

Free minds Connect

Memories...

I miss you so much

remember when we

You are always with me



REMEMBRANCE

Honoring and Commemorating Our Loved Ones

**GRIEF
THERAPIST
SHARES TOOLS
TO HEAL**

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BETTER TOGETHER – REMEMBRANCE

Greetings Free Minds Storytellers!

One of my all-time favorite quotes (I'm a big-time quote lover so that says a lot) is *"I am a part of all that I have met"* (from the poem "Ulysses" by Alfred Tennyson). It always seems to cross my path after I've lost someone dear. It's a tremendous comfort and reminder that I have been forever transformed by my loved ones and always carry them in my heart, mind, and spirit. I hope this *Connect* issue on Remembrance: Honoring and Commemorating our Loved Ones can also be a comfort as well as a catalyst to spark happy memories of your treasured friends and family. We wanted to make this issue really special as a way to honor all of the Free Minds family members who have died. So we are excited to unveil our new design! The *Connect* has bloomed into color! Let us know what you think of the new look. I love it and hope you will too.

You will find fascinating and touching articles and poems inside describing different traditions to commemorate and celebrate those who have died. The practices were so interesting to me. I couldn't help but start many wonderful conversations asking everyone around me how they remembered people in their lives. One friend performs random acts of kindness for strangers on the anniversary of her sister's death every year. She says seeing others' smiles helps her get through a very hard day. One father has the rims from his son's car on his own; he has changed cars several times, and always makes sure he buys a car that will fit the special rims. Another friend honors her grandfather who died due to complications from diabetes by keeping her own blood sugar in the safe range – something he would want for her. Many support a cause helping others dealing with the same challenge their loved one faced. One of our donors became involved with Free Minds because his teenage son died by accidental overdose and he wanted to help other young men who might be struggling with substance use. He told me recently that seeing Free Minds members thrive helps him heal and feel closer to his son. Free Minds Advice Man, on page 8, shares more powerful ideas for how to remember and honor friends who we've lost. Edward, a grief and trauma therapist and Free Minds friend, writes on page 6 that "grief is the price we pay for deeply and wholeheartedly loving the people in our lives." Edward tells us a very important way to heal that grief is through storytelling. Sharing stories is one of our passions at Free Minds as you know. Free Minds staff member Melissa tells us how her family shared stories to celebrate her aunt's life and memory when they all returned to El

Salvador to partake in special family traditions (page 11). My nephew Jeffrey honors the childhood friends he lost to cancer by pursuing higher education so he can become a youth counselor and help youth heal both emotionally and physically. FM friend Maji shares the ways he was taught to mark the deaths of young friends killed in his neighborhood by gun violence. FM intern Pramila takes us all over the world describing different countries' funeral traditions. She introduces us to one of my new favorite remembrance traditions – the fantasy coffins from Ghana. You have to see these to believe them. Now that our photos are in color they are even more eye-popping. ☺

The poems in this issue are so poignant. I can't stop reading them over and over. In "One More Memory, One More Time," AC writes, *"So in my mind I hold your hand and pause the beat of the whole world."* And I have to throw down my pen in awe of Keela, our master poetess and Reentry Manager, who brings rhythm and rhyme to the Reentry Corner: *"Your memories nothing can suppress/Because they will always belong to you/Just like eternal super glue."* I guarantee you will be super glued to everything in this issue! Along with our new *Connect* design we are exploring other ways to commemorate and celebrate members of the Free Minds family who, though they have died, live in our hearts forever. Please send us your ideas and suggestions. I see powerful signs that the Free Minds members who we have lost on this Earth physically, are very much alive in spirit, guiding and helping us. Just recently, one of our members who we hadn't heard from in a long time called out of the blue asking if we could help connect him to a therapist for grief counseling. I know it was Josh, who worked in the Free Minds office and who died in September, energetically showing us he's still with us as his passion was helping men heal from trauma.

Until next time, take care of yourself and always know we are thinking of you.

Tara

*May the long time sun shine upon you
All love surround you
And the pure light within you guide your way on*

**Next Issue's Theme:
Loyalty**

The *Connect* is a bimonthly creative writing newsletter published by the members, staff, and friends of the Free Minds Book Club. Each issue focuses on a specific theme as well as highlights the discussions of the Free Minds long distance BAM! (Books Across the Miles) book club. We publish five issues per year.



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We are ALWAYS looking for new contributors. Write or draw something for our next issue and send it to us! (Pieces not published in the *Connect* may appear on our Writing Blog and at a Write Night Event!)

Please write us when you are transferred so we have your up-to-date address as soon as possible!

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FREE MINDS HQ

All the latest updates on what's going on at the Free Minds office

By Imanee

Just Mercy

Free Minds' first apprenticeship group of 2020 joined together to watch *Just Mercy*, a heartrending movie that recounts Walter McMillian's harrowing fight for freedom. Convicted of the murder of an 18-year-old woman, Walter McMillian, portrayed by Jamie Foxx, is sentenced to death despite resounding evidence of his innocence. Michael B. Jordan plays Bryan Stevenson, a Harvard graduate and lawyer who represents McMillian as he seeks to have his conviction overturned. Battling against racism and an unjust legal system, McMillian and Stevenson inspired the world to hold onto hope despite all odds.



Bryan Stevenson, played by Michael B. Jordan, and Walter McMillian, played by Jamie Foxx, in a courtroom scene.

Takoma Park Poetry Reading

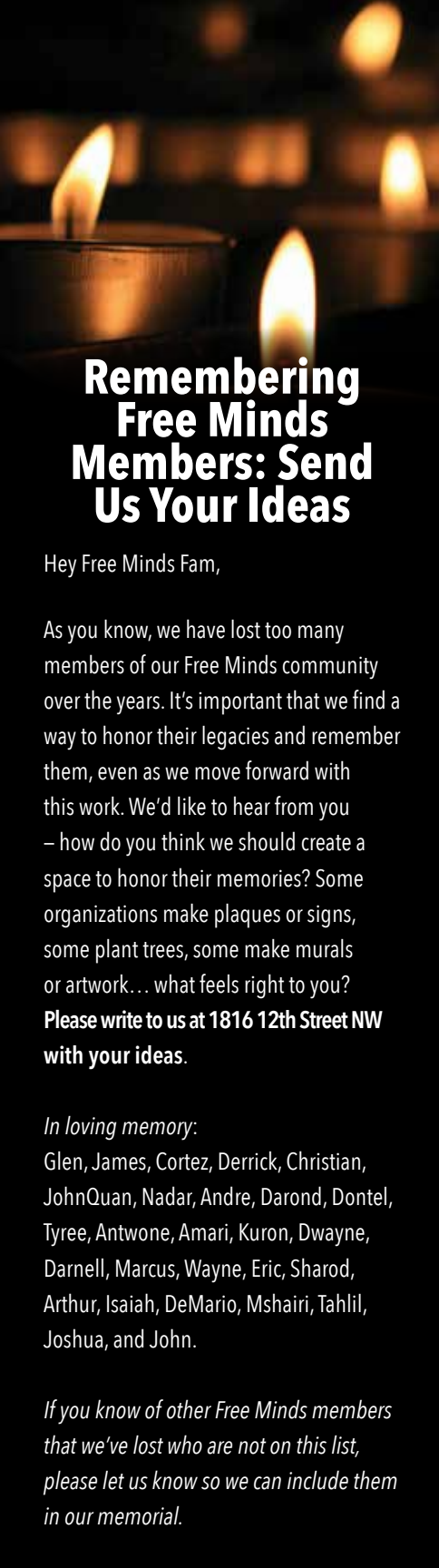
Free Minds was invited to be the featured poets at a poetry series.

Free Minds Poet Ambassadors shared their poems at Third Thursday Poetry, an event in Takoma Park to give aspiring poets a chance to read their work in front of an audience. Free Minds member Cliff commenced the event by sharing his piece, "What Is Life?," a moving sentiment that celebrates the joys and sorrows experienced in life. Following Cliff, members Shannon and Nokomis, as well as our Volunteer Coordinator, Sabrea, read their heartfelt contributions which were cited as "healing for them, for the community, for all of us." The crowd was awestruck and gave a roaring applause as Poet Ambassadors opened up ears and hearts about their experience "freeing themselves" through reading and poetry while incarcerated.

Honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Free Minds was busy on MLK Day! Free Minds co-founder Kelli hosted a Write Lunch and food drive in collaboration with Arlington Food Assistance in celebration of Martin Luther King Day! Over 70 people joined the celebration and read poems by Free Minds members. Students at George Washington University hosted their own version of Free Minds' Write Night, as a way to expose students to the beautiful creativity of Free Minds members. Additionally, the Free Minds outreach team led an On the Same Page event with students at Sidwell Friends School, using poetry and storytelling to discuss the theme of "unconscious bias." The session on unconscious bias was well received, raising students' awareness of unintentional or ingrained stereotypes they may have learned. Volunteers of all backgrounds and ages bonded through poetry and service on this amazing day!





Remembering Free Minds Members: Send Us Your Ideas

Hey Free Minds Fam,

As you know, we have lost too many members of our Free Minds community over the years. It's important that we find a way to honor their legacies and remember them, even as we move forward with this work. We'd like to hear from you – how do you think we should create a space to honor their memories? Some organizations make plaques or signs, some plant trees, some make murals or artwork... what feels right to you?

Please write to us at 1816 12th Street NW with your ideas.

In loving memory:

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Joshua, and John.

If you know of other Free Minds members that we've lost who are not on this list, please let us know so we can include them in our memorial.

FAMILY TIES

A Free Minds member who spent decades behind bars finds a unique daily practice to remember the people that matter to him

By Cliff, FM Member

When Cliff was 16 years old, he was charged and incarcerated as an adult. He spent more than 34 years in prison. Cliff's case has been to the Supreme Court and is the subject of a Netflix documentary series. The Mid-Atlantic Innocence Project is currently representing Cliff for a wrongful conviction case. In 2015, while in a federal prison in Virginia, he joined Free Minds. In 2018, he was granted parole and released from prison. Since Cliff came home, he has dedicated himself to youth violence prevention and community education.

I was locked up for 35 years for a crime that I didn't commit. I was only 16 years old when I was arrested for a murder the whole city was talking about. I'm 51 now. So much has changed while I've been gone. That's why memories mean so much to me now. I lost my grandparents who raised me while I was in prison. Before they died, they used to call me on the telephone from our family reunions held in Rocky Mount, North Carolina. Everybody would be there. My grandma would go around and collect money, saying, "My baby needs some money, put something in here for Clifton." They could never tell Grandma no. People loved and respected her!

In 2015, my little brother died after having a heart attack. He was only 11 years old when I was arrested. When I lost him, I just thought wasn't anything ever going to go right for me. I didn't let people know how much I was hurting on the inside. Having all my life taken away for something that I didn't do, and then losing some of the most important people in my life—it just made me want to lose hope.

I kept my faith though. And part of what has helped me are memories. The ones that are most important to me are the good times I did have with my family. Whenever we came together, we always had a good time. Family times, they was the best times of my life. Especially family reunions because I have so many cousins.

When I finally got out, I went to visit my grandparents' gravesite in North Carolina. I had a photo taken with me in between their graves. I talked to them. I consider them my Mom and Dad because they raised me. I told them, "Mom and Dad, I'm out. This is the time you wanted to see in life – when I got out of prison for something I didn't do. And I just want you to know that I'm out. I miss you all, and I think about you all every day."

Being in prison that long, it makes you realize just how important family is. I'm so glad to be out. My family – including my "found family," my Free Minds family – you all showed me so much love when I was in prison. Now that I'm out, it's an even bigger love. I am real grateful. Some of my people are gone, but for those many

continued on page 22

FREE MINDS MAILBAG



We love getting mail from our Free Minds family.

Here are some of your thoughts on the November/December 2019 Connect Forgiveness.

GD: I also received the latest issue of the *Connect*, the Forgiveness issue. I loved every word in it! Forgiveness is a very essential part of moving forward in life and not being burdened with the past. There are still some things that I seek forgiveness for... but in due time. However, I do forgive.

AW: The artwork on the cover page is so right on the theme; as forgiveness is a process that requires bringing together various pieces of our humanity to complete the patchwork which is our heart becoming forgiveness – before our mouth, our words, can say, “I forgive you.” On Page 12, the poems by Free Minds members is breathtakingly powerful, beyond words. I both enjoyed and learned deeply from each and everyone’s poem shared there in that space... I was actually blown away by Mr. Ghani’s concept on forgiveness. On this painful journey of my own, such had never truly occurred to me: Truth and Reconciliation. I understand the whole concept of “I am you and you are me,” but “I am because you are,” way above my bruised and battered sense of self. Being both a victim and victimizer, forgiveness had always seemed to be out of reach for me. The guilt and shame of it all overwhelmed me. Pushing me into political and intellectual pursuits that prevented my ability to heal without guilt or shame. To forgive and to be forgiven. Complex in consideration, but very simple once the work of Truth and Reconciliation is employed. I’ve started this process off in some ways. Like a puzzle, reading the words of Mr. Ghani has helped open my mind and heart to the possibility of forgiving and being forgiven, adding missing pieces that would otherwise remained elusive.

