

Learning Words

Malcolm X

Malcolm Little (1925-1965) developed an interest in the Black Muslim religion when he was in prison. He became a disciple of **Elijah Muhammad**, the founder of the religion, and changed his name to Malcolm X. At this time, he turned to Islam and to books to change his life. When he was released from prison, Malcolm X became a minister in the Nation of Islam and a spokesperson for African Americans. In 1964, he converted to the orthodox Muslim religion and adopted the Muslim name El Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. He was assassinated in 1965. The selection below is excerpted from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), which Malcolm X wrote with Alex Haley. IN 1992, Spike Lee wrote and directed *Malcolm X*, a film about Malcolm X's life.

¹It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education.

²I became increasingly frustrated at not being able to express what I wanted to convey in letters that I wrote, especially those to Mr. Elijah Muhammad. In the street, I had been the most **articulate hustler** out there—I had commanded attention when I said something. But now, trying to write simple English, I not only wasn't articulate, I wasn't even **functional**. How would I sound writing in **slang**, the way I would *say* it, something such as, "*Look, daddy, let me pull your coat about a cat, Elijah Muhammad—*"

³Many who today hear me somewhere in person, or on television, or those who read something I've said, will think I went to school far beyond the eighth grade. This impression is due entirely to my prison studies.

⁴It had really been back in the Charlestown Prison, when **Bimbi** first made me feel envy of his stock of knowledge. Bimbi had always taken charge of any conversations he was in, and I had tried to **emulate** him. But every book I picked up had few sentences which didn't contain anywhere from one to nearly all of the words that might as well have been in Chinese. When I just skipped those words, of course, I really ended up with little ideas of what the book said. So I had come to the Norfolk Prison Colony still going through only book-reading motions. Pretty soon, I would have quit even these motions, unless I had received the motivation that I did.

⁵I saw that the best thing I could do was get hold of a dictionary—to study, to learn some words. I was lucky enough to reason also that I should try to improve my penmanship. It was sad. I couldn't even write in a straight line. It was both ideas together that moved me to request a dictionary along with some **tablets** and pencils from the Norfolk Prison Colony school.

Vocabulary

Elijah Muhammad -- African-American clergyman (1897-1975) who was the leader of the Black Muslims from 1935 to 1975

articulate—clear in speaking and writing; easily understood

hustler—A person who buys or sells things through deceit and trickery.

functional—able to perform; able to work properly.

slang—informal speech unique to a group.

Bimbi a fellow inmate whose intelligence and breadth of knowledge impressed Malcolm X

emulate—to imitate.

tablets—pads of writing paper.

⁶I spent two days just **riffling** uncertainly through the dictionary's pages. I'd never realized so many words existed! I didn't know *which* words I needed to learn. Finally, just to start some kind of action, I began copying.

⁷In my slow, **painstaking**, ragged handwriting, I copied into my tablet everything printed on that first page, down to the punctuation marks.

⁸I believe it took me a day. Then, aloud, I read back, to myself, everything I'd written on the tablet. Over and over, aloud, to myself, I read my own handwriting.

⁹I woke up the next morning, thinking about those words—**immensely** proud to realize that not only had I written so much at one time, but I'd written words that I never knew were in the world. Moreover, with a little effort, I also could remember what many of these words meant. I reviewed the words whose meaning I didn't remember. Funny thing, from the dictionary first page right now, that "aardvark" springs to my mind. The dictionary had a picture of it, a long-tailed, long-eared, burrowing African mammal, which lives off termites caught by sticking out its tongue as an anteater does for ants.

¹⁰I was so fascinated that I went on—I copied the dictionary's next page. And the same experience came when I studied that. With every **succeeding** page, I also learned of people and places and events from history. Actually, the dictionary is like a miniature encyclopedia. Finally the dictionary's A section had filled a whole tablet—and I went on into the B's. That was the way I started copying what eventually became the entire dictionary. It went a lot faster after so much practice helped me to pick up handwriting speed. Between what I wrote in my tablet, and writing letters, during the rest of my time in prison I would guess I wrote a million words.

¹¹I suppose it was **inevitable** that as my word-base broadened, I could for the first time pick up a book and read and now begin to understand what the book was saying. Anyone who has read a great deal can imagine the new world that opened. Let me tell you something: from then until I left that prison, in every free moment I had, if I was not reading in the library, I was reading on my bunk. You couldn't have gotten me out of books with a wedge. Between Mr. Muhammad's teaching, my correspondence, my visitors ... and my reading of books, months passed without even thinking about being imprisoned. In fact, up to then, I never had been so truly free in my life.

782 words

Vocabulary

riffling—leafing quickly through a book

painstaking—meticulous; very careful

immensely—very much

succeeding—coming one after the other.

inevitable—certain to happen; impossible to prevent