

# Journal Starter Kit-Spring 2022

Dear Future Journal Writers,

Hello! This letter is being sent out to all new contributors to the Prisoner Express Journal Program. Welcome; we are excited to begin connecting with you. We hope that you get as much as you can out of this project, and we are here to support you in any capacity you need.

1 My name is Grace and I am the Coordinator for the Journal Program at Prisoner Express. I began volunteering with Prisoner Express over a year ago as a freshman in college. It is now my second year and I have been in this new position for about eight months. I am studying global and public health, but nevertheless I love to read and write, and I do it often. I believe writing can be empowering, and I find a lot of joy, benefit, clarity, and knowledge in it. Writing has saved me in many ways, and it has been an extremely valuable tool for myself. I hope you all can find hope in it as well.

The Journal Program is a thing with few restrictions, much like a journal itself. There are many purposes that a journal can serve, which I will go into greater detail about below, though ultimately it is up to you. You can write as little or as much, and as often, as you would like. For those who would like some structure, I am providing a thirty-day journal outline that you can start on any date. If you enjoy the outline, another one will be sent in about six months — so stay tuned! We encourage you to send in entries as often as you would like. When they are received, we add them to your journal file. We will also post select entries to our database at <https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing> where friends, family, friendly strangers, etc., can connect with you.

If you do not wish for your journals to be published, please mark them as private or send us a letter.

Moreover, these past couple of months we have been rebuilding the volunteer efforts that were put on pause due to Covid-19. We now have several volunteers come in a couple days per week to read entries and write letters back to you with their thoughts. In a single night we are able to generate anywhere from 30 – 50 letters. Both the volunteers and I look forward to hearing what you have to say every week!

We at Prisoner Express hope this program will continue to act as a space for you to speak, as well as a space for those who are unincarcerated to listen. For most people in the free world, the statement “out of sight, out of mind” rings true. We hope that by engaging with you through our programs, putting your writings on the web, and encouraging others to view your work, more people will become aware of the rehabilitation issues in the prison system, and actively seek to reform the unjust current penal system.

We strive to create a space where people will learn to hear you, listen to you, and advocate for you.

This program is for you, and though Prisoner Express staff manage it, your contributions and thoughts are what keep it going, and have led to its ongoing success. Write to me with any questions, comments, suggestions for improvement, or what more you would like to see from the Journal Program. I hope to work closely with you all throughout the next few years as we continue to build the program together.

—A small note: I will be in Zambia (Africa) this summer so I probably will not receive your responses until late August. As soon as I get back, I will be sure to catch up and answer any questions that you sent!

Thank you for joining me on this journey.

Best,  
Grace M.

## The First Steps:

To begin journaling, or if you have been writing to continue that process, I recommend that you address four key ideas. Write these at the top of your first page, or where you left off, but do put them somewhere, and **consider coming back to these questions every six-months or so to re-evaluate yourself.**

1. Write a brief introduction of yourself: who you are, where you are currently, etc.
2. Why do you want to keep a journal?
3. What do you hope to get out of writing? (For example, organize your thoughts better, gain

clarity on certain things, track your feelings over time, or anything that is true to you!)

4. Who do you hope might read your journal? Are you writing for someone, yourself, or both?

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

I tried to provide ample inspiration for journaling in this packet. The following sections are great places to determine how to begin writing regularly if you need some ideas.

#### **What is the purpose and possibility of a journal?**

- 2 It is your own space where you can freely express yourself and use your voice. It is one of the few opportunities we have for utterly free speech — uninhibited by outside expectations. Simply put, a journal is the best way to speak without concern of being interrupted. There is no prejudice, judgment or external influence to worry about. It can serve any purpose(s) you wish.

It is a catch-all for everything that is happening and has happened in your life. Many times our thoughts and feelings are not linear, and they oscillate up-and-down, switching between topics hourly. A journal can capture all of these thoughts, and by doing so provide an oddly genuine, truthful portrait of our mind.

*“The only time I know that something is true is the moment I discover it in the act of writing.”*  
– Jean Malaquais

It is time for yourself. Writing is a craft; a skill that strengthens each day you put words to paper. It is similar to self-reflection; with practice and dedication you will gradually reap more benefits. It can also be useful to set aside a specific time for writing each day; ensuring the space for writing can be gratifying and act as a compass during times of distress.

It is a means of healing. You can write about painful past and present events, experiences, and feelings. Writing about these things often leads to a greater understanding of trauma; we gain insight that allows us to move forward and begin to heal. A journal creates the space to give power to our voices, and tell stories of personal pain that

do not fit into daily conversations. Try to write about events that are the most difficult to understand or speak about — births or deaths, fears, loves, or hatreds.

*“I can shake off everything as I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn.” – Anne Frank*

It is a form of meditation. Journaling is similar to meditating in that it has the power to calm the mind and focus our thoughts. This can help to reduce anxiety, steady breathing patterns, and bring you peace. It can be therapeutic, and a tremendous release of pent up grievance that leads to clarity.

