

November/December 2022
Vol. 11, Issue 5

Free minds Connect

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ISSUE**

celebration

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ON THE INSIDE**

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Free Minds Celebrators,

By the time this issue reaches you, a new year will have begun, with billions around the world participating in a shared tradition of celebrating the end of another year and hoping that better things lie ahead. While different cultures might celebrate on different days of the year, all share the same general intent. On behalf of all of us at Free Minds headquarters, Happy New Year!

My wish for you this new year is that you make 2023 a year of daily celebration. Celebrate the special person that you are. I was talking with my good friend Mary recently about this issue's theme. She has been leading a DC nonprofit for the past 20 years that teaches young African American boys what they call the four C's, which they believe are all essential for life: Connect, Create, Contribute, and Celebrate. Mary and her team live daily what social psychologists have found to be true: when we engage in even mini celebrations, we buffer ourselves against life's challenges and stress. So take time to commemorate and celebrate you: you have survived another year, and created, contributed, and connected. You are a special person on a journey of personal and societal evolution. Let's celebrate!

One great way to celebrate the new year is to read and relish this incredible issue filled with wisdom, joy, beauty, and, most of all, a community of support here for you in the year ahead.

In the Real World of Work on page 33, you will read about Damon's enthusiasm for carpentry and the positive energy he brings to the construction projects he works on. As Damon says, "I feel like I've chosen a career that literally rebuilds my neighborhood." He has been renovating the school that he and his whole family attended for years. As he says, "Since the previous generation said the building was dark and sad, we recreated the new school to be light and hopeful for future generations. In fact, since I live around the corner, I now workout on the [school] playground that I helped assemble." Now that's something to celebrate.

Free Minds friend Lashonia shares her wisdom as she tells us about her passion for restorative justice and community

healing on page 16. We are so honored to have Lashonia as our guide in our restorative justice project, and as a mentor and coach in advocacy and leadership training. She is leading a movement of deep change. As she shares, "If we just listen to the people that are closest to this problem and support them and I'll say re-power them – I don't want to say empower because people have power, they just are not always in a position to really use their power. If we could just re-power people and create opportunities for them to develop the systems that they need to address this problem... I think we could fix this problem."

One of the many systems that needs transformation is family court. Free Minds paralegal DJ outlines what is currently available to help families navigate these complex situations (page 7). We must provide more of the foundational resources, opportunities, and healing that families need to thrive. On page 6, Aneka tells us how she and her family of choice celebrated each other during and after incarceration. It's truly uplifting. Pete lets us in on how he celebrated his homecoming after decades away (page 27), and our Advice Men share ways to celebrate the holidays, even though you are separated from your loved ones (page 10). A famous play that ran at Lorton, a prison in Virginia, called holidays the "Hollow Days," but as our wise writers say, we can still create meaningful and authentic celebrations despite these barriers.

Finally, you can read about ways people celebrate the new year across the globe (page 38). I love learning and incorporating new traditions. If you are still struggling to find something to celebrate, read the poetry in this issue and you will not be able to resist celebrating the act of resistance that is writing. The creative force that cannot be suppressed no matter what the conditions. Thank you all for being such resilient people filled with hope and strength. I raise a glass and toast you!

Until next time
Tara

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

Next Issue's Theme: Expectations

The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing magazine 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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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., Shawn, Roderick, Antoine, Davon, Jahmeze, Deonte, Stephon, Kavon, Damani, Kelvin

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 HQ

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

By Yamini

October Cookout

Free Minds staff, members, families, and friends joined together at Anacostia Park on October 15th to enjoy food, activities, and company.

It was an opportunity to meet with so many of our longtime members who we were unable to meet in person due to the pandemic, along with our newly returning members. One member drove all the way from North Carolina

so that he could introduce his three young children to his FM family! Another brought his wife and son from Baltimore. Community is central to the Free Minds family and we definitely felt it, with so many members bringing their families, friends, and children to join together in celebration.



New Peer Support Graduation Cohort

We are so excited to recognize our newest graduating cohort of the Free Minds Peer Support program. The graduates have completed a 12-week training program where members learn, build, and practice skills important for trauma-informed care, social emotional wellness, healthy boundaries, and crisis response. Peer support is integral to reentry and we find it important to stress the importance of building strong community networks and sources of support among the FM family. After graduation in December, Peer Supporters will be partnered with a newly returning member to share in easing the transition back home. The Peer Supporter serves as a source of encouragement and a reminder that no one is alone in this journey.

November Write Night: Restorative Justice Theme

Our November Write Night was filled with our usual eager participants and powerful sharing about the role poetry can play to overcome hard times and connect us to each other. Our speakers added an extra emphasis on restorative justice and the healing energy of exchanging poetry. Lashonia (read an interview with her on page 16) joined Carlos, Craig, and Quenten, sharing her passion to bring peace and community healing to DC. Craig spoke about the impact of his relationship with the father of his victim, while Quenten read aloud his profound poem on forgiving himself. Several community participants noted how deeply it impacted them and their outlook on forgiveness and community healing.

Life Stories Program

A new group of Free Minds members, alongside our very own Ms. D, have begun the latest session of the Life Stories Program in partnership with The Theatre Lab, which is a D.C. based nonprofit school for the dramatic arts. The Life Stories program includes 8-10 weeks of workshops, in which participants learn how to use their own life experiences to create original dramatic works that they will then perform to an audience of friends, family, and community. The Life Stories Program aims to engage its members to think creatively, critically, and beyond what they thought they could achieve. The final performance is January 31, and we will let you know how it all goes. We know it will be Oscar worthy!

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the July/August 2022 Connect Wealth and the September/October 2022 Connect Belonging.

On Wealth:

SK: Wealth should not be measured only by money. For me, there is no greater wealth than being in excellent health. Without proper health, there is no wealth. I never thought about this until I came to prison and seen so many in poor health. So, for me, wealth is all about health. Only now do I see that we must pursue wealth in community with others. It should never be a singular pursuit. We should all be building up each other together.

AHA: I really enjoyed Gene's piece in Family Ties... Many of us did not know a need from a want, and now do and like he said the strong ties and family support gets us by and wealth to most means so much more and with the means he mentioned it can take you many places. Learning about

financial literacy is something I want to learn more about myself since I have seen others like Gene express this... The wealth of knowledge in this issue alone is the key to success so I enjoyed every perspective on this theme. The DC photos are always a delight to see all the new sites or things that has been remodeled over the years so thanks for sharing. It is good to see our Hall of Fame book list building also. It is so many books that I can't wait to have the freedom to enter a library or bookstore and engage in any books I want!

On Belonging:

MH: I am very happy to belong and be part of Free Minds Book Club. I always look forward to receiving the letters, the books, the *Connect* issues, and to respond. It is wonderful. It makes me feel happy to know that there is such wonderful people who care.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Celebrate good times, come on!" - Kool and the Gang, American R&B/soul/funk band

"I forgot what we were celebrating. Because we were always celebrating something, a new job, a new poem, a new love, a new dream." - Audre Lorde, Black feminist poet

*"Celebrate your ability to
feel joy and sadness
Celebrate your ability to feel!"*

Only then will we be free to feel" - Tupac Shakur, rapper

*"I leave you to your ceremony of grieving
Which is also of celebration
Given when an honored humble one
Leaves behind a trail of happiness
In the dark of human tribulation
None of us is above the other
In this story of forever" - Joy Harjo, first Native American National Poet Laureate*

"When you fail is when you need to celebrate." - Stephen Tobolowsky, American actor

*"Celebrate when you're half done, and the finish won't be half as fun."
- Lemony Snicket (pen name), author of the Series of Unfortunate Events series*

*"It is better to lead from behind and to put others in front, especially when you celebrate victory when nice things occur. You take the front line when there is danger. Then people will appreciate your leadership."
- Nelson Mandela, first democratically elected and Black head of state of South Africa*

"What we have to do... is to find a way to celebrate our diversity and debate our differences without fracturing our communities." - Hillary Clinton, 67th US Secretary of state, former presidential candidate, and former First Lady of the United States



Tupac Shakur

FAMILY TIES: THERE'S ALWAYS A REASON TO CELEBRATE!

By Aneka

When I was incarcerated at 16 years old, I had no idea how, from that moment on, my life would never be the same. After years of my mother saying "risk and consequences", I finally understood the significance of that statement. I took a risk and my consequence was eight years in federal prison. You would think that I would have had nothing to celebrate after realizing that for the next eight years, my life would consist of count times, riots, and isolation. But I still found reasons to celebrate.

Birthdays and holidays are often a depressing time while incarcerated. I have learned that if you surround yourself with people that care about you though, you can make the most of those special occasions – even behind bars. There were women throughout my incarceration who went above and beyond to celebrate my birthday every year. I remember for my 21st birthday, the women in my unit threw me a casino-themed birthday party. They even built me a functional slot machine! They made champagne flutes, poker chips, and made me the biggest meal ever with all of my favorites! Even now that I'm home, some of the women that I met in prison are still close friends of mine. We travel to see each other and are there for every major moment in each others' lives. Being incarcerated should be a time where we come together and support each other. We are all in this predicament together so why not make the most of it?

When I was released, the halfway house helped me get two jobs. I was a head baker at a cafe and worked for a commercial cleaning company that specialized in construction clean up. Although the money was great and I was good at what I did, I wasn't satisfied with these jobs. I wanted a long-term career. Something I could put my all

into because it aligned with my passions and my purpose in life – helping others. I worked other jobs that provided me with temporary happiness but I still wasn't fully satisfied. I eventually applied to a nonprofit that provided housing for families and healthcare for those in need. I also applied to an airline because of my passion for traveling (I wanted the flight perks, haha!). Surprisingly, I was hired by both jobs within the same week. Unfortunately, because of my background check, both employers had to rescind their offers. I was beyond disappointed. I started to feel like the only thing I would be able to do was customer service and custodial work because I had a record.

I reached out to Free Minds Book Club to see if they had any open positions for employment. They were looking to fill a Program Assistant position so I sent them my resume. They were very impressed with the experience and skills that I had gained in my work with another nonprofit, and they hired me. It was truly a dream come true. Even when it seems like nothing is going right in your life and you have no hope for your future, remember these words: Your life is what you make it! If you see obstacles in your path, break through them. Never let negativity win. Be positive and everything will fall into place when you least expect it.





JUST LAW

By DJ, Free Minds Member and Paralegal

Family law involves legal matters that impact families. It includes the legal situations that people related by blood, marriage, or adoption may encounter. Whether you are faced with a pending divorce or need help in resolving a child custody or visitation rights issue, these legal challenges can seem overwhelming.

The Washington, DC Superior Court Family Court Operations Division deals with all kinds of legal disputes having to do with children and the breakdown of relationships. Most seriously, the Family Court will deal with cases where the government intervenes in a family to protect children from harm. The Family Court can issue a "non-molestation order" telling someone not to contact, harass, threaten or be violent to another person such as a former partner. Or it can make an "occupation order" preventing someone from, for example, living in or returning to the family home. Family courts have been known to dole out punishments too. For example, any violation of a protection order can result in criminal proceedings and if found guilty, the accused can be punished with up to one year in jail and/or a fine.

A Family Court order is legally binding. Failure to comply with the court order amounts to contempt of court and a person can, as a last resort, be committed to prison for contempt. Interestingly, a parent cannot be held in contempt though, simply for failing to take up the contact given.

