

## **Doctoral Perspectives**

The Journey of Life: Shapeshifting Through Challenges and Transformations - Reginald Gray

Life's journey encompasses individuals' diverse experiences, challenges, and transformations.

The term "shapeshifter" serves as a potent metaphor for those who have grappled with issues of identity and opportunity or their absence. It signifies the capacity to adapt and evolve to thrive in varying circumstances. This narrative prompts me to contemplate my path from the tranquil streets of Grambling, Louisiana, to the vibrant avenues of Dallas, Texas, shedding light on the triumphs and adversities that have shaped my complex identity. This tale embodies personal struggles and a quest for resilience, versatility, wisdom, and justice, all encapsulated within the concept of a shapeshifter.

### **Prologue**

From Grambling, Louisiana, to Dallas, Texas, my life has always been a testament to adaptation and transformation. As a young Black man navigating the complexities of identity and opportunities, I embraced the paradigm of a shapeshifter. This concept encapsulates the idea of fitting in and thriving within different environments. This narrative is a journey through a multifaceted identity, encompassing the triumphs and challenges that have shaped my path—a path paved with resilience and adaptability that can inspire others.

## **Early Years: Roots in Grambling**

Growing up in Grambling, a small-town rich in history and community, set the tone for a close-knit environment where everyone knew each other. Pride in the local university, Grambling State, ran deep in that town, infusing the community with a spirit of resilience and excellence. My hardworking and resilient parents instilled a love for education and adaptability. They were my first examples of shapeshifters—gracefully and resolutely moving through the roles of parents, providers, and community members.

My parents' influence stretched beyond their immediate roles. My hardworking father and tender yet firm mother personified the principles of adaptability. They balanced obligations with such ease, teaching me that the only real strength a human being has is the ability to change with adversity. Their teachings and actions laid the foundation for my future.

I was a quiet kid at school who loved reading and had an inquiring mind. The local library became an escape, offering a window to the world beyond Grambling. Books introduced me to new cultures, ideas, and possibilities. Historical biographies and science fiction were my favorite genres, each expanding my sense of what was possible. These literary adventures fueled my dreams and ambitions, pushing me to live beyond the parameters of my small town.

Even in Grambling, I faced racism and a lack of opportunities. These experiences taught me valuable lessons in adversity, resilience, and willpower. I witnessed firsthand how systemic structures tried to hold people back based on race. These challenges did not deter me; instead, they ignited a fire in me to strive for more and overcome those barriers.

As a child, I was heavily involved in sports. Football and basketball taught me the importance of teamwork, discipline, and hard work—skills essential for any group striving for success. These lessons helped me fit into different social settings and cultivate brotherhood among my peers. Music became another outlet for expression, allowing me to connect with others and find my distinctive identity, blending my intellectual pursuits with my cultural heritage. The discipline and camaraderie I learned from sports and the self-expression and connection I found through music were invaluable in shaping my resilience and adaptability.

With its rich culture and collective spirit, the Grambling community was a constant source of inspiration. Events like the annual Bayou Classic and local parades were more than just celebrations; they affirm our shared pride. These gatherings underscored the importance of community support and belonging for personal growth and resilience. The support and encouragement from this community were instrumental in shaping my identity and preparing me for the challenges ahead.

As the years passed, my ambitions solidified. Education, deeply valued by my parents and supportive community, became my primary aspiration. I set my sights on higher education and making an impact, emphasizing the importance of learning and growth in my journey.

## **The Move to Dallas: A New Horizon**

The transition from Grambling to Dallas was both exciting and intimidating. Dallas's sprawling urban landscape and vibrant cultural scene starkly contrasted with my hometown's familiar setting. Here, I had to learn to navigate a new social and educational landscape, forcing me to adapt and continuously redefine myself. The challenges were numerous, from cultural differences to academic pressures, but each was an opportunity for growth and resilience.

At a predominantly white high school, I quickly learned the art of code-switching—the ability to speak and act one way in one situation and another in a different context. I blended in with ease on the surface while remaining true to myself internally. Academics and extracurricular activities became my saving grace. Music, in particular, became a compelling outlet for expression, allowing me to connect with others and find my distinctive identity. This fusion of intellectual curiosity and cultural heritage was vital to my growth.

Dallas offered opportunities that would have been unimaginable in Grambling: vast resources, access to thousands of people, and a diverse population. These opportunities allowed me to explore interests I had never had the capacity for. I threw myself into various activities, from academic clubs to sports teams, which helped me develop leadership skills and expand my social network.