It is a record or account. A journal can be a place to remember, to keep track, and to keep perspective. The well-worn pages of journals unfold to offer a window into our lives, experiences, and feelings on days now past. A record of this type can be both useful and insightful. We can come to understand our repetitions and recurrences, recall memories that would have otherwise been forgotten, and observe our growth over time. It is important to chart things about our life so that we recognize what and how we wish to change. Life is a collage of victories and defeats, sadness and euphoria, peace and turmoil; we can be content in acknowledging these moments and our changing perspectives.

*“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 forever.” – Will Self*

It is a podium to reach and speak to others. You can write to anyone you wish, including future generations — all who may know you and hear your story through your journals. You can write to any audience, including myself and everyone at Prisoner Express. We will unequivocally listen.

It is part of a community. To some, journals are a very public space. Writing in a journal does not need to be quiet; it can be a way to reach out to others. This is especially true in this Prisoner Express Program. We publish the majority of the writing you share with us online. Our hope is that by doing so we may continue to learn about and from each other, and be reminded that we are not alone — but rather **all part of a larger community of voices who share in writing as a means of empowerment and freedom.**

Above all, it is personal. *Your journal is the opportunity for you to discover more about yourself.* A journal is a medium that embraces oneself. It guides us toward recognizing our weaknesses and our strengths; to better understanding our thoughts and what they mean, who we are, and who we want to be. One of the best parts about a journal is that it can differ daily — one day we vent or describe an event, another day we take to poetry, song, or meditation (I will add that venting is usually best productive when we use it to determine how to move forward after releasing tension). A journal is essentially a mirror of the soul and mind. It is uniquely and inherently you, and it is a place to affirm our voices and being.

*“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*

### 3 What to write about?

Here are some topics and prompts to get you started writing. You can take these ideas in any direction you wish. It does not matter how you write, but it does matter that you write — you matter, your thoughts matter, and a record of your thinking is both valuable and important.

- Write how you are feeling, or what you are thinking or observing, in the present moment.
- Comment on any of the quotes presented in this packet; what do they make you think of?

#### Possible Formats:

- You can address the journal to yourself, the universe, a God, someone you know, or someone you used to know. You can write without addressing it to anyone, which is what I usually do.
- Here are two options for formatting:

These are fairly standard formats, but your journal can take any shape or design. I highly recommend you **try experimenting with poetry, rhyming, letters, paragraphs, song-writing, or any other forms of writing in your entries.** The way you write can change each time, depending on the topic you are writing about or how you are feeling.

*“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*

- Write a list of things that are important to you.
- Describe your mood or conversations; what seems simple now could be fascinating years later.
- Discuss the interests that you hold and why they are fascinating to you.
- Address your journal entry to someone (it can be a friend, relative, or celebrity), and write whatever you need/wish to say to them, or describe how you feel when you think of them.
- Recount the mundane affairs of everyday life, and the things that you think of on a daily basis.
- Write about your childhood dreams, or the types of dreams that run through your mind at night.
- Capture a memory on paper. Write about a certain moment — if possible, evoke the five senses.
- Discuss the person (or people) you most admire. What is it about them that you hope to be?
- Record your opinion and views on any topic, worldly affair, or current event.

*“Why has my motley diary no jokes? Because it is a soliloquy and every man is grave alone.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson*

Dear _____,	DATE	DATE (time)
_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	DATE	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	DATE	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	DATE	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	DATE	_____
_____	_____	_____
_____	DATE	_____
_____	_____	_____
[sign your name or leave blank]		

**Advice:**

- Your writing must be legible, otherwise we cannot scan, upload, or read it.
  - Print is preferred to cursive because it is easier for volunteers to read.
- We will selectively choose entries to be uploaded to the online database.
- Feel free to write about any topic you wish, but know writing that is extremely sexual or graphic may not be shared with volunteers (however, it will still be archived).
- Included in this packet is a sample of some entries we have gotten from members in the program over the past year. Feel free to draw some inspiration from them.

Also, **please date your entries with the month, day, and year.** Some people write a timestamp as well, but that is personal preference. Dating your entries is incredibly important because it allows us to catalog your writing appropriately and it will benefit you whenever you read retrospectively.

4 I consistently admire and appreciate the openness with which you all write. The final and most important piece of advice I leave you with is to **be honest and authentic** in your writing, and to **write for yourself.**

*“Writing is a struggle against silence.” – Carlos Fuentes*

---

**30-day Outline Option:** The goal of this outline is to provide support for people who want a plan for journaling. It is completely optional but the prompts are short, simple and build off of each other to create a cohesive, full journal narrative (if that is what you are looking for). You should write all of the entries in your personal journal.