DK: Although I had recently decided on forgiving myself shortly before it was published, the stories and poems I read brought tears to my eyes. For so long I felt I was traveling the ‘forgiveness’ road alone, especially with forgiving myself. It showed in just about all of my past poems submitted to you all. ALL of the poems in this issue touched me, I felt the hurt, pain, and suffering, and hope. They ALL did an excellent job conveying their feelings! The articles by: Janet, Craig, along with Conversation with Melody really touched me. The essays by BB and JL; I feel you both. I understand everything that you both wrote, keep moving forward, and remember look forward, don’t live in the past like I did for so long; it is such a lonely path... I especially love what Julia shared from her conversation with Ghani near the end of her article: “Forgiveness is not letting go of regret but letting go of the hope for the past to be different.” That is so, so true – part of my not forgiving myself was that I couldn’t let go of the fact that I couldn’t go back to change the outcome of the crimes I committed. Not just my sentence, but the outcome to my victims, I wanted so much to change what they experienced. I missed so much over the past thirteen years living my life ‘living life in the rear-view’ then looking toward the future and what was currently in front of me.

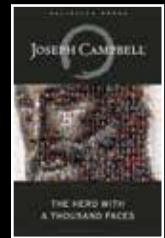
KW: It got me rethinking a lot of the pain I’ve been holding onto. And the ‘Two and a Half Hours’ on page 10? Incredible story of forgiveness. Yes indeed... Imanee’s piece on ‘Reparations’ is on point! Let me get that 40 acres and a mule! I got Native (Cherokee) and African drums beating in my blood so I’m need 80 acres and two mules! Seriously it’s definitely a beautiful attempt but education is what’s needed. Fix our education and MOST of our existing problems... *poof*... disappear.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

“To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.”

– Joseph Campbell (author, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*)

“Every authentic poem contributes to the labor of poetry... to bring together what life has separated or violence has torn apart... Poetry can repair no loss, but it defies the space which separates. And it does this by its continual labor of reassembling what has been scattered.” – John Berger (poet, author, *Into Their Labours*)



The Hero with a Thousand Faces

“There is no death. Only a change of worlds.”

– Chief Sealth (Seattle) Suquamish and Duwamish Native American Warrior and tribal chief

“Do not cry because they are past! Smile, because they once were!”

– Ludwig Jacobowski (German poet, 1868–1900)

“The chapters may have ended but the pages still remain” – Anonymous



FIRST, WE FORGET AND THEN WE REMEMBER: HEALING FROM GRIEF AND LOSS *By Edward, Grief & Trauma Psychotherapist*

In April 2002, just three months after my 30th birthday, my mother died unexpectedly from a week-long battle with pneumonia. For the past seventeen years, I have been on a journey to make sense and to find the meaning of both my mother's life and her death. What is grief? How does losing a loved one affect us emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually? How do we recover from the pain, sadness, and anger that is often associated with the death of a loved one? How do we remember those who were near and dear to us after they have passed away? These are a few of the questions that I would like to address here and I would also like to share some practical tools that you can use if you are struggling with making sense of grief and loss in your own life.

I believe that grief is the price we pay for deeply and wholeheartedly loving the people in our lives. When we lose someone we love, grief visits us and sometimes turns our world upside down and we are often never the same after beginning our grief journey. As I reflect on my own grief journey, it occurs to me that I am a fundamentally different person since the day my mother died. When she died some part of me died also and I have not been the same since. As a therapist who specializes in supporting people through grief and loss here's how I like to think of it: we take a journey into grief and that journey is uniquely our own. My grief journey may not look, feel or sound like yours but what we all have in common is the sense of bewilderment, pain, sadness and sometimes even despair that surfaces along the way. Feelings and emotions that we have buried arise and demand our attention which can be frightening and confusing for many of us – especially if we are not used to feeling and expressing deeply held emotions. Sometimes it can even feel as if we are walking through a maze that we must find our way out of... on our own.

Grief has been traditionally thought of as occurring in stages and phases and this idea suggests that we heal in a straightforward fashion, but nothing could be further from the truth. We do not heal from grief in stages that occur one after the other; instead, we travel around and around in a circle and we experience seasons of grief. There are seasons of sadness, of anger, of mourning, of pain, of letting go, of holding on, of laughter, of feeling lost, of feeling strong, of isolating ourselves, of asking for help from others, of forgetting and of remembering.

Currently, many grief experts focus on helping people realize the importance of remembering the love we shared with our departed loved ones rather than forgetting. When faced with the overwhelming pain of loss many of us work hard to forget the person who has passed away. This response makes sense and is understandable, but it is not always the most helpful or healthy way to work through the pain of grief and loss. Instead, imagine if we decided that it is ok to cherish and celebrate the memory of our deceased loved ones. In other words, what if we actively sought to remember the love we shared with them, the laughter, the happy moments, the important life events and the lasting love we shared. To remember means more than just to call a memory to the forefront of our minds. It can also mean to reassemble and to rearrange the fractured pieces of a thing and to make it whole and useful again – like a quiltmaker does when they weave together pieces of cloth to make a blanket.

Therefore, if you are on a journey of healing from the pain of grief and loss I encourage you to use the practice of remembering as a tool that can help you remain in contact with your loved one and to keep your relationship with that person alive. Our relationship with our departed loved ones continues after their death and it shifts, grows and evolves as we do. We remember them at every holiday, on their birthday, on the anniversary of their death and on the major milestone events that we experience like the birth of our first child, the day of our wedding, etc.

Here are a few practical ideas that you can use to remember and celebrate the life of the people in your life who have passed away:

- Collage – you can weave together pictures, drawings, images you've cut out from a magazine and words that express what the person meant to you and that uplift and inspire you to remember that person's unique qualities, values and characteristics and glue them onto a poster board, a larger piece of paper, a piece of cardboard or any other materials that are available to you.

- Journaling – you can write about your grief and the feelings that come to the surface when it comes to your mind. This can create a space for you to uncover feelings and emotions that you may not be aware of in your everyday life because you can't verbally express them.

- Drawing/painting/creative writing – you can draw pictures in ink or pencil that visually represent your feelings, or you can write fictional stories about your memories. When we allow ourselves to be creative, we engage our "right brain" functions and this part of our brain allows us to process emotions non-verbally

Telling stories about your loved one – storytelling is the oldest form of remembrance that we have created as human beings and it is universally practiced as a method of transferring knowledge from one person to another and from one generation to the next. But, more importantly, it is also HEALING! As we tell our story it heals us, and it encourages others to gain the courage to tell theirs.

Many artists have used creative arts to express their feelings during hard times. Painter Pablo Picasso went through a "Blue Period", where he was suffering from depression. Many of his great works resulted from this period, including this one called The Old Guitarist.



DEAR MR. ADVICE

Hey Free Minds Fam! We want to share as many perspectives as possible. Do you have advice for JT? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!

Dear Advice Man,

I see you and Free Minds are doing an issue on Remembrance. I have lost three close friends in the last year alone. It's rough being in here and losing people out there. On the one hand, I've gotten used to it. On the other hand, sometimes I worry that means I'm not properly grieving these losses. To be honest though, I'm so tired of "grieving." When I lost this latest friend, I had the idea that I would like to remember her and help others remember her in a really special way. I know she wouldn't want people always crying and being sad when they thought of her. That's why I'm not really with the RIP shirts and all. You see where this is headed. I need ideas. What can I do to remember and really "memorialize" my friend? She was one of the most special individuals I've ever known. She was always smiling and for real, she just made everyone - young, old, and everything in between - happier when she showed up. What do you think I should do?

Sincerely,
JT

Dear JT,

I want to first extend my deepest condolences on the loss of your friends, especially in such a short time span. Coping is never easy when you lose a loved one and the pain that comes with grieving can be exhausting in so many aspects (mentally, physically, emotionally, etc). Experiencing blows of that magnitude repeatedly in rapid succession renders you numb in a sense, but that isn't a cause for concern or worry. Everyone grieves differently and the effects of it differs in each of us - it can harden or soften a person and the choice isn't usually ours. But truth be told, grief never dissipates completely. Any and everything you do in loving memory of your friends will cause a small amount of grief - simply because you'll always miss them and want them there with you. How you choose to remember and memorialize them can certainly help extinguish the emotional distress and heartache that comes with such a loss. So, let's see if any of these ideas will aid and assist you. Hopefully so.

I lost two of my closest friends within the same year to gun violence, so I decided to get my first major tattoo in remembrance. It's a piece of them I'll carry with me forever.

My wife lost her mom this past summer (RIP to an amazing woman) and we bounced around the idea of creating t-shirts and maybe even bracelets of some of her mother's many witty and catchiest sayings she was known for—which are second to none and all so original. Just another way to memorialize her and remind people of the joy she could instantly bring to your life with just one word or sentence.

Those are a couple of ideas I've personally explored, but here are a few others to consider:

- Support a cause close to your friend's heart
- Make a tribute or donation in her name
- Create a living reminder of who she was
- Dedicate an event in her memory
- Start a new tradition to celebrate annually
- Start a social group in honor of her using poetry, art, etc.

In the end, what I think you should do is allow the personal knowledge and feeling you have for your friend to be the driving force in creating the best way to memorialize her. Because no matter what you decide on, carrying her in your heart the way I'm sure you do will guarantee she'll be spoken of in ways that'll still make people smile - as if she never left.

So, let the love you have for her be your guiding light. I wish you nothing but the best in accomplishing your mission.

Your FM Brother,
DA

REENTRY PROFILE: REMEMBERING DC

A Free Minds member finally gains his freedom, but is deported to a country he hardly knows

By LV

LV was only 11 years old when he made the trip from Mexico to the United States. Shortly after his 17th birthday, he was arrested and charged as an adult under Title 16. He served almost 10 years before completing his sentence in October. Because he was undocumented, instead of being released, LV was transferred to an ICE detention facility (Immigration and Customs Enforcement). LV chose to be deported rather than stay behind bars and fight to remain in the United States.

Before I was deported, it was a scary feeling. I knew I was going to a place that I just really didn't know anymore. I had nothing and no one waiting there for me. Of course, after ten years behind bars, I was happy to have my freedom. But when I arrived in Mexico that first day, I was truly in a foreign country. I didn't know what I was going to do. Nothing in Mexico felt familiar to me. I felt like I didn't belong. I had no place to go. I had nothing to eat. More than anything, I was afraid of the police.

I hadn't been here long when I was waiting at a bus stop and a police car pulled up. I watched the officers get out of their car and walk straight toward me. They began to harass me about whether I had proper identification on me. I knew they could decide to lock me up if they didn't like my answers. They asked me who I was, where I was from, and where I was going. I told them I was on my way to work and showed them my papers. I waited. My heart felt like it was beating a million beats per minute. It seemed like forever before they finally handed them back to me and went on their way.

It has been hard figuring things out in a new country. To me it seems unbelievable that I've only been out a little more than three months. I already have a fulltime job and even got my own apartment. I work at a call center for a company that provides internet and cable, and I have made new friends. I could never have imagined that I could do all of this so quickly and take care of myself. I guess I knew I had no choice but to adapt real fast and make it work! I'm still learning every day about the way things are done, and finding my way around the city.

My home has always been Washington, DC. And yes, of course I feel sad knowing that I will never see my city again. There is so much that I miss: the sidewalks, the streets, my middle school, Cesar Chavez High School. I miss Columbia Heights (pictured bottom top) and walking around Georgetown. I miss Benning Road, where I used to hang out with my friends. I grew up right there by the Shrimp boat (pictured below)... those are the places I considered home. And there are so many people that I've had to leave behind.

As long as I am alive, I will keep those memories of DC and the people that were special to me, close to my heart. And in that sense - in keeping the memories - it is not a loss. What I have learned is that we can't stay stuck in the past. We have to keep moving forward, always learning and growing. I have memories, both good and bad. And I think I appreciate both. I choose to look at each day as an opportunity for a fresh start. I get to choose what I want and how I want things to be. I'm far away from what I once knew, but I don't think I've lost. Yes, it's a different lifestyle but we've got to survive and thrive no matter where we land.



Texas Avenue

By LV

Texas Avenue

That place I called home

Texas Avenue

Where I dreamed and lived

Texas Avenue

I can still close ma' eyes and still

smell da' spices in da air

Of da' Latin flavors from all over

da' world

Texas Avenue

Where I breathe in nothing

but love

That's where I learned

good and bad

Texas Avenue

That place where we

were all family

That avenue where all da' kids

played and laughed

Warm summer nights

Where music filled da' air

With Latin rhythms played late

into summer nights

That avenue where I lived

and dreamed

Texas Avenue

That place where we ain't

reppin' a flag

We're family

Beyond skin color or language

Texas Avenue

Nothing but pure love

THE WRITE WAY

FM Member Writing a Novel

The column where writers share writing tips and prompts to inspire your creativity

By TTB

What's up FM Family. As you all may well not know, I have been working on my first novel called *Hyperlings*, for six years now, to date. And it is so fun and challenging and frustratingly beautiful work. *Hyperlings* is about Do-san and Nene-san Moon, two young orphan siblings whose entire race was murdered because they were born. My genre is fantasy.