Inspired by my interest in shaping and making a difference, I pursued economics after high school. This decision led me to Southern Methodist University (SMU), which became a

transformative experience. I earned a bachelor's degree in advertising and two master's degrees in economics and applied economics. My time at SMU was marked by rigorous academic challenges, competing with peers from diverse backgrounds, which sharpened my analytical skills and deepened my understanding of economics, highlighting the transformative impact of higher education.

### **The College Years: Broadening Horizons**

At SMU, I joined the university basketball team. Being part of the team meant much more than playing games; it was about fitting into a new community and learning the values of teamwork, discipline, and perseverance. Balancing athletics and academics was tough, but it taught me valuable time-management skills and resilience. The camaraderie and friendships I formed off the court were just as important, helping me feel at home in college's vast, unfamiliar environment.

Beyond sports, I immersed myself in SMU's diverse social life. I attended white fraternity and sorority parties, Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and St. Patrick's Day parades—events that taught me about cultural appreciation and understanding. My interactions with people from various backgrounds further broadened my perspective, helping me navigate relationships in a multicultural context. I co-founded Mastaminds Entertainment LLC with my best friend, Matt Ganucheau, during my sophomore year. Our record label was born out of a desire to create a platform for local talent and merge my love for music with my entrepreneurial spirit. Juggling

the responsibilities of a full-time student, athlete, and entrepreneur was challenging, but it was a labor of love that paid off in unexpected ways.

I began organizing parties to support myself financially. My business savvy and understanding of the social dynamics at SMU led me to collaborate with white fraternities and sororities, breaking down racial barriers and creating inclusive events. These parties became incredibly popular, attracting students from all backgrounds. For me, they weren't just parties but opportunities for networking and brand-building. I expanded my social network, gained business insights, and built confidence to turn challenges into opportunities.

Running a record label and organizing events equipped me with business knowledge in marketing, financial management, and negotiation. These skills were invaluable in both my academic projects and real-world business ventures. My professors encouraged me to incorporate my entrepreneurial experiences into my studies, further enriching my educational journey.

The music and event business also introduced me to new technologies, including digital rights management and blockchain. I became a Blockchain IP Consultant, helping artists with NFT strategies to better manage their digital rights and monetization. This placed me at the forefront of the intersection between technology and the music industry, showcasing my adaptability and forward-thinking approach.

## **Graduate School: Mastering Economics and Applied Economics**

After completing my undergraduate degree at SMU, I pursued two master's degrees—one in economics and another in applied economics. This decision stemmed from my desire to engage more deeply with economic theory and its real-world applications. Graduate school was challenging but rewarding, refining my analytical skills and opening new avenues for growth. I extensively researched theoretical and practical economic problems during my graduate studies. Collaborating with top professors on critical projects involving market trends, financial models, and policy impacts allowed me to apply my knowledge meaningfully. These experiences, internships, and collaborations with local businesses broadened my understanding of economics. Teaching also became an essential aspect of my graduate experience. As a teaching assistant, I led tutorials and lectures for undergraduates, reinforcing my knowledge while developing my communication and leadership skills.

## **Professional Career: Shapeshifting in the Workforce**

After graduating, my career took me through diverse roles that required different skills and parts of my identity. I worked as a full-time professor at Paul Quinn College, an HBCU, and as an adjunct professor at other colleges like Navarro and Collin College. These roles allowed me to further hone my teaching skills and deepen my understanding of economics. One of my most fulfilling roles has been as a full-time professor at Dallas College, where I launched a lecture series, "Make America Think Again," focusing on critical thinking and civic engagement. This work represents my commitment to education and social justice. In balancing academia and

entrepreneurship, I gained a unique vantage point on the intersections of culture, economics, and identity. From negotiating record deals to delivering lectures, I have learned to adapt and excel in different environments.

### **Struggles and Successes: Facing Racism and Sexism**

Systemic barriers like racism and sexism have accompanied me throughout my journey. Proving my competence and credibility in academia was often expected of me in ways it wasn't for my white counterparts. These disheartening experiences only solidified my resolve to advocate for equity and inclusion. Serving on the Board of Commissioners for the Dallas Housing Authority has positioned me to effectively address housing inequality and represent marginalized communities.

### **Epilogue**

Today, I embody the true essence of a shapeshifter. My life journey has been a series of transformations and adaptations, allowing me to navigate and thrive in various professional, personal, and social contexts. From my quiet upbringing in Grambling to my multifaceted life in Dallas, the art of shapeshifting has enabled me to embrace change, overcome adversity, and stay committed to justice and equality. I remain committed to my core education, equity, and community-building principles as I continue my journey. My story inspires others, particularly those who find themselves navigating multiple worlds. Adaptability, self-discovery, and resilience are the keys to thriving in an ever-changing world.