Even if you know it is for the best, divorcing or separating from your children's other parent is stressful as you consider the impact on your kids. Coming up with a custody and visitation agreement with your former partner or spouse may seem impossible. Family Court is the arena for addressing such concerns. In an especially contentious or high conflict separation or divorce, you may need a very detailed agreement that the court will enter as an order. Such a Family Court order is given full faith and credit similar to an order from criminal and civil courts. One of the major issues that play out in Family Court relates to child custody and child support. This is something that many Free Minds members have faced.

For more information, you can reach out to the DC Family Court Central Intake Center, located in the Moultrie Courthouse at 500 Indiana Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001. If you have a friend or family member on the outside to assist you, they can visit the Family Court Self-Help Center, a free walk-in and call-in service that provides unrepresented people with general legal information in a variety of family law matters (such as divorce, custody, visitation, child support). It is located inside the Moultrie Courthouse in Rm. JM-570. They also take calls on (202) 879-1212.

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

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DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*



Many kids who grew up in Anacostia have attended the Thurgood Marshall Academy Public Charter School (right). It was established in 2001 by students at Georgetown Law School as the city's first law-themed public school. In 2005, it relocated to its current spot across from Anacostia Metro Station. Even if you didn't attend this school, you've probably passed by it! Notice the brand new apartment building across the street. This is a small peek into the gentrification that is happening in Anacostia.

Right around the corner on Howard Rd. SE, you'll find this mural. Can you identify the woman who is portrayed with Dr. King?



Washington, DC, Chinatown was once home to thousands of Chinese immigrants. Did you know that in the 1880's it was actually located south of Pennsylvania Avenue? It moved to its current location in the 1930's. Once a bustling cultural center, the neighborhood was heavily damaged during the 1968 riots. The added impact of gentrification and development has left fewer than 300 Chinese Americans now living in the neighborhood. The iconic Friendship Arch was erected in 1986 to celebrate DC's friendship with Beijing.

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*



Some of you will definitely know this place... Potomac Gardens (aka "The Gardens") in Capitol Hill, Southeast DC, is a housing project that was built all the way back in 1967. But did you know that Potomac Gardens is featured in several novels, including James Patterson's *Cross* and George Pelecanos' *The Cut*?



This is a new mural on the 1200 block of U Street NW. Behind it, you can see the mural of jazz musician Duke Ellington on the side of the iconic True Reformer Building. Did you know this was the first building in the United States to be designed, financed, built, and owned by the Black community after Reconstruction?



The Capital One Arena (shown here from the 7th Street NW side) is the home of the NHL's Washington Capitals, and NBA's Washington Wizards. The arena holds 20,356 people!



This is the corner of 8th and H Streets, NE which is pretty much at the hub of what's now called "The H Street Corridor," and home to many new restaurants, shops and bars.

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!

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

Do you have advice for the Advice Man? 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,

As I write this, the holidays are fast approaching. And yet, I am locked up. I love the holidays and I absolutely love to celebrate. How can I ward off depression and celebrate in an authentic way, despite being physically confined?

I am the mother of a young son and daughter. I face a similar challenge when I think about my children's accomplishments. I want to be there with them to reward them and celebrate together. But I have nothing but calls and letters to offer. How can I truly celebrate with them in a meaningful way?

Thank you for your help in advance!

Sincerely,
BB

Seasons Greetings BB & FM Family,

We appreciate you BB and your thought-provoking question that plagues proud parents like us in our temporary positions. Let's start by taking an honest look at ourselves and digging deep to know better and do better. Let's also take this moment to apologize for our shortcomings that played us out of our positions to co-exist, co-lead, cooperate, and co-love with our co-parents—those caring and dependable parents and other individuals who have stepped in to cover for us in our absence. You all are truly some resourceful and steadfast beings. You are the ones who've stuck in there without us, for our children, and for us. THANK YOU!

So BB since this is all about you and parenthood, I do know what you mean and how you feel when it comes to being a loving parent in a close-knit family during the holidays and being physically missing from celebrations. Don't worry sister, all you have to do is focus on finishing your bid wiser than you arrived and staying as closely connected to your children as circumstances allow. Please don't devalue your contributions to your children and

their emotional bank accounts with beliefs like "I have nothing but calls and letters to offer." These are enormously valuable to our children. They want "us."

BB, your incarceration doesn't mean you can't continue to share old family memories and traditions. You can still celebrate special occasions with them. You just have to get creative! It is true that at the moment you can't physically be present, but, the bright side is you can still cultivate a loving spiritual and emotional bond with your children to fulfill their needs. Our actions speak louder than anything, including our current circumstances. It's the small meaningful sacrifices and sentimental beliefs, actions, and things that cement our unconditional love with our children. So, everyday we are alive is a reason to celebrate and praise a Higher Power and Self. Call and write as much as you can, love harder than you can imagine, be an example to your children; It's this example that will shape your children and pass down sincere rich family traditions in character.

Okay, let's dig deeper now into how we can be improved supportive and balanced parents, who ward off depression; and who celebrate in an authentic and rewarding way. Overcoming depression starts with our mental health and engaging individually in psychology services, parenting classes, or other activities that lift our spirits, educate us, and encourage us..

Financially, we can continue to reward and take care of our children by leaning on both institutional and outside resources and assistance. Business and finance classes have taught me how to save for rainy days, emergencies, and special occasions. I've also learned how to utilize programs like religious services' "Angel Tree" project to provide for and reward my children when they deserve it. If we desire better for our children, we must change our beliefs and actions to nurture, provide, and protect our children.

Let me hand it off to my dear brothers in advice who want to share with you BB:

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

EG: Your dilemma, unfortunately, is common among inmates world-wide. But especially among those of us who came into the federal system in the mid-70's. The phone policy then was draconian, to say the least. We got very few phone calls each year. In spite of that, I was still able to maintain a loving relationship with my two young sons for 11 years. I personally believe that you celebrate with children in a meaningful way each time they receive your letters and hear your voice. Mine did!

LW: Hello BB! You are not alone in this situation. I used to face the same thing years ago. But once I started to read and research and understand these holidays, it became clear to me that they wasn't designed for me with their capital gain. With the rich getting richer and poor staying stuck in poverty. So you need not worry about a day designed to make people spend money. Just stay focused on being connected to your children and family, who are your support system, and who will help you endure the time that you have left in prison. True celebration is sharing all your love for them and the love they share with you.

BM: Thank you for sharing, and for allowing me to share. Remember, though you're locked up, you're not locked out. Sometimes these environments alone can steal our joy, and rob us of what little peace we're holding on to. The challenge, though easier said than done, is not to let it. Keep that love for the holidays and celebrate regardless. Get creative. Think outside the box, instead of focusing on what you can't do. Create a list of all the things you can. Never underestimate the power of community, the power of like-minded people around you, fighting your same fight. Get together and be creative, brainstorm, institute something you all can contribute, that would not only shape and form all of your Holidays for the better; but also leave a deep impression with your children and loved ones. Indulge in the simple things. Reward your children by always gifting them with amazing energy.

Best,
TS

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Christmas Baby

By TH

Born on December twenty-fifth
Instead of a TV, I was my mother's gift
Definitely wasn't expecting me until New Year's Day
On this day, when kids get sweaters and toys
My mom wanted a television, but got a baby boy

Untitled

By KS

I give you this, the
bitter and the sweet
It holds my heart,
Can you not hear
It beat?
So poor a gift to
Put within your
Hand -
Apples and pencils!
- but you will
Understand.

Celebration

By JS

Can you see my heart smiling, celebrating a Free Mind
Every day is a blessing, if only we would realize.
Love who you are and always stay true,
Encourage others to do the same and we'll harvest good fruit
Blessings on blessings is always a reason to celebrate
Raising my hands in du'a, to Allah the Most High belong all praise
All will be well people, insha Allah, just trust in The Sublime
Take care of your heart by taking care of your time
Islam is my Deen, surah 5 ayat 3
Occupying my mind with beneficial knowledge so to see
Nirvana: an ideal condition of rest, joy, and also peace

Flow

By DAT

Forever I can write or shine light or
let my mind develop a plight
On how to ascend or pedal up the next flight or height
with my eyes locked tight on the goals of the flow,
I write from what I imbibe

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Celebrations!

By Gene

This is the time of year that always feels great... Love instead of hate...

I can relate... It's time to celebrate!

It's time to pay homage to all the wonders and splendors...

Blessings and dinners...

Snowflakes and Winter...

Beginning and ending... year in a flash...

So we must celebrate each precious moment that pass...

No moment will last... Forever

So let's celebrate and create beautiful memories together...

It's all for the better... And better we'll be

If we celebrate life while we're living and free...

A time full of glee... Joy and peace...

Smiling and dancing while enjoying a feast...

Cheers! Let's toast to all things in creation...

Inspiration... Jubilation... Foundation... Elation!

There's no separation when we unite in celebration...

Take education... That's something to regard...

It's all cause to celebrate... Rewards for working hard...

Accomplishments fulfilled or achieving your goals...

Having options to travel down any productive road...

From any day to holidays... There's always something to commemorate...

Something to appreciate... And something to shine light upon...

So let's Celebrate!!!!

To Belong Is To Be

By KW

I'm cut from what James Farmer built.

Congress, what are you forgetting about CORE?

If I belong to what made William Garrison,

why is the next candidate in a seat not fully reforming?

Campaign after campaign,

promise after promise,

talk after talk,

ends with no results.

John Lewis is turning in his grave.

Frederick Douglass, we are lost!

The money make 'em forget who they represent.

Democrats got the House,

but still don't help right the wrongs

of old that keep African Americans in

prison.

I'm a fourth-generation "freed" slave.

Why do I belong more in prison

than in my family's company?

Because I belong to a history that still demands justice.

I belong to what Ralph D. Abernathy is cut from.

Where Do I Belong?

By JK

Is this where I belong?

In this spot here on my bed?

Longing for the images flashing,

Back and forth within my head?

Waiting for the hour and minute to move

Getting prepared to leave and go see a man about a book

Head outside to the other building for school

The images of sitting in a van

With a stranger in a strange land

Going to an unfamiliar airport

With no one to hold my hand?

I walk around and see the sights and all

Someone said that this place was like a mall

"So big" they said, "You'll definitely get lost"

"It's fine," I respond, "my freedom is worth the cost"

Yummy, I'm hungry, finally some real food

I don't know what to eat: Subway, Popeyes, Applebees

Hey, I really don't care,

As long as it tastes good!

Anxieties are high, my thoughts are runnin' wild

Man, I need some new clothes,

I feel like such a child.

It's about that time, to make these images

A reality.

I close my eyes and watch the images

Flash forward entirely.

As I open my eyes I hear my daughter

Singing a song, I hear my son using those big words, I see my family

Waiting for me, and finally I am home.

