

January/February/March 2021
Vol. 10, Issue 1

Free minds Connect



THIS ISSUE'S THEME *Renewal*

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YOUR DESTINY**
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YEARS INSIDE**
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Warm Greetings Renewing Free Minds members!

As we mark a year since the US COVID-19 pandemic response, we grieve and remember the heartbreaking loss of 500,000 lives – among those dear members of the Free Minds family and their loved ones. We dedicate this issue to them and hold them in our hearts. We vow to continue the work to end racial disparities in all areas – health, economics, criminal justice – that have been magnified by this virus. This issue is also dedicated to all of you, our members, as you continue to endure and create in the face of mandated lockdowns and tremendous forces to simply shut down. The theme of renewal could be a synonym for what it means to be a Free Minds member. It reminds me of a truism of nature and life: one of constant regeneration. For example, there isn't a cell in your body now that was there when you were born, and some cells (blood, stomach lining) create new ones in a matter of weeks. I am comforted when I think about that. Each day is a new beginning on all levels, cellular, emotional, and spiritual. Our cover art shows the powerful example of a butterfly that starts as a caterpillar in a cocoon and undergoes an amazing metamorphosis, just as you who are now in cocoons inside are expanding your wings through learning, growing, and reflecting.

A good friend of mine is a film producer from Beirut, Lebanon, and recently hosted a virtual filmfest of films from the Arab world. Last night, I watched a film called 6:07 documenting the personal stories of lives shattered by the third largest explosion ever in the history of the world, when a warehouse with ammonium nitrate exploded on August 4, 2020 at 6:07 PM. 220 people were killed, 5000 were injured, and over 300,000 were immediately homeless. The explosion was compared to 15 years of war in 15 seconds. The destruction was that great. After a brutal civil war, years of political corruption, and now this tragedy, the Lebanese people were traumatized and demoralized. Yet a group of filmmakers came together and created a film to honor those lives lost. They recreated scenes in the same locations, with evidence of the disaster still there. It was beyond powerful to me as they described why they create in the face of devastation. It is a testament to the irrepressible renewal of the human spirit. Exactly how you continue to create

poems, and discussion, and essays, and letters. It is a defiant act of life in the face of destruction.

In his essay on page 26, AW shares the empowering realization that he can write his own story – and that it won't end in tragedy or defeat. He lifts us all up with his "vivid visions of better days." Free Minds mom Mary (page 4) held fast to a vision of a better day after walking with her son for 35 years after a wrongful conviction. A mother's love is the definition of renewal. On page 25, AC asks us to imagine life as a river, and every action we take, every decision we make, as an act of reviving. In The Write Way (page 14), TG shares an excellent, sound-filled strategy to boost the creativity of our writing and put another tool in our writing toolkit. FM friend Yana's advice is to write what you know (page 16). Her incredible journey from incarceration and drug addiction to urban poet motivates me – and hopefully you too – to see difficult experiences as chances to write about them. Free Minds member Marion's role as a COVID frontline worker (page 34) drives home something we see every day at Free Minds: our members are selfless, hard-working, vital participants in the community, who seek out the places where need is greatest. We're proud of the work you're doing, Marion. Thank you for your service.

Finally, your incredible poetry is the elixir that always brings renewal. Thank you for these moving creations of art. As GD shares in his poem "New Lease on Life,"

*There's no better time than now to renew your life...
Now we have to take advantage of all opportunities...
Be more vocal in our communities...*

Thank you all for being so vocal, and so strong.

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:
Friendship**

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



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

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

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FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

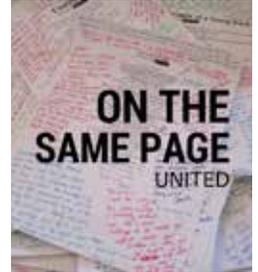
Blanket Drive

Continuing with our mission to serve the community, Free Minds staff and members held a blanket drive for people experiencing homelessness in DC. Shelters are more and more scarce due to the pandemic, leaving many people stuck in the cold. The blanket drive was heartwarming not only for the staff but for DC residents as well; one man was moved to tears upon receiving a warm coat and blanket!



On the Same Page in the Workplace!

Free Minds is going global! This January, we hosted an On the Same Page volunteer event with a large international media company. Opening the doors for our newly released members to share their stories, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors Jarrell and DeAngelo moved the audience with their powerful words. DeAngelo shared how he chose "poetry as a way to express myself," also mentioning that in the entire 10 years he was incarcerated, Free Minds never missed sending him a birthday card. Participants then wrote comments on poems, which are in the mail on the way to the poets!

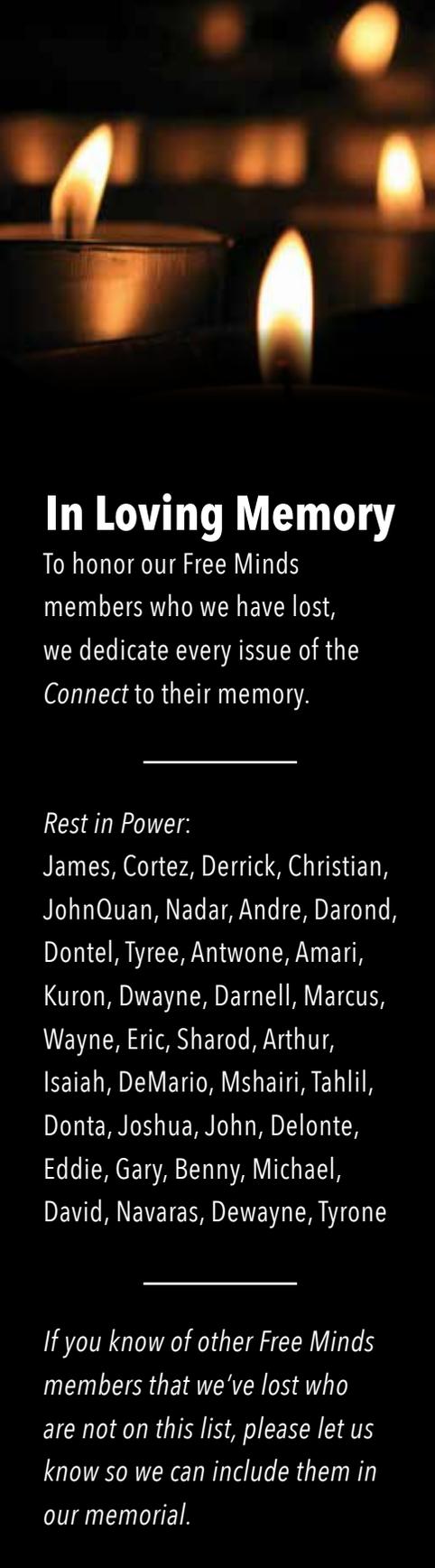


Write Night

Free Minds made history at our January Write Night! Not only did Free Minds' Write Night break its attendance record with 400 plus participants, but also it was included in the Presidential Inaugural Committee's National Day of Service! The Presidential Inaugural Committee is part of President Joe Biden's electoral staff, which selects certain volunteer events to advertise. 400 volunteers from around the globe gave feedback on hundreds of poems while listening to the moving conversation between Anthony and Jonas, Free Minds members recently released through DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act. The poetry of members in over 100 federal prisons touched the hearts and souls of countless individuals, and will continue doing so!

Congressman John Lewis Fellows

To meet the high demand for our On the Same Page program, we have brought on two new Congressman John Lewis Co-Fellows, starting in March. Welcome Craig and Jordan! We know that you will live up to the high standards set by our previous fellows Jameon, Shannon, Josh, James, and Terrell.



In Loving Memory

To honor our Free Minds members who we have lost, we dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory.

Rest in Power:

James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte, Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone

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

FAMILY TIES: A MOTHER'S LOVE THROUGH 35 YEARS OF INCARCERATION

By Mary, mother of Free Minds member CY

My baby was taken from me at 16 years old for something he didn't do. He was so young and given life. How could they throw him in there as a child? He spent 35 years away from me, until he came home almost 2 years ago. It was unbelievable. I thought he was coming home after the trial. We had all his Christmas stuff. He was innocent, so it would all work out. You think if you tell the truth it will be okay. I had no idea. I didn't know the law. I've learned the hard way.

It was a hurting time. I cried so many nights, I couldn't sleep. I kept hoping something would happen and he would come home. I prayed every day he would get a new trial. That the person who did this would come forward. Sometimes when he was still a teen, he would be upset that I wasn't doing enough and I would just keep telling him, "Baby, I'm trying, I'm trying." I just tried to let him know that I loved him and I'm not giving up on him. All I could do was say I love you, you are my child, and I will be there for you.

I tried to see him as much as I could. We drove from DC to Wisconsin and also White Deer and Allenwood in Pennsylvania and Petersburg in Virginia. I had really good friends who raised money and we rented a passenger van and we would stay in a hotel for 3 or 4 days. They knew he didn't do this and they were there for me. I am so grateful for the friends around me. The worst part of a visit wasn't all that searching by the guards. It was to have to leave him there. It was the hardest thing to actually stand up and walk away. I would cry and cry. I would never let him see me cry. It took me some time getting through that. The sound of those bars clicking behind me hurt so bad. I couldn't go to see him when he was in Arizona or New York. It was hard to travel to

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FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family.

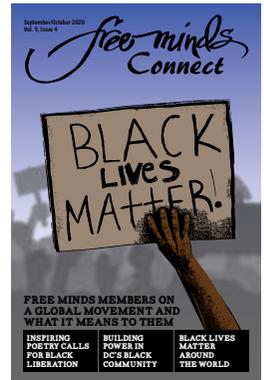
Here are some of your thoughts on the September/October 2020 Connect Black Lives Matter and the November/December 2020 Connect Find Your Purpose

SH: The *Connect* issue on Black Lives Matter was great, like always. Also glad that you let Eyone be a guest editor, Tara. Hopefully what I will say will show him how much he has been a role model and one who has made me grow as a person. I was 18 and fresh into a long sentence when we met. Now I'm sure he would smile at my growth and how much he has impacted my growth, even after sitting in this supermax all these years and becoming closely acquainted with some of the brothers he has... I salute him and you all for the work you all do, especially throughout these times: letting our voices be heard with all that is going on. The discussions and topics that vary were great, and Eyone's words were powerful. I am proud to be my brother's keeper and have my voice heard with others. This whole issue was good, from all the poems to the news clippings about many people across the globe standing up in solidarity together, from all backgrounds and walks of life. I liked the article "Did You Know?" by Shannon also, since it answered many questions about the BLM movement to inform us what it is all about. So this whole issue enlightened me in many areas.

GD: I recently received the BLM issue of the *Connect* and I was blown away by its content! What I found most intriguing was the worldwide protests. One would think that people in other countries had no interest in Black lives, but Black lives are everywhere and racial injustice is everywhere. Even in countries where we are not the main focus of racial injustice, someone is, so they can relate and share in our movement. I thought that piece was beautiful! I especially loved all the murals, paintings, and artwork of our fallen angels Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor. One of the bright spots of last year was how these lives torn apart brought so many lives together in unity. No matter how many more years I live, I'll always carry these fallen angels from last year with me in my heart... Black Lives Matter!

