

April/May 2020  
Vol. 9, Issue 2

# Free minds Connect



**REUNITED  
COUPLE'S ADVICE  
ON SURVIVING  
"LIFE" TOGETHER**

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# **BETTER TOGETHER - LOYALTY**

Dear Loyal Free Minds Members,

I hope you are all well and safe as you face the incredible challenges brought by COVID-19. Your Free Minds family has been thinking of you constantly, hoping you are okay and sending you strength and courage. A big thank you for being so concerned about the FM team in your many letters. It's a true Free Mind who shows empathy and is more concerned for others, when you yourself are going through so much difficulty.

When this issue's theme of loyalty was selected months ago, we had no way of knowing a virus would stop the world in its tracks and turn everyday life upside down for billions of people. The timing of this Loyalty issue is a perfect way for us to reinforce our loyalty to you, our Free Minds members. Know that you are not going through this alone and we are here for you! We are not going anywhere.

While many businesses and organizations have had to shut down due to the coronavirus and the need for social distancing, Free Minds operations are not only up and running, but we are actually expanding! See FM HQ on page 3 for a full listing of our extra programming.

The community's response to this pandemic has been phenomenal. So many people are asking how they can use their newfound downtime to help us and volunteer. The public awareness of incarceration has skyrocketed. Many who have never gotten involved with this issue before are now advocating for releases due to COVID and participating in online campaigns to increase reentry services. One of my favorite sayings is, "Crisis and competition don't build character, they reveal it." This pandemic has truly revealed upstanding character in so many helpers.

In this issue you will read about loyalty that uplifts rather than controls. On page 4, you will read about the power of true friendship as a foundation, as FM member David and his partner Yukia build a love partnership despite his life sentence. Hint: it has a happy ending 😊. Maji on page 6 almost lost his life due to misplaced loyalty to the streets. He cautions us to avoid joining anything where a person needs the group more than it needs you.

You're in for a real treat as our own Book Club Facilitator, Clint (page 14), was able to take some time away from his upcoming book to give us some expert writing advice. Ever since reading Clint's column, I've been noticing all of the small details around me. It's a whole new way to look at the world. On page 36, you will read about how FM member Bruce's loyalty to his job and new life enabled him to turn around an encounter that could have ended his employment. Instead, Bruce's actions brought about a stronger relationship with his boss. If we could bottle Bruce's maturity and professionalism and sell it, Free Minds would be a billion-dollar nonprofit now! As usual, we can turn to Kelli's calming meditation (page 18) when we inevitably fall into frustration and sadness, and remind ourselves that morning will come again.

I'll leave the poems to the end because, as always, they are powerful. The way you traversed the verse (I'm channeling Keela, our Reentry Manager, in her poem from last issue with that line 😊) to describe the pain of misplaced loyalty and the transformation positive loyalty can bring resonates deeply with the entire FM fam.

Years ago, when Kelli and I were first starting Free Minds, I asked a wonderful mentor for ways he thought we could engage our members. He had served time and was running a youth mentoring program. He said, "Be consistent, compassionate, and demonstrate true loyalty, and over time strong bonds will be built." He told me that the street game by its very nature is not able to support the kind of loyalty and trust that is needed for personal liberation – that the individuals in it try to be loyal, but the system and structure suffocate that loyalty. We hope this issue gives you something different – that it helps you breathe more freely instead.

Until next time,

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:  
Music**



## THE CONNECT TEAM

Executive Editor

Tara

Editors

Julia, Michael

Contributors

FM Team

FM Friends

Maji, Yukia, John

FM Members

RW, MH, MC, CM, TTB EL, VC, JL, BF, DL, GD, TG, AW, CS, RC, MT, KL, KG, MV, SM, MZ, SH, JB, JG, DC, QS, WH, DA, AB, AC, LA, DJ, SA, Bruce, David

## THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director

Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Facilitator

Julia, Deputy Director

Allen, Director of Finance & Operations

Keela, Reentry Manager

Melissa, Program Coordinator

Melody, Reentry Coordinator

Neely, Program Associate

Imanee, Program Assistant

Tia, Job Coach

Janet, Youth Education & Outreach Manager

Clint, Book Club Facilitator

Sabrea, Volunteer Coordinator

Shannon, Congressman John Lewis Fellow

Demetria, Case Manager

Pramila, Intern

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!

Free Minds Book Club  
1816 12th St. NW  
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# FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

## COVID-19 Update

When Mayor Bowser announced a city-wide shutdown and we all suddenly needed to telework (work from home) to keep social distance, the FM team sprang into action: grabbing paper, pens, printers, cards, stamps, and envelopes. The Jail Book Club facilitators started furiously printing off session plan packets and initiating book drives, dropping off hundreds of books and learning activities to keep our members' sharp minds active at the jail, New Beginnings, and Youth Services Center. We even partnered with the DOC Education Department to upload book discussion questions, writing prompts, and Kelli's calming voice doing guided meditations to tablet devices that were already being used for vocational training at the jail. The Reentry Team got a crash course in virtual video conferencing, so that our weekly book clubs could be held online (you download software and you can see and hear each other in boxes on a computer screen). And of course, our Prison Book Club program is still going strong. Tara picks up the mail and drops it safely off to Julia, who scans each piece. If you sent a submission that isn't in this issue, know that we have read every single one and we will share them with our community of readers. Regardless of what's occurring in the world, Free Minds will always be there for our members. Nothing can stop Free Minds Fellowship!



## Virtual Write Night

We haven't let a virus stop our community from reading and responding to your poems! We can't all gather in a room together due to social distancing but we are all gathering in the same spirit online. Free Minds has made the monthly Write Night virtual. The staff found a website called Miro where volunteers read your poems and type their comments on their own computers at the same time. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, many more people have been looking to volunteer - and they've come to Free Minds! Let us know what you think once you receive your poems back. It might not be handwritten any more but the same sentiment is there!

## Introducing Our New

### Congressman John Lewis Fellow

It is with great joy that we announce our current Congressman John Lewis Fellow. Shannon, a recipient of the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), was selected as Free Minds' new Congressman John Lewis (CJL) Fellow! The fellowship is an opportunity for a formerly incarcerated Free Minds member to gain professional and leadership experience, and use poetry and storytelling to promote healing and nonviolence. This fellowship is inspired by the work of Congressman John Lewis, a Civil Rights Movement leader and current Representative for the state of Georgia. During the pandemic, Shannon is head of the COVID-19 Crisis Response Team, assisting members in the reentry program in getting masks and supplies. Many Congressman John Lewis Fellows started as Poet Ambassadors, and still work with them to represent Free Minds at Write Nights and volunteer events. Everyone here at Free Minds sincerely welcomes Shannon to the team!



Congressman John Lewis



## In Loving Memory

We've been listening to your suggestions about how we can continue to honor the Free Minds members who we have lost. One of your ideas was to dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory so we are starting that today. Keep sending your ideas: **1816 12th Street NW.**

### *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, John, Delonte, Eddie

*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

## When Simply No One Else Will Do

*An interview with FM member David and his fiancé, Yukia*

On March 2nd, David was released after spending more than 16 years of a 45-to-life sentence behind bars. He gained his freedom after proving the prosecution committed what is known as a "Brady violation" by withholding evidence that would have exonerated him. While David spent hundreds of hours in law libraries of federal penitentiaries researching how to make his case, he could not have done it alone. His childhood sweetheart and best friend, Yukia, supported him every step of the way. Kelli spoke with David and Yukia about their journey.

**KELLI:** Tell me about when you first met.

**DAVID:** We were friends since junior high school. Yukia was one of those frail, skinny, nice girls who went to all of her classes (laughs). We was real cool. But I was young and dumb and running around not paying attention.

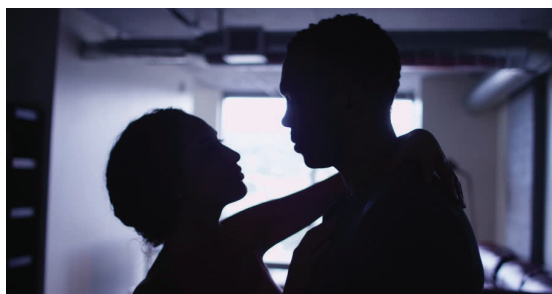
**YUKIA:** David was so mischievous! He hung out with the bad group. Interrupting my home economics class, being called to the office, etc. But he was always very handsome to me. He just had this way of getting people's attention.

**DAVID:** When we were 17, she started coming around the neighborhood.

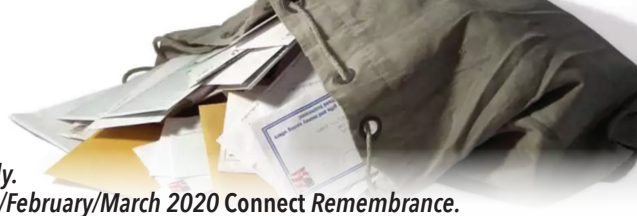
**YUKIA:** We all hung out in Congress Park. We didn't have one of those love at first sight situations. As we got older, we started realizing we had so much in common. I think what really added the candle to the cake is our birthdays are a day apart. We like the same music, the same clothes. We were interested in the same things. We started a friendship. And that title – *friendship* – weighs more than any other title you can give us!

**KELLI:** So tell me about when you were incarcerated.

**DAVID:** They locked my whole neighborhood up. There was a big indictment. I was facing the death penalty. When you're 24, that's tough to carry. Yukia though, she just didn't give up on me, not through all the years between my getting charged and locked up, the trial, and then getting sentenced. She couldn't bear to come to my sentencing.



# FREE MINDS MAILBAG



*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the January/February/March 2020 Connect Remembrance.*

**JL:** First, I love the new design. Color makes any reading containing pictures attractive, which adds to the messages of the writers' articles. *Connect* has always had class, but now it also has style :)

Edward's article on page 6 gives us all something to think about, whether you've lost someone dear to you or not. The possibility that I may lose a loved one while I am incarcerated dwells in the back of my mind because everyone in my family is getting older. Edward informs us of what to expect on our "grief journey" and I appreciate him giving ideas on how to remember and celebrate the life of those close to us after they've passed on.

Hooraay! to LV (pg. 9) for taking a tough situation and making the best out of it. Choosing to "look at each day as an opportunity for a fresh start" shows that he possesses a positive attitude and a mental flexibility to adapt to any situation. LV definitely has the qualities of a winner! All of the poems written by the Free Minds members are very touching and heartfelt. It never ceases to amaze me how a poet can take what is in the heart, intellectualize such feelings or experiences, and then put them into words. It is truly a gift of the poet that is shared with the reader(s). Write on poets!

The articles written on the works of Kehinde Wiley (pgs. 16-17) and Tara's nephew Jeffrey (pgs. 20-21) are inspiring. Kehinde Wiley's intention to create art that honors black men in the U.S. ("...who face harm in the street and harm from political and social disempowerment") shows that our struggles here in America are real and are still being recognized. Jeffrey's achievements show his strength and willingness to push forward and accomplish his goals. Both articles are very inspiring.

**VC:** Great job on the new design! It's absolutely awesome and complements everyone's insightful contribution within the issue. I love the *Connect* because I always learn something new, something of benefit, and something inspiring. In the "Remembrance" issue I really gravitated toward the cultural information, which was outstanding for my inquisitive mind. Recently I've really been drawn to increasing my cultural awareness so that I can learn to respect the views and rights of others. By doing so, I'm able not only to possibly develop relationships (healthy) outside of my culture, but also be able to maintain and nurture the relationships once they develop, which is essential in regards to my growth.

**MC:** Receiving my full-color *Connect* newsletter was a pleasant surprise last week. Definitely one of my favorite issues! I've been waiting for my poem for months now. To see it inside your issue touched my heart. I read it to my mother over the phone today. I could hear her start to cry. I questioned her about it and she said her eyes were getting wet. TTB EI I informed her that I sent a written copy to her house. I told her to take a photo of her mother and have my poem printed on that photo. I want to give framed pictures to our family members this August. That's the month of my grandmother's birthday. Sometimes they have a cookout to remember her. I think that would be the perfect gift for everyone.

Melissa, you did a great job informing us about your tia and how you remember her. I always seen the Dias de los Muertos on movies like James Bond and Superman. Thanks for giving me a better understanding of the tradition, and it's proper name.

Also, I wanna thank Roemer for the beautiful pictures of Rome. I love history and the ancient world. I have a lot of respect for their creativity, art, and inventions. As soon as I find some tape, them pictures are going up on my wall. The image of the Colosseum is amazingly beautiful.

**CM:** I loved the story by Jeffrey. I was able to learn for the first time how visually impaired people read. That's amazing, right? But the story that CB shared with us really hit home for me because what he is facing is what most of us fear when coming home after long prison bids! Keeps the ones who want to do right with high hopes that there is a place in society for ex-cons.

**TTB EI:** On remembering our FM Fam, I like how they are being honored in every *Connect*. I feel like this should be done in every *Connect* issue, so everyone around the U.S. who reads our paper will know of our lost family. Murals are cool, too.

Cliff's story is every man's story in the United States of America. His journey was touching and deeply heartfelt. Memories are the highlight of our lives. What would life be without them... especially for people like me (and previously Cliff) doing decades worth of time for commercial crimes. Thank you Cliff for allowing me to briefly walk with you and may the Great God bless you for your continued patience and faith.

You are a very brave man, LV. A lot of people I know look at me crazy when I tell them that I want to move to a state in the U.S. where I don't know anyone, a place I can start over. I would love to be able to move to another country. However, in your case you were unfairly and cold-heartedly moved without any say in the matter. The Great God has and will keep guiding you if you allow Him. And if not for memories, the Great God would truly be cruel. All praises to the Great God and may He guide you on your journey. FM brother TTB EI.

Thank you Melissa for allowing me to walk with you through your family's customs and traditions. It's very beautiful. I would like to thank all of my FM family members who've contributed to Vol. 9, Issue 1 poems. The poem that really touched me was by GD, "In Memory of... Mom." Excellent remembrance. I lost my mother to cancer in 2019 in the month of October. Thank you for allowing me to walk with you on your journey.

Ms. Keela, your poem was like that! I don't know what else to say. TTB EI Thank you.

Thank you Jeff for your story and allowing me to walk with you. I laughed at hearing (although I read it I could somehow imagine him saying): "Jeff, your brain can only absorb what your butt can endure." Your g-pa's saying. 😊



# CHOOSING YOUR LOYALTY

*By Maji, FM Friend*

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." – John 15:13 (NKJV)

I actually do have John 15:13 tattooed over my right eye. When the jailhouse tattoo artist asked me the reason for deciding on this particular Bible verse, I told him to read his Bible. After he was finished, I looked into the mirror to see how good of a job he had done. I couldn't get out of his presence any faster because the whole time he was tattooing me he had to give me his many opinions about the Bible. You know: him explaining how the Bible has been tampered with, the lies and contradictions, and his disdain over the story of Jesus. But he never asked me the purpose behind why I was getting this tattoo.