Before I continue, I would like to give a shout-out to our FM sister Jessica, who is no longer with us at FM, because she chose to go back to school to pursue her dreams. She asked me to write a piece about writing a novel and I told her that maybe I would. But I put it off. It wasn't until our FM sister Julia asked me to do the same; so here is my attempt at giving some writing tips about writing a novel.

To those of you thinking about writing a novel the first thing you should know is, not anybody can write a novel. Second, you have to have a passion for writing because third, there are so many components when it comes to writing a novel, that many who thought that writing was something they wanted to do, will quickly be discouraged. Four, many may know the rules about writing but may not know how to write. There is an art to writing and one can't be taught how to write (only critiqued), because writing is a skill that one has or does not have, and this skill will need continuous perfecting, until one has mastered his/her own style. But the most important to me, is one must have patience. Writing a good novel will require the writer to have tons of patience.

Writing a novel (or any piece) is time consuming, but one must find time if you love to write. Writing a novel requires:

- Good research
- World building
- Creating characters/development/identification
- Finding your theme
- Action
- Looking at what you love to read
- Thinking about what you love to read
- Thinking about what you love to write
- Flashbacks – taking a trip to the past
- Giving yourself permission to write badly
- Giving each character a past
- Rules of your world

- Creating a powerful emotional experience
- What your readers desperately want
- Educating your reader
- Making life hard on your characters/conflicts

I'ma end it here because I am not writing a book, but hopefully you catch my drift.

Here are some tips that I use when it comes to writing. I'll give you ten of them:

1. I take my time. I don't rush myself or I refuse to let others (who have read my works) rush me. Have patience with yourself. When you feel like writing, write. When you don't, don't force yourself.
2. Always brainstorm, whether you're writing it down or not. I do.
3. Put your love into all your characters. They deserve it and they will appreciate it.
4. Don't become too attached to your characters. You may have to cut them off. I understand this.
5. Find time to write. If you are thinking about writing, go write. So what if it is 50 words, 100 words, or 1,500. When you feel like writing, go write.
6. Write some, plan some, and sometimes create character bios. World build at others. These are the methods I use.
7. Do lots of reading and do even more reading of the genre you are writing in.
8. Do lots of research. It's important. Good books are well researched whether it is Fantasy or Sci-Fi.
9. Don't be afraid to let people critique you. I love it. But don't let people tell you how you should write, especially if they know nothing about it.
10. Have fun. The most important thing next to patience is to have fun while writing. Your level of enjoyment when writing will come from you having fun while writing. So have fun, I do.

I pray that my attempt at giving some pointers suffice.

Sincerely,
Your FM Brother T.

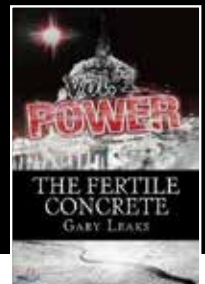
SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments!

If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

The Fertile Concrete: Volume 1 Power by G. Leaks

The Fertile Concrete: Vol. 1 "POWER" is a book of poetry written by Washington DC native G. Leaks. This book of poetry covers a range of subjects from religion to racism.





CONVERSATION WITH MELISSA

Hey everyone! My name is Melissa and I am the Program Coordinator at Free Minds. It's a sunny but cold day (30 degree-weather outside), but it's mighty toasty in the Free Minds headquarters. I usually start my day with 2 cups of water, my alternative to coffee, and surprisingly it's been working for me!

I'm just amazed how time has flown, as I will be celebrating my 7-year anniversary with Free Minds in May! I've had the privilege to see how Free Minds has grown throughout the years. In the past, I have worked closely with the reentry program, but now I oversee the Prison Book Club program. So I'm honored to work closely with you all!

This *Connect* theme definitely touches me close to home. I had a very close relative pass away almost 2 years ago. My tía (*aunt* in Spanish) was a strong and fierce Latina woman, who was always the life of the party (or wherever the environment was). She resided in Washington, DC for almost 3 decades. My tía was the reason why my mother came to the United States from El Salvador to search for a better life. She helped my mother raise my sister and I, so for that, I thank her tremendously.

In the Hispanic community, it is very important to remember the life of a passed loved one. We celebrate, after their passing, the first nine days, nine months, one year, and nine years. The first and ninth year are especially important. Family and friends join in the home of the loved one's immediate family for hours of prayers and food for a few days and end on the day they passed away. There would be a couple of rows of chairs facing a large shrine with candles and hundreds of flowers surrounding a large photo of that loved one.

For the first year of my tía's passing, I traveled to El Salvador. I had not visited El Salvador in over 10 years, so I had mixed emotions: happy to see my grandparents and extended family, but sadness due to the circumstances. When she passed away, we had an intimate ceremony in DC and the next day she was flown back home to El Salvador. The first couple of months were very tough but as a family, we held together, to remember her life as she was.



With the rest of the world, especially in Latin countries, we remember our passed loved ones two days every year; it's called *Días de Los Muertos (Days of the Dead)*. On November 1, we visit the cemetery and leave flowers for the children who passed on. The next day, November 2, we visit the adults and leave flowers as well.

Lastly, another tradition of how we remember our passed loved one is when we have a big milestone in the family such as, celebrating new life at a baby shower, a new union at a wedding, or a girl's coming of age on her *Fiesta de Quinceañera (Sweet 15th Birthday Celebration in Spanish)*. There is a small table display with flowers and candles with photos of our family members that have passed on. The reason behind this tradition is that, although they are not here physically, we feel their presence celebrating with us.

How do you celebrate or remember the life of your loved ones?

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

One More Memory, One More Time By AC

I keep playing memories of you
inside my head
as if they were movies in continuous looping scenes
that's just something that I do
to help me capture the features of your face
in an attempt to record each and every freckle
every mark, every line
trying my darn best
to hold on to something
anything to help me catch my breath

So in my mind I hold your hand
and pause the beat of the whole world
as I start studying the loving nature of your gaze
contemplating the kindness in your heart
savoring the ether of your soul
appreciating the tiniest of your gestures
and how every single one of them
could only keep adding to your grace

One more memory, one more time
I make you real once again
even if only in my mind
but I can hear your voice
like a gentle whisper in the wind
telling me you love me
telling me it's fine

New Star in the Sky By AC

The hours pass me by today
like any other day
but something feels amiss
the joy of your sweet voice
the comfort of your hugs
the soothing power of your words
and all the other things that I will miss

I know you had to go
and you know I didn't want you to leave
but that wasn't a choice for you to make
nor was it one for me to give

And so I say goodbye
with a broken heart
and tears in my eyes
blurring my sight
as I try my best to see
the new star there in the sky

Please be in peace
I promise I'll be alright

Note: I wrote this poem as a goodbye to my Grandma who passed 10/21/19. It's always hard to say goodbye.

Predator and Prey By AL

I remember we ran through the streets not afraid
to face death head on:
Foolish youth, just "**dy**ing to live."

We laid stowed away, covered by night skies and tinted windows.

Clutching thirty rounds of death at our fingertips.

This is our "Growing Pains."

But our reality was not made for TV.

Our misunderstanding often led to shots fired after too many drinks went down the "Eastside."

It was the ones we slapped-boxed with and called friends – that usually betrayed us, "**all for the love of money.**"

Matt and Wayne became victims of the "**BODY SNATCHERS**" essence warned us about.

So, these Moet bottles memorialize a life once known: my home, Chocolate City!

Percussion beats, 991's and a sack of "Love Boat" from Johnny Boys.

A eulogy to Washington, DC and those many late nights.

Remembrance By AME

I lost my best friend, mentor, and grandfather
He was the only one that I could talk to without judgement
He was the only one that could put a smile on my face
in any situation
He was a true example of what a man is supposed to be
Even though he's gone I see him in me
He had swag out of this world and was a man of God
He spoke statements to me each Sunday at church such as:

"Boy you cleaner than a hotel chicken with some extra feathers"

Little things like that made him so unique and sweet
He would give you his last and go without, just put a smile on your face
He was a very hard working man and did just that until he could no longer
Cancer came in and attacked him so quick and powerful
I cried for months while feeling abandoned and alone
But then I heard him saying: "My son, don't cry – you are strong
Find peace and praise God for calling me home!"
Amen... I miss you G-Pops... I'll see you again in Heaven!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Falling Memories and Cherishers

By MH

Dedicated: 2 Josh and whoever fell victim 2 violence

Day come nightfall to the one's I miss y'all.
Falling memories come a dime of dozen,
but cherish the moments you once had with the fallen victim.
My love and heart goes out 2 Josh and his family
and 2 all who fall victim to violence or natural causes
and I hope the loss get easy 4 the families.
Because I am still dealing with the loss of my cousin who
died at the end of September 2019.
Take 1 day at a time 4 can fully heal of the loss of a
wonderful young man Josh was.
I hope Josh's family accept my condolences.

In Memory of... MOM

By GD

There has never been someone so instrumental in the
shaping of my mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing...
There is really no comprehending your ending...
or should I say your beginning...
Since you are now on a new spiritual journey...
Though I understand the concept of life and death, I
still have yet to grasp why your cycle came so abruptly...
Damn! Gone but not forgotten...
No! That cliché doesn't apply...
Because you are still in every beat of my heart and the light
of my eye...
No single thought of you brings your presence Justice...
Every precious message you passed on, I held on to without
second guessing...
Yes, I had a thousand questions... And I still get to ask them...
Because you are only gone from the physical realm...
But here in every other fashion...
Every day I celebrate your love and passion...
Your unconditional love! Without it, my life I couldn't imagine...
Sometimes sadness befalls me when I delve into your memory...
But because the strength you instilled in me is still in me...
I immediately feel a sense of glee...
See... I don't grieve or mourn because that would imply...
That I lost the beat of my heart and the light in my eye...
So I don't recognize your passing as death...
But a passage to a new life...
I will forever keep your spirit in my mist until I am
with you on the other side of the light...

I Love You MOM!

I Am Near

By KA

From my sister, M.

6/26/96 - 7/29/08

Not Gone & Never Forgotten

*From sister to brother, from brother to Free Minds,
from Free Minds to the World*

Big Brother,

You know it's kind of funny, because I was about to ask you
"How you doing?"
But that is the only thing I can't ask
Because I'm always with you
I had the chance to be somebody's angel on Mother Earth
And I chose you
As we both know, you're my number one
Little Sister will always have your back like white on rice
Big Brother, every time you feel the wind, remember this
That I am somewhere near
So please don't hurt about me, because I'm in a better place
I know it may seem like I was gone too soon
But just know, it was for the greater good
My life became a lesson to many families
And knowing that a lot of people and a lot of families
are giving extra love
And are paying closer attention to who they bring
around their kids
Is enough for me to say, "I wouldn't change a thing"
My life for a chance to save a life is good enough for me
I can also see how my life is helping
A lot of parents are teaching their kids not to be afraid
to speak up
When something is going wrong or they are going through
things they shouldn't go through
And guess what?
I saved more than one!
It will also help the future of our family
To overcome evil, we must not fight it with evil
We must learn from it so that it could become a teacher
This is how we win
Through your memories, through your heart, I will never be gone
Love yourself more and show more humanity and
compassion for everyone and everything
Twice as much so you could love for you and I
I know you feel your heart growing because now you have mine
Through every heartbeat, every smile, I will be there like a sign
I lived a great life and with you, I had the most fun
But now I'm truly free
Like a golden eagle, I found my wings
I am not gone, only my body is not here
So pretty please with sugar on top, dry those little tears
I love you, I care for you, but I will not miss you
Because when you feel the wind, just know that I am near
This is a blessing for you and the family I am your angel,
your protector, and your heartbeat
I could see you from every angle
So please smile that lovely smile, laugh that beautiful
laughter and walk that confident walk
Why? Because I am not gone
I am always near
So when you feel the wind, remember that your little sister,
your angel is always near
I love you, Brother

I woke up, I dried away a tear, I felt my heart growing I felt
the wind, I knew she was near

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Reflective Remembrance By AW

Looking into the
mirror on the
wall of my memory
as
Neil Young strums his
guitar with James Taylor
playing the banjo, wailing
in my inner ear:
 Oldman look at my
 life, I'm a lot like
 you were...

