

December/January 2012

Vol. 1, Issue XVI

# free minds Connect

Our "Green"  
Issue!

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**RENEWAL**



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By *Santhosh*  
11-1-2012



# Free Minds Connect

Is brought to you by...

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Want to be on this list?  
Write or draw something  
and send it to us!

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## Next Issue's Theme: **Patience**

What does patience mean to you? What are some of the benefits or frustrations of waiting for the right time for something? What things are worth waiting for? Send us your thoughts, drawings, and poems!

# TALK-BACK WITH TARA

Happy New Year Free Minders!

I'm so happy to be celebrating another year together with you. We have a lot to look forward to this year in Free Minds and can't wait to see the exciting things that will unfold. Last year was a year of "firsts." First time FM poets won a major poetry competition. First time we won a prestigious award from the city—the Mayor's Arts Award. First time our volunteers number over 100 people! First time a hugely popular and famous young adult author (Walter Dean Myers) came to visit the Book Club.

Our *Write Nights* kept getting bigger and better as word spread among students, seniors, and others about your great writing. They came in droves to read your poetry and write back about how much it touched them. Many have told me how your words inspired them to write their own poetry. What an impact you are having on others! Recently I heard a famous actor say that everyone wants to be relevant. Know that you are relevant to many, many people. And don't forget that when you send us writing for the Connect or the writing blog, you can tell everyone that you're a published poet!

Yes, 2012 was a banner year for Free Minds. I have no doubt that this year will be even better. My wish for you is that it brings you rejuvenation, restoration, rejoicing, and this issue's theme: **RENEWAL**. I love the word "renew"—it means to begin anew, a fresh start, a "do over." As you'll see, we've started the process ourselves and *renewed* the Connect layout and

added more specific sections. Let us know how you like it.

In this issue you will read wonderful stories about renewal—of the environment, the psyche, nature, and the soul. I love that whatever the subject, the same principle applies: no matter how bad the damage is, it can always be repaired. That's a powerful message of hope I cling to when times get tough. So in closing, I urge you as always to write us with your creative, imaginative, and touching words. Let us know your feedback on the books you have received. Did you like them? What kinds of books do you want? We want to hear from you.

To all of you spread out far and wide across this country, know that you are part of something bigger than yourself. You are part of a movement of renewal: Free Minds!

May the long time sun shine upon you

All love surround you

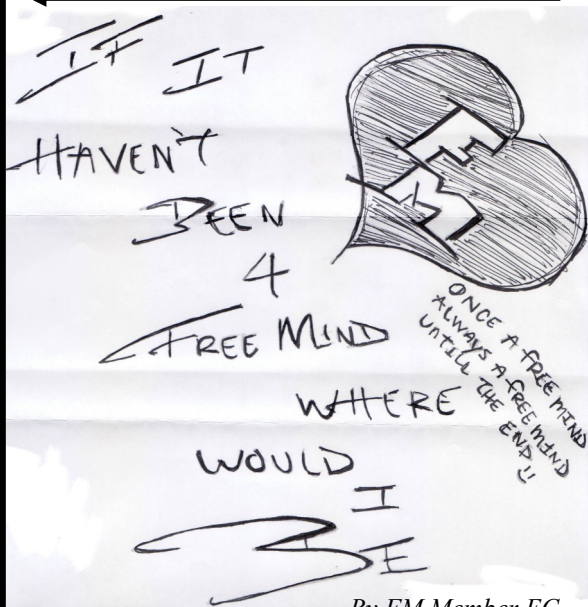
And the pure light within guide your way on

Tara

## A Note to Free Minds Members

By PM, FM member in Federal Prison

My name is Phil and I've been a member since 2004. At first I didn't want nothing to do with Free Minds because at that age (16) I was looking at it like they can't do nothing for me. But as time went on I was looking forward to Mondays. I was one of the few good men that'll actually stand up and read my poems. Once someone sees you with enough courage to stand up in front of everybody and express yourself, they'll get the courage to do it too. As time went on, Free Minds became a part of my bid by sending books and letters. Everybody has those "no mail weeks." 1 thing 4 sure—I of those dayz you know you're gonna get a letter and a few books :) Having your name on that mail list brightens your whole week. At least you know somebody still thinks about you. Free Minds always finds me, no matter where I get sent. I say all this to say appreciate your support system and appreciate those that's try'n to help! Stay up in there and out there. Phil.