AC: [On Marcos's story in the Purpose *Connect*] I have to say I'm extremely happy for Marcos. I can relate so well to him; I grew up in the middle of the Civil War in El Salvador and got to live the gruesome end of it... I did, too, travel to the USA at 14, one month before my 15th birthday... After the many similarities, our stories do head towards distinct endings. Marcos's brother died, mine couldn't be doing any better than he is already doing. Marcos gets to live the American dream, I get deported to a country which I will not have seen for decades by the time I get deported. It's so interesting how life twists and turns as we travel through it. In any case, I'm extremely happy Marcos is doing well, I honestly like hearing that he managed to see the light before he got too deep into the mud that has trapped many of us.

JL: The poems written in the Purpose issue are very inspiring. Purpose vs. Evolution, written by MR, is one of the most powerful poems I've read. SHA's Everyone Has a Purpose is realistic - finding our life's purpose is not always easy, but we should never give up the search for it. All poems in this issue gives hope in following through with our life's purpose. They're very inspiring. I admire Jeffrey's positive attitude in his article Staying On My Purpose, Even When Obstacles Appear. If any obstacle gets in the way, we should take on the attitude Jeffrey mentions: "it will all work out; I just need to keep trying." That's the type of position we all should stand on when striving to fulfill our purpose.





PAYING IT FORWARD: BEAT THE STREETS

By Imanee; Interview with Gee, Owner of The H Bar, New Orleans

Gee, please tell us a little bit about yourself:

I went to college but I didn't finish. I worked in the restaurant industry for 20 plus years. I also did house-gutting and renovation after Hurricane Katrina. I learned a lot of game from working in restaurants about how to run a bar, how to have good customer service, how to deal with money, etc. I always had a dream to open my own business and be my own boss. It eventually came true and I am happy at this moment.

You mentioned that you were in the streets as a youth. How did you get into the street life and how did you get out?

A couple of things got me into the streets. One was being tight with a family member who was in the streets. He was a bad influence on me. The main thing though was the music I listened to, the culture I was in. Our music mainly talked about three things: women, drugs or violence, and money. That fast life appealed to me and soon enough I began wanting all the wrong things. I started selling drugs, which hurt my community, even my family, but at that time I was only concerned with helping my pockets. I wasn't educated on other ways to make money. The more I was in the streets, the more I realized that it was a dead end. I know that after three strikes it's over for you. I saw a lot of people I was around end up dead, in jail, or strung out. I knew I had to get out or I would be the same way. I began working at a restaurant as a waiter and the manager pulled me aside and said, "Gee, what you doing with your life, man?" He gave me a book called *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki and reading that changed my life. Reading saved me.

What was your experience being incarcerated like?

I went to jail a lot of times. Every time I went, it was miserable. You don't have any freedom. You're just

a number. I felt like a failure. The first time I went, they didn't let me call my mama. I had to sleep on a concrete floor with no blanket; they only fed us bologna sandwiches to the point that I can't even eat them anymore. I had experiences where the police planted drugs in my car. Once they pulled me over and arrested me and left my 5-year-old daughter in the car. Every time I was arrested, I was mad at the world, mad the cops, mad at my women, when I really should've been mad at myself.

How has opening a business renewed you in life?

Opening up a business renewed my life in the sense that I feel better about myself. I feel better that I'm able to help out with taking care of myself and my family. My self-esteem is up. I owe a lot to one of my mentors who got me into reading books. He taught me about assets, liabilities, and how to invest your money and your time into yourself. It is a beautiful feeling to have your own business, to be in control of your own destiny.

How has COVID affected your business?

Being in the bar industry and getting broken down into phases where you can only have a certain number of people in your establishment, and a certain time limit where you can serve drinks is hard. In phase one, we could only have 25% capacity, so that is only 15-20 people. It hit us hard. The whole of 2020, we might've been open for 3 out of the 12 months of the year. Fortunately, we had enough saved so that we didn't go out of business. We're now operating as a mini-restaurant. The food permit really helped. As a Black man, trying to open a business and stay open was hard enough; COVID made it harder. But I'm thankful for the community of people we got supporting us. Our family, friends, really came through and helped make us the best bar in the city.

What are other things that have renewed you in life?

Writing. I love writing poetry. Those skills, being a good writer, helped out with a lot of behind the scenes paperwork for the business. It helped me get business loans, create our COVID plan so we can get back open. Also, I dabble and dabble with music so I like to make songs, but the songs I make now are written to teach other people how to beat the streets, and how to be successful. The name of my book will be *Beat the Streets*. I want young Black people to learn how to start their own business and understand that there are other options out there than sports, rapping, and the streets. The book will be similar to the Robert Kiyosaki books. But a lot of those books are written not in terminology where a lot of Black folks can understand. If you have a book written in African American Vernacular English, it will be easier for a lot more people to understand. A lot of those books are written in lawyer jargon; it's hard to understand. I want to write something in *our* language.

What advice would you give to youth to beat the streets?

Don't get caught up. Don't get hooked on drugs. Understand that there are other ways to make money. Understand that the music you listen to is just for entertainment. Learn the credit game. Learn how to invest.



SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

Do you have advice for RD? 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 D.A.

I have been locked up more than 10 years now. I am sick of it. I mean SICK of it. The thing that I hate the most is being dependent on other people for everything. Like I've been waiting for my lawyer to file a motion and he hasn't done it. So I have to keep writing and calling to remind him. And I have to ask my mother to call and remind him. I can't do anything else about it. And if I need something, I have to ask a loved one to put money on my account. I just feel like I have to depend on everyone else for everything in life. And a lot of the time, they let me down. I don't even feel fully human because I can't do for myself. What can I do to feel more in control of my life and my destiny?

Sincerely,
RD

Hey RD,

As your brother behind the wall, I totally understand your feelings. Not only can I relate, but I've recently experienced the same symptoms while dealing with a legal matter. It's never a good feeling when you aren't in control of the things happening in your life. Sadly, the movements of an attorney will always be one of those things. Patience is key. Patience is oftentimes painful, but absolutely necessary – because without it, you'll find yourself right where you are now. I know; I've been there. Trust the process. We can't control what others do in the matter, but what we can control, we must. We can control our attitude and our way of thinking, and believe it or not, those are most important in seeing us through.

Prison will threaten to make you feel inadequate at times. You wake up tired of it all some days. That's

totally normal, especially for those of us who have given more than a decade. My advice: hit the reset button. We've all had to do it. Change the monotony of your days. Switch your normal routine. Create a new program. Open your mind to things you once would never dare explore. Befriend individuals from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Pick up a new hobby. Learn to play chess. Do any and everything that'll make you feel alive and human again. Don't give prison that type of power over you – it doesn't deserve it. Granted, it's not a place you'll ever grow to like, but making the best of it is absolutely necessary to ensure your survival.

Having to depend upon outside sources financially is also natural. Prison isn't exactly economically friendly. But, there are also ways to overcome this menace. Work assignments that'll allow you to feed yourself are available, so put yourself in position to take advantage. Kitchen detail will always be a viable option that helps take care of two birds with one stone. Employment there will keep you fed as well as bring some small wages monthly – wages that can grow in size depending on your ambition and how bad you want it. Take advantage of any opportunities available at your institution. This alone will give you some of that feeling your desire, of being more in control.

Trust me: I've been exactly where you are, brother – and it's a place you don't have to reside forever. So, what can you do to feel more in control of your destiny? Simple. Believe you are in control and let the way you live reflect those thoughts. I wish you well in your journey.

Your FM brother,
D.A.

JUST LAW: IT'S THE LAW

By DJ, Free Minds Member

Someone asked me what I was writing about. It's funny because I was on the bus heading to work. It was a frigid February morning. The ground was covered in snow, the trees bare of leaves – looking very stiff and hollow, as if wanting to break at the wisp from the splintered winds battering the region. With all this going on amid the COVID-19 pandemic, I had no clue someone was paying attention to a writer on the bus. After a quick glance at the amber traffic light. I looked at the kid and said, "Procedural default. I am writing about procedural default in criminal court cases."

It's a legal principle that says that state and federal courts cannot review arguments you present in a motion to your judge. This happens when you file a motion in your criminal case about a problem. Your motion is unsuccessful. Then months or years later, you discover another mistake in your criminal case. Well, naturally, you file a new motion to the judge. The judge denies the motion because you did not present the second mistake in the first motion. This is called a "procedural default."

This legal principle can obstruct you from having your criminal case reviewed for mistakes, unless you explain why you failed to present the mistakes in the first motion. A good excuse

to give could sound like this: 1) it's newly discovered evidence; 2) the prison officials confiscated your legal documents; 3) you were denied access to the law library; 4) or your attorney refused to give you your case files until after the first motion was unsuccessful. To avoid confronting a procedural default, I would encourage you to study everything about your case and include it in your first motion for relief regarding mistakes in your case. Otherwise, be ready to explain why you did not raise this new issue about a mistake in your first motion.

Anyway, I told the kid all of this. He looked around, pulled the cord for this stop, and said, "I think I'll continue getting the honor roll in school." I smiled and thought to myself how smart that kid was. He knew the best way to overcome a "procedural default." I wonder why I didn't use that as one of the excuses. Oh well: at least you now know another way to get around the procedural default obstacle.

As always, please be safe and keep your mind free!

Free Minds Member,
DJ

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

New Lease on Life

By GD

There's no better time than now to renew your life!
A new year means new hope... NOPE!
I won't dwell on the past... It's bad enough we have to cope...
A new view seen through a new scope...
And what I see is prosperity again...
When it's not a sin to gather with your friends...
I'm a social person, so social distance is not conducive
to how I'm living...
We've really been tested... No pun intended...
So my vision for the future is to resume what is presumed
to be "normal"...
There's no room for negative energy, enemies,
frenemies or anyone who pretends to be... On my side!
This is my time!
And I encourage all of you who've been through the "Who's who"
of bad news, to start your life anew...
One thing I've learned in the last 12 months is that
life's short and you only live once... That's 2 things...
But I have many... See, there's plenty of cliches
I can jot to hopefully start your new journey...
But I believe that like me, you already see what's been
taken for granted...
Now we have to take advantage of all opportunities...
Be more vocal in our communities...
Be role models for our children...
The best wife, husband, lover, or significant other...
Best boss, employee, or whatever's your hustle...
Whatever you do... Be positive and do it right...
That's how you get a New Lease on Life!

Reform The Way "U" Think In Order To Change The World

By AB

I see me in the world...
Slowly, bright and beautiful.
So I give hope to the future
Reformer of the world.
Change your thoughts
and you'll see a change in the world.
So my reform begins in my approach
to the biggest threat on God's green earth. (Us!)
Because we are constantly destroying our planet
In so many ways...
So we must come up with a plan to see another day!
Reform is changing my heart.
Reform is moving away from the old (Me!)
Reform is striving to find solutions to a problem.
Reform is shouting, screaming, hollering
To point out that we have a written solution to the problem.
And if you have figured out the real solution to the
real problem...
Then look in the mirror and reform the problem!

