

July/August 2021  
Vol. 10, Issue 3

# Free minds Connect



THIS  
ISSUE'S  
THEME

# ACCOUNTABILITY

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| <b>CO-PARENTING THROUGH THE WALLS</b><br>PAGE 6 | <b>FM MEMBER'S DREAM HOME A REALITY AFTER 20 YEARS</b><br>PAGE 27 | <b>RESTORATIVE AND TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE EXPLAINED</b><br>PAGE 32 | <b>FM MEMBER CLIMBS THE CAREER LADDER</b><br>PAGE 34 |
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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Hello Free Minds Accountability Partners!

I hope this issue finds you in strong spirits. If not, I hope you feel uplifted after you read the amazing essays and poems inside. If you don't feel motivated, enlightened, or inspired let us know because we want to do everything in our power to make the *Connect* an informative, creative, and useful support tool for you all. If we don't meet that standard, we will own that and find out how we can improve and do our best to make it up to you. There, I just summed up this issue's theme: Accountability! 😊 To me, accountability is being responsible for our actions, making good on our promises, completing our tasks to the best of our abilities, and not making excuses or blaming others when we fall short. It also means learning and growing to improve ourselves and each other.

Accountability is the Free Minds way! Every day I see incredible examples of the staff and you, the members, working together to hold each other responsible and uplift one another. Accountability must always include support – if someone is unable to complete their commitments, our first response at Free Minds is what support, resources, assistance, and learning opportunities can we provide so that their goal can be achieved. That's why I love our cover image showing a team reaching out to join each other in unity.

Inside you will find Kay's moving story (pg 8). Even in the midst of her own trauma of incarceration, Kay knew she didn't want others to go through what she was experiencing. Now she's helping others through her own nonprofit, Mission Rebirth, showing us all that accountability means committing to what you set out to do.

Many of the beautiful FM member essays in this issue talk about how important it is that each and every one of us be held accountable – whether we're behind the wall or sitting in the White House. It takes each of us doing our part. Maji's "Keeping Each Other in Check"

exemplifies the power in deciding to be accountable for each other (pg 16). And now Maji gets to pay that life-saving mentorship forward!

We're so proud to share what Craig, one of our current Congressman John Lewis Fellows, has made happen for himself over this past decade (pg 15). Watching Craig help keep Congressman Lewis's legacy alive through his work is an inspiration to us all. We're always excited to introduce you to new people in the Free Minds Family, including volunteer Barbara (pg 4) and one of our youth interns, K.E (pg 26). The Free Minds Fam just keeps growing!

As always, this issue is packed with amazing, necessary poetry written by our members. In his poem, AA writes, "The shame and pain is over/Learn how to rebuild" (pg 12). I couldn't agree more. Deandrea taking on more than she expected (and finding more than she'd ever hoped for!) (pg 6), Deangelo cruising down highways on his way to the next challenge (pg 34), and Zion, who is probably sitting in his dream house as I write this (pg 27)! I hope you see your own future in their stories of success.

Thank you all for the great theme ideas. Keep them coming! The theme after this issue is joy – a perfect followup, because when everyone is accountable for their actions, joy results!

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:  
Joy**

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*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!

Free Minds Book Club

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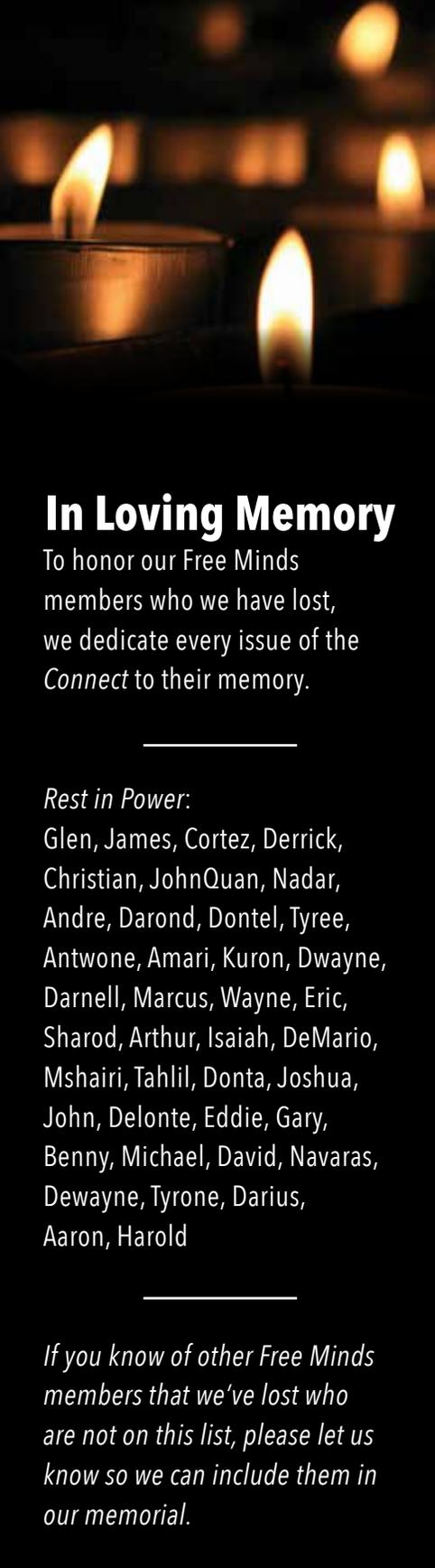
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# MEETING FREE MINDS VOLUNTEERS: INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA

By Imanee

## How did you start volunteering at Free Minds?

I saw some mention of it on the NPR website or the *Washington Post*. Somebody had written some accounts of being a part of Free Minds and I thought, "That is exactly the kind of thing I want to do!" Writing letters to people who are incarcerated is a way of having a connection in a very manageable way – to be part of an organization that supports you and trains you and where you can have a one-to-one conversation with people.

## What is the most memorable letter you have ever read or responded to?

I don't think there's any one letter. I think it's this overall feeling that so many of the members mention, about how grateful they are for people writing to them and paying attention to them and feeling seen – that's one thing that comes up a lot: "Thank you for paying attention to me, listening to me, and acknowledging me." It's that overall statement that I get from people. They appreciate so much that we spend our time with them.

## How as volunteers do you think we need to be accountable to our members?

I think it's important to keep them posted on things that are happening on the outside, especially the efforts that are being made to make things better. I think Free Minds does that so well. For example, when Free Minds gives us resources from places like the Marshall Project, where they are trying to make sure the appropriate language is being used when people talk about system-impacted folks.

Also, things about the new laws that are being passed and people who are getting out before their sentences are up, and voting from prison. I think getting them information that's going to be helpful to them and make them feel hopeful about their current situation and when they get out as well, letting them know there's something out there for them and that they're going to be supported and helped in adjusting to their new reality.

## Why do you think volunteering is so important? What do you think is the importance of the role you think you play as a FM volunteer?

What's so funny is, I talked about how grateful people are and when I read that in their letters I think, "Who am I? I'm nobody!" I just log on and try to find the right words to say – try to think of things in

*continued on page 39*

## In Loving Memory

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

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### *Rest in Power:*

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

---

*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.*

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Due to mail delays, we're printing feedback on the "Renewal" issue of the Connect as well as the "Friendship" issue.*

## Renewal

**AW:** The Renewal issue is full of jewels and third eye openers. Congratulations to Brother Pete, who was freed from the belly of the beast. Thanks for reminding me of James Clavell's Shogun. The way of Bushido is necessary when coupled with the very practical advice/insight you shared. It is truly this simple: keeping it simple and not stupid. Good luck to you. Yes, you know that kind of luck that we create for ourselves by simply doing the right things with the right people, places, things, i.e. authentic change. I'm truly happy for you.

DC Photos gets an A+ all around. As a visitor, as a sightseer, you've opened my eyes to parts of Chocolate City I never knew existed. Anyhow, I appreciate the view of Marvin Gaye Recreation Center. It always does my heart good to learn that the city of his birth keeps him alive by keeping us all saying his name, singing his songs, feeling his love and being aware of his great suffering as a ghetto boy, playing in dem ghetto streets, and still singing to us of our humanity in spite of our Inner City Blues. I appreciate Slim (Bro Shannon).

In closing, I appreciate DA's Spinning the Track advice. Slim, you just help save this old man's mental health. "Switch your normal routine" was a simple old school remedy. Your advice and insight, DA, never escapes me. Thanks.

**GD:** I really liked the piece by Yana. Her life's journey resonates with so many people who grew up in our kind of environment. To be able to come through the struggle of addiction, face all kinds of adversity, and still prevail is inspirational in itself, not to mention being a black woman living in DC. It's amazing how writing was the spark that turned it all around for her and now she's seeing success!

But the story that stood out to me the most was by Mary, FM member CY's mom. Her story touched me deeply because people can finally see the perspective of the mom who lost her child to the system. There are so many Marys, but oftentimes no one cares to know what it's like to have a child given a life sentence. Not only do I identify with this piece because I too have a life sentence and was 18 at the time of my arrest, but also because my mom suffered a mental breakdown shortly thereafter. Though she recovered, a few years later she passed away and will never get the chance to see her baby boy come home, now that I'm on my way.

**AC:** In Yana's story I find something so beautiful – and no, it's not just her facial scrub working its magic! I am so incredibly happy to hear that Yana has found opportunities that can change her life for the better. I am so glad to hear that she is managing to keep the beast of drug addiction at bay, a beast that devours

the lives of so many people every day, but Yana is fighting back. Our only way to defeat what haunts us is to first recognize what it is, then work towards changing for the better. One step at a time. One day at a time. Please pass along my most sincere congratulations: for everything, for being who she is. I see her strength and I truthfully hope she turns every single one of her dreams into a reality that gives her the joy she so deserves.

AS's A Fresh Start is a vivid, tangible dream of redemption to prove we are all so much more than the sum of our failures and that we have so much more to give. AS is not alone. Sometimes, I feel I'm not good enough as I am. I feel I have let others down and I don't fully believe my loved ones when they say they are still proud of me, or when they tell me they still love me with all their heart. A part of me wonders why they would be proud and why they would love me. But just as AS's dream points out, a fresh start waits for us and a clean state awaits. Those who love us don't love us only for who we have been, but also for who we are and for all we can be. They love us for the potential that resides within each and every single one of us, like a bright flame that only love-filled eyes can see. I hope AS's Fresh Start arrives and his miracle becomes a reality.

#Reform by ADC demonstrates one of humanity's greatest powers: the power to change our ways. I'm happy to hear ADC can recognize a personal trait that needs change. Not only does ADC recognize this trait, he also identifies what it needs to become and why this change is needed. Most people can't even say sorry and mean it – some people can't ever say sorry at all – and here we have ADC saying, "It's a duty of mine... This is the least I could do, since I was one of those who took part in destroying the community." Good for ADC. That's what a good person would do: take responsibility for his actions and make up.

## Friendship:

**GD:** I just received the latest issue of Connect and the issue of friendship is something that's important to me. I loved each piece written and the poems were fire as usual. I think everyone can take something from this issue because everyone wants, has, or needs a real, true friend. I found mine 3 years ago in my wife. She's the one person that I feel that I can truly be myself and knows that she has only my best interest at heart. I really loved the piece about the John Lewis Fellowship. Everybody there knows that receiving that honor is a very big goal of mine, and now I know more about what the position entails. In fact, I think my journey to the position has already started!

**AHA:** So many articles stood out and the one done with Maya, Editor-in-Chief of Truthout, stood out. Friendships can change the course of our lives and she did the best thing that came from her friendship and became a voice.

# FAMILY TIES: AN UNEXPECTED FAMILY AND A BEAUTIFUL LOVE STORY

By Deandrea, FM Friend

*14 years ago Deandrea was living in San Diego, where she worked as a manager for the US Postal Service, when she received a phone call from her aunt asking her for help. Deandrea's cousin, a single mother, had been arrested while visiting California with her two baby girls. Her aunt asked if Deandrea would go to Los Angeles to pick up the babies and keep them safe, "just for a couple of weeks."*

This is Deandrea's story:

I had never seen these babies in my life. I went and got the girls and I took them in because they are my family. I was raised to take care of my family, no matter what. And I thought it was just short-term. My auntie said, "Two weeks" and I really thought it would be two weeks! But after the first few weeks, nobody was reaching back to help me – the grandmother, the mother—nobody was doing anything. I started thinking, "Okay, they're going to be here for at least a year or two." I just adapted.

Two years later, I got a phone call from the girls' father. By then, I had full custody of Kiara and Renee. When their biological mother signed over power of attorney to me from prison, she said she didn't know who their father was. So when Johnny called, telling me who he was and thanking me for taking care of his daughters, my first question was, "How did you get my number?" The second was a request for a DNA test, which he took immediately.

Johnny lived across the country in Detroit. He was just a kid at the time—22 years old. That's 24 years younger than I was! To be honest, I was like, "I don't have time for you, boy!" From that day on though, Johnny and I just started talking and sharing. Our conversations were about being good parents to the girls. The more we got to know each other, the more Johnny started pursuing me.

It took him two years to convince me to even think about having a relationship with him. He used to call up begging me, saying, "Please give me a chance. I know this can work. The age difference shouldn't be a factor." I remember one day, I was walking my dog down the street talking to him on the phone. I just looked up at the sky and I said, "You know what, Johnny? I love you." It was August 2009. I had been in my feelings about it because it was a family member who he had the children with, and then he was so young. But that's how I felt.

