

Prisoner Express News Summer 23

Greetings from the Durland Alternatives Library, hub of the Prisoner Express program. Prisoner Express provides incarcerated men and women with information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression in a public forum. We wish to nourish your spirit and mind. We do it simply by sharing resources and by caring about what is happening in your life. Every 6 months we publish our semi-annual newsletter, and its purpose is to introduce you to our organization and describe the resources we offer. Much of who we are and what we do is spread by word of mouth. The newsletter is an attempt to help all the new members get an accurate understanding of what we can offer as well as update our regular participants of the changes, innovation, and obstacles the program faces. Of course, our favorite part is introducing all of you to the writings, art, and poetry of our current participants. Hopefully it motivates you to participate in some of the creative projects we offer.

Some of you are seeking out an avenue for your writing and art and you need a little encouragement to send us your material. Good keep it coming! Others of you write to say that you used to draw and write, and you look forward to trying it again. Still there are some of you who write that you never used to read, write, or do art projects, but now that you're incarcerated, you're finding some pleasure in these pursuits. Prisoner Express is here for you no matter where on that continuum you fall. We are not asking for you to be the best in the world at anything. We are encouraging you to stretch your limits and find out what stories and art are inside of you that you might like to share with others. Even if you don't share them and you write or draw for yourself it can still have profound impacts on your understanding about yourself and others.

My name is Gary. I direct the Durland Alternatives Library at Cornell University. I started PE 20 years ago from a single letter from a TX prisoner, Dani Harris. Dani made it clear how reading and writing were a pathway Dani used to maintain sanity. I actually spend way less time focused on library business these days and most of my work time is spent reading your letters and managing the PE program. I have been fortunate to find help from students and community members. It is our mission to provide you with activities that provide meaning and promote personal growth. I was listening to a radio interview of a woman from Afghanistan. She was saying repressive governments intimidate people, so they no longer pursue artistic expression, especially expression that runs contrary to the doctrine of those in control. Her words made me realize the heroic nature artists and writers display when they continue to freely express themselves despite the consequences. I think about you all in prison and can see a commonality. Artistic and creative self-expression is a power within us all. It takes great resilience to

continue to be expressive while locked up and experiencing deprivation. Many folks want to hide under a shell, and while it may feel a little safer in that shell, in the long-term shutting yourself down will not serve you well and it stifles development. Artistic self-expression while incarcerated develops resilience, and resilience means you have the strength to overcome adversity. That seems like a clear path to take, and I do applaud all of you who use reading and writing as tools to stay sane and balanced. That is the heart of what we have to offer at PE. We try to have a variety of programs to offer each cycle with the hopes that at least few of them meet you where you are. A little later in the newsletter there is a short description all the upcoming programs.

This life is all about discovery. Time flies by, and while I know in prison the faster the time goes by probably the better, you can make life meaningful and the passage of time an ally through the process of creative self-expression. I hope you find some programs in the upcoming list that spark your curiosity.

One of my biggest difficulties in running this program is not knowing when mail is delivered. Lately I have gotten back a lot of mail that wasn't delivered. Depending on what state you are in; the mail system may be changing. Some states like PA made the changes a few years ago and while initially mail was a problem, now the system is working fine and the mail I send is being delivered. PA prisoners are growing as a percentage of our program. Other states like FL and MO have started using Securus for the mailing and it seems that no matter what address I chose, prison or the Securus PO box, the mail is rejected. Often, I'm told to send it to the other address given only to have it rejected there as well. I am working to figure out a solution. I write this so you know that PE has been functioning continually and we generally do the things we say we will do. If the mail hasn't reached you, I am so sorry. It keeps me up at night as I know you often think we have disappeared or no longer want to work alongside you. In the future if a long period of time passes without hearing from us [6 months or so] and you start to wonder if PE is still happening, then yes write us a letter and let us know you are out there and would like to be back on our mailing list,

Each state seems to be adopting its own set of rules for how we should send books, newsletters, and personal mail. Some people have up to 3 addresses, others 2 and some still have all their mail going directly to the prison. It can change overnight and little or no warning is given. It leads to much mail not being delivered. I think what I know about failed mailings is the tip of the iceberg and I don't have a clear idea of who does and does not receive our mail. The only sure way I know is if you write to me and sign up for programs, or at least acknowledge receipt of this mailing and others. Because we

send this newsletter without an envelope it seems to be more successful at getting delivered, but we put all our educational packets and theme writing in envelopes and that seems to cause confusion, even if we stamp the envelopes **Direct From Publisher or Printed Bound material.**

For me it becomes an exercise in patience, which to date I don't have much of. Getting angry and frustrated doesn't solve this problem. I don't yet know what will. Please fill out the newest survey on electronic communication and tablets, and I will do my best to get you registered so you can submit your writings and poetry by email through your tablet system. I have tried to avoid this as long as possible cause it adds even more variables to my already aching brain, but it seems like the best alternative, given how hard understanding the mail system has been.

In particular it seems like lots of the theme writing packets I mail to the authors have been getting sent back. It breaks my heart a little every time I get one of those back. Not only do the authors not get to see their story in the packet, but they also miss the opportunity to read the other participating writers' thoughts.

On the good news side summer is a good time in Ithaca. The students are gone, traffic is calmed down and life is laid back. I have 20 acres and an old homestead to maintain so there is always something to do. I've mostly been vegetable gardening and clearing brush this summer. I get great pleasure from eating directly from the garden, and by freezing and drying food for the winter. Working outdoors is a great antidote for what ails me!

I was contacted by Jada, to share with you, info on a new writing project for incarcerated men and women Georgia State University is currently accepting submissions for its inaugural issue of *Beyond Bars*, a literary magazine that will be edited by incarcerated students as well as GSU graduate students in creative writing. They wrote, "*Our ultimate mission in starting such a unique literary publication, with a blended editorial staff of traditional graduate and incarcerated students, is to build bridges of communication and understanding between the incarcerated community, the academic community, and the population at large.*"

Word count and submission length expectations are as follows: Fiction (Short Stories) and Creative Nonfiction: up to 7,500 words

Flash Fiction: up to 250 words

Poetry: 5 poems up to 10 pages total

Regarding content, Beyond Bars is open to all genres (artwork, rap lyrics, drama, etc. At this time, we cannot offer payment to contributors but will provide a year subscription and two copies of Beyond Bars to contributors.

Contact -Jada Ford (she/her)

Beyond Bars

Georgia State University

25 Park Place NE Box 125 Suite 2440
Atlanta, Ga 30303.

B.D.Freestone was a long-time participant in PE. He is now free and contacted me. He is an author and is donating some of his books to PE for distribution. I asked him if he had any advice for you still incarcerated. Here's what he wrote. "*Much gratitude to Alternatives Library and Prisoner Express for all the books and newsletters over the years. I was incarcerated for almost twenty years; however, I was able to take advantage of the positive things that prison had to offer at the time. And you can do it too. Focus on education, good deeds and writing. Only you can tell your story. Don't worry about spelling or grammar, just get it down on paper. Editing can come later. It's a process that takes time, so take advantage of the time you have. Your story just might touch and help someone else in the future.*"

Sincerely, B.D.Freestone.



Art by Eric Downey

We have received many letters letting us know the value these programs have for you. Please keep that info coming as knowing what is working for you helps us plan our future offering. **I'd particularly like to hear from Journal program participants in the next few months to know how writing your journal or hearing from PE volunteers affects you.**

That of course cuts both ways. Feel free to let us know where we are falling short or when a program is not interesting. That helps us refine our offerings to meet your needs. PE is meant to be a dialogue among all of us. When it works everyone benefits. You, the volunteers, and the donors whose funds make our work possible.

Speaking of funds, I want to thank all of you who have sent us checks these past months. Mostly they are sent as donations to our PE book program, but others send funds without asking for books. It is very kind of you. **We have a new problem with checks. They can only be deposited if you write CTA/PE as the recipient. If you just write PE or Prisoner Express, the bank won't accept them. If you can add the CTA/PE to**

the “Pay to the Order of” line of the check this problem will disappear. If you see the check you issued to us was not cashed, now you know why.

There are many people online, and locally in person who volunteer for this program. We have posted many of your journals, poems, and art online with instructions on how people can write to you. This will hopefully generate more mail for many of you. I ask each volunteer to register and receive a number. . If you are writing back to a PE volunteer please include their number on the outside of the envelope so I can be sure to get it to them in a timely manner. If it takes a long while before you hear back it isn't because you wrote something disturbing or revealed too much information. Rather you are dealing with young people who are very busy, and they get caught up in schoolwork or leave town for vacation breaks and don't check their PE emails. As the school year is getting ready to start, I expect we will have many volunteers. The more you participate in our projects the more likely you will get letters from our volunteers. I see that volunteers benefit from an exchange of letters. I hope you do too!

We have a variety of interesting programs for the upcoming cycle. Before I describe them, I want to recap a little of what happened last cycle.

Certain programs like the **Ending Mass Incarceration** packet and the **Moral Philosophy** packet have critical thinking questions. Many of you have already taken the time to answer them. We should be mailing a compilation packet of the most interesting answers to participants who responded sometime this fall. I am forwarding the letters you sent to the creators of the **yoga, chess, and meditation packets**. Treacy is still collecting art for an upcoming show. We had a very successful art show that hung in 5 libraries for 5 months this past winter and spring. Patrons at the libraries wrote letters to the artists which we then forwarded to the artists. We had some of the best writing ever in our theme packets and I wish all of you could read all the writings shared by your fellow captives. I have reprinted more than the usual number of essays in this newsletter so you can get a taste of what the writing looks like. I hope you consider writing for the Theme essay program.

23 FALL Programs-following is a short description of each program offered in Fall 23. We try to mix the programs up a bit and offer a varied selection of topics hoping to find something for everyone. At the end of the newsletter there is a signup sheet for this next series of programs. If you don't want to rip out the sheet for signing up or for returning the survey on electronic communication just handwrite your response

Expedited Books- We create customized packages of books for individuals. This is the only program where we ask for a donation to help defray the cost of postage. We asked you to send us a check of \$4 or more [**Made out to CTA/PE**] to help defray the cost of postage. Check with your institution

to find out what you are allowed to send and receive. Let us know the maximum number of books you can get. If we send one too many books, some mailrooms reject the whole package. We do not seem to be able to send books to MI. We can't figure out how to become an authorized vendor there. If anyone in MI knows how to do this, share it with us. **If you send a check make it out to CTA/PE. That is the only way we can cash it.** Please give us a variety of subjects or genres that you are interested in receiving. If you only want a specific book, we probably can't help. All our books are donated, and the selection is always changing. We send excellent books most of the time, but you as the recipient can't be too selective. The more choices you give us the better our chance of having an excellent match.

Special offering for Women's Facilities -The Alternatives Library recently received a large donation of books on all things women. History, culture, feminism, sexuality etc are part of this treasure trove. We have sorted out 5 boxes of books we wish to send to libraries in women's facilities. If you have a connection to the librarian at your institution, please write or **have the librarian contact me at Prisoner Express to arrange for us mailing a box of books to them.**

Poetry Project- Every six months we publish an anthology of poetry submitted by the members of PE. Elinor is the current editor of the packet. The editorship changes every year or so as students graduate or get involved in other PE projects. Elinor is reading through all the poems received and she and the team select and type the ones to put in the anthology. The cost for the anthology is your submitted poem. Send as many poems as you like for consideration. Please know we receive thousands of poems for consideration, and we can only choose a limited amount for publication. Don't take it as an insult if your work isn't chosen. Better yet read and enjoy what is shared and continue to practice the art.

We scan many of the poems to our PE archive so even if you aren't included in the anthology you may hear from someone who reads your poem online.

<https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing/>

If you write under an assumed name as a few of you do, please note that we cannot post your work for others to respond to as they need your actual name and number to write back to you.

Hi friends, I'm Elinor and I'm the current poetry coordinator here at Prisoner Express. Over the past year, I've loved getting to know you all a little bit through your poems. I really admire everyone who submits their writing and I'm so grateful I was able to join Prisoner Express during my first week here at Cornell. Each time volunteers come into the library, I see them sharing, engaging with, and passing around many of these remarkable works. I hope that those of you who have participated in the program in the past have found meaning in reading and writing poetry, and that those of you who are

interested but have not participated before will feel free to give it a shot.

Poetry is famously slippery to define, but one of my favorite ways to understand it is as an attempt – to express and thereby understand a piece of yourself, to say something that is unsayable in your daily life, to stretch language in new ways. I would like to encourage you to try and to send in your poems, keeping in mind that there is no wrong way to craft poetry. Take risks and remember that reading and writing poems is one way to open up a life. Maybe there's a single line in a poem that you submit that will stick in someone's head and make all the difference.

If you have any suggestions about what you'd like to see as part of the poetry program, I would love to hear from you. We're here to support you in any way we can, and I send you all my best. Here is a selection of some recently received poems. Please send in your entries for consideration for our next poetry packet - Elinor

I am Nature By Jeremy Brown

Nature Beckons us
to her call,
She says,
please come
and jump off
my waterfall,
Build a house
in this comfy
cave
make it your
dwelling place,
Starseeds we
are this
Humanity.
Surviving
amongst
many
changes,
building
bigger
we gain
dominion
and supremacy,
good people
conquer evil intentions
creating we
many new inventions
simple and complex
systems, riddled
with the winds
senses
Nature still remains,

She says come here
I love you,
I embrace you
with the soft
Leaves of my trees,
I Fill your hair
with my breeze,
my mountains need
and want you
to climb,
fragrances and oils
you enjoy from
these Flowers,
come and stare
at my beautiful
clouds,
you do, For hours,
My stars are there,
for you to see,
You mind imagines
Animals and your
mythos in the
constellations,
I am the great
mother Nature
I hold you close
when you picnic
and Feel beneath
your soft toes,
my luscious grasses,
I am sorry for the
cataclysms of Aeons
past, it was a
cleansing,
I am Nature
I will always
be here for you,
Please plant new
seeds in me,
Please don't cut down my hair
trees,
Leave me my
oil, and my
gold alone.
IF you Find a
diamond in
a river or
the sea,
Just remember
it turns a gift
Fro me,
Synchronize with
my frequency
I am Nature
and I love you
you see, In me

exist in harmony.

The Things By Jonathan E. Cantero

when i draw
the figures aren't real
i can't make my hand
or eyes
replicate anything i see

when i draw
there is another
who usurps me
and refused to draw from the contours
of the current dimension

and when i write
the figure of self is more muted
so that i'm not sure
if these stanzas are dictated
by Cthulu or childish demons

arts seem to open me up
and expose my innards
to other dimensions
and plane-hopping fiends

gasping
i breathe
between strokes of pen and brush
canvas and paper transform
unreal and unpossessed

PAYING BACK By James Schmidt

A forest opens like curtains
A glistening sunset's revealed
The prison's 6am buzzer's heard
Breakfast is tasteless
Bobwire fence is seen through the window
Thoughts wildly grace his mind
For my crime do I give back
He flips through the channels to the news
An 8 am nap truly can't give back
Waking at 10:30 his body's full of energy
The treadmill squeaks under his shoes
Thoughts of being out in the community surface
Outside a family of ground squirrels run a much
Noon count has come with a undelightful lunch
Sitting in his cell voices are heard on the other side of the door
Is giving back to the community in the dayroom
Perhaps it's playing the game Connect Four
Maybe it's in the game SORRY
Ust it be in the game Battleship
Playing back the community can't be in them
Perhaps it's in the game of MONOPOLY

Maybe it's gambling in a game of poker
Must it be in the game of RISK
No paying back can't be in them
5pm count with a horrible dinner
Is paying back the community in minutes
Perhaps it's in all the hours gone by
Maybe in the long sad days that linger
Must it be in the lonely years that takes tears
Before his eyes the forest slowly closes
Warmth of the day is fading
His eyes dance through a vampire novel
With a turn of the page his mind slips
Is this paying back the community
Truly this cant be
9pm standing count comes
Gazing at the night sky
Is it all the tears shed when it rains
Paying back the community
Perhaps it's counting all the stars every night
He lays in bed and looses count
Turning over in his lumpy bed
He gazes at a picture of his wife
Tears escape their cages only to soak into a pillow
His thoughts swirl down to one
I just want a hug
He closes his eyes and whispers
This can't be the way to pay back the community for my crime.

Expansion By John James Obiols

The experience of being here in prison over time stretches the growing space between my family and myself. A space that will never shrink no matter what I try to do

I don't see myself as being changed but reformed this experience has shaped the way I view reality and the reality of who and what I am.

The concept of home for me changed from address to people. The most valuable thing for me is human intimacy. I don't miss things I miss people I miss our shared connection and experiences.

This time away has changed or in some cases broken that connection. when we experience new challenges, especially traumatic ones we tend to change our relationships with people who cannot or will not be able to relate. The more challenges I faced in life the bigger my space has grown around me and the more I deflect away people who never faced my reality.

Your average adult in the world might have faced their share of crisis in their life, many see themselves as being wronged or victimized, yet very few see themselves as the author of their very own tragedy.

when one sees that they are the author of their life good and bad, it's easier to accept reality and make a better

future for themselves. The past doesn't haunt me anymore I accept it as who I am, yet I am more than the good or bad, I am not just the person living in my own space I am the space around me as well.

Mirror Have Words By León Oliver

Mirrors have words
I avoid it to down
Those words
I repeat them
Ugly-
Frail, ugly, sunken-eyed sick person
I believe them

Battered like victims
Frail, ugly, sunken-eyed sick person
How they beat them

I did this To myself
I did this

For Being By F. "Bule" R.

I placed that poem upon my chest
Wrapped my fingers onto it- so to rest
I closed my eyes as quietly went to sleep
With a thought on her in heart to keep.

I dreamed, I dreamed I was Reading it to her:
She ignored me, gave me her back, spurned me altogether:
I got sad, I got mad- that angrily walked off
With the poem in hand and within me- that love.

I suddenly woke, by the dayroom's diurnal noise,
By the dream feelings outburst marring my poise.
The poem laid writhed upon the floor
As was I... For being... Poor-.



Art by Jesse Osmun

Knowledge of the Mind- We have included a philosophy offering in our last 5 or so newsletters. Ethan, who has shared his thoughts with you below, has been responsible for creating the last 3 packets. As he gets ready to graduate, he has recruited a fellow philosopher to join him in creating the next lesson. From your responses it is clear that Ethan's packets are engaging and offer many of you a chance to display your ability to think deeply on complicated subjects. Practicing and developing thinking skills will be lifelong skills you will be able to utilize whether you go out into the free world or live behind bars for decades. The journeys we take in our mind can have profound consequences in our lives and I am grateful to Ethan and all the folks who create programs that enrich your lives.

Dear Fellow Students of Philosophy, this is Ethan writing to you again, along with Prisoner Express's new philosophy co-author Alex. Thank you for the time and effort you have devoted to your responses to this summer's Moral Philosophy in the Western Tradition packet! We are excited to read everything that you have written. This fall, we are teaming up to bring you a new packet, Knowledge and the Mind! Rather than a historical overview like A Brief Introduction to the Western Philosophical Tradition or Moral Philosophy in the Western Tradition, this new packet will be diving into specific questions and subfields within the philosophy of the mind, the philosophy of perception, and epistemology (the philosophy of knowledge), and discussing how different philosophers have contributed to these areas throughout history. In this packet, you will be grappling with questions like, "Is the mind the same thing as the brain?" and, "What is the relationship between the world around us and our mental images of it?" and, "How do we know that when we know something?" You will come across philosophers you may remember from the previous packets, like Plato, René Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. But you will also learn about some philosophers you may never have heard of before, like George Berkeley, John Searle, and Andy Clark. As always, each section will conclude with a set of discussion questions for you to consider, and we are looking forward to reading your thoughts! Hopefully, this new packet will encourage you to think more critically about what exactly you know and who exactly you are. So, get ready for the fourth packet in this Western Philosophy series, Knowledge and the Mind! Happy searching! Ethan and Alex

Journal Project-The journal program has been with us since the first PE newsletter 20 years ago. We keep it going because of the profound effect journaling can have on your life. The program has evolved over the years, and we mail out a packet that extolls the value of journaling and it explains how to participate. Grace currently leads the journal project and will create an intro package to help you get started. Grace graduates this December so this will be her last time creating a PE Journal starter packet, so if you are interested in learning from a master, now is the time to enroll. If keeping a journal

seems like a good idea and you don't want to wait until we mail the stater packet, [sometime in late autumn], you can start sending in your entries right away.

My hope is that the scanned journals will serve as a record for folks in the future who wonder about life in America's prisons today. Remember to date each entry. We scan it so it is chronological for the reader.

My name is Grace, and I am the Coordinator for the Journal Program here at Prisoner Express. It is my fourth year at Cornell University studying global and public health sciences. I just got back to Cornell after an exciting although extremely busy summer, and I am excited to be back at work. The journal program was one of the first programs at PE, and we have members who have been with us anywhere from a couple of weeks to several years. There is room for all types of writers, and likewise, there is no wrong way to write. Writing can be empowering, and a source of hope and clarity. Many people who write regularly observe mental health benefits and experience powerful breakthroughs. By joining this program, you can also share your writing with fellow members and volunteers. Volunteers at PE read the material that you send in and often write a friendly letter back to share their own thoughts with you. I love hearing your ideas and stories, and the program is a great opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences with others. I highly encourage you to register! I will send an introduction packet with plenty of inspiration to get started, and if you write to me about questions or ideas about the program, I will do my absolute best to respond. PE may also upload submissions to an online archive where anyone in the United States can read and respond to your work: <https://prisonerexpress.org/read-prisoner-writing/>. We are here to support you in any capacity we can, and I hope you will join us on this journey.

Meditation- Tara has been leading our meditation program for many years. Tara is once again available to create meditation packets for you. Along with the packet full of techniques of meditation from Tara and testimony from fellow meditators, we will send you the Pema Chodron book, "**Start Where You Are**" Below is a review of the book

We all want to be fearless, joyful, and fully alive. And we all know that it's not so easy. We're bombarded every day with false promises of ways to make our lives better—buy this, go here, eat this, don't do that; the list goes on and on. But Pema

Chödrön shows that, until we get to the heart of who we are and really make friends with ourselves, everything we do will always be superficial.

In this perennial self-help bestseller, Pema offers down-to-earth guidance on how we can go beyond the fleeting attempts to "fix" our pain and, instead, to take our lives as they are as the only path to achieve what we all yearn for most deeply—to embrace rather than deny the difficulties of our lives. These teachings, framed around fifty-nine traditional Tibetan Buddhist maxims, point us directly to our own hearts and minds, such as "Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment," "Be grateful to everyone," and "Don't expect applause."

Tara sends her greetings below.

