

PATRICE GAINES



FROM PRISON TO THE POST

By Donna Reid-Washington

“**S**he is just a child and this is who I have been angry at for years, this child, this baby. This is who I was ashamed of. Oh my God, I’m angry at this baby, this baby didn’t know nothing. I couldn’t be angry at this child anymore. I’ve been carrying this around and look at her, she has baby fat on her cheeks. I had to let it go.”

In her calm, quiet manner Patrice Gaines remembers how she reacted when she saw her mug shot featured in a segment about her on Dateline. The first time that Gaines saw this image was when the program aired in 1995. The picture was taken in 1970, after she had been arrested at age 21 for possession of heroin with intent to distribute and possession of a needle and syringe. She served three weeks in the Charlotte Mecklenburg County Jail in North Carolina, and five years probation for the offense. The event proved to be a turning point in Gaines’s life and she became determined to turn her life around.

Patrice Gaines was born in New Bern, North Carolina, and raised in a military family. She lived in several places up and down the East Coast before ending up in Washington, D.C., where she remained until after high school. By age 19 she was a single mother, and by age 21 she was a heroin user. After her 1970 arrest, she quit using heroin, but change proved difficult. She continued to use other drugs and was later arrested for shoplifting. In the years following her arrest, she was beaten and raped by a boyfriend and later battered by her husband. Change had to happen in order for her and her daughter to survive.

Gaines started attending night school, where she discovered a love and talent for writing, and in 1973, she signed up for creative writing classes at a nearby community college. Patrice stopped using drugs, entered therapy, and began to heal. In 1978, she was selected for a national journalism education program and trained to become a reporter. After Gaines completed the program, she worked as a full-time reporter for several newspapers, until 1985 when the Washington Post hired her as a gen-

eral assignment reporter for the paper’s Metro section. Though her primary assignment was with Metro, Gaines’s byline appeared on features throughout the newspaper, and she also regularly wrote personal essays in the Sunday edition’s Outlook section.

During her 16 years at the Washington Post, Gaines won a Best News Story award from the Associated Press in 1991 for a series on gun violence. In 1992, Gaines’s article “Tough Boyz in Trouble” won first prize from the National Association of Black Journalists. Additionally, Patrice was part of a team that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in journalism. Gaines’ award-winning writing led to the publication of her first book, *Laughing in the Dark, From Colored Girl to Woman of Color—A Journey from Prison to Power* (1994).

In Patrice’s second book *Moments of Grace: Meeting the Challenge* (1997) she introduces readers to her journey with this analogy, “Imagine we are weavers, each given a chance to weave magnificent designs, whatever our minds can fathom. Our threads vary in color, length, width and texture. Some of us assume correctly that we have odd pieces, knotted, frayed, and therefore we cannot weave or even conceive a beautiful design. Regardless of how bad things may look to us, we must weave with great faith, enthusiasm, and joy! If we do this, we will see that the frayed and faded thread can create a most glorious tapestry.”

Patrice hopes that from this observation, people will understand that we often can’t see the beauty in our journey because of the “odd pieces” in our lives. When faced with obstacles, Patrice believes that each of us is born with the power to do things beyond our imagination, and that in some ways this life beats us down and makes us believe that we are less than who we are born to be.

That lack of faith diminishes our abilities. Patrice offers the example of the “student who does well, because the teacher believes the student can do well. If we all believed in each other and in ourselves, we could do much better than we do when we are judging each other, pointing





fingers, angry, fearful, all these negative emotions that we learn to take on.”

Believing in ourselves breeds the courage to make the life changes that will improve life.

Yet change is rarely easy. From personal experience, Gaines understands the fear and resistance people harbor towards change. With change sometimes comes pain and anger. Both emotions left unchecked can destroy. Gaines encourages everyone to work through it, and “allow the pain to show me what it is that I must do.” Use the experience for good. “Whatever it is, it can be used for good.”

The challenge to change can be made more difficult by “other peoples’ reactions to us . . .” Patrice holds a monthly workshop for women at the North Carolina Jail where she was incarcerated, and she tells the women that “I know this feeling, they get out of jail and they know inside that they have changed, but people look at them like who they used to be.” Patrice believes, that regardless of the challenges, “by being open to allowing experiences to move through you, change comes. It’s almost like you have to open your heart to receive, so that you will know how you can use this experience. But if your heart stays closed--you know like they say the closed hand can’t receive. If your heart is closed, change is not going to come to you. Instead, you’re just going to be in severe pain.”

Patrice also believes that making the deliberate decision to open the heart is where the work really starts. When she began the work of opening her heart, she looked at the things that were constantly causing her “pain on top of pain, on top of pain.” She believes her pain stemmed from the decisions she was making, and that she was inflicting pain upon herself. It wasn’t the people that were harming her that caused

the most pain. Rather, it was that she was allowing others to harm her. Although that doesn’t absolve them of responsibility, Patrice feels that almost in every instance, she chose to have these people in her life.

If she was with a man who abused her, she began to comprehend that she chose him, invited him into her life. “Why did I do that? I had to look at the ‘why’ because if I [understand the] ‘why,’ I can make better decisions.” As a result, her heart became more open. “I could trust more—I could trust myself. I could breathe more freely. [Having that understanding] just allowed me to really be more optimistic than I had been. I think I was always an optimistic person, but I had allowed so much to happen to me, I made so many bad choices that I forgot about that optimism.”

Patrice muses, “before I told my story it was like a scar . . . But in telling [my story], it’s become a gift to me. Every bit of the pain, the challenge, the shame of mistakes, they all become gifts, because I get to tell it in a way that offers people hope and encouragement. I believe you can make everything a gift. Even the most horrible, horrible pain you can make it a gift.”

For more on Patrice’s story or information on her books and speaking engagements, look to her website <http://www.patricegaines.com>. ♣

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