This structured journal outline can be started on any date, at any time. You can do the journal sequentially in whatever schedule works best for you. I would advise choosing one of these options to keep it simple: (1) daily (2) every other day (3) every Monday/certain day of the week. You can also make up your own pattern, but try to stick to a routine. If you get off track that is okay — just pick up where you last left off.

Here is a “calendar” where you can fill in dates you are writing & cross off days once you complete them:

<u>Day 1</u> Date:	<u>Day 2</u> Date:	<u>Day 3</u> Date:	<u>Day 4</u> Date:	<u>Day 5</u> Date:	<u>Day 6</u> Date:
<u>Day 7</u> Date:	<u>Day 8</u> Date:	<u>Day 9</u> Date:	<u>Day 10</u> Date:	<u>Day 11</u> Date:	<u>Day 12</u> Date:
<u>Day 13</u> Date:	<u>Day 14</u> Date:	<u>Day 15</u> Date:	<u>Day 16</u> Date:	<u>Day 17</u> Date:	<u>Day 18</u> Date:
<u>Day 19</u> Date:	<u>Day 20</u> Date:	<u>Day 21</u> Date:	<u>Day 22</u> Date:	<u>Day 23</u> Date:	<u>Day 24</u> Date:
<u>Day 25</u> Date:	<u>Day 26</u> Date:	<u>Day 27</u> Date:	<u>Day 28</u> Date:	<u>Day 29</u> Date:	<u>Day 30</u> Date:

**Day 1:**

*What is the greatest lesson that you have ever learned?*

*What have you done/felt differently since learning it?*

**Day 2:**

*Talk about the community that you have, or the community that you wish you had. What is it like? What change would you like to see?*

**Day 3:**

*Do you enjoy writing? Is it something that you have done throughout your whole life, or is it a new practice?*

**Day 4:**

*Describe one or two significant life events that helped to shape you into who you are currently.*

**Day 5:**

*Discuss your plans, dreams, fears, and/or worries about reentering the free world.*

5 **Day 6:**

*Name one opinion that you used to have but have since questioned or changed. What led you to change that opinion?*

**Day 7:**

*If you could change anything about your childhood, what would it be? Why?*

**Day 8:**

*What is a policy that you would like to see changed?*

**Day 9:**

*What was your experience when Covid-19 had its initial outbreak? How did you respond? Did fear affect your daily life? How are things now?*

**Day 10:**

*Review the most recent book, movie, podcast, television show, song, or other form of media that you engaged with.*

*What did you like or dislike about it? Did you learn anything new?*

**Day 11:**

*What item or possession do you value most?*

**Day 12:**

*Describe your day from start to finish. If you could alter any part of it, what would it be?*

**Day 13:**

*Write a letter to someone you know; tell them something you never got the chance to.*

**Day 14:**

*What is a country, continent, or place that you have always hoped to visit?*

**Day 15:**

*You are halfway through the outline! How do you enjoy writing now? Do you feel differently about it since the day you started journaling?*

**Day 16:**

*What is the best decision that you ever made? How did you make it? Did it take a long time to decide or was it based on instinct?*

**Day 17:**

*What type of music do you listen to regularly? What do you enjoy about it?*

**Day 18:**

*Do you celebrate many holidays? Do you have a favorite? What do holidays mean to you?*

**Day 19:**

*If you could offer any piece of advice to someone younger than yourself, what would it be? Why did you choose it?*

**Day 20:**

*Do you have a culture and/or religion? What defines it? Where does it come from and has it changed over time?*

**Day 21:**

*Describe yourself from the perspective of a stranger. What would they see and think?*

**Day 22:**

*How does the way a stranger sees you differ from how you view yourself? What is it like to be you? What would most people not know?*

**Day 23:**

*Who is your mentor? What do you admire about them? If no one comes to mind — where do you draw inspiration from?*

**Day 24:**

*Write about a new skill you have been developing or a subject that you are learning? What about it fascinates you?*

**Day 25:**

*Do you have a philosophy of life? Talk about it, and if not — what influences the decisions that you make? What do you value?*

**Day 26:**

*Talk about your job. What are the pros and cons? How does it play into your lifestyle?*

6 **Day 27:**

*What do you spend the majority of your money on? If you had extra funds what would you use them for? Why?***Day**

**Congratulations** — you finished all thirty days! Wonderful work; you should be proud of your commitment to writing consistently, and I hope that you were able to learn about yourself in the process.

Feel free to write to Prisoner Express with advice on the outline (why you did/did not enjoy it, if there are other (themed?) outlines you would like to see, or any revisions/suggestions you have, etc.) Thank you!

