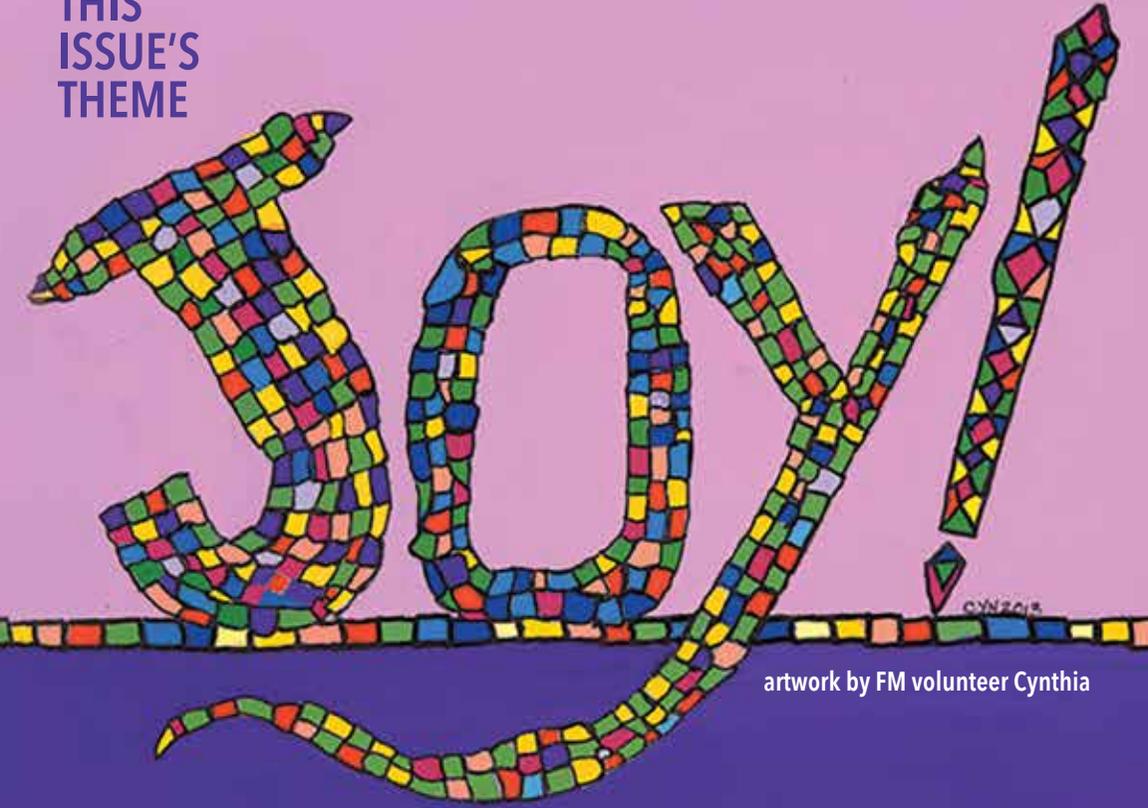


October/November 2021  
Vol. 10, Issue 4

# Free minds Connect

THIS  
ISSUE'S  
THEME



artwork by FM volunteer Cynthia

## IN THIS ISSUE

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Free Minds readers who bring us all great joy,

We want to say a heartfelt THANK YOU for making this community what it is! It isn't always easy to find joy or happiness. We are so thankful to each and every one of you for the joy that you bring us simply by being you and sharing your free mind.

We don't want to waste a minute waiting for joy, so we're going to keep this message short and sweet so you can dive right into this joyful (and joy-filled) issue.

On this page are just a few images of things we have done together this year that have brought joy. We hope in those times when you might feel your light inside flickering and dimming, you can look over these images and feel a warm glow of joy. Write to us if you would like more details on each photo.

Until next time,  
Tara and the Free Minds Family

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



A successful campaign for the Martinsville 7 (see Free Minds HQ) with incarcerated artists like R. Zumar getting involved and creating incredible work like this poster.



Your poetry inspiring creative responses from thousands of people across the country at virtual Write Nights.

Our member-led Planning Committee inviting fascinating guest speakers to the Build Up (our Reentry Book Club) on topics like finances, healthy relationships, social media, and travel.

The award-winning animated short film "Lines" with actors (including the late Michael K. Williams) voicing Free Minds poetry.

**"A powerful, devastating, essential read for anyone who believes in true justice for all."**

— KIRKUS REVIEWS  
Review of *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)*

The publication of our new book, and this awesome starred review (a huge compliment!) from Kirkus Reviews.

**Next Issue's Theme: Nourish**

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



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

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

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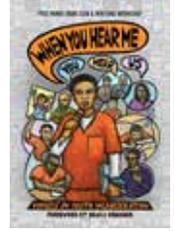
# FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

## Our Book Launched!

On October 5th, Free Minds released our newest poetry and prose collection entitled, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)*. *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us): Voices on Youth Incarceration*. This is Free Minds' third book, featuring powerful reflections on the realities of being a youth charged as an adult, as well as prose and poetry pieces on their community, trauma, life, and love. This collection is timeless, transparently exposing the fallacies of America's legal system and its impact on families expanding generations. Both heartfelt and honest, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* is a canvas where America's forgotten population has painted their voices. You'll be receiving a copy in the mail very soon as our next Books Across the Miles book!

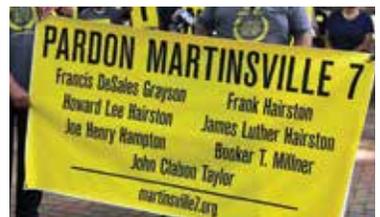


## In-person Book Clubs Are Back

Due to Covid-19, our book club at the DC Jail had to cease our in-person sessions last year. We were able to quickly pivot and upload the meditations, discussion questions and writing prompts to tablets starting in March 2020. This fall, we were very excited to return to the jail and gather in a circle with each other back in person! We hold in-person book clubs on two of the Lead Up units at the jail, as well as one of the women's units. Since starting up in person again, we have been reading *The Marathon Don't Stop: The Life and Times of Nipsey Huddle* by Rob Kenner, *The Ugly Cry* by Danielle Henderson, *Later* by Stephen King, and *La distancia entre nosotros* by Reyna Grande (in Mentas Libres, our Spanish language book club). We are more than ecstatic to be with our members in person again!

## Posthumous Pardon granted to Martinsville 7 in Virginia

Over the past year, a group of Free Minds Poet Ambassadors have been working along with other advocates and families to seek posthumous pardons for the Martinsville 7, a group of seven young men from Martinsville, Virginia who were unjustly convicted by an all-white jury and executed in 1951. The Martinsville 7 are Francis DeSales Grayson, Frank Hairston Jr., Howard Hairston, James Luther Hairston, Joe Henry Hampton, Booker T. Millner, and John Clabon Taylor. After meeting with advocates and family members of the Martinsville 7, Governor Northam granted these men posthumous pardons, 70 years after their executions. In Northam's own words, "These men were executed because they were Black, and that's not right." Though the Martinsville 7 were pardoned, their case reflects the ongoing racial bias present within America's legal system. This case was one step in the right direction, yet there are many more cases - and steps - to go.



## In Loving Memory

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

### Rest in Power:

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 J., Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold, Anthony, Donald, Bruce, Delonte K.

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 "Friendship" issue of the Connect as well as the "Accountability" issue.*



## Friendship:

**AW :** There is an interview done with the Editor-in-Chief of Truthout, that dealt with pen-pal friendships, it was a wonderful interview. I actually just sent some of my writing to Truthout. Your interview was right on point. You do have a very special voice and eye for the truth.

**DT:** Congratulations for being the receiver of the Juliette Gimón Courage Award in May of this year, which goes to show that no matter the thickness of the clouds, the sun rays will find their way through. Congrats to the other organizations that too share this amazing award, and also to Peter Ouko for not only founding his organization, but for regaining his life.

**MH:** I liked the story that MV wrote. There are a lot of good people who are incarcerated. Unfortunately, because of the prison system and the culture it created, you will see people acting as if they are bad or even do bad things. But that's not who they are. I was listening to NPR on the radio one day. I heard that it costs more to send one person to prison for one year than to send one person to Harvard University for one year! I also liked the poems by AC (To Whom It May Concern, Dance Dear Friend) and DK (John My Friend). I feel and understand what they mean. Every time I read the "Spinning the Track with DA" article, it is very much familiar. It is something I go through, something I feel and understand what it means.

## Accountability:

**TS:** It's a wonderful page-turner filled with very emotional and encouraging pieces and stories. I'm passing it around to the men and getting joyful responses.

**MC:** While flipping through the Connect, I happened upon Just Law: Freedom of Information Act by DJ, Free Minds member. This article is exactly what I needed to begin retrieving information pertinent to my upcoming trial. Turns out, I already had the FOIA paperwork. Now I have to use it to help myself.

**SJ:** Accountability is a powerful human characteristic that most human beings really lack and ultimately don't want to try to inspire to endeavor as well. Yes, we as the positive individuals must maintain upliftment in our communities as a universal family. When this happens people will realize that there is assistance in the world and you can become prosperous in life to uplift your family. Everybody can become rich in mind, spirit, body and environment...I loved the Accountability Connect, and I hope everybody benefits from the message as well. Love and peace!

**AHA:** All the poems were excellent to me but one of the pieces that stood out was "Keeping Each Other in Check" by Maji since I could relate to it and many others who have been in similar situations until someone wise who saw more in us decided to pull us to the side and get in our ear. This saved many and changed lives not to be stuck in this system or lose hope so thanks to Maji for sharing. Many of these pieces stood out and the piece by AC on Accountability made me understand his culture in El Salvador with tattoos and all he spoke about. Once again it was another excellent issue and the photos was nice since I haven't seen many of these places in over two decades so thanks for that.

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*What if we joined our sorrows, I'm saying. I'm saying: What if that is joy?*

– Ross Gay, Poet and Professor, Author of *The Book of Delights*

*"Joy is not found in the absence of pain and suffering. It exists through it. The scourges of racism, poverty, incarceration, medical discrimination, and so much more shape black life. We live with the vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow, and with the new creative tides of anti-blackness directed toward us and our children... But sin and shame are found in neither my body nor my identity. Blackness is an immense and defiant joy."*

– Imani Perry, Princeton Professor of African American Studies, Author of *Looking for Lorraine*

*"Joy is a freedom. It helps a person to find his/her own liberation. The person who is joyous takes responsibility for the time he/she takes up and the space that he/she occupies. You share it! Some of you have it... you share it! That is what joy is! When you continue to give it away you will still have so much more of it."*

– Maya Angelou, Acclaimed Poet, Activist, and Author of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

*"Joy lies in the fight, in the attempt, in the suffering involved, not in the victory itself."*

– Mahatma Gandhi, Indian Lawyer, Writer, and Nonviolent Social Activist



Imani Perry

# FAMILY TIES: “WAKING UP TO HER EVERYDAY IS A JOY”

*An Interview with Luther, FM Member  
By Sofia*

**SOPIA:** Could you please tell me a little bit about yourself and your journey?

**LUTHER:** I was released from prison on February 22, 2019. I was incarcerated for 23 years, since I was 16 years old. It's been a rough year since my son died. When I came home in 2019, he spoke at my hearing and was one of the main reasons I was able to come home. Most of my journey is about him. But since I've been home, I've accomplished a lot of things like working and interacting with the community. I currently work two jobs, one at UPS and another with Amazon, and I recently got married this year on July 25th. I also got my IT and CDL certifications.

**SOPIA:** I am so sorry to hear about your son. Congratulations on getting married, I am sure your spouse has helped you a lot through that. How did you meet your wife?

**LUTHER:** We met before I was incarcerated, she did the whole number with me. We were childhood friends. I met her at the Christmas skating rink, we just have been together ever since. We used to talk on the phone all day and night, you know, falling asleep on the phone, waking up for school, and the phone's still on. We went to high school together, junior high together, just real childhood friends. We did everything together. Her name is Valencia and she is a gynecologist. We have a daughter that is 15 years old, and Valencia is pregnant right now. That's my life, my rock, my roadie, and I'm happy. She's the best decision I've ever made.

**SOPIA:** How did she react when you were first incarcerated?

**LUTHER:** She was shocked because she didn't know that side of me. I had never shown her that side of who I was, so she was surprised.

**SOPIA:** How was your relationship impacted while you were incarcerated?

**LUTHER:** Well, it just made us closer honestly. She was always there for me, so it was never anything bad or negative. She was always there for the whole entire time for me, we were good during that time.

**SOPIA:** Did your relationship face any obstacles at all while you were incarcerated? If it did, how were you both able to overcome those challenges?

**LUTHER:** The biggest obstacle for our relationship was just the time. It was hard knowing when I was going to get

released. I lied about how much time I was doing. I was never really upfront telling her how much time I really truly had. But she said she felt it, she said she knew the truth. I would say we got through it though based on the lie, through me not telling her. It's hard because you know, you're afraid that if you tell someone how much time you really have, they'll run away and you'll lose them.

**SOPIA:** In what ways did she provide you with support and bring you joy while you were incarcerated?

**LUTHER:** She helped me through it a lot through letters, pictures, and financially. She did everything that she's supposed to do as a good friend. We are more than just romantic partners, we're best friends too. All of that plays a part too, we aren't just lovers because she was out here, being her, doing what a woman is supposed to do. She had to provide for herself and go through those stages of becoming who she was and who she is today. She is just the best thing ever, I am smiling now.