The first time I came across John 15:13 was when I sat over the City Jail and received a letter from my godmother. She always ended her letters with Bible verses to read because to her, "God is always watching." I never got around to it, being that my attention was placed on everything else other than reading the Bible. It wasn't until I witnessed a violent altercation between two convicts that made me finally open up that Bible to find some sort of peace. After reading what it said, I suddenly caught goosebumps on my arm and had chills running up and down my spine. Some maybe call it a religious experience but to me this Bible verse spoke volumes to what I was going through at that time.

Anyone who has ever been part of a street or prison gang knows it's a big difference from joining a fraternity, a social club, or any other organizations. You hear people talk about the Brotherhood (or Sisterhood) but there's so much more that goes with it. You have to first understand that you are at the mercy of the history that gangs surround itself with. Many established gang members, especially those with a decade or more in, will tell you to recognize the names of those who paved the way for you to continue to represent that particular gang you're in. You are responsible for expressing the characteristics in which your gang is known for. There are strict rules and a code-of-conduct to which one has to follow in order to gain trust within the gang. But once you add the elements of the street or the prison then you see how being involved in a gang can get real.

There were moments when I first started gangbanging where though I thought I had finally found ACCEPTANCE as being legitimately from the streets. I surrounded myself with a new circle of people whom I referred to as "my homies." Not only did I associate with "my homies" from my neighborhood but now I had connections with gang members from different areas in the

city. I even had connects with gang members from different states. To anybody who has never felt this important before, having all this at your hands would've made you feel God-like in a sense. Everyone who was part of my gang took the word LOYALTY and gave it a whole new meaning.

Loyalty meant a lot to all of us, especially to those older homies who fought through everything to keep their name upright and their gang's reputation intact. The best feeling in the world was knowing that you had a street army behind you if trouble ever came your way. That was all because of LOYALTY. We treated each other like family members, so it was nothing to find most of us sleeping under one roof. We gave each other anything and everything to be sure that no one around us was unhappy. We had our moments where we disputed over disagreements but knowing that loyalty was still there, we never let it go to the extreme.

Loyalty meant everything, but on the other side of the coin loyalty became deadlier than the Devil himself. I watched many lose their life for either being too loyal to something or someone becoming unloyal to people in different situations. Anyone who has ever been (or who is) incarcerated knows that you have to be careful who you give your loyalty to. When they say loyalty comes with a price, please believe that in the streets or prisons some people only want to be your friend or associate just to see how much you can give to them materially. It's like once they see that you aren't beneficial to anything or anyone anymore, then out comes the back stabbings, the manipulations, and everything else a person can do to show that they no longer need you.

I myself was shot 4 times by someone close in my circle. I won't reveal the events leading up to it, but the only way I got caught down bad was because of my loyalty to people whom I considered family. As much as I try to block the memory out, the truth is at the end of the day these "loyal friends" of mine set me up to be killed. I didn't realize what was going down until I looked up and saw the gun pointed at me. It hurts even 15 years later and maybe it's the reason why I don't cherish many friendships today like I have done in the past. I can still hear the sound of that shot being fired, especially when anger builds up in my system.

In prison, I saw men laugh and joke together so much that you would've thought they were lifelong buddies. Then an incident would go down and you have these same two men trying to kill each other. It just keeps up with the old adage old heads say that, "You got no friends in the joint." But I learned that I do have the responsibility of demonstrating good character wherever I'm at. Not only that, but I have the power to assure my friends that I'm here for them no matter what.

Maybe it is the same attitude Jesus had when he spoke the words of John 15:13 to his disciples. Even when the whole world turned against him, he chose to stay loyal to God's plan. There aren't a lot of us who would choose DEATH over something we believe in. But when you believe in something wholeheartedly then you know that even if they kill you, the message will live on forever.

So to me, LOYALTY means "trusting someone with your life" and in return you're willing to show that you can be trusted with theirs. Loyalty tests your character like never before. Like the late great Tupac Shakur once quoted, "Anybody who quits on you wasn't down with you from the start."

I gave up that gang life and people might say that I haven't stayed loyal, but you can't let your pride be the root cause of your demise. I left it with my dignity intact and most people can't do that in their position. They need it more than it needs them.

The real question you should ask yourself is, "Are you trustworthy?" Like can you really be trusted? It's not how you present yourself to the world, but how you look at yourself when no one else is looking. Become loyal to yourself first before you choose to be loyal to others.



# DEAR MR. ADVICE

*Hey Free Minds Fam! We want to share as many perspectives as possible. Do you have advice for DC? 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 need your help. I have a friend that's a girl and we have been friends for about 18 months. She has been here for me more than some people and I have gotten attached to her, but when I told her, "I love you" she said I only feel that way because I want to have sex. Do you have any advice that can help me out?**

**Sincerely,**

**DC**

Dear DC,

I understand your situation all too well; I was once a young man too (LOL). If your friend has been there for you, you must express to her that your telling her that you love her was sincerely coming from your heart, and in no way has anything to do with wanting to have sexual relations with her. It sounds like she needs to know that your love for her is genuine.

Friendships are not always based on sex. There are still some gentlemen who respect and cherish a beautiful friendship with a female. These types of friendships are an important part of growing as individuals.

My advice to you is to continue to be her friend, and be honest with her. You never know when the friendship may develop into something more. Smile :)

Sincerely,

WH

Dear DC,

It seems like your friend has challenged you to prove that you're unlike other men she may have encountered. Her stereotyping you could stem from her past experiences dealing with guys and her guards are probably up due to that. Now it's up to you to put forth the effort to show her that you're different.

In the 18 months that you two have been communicating, have her past relationships ever been the topic of discussion? If so, has the narrative been more positive or negative? If you haven't discussed it, then it may be time to broach the subject, in pursuit of a better understanding of her feelings. Women tend to try their best not to make the same mistakes twice, and even when they like you (which she seems to), how can they separate you from the rest?

I would start by explaining to her that if it was all about sex, "I love you" would've been spoken long before 18 months. That's a realistic time span for genuine feelings to develop. Explain to her exactly why you love her. Make sure she fully understands that your own feelings aren't something you're willing to play with just for sex. It's her, the person, that has you feeling an emotional attachment.

If you do hope to get intimate with this young woman someday, maybe an in-depth conversation between you two is necessary. It might help clarify the nature of the relationship in general and exactly where it's headed. Managing expectations is an important part of any relationship, sexual or not. Find out what she wants and if you can deliver, step up to the plate and be the man she needs you to be.

Take care brother.

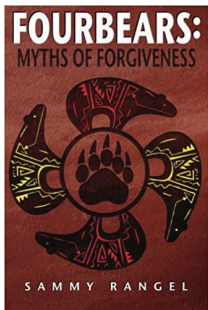
Your FM brother,

DA



# PAYING IT FORWARD

By Imanee



Life After Hate is an advocacy organization committed to helping far-right or formerly neo-Nazi individuals “connect with humanity and [begin] leading compassionate lives.” Life After Hate was formed by Sammy Rangel, Angela King, and Robert Orell. Sammy Rangel is Executive Director and a famous peace activist, speaker, and social worker. In his book *Fourbears*:

*The Myths of Forgiveness*, he discusses enduring physical and sexual abuse in his childhood, as well as receiving a 15.5 year prison sentence.

Angela King, Programs Director, has a very different life story. As a bullied youth, she was recruited by neo-Nazi skinheads, eventually ascending into leadership with them and developing women-centric propaganda. Shortly after, Davis was arrested for robbing a Jewish-owned store, thus leading her to reject her past as a neo-Nazi and begin speaking against violent extremism.

Program Director Robert Orell has 15 years of experience with Exit Sweden, an organization helping people leave political extremist groups and gangs. Orell is also an expert on radicalization and an adviser to the United States on establishing Exit organizations within many different countries.

Life After Hate began its mission of helping people leave extremist groups in 2011. The organization offers academic research, education and outreach programs, as well as a cultural competency training to help former extremists learn about other cultures. Though Life After Hate’s staff believes that deradicalization or the adoption of more nonviolent views is a lifelong process, their team ensures that each member receives an adequate support base and daily education to ensure that they can build new, fulfilling lives free from hate.

This organization has helped over 350 men, women, and families who have grappled with leaving—or the influence of—violent hate groups. The founders have stated that they received the majority of their cases in the aftermath of the alt-right (politically conservative or extremist) “Unite the Right” 2017 rally in Charlottesville, VA. The rally was organized by white supremacist groups.

In order to combat hate, Life After Hate teams with partner organizations: Formers Anonymous, Strong Cities Network, and Against Violent Extremism Network. Formers Anonymous in particular helps men and women who have a shared problem of attachment and addictions, whether to drugs, alcohol, or a certain lifestyle. Though the journey is long, Life After Hate is taking baby steps in creating a more equitable-and educated-world.



## QUOTE-I-VATOR

***“Loyalty means giving me your honest opinion, whether you think I’ll like it or not.”***

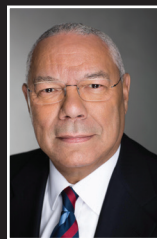
– Colin Powell, former U.S. Secretary of State

***“Loyalty and friendship, which is to me the same, created all the wealth that I’ve ever thought I’d have.”*** – Ernie Banks, former baseball player for the Chicago Cubs, featured in the National Baseball Hall of Fame

***“What do you do when you want to be loyal to your family but you feel that loyalty to them is in conflict somehow with loyalty to yourself?”*** – Tara Westover, author (*Educated*)

***“I belong to the people I love, and they belong to me – they, and the love and loyalty I give them, form my identity far more than any word or group ever could.”*** – from the novel *Allegiant* by Veronica Roth

***“A person who deserves my loyalty receives it.”*** – Joyce Maynard, author (*The Usual Rules*)



Colin Powell, former  
U.S. Secretary of State

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Loyalty By BF

I gave it my all, only 2 really find out loyalty was  
where I should fall.  
I trust you.  
I love you.  
I was honest with you.  
My loyalty went out 2 you.  
Only 2 find out that loyalty was not in you at all.  
Could it be me that loyalty has yet 2 find?  
Yes, no, maybe so.  
I test the limits of this meaning.  
Loyalty.  
Most people can't bear the understanding.  
Love is loyalty.  
Loyalty is power and  
power is pure and  
pure loyalty is rare.  
So if I can't give my loyalty 2 you, then who must I give it to?  
I sit and think and think and come up with only one way.  
Loyalty starts and ends with "me" so I give "my" full loyalty 2  
"I"

## Loyalty By DL

Loyalty is one of the most endearing  
and noble of all human qualities

Loyalty is a lifestyle

Loyalty can take years to gain  
but can be lost in just a matter of seconds

Loyalty is thin and attention is thick

Loyalty is faithfulness, trustfulness

Loyalty can start beautiful and end ugly

Loyalty I am

Loyalty I want back

Loyalty is a vow so don't disrespect it

## True Friends By AW

In friendship  
Loyalty is especially costly to we who are poor  
As we soon learn that justice means nothing for us  
Who are compelled to knock at those who control justice's door  
Against self-interest, self-loyalty has no place  
Loyalty can never end  
When and where it never began  
In friendship

## Loyalty By GD

Loyalty is a great attribute and one I hold the most pride  
But loyalty can also be the one to take most lives  
Sometimes we are loyal to the most disloyal people  
Or we might be loyal to things  
When our perception of loyalty gets confused, we lose  
what loyalty brings  
It's so easy to be loyal to "so-called" friends who choose  
a life of crime  
But those same "friends" refuse to be loyal when  
their lawyer tells them that  
it's their life or mine  
Loyalty is not defined by some code in the street,  
believe me there's really a difference  
My loyalty to the street is now obsolete and the reason  
for my 60 year to life sentence  
There's no denying that loyalty is an asset to one's character  
Especially when it's unconditional love... loyalty flourishes  
But when you're being loyal obscures you morals, it all  
then leads to peril  
If I had been loyal to my daughter  
I would not be here... but there to support her  
My loyalty now lies with my family, and my innermost self  
That is who needs the guidance, influence and the most help  
Loyalty is faithful, honest and true  
I learned that:  
Be loyal to righteousness and in turn righteousness  
will be loyal to you

## Loyalty By CS

I'm loyal to my kin  
I'm loyal to my friends  
Loyal to the complexion of my skin.

I'm loyal to my daughter's eyes  
The hidden mystery that dwells inside  
For a little girl whose world just began to spin.

I'm loyal to my growth  
Burden, struggles and boulders  
Loyal to the weight of the world upon my shoulders.

I'm loyal to the beginning  
Cause I never focus on ends  
To comrades, to soldiers and many faces of dividends.

I'm loyal to a cause  
The cries of a community speaks  
The blood of the fallen will forever rock me to sleep.

I'll carry you in my arms  
The universe is the limited peak  
I'm loyal to my loyalty.

This is what loyalty reaps...

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## On Loyalty, With Boom

By MH (Boom)

I myself have always took pride in being a loyal person  
Even if sometimes I am being loyal to people who are  
not always loyal to me  
My friends used to tell me I was a sucker sometimes,  
being loyal to the unloyal  
But the way I see it is, sometimes you have to lead by example  
When somebody commits an act of disloyalty against you  
And you maintain your loyalty to them  
It makes them feel like an a\*\*hole if they have any  
sort of moral compass at all  
But then again, some people see your loyalty as a weakness  
And will straight up take advantage of you with no remorse  
And those are the people you need to cut off  
It's just a matter of knowing the type of person  
you're dealing with  
Give people a chance to learn loyalty by showing loyalty  
But don't allow yourself to be taken advantage of

## Friends Challenge

By TG

Your words are always cordial,  
warm, heartfelt, sincere.  
Your kindness monumental,  
so precious and so dear.  
Surely you were a princess  
or a queen way back when,  
and I a knight of your court  
with the title of your friend.  
So patiently wait for the morrow  
to defend my maidens fair  
with an oath of undying loyalty  
and a binding pinkie swear,  
and I'll know I received an honor  
If the only thing I'd win,  
is the smile you'll always give me  
and the title of your friend.

We all search for happiness  
we all search for joy.  
Every woman and every man  
every girl and every boy.  
We may find it in the beginning  
and may lose it in the end  
So I hope that I will never lose  
the title of your friend.  
I'd rather fight wild creatures  
lions, tigers, bears, oh my!  
Or cross my heart and hope for death  
or stick a needle in my eye  
and empty the oceans with a teaspoon,  
Then fill them up again,  
there isn't a challenge I'd not take  
for the title of your friend.