This is it and now I know, this is where I belong

My Cabbage Patch Doll

By MW

Yes, my Cabbage Patch doll

Endless smiles cover my seven-year-old face

It's Christmas morning

Presents are everywhere

As I sit in my pearl white sweater, covering my PJ's

Two ponytails hang free with the joy and love of Christmas

My Mom is taking my picture

I cheese extra hard as I cross my legs and sit

My Cabbage Patch doll I named Terri on my lap

Mom always knew what makes her daughter smile

Yes, my Cabbage Patch doll!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Happy Birthday

By JOS

I know it's been years and we're not together,
I played it off cool but it kind of stung that you ain't remember.
I understand that it's just another day but 2 me it's kind of special.
Not 1 to complain so I grabbed my pad & pen
Started writing Free Minds - friends that don't pretend,
Friends that don't forget-
Friends that don't judge
Better yet they understand.
I really just wanted to talk to my son that day,
Not thinking about the time zone difference
I called you at 5:00 am.
You picked up and insisted that I not hang-up,
"It's ok Joshua-don't trip, I'm up."
I'm like, ok she knows, but the happy B-day
from you never showed.
At the end I still wished you well and kept my composure.
Later that day they did mail call and I heard my name,
It was from Free Minds
That always brings a smile to my face.
I opened the letter and this is what
They had to say -
Happy Birthday · Happy birthday · Happy birthday

Freedom

By DT

Freedom, freedom is the key to every door
Freedom is a feel of joy, feeling of energy,
Freedom is the tool we got to start overusing,
doing by reading more,
taking more risk to be people of color in position
Lawyers, doctors, firefighters, mayors, presidents,
Wardens, college professors, anything we put our minds to,
Freedom is a gift,
Freedom is a blessing,
Freedom is equality,
and Freedom is BLACK!!!

Where I Belong

by AEC

Late night, dark hallway, an illegal profession...
Weary eyes, vigilant, felonies in my possession...
Living life on a razor blade, but too scared to have fear
Looking out of a dirty glass door, I'm surely not happy here
I peer up at the full moon, glowing amongst countless stars
I think of a giant pearl, set in diamonds devoid of flaws
Beauty I see, but can't feel, it's past time to call it a night
Before I know it, I'm driving under downtown city lights
I see a small crowd, compelled, I followed them into a lounge
Heard something about "Write Night", I found a spot and sat down
Powerful words filled my ears, profound enough to draw tears
Deep expressions of what I've felt in my heart all of these years
Seeing I am not alone encouraged me to stay strong
Not in a hallway, but in a room full of poets is where I belong

On A Mountain Top

By MS

I found my love on a mountain top
Lounging beneath the sun
Resplendent, paradise like in her glory
Like a (Rose) wildflower in tall grass
Beautiful...
Being the only thing caressed by
Northern Breezes
She beckons me... whispering love letters
to my soul
But my Lord stayed my movement causing me to take her in
A pleasure, my treasure... A Jewel of Creation
Allowing me, Implying me to take her in
Like a prayer long asked for
Answered in her being created thusly,
A promise to my soul
Her created just for me
So these words of mine are my way
of being a counterpoint to her heart
like breath is intrinsically linked to our being
Ever thankful always for God gifting me with seeing
I found my love lounging beneath the sun on a mountain top...

The Way (Part 2...)

By AB

I finally found the way
To get out of my own way
That I thank God today!

Because it's so hard to break away,
From yesterday!

But the way is to pray everyday!
To cleanse my bones in not doing wrong,
Because I been on this path too long
(The pride of my heart has deceived me!)

But I must admit
That I knew what to do...
Put my pride to the side,
And think like Kelli, Julia, and the rest of you...
To get out of prison and make a way for the next Free Minds
member
to get out of their own way...
Is the way!

Soar to the Skies

By AC

By the creek of life waters flies a hummingbird
Fluttering his wings as the Earth spins beneath him.
All things do come by, then all things become past.
Attaching him to his world
Is only the shadow he cast.

Fly hummingbird
Soar to the skies;
Fly for you are free in your mind,
Fly for you are free, you are free at last.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Smile

By BF

I smile despite all the sadness I feel inside
I smile despite all the turmoil I see for miles
I smile knowin' that it does nothing for me
I smile Damn, this really is free
I smile can't tell you why I do it but
I smile knowing that I'm locked up and still
Loved that would do it
I smile keepin' it on my face for days
I smile made it through the wind and rain
I smile because I saw the look on her face
I smile when my friends and family come around
I smile
But when alone at night
I frown but we all know this ain't living right
Puttin' on a smile to please the next when
Really I would like to frown because the smile hurts my face

But I smile and when alone I
Turn that ugly smile into a beautiful frown

Hope I didn't turn your smile upside
Down.

BREATHE

By TG

Your inner love speaks. Stand still, listen.
Hear the birds, the ants, the people the air
Everything connected to you by the Divine.
Is it logical you would exist entirely orphaned?
The truth is you tuned everything out
For work, money, prestige, and other deafening distractions.
You do not need to be tangled up in other things.
You can tune into, again, what you once knew.
True peace, love, and happiness is through connection.
All you need do
Is breathe

Belonging

By NG

I wish I had good hair and it wasn't so nappy
I wish I had the swag that made girls want to sit by me
I wish I had all the fly clothes and shoes so I could look the coolest
But the holes in my sneakers made me look foolish
I wanted status like Jordan where I'm always seen
But instead I got picked on which only made me mean
I wish I always had instead of always never had
I wish I had skills to be first instead of always last
I wish I had jokes like Martin and always make people laugh
I learned patience is key
Being a leader is someone I would come to be
Stay down till you come up... something I always thought of
Don't be them, be you, now that's being cool
Staying down till I come up, yeah that's what I'll do

Life

By JES

Life is a beautiful thing, a creation from the creator.
Why waste it on things that don't make life better?

Spending your life thinking on how to do things right,
rather than just living life.
There's a right from wrong way to live life, the choice is
yours.

I rather live mine knowing that I made the choices no matter
the outcome.

Life is too short and time doesn't last forever.

So why not make the choices you feel are for the better?

Life is really a beautiful thing when you live it for you,
family, etc.
Making choices that you have a right to make.

Life is a beautiful thing.
I really pray that my good outweighs my mistakes.

Think about it.

I Am The Best

By BA

I have the will of a tiger. A heart filled with fire. I have the
desire to be the greatest creation that the creator created.

When I look at myself in the mirror, I will tell myself there
is nothing that I will fear in my attempts to achieve success.
I will climb the largest rock to conquer the mountaintop. I
am the best.

The blood of many kings and queens runs through my
veins. My inner soul has the elements of a truck that is
made of steel, with the strength of a lion, and a surgical
strategic state of mind like the bengal tiger. I am the best.

I will be tested to see if I have what it takes, which will do
nothing but give me exuberant strength with meticulous
thoughts to become a divine individual. I am the best.

I am the thinker, the thinking, the thought
I am the seeker, the seeking, the sought
I am the dewdrop, the sunshine, the storm
I am the phenomenon, the field, the farm
I am the desert, the ocean, the sky
I am the primeval self in you and I

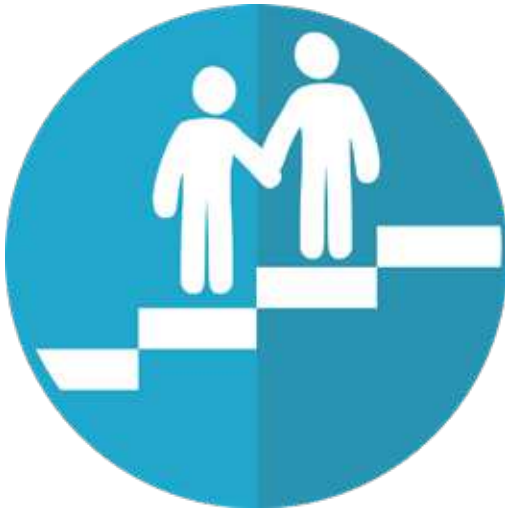
I am the best

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

To Belong: Young Self

By AD

To belong is to know self
Unfortunately, for such a young soul
Self was far from the goal of life
Sucked up and stuck in a world of perception
As one becomes more susceptible to oust oneself from reality
Only to discover in a later time in life
That the constant knocking on the door that one continued
to ignore was young little self
Coming to make peace with self, by informing self
that self belongs



Belong

By MH

What, who and to where do we belong?
Who are we?
What do we want?
Where do we want to be?

Questions only us can answer
The answers are all around us and within us if we open our eyes
I ask myself and I ask you brothers and sisters
What, who and to where do we belong?
When we find the answer, we will find out who we are

Let us belong to something that is noble and right
Let us not be satisfied with nothing less
Let us seek the highest virtues
Let us refuse to lower ourselves to the servitude bondage of
drugs and violence
Let us refuse to be statistics
Let us refuse to be nothing
Let us belong and be the builders and not the destroyers
Let us belong and be among those who carry the light to
shine the way to others
Let us NOT belong or be the darkness
Let us build our communities
Let us bring joy, happiness, and safety to our communities
To our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and kids

Let us bring dreams, imagination, creativity, opportunities,
love, knowledge, peace
Let us refuse to poison, terrorize, and destroy our communities
Only the Courageous, the Braves who are builders of good
Let us belong and be amongst the Courageous and Brave

ART BY FM FRIEND CYNTHIA



PAYING IT FORWARD: PEACE FOR DC

By Araba

Lashonia serves as Executive Director of Peace for DC, a local foundation supporting violence interruption efforts. She is also Executive Director of The WIRE (Women Involved in Reentry Efforts), an advocacy network for women returning home from incarceration. A friend of the FM family, Lashonia assists with our leadership, advocacy, and community healing efforts. Lashonia spared some time in her busy schedule to speak with FM Book Club Co-facilitator and Program Specialist Araba about her work in the community.

Araba: You are doing really awesome work. How did you get started with Peace for DC?

Lashonia: So I was a restorative justice facilitator at the DC Office of the Attorney General (OAG) when they received funding to start Cure the Streets. It's a gun violence intervention program that was started by a medical doctor who thought we should treat violence in the same way we treat any other diseases: by detecting and interrupting the transmission and treating those who are at the highest risk of being infected. I just fell in love with that model and decided to help implement it here. After four years, I wanted to do more to support these workers and provide them with the training and tools to actually do the job that they've been charged with. I went to work for Peace for DC which is a private organization. The founder, Roger, lost his son to gun violence in 2018. Roger is a white guy, affluent, entrepreneur; he says himself in his own words that he basically lived a problem-free life up in Northwest DC and thought that this problem was only happening to other people. His son Tom was riding through a neighborhood when one guy was shooting at another guy across the street and Tom got struck by a bullet. He was 22 and the person who took his life was 22, so Roger, his dad, took up the mission of supporting frontline workers and making sure they have what they need to treat trauma, transform lives and prevent violence. Roger hired me as the first Executive Director of Peace for DC.

Araba: What are the most rewarding parts and the most challenging parts of being Executive Director of these two organizations, Peace for DC and The WIRE?

Lashonia: The most rewarding part of being Executive Director of Peace for DC is that it's a private organization. It may sound like a small thing, but we have more flexibility to do things like buy food. If someone is working on the frontlines and they have personal needs that we can help meet, we have more flexibility than if we were a government agency. There's less regulations that government agencies need to adhere to by law, red tape, less bureaucracy. I feel like you actually get to do real work and see tangible differences that you're making. Real change. It feels like it happens at a faster pace, and it's change you can actually touch and feel.

What I like about being Executive Director of The WIRE, is that the women chose me to be in that role. The women said we want to do this and we want you to lead the effort - even though I feel like they're really leading the effort because they tell me what they want us to do. I just try to help make it happen. It's the freedom to really practice independent thought and be creative and get things done.

The challenge in both, is that funding is always an issue. Everything is always reliant upon whether or not you can get foundations and rich people to support your idea. I'm really big on evidence-based practices that I know work. But it's always a challenge to get funders behind gun violence intervention because people have their own agendas. Like people want to look at the wealth gap, or education, or health disparities, and for some reason they're not able to see how gun violence impacts all of that. It's still difficult to get people to see how women are being impacted by mass incarceration. The rates of incarceration for women have risen by 700% in three

decades, and it's still people out here who think women don't go to prison, women don't get murdered, women are not high risk. We have to educate people and try to get them on board. I think that it could actually take years, to be honest. The WIRE has been operating since 2013 and we still are a small, grassroots organization without much consistent funding/support. Fortunately, Peace for DC has been operating for a year, and we've been able to raise a million dollars to support this work, but that is still a smidgen of what we need!