*My dear friends,
I hope this finds you in good spirits and good health.*

Some of you know that for almost 2 years I was needing to focus on caregiving for my mom. She passed away quietly at home, on July 22, 5 days before her 103rd birthday. I'm grateful to all beings who touched our hearts with your kind prayers and thoughts. Now, as she is on her new journey, on other realms and very much within my heart, I am sad for this loss, and at the same time, I am grateful for my being able to again focus my energies on our precious prison sangha, our spiritual community.

We will have a newsletter coming out this winter, with teachings and inspirational quotes. Garchen Rinpoche, our dear Rinpoche in Chino Valley, Arizona is getting stronger and stronger after his bout with Covid. He's spending most of his time in retreat, and is still offering Refuge from Afar with anyone who wants to receive it.

Remember that spiritual books, articles, and teachings are precious because they are guiding us how to awaken from our inner struggles. So, please read them again and again and again! With each reaching, I always find new wisdom I hadn't noticed, or hadn't felt a connection to before - they suddenly come alive within me, like a light going off in the darkness. With every choice to dive a little deeper into our practice we are empowering commitment into our path of peace, kindness happiness. Whatever your practice is - meditation, mindfulness, prayer, kindness, service - let it become your sanctuary. We are all Buddhas in essence. And our awakening becomes a blessing for all beings. Best wishes-Tara

Climate Change- Well here's a hot topic! This summer we had two high school students working at the library. I asked them to create a packet on something meaningful to them. They came up with this packet as a way to share that with you. If you've been following all of the erratic weather around the country and want to understand more this packet is for you.

Hi all! We're Chloe and Ace, high school students working with Prisoner Express over the summer. As young people, who are already experiencing the effects of climate change, this is an issue we really care about. We think it is essential that people learn and talk about climate change, and we hope that this packet helps you do so. If you want to learn more about this important issue and what can be done about it, we encourage you to sign up for our packet. It will include the causes of climate change, its ongoing and future effects, and what's being done about it. It will also include questions for you to think about and hopefully reply to. We hope you'll find our packet informative and interesting!



Art by Patrick Bentley

Frogs- The natural world is all around us, yet humans seem to be more comfortable distancing themselves from it. We live in boxes with electric lights and many gadgets that keep us disconnected from nature and its cycles. Yet we are animals living in nature and we separate ourselves from it at a risk to our humanity. Eric, a student worker at the library has taken on creating a packet highlighting the amphibian world and especially that of frogs. We as humans share this planet with a myriad of life forms, and these animals are not put here simply for our pleasure, but in fact are part of a connected web of life. In our ignorance we believe man is important and everything else is secondary and here for our pleasure. That philosophy is leading to a rapidly changing environment, and we are grasping to understand how these changes affect all life on the planet. Amphibians are very sensitive creatures and seeing how environmental changes affect their lives gives us advance warning as to the effects of our attempt to divorce ourselves from the natural world. I am excited to read this packet and I expect there will be beautiful pictures as well as information I

never would have known. I often sit at the pond at night listening to the chorus of frogs as they croak away the night. Eric's thoughts are below.

Hello there! Whether you're a fellow frog enthusiast, an amphibian aficionado, or simply curious about the fascinating world of these creatures, here is something special just for you. Introducing our comprehensive packet all about frogs and their incredible world! Delve into the mysteries of metamorphosis, unraveling the secrets of their lifestyle. Explore the amazing adaptations that have granted amphibians the power to conquer diverse environments. Journey through the ancient origins of these remarkable creatures, tracing their evolutionary story. Get ready to embark on a journey that will leave you with a new appreciation and curiosity for the incredible realm of amphibians.

App Design- Lyss has taken it upon herself to create a packet explaining App designs. I, coming of age prior to the advent of computers have struggled to stay up to date with computer usage. As many of you know I am not particularly succeeding in that endeavor. Reading a packet like the one Lyss is creating will give me an insight into the world of apps. I certainly appreciate the power an app can bring into my life. My two current favorites are "Merlin" which turns my phone into a bird identifier. It listens and tells me which birds I am listening to. Every time a bird sings its name and pic flash on the phone screen. Sometimes I can hear twenty different birds in a matter of minutes, and I can start to hear the various conversations going on in bird world. I have another app that lets me take a picture of any plant and it will ID the plant. It makes walking in the woods or weeding the garden a much more interesting experience. **I am hoping that some of you who sign up for this will help us in the designing process for the PE App mentioned on page 46. Lyss's description is below.**

Hi all, my name is Lyss and I'm a fifth-year studying information science and urban studies at Cornell. I'm excited to offer a packet- it will be my first time creating one. I've never considered myself to be artsy so I was initially really scared to study app design, but then I realized it's more so problem-solving and doesn't actually require you to be artsy. Within this design process, you're solving problems/creating products to solve the struggles of those who will be using your product. In studying this, you can become a user experience (UX) designer, which is someone who makes products, services, and tech usable, enjoyable, and accessible for other people :)

No previous design experience is required- this packet solely focuses on the creative design process of app creation, excluding programming concepts. We will cover the life cycle of the human-centered design process, from user research (learning about your audience) to design (exploring design solutions) and prototyping (creating interactive prototypes of

your design)! You'll learn various skills that can be applied to other aspects of your life. Come unleash your creativity to create designs that respond to human needs and experiences!

Miscellaneous Essays-This is a kind of quirky offering. We have many programs at PE and receive thousands of letters every year related to our programs. We also receive a lot of mail that doesn't seem to have anything to do directly with the programs we offer, or the PE employee reading the letter doesn't see the connection. These letters have gone into a miscellaneous folder. Letter readers could see thought had gone into the letter, but no one was sure what to do with it. This summer I asked some students to read through the Misc. folder and select random essays that they thought others would enjoy reading. This is a fun way to see what some of your fellow PE members are thinking about not related to our PE specific programs. Come find out what your fellow captives are ruminating about!

Chess- *We can never get enough chess books to satisfy the requests of PE members who request books through our Expedited book program, so years ago we began a chess newsletter. Raheem joined the library staff last spring and created his first chess packet last cycle. Raheem comes from a culture that strongly values chess and I am thrilled that he will be sharing this information with you.*

"Hello all and thank you for subscribing to the Chess Newsletter for Summer 2023. My name is Raheem Amany and I am the coordinator behind the Chess Club. Chess can be a tool for entertainment, sport, or sharpening the mind, but to me, Chess is about connection. Through chess, two people with nothing in common come to an unparalleled understanding of each other. That's why through this packet, I plan to highlight the way chess brings us closer together through reporting of recent events in the world of chess, interviews with New York City chess players in the park, understanding of how the rules of chess can allow you to play in a variety of different situations, and much more. As the coordinator of this packet, your feedback is not just welcomed, but encouraged, so let me know what you like, don't like, or want to know more about. Welcome again, and I hope you sign up for the Fall 2023 Chess Newsletter and I hope you enjoy!"

Rattle Poetry and More- For the past few years Rattle magazine and its editor Tim Green have been contributing to PE. Each cycle We receive 500 new copies of a back issue of Rattle and make it available to you. Tim has also included a letter talking about poetry and what he looks for as an editor of a magazine who reads thousands of poems submitted for each issue If you are wanting to improve your skill at writing or understanding poetry this packet is for you. **This cycle we have a special feature to offer PE members, a poetry packet designed by Kaitlyn to help you better understand why some poems are considered great, and the**

techniques underlying some of these poems. Below is a description of what Kaitlyn's offering will look like.

Want to take your poetry to the next level? Dissect some of the master's poetical works to figure out what makes their work soar. Then, learn how to emulate their techniques in your own writing. This workshop will help you to improve your poetic techniques such as enjambment, lyric, abstraction, and repetition. Additionally, the packet will provide instructional "homework" assignments that will help you to think like a poet. A good poem has many layers to it: the diction, the structure, the meaning, etc. With so many elements, it can be sometimes difficult to decipher the techniques that master poets use to make their work extraordinary. However, with some tips and tricks you can learn in this packet, you can start approaching poetry like a puzzle and become familiar with the pieces, making them easy to use in your own writing. I'm Kaitlyn, a student pursuing a degree in Creative Writing. For as long as I can remember, I have always loved the art of poetry, scribbling lines in the margins of my homework and crafting makeshift books to share with friends. In my work, I love to explore themes of nature and how humans interact with it. I believe that poetry is a vital form of self-expression and that being an active poet changes the way I view the world, allowing me to appreciate even the most mundane with an artist's eye. I hope you will join me-Kaitlyn

ARTknows- Treacy has led our PE art program for the past ten years. She is a gifted artist as well as art show organizer. Sign up for her ARTknows newsletter and have your horizons expanded. It is as much about art appreciation and thinking like an artist as it is about technique and practice, so even if you don't care to draw you might find inspiration in Treacy's ideas and perspective. She shares her thoughts below

*Greetings!
Today is one of those beautiful August days in Ithaca. While July can be very hot, August always seems to move towards crisp air with a preview of fall. We concluded the library art exhibitions in June. Your work was well received in all libraries, and we hope to continue with various future exhibitions. I met with the exhibition coordinator at Trumansburg Library and we are planning a joint exhibition there, possibly in May/June2024. What I plan is to exhibit the large sculptures that I made from your letters with your art and writings. (The sculptures are made from letters that were historically destined for the recycle bins, but which I retrieved from the wastebin and made into sculpture. Here is the 12-foot giraffe that I made of these letters – one of several animals.)*

I plan to have your art and writings on the walls of the library surrounding the books and the sculptures. If you can, it would be fun to have an animal theme show.

Last week I sent your work from the traveling library exhibitions to a church in Denver. The church is planning to have an exhibition in September. I will let you know how this goes, and hopefully the congregations will write letters to you in response to the art.



The next ARTknows will focus on the art of couples who work both in tangent and/or in cooperation. Personally, Gary (my husband, a different Gary than PE editor) and I are partners in art but cannot work specifically together on one project. One such couple is Christo and Jean Claude (a husband/wife team) who are responsible for many environmental art installations, like the wrapping islands in Biscayne Bay with pink floating fabric.

How do art couples help each other – what are the difficulties? How do they divide the mundane chores of everyday life? How do they separate work from nonwork. Who are some non-traditional couples of art? These are some of the questions I will explore along with introducing you to art hoping to expand our knowledge of art and art history.

I received a letter from a PE artist asking if he could use his participation in the various art exhibitions on his resume. Certainly! In the next ARTknows newsletter I will list the various exhibitions from the past 6 years that we have asked you to participate in.

Take care!--Treacy

Heart of Darkness Book Club-We had 170 copies of the book **Heart of Darkness** donated to PE and are creating a book club where you read the book and consider some thought-provoking questions generated by Casey, a PE volunteer that has agreed to host this club. She will read your responses and create a document of your most interesting insights. Here's a short review of the book. I am limited to 170 copies I will send this to the first 170 people who register for this.

Heart of Darkness is the 1899 masterpiece by Polish-British novelist Joseph Conrad about a voyage up the Congo River into the Heart of Africa.

The story is narrated by Charles Marlow, recalling his obsessive quest to locate the ivory trader Kurtz, who has become ensconced deep in the jungle managing a remote outpost. As he ventures further and further down the Congo, Marlow finds himself and his surroundings become increasingly untethered.

Heart of Darkness has been widely re-published and translated into many languages. It provided the inspiration for Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. In 1998, the *Modern Library* ranked *Heart of Darkness* 67th on their list of the 100 best novels in English of the twentieth century. Literary critic Harold Bloom wrote that *Heart of Darkness* had been analyzed more than any other work of literature that is studied in universities and colleges, which he attributed to Conrad's "unique propensity for ambiguity."

Writing for the Screen is a program being created by Mathew, who teaches screenwriting at a college in NJ. Matt volunteered for PE when he was a student probably 15 years ago, and a few years back he wanted to get back involved. He has a deep knowledge of screenwriting, and even if you never have a movie made of your script, the practice of writing and learning the techniques of screenwriting may bear fruit in the future. Come learn more about writing for film. Matt's description of the packet follows.

Writing stories for film or television is different from crafting a novel or short story. There is a unique format to screenplays and more importantly everything we write has to be made visual by actors in front of cameras. In this packet, writers will learn about what makes screenwriting unique and engage in writing exercises designed to help you practice the art form.

Theme Writing

This is the longest running PE program, and it is the theme writers that inspired the creation of PE News. PE originally was a simple book mailing program. While that in itself was valuable, I believe expanding into offering meaningful and connected activities is where the unique value of PE shows up. Without the theme writers expressing themselves as they do, I would not have had the inspiration to create this newsletter. If you are a writer in the theme program, you can stand tall knowing your writing has been part of the inspiration for this entire project.

To explain to new participants, every month there is a word cue and a picture cue. If you send a submission by the deadline your essay will be included in the packet mailed to all the participants. Currently we include every essay received in the packet as long as it is under 800 words and does not spew hatred and is on topic. We do limit inclusion to no more than two entries for either a word or pic theme each month. You can send as many as you like but we will only choose two per

topic. [we have limited resources] If we can't see the relationship to what you have written to the topic, we do not include it. As far as hatred goes, you can be angry and express it about a situation, but if you generalize and start hating random groups based on an individual's actions, we have no room for that in this publication. Many of you already live within a charged angry system and I see no value in promoting more anger. PE is here to help you find more meaning in the everyday activities available to you. We are all confined in some way or another. I understand your confinement is more severe than most, but all of us universally want to find activities we find personally meaningful. For some writing these essays can bring great meaning and the pleasure of being published is the cherry on top. **I get so many great essays each month and if you want to see them all for a given month you will have to submit an entry.** If you don't, you are still fortunate as we reproduce a sampling of themes from previous months to give you all a taste of the creativity of PE participants. This activity is not about being the best. It is only about opening up and sharing a story. Writing is great practice for finding yourself, by examining the experiences that have been accumulated through living. Your writing also helps the other readers understand their own thoughts, especially as they too make their way through the carceral environment. Despite all the differences we all have, the commonality of being locked up elicits many of the same responses in all of you, and realizing these responses are normal helps one see more clearly what is going on in life.

Word themes must be true stories. Upcoming word theme topics are

Home due 10/1/23

Scars due 11/1/23

Leaders due 12/1/23

Far away 1/1/24

Parents 2/1/24

Prison Hobbies 3/1/24

Gratitude 4/1/24

Imagination 5/1/24

Here are some selections from previous word theme for your reading pleasure. Remember to see all the entries you must submit, one of your own.

Race

Race of My Life by Vicki Hicks

I used to think of a race as being the 5K or 10K or even the Triathlon that I completed in the three years prior to coming to prison. Now my perception of race has drastically changed. I am still looking for the finish line, but no medal this time around. This time I am doing a 10Y (10-year) race. The day-to-day time is good. Same thing every day; get up at 4:30AM, breakfast at 5:00AM, work at 6:00AM, come home at 2:00PM, relax the rest of the day. It is like running past the same mile marker over and over. As I look back over my race thus far; I

have completed 6½Y; almost there. I am on the final leg of this race. I look ahead every day and see the beautiful horizon; the finish line is right there. When this 10Y is over I will begin training for the next race and that one will look very different. I will have decisions to make, bills to pay, hugs to give freely and most of all I will not be a blue dot in the race of my life. What does your race look like?

By Greg Messenger

"Hey, you want some of this? You hungry?" He asked me.

"No thank you man, I'm sorry, I can't." I replied.

Not 'I'm hungry.'

Not 'I just ate.'

I can't.

You see, I was around 18 or 19 at the time, a scared kid (although trying hard not to show it) in on his first felony charge in jail looking over the downtown area of my hometown of San Jose, California. I had just, not a couple hours before entering the housing module, been asked by several older guys, all slung down with prison tattoos, the epitome of convict I had as an image in my mind from all the prison movies I had watched, the question:

"What do you run as?"

"Who do you run with?"

I didn't know what these people were talking about, so they simplified it for me.

"Are you white?"

"Well, I guess so," I responded, not knowing anything about California's racial prison politics.

"Great," they said, "You're with us."

They grabbed my mattress and blanket roll from me and led me on to my cell, made my bed up for me, and started explaining their "unwritten rules" they expected me to follow, "or else."

"To my teenage analytical nerdy skater kid mind some of their rules made sense and seemed only logical.

Shower daily.

Always wear your shoes while outside the cell.

Don't talk to the cops.

On the other hand, some made zero sense.

These phones are Whites only.

This shower is Whites only.

Don't take open food from Black inmates.

Don't eat off Black inmates' trays.

Or else.

And sadly, at the time, that 'or else' frightened me.

That fear continued to cling to me through my first prison term, tried to cut deep into my own beliefs and ideals like the razor wire atop the fences of San Quentin and Pelican Bay State Prisons, where I did my time.

Finally, I saw for myself what that 'or else' entailed, 3 men kicking and beating a young kid like myself to the ground on the yard until he wasn't moving and until they were down on the ground as well, covered in pepper spray, their wrists being zip tied behind their back while being held down by 4 cops each, being told to "stay down" and "stop resisting."

His "traitorous crime?"

Repeatedly taking coffee offered to him by a kind, elderly Black gentleman because he wasn't able to afford his own. What a world, to be forced through violent intimidation to live by other people's shitty messed-up values.

And yet, I saw one large area of disconnect from what these scraggly bearded shaved-headed hunks of racial discrimination and bigotry were saying and laying down as law and what they were doing.

Every single time an inmate hit the mainline with a bundle of stress-relieving heroin or paranoia-creating meth saran wrapped and shoved up inside their "you know where," no matter the color of that inmate's skin. They were first in line to get their fix and snort, smoke, or shoot their way into oblivion. They were not my beliefs or ideals.

This was not how I was raised, nor was it how I lived my life, and the people who were trying to force these things on me were the dictionary definition of hypocrisy.

But hypocrisy isn't the problem.

The perpetual hatred is the problem, and the way it cycles around itself older homeboys telling the younger ones to "hold true" to these racist ideals, building walls and barriers between people that, according to the findings of the Human Genome Project, are 99.9% similar genetically, regardless of skin color. Then those younger guys grow older all the while living by those ideals and passing them off as law to the younger generation coming in through those ever-revolving jailhouse doors, and the hate breeds hate and continues on. Enough.

It's 10 years later almost since that first time in jail, and I'm sadly back in the same jail, in the same housing module in a cell overlooking the same downtown San Jose cityscape. Some things are the same, like my true beliefs and ideals, thankfully untarnished from doing time in California's racially political prisons, but somethings are different, the most important thing being not being afraid anymore of that "or else," the violence promised for not living and conducting oneself by the racist ideology of others.

Now with myself being in the leadership role, I've thrown out all the old hate-based rules, making sure the younger guys understand "no, you will not be beaten up for eating food prepared by someone of a different ethnicity, go eat with whoever." I've helped abolish the racially segregated showers (although I do still try to have everyone shower at least every other day, because no one likes a stinky celly).

And most importantly, if other older inmates come in and try to make an issue over the changes, I kindly let them know that they can take that bullshit somewhere else, because nowadays I stand and will die by my beliefs and am not afraid to live by them.

There's enough hatred and bigotry in this world and it's not just enough to "just not participate in it;" we should actively be trying to fight against it, for a more loving and understanding world.

by Jeremy Brown

Life is a race to the death. Then we go elsewhere, no one knows where this elsewhere is located or what it may be.

Color Me Confused by Pedro Zamora

School staff: Ms. Burtlow, there is an issue with Pedro's records that we need to address. You see, you wrote him down as being white and he's clearly not.

My Mom: I don't understand why this is such an issue. His whole family is white.

School staff: I get that Ms. Burtlow but if he were ever to get lost or, God forbid, kidnapped then the authorities would be searching for a little white boy based on his file.

My Mom: Fine. You can mark him down as Mexican then.

Little Pedro: But mom, I don't want to be Mexican; he says as he starts to cry.

This situation, without knowing or understanding, was my first ever run in with the topic of race. I was in elementary school. My Mom is white/Caucasian and my dad is of Mexican descent, or Latino. My grandparents came from Mexico, my dad born in Texas, and I was born in Kansas, making me a second generation American. I refer to myself as Mexican, Hispanic, or Latino. Sounds exotic right? Spanish, a "love language." Machismo, the male Hispanic pride. The food, the music, the dancing, the passion, the accents, they're all so appealing. But then there are the negative stigmas. Laziness, gangsters, drug dealers / users, knives and being stabby, and the most popular one, illegal immigrant. But where did that leave me being bi-racial? Stuck in between two worlds, a purgatory of sorts. Growing up I looked too Mexican to fit in with the whites and acted too white plus didn't speak Spanish so I didn't fit in with the Hispanics either. Two races and not fully accepted by either: fun times. This realization came in middle school when the Spanish teacher, upon learning my name in class said, so everyone could hear, that she expected me to do really well in her class. And I probably would have, had I not been raised by the white side of my family and didn't even know my dad or the Hispanic side. That day kicked off the rebellious nature that is still sported to this day. In my mind if you were going to expect a certain thing from me and I knew it then I would purposefully do the opposite just to prove you wrong regardless of if you were initially right or not. I didn't care. I just didn't want to be what others expect me to be. I'm sure I would be fluent in Spanish today if others didn't always expect me to be in my younger years, because I even rebelled against learning that. Unfortunately, racism is a thing today. I had an instance once where my roommate James, his girl Rebecca, my girl Savannah, and myself all went to Wal-Mart to pick some stuff up. I noticed an associate was hovering within eyeshot of us.

Understandable since it was around 2 a.m. and we were a little noisier than usual thanks to intoxication. But the most interesting thing happened when the group split. I went by myself to grab some toothpaste and the other three went to a different area, but the associate followed me, the Latino, not the other three that were white. The associate was white too. Was I missing something or reading too much into it? I was the quietest of the group so why follow me? Only one reason I could think of. Had to be the color of my skin. But it's not like I'm 100% innocent. I can tell by the company I keep that I tend to hang out with people who "act white;" and that's probably because I act white too. And even though I refer to myself as Hispanic / Mexican / Latino, I still wouldn't know how to act it because I didn't grow up around that. That's why you'll often catch me referencing to myself as a coconut (brown outside, white inside), or navy bean (a white bean(er)), or my personal favorite a graham cracker (a "cracker" that's brown and sweet because I'm bisexual and have a little sugar in my tank"). I like to joke about race because so many people are far too serious about it. News media outlets are really bad about it. Always whipping the general population into a frenzy any time, a crime happens involving a possible racial motive. Race baiting. Causing fights, protests, and riots that typically cost millions of dollars in damage. But the highest cost is to the people. Divide and conquer has been a strategy employed by those in positions of power to control those who are not for thousands of years, and still people don't seem to realize it's happening to them today. As long as the American people are going at each other, the government can claim the need to exert their power in areas they have no business being in. Because they know if the people unite and stand for things they believe in and that benefit them, the government loses. America, you wanna be woke? Wake up and see that.

by Jason Powell

The lonely sound of the train couplings clanging together in the distance is more frightening than I expected. The sun strobing between the cars blinding. The rattle of the wheels grows to a roar as I step into the rushing wind and the silhouetted cars loom as apparitions over me. I take off like a shot, digging in with heel and toe. Racing alongside the train. I watch in dismay as the ladders leading up the cars speed past me still. I reach out, grab hold and feel my shoulder about to rip from my socket. Fingers numb and hurting, I almost give in to the fright and pain then. But something in me hardens. I reach again, miss. Miss again. I clutch at a low rung and instantly yanked off my feet, scraping my knees. The toes of my hand-me-down shoes digging furrows. With the last of my reserves, I pull my body up, kicking my feet like a madman. What comedy it must be to witness me holding onto the side of this train car for dear life taking long ten-yard strides.