## Friends to the End

By VC

I met my best friend during my darkest days  
While I was drifting through life in a daze  
When my irrational decisions  
Would often lead to head on collisions  
My friend could see that I really wasn't wild  
His words exactly  
"YOU JUST BEING INFLUENCED BY THE WRONG CROWD"  
He would always admonish me to get my attitude in check  
as he tried to get me to understand the value of self-respect  
He's been diligent when it comes to talking to me  
Never had a friend like him  
So, in the beginning it felt like stalking to me  
He's always doing his best to lead me and keep me in  
the right direction  
Therefore, his friendship is a blessing  
And can never be questioned  
After all we've been through  
We still fuss and fight  
For I'm so quick to disagree and wanna do me  
Stupidity  
Because this the same friend that told me years ago  
"Ain't no loyalty in the streets"  
FACTS!  
But despite my ignorance  
He's still always had my back  
And this why we still so tight  
We been around each other so long  
We look alike  
The difference is  
He'll compromise  
But I always gotta be right  
He has great emotional regulation  
Me on the other hand  
I'll jump out there quick with no contemplation  
I love him so much because from the start  
He's always had my interest at heart  
To be more specific  
His concern, honesty and friendship define terrific  
He doesn't boast or brag when I finally realize he's right  
Crazy how foreign I was to the earnesty of his insight  
In my eyes he's a role model  
And his direction is one I'll follow when Ummi passed  
My back was against the ropes  
Yet I looked in my corner  
And friendship was there to help me cope and reinstall hope  
This became my best memory  
For that is when this friendship truly became dear to me  
3 words to describe it  
TIGHT, COMPLETE and UNIQUE with so much wealth  
The first friendship I discovered  
Was the friendship I discovered with myself  
So now I hope you understand  
I had to be a friend to myself  
In order to be a friend to anyone else  
That's how it all begins  
I LOVE ME, MYSELF and I  
My "FRIENDS TO THE END"

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## True Friends By RC

Loyalty in we, exist when their loyalty in me,  
matches my loyalty to me.

To the end, to family from friends,  
my loyalty will not bend, when their loyalty stands.

But when loyalty breaks, from deliberate acts,  
not mistakes, this penalty is the same as treason.

Be conscious of each thought, speech, and actions  
because we must be accountable in and form all reasons,  
all seasons.

Anything less will never do,  
so before extending a hand to make a friend,  
be aware of who are they and who are you.

## Loyalty By MT

Some limits I can't pretend that doesn't have an end  
especially when speaking of others that's supposed to be friends.

Loyalty is to death due its part no matter the situation,  
nothing could pull us apart,  
whether we here together or far apart.

This undying loyalty has put me in some very chaotic situations,  
but for my loyalty we could do it again and come back  
and try it again later, till we get it right,  
even if it takes all night or the remainder of my life.

Regardless of the reason, never to be unreasonable  
because it's my loyalty that I believe in.

You can't be loyal to someone that you don't love  
because love + loyalty goes hand in hand,  
now how could I compromise that  
and still consider myself to be a stand up man.

## True Friends By CM

When boxing you have 12 rounds,  
When it comes to LOYALTY it has limitless bounds,  
Sometimes LOYALTY can be sold for a couple of pounds,  
Or have family watch you lowered into the ground,  
If you witness that LOYALTY has to have an end  
For some it will never end,  
Self-loyalty comes from within  
Can't be compromised even when it's me against  
ten.

## Friends to The End By KL

My family and I moved into a new neighborhood in '89  
I found myself bored on a summer day, so I was kicking  
rocks to pass time.

A young boy walked up and asked me my name, and  
wanted to know did I want to go swimming with him.  
I said sure why not, but first I have to go grab my  
shorts out of the bin.

The two of us was on our way, so we had to follow  
this path that was in the woods. This path was new  
to me, because this was my first time walking out of the  
neighborhood.

Once we cleared the woods there was a building that  
looked like a school. The closer we got I noticed a sign  
that said Douglass Swimming Pool.

He introduce me to a few boys from around the  
neighborhood, and we all clicked instantly, like we some  
kin. We had so much fun that day, he became a  
true friend.

Our mothers worked hard so we could have a  
place to call home. Ten years went by, and now  
we are 18, and think we grown.

By this time I was at the hospital witnessing my first  
child come into this world. This child changed my life,  
and I was so happy when the doctor said it's a girl.

My best friend took me to celebrate my first born.  
She means everything to me, that's why I included her  
in the poem.

I can depend on my friend, no matter the weather.  
We can sale water to a whale, once we put our heads  
together.

He always tell me things will get better and that helps  
me sleep at night. We don't argue, fuss or fight, and  
that's the reason we are so tight.

I am blessed to have someone like him as a friend.  
This is why he will always be my best friend to the end.

## R.I.P. Nadar By CM

In loving memory of a good friend,  
your loyalty had no end,  
A lil pressure didn't make you bend,  
Respected by all, and loved by the men,  
It was hard for you to blend in,  
b-cuz you stayed ahead of the latest trend  
When I heard the news it didn't make sense  
I saw it was 5 o'clock  
The reporter said you were killed while fixing  
your car  
Then everything went dark.

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Loyalty By SM

Loyalty is a strong makeup that dwells in one's character  
 Like a solid triangle - it will never bend, break or shatter  
 Disloyalty is the opposite - like hot and cold  
 Never be loyal to the half, be loyal to the whole  
 You may experience the meaning of loyalty in a true friend  
 No matter the weather they were there till the end  
 A photographic memory of the bond you share  
**BEWARE**  
 That loyalty is still there  
 It's like the diamond in your heart - the heartbeat  
 of your soul  
 A stone in the dirt - the tone of your loyalty will  
 forever be told  
 Floating in the ocean like a coral reef  
 The loyalty you give is admirably unique to say the least  
 Your loyalty stretches further than the moon and  
 the stars  
 The essence of loyalty is what make you who you  
 are

## What Is Loyalty to Me By QS

Loyalty is being right there with your friend or loved one  
 when s\*\*t is happening.

Loyalty is being present mentally, physically and spiritually  
 with them through the good, the bad, the laughter and  
 the tears.

Loyalty is having their backs through the shame, blame,  
 pain and guilt.

Loyalty is honored trust earned through one's actions.

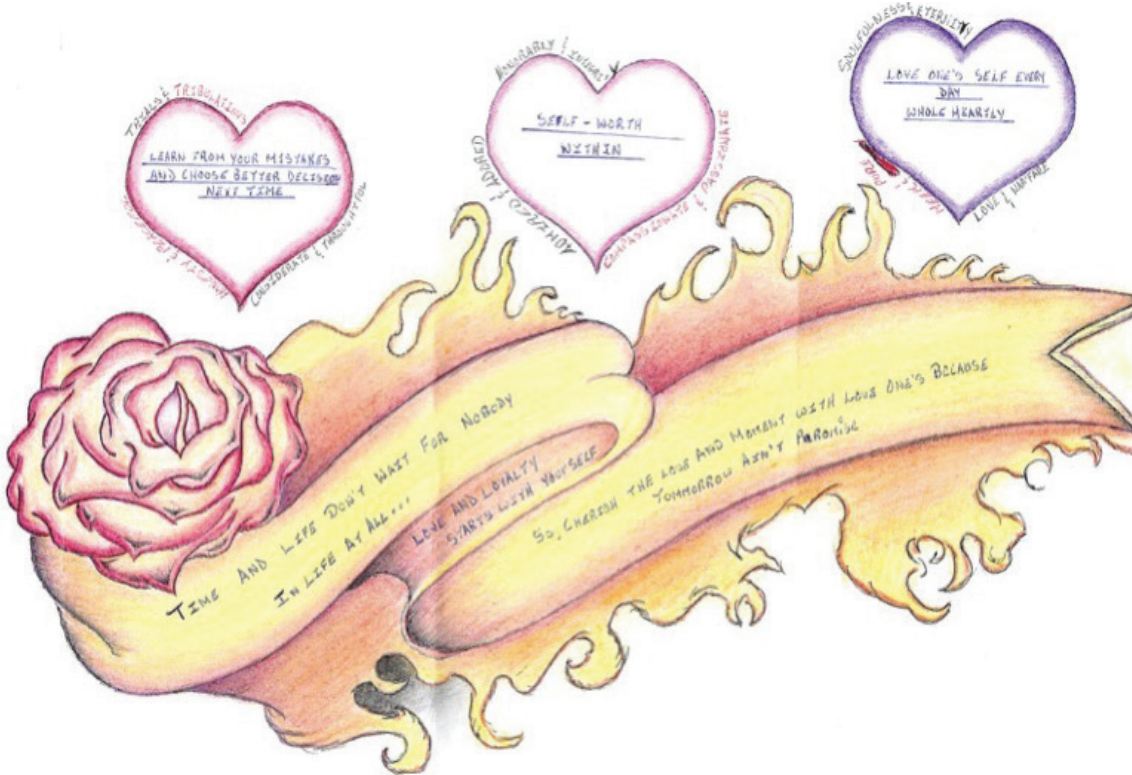
Loyalty is the tie that binds your heart to another.

Loyalty is not just riding in the limo with them, but also  
 taking the bus with them as well.

Loyalty is having the character of self to be honest with  
 another, to share your time and not take advantage of  
 their vulnerability.

Ultimately, loyalty is sharing the best of who you are without  
 any strings attached except the one to your heart.

continued on page 33



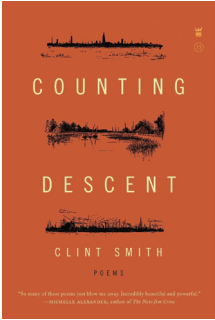
Art by FM Member MH

# THE WRITE WAY

## FM Member Writing a Novel

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

*By Clint (Free Minds facilitator and author of the book Counting Descent)*



*Clint was named to the 2018 Forbes 30 Under 30 list as well as Ebony Magazine's 2017 Power 100 list. His two TED Talks, The Danger of Silence and How to Raise a Black Son in America, collectively have been viewed more than 7 million times. A TED talk is a video created from a presentation at the main TED (technology, entertainment, design) conference engaging, charismatic speakers whose talks*

*expose new ideas that are supported by concrete evidence and are relevant to a broad, international audience." Clint is also a cohost on the award-winning podcast Pod Save the People.*

Hey, Free Minds crew! I hope everyone is doing relatively alright in what is certainly a strange and frightening time in our country and around the world. I just want to name up front that this can be a difficult moment to focus on tasks like writing, because so many of us are worried about our health and the health of our loved ones, as well as the economic implications this pandemic will have for our communities. It's more than okay to be in that space, and to have those days where you don't feel any desire to do something "productive." But writing, as you all know, can also be a great way to process the things we're experiencing and even to serve as a bit of a distraction from what is happening in the rest of the world. I know that, for me, working on my book has served as an anchor, something consistent that I can count on when so much seems uncertain.

What I want to talk to you all about in this column is the genre of narrative nonfiction. Most people know me as a poet. My first book, a poetry collection entitled *Counting Descent*, was published in 2016, and I feel incredibly lucky that it has been so well received in the world. It's being taught in middle schools, high schools, and colleges throughout the country in ways I could have never imagined. But poetry is not the only genre I write in. The book I'm finishing now, entitled *How the Word Is Passed*, explores how different historical sites throughout the country – places like museums, monuments, memorials, cemeteries, and even entire cities – reckon with, or fail to reckon with, their relationship to the history of slavery.

For example, one of the places I travel to is Angola Prison in Louisiana, the largest maximum-security prison in the country. Angola is a prison where the vast majority of people held there – as is the case throughout the country –

are Black. Angola is also built on top of a former plantation, a plantation named after the country where the majority of its enslaved workers came from: the country of Angola, in Africa. It still has that name today. What is interesting about Angola is that when you go there, they don't really talk about that part of their history. For the most part, they completely ignore it. I went to Angola to try to figure out why that is.

Now here comes the writing part. Part of my goal for this book is to talk about the history of slavery and Jim



The country of Angola

Crow in a way that's different from how many of us experienced it in our textbooks. I could have just written a history about Angola's relationship to slavery, but that's been done before. I wanted the reader to experience the sensory details of these places almost as if they were experiencing them first-hand. That means I have to describe everything with as much detail as I can. For example, when I'm standing in the room at Angola where the old electric chair is held, I want to ask: What did the room look like? What did it smell like? What were the sounds that were around me? What were people saying? How was my body reacting to being in the space? I can use these details to build on the history I present, comparing what the place looks and feels like now to what others have said about the same place one hundred years ago.

The goal of narrative nonfiction is to take the reader on a journey with you and your characters. The best works of narrative nonfiction can have you so wrapped up in the story that it feels like you're reading a novel. Describing the physical and sensory details of places, people, and scenery provides texture to the writing that often is not there in traditional nonfiction.

As a writing exercise, find a place and attempt to describe the place in as much detail as possible. What do you see? Hear? Taste? Feel? No detail is too small. Describe the insect crawling in the corner. Describe the voice of someone on the phone. Describe the light coming in through the door. Describe what it feels like to be a part of that environment. All of it. Part of being a writer, a great writer of narrative nonfiction, is simply paying close attention to the things around you so that the reader feels closer to the subject matter. Can't wait to see what you all write!

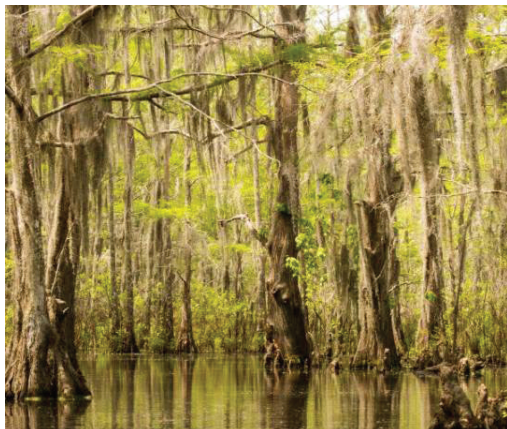
# CONVERSATION WITH IMANEE: SELF-LOYALTY

Hey y'all! It's Imanee, Program Assistant here at Free Minds. I'm writing to you all from my humid home in New Orleans, Louisiana. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, my school was canceled for the rest of the semester, so here I am: working from my cozy couch. My father's house is next to a swamp (, which can be a good and a bad thing. Good because I can watch the pelicans, ducks, and gators (not kidding, there was a gator in our backyard) while I work, but bad because... well, gators.