I traveled to Detroit with the kids the following summer. We visited family. We enjoyed special pancake breakfasts, and ramen noodles cooked by "Daddy." We went to parks, beaches, and carnivals. We spent the whole summer together. It was a family vibe!

It was shortly afterwards that Johnny got arrested for armed robbery. I was completely shocked because I had no idea he was involved in criminal activity. I was devastated and questioned my own sanity for being so unaware and getting involved with a person who would do this. It was a lot!

Johnny warned me when he went to court that he was going to get a long sentence. I remember calling the lawyer's office after the sentencing to find out how much time he got, and the woman said 57 months! I said, "Oh wow, 57 months? I can do that! Are you sure?" Then she said, "Oh, wait! It's 57 years!"

I fell apart. I told him, "This is impossible. You got 57 years." I will always remember his response. He said, "I am not dead. I'm just gone. You have to give me the opportunity to make this right. You cannot let me go like this just because I'm going to prison." I thought about it. From the beginning, Johnny always invested in our relationship. He has always fed what I needed emotionally. He is always in tune with how I feel. He can pick me up just by talking to me. He's always been able to guide me. That's the biggest part of us. I wasn't ready to let that go.

He has been incarcerated for 11 years now, and we have remained a family for the entire time. It's incredible. I'll be honest: at first I thought this dude was on some serious mind games! It took me a few years to accept that he might be

telling you the truth. He might really be in love with you!

Johnny is a hands-on father in every way. The girls feel like they have a mom and dad at home. They don't feel they're missing anything, even though he hasn't been here. He helps with all of their homework—especially math! He helped Kiara learn her Spanish. He talks to them about their emotions. He talks to them about boys. He's taught them how to play basketball. The only thing he hasn't been able to do is go to the Dad & Daughter Dance with them. But he is right there telling them how to dance—right down to how to move the left foot and the right foot. They know they are lucky he's so involved in their lives. They have friends who actually have their dads at home but they're too busy for them.

Johnny stays just as involved as a partner to me. He and Kiara share a love of cooking. So if he wants to make me a special meal, he sends the recipe to her and then she cooks the meal. He tells her what song to play on the radio for me. If he wants to get me flowers, he sends her the money and the instructions. It's amazing. I really don't feel like he's not here. He calls me first thing in the morning, then he calls Kiara at lunch, and he calls Renee in the evening. On top of that, he's sending us emails all the time.

It's unique. I have no desire to go out and date anyone else. That's how connected he is with me. And that's how he keeps me grounded. He's taught me a lot about being a mom and a woman.

The most difficult part has been not having that shoulder to cry on—not having his physical presence when I truly need it. When I'm at the end of my rope and I can't call and say, "You know what? You need to get your kids right now!" For a long time, he had a different way of parenting than I did. One of the girls could manipulate her daddy like nobody's business. But together we figured out that she was manipulating him against me. Now we present a united front, and it has been great. If I call and explain what they have done, he will call and discipline them, take their phone, whatever. The kids look at me like, "You're not really going to do this, are you?" And I do it.

We share everything with each other. We write poetry, we study our religion, we do the same workouts, we have our own book club together. We love to tell jokes together. Mine are corny, but his are worse!

Communication and accountability are the keys. People who are incarcerated have so many struggles they have to deal with. We can't whine that they got themselves there. I have chosen to hold it down, to be together with him through his plight. So I'm here to listen when he needs to talk. As a family, we are honest with each other, and we are accountable to each other. If you can't hold yourself accountable for what you've done, then you can't grow. He has had to share honestly with the girls how he got into this situation. And he does everything he can to remain accountable to them as their father, and to me as his partner and the parent of his children. Without communication and accountability, there is no trust. This is the foundation. It's how you construct a building with bricks and not straw.

Johnny wants others who are incarcerated to know: just because you are locked up, doesn't mean that you cannot have a relationship with your children. It doesn't mean that you can't have the love of your life. He wants to show others that you can do this. You can have this. We are living proof that it can be done.

Recently, Johnny received a 24-year reduction in his sentence. When he was first locked up, we had calculated that when he got home I'd be 101 years old! So now I'll be in my 70's instead. He'll be able to push me around in my wheelchair! We don't believe this is the end of the story, though. We think he will have even more time taken off. We are excited. He's a really good guy and ours is a beautiful love story.

# FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

## Member Led Reentry Projects

Our reentry members have been leading the way with a variety of projects ranging from the Peer Support Training Program and Credit-Building Project to the Black History Cooperative Learning Group and the Martinsville 7 Campaign, a movement urging Virginia governor Ralph Northam to posthumously pardon seven wrongly convicted African American Virginians. One of our newest projects is the Early Freedom Project, which was established by Free Minds members Shannon and DJ. The Early Freedom Project focuses on helping reentry members complete probation requirements and foster a close relationship with their probation officer.

## On The Same Page with the MLK Scholars

The Free Minds community outreach racial education program On the Same Page continues to be in high demand, with Poet Ambassadors talking to diverse audiences such as middle and high school students, interns at a law clinic, and staff at a nationwide tech company. To help keep Martin Luther King, Jr.'s legacy alive, Free Minds coordinated a powerful outreach event alongside New York University students in the MLK Scholars Program. The MLK Scholars Program is a prestigious cohort that selects 60 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds who have demonstrated a drive to help lead their communities. Joined by Poet Ambassadors Jameon, Jordan, Deangelo, and Shannon, these young scholars were interested in learning about the detrimental effects of mass incarceration. Each Poet Ambassador shared his story; Deangelo talked about how he did not read nor write before being offered a platform to share his voice in Free Minds. The Ambassadors then shared the story of the first Free Minds member, Glen, and shared poems written by members.



While commenting on a wide range of members' poems, the students asked our Poet Ambassadors questions about what they wish they'd done differently in their past and what they see as their future endeavors. At the beginning of the event, students were asked for the first thing they thought of when they heard the phrase "mass incarceration." Answers such as "dehumanization" and "solitary confinement" were prevalent. However, by the end of the event, the students thought of words like "brother," "father," "sister," and "friend."

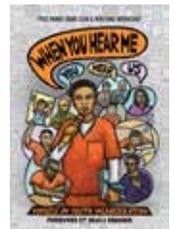
## FM Book Club in the Community for Middle Schoolers

Free Minds Poet Ambassadors, led by Shannon, have been leading a book club for African American boys ages 11-14 in collaboration with our nonprofit partner, Life Pieces to Masterpieces. This summer, they read and discussed the book *For Colored Boys* by Daniel King Robertson, and had the opportunity to meet the author in a virtual book discussion. *For Colored Boys* uses "imagery and affirmations to help build the mental health" of young men of color. Daniel shared his story with the students, expressing how as a youth, education was his lifesaver: "I read every day, because I understand that that is the only thing that saved my life." He was very open to sharing advice and life tips with the younger participants, who asked Daniel how his family helped him achieve his dreams. He replied that his grandmother saved his life when she drove him to a Baltimore college's orientation program. Another great reminder Daniel gave the students: "Self-actualization means knowing, appreciating, and accepting who you are." Thank you to Daniel King Robertson and the whole Life Pieces team for making this possible!



## When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)

We are persevering in spite of the many current obstacles due to the pandemic and the ongoing mail delays at USPS. For this issue, there has been an additional delay on your Connect getting to you, but it's for an exciting reason. We've had to adjust our Connect publication schedule because our team has been hard at work on another big project--our new book, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)*. The dream is a reality and the book will be launched on Oct 5th, so look out for it then! This book is a compilation of poetry and prose from over 100 Free Minds members, as well as interviews with the community at large, with the goal of demonstrating the collective impact of the prison system. Your voices will be heard by even wider audiences!





# PAYING IT FORWARD: MISSION REBIRTH

*Interview by Imanee*

## **Please tell us about yourself.**

My name is Kay. I'm from a small town right outside of Atlanta. My road to starting my nonprofit began when I was first arrested. They took me to Jefferson Parish Prison in New Orleans and my menstrual cycle started that day. I bled on myself for a day and a half. They didn't give me any pads, just a little piece of tissue. So now I'm a grown woman in my 30s, bleeding on myself.

I remember thinking, "I don't care what crime somebody does, they don't deserve that. We're still human." I was in that prison for 11 days. I had to get an attorney, but I had only been in New Orleans for two weeks and my kids were alone. They extradited me from Louisiana back to Georgia in the same bloody clothes I'd been booked in.

Now here it is, 2019, and it's time to go to court. I had a son who was 13. Him and a friend were playing and his friend shot him with an AK on Halloween. It was an accident, but after he got shot he was on life support. So he was on life support while I was trying to go to trial. They wanted me to do a year for a plea.

I tried to get an attorney, but attorneys wanted \$10,000 to represent me. How am I supposed to do that when I don't have a job? For two years before this plea conversation, nobody would hire me. I would get offered jobs, but when it was time to run the background check, they wouldn't hire me.

I started to see things in the system that are just not right. They were telling me, "If you lose, we'll try to give you 20 years." Everything that I felt could help me, I didn't have the money to afford. So I had to take a non-negotiated plea and basically it meant guilt for something I didn't do, just to keep from going to jail. They ended up giving me house arrest for 18 months and community service.

I started doing reentry work for a nonprofit and I met a lot of women who took a plea for things they never did. The agency I was working for, they would tell the women what they needed to do, but they wouldn't tell them how to do it. Eventually the nonprofit I was working for told me I couldn't volunteer anymore. They were a bigger nonprofit so they were getting a lot of phone calls from people coming home and I guess the workload was bigger than the staff. It broke my heart, because I felt like the organization threw me away.

The women I was helping were still calling me after I no longer volunteered at that agency, just thanking me for treating

them like a person. They wanted me to still help them with things like resumes. But I'm like, "I have so many women calling and thanking me and wanting more services from me, but I'm not an organization." So that's what made me start Mission Rebirth.

### **What is Mission Rebirth? Why did you choose this name?**

Our motto says, "Forgiven Not Forgotten." I feel like when you're in any kind of trouble, you have to forgive yourself. God or whoever is your Higher Power forgives you. Whatever the justice system says you're supposed to do as punishment, you should be forgiven once you do that time. "Forgiven Not Forgotten" means you are forgiven, and at Mission Rebirth we don't forget you. These people are still good people; they just made a bad decision or maybe had a survival decision they had to make—or maybe didn't get mental health checks or trauma care, etc. But you're not forgotten. You still deserve a chance at life, at getting an apartment, getting a job, going to school, taking care of your family. You still deserve that chance.



My grandmother, I was very close to her, and she passed right before all my legal stuff happened. She was born and raised on Mission Road. I thought about Mission Road and I thought about being on a mission, like you're on a mission to do better, prosper, and recover from whatever it is you've been through. I like butterflies, and how some Christians say you're "born again." I feel like once you've served your time, you're reborn. Don't let your past define who you are today. You're on a mission to start over and find new beginnings, transformation.

I would love to do transitional housing for these people: get them classes, get them jobs, and get them on their feet. Then, maybe partner with a housing agency to get them their own places after so many months of completing the program. My focus is reentry, but I also help women who aren't coming out of incarceration but need these services.

### **What is one success story that sticks out to you in particular?**

I met this woman who was one of my first clients. She had five kids and they were sleeping at the bus station when I met her. I don't know how she found out who I was but she showed up with her five kids and was like, "Please help me." So I did her intake and I gave her a toiletry bag. She started crying when she saw the soap. It broke my heart because so many things we take for granted. She really appreciated just having soap and her kids having sanitizer during Covid. I was able to get her into a shelter and about a month ago she called saying, "Thank you." Because I was able to get her some info about a shelter, she was able to start working and get housing vouchers. She and her kids are supposed to be moving into an apartment.

### **What are specific resources that incarcerated women need and don't have access to? What resources/opportunities does Mission Rebirth provide?**

Because of what happened to me, bleeding on myself in the prison, that's why I provide toiletry bags with combs, brushes, soap, etc. I provide it for my homeless women who come in. I feel like a lot of the issues with the women who come in are often about low self-esteem. They feel defeated, and they don't have money to shop or feel beautiful or to go into an interview. I want to do a diaper pantry and I want to have clothing and a toiletry bag. I want to get to a point where twice a week or so they can come and shop and it can be free. I partner with makeup artists who want to do beauty brunches and different things to boost self-esteem and confidence. I want to set up a closet—I have clothes for a year and I also want to provide kids' clothes. I want to give them a shopping bag and let them feel like they're shopping. I think that's very important, because you need to look like something no matter what you're doing. I try to teach them phone etiquette, basic computer skills, etc. I have an app where they can do their own appointments and we sit here one-on-one and do it.

### **You also raise awareness about violence committed against women. How can we as a society best show up for the women in our community? In what ways has this country/system let women down?**

I'm a victim of domestic violence, so I'm a big advocate. We partnered with the mayor's office for Cure the Violence, which is a big movement we're doing in New Orleans because of the crime rate. I see a lot of domestic violence situations with the women I've helped. Some of them fight back and shoot a man because they get tired. It doesn't make it right, but I

continued on page 31

# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

*Do you have advice for WH? 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 DA,

I am going to be honest: I'm lonely. I have been locked up since before some of you were born. I am doing this time all alone. My mother is my only family and she is too old to be worrying about me. I don't even want her and my stepfather to visit me anymore. They should be enjoying these years in their lives. I don't get any mail except the mail from Free Minds – which I appreciate. It means the world just to hear my name called.