We want our violence interrupters to be able to offer incentivized programming to high-risk individuals, we want them to have social workers and life coaches and tutors in *the neighborhoods*, so we're looking for a lot of support and that's a challenge.

Araba: What's a success story or a win from the organizations you work with that you've been able to celebrate recently?

Lashonia: Thank you for that question, because I've been struggling with that. It's hard to see success in the work that I do, especially now because it feels like the pendulum is swinging back towards punishment and law enforcement and incarceration. There's a lot of nuances involved when you're trying to get people to change their thinking and do something different from what they've ever seen.

With The WIRE, we worked with a group of girls in Ward 8 who go to Ballou High School who were having a lot of challenges and dealing with a lot of trauma. They were getting into fights and committing assaults. A couple of community leaders went on a crusade to have them arrested. We started to work with them; once a week, helping them to build conflict resolution skills, talking about what it means to be able to walk away from a conflict, doing role plays with them, and taking them on trips. We fed them, and were just really being present for them and holding space with them once a week. The women of The WIRE took ownership of that process of building with the girls weekly. At the end of that school year, I'll never forget, you know we thought we were going to wrap it up, and they were like, "No we want to continue to meet." And we were like, "Okay, what day are we going to do it?" And they said "Friday night." That is super dope, because the fact that they are 16, 17, 18 years old and they want to come out and hang out with us on a Friday night was big for me. We kept it going throughout the summer and even though some of them still have challenges, a lot of those girls are doing well. They went on to graduate from high school. Some of them have gotten involved in work, working as Safe Passage workers, mentoring other girls. This was a couple of years ago, so some of them were teen moms at the time—now they're young adults.

A success for me with Peace for DC is seeing the violence interrupters work. Some of them have lost siblings, parents, and so many friends to gun violence. And they are so passionate and so committed to this work that they are a success story in and of themselves, because some of them have been on the other side of this problem. Some of them survived gun violence themselves, and now they're committed to going back into the communities where they grew up and helping other people to do what they did. So I guess my celebration would be for the staff: the violence interrupters, outreach workers, and credible messengers who do the hard work.

Araba: Wow, it sounds like there's a lot to celebrate. It can be hard to remember when the work is so tough and there's always more work to do. What's something that you want our readers to know about the people that you work with?

Lashonia: "The people that are closest to the problem are closest to the solution and furthest away from the resources." We are beating that quote to death. I think Glenn Martin from Just Leadership was the first to say it, and it's real. If we just listen to the people that are closest to this problem and support them and I'll say re-power them – I don't want to say empower because people have power, they just are not always in a position to really use it. If we could just re-power people and create opportunities for them to develop the systems that they need to address this problem, which would be a community-centric approach, a restorative approach, a transformative approach, I think we could fix this problem.

And it's sad to say but I think it's going to take a long time, because we are so obsessed with policing and punishment that we refuse to reimagine justice. But I think the fact that we have a lot of directly impacted people who care and want to get involved, I think that we're going to win. I'm inspired by the people who have been released, who are home, and the people who are coming home. I served 18 years in prison. I went to prison when I was 19, convicted of a violent crime, grew up in Southeast in Ward 8, and when I came home, I hit the ground running, and here it is ten years later and I'm able to do this amazing work. And every day, more people are coming home and they got that energy. And they want to see our people be great. And they want to see our people be free. So, I don't think they're going to be able to stop us. I'm just worried that we won't be able to turn the tide as quickly as we should.

Finally, I would just encourage the men and women that's coming home: get ready, because we need your support. Also, keep making a difference, keep giving back, keep mentoring, keep teaching, keep developing curriculum. I cannot stand when people say "prison saved me." I respect the person's story, but it's not prison that saved you. It's the opportunity to rehabilitate ourselves and educate ourselves and heal our trauma that saved us. But we want people to have that experience without incarceration, without being away from your family, without having to deal with all those collateral consequences. As you can see, I could talk about this stuff all day long, but I'll leave it there!



REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

*Celebrate good times, come on! (Let's celebrate)
There's a party going on right here
A celebration to last throughout the years
So bring your good times, and your laughter too
We gonna celebrate your party with you
Come on now
Celebration!*

Okay hey guys so that is the perfect greeting for this month's theme CELEBRATION! That song is by the group Kool & the Gang and came out in the year 19__ (please do your research on those missing numbers cause I'm not trying to willingly reveal how many years young I am!)

Even the word "celebrate" brings a smile to my face, because it automatically makes me think of a party. The dictionary defines the word as a verb meaning: "to acknowledge (a significant or happy day or event) with a social gathering or enjoyable activity."

I personally believe that celebrating is a very necessary part of the human experience and we should be extremely intentional about it. Lets face it, when we look around there is a ton of negativity. We only need to turn on our phones, computers, read the newspaper, magazines or publications to be in close proximity to negativity and solemnity, which means we have to balance the scale. This is where celebrating comes in. Celebrating is good for humanity. It's an opportunity for activity, conversation, laughter and excitement. I've learned that laughter opens airways, lowers blood pressure and relaxes tight muscles.

When I reflect on my childhood, it feels good remembering birthday parties, family get-togethers (especially the cookouts y'all) and graduations just to name a few. The joy that comes with giving or receiving attention to honor a person or things achieved through their actions are very rewarding and necessary to the human experience. We are social creatures, and we're happier when we connect with each other. Multiple generations of family come together at celebrations to think about their shared history, to tell familiar stories and unveil new ones. Celebrating allows people to feel like they've achieved something significant, and see that their commitment to each other has value in the eyes of their family and friends. The joy and comfort of these events is an important source of strength for people. Celebration isn't just a party, it's a way to show someone that they matter, that their journey has meaning.

Now, let's celebrate these wonderful resources I'm about to reveal to you!

Southeast Welding Center
Integrated Welding and Job Readiness Program
1235 Kenilworth Avenue NE, Washington DC 20019
202-610-9858 / 202-290-1370

The Southeast Welding Center's Integrated Welding and Job Readiness Program's mission is to offer quality education in an effort to produce "World Class Welders." They train students with the skills, knowledge and workplace attitudes, essential to enter the workforce as dedicated and competent employees. This is a 14-16 week program available FREE to DC residents ages 18 and over. Participants who complete the program will receive Adult CPR and First Aid certification, obtain OSHA 10 certification, and be trained in welding so they can get their 3G Structural Metal Arc certification. The program includes workforce development, career coaching and resume building skills. Training is FREE for DC residents!

Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela

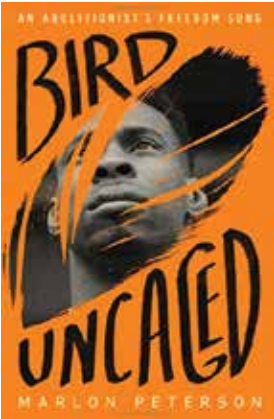
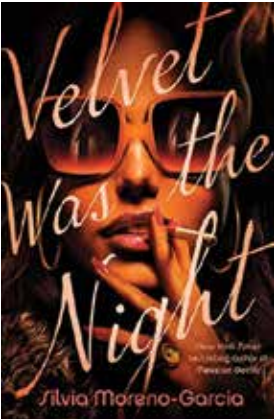
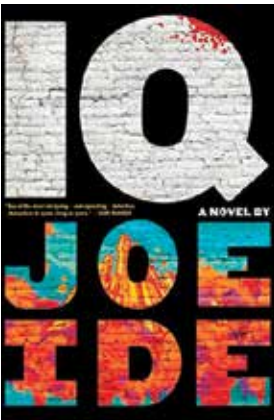
BOOK BALLOT

Alright Free Minds readers, get your voting pens ready because it is time to choose the 2023 Books Across the Miles books!

After *An American Marriage*, we'll read *You Are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment* by Thich Nhat Hanh.

We want to give you plenty of time to vote for the books that we'll read together in the summer and fall. Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. Also, if you have a book in mind you'd like to see on the next ballot, please let us know!

1		<p><i>The Master Plan: My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose</i> by Chris Wilson [Memoir]</p> <p>A DC native who grew up amidst violence and trauma, Wilson was 17-years-old when he was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. While incarcerated, Wilson began a personal journey of growth and healing through reading, working out, learning new languages, and starting a business. At 19, he created a list of everything he wanted to accomplish and how he could, calling it his "Master Plan." A roadmap for personal redemption, this memoir is a powerful demonstration of how everyone is capable of achieving great things.</p>
2		<p><i>Eden Mine</i> by S.M. Hulse [Fiction]</p> <p>For generations, the Fabers have lived on property in a small town in Montana. When the state seizes their property, Samuel claims it to be government theft and moves to find work in Wyoming. His sister Jo is left to do the packing. But when she hears news of a bombing at the district courthouse, and that a 9-year-old is in critical condition, she soon learns that her brother has suddenly gone missing. Could the person she loves most and who has taken care of her since she was little, really have done this terrible thing? Faced between loyalty and justice, this novel is a searing portrait of the legacy of violence, and a reckoning of the choices we make for the ones we love.</p>
3		<p><i>Felon: Poems</i> by Reginald Dwayne Betts [Poetry]</p> <p><i>Felon</i> is a glimpse into the effects of incarceration, written by long-time Free Minds friend, Reginald Dwayne Betts. It explores a variety of emotions and experiences, from domestic violence, to drug abuse, to being unhoused, to being unemployed, to drug abuse, to fatherhood, and more.</p>

4		<p><i>Bird Uncaged: An Abolitionist's Freedom Song</i> by Marlon Peterson [Memoir]</p> <p>Raised by Trinidadian immigrants amid routine violence in his Crown Heights neighborhood, Peterson grew to become a high-achieving student. But he ultimately could not escape the effects of trauma in his neighborhood, and was sentenced to 10 years when he was 19. While incarcerated, Peterson became dedicated to anti-violence activism and prison abolition work. His memoir is an exploration of the many cages that make up American society: the daily violence and trauma of poverty, policing, masculinity standards, and the brutality of incarceration. His book is a calling to an end of punishment, and a beckoning for a new vision of justice centered on healing.</p>
5		<p><i>Velvet Was the Night</i> by Silvia Moreno-Garcia [Fiction]</p> <p>1970's Mexico is dangerous and politically fraught, with violence sweeping throughout the country. When Maite's neighbor, a young art student, suddenly disappears, Maite is on a mission to find her. What she discovers is a secret life of student radicals. Meanwhile Elvis, tasked to find the missing student, embarks on a blood-soaked search for the woman—and his soul. Both up against hitmen, government agents, and Russian spies, Maite and Elvis' stories collide as they run against the clock to discover the truth behind the student's disappearance.</p>
6		<p><i>IQ</i> by Joe Ide [Fiction]</p> <p>In East Long Beach, the police are struggling to keep up with the neighborhood's high crime rate. IQ, a loner and high school dropout, has taken it upon himself to help solve cases the police won't touch. He takes any client that can pay, whether through a set of tires or homemade casserole. Tasked to save a rap mogul whose life is in danger, he discovers a vengeful ex-wife, a vicious dog, and an unstable hitman. The deeper he digs, the more dangerous the case becomes.</p>

1st choice: _____

2nd choice: _____

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: EXPECTATIONS (VOLUME 12, ISSUE 1)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on Expectations. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 12, Issue 2 will be exploring the theme of **Balance**.