*“I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart.” – Anne Frank*

*Illustrate the scene before you; describe with as much detail as you can where you are currently writing. Try to evoke the five senses (sight, taste, smell, hearing, touch) if possible.*

**Day 29:**

*What is your greatest hope for the future? It can be for your future, for the future of someone you regard closely, or the future of the world.*

**Day 30:**

*Reflect on your experience journaling. What did you learn about yourself in the process? In what ways, if any, are you different now? Do you plan on continuing to write?*

**Hi All, Gary here in the middle of the packet, adding my 2cents. Everything you have read prior to this section has been created by Grace. Feel free to write Attn Grace in your reply if you have thoughts about what you have already read.** Over the years I have received a lot of mail from Journal writers. They tell me over and over how helpful it can be to write down their thoughts. Often participants wonder, “are they doing it right”, and we always try to write back and let them know that there really isn’t a right way, and that everyone can come at this from their own angle. And of course, people do indeed have a variety of ways to write. While we post journals online for folks in the free world to read, you all are often in your own world of writing and don’t get to see what other journalers write. Well with this issue of the “Intro to Journal Program”, we have included some samples of what others write about. We hope to make this a regular feature of our journal program. **Sara, a long time PE volunteer, [who also created the” Immunology and Mental health Packet this cycle] read through many entries to look for entries she felt would be useful to share with you. Please write to us Attn Sara if you want to share feedback or ideas for how to further develop this shared journal writing section.**

## Newsletter — Journal Entries

This is the first of what will hopefully be a series of newsletters meant to highlight what others in the journal program at Prisoner Express are writing. We receive numerous journal entries here at PE and have a limited number of staff, so not everyone is able to receive a response. The act of writing itself, however, should be liberating for you—whether or not someone reads and responds to your work. Regardless, to build a greater sense of community, I have decided to create a newsletter that features several journal entries received here at PE. You can simply enjoy the writing, learn about what others are going through, or even use these entries as inspiration for your own. Each entry is accompanied by a short blurb reflecting on the entry/describing why it was chosen. Happy reading!-Sara

### 02-2021 – Arnold Barnes

In October of 2008 me and my then girlfriend were denied an apartment, forcing us to move back to Arlington, TX from Chicago. At the time, I was 26 and me and my family were still being punished for a felony theft I committed at 18 yrs old even though I had completed the probation. In the following months during the depression of 2009, I was laid off from my job as a truck driver from the Salvation Army and my girlfriend went from 40 hrs a week at her job to just 15 hrs. Every single day I sought employment until finally I was called to be interviewed for a truck driver position in Arlington. Needless to say, I was elated and my interview went so well that I was hired before I even filled out an application. \$16 an hour, with full benefits for me and my two kids. But before I walked out the door and after being told to show up for work the next day, I heard “Oh wait a minute I forgot. Do you have a felony?” Replying yes, both the manager and supervisor shared a look. “Well, Arnold, it’s company policy that we can’t here felons but you seem like a god guy and I would like for you to work for us so I’ll tell you what Ima do. Tomorrow morning I’m going to call headquarters and see if we can make an exception. So call me tomorrow afternoon.” When I called, I was told again, “Sorry Arnold, it’s company policy.” After thanking him, I hung up wondering, “Why was there a policy in place to keep me unemployed?”

Weeks later, still hopeful and while driving around seeking employment, I saw a large “Now hiring” sign in a shopping center. Immediately I pulled into the parking lot, parked, put on my biggest smile, and while reaching for the door, I saw it! A paper box taped to the door reading “No felonies.” I was devastated and could actually see the walls of

this “box” encroaching. Afterward, I went and had a talk with my father in which I told him as a last resort I would join the military, knowing full well I’d probably be sent off to war. I knew of convicted felons who were allowed to join and had seen no other options. He told me he was proud of me. That was the last time I hugged my father.

At the recruitment office the next day, I was told that because they had reached their recruitment quota, they were no longer giving felony waivers. From there, I went straight home only to be met with the faze of my girlfriend’s and kids’ eyes wide with fear as they handed me the eviction they found on the door earlier that evening. With the lights having been cut off that same day, that night I read the notice over and over again by candle light. By now, “the box” was having an ill effect on my emotional and mental wellbeing and the pressure to provide demanding my immediate attention.

I don’t know if there’s such a thing as temporary insanity, and by that I mean a degree of mental derangement, unsoundness of mind, or disorganized personality, but I was definitely experiencing it because the next day I had a gun and was no longer looking for a job. And though I cannot explain why I randomly approached a stranger, I can tell you in desperation, trying to take from him only to give to my family, that a struggle ensued and although unintentionally, in the end, I had killed a man.

I’m currently taking a philosophy course through a college for prisoners and gave this story as a reply only to be asked this question in return: Do you think society and law makers share responsibility for what happened? What I think doesn’t matter, but what you all think does. Whether you all ban these “boxes” from housing and job applications, or decide not to, know that as a democracy the future laws you all create will be of unimaginable importance, influence, and have an unforeseeable butterfly effect on our community. It is my belief that you all should “ban these boxes” from housing and job applications. Thank you for reading my personal story.