With the last of my will, I pull as hard as I can, finally getting my arm wrapped up and around a rung and my butt tucked tight to the car. I won. It's a livestock car and, as luck would have it, the next car forward is a feed car. I catch

my breath, amazed to be alive. Traversing the livestock car around to the coupling, I take a seat and scoot across. I will not become minced meat after all this trouble. Finding my feet again, it's an easy climb over the open top, stake side, feed car. How long have I been at this? My shirt is stuck to my back, I'm dirty and the sun is going down by this time. I climb a tower of grain sacks laying back with my head cradled in my hands, and my body cradled by huge feed bags. The rhythmic sounds of wheels on tracks seem far away and threaten to lull my exhausted body to sleep. A slow smile creeps across my face as the first star of the evening shows itself in the frightening loneliness of the universe and the smile fades from my dirty face as, eyes big as saucers, I wonder...when does the train stop?

Growth

by Jeff Clark

A Dictionary defines growth as: something constantly being added to. The opposite then would be to take away from or to disseminate. If you really think about it though, dissemination is a growth of nothing. Do you get that? Now think about this, the law of motion basically states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion until acted on by a force of equal and opposite force.

At one point in my life, I began to realize I was slowly losing my happiness. Nothing I did seemed to help. I remember back in school; I was sort of a class clown. People like to know me but wouldn't want to hang out with me. I adopted a Mantra: I am alone, not lonely. Oh, I had a few friends, but I was too carefree or was that careless. I guess, actually, I know, I wasn't a very good friend. So, I became empty inside. It got so bad I seriously began to contemplate my own demise. I'm too much of a wimpy to actually go through with it. Not that it wasn't noticed by those closest to me and yet they didn't do anything about it. I don't blame them, but it still hurts.

When I got arrested, I thought my life was over. All I could think about was all the movies and TV shows I had seen and how bad it was going to be. I would have to fight a lot, for respect, for my food, for my body. After all these people were hardened criminals. I felt I couldn't trust anyone, and I don't belong here. I've been down now three years and still have a long way to go. My concepts of prison life have been shattered. It's nothing like the movies and we are not all bad people. I finally started to figure it out. I found something to fill my emptiness: God.

I won't make this a religious rant. I don't believe in forcing my religion on anyone. God will call, is calling, and it's up to you to listen. I have friends and brothers in Christ! I've stopped crying and have a peace I have never known. Life gets better every day, because I have hope and I know a better life, a better future awaits me. Yes, I am talking of heaven, but also before that, when I walk out of this prison, one wonderful day.

Personal Growth by Leeann Parker

The first time I went to prison, I was nineteen and it was a whole playground for me; marching around in boots all day, yelling cadences, playing sports. Needless to say, I didn't learn my lesson when after only ten months, I was released. The second time was more serious, you see. I have been in a gang since I was 12 and at 24, I took a man's life, so they gave me 25 years this time. You would have thought that would have sat me down, but I came to prison still wilding out. I had to have the freshest clothes and shoes, and be with the in-crowd, loud, going in and out of confinement. Till one day, I met a little Italian lady who changed my life. She said "Kid, this is not the way." I started taking jobs that would keep me out of trouble. The little Italian lady became my mother and mentor, and she has kept me in line. For the past six years, I have worked at an optical lab making glasses for big companies, it has given me a sense of being. I have never had a real job until now. I've only ever been a gangbanger and sold drugs. To think my first W-2 and filing taxes would be in prison. But now my total way of thinking has changed. I want a good life; I don't want to be a gang member anymore. I want to counsel young girls that are affected by gangs because maybe if I would have had someone to talk to me that had been through something similar, it would have made a difference. That's what I want to do to make a difference in some young girl's life. So maybe they won't go down the same path I have and spend the majority of their life in prison.

Family Growth by George Hesse

I've never met my daughter who was born right before I went to prison.
I'm staying 100% sober and even gave up gambling.
13 programs and classes under my belt so far and I'm working.
I REFUSE to be a deadbeat dad. I will parole soon, close to a decade later.
She's growing up without me, is that a good or bad thing?
Am I good or bad? I need to make a choice, the clock is ticking
Is she growing up good or bad? I'm just wondering.
Her mom is one of my best friends, so there is a happy ending

Growth... or Epiphany? by Ricky Bright

I was born to a single, alcoholic mother, who still lived with her mother and stepfather, then I grew up in a very broken, dysfunctional setting. Her stepfather, the only father figure ever in my life, was also an alcoholic. He died of cirrhosis of the liver when I was fourteen years old and needed him most in my life. There were often other alcoholics and drug abusers who frequented the home and violence was never far away on our street.

In the second grade, I was physically abused and humiliated by my teachers. I never told my mother until years later because I feared she would not believe me either and would punish me too. This experience made me feel resentful of all teachers and distrustful of authority figures in general, planting seeds of rebellion and independent thinking in me at an early age. My childhood experiences were difficult to handle

alone, and I did not understand the post-traumatic effects they had on me until later in life.

Childhood traumas left me emotionally devastated and distrustful of everything and everyone. I remained constantly on alert, always expecting the worst. I became easily startled by the least sound or motion. I withdrew, avoiding eye contact with others. Flashbacks became commonplace, and reliving painful experiences became the norm. Nightmares too often robbed me of sleep. By the time I turned eleven years old, I thought I knew it all and ran away from "home" for the first time. By the time I turned fourteen, I had learned that alcohol seemed to soothe the savage beast within, which today is known as PTSD. At age fifteen, I nearly killed myself in one of my first car wrecks to come. I also attempted suicide at fifteen. While still a teen, I walked through the doors of one of America's worst Prisons— Moundsville, WV—serving a 1-10 year sentence for a crime I never committed.

Due to word-limit constraints I must flashforward to the year 2000. I had been on a second bid in prison for 21 years in 2000. I'd been playing "headgames" with a prison psychologist for years just to get some dope to replace the alcohol that once kept the PTSD beasts at bay. Around May 2000, I finally admitted I was powerless over alcohol/drugs and went to D.A.R.T. an intensive 90-day program, to address my addictions.

After D.A.R.T. I was transferred to NCI where I went back to work in the NCCE print plant. There I earned a Bindery Technician Apprenticeship, then an office system Technician Apprenticeship, then an Administrative services Manager apprenticeship, then a printing Estimator Apprenticeship. Each of these multi-year apprenticeships are recognized by the U.S. and North Carolina department of Labor as the equivalent of a two-year degree.

My responsibility grew from stapling booklets to answering the plant switchboard, performing weekly billing, processing job orders, and calculating job prices.

In 2012, I began having premonitions of doom for no apparent reason. I compiled a list of all the people I had harmed and wrote apologies to as many as possible. On September 10, 2013 I suffered a severe heart attack at 2.00 a.m. The following morning, in a second hospital where drugs, equipment, and medical professionals worked to keep me alive, I prayed and asked God not let me die unsaved or before I had made amends— not just apologies—to all I have harmed.

While off work, recuperating, the NCDPS posted a memo announcing a creative writing contest. To keep myself occupied, I sat down and wrote a short story titled " Hannah's Song" which won second place. A friend— a published author, suggested that I try my hand at a full-length novel. I did, and when I realized I brought my friend to tears, I was forever hooked on the art of creative writing. I have since completed a number of writing courses, including every writing program offered by Prisoner Express. PE helped me learn and grow, and that growth produced seven novels, over 125 short stories, over 250 poems, publications in Iron

City Magazine, first place wins in at least three writing contests, plus a first and second place win in two county fairs.

Creative writing helped me process my past, taught me to manage the PTSD beasts, and allowed me to feel comfortable in my own skin again. It instilled in me— thanks to Ernest Hemingway —the ability to feel empathy for others. I can now enter a room and sit with my back to the door. I contribute these transformations and my growth over the past nine plus years to creative writing. It changed my whole perspective on life, freeing things stored in my head for decades.

Once upon a time, I was always preparing for something bad to happen, always expecting the hammer to drop. Today I am hoping and preparing for my release from prison, preparing to publish the stories and hundreds of poems I have written, and preparing for success.

I'm sure I've exceed my 800-word limit by now, but I hope Gary will extend me enough leeway to say that my growth has also given me plans to one day return to prison— not as an inmate but as a facilitator of a creative writing workshop for inmates that I had dubbed "Writing My Wrongs." I want my personal growth to produce seeds upon which others may be nourished and grow too.

Rewriting The Script Of Life With Luv by Darrell Sharpe

Nonviolence requires strength for some people but even more so for those of us who came out of violent neighborhoods. From a very young age, most of us are taught that violence is a real, legitimate method, not only just for resolving conflict and survival, but for acquiring wealth too. We hear lyrics by Ice Cube like, "I'd rather be judged by 12 than carried by 6", or 50 Cent's "Get rich or die trying", as well as images and glorification of icons such as Tony Montana and Nino Brown. Violence as a method for resolving conflict and acquiring wealth is deeply ingrained in our psyche. This is what makes nonviolence difficult; this is why it requires strength.

First, we have to learn why violence is not a solution. We have to understand what impact violence has, not just on the victim or our communities, but on ourselves as well. A person who continuously carries out acts of violence on other human beings will eventually suffer from what Frantz Fanon in "The Wretched of The Earth" calls, "Reactionary Psychoses". These are severe psychological disorders stemming from violence. So within our "Growth," after we learn why and how violence is not the solution, we must begin the process of being able to deprogram ourselves, which means taking a critical and painful inventory so that we may adopt new principles for living.

I am here to say, "This Will Not Be Easy!" because we have to confront the ugly truth head on of who we were and are, which will take us way outside of our comfort zone. But it's very necessary, particularly for those of us who have lived this way our entire lives. Mind you, we have loved ones awaiting our return home. Communities that need our presence to demonstrate that manhood is much more than reacting violently to a conflict. A world that needs our skill sets, talents, our love and understanding. "Deprogramming through growth"

for myself meant that I had to begin by sincerely challenging the very beliefs that I had acquired coming up in my own neighborhood. I was a product of programming; the life script had already been laid out for me. I realize that my beliefs had shaped my attitude, which shaped my actions, which shaped my habits. I'm a creature of habit, and I was in the habit of thinking that to be kind, generous, caring, loving, etc. was weak, that to even demonstrate these virtues would be looked down upon by those I knew unfavorably. I had to reassess these things because, not only were they diametrically opposed to the values that I was raised with, but also because they were in conflict with the type of "Growth" of the future I was beginning to envision for myself.

I began to replace the lyrics of the Ice Cubes and the 50 Cents with the wisdom of the ancients and the examples of four current contemporary leaders; "Charity does not in any way decrease the wealth; and a servant who forgives, God adds to their respect, and the one who shows humility, God elevates them in the estimation of the people." It sounded counterintuitive at first, I must admit, but when practiced with pure intention, it is a real formula for life-changing "Growth", as well as success, one that I have personally seen take place in many instances. Dr. King once said, "To meet hate with retaliatory hate would do nothing but intensify the existence of evil in the universe .Hate begets hate. And if I accept this as truth, and I most certainly do, then its opposite is also true: Meeting love with a greater love only intensifies the existence of love and kindness in the universe, for love begets love just the same. So it is with all virtue." These days through my personal growth, this is the path along my journey in life that I have taken, and it no doubt has proven to be beneficial and has opened me to constant and evolving Growth, (In more ways than one).

By Nate Lindell

This is spontaneously written because I lack the time to put the extensive piece that this subject deserves. (I was planning on going "crazy" on the word theme for next month, "Loneliness."). Growth can only happen if the environment one finds themselves in allows it. Some animals (e.g goldfish) will cease growing when there's insufficient room in their environment to sustain their growth. And that is the reality that many of those of us in prisons faced from the time we were born. If something is a reality, is it an excuse? If someone is shot in the head, is "gunshot wound" their "excuse" for dying, or is it their reality?

See, the bizarre thing about our human societies is that we make them, yet far too many of us delude ourselves that they are some unavoidable objective realities. We are like goldfish who make their own bowls and (usually the powerful, the bowl makers) then preach that these bowls are immutable, even though these bowls hold back our growth as societies. Humanity is hilarious like that. Ah, think of the good old days when the powerful killed those who questioned whether or not sailors would fall off the edge of the Earth if they sailed too far!

(How's that for a fishbowl!) Back to us merry many band of sisters and brothers in boxes.

My state held me in solitary confinement for over 15 years. To get out of that fishbowl, I had to terrorize the WI supermax staff into sending me to the federal prison system, where I was immediately let out in GP with no ado. My state restricted my growth and chose to see me as someone who should only be buried alive; in the federal system, while there were some snafu, they gave me the opportunity to tutor special-needs GED students, nurturing my inner ham rather than my inner Hannibal. It's been around three years since my state finally released me from long-term solitary confinement. They had a change in the prison system's administration, eased up a tiny bit on their decades-old de facto practice of focusing on creatively tormenting us, and it's been years since I violently retributed.

While I'm still enduring the post-solitary-confinement disorder (PSD) that being held in prisoncrat's fishbowl for over 15 years inflicted on me, the WI prison system has given me the room to grow so that I now work as a tutor for special-needs HSED students and work on the editorial board for my prison's Writing 101 class. The opportunity for growth was allowed when for decades, it had been denied, and I grew. Another guy whom I know from decades in solitary confinement has, likewise, been afforded similar opportunities and now works as a peer mentor for mentally/emotionally disturbed captives and works with me as an editor for the Writing 101 class. Prisoncrats used to fear both of us, denied us opportunities to grow, and wasted our talents. That other captive and I both deal with inner terror, misery, despairs, confusions about how to appropriately socially maneuver, caused by years in barren boxes; but we are struggling to take advantage of the strange allowance for us to grow, to be kind & constructive humans rather than lashing out at hypocritical tormenters.

As I've discussed in previous writings, we captives almost all have been oppressed, handicapped, stunted in our ability to grow often since birth. I know that I was! And prisoncrats typically gleefully carry on that tradition. So, I hope you captives keep in mind that you can't grow unless the powerful get out of the way or provide the opportunity for you to grow—don't hate yourself if you haven't had a full-blown Malcom-X esque transformation given that you're probably being held in conditions that would kill a kudzu's attempted growth! But, there's nothing more revolutionary than growing, and developing your humanity in the face of prisoncrats fierce projection of their monster on you!

by Vicki Hicks

I was so broken when I came to prison. While in county jail, going to court monthly, I had to sit and listen to the state attorney make me out to be the worst daughter that ever lived. Whoever recovers from that? My first day of prison was dehumanizing. From the initial shower with delice shampoo to bending over to cough, spreading your cheeks, completely naked. "It can only go up from here." So, what I told myself. The reception center was not as bad as I thought, after sixty-

seven days I was permed out at Homestead where I was immediately assigned a job as an orderly for the colonel, then the assistant warden. Not so bad for me coming from a law enforcement background. I was right at home with all the officers coming and going.

Six months after arriving here I was offered a job at Pride Optical. This gave me the opportunity to begin paying my restitution and court fines, as well as obtain certification that will help me get a job when I get out. My job gives me a reason to wake up every morning.

I kept hearing about a program for writers called Exchange for Change. My first class was op-ed. I wrote a piece titled "Locked Up and Locked Out" (of the job market). It was submitted to the Miami Herald. Though I was not published, I gained the confidence to keep writing and joined several more writing classes. It was a turning point for me. I was able to tell my stories without holding back or being worried I would be judged. These classes along with encouragement from my peers helped me continue to move forward.

I brought a broken person to prison and through many entities I will take a strong, confident woman home; one who knows she can stand on her own two feet and not have to expend on anyone to become successful.

by Robert Viveiros Jr.

With so many different life experiences that have shaped my life, I would need 800 pages. So, I will stick with one topic I have had to endure my entire life, even up to this moment. After several attempts at writing about this topic, I thought that by sitting here and going through my memories, somehow the story of my life would make complete sense. But I learned the hard way that reality is more demented than fiction and the deeper I go back, the more the tears flow, as all the thoughts flood my mind all at once.

Throughout my life it's been difficult for me to get by without any depression, rage, and alcohol, lots of alcohol. And the source of it all was my father. As far back as I can remember, as punishment my father would hit me. And I don't mean a smack here or there, I mean a straight out beating. Leather to skin as he would whip me with a leather belt he would take right off his waist. He would force me to pull my pants down and he would whip my bare-ass. One time he got so carried away, he was whipping me in such a crazed manner, he missed my ass and stuck my lower back. It was so bad that I had to wear a shirt at all times until the bleeding welts healed. What hurt the most about that day is if you ask him about it, he will deny it. As the years went by, I got so used to the beatings that the pain would not bother me and I would not shed a tear. This used to piss him off and he hit me even harder, and the older I got, the harder he hit. My father taught me how to take and give pain. Because of him, I grew up cold and hateful and full of rage.

I learned to carry disappointment and grief silently and alone. I held it all in, throughout my body, except with my hands.

Because of my father, no one ever walked on me again, or ever got away with it when they did. The depression and the

rage mixed with drinking was a very toxic mixture. Fighting with these demons made me want to kill myself or beat someone up. And I had done both. At 15 years old, I did try to kill myself by ingesting pills. I would always beat myself up with the theory of why a father could hurt his own son the way my father hurt me. Why? Was I a disappointment? Was I not good enough for him? I was forced to see a therapist, but it didn't help because I chose to continue drinking. Being intoxicated numbed me from all the pain, better than any therapist could do. But with the rage still in me, it got me in a lot of fights. I ended up being arrested multiple times for assault and batteries, destruction of property and ultimately this gave me a two-and-a-half-year sentence in county jail.

At this time of my life, I had a two-year-old son of my own, and it was him who gave me the strength to work through and face my demons. I wanted to be a part of his life. I wanted him to know what it felt like to be loved and wanted by his father. While in jail, I was sober and stayed sober and took advantage of all programs available to me. Anger management, AA meetings, and other programs that taught coping skills. Through this process, I realized I was investing my time and energy in my father's narrative version of my life, letting them shape me through my memories. Up to that point, I had spent my life chasing myself in the past when all along I held the power to create myself in my present. It was time to take my life back, to be the best version of myself that I can be. And the only way to do that was to let go. I had to let go of either my memories or my father. I couldn't help how I felt, I ended up choosing to let go of him. To this day, I still haven't spoken to him, and no matter what anyone has to say, my life has been a lot better. The problem with him and me not connecting was a problem I have placed on my shoulders. I choose to carry the weight, why? Because I didn't want to be like him, and I never will. For one, I never put my hands on my own sons through anger.

Twenty years have passed, and I now have two sons. And my feelings for my sons come from a place deep inside my heart. Whenever I look at my sons, I wonder what they think of me. I know how I feel about my own father, and one day, if someone asks them, I hope their response will be that I am a good man and a great father. I have very few happy memories of my childhood, of my father, but the one thing I learned and am proud of is my ability to take pain. It was all I've ever known. That's one ability I never want my sons to learn from me.

By Cesar Hernandez

This year I've been working on being more of a people person. For a long time, I've been indifferent of those that surround me. Every day I see those around me do things they shouldn't. Every day I see them refuse to put in the effort to become better human beings.

I try to be as non-judgmental as I can. It's best to give people the benefit of the doubt. You only get to see one page of their book. If you could see their entire book, then you would completely understand why they are the way they are.

The compassion for those around me has grown this year. This year I've had countless conversations that I wouldn't have had in the past.

Our wing has sixty people. I now see seventeen people in a new light. I've had conversations with those people about a variety of topics. I think they also now see me in a new light.

When people share things about themselves, I now understand why they think or do certain things.

This year I've been very surprised with myself. I've disclosed things to people I haven't disclosed to anyone before. I've had some very deep conversations with people on my wing several people around me have lots of wisdom yet they fail to put it into practice.

Abnormal Growth By Christophere Negrete

As it turns out, I am not "normal." Okay, none of us are, but my particular abnormality involves the chemistry going on in my brain. Specifically, the zany alchemy transpiring in my coconut means that I suffer from severe anxiety. For those of you unfamiliar with this charming woe, allow me to briefly explain. You know that certain rear-view mirror flips on the lights, or when the phone rings at four in the morning and it's a family member calling? Now imagine having that feeling 24/7/365 for no discernible reason at all: the dial on the equilibrium meter perpetually set just a few notches shy of panic. As a result, any minor concern appears far more daunting than it should and genuinely worrisome issues are elevated to the level of crisis. Having anxiety exacerbates everything— nothing is "no big deal."

Now, hold on because get this: until my mid-30's I thought everyone experienced life the same way I did. And I just figured everyone lives the same way I did. And I just figured everyone else was better at keeping it together. Put that in your pipe n' smoke it: For over three decades I lived with a significant mental illness and didn't realize it was in any way out of the ordinary. One of my majors in college was sociology— a behavioral science —how did I not realize something was amiss? It was not until a conversation with a girlfriend that I had any indication that something might be off. Based on a description of my general state of being, she pointed out that not only was constant anxiety not normal, but I should probably see a doctor. In typical paranoid fashion, I immediately suggested that the doctor would probably accuse me of lying in an effort to get drugs. In fact, not only did the doctor agree that I did need to be medicated, but she also pointed me in the direction of a therapist, with whom I spent an hour every Wednesday for a year and a half.

It wasn't until my treatment began and the anxiety had significantly decreased that I became fully cognizant of how abnormal my previous state of mind had been. When I gave my therapist before and after examples of certain situations, it was only then that I understood that the new and improved "after experiences" were what most people characterize as common. As epiphanies go, this one was of the bombshell variety. OMFg,WTF.

To mention that my medications aren't magic pills that completely whisk away my anxiety so that I may frolic at will. Rather, my medications turn down the volume of the anxiety to a level that's manageable. It's still there, but instead of being horrid music thundering out of the subwoofers in the Honda (complete with dragon artwork) next to you at the red light, it's more like the old lady muttering to herself on the sidewalk. Boys and girls, I share all this not because I seek any kudos or whatever— "yay I'm not a basket case now?" But there remains a stigma around mental health which is frankly ridiculous. A mental health disorder is a neurological issue. Now what else is a neurological disorder? Epilepsy. But to the best of my knowledge there is no shame or guilt complex associated with epilepsy. Although I will admit my sample size is limited to a single person (the same girlfriend who realized my anxiety might warrant a doctor visit) she did confirm that no one who ever been so asinine to suggest that a change of attitude or scenery would be the way to avoid those pesky seizures. Meanwhile, I've heard on more than one occasion that my own malady could be easily overcome by simply "thinking positive." If anyone needs further evidence that mental disorders are rooted in neurology, I submit the following: Knowledge-Epilepsy and anxiety. That previously-mentioned girlfriend and I both took it. The point here is that some folks reading this (Yoda forbid) may be dealing with mental health ailments themselves but are reluctant to seek help because of the stigma. You are not crazy. It is not your fault. There is no reason to feel guilty. Goodness knows if my father feels no shame about eating himself into obesity and type 2 diabetes you should feel no guilt about your brain chemistry. Getting the treatment, you need is about more than just growth. It's about being able to flourish.