(1)

What are your daily expectations for yourself?

(2)

Sometimes we dream of perfect relationships that last a lifetime, but we never know what to expect from those who we love. Describe a time when you had expectations for a loved one. Were your expectations met? Or dashed? How did that make you feel?

(3)

Choose an important person in your life who has expectations for you. Do their expectations uphold what you expect of yourself, or do you expect something different?

(4)

Have you ever been let down or felt that someone didn't meet your expectations?

Write a poem about the emotions you felt when that happened.

(5)

Expectations vs. Reality: Describe a time when you had clear expectations about what was going to happen, and the reality turned out to be different (for better or worse). In the column on the left, write what you thought was going to happen, and in the column on the right, show us what really happened. Challenge yourself to make both columns the same number of lines!

Expectations	Reality

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: CELEBRATION

Enjoy the Flowers! By BK

Celebration, I believe, is one of the most sensationally pleasurable feelings life has to offer. It's the acknowledgement and appreciation of growth; accomplishment; relentless arduous work; etc. And by affirming that our efforts are worth celebrating we are galvanizing the self-confidence needed to take on tasks and challenges further ahead.

One of the most celebrated moments of my life was when I led my youth-16 football (soccer) team to a victory in the semi-finals, qualifying us for the finals in a summer tournament. I had suffered a serious injury, right after signing up for this tournament, and had to undergo surgery. It was unclear whether I'd even be able to play. When I wasn't chosen to start the game, I sat quietly until I was chosen. I came into the game in the second half. The score was 2-0, and was not looking promising for us. Forty-one minutes later, I scored a goal by curving a corner-kick right in the near post, which is like a unicorn play (a very rare play!). Three minutes later, one of my teammates was fouled just outside the opposing team's box. I took the free kick and scored! After my foot touched the ball, I literally blacked out. When I came to, my teammates were filled with ecstasy jumping up and down all around me. The whistle blew, marking the end of regulation time, and we headed to a tie-breaking penalty shoot-out, where we won.

Even though we lost in the championship to a much better team, we got second place, and to my surprise, I was chosen as MVP. There was no choreographed dance; no cooler water unloaded; no tossing me in the air like a hot potato. It was just pure, spontaneous, simple celebration! Sometimes I believe God gave me that moment, so I would have such a good memory to look back at.

I come from an extremely hard-working first-generation immigrant family, who seldom embraced celebrating besides cultural holidays. My parents were all work and no celebration. They viewed their lives as a sacrifice to strengthen the opportunity of a better life for their future generations. As noble and selfless that may sound, I am puzzled at how anyone can accept their life to be a stepping stone for fruits of their labor they may not be around to reap. Would you dedicate your entire adult life to something you may never see flourish?

I am not against building legacies or selfless missions; however, I am a firm believer in giving people their flowers while they are still alive. Plus, who doesn't love the healthy effervescent elation that's generated while celebrating? So, scream until your lungs get sore! Move until your reserves of energy become depleted! And celebrate life!

Warrior of Life By WJS

In the heart of the brave, resilience is fuel for the soul. Its sweltering heat consumes all of one's self-doubt and clinging woes. Armed with resilience, the warrior walks through the burning ashes of life's struggles. Clothed in perseverance, with endurance striding in boots of determination. Unfazed by what he will be faced with, "fore he knows that to fall is not to be defeated... The warrior, though, been trampled and bombarded by the occurrences of trials as he travels

the distance. Bruised and tattered by life's experiences, he clutches steady a reserve of persistence. Who but a warrior of life is capable of such resistance? For there was a time when we all wore ignorance. No goals, no vision. In a battle with no ammunition. Unreceptive, recessive, afraid of rejection. In order to rise, we must fall but learn from the cause. He who is knowledgeable of life and its cycle of impermanence is a warrior of life and uses resilience to aid in his furtherance.

Celebration By James, FM Congressman John Lewis Fellow

When the word celebration is mentioned, my first thought is of accomplishment. Like when we won a championship playing flag football while I was incarcerated. We would celebrate. The tradition of celebrating team accomplishment goes back as long as I can remember. The other traditional celebration that I was accustomed to was the birthday celebration. Celebration is not always associated with sport. There are other times to celebrate.

What I had to realize is that it is also a time to celebrate your own personal accomplishments. That has always been hard for me. I'm always seeking to accomplish more. So I'm always moving the goal-post back for myself. I guess I have the tendency to set lofty goals. Nevertheless, sometimes people come into your life and remind you that you are doing well for yourself—remind you that it would be a shame if you did not take the time to acknowledge some of your own wins.

It also ties into being thankful. Without proper acknowledgement

of your personal achievements you may overlook some of the people along the way who played a pivotal role in helping you to get to where you are. So celebrating your achievements also may be acknowledging some of your help along the way.

There have been so many people who have helped me. So it is important to celebrate some of the small wins. Even if it is accomplishing a short term goal. How did I get to achieve this goal? Was it all me? Of course I had a lot to do with it but acknowledging my accomplishments and the interconnectedness of how it came to fruition is a celebration in itself. My family has helped me achieve savings goals as a returning citizen. Allowing me to live rent free for nearly two years put me in a position to move into my own place with a solid foundation. This would have been very difficult without their help. So yes, some may see the goals that I've accomplished but it is definitely some credit due behind the scenes. So I celebrate humbly.



THE WRITE WAY: CELEBRATING YOURSELF IN WRITING

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

By Meg

Let's talk about celebrating yourself in your writing. Writing from your own perspective, or your point of view, can be surprisingly difficult. Maybe you've been made to feel like your voice didn't matter, or like it wasn't heard. Maybe you didn't feel like it was safe to speak up. I'm here to tell you that you have a wonderful voice, and I'm going to walk you through a few ways to share it.

There are so many different types of writing that center around your own voice. The first is a narrative. In its most basic form, a narrative is a story, usually about one's own experiences. A narrative could be a few paragraphs, or it could be a whole book! Narratives typically have a few different sections, no matter how long they are. The **exposition** introduces us to the story. **Rising action** tells us about the basic problem or conflict. **Climax** is when that conflict comes to a head. **Falling action** describes the results of the climax, and finally, there is **resolution**, which ties up your story. Even a short narrative can have all of these elements.

As an example, I'll tell you about the time I was on a train to the airport. I was with my friend, and we had two stops to go before arriving at the airport. Unfortunately, there was a problem at the station, so they made everyone get off the train. We had to find a bus at the last minute that would take us to the airport. We found a bus that was full, and we got there right before it drove away. The driver didn't want to let us on, and we were going to miss our flight! Thankfully, we were able to convince the driver to let us on the bus. We made it to the airport right on time, and we took off without any more problems.

Now, there's a LOT more detail I could add to that story to make it more interesting, like how it was right at the start of the pandemic; how we were in a foreign country trying to fly back to the United States before many countries went into lockdown to prevent the spread of Covid-19; and how the train was closed due to some pretty scary circumstances. But even

without all that detail, there are still the basic story elements there. Can you identify them? Write back to us identifying the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution!

Narratives are a great way to showcase both your experiences and who you are as a person. They can show how you've overcome hardships and come out stronger. They can highlight a problem you'd like to solve or help you remember a funny story with a friend. You are the main character, and a narrative is, at its center, a celebration of you.

Another form of writing that can feature your point of view is poetry, which is only a slight hop away from a narrative. You've still got the same grounding of your own story, but poetry is more lyrical and the rules are a lot less concrete. You can take the same basic memory of a train station and a crowded bus and just shift the form a little. If I was going to turn that story into a poem, I'd focus on the way the train screeched to a halt in the middle of the station, and how the conductor's voice boomed over the speakers, wavering but commanding. I'd describe how my heart was pounding in my chest, because I knew if I didn't make this flight, I'd be trapped there for the next six months, away from my family and my home.

With poetry, you don't have to stick so closely to narrative elements. You can write what you feel as it comes to you, and even if it doesn't have a climax or a resolution, your message still comes across.

So, how do you know which stories to turn into narratives and which to turn into poetry? Well, that is up to you. What emotional response do you want to elicit from your audience? What parts of yourself do you want to draw attention to? There is no right or wrong way to share your voice with the world, and you are always worth celebrating in all your forms.

We can't wait to read your written celebrations of YOU!



CONVERSATION WITH JAMILAH

This year I celebrated my 50th birthday!!! It was an essential celebration after dealing with the Coronavirus Pandemic for the past few years. I looked forward to this birthday like no other.

This birthday hit differently in many ways. The pandemic cut so many undeserving people's lives short, and many did not get to see another birthday, which is why it feels surreal to see 50.

On January 1, 2022, in the spirit of New Year's resolutions, I decided to count my blessings. Thanks to the Creator: I made it through the heart of the pandemic alive and well; I survived here on Earth for half a century; my children and close-knit family and friends are still here with me; I have been able to give back to the community I grew up in for the past 12 years through service and support and through my faith and core beliefs, I have never let my setbacks determine my destiny.

I was born August 9th, a Black Leo woman living in the Washington DC metro area. To reach the age of 50 as a minority is a blessing within itself. I say Leo because many believe that the horoscopes tell you a lot about a person, and over the years I've heard the positive and negative character traits of being a "Black Leo Woman." I agree with many of these traits and I am indifferent to and/or don't agree with others at all. Google tells me that as a Leo woman I am "confident, assertive, and at times domineering." I'll take "confident" and "assertive" (though not aggressive), but I'm not too fond of the term "domineering" (although many of my friends call me bossy). My favorite adjective for myself is "responsible": able to answer for one's conduct and obligations, trustworthy, and able to choose for oneself between right and wrong. A responsible citizen treats others fairly, honors their commitments and owns up to their mistakes. This is how I see myself.

Growing up I always knew I would be a phenomenal

mother, and an exceptional homemaker – until I wasn't. The day I was told by a judge that I would have to serve a year and a day in a federal prison camp due to my bad decision-making, I knew I'd failed in my responsibilities as a daughter, a sister, a mother, a wife, and the exceptional homemaker I strived to become. This was no doubt the biggest setback I could ever imagine happening in my life.

While this was an unfortunate experience it allowed me to own up to my mistakes, answer for my conduct and blame no one but myself. Once I was able to do these things, I was ready to set goals and become the trustworthy human being my family knew and loved. Going to prison was a huge stumbling block, and in my 50 years on this earth, I've had many bumps in the road of life, prior to prison and after. I pray that Almighty God allows me to be here many more years, and gives me the intelligence to know that as long as I'm a living soul there will be setbacks, bumps, trials, and tribulations to endure.

At 50, I celebrate gaining wisdom from lessons learned. I celebrate the strong relationships I've built over the years. I celebrate my family and friendships. I am not where I dreamed to be at 50, but I celebrate having the health and strength to continue working towards those dreams and creating new dreams and goals along the way.

One of my favorite places to be is on the beach – the humbling scenery, looking as far as the eyes can see, across the ocean where the sky touches the water. This is my happy place. It has a way of putting everything into perspective. For me, that perspective has nothing to do with my horoscope or how others view me but has everything to do with knowing there is a higher power than myself and as long as I keep that higher power first and foremost, all things are possible.

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*



The iconic Lincoln Theatre (left) first opened its doors in 1921, back when the city was still fully segregated. The theater became known as “Black Broadway,” a place where Black Washingtonians could enjoy top flight entertainment, when they were not allowed in other venues. The Lincoln hosted performers including Duke Ellington, Billie Holiday, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Fats Waller, Bessie Smith, Lena Horne, and Sarah Vaughn!