**SOPIA:** How has your relationship with her changed since you have been released?

**LUTHER:** It is the best, and it has only gotten greater. You can't go anywhere but up.

**SOPIA:** Could you please tell me about a specific story that comes to mind when she really brought joy and happiness into your life?

**LUTHER:** She has brought so much joy into my whole life, before, during, and after my incarceration. She never stopped being my friend, she never gave up on me. She was just always there when I needed someone to be there for me. If I needed money, if I needed to talk, if I needed companionship – not physically, but mentally – she was there. That's the joy of it. While I'm on the street, just waking up to her everyday is a joy. She brings me joy everyday just waking up and seeing her face, seeing her smile. I wouldn't change that for the whole world. One story that comes to mind was seeing her face when I was released. When I first came home, the look on her face seeing how big and strong I was.

**SOPIA:** What does joy mean to you?

**LUTHER:** Joy to me would be like what I just mentioned. Joy to me is waking up to my wife everyday, making sure my daughter is safe. Just to see her smile, that's the best joy ever.

# SECOND LOOK PROJECT

FIGHTING MASS  
INCARCERATION  
IN THE DISTRICT  
OF COLUMBIA

## JUST LAW: SECOND LOOK AMENDMENT ACT

*By DJ, Free Minds Member*

On January 13, 2021, Mayor Muriel Bowser signed into law the Second Look Amendment Act of 2019. This law allows people sentenced for a violation of DC criminal code that occurred when the individual was under the age of 25 to petition the court for a resentencing subsequent to the individual serving 15 years of their sentence. The judge may reduce the original sentence after determining that the person is not a danger to the safety of others and that the interest of justice warrants a sentence modification.

The process for someone to be released under the law will usually be a long one. The process requires collecting as many Bureau of Prisons records as possible about the person; collecting all educational, mental health, juvenile and criminal justice records about the person; extensive investigation into the offense of conviction and extensive investigation into, and interviews of, the individual's family, friends, teachers, therapists, neighbors, employers and others in their life. All of those things will have to be done before a motion can even be filed and can often take at least a year.

This is why obtaining letters of support from family and friends are very significant. Such letters can demonstrate to the judge that there is a large amount

of community support and people who are willing to accept the petitioner with open arms back into the community. Once all those steps have been taken, it takes several weeks or months to write and file a motion. After a motion is filed, the government files a response, and then the petitioner may file a reply. There may be many court hearings once all the written materials have been submitted. But, to have the letters of support included in the relevant documents that the judge must consider could possibly be the determining factor on whether or not the petitioner is released. Therefore, if you are filing a petition under the Second Look Amendment Act, get all the letters of support possible to add to the documents the judge may consider in determining whether or not to grant the release. For Free Minds members who are eligible for this bill, you can ask us to provide a letter of support, or encourage your attorney to connect with us so we can make sure they are including Free Minds in the reentry plan that they submit to the court.

If you are eligible for the Second Look Amendment Act and you do not yet have an attorney, you can contact the Second Look Project, Inc at 200 Massachusetts Ave NW, 8th Floor, Washington, DC 20001, or via phone at 202-888-7520.

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

*Free Minds* Connect | October/November 2021



## **PAYING IT FORWARD: FM MEMBER SPREADS COMMISSARY JOY**

*By JH, Free Minds Member*

My name is JH. I'm currently incarcerated. I'm writing to my Free Minds family about one of the ways me and some of my church brothers pay it forward here at the prison.

On our tier we have what we call a "store house." It is for any and everybody on the tier who needs something when they don't have something. It's available when a person needs any type of hygiene items, food items, soap powder, or something to drink. Sometimes in prison, the commissary people might not have brought all the things a person ordered. That person can then come to the store house and get that same item if it's available. Sometimes a person might be missing that one ingredient they need to make their meal perfect. That person can come to the store house. Sometimes people locked up don't have any support from home or a prison job, so that person is desperately going to need some hygiene items off the top. It's always good to put some food in a brother's belly. For all these reasons, we started the store house.

Now when you come to the store house and get an item, all you have to do is return that item when you get a chance and it's encouraged to donate whenever anyone is feeling free to do so. That's how it got started. The brothers in church came up with the idea and we all just started donating everything that was on our minds to donate, and it took off. In the Bible there are store houses that are used to store food for when there would be hard times in a city or town, etc. It was there for when times got hard. That's where we got the idea.

Sometimes when a person comes to the store house, they can trade items for something in the store house. This system has worked for us and our whole church community is on board. People come to church and bring things with them to donate to the store house. Last year, they would not let us go to church or any other activities and a lot of people could not go to their prison jobs. So that meant no money for a lot of people. The only way a lot of people got some type of money to buy food and hygiene was if their family sent them money from home, and a lot of people at home were not working so that meant no money orders. A lot of guys didn't have support from home on the days when there was no pandemic, so you know when they took all the prison jobs, guys were feeling it in here.

Thanks to God, the store house had so many donations that our pastor made care packages for everyone in our service. We have about 80 in our church. Everybody got a bag with soap powder, a couple of bars of soap, toothpaste, hair grease, etc. There was so much in the bag that I don't even remember everything. 😊

The pastor is my cell buddy. He came back and told me the reaction to him showing up to people's cells with a bag full of stuff. He said people were happy to see him for one and most said they were just so thankful to get some help. Every single person was super happy that someone thought about them.

Some guys gave the bags back along with more donations. Some guys didn't need the bag. It was only a few, but those few were honest and did not take what they did not need and even gave more items for donation when it was not ever asked of them. Great, right? See, that's what it's all about: helping others and being genuine about it. Paying it forward. It's the human thing to do. It's all love! It needs to be all love all the time.

Another big thing with the store house is honesty, integrity, and changing a person's way of thinking. I say this because you come to the store house with no money, nothing to trade, and you can say I won't have anything to bring back. You can come and just let us know you're down bad and need some things and we will believe you aren't trying to take advantage just for some free stuff. You will get the help you need.

We want the guys in here to know that they don't have to do something stupid, messed up, or negative to get what they need. You can get help, have someone to talk to, and have positive friends in here. We need guys to learn from the experience so they can change whatever it is about themselves that got them here. We need guys to know that they can do better and be better. Sometimes a helping hand, a bag of chips, or a bar of soap can touch a person's heart, change a person's mind, and/or encourage change in that person. Then that person will maybe feel like they can help someone. Maybe that person will go start a whole new program at home helping people. You never know until you try. You helping someone just might encourage that person to pay it forward in a bigger way. How great would that be? These young guys and girls are there and need examples. They need help, positive examples, positive help because it's easy for them to get negative examples and negative help from a person that don't really have their best interests at hand. They can easily be manipulated because a lot of them don't have help, friends, or love from the right person at home. So when they come past us in here, we try to tell the young guys and old ones that they can do better, and they can be better. I tell them that whatever they can do to help someone else do or be better in a positive way, don't let that opportunity go past.

I also try to encourage the guys in here to try to put more positivity in their lives. I love to meet positive people. That's why Free Minds is so dear to me. I love everything about them. I'll always want them in my life. In prison and at home.

I know my paying it forward piece is long, but I really, really believe in love, help, and forgiveness, positivity, and paying it forward. That's what our store house is all about.

I'm going to go now, I could write all day. Thanks for letting me share. I love you guys.

# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

*Do you have advice for DH? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!*

Dear Advice Man,

I need help! Right now I'm working toward my high school diploma while I'm locked up at the jail and waiting for my trial date. The problem is that because of COVID, my trial is delayed for more than a year! How am I supposed to stay motivated with all of that time ahead of me before I will even know whether I'm going home or going to prison? It's so hard to stay focused, and then I'm around all kinds of people who aren't doing anything positive or productive with themselves. It's just stressful here. Can you give me some advice?

Sincerely,  
DH

*Salutations DH, Free Minds family, and friends,*

*This is FM member TS gratefully and honored to be standing in the gap for brother DA to fill his column and perhaps pay forward some beneficial advice to our brother DH and readers.*

*DH, at the moment I terribly regret physically where you are at and the circumstances you are currently facing. Right to it though, flash back to the last Connect issue on accountability. Let's start here using a portion of what Tara shared on "ACCOUNTABILITY." It was an eye-opener for me, because I care about our future and sometimes we need the brutal truth to develop our minds and to receive advice that can wake us up. Tara said: "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." PLEASE! take a minute to really think about this.*

*Coming from where you are, I had to share that with you. To have been in your shoes and now nearly after two decades behind these walls on a life sentence. I wish someone had shared things like that with me. Better yet, I wish I had listened when they did. Moreover, I wish I had applied it when I was told. So knowing just where you are coming from, the past decade I've been mentoring men on their pro-social behavior as well as tutoring them for their GEDs. When I started my bid, I wanted to soak up all the knowledge I could get on both my beliefs and actions, and gain all the education I could for myself. I knew it would make me a better person, and for what it's worth, at the very least I believed all I would learn would benefit my children and family.*

*Lo and behold! Fast forward 17 years later into this new era of justice and sentencing reform. I have a great shot now to be free in the future. I didn't have to even get ready, because over the years I've been applying myself. As I write this, my briefs are on the Judge's desk and guess who was one of the first willing to go to bat for me due to my hard work: Free Minds. In all this still two of the most important things the judge will*

*look at in your background for resentencing is if you are a threat to society and your post-conviction conduct and educational programming. If you give up now look how fatal that can be for your future. I encourage you to recognize and ponder why you should stay focused and strive despite the circumstances. And I'm delighted to share my wisdom why: I mean plainly that you're struggling at a stage called "AMBIVALENCE." It's a wonderful thing you are aware that your beliefs, conditions, cognitions, and choices are walking on a path in between pro-social and anti-social conduct. My advice to you is to draw a line in the sand about them and choose the side where you can create a schedule of positive structure for yourself for your time in prison. Some examples of things that will balance your life are: education, trade, religion, family (calls, visits, writing), work, health (workout, etc.), hobby, and volunteering. This would be a good thing to take back to society with you. Change your beliefs and choices and you'll change your outcomes.*

*Thanks for sharing the topic and your raw feelings on something so pivotal for our young readers. This is going to help somebody who reads this. Even in an abnormal environment, surrounded by negative influences, we need to seek a good education. It's a commendable journey, one that adds worth and value to you and speaks volumes about your character. In your case DH, it would be the foundation in which you could keep adding, which starts your legacy that will open all kinds of doors and opportunities for you and your family. Not to mention an education is one thing you give yourself, that no one can take from you, even in a place where it's so easy to slip through the cracks and be ignored. An education also gives one the confidence to lead and take their rightful position with their family and in society. DC needs more leaders and mentors desperately today like you.*

*DH, we come from the same dysfunctional environment surrounded by the same things. Out of that same state of semi-chaos, true indeed, have you ever asked yourself: why have there been a good number of us who make great things of themselves with the same opportunities our community provides? Be a positive rebel like Jesus, Malcolm, or Martin, and go against the dysfunctional flow presently in your environment. In doing so you will stand out and draw positive attention, praise, advocacy, and grace your way. Maybe your judge might see and hear of your transformation and it will produce some undeserved favor for you. Today I believe these long and tough roads are the way we stand out and add positive character to the good we already possess. If so, who wouldn't network with us or co-sign for anything in the world for us. These types of standouts, just think about it, are our leaders and mentors, who have gained the confidence in themselves and of others with their gifts and wisdom. And wisdom is nothing but knowledge and understanding applied. Apply this advice starting today and watch your circumstances change. I pray this was insightful.*

*"If We're Not Learning, We're Not Living"*

*Your FM Brother TS*

*continued on page 31*



## CONVERSATION WITH SOFIA

Greetings, lovely friends and family to Free Minds! This is Sofia, the Prison Book Club intern here at Free Minds writing to you surrounded by wonderful books and letters in the Free Minds office. I joined the Free Minds family back in June of this year, and it is surreal to finally have the chance to be here in person.

The past year and a half of COVID has left me thinking a lot. Whether that be stressing, daydreaming, or learning, my mind has been in overdrive. One thought that has constantly been on my mind, is the question: "What brings you joy, Sofia?"

Growing up, I defined myself through school, extracurricular activities, work, and approval. This was born out of the constant stress I felt in wanting to be perfect, of wanting to escape the poverty and instability that defined my childhood. This in some ways paid off as I became the first in my family (along with my twin) to attend college, but I left home and all of those structures I came to define my happiness through, feeling lost. I tried to mimic the ways I found joy in the past by overworking myself, thinking that professional accomplishments would bring me joy and freedom, but was left unfulfilled.

Then, I got sent home from college, and was thrust back into my homelife, living in isolation with my sister and helping to take care of my sick grandfather. This time, I had nothing to escape to. As people went viral for finding new joys during the pandemic, I began to ask myself what made me happy. I thought beyond school, work, or extracurriculars,

which I knew were bringing me more stress than happiness. I began to make a list in my head of seemingly small things that make me happy; seeing the smile lines wrinkle together on my grandfather's face when he laughs, painting my nails red, riding the train, the list goes on.

I realized the joy in simple things. I challenged myself to take this a step even further and look for a pattern. I've realized that expressing joy is an act of resistance. I've enjoyed witnessing my grandfather smile in spite of the obstacles he has faced, I've enjoyed painting my nails red even when I was told that red did not look good with my brown skin, and I have enjoyed riding the train home to Baltimore, even if it represents a past I have tried to escape. Despite the forms of oppression I have faced, on an institutional and individual level, I have still been able to laugh, dance, and smile.