Art by Michael Dorcas

Loneliness

Loneliness: A state of mind and being by Jeri Hubbard

When I think of the word loneliness, I think of its core word lonely. For me it means a state of being alone, isolated,

separated from, outside or on the fringes of things happening or taking place. Being in the midst of a crowd and feeling there is no one who knows or understands what I am going through or even have need of.

Yet loneliness is so much more than this, for me it's not only a physical state but mental as well. It affects how I see others, has led to depression oftentimes severe in nature, anti-social behavior, anxiety to the point of fight or flight symptoms coming to the forefront and even suicidal ideologies that have led to attempts at taking my life. I have and continue to chastise myself for perceived wrongs and constantly ask why no one loves me.

For me this started at a very young age, developing quickly while going through physical, psychological, mental, emotional, and verbal abuse by a family member. I was, with the exception of attending school, kept isolated from other children my age and as a result I never developed the social skills a child would normally have.

I rarely had friends as we constantly moved around the country and once reaching Florida, I sought out others to love with the hope it would be reciprocated. I cannot remember a time that it was. Sad to say, I was seen by my peers in high school as having loose morals, being unapproachable or even better than everyone else. This was truly not the case; I simply had no idea what to do in such settings and failed miserably at every attempt I made.

I went from one relationship to another with similar results, always envying those who appeared to be happy and settled. I married young thinking my new husband loved me, yet this too was a mirage. He only wanted someone to care for his needs, his home, his children, etc. without giving anything in return except scorn, contempt, jealousy, and eventually hatred. He went on to have an affair while we were together fathering a child with this woman he would never claim as his own, his two daughters I gave him were most often ignored or forgotten.

Then it was divorce, losing my children to claims of abandonment and entering into a relationship with my second husband. Worse than before it was "my way or the highway" and this set me up to land in prison. All the while never feeling part of anything, being locked away in a self-imposed cell longing for someone to care and love me for what I was, not what I could give them. I went so far as to make attempts to take my own life while on psychotropic meds which didn't help and landed me in a psych ward.

Once in prison the feelings of loneliness grew worse as everyone and I mean everyone in my family turned away and stopped having contact with me. Loneliness pervades my soul, sits in the core of my being like a boulder that cannot be budged. It has affected relationships I have tried to establish and develop and continually has affected worst situations.

Even now as I sit here writing this piece I long for someone, anyone who would give two hoots about me. No matter what I tell myself or even others I cannot seem to get past it enough to allow myself to join in, keeping myself separated to the point I am seen as uppity, mean, conceited or

even as one person told me racist. This is not the case, I simply do not know how to react in social settings.

I can only pray that this will change though I am even losing the battle I fight daily. Maybe someday.

Loneliness by Leo Cardez

Prison is lonely. It seems counterintuitive that one can feel alone when physically surrounded by others. We are literally never alone in prison. And yet there are often times we will feel as if we are on an island on an island. Recent research shows this is a growing trend in America (especially among the Z generation) and even more so in this time of uncertainty and fear, of lockdowns and social distancing. Some studies show up to 75% of subjects report feeling some aspect of loneliness in the past year. One only needs to use common sense to extrapolate those numbers for the inmate community to realize how serious and deep this problem is.

As an inmate locked up in quarantine protocols with complete strangers in a cut-throat volatile environment it makes sense to feel utterly alone. We have no family nearby, no real friends (not really); we don't have Zoom or Facebook Live or even a cell phone; we can't jump into our cars to visit loved ones. We are, in many real ways, alone on another planet. Planet Mindfuck.

Firstly, don't feel ashamed, in fact, quite the opposite, be proud that you picked up on this healthy cue. That feeling of emptiness you're noting is your psyche sending up a warning signal: You're low on something. Time to check the engine.

Typically, it is both an internal and external deficiency. They are both correlated, co-dependent, and overlap with each other. On the outside, we are likely lacking significant, meaningful relationships – ones where trust, respect, and honesty are in the forefront. This is especially true in prisons where most relationships are superficial and temporary. Some of that is the nature of the beast – we're always being moved cells, buildings, or facilities with no way of keeping in touch. The other part is the nature of prison life itself. It is hard to trust and open up to others in prison – predators are always hunting for those they deem easy prey. Eventually we get so used to these surface friendships and of hiding behind our masks it's hard to know who or what to believe anymore.

To be fair, you can't blame us too much. We are taught early in our incarceration that we, alone, are serving our sentence – no one can do it for us. There's also this false belief that keeping that sort-of standoffish mentality will keep you safer in the long run, but it is also true that that type of thinking could be hurting us.

Humans are social creatures. Every study has reinforced this ingrained natural instinct to connect with others. We don't just crave connections; we need them for our continued survival as a species. Some have been able to fill this void temporarily with their faith/spirituality; finding purpose; volunteering or any other avenue that helps one appreciate someone or something in a meaningful deep way, but there is no replacement for the real thing.

The tricky part is we need people – sometimes too much – but to expect others to meet our deepest need for connectedness is unfair and unrealistic. We need to do some hard work on our end too; that's where the internal deficiency comes in. Maybe we are not giving ourselves enough self-care or self-love or maybe we are not being honest with ourselves in some aspect of our lives? This contradictory thinking (thinking you're okay when you clearly know you are not e.g.) wreaks havoc on our psyche. We have to be willing to take the time to listen to what's going on in our head. Sometimes it takes a while for the truth to trickle from our head to our heart.

If we are not being genuine with ourselves, how can we possibly believe we can be genuine to others? As cliché as it sounds, we need to build a meaningful internal narrative if we ever expect to have healthy, deep relationships with others.

In a weird way, loneliness connects us. Our shared human experience creates a bond of understanding. Letting go of preconceived notions of what it means to feel alone moves our thoughts from our pain to our purposes. When we see we aren't the only lonely we can comfort others. We can start to make those meaningful connections we all need and help us feel a little bit less awkward.

In prison, there's some loneliness we need to learn to accept (spoiler alert: prison sucks), but it also provides an interesting revelation. That feeling of loneliness and invisibility in proper perspective can drive us to become better people, better to ourselves and better to others. That initial pain we feel can be difficult, but not all pain is bad. Oftentimes, beauty can be found through pain.

Painless Window By Bobby Thompson

The paneless window of my prison cell
permits penetrating rays of light
Emitting overbearing heat
that lasts throughout the night
Leaking ceilings and clogged sinks
locked in a cage that's not fit for humanity
It siphons one's will to live on
as it eats at the core of my sanity
The weight of a sound judgment
is on cleaning the floor now or after it rains
So for twenty-four hours, I'm watching a wall
and the filthy water as it drains
Each lighting strike is followed by a roar of thunder
which violently shakes the soul
Then all of a sudden, and in the blink of an eye
the wind turns utterly cold
I reach for my issued blanket that's made of cotton
that has to have been meant for the trash
Vigorously, the cold wind reaches for my skin
as from left to right, I thrash
Uncomfortable, I am, in any position
sound sleep feels eons away
So I lie here and sigh with a tear in my eye
for, this is only my second day.

By R.K. Taylor

The loneliest I have ever been by far was while I was on my second deployment in Kabul, Afghanistan. There were twenty of us in a small camp, just enough for us to have two twelve-hour shifts of people. Half of us were on guard, the other half slept. The only interaction I had with another person was the short, one on one, shift change brief. This went on for months until our ODB and second squad came back. The worst form of solitary is when you're guarding your own prison, when you're all that keeps the Taliban out.

Lonely all the time By Mario Leyba

It's so lonely. Even when I am surrounded by a lot of people, I still feel so alone. I walk around and talk to everyone in the room but at the end of the day, all the conversations feel so empty and without purpose. I really just want to be whole again. I really just want to be home again. I miss the smell of roses. I miss watching the sunset. The trees change colors in the fall, the breeze in the spring, the heat from the summer sun. These are the things that used to help when I felt lonely. Now I just feel lonely all the time. I need something that is real. I'm tired of all the small talk. I'd rather just sit and listen to the birds sing. But there are no birds here, just jail birds that can't fly, can't sing, can't do anything.

Loneliness is the worst disease to have in the world. Even though it does not kill you, it sometimes makes you wish it could.

I love life and love people; I just don't why I don't seem to connect anymore. I'm tired of being alone. I'm tired of not having a place to call home. Maybe I will figure it all out one day. Someday?

By Colin Broughton

I work 12-hour days. Six days a week. I don't get state pay or time deducted from my sentence. I work in the prison's infirmary, and it's a job that requires a lot of sacrifice. I do my best to push past fatigue. I give words of encouragement to men who feel hopeless, and I pray with them to lift their spirit. Even though I'm blessed to have my health and strength, I feel all alone. My shift begins at 6.00 am. I pass out ice. Take out trash. Wash linen. Change linen. Change diapers. Empty urinals. Watch health decline. I watch people die. I feel like a robot on most days. I turn off feelings, or at least I try to. Because getting attached can't always be an option. Men come into the system young, wild, and strong, only to succumb to a sickness that will eventually cause their demise. I cry, I pray. I stopped crying. I still pray. I watch the coroner take pictures. I see the body bag zipped up. The dead weight is a bit much for him to handle, so I give him a hand. I wash my hands. I proceed to the next task. My robot mentality kicks in. Turn off all feelings. Remain the well, dialed machine you've become, I tell myself. Who will lend an ear to the inmate who just needs someone to listen? Maybe I want to talk about last night's game, or the undercooked chicken sent from the cafe. Even the weather isn't off the table. As long as it does not involve the man I just gave a roll of toilet paper to, who died

after my shift. Or the man who held my hand as he breathed his last breath. My pen can't talk back, but for now, it'll have to keep me company when the last drop of ink hits the page, I'll be alone once again.

By Jeremiah Owens

When I think about the good times, and how much fun I had and the joyful bliss. Looking up at the sky at night over a campfire and letting my mind take over. Now being stuck in prison for my own reasons and missing out on what life has to truly offer. Looking at the walls listening to people lose their sanity. It's hard to think positive thoughts when all around me are negative people. Never get to hold my loved ones and tell them how much I love them, now all I have are their past memories. When I think of my future it's hard not to get depressed, down under, and shut down from within. It's hard to see the light, when it's all darkness. It's hard to breathe when it regards air. I sit in a cell 23 hours a day letting my mind go, but I still try to hold on to my sanity. I read, write, think of what ifs. Trying not to let it destroy me, I know I have a future one day because God says but facing reality with all its lows and highs. It's hard to see things will get better. I have only hope, trust, knowing God will carry me through this and onto a better life.



Collage by Kristopher Storey

Education

by Steve Deloge

Education is expensive. That's what folks say and it's true. Not only in the traditional sense like tuition at Notre Dame, but in the literal sense where scars represent deep lessons. There's one on my left eyebrow. Just got a new tricycle and was burning up the sidewalk. Girl asked if she could take it for a spin and I said, "Nope!" Pushed me right overboard. First civics lesson: "No" is not a diplomatic response.

Grandma thinks of everything, even a wrought iron stool so little tykes can reach the faucet to wash up for lunch. But you can balance against the sink and teeter the stool with your feet. Until you crash into the side of the toilet. The one on my right eyebrow is a lesson in levers, fulcrums, and gravity. I have shrapnel wounds from when as a child with an aptitude for mechanical engineering, I designed my own gun. I put an iron pipe in the vice and inserted a shotgun shell. It fit perfectly! Tap, tap, tap against the firing pin with a ball-peen hammer and I found myself outside the shed with ears ringing. I saw red spots on my t-shirt and pulled it up to see cuts all over my upper body. Some stunts are both stupid and dangerous; you could end up blind, or dead. This one will be on the final exam. The neighbor girl kept riding her bike past our open apartment door as I stood shyly watching her and fidgeting with the thin copper weather-strip. It sliced my thumb like a razor. She got a good chuckle, and I got a huge bandage. That early lesson in basic biology, including stitches, taught me that females cause my brain to glitch.

I learned the mechanics of mass and velocity, and the value of seatbelts when my pickup slammed into a hillside and the Cal Custom steering wheel collapsed. I was upside down on the passenger side floor with massive pain in my chest. Lucky to be alive. This was a lesson in physics and economics; strap yourself in and don't drive fast with budget brand Maypop tires (sold throughout the southern United States, "They may pop, and they may not!").

Then there's the one on my thigh that is as long as a Marlboro 10. I'd gone into the wood-decked attic to be alone and do another bump. I lit a smoke and loaded a syringe with the cheap thrill. I awoke hours later to find a cold butt and a long char in the plywood, and a similar burn on the front of my jeans. I pulled them down to discover a matching-length blister on my skin. Who knew that you could pass out on top of a smoldering cigarette and not even feel it? I realized how close I'd come to starting a house fire, and never waking up. First rule of chemistry; do not experiment on yourself. Every time I wear shorts I look at the burn scar and think that it would probably have been cheaper to earn my degree at MIT.

Taken Away by Myron Martens

I have wrote previously about my ventures in self-education behind these walls; how five years ago I decided getting educated in prison is one of the best things I could do for myself in here; how I contacted the US Department of Education, the NCDPS Education Department, as well as a host of other organizations that help educate inmates such as the College Guild, Crossroads, Prisoner Express, etc; how I've completed and earned certifications in dozens of correspondence courses in theology, philosophy, and more.

It was great, I felt I had found meaning and purpose in here. As I was continuing my studies, it was shaping and molding my life, my way of thinking. As I gradually earned more and more certificates, I found the motivation I needed to continue my studies since I felt and saw my progress, the fruit of my work. I had taken several courses at a time, often

studying all day, long nights, and weekends too. By doing so I was becoming a different man. These extensive studies had transformed my character, then came TextBehind.

Much like the Covid-19 pandemic, TextBehind changed everything. In October 2021, NCDPS hijacked our mail system in NC prisons all around the state, effectively ending all my correspondence courses. To say that this was a blow to my studies and my perspective would be a vast understatement. Imagine how I felt when all this was taken away and I received very little to no response, no mail, no lessons anymore. I used to get lessons in the mail all the time. So, I started writing requests regularly trying to figure out why on earth they would take away and censor the very thing that transformed my understanding, my perspective, my life. And what must I do to continue my correspondence studies. At about the same time they changed the mail system in MC prisons, they started rolling out tablets too.

Around six months later, they launched an education app on our tablets. Thus, hijacking not only mail, but my correspondence, education, and religious studies as well. I have received only two or three lessons in the mail since TextBehind. Now after a few months of use, the new education app is both fascinating and frustrating at the same time. It is filled with hundreds of educational/academic videos, lessons, lectures, assignments, courses, and studies in every field of interest: science, physics, astronomy, cosmology, biology, psychology, mental and physical health, art, history, civics and government, religions. It has a little bit of everything one could imagine.

The problem is the app is more like a social media feed than it is a correspondence course. As you scroll through the vast array of courses and videos, e-books, and other digital data, it becomes very difficult to navigate. I started studying a so-called correspondence course one day and the next day I couldn't figure out how to get back to that same course. Thus, it gets lost in the digital world of ones and zeros and I cannot study productively. I'm mindlessly scrolling through feeds.

To me this doesn't even compare with having actual course material, paperwork, textbooks, and other study course material in hand, on a desk. On top of that, this environment is not conducive to learning. Time and time again I have set up in the block trying to study, learn, trying to figure out how I'm ever going to figure out learning, self-education, self-study, or self-motivation in such an oppressive environment which does not facilitate, promote, or approve of such a thing. In fact, they complicate the matter by blocking access to real correspondence courses from great programs for prisoners such as the College Guild, MZBI, PCOG, Prisoner Express, and Syda Foundation, just to name a few. They now reject, deny, block, and censor these under the cloak of TextBehind and "security interests." They've all but banned my education. Therefore, I've concluded that the administration, the penal system does not really care to educate me which would inevitably lead to better thinking skills, communication, and just a better reformed life, a changed and improved individual. No, they have taken away most of my academic educational

pursuits. It's gotten to the point where I'm almost ready to throw in the towel and give up on education, especially in correspondence courses.

They're making it so oppressive, so harsh, so expensive on us in here. It's like they're always trying to find more ways to make it harder on us, kicking us while we're down while getting rich off things like TextBehind, Tablets, and Canteen. They don't care about education; they don't care about reform, they care about their greed, profits, and money. TextBehind is charging non-profit organizations and prison ministries more, just so they can make more money off us. All the educational programs I was in prior to TextBehind have been taken away. These outside programs I found on my own accord through my own determination, self-study, self-motivation. Apart from the minimum exposure I get on the tablets now, they have virtually no educational programs; none in class anymore. And I discussed earlier those courses and programs are so difficult to navigate on the tablet.

Unfortunately for me, with all the issues I've been having, the administration the way it is... I'm on the brink of giving up on education, even religious studies. Everyone around me seems to be antagonistic towards my studies, my religion. I cannot continue to battle the administration for an education. I give up. I give in. I throw in the towel. I can't win. They don't want an educated prison population. They don't want us to become successful. That would take money out of their own pockets. They don't care about education, but profits, money, and power, not education, or knowledge, or training in righteousness. That would destroy their agenda. They're not for us, they're against us. This is my experience, my education taken away in prison.

Why Didn't I Get My Education by Bernardo Rodriguez

Thanks, and praise is due to God that I can read and write, that I got basic math skills. Although I still lack education. Why didn't I get my education? Bottom line, a misspent youth, not the right guidance, the wrong crowd. I bet I could go on for a while finding excuses. In the end, it would be "Z." All of the above.

Boy! Let me tell you am I paying the price for not having an education. I was born and raised in the San Fernando Valley in California. I went to O' Melveny Elementary, San Fernando Jr. High, and to San Fernando High School. My highest education grade level is 10th grade, but I never completed the 10th grade.

Currently, I am an inmate & ward of the Los Angeles County Jail. I was recently sentenced on 12-13-22. I was sentenced to 6 years for possession of a firearm.

I'm 46 years old. A high school dropout with little or no education. I hope the youth, or some youngster may get the chance to read this. Take it from me, stay in school, get your education.

This is my first time writing to Prisoner Express. I got a hold of the address of P.E. through the Prison Activist Resource Center (P.A.R.C.). They offer a great resource directory.

I'm going to further my education and my first step was Prisoner Express. I know deep down inside of me, I love to write or more like, I wish I had talent to write and be a writer. Why didn't I get my education?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm a newbie to PE. This is the first time I got the PE Newsletter. All I can say is that it's an awesome thing. I truly loved the word theme & picture theme - there are some very good essays & good stories.

It only makes me think & wonder, why didn't I get my education? Right now, I wish I paid attention in English classes and to my English teachers.

I wish I truly knew how to write as a storyteller, as an author, as a journalist, as an editor... as a poet, as a songwriter. I wish I had a writer's guide, to truly compose a letter, book report, story/article.

Hey, I'm not the most eloquent nor the most articulate. More than likely, grammar wise, I'm not there yet, but I'm working on it. I'm also working on my education. I enrolled in the Five Keys High School Program. Am I educated? Or do I do possess an education above average?

For me to say I am well educated & have knowledge of orthography, etymology, syntax, prosody, biography, astronomy, geography, cosmography, algebra, land-surveying, and leveling drawing/art, physical science, French, German, Latin and Greek and among many not mentioned due to lack of knowledge and/or education.

No lie, heck yeah! I want this to be posted on the next newsletter of P.E. I fear, #1 that my writing is not clear & sloppy. #2, I don't know how to write. I know nothing of punctuation: apostrophe, brackets, colon, comma, dash, hyphen, parentheses, period, ellipses, exclamation mark, question mark, quotation marks, semicolon & virgule. "Oh where do they belong, where do they go."

That's the tip of the iceberg of my lack of education & knowledge of English & writing. Grammar, morphology and again syntax, idiom, synonyms, antonyms... adjective, adverb, conjunction, interjection, noun, plural, proposition, pronoun, singular, verb, reflexive verb & the schwa.

I didn't remember the subject & predicate, but I remember 3rd grade, Mrs. Bell. Oh, why didn't I get an education? Perhaps my writing will not get me posted in the P.E. Newsletter. But my lack of knowledge & education will.

The point I want to get across to all young & old about education, that it's never too late to pursue your education. It's never too late, get your education! Knowledge is power.

CONVICT CHRONICLES: A Prison Education by Leo Cardez

These years In prison have become the defining learning moments of my life. They have taught me more about people and the world in seven years than the previous seven decades, I've learned:

There is no feeling quite like the loss of freedom – an unquantifiable pain beyond any known words. Patience is never truly mastered.

I am a hurting, ignorant, son-of-a-bitch, no better or worse than anyone else.

My loved ones are doing this time with me and that time away from both tears the relationship apart and binds it together in beautiful new ways we never expected.

True friends are the family God allows us to choose and those ties can be stronger than blood.

There is such a thing as good bad people and bad people and monsters and angels exist among us...and in us.

Beauty exists in the details that we too often take for granted: the smell of fresh cut grass, the sound of our children's laughter, the warm brace of someone who cares about you. Never take these moments for granted.

I have an extraordinary family. Their resilience and unwavering devotion is beyond comprehension and something I will never be able to repay.

Stay focused on what you can change and let the rest of it go. Unknown depths to my own soul and that courage doesn't stem from the lack of fear, but from action in spite of it. And that facing and overcoming those fears will define my character.

True change can be slow and steady, or come in spurts, but it will always be painful. Learn to embrace the pain. Freedom can be found through pain.

Newfound compassion for my fellow man, most surprisingly, for those I barely know or even like. I've begun to open my heart and let people in. This is not normal for me and I'm not very good at it, but I'm glad it's come about, and I hope to continue to nourish it.

We have a broken justice system and we're at a critical junction where we can either push towards creating a better, humane, fair system or lower our sights and continue to compromise our humanity and fall deeper into the darkness. The choice is entirely ours.

That the world is lost and confused. People are blind to their blessings – that can't see we've hit the fate lottery – living in the best time in history. For my part, my heart is full knowing that I'm living on the most beautiful planet among the most wonderous people ever.

Little Things I Learned Along the Way

by Catherine LaFleur

'Tis I, your faithful correspondent reporting again from the bowels of Camp Prisonery Land. As January 2023 approaches, I've been thinking about what I have learned and distilling the most important ideas. Here are a few of them:

How to tell when it is cold: There is a cat, a dog, and a man in your bed all at the same time.