*I chose this piece because it points to a key issue in society that encourages repeat offenses rather than offering the opportunity to change and lead a different life. Perhaps many offenses could be prevented altogether if there weren’t as many barriers for those who have served time. One question for you all to consider (and perhaps write about in your own journals), is: “What are challenges faced by those who have been incarcerated as they attempt to re-integrate and what do you think could change to reduce the number of repeat offenses?”*

08-03-2021 – Paul Barber

A sprinkle of hope in this vulture-filled sky. I vow to not give up despite the odds of tragic circumstances. Everything looks bleak in this dark dungeon. Is that a flicker of light in this pitch black cell? I ask myself, "How can anybody not go insane in this hell?" I feel constant anxiety and frequent depression. My cellie is almost as crazy as myself! He says he talks to himself and complains of demanding voices. We both apparently have fallen into the cuckoo's nest.

*I chose this entry for a couple of reasons. First, the imagery is poignant: "vulture-filled sky" and "flicker of light in this pitch black cell?" These phrases help me picture what Barber's environment is like without being as literal as "There is no light in this cell." Additionally, it reminds me of Gary's description of prison as a "crazy making environment," hopefully normalizing mental illness.*

12-15-2021 – Jon Kaspar

#1: My name is Jon Albert Kaspar. I am at a level 4 prison in Virginia.

#2: I want to keep a journal for a couple of reasons; the first is to keep track of things and events I might otherwise forget. The second is to have a place where I can speak and share things with people. The third is to find out things about myself.

#3: I really hope journaling helps me to be a better person by helping me to figure things out about myself and to help to deal with things.

#4: I hope the right person reads my journal.

Day 1: The greatest lesson I've ever learned is to not do or act a certain way for the purpose of "making" someone/people feel or think a certain type of way about me. Just be yourself. You can never know just how someone perceives your actions.

Day 2: The community that I have...I don't have one. I have my mother, who loves and supports me, and I have a celly/friend who I talk with. I don't wish for anything else...No new friends, no fake friends.

Day 3: I love to write — I just finished my first book! With a little help from The Night, a fiction novel with soldiers and monsters....you got to read it.

Day 4: One of the biggest events in my life was having a group of people who I thought were my friends call me up to go to a party when I was in high school. When I wasn't looking, I was attached and ended up with a broken jaw. I hated more after. Didn't trust as much. Depressed. Drug use.

Day 5: When it comes to re-entering the free world, I have no plans. Only fears and worries. I do have dreams that I fear won't come true. I'd like to help my mom and dad out when I first get out then get an awesome (dream) job. Dine a great (dream) girl, start a family...I'll be 42 when I get out and I worry I'll be too old. I also want a nice house.

Day 6: I used to think everyone had some good in them. That nobody was just a bad person. Now I know some people are evil. Being around some of those people here in prison led me to believe this.

Day 7: My father was in the army when I was a child and we moved from Mass to Hawaii to Texas, where I acted out and got in big trouble twice at school. My dad retired and we moved to VA for good. I'd change not acting out.

*Specifically the first page and "Day 1" stood out to me. The way he outlines why he is keeping a journal and what he hopes to get out of it is a great example for others. Day 1 will likely resonate with a lot of people, as it did with me, because one of my most important values in life is staying authentic and true to myself. This can be hard at times, especially in new or challenging environments. In the rest of his plan, Kaspar discusses what many of us can relate to: inauthenticity in friendships, the importance of having someone to turn to, regret and the desire to change, and desires for the future.*

12-31-2021 – Daniel Briggs

I heard a new song this week. It pulls on every possible string in my heart as I hear the lyrics: "I just want to run away, find somewhere to feel safe, rinse away the bad days—I don't learn my lesson. I don't see no end in sight, I don't feel the best when I try, holdin' my head up high but it's not workin'" The song I quoted mixed lyrics to is by NF called "Chasing." Exactly 7 days ago, his song would just be any other song. But because of the way I'm feeling, it sings to the pain inside, and I can't help but struggle to breathe normally. My head hangs as I stare out at nothing. Let me explain what I'm feeling and why.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of January, I tested positive for COVID-19. So I quarantined accordingly. For 14 days, we had no access to phone and e-mail. I got out and was able to use the phone. I called my big brother Robert. He right away asked if I spoke to my big sister Shari yet. Right then I felt something had happened. "No, I haven't yet. Is something wrong?" I said. So he told me that Shari's daughter passed away. And the pain hit, but I stayed calm. "What happened?" I asked. He said, "She hung herself in her closet." It took everything I had to fight my tears. I'm in a place you can't be vulnerable. My niece was

super young, 17 going on 18; still a baby. This isn't the first time I've dealt with suicide. Where I'm from, it happens too often. And it doesn't get easier each time it happens.