My reflection's eyes waters,
I choke back the lump in
my throat, as the song continues:
 I need someone to
 love me the whole
 day through
 Aw, one look in my
 eyes and you can tell
 that it's true

Awoke to this sadness that
grabs at my throat.
Now focused. Looking into my eyes
I see my dad, and it is
the best of him that is
now in me.
We both smile
My reflection
and I.
 And
I am free/ We are free
 My old man and I
Knowing that he is proud
of his son that survived
as a child where no child
should ever be,
 Now a Man
Proud and Purposeful
 I remember his last words
to me in a letter:

Son,
 Get free, get out of prison
 Create a family where
 there was once none.
 Try leaving the world
 A better place by leaving
 A legacy. As I am happy
 As you are the legacy I am
 leaving the world.
 Remember, be happy through
 Your legacy.
 - Dad

And through my
reflective remembrance
I learned that
through me my Dad's
spirit shall be set
free from this
slave ship that does
not sail on oceans
blue, but on the Black
Man, woman and child's
blues.
 - AW

Sing About Her By MC

I remember your hugs
And the comfort that it brought me
That gold tooth smile
And the joy that it brought me
Oh I remember your kind words
And wisdom that you taught me
Everything you said finally makes sense to me
The Lord knows,
 We miss you Shirley.

Remembering You By RD

Remembrance –
Of the time we spent walking through the park,
The deeper conversations get,
Not realizing how life gets so dark,
Remembrance –
Of the time we spent sharing ideas and doing well,
Casually enjoying life as deep as the well.
Remembrance –
Can't let it go
Remembering you is a never-ending episode.

Forget By RB

To forget you, is to forget myself.
To forget and forget and forget until there's nothing left.
To try to go on taking the next step.
Yet without you, there's no "right,"
I seem to continuously go "left."
Wondering and wondering and wondering
As if these thoughts will never end.
How could you have ever left me my friend, my friend, my friend.
Time heals all, or so they say.
So why is it that I see your face and feel your loving embrace?
Your position in my life, no one can replace.
Your memory in my heart will never be erased.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Sing About You By MW

Singing about you is like having you here at that moment.
Singing about you gives me hope I'm not alone.
I listen to the music of your laugh as I sing to you,
I hear the music of your smile when I sing of the person you were.
When I sing to you, I hear your love and encouragement.
I sing to you now because I didn't sing to you when
you were here.
I missed out on the best time to sing your song
But I hope you can still hear it.

O Say Can You See, Part 1 By KW

I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in protest to Parliament,
"Taxation without representation is... Tyranny."
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in battle during the Revolutionary War:
"For Liberty! For Justice!"
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in confusion over the Articles of
Confederation, yet brainstormed into existence
the United States Constitution.
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in joy as they settled into starting farms,

digging mines, and connecting railroads.
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in slavery for Freedom, causing hearts
to reflect that...
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in hope during the Reconstruction
and Freedman Bureau
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried out courageously while storming
the beaches of Normandy.
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried for change during Jim Crow
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in Perseverance as P.O.W.s in Japan
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried in unity, "Free at last, free at last, thank
God Almighty I'm free at last!"
"We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men
are created equal"
I Remember... and dare not forget,
Those who cried...



Art by FM Member RW



KEHINDE WILEY: RUMORS OF WAR

Art May Be the Key to Changing
the Narrative in Public Spaces

By Janet

Statues of soldiers on horseback have scared me for as long as I can remember, long before I understood much, if anything, about death, history, or war. I don't know why they scared me, but they did.

As a little girl growing up in New York City, there was no way to avoid the many war memorials. The only time these statues did not intimidate me was when they were covered in pigeons, wings flapping, cacophonously cooing, painting the hard, cold metal by doing what birds do.

Monuments, and some forms of public art such as sculpture or murals, intend to create a reaction, communicate an idea, or influence how we remember selected events and people. But, *who is selected? Who decides how the story is told? Who tells the story, and whose stories are told?*

D.C is a famously beautiful city. People travel from all over the world to visit the National Mall, to see our larger than life monuments, read the words etched into stone, and remember our history as a nation. These monuments aim to inspire a united feeling of national pride, with monuments depicting triumph in battles won and a place to solemnly mourn lives lost to war. But some people—their families, their ancestors or even people that look like them—are not represented here at all.

How do monuments make you feel? First, imagine the Washington Monument, a 555-foot towering obelisk in the center of DC. Does it make you think of George Washington, the first President of the United States, as a leader, or as someone who also enslaved people? Likewise, the Statue of Liberty – does it make you think of freedom and democracy, or how many immigrants who came to this country were subjected to discrimination?

If you could build a monument in a public space, whose story would you tell?

Now imagine the experience of an artist named Kehinde Wiley. The year is 2016. Obama is still our president. Wiley is 38 years old, a Nigerian-American man born and raised in L.A. and has just arrived in Richmond, Virginia for one of the most important moments in his career, the opening at a museum of a huge retrospective exhibit featuring his art. Wiley decides to take a walk before his big night and finds himself beneath an enormous statue of J.E.B. Stuart, a confederate soldier on horseback. Just around the corner on Monument Avenue stand five more massive statues of confederate soldiers on horseback, a reminder that this city, Richmond, which is honoring Wiley, is the former seat of

the Confederacy, the 11 states that seceded from the US during the Civil War in a campaign to uphold slavery.

Wiley is overcome by emotion: "I'm a Black man walking those streets. I'm looking up at those things that give me a sense of dread and fear. What does that feel like, physically, to walk a public space and to have your state, your country, your nation say, 'This is what we stand by.'

"No. We want more. We demand more."

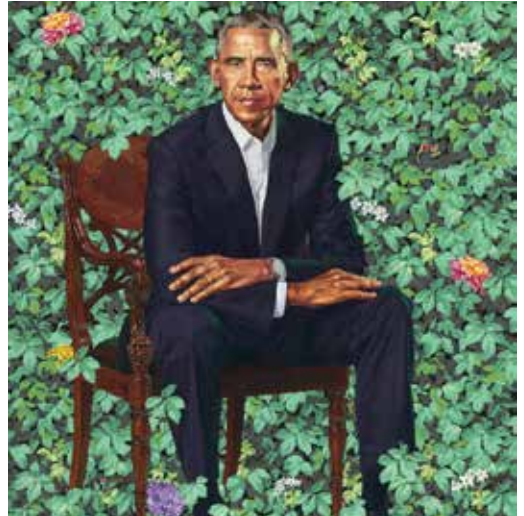
The statues portray confederate soldiers as heroes and victims of the "War of Northern Aggression," a name that southern history revisionists created to deliberately change the way the Civil War is remembered and to provoke a reaction. It is important to know that this phrase and these monuments were created during the Jim Crow Era, long after the Civil War ended. The Civil War ended in 1865. The monument of J.E.B. Stuart was erected in 1907 at a time when the Klu Klux Klan was growing rapidly. The monuments were part of a campaign to glorify an era when black people were enslaved.

One year after Wiley's trip to Richmond, two things happened that compelled him to follow his strong reaction to the monuments and take action. The nation watched peaceful protesters be attacked and one person die on national television at a White Supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. In 2017, Wiley became world famous for painting the official presidential portrait of President Obama. He chose to portray President Obama sitting in a formal armchair that looks like it belongs in an English mansion but this chair and President Obama appear to be *floating* in a wall of gorgeous, vibrant green leaves and brightly colored flowers, a lush tropical setting that reminds the viewer of his connection to Kenya and Hawaii. Before painting President Obama, Wiley was best known for his paintings of young African American men wearing the most trendy Hip Hop apparel, "street soldiers" that he painted in the classical style you'd see in the "masters" the European oil paintings that hang in the famous museums all over the world, valuable portraits of people that do not look like him. ***His goal is to change who is represented, who is seen, where we are seen and shift the power to transform culture and the perception of whose lives have status, value and importance.***

Wiley knows that art creates change. Wiley created a statue he named Rumors of War. It is huge; 27 feet tall, 16 feet wide and 25 feet long, deliberately larger than the Confederate statues on Monument Avenue. Its powerful features remind us of the classical style of the J.E.B. Stuart statue, but Wiley's statue is completely contemporary. Wiley's soldier is a young, black man with short locs, wearing a hoodie, leather jacket, ripped jeans and Nike high tops, a proud hero on a powerful horse. The name Rumors of War refers to a warning of God's Judgment. Wiley believes the biggest changes come in

times of upheaval and disturbance. Wiley's intention is to honor the black men in the United States today who face harm in the street and harm from political and social disempowerment. At the unveiling of the statue, Wiley described how he felt the night he first saw the monuments in Richmond adding, "Today we say yes to something that looks like us. We say yes to inclusivity. We say yes to broader notions of what it means to be an American. Are we ready? Let's get this party started!" The crowd exploded.

Wiley's art has unquestionably changed the narrative on Monument Avenue in Richmond, Virginia.



Kehinde Wiley's portrait of President Obama



Kehinde Wiley's "Rumors of War" statue in Richmond, Virginia

MEDITATION

by Kelli

Note: Usually a guided meditation is meant to be read by someone else while you close your eyes, listen and meditate. So if you can find a partner to read it aloud for you, do it! Otherwise, read through the script a few times and then close your eyes, relax, and breathe while recalling, visualizing and experiencing what you've read.

"Be the Mountain"

Today, we're going to meditate about mountains. Mountains are majestic...think of the adjectives we use for mountains...majestic, solid, beautiful, wooded, sacred, firm, strong...

Find a comfortable position... relax your body... from your head... all the way down to your toes. Take a deep breath in... and let it go... Continue to breathe deeply.

Bring your awareness to the sensations of your breath, and the gentle rhythm it is creating within you. Letting it be, just as it is. Each inhale and exhale announcing the next.

Expand your awareness to the sensations of your body. Sitting upright and with dignity – experience the surface beneath you and the support it provides. Root your body into its strength and become aware of your connection to it – complete, whole, and in this moment, you feel grounded.

As you sit there, visualize a beautiful grand mountain, reaching up into the clear blue sky, and rooted deep in the earth. This mountain is a monument to all that is solid, grand, unmoving, and beautiful.

Be this mountain and share in its stillness.

Be this mountain... take on its stability as your own. From the top of your crown, down your neck, and into the balance of your shoulders, like cliffs, descending into your arms and forearms, and coming to rest in the valley of your hands.

The rhythm of your breath is all that moves you. A living mountain: alive and aware, "yet unwavering in inner stillness. Completely what you are, beyond words and thought: a centered, grounded, unmovable presence."

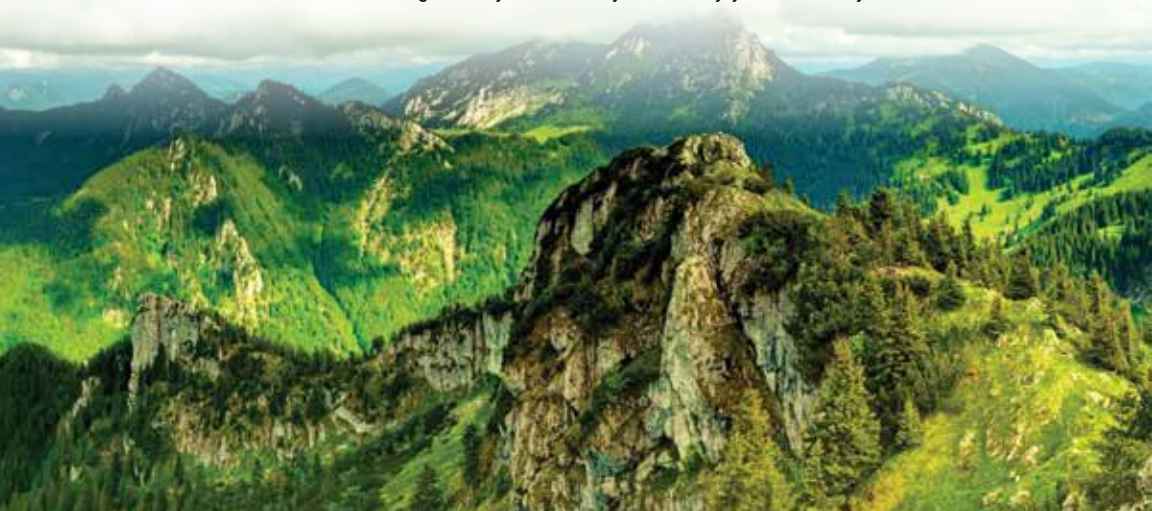
A mountain, which witnesses the sun travel across the sky, casting light and shadows and colors across its face. Moment by moment, in the mountain's stillness, the surface buzzes with life and activity: Snows melt, streams run down it, trees and flowers bloom and die and bloom again as the wildlife returns and departs with the seasons.

Through it all, the mountain sits. Aware of the changes that each moment brings, around it and to it. Yet it remains itself. Still, as day becomes night, becomes day again. The seasons flow one into the other, and the air swirls from hot and cold, and the weather turns from tame to turbulent. Still—none of this concerns the mountain, whose serenity is housed within, and cannot be disturbed...

In the same way, you can learn to experience the mountain as a way to embody the same centered, unwavering stillness and groundedness in the face of all that changes around you in your life – over seconds, and hours, and years.