I've thought about signing up for some of those online pen pal sites, but it makes me feel desperate. I feel like a person who writes to me through one of those sites is doing it out of charity. I don't want anyone pitying me; I'd rather be alone. I just miss simple human connection. How does a person like me make new friends? I'm not sure there is an answer to my situation. But if you've got one, I'm all ears.

Thank you for listening.

Sincerely,  
WH

Hey WH,

*First thing's first: desiring human connection should never be associated with desperation. If anything it shows that you're fully alive, because human interaction is still important to you. You are human after all, so it's only natural. As long as the blood flows through your veins, you should seek and desire this. It's especially important to those of us caught up in a system designed to disrupt that connection. Opting to be alone is a decision born of frustration. Why choose that when options are available for companionship?*

*You indicate that you may be slightly older, and with age comes wisdom. There are plenty of people in society who would thoroughly enjoy being your pen pal just for your perspective and knowledge of different subjects. Your input and point of view could help elevate someone's*

*mental capabilities. Your outlook can cast a positive shadow on someone cloaked in negativity. You could become the listening ear that someone is lacking in their lives, or the source of encouragement they very much need. You aren't a charity case just because you're incarcerated. Your limitations are just more pronounced. The only way to overcome them is to apply yourself without bounds. Pen pals don't pity you. If anything, they're people who don't define you by your current situation. Why else would they be offering to connect? Those are the people you should WANT to connect with.*

*Wanting to ease the burden that you feel your incarceration puts on your parents speaks volumes about your character. It's considerate and very noble. You never want your incarceration to weigh down someone else—I get that. I just hope you were able to communicate that in a way your mother could see was coming from a place of love and care. You know how Moms are about their kids :)*

*In closing, I just want to leave you with a jewel once given to me. It's easy to develop a "fixed mindset" behind these walls. In the fixed mindset, everything is about the outcome. If you fail—or it doesn't go exactly as you plan – it's all a waste of time. The only way to surmount the fixed mindset is with a "growth mindset." The growth mindset allows us to value what we're doing regardless, because it's about the process and the willingness, not the outcome. In the growth mindset we say to ourselves, "You can do this!" And think, "I'm never giving up!"*

*Never give up your pursuit of making human connections and never think you're alone. You always have your family here at Free Minds and we're here to stay!*

Stay strong and take care,  
Your FM brother,  
DA

**In our Renewal issue, we printed a question from RD. TG wrote in with his own advice on the matter. Here is RD's original question:**

*continued on page 31*



# JUST LAW: FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

*By DJ, Free Minds Member*

The Freedom of Information Act, Title 5 U.S.C. section 552, basically permits any individual with the right under this particular law to gain access to information that is in the government's possession or control. Most states and the District of Columbia have enacted their own version of the federal law. The D.C. version of the law is located under D.C. Code sections 2531-539.

Under the federal version of the law, you can request that federal agencies such as the Executive Office for the United States Attorneys, F.B.I., A.T.F., D.E.A., C.I.A., Bureau of Prisons, National Archives and Records Administration, and other federal agencies provide you with any records and/or information pertaining to yourself or your case. You can also request to be provided with other information in relation to the federal government agency that you would like to have information about.

Under the District of Columbia version of the law, you can request that District of Columbia agencies such as the Metropolitan Police Department; D.C. Jail; and other such agencies run by the local District of Columbia government furnish you with information or records pertaining to yourself or your case. If a federal or D.C. agency denies your request, you can file a lawsuit in federal court or local Superior Court in D.C., asking the judge to order the agency to release the information or records to you.

Such acts are very popular with incarcerated individuals, because incarcerated individuals often make a request and discover vital information about their case that

was not given to them in time for trial. In such cases, especially when the information could have been useful for their defense, defendant's would then show the withheld information to the Court and request a new trial.

For example: in one case, a defendant filed a Freedom of Information Act request for records in his criminal case and was given a document relating to a five-year plea offer made to him by the government – which his attorney had never told him about! So, he filed a motion to his judge asking that his seventy-year sentence be tossed out, because he would have never gone to trial had his trial attorney told him about the five-year plea offer.

This is just one example of how people use these acts. There are so many others as well! You should learn about the freedom of information act law, because it may be a pathway to a successful strategy for asking the Court to relieve you from your conviction or sentence. The act is used for many different reasons.

In any case, this act is a very useful tool to understand and assist you with gathering information for your agenda. You can always discover power in the law and use it to do justice in your own legal situations. Until next time, stay free and free your mind!

Free Minds member,  
DJ

**NOTICE THIS DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE!  
YOU MUST STILL CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY**

*Free Minds* Connect | July/August 2021

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Accountability

### By WA

I was once naive and afraid to believe!  
Hiding behind an identity that truly wasn't me.  
Taking account for being the opposite of right...  
Until I was "left" alone, with no one to count on.  
That's when the illusion I was living "Poofed" away!  
like an afterthought.

Visions of my victory outlined in chalk!  
Reality blew in with the wind,  
it was time to take ownership for my sins,  
no matter the consequence!  
Take it from me, true liberty is freed!  
When you take ACCOUNTABILITY!

Love is Love

## Rebuild

### By AA

It is done  
The shame and pain is over  
Learn how to rebuild  
You can't tarry in guilt any longer  
It is time to rebuild  
The lesson is learnt  
Pick up from anywhere  
Slowly but surely rebuild  
Mercy showed up  
God's grace is here  
Therefore stand up and rebuild

## Accountability

### By AHA

My choices are undeniable  
That which is chosen by me.  
I make the decision to do  
And act and must accept  
Responsibility.

I see myself as the one  
Who said I will do or did  
Do and act, so my fate within  
This decision is in my hands,  
So I must live with that.

If I suffer or  
Be happy once it is  
Done it was my  
Choice to take in  
Account for what  
I have done.

Peace



## Brick

### By CM

I am a brick, I am a brick  
People knock on me  
But I do not fall  
You will need a wrecking ball  
To knock me down  
I can be red, brown, yellow or purple  
But it doesn't change who I am  
Society toss me around, beat me up, run all over me  
But I am still a brick  
I am a brick, I am a brick  
I am strong and healthy  
People use me to build structures in life  
I am useful  
I am determined to hold up my people  
I don't fall  
I don't quit  
I am a brick, I am a brick

## The Bad Guy

### By CS

They lock us in a cell  
Claiming there's none like us  
Since we're such bad guys  
Show me who's righteous  
We are all sinners  
So we all fall short  
I can admit it  
Now the ball's in your court

## Accountability

### By CMK

Being responsible for your actions  
Owning your mistakes  
When you're on a diet, you shouldn't eat cake  
It's easy to blame others for you gaining weight  
The mirror only shows your face  
Running from your problems won't solve the case  
Man up and understand honesty is the best way  
My past left a bloody trace  
Accepting my wrongdoing helped to deal with my fate

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Road to Redemption

By GD

My background isn't one of an angel  
In fact, it's one that's tangled, woven in danger  
Familiar places filled with strangers  
Constantly trying to unhook the anchor that's holding me down  
I look around... My surroundings enticing me to want what appears  
To be easy to gain  
My peers insist that my circumstances are easy to change  
And I blindly obliged!  
Reluctant to open my eyes, refusing to abide by any law despite  
The fact that I'm just a... child!  
Responsibility doesn't apply...education?  
Why try?!

I didn't need to think academically to participate in criminal activity  
Just the ability to continually perpetuate false civility  
Lost I was! Ignorant! In need of a savior!  
Who knew that my comeuppance would come  
with handcuffs to bound  
A very long sentence devoid of verbs and nouns  
It's like as if I've been in the lost and found  
Once lost...but NOW I'M FOUND!  
Again, I look around...A feel out of place  
So I cherish every inch of my personal space  
Value life...And know that change is an act that needs to be  
Acted upon and not spoken  
That laws are necessary and not meant to be broken  
Open! Are now my eyes and I see so many me's and  
couple of mini me's  
That were once my enemies, but now they are my mentees  
See, I realized that lives are meant to be lived  
Given...Not taken...At least not by me  
And I also see that if you live in peace, you are mentally free  
So I seek to free as many people I can free  
Thus, freeing myself...No hidden agendas... Just being myself  
My road to redemption consist of just me and myself...And I  
All other motivations and aspirations come only after  
the application of self reflection  
Yes, introspection...becoming the best me I can be, so I can be  
The best me for you  
In all I do, I now do it in righteousness  
Aid and assist those in need so we all can be right in this  
I came a long way down this road and though I previously chose  
An alternate route  
My destiny still led to you no doubt...Redemption!

## Let's Help

By NS

We must reunite,  
And start a new fight,  
To help reduce the hunger,  
That the covid crisis brought upon us,  
So we must tour our streets,  
And plan on helping the ones in need,  
And if you cop what I speak,  
Then come on this journey with me.

If I had a community fridge,  
I would design it with love,  
With a pair of open arms,  
And a beautiful horizon above,  
Then I would stock the fridge with milk,  
I'm talking by the jug,  
With boxes of cereal  
That the children might love,  
And I also have slice turkey and ham,  
And hamburger meat,  
With plenty of butter and bread,  
So you can make grilled cheese,  
We also have vegetables and fruits,  
With spices too,  
And I can't forget about the pets,  
So I got dog food,  
And if you looking for something particular,  
And it's not there,  
Just look across the street,  
I have another fridge over there.



Art by BG and the men of the Challenge program,  
inspired by the Black Lives Matter issue of the *Connect*.  
What does this artwork mean to you?

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Greetings, Family! It's good to be writing to y'all again. This month's theme is one that is always necessary but not always easy – and can even be a little difficult to discuss or engage in: accountability, the thing that every adult loves to hate LOL! I'm only joking, it's not that bad, but I decided to try and make it a little fun (okay, that might be a stretch LOL). So, I'm going to do an acrostic in accountability's honor. But before I do, let me tell you a little thing about myself and accountability.

Ever since I was a kid, I couldn't let myself get away with anything. I mean every time I messed up and tried to duck the consequences or not take the blame, it was like a responsible big sister just popped up on my shoulder and said things like, "Girl, you know goodness well that was you. Why you not saying nothing?" or "Keela, for real: you really going to act like you just didn't cause that to happen?"

It was like there was this innate pressure on the inside to take responsibility for my actions—and it was so irritating LOL! Of course now that I am grown, I have come to respect the power of being accountable for my actions. I have to admit that it has saved me from the inevitable negative trickle down effect that surely came whenever I tried to act like nothing happened.

I'm not saying that it isn't still irritating. But instead of wanting to knock that responsible big sister off my shoulder, I embrace her and say, "Good looking out, sis." So in an effort to make this more fun or tolerable (however you choose to look at it) here is my acrostic dedicated to good ole accountability:

- A** Accept that you are human and will make mistakes
- C** Come to terms with whatever mistakes you have made
- C** Confide in someone: we are not meant to deal with issues on our own
- O** Own it: if you are responsible, man or woman up about it
- U** Understand that this too will pass if dealt with correctly
- N** No: say no to any voices that encourage you to duck responsibility
- T** Take a break from the issue or issues: once you have owned it and made amends, release it
- A** Ask for assistance if needed: in some instances, you may need to reach out to others for resolution
- B** Be open to getting advice: I know this is along the line of asking for assistance, but I can not emphasize this enough. So many of us turn inward when we mess up or make a mistake, when we should be doing just the opposite
- I** Ignore negative self-condemnation
- L** Learn, learn, learn from mistakes
- I** Initiate the process: don't let your accountability start with others
- T** Timing is everything: take responsibility early to avoid further damage
- Y** Yield to the voice of that responsible big sister/brother on your shoulder, and you will not be sorry

I really hope I accomplished my desired outcome with that acrostic, which was to make accountability more fun (smile)!

Now, on to some awesome resources!

**United Planning Organization (UPO):** 301 Rhode Island Ave, NW Washington, DC 20001, 202-238-4609

*Steady, reliable work is the key to having money in your pocket, food on the table, and a roof over your head. If you're ready to get to work and aren't afraid of learning something new, UPO's Workforce Institute offers training for some of DC's most in-demand vocational careers. We also help you search for jobs, nail your interview, and find and keep the job that's right for you. And we provide each and every student with one-on-one case management services to keep you focused, moving forward, and ready for better days ahead. We offer a variety of hands on job training programs taught by industry professionals to help you earn national certifications and get the tools and knowledge needed to become a productive member of the workforce:*

*Building Maintenance  
Commercial Driver's License  
Culinary Arts  
Emergency Medical Technician  
IT Help Desk & Application Support Specialist  
Electrical Technician  
Hospitality & Tourism Industry Service Worker  
These services are free for DC residents 18 and over*



Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms. Keela



# CONVERSATION WITH CRAIG

My name is Craig. I'm the Co-Congressman John Lewis Fellow at Free Minds and one of the first members of our peer support group. As I sit alone in the Free Minds office writing this, I think about when I was first introduced to Free Minds back in 2015. It was the first time that I personally witnessed a group of people, apart from religious organizations, come into a prison and have such an impact on the prisoners.

I knew when I first encountered Free Minds that I wanted to be a part of their prison poem class. Unbeknownst to me, a little over a year after I first met the Free Minds team, the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) bill would pass. That gave me the opportunity to petition for my freedom, which I ultimately won. Since being home, I have done a lot of work with Free Minds: advocating for the men and women who are still incarcerated and others who have been through the criminal justice system. I have also been mentoring young men, because I feel that if I'd had someone like myself when I was younger, maybe my situation would've been different.