Identity Crisis

By MC

Is the real me who I was
Or what I've become
Was the change in my life
A run from fright
A cry for help
Or a heavenly plight
Envision my past,
Make a mental collage
A minor build for a
Major fall
The stagnated growth spurt
Like a mile run in a back pedal
If I've learned so much
Why the simple mistakes
Am I the dancing monkey
Or the empowering imp
The truth or a lie
Which will rule
Which will I choose

Post COVID (The Rebuild)

By KW

Freedom today! Freedom so close I can taste it.
Re-Enter Society on a Mission!
My mind is Free, my focus is Sharp.
My will is strong.
To help Rebuild America
My Sweet Beloved.
The awareness of her impact on the world
Will be marveled forever in the History of Mankind
Look we aren't perfect,
But we are getting close to treading in those waters.
Because we work together.
Despite our differences.
We've lost a lot of Americans to this virus,
But we won't lose this battle.
God willing we will rise again,
Better than before.
Yeah there's a lot to figure out,
So let's put our heads together,
And allow our leaders to lead.
Freedom today! Freedom so close, I can taste it.
Re-Enter Society on a Mission!
My mind is Free my focus is Sharp.
My will is strong.
To help Rebuild America.
My Sweet Beloved.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Past

By BG

The past is behind
Let's begin to look forward to the present
Today is a gift
I enjoy its presence
I smile to myself as I reflect on memories
I'm embarrassed at times when total strangers ask,
"Remember me?"
I dream sometimes and it's like déjà vu
I've been here before
Now tell me
Have you?
Tell me the truth
Please don't lie to me
I can't recall
Yesterday is history
In the future, tomorrow will be yesterday
I live right now in totality
The past was here but goodbye to it because it has
gone away

Dare I? I Dare

By AC

Dare I dream of bright new skies
filled with radiant colors or maybe shining stars?
Dare I dream just for today
of trying something new
of finding a new way?

Life is short and I should know
that time waits for no person, nor for their soul,
that THAT dreaded day will come for me
just like in time,
that dreaded day will come for all.

Today I'll overcome the barriers and the walls
that hold me back from doing something more,
from seeing further, from going farther,
from being one step closer to becoming someone greater
than the person that perhaps I was before.

This day will live within my thoughts
as the day I dared myself
to take part in something new,
to take part in something brave.

About this poem: I pretty much go for anything in life - as long as it's legal. My thought process for daring myself to go through with uncomfortable settings is within the poem except less romantic maybe. Anyway, enjoy!

Renewal

By WD

Deposition is removing their definition and
taking the position
That you will no longer give recognition
To their truth

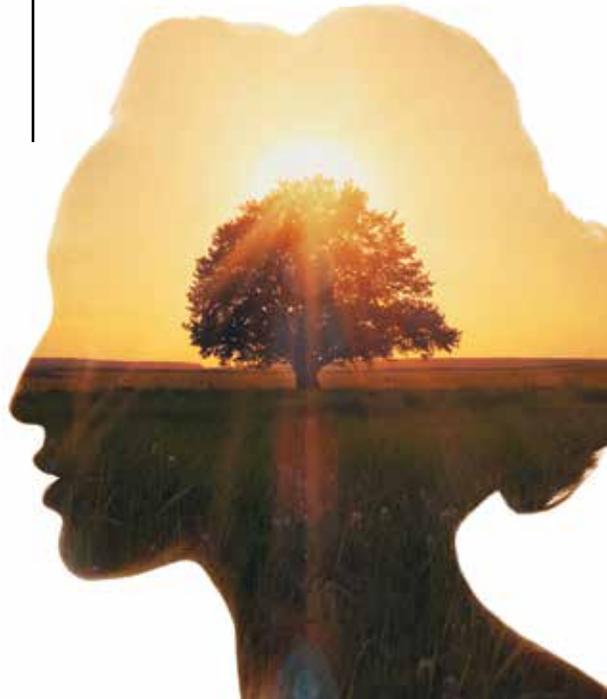
Because an infatuation with disinformation
is the explanation
For the disadvantage that you have managed
To put yourself at

And if you don't know what to do with her
Then let her go
To let her grow

Because the knowledge that you lack
Is holding her back
So let me give her the nutrition that she's been missing

And if you listen from a distance
Then my long handle spoon will help groom
Or renew you

Through unequivocal expressions that leave impressions
On subconscious thoughts
That seek to restart smart



REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey, Peeps!

I'm sure that, just like every other human being in existence, you were glad to tell 2020 to kick rocks LOL! I'm so glad to be communing with you in this New Year, and what better way to welcome 2021 than focusing on renewal?! Just saying the word renewal makes me smile; you think about so many awesome things like hope, newness, change, starting over, and looking ahead – basically you think of brand new, and who doesn't like brand new?!

I want to give you guys a good dose of encouragement, starting with forsaking any resentment or regrets that you may have accidentally carried over from 2020 (have you ever heard that saying: "resentment is like poisoning yourself and waiting for the other guy to get sick"?). We all know that we can't change the past; we can only do things differently going forward that will give us a more promising future. That applies to all of us, no matter where we find ourselves in our life presently.

Now once you have made the decision to push forward, what are some things that you want to focus on: things that make you smile, that make you excited, that make you hopeful, things that will add a brand new vibe to the necessary person you already are? Notice I called you necessary, and that's because you are! So many times we can't see the talents and gifts that we possess – talents and gifts that were given to each and every last one of us divinely. But trust me, they are there and you indeed have them.

Maybe you want to focus on developing these talents and gifts for the good of mankind. Maybe you want to develop them as a therapeutic outlet. Whatever your reason is, it's perfectly fine, and doesn't need to be justified. Do you, and that in and of itself constitutes your very own renewal! I'd like to hear about some of those talents and gifts, so how about writing in and telling us about them?!

Right now, I want to tell you guys about some awesome opportunities awaiting you here in DC when you return!

The GRID Alternatives Mid-Atlantic is a community-based organization that brings the benefits of solar technology to families that can benefit from financial savings the most, while giving volunteers and job trainees hands-on solar installation experience. The job training program is free to DC residents 18 and over. During training you will learn:

- Job site safety
- Fall protection
- Array layout
- Racking installation
- Module level power electronics (MLPE) installation
- Module installation
- Electrical safety
- Electrical layout and mounting
- Conduit bending and installation
- Electrical wiring



The GRID Alternatives Mid-Atlantic Job Training program is located at 1629 Benning Road NE, Suite 300. They can be reached at 202-602-0191 or you can email them at dcoutreach@gridalternatives.org.

Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela



CONVERSATION WITH JANET

Two years ago, my life changed unexpectedly. The most important parts of who I believed I was seemed to end all at once. My all-consuming, career – gone. Being a mother caring for three children – two away at school – almost over. My energetic body – injured in a freak accident far away from home, ankle bones in pieces.

I'm told I was calm, almost upbeat. With pain arrived a feeling of being unbelievably lucky and grateful about everything in life. My mind played thoughts like: *I didn't break my neck; I'm alive; This didn't happen to the children; Everything is fine!* These thoughts shielded me. I tuned out the message my surgeon sent about what not to expect in the future when he warned, "If you smash a vase into a million pieces and glue it back together, it will never be the same vase." I stubbornly wore positive thoughts like armor, locking myself into denying that anything happening was difficult.

FM member Cliff has described how from the time he was sentenced to life at 16, throughout his 34 years of incarceration, he never believed he would come home **and** he never gave up hope that he would come home. Cliff held these contrasting beliefs, allowing himself to embrace his own feelings of despair, acceptance, optimism and faith at the same time. He didn't close his ways to what his life was, nor did he deny himself from imagining his future turning out differently from the fate unjustly pronounced upon him in court. Cliff's remarkable mind supported his will to live and his need to heal from trauma. My recovery looked positive but internally, it involved struggles that Free Minds members describe vividly in poems and letters. Thank you, writers! Later, your poems provided a place to sink into feelings otherwise hidden, take a closer look without pretending, and think outside myself about how to move forward.

My transformation from being a hyper loudmouthed risk-taking adventurer with a cool job to an almost silent woman stuck on a couch led to a series of negative thoughts. These thoughts crept in quietly. I didn't take them seriously. Ignorantly, I falsely believed since no tears were shed, I wasn't depressed. My strategy, be positive or avoid contact, led to isolation. I thought

I'd lost the keys to my identity, but what was really missing was that I'd stopped doing what was most important: connecting with others and living with purpose.

Then incredible luck happened, just like in the best books and movies.

Tara called!

She asked if I'd be interested in facilitating the FM Book Club at New Beginnings (juvenile detention center) with a Poet Ambassador. REALLY? My dream job! FREE MINDS! Of course!

But I still couldn't walk. Happily, Free Minds waited!

After that call, I began doing the things we do at Free Minds. Meditate. Yoga. Reading instead of watching TV. Reach out and connect with people whether I felt like it or not. My will to live and vision for the future grew as I prepared myself to be stronger mentally and physically for the guys in the book club. They deserved more. As soon as I was allowed to drive again, the first place I drove was to New Beginnings. The guys helped me through crutches, a peg leg, moonboot all the way to sneakers. The impact of their kindness, humor, original minds and hearts – not to mention their fiercely competitive game skills – was huge.

Two years ago, I couldn't imagine having this opportunity to thank each and every member of Free Minds for helping not only me but so many others across this country grow, learn, heal, transform their own lives by reading and responding to your incredible poems. In my work at Free Minds, I hear and see people connect with you everyday because your poems are honest, deep, brilliant, and you share the enormous universe of human emotions with us.

A special shout out to the amazing YSC Free Minds members from NB and all the incredible poet ambassadors. Your words and actions create more positive change than you can imagine.

THE WRITE WAY: THE ONOMATOPOEIA

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

By TG, Free Minds Member

Howdy, Free Minds Fam! My name is TG, which are initials for “too good-looking.” Just kidding. I am a Free Minds member and I want to share a literary device that will enhance your creativity. It is **onomatopoeia**. Onomatopoeia (too many letters to use in Scrabble) are words that imitate (sound like) the sounds they describe. Examples are pow, bang, hiss, and ka-boom. Basically they are words that spell out the sound (thank you, Webster’s Dictionary). Whenever you write a word to express a sound in your writing, you have used an onomatopoeia.

Here is an example from Lord Alfred Tennyson, an English poet from the 1800s:

The sparrow’s chirrup on the roof
The slow clock ticking, and the pounds
Which to the wooing wing aloof
The popular made, did all confound
Her sense

Here is one by me:

Black kings Black Queens with a heavy heart sigh
A boom blast from cop guns and we all die
No justice No peace we roar to the sky
Breonna, George Floyd, black angels do cry

(Lord Tennyson’s poem is also a **tetrameter**, whereas mine is **iambic pentameter**. Which is something I would like to touch on in the future). Onomatopoeias are occasionally used with **assonance** (close repetition of similar sounds, usually vowels) and alliteration (words beginning with the same sound) to create a musical-like effect in poetry.

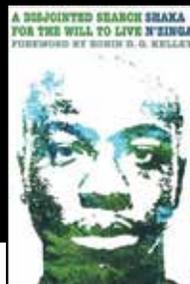
Now, Free Minds fams. Let’s hear the Ch-Ch-Ch of those pencil sharpeners. The scrunch, scratch and zip of those pens, and the yeehaw of creativity as you put this new device to work!