When I began writing this article, I found myself stuck for days on end, searching for different topics to write about. I was even going to interview another person, and ask them about their experience with loyal and disloyal people. I've heard about different types of loyalty: loyalty to family, to friends, to your hood... but what about loyalty to oneself?

Loyalty means having strong support or allegiance to someone or something. When we think about loyalty, we always think about it in terms of our service to others. But now it's time to think about serving *you*.

I realized I've been disloyal to myself in the past. In September of 2019 my close friend suddenly died, my brother was shot two weeks after being released, and a large amount of other betrayals and mishappenings occurred shortly after. After experiencing all of that trauma and heartache in such a small period of time, I became stuck in a state of limbo. School and work have always been automatic for me, but every other aspect of my life was in disarray. I stopped writing poetry, which is my absolute love and passion. I stopped seeing friends and became very isolated. I didn't eat as much, and unhealthily lost 15 pounds. My entire family was in New Orleans, so I turned within myself, spending months stressed, sad, then angry.



This is what a typical swamp looks like.

Loyalty means support, and I was not supporting myself emotionally, mentally, or spiritually the way I would support a friend going through the same things. Loyalty means allegiance, and I was not committed to doing activities that would foster my own happiness and healing. I was so stressed over others' disloyalty towards me that I forgot to be committed to the most important person: me.

I say all this because everything beautiful in life starts within you. Once I started honoring myself by prioritizing my mental and physical health again, every relationship, every workload, *everything* in my life followed suit. I started seeing friends again and eating healthy because I was committed to happiness.

Not everything in life will go our way; everyone we encounter may not have a genuine heart, and those things are out of our control. What *is* in our control is how we react to life's circumstances, and how we choose to move forward. Never let life alter how you feel and care about yourself! Stay loyalty to you, and those that are meant to be will too.

## 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.

### **Bullied by Andre "Dre" Cooper**

*Bullying is an American issue irrespective of age or background. From the bullying of professional football players, to teenage high schoolers, to social media, this book looks at how America has failed to address one of our most prevalent problems.*

**BULLIED**

A Story About How A Few  
Teenagers Started A  
Movement

Andre "Dre" Cooper



# REENTRY PROFILE: A GLIMMER OF HOPE

*By Shannon, FM member*

I was only 18 when I got locked up for a crime that happened when I was 17. I was given a life sentence. At that age, like most kids, I thought I was grown, but I was still immature in a lot of ways. What truly saved me was that I had always respected my elders. I knew I could learn a lot from them, so I wanted my cellies to be 40 or older. Because they saw that I was respectful and I was always willing to learn, they were willing to show me the ropes at the beginning of my bid.

I used to walk the track with one of these guys, named Boone. He told me how, as a young man at Lorton, he was always cuttin' up, acting out, doing everything under the sun, even selling drugs. But he was also doing good things. He started his own nonprofit. He took college courses and got his degree. After 17 years, he saw the parole board. The lady told him that all of the good he'd done outweighed the bad. They set him free. That was an "Aha!" moment for me. I stepped up my programming: taking classes, learning trades, even teaching classes. I decided to surround myself only with positive people. Boone taught me that if you do the right thing, good things are gonna happen. All I needed was that glimmer of hope.

Twenty-five years later, because of the DC City Council's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA), my life sentence was reconsidered. I was released June 8, 2019. That first day was crazy. Nobody knew I was getting released, not even my family. I was calling everybody. I couldn't reach my uncle. I finally reached my cousin and she sent her fiancé to come get me. For years, I'd said the first thing I'd do when I got out was go to Red Lobster and get myself some fried shrimp. Everyone knew it. So my cousin's fiancé picked me up, we grabbed my cousin and the kids and went straight to Red Lobster! And I'm allergic to shrimp! I still ate shrimp, crab legs... I took a couple Benadryl though (laughs).

Like a lot of guys, I was filled with dreams and ambition. While I was gone, I lost people I dearly loved. I wanted to be with my family, especially my father. I'd already lost my mother; she was killed five years into my bid. I wanted to



come out here and help my father because he was struggling. I just wanted to hug my father. I wanted to bring the family together. I was so lucky that my uncle welcomed me into his home. I hadn't seen him in 15 years! He's been so patient.

The biggest challenge has been getting work. But just like I did on the inside, I held onto my glimmer of hope. I'd prepared myself the best that I could. While I was incarcerated, I obtained seven different trades, and attended college for a year (through the pilot Pell grant program that offers college courses at a few select spots in the BOP). My uncle didn't put pressure on me, but I put it on myself. I knew I got to get a job to get a bank account and a credit card. It all starts with a job. Once I got my license, my uncle let me use his car to go job-hunting. I got my first job within a week... on a cleaning team. Then I got a job with the Redskins on Sundays, directing fans to their seats. Free Minds and my friends helped me, but all I found were temporary jobs. Whoever was offering a job though, I was willing to work, because I had that mindset. I had hope and faith.

At Free Minds, I met a member named Josh. He'd come home the year before I did and earned the Free Minds Congressman John Lewis Fellowship – a 6-month paid position doing outreach with the organization. I knew all about the civil rights hero, Congressman John Lewis, and being around Free Minds I learned what it takes to be a John Lewis Fellow. I watched how Josh carried himself. He did his work in such an upstanding manner. Sadly, as most of you know, Josh died in September. May he rest in peace.

When Free Minds eventually announced they would be doing interviews to fill the position, I knew I'd apply. It wouldn't be easy, because there were a lot of really qualified men also applying. And Josh set that bar high! That's why I'm so honored to have been chosen. I try every day to model persistence, consistency, learning, teaching, and giving back to the community in my work. Those are all the things that Congressman John Lewis stands for, that Josh stood for, and Free Minds stands for.

In February, I started my job as a Poet Ambassador and the Congressman John Lewis Fellow. I reach out

to youth to show them the right way and lead by example. I was going twice a week to events in the community to share my story. I love that! Right now, because of the pandemic, it's all in-house over Zoom. That's okay, but I can't wait until we can get back out there in person. I love working with people I might not have met otherwise. It lets me show appreciation to people who want to help.

There's nothing I don't love about this job. When I came home, I'd never had a job before in my life! Going from temporary cleaning jobs to this fellowship was a big jump, but I love it. This is what I want to do. It's right on time in my life!

My advice to you is to keep reading and writing. Focus on positivity. Behind the walls, you're in a negative environment. Balance it out with positivity. Utilize your talents. Do constructive, positive things. Educate yourself. Hang around the right people. Remember that older guy that I was walking the track with? He changed my life with that lesson. Prepare yourself for freedom. Whether it's in a year, 10 years, or even if it don't seem like you're going to get out. You never know. Laws change and progress happens. There are guys right now out on the streets of DC just like me. We were told by the courts, "you'll never get out." And we're free! So don't let the time discourage you and never give up. Believe in yourself.

And hang on to that glimmer of hope!



# MEDITATION

by Kelli

**Meditation: Morning Always Comes** – As each day has brought grim news about the impact of the coronavirus across the world, it's really important for each one of us to look for signs of hope. The other night, I was reading a book called *The Prisoner's Wife*, a memoir by Asha Bandele about her experience falling in love with and marrying a man who was incarcerated and serving a 25-to-life sentence – we're reading it in our book club on SE2 at the recommendation of one of the guys on the unit. Anyway, the author was describing the fear, worry and despair she often felt when she woke in the middle of the night. Things are so much scarier in the dark when we're alone. She described the feeling of spiraling into depression, but then she writes: *morning always comes*. I read and reread this line in thinking about the fear and uncertainty that so many are feeling right now. It made me think about the way that, **yes, morning always comes**.

A couple of summers ago, I was with my family at a beach outside of Charleston, South Carolina – a place called Folly Beach that I think you should all visit one day! One night someone had the idea that we should get up super early the following morning and go down to the dock to watch the sunrise. It sounded like an amazing idea... until the alarms went off the next morning before 6AM. Our daughter shouted from under the covers "Nooooo!!!! Go without me!" We did, and we made it to the dock just before the first bits of sunlight rose out of the bay. It was absolute magic! When we watch the sunrise, we are reminded that yes, morning always comes...

*It's time to relax... time to take a mental vacation from stress and worry. Start by making yourself comfortable. Begin to let go of tension and relax your body. Concentrate on breathing in relaxation... and breathing out tension. Feel your muscles relaxing... loosening... as you breathe slowly and deeply.*

*Imagine that you are on a dock on the bay... just before sunrise. You are sitting on the wood of the dock and it's still cool from the evening. The sky is still an inky black. The darkness has you just slightly on edge, maybe because you are all alone. And it is dark. But you notice that despite the darkness, the water is glassy and calm. The sun has not yet risen. Imagine the feeling of a slight, gentle breeze on your skin. The breeze blows just enough so that the dock rises and falls slightly on the water.*

*Imagine the fresh smell of morning air... it is refreshing. You hear the sound of the water lapping gently against the dock. It is early morning, and you are the only one here. You notice that the sun is slowly starting to rise. You can see a tiny speck of light at the horizon, as if the sun is rising right out of the water. Bit by bit, you see the light growing... small streaks of orange, pink and yellow light shine into the sky, as the sky grows lighter and lighter with the growing dawn. You see a bird – a blue heron – fly overhead... he calls out as if to remind you that you are not alone in this world... a fish jumps, causing a circle of ripples in the water. See the peaceful waves gently expand... the ripples slap lightly against the wood of the dock... the sound is calming... peaceful... Feel your breath going in... and out... like the peaceful waves of water... You feel a sense of joy and relief wash over you. The morning is here...*

*As you relax, you can enjoy the beautiful sunrise. The pink and orange give everything around you a warm glow. The sun has risen... it's still low in the sky... The breeze... the warm early sunlight... the gentle water... All of these create a calm and peaceful place just for you.*

*Everything around you seems to be waking up. Getting ready for a lovely day. When you are ready, gradually return your attention to the room. Keep with you the feeling of peace and calm from the sunrise. And remember that no matter how dark it may be now, morning always comes!*



# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hello! I greet you all in solidarity!

I have hope and faith that you all are hanging in there during these very unique times, and I also want to reassure you that your Free Minds Family is doing the same. I wanted to give you guys my thoughts on the theme of Loyalty.

I've been thinking a lot lately about loyalty and what it means to be loyal to someone or something. Loyalty is a very big, and important, word. In addition to carefully describing this word, it's worth considering what or who each of us are loyal to, and why. When I consider the word loyalty, my mind pictures someone standing by someone, no matter what. Even when things go badly, they stand by them and continue to support them. For some reason, various Washington Redskins fans over the years come to mind (LOL). However, loyalty goes far beyond sports teams. It's easy to be a fan of any team, really. Some may be more frustrating than others, but there is no fear in supporting any team. Thus, while it's fun to consider ourselves loyal to sports teams, we shrink the meaning of the term 'loyalty' by using it to describe our sports (or music, or author, or restaurant) preferences.

True loyalty means standing with someone else and making true sacrifices to do so. Loyalty means that even when everyone else turns away, you remain steadfast, you don't deviate from the person or purpose, even if and when things go south. Another word that mirrors loyalty is integrity. To me, the two can go hand in hand. Integrity means being honest and showing a consistent and uncompromising adherence to strong moral and ethical principles and values, and most importantly, adhering even when no one is watching. To me, this last part is what makes integrity so special! It is so easy to try and impress others and do what's right in front of others, but one truly upholds integrity when alone. Admittedly this is tough and admittedly, I don't always get this right, but every day is a new day to work on perfecting this craft for all of us!

As always, I wanted to give you some very beneficial information that you can take advantage of upon your return to the District. Amazon officially moved their headquarters to the DMV this year! They are located just 10 minutes outside of DC in Crystal City. During COVID-19, many Free Minds members have lost their jobs in the restaurant and construction fields due to the requirements for safe social distancing. Fortunately, several have been able to obtain employment at Amazon's new headquarters. They are consistently hiring for Warehouse Team Members, Shopper Team Members, Warehouse Associates, Warehouse Laborers, and Warehouse Handlers.

We also found some information that you guys could give to your family members back home:

The Mutual Aid Network has been a staple of radical social movements for decades – from food distribution services like Food Not Bombs to the "Survival Pending Revolution" programs of the Black Panthers, which included free health clinics and breakfast programs. When the state fails to meet the needs of the public, many communities will build resources themselves, and in doing so will build an alternative to the hierarchical bureaucracies of the government. Below is the number for the Mutual Aid Network in each Ward of the city:

- **Ward 1:** (202) 681-9183
- **Ward 2:** (202) 688-5812
- **Ward 3:** (202) 556-1315
- **Ward 4:** (202) 681-3098
- **Ward 5:** (202) 643-7030
- **Ward 6:** (202) 683-9962
- **Wards 7 & 8:** (202) 630-0336

I want to close just as I began, until we *Connect* again!  
– Ms. Keela



Food Not Bombs (logo above) is an all-volunteer movement that recovers food that would otherwise be discarded, and shares free vegan and vegetarian meals with the hungry in over 1,000 cities in 65 countries in protest to war, poverty, and destruction of the environment.

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

*with Neely*

Thank you for your book ballots. Here at Free Minds, choice is a prized value. The top vote getter is *Kindred* by Octavia Butler! Keep sending those votes in for the next selection. Written in 1979, this timeless book follows the story of a young African American woman, Dana, on her involuntary time travel back and forth between her 1976 California home and the pre-Civil War Maryland plantation where her ancestors lived – a commentary on race, gender, and power. We cannot wait to hear what you think. Happy reading!

1. Do you think Dana changes over the course of the novel? If so, how and why?
2. Why do you think Octavia Butler decided to make Kevin white? How do you think this impacted his relationship with Dana and what they experienced together in the novel?
3. The word **kindred** refers to one's family and relations. What are some of the ways family relations are explored in this book? Do you think the title of the book is **ironic** (something that is contrary to what we expect), **literal** (something that fits our expectations exactly), or both?

4. On p. 252, Dana talks about how she sometimes writes when she can't sort out her feelings – and then throws away the writing because it was for her, no one else. Do you ever write just for yourself, with the expectation that no one will read what you write? If so, how does that help you process your thoughts?

5. Octavia Butler once said in reference to Dana losing her arm, "I couldn't really let Dana come all the way back... antebellum [pre-Civil War] slavery didn't really leave people quite whole." Do you think if Dana had not lost her arm, she would have ever been able to fully recover? Why or why not?

**Please remember to vote for the next BAM book!**

**See page 39 of the Remembrance *Connect* for the titles and descriptions!**

1st choice: \_\_\_\_\_

2nd choice: \_\_\_\_\_

# NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: MUSIC (VOLUME 9, ISSUE 3)

Our next issue's theme is Music, and we've been getting great responses already. For those who haven't submitted yet, we'd love to read your poems or essays about what music means to you. Has music ever made you feel comforted or understood? Why? What role does music play in your life?