In a Sociology class I took last year, a student brought up that the oppressor does not want to see the oppressed living and embracing their lives. This is not to say that anger and sadness at the unequal world we live in isn't valid, but that celebration within oppressed groups has historically been suppressed. Celebrating, especially in community with fellow oppressed people, is an act of defiance and resistance in that it makes the oppressors uncomfortable. Search for what brings you joy on a deeper level, ask yourself what truly makes your belly full with happiness. Express whatever that is to you, as an act of resistance.

photo credit: Cards by De, cardsbyde.com

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Butterfly

By AW

Not knowing where they came from  
Watching them move in the thousands  
Everywhere, as my friends would  
Step on them to watch the yellow stuff  
Ooze forth, I would pick them  
Up to take to a tree or  
Place in grass to help them  
Escape what would turn into a massacre.

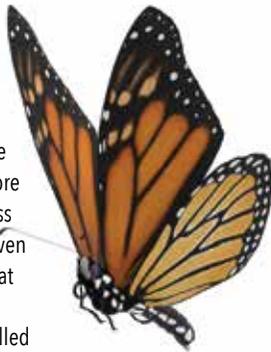
Nor did I know what they were to  
Become: Butterflies. Watching  
A butterfly emerge from its cocoon  
Still ignorant was I of the caterpillar's  
Transformation, Metamorphosis, Change  
From the cute little worm into the  
Winged beauty, multicolored and majestic  
Upside down in a huge cocoon, coming  
Forth to brighten the day of this poor  
BLK boy having to figure out the  
Beauty naturally housed within the  
Cocoon of his battered and brutalized  
Soul, alone he moved to learn to love  
himself BLK Butterfly naive and  
Prayed on by his own, scared  
Yet, from out of his cocoon he  
Emerged, transformed  
Metamorphosed into

A Majestic

Human

Being

Still moving forth to create  
Better dayz, becoming more  
Fully Human in the process  
Of building community even  
From the graveyard of what  
Is called incarceration, in  
Truth imprisonment so-called  
Amerikkkan Justice  
While reading Saulina's  
Evolutions, far beyond life  
I move forward to pour out  
These living words before the  
Same strangers now family  
Knowing full well why the caged  
Butterfly dare still fly



Written 4 Saulina and Lalaine: 9-6-21 in a cage

## Haiku

By JS

I hear the birds  
And I smell freedom  
I taste it.

## Me & My Pen

By DA

The bond we share is unbreakable  
The love I have for you is not overrated  
The feeling I have for you is real  
The energy you give me is good

## Serenity

by LC

In poetry I find comfort  
It is a door to the soul  
It's the only place  
That never judges me  
I can be myself  
Say the things I want  
Beyond these uniforms  
Beneath your divine  
I have fallen

## Our Garden Will Stay

By TT

I'll plant us a garden  
under the sun  
and it's warm light  
will surround my love.

I'll fill our garden  
with all that I know  
and sow  
what is good.

Row after row  
my effort will hurt me  
so, upon thee  
will be my woes.

And in our garden  
you will know me  
by all the different flowers  
that grow.

And when we are gone  
our garden will stay  
under the sun's rays.

*This poem is describing my intentions to build a beautiful legacy (life) with someone I will love and be dedicated to. I dreamed this poem.*

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Ode to Jason

By DK

*An ode to someone/something that brings me joy*

A man confined behind these prison walls, a Penn State Grad,  
He's a son, a brother, uncle, husband, and a loving dad.  
My Rocket Scientist friend, who anger seems to never visit,  
Appears to be full of life, even in prison, it's not what it  
seems, or is it?

He's full of God, a man of patience, and lots of knowledge to share,  
A man snatched from his family, a real man who truly cares.  
He's someone, when I'm in a funk know I can visit, and  
again feel alive,

He brings joy to those who surround him, and soon  
he'll say good-bye.

See, this new true friend of mine will soon be released  
to go home,

A friend that will be sorely missed, once he's gone.

I'll make my usual visit down to cell fifty-four,

And there I will find, Jason sleeps no more.

This, my Ode to Jason...just a short story,

About a man I met, who knew how to bring me joy!

## True Joy

By MH

Joy is not in violence

Joy is not in bullying, cheating, stealing

Joy is not in a gang

Joy is not being tough to impress others or to show off

Joy is not in false short-term pleasure, not in drugs  
or womanizing

Joy is in humility, kindness

Joy is in family

Joy is in true love not in flings

Joy is in helping others to be the best they can be to  
see them succeed

Joy is in true friendship, a friend who teaches you to be  
successful in life, it's not your friend who leads you to end  
up in prison, drug addicted, or even killed

You may laugh it out, it is nonsense for now

But I know you know it deep inside you, be brave, have the  
courage to have a true joy

Don't wait till you are old to come to terms with it

Be it now

So be brave, be courageous, be joyful

## Ode to My Daughter

By AHA

You bring joy to my life

You inspired me to become a better man that changed my life

And become the best version of myself

Without you joy would not have entered my life so suddenly

When I needed it the most

So this is why I think of you

I smile since you bring me joy

And you are the joy of my life

## Joyous

By GO

I am most joyous **when with family.**

The best version of myself looks **like Heaven**

**because my grandson** brings me joy.

My favorite quality is my **motivating behavior, but**  
**listening** is something I wish to improve on.

I am motivated to **do better**

because I am equipped with **knowledge and resilience,**  
nothing can get in my way!

## Happily Ever After

By MW

I'm Happy to wake up

I'm Happy to see the sun shine

I'm Happy to hear the birds chirp

I'm Happy to watch the trees dance

I'm Happy when it rains

I'm Happy when it snows

I'm Happy to read my Bible

I'm Happy to see smiles

I'm Happy to hear, see & smell

I'm Happy to be alive

I'm Happy to have family

I'm Happy to be loved

I'm Happy to see the sun set

I'm Happy to see the moon and stars

I'm happy to go to bed

Knowing I'll awaken to be just as happy all over again

Happily ever after

## Joy Poem

By MS

**J**ust because I can't see you

Does not mean that I don't feel you

Here like weighted kisses.

**O**ver the intervening miles, I am here

To walk at your side, fight your fight.

I smile with you, shed tears with you,

Reaffirm your being's language, because

We are kindred spirits.

**Y**ou stand your ground, because God created

You to be greater than mountains.

You need only to be you.

Stand in your light,

Stand strong as the foundations of the mountains

And cause those that cool themselves

In your shadow to behold, a form of

Creation's glory when they look up at

You... and in that moment they will

Know... Joy

Love Y'all

*Thank you for bringing me Joy... Freeminders*

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hello, I greet you guys with much JOY which actually comes from the fact that I am greeting you! Joy is also contagious so I hope you guys felt that greeting because it's truly genuine! You know, sometimes even saying the word joy has the ability to make one smile by just thinking about the good vibes that come along with true joy! One amazing thing that I learned about joy is that it has the ability to heal because when you think about it, joy is also connected with purpose. If you can identify your purpose and your reasoning for it; and can anchor yourself in that, it opens you up to new opportunities. A very helpful suggestion that I have for everyone, including myself is to try to find purpose in everything you do and live it every day! Along with that:

1. **Find joy within yourself.** Don't tie it to your circumstances or life achievements. Identify your purpose, anchor yourself in it, and live your authentic self freely and without regret.
2. **Recognize the difference between joy and happiness.** Joy is pervasive and sustaining. Happiness is transient and fleeting, it ebbs and flows and is dependent on happenstance, but joy will anchor you through hope.
3. **Be present in the journey.** Take the time to empathize with others and form strong, genuine connections, even if it's with a character in a book! (shameless plug LOL)
4. **Practice self-care.** Give yourself "time-ins." Surrender the things you can't control and embrace your sense of spirituality. Allowing yourself to feel support from others builds resilience.
5. **Be wary of joy-blockers.** Try to avoid constant exposure to the news, social media and anything else that has the ability to make you anxious or gets you down, protect your joy!

This is my recipe for joy, but guess what? You can create your own by making a list of the things that give you good vibes and share them with others who need a dose of joy. That's purpose right there and will in turn, bring you joy for helping others access Joy!

Now, here's something that I take joy in, sharing helpful resources to my friends so here goes!

## The Ready Center

1901 E. Street SE,  
Washington, DC 20003  
202-790-6790

The Ready Center is located just outside of the DC Jail. It serves as a one-stop shop where returning citizens can access critical post-release services, obtain vital documents such as birth certificates, social security and state issued ID's and get referrals to treatment programs for substance abuse and mental health. I think a quote from Mayor Bowser sums it up best: "To give more returning citizens a fair shot, we must continue building strong support systems for men and women transitioning back into the community. By partnering with community-based organizations, and working across DC based government agencies, we can set more residents up for success by providing more immediate access to employment, housing, educational opportunities, health care and more."



Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms. Keela



# BLACK JOY AS RESISTANCE

*By Sofia*

Joy is not only an emotion we all strive to experience, but expressing joy can also be an act of resistance. In a society where minority groups especially are held down by their oppressors, and have had to historically face racial torment and tragedies, joy acts in opposition to this. Today, many activists and social justice groups aim to not only advocate against oppression, but also to center joy and celebrate the triumphs of minority communities. Black joy has been a focus of groups like Black Lives Matter, who wish to highlight the beauty and perseverance of the Black community.

Black Joy events took hold in the mainstream in the summer of 2020, at a time when protests erupted across the country after the unjust murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. However, Black joy has long been central to the Black community, as seen through historical celebrations of Juneteenth, a holiday that celebrates the official end of slavery. The idea that despite racial oppression and struggle under white supremacy, the Black community still chooses to show love and embrace their history, is a powerful act of resistance.

Events that celebrate Black Joy have taken place all across the country, including in the DMV area. Black Lives Matter DC has made it a point to center the concept of Black joy in their work, wanting to showcase the pride, culture, and liveliness of the Black community. In 2018, the group held Black Joy Sundays, a time where Black folks of all walks of life were invited to celebrate and create community. The events welcomed ALL Black people, including members of the LGBTQ+ community, all religions, Black men and women, those experiencing houselessness, and Black people of all ages and nationalities. The focus was on celebrating the myriad that is the Black experience.

These events have continued on, with Black Joy events being

held in DC celebrating this past Juneteenth. A group called the Thursday Network held a Juneteenth mixer, which featured DC Black creatives, artists, and music. The event created a safe space for the DC Black community to empower and celebrate one another, and while acknowledging the painful aspects of Black history, also celebrated Black excellence.

While Black joy events are powerful examples of celebrating Black joy, Black joy can also be created and celebrated on a smaller scale. Practicing self-love and creating community with Black family members and friends is another powerful way to celebrate the joys and beauty of the Black community. Self-love and community ultimately lead to joy, and Black joy is all about challenging the notion created under racism that Black folks must suffer. On the contrary, the Black community has triumphed and excelled.

Embracing Black joy is important to anti-racist efforts moving forward. While it is important to acknowledge the historical oppression and racial trauma experienced by the Black community, it is also important to highlight the beauties and joy of Black culture. Constant images of Black violence are traumatic for the Black community to constantly view, it is important and powerful for spaces to be made that acknowledge the happiness of Blackness and create community for Black folks. Black joy is a beautiful, and necessary act of resistance.

In the words of Black Lives Matter DC, "Black Joy is a transformative force. It is a visceral, deeply embodied reminder of the precious euphoria of our humanity. It is the source of Black resilience which is itself the wellspring of Black Liberation." How do you plan on celebrating Black joy, or the joy in other communities you are a part of?

# JOY

*By Maji, Free Minds Friend*

Not too long ago, I was introduced to a new LADY friend, who lately has been a source of great satisfaction. I met her recently through a mutual friend, and I got to know her more through the many phone conversations I've had with her. Learning that she's never dealt with anyone incarcerated before has me rubbing my hands together thinking how I can make this a fine experience for the both of us. We all know that it takes a lot for someone on the outside to connect with someone doing PRISON time on the inside. Sure she had her questions about why I was locked up and what I go through in here every day. But it seems as though her intention is to show me that there's someone outside of these prison walls still interested in getting to know the PERSON I am today. Knowing that has given me [the feeling of JOY] that I haven't experienced in years.

I'm starting to wake up more in the mornings so I can make it outside to get my exercise in. With her in mind, I've been doing my WORKOUT for the purpose of not only staying healthy and fit, but to look good for her once the time presents itself to see each other face-to-face. It also has me looking into the mirror more to fully keep myself groomed. Not that I haven't been keeping myself clean, it just adds on to how **PERFECT** I want to be for this LADY.

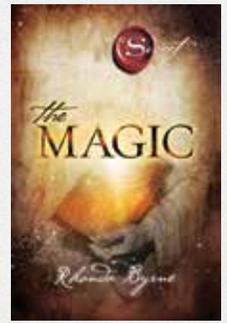
Our phone conversations have put me in a total trance. It feels so easy to just speak my mind anytime I hear her voice. She always seems to latch onto everything I have to say. Our conversations never dull out because we both have so much to offer each other. The only thing I hate is not being able to vent all this good news that's going on with me with anyone who is incarcerated with me. I learned that you have to keep things like this as low-key as possible. My fellow convicts don't like seeing or hearing the next man in a joyous state or any other state that is associated with happiness. But this isn't about them right now, so I be damned if I let them steal my JOY.