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.

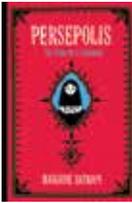
A Disjointed Search for the Will to Live by Shaka N’Zinga

This memoir delves into the author’s personal and political transformation, and his experiences growing up in Baltimore and being incarcerated as an adult at the age of 16. The memoir weaves together poetry and prose in a creative, thought-provoking exploration of the author’s consciousness.



BOOK BALLOT!

If you haven't already, please send in your choices for the next books we will read together! Our first book of 2021 will be *The Man Who Came Uptown* by George Pelecanos, but we want to hear from you about what we'll read together after that. Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. If you have a book in mind that you'd like to see on the next ballot, let us know!

1		<p>Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System by Cyntoia Brown-Long [Nonfiction - Memoir]</p> <p>Cyntoia Brown was sentenced to life imprisonment for a crime she committed at the age of 16. After gaining support from celebrities and activists with the hashtag #FreeCyntoia, she was granted clemency in 2019 and released after serving 15 years. This book contains her words, written over the course of her incarceration – a powerful demonstration of how she found the strength to thrive. This is a powerful look at conquering a family's legacy of addiction and abuse and finding the transformative power of love, forgiveness, and self-discovery in a system that was designed to fail her.</p>
2		<p>An American Marriage by Tayari Jones [Fiction]</p> <p>Newlyweds Celestial and Roy are the embodiment of the American Dream. Just as they begin to build their new life together in the American South, they are ripped apart from each other when Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Although fiercely independent, Celestial is devastated by Roy's absence and turns to her childhood friend, Andre, for comfort. When Roy's conviction is overturned 5 years later and he returns home hoping to resume his normal life with Celestial, he finds a completely new way of life. This is a stirring love story about people who must reckon with the past while moving forward.</p>
3		<p>The Poet X by Elizabeth Acevedo [Fiction]</p> <p>As Xiomara begins her journey into womanhood, she has learned to let her fists do the talking. But Xiomara has plenty she wants to say, and she spends her time writing her words into a notebook. With her mother determined to keep her obeying the laws of the church, Xiomara understands that her thoughts are best kept to herself. But when she is invited to join her school's slam poetry club, she knows her mother would never approve. But she can't stop thinking about her passion to perform her poems in a world where she refuses to be silent.</p>
4		<p>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood by Marjane Satrapi [Nonfiction - Graphic Memoir]</p> <p>Through comic strip images, Satrapi tells the story of her childhood in Iran, during which she witnessed the overthrow of an oppressive regime, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the devastating effects of the war in Iraq. As Satrapi walks us through her childhood of dethroned emperors, state-sanctioned whippings, and heroes of the revolution, the reader is invited to learn about the fascinating history of Iran. This is a story of growing up and a reminder of the human cost of war. It is also a reminder of how we can carry on, with laughter and tears, in the face of absurdity.</p>
5		<p>How Long 'til Black Future Month? by N.K. Jemisin [Fiction - Short Stories]</p> <p>The short stories in this collection include spirits haunting the flooded streets of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In a parallel universe, a utopian society watches our world, trying to learn from our mistakes. A Black mother in the Jim Crow South must save her daughter from a fairy offering impossible promises. And in the short story "The City Born Great," a young street kid fights to give birth to an old metropolis's soul.</p>
6		<p>The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma by Bessel van der Kolk [Nonfiction - Psychology]</p> <p>Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's foremost experts on trauma, has spent over three decades working with survivors. In <i>The Body Keeps the Score</i>, he shows how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferers' capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust. He explores innovative treatments – from meditation to sports, drama, and yoga – that offer new paths to recovery. <i>The Body Keeps the Score</i> exposes the tremendous power of our relationships both to hurt and to heal – and offers new hope for reclaiming lives.</p>

CHANGING MY THINKING THROUGH WRITING

By Yana, Free Minds Friend

Yana was born in North Carolina, raised in Maryland, and has lived in DC for the past 12 years. She is in the process of writing a book of poetry and exploring spoken word poetry, something she hasn't tried yet.

When I was 14, I wrote my first poem. I was at a summer program and they gave writing topics. It came natural to me. Writing poetry helps me get through hard times. Sometimes I might get writer's block but all I do is think on a real life situation I've experienced and I'm inspired. I call myself an urban poet because I write about real things that happen to me as a Black woman living in DC.

I am a product of incarceration. I have been incarcerated over 15 times. A lot of my arrests were due to drug abuse. While incarcerated, I found poetry to be a way of channeling my energy in a productive way. I have written over 29 poems, but I lost a few when I experienced homelessness. I am now in recovery, in my own apartment, getting my high school diploma, and writing my first book. Who says change isn't possible? Every day you wake up, you have to reset your mind. God gave me another day. I ask myself, what am I going to do different today? Change your mentality and change your thinking. Writing is a

big part of that for me. It's very therapeutic. Writing helps me expand my mind and my surroundings. It motivates me to try new things so i can experience them and write about them. A lot of people in DC just know Good Hope Road, but what about Friendship Heights? There is a great library there. I dare you to go there. I dare you to go to Eastern Market. You have to expose yourself to different people.

Before my mom got addicted to drugs, when I was a little girl, she used to take me to the Kennedy Center for plays, and my aunt took me to the mountains, so I keep that mindset. I try different foods. I eat sushi and escargot. I'm planning on riding a horse one day. I'm getting a car and a passport and traveling. I also realized in my recovery that you not only have to be willing to learn new things, but you have to be willing to listen.

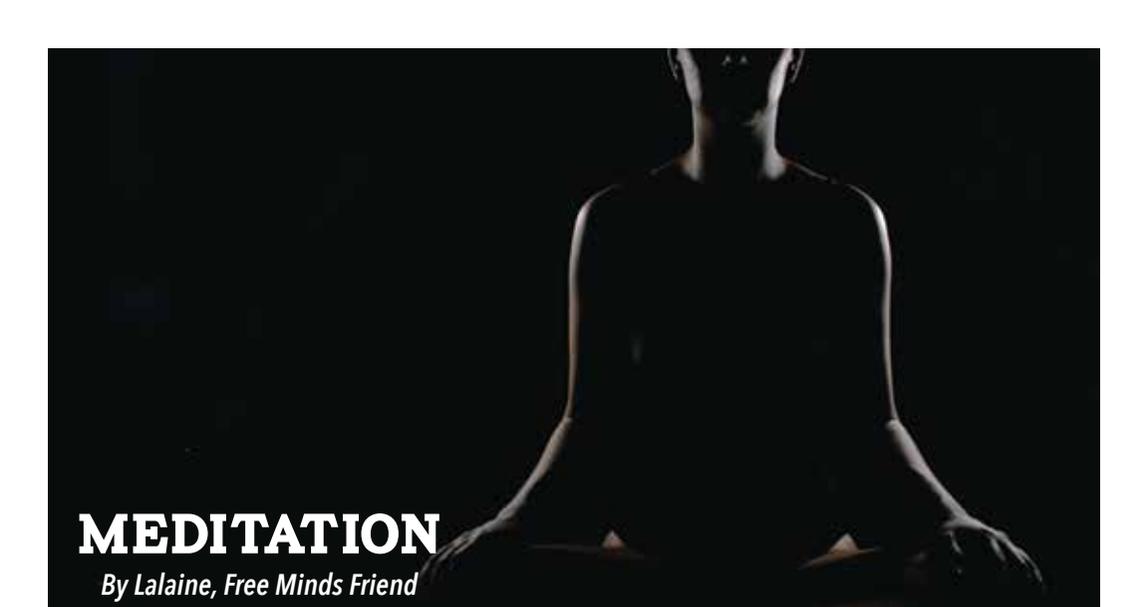
I have to work extra hard as I have three strikes against me. I'm formerly incarcerated, I have a mental illness, and I am in recovery from drug addiction. This gives me motivation to prove to myself that I'm not this person anymore. My mind is always thinking of creative things to do. I looked up on my phone how to make facial scrub and realized I can get all those ingredients at the grocery store. I ordered mason jars in bulk and am making a wonderful product with green tea bags, brown sugar, coconut oil, and coffee beans. Facial scrub - it's a girl's secret.

So to all my sisters and brothers and siblings reading this who are currently incarcerated, if you haven't already, you are in the perfect spot to get in touch with your creative side! Ms. Yana dares you to write about what you are going through. Keep writing and who knows, you can have a book someday.

As my grandmother used to say, "you can't live in this world alone." If you don't want to speak out to a person, write it in a poem. If you can find therapy, that is always good. I know sometimes my own thinking is not my best friend, so I rely on people. I call my best friend and ask what do you think about this? You need support and advice from people who have your best interests at heart and have good judgement. You know who they are.

If you feel you can't express your feelings in a poem, write a rap song. Get a journal and just write out all you are feeling. What you are going through. I dare you to rap about something positive about our community. Let's rap about change.

This issue is about renewal, and I say you can always reinvent yourself. You get to decide what you're going to do with your life. So many people have an addictive personality. We may stop using drugs but we eat a lot or shop too much. I have a positive addiction now, and it's writing poetry!



MEDITATION

By Lalaine, *Free Minds Friend*

A few years ago, I started meditating as part of my New Year's resolution to try new things. Since then, I have been doing it regularly as part of my self-care routine. Focusing on a thought or activity for a few minutes a day is a form of meditation if it helps train the mind to be calm and emotionally stable. Mindful meditation isn't about clearing your head and focusing on nothing. It's about training your attention on one thing at a time and not judging whatever thoughts enter your head space.

There's been a lot of scientific studies published on the benefits of meditation in prisons. The evidence is clear that there are mental, physical, and social benefits that can include decreased stress, improved concentration, reduced symptoms of anxiety, and more. Doing a body scan is one of my favorite ways to incorporate mindful meditation into my day. I like to do it upon waking up or at night before bed.

Body Scan Meditation

This meditation is exactly that: a mental scan of your body from top to bottom. (You can go bottom to top too!) This can be done lying down or sitting comfortably. Just be sure you're in a safe, quiet space where you can focus on yourself for a few minutes. This can take two minutes if that's what you have, or 20 minutes or longer, with practice and patience.

Start by taking five long, deep breaths. Take your time with this; it will set the tone for this exercise. When you take a deep breath in, you want it to start in your belly and move upward until you feel your lungs and chest expand. When the breath reaches the top of your throat, take a pause and then very slowly let it all out in a long exhale through your nostrils, until your stomach feels a little deflated. Do this five times.

If you're sitting down, lower your gaze or close your eyes and

draw your attention to the top of your head. Notice any particular sensations. Does it feel light today or heavy? Do you feel any tension in your face? Move on to your neck. And down to your shoulders, chest, arms.

Pay attention to any pains or general discomfort. Imagine that your next inhale will wash over any place where there's tension and bring some ease. Noticing any pain might not relieve it – you just want to acknowledge that it's there.

How does your abdomen feel as you breathe in and out? Are there sensations you're noticing? Tune in to your hips, backside, thighs and knees. Do your legs feel heavy, light? Maybe there's a neutral feeling. Move on down to the ankles and your feet. They've carried you a long way. Is there weight on them now or are they at rest?

