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The Destinies of Two Men Who Share One Name

By Melissa Block and Michele Norris
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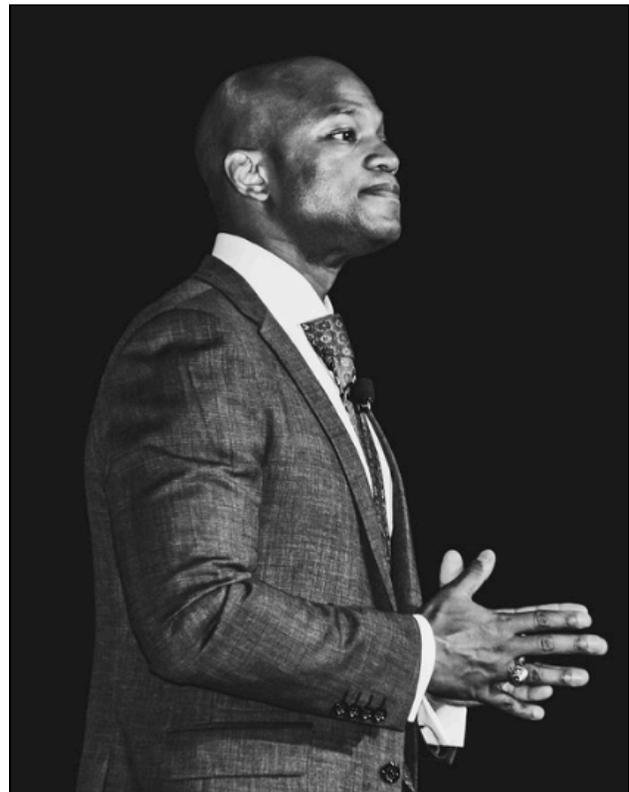
Despite a challenging childhood, Wes Moore has accomplished much, including success as an author, producer and decorated US Army officer. In late 2000, he was made aware of a man who had the same name as him but a very different future ahead of him, life in jail for murder. In the following interview, Michele Norris discusses ideas of fate and destiny with Wes Moore, and what ultimately shapes who we are. As you read, take notes on the events of each Wes Moore's life and how they contributed to the people they became.

- [1] Wes Moore escaped a rough-and-tumble childhood to become a model of achievement. Decorated¹ combat veteran. White House Fellow. Business leader. Just after he learned he'd won a Rhodes Scholarship² in late 2000, he also learned about another Wes Moore, who would soon be sentenced to life in prison. Michele Norris talks to Wes Moore the achiever — and now author of *The Other Wes Moore* — about his journey of discovery and friendship.

MELISSA BLOCK, host: From NPR News, this is All Things Considered. I'm Melissa Block.

MICHELE NORRIS, host: And I'm Michele Norris.

And we're going to spend some time considering the notion of fate and the destinies who share one name, Wes Moore. The first Wes Moore escaped a rough-and-tumble childhood to become a model of achievement, decorated combat veteran, White House Fellow, business leader.



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- [5] Just after that Wes Moore learned he'd won a Rhodes Scholarship in late 2000, he also learned about another Wes Moore, who would soon be sentenced to life in prison for his role in a botched jewelry store robbery that resulted in the death of an off-duty police officer.

The stories of both Wes Moores were chronicled in the Baltimore Sun. Wes Moore the achiever was so rattled by the coincidence he eventually wrote a letter to Wes Moore, the prisoner. The resulting correspondence led to a journey of discovery and friendship and a book published this week. It's called *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*.

1. **Decorate (verb):** to give a medal or award to (someone, such as a soldier)
2. The Rhodes Scholarship is widely considered to be one of the most prestigious or honored scholarships in the world.

Wes Moore the achiever and now author took us back to the moment he first learned of his counterpart.

Mr. WES MOORE (Author, *The Other Wes Moore*): I was in South Africa, living in one of the townships³ of South Africa doing research, and I got a call from my mother, and we were talking for a little bit, and she said, I have something crazy to tell you. She said, you know, the cops are looking for a man with your name in your neighborhood for killing a cop. And it hit me. I was like, what? And she said, there are wanted signs all over your neighborhood for Wes Moore, and if you happen to see Wes Moore, do not approach because he's assumed to be armed and very dangerous.

That was the first time I really even learned about him, but then as I started reading these articles and learning about this other Wes Moore, I realized that we had so much more in common than just our name. The fact that we both came up in single-parent households, the fact that we both had trouble with school and the fact that we both had, you know, these interactions with the criminal justice system.