One of the biggest things I stand on is accountability. I try to hold myself accountable no matter what. I also allow others to hold me accountable, but it was not always like that. As a young man, I did not know what accountability was; when others tried to correct

me, I would get defensive. That's all accountability is: correction. The people around me were trying to correct me for my wrongdoing and teach me accountability without me even realizing it.

Over the years I began to hold myself accountable, because I knew it was the right thing to do – and between you and I, I don't want someone else always holding me accountable. We all know right from wrong, but if we are not held accountable for our actions, we are going to keep doing what we are doing, even if we know it is wrong. That's why accountability is very important.

Holding yourself accountable, or allowing others to hold you accountable, is key because accountability can keep you out of bad situations. It is best to not be on the defensive when someone is trying to correct you. Be open-minded, even if they use words that you might not agree with. When you are holding someone else accountable, try to use kind words because your words can make others go on the defensive, or on the other hand, they can relax and you can be someone they feel comfortable with.

I sit here today as a man who has matured so much over the past 10 or 11 years. I know if accountability was not important to me, my outcome could've been much different.



# KEEPING EACH OTHER IN CHECK

*By Maji, Free Minds Friend*

I remember almost turning 22 years old when they sent me to a maximum-security state prison, after being sentenced to a LIFE imprisonment by the courts. This wasn't just any maximum-security state prison, but at the time, it was said to be the most secured and highly technological prison in the country. I never experienced being in this type of environment, and here I am being thrown right in the den with wolves. Even though I had a little common sense on how to conduct myself, it still was a lot I needed to learn because now I was surrounded by men who were decades ahead of me on how to handle being incarcerated. Most of them have been serving LIFE and long-term sentences for so long that they knew how to keep themselves in check when dealing with the unpredictability that prison brought to them every day. But here comes me, coming in with this attitude that since I got LIFE, I'm not going for nothing or I'm not listening to none of these old dudes telling me how to move the right way in prison. It only made my time in there a lot harder than it had to be. I was seen getting into fights with not just other convicts but I even got into it with a few correctional officers. I stayed on LOCK-UP like it was nothing.

Usually being on LOCK-UP, it can take you through mental distress if you allow it. Disciplinary Segregation strips you of the little belief of thinking that PRISON can help you change for the better. On LOCK-UP, is where you see some of the most inhumane behavior from those who you are incarcerated with. I witnessed some of the craziest incidents being locked down in the cell for close to 25 hours a day. Sometimes you caught me participating in the craziness because I thought that type of behavior was normal. It wasn't until one day I received a letter from a good man who slept down the tier from me. His words would forever save me from letting what I was going through destroy me for the worst. He wrote how I should not become a victim to the behind the door games that dudes were playing. That I need to put up a strong shield to protect my energy from the psychological warfare that went on around us every day. He told me how he sees the potential in me to do big things, so I needed to make myself approachable to the foolishness that was

being thrown my way. Among the many things he wrote, he just wanted to let me know that I needed to focus on my main priorities: my daughters and getting out of prison. Now I know this might not mean much to most who are reading this, but this letter came to me at a time when I felt that nobody even cares that I was on the verge of a total mental breakdown. The person who wrote me that letter didn't have to but he felt obligated to not see another young soul get lost in the prison system

Once I began taking into account that it was time to stop playing around and really fight for my freedom, everything started to change for me. I realized I could no longer dodge the responsibility of making better choices. I knew I was headed in the right direction when I received notice from the appeal court that my LIFE sentence was vacated and they were giving me a new sentence hearing. Being able to have my time reduced due to the progress I made while incarcerated, let me know that when you start choosing the right thoughts and behavior, you'll get the right consequences.

But all this wouldn't have been possible if it wasn't for somebody accepting the responsibility of not allowing me to go down the wrong path. I know if they can do that for me, we can all do it for each other. You see a brother or sister fall, aren't we supposed to help them? I appreciate every person who came into my life for the sole purpose of keeping me on the right track. Understanding that if it wasn't for their ability to have me see the positive side to every trouble that I was up against, one misstep could've left me with years of regrets. I wished I had them around me all the time. But GOD sends his angels to us, in the most unusual ways, when we about to do something insane.

**ACCOUNTABILITY means to accept what LIFE has given us and being careful not to push our pain, problems, and faults off to the next person.** We all create our own experiences. So we should try to create good experiences with anyone who comes into our lives. It's evidence to why we celebrate the principle, "UJIMA" during the KWANZAA holiday. Which states that, "Our goal is to build and maintain our community together and to make our Brothers' and Sisters' problems our problems and solve them together."

I do wonder sometimes if I never received that letter that day, how would've things turned out? I'm glad to not have crash all the way out and really be sitting here for the rest of my life. I'm just one example of what happens when we take the chance to help not only advance ourselves but also the person next to us.

## BOOK REVIEW: *WE DO THIS 'TIL WE FREE US*

By Araba

*We Do This 'Til We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transforming Justice* is a collection of essays, interviews, and short stories written or edited by Mariame Kaba. Kaba is a prison abolitionist, meaning she believes in closing prisons and investing in changing the conditions that cause mass incarceration (poverty, homelessness, substance abuse/mental illness, etc.). She is also the founder of Project NIA, an organization that works to end youth incarceration around the country.

*We Do This 'Til We Free Us* is divided into seven parts; my favorites include "There Are No Perfect Victims," "The State Can't Give Us Transformative Justice," and "Accountability is Not Punishment: Transforming How We Deal with Harm and Violence." In the first essay of that last section, entitled "Transforming Punishment: What is Accountability without Punishment?", essayist Rachel Herzog provides three basic principles of abolitionist thinking:

1. "Prison-industrial complex (PIC) abolition calls for the elimination of policing, imprisonment, and surveillance.
2. PIC abolition rejects the expansion in breadth or scope or legitimization of all aspects of the prison-industrial complex: surveillance, policing, sentencing, and imprisonment of all sorts.
3. PIC abolition refuses premature death and organized abandonment, the state's modes of reprisal and punishment" (pp. 133-134)

Many of the pieces within *We Do This 'Til We Free Us* expand on themes of accountability and transformative justice within these three principles. They cover a variety of topics recently discussed in the media, including accountability within the #MeToo movement, what abolitionist justice can look like for sexual assault survivors (discussed in the context of the victims of R. Kelly), and the frequent lack of justice for folks who experience violence while incarcerated. These cases are examples in which serious harm has been caused, and ones in which abolitionists challenge us to look for alternatives to a criminal legal system that resorts to imprisonment as the only solution for righting wrongs.

Authors throughout the collection take care to address the criticisms people have of prison abolition. One of the most common responses to the suggestion of PIC abolition is to ask about the extremes: If we get rid of prisons, what will we do with the rapists and murderers? To this, Kaba replies:

"If we want to reduce (or end)...violence, putting a few perpetrators in prison does little to stop the many other perpetrators. It does nothing to change a culture that makes this harm imaginable, to hold the individual perpetrator accountable, to support their transformation, or to meet the needs of the survivors. A world without harm isn't possible and isn't what an abolitionist vision purports to achieve. Rather, abolitionist politics and practice contend that disposing of people by locking them away in jails and prisons does nothing to prevent, reduce, or transform harm in the aggregate...None of us has all the answers, or we would have ended oppression already. But if we keep building the world we want, trying new things, and learning from our mistakes, new possibilities emerge."

Let us know if you'd like a copy of *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, or if you have thoughts on Kaba's position on PIC abolition. We love hearing from you!



# THE WRITE WAY: BEING VULNERABLE ON THE PAGE

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

*By Michael*



Hopefully this issue of the *Connect* is helping you think through what accountability could look like in different aspects of your life: your day-to-day, your relationships, even the attitude with which you greet challenges. But as writers, what does accountability look like in our writing? What does it mean to hold

ourselves accountable on the page?

Many great writers talk about implicating themselves in their writing. A lot of us might be familiar with the word “implicate” in a legal context, but “to implicate” more generally means “to bear some of the responsibility for an action or outcome.” This isn’t about telling on yourself; at its core, this is a practice of self-awareness. By being vulnerable and honest about your faults in your writing, you show that you’re self-aware enough to realize you aren’t perfect – and that builds trust with your reader.

Some writers insist on being the heroes of their own stories: “Everyone else was wrong, and I’m happy to tell you all about the faults of others... but I did great!” But that’s never the full story, and the more you acknowledge your own shortcomings on the page, the more human and honest and relatable your story becomes.

In order to see how this works, let’s look at an example from the writer Kiese Laymon (author of *Heavy*). In his essay “What I Pledge Allegiance To,” Kiese is on a train to New York City to volunteer at Ground Zero, only four days after the September 11 attacks. Everyone in his train car is staring at and making comments about a South Asian family riding near the front, implying that they might try to blow up the train. Kiese is a Black man who knows what it’s like to be unfairly profiled and feared, and he doesn’t want to see it happening to other people. So he defends the South Asian family under his breath to the people sitting near him.

Later in the essay, Kiese writes, “When I took the train back to Poughkeepsie that night, I remember feeling sad that there were no ‘Muslim-looking’ folk in my car who I could feel good about silently defending.” Oof. Talk about holding yourself accountable! All Kiese had to do was not admit that he ever thought this, and he would’ve come out smelling like roses. After all: he saw a family being profiled and he spoke up to defend them. End of story, right?

But Kiese knows that’s not the full story; life is never that simple, and none of us are ever quite that innocent. He knows that yes, he did a good thing. But he also acknowledges for the reader that 1) it wasn’t that good of a thing – that it was, in fact, the bare minimum we all should expect of ourselves when confronted with injustice – and that 2) he did it partly to inflate his own ego. Kiese enjoyed being the good guy on the train. He enjoyed the “heroic American feeling” it gave him – so much so that when he takes the train home later that night, he *wishes there were people being mistreated* on his train, so that he could play the good guy again and come to their rescue.

Think about how much self-awareness, personal reckoning, and courage it takes to admit that to an audience of readers. And you know what? As much as I hate to admit it, I can relate. I’ve had similar thoughts in similar situations. And that’s the power of taking a risk and telling your full truth: it’s the moments of vulnerability that affect your reader the most, because they can relate, even to things that seem too specific or too embarrassing to say.

If you’re like me, the fact that Kiese is willing to implicate himself like this makes him ten times more credible and relatable than the average writer. His admission lets me know that Kiese is in the business not of showing off but of brutal, human honesty – even when it makes him look bad. And that, I believe, is the business each of us should be in when we write.

## 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.*

### **25 To Life With A Juvenile Mind by MV**

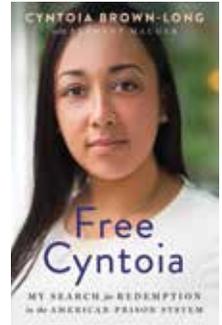
*Having entered prison at the young age of 16, MV decided to take the necessary steps to transform his life and share his story with others through poetry. He shares his struggles and the feelings that accompany those struggles, as he serves his sentence of 25 years to life. The book includes various stories from MV’s life, from missing his family to losing his grandmother during his incarceration, learning about the impact of his actions, and his perspectives on social issues. Witness the transformation of a 16-year-old child into a 27-year old-man in 25 to Life with a Juvenile Mind.*



## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS: **FREE CYNTOIA**

*with Neely*

The votes are in and, if you will please allow me, the next BAM book will be... *Free Cyntoia* by Cyntoia Brown Long! This memoir follows the journey of Cyntoia Brown Long, who was tried and convicted as an adult when she was just 16. Sentenced to life, Cyntoia's story is one of resilience and determination, which exemplifies the possibilities that can be achieved when we find and hold onto our own beacon of hope. We are excited to hear what you have to say about this!



1. Cyntoia tries desperately to understand why she rebelled so much growing up. What do you think was most responsible for the negative behavior and self-destructive choices she made early in her life? Have any of those same things influenced you in your own life?
2. Cyntoia talks about the transformative power of dialogue she witnesses in her college classes, where people from opposite backgrounds talk with each other to learn about incarceration. Do you think society's opinion on the criminal legal system would change if people were able to hold personal conversations with someone who has been incarcerated? Why or why not?
3. On page 40, Cyntoia reflects on how she learned more from the girls around her than what was being taught in school. Have you learned more from books or real-life experiences? Do you think it's better to be book educated, life educated, or a mixture of both?

**4.** The one rule in life Cyntoia sets for herself, and which she refuses to break, is her mother's rule of never asking someone for money. Is there a rule in your life that you refuse to break, no matter the circumstances? Why is that rule so important to you?

**5.** *Free Cyntoia* explores the narrative around "trafficking" and how it's often misunderstood (p. 113). Did Cyntoia's awakening to the fact that she had been trafficked change the way you saw this issue at all? If so, in what way?

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: JOY (VOLUME 10, ISSUE 4)

Hey family! The theme for the next issue of the *Connect* is Joy. Here are some prompts to help you get started. And we want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 10, Issue 5 will be exploring the theme *Nourish*.

### (1)

Write an ode –a poem dedicated to a particular person or thing—to someone who inspires you or brings joy to your life.

Ode poems typically begin as, "Ode to \_\_\_\_\_."

### (2)

Describe yourself when you feel the most happy or joyous. How do you carry yourself? What do you feel?

Do you look at the world or others differently? For an extra challenge, try starting each line with a different letter of your name.