By FM Member EC



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

## Renewal

By Ms. Keela, Free Minds Program Manager

When one hears the word renewal  
Several different ideas may come to mind  
For me, however, it's very simple—not nearly hard to define  
When I hear the word renewal, I think of the first day of spring  
The cold is gone, the wind has ceased  
And with a fresh new outlook, my heart beats  
I think on the dark, cold days of winter  
And all the drama it produced  
My heart reflects, my mind deflects  
And I wonder how I made it through  
In an instant, my mind swings back as out the window I see  
The bright ray of sunlight announcing the arrival of Spring!  
New hope, ideas, and possibilities flood my heart and mind  
Another chance has arisen for me to sparkle and shine  
I will not take for granted this fresh and precious season  
Who knows if I'll get another, my mind cautiously reasons  
So for that I hold it close just like an expensive crown jewel  
This beautiful thing I like to refer to is called renewal

## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM: Hip Hop as a Tool for Change

By JG, Free Minds member in federal prison

What's up with my Free Minds Family? This month's theme seems very fitting given the fact that we just had a presidential election, and our sitting president has been renewed so that we can continue to push forward for the next 4 years. Anyway, you all may or may not have noticed, but I'm the type of dude that would rather shoot straight to the heart of the matter. And with that said, our society could really use a mental makeover. I think that, collectively, our priorities are wrong. Any time you have a nation full of billionaires and millionaires, yet you still have large populations of that nation poverty-stricken and disenfranchised, something isn't right at all.

This speaks loud and clear to me. Our sense of responsibility, our sense of justice, and our sense of compassion must be renewed! I'm a product of the Hip Hop generation, and I love Hip Hop, but it frustrates me to see where Hip Hop has gone. On one hand it's come a long way in the sense that it has an enormous amount of influence internationally. But I'm not so sure that this influence is a positive one.

Don't get me wrong, Hip Hop has always had an aggression—a rebellious edge to it. That's part of its beauty. But it also used to highlight social issues and give you food for thought. It would expose lots of things that mainstream people wanted to keep covered up, all while entertaining you. This was an MC's job and primary goal at one point in time.

Though you still have certain MCs out there who highlight issues, for the most part you have a whole bunch of rappers simp-



## WHY I COMPOST

By Marissa, a Free Minds friend

Composting is the process where food waste is converted into nutrition for plants. Instead of throwing out food you don't eat such as vegetables that go bad, you can let them decompose and put them back in the soil. When plants die, their nutrients go back into the soil to feed other plants. Thus, when we compost we are using dead material to help new life thrive.

I think there is something really significant about how we think about "waste." What we might think of as something that has no use can be of extreme value. It is amazing to me that the earth needs dead "waste" in order to create new life. This cycle of death and birth keeps the earth thriving and surviving.

I feel the concept of needing "waste" to make things survive can be applicable to our lives. I was raised doing a lot of breathing exercises to help balance my mind. One of my mindfulness teachers said that any struggle we have in life is not waste but compost for the future. This idea was amazing to me. I realized many of the struggles in my life have been opportunities for me to learn and grow. Many times my previous struggles have helped me give advice to people struggling through the same things. Now I think of my struggles as fuel for my future self. I like thinking about how everything that is waste can often be reframed as compost or nutrients for the future.



By FM Member SE

ly glorifying ignorance and stupidity, talking about a life that most of them have never lived. And the way these rappers talk, you would think they hate women. If kids are growing up being influenced by this, how are we ever supposed to restore the family unit in our community?

Hip Hop could be such a powerful tool used to bring about positive change, but first it needs to be renewed back to its origins. This would do wonders for my generation, I think. Until next time, peace.