Like the mountain you will experience enormous changes in your mind, your body, and the world around you. Through it all, be the mountain, and call on its patient strength and stability within you. Let it empower you to encounter each moment with mindful composure and compassionate clarity.

Breathe in... and exhale... You are strong and majestic... When you are ready, you can return your attention to the room.



REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Fam!

Hope this new decade brings lots of hope and promise to you all!

When I thought about this month's *Connect* theme, I was at a loss as to what I should write. I reflected on what it means to remember, and I found that memories are sooo powerful. Memories are one of the only things that can make you laugh and cry at the same time. Our brains are wired in such an awesome way, that we can even smell something that was familiar to us from our past and certain memories will come flooding back to our brains spontaneously!

I am so grateful for memories; they are very precious and one of the things that no one can take away from us. However, I have to admit that there are some that I wish I could forget, and I am sure that the entire human race has felt the same way at one time or another. Although this is the case, I am also thankful for some of those not so great memories, because they make me appreciate the good memories all the more! Therefore, in order for me to fully express how I feel about this month's *Connect* theme, in true Free Minds fashion, I have decided to dedicate a poem:

Remembrance

Our ability to remember is a beautiful gift
When times are hard, they help us shift
Going to another place and time
When our heart was warm and times sublime
Although the mood may be blue
It's taken captive by a memory coup
Next thing we know
We're somewhere else
A different time

A different self
It's like medicine to the soul
Memories power to console
So please remember not to forget
Your memories nothing can suppress
Because they will always belong to you
Just like eternal super glue
This perfect elixir
No thing can consume

Now of course, I have some very beneficial resources to pass on!



Toni Thomas & Associates

Community Empowerment Training Academy
101 Xenia Street SW - First Floor
202-610-1080

This is a workforce development program in DC offering CDL, security certifications and has recently partnered with another awesome workforce development in DC, the Hope Project, to also include IT services FREE to DC residents age 18 and over. Toni Thomas will also provide stipends for participation. Other services include extensive life skills training, job preparation, job development and entrepreneurial training.

Braille is a system of raised dots that visually impaired people can read with their fingers.

GETTING MY DEGREE FOR A JOB I LOVE

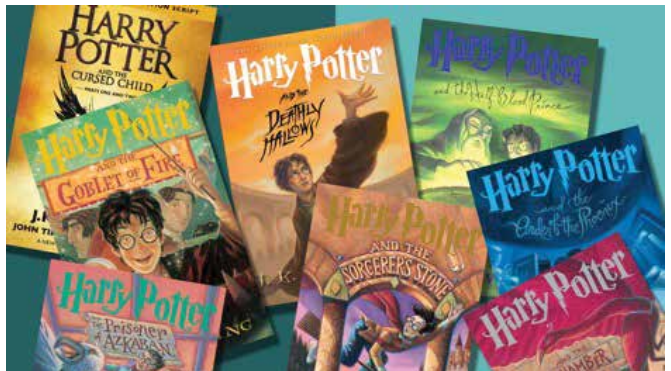
By Jeffrey

Tara's nephew, Jeffrey, wrote in a previous Connect about his diagnosis of a cancerous tumor that affected his optic nerve when he was a toddler. The chemotherapy caused him to lose his sight, but that has not stopped him in achieving his goals. Now 25 years old, he is in college and shares his journey and the struggles he overcomes every day to pursue his dream of becoming a counselor to help youth.

My relationship with school is a complicated one – highs and lows, struggles and achievements. I went to a special school for blind kids. I started learning braille (a system for the visually impaired to read) in the 2nd grade and it was hard. I couldn't read braille for long periods of time.

Everyone thought I was just lazy because I didn't want to read much, but it was because I had neuropathy in my fingertips (where they go numb and you can't feel anything) due to the chemotherapy. I just thought every blind kid had it and didn't realize the cause. School was also difficult because I never liked math and found sitting and listening to teachers' lectures boring. I wanted to move around and do activities. Then in high school I had an English teacher I loved. She got me into the *Harry Potter* series which I love. Sadly, she passed away during my senior year. I will never forget her. I went through depression and wrote about it in English class and she'd read it and give me a hug. She knew that's all I needed. She knew I wasn't the best braille reader, so she let me use audio books for book reports. She knew I'd love the sound effects, which I did.

She got me into college level English classes in high school. I started taking community college classes in the afternoons and then when I graduated, I went to one. It was all new for me. I was one of very few people who was blind



on the campus. I took a class called "Mobility" on how to take the bus and get around campus. It's hard getting around a college campus when you have sight; imagine when you are blind!

I had to take a psychology class as an elective and really loved it. It totally engaged me. I loved learning about how the mind works. The fight versus flight response. We did fascinating exercises like for a unit on addiction, we all had to give up something so we could relate to the psychological and physical pain of addiction.

I ended up getting my Associate's degree in Psychology. I then went to another college and got my bachelor's degree. Now that sounds all easy right? Wrong! At first, I didn't realize everything you had to learn was on the syllabus from the start. All the assignments. I took on the bad habit of waiting until the last minute to complete my assignments and study. I also felt lonely sometimes because there was only one other vision impaired person at the school, and they were low vision so could do the work more easily.

Everything I did took twice as long. I had to go to the writers' center to help with my papers. I took my braille notes in class and reviewed them. I also have text to speech but it's laborious. One of the hardest parts is actually formatting the papers correctly on the computer!

I decided that I wanted to be a counselor, but I knew I needed a second degree after college, which I wasn't looking forward to!

The great thing though was I was able to take what they call a practicum and I worked at a counseling center doing play therapy for kids. I loved working with those kids. Kids communicate their feelings through play so you can help them when they are going through depression, healing from abuse, or any other hard emotional experience.

I was working and taking intensive graduate level classes and it got to be too much. I went through a breakdown and thought about quitting school, but I went to visit some family in Florida and got a chance to mellow out. I knew I had to complete school to do the work I loved, so I went back. I switched to part time. I told myself if it takes an extra year, I can focus on my internship. It worked. It was long days working with both kids and adult support groups, but I knew I wanted to do the experiential learning. That's how I learn best. My co-workers were really helpful. I had to learn to ask for help a lot with the paperwork we have to fill out for clients.

I will graduate this May. I can't wait. The best news is the place where I interned wants me back and has hired me after I graduate! I have a reason to get through the hard schooling part. I have a lot of school debt from my loans and won't be making much money, but I will be doing something I love and helping kids.

I know this *Connect* issue is about how we remember the people in our lives who have died. I do this with my work. When I was a kid, every summer I was so lucky to go to the Ronald McDonald summer camp for kids with cancer. I've lost good friends who didn't make it through their cancer treatments. Each summer you worry who will be able to make it back. We have a special ceremony at the lake (the camp is in the mountains) where we write the names of our friends who died on stones and throw them in the lake. We all stand in a circle, hold hands, and pass the energy by squeezing each other's hands and passing it along. When my good friend Gabe died, it was really hard. I think of Gabe a lot and talk about him. It definitely helps. Sometimes it's out of the blue. Someone will say something, and it will remind me of Gabe or my other loved ones who died and it will bring it all flooding back. Through my work in counseling in schools, I know to recognize the physical symptoms, heart racing, muscles tight and I remember to breathe and think of them with me. My grandfather died last year, and I miss him so much. He was really funny. On the days I'm struggling sitting through class, I can hear his voice in my ear. He used to say to me, "Jeff, your brain can only absorb what your butt can endure." And I smile and the time seems to go by faster.

KEEPING A LOVED ONE'S NAME ALIVE

By Maji, FM Friend

Back in my younger years after recently "jumping off the porch," I used to be so hell-bent on wanting to hang with the older crowd around my neighborhood. I mean I was the best (and worst) at trying to imitate everything they do. Even when it came down to partaking in consuming drugs and alcohol. I never really knew the impact gun violence had on my environment because it was NORMAL to hear somebody got killed. It was NORMAL for me to have to dress up and attend a funeral of one of my neighborhood friends. It was also NORMAL after the funeral to have get-togethers in which we sit around and REMEMBER everything that person was to all of us.

One time I attended a repast of another older homeboy who got killed; we were doing the usual of smoking & drinking all while giving our individual stories of who that person was to us. One of my homeboys asked me to open a bottle of liquor that sat next to me. When thinking nothing of it and wanting to impress everybody sitting around us, I took the bottle, cracked the seal but before I could take the first sip my homeboy grabbed my arm and stopped me from taking that first sip. Then he gave me this angry look that I never seen before. I don't know if it was because of the passing of our friend or if he was too high. But I remembered him not letting go of my arm for some reason. As I tried to shake from his grip embarrassed that we now had everyone's attention, he took the bottle out my hand and lectured me on the following:

"Boy, you never drink from out the bottle until you pour out a little bit for our homie. Give me that bottle, yo!!!!"

Then he proceeded in doing just that. He took the bottle, held it up, said a few words under his breath and poured out enough liquor for our dead homeboy. Until the party was over, I sat there in deep thought realizing that it wasn't no game around my neighborhood. I was having friends getting killed and I knew that I would never see them again. After that night, I held on to that liquor bottle as evidence to never forget what I was taught.

I never understood the significance behind why we "pour out a little liquor" for the departed. You see it happening everywhere, especially in the African American culture. But in the traditional African culture, many tribes believed that even after a person's physical death, as long as you recognized and remembered that person, they would continue to exist here today. It's not until the last person who knew him (or her) has also died that one becomes completely dead.

So keeping a person's name alive is actually the best medicine especially during the grieving process. Today, whenever I look at any of my tattoos in memory of homeboys I lost, I just remember certain moments that had us at our happiest. An obituary might give you a brief insight of what a person's life was like but the real stories come from those who had deep personal connections with that person.

As far as what we could do better as a society. We need to convey messages of truth and unconditional love to the younger generations. In order to break the psychological chains that "Death Is Imminent," it's important to educate that there's truly LIFE after death and that no one really dies even in passing. I want to be remembered as a resilient and compassionate person. A man who loved his family even when I felt FAMILY had deserted me. A man who tried to piece together his own story to leave behind to his future family members. Because as much as I want to be remembered, when I'm gone hopefully I'm not forgotten. And maybe someone will "pour out a little liquor" for me.

FAMILY TIES

continued from page 4

who are still here, I have made it my mission to show my appreciation.

I send 80 texts every single morning Monday through Friday. People can't believe it, but I do it. I text each and every one of my nieces and nephews every morning. I text everyone in Free Minds every morning. I text my seven lawyers that have been fighting for my freedom every morning. I text all uncles and cousins. I text the reporter at *The Washington Post* who wrote about my story every morning. It's not easy. I didn't know much about cellphones when I got out. I'm still not good with the emojis! But five days a week, I wake up at 4:45AM to get started. My goal is to be finished texting every day by 6AM. It's important to me as a way to remember the people that matter to me.

It's gotten to the point that people expect to hear from me. Once my phone got cut off, and when I got it back, I had all kinds of texts from people asking "What's up? Where's my text?" People like my texts. I work fulltime as a parking lot attendant. But in a way, this is my real job now! And it's a job I take seriously. Among those 80 people are people who I did time with, as well as the ones outside that showed me love and support while I was behind bars. They had faith in me that I didn't commit that crime. They prayed for me. They wished me the best. They were there for me. The least I can do is say *good morning, have a nice day, or have a blessed weekend*. No question, I'm trying to spread the love I have for all of you. Now that I'm home, I want other people to know that they're not forgotten. Love starts from within. So I'm sharing it.

DEAR JOSHUA

By AW

Live your life not celebrating victories, but overcoming defeats. – Che Guevara

Dear Joshua,

Having learned of your passing, but not knowing you personally has not in any way interfered with the heartfelt expressions of love, loss, and honor for your memory. What follows is my attempt of using the written word to express what my soul is so thankful for in saying; I appreciate the love, concern, and willingness to fight for my right to life, liberty and justice you practiced in your time here.

As I was going through the "On The Same Page" issue of the *Connect*, your poem "Going Forward" kept calling to me, as it connected with that gift which is you. After reading and rereading your thoughts, your poem unnumbered times, I knew that you know me even though your birth occurred six years after my incarceration at the age of 16. Your entire life I was in chains, in a cage, from the time of your birth until your passing from the physical.

In the 26 years span of time, you became a MAN, so young, yet so WISE – full of wisdom gained through much hardship and pain. Your humanity, in spite of the hate that hate produced, transcended the inhumanity of institutionalized racism and color-based caste system that touched this old soul of a man incarcerated since he was but a sixteen-year-old child. Instead of learning to hate, you chose to love – in spite of the cruel and brutal practice of a system that caged you as a child of sixteen.

The spirit behind the words of a man so young, hailed from a place where you were so old and so very wise. Joshua, as I write you this letter, one of your homies sings to both you and I as I push this pen across this page, communicating with you on a whole different level: Marvin Gaye. He connects us in ways beyond the so-called rational.



Marvin Gaye (singer, songwriter, and record producer)

Joshua, your piece, "A Self-Care Practice: Forgive Yourself," moved me to look long and hard at myself.

