

# Prisoner Express Journal Project

## Winter 2021

Dear Friend,

Hi, It's Gary from Prisoner Express! You have signed up for the PE Journal project, and this is your official invitation to join

Keeping a journal is a useful habit. I will describe how the PE journal program works and I will share some Journal keeping tips created by Agnes a former PE Journal program coordinator. Agnes graduated and we are fortunate to have some new students coming in to coordinate the program. If you begin sending in entries, you will receive a letter from this year's program coordinator sometime in Feb or March.

The journal program began 15 years ago, and I have been reading many of your journals over that time. And that have read and witnessed the insights that come to many of the people who regularly journal and find ways to express themselves through writing. Give yourself a goal. An entry a day. Maybe twice a week. You are in control, and can write when you want. Maybe it's magic, but it seems to me that those people who keep at it can gain understanding and sense of controlling their destiny, though they are locked up

Writing your thoughts generally slows things down, it lets you harness your energy and focus it on a particular direction. It also captures where you are at any given moment and becomes a record you can refer to later if you wish.

My experience reading prisoner journals has been to see growth and connection develop in the people who regularly write a bit about what they are facing in their lives. I want to invite anyone reading this to take the time and record your thoughts and join a fellow group of men and women reflecting on life while incarcerated. You are fully functional human beings, greater than the setting where you live so of course your journal entries can be about whatever has your attention in the moment. Writing your thoughts is a great way to develop communication skills, which are life skills you will be able to use until you no longer inhabit this planet. [Being an older person, my thoughts turn to my limited time on the planet] All of us will be checking out someday, so the point is to live and experience meaningful moments. I believe writing and reflecting helps create meaningful moments. In prison much of what you are allowed is monitored and controlled. Your writing is your own and has the potential to set you free, if only for a little while. I ask you to try the journey. There is no consequence for starting a journal and letting it go. It only takes me a manilla folder to organize and store your journal. You can talk about everyday life, memories, you decide. Be honest and be fearless in exploring your being and underlying feelings. There is no shame in an examined life no matter what you uncover. The shame lives in what we are afraid to face, explore and acknowledge.

You can keep your journals for yourself or you can send your journals to us and we will share them with our volunteers to read. Pre-COVID-19 we had students coming to the Durland Alternatives Library where PE is headquartered, and they would read your journals and write you back. I know that meant a lot to both the journal writers and the students participating in this project. Since last March the building where library is located has been closed. We have a few volunteers who still help out, but we are figuring new ways to keep getting your words out to the public. We have begun scanning journal entries and putting them online. We hope to get many journal entries scanned as we can, but it takes time and volunteers

Past journal participants have told me their thoughts often go round and round in their head, and that they can get into some bad thinking habits by constantly thinking the same obsessive thoughts over and over again. Writing has a way of stopping that process and opening new avenues of thought. It can also help you remember incidents that were important to you. You can write about whatever is important to you. If you do not want to send your entries to us, I certainly understand and still encourage you to write. If you want your self-reflections to share with others than please share your journals with us. My hope is to donate all of the Journals we collect in 2020 and 2021 to the "Rare and Manuscript Library at Cornell. They will store them and make them available for researchers in the future who want to know what prisoners were experiencing during these COVID-19 years. You will get occasional letters from PE staff as well updating you on the developments in the journal project

You should date all your journal entries. Please make sure your name is on your journal, so it doesn't get mistaken for someone else's. You can send in your journals whenever it is convenient for you. Some people send entries a few times in a week, others weekly, others when ever they want. You can save up a bunch and send it in. I know that takes stamps. If you really can't afford to send in an entry let us know and we will see if we can help.

I am glad PE can function during this pandemic. I expect I will be working from home throughout the winter and spring and mostly likely this summer. For sure we have been told we will not be back at the library before Mid-May. I feel privileged to read your words and get a better understanding of your lives. If you write Journal on the outside of the envelope it helps get your letter get processed by our volunteers sooner. I would like to find a way to share sample journal entries that individuals have submitted that were poignant whether for the inspiration or for the difficulties you are experiencing. We are all humans, and we all feel. We are all in this together and recognizing our common humanity is the first step in mitigating all of the problem's humans are creating for themselves and the world. [enough preaching-sorry]

### **Agnes's Tips-What is a Journal**

**A private world** -- a space that is entirely your own, where you can use your own voice and say what you wish.

There are few times in this world of ours when we can speak completely freely, unlimited by expectation or influence. Some situations demand that we sound smart or tough, and at other times it's easier to pretend stupidity or vulnerability. The journal can be a place of escape from those external pressures – prejudice, oppression, or judgment.

(Tips: If you have trouble beginning, write about a memory [you could start writing about the place you grew up, and see what you can recover from describing the rooms or the streets. See if you can capture a place at a certain moment in time]. Or try writing about your day, or what you hope tomorrow will be like. Start writing about the last time you were angry, or the last time you were happy.)

*"Why has my motley diary no jokes? Because it is a soliloquy, and every man is grave alone."*  
-- Ralph Waldo Emerson

*"Writing is the best way to talk without being interrupted."* -- Jules Renard

**A blank slate** -- a place for you to explore new ways of speaking, and for you to experiment.

Just as a journal can be a sanctuary for what we say, it can also invite new ways to say it. Writing a journal is between you and the page.

We don't always have one way of speaking and one way only. We tell different stories to our family than the ones we tell our friends and talk differently to authority than we do to our children. We are affected by the voices and the presence of others. It's not always a simple endeavor to find out what is authentic – to question what we want to be, rather than what those around us want us to be. The blank page, though, can get us started, because it is a place with few constraints.