# UPDATES FROM THE OUTSIDE

Hey Free Minds members! We're trying something new for the Connect: a section devoted only to news and things going on around the world. Let us know what you think of the new section! In this edition:

- Juliana says hello from Argentina
- John updates us on politics, sports, and other big news issues
- Free Minds fills you in on what's going on with the office

I hope everyone is having a safe holiday season. When we last updated you, the first presidential debate had just taken place, and the Nationals were in the baseball playoffs. Well, quite a bit has happened since!

## In the News

*By John, FM Friend*

### National

Let's start with the obvious: Barack Obama has been elected to a second term as president. After 3 debates and hundreds of millions of dollars spent on television ads and campaigning, Obama was returned to the White House to work with the same leadership in Congress: a Republican-led House of Representatives and a Democrat-led Senate. Here are some of the most pressing issues that the president and Congress will need to handle soon:

*Spending:* National debt continues to rise, and these guys will have to figure out how to fix that. There are two main ways to achieve this: spend less, or else require citizens to pay more taxes.

*Education:* The president and Congress want to invest in education and job training to help young Americans prepare for jobs. There are disagreements on exactly how to invest though.

*Foreign Policy:* The Middle East is quickly becoming a very unstable place. Israel and Palestine have been firing rockets at each other. Syria has been accused by the United Nations of killing its own people, and a new government in Egypt is being questioned by its people. Obama, Congress, and the military will need to carefully consider their actions in the region while also ending U.S. military presence in Afghanistan.

### Washington

In October, the city was lucky that it was not hit hard by an enormous storm known as Hurricane Sandy. Many weather experts thought that D.C. might get some of the worst of the storm, but instead the city was only hit with severe wind and rain for about 10 hours overnight. Most D.C. residents did not even lose power. Unfortunately, the storm did hit New York City, Long Island, and much of the New Jersey shore with great force. Lots of people still do not have homes and apartments to go back to because of the damage from Hurricane Sandy.

### Sports

In sports, all eyes are on the Redskins. The Nationals lost in the first round of the baseball playoffs in a tough series against the St. Louis Cardinals, and the Wizards have started their season



0-12! So the Redskins are the main source of excitement right now. The record is looking good, at 8 wins and 6 losses.

The Redskins are still a long shot to make the playoffs this year. They will need to win most or maybe all of their remaining games to do it, and they have tough games coming up. But whatever happens this year, any fans reading this can be excited about the future thanks to Robert Griffin the Third, AKA RG3! The rookie quarterback is on pace to pass for more than 3,000 yards and rush for more than 1,000 yards.

### A local update from Free Minds Headquarters!

These days, Free Minds is up to a whole lot more than just the Book Club! Here are some updates about what's been going on with the organization since the last newsletter:

- *On the Same Page*—Your fellow members home in the community have been reaching out to different high schools including a charter school on Capitol Hill and an alternative school in Northeast. They shared their poems and inspired the next generation to stay on the right path.
- *Write Night*—Over 40 people showed up for our November event! Many of you received comments in the mail on your writing. Send us new poems so we can feature you in our next Write Night!
- *Talent and Variety Shows*—Several reentry members read their poems on stage for a performance for Catalogue for Philanthropy and a show for the CSOSA Probation Agency. Congrats to everyone who participated for getting their voice and the voice of all Free Minds members out in the community!



# UPDATES FROM THE OUTSIDE (CONT'D)

## *It Was the Mothers Who Were Bravest of All*

*By Juliana, Free Minds Foreign Correspondent*



What's good, Free Minds?! I am writing you today from Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina. If you look at the map, you'll see that Argentina is way south of Washington DC. It's in the southern hemisphere, which means that the seasons are reversed. So right now, it's SUMMER here. This fact blows my mind—that while there is winter in DC, somewhere else there are trees blooming with flowers.

I guess if we were feeling poetic, we could use this idea to talk about renewal. Know what I mean? Winter somewhere means it's summer somewhere else, and we know that the seasons will change again. Of course our lives aren't as regular as seasons, but knowing there is a possibility of summer is enough to begin a change.