Anytime someone new comes into our lives, they give us that spark and ignite in our soul a satisfaction that feels like a **touch of heaven**. It's my responsibility to keep that spark alive by expressing to this new LADY friend that I want her to feel the same excitement I feel whenever I'm in her presence. Meaning I'm going to work on showing her all the GOOD in me to camouflage all the FLAWS. I don't think I ever want to seem like a bad guy to the woman I'm talking to.

In the book *The Magic* by Rhonda Byrne, she explains how we can really experience JOY in our lives through practicing GRATITUDE.



She writes that, "No matter how big your desires seem to be, you can receive them through gratitude. Even more than that, gratitude will bring a JOY and HAPPINESS for life that you never felt before, and that is truly priceless." One of her assignments was to create a list of all of our desires. Of course, one of my desires was to find a good woman to talk to. In addition to that, I wrote down that I hope she possesses leadership qualities and is someone I can rely on through these tough times. I think that sums up what each man incarcerated wants from a female friend on the outside.



I guess I got what I asked for once I met this new LADY friend. She recently got her real estate license and when she's not selling houses, she works for the VA as a nursing assistant. I love the way that no matter how hectic her schedule gets, every time she sees I'm calling, she answers and gives me her attention for them 30 minutes that we are able to talk. She even likes all the letters I been writing to her. Calling me her "MALCOLM X" as an inside joke only goes to show that I been putting in the effort to really have her see that she's not dealing with just anybody. I show her where I'm at mentally and she appreciates that I been using my time wisely in here.

Now that I been able to show you what JOY looks like for someone incarcerated, allow me to devote this part to all those who like to understand concepts from a humanistic point of view. We, as the incarcerated, have to deal everyday with the uncertainty this experience brings. Asking for help might seem like the right thing to do, but when you are constantly denied even the smallest privileges, it usually develops into an emotional disorder for most of us; like being anti-social. No matter how many prison programs deal with improving our ways of thinking, at night we still find ourselves falling asleep inside of a prison cell. In them moments, we think about almost everything that led up to us being incarcerated. Mental Health professionals diagnosed this as one being in a state of DEMORALIZATION. They say we feel as if we have failed to meet our own expectations or those of others. And that we are unable to cope with some pressing problems and feel powerless to change the situation or ourselves.

When we don't have that support coming from the outside, it makes us feel that the WORLD has given up on us. So we cherish the ones who do whatever they can to let us know that we are not forgotten. The JOY of knowing that we have so many opportunities and resources for us once we home makes our time in here a little easier. Every time you send us a letter or a few pictures in the mail, it keeps our spirits up, giving us a reason to want to live and not allow this place to kill us. Don't believe me? Anyone you know who is incarcerated, just send one picture and a few words and watch the next letter you receive from that person thank you for making their day. That kind of JOY could last for a day or four years. Because one thing for sure, we that are incarcerated don't forget the people who were there for us, especially once we make it home.

As far as my new LADY friend, it's crazy I spoke all good things about her but haven't seen a picture of her yet. I mean she seen how I look but I'm still waiting on the pictures that she sent to me. When that day do come, it might be the best thing to happen to me this year. She needs to know that her involvement with me will be beneficial in the end. As time goes on, I will be building myself up to be a better man, in hopes that if she still there once I'm free, I can become the man of her dreams. If she gets the chance to read this years from now, I pray she learns that the JOY I experienced when she came into my life, is the reason I had to let the world know what HAPPINESS do for someone who almost lost hope. So in the words of FREE MINDS MEMBER "A.C.," thank you for being the shining sun to my dark moon.

# THE WRITE WAY: THE RULE OF THREE

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

*By Julia*

How many jokes have you heard that begin with something like "A doctor, a lawyer, and a politician walk into a bar?" Or maybe it's "A rabbi, a priest, and an atheist..." Or "A blonde, a brunette, and a redhead..." Have you ever noticed that it's always three people in jokes like this?

There's a term in writing called "**the rule of three**" that refers to this idea that having three people/elements/events/etc in a piece of writing is often funnier or just more satisfying than two or four. Often, these trios seem to just roll off the tongue better. Maybe that's why we say the ABCs instead of the ABs or the ABCDs. What other examples can you think of like this?

Do you know the story of the wolf and the three little pigs? In the old fable, three pigs each build their homes out of increasingly more durable substances (straw, sticks, and bricks). At each pig's house, the wolf threatens to "huff and puff and blow the house in" (see the rule of three here?). He destroys the first two houses, but can't destroy the third pig's house because it's made of bricks. This is another example of the rule of three, both on a linguistic level - the wolf's threat has three actions in it, to 1) huff, 2) puff, and 3) blow the house in - and on a larger story level.

One reason the rule of three can be so effective is that the first two parts of whatever it is you're writing set up an idea for the reader about what the third might be - and then the third part can subvert that, or go against expectations. In the case of the three little pigs, the same thing happens at the first two houses, and then the third one breaks that pattern. It also gives the story a beginning, middle, and end, which can be really satisfying even in a short story, poem, or joke!

Another way to think about it is that the first sets up the story, the second part builds anticipation or expectation, and the third part is the resolution or, in the case of comedy, the punchline.

There's a silly little joke somebody told me many years ago, about a talking string (just go with it). This talking string and his other string friends see this bar that looks really fun, and they want to go in and have a drink too. So the string walks into the bar, but the bouncer says "Hey, we don't serve strings here" and tells him to leave. Disappointed, he goes back out to his friends and tells them what happened. They say "oh well" and get ready to leave, but now

the string is mad and determined. He says he has an idea, so he grabs a hat and draws a fake mustache on himself. With his new disguise, he's sure he'll get past the bouncer. He walks in, feeling confident, but right away the bouncer says, "I told you, no strings allowed!" Back out on the street, his friends tell him to give up, to go home, but this string is stubborn. "Watch this," he tells them. He ties himself up like a pretzel, and ruffles the top of his string head. He walks inside and the bouncer says, "Aren't you that string I just kicked out of here?" To which the string replies, "I'm a frayed knot."

(Get it? Try saying it out loud.)

I like this example of the rule of three in a joke because it just wouldn't be funny if the talking string was successful on the first or second tries; we need the first two to set up the expectations and build tension so it seems impossible that he'll be successful.

But the rule of three can work in a really short format too, usually with the third item in the series being really unexpected after the first two.

Here's an example from the comedic science fiction book *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*:

"In those days... men were real men, women were real women, and small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri were real small furry creatures from Alpha Centauri."

Here's another example (I made it up myself, so forgive me if it's not very funny lol):

"A doctor, a lawyer, and an elephant walk into a bar..."

Okay I don't have any more to this joke! But I hope that at least the elephant surprised you in this list, and made you curious about what might happen next. (Got any ideas? Write in with your own end to this story!)

Maybe you can tell I'm not a comedian - but I bet some of our readers are! **Your quest, should you choose to accept it, is to put the rule of three to use in a joke, short story, or poem - whatever you want!**



## 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.

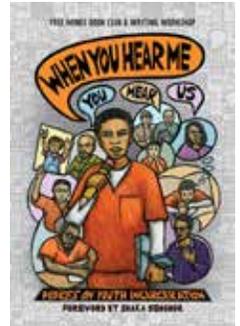
### **One Woman's Journey by Charles Fantroy**

Meet Sharee Parks, a steely native of Inglewood, California, and a mother of two sons. When Sharee is falsely accused and convicted of murder, her whole world is turned upside down, and she must fight to keep her children safe from the violence of Inglewood. This thought-provoking and captivating read is a powerful exploration of grief and the power of a mother's love. Author Charles Fantroy is a DC native, novelist, and screenwriter.



**BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**  
***WHEN YOU HEAR ME (YOU HEAR US): VOICES ON YOUTH INCARCERATION***  
*with Neely*

We take this moment to interrupt our regularly scheduled voting results to bring you our next BAM book, which is a truly special one: *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us): Voices on Youth Incarceration*. Why is it so special, you ask? Because it is written by Free Minds members and friends like you! Its pages are filled with powerful poetry, prose, and personal reflections that illustrate how youth incarceration affects all of us. While we weren't able to include a poem from everyone in the book, this collection is a glimpse into the wisdom and hope you all share with us in your poetry, essays, and letters that inspire us every day. We look forward to hearing your feedback!



1. The goal of this book was to show readers the reality and community impact of youth incarceration. Do you think the book achieved this goal? Why or why not?

2. What was your favorite poem and why? (Challenge: If your poetry is featured in this book, try to pick one written by someone else!)

3. Was there a profile of someone who was interviewed in the book that resonated most with you? Who was it, and what about their story meant so much to you?

4. This is our first collection featuring the stories of family members, friends, and others involved in the legal system in different ways. What do you think this adds to the **narrative** (“a way of understanding a situation that reflects a particular point of view or set of values”) of the book?

5. Many of the poems and stories tackle difficult and painful subjects, such as Ebonee’s story of her two sons surviving gun violence in “Takin’ Losses.” What do you think we can do to bring about safety and healing? What has brought you hope and healing in your life?

6. What does the title of the book mean to you?

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: NOURISH (VOLUME 10, ISSUE 5)

Hey family! The theme for the next issue of the Connect is Nourish. Here are some prompts to help you get started. And we want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 11, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme *Wellbeing* – talking about healthy bodies, minds, and spirits.

### (1)

Nourishment doesn't only come in the form of food. Nourishing your body, mind, and soul with healthy habits and practices are just as important. Try writing an allegory poem about different ways to nourish yourself, whether that be through meditation, reading, writing, exercising, etc. An allegory is a type of poem where a pattern of symbols is used to tell a story within a story. Here is an example:

#### Fire and Ice

by Robert Frost

Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say in ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
And would suffice.

### (2)

#### FIND THE BEAUTY IN THE STORM

Another form of self-nourishment can be "finding the beauty in the storm," meaning trying to find the good in difficult situations, which can be tough! Write a story about a time you found the good in a tough situation. Was there a specific lesson you learned? Is it hard to find the good?

### (3)

Pick one person who has made a great impact on your life or others' lives – someone who has encouraged you to grow in some way.

Write a *first person narrative*, a form of storytelling where the storyteller recounts events from their own point of view, about a key moment of growth in that person's life. Put yourself in their shoes and reflect on the emotions you think they felt during that moment.

*Empathy*, the ability to understand another's feelings, is a great skill to have!



### (4)

Do you have a favorite food, a meal you shared with a loved one, a tradition for special occasions, or just any particular food or drink that really takes you back to a specific moment in time? Describe the meal and the memory with as many sensory details as you can (taste, scent, sight, feel). Take us with you to this special moment in your life.

# DC PHOTOS *By Justin*



This new mural in Buzzard Point (painted in 2020) pays tribute to DC icons past and present. This image shows musician and DC native Marvin Gaye, painted by local artists Kaliq Crosby and Rose Jaffe.



Maya Angelou Mural at Maya Angelou High School in Capitol View, a neighborhood in Southeast DC



Sunset over the Anacostia River



We Act Radio Storefront



The view of the new Frederick Douglass Bridge (seen from Anacostia Park)

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: JOY

## Why Wait for Windfall?

by TG

Windfall: The finding of unexpected Good fortunes

It all started when I was 5 years old. My mother and I stood in the checkout line of our local Piggly Wiggly grocery. I was clinging to her leg like a good little boy when I noticed something green on the floor neatly tucked against the counters wall: money. At 5 years old I didn't really understand the value of a hundred dollar bill. I knew adults bought Cookie Crisp and Captain Crunch cereal with bills that looked like it - so I picked it up and gave it to my mom. She was so excited by my find that she bought me two boxes of Cookie Crisp and Captain Crunch.

Growing up I continued to find what I defined earlier as windfall: the finding of unexpected good fortune. I would find a fifty dollar bill here and a twenty dollar bill there. I once found a 1901 Susan B. Anthony silver dollar by a creek in downtown Austin, a 3-legged Buffalo nickel in downtown Shreveport. The most lucrative find I ever made was \$1,300 in a clutch purse laying in the middle of the street. I also found her drivers license in the purse so I returned everything - with the hope of a hefty reward of course.

Money wasn't the only thing I would find either: diamond rings, wrist watches, herringbone necklaces to name a few. Finding things literally conditioned me to walk through life with my eyes scanning the ground expecting my next find. Incarceration didn't hamper my lucky streak either (but I don't want to talk about the things I found on the prison floor). Today, I've learned that windfall does not need to be stumbled upon while scanning the ground. Windfall can be an unexpected opportunity you can create. Therefore, why wait for windfall when you can create it for yourself?

Now, I will tell you four key concepts that, if you accept, adopt, and apply, will help you achieve what I call *Incarceration Windfall*: unexpected good fortune created while in prison. These keys are: Reflect, Recon, Research, and Write. They are tools you can use for creating opportunities for unexpected windfall while keeping your head held high.

First: *reflect* on what your strengths and weaknesses are. What can you do and what are you willing to learn? There are many individuals in prison that draw, dabble in arts and crafts, and create literary works. Be honest with yourself about what you are willing to sacrifice to achieve this goal.

Second: *recon* for companies, corporations, and organizations that offer payments for services within the field you have chosen to work. Recon through books and magazines like the Inmate Shoppers, The Guerilla Prisoner's Resource Guide, and 500+ Resources For Prisoners to find places that assist inmates in this endeavor. For me, recon required reading every Writer's Market and Poetry Contest magazine in the prison's library. I enjoyed writing poetry and short stories, so my goal, based upon my reflection, was to find publications that paid for poetry.