I feel heavy guilt because I couldn't be there for my sister. I'm weary, because I wished I could do something to help. And that I'd say 5 people in my family have attempted, 2 nearly succeeded, and one did succeed. That's just my family; where I'm from, it happens a lot. I myself had once decided to hang myself, but changed my mind due to a dream I had. I tried to take the easy way out instead of dealing with all of my pain and anger. So I feel as long as I am alive, I better start speaking up against suicide. When others see me do it, maybe they will do it too.

9 My heart is heavy, but it's not about me. I have to be strong for my sister and anyone who knew my niece Alva. I will honor her. And I will pray hard for my sister and my family. I don't know why anyone decides on suicide, but from my experiences, it was, for me, a matter of feeling insignificant, like not a soul in this world cared about me. I lost everything. I felt bad for all the people I hurt in any way, and I never dealt with the loss of my mom, my best friend, and my younger cousin. I just carried all of it. I won't say God spoke to me, I'll say that an old grandma spoke to me and she said that I'll be okay. And her voice was so soothing I felt it once she spoke. And I remember feeling love. And I cried. I felt thankful. So I dealt with it all. Losing my family members, all my wrongs, my flaws. I prayed about it all. And prayed for forgiveness. It took time, but I got stronger. I decided to let it all go. I was ashamed for wanting to die. Because my family did still love me, and I still had close friends. I can say that I survived. But it wasn't easy.

I am stuck for now, but I will pray hard for those who are struggling out in the world. And pray that the ones who can, also pray. Suicide is never an option. And I'd give my life, give anything, to bring my niece back and try to talk some sense into her. I don't know what else to say, other than that I hope that me writing about this will help someone cope with suicide, or it will convince someone to speak up. Because you can't make a difference if you do nothing.

*Briggs's entry spoke to me because it explored how his personal experiences had pushed him to action. Just as Briggs writes, suicide is a difficult topic to unpack, but I do believe that "[Briggs] writing about [suicide]...will convince someone to speak up." I appreciate Briggs's vulnerability in this piece: it takes a lot of strength to share something as personal as the emotions around suicide.*

03-16-2022 – Noah Brock

Coincidentally, the happiest day of my life was also the scariest day of my life. My wife and I had been in the adoption process for years by the time Malachi was born, but leading up to that wonderful event I remember thinking that I was nowhere near prepared to be a father.

As it turned out, I don't think I was ready to become a father at the beginning of our adoption journey. I call it a journey because that is exactly what it was for us. Six grueling, heart wrenching years filled with plenty of tears, failed adoptions, and a growing suspicion that it just wasn't meant to be. These events were molding me and preparing me. Even though I didn't realize it at the time, God was preparing me to love someone unconditionally.

I was at work when I got "THE CALL." My wife sounded more hopeful than I'd heard from her in a long time, and while I would never hear her say the words "I'm pregnant," "baby boy" carried the same weight. My brilliant response (while those billion thoughts raced through my mind,), "cool." I wasn't surprised when she said that she'd already told the agency yes, and was merely informing me as a formality. While on the phone with me, she also had a travel agent on the landline. Here we go I thought, time to...hang on for the ride.

The pregnancy was over, nine months (six years) gone by in a flash, and I wasn't ready to become a father. We couldn't find a flight that would get us there in the time that we could make the drive, so...road trip. My wife picked me up from work, and we were on our way. I drove as fast as I dared, any faster and I was sure to get a ticket, any slower and I would have to contend with an angry wife. I remember thinking that I was racing towards one of the most defining moments of my life and I didn't feel any love towards our future child. I loved my wife and wanted her to be happy. She'd wanted kids after only nine or so months into our marriage and I knew that she would never feel complete without a child to love. I hoped that her love would be enough.

As we drew nearer to the hospital we tentatively decided on the baby's name. We both agreed that we liked Malachi. She liked it because it was a strong biblical name, and I liked it because Danny Glover's character in the movie Silverado was named Malachi. While having this conversation, it hit me how strange it was to be picking a name for someone I'd never met, hadn't watched grow inside the womb. I remembered all of those adoption courses we went to. They always talked about "bonding" with the child, and how in some cases it could take years. I just figured that would be me, but of course I knew that my wife would bond with the baby right away.

By the time we pulled into the hospital's parking lot it was well past visiting hours, but we were determined to see our child. We called the adoption agency but they had gone home for the night. We were on our own, left hoping that someone on the hospital's staff would point him out to us in the viewing room. When we entered the hospital's lobby, I remember feeling a surge of energy, not for love, but of fear. Life as I knew it would soon be over. I put my hands in my pockets so my wife wouldn't see how nervous I felt. I couldn't believe how calm she was comparatively, that was, until we were inside the elevator. I turned to my wife and she had tears in her eyes. For her it was never a matter of loving the child, rather the child would love her back. I knew that he would, how could he not? She was an amazing person and became a fantastic mother.