### (3)

Fill in Blanks:

I am most joyous when \_\_\_\_\_. The best version of myself looks like \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_ brings me joy. My favorite quality is my \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ is something I wish to improve on. I am motivated to \_\_\_\_\_

Because I am equipped with \_\_\_\_\_, nothing can get in my way!

## (4)

Write instructions to your childhood self on how to find happiness.

## (5)

Try writing a haiku poem describing the perfect day. A haiku is a three-line poem with a 5-7-5 syllable pattern. For an extra challenge, try including one of the 5 senses (touch, sight, sound, smell, taste) in your poem. Here is an example of a haiku:

"A Poppy Blooms"  
by Katsushika Hokusai

I write, erase, rewrite

Erase again, and then

A poppy blooms.

## (6)

Write a *list poem* of the things that make you smile.

# DC PHOTOS



New Balance sneakers are a big part of DC culture, and this edition was introduced recently in honor of DC.



Skating pavilion at Anacostia Park



Basketball court at Anacostia Park



View of the river from Anacostia Park



Friday Night Concerts Returning at SW Capitol Riverfront

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*: ACCOUNTABILITY

## Accountability By Warren

Accountability is a mechanism one would have to understand to truly embrace. Maturity plays an important role in being accountable for his/her actions. One has to bring themselves to a place where they authentically feel that their actions were irrevocably wrong – and accept that because of their actions, someone or something was harmed. Shame properly leveraged can cultivate righteousness, which in most cases encourages individuals to do the right thing.

Three important factors that play key roles in accountability are 1.) Mindful awareness, 2.) Honorable maturity, and 3.) Regret. These components have to be present in order for an individual to take accountability for his/her transgressions. I can attest to this because of my own experiences. I personally agree with Danielle Sered's definition of accountability: "Being responsible for understanding the impact your actions can have on others." Her philosophy makes common sense to me. In closing, I ultimately believe that in order for us as a society to genuinely and holistically be more responsible for our actions, we have to have a moral respect for something greater than ourselves.

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## Accountability By AC

I'm not really a tattoo person. I like tats in general and I like how they look on other people, but I've never gotten one, nor do I feel inclined to do so. I believe this refusal to get a tattoo might come from the fact that I am from El Salvador and the tattoo culture is much different there than in the USA. A lot of things are different in El Salvador. However, if I were to ever get a tattoo, it would most likely be a yin-yang symbol, because of my sincere belief in a true universal balance – a belief that in time, the balance of justice prevails.

It's funny, really, to think about the fact that even the smallest of actions can jumpstart a chain reaction with massive ramifications. This is true for good actions, but it's true for bad actions as well.

I currently find myself within a system that promises justice and accountability for the deeds I, and my fellow inmates, committed. I accept this promise and I agree to any and all punishment because I want to believe in justice. I truly believe that when we make mistakes in judgement, when we humans cause harm, we should be held accountable. I want us to be held accountable in order to bring order to our chaos, light into darkness, love amid hatred, peace during war – a yin to a yang.

But what happens when accountability becomes a matter of opinion? When it becomes a subjective process? When it becomes independent of truth or fact? When it entangles itself with what's wrong about a world full of systemic inequalities? When it becomes dependent on how much a person can pay for legal fees, or even to the color of a person's skin? What happens then? How diluted does the definition of accountability become?

Part of the beauty of accountability is that it allows us all to be known for our deeds, right or wrong. Once our deeds have been recognized, we are faced with the opportunity to grow, to acknowledge our mistakes, and to even redeem ourselves. Ultimately, a person is not measured by how many times he/she falls down, but by how many times he/she gets up and continues to fight for a better future. By removing the necessity for us to face our errors, we are removing the opportunity to come out stronger on the other side.

Sadly, in today's society we see police officers, who are supposed to uphold the law, breaking the most fundamental laws; we see politicians at the highest levels thinking they are above the law; we see representatives of the government, who were chosen by the people to serve the people, choose to serve their own agendas instead; we see people of this country refusing to recognize that we are all created equal and have the right to enjoy the same freedoms as the next person. Sadly, accountability is something we need in high quantities in order to bring balance to this declining world. We need everyone to be responsible for our communal future.

This country, this society, needs to demand better accountability from everybody, regardless of position or race. This country needs to bring balance to this social dilemma before it falls into a chaos only comparable to struggling countries, like my home country, where a person cannot even get a yin-yang tattoo without feeling at risk. The universe has its own way of finding balance if we humans fail to find a way to bring balance ourselves. I hope we can find a way to use accountability to bring balance before it's too late, before life demands balance with or without us.

# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ACCOUNTABILITY

## On Accountability

By AHA

Accountability to me means being responsible and answerable to one's actions. I do agree with the definition suggested from the book *Until we Reckon* by Danielle Sered. Why? Because everything involves responsibility and when we do something wrong or right we are responsible for what we have done. If it was wrong we seek to change it and grow from it not to do it again' and if it's right we are responsible for passing it to someone else to do and use if necessary.

I have held myself accountable for my actions and do so daily. I haven't practiced it with someone else but always tell my daughter to be accountable and responsible in all she does. Me telling her this I believe is somewhat a practice and has helped her do a lot of good and has shown me my words and insight can guide her; and showing me I have to be more responsible so I won't do things I'm telling her not to do.

I think the society as a whole can be more responsible and accountable for what they do and say while understanding the impact and effect on others. Some examples for me can be what is presented to youth within music, TV, etc. What some will act upon and incorporate into their lives when the one doing it only looks at it as entertainment. These actions lead to more violence and mass incarceration, so I think people need to look at what they present and be more responsible. This is with everything we do though as a society, since everything has an impact.

So, for me, being accountable as I mentioned is being responsible and being answerable to what you have done, but also understanding what you have done that has affected someone else. For me, it's like both fit so my two opinions is what it means to me...Peace.

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## Questions

By DT

How could I ever make life better for myself when I'll forever be considered a murderer, even though I have never been a killer? How could I make life better for myself when I have rich dreams, but poor pockets? Where will my knowledge grow from when it's hidden from me, scattered throughout every book concerning history? Those untold tales of my kind, being kept from my kind. How could I properly learn to be a productive man within society, when the D.C. government gave me a prison term of life for being a mentally confused boy? How could I come to recognize a true act of kindness, when deceit is all that seems to surround me? How could I receive love, when hate is what mainly perceives me? How will I learn to smile if society comes back amongst me, when society has been trained to despise me? Where will I find joy in my life, when my heart doesn't hold any happiness? How could I become a human being again after being called an animal for countless years? How will I know my true origins when I am told I'm "black," something I am called only here in America? What am I, who am I, and where do I originate from? How come I ask so many questions? An answer will never come without one.

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## Taking Accountability

By TTB

Accountability is the recognition that one has either erred in some way against him/herself or has caused harm in some way to another that needs correcting. Oftentimes when we do something that hurts someone else and we do not take accountability for it, it speaks loud and clear to the injured party that we don't care. For example: the officers who barged into Breonna Taylor's house and killed her have yet to hold themselves accountable for her death, and their lack of accountability speaks loud and clear to the world about their character.

To take accountability for your actions means to send a clear message to the injured party that you are sorry for causing whatever harm or distress you may have caused. To take accountability is to admit to being human and to show that one is remorseful and understanding of the injured party's feelings. Taking responsibility shows that one is not above anyone else, that one will do whatever it takes in the future to better one's character so that one does not repeat the same offense again. A lack of accountability is one basically saying, "I don't care how

you feel or what anyone has to say about me. I will do what I want and I don't care who I hurt in the process!" This way of thinking displays a very poor attitude and is unacceptable.

I have learned to take accountability for many of my actions throughout my life. The biggest thing I have taken accountability for in my life is the sale of drugs to one of my friends who is no longer living – may he rest in peace – and although what I gave him wasn't the sole cause of his death, I take full responsibility for what I did. Accountability is often a hard pill to swallow. We humans are blinded by the lowerself – some call the lowerself pride, ego – and so it is hard to imagine that we have done something wrong to offend or even hurt someone, especially if we think that person deserved it. But once we start to remove the lowerself from the picture, we can see with clearer eyes when we have caused some type of harm, and with this recognition comes the most logical of actions: holding ourselves accountable for our past mistakes and bad decisions.

# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ACCOUNTABILITY

## The Human Being Behind the Prison Number

By BB

Once a person is convicted of a crime and sent to prison, they are automatically assigned a prison identification number. For all intents and purposes, in the eyes of the system, the person then becomes that number. In order to receive their mail, commissary, or even dial an outside phone number, they must state their prison identification number. Furthermore, in order for them to walk out of the prison door as a free citizen, they must state their prison identification number to the guard who processes people in and out.

Nevertheless, we must ask ourselves who this person was before they became a prisoner. Surely, he/she is someone's father, brother, sister, mother, aun-tie, uncle, or cousin. A person doesn't lose their humanity by being branded with a prison number. With millions of prisoners in their custody, the state and federal government is a bloated bureaucracy that doesn't have the capacity to address the individual needs of its prisoners. In such an overpopulated system, it is much easier to assign each human being a prison number. By assigning the person a number, it is much easier to look at them as a thing.

Prison is a well-oiled machine. But just because a machine is well-oiled, doesn't mean that it runs well. In fact, the prison machine is broken in many places. It is clear that the entire machine needs to be fixed. However, the status quo has no vision or appetite for that. Therefore, the broken parts just get taped or welded back together to function temporarily, and the broken prison system just keeps on churning. You can tell that a machine is broken from the products that it manufactures. Prisons are called correctional and rehabilitation centers. However, their customer satisfaction rate is very dismal because they produce a 68% recidivism rate.

What becomes of people when they are sent to prison? How are they treated? If you ask the majority of prisoners, they will tell you that the system treats them more like a cog in the machine, rather than as the human being they are. This is where incarceration becomes a lose-lose situation for the state as well as for the people it incarcerates. No one is suggesting that prison should be a nice or even a pleasant place. Most people have done some bad things to end up in prison – but does this mean that society should treat them so poorly? These same people will one day be released into the communities that helped imprison them. Society needs to truly attempt to rehabilitate these individuals.

A person will always be more than a number. Guards who abuse their authority treat prisoners as less than human. It's true that some prisoners have done some inhumane things in society, but they are still human. In order to rehabilitate them, we must find and bring out their humanity. Remember: they are someone's family member. He/she had a life as well as an occupation prior to coming to prison. Let's give them the respect that they deserve as human beings. Let's find out where they went wrong. How can we as a society help them to correct the thinking errors that caused them to commit crimes? How can we show them a better way? We must demonstrate to them that getting high on drugs will not solve their problems. Illicit drug use and the securing of funds to support their drug addictions will only lead to the commission of more crimes.

The majority of crime has its root directly or indirectly tied to drug use. Who were these prisoners before they became drug addicts? Let us look at them in this light instead of seeing them only as zombies of their old selves. It becomes easy to dehumanize a drug addict if you didn't know that person before they become their worst selves; when the addict becomes a prisoner, it makes it even easier for a person to view them as less than. When society places prison guards with this incorrect mindset in positions of authority, it becomes clear how they can treat inmates as only numbers and not as human. Being overworked and underpaid only adds to the frustration of guards who feel as if the state doesn't appreciate their contributions. Some guards feel as if it is their moral duty to give prisoners a hard time. Yet when prisoners are mistreated, this only heightens tensions.

Must we forget that prisoners are human beings too? They are someone's mother, sister, father, or brother. If we can see them in this light, we will treat them better. As humans they will no longer be looked upon as a number or a thing. Once we see their humanity, then their prisoner identification number is only an identifier, just as a fellow guard and his/her fellow co-workers have an employee identification number. When prisoners are treated in a humane way, it tends to make them want to become better. In turn, they seek the help that they need to correct the errors in their thinking. Once these men/women truly seek to rehabilitate themselves, it becomes a win-win for everybody. As society and the world at large, we must see the human being behind the prison number.

## INTRODUCTION TO K.E.

My name is K.E. and I am a youth intern for Free Minds Book Club. I am 16 years old and this is my first time being an intern for Free Minds. I have enjoyed the first week here. I wrote essays about some of the hobbies I do, and was introduced to a lot of things that Free Minds has done to change people's lives. I joined Free Minds for a better understanding and opportunity for me to earn money, work harder, and do better in life.

Some things I like to do are dance, play football, and box. What inspired me to dance was my formal guardian, who introduced me to mime and other types of dance. What inspired me to play football was watching the best running backs like Barry Sanders, Beast Mode, Derrick Henry, and others. What inspired me to box was unstoppable boxers like Mike Tyson, Sugar Ray Leonard, Floyd Mayweather, and Muhamad Ali. I am a foster child and I have gone through a lot in my life, but I am not letting anything keep me from achieving my goals.

# REENTRY PROFILE: MY DREAM HOUSE

By Zion, Free Minds Member

I was released two and a half years ago after spending more than two decades in prison. While I was locked up, I dreamed of a lot of things. I dreamed of having a family, and working to provide for myself and my family. Even though my dreams have not unfolded as rapidly as I wanted, slowly but surely, everything that I envisioned is happening. Even when doors have been closed on me, I continue to keep the faith and move forward. In that way, I am achieving what I dreamed of with the support of family, my friends, and my significant other (her name is Rebecca, but I call her my Empress!). I've had to be patient, but it's happening!