Third: *research*. Once you've found a company that pays for your type of talent - literary arts, or crafts - you now make sure that your product fits that organization's market and clientele. This required me to read samples of present publications and learn different styles of poetry the agencies sold. Valuable time and resources can be saved by not sending sonnets to a company that published Haiku's (or Christmas poetry for the Fourth of July). Making sure you know the company's market will save you a wealth of time and money.

Last: *write*. Once you find a company that matches your talents and you know what theme they market to their customers, write a query letter requesting permission to send samples of your work for evaluation. This step is important because some companies do not accept unsolicited works or they require examination of your works through a specific medium (PDF scans, or picture of your product). I once sent 832 samples of my poetry to literary agencies only to have them returned with letters stating, "We do not accept unsolicited work." I ignorantly wasted \$200 in shipping that I could have saved if I had followed this step.

These four key concepts, Reflect, Recon, Research, and Write, are simple and easy to remember. *Reflect* on what your strengths and weaknesses are and what sacrifices you are willing to make to increase those strengths and decrease those weaknesses; *recon* organizations you can market your talents to and will compensate you for your services; *research* the market and customers they serve to be assured you can provide the correct product; and then *write* for permission to submit your work for evaluation and consideration.

I applied these tools as I completed the College Guild's "Creative Writing Course" and I was eager to put my skills to work: reflection. Each Saturday I perused the prison library seeking different companies that published poetry: recon. Then I scanned through magazines and newsletters to see if my style of poetry fit their context: research. Once I had compiled a comfortable list of appropriate agencies, I sent letters requesting permission to submit my work for evaluation. There were many rejections in the beginning, yet, I did not give up, and eventually I received a letter stating, "Your work has been accepted for publication" and a contract for payment. It was the most fulfilling moment in my writing career.

These key concepts are not just for writing, but for arts and craft as well. I recently found a company that will market your artwork for printing on various items, and another that will sell your craft on consignment.

If you accept, adopt, and apply these four key concepts - Reflect, Recon, Research, and Write - accurately, you will no longer need to seek rewards through chance by casting your gaze on the ground in search of windfall. You will have created your own opportunities like diamonds in the sky.

# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: JOY

Optimism is the Key

By AHA

I agree that optimism is the key, since if you push to expect the best outcome of something, then this is what you will get. I tend to see the good in things before seeing the wrong because if I look at it in a negative light then I won't try something or see things in a positive light. To me what is meant to happen will, even if I see it won't have a good outcome. I look to make it one. In any challenging or difficult situation, I use what I am taught as a Muslim to depend and seek any help and aid only from God knowing that any and all good comes from our Creator and any harmful thing comes from ourselves, so thinking positive leads you to expect what is positive.

I use optimism a lot, but I can recall when the pandemic first hit. Due to being in a federal supermax, the only of its kind in the U.S., I knew that we would now have to endure some harsher conditions. Lockdown was already 22 hours a day, five days a week; and the other two 24 hours with no human contact would take it to 24 hours, total. All books ordered from the library were halted. Newspapers, etc. were stopped. So we would be in our cells for months without leaving: just imagine being in your closet for that long.

I sought to see the good in it and that I was in good health and would come out stronger by staying active, knowing I wasn't the only one enduring this; but many had negative thoughts only expecting the worse. So, I really think my optimism helped me out in many ways during such a time where it was not expected... peace

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Joy  
By HH

*Instructions to my childhood self on how to find happiness*

Dear younger me,

Here's the deal, no one can bring you joy. People and things can give you pleasure. Maybe even cause you to be happy for a while. But joy is a state of being, a condition of the heart. Here's how to find it: you have to start with accepting yourself. It'll be hard to ignore the negativity and discouragement, especially because it'll be your "family" giving it to you. The sooner you block it, the better. The negativity will weather your self-worth and self-esteem. Blocking it will leave only one other major obstacle: learning the difference between people who are with you and those who are for you. Because of your natural attributes, people will be drawn to you. Mostly, because they'll benefit from the association. You'll have plenty of people with you. The people who are for you will make themselves apparent. The difference: they'll look out for your best interest, expect nothing in return. The final step to finding your joy is to deal with all your unaddressed emotions. A lot of painful introspection will have to be endured for this. Ironically, you'll have to remove emotion from the memory, approach it objectively to reconcile and let go of the pain in order to forgive yourself and others. This is your path for finding joy. The earlier you begin, the more joyful life you'll live.

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Pure Joy  
By AHA

What brings me joy is my daughter. My family and loved ones as well – but my daughter I knew would change my life the day she was born. Knowing that I had become a father was pure joy to me. The first time that I held her in my arms I felt it. These memories of holding her and of my loved ones who I have share moments with sustain me through tough times. My faith brings me joy also since it is the guide that leads my daily life. Acting upon my Islamic teachings keeps me happy and filled with joy.

When it comes to happiness and joy I see the two as being a little different. You can be happy about something in that moment, but joy is a deeper feeling that can sustain you at any moment: be it a memory, loved one, or anything that brings you this feeling. Joy can help you at any time. I never find that it's impossible to find joy in the hardest situations. I stay joyful in the midst of despair thinking of those I love and those who care for me. I have encountered a lot of situations, but in each I knew I had to stay positive and think of a positive outcome. That kept me filled with joy.

What makes me smile is good memories, jokes I hear or see. A fond memory that always makes me smile is when my mom tells me the story of how I learned to walk. She knew that I loved chicken, and instead of giving it to me, she sat it on the table and watched me try to walk to get it. Eventually, after trying so much, I walked to it. This is how I learned. So these types of memories and moments are fond to me and how I find joy and happiness in it all... peace

# MEMBERS CONNECT: JOY

JOY!

By BW

I would like to say that when I think of joy, I first picture myself as a child with a toy. I find joy in family, friends, and people, in general. I find joy in life and generosity. Sometimes it's minimal, and sometimes it's plentiful.

Joy is elusive, joy is omnipresent, joy is a feeling of something we long to bottle up, for it's the world's antidepressant. When your days become short and your nights are long, when the clouds are always there and the sunshine seems gone, just go deep into your soul and "joy" you'll find, because the greatest moments – home movies and triumphs – are stored in our minds.

So, yes, when I think of "joy," I can go back to that little boy. But it all boils down to the times, people, and experiences that help to fill that void.

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## Source of Joy

By AC

I was asked about what has been bringing me joy lately. I thank the Free Minds volunteer who wrote me a letter for this question by the way. A lot of things popped to mind as possible answers but the interesting thing is that I've been going through a lot of stressful things lately, so I can't truly explain as to why I get joy from the seemingly mundane things that do bring me joy. To get a better answer I think I have to ask myself what is my source of joy.

My main source of joy, as I see it, comes from this one thing the world can never have enough of: Love. Love can manifest itself in many different ways; it can be found in hugs, laughter, chatter, and even in silence. Love is the one thing that allows us to find such pleasure in hearing the voice of those we love, the pleasure in knowing those we love are happy and doing alright, and even pleasure in knowing that those we might not even know or like will be okay. Love, and joy, can be found everywhere you look if you just look hard enough.

The trick to finding the most amount of joy, it would seem, would be to find the joy and share the joy that others feel as well.

With that being said, I am happy to say that my baby brother has just recently started a new school year, one of my amazing cousins just left for Marines boot camp, my parents are healthy, all other friends and acquaintances are alive and well, and I personally can say that I feel great and blessed. I find joy in the fact that even though I was sort of forced by the BOP to move prisons, this new place is not bad at all; I find joy in the fact that even though I had to go to the hospital for a broken toe, everyone was so nice and kind to me; I find joy in knowing that though I find myself in this small make-believe world, I'm still able to enjoy life vicariously through the people I love.

And as long as my love for them exists, so will my source of joy.

## CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Congratulations to the following Free Minds members on their recent accomplishments! We know these are just a few examples of many achievements. We know you have many more to share. Please write in and let us know about what you've been up to so we can feature your exciting accomplishments in the next issue!

- Joel became the first incarcerated person to be elected in District of Columbia's public office. He will be serving as the Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner (ANC)
- MV completed 3 college classes
- TG's short story "Clearing the Air" won Eaton Literary Agency's Annual Awards of 2021
- GW passed his GED

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!



## REENTRY PROFILE: DISCOVERING WHY: A FREE MINDS MEMBER RETURNS HOME TO FULFILL HIS PURPOSE

*By Quenten, FM Member, as told to Kelli*

I came from a middle class family. My father was in the military and we moved all around the country. In my junior year of high school, we came to Prince William County and the DMV became my home.

I grew up playing all sports. I was an outgoing person and got along with everyone. I spent two years studying sociology in college before enlisting in the military. I was a people pleaser, you know? I liked to go along to get along. And that led me to make mistakes about the people I was around. Ultimately though, it was my decision. I got caught up after I left the military and started using drugs. I lost my job and started committing crimes to support my habit. Eventually, I was charged with bank robbery and sentenced to 30 years. I was 27 years old.

Honestly, I was in a daze for the first several years of my incarceration. I never in my wildest dreams could have imagined I'd become a drug addict, do what I did, and be incarcerated and sentenced to 30 years in prison!

Once I got my mind straight though, I decided I could take one of two roads. I could *regress* or I could *progress* and learn from this experience. I decided to *progress*. I made a commitment to do everything I could, take every course – whether it was anger management, conflict resolution, or emotional intelligence – I would take every opportunity I could to learn. I worked every job that I could get. I was a clerical worker. I was a tutor. I even started going to the mental health department so I could learn more about myself. I developed a good rapport with a psychotherapist allowing me to talk about my life and understand how I got involved in drugs and made the choices that I did. If I didn't want to die in that negative environment, I just knew I had to change!

My dream and my purpose is to become a substance abuse counselor. I didn't figure this out overnight though. I once read a quote that says: *"The two most important days of your life are the day you were born, and the day you find out why."* It took some time and some searching, but I learned my true purpose. I want to use my testimony to help others fight addiction.

I was released last year on December 14th. That day? Oh man. I couldn't sleep the night before. When I woke up, everything just felt so surreal. I couldn't eat. I was too nervous and excited! When they called my name, I was still wondering if it was a dream. I grabbed my bag and I said my goodbyes. The good men I called comrades and the officers all wished me well. As I walked, I looked at the walls of this place that had been my home for so long.

I'll never forget walking out that door to freedom – the smell of the fresh air, the sound of birds chirping. It felt as if the weight of the world came off my shoulders. I looked up to the sky, took a deep breath and thanked God for carrying me through the valley of the shadow of death. It was only through His grace that I made it. My brother and I hugged each other and we broke down in tears. I turned around to look at the

complex so I would remember where I'd come from and I knew I'd never return. It was blurry because tears were coming from my eyes. I knelt down and kissed the ground. I never looked back after that. I felt like I was reborn into the world.

I sat with my family that night. We ate fried fish, hush puppies from the local carryout, and just sat back and joked and laughed. I couldn't stop staring at all of them. I just couldn't believe it was real.

As amazing as freedom felt though, coming home wasn't all easy. When my sister-in-law took me to the mall in my sweat-suit to buy some new outfits, I looked around and saw just how much society had changed in the three decades I was locked up. It was culture shock! I felt stuck in the past. I had to get my bearings. There was a lot of anxiety! Even now, I still deal with it. When you're in prison, you see life evolving through TV, but you're not out there. It's like being let out of a time capsule! My advice to my brothers and sisters who are still inside is to always progress with time even when you're locked up. Otherwise you'll suffer from arrested development. You need to make sure you still grow. I'm about to turn 55. I was only 27 when I went in. So I can't come out here with the mindset of a 27 year old. I have to keep up with what a 55 year-old person would be doing in the world!

The anxiety is a lot better now. I stay in the present moment and tell myself this is real and I deserve to be here. I work out, I read, I go to sleep at the same time. I take things slow. I don't try to rush into things. It's a process. But each step I take, each program I complete and succeed at is a brick in my foundation for the life that I'm building.

I am well on my way to pursuing my purpose. I signed up for a program called P2P, or Prison to Professional Programs. It's a goal-oriented program to help people with criminal convictions obtain a college education. Janet from Free Minds told me about it. She knew I wanted to go back to college. I applied and I was accepted! We meet weekly for different courses and workshops. For example, we're learning how to fill out the financial aid form, how to apply for loans and get ready for the college entrance exams. They will place me in a professional internship, hopefully with a substance abuse or detox program. Then, I'll start my college courses next spring. They'll match me with a tutor and a mentor. Basically they set you up for success in your education. I'll be starting classes at Northern Virginia Community College in the spring and then hope to transfer to George Mason University.

I always asked God, *Why did I have to go through all this? Why did I struggle with my drug addiction and why did I have to be incarcerated so long?* He gave me the reason why. It's to go back out and help others. If I touch one or two people through my life story, maybe they won't have to go through all of that.

What brings me joy is helping people and seeing them smile.

# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

## DEEP DIVE: AFGHAN REFUGEES

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

This summer, two decades of U.S. military involvement in the country of Afghanistan came to an end. It was not the ending that anyone wanted – a return of the country to the control of the Taliban, who had harbored the terrorists who executed the 9/11 attacks – but after 20 years with boots on the ground, the political and popular will to remain had all but vanished.