When we finally reached the viewing room, our baby boy was there in his crib, not crying, just chilling out like he knew we were coming. Until that moment I'd never believed in love at first sight, but then I saw it played out between my wife and the baby. A nurse spotted us and when she saw who we were looking at, took us in to meet him. The hospital had been notified that we were coming, and she told us that she had made sure to tell him that we were on our way when cuddling him during feedings. I was intrigued by her saying that until the moment I came face to face with our son. Yep, he definitely looked like a Malachi, and I knew that he would carry his name well. My wife was the first to hold him, and any idiot (including me) could see that they bonded immediately, in a way that even in that moment, I could not imagine. I watched him being held in her arms, a cute little ball of life changing responsibility. Then it was my turn to hold baby Malachi, my son.

The only way I know how to describe the overwhelming love I instantly felt for Malachi is to say that God didn't open the floodgates to my heart, he kicked the damn things off the hinges. I'd never known anything so powerful. I knew in that moment that I'd love that kid forever, that I'd do anything for him, and that God had blessed me with something I could never deserve. Forget the whole "father thing," I was, and am Malachi's dad.

Almost fourteen years have passed since we adopted each other, and though I've failed in a great many things, the love God has given me for my son has never failed. I am currently incarcerated by my own doing, torn from Malachi's life, and while I long for the day I can see him again, I have entrusted him to the God I now serve, and his mom, my ex-wife. I am confident in the love we share, and can sleep well at night knowing that God doesn't withhold his love for us. Every time I think about Malachi my heart soars with love, joy, and

pride. I love you Malachi, and hope that you never forget that you mean the world to me.

*I selected Brock's piece because it speaks to the importance of family, whatever form that takes. One theme I have noticed throughout many journal entries is how family is often a lifeline, a connection to the outside world and to sanity for those who are in prison. Brock's story also highlights the idea that while change can sometimes be fear-inducing, it can also bring with it happiness.*

3-28-2022 – Kevin Jackson

If you commit a crime and are tried in court and acquitted by a twist of a tort... Are you really innocent of what you've done? Even if the courts say you have won. But that's not true, there's a universal law. It works all the time without a flaw. It's the Law of Compensation: there's a price to pay even if things seem to go your way. There's an internal price for everything you do. It must be paid no matter how you argue. Harm someone, you'll know it within even if the courts say you shall win. You'll know it in your heart; you're guiltier than sin, so before you do anything, ask these questions: Even if it's a simple task, is this task wise? Will it hurt anyone? Will everyone benefit when the task is done? Will everyone say it's a win/win deal? Will everyone be satisfied with how you feel? Am I willing and able to pay the total price? Will everyone be free of sacrifice? If you can say YES to these questions, you can be sure everyone will be a winner. Everyone will feel secure.

*I love the rhyme scheme included here. It gives insight to the writer's personality, and it shows how writing can take many creative and interesting forms! The Law of Compensation is thought-provoking too.*

03-30-2022 – Terrence Hopkins

Hello Prisoner Express,

First let me thank you guys. It's about time someone stepped up to the plate and demonstrated a real to life foundation that allows the prisoners a true chance to bring forth a recreation of exercising of the mind to keep the brain muscle intact to build and grow and truly develop into a force that keeps a positive momentum going so the thought process will not deteriorate into a stagnated cesspool of negative thinking. Thanks guys. I have been inside prison 12 long years and I have a short time left inside. I have transformed my life since I have been on the inside of this prison world. I will let my

actions of my state of mind show and prove I am not only (not) coming back to prison, but it's a goal of mine to help the prisoners and their family reconnect in a positive manner. I am 47 years old and it's thanks to the good spirit of God's love that I am still here alive and well, healthy and strong mentally, physically, and most of all spiritually. It's my spirituality that has carried me on this journey, that allowed me to survive all of my trials and tribulations of the things I involve myself in, partaking within the street-style life. Reading the prisoners' words, taking their life's tribulations and relating them to my own is so inspiring and uplifting. I cannot thank you guys enough. It's like a breath of fresh air, due to the stale repeated conversation of fake lives instead of just being real, true to self. I have five months left inside this prison world. I wish to stay in contact when I get released and also help with P.E. movement. In conclusion to this letter, can you guys please put me on your mailing list? I will have a family member pay the \$4.00 fee. Thanks again guys; Keep up the good work.

*Hopkins acknowledges the hardships of life in prison but emphasizes the positive momentum and uplift that he has gathered from not only his writing, but also by reading the words of fellow inmates. It is an encouraging note.*

#### Leo Cardez – Battling Depression on the Inside

I was raised by an old-fashioned father; raised to be strong, not to show emotion, never cry. Now, as an inmate living in a concrete jungle, these expectations are amplified. In that meeting, I was afraid of being judged as weak – a valid fear behind these walls. In prison, more so than in the “real” world, perception is everything and any hint of weakness would surely be exploited by predators seeking prey. So I hid behind my tough guy façade, but inside I felt small, stupid, and under siege.