Here's a preview of Volume 9, Issue 4: 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 *Purpose*.

### Rhyme

Rhyming is a popular technique in poetry that matches the sounds of words together. It can be used in more than just poetry and is often used in songs too. Imagine you are writing a song. Can you create a chorus (the repeated phrase in a song) with a rhyming scheme? Add in an extra challenge and see how many difficult words you can find a rhyme for!

### Make a Musical Instrument

Personification is a term in poetry and writing that describes when an author describes an inanimate object as a living being. For example, "The guitar breathed life into the room." Using personification, create a new musical instrument. What would it sound like? What does it look like? How can you use descriptive words to make this instrument come to life? You can also look around you – what objects could be used to make interesting sounds? Or, use your imagination to think about what sounds an object – like a window, or a book – would make if it could make sound?

Here is a fill-in-the-blank writing prompt if you want help getting started:

My instrument is called

\_\_\_\_\_

It is made of

\_\_\_\_\_

It is the color of

\_\_\_\_\_

It looks like

\_\_\_\_\_

It sounds like

\_\_\_\_\_

Playing it feels like

\_\_\_\_\_

When I hear it playing, I

\_\_\_\_\_

It reminds me of

\_\_\_\_\_

It takes me to

\_\_\_\_\_

It makes me want to

\_\_\_\_\_

I hope my instrument

\_\_\_\_\_

Would you like to hear my instrument?

# PARTS OF A SONG

**Intro:** The intro is the first paragraph or beginning of a song. It lays the foundation for what you will discuss further in a song.

**Verse:** The verse is one of the most important parts of a song. It's often the second paragraph – a body paragraph – where the story of the song begins to unfold for the listener. The verses will usually be more or less identical to each other, while the story contained in the lyrics will play out over the course of several verses.

**Bridge:** The bridge is a section of the song that interrupts the standard verse/chorus by introducing new musical and lyrical content.

**Chorus/Hook:** This is the middle paragraph of the song, where the lyrics often repeat. The hook is the catchiest part of the song, often containing the theme.

Think about your favorite song. Try breaking it down into parts: Intro, verse, chorus and bridge. What part of the song do you feel is most impactful? Why? Now, try writing a poem based off of this part of the song. What do you think the artist was feeling as they were writing this?

If you want an even bigger challenge, write your own song or poem with all of those parts (intro, verse, chorus, and bridge).

If you have trouble thinking of a song, here's one below to help!

## Stevie Wonder 'Higher Ground'

People keep on learnin'  
Soldiers keep on warrin'  
World keep on turnin'  
Cause it won't be too long  
Powers keep on lyin'  
While your people keep on dyin'  
World keep on turnin'  
Cause it won't be too long  
I'm so darn glad he let me try it again  
Cause my last time on earth I lived  
a whole world of sin  
I'm so glad that I know more than  
I knew then

Gonna keep on tryin'  
Till I reach the highest ground  
Teachers keep on teachin'  
Preachers keep on preachin'  
World keep on turnin'  
Cause it won't be too long  
Oh no  
Lovers keep on lovin'  
Believers keep on believin'  
Sleepers just stop sleepin'  
Cause it won't be too long  
Oh no  
I'm so glad that he let me try it again  
Cause my last time on earth I lived

a whole world of sin  
I'm so glad that I know more than  
I knew then  
Gonna keep on tryin'  
Till I reach my highest ground... Whew!  
Till I reach my highest ground  
No one's gonna bring me down  
Oh no  
Till I reach my highest ground  
Don't you let nobody bring you down  
(they'll sho 'nuff try)  
God is gonna show you higher ground  
He's the only friend you have around

# MEMBERS CONNECT: LOYALTY

## Being Selfless

By MZ

To me, being loyal to a person, group, or a cause means being selfless! Expressing my loyalty to others comes in different forms. Like being there for anything, whether it's just to listen or to aid and assist. My most consistent, steadfast family member has been my mother. We been through the most, hell and back for sure. I'm most definitely loyal to my family. Ain't nothing more important than family in my eyes. Never would I change my loyalty to anyone because of something that they're on. All people are different, not all people are gonna have your best interest. But that don't change my loyalty. Yes, loyalty has negative consequences because I'm loyal right, wrong, or indifferent. Never have I felt group loyalty, never really ran in groups. One of my mottos is *loyalty is a must, being disloyal is unforgivable!*

---

## Friendship

By TG

I recently had a very uncomfortable situation with a person I perceived as a "friend." During this dispute, I tried to reason with him by explaining my side of the events that had brought about the situation. I felt assured that once he heard my explanation, surely, he would see things my way, and everything would go back to normal. But why should a friend allow me to plead my case? Why should a friend change his views?

We as a society have an unwritten set of rules loosely known as a 'Social Compact'; contracts of social etiquette that are supposed to guide our actions when dealing with friends and associates. They are sort of like manners and are malleable for different spheres of society.

However, there is no 'mandatory' set of principles that constrict my friend to listen to me. He is not obliged to share my views on certain issues. Moreover, the social compact is not the same for everyone. I would have liked for my friend to have given me the chance to explain myself based on

the credit of our friendship. Though by doing so I am self-serving; I am placing our friendship under definition and expectation. I am saying, 'this is friendship and if you do not follow my guidelines for it, evidently you must not be, or want to be my friend.'

Is that truly fair for a friend to do? I think that by doing this I am totally eliminating the uniqueness my friend contributes to the relationship. It was that uniqueness that initiated the friendship in the first place.

I have learned that friendship is a bit like marriage. It requires an equal measure of love, patience, and hard work. I have to let my friends be who they are, and treat me the way in which they view the friendship.

This does not mean that I will accept being taken advantage of, or allow myself to be abused as (or by) a friend. What it means is, I will be that friend I want a friend to be, to me.

---

## Best Friend

By SH

My best friend was a young lady that I call Obrell. She was so loving and sweet, one of God's special treats. When she walked in the room she stole my heart. I fell in love with everything about her before she said one word. She could have told me to lay in the street and promise I wouldn't get hit and I would have did it. Love at first sight is what it truly was, you could stand any woman in the world in front of me to have an I still would be left with my Obrell!!! I loved Obrell with everything I stood for as a man even after she split my heart into two.

---

## True Friends

By JL

I am not a poet to say the least. I will do my best to answer all 3 questions. I do believe that there should be limits to loyalties. Loyalty should end if it means you causing harm to anyone for any reason or you having to put yourself or someone you care about in a compromising situation. I don't believe you should compromise your self-loyalty for others, unless it is a life or death situation.

Again not much of a poet, but I will tell you about a good friend I once had that taught me about being a gentleman, and displaying charm when it was needed. He even taught me about manners and politeness when necessary. But most importantly, he taught me about kindness and being a good person. He was a good friend.



# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: LOYALTY

## What Loyalty Means to Me

By JB

My definition of loyalty is being honest, straightforward to the person you're showing loyalty to, showing Respect, Love, Gratitude, Care, Honesty, Unconditional Support.

Loyalty is not taught. I believe it's embedded in a person. People show traits and characteristics of being loyal before they even know what the definition is.

To me Love and Loyalty go hand in hand. There's no better pairing.

It means a lot to be loyal to a person, to most it means everything to them, and it often goes a long way.

Loyalty also has consequences, because not all people are worthy of being loyal to. Some people can take a person's loyalty for them and take it for granted and misuse it for their own benefit, not caring how it can affect the person who is showing their loyalty.

For example: I can know my homie's loyalty has no limits, so I can go and ask him to do something that I wouldn't do myself knowing the consequences behind these actions can cause harm or trouble for him.

Also that's blind loyalty for the home boy because he doesn't know the true intentions of his so-called friend and is blinded, not knowing his loyalty has been misused for someone else's benefit.

I no longer share group loyalty with those who I've shared it with once before. People will only show loyalty to you due to circumstance when it's beneficial to them. Not because it's genuine and real. You often learn that when you locked away with a lengthy prison sentence, assuming that the group who you thought was loyal was only using you until you were no longer any good to them.

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## Honesty to Self

By TTBL

Loyalty to me is always being honest to yourself. Honesty to Self is like eating all the right foods, vegetables and proteins, along with exercising the body to maximize vigor and health. Throw in a clear, reasonable mind then one's loyalty can be exercised properly. It's when we don't know ourselves or when we lie to ourselves that loyalty becomes a double-edged sword. Sticking to a code is great, but codes are meant to be upheld with honor, integrity, and love. Those who make oaths oftentimes hurt themselves, but those who are honest have nothing to do with them. True loyalty lies in honesty.



# MEMBERS CONNECT: LOYALTY

Loyalty, Then and Now  
By VC

Good topic! Okay, so when it comes to loyalty and my (past) view of it, I used it very loosely. Out of pure ignorance I recklessly applied what I thought it was. Growing up, once I got wind of the word and observed how my peers displayed its interpretation, I took it and ran with it. In all honesty, I followed the herd right off the cliff. E.M. Forster's famous dictum says: "It is better to betray one's country than one's friend."

I was so engaged in trying to uphold what I figured loyalty to be that not even once did I consider how my foolish/false sense of loyalty was placing myself and others directly in harm's way.

I had my foot to the pedal with my impression that if we existed in the same neighborhood, came off the porch together, or had developed a bond through similar adversities, then my loyalty had me like whatever when it came to my peers, close and distant ones. Talk was cheap, so I would rely solely on my outlandish actions to solidify my sense of loyalty. I was looking for that acceptance and what I thought would be respect, by showcasing that I would go all out for those I considered friends and homeboys. So you see, it's safe to say that I didn't have the slightest clue.

Being with those I considered my people and having (showing) their back at any cost was what loyalty meant to me.

I was certain that I was being a good, solid, loyal friend/homie/partner, etc. (foolish me, smh). The foul part is that



A herd of horses

I couldn't even recognize that my behavior (toxic as it was) wasn't even being reciprocated.

In retrospect I displayed serial stupidity, but in my mind I was just trying to exert loyalty. I was diligent too (LOL). I was doing my best to be viewed as the epitome of a real loyal friend, partner, homie, right-hand man. All under or in the name of loyalty.

Now today my loyalty has made a U-turn and takes on a different focus. I still have the same energy. It's just no longer being wasted and I'm reaping the positive benefits of having it placed in all the right places. For instance, my sisters, Free Minds, and others that are positive, on the right track, and have my best interest at heart. I'm also loyal to educating myself, further educating myself, and becoming an overall better and compassionate man. Much more, but no less. I hope that I'm fully understood.

---

Loyalty  
By SA

Growing up, I viewed loyalty as many youth in my generation viewed it: being committed to your peers and faithful to them for a cause without ever crossing them. This view is what we were taught, but also a blind following since once many broke it would lead to discourse, bloodshed, death, incarceration, etc. We expected certain things from each other because we expected each other to be loyal; we had each other back, never told on each other, and used other rules we thought loyalty outlined in our lives to implement how we wanted due to our lifestyle. I viewed loyalty as such at its deepest level, even when others may have not shown it fully you will come to know how others had your best interest at heart. But the loyalty we knew of in society was different from its literal meaning you will read in a dictionary, since we created our own norm for such a word for our cause that wasn't pleasing to the masses. It was a trait that you can be trusted, depended on, and something embedded in you not to cross certain lines. What I learned as I grew older though is everyone has a cause that they are loyal to, even as a law abiding citizen, and I tried to compare the difference and noticed it was a lot different than the view we followed. Why is because what we was taught and lived by in our society is what we was accustomed to and similar to the rule system that Jason Reynolds used in his bestseller book *Long Way Down*, so this is how I can compare what this concept meant to us. Even today some things you won't do or cross the line to do even not being involved in that life you once lived. Loyalty is a word that can be a test since if you see someone who is not loyal, then you may not trust them or choose to deal with them since you know they are not loyal or have your best interest at heart. But I always remember the words of my late grandmother: "Treat others as you would want to be treated and remain true to those you love and who love you..."

# DC PHOTOS *By Shannon*

*These pictures were taken before the pandemic. Don't worry, we're staying home and staying safe!*



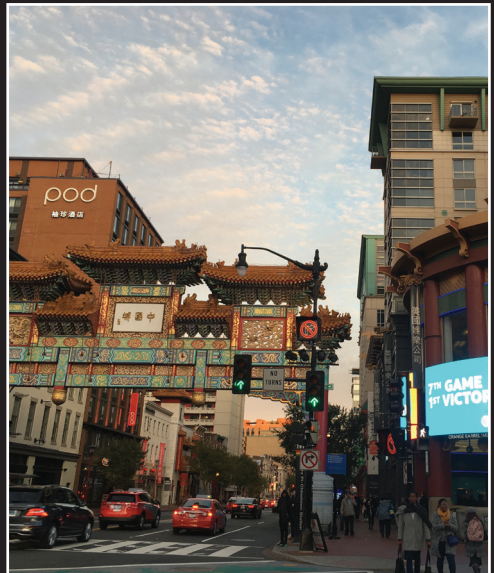
Cherry Blossoms at the Tidal Basin in DC



Boats at the waterfront in SW DC



Gallery Place in downtown DC



Chinatown in downtown DC

continued on page 33

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!



## LEGAL PAD: IT NEVER HURTS TO ASK!

*By DJ, Free Minds Member*

*DJ is a Free Minds member who was recently released under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act. DJ is not an attorney, but he has studied the law and hopes to go into the legal field in the future!*

Across the nation, inmates and prisoners are being considered for early release from prisons and jails based upon the coronavirus pandemic. As a D.C. inmate or prisoner, you should not be left out. Superior Court Criminal Rule 35 permits the judge presiding over your case to change your sentence. This can be a change to time-served, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Rule has two parts. Part (a) permits the judge to correct an illegal sentence at any time; part (b) permits the judge to reduce your sentence within 120 days after all your appeals are complete or once your time to submit an appeal has expired. Despite the 120 day time-limit, the judge can still grant a reduction if he/she believes it's warranted.

The COVID-19 pandemic presents a viable reason to ask your judge to reduce your sentence. Under D.C. Law, the Court is required to appoint an attorney to file the Rule 35 motion on your behalf upon your request. If you request your attorney to file the motion, he/she must do so. This responsibility of the attorney is set out by the Criminal Justice Act, D.C. Code 11-2601 et seq.

Also, you can ask the judge yourself by writing the judge a letter referencing Rule 35 as the law to support your request. If the judge denies your motion, you can appeal by writing a letter to the court within 20 days and saying: "I wish to appeal the decision." Do not waste time! Get your motion for reduction submitted. Ask for release based on the dangers that COVID-19 presents to you as a prisoner or inmate. **SAVE YOURSELF!!** Good luck! Until next time, keep your mind free.

**THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE; CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY!**

# THE YOUTH REHABILITATION ACT

By DJ, Free Minds Member

The Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) in Washington D.C. gives the court greater latitude when imposing a sentence on a person who was under the age of 25 at the time the crime was committed. The law sets out at least two vital benefits to a sentence that is imposed under the law. Number one, in cases in which there is a mandatory minimum prison sentence, the law permits the court to dish out a sentence that is below the mandatory minimum! Next, the law permits the court to "set aside" a conviction (that is, to seal it from public view) upon successful completion of the sentence. Check out D.C. Code section 24-901 to 906.

The law was first enacted in 1985. In 2018, the law was amended in three main ways. First, the definition of "youth offender" changed. This is important because only a "youth offender" can get the Youth Act. "Youth offender" was changed to mean a person who was under age 25 at the time that he or she committed an offense other than first and second degree murder; first and second degree sexual abuse; and first degree child sexual abuse. Second, the law made clear that the judge could sentence you below the mandatory minimum if you were a "youth offender." Third, the law separated the decisions on the sentencing portion of the Youth Act and the set aside portion of the Youth Act.

One goal of this law was to distinguish youth from more mature, experienced adults and to provide an opportunity for a deserving youth to start over with his or her criminal record expunged.

The process for relief unfolds in two steps.

Step 1: The sentencing judge can agree at the sentencing to sentence you in accordance with the YRA. In doing so, the sentencing judge must weigh a multitude of factors. The final decision must be in writing.

Step 2: After you finish your entire sentence including probation or supervised release, you can file a motion asking the judge to set aside your sentence. The judge looks at the same factors for both decisions.

Factors:

- (A) Age at the time of the offense;
- (B) The nature of the offense, including the extent of the youth's role in the offense and whether and to what extent an adult was involved in the offense;
- (C) Whether the youth was previously sentenced under this chapter; (meaning whether the individual previously received a YRA sentence)
- (D) The youth's compliance with the rules of the facility to which the youth has been committed, and with supervision and pretrial release, if applicable;
- (E) The youth's current participation in rehabilitative District programs;

- (F) The youth's previous contacts with the juvenile and criminal justice systems;
- (G) The youth's family and community circumstances at the time of the offense, including any history of abuse, trauma, or involvement in the child welfare system;
- (H) The youth's ability to appreciate the risks and consequences of their conduct;
- (I) Any reports of physical, mental, or psychiatric examinations of the youth conducted by licensed health care professionals;
- (J) The youth's use of controlled substances that are unlawful under District law;
- (K) The youth's capacity for rehabilitation;
- (L) Any oral or written statement provided pursuant to § 23-1904 or 18 U.S.C. § 3771 by a victim of the offense, or by a family member of the victim if the victim is deceased; and
- (M) Any other information the court deems relevant to its decision.

The change regarding when you can get a set aside is really important. When the law was amended in 2018, they made an important change regarding this "set aside" option. Before, if the judge didn't apply the YRA at sentencing, people had no opportunity to have their conviction set aside, even if they had a spotless record and never got a single shot. Now, anyone who fits under the definition of "youth offender" can apply to have their conviction set aside after they have completed their sentence (including probation or supervised release). Judges will look at a person's accomplishments in the years since their sentencing. This is an opportunity for people to demonstrate through their actions who they really are and who they can be!

Setting aside your conviction does not obliterate all records about the conviction, but the records are hidden from the public for observation.

If you ever got in trouble again and had to be sentenced, the new judge would know of the prior conviction and use it against you at the new sentencing proceeding. But having your conviction set aside should really help with employment opportunities. Finally, even when the conviction is set aside, it is still your responsibility to file a motion in court to seal your arrest records connected with the case. Check out D.C. Code section 16-803.

Hope this info was useful. Until next time, keep your mind free.  
Free Minds Member,  
DJ

**THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE; CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY!**

# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: COVID-19

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

The last Free Minds news column was written and sent in on February 24th, 2020. It seems crazy now to think that three months ago, that column made hardly any mention of the words coronavirus, COVID-19, or pandemic.

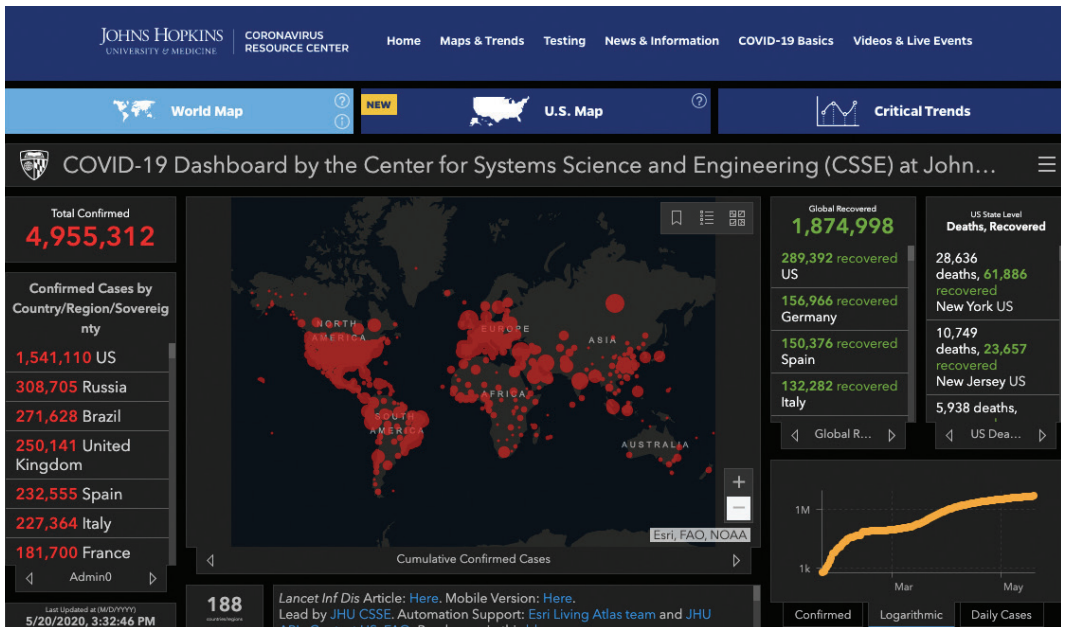
By then the virus that has now brought America to a standstill had spread across China from its original inception point in Wuhan, a city as big as New York City. China took drastic measures to halt the highly contagious virus, including locking people into their own homes in some areas, but the illness had already jumped to other countries and begun to spread new outbreaks.

As we write this, the United States has confirmed more than 1.5 million cases of COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel (new) coronavirus, and more than 90,000 people have succumbed to it. Worldwide, the numbers are 5 million cases and over 320,000 deaths.

The mission to confront this illness through medicine is well underway, with the world's greatest scientists, doctors and chemists working on three key fronts:

- Grow the body of research about how the mysterious illness affects the body, and how it spreads from person to person.
- Develop medical treatments that greatly reduce the likelihood of death for those who become very sick from coronavirus.
- Establish one or more vaccines, which can be administered by pill or injection and prevent people from getting sick.

Long term, the vaccine is most critical for society to get back to normal. There are dozens of vaccine trials going on to test the effectiveness of various options, and a few early trials have shown real promise. But the record for developing a vaccine is about four years, so hopes of a final solution on coronavirus anytime soon should be tempered.



COVID-19 Case Tracker from the Johns Hopkins University & Medicine in Baltimore, Maryland

# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *By John, FM Friend*

## NEWS

*As of May 19, 2020*

Most Americans first became aware and alarmed about the coronavirus when dozens of senior citizens at a Washington State nursing home died of the disease, which ripped through the home like wildfire before anyone knew about how quickly it spreads. Then, hundreds of passengers on a cruise ship became infected off the coast of California. By March, New York City had become the new epicenter of the virus.

Most states have spent the time since mid-March in various states of lockdown with stay-at-home orders that limited travel to mostly essential things like grocery shopping and doctor's appointments. The federal government strongly recommended social distancing, keeping a distance of six feet from people and avoiding groups larger than 10.

The goal was to accomplish what is known as "flattening the curve." Countries that were hit hard before us, like Italy and Spain, had seen hospitalization rates growing so fast that they did not have the beds or the ventilators to handle all of the patients. Painful decisions had to be made about which patients were worth using equipment on, and which ones would just be made comfortable before they passed.

Flattening the curve was about preventing that horrific scenario. By remaining indoors most of the time, and not interacting at restaurants and churches and concerts, we could slow down the spread of the illness for long enough that our hospitals would not be overrun by thousands and thousands of patients all at once.

That goal has been met for the most part, and states are now beginning to allow more businesses to reopen, or are making plans for reopening soon. The District of Columbia, so far, plans to remain largely shut down until early June.



The reflecting pool and National Mall, normally filled with tourists, is shown nearly empty due to the impacts of coronavirus (COVID-19) on March 17, 2020 in Washington, DC.



Empty streets in Washington DC



People wear face masks and stand six feet apart to practice social distancing while waiting in a line

There is likely to be another increase in cases of coronavirus as more states allow people to eat out, or congregate in large groups. And scientists mostly agree that a second full wave of coronavirus will occur in the fall, when temperatures start to drop in much of the country.

# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) By John, FM Friend

## SPORTS

As you might imagine, it is not safe to have 20,000 or more people get together to watch sports, nor is it safe for the players to compete in close quarters. One of the earliest indicators that coronavirus had come to America came in mid-March, when several players on the NBA's Utah Jazz were diagnosed with it. The league suspended the season immediately – shortly after came news that the NHL season was suspended, the NCAA basketball tournament was canceled, and the Major League Baseball season would not start until at least July.

Now the NBA and NHL are trying to figure out ways to safely conduct their playoffs and conclude the season. For sure, there will be no fans in the arena. More than likely, the teams will live in an isolated environment with necessary staff to make the games happen, with little interaction with the outside world.

Meanwhile some of the sports that require the least human interaction – golf and auto racing – have started competition again, just without fans.

## MUSIC

Stevie Wonder, one of the greatest songwriters and musicians in the history of this country and music in general, turned 70 years old recently. While coronavirus has prevented any sort of large gatherings to safely celebrate birthdays, online tributes to Wonder poured in in May, including a 24-hour DJ set by Roots drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson.

Stevie Wonder was born in Saginaw, Michigan in 1950. He was born prematurely, and complications from that left him becoming permanently blind. But by 11, he had become such an enormous talent behind the piano that he was signed by Detroit's Tamla Records, which would eventually become the famous Motown imprint.



What sports could look like without fans.



Wonder took home his first Grammy award home in 1972, and he's taken 24 more home since. Along the way he has seeded America with some of the greatest R&B songs ever: *Uptight*, *Superstition*, *Isn't She Lovely*, *I Just Called to Say I Love You*, to name a few.



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Loyalty By MV

Boundless and Endless  
My loyalty  
Knows no limit  
Beliefs ingrained deep  
Within my figment  
But it can and will  
Eventually be broken  
Perhaps by  
Lack of reciprocation  
Or words unspoken  
But within  
That broken state  
Comes introspection  
Into my possible fate  
What would my life be  
Solely dedicated to others?  
A slave  
To others needs  
Bitter because  
Of expectations  
Of what  
Loyalty's

Supposed to be  
So loyalty  
It seems  
Must come  
Firstly to me

## Jazzy Loyalty By KG

I guess I see her with a clear eye view,  
It's like God blessed me and I said hichu,  
She told me she got me and I said I got you,  
I had a lot of women now I'm blessed I got you.  
LOYALTY, that's all I wanted from a woman  
And I got it from you, women always abused  
It from me so I give it to you, a man  
Or women never took nothing from me and  
Damn sure ain't going to take me from you,  
Even with the pain you weather the storm  
With me through the rain, that's loyalty.  
That's all we needed to gain.

## DC PHOTOS *By Shannon*

*These pictures were taken before the pandemic. Don't worry, we're staying home and staying safe!*



An independent bookstore in the  
Petworth neighborhood in DC  
*Photo courtesy of Loyalty Books / Twitter*



The African American Civil War Memorial  
outside the U Street Metro

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?

### Rumspringa - A Taste of Freedom (And Test of Loyalty) for Amish Youth

*By Pramila*

Imagine that you are given a two-year period in which to decide whether or not you will stay in contact with your family, if you will ever speak to your lifelong friends again – if you will remain loyal to virtually everything you've ever known. This is exactly the experience that young people in the Amish community go through.

The Amish are a group of people known for their simple living and simple dress. They are opposed to modern technologies, but given the overwhelming presence of technology in the modern world, the Amish have been forced to adjust and deviate from their traditions. They choose to live such simple lives because they believe their way of life marks them as different from the rest of the modern world. While you may not have heard of or ever met someone who is

Amish, they have many thriving communities throughout America. The US states with the largest Amish populations are Ohio, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Wisconsin.

Simplicity extends to every part of an Amish lifestyle, starting with clothing. The Amish are immediately recognizable by the way they dress. Amish women and girls dress quite modestly. Their clothes are made from solid-colored fabric with long sleeves. Their skirts end below the knee, and they wear aprons as well. Amish women don't ever cut their hair, choosing instead to style their hair into a bun at the back of their heads. They wear a white prayer covering on their heads if they are married and black one if they aren't. As you might imagine in a community that values simple living, they don't wear any jewelry (info from LancasterPA.com).

Amish men and boys also dress conservatively. They wear "dark-colored suits, straight-cut coats without lapels, broadfall trousers, suspenders, solid-colored shirts, black socks and shoes, and black or straw broad-brimmed hats. Their shirts fasten with conventional buttons, but their suit coats and vests fasten with hooks and eyes. They do not have mustaches, but they grow beards after they marry" (info from LancasterPA.com).

One of the unique aspects of Amish culture is a rite of passage known as rumspringa. Children born to Amish families aren't automatically a part of the Amish church. When the children reach a certain age, they get to decide if they would like to officially join the church and continue this way of life, or if they would rather leave their Amish community and have more freedom in the modern world. This decision, which begins when they turn sixteen, is called rumspringa. It ends after about two years, when the individual decides to either be baptized into the church or go off on their own. Rumspringa in

modern German means "jumping around."

Many people are misinformed about rumspringa, partly because of its inaccurate portrayal in mainstream American culture. There was a TV show in 2012 called "Breaking Amish"; television advertisements and t-shirt slogans saying "what happens in rumspringa stays in rumspringa" don't help popular perceptions either. Even Oprah Winfrey had a program where young adults spoke about their experience during rumspringa and growing up in Amish families.