The plan was for a measured and steady withdrawal of U.S. troops and civilian staff, of course, who would be in harm's way remaining in Afghanistan under Taliban occupation. But there was also an expectation that Afghan citizens who helped the U.S. and its allies during those 20 years – interpreters, civilian aides and workers, and their families – would be allowed to relocate to the United States or to another country. These people were also at risk of punishment, or even execution by the Taliban.

But the Taliban's advance through the country quickened in the last weeks of summer, and in mid-August, the group took the country's largest city, Kabul. The rapid seizure of the nation wreaked havoc on plans for an orderly withdrawal.

Despite this setback and extremely dangerous conditions, including a suicide attack on the Kabul airport that killed 170 people, the U.S.-allied evacuation of Afghan citizens did proceed. By August 30, when the last planes left Kabul, the total number of people airlifted out of Afghanistan had reached 123,000, the majority of them Afghan citizens. The total number of Afghans who have been displaced by the Taliban takeover is much higher: the United Nations Human Rights Commission estimates that 550,000 fled over land in the past year, and the total number might be as high as 3.5 million Afghan refugees.

In the past several years, America has accepted record low numbers of refugees, first due to policy changes made by the Trump administration and then due to COVID-19 safety protocols. But the Biden administration has greatly ratcheted up the number of admissions to facilitate the entry of more Afghans.

The first wave of 37,000 refugees have been relocated within the United States, spread out somewhat proportionately among states. More than 10,000 were settled in California and Texas; another 2,500 have moved into the DMV area to start a life there. Thousands more Afghans, now living on U.S. military bases inside the country and abroad, will soon be resettled in a second phase.

The process to be approved for the U.S. refugee resettlement process is an incredibly detailed process. The United Nations screens people seeking refuge in America and refers them to the executive branch, where candidates will be further screened by eight different federal agencies, be cleared through six background checks, and three in-person interviews.

If a refugee makes it through that process, the State Department assigns them to one of nine organizations that serve as resettlement agencies. These organizations help refugees integrate into their new community and help them connect with job training and employment opportunities.

The resettlement of Afghan citizens will likely end up being one of

the largest refugee support efforts in U.S. history. Some of the other nations' refugees who have been welcomed into America include the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma), and Iran.

## TECHNOLOGY

While everyone is focused on the COVID-19 vaccines and their effectiveness, victory was quietly claimed in the long battle to curb one of the world's most vicious killers: malaria.

In October, the World Health Organization recognized Mosquirix, a vaccine that was first introduced in the 1980s but has been refined and improved through research and collaborations over the decades. Recent iterations of the drug have been shown to be up to 50% effective

in preventing the infection of malaria in children, which is a game changer. Malaria is transmitted through the bite of a certain type of mosquito that is prevalent in sub-Saharan Africa. More than 400,000 people die of the disease every year, and it is particularly devastating to the health of young children.

SpaceX, an American aerospace company founded by Elon Musk in 2002, became the first company to launch a successful all-civilian spaceflight in September, with a four-man crew aboard the ship Inspiration4 going on a three-day orbit of Earth.

If all goes according to plan, by the time you read this, SpaceX will have operated a successful trip to carry a crew to the International Space Station.

## MUSIC

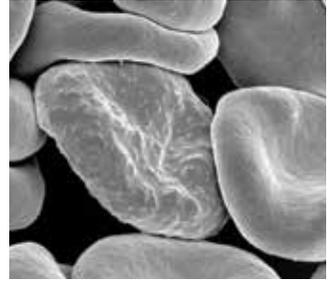
The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inducted its 2021 class last month, and it is full of hip-hop royalty. This year's 13 inductees: rapper-turned billionaire Jay-Z; LL Cool J, a pioneer of the art; and Gil

Scott-Heron, whose spoken-word poetry in the 1970s earned him the retroactive moniker, "Godfather of Rap."

Among the other inductees joining the hall this year are soulful singer Tina Turner, rock band Foo Fighters and bluesman Charley Patton.

## SPORTS

Another year, another so-so start for the Washington Football Team, who as FM News goes to press are off to a 2-6 start. One bright spot for the team has been the continued emergence of Terry McLaurin as an elite NFL wide receiver...which will only help if they can develop a franchise quarterback to pass him the ball.



Malaria cells



Rock and Roll Hall of Fame

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

After seven weeks, the surprising leader among all teams are the Arizona Cardinals, helmed by emerging superstar quarterback Kyle Murray and All-Pro receiver DeAndre Hopkins. There is plenty of season left, but at this point your strongest Super Bowl candidates are: Dallas Cowboys, Tampa Bay Buccaneers and the Buffalo Bills.

The WNBA wrapped its season with a surprising underdog getting hot and rolling through the playoffs. The Chicago Sky signed legendary forward Candace Parker before the season, which proved to be a smart move. The Sky shocked the top seed Connecticut Sun 3 games to 1 in the semifinal, then bested the Phoenix Mercury by the same margin in the finals.

The NBA season has only just begun, but so far the Chicago Bulls are looking better than expected in the Eastern Conference, led by scorers Zach LaVine and DeMar DeRozan. Golden State jumped out to 3-0 in the first week, and Steph Curry appears poised for a run at the scoring title. His partner in crime, Klay Thompson, should be back by January after suffering a season-ending injury last year.

Meanwhile in the DMV, the National Women's Soccer League's Washington Spirit won its 1st NWSL championship after 2-1 win over Chicago. The 2021 season was rocked by controversy and scandal,

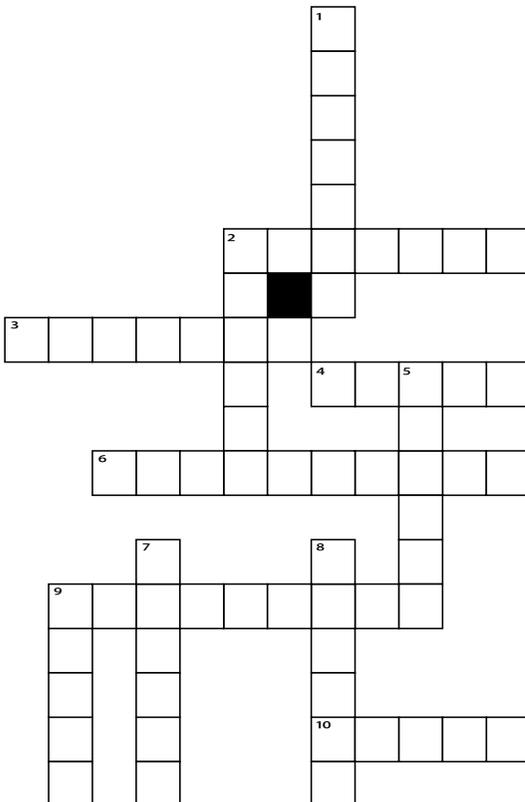
with the head coach being fired partway through the season after allegations of harassment and abusive behavior towards players. After the head coach's firing, the Spirit went undefeated for the rest of the season with the exception of two games forfeited due to COVID-19 protocols. The Spirit secured their 2-1 win over Chicago with a goal from Kelley O'Hara during extra time at the 97-minute mark. O'Hara sent a header past Chicago's Cassie Miller after a cross from Washington's Trinity Rodman.



The Washington Spirit celebrates defeating the Chicago Red Stars after the NWSL Championship held at Lynn Family Stadium on Saturday in Louisville, KY (Joe Robbins/ISI Photos/Getty Images)

## JOY CROSSWORD PUZZLE

*By MC, Free Minds Member*



### ACROSS

- It's impossible not to feel joy while riding a roller \_\_\_\_\_.
- Craving this? Have an Almond Joy.
- Feeding the \_\_\_\_\_ at the pond can be a relaxing, joyful pastime.
- Well-known Christmas carol: "Joy \_\_\_\_\_" (3 words).
- Where kids go before kindergarten to learn and have fun.
- When you are really happy, you feel \_\_\_\_\_ of the world (2 words).

### DOWN

- Building a \_\_\_\_\_ on a cold winter's day can be lots of fun.
- For some, going here on Sundays can bring them joy.
- Pleasures of the flesh; sensual pleasures.
- Going here for a Baconator and a Frosty can make everyone happy (except vegetarians!).
- What's more fun than eating a \_\_\_\_\_ at the ballpark? (2 words)
- A surprise or birthday one of these can be lots of fun.

Answers can be found on the back cover

# MEDITATION

By Kelli

What brings more joy than catching sight of a rainbow appearing magically on the horizon? Seriously, after weathering a storm, isn't there just a feeling of absolute elation to see that universal symbol of hope? A rainbow is a reminder to us that everything is going to be okay. A reminder that there is always goodness in the world!

For those of you who may be new to *The Connect*, the guided meditation requires a plan. The best option is if you can ask your cellie, or maybe an open-minded comrade on your unit to read the meditation aloud to you while you close your eyes (and don't forget to do the same for them after you finish!). If you don't have someone to partner with at the moment, you can read through the script a few times and then put your *Connect* issue down and meditate using what you can remember. Either way, I promise that it will be worth your effort!

We're going to envision the colors of the rainbow filling us up – each one settling at the different points in our bodies that are known as *chakras*. You may have heard the word *chakra* if you've ever practiced meditation or yoga. In Sanskrit, *chakra* refers to each of the main energy centers (nerve bundles and major organs) in your body.

You will breathe in each color, and then on the exhale, you'll repeat a phrase, or mantra. These words will help you to stay centered on your breath and to connect to your body. Feel free to repeat each step/color of the rainbow as many times as you want in order to truly envision and feel the color infusing your body! Let's do it!

*Start by finding a comfortable position...*

*Close or relax your eyes. Take a deep full breath in through the nose...*

*And exhale all the air out through your mouth...*

*Again, deep full breath in...*

*And exhale...*

*Now, as you take your next deep breath, imagine the color **RED** entering through your nose. Visualize it traveling all the way down your back to the bottom of your spine... Feel the red warming and relaxing your body and all of your muscles. As you exhale, gently say the words, "**I AM...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*Now, inhale and imagine the color **ORANGE**... breathe it deeply into your body... envision orange settling into your lower belly... As you exhale, gently say the words, "**I FEEL...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*Next, let's inhale the color **YELLOW**... breathe the color yellow deeply in through your nose and picture it traveling all the way down to your belly button, relaxing you even further... As you exhale, gently say the words, "**I DO...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*ake a deep breath in, and feel the color **GREEN** expanding across your chest*

*and through your heart. Now as you exhale, whisper the words, "**I LOVE...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*Next, breathe in **BLUE**, and imagine it settling right into your throat... As you exhale, gently say the words "**I SPEAK...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*Now breathe in **INDIGO** (a deep blue/purple color), and envision it filling up your forehead... as you exhale, repeat the words, "**I SEE...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*And finally, inhale deeply the color **VIOLET**, picturing it filling the crown of your head... and as you exhale, repeat the words, "**I UNDERSTAND...**"*

*Repeat for as many breaths as you like...*

*Continue breathing... focusing on the inhale... and then the exhale... Envision this beautiful rainbow inside of you...*

*Follow your breath in... and out.*

*I am, I feel, I do, I love, I speak, I see, I understand...*

*You are a whole and capable human being!*

*Feel each part of your body as it releases every last bit of tension on your exhales...*

*On your next inhalation, gently open your eyes, and return your attention to the room. You can repeat this meditation whenever you want to relax and also increase your focus on the present.*

Please let us know how this meditation worked for you. Were you able to truly see the colors filling you up? Did the mantras help you to feel all that you are capable of as a human being? Give us your feedback so we can ensure you all get the most possible from these meditations. If you have a place that you'd like to visit in our next meditation, just mail in your request. We'll try to develop a guided meditation that uses the visuals from that locale. Past destinations we've visited in our minds include Dubai, the ice hotels of Sweden, and the beaches of Hawaii. So as you can see, there are no limits. *Our minds are free!*



# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH D.A.

continued from page 10

After reading Vol 10, Issue 3, HH wrote in with advice for WH as well. Here's what WH asked in case you don't recall:

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

Dear WH,

*#TrillTalk, I completely understand your desire to be "alone." I'm not very "friendly." I'm not very sociable. I've been incarcerated for 20 years. I'm still as wary of people as I was when I got locked up just before my 20th birthday. On the flip side, I've met guys during my journey who've become close to me. Guys I've been in the trenches with, or just super cool with. One such guy was my celly for 4 years at the beginning of my bid. Through him, I had multiple pen pals. Later, I had none, and I became accustomed to bidding alone. I had my mom, and a couple of home girls who I spoke to periodically. But they had whole lives that didn't include me. I tried WriteAPrisoner, signed up right before I went to SMU. In the two years I was on there, I received 2 letters: both were generic messages from a Christian group. However, after getting on another site, I received a lot more mail, and a chance to share my thoughts with someone else. I ended up in a relationship with a woman 14 years older than me. I believe it had to be that way, because I think I was too far ahead of the younger women who wrote to me. It's been 7 years, about 4 of that without email/phone/visits, and one of the most beautiful aspects of our communication is that we lift each other up. We provide emotional/mental/moral support to each other. I didn't intend to fall into a relationship, it developed organically, but I'm glad for it. I have someone I can relate everything to without judgment or ridicule. I had a lot of people writing, but she stood out, and pushed out everyone else. I suggest you give the pen pal thing a try, be open and honest, you just might find what you never knew you needed.*

Sincerely,  
HH

*Interested in pen pals? Here are a few programs that you can contact:*

## Interfaith Action for Human Rights

Address: PO Box 55802,  
Washington, DC 20040  
Phone: 240-324-9160

Email: info@interfaithactionhr.org



## Black & Pink

Black & Pink is an open family of LGBTQ prisoners and "free world" allies who support each other. Contact Black & Pink for more information about their pen pal program.