If your mind starts to wander during this exercise, simply take note that your mind is wandering, and gently remind yourself that you're doing a scan at the moment and bring your attention back to where you left off. Go easy on yourself; this takes practice.

At the end of your scan, take a moment to mentally connect all the parts you've just scanned and feel your breath moving freely throughout your body. If your eyes were closed, slowly open them. Then pat yourself on the back for taking a few minutes to take care of yourself!

Sam Settle, who edited the book *Peace Inside: A Prisoner's Guide to Meditation*, says that meditation is about "living from a place of freedom in the truest sense of the word, right where you are, bars or no bars... Unlike 'the system' which can seem rigid and unforgiving, our hearts and minds are flexible places we can dive into and work with at any moment."

4. Michael reflects on how nobody understands who he is just by looking at him, that he appears to be "just another man who came uptown (p. 263)." What is something about you that people wouldn't realize just from looking at you? Do you prefer to keep that level of secrecy or do you wish more people understood you?

5. What is your opinion of Ornazian? Does your opinion about him change over the course of the novel? Why or why not?

6. Was reading this book **nostalgic** (a longing for home or long-gone moments in one's life) for you, if you are from DC? If you are not from DC, did anything about the book remind you of your own home?

***Please remember to vote for the next BAM book! See page 15
for the titles and descriptions!***

1st choice: _____

2nd choice: _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: FRIENDSHIP (VOLUME 10, ISSUE 2)

Hey family! The theme of the next issue of the *Connect* is Friendship. Here are some prompts to help you start sorting out your thoughts. And we want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 10, Issue 3 will be about Accountability.

(1)

Define friendship using this acrostic poem! Start each sentence with a letter in the word "friendship."

F

R

I

E

N

D

S

H

I

P

(2)

A tanka (which means "short poem") is a Japanese form that is five lines. The first and third lines have five syllables and the remaining lines have seven syllables each. Here is an example of a tanka poem by the Japanese poet, **Sadakichi Hartmann**.

Sadakichi Hartmann, "Tanka"

Winter? Spring? Who knows?

White buds from the plumtrees wing

And mingle with the snows.

No blue skies these flowers bring,

Yet their fragrance augurs Spring.

Try writing a tanka poem about the qualities you would like to see in a true friend *or* write about a particular friend, titling the poem with their name.

(3)

A "Day 1" is a term used to describe a person you have been friends with since birth or early childhood. Write an *ode poem* – a poem that celebrates a person, place, or thing – to your Day 1. Title the poem "Ode to _____."

(4)

Are there different levels or stages to friendship? Thinking in terms of this pyramid, what is the first level of friendship for you? Try writing it down within this pyramid. For example, one could fill the base of the pyramid with:

Level 1 to Friendship – Having a good first impression.



(5)

"You become like the 5 people you spend the most time with" and "Be wary of the company you keep for they are a reflection of who you are, or who you want to be" are two coined phrases about the power of friends' influence. Do you believe these phrases are true or do friends hold no influence over you? Write a story about a time when you were either positively or negatively influenced by your friends. What would you have done differently? Here's a challenge: try making the entire story rhyme!

(6)

Falling out with a close friend is a tough situation that many people have experienced. If you could do life over again, would you do anything different in terms of your friendship or the effort you applied to that friendship? Try writing a poem about things you wished you said to a friend you have lost, beginning each sentence with the phrase, "I wish..."

DC PHOTOS *By Shannon*

These places are new to me. Marvin Gaye Park was Watts Park and the trolley station was part of Spingarn High School, which is now closed. The picture with the building is a place where people hang out, but they just built that building within the last two years. Also Marvin Gaye Park is where NBA player Kevin Durant and some NBA players be playing during the off season. That building changes the whole landscape of that corner, which looked totally different.



continued on page 35

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!

MEMBERS CONNECT: RENEWAL

Renewal
By JL

Since this prison facility has been on lockdown due to the coronavirus, I have not been able to avoid other prisoners as much as I usually do. Staying away from most others in here is a survival tactic to stay out of other people's business; their business can sometimes mean trouble. But for the past year, everyone in the block has been packed together stressing. In an effort to help pass time, some prisoners now come to my cell to stop and chat. (My celly, who proved a recluse prior to COVID-19, is now somewhat of a welcoming sort in order to ease his worries and idle mind)

At first, other people coming over to my cell bugged me. Then a meddlesome prisoner noticed me trying to solve one of the puzzles Free Minds sends every couple weeks. His query led to

me informing him of Free Minds and letting him read some articles I contributed to the Connect in past issues. Our convo again led to me showing the guy two of my book manuscripts. Days later, as I walked through the block, the curious prisoner called out and introduced me to some others who write and read to "avoid trouble." I've been in this block with these guys for years, but because of my choosing to limit associating with others, I had no idea we share a lot of the same interests.

This issue's theme is concerning RENEWAL and I guess I got a fresh start when broadening my association and perspective when meeting some really good dudes in my block. Didn't aim for it to be this way. Guess that some things, like RENEWAL, simply cannot be avoided.

The Renewal of Ourselves By MDC

Today, as snowflakes danced from above, whirling and twirling with the grace and elegance of a ballerina, and the snow conquered every inch of terrain it fell upon with the vengeance and brute force of Gengis Khan, it finally hit me. The first definition as stated in my Oxford dictionary for "renewal" says, "to start doing something again after an interruption." WE, are all currently experiencing interruption. An interruption from mankind. An interruption from our families, friends, communities, goals, hopes, dreams, and aspirations.

Some of us have been sentenced and transferred to environments worse than the colonized neighborhoods we come from, but we endure in silence for fear of further damaging the relationships that we have come to cherish as they provide us with the strength daily to rise another day. I'm certain that you brothers and sisters have experienced the dark thoughts that may at times seem like logical solutions, after braving the dehumanization, demoralization, bigotry, callousness, and emasculation that unfortunately begins the moment we entered these concentration camps. It makes you wonder who are the criminals here, really? For me, the strip search procedure awakened my senses. It really cut me deep. There are but few things that have ever reduced me to tears: childbirth, death, and now, prison.

There is no need to elaborate and execrate the perpetuating sordid atrocities and dimensions of this system that we are forced to cope with daily. I mean, let's be honest, what would you rather hear: mass incarceration and prison reform constantly being intellectualized by politicians and celebrities, or the mittens Bernie Sanders wore to President Biden and

Vice President Harris's inauguration? 😊 Furthermore, in my opinion, I believe the practice that has formed this machine, whose apparatus has been lubricated with the blood, sweat, and tears of the hapless for centuries is simply sacrosanct to the powers that be. WE know by now that the only thing that we can change for now are ourselves. Although those charged with executing the law and those charged with our custody believe we deserve the level of treatment that is unfit for even a zoo animal, we must realize why we have come to such a place, what we must do to never inhabit such a place again, and once we are released, what we can do to fix what we just suffered. We must embrace humanity as we would embrace our loved ones before or after each visitation. We are more than criminal records, labels, tattoos, gunshots, stab wounds, and gang affiliations. We are sons, we are daughters, we are fathers, we are mothers, brothers, sisters, etc. The renewal of ourselves before the trauma – compounded by addictions, miseducation, misfortunes, and politics – must occur now even under these circumstances.

Beloved, we are born pure. Conditions are the hands that meticulously mold us into misunderstood and undervalued souls. But we must irrevocably renew ourselves. Henley, a famous poet once said, "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." So ask yourself, "what am I willing to sacrifice in order to be renewed?" Stare intensely into that figurative mirror. I'm very familiar with this struggle. While it isn't easy, I promise you that it is worth it.

I leave you as I came; in love, peace, truth, justice, liberation, beauty, patience, and understanding.

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: RENEWAL

The Year of Renewal

By AC

I love horoscopes. A buddy of mine knows that I love horoscopes and so he passed me a magazine that talked in detail about what's going on in the cosmos. One of the very first things I learned was that, according to experts, Pluto is in Uranus. Now, don't ask me, I don't know how that would even happen. Apparently, one other thing horoscope experts are saying is that 2021 is the year of Renewal.

See, the reason I read horoscopes is because a part of me wants to believe in the idea that we can magically look into a window and peek into our futures. I might be wrong, but I like having a reason to be happy and excited about tomorrow: My horoscope said good things are on their way.

When I read that 2021 is the year of renewal, I automatically thought of Imanee (Hi!) asking me what I think about it. The magazine said the last era of Renewal that the world experienced was back during the Renaissance; when great artists, scientists, and the whole world made so many achievements towards the bettering of the planet. I personally think renewal happens more often than we'd care to admit.

In my mind, life is a river that has currents pulling and pushing in so many directions, but ultimately, all leading downstream. I also see us humans floating on the waters,

sometimes swimming desperately to change the course to which we are heading, sometimes we are cruising right along, sometimes we are struggling so much just to stay afloat. Well, in my mind, I believe every stroke of our arms, trying to swim, trying to change where the river of life is taking us, is a Renewal.

Sometimes it's something like changing schools, changing addresses, changing jobs, getting new girlfriends/ boyfriends, a divorce, or a marriage. Some Renewals are bigger than others, but in essence, they all change who we were before. We are who we are because of who we have been, and we will be who we want to be because of the choices that we make. Renewal, like strokes in the river of life, gives us the opportunity to change those things about ourselves that can turn us into better men and women. We can be great people, even greater than we already are.

I sincerely hope this horoscope is correct about 2021 being the year in which the entire world moves to be Renewed in order to be kinder, more accepting, more equitable, more just, and of course, more loving. I have no problem believing this, after all my horoscope said so. Now, if I can only find the part where it gives me the next Powerball numbers... Just a thought.

A Fresh Start

By AS

A fresh start? This is a want, need, desire, a thought that composes a hopeful future that can only strengthen my faith that yes, I can be granted something so beautiful. This allows passion to control your lifestyle. Oh, how important is it to keep in mind the possibility of this happening. There is so much, and so many goals I can still reach while I'm still young. To start with making my father proud of me like he is of his other kids. For I do feel I make him sad no matter what he says. So, with this fresh start I'm making him smile when he is given a chance to speak of me.

To receive my driver's license and going to work every day earning an honest dollar while looking good in a suit and tie. Being a family man, a provider especially for myself. A clean state would allow me to truly take care of

myself. Living out on my own being an example of what success looks like after being released. I truly believe if you work and are willing to work for a fresh start when it is given, you would make good use of it like a lost twenty.

I understand this is rare, almost like a miracle, and we know how much we pray for such a divine intervention. This would be my fresh start into society being what is needed of me. Everyday proving my worth to the world. To cook for myself. Demonstrating my capability of living out my responsibility of being a human. Showing love for my neighbors without judgment. What a life to be what everyone knew you could be. It only took time. I have everything to prove, everything to gain with a fresh start.

MEMBERS CONNECT: RENEWAL

Reflection

By AW

It was the summer of 1989. I hadn't turned 17 yet; I was sitting on an administrative seg. unit in prison, the "Old Jail," infamous for its open racism and rape. Before I was forced into the adult population as a child, I would sit in this single cell spending most of my time daydreaming, as I looked out of the cell's window onto the endless cornfields.