*"The mind is like a sponge
So the more we educate ourselves
And stay around positive energy
And begin to seek
We shall find our gift and our sole purpose
Which God created us for."*

At 47 years old, like a sponge, my mind soaked up your words of wisdom. Compelling me to have to really consider whether or not I had truly forgiven myself for things I had done when I was but a child of seven and eight years old. My value lost before I even knew I had any. PTSD, just letters used to describe a mental health condition invoked when I was handcuffed behind my back as a child and told I would be a criminal just like my dad, and then exacerbated by being shoved into prison at 16 years old.

Joshua, you would agree that,
"Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."
– MLK Jr.

In closing, I celebrate your life with this letter I am writing to thank you for your example and the road map you have left for us, your Free Minds Family to follow. Your last email to the staff of Free Minds reflected your deep love and understanding of the needs of the wounded, abandoned and neglected humanity which is we, the untouchable caste called criminals, n*****s, sp**s, f**s, d***s, outlaws, thugs, and incarcerated 21st century human stock to be traded (bought and sold) in the open aired markets of the so-called halls of justice.

(Sorry, another rant and rave).

Simply put; Thank you, little Brother, who is both a teacher and friend to me, even though we never met in 3D, face to face.

Though we have not had the honor or pleasure to enjoy the blessing that is a simple human hug, handshake, and share a chili dog at Ben's Chili Bowl, still through all those who went before us, we have touched in a way that no bars, walls, razor wire, gun towers, or guards' mean stares can curtail: on the plain of souls, ideas, love, truth, peace, freedom and justice... We have touched, are in touch, and little Brother your name and the fact that you was will remain with me until it is my time to come join you all.

And we shall continue
Loving each other and
Lifting each other up
And fighting for justice.
While all the while asking,
"What more can we do?"
A Love Supreme,

AW
a.k.a. Shaka N'Zinga

IN THE NEWS *by John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: UNDERSTANDING BREXIT

In every issue, we will bring you an in-depth analysis of a particular topic.

In June of 2016, all of the citizens of the United Kingdom were invited to vote on the future of the country. The U.K. is made up of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. At issue was the decision of whether or not to leave the European Union (the "E.U."), a collective governing body that sets common political and economy policy for more than two dozen countries.



More than 46.5 million people voted on the notion of a British Exit, aka "Brexit." And 52 percent of them supported leaving the E.U. So on that day, the United Kingdom began a process that continues nearly four years later of extracting itself from a major political alliance.

Why is this a big deal? Because as a member of the E.U., a lot of international rules were set for the United Kingdom. And now it must define its own relationships with the world for the first time in decades.

While it is not exactly the same, picture the E.U. like our federal government. Our states have a lot of power to run themselves, but they must follow certain economic and political rules set at a national level. So the members of the E.U. are like our states, and the E.U. is like the federal government.

The E.U. countries enjoy easy access to trade amongst each other and with other major partners around the world with relatively low or zero tariffs, a form of tax meant to serve as a barrier to trade. Just like California would not pay tariffs to send goods or services to Indiana, and California businesses would not pay a higher tariff to do business in China than Indiana would.

Imagine if, say, New York left the United States. It would have to set up its own trade deals, not only with other countries but with all of the other states in America. It would have to set up its own rules for how it partnered with the world on intelligence sharing and security issues, because the FBI and CIA would no longer represent New York.

But this was the desire of the majority who voted to "Leave" in the United Kingdom. They believed too much of their own interests, both economic and cultural, delegated to a government that met in Belgium and did not have the UK's true interests at heart.

One major issue at the time of the vote was immigration. European Union countries, as part of their membership, commit to relatively free movement of people within the union. So members of other E.U. nations could move to London, for example, get a job and connect to the national healthcare system.

Immigration was identified as one of the primary drivers of "Leave" voters, along with tighter border control and the ability to set U.K.-only laws.

While Brexit technically occurred in late January, the process has not finished. And the reason that Brexit is not yet completed is simple: It is really hard to set up new economic terms with dozens of countries and trade unions, while also creating a new immigration and customs system. There is also the issue of Northern Ireland's border with the Republic of Ireland, which was once a politically divisive hotspot and could be again now that one side has left the E.U.

Many within the U.K. feared that its departure from the European Union will have a massive, destabilizing effect on the world's economy. While that is still possible, a post-Brexit crash has yet to occur. The U.K. is a major economic hub, and it now must write its own economic future.

Despite the majority of voters supporting Brexit, there has still been protests over the decision to leave.



IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *by John, FM Friend*

HEALTH *by Pramila*

The new coronavirus (Covid-19) is spreading rapidly across the globe. It has killed more than 2,700 people and infected more than 81,000 people. A majority of the cases have been confined to the Wuhan region of China but as of early March, there have been a small number of reported cases in the US.

Coronaviruses are classified into a family of viruses that infect animals. Seven different types of coronavirus have transferred from animals to humans. This latest type of virus isn't as severe as the other types but it can still be dangerous, even deadly, for the elderly or people with other health conditions.

The Covid-19 virus is thought to have originated in a "wet market" in Wuhan which sold live and dead animals. On average, these markets are densely packed and the lack of sanitation in these markets, such as killing live animals there, is believed to be the cause of the outbreak. The original source of this virus is thought to have inhabited bats as bats carry many diseases but it has not been confirmed by scientists.

It has spread to 77 countries. Six European countries have reported an outbreak of the virus. Three European hotels have been on lockdown as new cases arise throughout the continent. South Korea has reported more than 1,000 cases. It is so far the largest outbreak found outside of China. A US soldier stationed in South Korea tested positive for the virus. President Trump stated on February 24 that everything is under control. How will the US respond to the outbreak? Will everything be under control?



The map above shows the spread of Coronavirus as of February 27, 2020. The dark red represents the country of origin, China. Red represents countries with confirmed cases and blue represents countries with suspected cases.

NATION

The presidential election looms in November, and the field of Democratic candidates to take on Donald Trump is finally starting to narrow. By the time you read this, things could already have changed, but as of late February, former Vice President Joe Biden is leading the race to become the nominee. Bernie Sanders, the Senator from Vermont, remains in serious contention for the nomination, and Massachusetts Senator Elizabeth Warren is still in the race as well.



ENTERTAINMENT

Awards season is over, and the Oscars and Grammys both welcomed exciting new artists into the winner's circle this year.

The lion's share of the big Grammy awards went to two up and coming stars: Lizzo (pictured below), the Detroit-born rapper whose "Truth Hurts" won Best Pop Solo Performance, and Billie Eilish, an 18-year-old singer who cleaned up with five wins that night.

At the Oscars, filmmaker Bong Joon-ho won Best Director and Best Picture for Parasite, a Korean film that follows a poor family's efforts to put food on the table by using its connection to a very wealthy family.



IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *by John, FM Friend*

SPORTS

In January, the sports world witnessed one of the most shocking celebrity deaths in recent times. Kobe Bryant, one of the NBA's most prolific scorers and a five-time NBA champion, was killed in a helicopter crash with his daughter Gianna and seven other passengers.

Bryant had recently retired, and was already starting to make his presence known off the NBA hardwood. He won an Oscar for his short animated film, "Dear Basketball," and had begun a basketball academy for young women.

Bryant and his daughter were honored at a ceremony in February at the Staples Center, where the Los Angeles Lakers and Los Angeles Clippers play.

Bryant's death raised the question of how we, as a society, honor and remember complex public figures who may have harmed others, as Bryant had in 2003 been arrested for sexual assault. The charges were later dropped but Bryant and the unnamed woman settled a civil lawsuit. He said of the incident, "Although I truly believe this encounter between us was consensual, I recognize now that she did not and does not view this incident the same way I did. After months of reviewing discovery, listening to her attorney, and even her testimony in person, I now understand how she feels that she did not consent to this encounter."

Bryant and his wife, Vanessa Bryant, were also notable philanthropists; they founded the Kobe and Vanessa Bryant Family Foundation, with the goal of helping young people in need and aiding people experiencing homelessness. The Bryants were founding donors of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC.

There are a few sports career records that most people believed would never be broken. Two of them could go down in the next five years.

In basketball, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar's record for points scored (38,387) has stood for decades now. Kobe, Michael Jordan, and Karl Malone all came close, but no luck.

But LeBron James has moved into third place all time on the list, and now sits less than 5,000 away from Abdul-Jabbar. If he can stay healthy, and his team keeps making the playoffs, he could do it in about three or four seasons.

The other seemingly unbreakable record: Wayne Gretzky's 894 goals, which is a full 93 goals better than second place Gordie Howe. But there is a chance that will fall too, because Washington's own Alex Ovechkin just notched his 700th career goal in a February game against the New Jersey Devils.

In the NFL, the Kansas City Chiefs defeated the San Francisco 49ers 31-20 to win the Super Bowl LIV. Kansas City was led by quarterback and game MVP Patrick Mahomes (pictured right).



LeBron James (left) and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (right)



DC PHOTOS



This mural inspired by *Dia de los Muertos* (see page 28 for more information) has just recently been painted on the side of a building in the U Street Corridor.



This mural celebrates the history of Lee's Flower Shop, an independent, Black-owned business operating in the District since 1945. Do you know where Lee's Flower Shop is located?



This popular soul food restaurant has two locations in DC – do you know where they are?

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!



DID YOU KNOW?

Death and Remembrance Around the World

by Pramila

As someone who has a foot in two different cultures, me being a Nepali-American, I was exposed to different ways of remembering those who have gone. I was born in Nepal, a small Southeast Asian country nestled between India and China, and lived there until

I was seven. At that age, I was adopted by a white Christian family and moved to a city near Boston, Massachusetts. In my experience growing up in a white Christian family, the funerals I attended have been somber. The funerals were more about the death of the loved one rather than celebrating their life. You could only wear certain colors, you had to compose yourself a certain way and different traditions were practiced. There was usually a church service and then there was a gravesite visit where the family and friends of the deceased would say a few words about them. After, we would have a small luncheon and talk about that person. Then everyone would go home and move on with their life. I took a class on the history of emotions and one of the topics we discussed was death. I learned that death is a tough subject that isn't talked about a lot in American society, except when we are confronted by it. Even then, we are uncomfortable talking about it. But I believe it needs to be talked about as it is part of the cycle of human life.

This way of remembering a loved one in my American family was such a contrast to what I witnessed in Pashupatinath, an important site where funerals are performed by Hindus in Nepal. As a little girl whose family members were Hindus, I do not remember witnessing a funeral and as a grown-up, I still do not understand the traditions of my family. While I was visiting Pashupatinath and witnessed a funeral, I observed that the funeral being performed was largely tied to what religion they practiced and in this case it was Hinduism. For Hindu Nepalis, the wrapping of the body in a white cotton cloth and setting it on fire on a raft down the river is the tradition they follow. The family of the deceased bathe in the water for they



believe that it is holy. Also, the oldest male relative of the deceased is the one who performs the rituals. While mourning is never suppressed, it is frowned upon to cry for the dead. During the first thirteen days after the relative's death, the family does not participate in celebrations such as weddings or go to the temple. Sometimes, the family is in mourning for up to a year.

I have always been fascinated by cultures that are not my own and I have been tasked with finding out how other cultures around the world remember the living. We will start with Mexico, then South Korea, Indonesia, Ghana and Australia.



Pashupatinath Temple

DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS IN MEXICO: For Mexicans, Día de Los Muertos ("Day of the Dead" in English) is a celebration of life. Children from a young age learn that death is not to be feared and is a part of life. During Día de Los Muertos, it is believed that the souls of the departed come to visit and provide advice to their loved ones. People in Mexico visit gravesites and take that time to clean their loved one's grave as gravesites in Mexico are publicly owned and often managed by the local churches. People leave candles, flowers and their loved one's favorite food. The family gathers around to sing, eat, and tell stories. On page 11, read about how Melissa's family from El Salvador celebrates Day of the Dead – it's similar to the Mexican tradition but not quite the same.



SOUTH KOREAN BURIAL BEADS: In South Korean traditional funeral practices, the body is buried. However, funeral practices have changed due to a law passed in 2000 which required that anyone burying their dead would have to remove them in 60 years. Cremation has become popular. Some have created a new practice called "death beads." The body is first cremated and then transformed into these shiny colorful beads. The beads are kept in a glass container, usually in the living room like you would if you had ashes in an urn. It is their way of constantly reminding them of their dead loved ones.



South Korean burial beads

DEATH RITUALS OF THE TORAJANS PEOPLE IN SOUTH SULAWESI, INDONESIA:

For the Torajans, an indigenous (native) group in Indonesia, death is constantly talked about and young children are taught that death is a part of life. The Torajans treat their deceased loved ones as if they were sick. They treat the body as if it were still alive because they believe that the spirit remains near the body and desires more care. The body is cared for in a traditional ancestral house, called a Tongkonan. The body remains there for several months to decades, until the tribe has enough money to give the deceased a proper funeral. Dried plants are used to combat the smell of the body. A water buffalo is sacrificed, and the last breath of the water buffalo symbolizes the official death of the sick person and at that time, the soul leaves the body. The funeral ceremony lasts for a couple of days and during that time the body is cleaned and dressed for their departure into the next life. There is a huge feast and family and friends gather around and share stories.