There was also a famous documentary called "Devil's Playground" by British filmmaker Lucy Walker, who documented rumspringa. In "Devil's Playground," Amish teens engage in self-destructive behavior such as smoking and drinking excessively and doing drugs. They are technically not allowed to be filmed or photographed, yet they are in the documentary.

In reality, these are all atypical behaviors for Amish youth. According to Richard Stevick, author of *Growing Up Amish*, experiences like these during rumspringa are abnormal and on the extreme end of the spectrum. Yet because popular American media chooses to highlight these extreme cases, it can be hard to have an accurate impression of what rumspringa is actually like.

Although there is smoking and drinking during rumspringa, it usually isn't excessive. Viewers from the outside world wouldn't find Amish youth during rumspringa very interesting; in reality, they usually partake in mundane things. During rumspringa, they get to go out with their friends on the weekends with very limited supervision, to choose their own friends, and to engage in whatever activities they want to partake in. Rumspringa is a stage in a young adult's life when they are able to participate in more "singings, peer relationships, dating and eventually finding one's life partner" (Stevick).

*"We don't give our folks leave to go out and sin just to get it out of their system. We give them a little space so they can be with people their own age and find a life partner"* – Amish Minster (Quote from R. Stevick's *Growing Up Amish*)

If an individual decides to become a part of the church, they are forever consigned to the Amish way of life. The Amish place a very high value on loyalty, especially loyalty to their families, their community, and their faith. According to Thomas Meyers, a sociology professor at Goshen College, more than 80 percent of Amish youth return to the community after rumspringa and become baptized into the church. In some communities, this figure is over 90 percent.

For many Amish young adults, their families and their



faith are very important; they will do what is necessary to keep them in their lives. The choice of whether or not to remain in the Amish community is a heart-wrenching decision. Leaving often means being cut off from one's family and former community – leaving behind all of the things a person has ever known – in order to try a different way of life. Given this choice, many Amish young adults decide that their family and faith are more important than the freedoms of the modern world. They choose to remain loyal to what they've always known.

### Food for Thought

If you found yourself in this situation, what would your decision be? Or if you have been in a situation where you had to choose between two important things, whether it was a different religion from your family or wanting to be with someone of a different ethnic background, what was your decision in the end? Was it worth it? Was it worth whatever you had to sacrifice to get what you wanted? Do you regret your decision?

What does loyalty mean to you? How important is loyalty to the different groups you belong to, your family, your friends or to you?

# REAL WORLD OF WORK: THE HAPPY MAN IN THE YELLOW CAR

By Bruce, FM member, as told to Kelli

After spending 25 years in prison, I was released in July 2018. Now I work full-time as a vendor for a company called Guayaki. They produce energy drinks made out of yerba mate. If you've never heard of that, I'm not surprised; I hadn't either. Our energy drinks are made of all-natural



Yerba Mate energy drinks

ingredients, except for caffeine. Yerba mate is actually a plant grown in South America. The company likes to say that, "yerba mate has the strength of coffee, the health benefits of tea, and the euphoria of chocolate, all in one beverage!" My favorite flavor is the ginger sage. I will drink one of those once in a while. To be honest, I never really got into energy drinks. I've got a lot of energy all by myself! People love them though.

I get up every day and start work by around 5:30AM. I drive all over the DC metro area in the company car. It's a Volt electric car. It kind of reminds me of a Beetle Bug! It's all painted up in bright yellow and green and says "COME TO LIFE" on the side with the company's logo. I get a lot of attention when I drive it. I guess it's an eye-catcher. Sometimes when I stop at a light, people will look at the car and they'll smile. Little kids might get to pointin' and jumpin'. People know I'm comin'!

My job is to go to all of my assigned spots—these are stores like Whole Foods, 7-11, as well as restaurants around town. I check in, see how many of our energy drinks they have, and then I'll supply them whatever new inventory they need. The people are all nice and we treat each other with respect. The electric car is cool, but I'll be honest. Sometimes it's annoying to have to spend an hour or two at the end of the shift, just charging the car. It's not so bad though!

I enjoy my job because I kind of get to be what I call a "lone wolf." As long as I get my work done, I can just do me. It's almost like being my own boss. I love that freedom. After being confined and controlled for so long in prison, to be out here free to just move forward and pursue my work and my dreams is a blessing. I'm a God-believer, so I put everything I got in God's hands, but I know that it's up to me to do the footwork. So I'm just moving forward and I feel like for that reason, doors are opening for me.

I'd been in prison for so long, so when I came home, I treated my job search as my actual J-O-B. I took it seriously and I knew I had to work at it every day until I landed work. It wasn't easy, but you just can't give up. I worked several odd jobs and temporary jobs at first. I worked hard. I finally got this job through my nephew. He's a returning citizen too. He worked for the company and when he heard about an opening, he gave



The yerba mate plant

them my name. They called and by the end of our phone conversation, they were giving me my starting date!

My job is always teaching me something. I'll tell you a story about a rough situation that ended up positive in the end. My supervisor is the type of person who doesn't really know how to communicate. He can be disrespectful. Some guys would snap on him. But I'm an older person (I'm 67) and I have a saying: "Sometimes you gotta play the game." I don't mean it in a negative way. But when people are disrespectful, sometimes you have to learn how to humble yourself. You may feel bent out of shape, but you can't act on it.

On this particular day, I was driving through traffic when my supervisor called. I tried to ask if I could call him later, but he wouldn't listen and kept talking. I tried to explain that I was dealing with traffic and trying to follow GPS. Eventually, I chose to hang up the phone so I could concentrate on driving safely. He called back and I hung up again. When I reached my destination, I called him back. Of course I got fussed at, but I humbled myself. He made accusations and said he was going to write me up. I said "Yes sir, if that's how you feel."

The next day, I thought: *Man, just call him and find out how his day is going.* I wasn't trying to bow down to him, or nothing like that. It just came from my spirit. I called and said, "Man, I hope you have a good day today."

He said, "Man! Thanks. I'm having a doozy of a day." Then he said, "Man, I was in the wrong yesterday. I apologize for how I came off. I'm not gonna write you up."

I was like, "I appreciate that. I apologize too for hanging the phone up, but I know I'm supposed to be driving safely and all." We were cool after that.

When I was getting ready to come out of prison, in all honesty, in my spirit, I knew I wanted to go into the community to talk about my life before incarceration, while in prison, and then my path after I got out. I've been able to do that as a Free Minds Poet Ambassador. One day, I hope I'm in a position to do this kind of mentoring full-time. Sharing my story just feeds me.

But right now, I love my job and I'm always gonna give this company 110%. Sometimes you're going to have to do jobs you don't really want to do. But at some point you'll get a job you really want to do. This builds character. So that's good for you. I know what I'm going to be doing tomorrow, and that's gonna keep me going.

## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

For the Loyalty issue this month, I'm sharing an acrostic poem that I wrote. I'm from the streets and that'll never change. I'm a gangsta and I strive to be loyal to my core self every day.

G.A.N.G.S.T.A

By J.G.

**G**od in the flesh; a thought of Allah made manifest, having a human experience in the process of elevating toward a higher consciousness.

**A**lpha male, rocking to the beat of my own drum set, pioneering unique and innovative schools of thought.

**N**oble, striving daily to be a man of integrity and positive influence.

**G**enius, genetically inclined toward greatness. My skin is melanin rich, my blood is that of a king. This thing was predestined.

**S**ensitive, understanding that my emotions are my guidance system so allowing them to flow really is a strength.

**T**ruth seeker, knowing that truth is universal and that I must be open minded in order to educate myself and reach my fullest potential.

**A**dventurer, understanding that the world is bigger than my block, my hood, my city, and it's supposed to be explored.

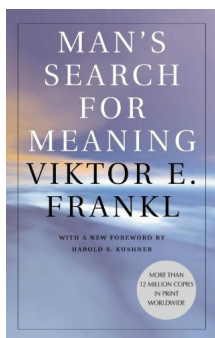
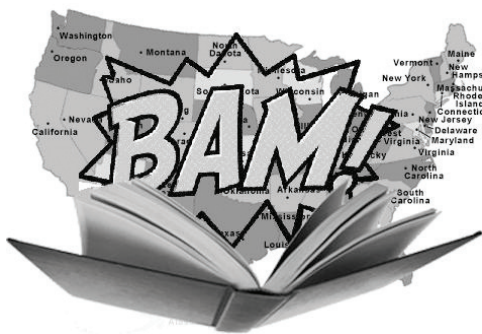
I'mma be a gangsta for life.

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

## Man's Search for Meaning

with Neely



Hello, Free Minds readers! We were so excited to receive your responses to the latest BAM discussion questions for Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. In this book, Frankl shares his experience of surviving a Nazi death camp during World War II and how he used this experience to move forward and find meaning in his life. Thank you for sharing your thought-provoking responses with us. Here are what a few Free Minds members had to say:

**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?**

**JL:** The similarities are in the psychological attributes prisoners face by being taken away from loved ones and dealing with the unknowns of prison life, especially when facing a lengthy sentence. The differences are that compared to a Nazi concentration camp, in prison you are not starved nor tortured to death, not to mention being executed by the hundreds of thousands just for being Jewish.

**TG:** There are some similarities between his experiences in the concentration camp and being incarcerated; isolation, dehumanization, the lack of self-identity. However, the experiences he faced as a whole far exceed anything we could experience locked up.

**MT:** Yes, because the main objection of camps and prisons is to deprive another of their freedom of will. It becomes a hard fight for existence, an unrelenting struggle for survival. The main difference between past and current situations of today is that there are laws set in place to serve and protect the occupants.

**SM:** Frankl's experience in concentration camps could be compared to a higher degree of incarceration in the United States. Although Frankl had a harsher experience it is similar in ways such as mental clarity. Concentration camps, prisons, and the likes could cause a mental death to the incarcerated. The cruel and unusual punishment that is endured could lead to mental health issues – anxiety, depression, stress, etc. – resulting in suicide. It is different today because prison has better food and living conditions. Although we get slave wages, we are not forced to work under inhumane circumstances. There are life sentences but we know our fate; they didn't know if they would get sent to the gas chamber, die of sickness, or get beat to death.

**MV:** Frankl's experiences in the concentration camp are comparable to current experiences of incarceration in the U.S. Mainly in the cruel manner in which prisoners are treated by officers. We're mistreated, degraded, looked at as inferior because of our titles of "convicts," "criminals," and "monsters," much like the Jews were. The tactics here are mostly psychological and in turn most of the violence is amongst ourselves. The differences are we are prisoners because of crimes a majority committed or knew about, while Jews' only crime was being a Jew in the time of Hitler.

**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?**

**RC:** The shock is definitely true in federal prison; being in a new state, surrounded by many men of all walks of life from all over America and other countries. Also the response to the circumstances is different, depending on the mental capacity of the individual, length of sentence, support system, resolve, and faith plus hope to overcome the situation.

**TG:** Yes I believe we, the incarcerated, experience some form of shock the minute we set foot at the intake centers. Words cannot describe what you will experience so it's shocking in itself. I've witnessed people crying, screaming, some people mentally lockup. I passed out.

**SM:** If I had to endure the same experience as Frankl then maybe I would've been in shock knowing the dire situation. I responded differently. I was young and I didn't have any support so it was more of a "man up" thing for me. I had those emotional waves but they came and went.

**MC:** I do agree with him. You should never be able to come into these conditions and not have some experience of shock. I don't know, I can't speak for other people.

**KL:** No, I do not agree that his perspective relates to all people. I believe the "shock" Mr. Frankl describes applied to a man whose social status and upbringing afforded him the opportunity not to experience an environment so

repugnant as to assault his sense of decency to the point of shock. Conversely, for those who are born into ghettos, there seems to be no shock at all. They are jaded and the uniquely inhumane experience of incarceration affects them totally different it would seem.

**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?**

**RC:** It's almost a cocktail of all your mental, emotional defenses to protect yourself because your skin must be thick to deal with the day-to-day. So working out to relieve physical, mental anxiety; reading has a sense of escape of chaos; laughter to keep from crying; and also positive self-talk because this environment is a constant mental/spiritual battle.

**AW:** For me, no matter what I do, my greatest weapon against apathy developing is to never forget that I am a human being, innocent, and have a value worth protecting and sharing with/for the world.

**JL:** Frankl's second reaction, apathy, did not take hold of me until years into my sentence and shows itself sporadically, depending on the situation. It is a tool for self-defense like Frankl mentions. But my primary emotional tactics are physical activities and trying to stay positive.

**SM:** In my humble opinion doing time is all about being active, productive, and strong minded. Every day is not going to be sunny, so you have to prepare yourself for the dark clouds and find ways to stay motivated. I like to read, write, listen to music, sports, and most importantly invest in myself.

**MV:** Yes, for my first 3 or 4 years I used religion as a way to escape my reality. It gave me peace because I thought, "If this life is over, at least there's a next life." Today I'm spiritual and balanced in order to take care of myself. I exercise, read, assist others and continue my path of righting past wrongs each day.

**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?**

**AB:** Yes, all of these prison officials are not miserable, deceitful people! There are a few staff that I do enjoy being around in here.

**RC:** Yes and it is an eye-opener and living example of, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Also, it keeps you humbled when good things are found in some of the weirdest places.

**JL:** Yes I have, but if I may be honest these acts of kindness were not experienced in prison but instead when I was free. As of yet, I have not experienced any acts of kindness in prison. Instead the contrary. I do consider this book club an

act of kindness, but I came about this through the jail, not prison.

**CS:** Yes. See in the situation I'm in now, I'm around so many people. I try to read them before I deal with them, so sometimes I read wrong and am surprised by certain people's kindness.

**AC:** Yes, I've experienced this type of kindness from an unexpected source. One day, out of the blue, a correctional officer called me in the office and wished me luck on gaining my freedom. He had been reading my outgoing mail for months. I had been sending letters and petitions out to different organizations, the White House, and others. This officer had seen through my writing that I was sincere in helping the at-risk youth, and getting my juvenile life sentence reduced. Still didn't get that done yet, but the correctional officer showed some kindness that I thought he never had based on his actions around the prison.

**KL:** I am exceedingly blessed to have found a person who showed me not only kindness but true brotherly love. He also gave me three principles which guide the course of my life. They are: 1.) Never be a burden; 2.) Struggle - and like it; 3.) Always give back.

**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?**

**LA:** Yes. One step is for us as a people to open our eyes and realize, not look, but realize that meaning is there for everyone.

**AW:** Knowledge of self, love of self, love of humanity, love of love, love of truth, love of peace, love of justice, love of freedom, and an active ability to act upon the world in a positive way to promote your meaning and freedom that is your humanity.