Address:

2406 Fowler Ave, Suite 316  
Omaha, NE 68111

Phone: 531-466-3346

Email: members@blackandpink.org



## Justice Arts Coalition pARTner Project

The Justice

Arts Coalition's

pARTner project provides artists on the outside an opportunity to foster connection with artists in prison through letter correspondence and the exchange of creative works. Unlike typical penpal programs, the pARTner project's focus on the arts provides an immediate point of connection – a common ground shared by all who have felt the power of creative expression in shaping who we are, how we see the world around us, and how we see ourselves. For those participating in the pARTner project, art and creativity become the catalyst for mutual support, encouragement, and inspiration. Please note that the pARTner project is not intended to be a way to seek romantic relationships.

Address:

Justice Arts Coalition

PO Box 8261

Silver Spring, MD 20907





## **DID YOU KNOW?** **The Science of Joy**

*By Justin*

Among people who study the brain for a living, all agree that within those few pounds of pink mushy matter is a complex universe. Much remains mysterious up there,

though it is clear it is filled with electrical activity and chemicals – including serotonin, norepinephrine and dopamine – which regulate our mood and motivation.

Much of psychology's interest in how the levels of these chemicals change has to do mostly with pain. For instance, much research has looked into PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder); even so, as societal stigma has seemingly decreased around the condition, still much less is known about what is actually happening to the brain's chemistry.

Speaking for myself, I too had no idea until thoughts of self-harm and pervasive joylessness in the wake of a traumatic event had me seeking answers. What I learned allowed my body to experience joy again: the shame I felt for my panic, anxiety, and depression all had to do with my serotonin levels being out of wack.

Experiencing trauma, as I found, disrupts the release of all kinds of chemicals in the brain in response to catastrophic stressors. For me, most potent was serotonin, an all-important neurotransmitter which relays messages around the brain to support functioning; coping; and influence mood, sleep, fear, and appetite. Specifically, it is believed that serotonin aids in the creation of brain networks that can help manage stress and anxiety. So what were my doctor's orders? A medication which targets that serotonin pump and gets things up and running at normal levels. She also suggested pairing medication with therapy (particularly something called EMDR) as well as practical strategies like more exercise, foods like salmon, chicken, eggs, spinach, and milk that produce tryptophan, and more exposure to sunlight.

Especially with the medication, I was still skeptical. "If I prescribed you medication for low blood pressure, would you take that?" my doctor said. "I mean, absolutely," I stuttered. "Then why wouldn't you be open to a medication for low serotonin levels? It's just a different part of the same body." As some of my symptoms have vanished, and joy has taken off its coat and remained awhile: she was right then, and she's right now.

And yet, "joy," according to leading psychologist George Vaillant, remains psychology's "least-studied emotion." Vaillant,

though, has done his homework, and he reveals in his work a lot about how joy is different from and deeper than happiness. For starters, Vaillant, as he says in an article from Harvard Magazine, doesn't see happiness as an emotion, but a state of mind. Happiness, mostly about me and my survival, activates the sympathetic nervous system (which triggers the "fight or flight" response).

Joy, on the other hand, activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which controls the "rest and digest" response; this system, like the undercurrent beneath the waves, kicks in when threat and danger pass. Interestingly, children first smile, kittens first purr, and puppies first wag their tail – symbols of joy – at the same time: when the brain's fundamental elements begin to be effectively wired. In other words, the brain first becomes its own when it responds to another's face, is flooded with another's generosity, and is connected to something bigger than itself. In this way, joy is also a positive emotion, since it, unlike happiness, is connective. Joy is social, not just personal. It cannot be experienced in isolation. As Vaillant concludes: "We can laugh from either joy or happiness, [but] we weep only from grief or joy. Without the pain of farewell, there is no joy of reunion. Without the pain of captivity, we don't experience the joy of freedom."

The problem is, for people who have experienced trauma, joy is so hard to experience because the traumatized body is conditioned to exist in a state of fear, hyper-vigilance, threat, and danger. Thus, it is extremely difficult for the parasympathetic nervous system to actually activate. The traumatized body has unlearned the capacity to "rest and digest."

That said, there are ways to challenge the effects of trauma and allow the parasympathetic nervous system, the neurological foundation for experiencing joy, to take over. Some are more predictable: practicing meditation (see Kelli's guided meditation on page 30) visualization, deep breathing, repetitive prayers, mantras, doing an enjoyable activity, or spending time in a place your body knows is safe. Others are more surprising: for example, gently touching your lips with two fingers can activate the parasympathetic nervous system, since the lips are packed with parasympathetic fibers. Who knew?

Before we go, here's some questions to sit with: How would you describe what joy feels like in your body? Are there rituals you have to ground yourself and return to this joy? Has your joy ever felt subversive or dangerous in the context you found yourself?

## WHAT MAKES US LAUGH OR SMILE?

*For this issue, I asked each of the staff to share a joke, a funny story, a favorite comedian, or something else that makes them laugh or smile. As for me, I couldn't pick just one, so I included a few jokes. I hope these earn a grin or two. 😊 – Julia*

**PRISHNEE:** One thing I absolutely love are sitcoms. My favorites are New Girl, Brooklyn 99, and Friends. It's pretty much a guarantee that I will laugh watching any of these shows, and they're my go-to whenever I need to be cheered up.

**MELISSA:** I saw one of my favorite comedians about 2 years ago, Gary Owen. He headlined at a comedy club in DC, called DC Improv. It was a birthday gift to myself :) He passed right by my table I was sitting at and I was starstruck lol.

**CRAIG:** My favorite comedian is Martin Lawrence and my favorite TV show is Martin. I find joy being around positive people and just living and appreciating life.

**ALLEN:** A TV show that has brought me a lot of joy and laughs recently is Ted Lasso (thanks Kelli for the recommendation). It's about an American football coach who is hired to coach an English soccer team. Ted is relentlessly positive and kind which carries over to the team and the executives. Also, he's full of funny quotes. Some examples:

*"It's just a group of people who care, Roy. Not unlike folks at a hip-hop concert whose hands are not in the air."*

*"Your body is like day-old rice. If it ain't warmed up properly, something real bad could happen."*

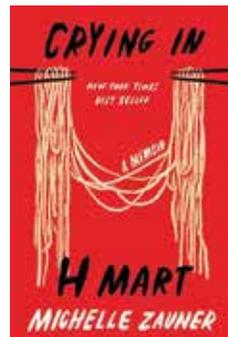
*"I believe in Communism. Rom-communism that is. If Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan can go through some heartfelt struggles and still end up happy, then so can we."*

# WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

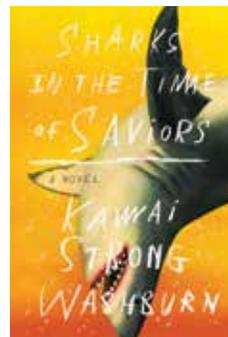
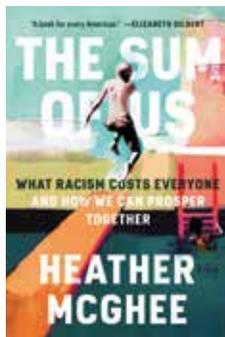
Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

- **AC: *Things We Lost in the Fire* by Mariana Enriquez**  
This book offers 12 fictional stories that were written in such a way that feel veridical (true), and so allows for the reader to be haunted by the horrors found inside the book. Boo! A good horror story book that will make the reader second-guess the choice to read it alone, in the dark, before going to sleep.



- **Neely: *Crying in H Mart: A Memoir* by Michelle Zauner**

This book is an exploration of food and memories, and how they are intertwined. The title references H Mart, a Korean grocery store chain. Zauner, who is Korean American, spent her childhood walking its aisles with her mother. While her mother was often strict and seemingly cruel at times, she loved her daughter deeply and expressed it the best way she knew how: through food. After losing her mother to cancer, Zauner finds first grief and then healing through making the Korean dishes of her mother. This book is a fascinating reflection on growing up Korean in the United States and how food connects us to who we are and who we love.



- **Tara: *The Sum of Us: What Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together* by Heather McGhee**  
We received this as part of a campaign from a huge Instagram, book lover, fan of ours who encouraged her followers to donate books to Free Minds. I love seeing what packages will come into the office and opening them up to find surprises. This one caught my eye. I'm just starting it, but it's already pulling me in! McGhee is an economics and social policy expert and now chairs the Board of Color of Change, which is an online progressive nonprofit civil rights advocacy organization. It was formed in 2005 in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in order to use online resources to strengthen the political voice of African Americans.
- **Julia: *Sharks in the Time of Saviors* by Kawai Strong Washburn**  
*Sharks in the Time of Saviors* is about a Hawaiian family whose lives are changed by a strange, seemingly miraculous incident in which one of the family's three children is saved from drowning by a group of sharks (fun fact: did you know that a group of sharks is called a "shiver"? Neither did I!). After this, the boy discovers that he has an uncanny gift for healing, with people from all over their island coming to him for help. The novel follows the three children as they grow up and explores the way the boy's gift affects them, for better and for worse. This was a really moving story about a complex family and their connections to their native Hawai'i and to each other, and the ways those connections could be fragmented or rebuilt. I loved this book – 5/5 stars!

# REAL WORLD OF WORK

*By Dwone, FM member, as told to Lancy*

I grew up in northeast DC. I grew up in an environment that led to me getting caught up in the streets and getting locked up. I was locked up for four years and came home in 2017. But I was locked back up in 2018 for a parole violation and came home at the end of 2019.

When I was little, I wanted to play sports – to be an NFL or an NBA player. Football and basketball were all I did growing up. I even played when in high school, but I got incarcerated and that set me back. So that's what turned me off from sports. I couldn't play when I was incarcerated, so I stopped thinking about it anymore.

Right now, I am a glazier apprentice. You know the new big buildings you see around DC? We work on those. We put in the glass, build the frames for glass planes, work on curtain walls, and weld. I mostly work on commercial properties.

When I came home in 2017, I got into the union – Local Union 963 which is for glaziers and architectural metal and glass workers. I knew I liked to do hands-on work, so I figured I'd get into an apprenticeship where I could do something with my hands. I don't mind going to class or studying. Through the Department of Employment Services on Minnesota Avenue, I interviewed for a couple of unions, but the glaziers were the ones who called me back. One month after my interview, they called and told me I made it. I was just coming home – they knew that I was in the halfway house – but it didn't matter to them. So from then on, I was in the union, but I didn't have a job yet. And then I got locked up again, but when I came home, I was still in their system. They told me to come down and take a drug test and then I could go straight to work.

When I first got the job, I was excited – not nervous or anxious. Just happy that after all the trouble I'd gotten into, I got a job that was going to teach me something and that I'd make money from. I was proud – it made me feel good, and I know it made my family feel good.

I work on projects all over DC. Right now we're working on one site that will be a hotel, apartments, and an office building. I've been on this site for almost three months. Most of the time, with a big company, you stay on the site for a while. But if you work for a small glass company, they might have you bouncing around. Most of my jobs are new construction – that's what it's called when you're building something up.

I also take the classes for my apprenticeship at the union hall. They have a classroom set up with all the stuff we are doing on the job so we can take what we learn back to the site with us. We are taught by a journeyman – that's what you become when you finish your apprenticeship. He answers all our questions – he's good. We have class every other Tuesday for eight hours, so we don't go to work that day. Class is from 7 am to 3:30 pm. I got two more years of being an apprentice. It's a four year program, and I am just starting my second year.

If people are interested in construction and like working with their hands, I recommend getting in a union apprenticeship program. You get an education for free. You learn a skill that

you can take with you. You also learn so much other stuff from being on a construction site around different types of construction workers – electricians, plumbers, drywallers. You learn from them, too.

I like putting in the frames and curtain walls because you gotta measure. Your measurements gotta be right. You gotta put these little plastic things to raise the glass or keep it on the level that it's supposed to be. I like to think and measurements and reading the print make me think. My favorite thing is when I get a job done and I can sit back and look at my work.

Overtime is what I like the least. I like doing overtime during the week. But when they want you to come in on the weekend, I'm like, "C'mon. I need some days off! You can do that during the week. I'll work all the overtime you want during the week." On the weekends, you need those two days off. I say you need a mental break and a physical break from the work.

Sometimes when we are setting glass, we have to be in the air or in the boom lift. Anytime you are six feet off the ground, you have to be tied off. They say that if you trust your harness, you should be good. Some people get a thrill from being in the air. I don't get a thrill or anything – I am not scared but I don't get a thrill. Some people will be walking across beams 50 feet up in the air with no harness. I'm not doing that. They always have safety people on the job. They have safety meetings and they tell you all that – how to be safe. For me, I make sure I'm safe – that I'm tied off when I'm in the air. I make sure I have glasses on if I'm cutting or if I'm drilling. It's really on you to keep yourself safe.

Have you ever seen the lift they go up in when they're fixing the street lights or something? A boom lift is similar to that. So when you're in a boom lift, you gotta strap in – they have a lot of bounce to them. Once, I saw a boom lift going kinda fast and it hit a bump, and one of the men came up outta the lift. He was strapped in, so he was hanging from it. The one who was driving lowered the lift down. The man was shaken up but okay. Probably one of the strangest things I've seen. I don't think too many accidents are funny but...sometimes they are, you know what I'm saying?