If you're from DC, you know Hechinger Mall. According to Twitter, a Foot Locker is soon moving into the spot where Payless Shoes was.

This is the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency (CSOSA) location on MLK Avenue. Readers who will be on supervised release after returning home to SE Washington, DC, will likely report here. Notice the construction you can see to the left—a reminder of the aforementioned gentrification of Anacostia!



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!

REENTRY PROFILE: PETE'S STORY

Interview by James, FM Congressman John Lewis Fellow

My name is James and I am Free Minds' current Congressman John Lewis fellow. I recently caught up with my friend and fellow FM member Pete, who returned home from prison in December 2020, after serving 30 years.

James: The theme of this issue is Celebration. Can you describe how you and your family celebrated your release from prison?

Pete: My mom, family members, and friends came to meet me as I exited the DC Jail. We hugged and celebrated the moment. But when I was locked up, I had made the decision that I wasn't coming home to be a party animal, going to clubs, etc. A lot of people wanted to take me out to celebrate that way, but I just wanted to go home, lay back and enjoy myself with my close friends. We sat around a table, just talking. I really loved the feeling of being free—not worrying about anybody telling me what time to go to bed, or that it was time to go in my cell.

James: This past September, the organization Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth (CFSY) held their "Inaugural Freedom Celebration" for so-called "juvenile lifers" that brought together more than 100 individuals from across the country who were once sentenced to life in prison as children. Can you tell me what that was like?

Pete: Yeah, it was held at the Omni-Shoreham Hotel here in DC. We just had a party to celebrate everybody's release. We got to dance and have fun. When I was away, I told myself that when I came home, I would dance when I felt the music. I danced with people and by myself. In addition to all of the juvenile lifers, there were another 200 supporters and advocates from all over. It was a lot of fun! They had all kinds of food. We stayed for three days! We had a common experience we shared. We had camaraderie because a lot of us went through the same issues, being incarcerated at such an early age. It let us know that we didn't experience these things alone. It made me feel so good that we all made it out. A lot of us are out here now, working for change in society and doing what we can to help our community.

James: How was your Reentry experience?

Pete: I was fortunate in that I started working after just 19 days of being home. I worked with an organization called BreakFree Education. I then began working with the city as a Credible Messenger.

Reconnecting with members of my family was a lot easier for me because I had been transferred back to the DC Jail prior to my release, so I'd been visiting with them in person over those 20 months, rebuilding the bonds. It was a blessing!

When people ask me about my reentry experience, I always tell them there is so much that people take for granted. Just to have my own credit card. To go into any store that I want. To make my own schedule. So I don't take these things for granted!

James: What is the greatest barrier to reentry for returning citizens?

Pete: I would have to say the lack of tech skills that we come home with. The Federal Bureau of Prisons didn't do much to prepare me with the skills that I needed in modern society. That's really a barrier for returning citizens.

James: Any message that you want to relay to those who are on their way out?

Pete: Have a plan. It's very important to have something that will keep you focused and your path.

James: What are you celebrating right now?

Pete: I'm celebrating two years of being home this coming Saturday! Most of all, I'm celebrating seeing my friends come home! This past year so many have made it home and it's just a beautiful thing for me!

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.

My Journey Home by Momolu K. Stewart

Description provided by the author: My Journey Home is a testament of faith. This book is a clear demonstration of why a person's humanity shouldn't be defined by one inhumane act. It expresses one's ability to change a path once leading toward an imminent violent death, and lifelong sentence of imprisonment, to a life of freedom, restorative justice and the healing of the heart and community. This book is not only about a physical destination that I call home. Ultimately, the word "home" is used to describe the alignment of my mind and spirit, which enabled me to learn and adhere to my spiritual purpose in this life.

Consequently, this book is for those who struggle. Whatever that struggle may be, I've been there, and I am a walking testament of what your life can become if you remain present and learn the lesson of your experience. No one can tell you what your purpose is in this life, but your experience will lead you to ask healthy questions of your soul. And, if you are present, your spirit will respond.



IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

DEEP DIVE: IRAN PROTESTS



Source: *Geology.com*

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a highly controlled theocracy (a government ruled by religious figures) which, while operating regular elections for political leaders, is led by a Supreme Leader selected by an assembly of religious experts, who oversees a government that enforces a tightly controlled social order.

At the same time, it is demographically one of the youngest countries in the world. About 60% of Iran's 80 million citizens are under the age of 30. And these younger citizens are savvy about using social media and technology in general to learn about the world around them and the political and cultural freedoms granted to people in other countries, especially in regard to women.

The natural tension between a way of life tightly controlled by older men and a burgeoning youth movement has led to several waves of political protests since 2009. The most recent one, which continues to this day, began in September of 2022 with the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini.

Amini was arrested by the Guidance Patrol, a police sect that enforces religious morality in Iran. Her crime was

failing to wear a hijab, a head covering that all women have been required to wear in the country since 1979.

What happened next is not entirely known, except for that Amini was first brought to a police station and then sent to a hospital where she died on September 16. According to Iranian officials, she suffered a heart attack at the station and died of it in the hospital. Eyewitnesses have said that Amini was badly beaten on her way to the station, leading many to believe that she died of her injuries.

A small protest broke out immediately outside the hospital in Tehran where Amini died. Not surprisingly, it was met with brute force and mass arrests by Iranian security forces. The protests spread in the nation's capital city, and broke out in Amini's hometown of Saqqez.

Not long afterward the hashtag #MahsaAmini shattered Twitter records, with more than 100 million retweets and references in a short period of time. The social media virality of Amini's death propelled the protests on the ground. At the recently completed World Cup of soccer, Iran's team refused to sing the nation's anthem before its first game against England.

The movement has centered on women's rights in the country but contains a strongly implied rejection of the nation's religious leadership. "Death to the dictator," a reference to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has been a common refrain as the protests continue into their fourth month.

As has been the case in protests past, hope springs anew that the uprising will lead to changing cultural norms and new freedoms. But Iran's leadership has shown a willingness to use violence and intimidation as a deterrent against those who would question it. More than two dozen protesters are currently scheduled to be executed, and two already have been, according to human rights watchdog groups monitoring the situation. After the soccer team refused to sing the national anthem at the World Cup, it was reported that Iranian officials told players their families would face violence and torture if they did not get in line; the team sang the anthem at its next two matches, one of them against the United States.

Already, at least 60 security force members have been killed during the protests since September. Amnesty International estimates that more than 300 protesters have lost their lives, including several dozen children.



Source: *Unsplash*

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

WORLD

After a year of backroom negotiating, an American basketball superstar is coming home in a controversial prisoner exchange with an American adversary.

In February of 2022, just days before Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered a military invasion of Ukraine, Brittney Griner of the Phoenix Mercury was arrested in Russia after customs officials found a small amount of hash oil in her luggage.

Griner, an eight-time WNBA all star and the NCAA Player of the Year in 2012, had been playing in the Russian Premier League. The hash oil in her possession was medically prescribed to Griner, but is illegal in any form in Russia.



Brittney Griner
Source: Wikipedia

It quickly became obvious, as Russia committed to a full war in Ukraine and the United States began to assist Ukraine in procuring strategic weapons to defend itself, that Putin intended to use Griner as a political pawn. Over the summer, the court found Griner guilty and sentenced her to nine years in prison, sending her to a female prisoner colony in Mordovia.

On December 8, Griner was freed and sent back to the United States in a one-for-one prisoner exchange reached by our State Department and Russian foreign officials. On the other end of the trade is Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer known as the “Merchant of Death,” who in 2011 was convicted in federal court of conspiring to kill American citizens. Bout had served just over half of his 25-year sentence.

NATION

In the last FM News we discussed election integrity in the leadup to the 2022 elections, where control of both chambers of Congress – the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate – were up for grabs.

Historically, or at least in the past half decade, the party that does not control the White House tends to fare poorly in midterm elections. This is the general gravity of democracy in a country with a large contingency of voters who are not affiliated with either major party. Even more so when the country is experiencing economic turmoil, continuing inflation, and several large metro areas have seen sharp increases in violent crime since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

So the expectation just months before these elections was that the Republicans would have a strong day at the ballot

box and take control of both the House and Senate. If it was a sound thumping, some speculated, that might even prompt President Joe Biden to announce that he would not seek another term in 2024.

But that was not the case, by a long shot. The Democrats retained control of the Senate and actually increased their margin by 1. The Republicans did win control of the House, but only by a handful of Congressmembers; the projection before Election Day was that they would have a leadership margin of 30 or 40.

One Republican did emerge from the vote in a strong position, and that is Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who easily won reelection and saw his party have a very successful night in local state elections. There is added national significance to this because at the moment, there is only one candidate that has declared an intention to run for president in 2024: former President Donald Trump. DeSantis is widely believed to be considering a run himself, and he is now polling higher among Republican voters than Trump.



Ron DeSantis won reelection in Florida.
Source: CNN

As for present-day politics, the split decision with Republicans winning the House and Democrats maintaining control of the Senate means that there will likely be a bit of a stalemate in Washington for the next two years. As we print this, leadership in both parties are negotiating in the hopes of finding a deal on spending that will keep the government open and operating. Both parties will also have to get together at some point on a deal to raise the nation's debt ceiling, which permits us to borrow new money while paying down the interest and principal on our best loans and obligations.

Perhaps the best outcome of this election season is that unlike 2020, there have been almost no cries of cheating and stealing by candidates. With the exception of one gubernatorial candidate, nobody that lost an election in November has made the claim that victory was stolen from them.

IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

SPORTS

The world's most-watched sporting event, the men's FIFA World Cup, came to a close in mid-December. The tournament was marked with controversy for years leading up to the 2022 World Cup. According to Human Rights Watch, thousands of migrant workers died during the preparation for the massive event in host country Qatar, and many of their families have not received compensation.

Despite these tragedies, the tournament continued, and concluded on December 18th with one of the most memorable championship matches in history. In a game that went into extra time and then to penalty kicks to decide a winner, Argentina narrowly bested the defending champions France in an epic battle that featured two of the sport's greatest athletes, Lionel Messi and Kylian Mbappe.



Kylian Mbappe
Source: NTVSpor.net

Argentina got off to a hot start, netting two goals in the first half of play. In the second half, Mbappe squared things up for France with two goals of his own, sending the game into extra time. Over the course of those 30 minutes, both teams scored sensational goals, which meant after more than 120 minutes on the field, the game would be decided by which squad could score the most penalty kicks out of five. After two early misses from France, Argentina secured victory on the fourth kick. The match was by far the most viewed sports event in broadcast history.



Lionel Messi and Argentina are the 2022 World Cup winners
Source: CNN



Map showing location of Qatar, the host country for the 2022 World Cup
Source: ontheworldmap.com



Source: Forbes

Off the field, controversy continues to swirl around the Washington Commanders and the team's embattled owner Dan Snyder. After decades of ownership, he has made a few moves that suggest his willingness to do what the fan base has been hoping for years: sell the team.

On the field, the team has bounced back from a clunky start to the season and have entered the playoff picture with just a few weeks remaining in the regular season. The Commanders won their first game back in September and then proceeded to lose four straight. After that they won six of the next nine, tying once and losing only two.

With four games remaining, a playoff spot is theirs to lose. But the competition for the last few postseason spots is stiff: the Giants, Detroit Lions and Seattle Seahawks are all right around the Commanders with 7 wins each as we went to print.