**JL:** For me, the meaning of life is to be a good person and a good human being. This can be interpreted in many ways but for me it is about leaving something better than you found it. Whether that something is a relationship, place, situation, or person.

**TG:** Protect your heart. If you're a kind person who made a mistake, stay that way. Do not conform to prison. It's better to be seen as yourself than to hide among the populous as someone else.

**MC:** I'm reading *7 Habits of Highly Effective People* so I use some of the skills or habits he explains in the book. I've written a personal mission statement which I read 3 or 4 times a day and I started my own diary.

# AROUND THE WORLD: STUCK IN THE CANARY ISLANDS

By Neely



Mountains in La Gomera

What happens when you are out of the country, thousands of miles away from home, and a world pandemic is announced? Well, on my recent trip to the Canary Islands, I found out.

Before we get to that though, I invite you to come along with me as we explore the Canary Islands, an **autonomous** (meaning they can govern themselves) region of Spain located off the northwest coast of Africa. There are eight main islands in total and I stayed on Tenerife, the largest and most populated island.

One of my favorite things to do when I go somewhere new is to try out the food. And the Canary Islands were no disappointment! Because the islands are a region of Spain, the cuisine has Spanish influence but with its own Canarian kick. It is common in the islands for locals to have **tapas**, either as an appetizer or a main meal. Tapas are small portions of dishes that are meant to be shared with everyone at the table and is a great way to try a little bit of everything. And trust me, everything was so good: spicy chorizo sausage in cider, *papas arrugadas* ("wrinkly potatoes," or small boiled potatoes served with a special spicy Canarian sauce called "mojo"), *almogrote* (a paste made out of cheese and served on bread – my weakness!), and queso asado (grilled cheese with various dipping sauces; cheese is very popular in the islands, especially goat cheese).

One day I took a trip to a neighboring island, La Gomera. The island is home to whistle-blowers. *Silbo Gomero* ("Gomeroan whistle"), a language that is unique to the island, is where people communicate through whistling. La Gomera is a mountainous island, so farmers would often use the language to communicate with each other because it can be heard up to two miles away! It continues to be used today, in addition to Spanish, and is still taught to children in school.

After a week of good food and exploring beaches, I was scheduled to return home on a Saturday. A few days before, the World Health Organization had declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, but everything still seemed relatively normal. That soon changed. We checked out of our hotel and went to the airport, where we found a scene of utter chaos: 95% of flights had been canceled, there were long lines of worried people trying to talk to representatives, and there were news reporters everywhere. My flight was one of the many canceled. My tickets were with a small airline and there wasn't a representative I could talk to at the airport. Because I was abroad I didn't have any cell phone data to call them. Fortunately, my friend had data I could use to call the airline, but the call went straight to a voicemail that said the office was closed and would open again on Monday... it was a Saturday! What was I supposed to do? Where was I supposed to sleep?

My friends' flight, which was with a different airline, was also canceled, but their airline had a representative at the airport they were able to talk to. The representative booked them for a flight on Tuesday and booked them into a hotel (for free), and while I normally wouldn't do this, I snuck into the hotel with them. Once we got to the hotel and I had Wi-Fi, I tried contacting my airline through Facebook. I was able to get through to someone and they rebooked me for a flight on Monday.

The next day, the island went on lockdown. All the shops, restaurants, and even beaches were closed. We were only allowed to leave our hotel if we were going to the grocery store or pharmacy, and there was a guard by the hotel entrance who interrogated everyone leaving to make sure they weren't ignoring the rules. At least, we told ourselves, the pool and recreational areas in the hotel were still open for us to enjoy. I was leaving early the next morning anyway, so I wasn't too concerned.



Traditional tapas



Then on Monday, I got to the airport and learned that I wasn't on the list of passengers for my flight. In a moment of panic, I called the representative to get some answers and they put me on hold while they looked for other flights. They came back after about fifteen minutes and informed me that the only flight available was for next Sunday (a week away)! Feeling like I had no other option, I asked them to go ahead and book it for me.

I went back to the hotel and found that the pool, recreational area, and all spaces that were open to the public had been roped off. The hotel's restaurant was still open, but other than that we were to stay in our rooms. I was scared I would finally get caught crashing with my friends, so I booked into my own room. After getting settled, I went to the grocery store and saw an eerie sight: unlike a few days ago, when the streets were bustling with tourists, they were now completely abandoned. A car was driving up and down the roads, blaring an announcement: "Atención, atención..." It was telling us we were not to be on the street unless for approved reasons.

That night, I got an email saying my flight had been cancelled. On the verge of tears, I called a representative again who said that they could get me a flight out of Madrid, Spain on Wednesday. All I had to do was get my own flight to Madrid. I booked a ticket, feeling reassured. Then, a few hours later, I received another email notifying me my flight had been canceled. I felt like my options were running out. At this point, my friends had managed to get a flight back home and I was by myself. Out of a final act of desperation, I bought a one-way flight to Dublin, Ireland, where I have friends who said I could stay with them and try to get a flight from there.

My flight was at 7 pm Wednesday night. So for the third time, I went to the airport, went through security, and walked up to the gate... just to learn that I had been put on **standby** (when an airplane doesn't have enough seats for everyone, people are put on standby and given a seat if someone with a ticket doesn't show up; usually this is done for people who want to change flights at the last minute). I was confused because when I bought my ticket, nothing was said about it being a standby ticket. So I waited while everyone with

a ticket boarded. There was a huge group of people left; apparently the same thing had happened to about 50 people.

One by one they started selecting people from the group to board. Families and elderly people were selected first. Then people traveling in groups. And finally, the single passengers remained. Y'all, I mean it when I say I have never been so stressed in my life! I stood there for 30 minutes, hoping each name that was called next would be mine. Each time it wasn't, my panic increased a little more. Finally, with only a few people left, my name was called. I almost fell to the ground in tears, I was so happy!

On the plane, I focused on my next obstacle: dealing with the Irish immigration officers. Any time you fly into a new country, you have to go through an immigration section at the airport, where you are questioned about why you are visiting, where you will be staying, etc. Most important, they want to know that if you are a visitor, you have a return ticket booked to fly home. Unlike most European countries at that time, Ireland had not yet closed their borders, but I knew the officer would be curious as to what I was doing visiting the country during a global crisis.

At around midnight my plane landed and I nervously walked up to the officers (I was the only non-Irish citizen on the flight, so everyone else breezed through immigrations). When I handed the officer my United States passport, I could immediately tell he was equal parts confused and angry that I was standing in front of him.

"What happens if you get stuck here?" he asked. I told him his guess was as good as mine, but that I had been trying to get home for five days at this point, was doing the best I could and that I at least had a place to stay in Dublin. He was fuming! He hesitated; I think he really didn't want to let me in. But what else could he do with me? I wasn't from the Canary Islands, so it's not like he could stick me on a return flight. He reluctantly stamped my passport and I rushed out of the airport to meet my friend who was waiting for me. I was able to book a direct flight home that Friday.

And that, my friends, is how my adventure concludes. It was a whirlwind trip that didn't go quite as expected, but I am fortunate enough to have had friends there to help me out and to make my "trouble in paradise" not so terrible.



Tenerife is also home to Mount Teide – an active volcano and Spain's highest point



Masca is a quaint village hidden away in Masca Valley, Tenerife

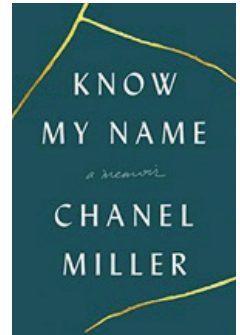
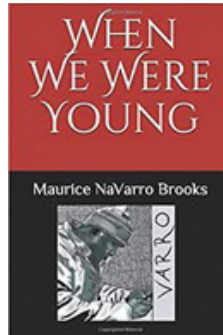
# WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

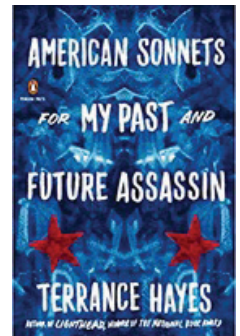
- **Julia:** *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee

I'm reading *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee (#ownvoices!), a lovely and expansive novel following a Korean family that emigrates to Japan in the early 20th century. The story starts with a pregnant young woman named Sunja who moves to Japan to build a better life after being abandoned by her unborn child's biological father. In Japan, she faces poverty, loss, anti-Korean discrimination, and the devastating effects of World War II. I'm about halfway through the novel. It's really beautifully written, and I'm learning a lot about a historical and cultural perspective that I don't know much about.



- **Shannon, Congressman John Lewis Fellow:** *When We Were Young* by Maurice NaVarro Brooks

This book is about Maurice NaVarro Brooks, a young kid from Louisville, Kentucky who was raised in the inner city. He succumbed to some of the same negative influences and peer pressure that resulted in making a bad decision that he would forever regret, motivated by his love and loyalty for his brothers. His journey was one that's experienced by young African American children in inner cities throughout the USA. Drugs, violence, and a string of bank robberies ultimately led him to receiving almost two hundred years in the feds at the age of 18. After 20 years of incarceration, this is his perspective from a wiser point of view, trying to use his example as a lesson for the youth of today.



- **Kelli:** *Know My Name* by Chanel Miller

I am reading *Know My Name*, a memoir by Chanel Miller, the young woman who was sexually assaulted outside of a Stanford fraternity party in 2015. This book is an in-your-face, gut-wrenching and raw look at the alarmingly common experience of way too many women in our culture. Miller's writing is beautiful. As I read it, I feel her pain, confusion, and ultimately her strength when she discovers the power of her own voice. For too long, we have been afraid to speak out about the devastating impact of toxic masculinity on ALL of us – regardless of our gender. I hope everyone will read this book!

- **Melody:** *Becoming* by Michelle Obama

*Becoming* is the memoir of Michelle Obama, the former First Lady of the United States. *Becoming* is raw, relatable, and most importantly redefining, as the former First Lady explains her struggles but overcomes various obstacles to ultimately "become" more. Many would consider Ms. Obama's upbringing as poor, but in her eyes she was blessed and thankful for the little things such as unity, love, and family bonds. Ms. Obama's journey was intriguing but most of all inspiring. I believe many readers will begin to understand the importance of purpose after reading this memoir.

- **TG, FM Member:** *American Sonnets for My Past and Future Assassin* by Terrance Hayes

This is a unique collection of sonnets written in the day and age of the 45th (President Trump). It gives an interesting look at America from the future to the past, causing thoughtful examination of the world and those in it. As these sonnets weave their way through the entirety of the book, it demands the reader to ask questions, connecting them to the outside world, to the author, but mostly to themselves.

# FAMILY TIES

continued from page 4

**YUKIA:** I remember, David called me and said, *did you hear the news?* I felt betrayed by the government. It was an absolute injustice. David wanted to know: *Will you still be my friend or are you going to check out?* You start calculating 45 years... but I had faith and I just knew he wasn't going to do that time. I just had to help him to see it.

**DAVID:** I was like, *I got a life sentence.* She was still like, *I don't see nobody better for me to be with but you.* I was reluctant to be in a relationship with her. I just kept saying, *This road gonna be bumpy.* It ain't gonna be no smooth ride.

**KELLI:** And you've been together ever since?

**DAVID:** No, not completely. We stopped speaking for a number of months. When you're in prison, you're just so vulnerable, you think the worst. So, at some point, I just told her I didn't want to be in a relationship. I told her, *I don't want you to put your life on hold.*

**YUKIA:** We took breaks because it was an emotional roller coaster. I never fell in love with anyone the way I loved David. Never! Anyone else I dealt with was just a momentary thing. But when I got pregnant, it crushed him. I could hear it in his voice. That was hard. The crazy thing is my daughter looks a lot like David. Everyone says so! Her biological father isn't in the picture. I kept sending David photos of her. I wanted him in my daughter's life. I just kept telling him, *Please, you gotta forgive me...* Now she and David are inseparable. There is no "step daughter." She is his *daughter.*

**DAVID:** People just don't stay together through prison. It don't happen. But I don't see nobody else better for me. I could always be myself and be vulnerable with Yukia. I never had to be this guy they created in my neighborhood. She knew exactly who I was. So, I was willing to do the hard work.

**KELLI:** Did people try to convince you it would never work out?

**DAVID:** Yukia got a number of warnings. They'd say: *He ain't gonna come home to marry you. He ain't gonna come home period!* And guys in prison were like, *I know she's good people, but man...?* But look! They was wrong!

**YUKIA:** Some people said I was crazy, but it wasn't anybody whose approval I needed. Look, you may not believe this, but I was conceived in Lorton prison. My father was incarcerated. My mother went to visit him, they had sex, I was conceived. Yes. At Lorton, anything went! A lot of us my age in DC were conceived at Lorton. They just don't tell the story the way I do! And so my mother and my family supported every decision I ever made. They knew I was smart and I loved David. I never met anyone else who had what David had. So my family knew they couldn't keep me away from him.

**KELLI:** How did you get through the turmoil of the legal case together?

**DAVID:** Yukia did a lot of my legal work, writing letters to the judge, filling up the courtroom and being in contact with my attorney. I remember when I told her my appeals got denied. She was like, *Okay.* I was so surprised. She just said, *What? You think I'm going somewhere?* And I was like *Yeah.* She said, *I ain't going nowhere. We gonna get through this too. What's the next step?* She is special. I guess we just both knew we'd built something big and she stayed in there with me.

**KELLI:** So after the court got the transcript to a tape-recorded confession by the people who actually did the crime, you were offered a choice between going back to trial, or taking time served?

**DAVID:** Yes. I'm innocent, but I wasn't going to spend another day behind bars or another day without Yukia. I had proposed to her a couple of years ago over the phone. When I was released, Yukia and my family came to pick me up. There were so many people and news cameras... When our eyes met, I was so nervous. I hugged and kissed her. It was definitely emotional.

**YUKIA:** I felt like I'd finally been offered the lead role I had been practicing for my whole life. It was the day I had dreamt of, finally manifesting. It was the missing puzzle piece that fell in place and made my life complete.

*More than 30 years after first meeting at Johnson Junior High School, David and Yukia are now together at last and planning their wedding! Best wishes and congratulations to both of you from the entire Free Minds family.*



# **FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP**

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## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: MUSIC**

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*By Julia*

For the next issue, we're digging deep into the topic of music. What does music mean to you? Has music ever made you feel comforted, or understood? Why? What role does music play in your life? Whether you create music or just listen to it, think about songs or sounds that have affected you. Of course, music and poetry are closely related. If you write lyrics, share them with us! Or send us your poems that use creative musical techniques like rhythm and rhyme. We can't wait to see what you create.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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