Both Rebecca and I have full-time jobs. We live together with her three kids. We work hard. It's a busy life! Two months ago, we bought a house together. Buying a home has always been a dream of mine. I'm going to be honest: I always wanted a mansion! But as I have grown into an adult, I've come to understand that it's not about the size of the house. It is just knowing that this is your home. You're coming home after work. You're waking up in your home in the morning and doing the yard work and working together as a team. We all pitch in around the house: cut the grass, even painting, doing laundry, doing dishes. We all take turns working together as a family.

The day we got the keys to our house, I just couldn't believe it. I felt like, *This is my place! This is where I'm coming to after work!* I feel different. I often think about where I was just a few years ago, and then I look at where I am now! It feels good.

We love our house. It's an old building that was once a barn. It has two units. We live in the main house. The previous owners did a lot of work to update it inside and out. It's beautiful. I'm especially excited about winter time, because our house is very cozy! We are renovating the second unit, so that we can rent it out. Just think: I will be a homeowner and a landlord!

Preparing to buy a home takes a lot of hard work and time. If you think you want a home one day yourself, I would tell you to believe in yourself! Believe that you can do this, and you can have your own home. Work hard. Things may not happen overnight like you want. Remember what they say: *Rome wasn't built in one day!* Be patient. Look for the right partner and the right supporting cast to have around you. If you do these things, you will get there!

Financially, a lot of people think it's just about getting a big chunk of money. It's not. It's all about the credit, credit, credit! You have to establish good credit so you will be approved later for a loan. When I first came home, I opened a bank account. I also applied for a secured credit card. As you probably know, it's hard to get a credit card if you don't have any credit history. But how are you supposed to get credit history without a credit card? It's crazy-making, right?

A secured credit card requires that you make a deposit that the

credit card company holds. If you default on your payments, they keep your deposit. Otherwise, as long as you pay your bill on time, they will return your deposit to you after a certain number of months. So I had to put a down payment on it to start. Once I got approved, my monthly credit limit was \$500. Within a couple of months, the bank sent me a letter notifying me I was making good progress, and they raised my limit to \$750.



I used the card for various little things. My nephew gave me good advice. He said: "Do not let a payment due date go by!" My payments were always due by the 24th of the month. So every month, I called and paid off my bill *before* that day even got here. This shows the bank you are responsible. The added benefit is that you don't have to pay any interest. There are a lot of good books and courses available out there about how to establish good credit. Do your research and be patient. It's a slow and steady process, but it will pay off!

We not only got a new house, we are now also part of this community. Everyone is very peaceful, respectful, and loving. People greet you on the street. I want to give back the way people have given to me, just by embracing me when we arrived here. The environment is laid back, surrounded by trees and nature. There are no sirens or noise. There are a lot of children too and I love that. They just make you feel welcome. There is a website for the community and we have already joined that. I am going to open a boot camp for the community on Saturdays. I take pride in physical fitness. So I thought of this as a way to give back to my new community!

Accountability plays a role in my life at every level. I have responsibilities now, and being accountable means I don't let myself or others down. Being a homeowner means I'm accountable to pay the mortgage, to take care of the home, to be a good member of my new community. And in the broader sense, if I want to be a leader, and give others advice, I have to lead by example. That means providing for myself and my family, and walking in a fashion that shows others that I hold myself to a high standard.

Finally, I absolutely believe that I am accountable to all of you – my brothers and sisters who are still incarcerated. I believe that each one of us, when we come home, has an obligation to be an example for those coming behind us. I do that by respecting myself and others and not letting the slightest thing knock me off track in the pursuit of my dreams!

# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: STRAIGHT TALK ON VIRUSES, VACCINES AND VARIANTS

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



Since the first modern vaccine for smallpox was invented in 1796, the world's science and research community has time and time again developed safe medicine to help the body learn to defend itself against new, deadly threats. The list of epidemics, often highly contagious viruses that have been contained by vaccines, includes polio, measles, chickenpox, and hepatitis.

Vaccines are far from a silver bullet. When you hear about people getting "flu shots" each year, those are vaccinations against the common flu. That flu has been with us forever and manages to mutate enough annually that in some years it's fairly mild, and other years fairly dangerous to newborns and the elderly. In some years, those flu shots are less than 50% effective against the flu. But even at coin flip odds, every winter these shots help keep hospitals from filling up with people who otherwise might have had a very bad case of the flu.

For some illnesses, we have yet to find a vaccine that works. This list includes HIV/AIDS, which is transmitted from person to person, and malaria, which is transferred from mosquitoes to people.

Before last year, the previous record for speed in developing a vaccine was for the mumps; it took four years. But due to breakthroughs in science and technology (and the attention of the entire global medical community), multiple vaccines for COVID-19 received emergency use authorization in less than two years.

It is perfectly reasonable to be wary of the fact that this medicine made it into the world so fast. However, there are two factors you should keep in mind that explain why this was the case:

First, there has never been so much money made available in such a short time to help scientists and researchers move vaccines from invention through the very strict process used to make sure they are safe and effective. The initial funding from the U.S. government for vaccine development, in a project called Operation Warp Speed, was \$10 billion. And many other countries, from China and Russia to South Africa and England, were also heavily involved in the quest to slow the spread of COVID.

The second factor is that it has been more than a century since the world has encountered a virus resembling COVID's combination of contagiousness and severity. In less than two years, more than 200 million people have been infected with the virus, and about 4.5 million of them have died. Coronavirus has killed about 2% of the people who get it. If that sounds like a low number, think of it this way: If every person on Earth got COVID, we would see 160 MILLION people die from it.

Now, here is why that combination helped the vaccine development process move at lightning speed:

The process of testing vaccines moves through three trial phases. It begins with lab testing, often involving animals. Only about 10% of vaccines make it to the next round, phase two, which involves very small-sized human trials. Then begins phase three, which requires thousands and thousands of people who either receive the vaccine or what's called a placebo, a fake shot. Generally, this phase takes a very, very long time, because a drug will not make it out of this phase until you find a high number of trial participants who are infected with the illness in question.

Because COVID is so contagious, and so deadly, it did not take long for these phase three trials to build a large body of evidence. And what those trials showed, in the case of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, was that the trial group who did not receive the vaccine got COVID at a high rate, and almost nobody who received the vaccine got it. And against the original version of coronavirus, not one person who got those vaccines died from COVID.

But viruses do their best to survive as humans fight to kill them, and to do this they mutate. Sometimes they morph into a less dangerous version of themselves, other times they get scarier.

You have probably heard about the "Delta Variant" of coronavirus, which is the dominant version in the United States today. It is at least twice as contagious as any other version of the virus, and that has made it far more likely that people will pass it on to each other. Because it is more contagious, it is also more likely to infect even those people who have already received a vaccine. These are often referred to as "breakthrough cases."

But the reason that the coronavirus has become a catastrophic global event is not because of how many people get it: millions and millions of people catch colds every year, or get the flu, or experience allergies, right? And we have seen highly contagious viruses, like the recent swine flu, spread across the globe before, without the societal damage done by COVID.

The difference with COVID is that it sends such a high rate of people to the hospital or, worse, to their deathbed. We badly needed vaccines to protect against it in order to prevent our hospitals from being overloaded with very sick patients, and to prevent us from losing loved ones or succumbing to the illness ourselves.

And on this point, the numbers are now indisputable: even with this new Delta Variant, those who are fully vaccinated are almost never hospitalized or die. In the United States, where vaccines have been readily available for months, almost everyone currently in a hospital or a coffin as a result of the coronavirus got there because they were unvaccinated.

There is probably not a form of medicine in the history of time without some potential side effect. The very strict process for testing vaccines is meant to ensure that dangerous ones, such as blood clots, are either nonexistent or extremely rare.

There is a lot of disinformation flying around the internet about the coronavirus vaccines available in the United States. For example, one claim you might see is that the COVID vaccines make men sterile or decrease their fertility. That would be a scary side effect, but there is no evidence it is true. A University of Miami study on this question found that the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines did not decrease male reproductive ability at all. In fact, the study found that alcohol and even some prescription medications have actually been proven more

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

likely to lower male fertility rates.

You're more likely to walk out of a corner store with something that's actually been proven to lower male fertility (alcohol, even some prescription medications)!

In America, everyone has the freedom to make their own medical choices, but they should do so by weighing risks and considering evidence-based facts.

In the case of coronavirus, we know that for every 100 people who have been infected, two have died. We know that the odds of death are low for people under 50, but that younger people are still at risk of severe infection that can stay with them for a long time. And we know that adults who are overweight, have high blood pressure, or suffer from chronic lung conditions have increased odds of severe illness or even death from COVID.

With vaccines, we know that – like every drug ever invented—there are some side effects. But we also know that, in terms of the ones available in the United States, these vaccines went through the most publicly followed and scrutinized trial process in medical history. Those trials found dangerous side effects to be extremely rare; the more likely side effects were quite mild (arm pain, headaches, and fever). And they found that these vaccines frequently prevent COVID infection, and almost always prevent hospitalization or death.

No legitimate research or studies produced since those trials have contradicted those original findings. The facts are that the coronavirus has grown more contagious, and thus more dangerous, to the world, and the U.S. vaccines have continued to protect the people who receive them.

## WORLD

After 20 years and trillions of dollars spent, the U.S. war in Afghanistan has drawn to a close. The nation known as the "Graveyard of Empires" finally ends its close connection with America in the same way it started: with the Taliban in control.



The U.S.-supported Afghan military has been engaged in a bloody civil war with the Taliban for years, and it was widely expected that eventually, the Islamist political group would overtake the military and once again lead Afghanistan. But as America moved to withdraw the remaining thousand or so troops from the country, the Taliban shocked U.S. national security, military, and diplomatic leaders with the speed with which they were able to topple the remaining Afghan troops.

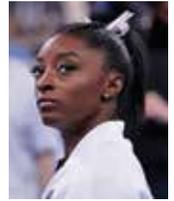
The quick capture of the remainder of Afghanistan by the Taliban jeopardized our ability to evacuate two groups of people from the country: American workers still inside the borders, and Afghan citizens who assisted us with things like translation and travel. As this goes to print, U.S. forces are struggling to keep the country's main airport in the city of Kabul secure enough to have airlines evacuate people from the country.

## SPORTS

It was a year late – and happened without fans—but it got done: The 2020 Summer Olympic Games are a wrap in Japan. The United States emerged on top of the medal count with 113 (China finished second with 88). America narrowly topped China in gold medals, 39 to 38.

After struggling early with an exhibition loss to Nigeria and a first round upset at the hands of France, the U.S. Men's Basketball team resumed their dominant ways on the path to a gold medal. But more impressive was the U.S. Women's Basketball team's streak. In a decisive victory over the host nation Japan in this year's final, the squad locked in their seventh consecutive gold medal and their 55th consecutive Olympic victory.

In gymnastics, real life did not play out in the way the script was written. Simone Biles, (right) perhaps the greatest U.S. Olympic athlete of all time, was poised to take home a slew of golds to add to her haul from the 2016 games in Brazil, and lead the U.S. team to overall gold. But Biles, bravely recognizing that she was experiencing mental blocks that made her routines risky to execute, withdrew from the team competition early on. She ended up only competing in one individual event (the balance beam, where she won bronze). Even without Biles, the U.S. women managed to take home silver in the team all-around. Minnesota's own Suni Lee (right) succeeded Biles as the gold medal champion in the individual all-around competition.



As you read this, the Washington Football Team has begun its second season without an actual name or mascot. But it has a new quarterback: Ryan Fitzpatrick, a journeyman passer that some are optimistic could bring the best out of D.C.'s young nucleus of rushers and pass catchers. Hopes are high this season for breakout years from receivers Terry McLaurin and Curtis Samuel, and running back Antonio Gibson.



The likely favorites to return to the Super Bowl this year will be last year's conference champions: the Tampa Bay Buccaneers, led by Tom Brady, and the Pat Mahomes-led Kansas City Chiefs.





# MEDITATION SUMMER SOLSTICE

By Kelli

On June 20th, we celebrated the Summer Solstice (also called Midsummer). Does anybody know what it is? The summer solstice happens when the sun reaches its highest position in the sky, as seen from the North Pole. It is the longest day of the year (or period of light), followed by the shortest night (or period of darkness). The word "solstice" actually means "sun standing still." As you go closer and closer to the North Pole on the summer solstice, the daylight lasts longer. At the North Pole, the sun never goes down on the summer solstice! Seriously. I had a friend who once went to Alaska during the summer solstice, and they played football and ultimate frisbee in the daylight at 3 a.m.!

Cultures around the world mark the solstice with celebrations. In some places, it is a celebration of the end of winter. In others, it represents the light winning out over darkness. Together everyone is witnessing the turning of the wheel of the year. People attune themselves to the rhythms of the natural world and invite all of the seasons – of birth, growth, death and renewal.

Let's meditate about the power of sunlight and the summer solstice.