MEDITATION: CELEBRATION

By Kelli

Hey Free Minds Brothers and Sisters,

It's time to meditate on the idea of celebration. I think we often think of a celebration as something that has lots of noise, a big crowd at a party, with loud music, etc. And don't get me wrong, those celebrations can be amazing. But the truth is, there are so many reasons and ways for us to have mini-celebrations every single day, all by ourselves. So, let's meditate on these moments... on celebrating the small victories and beautiful moments of life...

Find a cozy and relaxing place and position where you can eliminate distractions as much as possible. As usual, if you have a partner to read aloud to you, go ahead and close your eyes as they read. If not though, you can read the script through once or twice before closing your eyes and meditating on the words and ideas you have read. Are you ready? Let's go...

Start by taking a deep breath of air into your lungs...as you do so, celebrate your body and all that it can do. Now exhale... feeling the air rush out of you in a whoosh. Continue to breathe in, and out... in and out... feeling joy, and celebrating your breath. The oxygen that gives you life!

Feel the expansion of your chest, and the feeling of warmth that spreads throughout your body with each inhale... and the sense of release and letting go with each exhale...

Now think of something that you have accomplished recently. It may be something big, such as completing a class... or finishing a book... or patiently working through a disagreement with a loved one. Or it may be something

as seemingly small as waking up this morning and getting yourself out of bed despite feeling a bit down.

Or exercising self-discipline and not acting out in a moment of anger. Or doing your burpees and pushups even though you weren't feeling it. It may be just taking this moment to try out meditation... to care for yourself! Trust me, all of these things are worthy of celebration.

Now with your accomplishment in mind, let's celebrate! Envision someone putting a big, gold medal around your neck. In this moment, you are a winner! Pump your fists into the air above you and say, "YES!!!" Now open your hands, spreading your fingers wide, waving your arms in the air like you just don't care! Raise your chin, and puff out your chest! Imagine colorful confetti raining down upon you! Feel the joy of celebration!

Breathe it in with jubilation! And now, exhale with satisfaction! Celebrate life! Celebrate yourself! Celebrate all that is good in the world...

If this feels like a stretch to you... think about it. You are alive! You are breathing! You are striving! We can and we should CELEBRATE! Revel in THIS moment which has never been before, and will never be again...

The more we look for reasons (big and small) to celebrate, the more they will appear. The more we will find to celebrate. You deserve to feel joy in ALL of your accomplishments and in the simple beauty of life. Hold on to this sensation of celebration as long as you want. How do you feel? We'd love to hear from you about what you celebrate... Please write and tell us more. We celebrate with you...

DID YOU KNOW?

Diwali

By Yamini



My (Yamini's) grandparents' prayer room decorated for Diwali

Diwali, also known as the Festival of Lights, is one of the most important festivals celebrated in Hinduism. Falling during the Hindu lunar calendar, the celebration usually takes place during mid-October to mid-November and lasts five to six days. Symbolically, Diwali represents the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. While the specific deity or manner of celebration differs between states, ethnic groups, and religious groups, Diwali is a huge part of Indian culture, much like Christmas for those who celebrate it in the United States.

Since my mom is from North India and my dad is from South India, I grew up celebrating Diwali with traditions from both sides. With my grandparents on my dad's side (my Thatha and Patti as they're called in the language Tamil), we would decorate the front porch of the house with kolam – a geometric pattern that is drawn with colored rice flour and flower petals – as a sign of welcoming the Goddess Lakshmi into the home so she may bless us with prosperity and wealth into the new year. My sister, grandmother, and I would also spend the days leading up to Diwali making modak, tiny dumplings made of coconut, jaggery, and rice flour, which are supposed to be the favorite of Lord Ganesha who is known as the remover of obstacles.

On my mom's side, my grandparents (my Nana and Nani) would always buy red clay diyas (a type of candle holder) that we would paint together – red and gold for good luck – and then light them on our front porch. We would burst firecrackers along with all of our family, friends, and neighbors and enjoy different types of Indian sweets (my childhood favorites were besan ka ladoo, which is made of chickpea flour, cardamom, and sugar and also kaju katli which is cashew-based and has a layer of real silver pounded onto the top). Decorating our house with lights, fresh flowers, and the smells of my mom and grandmother's cooking for days in advance are all memories I hold close, especially after moving to the U.S and having to learn how to celebrate in different ways. Despite the change in location, Diwali for me has always been about family, community, and the fight for good.



Coconut Barfi made by me and my mom, 2015



Ganesha statue in my grandparents home decorated



Kolam

REAL WORLD OF WORK: DAMON'S STORY

Interview by Jennifer

I came home in 2019, after being incarcerated for 24 years. I didn't know how to monetize my skill sets, which were mostly soft skills since I hadn't been able to take a lot of classes or earn certifications. I felt like I was coming home with nothing and had nobody who would finance me, so I had to get to work. I kept beating myself up about not having the things of other people my age. Eventually, I just had to embrace being at the bottom. The biggest challenge was having to adjust, adapt, and build all at once. I began working with different organizations, taking classes, and leveraging resources. Eventually, my Free Minds coach referred me to the Building Futures Construction Pre-Apprenticeship Training program, where I earned certifications and got a job offer in the trades.

As a Carpenter's Helper for Dynamic Contracting, Inc., I hang drywall, cut and carry metal, hang doors, read blueprints, caulk, and help mechanics install ceiling tiles. I grew up in Northeast DC and most of my projects have been in this neighborhood – first doing roofing on an apartment building on 50th Street, then renovating Smothers Elementary School on Brooks Street. Now, I'm helping create the new DC Department of Government Services headquarters on Minnesota Avenue. I am grateful for the opportunity to build my community up now after having been a destructive force in the past.

I feel like I've chosen a career that literally rebuilds my neighborhood. My family has been in this neighborhood for generations. In fact, my father, uncle, and aunt all attended Smothers Elementary School. They described the school as feeling old and grim like a rundown castle. What kid wants to learn in that kind of environment? Since the previous generation said the building was dark and sad, we recreated the new school to be light and hopeful for future generations. In fact, since I live around the corner, I now workout on the Smothers playground that I helped assemble. It's a part of my community and I am proud that I contributed to it. I love seeing the neighborhood children enjoying the space!

Now I get up every morning at 4:30 a.m. with a purpose, instead of getting up that early just to get breakfast and go back to the cell. I clock in at 6 a.m. and my objective is to learn every day. The work is

physically demanding, dirty, and out in the elements. I started off doing unskilled labor work and slinging trash, but my coworkers and supervisors quickly saw the effort I put into every task, so they gave me more opportunities. I have a reputation for helping everyone. I am never disgruntled. I recognize that construction work is about the job and not the individual. Other foremen have tried to recruit me to their teams, and I've also been asked to work overtime and help out with side jobs.

My favorite part of my job is connecting with people. Most employees in my company are native Spanish speakers, so we largely communicate with body language. I have found that a smile is universal. For example, they call out numbers in English and I yell them back out in Spanish. There is a mutual understanding and appreciation for each other's different cultures as we all work towards a shared goal.

Since I've been home, I also worked at the JC Penney stock room and as an attendant at the Gaylord Christmas program. But I prefer the construction career because there are so many opportunities to grow yourself—especially by talking to more experienced coworkers in different trades to find out the skills, pay, benefits, and learning opportunities with them.

One of the greatest things about this job is that it allows me to show my daughter and my mother (who supported me while I was incarcerated) that after all that time away I came home not bitter, not broken, but able to be this positive, focused, contributing career man for our family.



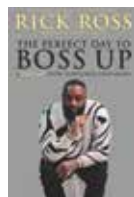
Smothers Elementary 4400 Brooks St NE, Washington, DC 20019

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."

- **Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up": *The Perfect Day to Boss Up: A Hustler's Guide to Building Your Empire* by Rick Ross**
Rick Ross has become known as not only an icon in the hip-hop world, but he is also an established name amongst entrepreneurs. Despite having to overcome obstacles and challenges growing up, Ross never gave up on achieving his goals. In this book, he shares the secrets to his own success and offers a road map for how readers can build their own business empires.



- **Tara: *Being Too Fierce* by Lisa P. Cohen**
This book was recommended to me by a good friend of Free Minds, a former attorney at the Public Defender Service. We met the author, Lisa, at a DC Rotary Foundation event, as she is a Rotarian and they are one of our reentry partners. Free Minds' Reentry Case Manager Ms. D. also knows Lisa, so I was excited to read the book. It details her extraordinary journey from experiencing abuse and abandonment in the DC foster care system, to discovering boxing as a way to heal from her childhood traumas and help other youth. She started a DC organization called Capitol City Champs, using boxing and fitness training to empower youth. Her story on what she overcame is amazing. It was hard to read about the horrible abuse she suffered, but her writing is really accessible and so uplifting.



- **Julia: *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown (the author chooses not to use capital letters in her name)**
Emergent Strategy is a nonfiction book about how people who want to see big picture change in the world can begin to create that change by embodying the values and the world we want to see in all of our interactions, no matter how seemingly small. The book is full of challenging ideas, and I've been poring over it now for several months. I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in advocacy, activism, community organizing, or being a changemaker in any way!
- **Neely: *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones**
This novel follows the story of four men who are members of the Blackfeet Nation, a Native American tribe in the northern part of what is today called Montana. Ten years prior to the start of the novel, they were involved in a hunting accident with repercussions that have continued to follow them over the years. The story explores generational trauma, grief, and what it means to be Native American in the current day amidst a slew of stereotypes and misrepresentations. Graham Jones is ultimately tackling what it means to be a "good Indian," because, as he said in one interview, there are over seven million different ways to be Native American (referring to how there are over seven million Native Americans today). Be aware, this is actually written as a horror novel, and there were plenty of chapters that made me scared to turn off my lights at night!
- **Jasmine, FM Friend and Board Member: *FantasticLand* by Mike Bockoven**
The suspense thriller takes place in the aftermath of an extreme weather event that hits the Florida coast, ravaging an amusement park and leaving its college-aged employees stranded. To survive, they compete for social dominance, medicine, human flesh and food. *FantasticLand* is told through first-person interviews of survivors, exploring the nightmarish events from multiple perspectives. It may be fiction, but it is totally disturbing, yet believable. You won't want to put it down!

BOOKS HALL OF FAME!

You may remember that in our first issue of the year (Wellbeing), we asked you, our readers, to nominate your all-time favorite books to the Free Minds Book Hall of Fame. Thank you to all of you who sent in your favorites. By combining the titles with the most nominations with a count of the most often requested titles over the years, we have come up with the following Free Minds Books Hall of Fame:

- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley*
- *Blood In My Eye* by George Jackson
- *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand
- *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
- *Standing at the Scratch Line* by Guy Johnson
- *Assata* by Assata Shakur
- *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho
- *The Maze Runner* by James Dashner
- *Becoming* by Michelle Obama
- *The Other Wes Moore* by Wes Moore
- *As a Man Thinketh* by James Allen
- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah
- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
- *Slugg: A Boy's Life in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Tony Lewis Jr.
- *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver
- *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas



Let us know if you would like to read any of these books!