My dream job is to own my own business. I have a couple of ideas, but they change so much. I don't know exactly what it's going to be. When I know, I'll let you know. I just want to own something that will make some money and provide for my people.

I have been blessed to turn my life around. My joy is the job and them teaching me this trade I can take on for the rest of my life.

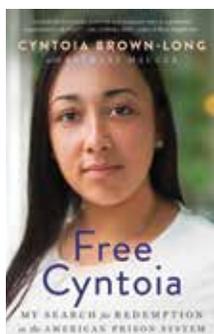


# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

## Free Cyntoia

with Neely



Hello Free Minds readers! I'm sending a huge, glowing shoutout to everyone who shared their responses to our latest BAM book, *Free Cyntoia* by Cyntoia Brown Long. This memoir follows the journey of Cyntoia Brown Long, who was sentenced to life as a teenager. 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. It's not too late to share your thoughts with us! Keep your responses coming and we'll be sure to share them in the next issue. Here's what some of you had to say:

**behavior and self-destructive choices she made early in her life? Have any of those same things influenced you in your own life?**

**RB:** I went through the exact same thing as Cyntoia. When I was a child, I couldn't stay out of trouble, and at the same time, I was labelled very intelligent. Cyntoia had the same mental health problems so many young, bright, hyperactive, and obsessive compulsive children have. You're intelligent, but you can't control your emotions. This makes people react badly to you, which causes you to become frustrated and cranks up your negative emotional responses, making people, again, react badly to you; the cycle continues until you self-destruct or figure out how to deal with your mental difficulties on your own.

**MV:** I think the biggest thing responsible for Cyntoia's negative behavior was her thinking that she was different and believing it. This belief translated to low self-esteem, insecurities, and people pleasing. She needed to find her image in outside sources, and these were all factors in her crime. I relate a lot. I grew up being physically abused by my mother. I thought I was different and that nobody cared. I was a straight-A student, but because of what I believed, nobody could convince me otherwise. I dropped out, ran the streets, and sought the respect, acceptance, and love of someone who was 27 years old when I was only 14.

**GO:** She had an undiagnosed hurt and pain from being neglected by her biological mother and not being accepted

**1. Cyntoia tries desperately to understand why she rebelled so much growing up. What do you think was most responsible for the negative**

amongst her peers. What caused me to be rebellious was also my peers, amongst whom I wanted to be accepted – even though I was raised in a two-parent home, with love.

**MC:** Rebellion does not always have to be negative. But in Cyntoia's case, and mine also, I believe that after experiencing such a profound amount of trauma, and not being afforded the necessary therapy, etc., it led to juvenile institutions. The negative behavior was a cry for help. Had the thought process been properly addressed early on, Cyntoia would have never had to be imprisoned.

**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?**

**MC:** I do believe opinions can be changed regarding the criminal legal system. I wish that more people cared about the makings of these institutions. The "lock 'em up" mentality has got to stop somewhere! If more people cared to not only have conversations, but investigate what happens here, I think they'd be outraged. They'd also begin to understand recidivism (Free Minds cares!).

**GO:** I think it will help somewhat if people from opposite backgrounds talked about the social injustice of our biased criminal legal system. So many people in society are oblivious to its unbalanced scale. They either see it as fair or simply don't care. We need to come together and paint a picture that people who have never interacted with the criminal legal system can see.

**RB:** Society's opinion would be changed for the better by having dialogue with a self-developed Cyntoia Brown: someone who is articulate, someone who understands actual causes and effects and knows how to communicate solutions. But society's opinion is not the only factor at play. Look at the issue of guns and violence. Society's opinion is overwhelmingly more powerful than gun control laws and stringent background checks – and yet change does not occur. So there's more than just society's opinion at work in the criminal/incarceration system. The political groups that use incarceration to weaken certain demographics have to be countered directly. No amount of dialogue will bring any meaningful result.

**MV:** Definitely. I've witnessed it in my college professors who compliment us on our work and how their perceptions change through their dialogue with us on social issues and other topics. I think the media plays a major role in those negative beliefs about prisoners/criminals. They sensationalize crimes constantly on TV, and so their beliefs are forced upon them instead of growing organically through dialogue.

### **3. 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?**

**MC:** I grew up enjoying learning in school until I discovered what was going on in my community, outside of school. Real life experiences are painful! I can't say that they are the best teachers for everybody, though. Since being incarcerated, I've learned more from reading than real life experiences. I think balancing book education and life education is the best way to go about things.

**MV:** I think life (before I was reading) was confusing, but books helped me to better understand what exactly I was experiencing and realize that I wasn't alone in the things I felt and experienced. I think being book-educated and life-educated go hand-in-hand, they complement each other. Books provide information and help prepare, while life presents opportunities for us to practice what we've learned.

**GO:** I've learned from a mixture of both: books and real life. I think it's better to be educated from both books and life education, because books give you the blueprint and real life is the application of your book education.

**RB:** Without life experience, learning from books is like reading about a country you've never been to. Intellectual knowledge helps to clarify life experience, but it can't replace it.

### **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?**

**GO:** I never go against my word, and I never say it is not possible. Why?... Our word is very important to keep because it shows we're dependable. I never say something's not impossible because this country was structured by thoughts that were first said to be "impossible." Now look at how far technology has brought us.

**MC:** I would say it's a tie between being open-minded and never being anyone but myself. Being open-minded for me is about accepting ideas, etc. from others that could help me grow/evolve. Never being anyone other than myself is important because I love myself. If I must change myself to "fit in" or be "accepted", those situations are not for me. I respect everybody's right to live how they like; I expect the same.

**MV:** I think a rule for me is not to lose faith, no matter what. My mother instilled in me a strong faith in a higher power (Tah) and better days ahead – no matter how dark, no matter how sad.

### **5. Free Cyntoia explores the narrative around "trafficking" and how it's often misunderstood. 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?**

**RB:** Understanding "sex trafficking" personalizes the story. It makes you see the actual victim in the story, the children who are victims of sex traffickers.

**MC:** After reading Cyntoia's emotions and truly feeling her devastation, I wish I could apologize to the females I've lied to, disrespected, cheated on, and manipulated. While I've never trafficked anyone, I'm just as guilty as a trafficker. Reading Cyntoia's book opened my mind and heart to the struggles girls and women suffer. I cannot bear to imagine the hurt I've caused females I've been in relationships with and how that hurt shaped the way they felt about men and themselves.

**GO:** I've always seen making a female have sex without her free will as trafficking. No matter how society tries to sugarcoat it, it's trafficking... A terrible crime!

**MV:** I think it only strengthened my sense of passion to raise awareness and support causes against trafficking. To read about her experiences made me tear up, made my stomach turn, and sparked a lot of negative thoughts towards those who exploited her. It was bold and courageous of her to tell her story.

# AROUND THE WORLD

*By Ian, Free Minds Friend*

The Covid-19 pandemic had been keeping us all isolated and inside for a long time. So me and my girlfriend decided that it was time to make a change and hit the open road. We needed to be reminded of what is possible and to re-ignite the imagination that was dampened by our isolation. We packed our bags and drive across the country. Our destination: Missoula, Montana, 2,288 miles west of DC.

Compared to a lot of countries, the US is large and has a variety of landscapes. It has access to both the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. In addition, there are roads that connect almost everything and allow easy access through otherwise hostile terrain. Through mountains and plains, we expected the trip to reveal the natural beauty that our country has to offer – outside the city limits. With this vision in mind, we picked up coffee for the road, turned on our favorite music, and set off. We broke our drive into three days.

From the DC area, we merged onto interstate 70 (I-70) and took it north to I-76, through the rocky hills and open fields of western Pennsylvania. We drove into tunnels that cut through the inside of a mountain. We tried to play an old family game of seeing who could hold their breath all the way through the tunnel, but it seemed to go on forever and we both had to take a breath!

We coasted around the edges of cliffs as we traversed the Appalachian mountain range. After about six hours on I-70, we merged onto I-80 and coasted easily into the flat midwest, across Ohio and Indiana and to our first night's destination: Michigan. We found our space for the night, pitched our tent and prepared for another day of driving.

On our second day, we set our sights on our second destination: the Badlands of South Dakota, a full 16 hours west of Michigan. My grandfather on my mom's side is from this part of the country and I felt the ancestral pull of the land. The indigenous Lakota named this area the Badlands because the rough terrain, extreme heat, and dry climate made it hard to live there.

This portion of the drive put us on I-90 west, the road that would eventually deliver us to Missoula, MT. We set into a routine and began to notice highway culture and etiquette. The right lane was the slow lane. Trucks, RVs, and people new to long distance drive stayed in this lane. The left lane was for people in a hurry or for people who didn't like to look at the bumper of other cars—and the middle lane was for those who couldn't decide. If you merge between lanes, it is polite to use your turn signal. And if you are riding in the left lane and someone comes up behind you, my advice is to move out of the way, because the left lane is for people in a hurry (you can imagine what I mean when I say in a "hurry" lol).

We broke this day up into several long stretches and visited some of the midwest's favorite type of tourist attraction: unnecessarily oversized statues. We stopped in Minnesota at the 50-foot-tall Jolly Green Giant statue, and in South Dakota at the 12-foot-tall Prairie Dog statue and 150-foot-long Brontosaurus statue. On our second night we decided to pitch a tent and camp inside Badlands National Park – a decision we second-guessed, once the wind and cold found its way into our tent!

On our third and final day, we begrudgingly pulled ourselves from the warmth of our sleeping bags and buckled up for one last day of driving. This drive took us out from the plains of the American interior and into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. This day presented us with all of what

Montana has to offer and all the driving was worth it.. We found out why people call it the "Big Sky" state; the horizon seemed to stretch farther here than anywhere else we had been. There were no buildings or freeways to interrupt the great blue divide between land and endless sky. The drive took us through hills covered in golden grass and mountains with snow-capped peaks and mighty pine trees. We drove through winding valleys and along steaming rivers, until eventually our journey had come to an end. We had arrived in Missoula.

Overall, our adventure took us 33 hours of driving. Looking back, we realized just how big the US is and how much space there really is outside of our homes, and how quickly our imaginations and perspectives changed when our walls became sky and endless roads. Our trip brought us healing after the depression of being stuck in one place for so long. I know you all are going through that. I hope this travelogue can bring you some joy and take you out there for a brief time.



The Badlands, South Dakota



Big Sky, Montana

## WHAT MAKES US LAUGH OR SMILE?

**JULIA:** I couldn't pick just one joke, so here are three for your reading pleasure!

Joke #1: There are two muffins in an oven. One muffin says to the other, "Wow, it's really hot in here." The other muffin says, "Oh my god, a talking muffin!"

Joke #2: A dog walks into a bar and asks the bartender if they're hiring. The bartender says, "A talking dog! Maybe you should try the circus?" The dog says, "Does the circus need an accountant?"

Joke #3: A man from Mexico is visiting the United States. On his first day in the US, he realizes that he forgot to pack socks. He goes to the nearest corner store to see if they have any, but he doesn't speak English and the man working in the store doesn't speak Spanish. He keeps asking for "calcetines" but the guy in the store doesn't understand him. He just grabs different items from behind the counter to see if they're right. Batteries? No. Cigarettes? No. Stamps? No. This goes on for a while, with both men getting more and more frustrated, until finally the cashier grabs a pair of socks.

Elated, the Mexican man yells, "¡Eso si que es!"

To which the cashier responds, "Well if you could spell it, why didn't you say so?!"

("Eso si que es," which roughly translates to "that's it," is pronounced S-O-C-K-S)

**JUSTIN:** Here's a little blurb about a person I look back on when I need a laugh: Adam would have my hand-crafted, gourmet PB&Js only one way: *crustless. Isn't the crust the sandwich's best part?* is a separate, debatable question, but what was always clear was when part one of dinner was over. *Crash!* was the classic shock that alerted all he was done with foster-care quality grub, thrusting his plate off the table. Before we knew it, he was pulling his stained white t-shirt over his shoulders and flicking it to the floor. A silent signal our staff could easily interpret: *cut it with this rice, get me some PB&J!*

Well before being welcomed into the Free Minds family :) I spent my free time in school working in Boston's foster care system. As a five year-old boy with autism, Adam and I developed what I felt to be a special connection. I always looked forward to seeing him, and I look back at him now in gratitude, almost daily. I marveled at the intelligence he demonstrated even without the written and spoken word that makes Free Minds tick (non-verbal, his language was mediated through a communication board that he tapped to construct sentences such as "I-am-happy.") And I exhausted myself with his love for patterns, chasing him around our circular unit without end. His was, indeed, a subversive joy.

# FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: NOURISH

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For the last issue of 2021, we're focusing on the theme of Nourish. Nourish means to feed, or to cause something or someone to develop or grow stronger. For this issue, we would love to hear all about what nourishes you – what gives you strength, courage, and hope for the future? What helps you build yourself up? In what ways can we nourish each other and our communities? What or who nourished you in your childhood, or throughout your life? Are there favorite foods that bring you joy? Do you have an awesome commissary recipe? Let's come together and share some enriching food for thought (see what I did there?) on the page.

Until then, take care and **KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!**

### CROSSWORD ANSWERS:

**ACROSS:** 2. Coaster; 3. Coconut; 4. Ducks; 6. To The World; 9. Preschool; 10. On Top

**DOWN:** 1. Snowman; 2. Church; 5. Carnal; 7. Wendys; 8. Hot Dog; 9. Party



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