Pacific Garden Mission in Chicago. If you know Daniel or have more current information, please contact me at anchoracademy@robinshaw.me.