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES/ FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

UNA COLUMNA NUEVA EN ESPAÑOL, A NEW COLUMN IN SPANISH

By Carlos

Bienvenidos a "Conversaciones de Mentes Libres". Esta será una sección regular de la revista Connect, donde ofrecemos un artículo escrito en español y luego lo traducimos al inglés. Como sabrán, en 2019 lanzamos Mentes Libres, un club de lectura en español en la Cárcel de DC. Free Minds trabaja para trascender todos los desafíos hacia la verdadera conexión humana y la autoexpresión creativa, ¡incluyendo las barreras de los idiomas! Es nuestro deseo que disfruten de esta columna. Si hablas español y te gustaría contribuir a esta columna, ¡escríbenos y déjanos saber! Y si no hablas español pero te gustaría aprender, puedes solicitar para poder obtener un libro y comenzar tu aventura de aprendizaje de este idioma.

Welcome to "Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" (Free Minds Conversations). This will be a regular feature of the Connect magazine, where we offer an article written in Spanish, and then translate it into English. As you may know, in 2019, we launched Mentes Libres (Free Minds), a book club in Spanish at the DC Jail. Free Minds works to transcend all challenges to true human connection and creative self-expression – including language barriers! We hope you will enjoy this column. If you speak Spanish and would like to contribute to this column, write and let us know! And if you don't speak Spanish but would like to learn, you can request a book and start your language learning adventure (that's "aventura" in Spanish!)

Celebraciones

Saludos primeramente a toda mi gente, los que están siendo fuertes por mientras se espera el momento que se abran esas puertas y que, entre eso, se haga todo lo posible para mantener nuestras mentes libres.

Nunca he sido mucho de celebrar los días festivos. Durante el tiempo que estuve en prisión, fueron días que me trajo mucha tristeza porque no pude estar con mi familia y seres queridos. En esos años de encarcelamiento, traté de hacer cosas para sentir ese sentido de estar con la familia y pasarla bonito y sentirme normal. Nos poníamos todos juntos (los que con quien compartía) para comprar las cosas que se ocupaban y poder cocinar algo. Pero al fin, no era lo mismo. Siempre me faltaba esa presencia que nunca se puede sustituir. Pero como lo dije, no lo hacía para celebrar, sino para tratar de llenar ese vacío que sentí por todos esos años. Me dolía tanto por dentro que hasta pensé que nunca volvería a estar junto con mi familia de esas maneras. Con la sentencia que me dieron, 35 años a vida, era fácil a veces perder las esperanzas.

Pero por la bendición de Dios aquí estoy en Honduras, el país donde nací y puedo estar con mi familia nuevamente. Hoy día, me parece que desde que salí de prisión, he estado celebrando cada uno de mis momentos. Los momentos más pequeños tienen un significado mayor... he empezado a disfrutar las celebraciones con mi familia nuevamente. Ellos sí, ellos le ponen tanta energía y amor a todo... Los cumpleaños, aniversarios, días festivos. Bueno, ustedes ya saben cómo es nuestra cultura Hispana. De todo esto, les cuento la celebración más grande que he experimentado después de celebrar mi libertad: Fue con mi esposa y estábamos planeando para celebrar mi aniversario de dos años de libertad. Ella sabía que yo tenía mucho deseo de ir a la playa. Más de veinte y ocho años sin poder ver la playa... ¡Y ese fue mi regalo! No tengo las palabras para decirles lo bello que era estar allí parado junto con mi esposa en la costa del mar y solamente mirar esa libertad sin ninguna pared. Solo mar y cielo. Solo el sonido de las olas cuando encuentra la tierra. ¡Solo las aves que vuelan libremente como yo me sentía en ese momento... libre! El viaje duró seis horas para llegar a la costa. Pero fue a la hora perfecta cuando llegamos. Faltaba hora y media para que se acostara el sol. El cielo ya había empezado a cambiar a esos colores lindos. ¡No les voy a mentir, llore! Lloré porque me acordé de que, en mis momentos más difíciles, pensé nunca tener esos momentos donde podría celebrar mi libertad en esa magnitud.

Comparto con ustedes mis celebraciones solo para poder librar sus mentes por lo menos por un ratito. Y al mismo tiempo, para animarlos a seguir adelante con fuertes esperanzas. Porque las celebraciones más importantes y valiosas son las que se hacen entre familiares y amigos, en forrado en libertad.

Celebration

First, I greet all my people, those who are remaining strong while awaiting the moment that those doors open and that, until then, we do everything to keep our minds free.

I've never been one to celebrate holidays. While I was in prison, those were days that brought me a lot of sadness because I could not be with my family and loved ones. In those years of incarceration, I tried to do things to feel that sense of being with my family, have a great time and feel normal. We all pitched in to buy the ingredients to be able to cook something. But in the end, it wasn't the same. I always lacked that physical presence that can never be replaced. I didn't do it to celebrate though, but instead, to try to fill that void that I felt for all those years. It hurt so much inside to think I would never be together with my family in those ways again. With the sentence I was given, 35 years to life, it was easy sometimes to lose hope.

But through God's blessing, I am here in Honduras, the country where I was born, and I can be with my family again. Since I got out of prison, it seems like I have been celebrating every moment. The smallest moments have a greater meaning. I have started to enjoy the celebrations with my family again. They put so much energy and love into everything – birthdays, anniversaries, holidays. Well, you know what our Hispanic culture is like! But let me tell you the biggest celebration I have experienced. I was with my wife and we were planning to celebrate my two-year anniversary of freedom. She knew I really wanted to go to the beach after more than 28 years without being able to see it. And that was my gift! I don't have the words to tell you how beautiful it was to stand there with her on the seashore and just look out at that freedom without any walls. Only the sea and sky. Just the sound of the waves when they find the land. Free-flying birds that felt like I felt at the time... free! The journey took six hours, but we arrived an hour and a half before the sun set. I was going to lie to you. I cried! I cried because I remembered that, in my most difficult moments, I thought I would never again celebrate my freedom in that magnitude.

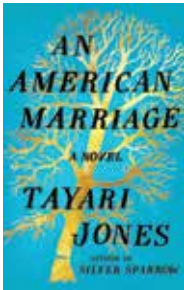
I share with you my celebrations just so I can free your minds at least for a little while. And at the same time, to encourage everyone to move forward with strong hopes. Because the most important and valuable celebrations are those that are made between family and friends, engulfed in freedom.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



The Free Minds long-distance book club

An American Marriage



The current BAM book is *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones. This story follows the journey of newlyweds Celestial and Roy, who are just beginning to build their new life together when they are ripped apart from each other after Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. We can't wait to hear your thoughts!

1. How would you describe Roy and Celestial's marriage in the first 50 pages of the book? Is it a good marriage? Why or why not? What do you think are the most important qualities for a healthy marriage?

2. Roy says: "You can't pick your home any more than you can choose your family. In poker, you get five cards. Three of them you can swap out, but two are yours to keep: family and native land." What do you think of this quote? Would you swap out either if you could? How much do our families and where we come from shape who we are?

3. In a letter, Roy says to Celestial that he has nothing to offer her. Do you agree? Have you ever felt this way? What might he have to offer? What might you have?

4. Why do you think Celestial starts to distance herself from Roy? Have you ever experienced someone important falling away from you while you did your time? How did you deal with it personally?

5. Roy and Celestial both had secrets from each other. Do you believe they should have kept these secrets about their past as long as they did? Do you believe that when you are in a serious relationship (ie considering marriage) that you should share everything? Why or why not?

AROUND THE WORLD: NEW YEAR'S CELEBRATIONS

By Meg

In this issue of our *Connect*, we're showcasing a variety of different New Year celebrations around the world! From lanterns in Thailand, to firecrackers in China, to black-eyed peas in the Southern US, communities all over the world have exciting ways of ringing in the New Year. Whether it be food, drink, noisemakers, or other forms of celebration, the stroke of midnight is never a dull moment.

A variety of different foods are eaten to mark the new year across the globe. In Spain, 12 grapes are eaten at each stroke of midnight to mark good luck in the new year. Eating 12 grapes is common in Mexico and in other countries in Latin America as well. Like grapes, lentils also hold important meaning in the region for luck and good fortune in the coming year. It's customary to leave a bowl of lentils outside your front door, or simply to have them in a soup for dinner. Celebrators in Japan feast on *toshikoshi* soba noodles on New Year's Eve to toast to a long and plentiful life. In the Southern US, black-eyed peas are a must. Also symbolic of good fortune, these coin-sized peas are often served with collard greens and cornbread.

Of course, sometimes food is not just for eating. In Turkey, pomegranates are smashed outside the front doors of most houses to bring about prosperity, or given as a gift to others. If you're in Greece, be sure to hang an onion on your door to bring about growth and rebirth.

There are plenty of New Year's traditions that don't have to do with food, too!

People in Thailand light and release *khon loy* lanterns into the night sky to let go of last year's worries and give way to hope and prosperity in the coming year. While New Year's Eve on December 31st is celebrated in Thailand, many also celebrate the Chinese New Year in January or February, as well as *Songkran*, Thailand's traditional New Year in April. If you're in Denmark, be sure to stand on furniture and jump to the floor right at midnight, to "jump" into the New Year and bring good luck with you. In Egypt, one long-standing tradition is to write your resolutions down, burn them, and absorb the ashes in alcohol.

The Chinese New Year sees its celebrators begin festivities according to the lunar calendar, which is different from the January-December calendar that we commonly use here in the US. Chinese New Year will be celebrated on January 22, 2023. People come together in festivals to light firecrackers, dance, and



enjoy the company of family and friends. The color red is also said to be a symbol of good luck. In India, there are a variety of New Years celebrated across the country. *Puthandu*, the Tamil New Year, occurs on the first day of the Tamil month *Chittirai*, which usually occurs in April, when people take part in rituals and celebrations at temples and eat *mangai pachadi*, made with mangos and jaggery. *Pohela Boishakh*, the Bengali New Year, also occurring in April, includes a New Year salutation and a rice-based meal called *panta bhat*.

A common theme of all cultures on New Year's Eve, are declarations of prosperity for years to come. Does your family have any New Year's traditions you remember growing up? For example, my family eats lentils and herring at midnight every year for health and wealth. They don't even heat it up first – just down the hatch it goes! The world is full of diverse and memorable traditions for ringing in the coming year, each one designed to bring us together in hope and celebration. Enjoy the holiday season, and have a wonderful New Year!



CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Here are a few of our members' many accomplishments since our last issue!

- ★ Leonard Brown is the new 7F08 ANC (Advisory Neighborhood Commissioner) at the DC Jail.
- ★ Special recognition to those that also applied for the ANC position: SA, PM, RS, HC, AB, XL, SG, CR, LC, LA, RC and BB.
- ★ Irving has a new job at a hospital in Maryland and is the Director of Jacob's Ladder, a reentry service provider for juveniles in Maryland.
- ★ James is in ISC Squared Cyber Security school.
- ★ Gordon is the Executive Assistant for The Center for Law and Justice
- ★ Lamont works for the Operation Team at the Civil Rights Corps
- ★ Gene works for the Outreach Team at The Council for Court Excellence.
- ★ Ryan received his flaggers certificate.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: EXPECTATIONS

By Aneka

Our next issue will be focusing on EXPECTATIONS. The dictionary defines an **expectation** as the strong belief that something will happen, or that someone will or should do something specific. What is something for which you had expectations? What were the results? Often, we set expectations for our futures, our goals, and our interactions with others. Nine times out of 10, we're disappointed with how situations transpire. Whether it's trying to maintain relationships with loved ones while being incarcerated or having an expectation of how things will be once you're released. We value the expectations we set and it discourages us when things don't work out the way we'd hoped. How do you overcome disappointment when expectations are not met? How do you feel when your expectations are met? How do you decide whether or not you've set realistic or unrealistic expectations? We look forward to reading your poems and short stories on EXPECTATIONS!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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