*Find a comfortable spot to meditate. Close your eyes, with your feet on the floor, and your arms relaxed... Take a deep breath in... and out. Now imagine yourself sitting on a big rock at the side of a beautiful river. You are bathed in sunlight. The water is brilliant blue and you can see clear to the rocks on the river's floor. Your feet dangle in the cool water... The sun is directly overhead. It is as far north as it will travel this year... You feel the heat of the sun. It kisses your skin, and its light gives you energy. Breathe that energy in through your nose...and release it through your mouth. Take another deep*

*breath in... hold it... and release.*

*You feel thankful for the summer that is now just beginning. Imagine that the sun's powerful light actually enters your body. Picture the light and see it infusing you... beginning at the crown of your head, the light fills every part of your head... the light grows, illuminating your neck, your shoulders, your arms, your chest, your body, your legs... the light shines all the way through to the soles of your feet! Focus on that light... as you breathe in... and exhale.*

*You feel the light's power inside of you... you feel the strength of your creativity... you feel that all the best things about you are being highlighted and lit up, so that everyone can recognize your goodness and your talents. The light clarifies all of your potential. It is as if the sun is inside of you and you shine.*

*As you continue to feel the sun's light, warmth, and positivity, you also feel the cool water on your feet. Behind you, a garden teems with tall, golden sunflowers. Each one cranes its face to meet the sun. You feel in perfect balance with nature. Feel the light... as you breathe in... and out... and in... and out.*

*The light makes you see how strong you are, how good you are, and how much you can do. Breathe this feeling in... and out. Allow the light of summer to stay within you. Hold on to the light, and embrace the summer solstice. When you're ready, open your eyes and return your attention to your surroundings. But remember that you can carry this light with you and return to this meditation as often as you wish!*

# PAYING IT FORWARD: MISSION REBIRTH

continued from page 9

understand. But now their whole life is ruined? There's another place in New Orleans that deals with displaced people, like individuals who have been sex trafficked, and they're often undocumented. So I also help those women. I believe we need to stop judging these women. It hurts more than helps them. A lot of women have trust issues because of what they've gone through, and they're more afraid of your judgement and feeling like they're stupid for staying or having low self-esteem. Getting verbal abuse from people can be worse than the original situation you're dealing with sometimes. Instead, say, "I don't understand why you're staying or why you're in this situation, but I'm here for you." Let them make that decision to open up to you. Knowing there are resources with no judgement makes it a little easier to get out. Allowing them to have those conversations, open up, and sort through it.

In my situation people would say, "You got kids. How's your daughter going to feel?" That would make me feel awful, because at the end of the day I'm their mom and he was abusing my kids, he was abusing me. For me, I felt like I was protecting my kids by just taking it. People don't understand the logic of why you do it, because they are not in that situation.

## What are some ways individuals can help incarcerated women?

Donating, volunteering, buying toiletry bags that can be given to those in need. The best way to help people in those situations is to find agencies like mine that you can donate to or volunteer with. That's the best way you can be helpful to the mission.

## What is a piece of advice you wish you heard growing up?

You know the saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover"? I always thought that was cliché. But I've learned: I could look nice all day long, talk in executive meetings and sound so professional, but I also have a record. I have a legal situation, but you don't know that. Judging a book by its cover took on a new meaning. You can never judge a book by its cover, good or bad.

# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

continued from page 10

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?

Dear RD,

Humans are interdependent creatures. We depend on farmers to grow our food, industries to process it, and stores to sell it. So you being sick of dependence on others is a fallacy. What you're sick of is people not living their lives in conjunction with your time. You want them to set aside those things important to them and replace it with what's important to you. Nevermind the responsibilities they must attend to in order to fulfill those things you accuse them of not finding important. Still, you're finally asking the right question: How do you take control of your destiny? That alone is a blessed first step.

The second step is to admit and accept that everything our friends and family give us is a gift of their love. Abandon the mindset of entitlement; it will help with your expectations.

Third, list your goals and determine what you want for yourself. Is it something you're good at or something you'd like to learn?

Fourth, be honest and realistic with yourself in light of your goals. Assess your strengths and your weaknesses for achieving those goals and what you're willing to sacrifice to increase your strengths and decrease your weaknesses. Sometimes we have to settle for the less glamorous success, which leads to the last step.

Success isn't always about expensive clothes, cars, and jewelry. Sometimes success is getting out of prison and staying. Being able to hug your parents and your kids every day. Making it big ain't always about being the next big star on the radio. Success is about being a star in your own home.

RD, I know I'm a little abrasive in my advice – I apologize. I only give to you what I expect others to give to me and what I give to myself. My grandmother once sat in her home for two days with no utilities; I had stressed her so much to do for me, that she neglected to do for herself. Free Minds Fam, what you find yourself doing now, and thinking now, has the potential to end up being how you think and act when you're released. If you take these positive steps and really walk them, I promise that you'll walk the path to a better Destiny.

Much Love,

T.G. aka Ronin-Cutting thru ignorance

# DID YOU KNOW?

## Restorative Justice and Transformative Justice

*By Araba,  
Free Minds Intern*



With the increased public attention to police brutality and the racial disparities in mass incarceration, more justice advocates are trying to find alternative ways of holding people accountable for the harm they cause. Many of these advocates are trying to make a distinction between **harm** – the specific actions someone might do that hurt a person, family, or community – and crime, which is a category defined by court systems that prioritize legal consequences over addressing the harm that was caused. People have used restorative and transformative justice to move away from carceral consequences (i.e. consequences that involve jail time or some form of state surveillance), although the two approaches are a little different in what they hope to achieve.

**Restorative justice** is a process that works to bring victims of harm and perpetrators of harm together to *restore* a person or community back to the state they were in before the harm was committed. Danielle Sered, a racial equity advocate and author, explains in her book, *Until We Reckon*, the five steps of a restorative justice process:

“(1) acknowledging responsibility for one’s actions; (2) acknowledging the impact of one’s actions on others; (3) expressing genuine remorse; (4) taking actions to repair the harm to the degree possible, and guided when feasible by the people harmed, or ‘doing sorry’; and (5) no longer committing similar harm.”

In her book, Danielle provides an example of a girl who attacked someone on the train. As part of the restorative justice process, the perpetrator stopped riding the train for a whole year, even though it was her only form of transportation, so she could meditate on the impact of taking away another passenger’s sense of safety.

Some people have criticized restorative justice practices for relying on the victim to interact with their perpetrator. Others have also criticized it for trying to restore communities to their original state, as this can sometimes bury problems that have previously existed in that community.

**Transformative justice**, on the other hand, is still interested in finding ways to solve harm without relying on incarceration. However, unlike restorative justice’s work on individual instances of conflict and a restoration of

things back to their original state, transformative justice tries to solve the larger, systematic issues that caused the harm in the first place. In the previous example of the girl attacked on the train, a transformative justice advocate might ask: "What sort of conditions was the perpetrator living in that made her want to attack someone? How can we improve those conditions? What can we do to make each other safer?"

Adrienne Marie Brown, a transformative justice advocate and contributor to Mariame Kaba's recent book, *We Do This 'Til We Free Us*, talks about the danger of punishing people by removing them from their community once they've done harm. Instead, she challenges us to not rely on the state (i.e. calling the police, advocating for someone to go to prison) and instead to "turn towards each other, and say 'I believe you can transform.'"

One scholar of transformative justice theory, Anthony Nocella, has provided context on how restorative and transformative justice are related:

"Restorative justice stresses that the system is flawed, overworked, and retributive, but does not address why it exists, how it is racist, sexist, ableist, and classist, whom it benefits, and how it was developed. Transformative justice... is about looking for the good within others while also being aware of complex systems of domination. If the world is to transform, we need everyone to transform and everyone to be voluntarily involved in critical dialogue together."

Do you believe that restorative and transformative justice practices can work? If you were a justice advocate, which approach do you think would be best for solving the problems present in your community, and why? What do you think are the challenges with getting people on board with either practice?

Let us know your thoughts – we love hearing from you!

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

***"It is not only what we do. but also what we do not do. for which we are accountable"*** – Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, also known as stage name "Molière," French Playwright, Actor, Poet

***"On one side of accountability is courage, on the other is freedom"*** - Jean Hamilton-Fford, Author (*Play. Create. Succeed.*)

***"Accountability turns pain into peace"*** – Amy Larsen Davenport, Blogger

***"Accountability is the glue that ties commitment to the results"***  
– Bob Proctor, Author, Lecturer

***"Accountability is essential to personal growth, as well as team growth. How can you improve if you're never wrong?"*** – Pat Summitt, Women's College Basketball Coach



Jean-Baptiste Poquelin

# REAL WORLD OF WORK

By Deangelo, Free Minds Member

I'm working at a moving and storage company. I've always been into the moving profession, but when I first got out it took me a while to get here. I had to do other jobs that I wasn't really fond of in order to get here, but you know I'm gonna do what I need to do in order to get what I want. When I first came home I was working for a warehouse, moving furniture and loading trucks, until I got everything right – until I found out where I was going to be living, etc. At that point, I relocated to southern Maryland and started working for a dump truck company. I just asked them if they were hiring and they said, "Yeah."

From there, everything worked out pretty well. I was driving a dump truck for a while, but then I decided I wanted to get back to the field I ultimately wanted to be in. That's when I looked up this moving company – knowing they were the number one moving company in the nation, with the most branches across the country. They said to come in, and I showed up and told them how I already had a history working in moving and storage. They called my old supervisor and then hired me right on the spot. Over the last few months I've been their number one driver, and now I'm training to become a manager. Soon I'll be able to come back home and help other guys from the DC area.

After being incarcerated for so long and spending most of my life in prison, my favorite part of my job is the travel. I'm learning about so many different cities and states, including places that aren't even that far from DC but that I never had a chance to see before. (My favorite place I've been so far is Boston.) It's a job, but at the end of the day it's fun for me, because after being locked up for so long, getting to drive and see the country is a great way to experience my freedom.

My day-to-day keeps me accountable because I have to work and I have to be responsible for getting up every morning without anyone telling me to. It keeps me accountable to my family too; they love seeing me doing something positive, so they're really supportive of me.

Even when I was younger, I was always interested in building up my skills. But I was arrested at the age of 16, so until I came home I didn't have experience filling out job applications or anything like that. That was all new to me. I'm just glad that these days technology allows me



to do things like that with a computer or even a phone. It definitely makes everything better.

I've actually surprised myself with how easy it is to get up at five o'clock in the morning every single day, go to work, and be happy with it. I'm totally cool with that, because I know I'm making my family happy and I know in the back of my mind that I'm truly doing the right thing.

I try to tell everybody who's still inside: take advantage of those reentry classes. A lot of guys are too quick to let other people talk for them and say, "Nah, that's a waste of time. That's not gonna lead to anything." But I'm here to tell you that's not the case, so I tell guys to take advantage of the resources that are offered to you in the feds.

With everything you do in life, the key is patience. You can return to the negativity when you get out and make some money for a couple days, but you'll either get killed or end up back in prison for a long time. But if you come out here and do it right? Yeah, it might take a little bit longer to get to where you want to be financially, but guess what? You won't have to be looking over your shoulder every single day anymore, and that's the 100% truth. It's not about the short-term money, it's about the long-term: the long haul.

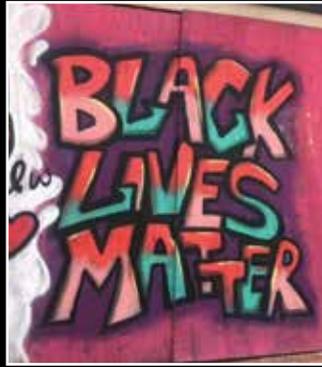
Even though I'm about to become a manager, I'm also working on starting my own moving business. I've already been doing some work on the side, so that one day I can branch off and have my own company – be my own boss. The sky's the limit!

The best thing I can share with you is to come out here, don't rush, have patience, and seek a better life. If you keep doing the same things, hanging around the same people, you're gonna get the same outcome. Find people who mean well, who want what's truly best for you, and then go get it.

# DC PHOTOS

continued from page 23

Murals on Martin Luther King, Jr. Ave



Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?

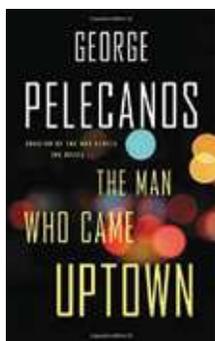
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

## The Man Who Came Uptown

with Neely



Hello, Free Minds readers! Thank you to everyone who sent in responses for our latest book club read, *The Man Who Came Uptown* by George Pelecanos. This book follows the story of DC native Michael and his journey in navigating a changing city after coming home from prison. Here is what some of you had to say:

**1. Why do you think Michael Hudson's brother, Thomas, is so angry and hard on him? How do family relationships suffer when one person is incarcerated? Have you ever experienced this? How did you deal with it?**

**JL:** Thomas is simply a stern man; he probably became that way while having to fill in for his and his siblings' absent father. He's hard on Michael because Michael's incarceration proved hard for their mother. Everyone in the family becomes locked up whenever a family member is convicted of a crime. The whole family suffers.

**MV:** Family members of those incarcerated are caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they love their family member deeply. On the other hand, they're disappointed that they weren't called upon to help deal with whatever the person was going through. Every family is different, but trust is something that has to be built up again from the ashes of where the bridges were burned.

**RB:** For one, Thomas had to be the father growing up. Now he has to watch his little brother seemingly go down the same road as their deadbeat father. Thomas is also a member of the military and is a strong believer in the military code of carrying your own weight. On top of all that, his personality is fiery.

**AH:** Thomas is angry and hard on Michael because he wants to see him do good and not disappoint their mom. He also wants him to be responsible for his actions and has always been tough on him since he loves him and wants to see him do better. Family relations can suffer a lot due to incarceration. The role you play in your family can be affected and those who look up to you can suffer a lot without your presence. It can be hard knowing how affected someone can be, but I just try to stay positive.

**2. On p. 70, Michael reflects on his own journey with reading, remembering how he went from being a non-reader to a book lover. What is your own journey with reading?**

**RB:** I've read since I was a very young child, but it was mostly for enjoyment. When I came to prison, I began to read books given to me by other mostly older prisoners. That's where my real comprehension of the world started.