How to tell when it is warm: You kicked everyone out of your bed and have the fan and air conditioning on at the same time.

Start as you mean to go on: Never address anyone by a nickname. These cease to be cute at age 21. Requiring me to call you "kid" when you are age 45 is unpleasant. I am empathetic to the fact that your mother named you Eunice and you wish to be known as "Big Murder D". Still, I am either

calling you Eunice or your last name, Stinkelmeyer. I feel your pain.

Never be afraid to eat the food: Yes, I know what you are thinking. Returning to your cell, you discover a Snickers candy bar on the bunk. Go ahead and eat it. When the person who left it for you reveals herself, you must take the situation in hand. If the candy bar was a ruse to lure you under some kind of influence, then give them The Crazy Eyed Look. Say in your scariest sociopath voice, "Are you ever going to need my assistance for anything?" If you are not sure what the voice should sound like, think of Anthony Hopkins in the role of Hannibal Lecter. Calm, smooth, yet undeniably creepy.

Stress: Don't indulge. Learn to breathe correctly. Remember prison is all a grand facade. Most things don't count. Most people don't really matter. Surround yourself with silence. Preferably your own. That way you can enjoy the pleasure of finding a friend, reading a book, or listening to music. Although I don't like to tell people what to do. Here goes me..... telling you what to do. I remain your faithful correspondent.

By Sean Riker

From age twelve to fifteen, I was housed at Youth Training School in Chino, California for being a mindless misfit. YTS, aka, Gladiator School for maniacally gifted violent offenders. The first day of my arrival, I entered the unit carrying my bedroll and hygiene products and a group of white boys, literally boys that were white, and one said, "Hey Brother, come back here and we'll show you where to put that stuff." We went into a cell and the one said, "Heart Check" and punched me in the face. And then all of them started hitting me, the one said, "Fight back, Brother" and that's what I did. I hit as many as I could and was losing so I grabbed onto the nearest one and got him in a choke-hold while my "Brothers" were beating the fuck out of my head. Staff weren't the ones that came running. Nobody came running. It was "Heart Check" guy that said, that's enough, we gotta go to school. They all congratulated me for passing the initiation and they gave me homey love from that day forward.

We went to school where we were handcuffed to our chairs because kids were constantly beating down the teacher. This teacher used to make us line up before class started and check our underwear for skid-marks. If we had them, he'd make us take off our tighty whities and scrub out the offending skid-mark-a-roony. He always had a pup-tent going on in the front of his pants while checking our Bonnaroo's. He got put in the hospital and might still be to this day unable to talk, feed himself or clean his own skid-marks.

The next teacher was a female, and she was pretty cool. She always wore perfume that would gag a maggot but being in a prison that smelled of urine, blood, and other unmentionable bodily fluids, it smelled right nice to us when she'd lean over and help us with a difficult problem. I was above average in my intelligence, and she seen this and even had me stay after class one day, even had me uncuffed and spoke to me one on one. She was really cool and I liked her a lot. She said what I

already knew, that schoolwork comes easy for me, and she asked if I'd be interested in a fast paced study that would allow me to graduate prior to my release in three years. I accepted and unbeknownst to my Brothers, I was doing work that they were not aware of. I kinda sneaked it so they wouldn't know I was a preteen brainiac. Wouldn't look too cool, ya know? YTS was a trip. Assaults were an everyday thing. Staff didn't care as long as you didn't kill anyone back in them days. Kill someone and they'd lock us down without raisins and popcorn snacks for an entire week! And don't you forget! I learned a lot for those three years in both school and in gladiator school. The day I was released I was fifteen and I had my high school diploma in one hand and a feeling of loneliness within me. I missed my brothers. Mindless Misfits, hell yes, Homey Love, hell yes, Camaraderie, hell yes, kill me if I violate the code, hell yes, but I missed them.... Now I serve life for crimes I didn't commit. Nobody will help me.

Recently, this supermax offered college scholarships for inmates that were qualified. I was real happy about this offer and I quickly asked for and received an application. I didn't receive an answer for over a month. I started sending in requests asking WTF is going on and those didn't receive an answer. Then one day, a plain clothes lady came to my cell with an app and numerous requests asking WTF? And she passed everything to me, unsigned, unstamped as being rec'd and she says, I am sorry Mr. Riker, you're not qualified because you're serving life, there's no need for you to further your education. I think I said, Fuck you asshole, get the fuck away from my door and she said, Irregardless [sic] you don't qualify, and I never saw her again. Education? What for? I'm justa number. I don't matter. I'm not even human anymore. But I am the smartest uneducated person I know, ha! PS: Anyone out there willing to help on my wrongful conviction??

By Christopher Negrete

"All men by nature desire to know" wrote Aristotle. And, "knowledge of any kind is a thing to be honored and prized." While I agree with these statements, it should be pointed out that knowledge and education are not exactly the same. To educate a person (or yourself, for that matter) requires the ability to think critically. It requires that a person be able to examine information from different perspectives, to decide how relevant or practical it is. In other words, it means knowing how to think— not simply what to think. This is particularly important in a world swarming with misinformation, conspiracy theories, superstitions, and so on. And if your correctional facility is anything like mine, odds are that you've plenty of people in your environment who readily gobble up quack ideas; And then try to foist them on you. For example-

Regarding COVID-19, I've heard multiple people spout tales of the Chinese government developing the virus in a lab. Germ warfare they claim. These folks dismiss out of hand that COVID has any association with bats. They've heard no reports of killer bats attacking humans, they say, so the bat excuse is part of a cover-up. What these individuals don't know however, is that in several Asian cultures, bats are regularly

eaten as food. In Thailand for instance, a person may purchase fried bat from the sidewalk vendor with the same ease a New Yorker purchases a hot dog. Thus, armed with just a nugget of education regarding Asian culture, a person can look beyond a vast, Imaginary Germ warfare plot, and deduce the far more logical (and likely) explanation for COVID. Someone did a half-ass job cooking his or her lunch.

Admittedly, the process of education can be daunting at times. As Carl Sagan points out, a person who is interested in quantum mechanics must first learn basic math, geometry, algebra, differential and integral calculus, differential equations, vector calculus, Mathematical physics, matrix Algebra, and Ground theory. About fifteen years, give or take to acquire the math background, so yeah, certain academic pursuits are more involved than others.

But the benefits of education—Regardless of your area of study—can manifest themselves in countless practical ways. From better employment prospects to making more informed choices in the voting booth or grocery store, it behooves us all to enrich our understanding of the world around us. Especially now, while we have plenty of time to devote to the study of our choice. And whether we have a piece of paper to show for our efforts is not so important. I've read and examined hundreds more books and works of literature while incarcerated, than I did while earning a B.A. in English. Also, I've managed to learn both Spanish and Korean while here—More than I can say for my university Education. But I digress.

There exist a number of options—Trade, college, correspondence, courses, etc. For inmates in the U.S. to begin or continue the education we all deserve, it may not be easy, and (unfortunately) it may not be inexpensive, but almost always it does prove to be worth it.

by Jonathan McCord

I am a prisoner in Virginia, and I can't complain at all. Learning to be happy is an education worth pursuing. Siddha Yoga meditation has totally rearranged my psyche. I enjoy my life. I love simply being alive. Of course, God has an infinite number of techniques humanity can use in order to ascend spiritually. If I were to suggest a topic to learn, I would suggest a person delve into meditation in some form. Meditation works even for atheists. Grace is not dependent on a vessel. The previous line is out of one of the monthly lessons Siddha Yoga meditation offers free to prisoners. The lessons educate me on timeless spiritual principles, yet that is just the tip of the iceberg. There is great meaning in all of our lives, just waiting to be uncovered.

By Tisha Morley

You hear your whole life how important it is to go to school and get an education. There are tons of government programs to support this—especially no child left behind.

So, what happens when a child does get left behind and ends up in "the system" Or when that child becomes an adult without that education? Or, heaven forbid, that child/adult ends up behind bars due to a series of bad choices? Then what?

When the vast majority of people in our prison system want to further their education it's so disheartening. Lack of funding, limited security, no physical space available for a classroom... and the challenges for a better education increase the odds that someone will be left behind.

Accepting Education by Jonathan Holeman

They, whoever they might be, are often dealing out wonderful and quite senseless adages and advice. Even more profound are the exquisite ideas of nonsensical invitation concerning how or what everyone is supposed to think about all things, people, life and death.

For instance, it is said that "we grow wiser with age." They have also suggested that getting an education is a great and beautiful achievement. The problem for such a considerable waste of all breath, such as myself, is that the older I get, the more it seems I knew when I was younger. It also seems that I learn more about things by looking at nature and thinking about them than I ever learnt in a classroom or study course. Then it becomes quite perplexing when reading some such great new breakthrough in scientific gibberish, just to discover what I once learned from a classroom environment, and institutional college learning centers, is now not true. All of a sudden.

A great example is that when I was born, and all throughout my early nice peaceful days of childhood, I was told and knew that there absolutely were only two genders. One was either a boy, or one was a girl. Anyone else was a defect, or confused, delusional, wrong, strange, weird, or maybe just gay. Not the gay of old English linguistics as in happy, but the gay of modern use and explanation, as in homosexual.

Now as I've aged and the world has moved on, I've come to find out there's too many genders for me to keep track of. Now one is born and "assigned" a gender that they might not relate to once they honestly analyze their own body, mind, and spirit as a whole. Then one can be or become the gender that reflects upon who they are, whoever they might be. This baffles me, and did seem at first to be quite insane. Then they, which is also a gender, informed me that I might be the insane one. I find this perfectly reasonable. Perhaps I thought I was under-educated on the topic. Now, by the time anyone reads this, I should have several college degrees, titles, certificates, and so on. Undereducated? Maybe not, but unable to understand the science of gravity either? Therefore, gravity is wrong and I can jump off buildings unharmed. A true dedication to idiocy. The fact is, something isn't wrong just because you disagree with it, or don't grasp it on any level of understanding.

After all that they have said, I have reached a conclusion. If I am Jon a he/him, white dude, that likes Morales, books, and music, why do I care if my neighbor has purple hair, green skin, assigned as a female named Nancy at birth, but now wants to be, or is, Bob, a dude that wants to join the armed forces. Whatever or whoever Bob is, I'll still be Jon, Bob will still be Bob, why would I have a problem with that? Insanity?

The fact is there's only one adage that really applies to all situations. An adage that makes life a hell of a lot easier if put into practice. It's simple and has a bajillion variations. "If you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all." No matter how things do change, or what I disagree with, that still applies. If someone is just being who they are and they aren't hurting anyone else and are happy, they're managed to achieve something I still think we all could learn from. Insanity, it is hating someone else's happiness. Sad.

Education, a Recipe for Success by Spin

"You gotta take a vocation class if you ever wanna get out of here." This is the statement I've heard time and time again since I have been incarcerated. My reply was always, "Why?" I've worked as an executive at large corporations, owned my own businesses, and was even a licensed electrician before I was locked up. "I Got This!"

Then reality set in. There isn't going to be much call for an old(er) ex-con with a felony record in the workplace. There **are** opportunities out there, but I was going to have to retool my skill set in order to take advantage of them.

I looked at the list of vocational classes available and talked to an education counselor. "What do you like to do?" she asked. "Play music and eat," was my response and since music wasn't an option, **food** was it. I'd always considered myself a pretty good cook in the world. I had my signature dishes I made when I wanted to impress a date, and I could grill just about ANYTHING to perfection, in my opinion. But I was never properly trained in the how and whys of good cooking. So, I signed up for an Intro to Culinary class and thought to myself, "Well, at least I'll eat good." Little did I know just how much of an understatement that would be.

The first thing I learned was that cooking is really Applied Science. Being the Science Nerd I am, this certainly appealed to me. There's a reason why the recipe says to bring the ingredients to a boil – to accelerate the chemical reaction. Cooking also involves more than just taste. Smell, sight, hearing, and touch are all integral parts of the eating experience. The sound of fajitas sizzling on a hot plate, the sight of a juicy steak when you cut into it, the feel of chips and fresh veggies as they crunch in your mouth; these are all just as important as taste. And olfaction, the sense of smell, can have even more of an impact. Anyone who has survived COVID and temporarily lost their ability to smell can attest to that fact. Airborne molecules reach the olfactory bulb in your nasal cavity and are transmitted directly to the deepest part of your brain via the olfactory nerve. That's how a single smell can trigger memories of a specific place and time in your past.

Gustation, the sense of taste, results from the stimulation of small bumps of the tongue called papillae, better known as taste buds. Most people are born with about 10,000 taste buds located throughout the mouth and throat. These taste receptors detect sweet, salty, sour, bitter, and umami (the protein called glutamate that gives foods like aged cheeses and meats their meaty taste). A cool thing I learned about taste buds is that they are constantly replacing themselves – about

every ten days. That's why when you burn your tongue it isn't permanent.

Our instructor Mr. Spalding made sure we understood the science behind preparing, assembling, and presenting a well-cooked meal. He ought to know. He's been cooking from scratch since he was six years old when he developed a palate for eating something and then figuring out how to make it. In addition to his catering business, he also cooks for two professional teams in Chuck wagon and BBQ meals over an open fire. He also has a garage full of championship trophies to show for it. Currently he is cooking with teammates Randy and Carol on the C4B (Cooks for Budweiser) Crew.

In 1995 he worked at a celebrity cattle drive which led to the formation of the Working Ranch Cowboys Association. This year marked the 25th anniversary of the WRCA and C4B plated meals for 600+ attendees, twice a day, for four days. Yeah, this guy knows how to cook! I asked him what his favorite dish to cook is, and his reply was brisket. He cooked 350 in one year before COVID. His favorite dish to eat? Mexican Food. Fav food group? BUTTER! And when I asked why he started cooking? "I was hungry, dude!"

His answers capture the spirit of our class. He keeps it fun and interesting while also being informative. Best of all, he lets us do the cooking. And if we get the dish a little wrong – it's OK. "That's how you learn sometimes, by screwing up. And next time – you do it better." A lesson for LIFE as well. My favorite part of our class is, when we're done cooking, we eat it. And BOY do we eat some good stuff!

On my 3rd day in the class, we made Chicken Fried Steak with homemade gravy, garlic potatoes that melt in your mouth, fresh baked sourdough rolls, and a tossed salad with a raspberry vinaigrette dressing. OMG was it good! We've made several dishes since then, some complex, but many with simple steps and ingredients that taste amazing when prepared in the correct proportions. Last week was the best. We made Calzones. If you have never had one of these magical treats – think of a supreme pizza folded over on itself with the edges pinched close to form a Hot Pocket about the size of a pee wee football, but SO MUCH better tasting.

We made everything from scratch – the dough, tomato sauce, even the ranch dressing for the spinach salad – and all of it was made by hand with the freshest ingredients. Did you know authentic tomato sauce is made with carrots? I did, but only because I remember my Italian grandmother making it when I was very young. You start with diced carrots, celery, onions and sweat them in a saucepan with some extra-virgin olive oil. Then add minced garlic and tomatoes along with the secret spices and bring it to a boil before reducing to a simmer to thicken. Puree the sauce in a blender or food processor before adding the final seasonings to take it to perfection.

We each rolled out the dough we made by hand the day before, to the size of a large dinner plate. Added sauce, pepperoni, seasoned ground beef, two kinds of cheese, onions, and black olives to one half of the dough. I folded over the other half and pinched the edges together to seal the

goodies inside. Then I brushed the top and edges with an egg wash, sprinkled on some diced green peppers I forgot to put inside, said a prayer of thanks to the pizza gods, and placed the whole thing in the oven until it was golden brown.

I took my expertly cooked calzone, which I drizzled with a little more sauce and a pinch of cheese for presentation, along with my tossed spinach salad with homemade ranch dressing and bacon bits, back to my seat. I cut into the sealed pocket of yummy goodness and released a smell that I swear came straight from Heaven. The gooeyness of the melted cheese, the combination of the flavored meats, the crunchy yet flaky crust, and the sauce – oh that sauce – it all came together to form a full-frontal assault on every one of my senses when I took that first bite.

I'm not too proud to say, I got a little misty-eyed. For the 30 minutes or so I took to savor every bite of this wonderful meal, I was no longer a prisoner. I was a youngster again sitting in my Gramma Degi's kitchen, watching her dance around – seasoning here and tasting there – while she hummed Italian love songs and called me here Bambino Dolce (sweet baby).

An old school inmate gave me some advice when I first came to TDCJ. He said, "Spin, you gotta let go of that outside world. It's only going to bring you heartache and disappointment. THIS is your world now and you better start living in it." Looking back I can honestly say that was the DUMBEST thing I ever heard. My body may be imprisoned here but my mind certainly is NOT! I LIVE in the memories of the loved ones I have left behind, in the reality of the world going on around me – here and in the free world, and in the HOPE of a better future when I can finally walk through those prison gates and start the next chapter of my life. Education and Vocation classes, like the one I am taking, are the bridge to make those hopes and dreams become a reality.

Write to your unit's Education Department and ask to speak to a counselor to discuss your options. At my unit, her name is Ms. Podzemny and she is awesome. She took the time to talk to me about my experiences from life and my thoughts about the future, and together we came up with the right class to give me a fighting chance at being financially independent while still doing something I love.

Do I see myself getting out and becoming the next Gordon Ramsay or Emeril Lagasse? No – not likely. But I CAN see myself using my business management skills, paired with my culinary education, and seasoned with my new love of cooking to come up with a recipe for success with a food truck or two – or maybe even a fleet of them. The possibilities are endless and my future looks a heck of a lot more appealing



Art by Steve Fegan

Mama Tried

by Earl W. Cox

Probably one of the greatest country music songs of all time, recorded by Mr. Johnny Cash, was the hit song "Mama Tried," in which are recorded the lyrics "turning 21 in prison, doing life without parole. No one could help me be good... But... Mama Tried..."

I was 23, and in federal (military) prison, listening to that song on the institutional radio station. Then 40 years later, I was in state prison, listening to that song on my tablet. Now, I am doing life without parole, or as we call it, LWOP, at age 63. In over 40 years, I've now done over a quarter century in prison. Sad but true.

Also, sadly, my mama Tried all her life to "be there" for me, regardless of whatever federal prison I was in; always hoping I would "go straight." She died in my arms nearly a quarter century ago. My mother's efforts, forty years of trying to help me "do right," ended with her death and my spending the rest of my life in prison. Mama Tried...

When I first came to prison at age 23, a whopping 42 years ago, had someone told me then that in 40 years I'd be in prison again, I wouldn't have believed it. Yet, I've now done 6 years in military facilities, 16 ½ years in the Federal Bureau of Prisons, and now 3 ½ years on LWOP in MODOC.

My earliest childhood memories revolve around my mother, more than any other person. Specifically, around her constant efforts in everything she did; whether for herself, her children, her husbands, or for anyone else. Yes, indeed Mama Tried... I remember one time in particular, after our family moved back from California.

After walking by herself through our house, which had been rented out during our brief foray to the west coast, my mother sat down on the front porch steps and started laughing for several moments. Our next-door neighbor, a younger heavyset woman nicknamed "Pudge" asked Mom why she was laughing so hard. My mom replied, "Oh, Pudge! If I didn't laugh, I'd be crying, and I don't know when I'd be able to stop. My God, Pudge! Those people that rented the house while we were gone, not only didn't pay the rent for six months, but also destroyed the entire inside of our home!" For nearly two weeks, often by herself, while we were in school, playing, or sleeping, Mama Tried her very best and successfully: cleaned up the house, repaired all the damage that had been done, and again turned it into "a home."

My mother's efforts of love, compassion, and forgiveness were the "glue that held our family together" throughout all the years of turmoil and strife. When my father died, my mother instilled in each of us a "can do" attitude. She believed that the best way we could best remember our dad was by doing our best to do things just as though he were still alive. She spent years trying her best to help Dad become successful at his job as the youngest store manager in a major restaurant, while at the same time, teaching us, by her example, to be the best we could be loving, compassionate, and forgiving. Lessons I would struggle to apply in my own life, until decades after her death.

Truthfully, after my first time in prison, I gave up trying to please others first; placing my own selfish desires and interests ahead of others' needs, wants, or desires. Especially when those others were family members, in particular my own mother.

I believed deep in my heart that because I had been in prison, my mother had somehow failed me as a mother. It was easier to blame her for my troubles than to blame myself or to accept responsibility for my own actions. Meanwhile, throughout my lifetime, my mama tried her very best to continue to be loving, compassionate, and forgiving. Even to me, no matter what I did in my lifetime, or who I hurt by my actions. Even when the one I hurt the most often was her herself. My Mama Tried!! She didn't fail me! I failed her!!!

Upon reflection, one of the most selfish acts my mother ever did was to place her children's happiness in front of her own. One clear example was dessert. Whenever there wasn't enough for everyone, she always suddenly wasn't hungry.

Mom's love and compassion were only outdone by her unlimited forgiveness. No matter what wrongs I committed, Mama Tried her very best to always forgive me. Even when she couldn't muster forgiveness, she found within her heart Compassion and Love. "And now abide faith, hope, charity; these three, but the greatest of these is Love.

by L. Roldan

in life we will never understand certain things.
only God knows why he does to us certain things.
but the only thing we must always be... is grateful.
To be alive everyday in this world is so beautiful.
but always remember.
we came from dust.
and one day we must go back to dust.
I always pray for you and appreciate that you gave me life.
because without you I wouldn't be able to be a part of this life.
never think that you're not missed or beloved from this side.
because I'm always going to love you from deep inside.
I know you'll be asking yourself why this had to be this way.
but just know it's because God made it this way.
You did your part.
now destiny will do its part.
but I hope you know you're the most beautiful Mom in the world.
and nobody in this life can ever equal up to the queen you are in my world.
Thank you, Mom, for letting me be a part of your life.
and I know my thank you is not enough to repay you in this life.
I breathe because of you. I see colors because of you.
I know how to love because of you.
and even though we are apart today
you will always be a blessing to me every day.
Thank you for always trying and never giving up on me.

I love you Ma...

by Omar Recalde

For, mmm, maybe 30 years of my life, I didn't like my mother. She was emotionally absent all my life, until I moved out. Then she'd call every couple of days, at least twice a week, Then I felt she was smothering me. When I told her so, she was hurt. I can still remember her voice, thick with emotion, telling me I'm going to miss her someday. Me saying, "Ach, don't be so melodramatic, I'll call you next week."

My mother tried to be there for me. I know she went as a chaperone on at least one school trip, a Circle Line boat trip around Manhattan. Luckily for me, she didn't write me off like my father did. She went to my court appearances, she took my calls, she visited me in the prisons I've been in.

After I learned to see my parents as people, just as flawed and fumbling as everybody else, my heart opened up to both of them. Now I recognize the love they felt for me. The way they expressed their love for me, individually and together, might not have been the way that made sense to me, but it was there. They both loved me. I'm glad they tried.