One day during my daydream believer's voyage, four big John Deere tractors rolled onto the prison grounds. The prison was locked down, though the wildlife was still active: crows, of course, enjoying the rows and rows of corn. No cloud in the bluest of blue skies, made especially for us daydream believers.

On one of these tractors, the driver was a teenaged boy, not much older than I was. I watched him very closely, as this nagging thought began to grow larger and larger in my mind. As he smiled, I cried. A tragic flaw, my flaw, became obvious to me, which was my failure to be blinded by the reality of racist injustice. An injustice that made it so very obvious that the life of the white child driving the tractor, working with his elders, had a greater value than my own.

I attempted to be angry at him, but instead I became angry at myself and my kind, whose failure to check this sh*t 1,000 years ago had allowed self-determination to be crushed and replaced with these chains of cultural, political, and religious enslavement. At 16 I thought these thoughts, and my daydream believer escapism melted into a fury ocean of "a disjointed search for the will to live." As the protagonist in that still-unfolding tragedy, I came to understand in that moment "it could be I who wrote my own story, and it would be no tragedy at the ending."

This criminal justice system has shown me the true nature

of man's inhumanity to man: defenseless and unable to even articulate a basic understanding of an adult's way of functioning when life, liberty, and due process is violated. On February 7, 1989, a Black child was denied any chance of ever having a normal life. A group of all white men, in the name of justice, seeking punishment, compelled him to enslave himself through the process called plea bargaining.

Sitting in that prison cell, 16 years old, alone – not moved by hate, but touched by consciousness of six thousand years of madness, and choosing the path of "me, myself, alone," knowing no one is an island unto themselves – I had to develop a mindset unlike anything that I'd ever been exposed to. And most of it would emerge from my own humanity and genetic/ancestral memory.

But still, the tragic flaw remained: I was naïve and sincere to a fault. Racism is a system, a blight, that isn't just a white man sickness. Our white women are products of it also. The woman I loved taught me a very costly lesson: this fight for our humanity takes work, serious work, soul searching, and sacrifice. All of us have been touched by this blight; broken bones need mending and scarred souls need healing.

And as I watched the young man drive away on the tractor, free and whole, I had no idea as to the future brutal, dehumanizing and degrading experiences I would have to endure over and over again. I cried and cried until sleepless dreams claimed my attention, and that existential awakening was repressed until this day of December 30, 2020. Moving on into a New Year. 2021 and still I find myself in a cage/cell. However, these days I have vivid visions of better days to come! Smiling, looking ever forward to telling my story, and making, living, experiencing new ones in 2021 and beyond.

#Reform

By ADC

Reform! The literal meaning of this word could come in the form of a noun or verb, depending on the particular usage.

Using it in the form of a verb I think would be the best way to describe it for me. Only for the simple fact that I need to take action on improving or correcting that part of me which is corrupt or defective.

The corrupt or defective trait that I am speaking of is the downplaying of or not caring at all about the problems which affect my community. Which, I think, is the poor

financial conditions.

Therefore, I will improve that horrible trait, in order to help the community. I'll do this by taking advantage of the newly-enacted law restoring Pell Grants (grants in order to attend college). I am going to enroll in a college program in order to study economics or finance.

It's a duty of mine to take part in building the community back up financially. This is the least that I could do, since I was one of those who took part in destroying the community.

REENTRY PROFILE: PETE: HOME AFTER 30 YEARS

By Kelli

On December 11th, Free Minds member Pete walked out of the DC Jail a free man. The last time he walked the streets, it was 1990 and Pete was a 16-year-old boy. He's 46 now. Originally charged under Title 16, he received a sentence of 35 years to life. Under DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act, he was resentenced to time served. While awaiting resentencing at DC's Correctional Treatment Facility (CTF), Pete served as a mentor on a special unit called Young Men Emerging, where he worked with incarcerated young men 18-25 years old.

Kelli gave Pete a call to catch up and allow him to share his story with all of you:

KELLI: Thirty years is a long time, Pete. Longer than some of your mentees have even been alive! What can you tell us about the time you did?

PETE: I'll be the first to tell you: I was far from a choir boy back then! My thirty years was a hard thirty years. But it was hard because of me. It took a long time, but eventually there was a turning point. What changed my whole perception was reading books. I've read SO many books! I remember I read the book *Shogun*, by James Clavell. It's about a Japanese warlord in the 1600s and describes "Bushido" which was their code of honor. I always believed I was a man of strong morals and principles. But then I read that book, and I realized I was still getting into all of this trouble, you know? It made me wonder.

But then I read the book *A Man's Search for Meaning*, by Victor Frankl. That book right there? It broke everything down for me. Frankl writes that every second, every minute, every hour of every day, you *always* have a choice in any matter. When you're young, you don't pay that any attention, because "Well, he called me a B!" or "Well, he pushed me!" But you *still* got a choice!

It was like a big ol' light bulb for me. After I read that book, I never got in trouble again! I realized all the things I was doing, I was the cause! I grew up in a

culture where if someone says this, you gotta do this. That's how I was. Now I understand that no matter what a person may do or say to me, I always have the right to choose to react towards it, or I could just just walk away! This changed my entire life!

KELLI: What was it like to walk out those doors?

PETE: Ah, man! When I was leaving from out the unit, and all the guys, they was saying their goodbyes. It was a really bittersweet experience because I'm happy to be going home, but I'm sad because I'm leaving all my friends and the mentees behind. I'm not gonna lie, that was one of the hardest feelings I ever felt and I still feel it. Because I'm here and a lot of them are still there. And I understand what they're going through.

Now don't get me wrong, I was happy! I always said, as soon as I get out there, I'm gonna dance! I'm gonna kiss the ground! But as soon as I walked out, I seen all my friends and family and the way it felt, I can't even describe it! That right there is a feeling I never felt before.

KELLI: What surprised you most when you came home?

PETE: Man, you go to jail when you're 16 and you come home when you're 46? Understand, last time I was free I was a 16-year-old living in public housing. I didn't have no bills, I didn't have no type of work experience. I was a little street urchin. Now I realize I'm a grown up. I gotta pay taxes! I gotta get a job! I gotta get a place to live! I gotta pay my water bill! Everything is different!

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IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: VACCINES

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

The world is now more than a year into the global pandemic caused by the widespread impact of the coronavirus. More than 2.5 million people have died of the potentially fatal disease around the world, including more than 500,000 Americans.

But there is hope on the horizon, thanks to the quest to establish a vaccine for COVID-19 that is nothing short of miraculous. Previously, the fastest vaccine to go from development to widespread use was the mumps vaccine, created in the 1960s. That took four years to complete. In the case of HIV/AIDS, the world has still not figured out a vaccine.

In less than a year, the world saw the development of two highly effective coronavirus vaccines, and has since seen the addition of several more from the United States, China, Russia, India, and Europe.

How do vaccines work? There are a few different kinds, with complicated names like mRNA or adenovirus vaccines. But the common theme is this: through an injection of a safe, small amount of material related to the sickness, the vaccine teaches your immune system to fight off a real infection. Human bodies create proteins called antibodies to fight against illness; the vaccine isolates enough of the virus to show the body how to build up antibodies against it, but not enough

of the virus for you to actually get sick from it.

This process was likely used in some fashion in China and Africa as far back as the year 1000. The first formal vaccine was developed in 1796, when a scientist named Edward Jenner noticed that while the airborne smallpox virus originated in cows, the milkmaids who worked most closely with cows tended not to get it. Jenner used material from cowpox to create a substance that helped prevent humans from contracting the deadly disease.

When a vaccine is developed, the research community begins to conduct clinical trials on it. The last phase of trials is to take thousands of human volunteers, and either give them a shot of the vaccine or a "placebo," basically a shot of nothing. Then, researchers study two things: how frequently people in either group got coronavirus, and in the group who got the real vaccine, if anyone experienced serious side effects.

In the case of the first two coronavirus vaccines, made by the companies Pfizer and Moderna, the results so far suggest that they are among the most effective vaccines ever created. More than 90 percent of vaccine recipients did not get coronavirus, and zero percent got a serious case of the virus or died from it. Another vaccine recently approved in the U.S., made by the company Johnson & Johnson, has shown similar ability to prevent serious illness and death.

There are certainly challenges that remain for the world with coronavirus. These vaccines are still in short supply, though companies are starting to partner up in an effort to increase output. So far, the shots are mostly available to the people of wealthy nations involved in their development, but we will all risk future outbreaks of the illness unless a global ability to vaccinate people is built. And even in the countries with vaccines available, there are still many people who are hesitant about receiving it.

Vaccines continue to be a significant invention in human history, responsible for the prevention of millions of deaths.



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

WORLD NEWS

One of the most consequential foreign policy decisions made by the Trump administration was to remove the United States from what is known as the Iran Deal. During the Obama administration, America and several other powerful allies agreed to lift heavy financial sanctions on Iran, and Iran agreed that it would stop developing the necessary material to make nuclear weapons. Ever since America left the deal and slapped new sanctions on Iran, the country has restarted its nuclear program.

Will the new president, Joe Biden, re-engage in the deal? Iran has so far said that it wants additional concessions in any new agreement, since it was the U.S. that backed out. That will be a tough sell, because Iran-backed militias are causing upheaval in several countries at the moment, including the war-torn nations of Yemen and Syria.

NATIONAL NEWS

Senator Cory Booker and Congresswoman Barbara Lee (pictured to the right) have introduced legislation that would establish a Congressional Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation. The goal would be to study the impact of systemic racism on Black Americans throughout our nation's history, and assess the racial inequality of today.



The commission, if it happens, is seen as a first step toward the consideration of reparations for slavery in America. Another member of Congress, Sheila Jackson Lee, has proposed a commission to study what reparations might include.

SPORTS

The Washington Wizards had a ton of buzz going into the season, having made one of the biggest blockbuster trades of the offseason: a straight-up trade of John Wall for Russell Westbrook (pictured to the right).



The early going was rough, though. The team suffered through a long slate of postponed games due to COVID-19 issues, and Westbrook was hobbled early with injuries. However, the Wiz have come alive before the All-Star Game, and have been one of the best teams in the league in February. The squad's franchise player, Bradley Beal, is leading the NBA in scoring, as the only player in the league averaging more than 30 points. And Westbrook, now back and healthy, is averaging a triple-double.



In the NFL this season, Tom Brady solidified his claim to the title of greatest quarterback of all time. In his first season with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, Brady delivered for his new team with a Super Bowl victory over the defending champions, the Kansas City Chiefs. The game was expected to be a clash of the old guard versus the new, with emerging megastar Patrick Mahomes favored to best Brady. But the Bucs put the clamps down on the Chiefs in a 31-9 drubbing.



Brady has now won seven Super Bowl titles, which is one more than any NFL franchise can claim. A fun fact: the Buccaneers are the first team in NFL history to win a Super Bowl in their home stadium.