**MH:** Before my incarceration, I never read books that were not school books. When I became incarcerated, I did not speak English, but someone gave me a book in English. I was curious, so I read it with the help of a dictionary, looking up every word. It took me some time to finish it, but once I did I loved it and started to read all the time. Reading books helped me learn English, as well as many other things.

**JL:** During my younger years I did not enjoy reading. It was far from a hobby of mine because my reading comprehension was low, so reading bored me and felt like a chore. But ironically, I enjoyed sharing my thoughts through writing raps and short stories. Just before my incarceration I began reading a little more to acquire ideas to write about and develop a better vocabulary. Since my incarceration, reading helps set me free by giving me something else to focus on besides prison.

**AH:** My journey is similar to Michael's, since I went to the same high school as him and was not concerned about school. I had a good buddy who was older and read a lot and would always be in my ear about his books until one day I told him I'd check the book out that he gave me, which was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. After this I became a book lover.

**3. On p. 90, Ornazian and Weitzman are discussing their own experience with the "American story." What is the "American story" to you?**

**MV:** My experience with the "American story" unfortunately has been falling into mass incarceration, lacking proper education and programs as a child, poverty, and being given a life sentence before I could buy cigarettes. But through education, passion, determination, help from people like Free Minds, and dedication, I want my "American story" to be one of redemption, activism, author, youth counselor and advocate, physical freedom, and family.

**AH:** My story is being born and raised in a community where you were taught to survive by any means. I always knew my grandmother on my mom's side was mixed and that my granddad fought in the wars. Then I learned her mom was Cherokee and dad caucasian, so my story continues to evolve as I learn more about the roots of my story.

**MH:** I am from Iraq and to me, the American story is complex. I have a lot of admiration for it, but about certain things, not so much.

**JL:** Ornazian and Weitzman's "American story" seems to be one in which their grandparents escaped to America so that their children and grandchildren could live a better life. The "American story" is opposite for those whose ancestors were kidnapped and forced to come to America.

**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?**

**MV:** People assume a lot about me because I'm one of the youngest people at this prison. Older people steer clear as if I'm a bad person, and people in their 30's and 40's give me advice as if I'm in trouble all the time. People who know me can't believe I haven't been "written up" or disciplined my whole 12 years. A lot of people don't know I'm a published author and someone dedicated to change and raising awareness about the plight of the American prisoner. I'm a Taurus, so I can be stubborn at times when it comes to what people consider social norms.

**RB:** You wouldn't be able to look at me and say this guy is Buddhist or likes REO Speedwagon or Ozzy Osbourne and Wu-Tang Clan. Whether people understand us or not is unimportant; understanding ourselves means everything. Most of us spend our whole lives trying to be something for others to appreciate. Waste of life. Try to figure out what you are. That's why we're here.

**VC:** The great amount of pain, anger, and remorse that lingers within me. The disappointment I have towards myself, and my many near-death experiences that have caused me to look closely and understand that I'm alive for a reason.

**MH:** Because of who I am, a Middle Easterner, Muslim, people think I am a certain type of person, which I am not. I leave it to myself. People generally judge a book by its cover and once they form an opinion of you, it is almost impossible to change it, no matter what you do.

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

**VC:** Ornazian is ungrateful! My opinion of him never changed. He had a family that he constantly put at risk by playing both sides, he was greedy, and, to me, more toxic than the individuals he was pursuing.

**MH:** In the beginning of the novel I thought that he was just a criminal, but later the author tried to portray him as if he is a hero. You can see that even Ornazian starts to think he is doing good. But I don't like that. Vigilante justice is not good, no matter how a person tries to justify it. Even with him doing some good, he still does it for himself because he benefits from it.

**RB:** Ornazian is basically a good character, who is also an adrenaline junkie. He's addicted to the rush of combat, like many criminals. He makes very bad decisions because his moral foundation is weak. As a result, he can't see that his actions could have severe repercussions for his family. And he used a criminal code of behavior to see and act in the world. Huge mistake.

**MV:** I see Ornazian, who's doing what people do all the time – justifying and rationalizing their actions for their benefit—so I can relate. I was upset when he held his assistance over Michael's head to make him drive for him. But I enjoyed the very imperfect person that was still willing to help others, which the author created in Phil.

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

**MV:** I liked how Michael's dog, Brandy, followed him everywhere. It reminded me of my pitbull "Big Daddy." We had to put it down like Brandy, so it was sad when the book says she looked at Michael as she died.

**VC:** Absolutely! The locations within the book were my environment before coming to prison. The whole Petworth area, 14th St, etc., I'm all familiar with. At times, I felt like I was Michael walking in these different areas. It also made me yearn to see firsthand the gentrification that has taken place.

**MH:** I am not from DC, but a few things reminded me of home. For example, when Michael was released from jail and his family welcomed him home. As well as how Ornazian kept on coming to Michael to help him with his crimes, despite Michael not wanting to be a part of it or any other criminal activities.

**TT:** This book really took me down memory lane. Once upon a time, I could closely relate to Michael and his delicate, troubling, and wonderful circumstances – coming home from a setback and not wanting to fall again. Unlike Michael, I didn't make it so good. I wish I could return to the life of Michael. Kinda see where I would have gone, ya know?

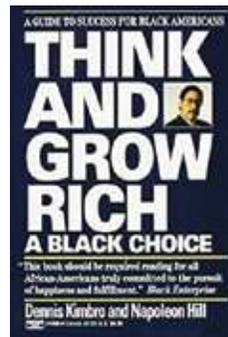
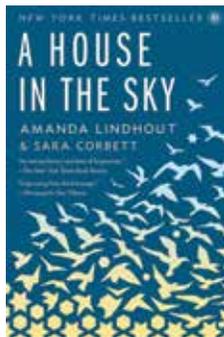
# WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

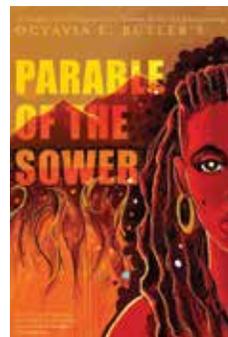
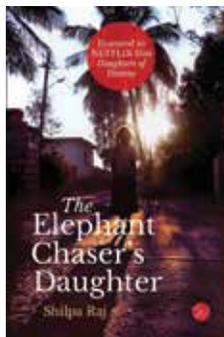
- **Tara: *A House in the Sky* by Amanda Lindhout**

This is the memoir of a young American woman who was fascinated by world adventures and saved up her waitressing money to travel around the world. She started reporting for TV outlets in places engulfed in war and violence, like Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008, she was taken captive in Somalia and held for 460 days. The book describes how she survived by remembering every detail of her life before she was abducted. When she is really low and desperate, she imagines a house in the sky far above where she is being held in chains in the dark. She now runs a nonprofit funding aid and education in Kenya and Somalia.



- **TMW: *Think and Grow Rich: A Black Choice* by Dennis Kimbro and Napoleon Hill**

This book speaks to Black lives' grit and determination to make it through the muddy waters they'd prefer we swim in. Sadly speaking, it helps me knowing that others with even worse beginnings end up making life work successfully. Like, how can I complain, knowing others who've been in "real" slavery or who have come from the depths of hell who then went to heaven through all those flames? When I retrospectively go through history books like this, it gives me the notion to delete "complaining" out of my dictionary.



- **Julia: *The City We Became* by N.K. Jemisin**

*The City We Became* is an exciting new urban fantasy novel, which imagines that great cities have souls, and they are embodied by avatars – people who are essentially the city in human form. New York City, though, has six avatars – one who is the "heart" of NYC, and five others who are tied to NYC's five boroughs (Manhattan, Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Staten Island). People awaken one day and realize that they are no longer just human beings, but are now part of the city and they must defend themselves and the city from a mysterious enemy. I'm only about a third of the way into the book, but it is really unique and thrilling so far. This book is the first in a trilogy, so I'm looking forward to reading the rest of this book and the sequels!

- **Neely: *The Elephant Chaser's Daughter* by Shilpa Raj**

I recently finished reading this memoir by Raj, a young woman who was born into the lowest caste in India. The caste system is a social structure in India similar to what we would call class, and one's place is determined by which family you are born into. Raj was born into a dalit family, or what some call "untouchables," who are extremely ostracized from all aspects of society. When Raj is given a chance to go to a K-12 school run by a wealthy man from the United States, she has the opportunity to change her life's path. But that also comes with the stress and responsibility that her family puts on her to not only transform her own life, but theirs too. I really like this book because there are many books by people who have started overseas nonprofits, but this book is from the perspective of someone who actually partook in and benefited from them. It was very eye-opening.

- **GD: *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler**

Wow! Where has this book been all my life?! I read *Kindred* by Butler and I loved that too, but this particular book by her can be (is) life changing for some. It's not only one of the best books I've read, but one of the deepest, and I'm not sure if she meant to be that deep. The main character's life and perspective on life and God is eye-opening. Her name is Lauren Olamina and if you haven't read about her or Earthseed, then you need to.

# MEETING FREE MINDS VOLUNTEERS: INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA

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my life that might be relevant. So I think that is what really impresses me.

It's a way for us to contribute to our world in a positive way. When I'm online with the other volunteers, I feel like, "These are my people." Even though I don't know them well, I feel like we are thinking the same things on a lot of these issues, and trying to put into the world something really positive.

If you look around at the problem of mass incarceration, it's completely overwhelming. But if you take a piece of it and think, "What could I do to try and ameliorate some of this?" Then it makes me feel like my ability, my freedom, my privilege as a human being can be used in this really proactive and positive way. I think it's really valuable for us and it helps us be in touch with our own humanity in a way that you don't get from other volunteer activities.

**Writing one letter per week may seem small, but having someone consistently write to you, check up on you, makes the members feel important and seen.**

That's so true! I look around my world, which is so simple compared to the life of someone who has been incarcerated. I have so much freedom and so much capacity. I wonder, "Can I bring any of that good to somebody who's being overlooked?" Because that's what we do in our society, we lock people up and we feel like we're making everybody safe. But we're really not.

I hope that eventually this whole system will break down. I know Free Minds and other people are working to make that happen. I think people don't really think of the implications involved in this. People assume, "Oh, he's a bad guy, he did a bad thing so he should pay the price." Well, *if* someone did something bad – which we know a lot of times people are incarcerated even when they're not guilty—but if they actually did that thing: well, is this the only response that we as a civilized society can have? Is there another way that we can respond that does hold that person accountable and does keep everybody safe, but doesn't mean that he's just thrown away? When you see the system's impact on poor people, people with disabilities, people of color, it's so glaringly obvious that we don't really know how to work compassionately with so many people in our society.

**How would you define accountability?**

Following through on the things you say you're going to do and approaching things in a responsible way. Doing things as best as you can, whether it's your job or a favor you're doing for a neighbor. It's trying to be cognizant of what

you're putting out there and make it the best thing you can do in that situation.

**Is there anything more we can do to be more accountable for helping our community?**

First of all, we as a society have to address things like trauma – things that happened to people when they were really young that have impacted their whole life and how they respond to things later. We need to give people the resources they need early on. The whole school-to-prison pipeline sheds light on practices that people don't even notice.

I was at a conference a month ago, and somebody was talking about this study where they were trying to identify behavioral problems in children before they get worse. They told teachers to watch four children and to "check and see if they are doing any behaviors you may think are going to turn into problem behavior." So they had four children sitting at a table playing with Play-doh; there was a white boy, white girl, Black boy, and Black girl. Researchers did an eye-tracking test on the teachers and they found that an overwhelming percentage of the time they were looking at the Black boy. They were just kids, just actors playing in a set up to see how people would react. All of the teachers had their eye on the Black boy more than any other child.

So, I think people really need to start talking about those things more and acknowledging that. I'm sure the people in the study did not intend to be racist and didn't believe they were; some of the teachers in the study were Black. But there's an ongoing issue with calling boys of color out more than other people and treating them worse. There's still so much that needs to be done.

Acknowledging the history of racism in this country is also crucial. People still don't want to talk about it and they get very defensive. People say, "Well, I didn't do that" or "My ancestors didn't have slaves." I don't think they're bad people, these people who are very defensive. You don't want to turn them off, you don't want them to decide, "Oh, that person is calling me a racist but I'm not a racist" and then the dialogue shuts down. You want to respect whatever their experience has been – but at the same time, if there is a truth to how things have been, how do we convey that in a way that people can really hear it?

# FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: JOY

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As we look forward to emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic and reshaping our lives, we thought it appropriate for our next *Connect* theme to be joy! Some people might distinguish joy from happiness, which can often be a momentary experience – a more fleeting feeling that comes and goes. Author and artist Ashon Crawley maintains that joy is “that which sustains you during ebbs and flows of life's ongoing happenings and occurrences, a deep reserve from which emerges perseverance and tenacity and lightness and delight.” In other words, while happiness might be the sun coming out from behind the clouds, joy is the memory of light and warmth that keeps you smiling on rainy days.

What brings you joy? What people, memories, or meditations sustain you when times are tough, and you need to draw on your reserves? Do you think there is a difference between happiness and joy? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt it impossible to find joy, and if so, how did you get yourself through that situation? How do you stay joyful in the midst of despair? What makes you laugh? What makes you smile? Send us your best jokes and your happiest memories – let's all make each other smile and laugh with joy. We'd love your help in making this upcoming *Connect* an issue filled with lightness and delight, so let us know your thoughts on the questions, or the theme in general!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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