Dear Mommy by Leo Cardez

Thank you for giving me such a wonderful and safe childhood (the best imaginable). I appreciate you now in a whole new way. I see the sacrifices you made for me - it is an unmatched, indescribable gift.

Though dad was always trying to make me into a man. I was an unapologetic momma's boy. I was happy to spend my days with you in the kitchen while you cooked all my favorite dishes: mole, tamales, enchiladas. My stomach growls even now with the thought of them.

It is amazing how deeply you loved me. Your patience was endless. Your kindness innate. Your warm eyes and good humor never wavering, bearing your misfortunes with grace and even style; always respecting others, and standing up for what you believed to be right. Somehow you knew how to walk into a room and make everybody feel at ease. You are gracious, gentle, community-minded, and honest. You know the secret to life was following your heart - just like you seem to know everything... naturally.

You were the middle child of 8, not all of your siblings survived childbirth or the violence and poverty of rural central Mexico. Your family didn't have much money. You lived humbly. You ate sitting on the floor around a make-shift table that was covered with mismatched plates and bowls. You started working when you were 8 and never quit. You spent your life on your feet cooking and cleaning for your own family and then for others. The only time you were even seated was when you sewed - a side-hustle you brought with you to America.

But cooking was your forte. Cooking was how you expressed your love. But you never used a cookbook, not in your whole life. Never went by a written recipe of any kind and never wrote down any of your own. I remember asking for a recipe when I got older, and you invited me over to show me how to cook the dish as you couldn't quite remember the precise recipe. As busy as you were, you were always generous with your time with me and taught me that hospitality is rooted in action, not just things. When you were in the kitchen, you were like a fish in water. You moved as if in a trance, on instinct and muscle memory alone.

I like to think that I inherited this from you, but I also know I am still a product of American consumerism mentality and care too much about how things look. You tried so hard to teach me that the true purpose of cooking is to gather your family and enjoy spending time together - the rest is just noise.

Regardless of all my teen drama, the truth is, I have never really needed anything in my life with you at the helm pointing our family's ship toward Love. You played with my sister and I, took us to the park, helped with our homework, applauded our highs, and consoled us in our lows. You wanted

(want) everything for us and because of it, left us without need to want of anything.

I wish people would say, you remind me of your mother. That would be the best compliment. But I am a spitting image of my old man (God bless him) in looks and likely, personality. BUT I aspire to be like you. I am desperately trying just to keep up.

by Vincio J. Garcia

My mother worked very hard - she was not well-educated – we communicated very little. She had no idea who I was – she did not have a clear picture of who she was – certain beliefs were etched in steel – some were in contradiction with each other. She was the best mother she knew how to be – she didn't cook, never learned how to drive, or swim but she liked Miss America Pageants, the Ed Sullivan Show, and Perry Mason. She was never very happy – she was proud of me and sought my approval, which I gave on a few occasions. I gave her antiques of which she was very proud – to mom: proud of you. She was 90 when she died.

Teachers

Reading Lessons by SPIN

Being the youngest in a family full of boys meant I played every sport and learned every skill a boy could. I also had to make good grades.

I was my father's last-ditch effort at glory,
and at fulfilling his unrealistic expectations.
in light of the failures of my older brothers.

Run faster, shoot straighter, jump higher, hit harder,
plow through that line, and don't you dare cry.
Boys don't cry! You're hurt? Rub some dirt on it!

But no matter how hard I tried, it was never enough.

The son of a retired military man does not fail.
Win at all costs. Losing is not an option. No one loves a loser.

I brought home a report card with a C in English. It wasn't my favorite class to begin with, so I sat in the back. Not like math and science where I sat in the front row.

The sealed note enclosed said I had, "become lazy,"
didn't answer questions any more, and refused
To read when called on. "I know he can do better."

Father knew how to fix this. A reading lesson of sorts.
I grabbed my English book and joined him in the backyard
where he sat in a lawn chair, watching my brothers play
basketball.

"Read," he growled. "What?" I asked. "Anything."
I picked the story we started in class about the kid who tricked
his friends into painting his Aunt's fence, while he ate apples.

He made me stand a step in front of him on his right, facing
forward. I started to feel anxious and embarrassed as my
brothers laughed. I opened to the page we stopped on in class
and began to read aloud.

The first word I misread was "tranquilly." I had a hard time
saying R and Q. I worked with the speech teacher for an hour
on Fridays, while the other kids got to play kickball.

"Read it again!" he yelled. I winced at his intensity.
Why was he screaming at me? I read the sentence again.
I got the Q right, but the R came out as "twanquilly"
Out of the corner of my left eye, I saw my father
unbuckle and remove the belt holding up his trousers.
He doubled it over and held it in his right hand.

"DO IT AGAIN!" he shouted. I couldn't understand why he
was so angry. I knew what the word meant, I just had trouble
saying it. I also knew exactly what a belt held like this was
used for.

I stood trembling, book shaking, taking my time to sound out
every word, carefully ensuring I did not mess up again.
When I got to the period I looked over at him, "Continue," he
snapped.

I don't know what the next word I messed up was.
Panic-stricken and fearful of making a mistake,
I started scanning ahead to look for troublesome words.

In my manic confusion I must have mispronounced or skipped
a word because, without warning, the next thing I felt was a
searing sting on my thighs - thankfully above the edge of my
cutoff jean shorts.

The impact was so strong, I had to take a step forward to keep
from falling. "AGAIN!" My brothers stopped playing to point and
make faces as I read the sentence again, feeling like my life
depended on me not screwing up.

When I got to the period this time I just kept going. I didn't give
a fuck about Tom or Aunt Polly or that goddamn fence any
more. All I wanted to do was finish the chapter so I could go
back inside.

"Alacrity" was the next word I missed. I had no idea
what it meant, or why Tom had it in his heart. But I knew I had
gotten it wrong, and what was coming.

The snap of leather on bare skin makes a very distinct,
unforgettable Sound. I guess he felt the first blow didn't make

enough of an imprint, because this one arrived below the edge of my shorts.

I missed three more words before finishing the story - same punishment. My audience stopped laughing. Even when I pissed myself. I vividly recall the feel of it running down my leg and puddling around my bare feet.

The basketball game dissolved, and my siblings scattered, afraid they would be next. Leaving me and my collection of backside welts alone with my father, the pile of empty beer cans beside him, and his teacher's aide.

I remember looking up at some point towards the kitchen. window that overlooked our backyard, desperately searching for my mother to rescue me.

She just stood statuesque at the sink, peeling potatoes or carrots or some other mundane kitchen chore. Tears streaming down her cheeks, knowing that if she interfered, his attention might turn to her.

When I was done, he asked, "I'm not going to receive any more notes from your teacher about being lazy, am I?" "No Sir." I managed to get out between sobs and snorts, trying not to collapse.

"Good! Cause I'd hate to have to have any more of these reading lessons. Don't you agree?" "Yes sir." "Well, I guess you're not as dumb as she thought you were. Wash that piss off my patio and go clean yourself up."

I did as I was told, then ran into the bathroom to throw up. Mom followed. She wiped away her own tears while she helped me undress, and sprayed Bactine on my bleeding thighs.

To this day, the smell of that shit makes me sick to my stomach. All I could say between my screams of agony was, "Why?" "It's just his way, honey. It's just his way," was all she offered.

I HATED reading after our lesson. I only read what was required to complete my schoolwork, and nothing else. It wasn't until my sophomore year of college that I read anything for enjoyment.

I turned to TV, movies, and - my savior - music, for my entertainment, and my solace. I hated my father for that day, and I hated even more that he made me hate reading.

When my friends talked about the sci-fi and fantasy books they read; I had nothing to offer. When I found out later the reason for our lesson was because I'd embarrassed him. I stopped reading out of defiance. "Fuck him!"

A week later my little league coach asked why I wasn't catching the ball as well as I had at the start of the season. "I don't know coach, I guess I just don't see it until it's too late."

Coach must have talked to mom, quietly, a few days later I saw the eye doctor and was issued a pair of glasses. I didn't miss any more throws to second base after that.

Miraculously, my English grade improved, once I could see the board from the back row. I received a trophy for most improved player that year. I received straight A's.

I did not receive any more notes from my teachers, or another word about reading lessons from my father, or an apology. Results don't lie and, in his eyes, he had done nothing wrong.

*I'd like to thank Vicki Hicks for giving me the courage to write this piece. You are an amazing writer.

Teachers by R.K. Taylor

Through the years, I've had outstanding teachers. After high school, I had great drill sergeants, plenty of good NCOs, and great peers to seek counsel from. I've worked with CBP's Border Management Task Force, 519th Military Police Battalion, 7th Special Forces Grove, 19th Special Forces Group, Task Force Paladin, and been to several schools in the Army. I've learned from the Romanians, Australians, Royal Troops, the Germans, Afghan forces, and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Yet, the best teacher I've ever had is myself. No one can teach you how to grow spiritually, you must put in all the effort for yourself. You can only grow yourself. Yes, great teachers are necessary in order to ensure that you do things right. However, it is you that chooses what to pay attention to, what to focus on, and how much effort to put in. Get moving, or someone will live your life for you.

By J. Bauhaus

Teachers do need some relief from parents interfering with education. Teachers need the politicians to butt out too, along with their church pals. Thanks to all of these groups, education has gone to dogs. Education is not patriotism. Education is not mysticism, not theology, not propaganda and not crap like "political science." All kinds of garbage - 'thought' tries to worm its way into education so that some of the legitimacy and utility of education might elevate these trash concepts toward the worth of education by merely achieving a presence near where education exists. Education is just the facts. Facts are, and should ever remain, separate from "truth," "faith" and other amorphous, abstract concepts like duty, sin, magic, horoscope, and water witching. How do teachers know what reality is and what is nonsense? We use the scientific method. If it can't pass the simple five-step test, it is garbage. When people insist that their particular brand of garbage must be taught, we must insist that it be taught outside of our schools.

No more free ride for garbage-thought!

Belated Appreciation by Glenn Thomas

I once scored front-row seats to see my favorite musician, and found myself awed by his hands, which flew effortlessly across a giant grand piano. He made a lively two-hour performance under burning spotlights seem like a piece of cake, when in reality it was a highly rigorous endeavor— one that required years of practice and preparation.

Most concert musicians started taking lessons when they were quite young, and not only were they blessed with a natural talent for music, but also with dedicated instructors, who developed their skills— one note at a time. As an amateur keyboardist for a prison band, I once had an intensely committed piano teacher— one who firmly believed in all of her students' talents, including mine. Sadly, I despised her.

When Miss Vasselle introduced herself as our Junior High Keyboarding instructor, she pulled no punches. On the first day of class, the students let out a collective sigh, as she outlined the rigorous curriculum to which us budding young maestros would be subjected— one hour of grueling finger exercises in class, coupled with a full chapter of music theory homework each night. As if that was not enough, she then heaped on a plate of piano practice, most of which we spent butchering everything from Beethoven to Barry Manilow. To top it all off, she announced that each of us was required to perform a classical music suite in front of the entire school at our end-of-the-semester concert. I already pictured myself on the auditorium stage, surrounded by my cherished friends and acquaintances— while they laughed their heads off at my sorry reproduction of Chopin.

Despite our rebellious whining and mutual hatred for our evil piano teacher, we ended up obeying Miss Vasselle's every command. We learned our notes and scales, exercised our fingers and practiced diligently for our upcoming concert. Finally, that fateful day was upon us. I sat alongside my classmates on the auditorium's front-row, and gazed into a dark expanse that was eerily devoid of all objects, save for a single upright piano, bathed in the glow of a white-hot spotlight. Our youthful audience was surprisingly well-behaved as they watched Miss Vasselle's class prove to the crowd what a hard-nosed teacher accomplished, despite being saddled with the most vindictive students on earth. Several of us received standing ovations and Miss Vasselle, whom we so vehemently despised all semester long, beamed with pride as the audience's final, lengthy applause thundered across the auditorium.

Although I never became the next American Idol, I eventually learned to play well enough to join several pop, rock, and gospel bands over the years. Sadly, I never thanked Miss Vasselle for all her heartfelt devotion. Over the years, I had often reflected on that formative semester I spent in Miss Vasselle's classroom, and each time I relived it, I found myself mired in overwhelming sadness and regret, knowing that I learned to appreciate her far too late.

My Name Is Andre by Gary Farlow

Hello. Welcome.

His voice was soft, almost melodic.

One could imagine such a voice lulling a person into a warm cocoon.

But he was here, in the land of the brutal
To promote peace.

My name is Andre,
welcome to Mindful Meditation.

For twelve weeks we met.

Twenty-Four convicts of various crimes
coming together to develop compassion.

Undaunted by this ominous task

Andre came each Friday
bearing a smile, that silky voice,
and compassion for the unlovable.

I've heard that into each life
will come a brief encounter.

A person known for only a short time
but their impact is so profound
you are left forever changed.

Andre never tried to proselytize,
yet his "Stealth Buddhism"
Imparted love, peace, and kindness
replacing mistrust, bigotry, and anger.

He was my Teacher.

I shall never forget him.

Teachers by Jeremy Brown

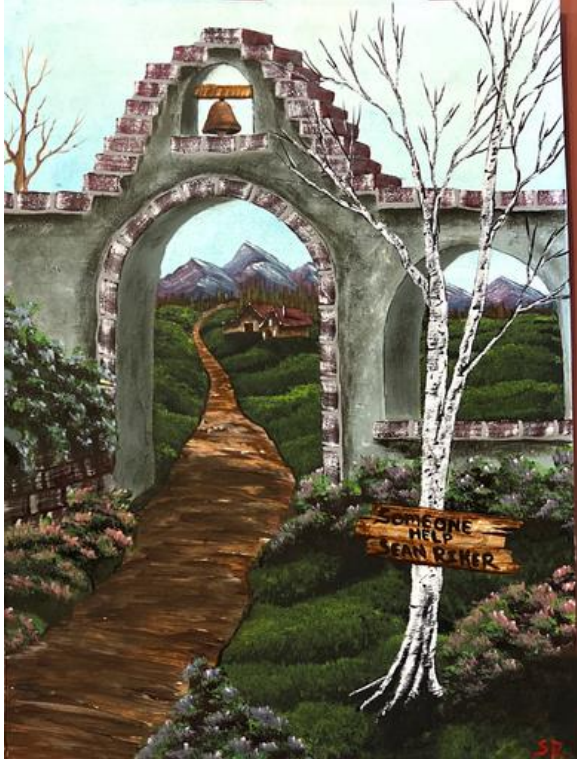
The best teacher is experience. When you live through a struggle, or a time, or an event, you become something more through that unique experience. You know things no one else does. You start to see things that not many people see. The wisdom contained inside an experience starts to unfold as you talk or write about it. You see details from a particular mindset or perspective no one else does. The experience then becomes this living organism, it grows and begins to create effects on other peoples' realities.

The second-best teacher is a human being. Most learned knowledge throughout early Hominid Bipedal Ape History was expounded orally to other grunting apes. Then we learned not only through the human voice, but also through visual content of what the teacher did. If we did as shown, our actions or inactions would reflect our capability to learn and advance.

The third best teacher is the written symbol, text, or word. All language originated from Sumerian Cuneiform Script and later as Egyptian Hieroglyphics to Pictograms. The Chinese language now still uses a rough form of the glyphs to form a picture in the mind. More information can be contained in symbols and pictographic glyphs than letters any day! As early cave dwellers have shown, the first developments of communication were portrayed as story images of past hunts. Recent new findings in archaeology have shown crude workings of changes as well to plan for agriculture.

The last teacher is a person's intuition. Intuition is said to originate in the gut. A sixth sensory perception. A mental reception! A dream's inception. Intuitive sensations, dreams, goosebumps, shocks, acute awareness, keenness. Intuition, when paid attention to, teaches us precognition. To see the unseen, to feel and understand or to see what is on the edge of our reality.

All of these teachers are tools to a greater understanding of life and what reality is showing us. We are being taught to be curious, to have a beginner's mind, that we all know nothing. Lastly, that we and the universe are infinite and ever expanding; until the Big Rip happens and tears apart every molecule and atomic particle in existence. :) Ahhhh...



Artby Sean Rilker

Challenged

By Megan Bickham

Punishment becomes survival when you're told things like "If you're hungry enough you'll eat it" But the food was barely cooked, raw. When you're deemed suicidal, sick, but instead of being cared for you're stuck in a filthy room alone with nothing but a padded dress, bodily fluids of others. And, the freezing cold air never gets warm, while they put your cold meals on a napkin on the floor like you're an animal, not a human being who is suffering through their sickness. You lay there on a cold hard surface, no blanket, sheet, or pad to cushion yourself. Wet, cold, and afraid to the point you lie and tell the doctor you're fine because fear of another day in those conditions after 5 nights, is well past punishment and has literally become survival. And the numerous ways your mind has found to hurt yourself, maybe even succeed in suicide, have become more

appealing than one more second in that hell because you admitted to them, you're sick. Just to be punished and forced into survival mode, talked to like you're stupid, loss of basic hygiene, forgotten about. They don't care, you're just another "animal" to them. Part of their paycheck, looked down on because despite the law, in reality you're Guilty until proven innocent because who will win the argument? The ones with the keys behind those heavy, locked doors, of course.

By Michael Shane Wilmoth

Most of my life I've been locked up in a cage, in and out of prison or lockup since I was 14 years old. I'm now 47 and more in than out! Most of those years were wasted or squandered.

In 2007, I was set up by a so-called friend and I sold (4) four pounds of Marijuana. In 2008, I was sentenced to 25 years on this Marijuana charge, after I was sentenced, I got to my cell at the county jail in Benton County Arkansas and thought, Man, my life is over with, I won't be out of a cage until 09-21-2032. Over the next few weeks, I had done a lot of thinking about what I had done with my life and how I would spend these next 25 years!

That's when I challenged myself, that these next 25 years would not be wasted or squandered the most productive 25 years of my life, each day I would wake up, I would do something to make myself better than I was the day before, I would stop reading fiction and only study and read things to educate myself, I would work out, and lastly but not least, I would do something good for someone else without them knowing I had done it and I would do this every day. At the end of each day, I would write about my successes and my failures or failings, and I've learned so much by doing this!!!

When I first started this challenge or journey, I could not stand the Man I saw in the mirror, I had very little education, no self-respect or love, and honestly didn't care if I lived or died - as a matter of fact, I hoped I would die! Today, when I look at the Man in the Mirror, I love the Man I see looking back. I have self-respect, self-love, self-education, self-worth, and I WANT TO LIVE like I have never LIVED!!! These last 15 years have not been wasted or squandered, I have made the most of them, even being in a cage!

So today I challenge you to wake up each day and do something to make yourself a better person than you was the day before, work-out each day, do something to educate yourself and lastly, do something for one person each day without them knowing!!! Do this for one year, write down all your successes and failures or failings and see how your life changes no matter where you are or live!

You have been CHALLENGED!

By Tisha Morley

Obviously, being sentenced to prison has been the most difficult thing I've had to endure. Being away from my children and watching them grow from afar is tough. Knowing they're hurting & not being able to be with them or comfort them brings back the anger, resentment, & guilt all over again.

The biggest challenge? Forgiveness. Learning to trust, care, & have empathy for those responsible. That includes forgiving myself & recognizing that I am worthy of love.

Everyone has something to endure. I am not excluded from the pains of the world, & neither is anyone else. Pain & challenges come in different forms. Pushing through & rising above is how you find out who you are.

Take this Journey!!!

by Brian Maiese

Challenged? Damn right I am challenged! Almost twenty years ago I got a raw deal and was placed in a system that is designed to break the spirit of men and women, no matter how strong they may be.

When I entered prison, I quit drugs and that fueled my serious anger problem, my misery literally owned me. From the start I was challenged daily by all the drugs that are here and have been very fortunate that I was blessed with a strong will to turn them down, but it still is something I am challenged with overcoming on a daily basis.

I have also been challenged with fighting, whether for a seat, or for being White, or just being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like I said, I got a serious anger problem and been challenged numerous times with whether or not to use a rod; fan motor; or whatever on someone for being extremely disrespectful. I got to keep telling myself extra time isn't worth it, and I cannot conform to what the prison system is trying to make out of me.

Regularly, I am challenged with whether or not to be obedient. Do this, do that, rack up, take your lines down, stand or walk in a single file, etc.,... Well, I am human and still have problems with being challenged in regards to following rules.

I am gonna be challenged daily as I am in Satan's earthly playground and I don't want to play by his rules and that is unacceptable to him and to those who do not want to change.

by Cesar Hernandez

Too much of our time is spent worrying about things that don't matter.

Suffering is the great purifier of the pettiness that often consumes us in life. One of the reasons some of us never develop into people of great character is because we constantly give our attention to the petty things of life. Pettiness is the tendency of people without large purposes. If you live with a larger sense of purpose, then you're not going to let your life be burned up by all the little things that really don't matter. If we ever lose sight of what we are about and helping people who suffer to have hope, then we miss everything that really matters in life, and we focus on all the wrong things. Your life needs to count for more than just the petty trivialities that so often consume us. Suffering in life matters.

by Hanna Bazzi

I'm busy doing something and the officer butts in. I'm in the middle of praying and my celly walks in. I'm thinking about something and all of the sudden I want to cry but I already took a shower, the only private place, so I swallow another set of tears. I try to move on with my day. I hear voices. I see shadows. Energy with shape. The ghosts here are alive and sometimes they touch me. The next life that couldn't move on. I moved units today and it's chaotic. There's so much going on. I gotta keep up and keep paranoia at bay. My mental prescriber thinks I might have PTSD with ADD. A combo that can cause... that can cause... What did she say it can cause? My overwhelmed brain is looking for his words from the other day. It can cause a psychotic disorder. That's what she called it. I've been damaged and always seem in need of repair. My challenge is in my thinking. To think and believe that I'm good enough. I'll remember that I am good enough, but getting all that nasty dialogue to change its tune is no overnight affair. I collect my thoughts and put effort into reframing them. I love myself exactly as I am and believe in my recovery -Amen- this sentence is my lifeline. I try to be a positive person for other people as well as for myself but sometimes I'm tempted to let my anger out. To start a fight. Be rude, stick out my chest and make 'em move out of my way, out of my space. I have 9 years left here and I still choke when I think about my future. It's a challenge to believe in myself again. I am challenged. Thank you for reading this.

Challenge Issued by Kamdyn Alexis Love

I am always being challenged. At birth, I was challenged not to die when the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck. At age three, I was challenged to show my intelligence by knowing the names of all fifty states and their capitals. At age five, I was challenged with my first major death in my family, my grandfather, who I loved dearly. At age six, I was challenged to question my sexuality at a time where I should have been enjoying innocence. At age seven, I was challenged by domestic violence to see if I was resilient. At age eight, I was challenged not to take my own life. By age ten, I was challenged to keep it together my first time away from my family in a psychiatric hospital.