Traditional Tongkonan house.

GHANAIAN FUNERALS: Funerals in Ghana are extravagant and over the top. Thousands of dollars go into the cost of the funeral. Family and friends from all over come to say goodbye to the deceased. Mourners will come to the funeral either dressed in all black or black and red. Sometimes when conflict arises in the family, the body may not be buried for several months. At the funeral, there will be singing, dancing, food, drink and traditional drum groups and dancers. A unique ritual that takes place among Ghanaian people are the fantasy coffins. Fantasy coffins are caskets that are made to look like animals or objects and are usually decorated in bright colors.



(Top) A man can be seen working on a fantasy coffin.
(Bottom) A fantasy coffin in the design of a shoe.

ABORIGINAL MORTUARY RITUALS, AUSTRALIA:

The funerals in the Aboriginal tradition are quite different from Western traditions. The term "Aboriginal" refers to the various indigenous tribes of Australia. The funeral starts with a smoking ceremony. The reason why this is done is to drive away the spirit from the body. In the next part of the funeral, they paint ochre (clay pigment from the earth) in the areas where the dead person lived, and they raise a flag there to signal that the person has passed. In addition to the smoking ceremony, the next part of the funeral is called the death ceremony. In the death ceremony, the body is left in the deceased's home while the family and friends celebrate. Afterwards, they wrap up the body and put it on a platform where it will decompose. Instead of being sad, the mourners celebrate that person's life by singing, dancing, eating and drinking.



Traditional platform on which Aboriginal people place the deceased to decompose.

Now that you have an idea of how some other cultures remember the dead, what do you think of their practices? Do you find any similarities between these practices and your family's practices in funeral rituals and remembrances?



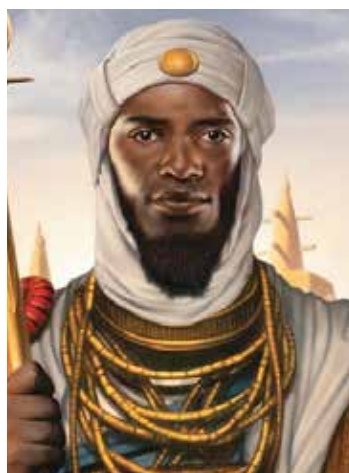
JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

By JG, Free Minds Member

"Honor your ancestors" is something I used to hear all the time when I attended certain Black History events or read certain books, but I didn't really understand what that meant for quite some time. It used to feel preachy in the sense that all of these older guys would stand behind the podium and tell the younger guys that we needed to get our stuff in order because those who came before us lived and died so that we could enjoy so many of the rights that we didn't have before as black people in this country. I guess, as a younger man at the time, the accusatory tone that I felt kind of turned me off from truly trying to understand exactly what they meant.

As time went on and I took in more information it became clearer to me. I began to develop a very holistic view of the importance of honoring my ancestors. My ancestors understood that they were under attack in every sense of the word, physically, mentally, economically, spiritually. They mobilized different organizations and did their best to not only combat all the ways in which we were being attacked, but also to educate and motivate the masses to be proactive and take charge of their own lives. Men and women such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr, Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Noble Drew Ali, etc., were all examples of what acknowledgment of our personal power can do for us and those around us.

I honor my ancestors by knowing and understanding the fact that my history didn't begin with slavery in the Americas. I honor my ancestors by knowing that I share the same bloodline as Mansa Musa and General Tariq and understanding what that means. I honor my ancestors by remembering that my blood is noble, by knowing that I am a king and holding myself to that standard, even when the whole world is telling me otherwise.



Mansa Musa was a sultan of the Mali Empire of west Africa.



Assata Shakur



Angela Davis



Martin Luther King Jr.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: TAKING THE FIRST STEP

By CB, FM Member

"The secret of getting ahead is getting started."

-Mark Twain, celebrated American author

"Nobody got the perfect job overnight. You have to take the first step and work towards it." - CB, Free Minds member

CB was one of Free Minds' very first book club members. Just 17 years old when he was charged and incarcerated as an adult in 2002, he served six years before being released. Unfortunately, CB was home less than a year before being rearrested. This time, he served nine years in federal prison. CB came home in October and says the rest of his life starts now!

I have a 15-year-old daughter, and I've missed all of those years with her. That time being away taught me that being locked up was not the thing to be. I truly just got tired and decided I'm going to come home and do the right thing. I've been lucky to have support. But I'm getting older and I realized that the people that always been there for me aren't always going to be there if I continue to act up.

Before I was released last fall, I decided I would focus absolutely everything I had on getting a job. I wasn't nervous about whether or not I could find something because I was determined to work and I was willing to do absolutely anything, even if it was what some might consider the lowest job - working at a fast food restaurant. And that's what I'm doing. I got a job at Wendy's.

To be honest, it was easy. Free Minds helped me get my identification in order and before I knew it, someone connected me with a person at Wendy's. I made a call and they scheduled an interview. I didn't even have to get dressed up because it was a phone interview.

It was easy for me. They gave me different scenarios about how I would respond to difficult situations. They asked what I would do if I disagreed with my manager. Or had to deal with a challenging customer. I guess they liked my answers because they offered me the job. I was so excited when they told me, I couldn't sleep that night! I knew that some kind of income was about to come in, and I didn't have to go back into the streets or be dependent upon other people.

I work at the cash register taking people's orders. I'm also responsible for helping to keep the restaurant looking nice. I sweep up, wipe down tables, all of that. One of my strengths has always been to help other people out. I like my job and I'm good at it. My favorite part is meeting all different kinds of people. I didn't see new people in so long while I was locked up, so talking and interacting with

all kinds of people, that just makes me happy. You'll get people coming in who want to joke around, and I'll laugh and joke with them. Of course sometimes the customers are rude. I work the night shift until 3 am, and usually at the end of the shift at night, you might have people who are drunk or they just want to be derogatory. I've had to work at not letting other people's bad behavior get under my skin and this job has taught me patience. Taking verbal abuse from customers is hard.

One time this woman ordered her food and we were busy, so it took a little time for her order to come out. She was so impatient. Her food came out and she was so angry, she said she wanted her money back. But her food was sitting right there! She still didn't want it. That's crazy! I try to calm people down. At first, I would go back and forth with them. But I've learned not to do that. Now I know that the best thing to do is go get the manager and let them deal with it.

It's not always just the customers who are difficult. My first manager was a young woman. She wanted to be on my back about every little thing. She wanted me to move like a robot-moving so fast, and all the time, she's still moving so slow. It got to the point where she was going overboard trying to show her authority over me. I dealt with it the best way I could, without disrespecting her and talked with the general manager about my work. They agreed and moved her to another location and that has really helped.

I get tired working so late every night. But I'm not gonna lie. I go to bed happy every single night. My head hits the pillow and I know that I am free, I have a job, and I'm making a stable life for me and my daughter. My paycheck is small and it's hard to save because I need to do for my daughter. There are things she needs. But it feels so good when I see how proud she is of me. She tells me all the time. I was willing to take this job because I knew I needed to prove myself. I've never worked before. This is my first actual job. We all have to start at the beginning. I wasn't going to waste a bunch of time waiting for the perfect job to find me. I wasn't qualified yet, so that wasn't realistic. What I needed to do was just take the first step. I'm hoping in six months or a year, I can transition to a warehouse job making a little more money and get better hours. But I know I gotta run through the storm and stick to it. There will be better opportunities for me. Meanwhile, I'm learning skills and discipline. Most importantly, I'm showing just how much I want to work.

AROUND THE WORLD: A VISIT TO ROME, ITALY

By Roemer, FM Friend



Evening in Rome, Italy

Way up high on the famous Spanish Steps, rising up from the Tiber river, you can see almost all of Rome. The great city, 4,000 years old, sprawls out before you. Obelisks, churches, cathedral domes, basilicas, the Roman baths, all of it lies before you in a vast display. And paintings, paintings, paintings. The city is very long and very wide, and very, very old. There is so much here, in layer upon layer over the different centuries, that you can study this view for hours. Birds are wheeling in the sky above you, and other tourists are coming and going, but you just keep staring at this great sight.

The Vatican and Vatican City are right in the center. The big dome of St. Peter's Basilica is one of the many works of Michelangelo, who carved the Pieta statue, and painted the Sistine Chapel for a pope as well. He was born in 1475 and lived almost 90 years. He carved the great Pieta, in light gray marble, when he was just 24. When I see it, it takes my breath away, and I try not to cry – at least not in public. The dead Christ, down from the cross, is lying in his mother's arms.

When you land at the Rome airport you might not know it, but you're in for your first great Rome experience: the 90-mile-an-hour taxicab ride! Rome is 20 miles from the airport, and the taxi drivers are a competent and friendly bunch, but they hit the pedal on those nice straight roads into town, usually talking fast on a cell-phone to their buddies. They talk Italian in a torrent and they know you can't understand it, and that's fine with them. Welcome to Rome! Actually, this experience is not that harrowing. Speeds can be 80-85 miles per hour! Before long you hit the huge, ancient outer walls of ancient Rome, and the cabbies have to slow down.

I've got to mention the food! Pasta made fresh every day at the many small and large restaurants all over town. Linguine, fettucini, penne, etc., plain with tomato sauce or mixed with meats of all different kinds. Thousands of coffee and cappuccino bars on almost every street in the city, and jammed together in the many piazzas (public squares). The desserts are many and fabulous, home-made also. There is a strange lack of vegetables on the menu in Italy.

I was lucky enough to be in Rome on New Year's Eve, welcoming in 2020. The Italians love disco, and they love fireworks! What a great party, at the big old hotel, the Principi. There's nothing like dancing at midnight on colored, inlaid marble floors! I felt for just a moment like a grand old Roman aristocrat in his big old domus (grand home), 2,000 years ago.

"Everyone tells me the apocalypse is coming, so why not live in Rome, the eternal city?" – Gore Vidal



Piazza (Plaza) Navona in Rome



The Spanish Steps in Rome



Roman bath



The Pietà



Cafes like this one are abundant all across Rome



Rome is also home to the Colosseum, an amphitheater where public spectacles were put on, including gladiator battles and plays. The Colosseum was built almost 2,000 years ago.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

Long Way Down

with Neely



Hello Free Minds readers! As you know by now, our most recent BAM book was *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. This book takes place over the course of 60 seconds and follows Will's way down an elevator on his way to avenge his brother's death. Before he reaches the bottom, he meets a variety of characters, learning that bullets can miss, leaving an impact on the entire community. Here are some thoughts from Free Minds members:

1. Throughout the book, Will talks about the importance of following the "rules" of the neighborhood (see pages 31-35). Were there rules in the neighborhood you grew up in? Who sets these rules and why? How would you go about changing them?

DS: Yes, there were rules in my neighborhood. The rules were the same as any other "hood". If you didn't follow the rules you were picked on, victimized, and in certain cases killed. The rules are set by misguided individuals who perpetuate drug use, violence and death at the expense of those too weak to see what's going on. I would get rid of the hood mentality and focus on community. A hood is used to cover the head.

DP: Yes, there were rules in my hood, usually written by the most aggressive or most cunning. I went from following the rules to writing them. And like anything rules can be broken. The consequences can sometimes be deadly, but truth be told the rule followers often die faster than the rule breakers. Following them can be an option but it depends on the situation. The only way to change the rules is through love. Love conquers all 90% of the time.

JC: Yeah there were rules when I was growing up and if you didn't follow them you could end up dead. There's no such thing as only one option, it's only the ones that you choose that decides your fate. These rules were established generations before our time to create some type of structure, so what's the point of fixing what's not broke.

MZ: Yes, there were "rules" in my neighborhood. Well if you didn't follow them the ole heads would step in and make sure you knew you were outta line. To me not having a father, I looked up to a lot of the ole heads so yes it was the only option. The ole heads set the rules because they been there, done that, they set the foundation. Changing the rules to the hood is to try to get the youth to understand that it's not cool to do certain things.

2. Why do you think Reynolds uses poetry to narrate the story?

AW: Mr. Reynolds' narration by poetry has made his creative storytelling both very intimate and personal for me. I am hooked on this writing style. I'll attempt it at some point.

DS: I think Reynolds' use of poetry is to get the reader to look at his words as a work of art. He gets you to look at Will's situation with the eyes of someone looking at a picture. This is why I think it impacts the reader in a way normal sentences wouldn't. For instance, it doesn't read like a novel, it reads like a series of poems that turn into a story.

DP: It's upbeat and requires one's brain to click in a way a normal novel wouldn't. I never seen a book like that. Great selection, Family.

KS: Yes, I feel he did this because poetry speaks to the other heart within. It feels like I have met the soul walking upon my path.