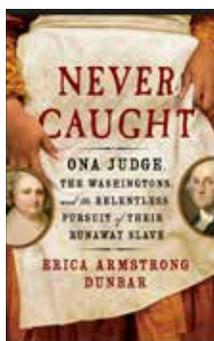


BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

Never Caught

with Neely



Hello Free Minds readers! Thank you to everyone who sent in responses for our latest book club read, *Never Caught* by Erica Armstrong Dunbar. This book follows the inspiring and resilient story of Ona Judge, a woman who was enslaved under George Washington. Here is some of the feedback you shared about Ona's fight for freedom:

1. While both Martha Washington and Ona were upset about having to leave Mount Vernon, only Martha was allowed to express herself while Ona had to hide her feelings. Have you ever been in a situation where someone

else was allowed to express themselves and you couldn't (or at least felt like you couldn't)? How did that affect you?

MDC: I grew up in a very abusive setting. I was discouraged from expressing myself. Then coming to the prison system, I thought to myself, if I want to help myself I must speak up and out. I learned quickly that this behavior is frowned upon. This is why I'm thankful for Free Minds, providing me with a platform to be heard. Our opinions are what make us individuals.

JL: In my prison experience, it is sometimes best not to express how one truly feels because the prison staff can read too much into what a prisoner is trying to say.

AW: On February 7, 1989, in the circuit court for Baltimore City, in front of a white man in a blk robe, with a white man as my public defender throwing my future away with words I never heard before, with words I didn't understand. Sixteen years old, stuck and unable to speak in my own defense. Innocent of the crimes as charged, guilty of being poor, blk, and in real trouble. Except... "slavery shall not exist except for one duly convicted of a crime". A slave for well over 32 years, except I have found my own voice. A blessing and a curse.

MC: When I was growing up at home, I always felt like that. It seemed as if the adults had all the say so, and us being kids, we just had to accept it. A few times I spoke up and the replies I received were over vicious or I was told, "You don't know what you like or want." And in the end I lost my voice and it took years to get it back.

2. After experiencing the lifestyle of the free Black community in Philadelphia, William Lee insisted people call him by his full name. Why are our names important? What does your name mean to you?

JL: The names given to people at birth describe us as living beings instead of inanimate objects or property. My name means, "Beautiful, Unmeasurable Warrior."

AC: Our names tell the world exactly who we are. My name carries the wishes of my parents. My last names carry the full weight of thousands of years of tradition, culture, and history. My whole entire name sings the unsung songs of my ancestors, the ones I did not meet, and the ones I was fortunate enough to have in my life.

MC: I feel names are important because they are one of the first gifts given by our parents. They are unique. They allow us to remember we are human. My name to me means Mom and Dad.

MDC: Our names are a part of our identities. For instance, these prison guards etc., don't want to view us as people with unique identities etc., so they refer to us as inmate number so and so. This is a part of their dehumanization process. My current name is loathsome for me. It is my father's name. A man who has rejected and abandoned me my entire life. This name means hurt, anger, pain, disgust, fear, depression, anxiety, and embarrassment. When the courts reopen, I look forward to changing it to a name more befitting my character.

AW: One's name represents place and time. One's name tells the world who you are and where you are from and what you are part of. A good name is truly worth more than gold. A full name for our ancestors marked them as free women and men. Human beings, whole and free, braveheart and true, liberated to move in life with the rest of humanity.

3. Ona feared that by seeking freedom, she would be mis-labeled and perceived as a “criminal” (page 112). How is the word “criminal” used to mis-label people today?

MV: Ignorance plays into how we treat people who commit crime. We want to punish and cut them off for an act against a “perfect” country. But if we were to acknowledge our past and learn from our many mistakes throughout our history, the mindset would definitely shift in our “justice system”. We would help them (“criminals”) learn from their past and move on instead of punishing them and bringing up their past.

AW: The criminalization of enslaved people is written, legislated into the enslaving society system’s judicial system to reflect it’s master/slave relationship with its captive population. From the writing of the Declaration of Independence to the ratification of the 13th Amendment, being born free is outlawed as, a truly free people need not have their freedom legislated. As such, we Blks are born criminalized.

TT: Some people are called “criminals” for doing something that others think are wrong and not in violation of a set law. They may be immoral, but not criminal.

MDC: Being incarcerated, it is so hard to get out of here, whether it be via the courts or parole hearings, because the powers that be will only view us as “criminals.” Not people who committed a criminal act, but merely “criminals.” This is also true for when we are released. Employers, family, old friends, etc., view us as “criminals.” When you label someone as being something of the sort, in your mind, you have already decided upon how to deal with that person. You are saying you don’t believe that that person has changed or can change. Both the penal system and society can be unforgiving in this regard.

JL: Anyone going contrary to the “norm” is usually labeled a criminal in some way. Words like “terrorist”, “mob”, “felon”, “gang”, etc. all prove to be key words to mislabel a person, especially if that person is going contrary to the norm to advocate for justice.

4. What are some characteristics (a distinguishing feature that describes a person, place, or thing) about George Washington we are often told? How does this book challenge those?

TT: George was always portrayed as the master of his era – certain and all success. This book humiliates him. It shows how he searched, but couldn’t find, and how ignorant he was.

MDC: I didn’t know much about George Washington prior to reading this book. What I now know about his character is that he was no different than any judge, states attorney, legislator,

warden, or C.O. What I mean is, you’ll have some who agree that prisons need to be reformed etc., but they’ll continue to oil the system’s gears with our blood to feed their families.

CS: In clear violation of the law, the Washington’s went to the extent that they had to recover their “property”. Shame.

MV: This book is a great way of raising our consciousness. We look at Washington as this hero without blemish. I never knew he owned slaves! But in a sense, America does the same and hides their blemishes and dark side.

AC: People are told that G.W. was a hero who fought tirelessly for the freedom of the American people from the claws of oppression. This book made it obvious that G.W. didn’t truly believe in the “freedom” he so preached. It was obvious he cared more about his money than the human need for freedom.

5. On page 137, Dunbar emphasizes that “small tokens of kindness” towards enslaved people did not matter. In any situation an enslaved person preferred freedom. Why do you think it was so difficult for Washington to understand that even if Ona was “treated well”, she still wished for freedom?

AW: In such captivity, the enslaved is commonly viewed as being happy, no matter how nice or cruel the enslaver may be. So, in the minds of the so-called master, nothing s/he may do to the enslaved is viewed as illtreatment, just him or her exercising their rights as property owners.

JS: My sister Ona was not about to be tricked under any circumstances to going back to slavery. I know she was apprehensive about how her remaining family would be treated for her leaving, but this says 2 things: 1.) The one who is sacrificing and the one(s) being sacrificed both should know that it’s bigger than us 2.) The promise of better treatment for her to return to slavery is so oxymoronically ignorant to say.

TT: Washington was very inconsiderate of Black people concerning their individuality. He didn’t understand because he couldn’t visualize a Black person wanting freedom more than what he helped with. It made no sense to him. He just saw Black people as slaves and not people with reasonings and deep desires.

AC: In Spanish we have a saying: “Just because the cage is made of gold, doesn’t mean it’s not a cage.” G.W. didn’t realize that the need to be free is the need that pushes us to be independent, purposeful individuals. No man or woman can ever rise to their true potential, while under the oppression of another human. Ona wanted to be the best that she could be; she wanted to be herself, free.



DID YOU KNOW?

On "The Butterfly Effect" and Beginning Again

By Araba,
Free Minds Intern

Have you ever seen the movie *The Butterfly Effect*, with Ashton Kutcher? In the movie, Ashton Kutcher plays a college student named Evan who suffered memory loss and blackouts throughout his childhood. Evan discovers that, as an adult, he can travel back in time to the moments in his childhood where he was blacked out, and he can change his behavior and actions to hopefully make things better. However, Evan finds that even when he tries to fix small actions in the past with the best intentions, his future is altered in negative ways he would never have anticipated.

Although the movie's concept calls what Evan experiences "the butterfly effect," the original concept of the butterfly effect is a mathematical one. An American mathematician named Edward Lorenz created a model (pictured right) that tried to predict weather patterns. In creating the model, Lorenz discovered that a very small change in the initial weather conditions he put into his equation would result in a very different outcome than expected. Lorenz likened this phenomenon to the metaphor of a butterfly flapping its wings causing a tornado to form weeks later.



Other cultures have thought widely about this symbol; French philosophers, ancient Greeks, and much of Japanese culture have considered butterflies to be a symbol for the soul. Perhaps all of these different theories about butterflies are true in one way or another – considering the life cycle of a butterfly, a creature whose life is marked by inevitable change (egg, caterpillar, butterfly, repeat!), may give us perspective on what it really means to start anew.

Throughout *The Butterfly Effect*, Evan realizes that his trips into the past are hurting him and his loved ones more than they're helping. His initial approach is understandable, to be fair. Hindsight is 20/20, and it may be far easier and less scary to fix the things in the past that we already know we have done wrong than to continue marching forward into an uncertain future.

In his last book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King, Jr. meditates on how his people can move forward, after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act did not bring the widespread end to racism that some had anticipated. King reminds us of the power of renewal – that it is always possible to start again: "There is nothing, except a tragic death wish, to prevent us from reordering our priorities. There is nothing to keep us from remolding a recalcitrant status quo with bruised hands until we have fashioned it into a brotherhood."

While we can't travel back in time, we can think of our actions now as the flapping of a butterfly's wings: small but mighty, reflections of our souls that continue to change, evolve, and renew.

Do you know any butterfly symbolism that I didn't discuss here? What are your thoughts on the butterfly effect? Do you think small actions can affect your future in a big way? Have you read anything that discusses the butterfly effect, or something like it? As always, let us know your thoughts and reading suggestions; we love hearing from you!

REENTRY PROFILE: PETE

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DC has changed. I tell my buddies in the feds: DC looks so good right now! I wish they could get a chance to see it. On the good side, gentrification is bringing a lot of different people and it's very beautiful what they're doing in some areas. But at the same time, I don't like to see older people pushed out of neighborhoods where I grew up. This neighborhood wasn't so quiet back then. It's crazy because I see these white people with these dogs, and these be some real bad neighborhoods, and they walking around like it's no problem! I just hope that we can keep some of our people in the city.

KELLI: So Pete, you are a man with a mission. Can you tell us about your goals?

PETE: My biggest goal is I want to stem this violence in DC. That's why I'm happy some of us IRAA guys are home. The government needs us. They got all of us here; we're foot soldiers. They give us the resources, we'll come up with a plan to get these young guys to fall in line and understand when you hurt one, you're hurting us all. There are so many organizations in DC that need people like us.

Right now I'm working part-time with Break Free Education (a national organization developing

quality educational programs to inspire and engage incarcerated students). I appreciate this opportunity because I'm gaining job skills I need and I'm getting acclimated. I'm also doing work with Neighbors for Justice (a nonprofit founded by residents in the blocks surrounding the DC Jail to support their incarcerated neighbors during COVID and beyond). Last week I applied for a position with the city as a Credible Messenger (neighborhood leaders with relevant life experiences whose role is to help youth transform attitudes and behaviors around violence). This is the lane I really want to be in. I want to be in a position to help! I want to help stop the violence and to help all of the people that's coming home behind me. I just want to open some doors for others. That's my dream.



REAL WORLD OF WORK: WORKING ON THE FRONT LINES OF THE PANDEMIC

Marion, FM Member

I was just 16 years old when I was charged under Title 16, more than 23 years ago. The judge gave me 35 years to life. Thankfully, I was resentenced under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) and released the day before Thanksgiving.