(Tips: Keep a poem- journal, or a dream-journal. Try writing without stopping to think, then try thinking about each sentence before you write it. You could choose a number of paragraphs and write that amount per entry. Find out what works for you.)

*"For many years I was self-appointed inspector of snowstorms and rainstorms, and did my duty faithfully, though I never received one cent for it."* – Henry David Thoreau

**A way to heal** -- a place for you to write about the things that hurt you (either in the present or in the past) so that you might find a new clarity in your feelings and in your understanding of trauma.

When we write about painful events, experiences, and feelings, we can often gain insight into them -- and then move through these moments and start to heal. Writing in a journal can allow our bodies and our minds to recuperate, as we find a way to speak that feels genuine. We have stories that often can't find a place in our daily lives to be told, that we can't speak to others, and sometimes that we can hardly bear to tell ourselves. Give yourself the opportunity to tell your stories, your feelings, and you may find a new power in your voice.

(Tips: When you think about your experience, try writing about it in several different ways. Write about the hardest places you know, and about the things that you seem least able to understand – births or deaths, loves and hatreds, fear. The details of your experience are important in the healing process, so see how many images, smells, and impressions you can pack into your writing.)

*"The only time I know that something is true is the moment I discover it in the act of writing."*

-- Jean Malaquais

**A net** -- a place where you can write anything and everything.

Our thoughts do not always follow clear lines, coherent themes, or consistent routes. We don't think only of small things for twenty-four hours and then only of large, serious things for the next – our mind doesn't shift over at midnight and at noon like a changing train. A journal can capture big and small thoughts side by side, and so can give us a strangely truthful portrait of the human mind.

*"There are thousands of thoughts lying within a man that he does not know till he takes up the pen and writes."* -- William Makepeace Thackeray

*"What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose-knit and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind... I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do..."*—Virginia Woolf

**A record** – a way for you to keep track, to remember, and to keep perspective.

The old pages of our journals can unfold to us the world as we saw it on a day now past. Such a record can be useful, if only because we can see our habits and our repetitions laid out before us. The journal can give us perspective. And if there are things we want to change about our lives, it is helpful to chart them -- so we can know them and change them.

Just as importantly, a record of our past days can show us how we've grown. Life can blend all together, day into day, and sometimes it is too easy to forget our victories, and our sadness, and our progress. Sometimes it's good to be reminded.

(Tips: Note the day of the week, the date, and the time you are writing. If you wrote about yesterday's weather, try writing about today's weather, too – it can be interesting to see how your perspective changes day-to-day. Write about the details [of your health, your conversations, your moods] because the things that may seem mundane at the time can be fascinating years later.)

*"Always carry a notebook. And I mean always. The short-term memory only retains information for three minutes; unless it is committed to paper you can lose an idea for ever."* – Will Self

*"If you think that something small cannot make a difference, try going to sleep with a mosquito in the room."* -- Anonymous

*"It is necessary to write, if the days are not to slip emptily by. How else, indeed, to clap the net over the butterfly of the moment? For the moment passes, it is forgotten; the mood is gone; life itself is gone. That is where the writer scores over his fellows: he catches the changes of his mind on the hop."* -- Vita Sackville-West

**A podium to speak to others** – a space for you to write to future generations, who may remember or know you through our journals; to those you love or those who are gone; to any audience, even the audience that is Prisoner Express.

To some people, journals are not a private space, but a public one. It may help to picture the people who might read your journal someday. A journal doesn't have to be quiet or private to be a journal. I read my great-grandmother's when it was passed down to me. Because of that experience, I feel I know her, and I treasure that feeling.

Journal-writing can be a way to reach out to others. This is especially true in this Prisoner Express program; in which you share with us your journal-writings and we publish some on-line. My hope for this program is that we may continue to learn about each other's lives, so that we may be reminded that we are not alone.

(Tips: Remember that if you wish to include us in your journal-audience, we'll always be here to listen.)

*"Writing is a struggle against silence." -- Carlos Fuentes*

**An activity beyond the page** – a time that you give to yourself.

Journaling can help us to exercise our thoughts and our writing. Writing is a muscle that grows with practice and time. The same is true for self-reflection. For me it has also been important to have a small time in the day that is dedicated to a productive purpose, which can act as a compass in times of tumult.

(Tips: Try out journal-writing as a way to clear your head before you sleep, or as a start to the day when you wake up. Write in your journal a list of things that are important to you; write out a prayer or a poem or a song, one that you either know or create.)

**And, ultimately, an opportunity for you to find out more about yourself.**

To me, a journal is a medium that, more than any other, embraces us. It helps us to know our own thoughts; to recognize our weaknesses and our strengths, and to better understand who we are and who we want to be. A journal doesn't need to be just one thing – one day it's where we go to meditate, another day it's where we go to vent. Here we search for listening ears, here we look for solitude and silence. But always a journal is a mirror, a place to affirm our voices and our very being.

*"How do I know what I think until I see what I say?" -- E. M.*

Gary, back for some closing words. If you have friends outside let them know your journals might be found at the link <https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing/> So to sum up, Congratulations you are part of the Journal Project 2021! Start writing! Date your entries and send them to us. Put word "journal" on envelope please.

See what comes. Sometimes I pray for guidance. It is the one type of prayer that seems I get answers. I don't know who I pray to when I do pray. I guess sometimes I try to summon the attention of Mother Earth cause I came out of her body and sometimes I look for the part of me connected to the "Whole of Creation". So I guess I ask the "Whole of Creation or Mother Earth for guidance.

In this case I ask for guidance through them for you and I set an intention for the journal to be part of your path in accessing guidance, balance and curiosity through increasing awareness.. Blessings on us all!

Happiest of New Years. I wish you joy and comfort in trying times.



Gary