3. Will says that no matter the tough situation he finds himself in, he is always comforted by the moon (page 21). Is there someone or something in your life that you always rely on to give you comfort during difficult times?

BC: My pets.

DJ: Me, I would have to say reading a book or listening to slow jams just makes the day like a hug from an old friend.

KS: When I was a babe, little child, going to sleep to fly. As I've gotten older a book, almost any book gives me great comfort or hearing someone reading. Thanks for this question.

TG: At one time it was my best friend. Now, I too seek out the reliable appearances of the moon.

EH: Yes, thinking of my daughter Mercedes.

4. One of the rules in Will's community is, "Don't cry." Why do you think this is a rule? Do you think when people refrain from crying it has an impact on them and the larger community?

DS: Crying is a sign of weakness in the hood and the weak are taken advantage of. I do think not crying has an impact on not just the community, but individuals as a whole who have no way to express emotions like hurt, anger, pain and happiness. A baby cries because it can't talk and tell you what's bothering it. Crying is a form of release. I cry in the shower (lol).

TG: To cry is to show a connection to your feelings, your heart, a place where you can be hurt. If you cry it shows those outside of you where you're vulnerable. The "don't cry" rule causes a mental disconnect of an individual in terms of what he feels and how to express them.

VC: I believe that when you refrain from crying, that hurt, pain, anger whatever is causing it has to be released and in my case those tears always poured out through bad decision making, impulsiveness, drugs, alcohol, acts of violence, which all showed how unhealthy it was to suppress those tears. And so, my suppression of the cries inevitably impacted the larger community because I played a part in the perpetuation of the cycle of negative activities.

5. The ending of the book is ambiguous (open to more than one interpretation). What do you think happens? Why do you think the author ended the book this way? If you were writing the sequel, what do you think would happen after this?

AW: I think Slim goes on to live out his dream. I'd write the sequel to reflect this.

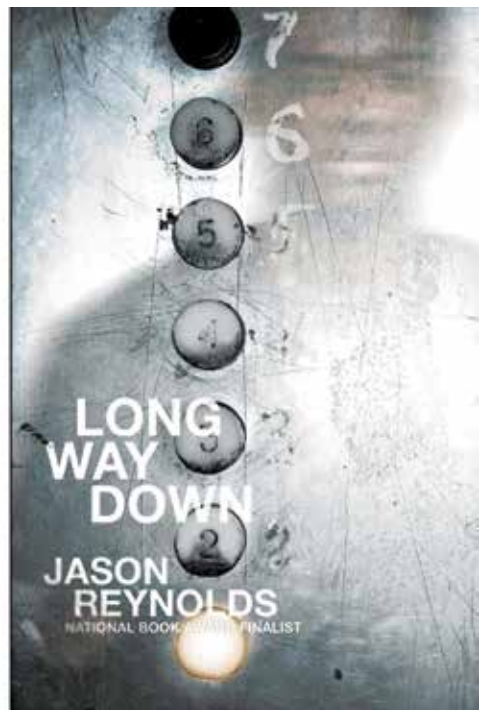
BD: I think the author ended the book that way to allow the readers to use their imagination to figure out the rest of the story or to paint a picture of what can or could have happened. I think if I was writing the sequel at the end it would have made me wake up and realize that history repeats itself and maybe it's time for a change.

JC: I think Will goes back upstairs to change his clothes. Then continues on with the matter at hand, taking the stairwell this time. I think the author ends the book this way to leave you to your thoughts and ponder.

VC: What I think happens is that Will continues on to avenge his brother's death off assumptions and nothing factual as to who actually killed Shawn. I think the author ended it the way he did to see who would catch the cycle within the story. Okay so Will goes and shoots the wrong person, or even people out of anger, and then those people's people want revenge and basically the killing never ceases. And that's usually how it really is when it comes down to retaliation, it just goes on and on and on! Innocent people suffer from the grenade effect!



Jason Reynolds



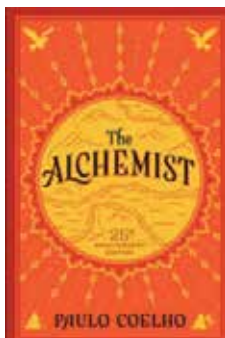
WHAT WE'RE READING

by Neely

#OwnVoices is a hashtag on social media used to highlight books that were written by authors who share the marginalized identity of the main character they are writing about. Free Minds is dedicated to reading these types of books that lift up the voices of communities that are often silenced. Have you recently read a book like this that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading".

- **MC, FM Member: *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho**

This is definitely one of my favorite books of all time. Especially when he writes about one's personal legend, fear of failure, and the principle of favorability. This is a warning to my own fears and pursuing my own personal legend, which is opening my own retail store and selling my own handmade leather bags. I've had this dream for 16 years. I could not have read this book at a better time.



- **Tara: *Race Against Time: A Reporter Reopens the Unsolved Murder Cases of the Civil Rights Era* by Jerry Mitchell**

I could not put this book down. I went to hear author Jerry Mitchell at DC's Politics & Prose bookstore and was captivated. It is the story of how Mitchell, as a newspaper reporter, investigated four of the most infamous killings from the Civil Rights era. His investigative work resulted in convictions against the Klansmen responsible, decades after the murders.



- **Neely: *Citizen: An American Lyric* by Claudia Rankine**

In *Citizen*, Rankine provides a series of situations and contexts in which the presence of a Black body alters how the situation/event unfolds. What is unique about this book is that it mixes poetry, essays, and images to create a series of meditations on place and identity as the reader is transported everywhere from the classroom, to the supermarket, to the tennis court with Serena Williams. Addressing the reader as "you", this book inspires reflection on the stress that racism induces and how it can impact a person's ability to function in a society that calls themselves "post-racist".

- **Julia: *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli**

In the spirit of #ownvoices, *Lost Children Archive* is about a Mexican American family with two young children traveling from New York to the southwestern border. The father wants to go to Apacheria in the southwestern US, the homeland of the Native Americans known as the Apaches, who famously resisted European conquest for centuries. Meanwhile, the mother has her own mission and drive – to search for two migrant children who have vanished in the desert. The parents and their children are in the middle of their own personal crisis, even as this political and humanitarian crisis is unfolding around them at the US/Mexico border. I found this book to be fascinating and deeply moving; it was one of my favorite books that I read in 2019.

BOOK BALLOT!

Your vote matters! It's time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book. Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. If you have recommendations for the next ballot, let us know!

1		<p>Kindred by Octavia Butler [Fiction]</p> <p>This novel is a combination of slave memoir, fantasy, and historical fiction. After celebrating her 26th birthday in 1976 California, Dana, an African American woman, is suddenly taken back in time into antebellum Maryland. After saving a drowning white boy, she is transported back to present day. She continues to be transported back and forth, having several encounters with the same boy before realizing that she has been given the task to protect this young slaveholder until he is able to father her own great-grandmother.</p>
2		<p>The Man Who Came Uptown by George Pelecanos [Fiction]</p> <p>Michael Hudson spends his incarceration reading books from the prison's library. One day he is suddenly released after a private detective manipulated a witness in Michael's trial. Once released, Michael encounters a changed Washington D.C. where expensive cafes and boutiques abound. But one thing hasn't changed and that's the temptation of crime. While Michael tries to balance his new job, his love of reading, and the debt he owes the man who helped get him released, he struggles to find his place in this new world. (Fun fact: Free Minds is mentioned in this book!)</p>
3		<p>Pride by Ibi Zoboi [Fiction]</p> <p>Zuri has pride in her Afro-Latino roots and her family, but that pride is not enough to save her Brooklyn neighborhood from becoming unrecognizable due to gentrification. When Darius and his wealthy family move across the street, Zuri can't stand his arrogance and judgmental attitude. But as they are forced to live by each other, they eventually come to an understanding and acceptance of each other. As her sisters begin to pull her in different directions, a cute boy named Warren vies for her attention, and college applications are due, Zuri fights to keep her place in her changing neighborhood. A modern retelling of Jane Austen's <i>Pride and Prejudice</i>, this is the story of cultural identity, class, gentrification, and love.</p>
4		<p>Never Caught by Erica Armstrong Dunbar [Nonfiction - History/Biography]</p> <p>In <i>Never Caught</i>, Dunbar tells the real-life story of Ona Judge, a woman who ran away from slavery under George and Martha Washington. At the time of Washington's presidency, the capital of the United States was in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, a free state that required people who were enslaved to be released after living in Pennsylvania for six months. Washington managed to work his way around this law, but Ona was still given a glimpse of what freedom might look like. After she escaped to New England, Washington initiated a manhunt, using his political contacts to find her and reclaim his "property".</p>
5		<p>Makes Me Wanna Holler by Nathan McCall [Nonfiction - Memoir]</p> <p>This is the story of McCall's journey from growing up in a Black working-class neighborhood to becoming involved in crime, leading to his incarceration. McCall chronicles his passage from the streets to the prison yard, to the newsrooms of <i>The Washington Post</i>, and finally to part of the faculty at Emory University. He sheds light on the realities of racism in every aspect of the United States, from the newsroom to inner cities, where it continues to condemn Black men to prison, dead-end jobs, and/or violent deaths.</p>
6		<p>The Book of Unknown Americans by Cristina Henríquez [Fiction]</p> <p>This story follows fifteen-year-old Maribel and her family as they leave behind their comfortable life in Mexico to risk everything in the United States. In their new home, Maribel soon attracts the attention of the son of her next-door neighbor. Their love story begins a series of events that will have profound consequences for everyone involved.</p>

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: LOYALTY

By Julia

For this issue, we're thinking about the concept of loyalty (definition: a strong feeling of support or allegiance). What does it mean to be loyal to a person, a group, or a cause? How do we express our loyalty? Who have been your most consistent, steadfast friends or family? Who or what are you loyal to? Have you ever changed your loyalty to someone or something, maybe after realizing it was not in your best interest? There's a term called "blind loyalty," referring to allegiance to a person or cause despite the damage the person or cause does to oneself or others. Does loyalty ever have negative consequences? "Group loyalty" refers to dedication to a group that you belong to or identify with; have you felt group loyalty? What made you identify with this group? Have you ever changed the groups that you identify with?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



Give us a call when you get out: (202) 758-0829

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

Your votes are in! Our current Books Across the Miles book is *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. This memoir offers a glimpse into psychiatrist Viktor Frankl's life in Nazi death camps during World War II. Frankl used his experience and survival to develop his theory of "logotherapy," which holds that the primary purpose of life is to discover and pursue meaning. Happy reading and we look forward to hearing your thoughts!

1. Do you think Frankl's experiences in the concentration camp are comparable to current experiences of incarceration in the United States? How are they similar and/or different?
2. The first experience one feels at the beginning of imprisonment, according to Frankl, is shock. Do you agree with him? Do you think some people respond differently?
3. According to Frankl, the second reaction to imprisonment is **apathy** (a lack of interest; indifference), which he says was a necessary tool for self-defense under the harsh conditions of the Holocaust. Are there emotional tactics, like humor or positivity, or physical activities, like reading or working out, that you use for self-defense or self-care?
4. Frankl talks about how human kindness can be found in all people and groups, even from those we might not expect it from. Have you ever been surprised by someone's kindness when you weren't expecting it?
5. *Man's Search for Meaning* is about finding the meaning in one's life in order to establish a sense of personal freedom. What are some steps one can take to find this meaning? Have you used this in your own life?

Please remember to vote for the next BAM book! See page 39 for the titles and descriptions!

1st choice: _____

2nd choice: _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: LOYALTY (VOLUME 9, ISSUE 2)

What does it mean to be a loyal to a person, a group, or a cause? How do we express our loyalty? Who have been your most loyal friends or family? Who or what are you loyal to? Have you ever changed your loyalty to someone or something, maybe after you learned more? There's a term called "blind loyalty," referring to loyalty to a person or cause despite the damage the person or cause does to oneself or others. Does loyalty ever have negative consequences? "Group loyalty" refers to loyalty to a group that you belong to or identify with; have you felt group loyalty? What made you feel group loyalty? Have you ever changed the groups that you identify with?

And a preview of Volume 9, Issue 3: ***We want to make sure people have time to write in with their submissions, so here's a heads up for the next-next issue! We'll be writing about Music.***

True friends	Friends to the End
<p>What are the limits on loyalty? Where does loyalty end? Can self-loyalty ever be compromised because of others? Try writing a poem that ties in all three of these questions, focusing on what encompasses having "loyalty to oneself."</p>	<p>Write a poem about your best friend. Here are some questions that can get you started: How and where did you find your best friend? Why did you end up best friends? What keeps you tight? How are you two similar? How are you different? What are the things you love most about your best friend? Do you argue and fight? What's your best memory with that friend? What are three words to describe your friendship? Are you and your best friend FRIENDS TO THE END?</p> <p><i>(If you don't have a best friend, write about a best friend from your childhood, or write about the idea of friendship.)</i></p>