[10] That always haunted me, and it just sat with me for years until I eventually decided to write him that letter.

NORRIS: What did you expect to hear back, and what kind of response did you actually get?

Mr. MOORE: Well, you know, initially, I wasn't even expecting to hear back. The day after I mailed that letter, I thought to myself, man, that was a mistake. I was asking what, in retrospect,⁴ were relatively naive⁵ questions, like, you know, who are you? And I was asking questions about his kids and about his older brother, who I knew was also in prison.

I was actually a bit surprised when a month later, I get a note from Jessup Correctional Institution from Wes Moore. And it was just a remarkable letter where he just literally went point by point answering the questions. And he was explaining to me how much it meant to him that I wrote him in the first place because he said when you're behind bars, you believe that no one even knows that you exist anymore.

NORRIS: Now, we ticked through some of your achievements. You have a sterling⁶ resume. Perhaps you could for us tick through a few of the important milestones in the other Wes Moore's life.

[15] **Mr. MOORE:** I think there were a few really important milestones. I think, you know, a couple crucial moments have to come down to the first time that he started experimenting and getting involved in the drug life in Baltimore. As he first started, you know, getting involved with the, in many ways, the revolving door of the juvenile and eventually adult criminal justice system. The time that he first had his first children when he was 16 and 17, and then two more children at 19 and 20 years old and the way that shapes your future and affects the way you think about your future and the future of your family as a whole.

3. The term "township" in South Africa usually referred to underdeveloped urban living areas reserved for non-white residents.

4. **Retrospect (noun):** a review or analysis of events that have already taken place

5. **Naive (adjective):** having or showing a lack of experience or knowledge: innocent or simple

6. **Sterling (adjective):** being of the highest standard or quality

And after, you know, being involved in drugs and having a chance now to rebuild his life, going to Job Corps,⁷ getting his GED, when he came out of that GED program, he was very fired up and excited about life and excited to do things differently and realized just how strong that calling and how strong that pullback into the streets was, to the point that it eventually broke him.

NORRIS: When you talk about the grip of the street, you often think of this sort of voracious⁸ force that grabs young men and women, but in his case, it was almost like he drifted into drugs, both using drugs and selling them. He saw a kid with a cool headset that looked like something out of a Janet Jackson video and said, ooh, I want one of those.

Mr. MOORE: That's right.

NORRIS: And before long, he was a lookout.

[20] **Mr. MOORE:** That's exactly right. My mother always says, she says, you know, kids need to think that you care before they care what you think. What Wes saw from the streets and from, you know, the kids on the corner and the kids who were dealing was he saw kids who he felt at that time genuinely cared about him and genuinely cared about his future. And he saw what they had and the material items that they had and how cool they looked, and then you see these kids who are willing to take you in and embrace you as family.

What they say starts meaning a whole lot more than what the teachers are saying or what the community leaders are saying. And that's that pull, that's that draw that really dragged Wes in.

NORRIS: Now, we should say that you also had run-ins with the law yourself, and you flirted with the idea of walking across that line and leading a life that could ultimately have led to prison. But when you were arrested for spraying graffiti on a wall, you immediately knew this is not someplace I want to be. And you were with someone who had a very different reaction. He almost dealt with the cops like, come on, bring it on. I'm tougher than you are.

Mr. MOORE: That's exactly right, and you know, I think about it, and it is almost embarrassing now to think about the fact that I was, you know, here I was with, you know, with a tremendous mother and, you know, support from family but just this draw of the streets and this challenge that I was personally having internally about what does it mean to be a man, was really pulling at me. So it manifested⁹ itself in things like vandalism¹⁰ and getting into fights.

And it was really at that point that my mother decided, she said, you know, I've got to do something different. You know, I've tried other schools in the Bronx, and this hasn't worked. So I'm just going to try something completely new, and that's when she decided to send me off to military school.

[25] **NORRIS:** Is it key for boys to have consistent authority figures, also guides in their life? I guess that's what I was thinking about because your father died when you were very young, but he was there in the very early years, not so for Wes, the other Wes.

7. A free education and career training program that is offered by the United States Department of Labor to men and women between the ages of 16 and 24.