At age eleven, I was challenged to question my gender identity and what it meant to be male or female. At age twelve, I was challenged by the legal system and abuse. At age thirteen, I was challenged with becoming a teenager, serious mental illness, and accepting rejection from my family, but acceptance into a world of men I had no business knowing. At fourteen, I was challenged to audition for my first high school musical. At fifteen, I was challenged to compete against over seventy other kids who sang my vocal section. At sixteen, I was challenged to get my permit, then my license on my first try. And by seventeen, I was challenged to graduate high school and go off to college.

At eighteen, I was challenged to be an adult. At eighteen, I was challenged to make life-sustaining decisions for my sick mother. At eighteen, I was challenged to quit 14851 prisonerexpress@gmail.com

school and get two jobs to keep food on the table for younger siblings that didn't like or respect me. At eighteen, I was challenged to accept my womanhood, that my gender assigned at birth didn't line up with who I really am. At eighteen, I was challenged with spending the majority of my life, if not the rest of my life in prison.

Challenges come and go all the time in our lives. They can make us or break us, but they always teach us. Every day, we face challenges big and small, but it's what we learn from these challenges that builds resilience. It's those challenges that turn us into the people we become. They shape our beliefs and our faith, building and re-building our outlooks on life.

I've been challenged most of my life to let my voice be heard. I've been challenged to be the change I want to see in the world. I've been challenged to be better than those who have come before me. I've been challenged to go for my dreams. I've been challenged to face my fears. I've been challenged to never give up.

And now you've been challenged to do all of those things too.

Picture Themes

A Picture is worth 1000 words, except in the case of PE. Here once again you have 800 words or less to tell a story. **While the word themes must be true stories, with the picture themes you can let your imagination run wild or tell a true story.** Your choice. The only rule is the writing must pertain to the picture. Random unconnected stories won't be reproduced. If you want to only be published under a pen name, please be sure both your pen name and given name are included in the writing. Sometimes people only sign their pen name and we are not sure who to mail the finished packet to. I have had a hard time getting the theme packets sent to individuals especially in FL, MO WI and NC. Hopefully this will be figured out. I know how frustrated I am by mailroom difficulties, and I imagine it is even harder for you when mail is rejected. I'm not giving up, and hopefully one day all mail will be delivered to all of you. In the meanwhile let's keep on keeping on.



I Have Seen the Elephant by Catherine LaFleur

Hero and I are sitting in the visit park. He's holding my hand lightly and rubbing his thumb over the top. His visit is a check-up to see if I am well, healthy, and not flaming crazy due to incarceration. It is one thing for my family and

friends to receive pictures from me, to talk to me on the phone, and to receive my letters and emails. They take turns visiting me to report to each other on my welfare. After Hero leaves this afternoon, he will be on the phone to my uncle, my sister, and my closest girlfriends.

Hero can't be snowed. We grew up in the commune together and I've known him most of my life. He's on to all my tricks: looking up and to the right, obfuscation, starting an argument, diverting the conversation, and my nervous tremble when telling absolute lies. I'm ready to stop talking and play poker for a while. He owes me \$7,500,046.00. A debt I'll only be able to collect on in the visiting park in \$50 increments. I only owe him \$15,345,207.00. Ha! He'll never be able to collect. What's a little debt between close friends?

Hero grasps my hand and I wince slightly. My wrists are swollen because the day before I was taken on a medical trip. On these excursions, I have to wear the black box vise which relentlessly pinches my wrists for hours. Hero frowns, pushes up my long sleeve and flips my wrist. The evidence is painted up and down my arm black and purple. Hero's lips transform into a flat line. Before he can say anything, I pull my hand away. "Don't tell," I demand whisper. Don't tell who? My friends and family? The administrators of the prison? He knows nothing good can come of telling anyone.

Hero is a veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan. He survived serious combat wounds, a traumatic brain injury, and a barking case of PTSD. He has seen and done a lot. We never talk about his war-time experiences, but they are in every conversation. The elephant in the room.

Elephants are massive and strong but usually gentle. They have long memories and are extremely loyal. However, if you've ever seen an angry elephant, you know how powerful they can be. A wild, destructive elephant can symbolize forces untamed and uncontrolled. I think this is what combat must be like. I've been in combat, and I've been in war. A different kind than Hero experienced.

We've moved on from Poker to Crazy Eights. Hero starts play flirting. I'm frustrated. I snarl at him. "Why do you keep coming around here? Don't you know what happened to the last man I loved? I shot him in the head!" The officers at the observation table craned their necks but I quiet down. Hero narrows his eyes and grabs both my hands in his. From a distance this probably looks romantic, but I can see the cold look in his eyes. He growls, "Don't play with me, Catherine. I did much worse things to people in Afghanistan. To me you are a cute, fanged kitten."

And my eyes go round and very big because what could be worse than killing someone? I pick up my hand and crazy eight change the suit to hearts. The elephant moves on.

Daisy by Jack Simpson

My uncle lived and owned a wildlife ranch. He (Robert Schnelle) would take in any animal. He has a heart as big as all the outdoors. On his land he has plenty of room and a couple of large lakes. Ideal for any type of animal.

This summer he had been given a chance to take in an adult female elephant. She had started to show signs of slowing down and at her age it was time to retire. Not only was her temper showing, but there were also times she did her own thing. Knowing my uncle, he would take her no matter what. He loved animals.

Uncle Robert called my mom. She asked if I wanted to spend the summer with him and his animals. I knew I couldn't control myself. "When can I go mom," I cried out. "You will leave this Saturday. When I carry you to the airport, your ticket will be there waiting."

Just imagine at fourteen years of age I will be working with animals. I smiled sitting in the seat as we flew out to his ranch. We landed with no problem. At the gate my uncle stood smiling as we gathered my suitcase.

"Well, John, you ready for some adventure?" "Sure, Uncle Robert. I do love animals as well." The elephant, no one has gotten her to warm up to them. All the people have tried only to fail. "Can I give her a try? She might give in to me. Please, please."

"Only if you be careful."

"I'll be careful Uncle Robert."

When I walked out the front door, I stopped to look around. The place seemed bigger than the last time I was here. There off to my right stood the largest elephant I had ever seen in person. She was rocking side to side. I knew she needed tender loving care. My mind was made up, she would get it from me.

My uncle was watching from the house out of sight. He knew if something happened to me, my mother would never forgive him. I slowly made my way toward her while talking to her in a calm voice. At twenty feet I stopped. She looked me straight in the eye. Suddenly her ears flopped a couple of times. Keeping my distance, I still talked to her. Not knowing what to expect, I was ready to run at a moment's notice.

Her eyes were trained on me hard. She looked like a lion watching its first kill. Moving side to side she did the same. Deep inside, I figured she was feeling me out.

From the kitchen, I had picked up a nice red apple. I had read they loved fruit. Slowly bring the apple in view. She could see what I had in my hand. Her massive trunk moved toward me. I knew she could grab me in a death grip. Grabbing the apple with her trunk she ate it.

I moved toward the lake, and she followed slowly. At the edge I slipped in and started to go splash the water. Her eyes followed and soon she was up to her belly.

I tried all the names I could think of. Then I used my mom's. "Daisy." When I made my way back to the bank, she was still sending water flying in the air. "Come, Daisy, come." She came toward me and stopped. In front of me, my hand reached out and rubbed her head. She knelt on her front legs, and I stepped up on her back.

Turning toward the water, we went back in together. Standing on her back she sprayed water up in the air that wet her and myself. I laughed hard at her, as she let out a trumpet sound. Followed by a low groan.

For once in a long while she felt young again. I found a new friend who I could spend the summer with. I know it sounds odd, how an old elephant befriends a young boy. I was told an elephant never forgets.

We all need someone. No matter who or what it is. I found a new love for animals, and she is my best friend. "Daisy." I still see her from time to time, now that I am older and work at my uncle's ranch. When she hears my voice, she comes running to find her friend. An elephant never forgets

S is for Stop by Alan Piwowar

Stop

Us dead in our tracks,
that's what you do.

You're

Over developing of the
forests and savanas
is taking OUR FOOD!

Killing

us off one by one
we wander emaciated.
through our sacred treks

Elephants

Remember where one
of us has died. We
stop to pay homage
to the spot where no
bones or no hide

Remain,

Where our sisters have
died. Where we've kicked
dirt on them and rang
out in funerary trumpets

Protective,

of our gentle giants.
The elephants.
They play and talk and
grow and love and
remember like we
do— but soon all that
will be left are their
cousins in the zoo.

Let us live, too.

GET OFF MY BACK, DUDE!



Stand Your Ground By Chrome

The guard was looking at him from beyond the fence. "You... get up and present yourself to the warden," he said slowly and calmly. This guard was one of the better ones, he knew who was not quick to dehumanize the prisoners. The guard likely chose him so as to make a good impression on behalf of the other prisoners. Regardless, his nerves were now tight; he was on edge.

The guard stood between the fence and the warden to his right. The others crowded around to observe. He got up and presented himself, and the atrophy beginning to take his body was presented as well.

He was glad to be standing next to the tree trunk used as a fence post. It allowed him to make sure he stood up straight. The smell of the wood also kept him focused in the moment; the earthy perfume still strong from the wire being regularly dug into its bark. Being underfed, especially without enough protein, can make a man's head fuzzy; make him float.

The warden studied him for what may have been the longest minute of his life. He was not a tall man, and the most obvious difference between him and the others outside the fence was his glasses. "Maybe they took him for a nerd, and decided he was the best man for the job without even testing his metal," he thought to himself.

"Well, young man," the warden finally spoke in a voice that stood out in no one's mind. "What would you call this happy little place you find yourself in?"

"Summer camp, I guess," he spoke back in a way that could have been a slight stupor or a beckoning sleep. This alarmed him more than it seemed to the warden, and he set about keeping it out of his voice.

"Hmm, yes. I guess that would be fitting. You certainly seem to be having fun sunning yourself. I'm so sorry we couldn't take you on a trip to the beach today. I know you boys were looking forward to it." The warden said all of this in a way that sounded like he meant it.

"It sure ain't like it said it would be in the brochure," he said in a slightly melancholic way, and he felt it.

"No, I guess we'll have to fire our writer," the warden continued the charade. The other guards gathered around were starting to let a few snickers slip out.

"Now," the warden paused, and seemed to draw himself up for a serious conversation. "They say you can tell a lot about a man by looking at his shoes, but seeing as how your boots were issued to you, I suppose that won't do in this case." More snickers.

"Instead, I want you to empty your pockets," the warden spoke with a hint of authority. "There's more than one way to glimpse inside a man's soul, I suppose."

He reached into his pockets with a slow hesitation. He pulled his closed hands out and opened them for the world to see. In his left hand was a small metal spoon issued by the prison. In his right hand was an officer's whistle.

"Does that whistle work?" the warden asked, a bit concerned. "No, it's just for sentimental value," he replied. He blew into it to show it was the truth.

"Hmm...", the warden paused, and then he smiled. He turned to the others. "You see? Food and memories! That is all they need! So long as we give them that, there is no need to worry about them causing problems! What say you, boy?"

"Yes," he replied, and drew up a careful smile. "I think we can manage on that."

This brought a harsh laughter from the group of guards. He knew they were wolves who saw him as a trembling lamb on display from the herd of sheep. That's all they were to these people. Not many had much respect for them as men, despite superficially addressing them as such. They were animals to be taunted.

He knew that his spoon was valuable: it and many like it had dug a small tunnel out of the prison, and after polishing it could be used to send signal glares to the others. His whistle was also useful: once he removed the folded-up picture of his girl from inside, it would send signals from further away.

As a young, well-trained officer not-too-weak from starvation, he was the best choice to lead the guards away to the north with his whistle. The others would then head south while they were distracted.

He chose to be the distraction for the same reason he hadn't backed down from the warden: if you want to survive the prison, if you want to overcome those who dehumanize you, you do not become the beast they make of you; you must put on a brave face and stand your ground.

By Brian Byrnes

Hey look at me through this barbed wire fence.

You oppressive, ignorant captor.

Everyone around me sits and stares.

As you and your cronies walk by.

But not I.

I face you. Tall and proud.

To show you the man you wish to be.

All alone.

I'll stir up the whole fuckin' crowd

And make history.

You WON'T dare act alone.
'Cuz the lion in me....
Hold up.
Why am I wasting my breath on violence?
That's your world, not mine.
Look at me.
Look at us.
Look at you.
What makes you, you and us, us?
A mother and father. Pause.
The same fuckin' air fills our chest.
The same beat thumps our breast.
Now keep walking, BOY.
In time, I'll be the first in the pit of death.
All because I stood out and spoke up.
This face....
You won't forget.

By Glen Bracy

"Really," thought the prisoner behind the wire, "I am JUST as good as you. You look at me as if I'm below you or somehow subhuman, but I'm not." Even though he was behind the wire being looked down upon by the captor, he refused to allow his spirit to be broken. He might go to bed hungry each night, not be very healthy or even scared or nervous at all times, but he refuses to let his spirit fall.

He stands in defiance on his side of the fence. His eyes focused on his captor's eyes. He says nothing, knowing that his defiance and eyes say it all to his captor. It says, "You may hold me but you'll never own me." There is a lot that he would like to say, but he knew when and where to pick his battles. Words were not what was needed, stoic defiance was.

The other prisoners stood behind him mentally, but not physically. They had all been captured and sent to the same camp. Yet not one of them had the courage that the prisoner at the fence had, and they all knew it. All through his training and deployment to the war he has made sure that he gave his all to whatever it is that he endeavored to do. His father taught him if you're going to do something give it 110% or more or don't do it at all. So, at war, it was all in.

On this side of the fence, the captor looked at the prisoner and thought, "The fancies of youth will get you killed." When his eyes met with the prisoners, he could see the defiance, conceit, and pride his eyes spoke. No words were spoken, yet his eyes conveyed the authority he was endowed with. The captor's eyes spoke of his power and authority to choose whether the prisoner lived or died on any day, at any time.

His men stood tall and proud behind him. Each is filled with their own degree of authority and power. They too look at the defiant prisoner with abhorring eyes. Each one willing to end the young prisoner's life, if told to do so. None of them saw the prisoner as human, no, in their eyes, he was an expendable captive. He had lost in this scheme of war they had won.

The captor met the prisoner's gaze, silently asking him to give him a reason, yet, none was given. A million words can be passed by two people who lock gazes depending on the situation. Here, only one would win in a war of words. They each knew it.

By Gary Farlow

He recalled the stories of his grandfather, who fought in World War II and was in a Nazi POW camp. Now, here *he* stood, watching as this fascist officer eyed the inmates along with his henchmen, but wait, this wasn't Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 40s. This was *America* in the 21st century! How did this happen? How and why did an apathetic America let a fascist tyranny take over this "land of the free."

It started innocently enough. New laws, tougher, more restrictive laws, were passed curbing long-cherished freedoms. It got to the point that a person couldn't get out of bed in the morning without breaking a new law.

The Jones' just down the street were hauled off by the new Domestic Security Force, a black-uniformed national police who acted outside the laws they were to enforce. Dark tinted vans would pull up to a house and neighbors would scurry inside to avoid being thought to be watching. The residents in the house would be taken away, all of them.

No one spoke out. In a conspiracy of silence, people simply shrugged, looked away, and either thought or muttered that it was none of their business. In reality, they prayed silently— for that was illegal now too— and thanked their deity for it not being *them* taken away. Soon, entire communities emptied, and "Relocation and Education" camps sprang up.

Rumors swirled about what exactly took place in those camps. But as no one was ever released, the true story remained secret.

He eyed the fascist colonel back in the old spirit of '76 attitude. But this wasn't Germany, wasn't Poland, or Austria, or Hungary. This was Iowa!

The colonel sneered at his captive and motioned for two guards to take the man on the other side of the wire away.

"Can't let these liberty buffs get any roots in," he laughed to his entourage as two black-uniformed guards dragged the man away. The other prisoners behind the fence shuddered and looked away, pretending not to hear the screams of the one who dared look into the eyes of hate.



Answered Prayers By Steven Beauchamp

Storms were tearing across the plains of Oklahoma. Their portable radio in Amy's tiny trailer warned of possible tornadoes in the next few hours. Homeless and a single mother, she had sought refuge in the abandoned trailer with her son, Michael, after being kicked out of a Texas-bound semi by the driver she refused to have sex with. Amy and her son stumbled upon the trailer in the middle of the night, and quickly took shelter from the chilly rain that fell.

When they woke up in the morning, they found some faded cans of soup and some stale crackers. A Coleman outdoor cookstove still held a small amount of oil which Amy lit with a push-button ignitor to heat the soup. As she watched the can begin to steam, she found the weather radio inside a drawer of a rickety nightstand by the cot she used for a bed. To her surprise, it crackled when she turned it on. Amy rotated the dial until she heard the familiar beep of the National Weather Service, and the ominous forecast they were broadcasting.

"We can't stay here, Michael. It won't be safe in this trailer much longer," she spoke softly to her baby. He just looked at her warmly as he suckled tomato soup from her finger. The makeshift meal wasn't much, but it would suffice for a few hours. The radio warnings kept coming with updates for small towns in the path of the storms.

"Lord, if you're up there, I need you in this moment. Please keep me and Michael safe. We've no place to go if it gets bad. With you, everything is possible. Amen."

When Amy opened her eyes from praying, she noticed the black clouds thickening on the horizon. Stray lightning bolts split the sky and left the drumroll of thunder which startled the baby. She tried to stay composed, but the thought of dying in the middle of nowhere really frightened her. More than anything, Amy's maternal instincts were in overdrive as she fought to keep her son from being harmed.

In the few hours they'd spent in the battered trailer, not a single vehicle had driven in either direction. The desultory emptiness of the landscape surrounding her sent shivers down her spine when she wondered why a rogue trucker had passed through here. She felt lucky to be alive and in one piece!

Her thoughts were interrupted by a heavy gust of wind which seemed to levitate the lightweight abode she was

inhabiting. Amy grabbed the striped shirt she'd been drying from the heat of the Coleman stove and quickly put it on. With a piece of string, she'd found on the nightstand, the kind probably used to bulge a vein for injecting drugs, she tied her long hair in a ponytail and walked outside by the road.

"Damn!" she thought out loud. Nothing but dark, rolling clouds moving closer. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity, Amy started walking down the side of the highway, away from the storm. A few steps away from the rattling tin box, her heart skipped a beat. "Could it be," she thought as the lonesome sound of tires on pavement filled her ears. Or was it just her heightened sense of fear playing tricks on her imagination?

Amy looked over her right shoulder apprehensively and saw an answered prayer—a truck just piercing the horizon.

"Thank you, Lord," was all she could muster beneath the tears of relief smudging the prairie dust on her cheeks.

Owned by LeRoy Sodorff

On the outskirts of "adversity"
In the state of "misery"
On a long desolate roadway
Appears quite a mystery
With a history.

A trailer on the edge
Once towed
By a person of interest
Whereabouts unknown
Abandoned or a loan?

It beckons forth
To those passerby
Calling their names
Asking them to reside
From moon to sun

Now Amy hears
This lonesome cry
As she looks up toward the threatened sky
And sighs.

Only thinking of her son
A babe in arms,
She ventures toward the call of the wild
Without raising any alarms
And thinks of her son's worldly charms

A sign on the front door
"Welcome Amy to my humble abode,
Come in and have a seat
Off your feet, take off a load
And consider this life on the road

If the furnishings are to your liking
And I assure you, they will be,
A nice comfy bed for you,
A crib for the baby
And a forever pantry.

Stay as long as you like
Consider it your own.”
Now take a hint
From the poem
And call it home.

The Valley of Decision by David Lee Wilson

Here stands the most enormous weight... on the one hand it is our future...just the two of us—alone in an unsafe, uncertain, and often times unforgiving world; We have no money, no roof over our heads, no transportation, no food, or medicine for you. Because all of my friends are his too. We are without guarantees.

On the other hand, we have shelter even as small and compact as it is. We have transportation however it comes with a cost I don't believe I can live with anymore. A certainty! Back in the trailer your daddy is passed out on the couch, and when he awakes in his drunken condition...when he realizes we left him...he will come, bringing hell with him!

Honey...when you're older...I pray you understand why mommy had to leave. You're not safe anymore. We're not safe. I love you and will do anything to keep you safe, healthy, and surrounded by love.

Taking one last look at what could've been...I look over to the window of our trailer, praying he won't be standing there. While I look behind us into our past...you my love, I see staring into our future...May our future be filled with blessings! Our journey begins at our door—leading us out of and away from the abuse and captivity, while taking us in the direction of wide-open infinite possibility



Sportsmanship by Brian Maiese

Ah, the glorious memories of my youth as a jock. Looking at these two soccer players showing signs of good sportsmanship brings my mind back to being taught by coaches to play hard, try to win, have fun, and play to the best of my ability. But what stuck out the most was whether, while playing or after the game, I was to humble myself and show good sportsmanship conduct.

Just by looking at these men you can see they played their hearts out on the soccer field, hell they probably literally had a few run ins with each other while trying to steal the ball, they even could have exchanged some harsh words out on the field, or even headbutt one another while trying to score a Gooool! But what we see after the game is a show of good sportsmanlike conduct, an act of comradery.

All athletes from pee-wee league to professionals usually show this humble expression of camaraderie and sportsmanship on a daily basis, whether with teammates or opponents so that opprobrium does not fall upon them. It is very heartwarming to see the athletes humble themselves and congratulate and or uplift one another after the tough game they just engaged in

World Cup by Christopher Norton

I know what I see, but the question which intrigues me most is— what do you see? More importantly, what do you think the meaning of this life is? Sometimes, I think it's the only question that matters- the reason I wake up every morning is to answer the question. I think it's the only question worth asking other people, and to know what everyone thinks it is.

Two sets of eyes for the same questions. What is it? What's the meaning of his life? Did we just find it's answer? Is this it? I'm so glad I've found someone else I can ask. If I keep asking, maybe someday I'll know.

By Cesar Hernandez

Our wing has sixty people. Some people have been in prison for over thirty years. Some have been in prison multiple times, others for the first time.

Almost every day I'm surprised at some of the conversations that happen on our wing. Some conversations I hear first-hand and participate in. Some I overhear. Other I hear about after the fact.

There have been plenty of times when people de-escalate all kinds of situations. People help other people try and see the long-term consequences. It doesn't always work but when people share their wisdom all kinds of things don't happen.

For a long time, I've been indifferent of those around me. I have no interest in all the drama that comes along with interacting with them. My view was to simply say no even when I could help them.

I am working on taking an interest in some of my peers. Some I still stay away from. When they try to engage, I simply walk away.

At the same time, I have been surprised at how when I do engage with my peers, we do share some or many things in common. I have been surprised at one person who is many years younger than me. He's been locked up since the age of twelve. I thought we had nothing in common. I think we now see each other in a new light since we think similarly and do have many things in common. We both have lots of the same opinions. I have more in common with him than my cellmate who is five years younger than me.