*In this excerpt, I liked the use of the phrase “concrete jungle” and the juxtaposition of “tough guy façade” and “small, stupid, and under siege.” I like that the journal program, among other offerings at Prisoner Express, allows participants to vent their frustrations and reflect honestly without the fear of being targeted.*

#### Shon Pernice – Conditioned Emotional Response

As a combat medic, emotional detachment is paramount to your sanity, and the survival of others. With traumatic injuries, you have to maintain your composure in the worst situations. If a severely injured casualty sees you scared, alarmed, or

grossed out by their wounds, they will lose hope and die. Sometimes you need their will to fight in order to get them on the next level of care alive. You adapt to being emotionally numb all of the time. That same tourniquet that I placed on the soldier's leg to stop the blood loss is the same one I place on my emotions.

*This excerpt is similar in some ways to Cardez's detailing of how an inmate must build a wall around themselves just to survive in prison. I liked Pernice's analogy to the “tourniquet that I placed on the soldier's leg” in describing the emotional wall.*

#### Francisco Ortega

to our limits. We are tried by “life” and just like any test score

The saying goes, “for every door that closes, another will be opened,” so with that being said, you can count on every tragedy to bring its own set of silver linings. After all it is only through these calamities that we begin to find ourselves. We are either defined or transformed by these and it is in these moments of suffering of pain and anguish that we are pushed some of us excel and move on to great things and yet, not all of us. Some of us must fail to learn and although we are caught unprepared we must learn to cope with these blows.

*In this excerpt, Ortega reflects on the importance of mistakes. I agree that the moments that push us to our breaking point are invaluable—in these moments, we reflect on ourselves and are given the chance to show what we're capable of.*

#### Matthew Shelton

My desires for the future may never come to fruition, but believing there are new experiences out there waiting for me, new paths to follow, keep me going. Both the future highs and lows are unknown, but remember—journey before destination. Use this time to find yourself (and accept yourself). There is joy to be found in prison. Get a job, take a class, fill the void by spirituality that fits YOU. Show gratitude for those who make your time easier. Be a friend or mentor to someone who is struggling. We have it in us to come out better than we came in. An opportunity to BE somebody.

*Shelton's words here capture the mission of Prisoner Express. Despite the lows that come with being in prison, Shelton tells us that the time can be used to change, to “come out better than we came in.” The programs at Prisoner Express, even*

*something as simple as journaling, can help you reflect on your past, your future, and discover new passions and interests.*

Bernard Wroblewski

But you know what? I'm still a person. I hurt. I cry. I think. I bleed. I laugh. I smile. I love. I hate. I long for love. I want to be wanted and needed. I'm not perfect. I fall down. I break down. I'm scarred. But. I get back up. I fight. I persevere. I want to be better. Stronger. Back up. I fight. I persevere. I want to be better. Stronger. I've changed. I've come a long way. And there are many like me. We've spent our entire lives in a war zone. And we'll forever be in a war zone. Battling our demons and desires. That don't mean we are not human. That we are worthless. Or trash. We have something to offer. We can help others. And maybe help the world understand some harsh truths.

*I selected this entry because it captures something I've heard a lot in the context of Prisoner Express: humanize. I'm sure a lot of volunteers can relate to the idea that volunteering with Prisoner Express has helped to erase some of the stigma around the prison system and to humanize the incarcerated.*

Thomas J. Gordon

Being honest, I guess, is just you being cognizant that whether you were righteous in your actions or not, the other person may not have felt that way. I've left too many negative "footprints in the sands of time," and I don't desire that going forward. It may take me some time to realize my actions for what they were (a day, hours, a week, maybe a month). BUT, the sooner the better for all parties involved. My mental health hinges on me being a good person to others and to myself. Stop being pessimistic and just deal with the elephant in the room. Work toward understanding the other person (feelings and all) and this will help one to be more selfless, insightful, aware.

*We are often our biggest critic, and I think that Gordon touches upon this when he writes: "My mental health hinges on me being a good person...to myself." Honesty, in Gordon's opinion, is about admitting to yourself that you have to acknowledge other perspectives. And I would agree—a lot of times, conflict is borne not just of differing opinions, but the*

*inability of one or both parties to realize where the other is coming from.*

Gary here again, I hope you enjoyed the content Grace and Sara created for you. We often have folks who come to the library just to read journal entries. Your words, stories, ideas affect them and, and some folks will even stop and write a letter to participants letting them know so. The main thing to remember is this is a project for you to talk to yourself and others about what is going on in your head and in your life.

You don't need to focus on the prison environment if that is not what you wish to explore, but certainly it is always an option.

Our bodies imprison us all in some ways and the only liberation means the end of physical existence.

For now though we are in our bodies and our lives leave us with many stories to tell, and much wisdom to glean from our experiences. We'd like to hear about what is important to you, and what lessons you are learning during this all to short lifetime.

Thank you for helping create the Prisoner Express Project.

May good things come your way.

Gary