I was absolutely ready to go into the workplace. Yeah, I had jobs before when I was in the BOP, but mainly just detail on the housing unit and never for very many hours. I was anxious when I got this job, but in a good way. I was excited. I never had my own paycheck.

I got this job with the help of a reentry organization called Changing Perceptions. I work for a company that is providing COVID and HIV tests. I work inside of a church on Pennsylvania Avenue. My job is to hand out PPE (personal protection equipment) and food boxes to the citizens who come in to get tested. I work 6-hour days, 4 days a week – and I love it! I'm interacting with people all day. I see old men, old women, young people, kids. It pays well and it's fun! I look forward to going to work.



The older people, they can't carry the food boxes by themselves, so I help them get to their cars and they like to talk. I might sit there for 5, 10, 15 minutes with them. You never know who you're going to meet. Like one guy, he must have been 80 years old and he's driving for Lyft. The man drove a cab for 52 years. I felt good that day because I kind of got the sense he just needed someone to talk to. This pandemic is really isolating. So many people are just staying in the house by themselves. They just need that human interaction. So I like to talk to them, give them a smile and brighten their day.

Sometimes people are nervous about the test. One little girl was crying before they even put the Q tip in her nose. She was screaming! They've heard about how much it hurts and they'll ask me if the Q-tip is going to be going all the way to the back of their heads. (I get that all the time and I get a good laugh.) I let people know that now they just do a quick swab. I tell them they'll be okay and it's not painful at all.

I feel good about myself at the end of the work day. Not only am I getting paid, but I'm helping society. There's work out here that needs to be done, but some people can't be bothered to take these jobs. It's up to us to help older folks – scratch their back, help them out.

My first day on the job, they dropped off 1,000 boxes of canned food, and the people who dropped the boxes off were supposed to bring them inside the church. They didn't do that. They shirked their duties. So me and my coworker had to do it. That day was the hardest I ever worked in my life! Believe it or not, the guy I work with was actually my cellmate 12 years ago. We work well together. We both work hard.

Helping people during the pandemic feels important to me. My own mother had COVID back in August. It almost killed her. She has a breathing tank and everything now. She came through and she even got a follow up test where I work. She wanted her picture taken that day with the mascot outside. We had a mascot, this woman dressed up as a dog in a doctor's suit trying to get people driving by to come in and get tested (laughs).

When I got my first paycheck, I felt so *independent*. I have been saving most of what I earn. But I am going to take my new lady friend out to a restaurant for Valentine's Day. Being able to pay for her? It will make me feel like a king!

My advice to my Free Minds family is to stay connected with the people who are helping you now – whether it be Free Minds, Georgetown University Prison project, Campaign for Fair Sentencing of Youth, or Changing Perceptions. All of these organizations are doing good reentry work. Take them up on their offers to work with you.

I love my job right now, but it's temporary. My dream job is to pursue my craft, which is leather working. I learned how to do it while I was incarcerated. I make creative and unique purses, duffel bags, backpacks, belts, and laptop covers. My line is called Devon (which is my real first name). Eventually I want my own store, *Devon Leather Arts*, where people can come in and look at and buy my pieces. I'm going to get started this summer. I'm on my way!

DC PHOTOS *By Shannon*

continued from page 23



And a request from AC. This photo is taken from a famous memorial in DC. Can you name the memorial?



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!



AROUND THE WORLD: THE LITTLE GIRL IN KABUL

By Jessica, Free Minds Intern

My name is Jessica, and I work with Free Minds as an impact and evaluation intern – focusing on ways we can unlock the power of data to better understand and communicate about

our program's impact. In 2012, I spent 90 days overseas in Afghanistan as a strategic engagement and communications adviser. It was my first experience in a part of the world wholly unlike my own. Though my time there was relatively brief, the impressions were imprinted deep.

When I would leave the secured area where I worked and walked towards the city, a little Afghan girl with messy hair and a dirty face would plunge her dusty hand into mine. She would chatter in broken English, sometimes in an effort to cajole me into buying one of the many broken trinkets she was peddling. Other times, she would just seem to enjoy holding my hand. I'd have to let it go when I got to the next security checkpoint; she understood. We took this little walk probably a dozen times over the course of the summer I was in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. Sometimes I'd bring her an apple from a cafe. I'd pick it out, enjoying that I could do

this small thing for her. She would hold other women's hands, too. Her bright smile and wide eyes were well known among many whose travels took them out the main gate. There weren't many women on our installation, so a small community of us recognized her. I liked her. She was bright, and tough.



Two weeks after I returned home from Afghanistan, a suicide bomb detonated in front of the main gate,

in that area she and I would walk. She was killed. I received an email from one of my colleagues, who recalled that we would often walk alongside each other, and he asked me if I had ever taken her picture; they wanted to host a small ceremony to honor her, and the other lives lost. I hadn't. I wondered if anyone had taken her picture.

I still think sometimes about this little girl, who felt so immediately comfortable holding my hand, skipping by my side. I wonder about the

unfair lottery of chance. I wonder what life she could have – should have – had. I didn't know her well, but I knew her enough.

There remains no acceptable reason why this happened. I've only shared this story with a few people, and now you, too. But our being here, and able to remember and share these stories – sometimes, on some days, that's enough. That's my renewed perspective. That's my renewed hope.



QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Child asked Grandmother. What does it mean to reweave your life? Grandmother answered, Unlearn your old harmful ways. Learn your new healing ways. Garden the stories you tell yourself. Allow beauty to run like a river through your soul again. Permit peace to graze your heart. Drink the rain. Savor the sun. Love like Love Loves." – Jaiya John, Author, Founder of Soul Water Rising

"And in great decay comes great renewal. Life finds a way out of the darkest spots."
– Tyler Knott Oregson, Poet, Author, Photographer

"Renewal requires opening yourself up to new ways of thinking and feeling"
– Deborah Day, Author, Mental Health Practitioner

"If there is nothing new under the sun, at least the sun itself is always new, always re-creating itself out of its own inexhaustible fire."
– Michael Sims, Author, *In the Womb: Animals*



Jaiya John, Author,
Founder of Soul
Water Rising

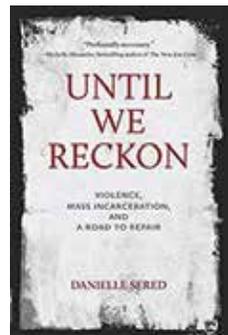
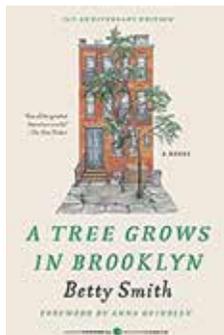
WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

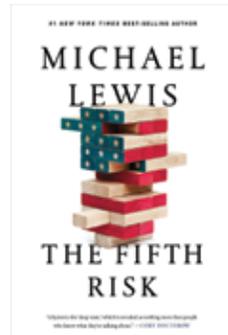
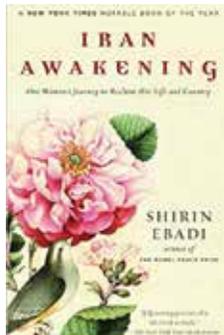
- **MC: *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* by Betty Smith**

I was pleasantly surprised by how good this book was. I loved the main character, Francie, and her slightly younger brother, Neeley, and how they survived life in early turn-of-the-century Brooklyn. Navigating adolescence through Francie's innocent eyes was fun, and I hurt for her when she faced heartache. Her eccentric aunts made the story even more enjoyable. I highly recommend this book and can see why it's an American classic.



- **Julia: *Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair* by Danielle Sered**

Danielle Sered is the founder and director of the NY-based organization Common Justice, which does a lot of restorative justice and advocacy work. *Until We Reckon* examines the ways we respond, or fail to respond, to violence in our society, and looks into paths forward that could help us collectively heal and repair harm. I don't read a lot of nonfiction, but this book was really fascinating to me, and I found myself underlining lots of great points that the author was making. I definitely recommend this book!



- **SH: *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country* by Shirin Ebadi**

Ebadi showed me a woman's journey through so much, from childhood to her professional life in Iran. She opened my eyes, as a Muslim, to the culture she grew up in deeply, which was very interesting. I loved this book.

- **Allen: *The Fifth Risk: Undoing Democracy* by Michael Lewis**

This is a book from 2018, written about the bungled 2016 presidential transition from the point of view of government officials in obscure agencies such as the Department of Energy and Commerce. The book details critical services provided by the government and the risks to our safety if there isn't enough competent and attentive management in those agencies.

- **Tara: *The Vanishing Half* by Brit Bennett**

The Vanishing Half is about the lives of the Vignes twins, Stella and Desiree, who dream of lives beyond the lynching of their father and housekeeping for white people. When Stella discovers that she can pass as white, she disappears to California, keeping her past a secret from her husband and daughter. After leaving her abusive marriage, Desiree returns to her hometown with her daughter, Jude. Desperate to find a place where she fits in, Jude goes to college in California and discovers she was searching not just for herself but for her mother's sister. I haven't started it yet, but I can't wait to climb into the pages!

FAMILY TIES

continued from page 4

see him after I was getting up in age. I would always write him letters and send money so he could go to the canteen. I couldn't let him do it alone. I was there with him in my heart.

I learned after the fact that he was in the hospital for heart trouble. He said, "I don't want you to worry but I'm going to tell you something." Then he would tell me. It caused me so much stress. Whatever he was going through, I was going through it right there with him. I prayed constantly that he would be alright. My biggest worry was that someone would hurt him. I was always reading in the news how much violence there was inside.

He kept himself really busy inside. He constantly played basketball, coached basketball teams and took many classes. He received so many certifications. I was really proud of him. When he finally came home on parole, I couldn't talk to him enough. I would call him every day when he was in the halfway house. He would always tell me everywhere he was going and

what he was doing because he knew I needed to make sure he was safe. I kept asking, "where are you?" and he finally said you're worrying too much! So I forced myself to back off calling two to three times a day. He's always been a talker and he loves to talk and makes friends easily so I know he will be okay. He has a strong faith and does not have hate in his heart. I know good things are in store for him.

Over the 35 years since he was 16, he missed so many family reunions. My first grandchild was born the day after his conviction when my daughter went into labor after hearing the news. He has so many nieces and nephews that he didn't get to know. He loves spending time with them now and they love him so much. We try to just keep closing the gap as much as possible.

My advice to the Free Minds members is, know that your mother and loved ones are locked up with you. Tell them you love them and appreciate them. The bonds of family can't be broken even when prison walls are there.



FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: FRIENDSHIP

Have you heard the saying “no man is an island”? This phrase, from English poet John Donne, expresses the idea that we all need a community and a support network. For the next issue of the Connect, we’re focusing on the idea of *friendship*. What does it mean to be a good friend, and how can we all be good friends to each other and to the people in our lives? Have there been people in your life who you’ve always known you can count on? Can you write a poem about a dear friend who has supported you, or who you have always supported? Or maybe a poem about the ideal friend who you haven’t met yet? We want to hear all about what friendship means to you. And remember, you always have a community of friends here at Free Minds.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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