So often we feel unequal to the tasks that life sets before us. It's a struggle to even begin them, much less complete them. We can't see a way forward. All we see are obstacles-an insurmountable summit towering above us, rather than the easy step we can take to get a tiny bit closer. Perspectives can and do change, but only if we move ourselves. We must change and learn, and with every step we will overcome.

The Extravagance of Love by Jeffrey Sudoff

The extravagance of love
 Should be cultivated,
 Nurtured in desires and acceptance,
 Not wrapped in hate
 Or discriminating prejudice
 Not dripping in phobic bigotry
 Or misunderstanding
 But rather protected
 And adored for its truth
 Not having to hide,
 But rather a celebration of bravery
 For making the leap
 Regardless of what society dictates
 To be abnormal, taboo, or shameful.
 For how can love and its suppression
 Even be these things?
 How can one say these things
 About another's experience of love?
 Is my life not my own?
 Is your life not your own?
 Love should represent
 The ultimate personal freedom
 And when it's untampered
 And given - received unconditionally,
 Love of all kinds,
 Of all beings,
 Is beautiful and special,
 Shared because...
 In love,
 Connections are made,
 And bonds are strengthened -
 Made anew with
 The extravagance of love.



Children Playing by Vinicio J. Garcia

I have never had such an experience. There were no neighborhood kids. It is difficult to tell but it appears that only the little boy has no shoes. The photo reminds me of how if given even a small chance, the young can revel in life. I wonder who took that photograph and why? Did any of the kids get a copy of the photograph? Since I was an amateur photographer, I was curious as to the type of camera used. A moment for us to visit in the solitude of our minds.

School by Jackie Moorehead

I can vaguely remember moving from our home of rolling farmland to northwestern Pennsylvania, to the self-contained lumber company-owned community of Swandale, West Virginia in the fall of 1954. Swandale was nestled on the high banks of the Buffalo River that snaked its way through a deep hardwood forest valley of the southern Appalachian Mountain Range.

The Swandale Lumber Mill had three huge scrap wood and sawdust-stoked steam boilers. That supplied steam that ran the machinery in the sawmill and the cast iron radiators that heated the company store, school and church combined building, and all the lumber company's employees' houses. Every night at approximately ten o'clock pm, the sawmill's whistle would blow the short toots and the electricity and steam radiators would be shut off at ten fifteen pm, so the boiler tender could clean the boiler's fireboxes and restore the boilers. At twelve-o'clock midnight, the sawmill's whistle would blow two more short toots and the electric and steam radiators would be turned back on.

Some of my most cherished memories are of attending school at the Swandale Grade School, a large, two-story building that was shaped like a square grand hall. The bottom floor had three large classrooms and a community sanctuary. The bottom floor had three large classrooms and a community sanctuary. The top floor was a gymnasium that was also used as the community activity center during the holidays.

The three classrooms had first through fourth in one room, fifth through eighth in another room, and ninth through twelfth in the last classroom. The community sanctuary children's' Sunday school classroom was held in the first through fourth grade's

classroom and taught by its teachers. The school usually had a total of eighty students attending the school.

Some of my peers in the Swandale Grade School rode the ten-wheeler steam locomotive into school in the morning and back home in the evening. Until they built a box in the back of a pickup truck, they lived in Dog Run Holler and Camp Creek Holler (Hollow).

We had an ingenious hot lunch program at Swandale Grade School, which consisted of placing our brown paper bag containing our pinto beans or scrambled egg sandwich on top of the hot steam radiator just for the noontime recess to heat up for lunch. We also had mason or fruit jars of water to wash our meals down with. A special treat would be a peanut butter sandwich, which was considered a luxury item back then! Of course, we might have a homemade cookie or a piece of cake, which was also a rarity.

The country schoolhouses of the 1950s had no modern conveniences, such as hot lunches, inside plumbing, and so forth. The latrines were his and hers outhouses that blossomed the air around them with the smell of rotting human defecation during the warmer seasons of the school year.

A special honor granted the younger school-aged children was to ring the large brass bell in the belfry on the roof of the schoolhouse. It was rung by pulling down on a large rope that hung next to the large double door in the front of the schoolhouse. The principal or one of the teachers would help us pull the bell's rope down and it would usually lift us little ones up off the floor on its return back up, and slowly lower us back down onto the floor.

In the late 1960s, the Swandale Lumber Mill, its company store and most of the employees' houses were dismantled and hauled away, and the school bell no longer tolls in the Buffalo River Valley.

Tag! You're It! by Darrell Sharpe

After much contemplation and reflection as well as a need to connect with the inner child from my yester years of playing outside with my friends. Today I am hereby officially tending my resignation as an adult. I have decided that I would like to accept the responsibilities of my 8-year-old self once again and here's why: I want to go to McDonalds and think that it's a 4-star restaurant. I want to sail popsicle sticks across a fresh mud puddle and make block sidewalks with rocks. I want to think that M&M's are better than money because you can eat them. I want to stand outside of my house and run a lemonade stand with all of my friends on a hot summer's day. I want to return to a time when life was simple; when all you knew were colors, nursery rhymes, but that didn't bother you because you didn't know what you didn't know, and you really didn't care. Because all that you knew was to be happy because you were blissfully unaware of all of the things that should make you worried or even upset. I want to think that the world is fair, that everyone is honest, and I want to be good. I want to believe that anything is possible. I want to be oblivious to the complexities of life and be overly excited by the little things again. I want to live simply again. I don't want my day to

consist of standing for count 3 times each and every day, or having no peace of mind, or eating the nasty state chow that's served, feeling the pain of what my family has to endure in order in order to visit me in prison, or the tragic loss of my loved ones leaving me no way to really process my grief at all. I want to believe in the real power of smiles, a kind word or gesture, in truth, peace, dreams, my imagination, mankind, and the cold winter months being able to make angels in the snow. So here is everything related to my adulthood inside of this mental/emotional box. As of this moment, I am officially resigning from adulthood and if you want to discuss this any further, then you will have to catch me first, cause Tag You're It!

Children Playing by Desmen Best

As black children, growing up in the inner city, I vividly remember all the games we would play with each other; manhunt; freeze tag; catch and kiss; red light, green light; hide and seek. Growing up in the 90's, especially in New York, were some of the best times of my life.

Summertime in the city was like a constant party; playing in the fire escape; block parties; riding our bikes across the bridge to other boroughs; flirting with girls at the local pool; going to camp. Nothing could compare to the fun we had at the local game room, or going to Yogi Bear on school buses, meeting kids from all over the city. I grew up in an era where children had no other choice but to interact with one another. Every day was a learning experience and every trip outside our community was a journey. The ghetto is where friendships were forged; at free lunch in school cafeterias; in supermarkets, while packing bags to earn money; at gas stations, pumping gas for cash. Poverty, and being raised in single-parent households taught us the value of the dollar.

Childhood reminds me of my first love, and when I was innocent, before I knew what prison was and before society was addicted to social media. Before gangs ran rampant, it was just neighborhood kids, from the same block, sticking together. Back when you had to know how to fight, as the worst case scenario was getting jumped by your peers, versus nowadays, being shot to death by officers.

As a child, I went to church for what seemed like every day. Back then I got beatings if I disrespected my elders, and had to be home before the streetlights came on. Eleven kids and two adults. In a two-bedroom apartment, we shared everything from Chinese food orders to heroes to clothes and sneakers.

From baggy Guess jeans, Karl Kani shirts, gold teeth and 40-inch chains, to high-fid fashion, bust down necklaces, and all-electric foreign vehicles. Hip-hop became rap, then trap, and now it's drill. Beepers were replaced by iphones, ghost guns replaced fists. Bullying now leads to suicide and once teens, are now grandparents; using the same mantras once quoted by our parents.

Every generation has their own comprehension of the present, but without respect for those that came before them, our struggles and the history of our ancestors will be lost.

It's my duty to tell tales of the past, that made me the wise man I am today. Giving up on today's youth is giving up on ourselves, our resilience will be lost in translation. I see the future when I stare at kids playing in the streets.



By Edward Wrench

That picture reminds me of a camp I used to go to called Camp Paycock in New Jersey for Boy Scouts. That was my Boy Scouts leader would yell all a rise. We all went outside to see the leader and get ready for the day. That was back in the 1980s. I miss camping, going for walks, and using bows and arrows.

Silent Screams by Jermei Lowey

I was seven years old the first time I remember screaming and no one listening. That's when I found out my mom had cancer. I remember being told not to cry because she would be upset. So I didn't cry - at least not outside. Inside, though, I cried. No, I screamed.

Five long years later, on May 27th, I woke up screaming in my sleep with my radio clock flashing at 5:29 am. I went to school only to get a call from my father. Mom had died in the hospital around 5:30 that morning. I didn't cry - not even at the funeral. We had to be strong. Inside, though, I cried. I screamed.

From there, I continued to scream. No one could hear me. No one would hear me. On the outside I was strong, a hard worker and a rule follower. On the inside, I was screaming - screaming - screaming, trying to stop myself from sabotaging everything good in my life. I was screaming for someone to stop me. I was screaming to stop myself. I didn't listen. No one listened. I know I'm not alone, but I've never felt like I deserve happiness. No matter how much I scream to try to stop myself from tearing, how much I scream to try to stop myself from tearing down my own happiness, I don't listen.

Have you ever wanted to scream? Not because you're afraid or frightened or even surprised, but because you want to wake yourself up and stop yourself from making other major mistakes? That's how I've lived. I can see it coming. I recognize what's about to happen. But no matter what, I can't stop myself from making another head-scratching decision. It really makes no sense. Maybe if my inner-self could scream a little louder, I'd listen before it's too late. Maybe if anyone else

could hear my silent screams, they could help. Maybe, just maybe, I wouldn't be where I am today...alone. Screaming.

The Wokers are Coming! by F.L. Wilson

The Wokers are coming to our towns, cities, suburbs, and our proverbial Mayberry's across this fair nation.

You know the usual suspects, Wokers; Kimberlé Williams-Crenshaw and her critical race theory, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nikole Hannah-Jones who wants to rewrite our great American story under the guise of "truth and reconciliation." Traitors such as Robin Diangelo showing the fragility of our-story. These and other Wokers, who believe their lives matter.

Our-story must continue to be about the discoveries of new frontiers and not the theft of native lands and the resulting destruction of cultures and the genocide of indigenous people of those "discovered" lands.

We must race together to protect ourselves from their wokeness by telling our-story. The legitimacy of our Founding Father's must not be undermined by the dark truth of his-story.

Our stories of "*all men are created equal*" must prevail, although we have relegated our women to second class citizenship and enslaved African's and other people of color.

We must protect the myth that George Washington "*never told a lie*, and defend the fact that our first American president was a slave owner.

We must safeguard our myths about our great patriots such as Betsy Ross, and not allow the Wokers to expose the fact that her myth was invented years later as a tourist attraction. Betsy Ross had nothing to do with the creation of our first American flag.

The Wokers Are Coming!

Straight out of the Thirteenth Amendment, they are awakening from our frigid Jim Crow winter that placed them into a deep-seated hibernation of paralyzing unconsciousness.

Our story must remain about how our people amassed the greatest wealth in the world and not about the mechanism of chattel slavery that actually generated that wealth for our privileged elites and their chosen few.

When they awaken in our socially constructed world of prevaricated stories, we will euthanize the dark truth of his-story with our little white-lies of omissions, wrap them in illusions of goal intentions.

We must attempt to form a more perfect union from our ongoing lies, half-baked truths and unequal ingredients which

were designed never to be equal in this America, our melting pot of justified, nevertheless horrific deeds.

The Wokers are coming!! The future of our people and way of life is at stake.

We need to make America great again with more sundown towns and drawing redlines around our communities where bluebloods and their clans can stroll freely.

To accelerate Woker assimilation into our culture and customs, we must pass legislation to make English the only official language for government bodies, schools, and libraries.

We must make certain that our fair-minded people are on schoolboards to select the curriculums and textbooks that DeSanitize *us* and *our-story*. Purge all factual books, movies and music with woke his-story that may elicits discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other forms of psychological distress for our young people.

It is important to continue our removal of LGBTQ books, and publications to preserve our patriarchal system. There can be no curriculums or textbooks that does not tell how exceptional our white America manhood is.

LGBTQ people do not produce the types of values and families structures we want in our neighborhoods. We should not support businesses that treat LGBTQ people as normal or acceptable. That is a Disneyland fairytale that does not result in our communities being the "happiest patriarchs on earth."

The Founder's knew not to teach the dark Wokers to read and write. We have failed that edict and must no longer teach Wokers how to read cursive writing so that they cannot read the documents and letters written in longhand by our leaders. When teaching reading, hook them on phonics to slow their reading and comprehension abilities.

We must be careful to protect our-story and not reveal that America's dark his-story is longer, more wide-ranging, immensely diverse, immeasurably beautiful, yet more brutal and horrifying than anything our-story has told about woke his-story.

The dark Wokers population is increasing faster than our Gentile population. If we do not want to lose the numerical dominance we have, we must remove a woman's right to choose by implementing forced birthing on all females. This will not only stabilize and multiply our population, but it will also cause a severe financial burden on the Wokers, as they will not be able to afford the food, shelter, clothing, education, and basic medical expenses required to rear healthy, active and intellectually inquisitive children in today's global world.

Meanwhile, we must slice up our voting districts by gerrymandering the areas that Wokers live in. This ensures we maintain political control over these regions. This should trump all Wokers endeavors to wake up and become conscious in our fair-world.

The Voiceless Scream by Marcus Warren Compton

I'm trying to say something, yet to no avail
Though sun shines outside, inside me rains of hail
Can you hear me calling, my lungs call out
As my mind ask what's all the fuss about

When you had time you used it carelessly
Now you beg for sound to show you mercy
Stop all the noise, nobody cares to hear
You should have been thankful when you had their ear

It is too late to apologize, for all is gone
Nobody cares to hear the echo of your song
If you had been aware, how close death was to you
I'm sure there would be plenty of sound, coming out of you

Now the road has ended and no word can explain
The feeling of being never heard again along with pain
Now wake up from this nightmare of a dream
And never forget the agony of the voiceless scream

I Said...! by Thomas Harris

Noise pollution: One of the deliberately unnoticed, and even less addressed, issues of prison life.

After more than twenty-five years in various prison Units in Texas, the present building – and cell – assignment is the absolute worst. At 128 feet long, 20 feet wide, and 20 plus feet high, this concrete tunnel has become a fifty-one thousand cubic foot echo chamber.

Within this tubular room, for fifteen to eighteen hours-a-day, are in excess of sixty male inmates (while there is seating for only forty) all competing to hear or be heard. One can only imagine the same room with the same number of female inmates, whose voices are higher and carry much, much further.

Five telephones (thank you Securus® – though it would be nice to have noise-cancelling microphones) spaced roughly a yard apart are on the far back wall – one hundred and twenty feet from where the officer is usually perched – is also the noisiest location of all in this immense room – because of an eight-foot ceiling! Because of its distance from the desk, and far from the obstructed view of the desk (“quisnam custodiet ipsos custodiet?”) most of the verbal (and sometimes physical) altercations take place there. It is also the smokiest.

Inasmuch as there is also always one idiot (er...can't find another synonym that is quite as accurate, so...) who wants to communicate – while also on the telephone – with his homey on the second row (there are two) at the opposite end of the room – even talking on the telephone twelve feet away is quite a challenge.

Respect and control left this place years ago. Staff does nothing to keep the noise level down: dominoes slammed (for no apparent reason) onto stainless steel tables, six-inch homemade speakers on both televisions (at maximum volume, of course), the occasional order or calling/screaming/et cetera from staff, those inmates who feel that clapping and shouting at the televisions for their sports teams, and those who seldom have anything of any importance to say, unite to bring the noise level ever higher and higher. By the end of the day, even shouting is not loud enough – until some fool develops a public address system, that is. If OSHA were to be called in to check the noise level (as there are employees who are protected by law – ostensibly), this job would be condemned as being louder than that which is permitted in any industrial setting. As I try to speak to the man only two feet away, across the table from myself, or to my beautiful daughter on the telephone, I must often forcefully restrain myself from cupping my hands around my mouth, and shouting, “I said...!”



Due 12/1/23

Upcoming Pic Themes



Due 10/1 23



Due 1/1/24



Due 11/1/23



Due 2/1/24

There are more picture theme cues on page 47. This is a page you can carefully tear out and return to us. You can make your own copy if you don't want to tear it out. If you handwrite you don't have to copy it exactly. Sending us the answers to the survey and letting us know the programs you wish to sign up for is sufficient. Please try to write back to let us know you received the newsletter. One of the problems of being a national program is all the contradicting variables thrown at us by each state. Ugh! I know I complain a lot, but I also know you understand why.

PE Survey Summer 2023

Last year in our survey we found out the 1/2 of our respondents had access to tablets. The number is growing, and we want to use this technology if it will help us communicate with you. In our previous survey we asked if you'd prefer to get your material electronically and many said no. This time we write to say we may not be able to get some packets to you unless we figure out how to use the electronic system set up on your tablets. I prefer the paper copy as I was trained in the 20th century, and will continue to try to find ways to create paper copies. I also recognize how much mail is being turned away and the great cost of printing and mailing material that is not reaching its desired recipient. **That everything changes is the only constant.**

Please circle answer

Do you have a tablet provided by the prison ? yes no

Can PE send you lessons to your tablets? yes no
If yes let us know how!!

Can you send messages to PE through your tablet ?
yes no

What is the name of the service we must register with so we can be in contact/tablet provider with you through electronic messaging?

Do you need to send us an invite before we can message you.
If yes our email address is prisonerexpress@gmail.com

If you don't have tablets, but your mail is scanned and you are given a copy what address should we send it to.

When we have packets of 24 pages plus, can we still use that scanning service? [I know Securus limits us to 15 sides in FI and MO]. Yes no.

If we can't get a packet scanned because it is too many pages, can it be mailed directly to the facility? We know some states are yea and others no. Can you find out how we can mail you packets that are 15 pages long and longer and include instructions in your response?

Are you willing help us figure out the mailing rules in your state or unit? We would like to have a few individuals in each state be PE representatives, and willing to learn the mailing rules and share them with us. Yes or no? circle please

What subjects would you like to see addressed in future PE distance learning packets

Do you have access to EDOVO on your prison issued tablets. If so we can begin posting there. Yes No

Can you reply through EDOVO Yes No

If you have multiple addresses, one for books, one for personal mail and/ or one for newsletters please list each of them with your next registration.

I need your help in understanding where to send your mail.

Personal Mail Address

Newsletter/PE Packets Address [if different]

Fall 2023 Registration Sheet – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.

Expedited Book Mailings – Check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send a check for at least \$4.00, or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

_____ Number of books allowed
_____ Soft cover only
_____ Hardcover and soft covered both allowed

Send a separate note with a list of the types of books you want. The more choices you offer, the more likely we will have what you want. It is okay to prioritize the list for us.

Address for Book Package Mailing

Poetry Project – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 28. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

Philosophy Packet – Yes, please me the Knowledge of the Mind packet. I am ready to explore my brain and how I function!

Journal Project – I will keep a journal for a year, and I may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

Meditation Project – Yes, send me Tara’s packet and the Pema Chodron book “Start Where You Are”

Climate Change- Please send the packet explaining why the weather is becoming more extreme.

Frogs- What the world needs now is more knowledge about amphibians. Let it start with me!

APP Design- Join Lyss in learning how to design an any type of App. Then help us at PE create one for this program. We want your input!

Miscellaneous Essays- Send me the writings of PE authors that PE volunteers compiled for this cycle.

Chess Club – Yes, I want to receive Raheem’s packet on chess.

Rattle Magazine and More – Send me a copy of Rattle and Kaitlyn’s instructional poetry packet.

ARTknows-Please send me Treacy’s latest packet of ideas and techniques from the art world.

Book Club - Please send me a copy of **Heart of Darkness**. We have only 170 copies. If it doesn’t come to you it’s cause we ran out. If you sign up, please commit to responding to the questions that accompany the book.

Screenwriting- Yes I’d like to understand all that is involved in writing for the screen, where visuals and the dialogue are used to tell the story

Prisoner Express Permissions Form

I grant Prisoner Express the right to publish, in its newsletters and website, any work including essays, artwork and journal entries. Please check boxes if you wish us to display your work in public

that I have sent to Prisoner Express in the past
 that I will ever send to Prisoner Express in the future, unless I clearly indicate on the work that I do not want it published.

Signature: _____

Print name: _____

Prison ID #



Due 3/1/24



Due 4/1/24



Due 5/1/24

Final Notes-With all the mail delivery problems we have I know it is time to go electronic especially if it ensures you receive our programs. I fear it will be confusing and expensive, but I realize it is insane for me to keep doing what I am doing and expect better results. In our last newsletter I noticed less responses for signups for programs. While indeed, I could suspect that our programs are not relevant to you, I lean toward believing that many of you are not getting our mailings and give up on writing. We must hear from you within 6 months of a newsletter mailing to be sure you stay on our active mailing list. I am committed to this project so please know the mailings are going out.

Often the mailings go later than I wish due to everything taking longer than I think. I thought I'd have this newsletter finished by the end of July, and here it is late August and I am still working on completing it, There is much to do and time gets away from me. So, while I ask you to write to me if you don't get something you expect to receive, don't be in a too much of a hurry. It will be mid to late November before we mail the programs offered on the sign-up sheet for this cycle.

I have the opportunity to go to Ireland with a friend for 3 weeks in late Oct. He has an airbnb rental. His wife is no longer able to go, and he asked if I'd like to join him. My travel overseas has been limited, and the idea of wandering about Ireland even in November has its charm. If I go, I'll be back by Mid Nov full of tales from Ireland, and I will commence getting the packets and books mailed to all of you who respond. Please understand that things shut down on the university campus at different times for breaks. Between summer and fall [right now] for instance we are short on helpers. They are streaming back to town and by late September we will be rocking with volunteers interested in reading what you have to share. I am privileged to be a conduit between you and the volunteers of PE. It is clear that much that is happening in the world is beyond my or most individual's control. What we can do is take care of those around us. Participating in PE keeps you close to all of us, and we do what we can to make things a little more humane for all of you. A chain is only as strong as each individual link. All of humanity and life have connection. Sometimes it is obvious, and often it is not. Helping anyone helps ourselves. I believe that and encourage all of you to pay any kindness you receive from PE forward. While forces conspire to keep prisoners alone and on their own, each of you reading this has the power to do good and be kind. Perhaps your kindness towards another will start a chain reaction leading to something wonderful for someone. If indeed there is a supreme intelligence all will be noted and if there is some type of afterlife then lucky us. If there is not, then enjoy the satisfaction of being a kind loving person of good character.

Wishing you a pleasurable and bright tomorrow- Gary

Change Service Requested

Prisoner Express News

Summer 2023

Prisoner Express promotes rehabilitation by providing information, education, and opportunities for creative self-expression to incarcerated individuals throughout the United States.

Subscriptions are free to prisoners.

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