8. **Voracious** (*adjective*): having or marked by a strong desire for something

9. **Manifest** (*verb*): display or show (a quality or feeling) by one's actions or appearance

10. **Vandalism** (*noun*): the act of deliberately destroying or damaging property

Mr. MOORE: Absolutely, yeah. And, you know, there's actually a part in the book where Wes and I are talking about our fathers, and he said something that I think is very true when he said, you know, your father isn't here because he couldn't be. My father wasn't there because he chose not to be. And therefore, we're going to mourn their absences differently.

And I think he's absolutely right. I think we do mourn their absence differently. However, that hole that was left in both of us from not having a father there, from not having that presence there throughout to help us to make decisions is, I think, something that both of us spent a lot of our time, particularly our young years, trying to fill.

NORRIS: What does the other Wes Moore want from this book?

Mr. MOORE: You know, what's amazing, Wes has had the chance to read the whole book, and he's had two reactions to it. The first reaction was, he's like, it's amazing that you got all the facts right because, he said, it's obvious you've done a lot of homework and a lot of research and talked to a lot of people.

[30] But he said the other thing that he realized from the book was how little he's done with his life. He said, he said, listen, I've wasted every opportunity I've ever had in life and I'm going to die in here. So if you can do something to help people understand the ramifications¹¹ of their decisions and do something to help people understand the neighborhoods in which these decisions are being made, then I think you should do it.

And I'm glad I did it because I think I'm a better person because of this process, and I think I rediscovered a part of myself that I never even dreamed and never even imagined was even there.

NORRIS: Do you feel at times that you're afflicted¹² with something akin¹³ to survivor's guilt?¹⁴

Mr. MOORE: It's a great question because I thought about that as I was, you know, writing this book. And, you know, I would wake up at 5:30 in the morning every morning and begin my day, and I'd write for a couple hours before going to work.

And when you start your day reading a letter from someone who is going to spend the rest of their life in prison, when you start your day like that, it really helps you to think about your day. It humbles you. And I do think about the blessings that I had, the family, and I do feel like I'm very lucky, and I'm sincerely thankful for it.

[35] **NORRIS:** Wes Moore, thank you very much.

Mr. MOORE: Thank you so much.

NORRIS: Wes Moore is the other of *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates*.

11. **Ramifications (noun):** things that are the result of an action, decision, etc.

12. **Afflict (verb):** to cause pain or suffering to (someone or something)

13. **Akin (adjective):** similar or related

14. "Survivor's guilt" is a term used to describe a mental condition that is experienced when a person believes that they have done something wrong by surviving a traumatic event when others did not.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which sentence best expresses the central idea from the text? [RI.2]
 - A. The two Wes Moores' similar backgrounds but contrasting accomplishments show how one's destiny is random and cannot be controlled.
 - B. The fate of Wes Moore, the prisoner, is an example of how the criminal justice system has become too harsh in sentencings.
 - C. While both Wes Moores' surroundings contributed to their fates, their individual decisions also played a large role in shaping who they became.
 - D. Wes Moore, the author, is unable to fully accept his success in the face of the guilt he feels for the other Wes Moore's incarceration.

2. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "Wes Moore escaped a rough-and-tumble childhood to become a model of achievement," (Paragraph 4)
 - B. "Wes Moore the achiever was so rattled by the coincidence he eventually wrote a letter to Wes Moore, the prisoner." (Paragraph 6)
 - C. "if you happen to see Wes Moore, do not approach because he's assumed to be armed and very dangerous." (Paragraph 8)
 - D. "when you're behind bars, you believe that no one even knows that you exist anymore." (Paragraph 13)

3. PART A: What does the phrase "revolving door" mean in the context of the text (Paragraph 15)? [RI.4]
 - A. The direct relationship between individuals serving time as juveniles and later as adults.
 - B. The lack of opportunities that are available to those who have experience with the criminal justice system.
 - C. The ease in which people are able to come and go from prison.
 - D. A situation in which the same events happens on a continuous cycle.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "the important milestones in the other Wes Moore's life." (Paragraph 14)
 - B. "when he came out of that GED program, he was very fired up and excited about life and excited to do things differently" (Paragraph 16)
 - C. "how strong that calling and how strong that pullback into the streets was, to the point that it eventually broke him." (Paragraph 16)
 - D. "we should say that you also had run-ins with the law yourself, and you flirted with the idea of walking across that line" (Paragraph 22)

5. In the article, factors that neither Wes Moore had control over, but played significant roles in shaping their futures, are discussed. What were these factors and how did they contribute to the differing fates of the two Wes Moores? [RI.3]