But enough poetry—let me tell you some more about Argentina. Food is always a popular subject, so let's start there. I have one word for you: steak. Argentina is one of the top producers of cattle in the world, and my lord, people like their beef! They also eat all the parts of the cow we don't usually eat in the US, including things like blood sausage. Yeah, I tried it. It's not bad, but it's a reeeally strange texture. A popular snack here is empanadas—they're like little packages of food, with a filling wrapped in bread. They can be filled with almost anything, from vegetables to meat to fruit. I like them because they're cheap and you can buy them on the street

at any time of the day. That's the other thing about Argentina—everyone stays up super late. It's seriously normal to be out until 3am any night of the week, and most people don't eat dinner until 9pm or later.

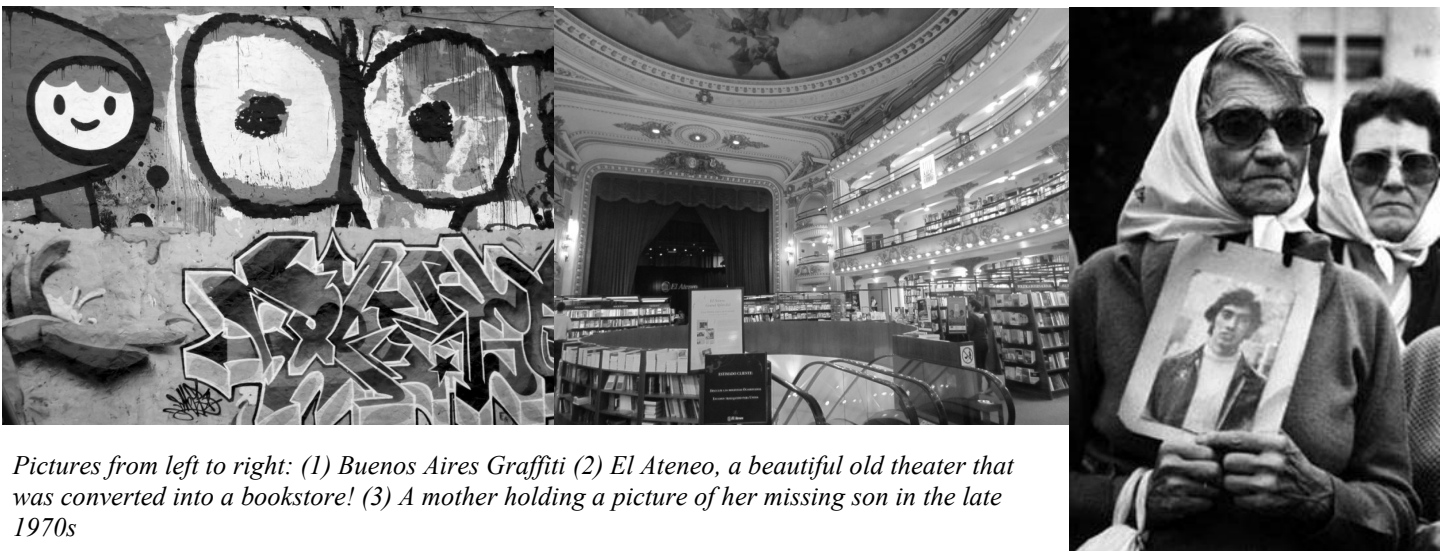
I also want to tell you about a meeting I had yesterday. I met with a man named Federico, who helped to start a group for people coming home from prison here in Buenos Aires. As we talked, Federico and I were both surprised at the similarities we saw. Inmates and returning citizens face many of the same issues here. And because the economy is even worse than it is in the US, getting a legit job can be very hard. Which is why I was so impressed to hear about the group that meets every Saturday for people in reentry. They share what's going on with them and support each other. Federico said that when they can inspire each other—when someone who's been really down can talk about how their life has improved—that's when change happens. I guess we're back to the theme of renewal, huh?

Some of the issues here are very different, however. One thing I learned is that if a woman with children is imprisoned, her children are allowed to stay with her until they are three years old. People say that this is both good and bad: kids get to be connected with their moms, but it also means that there are children growing up in prison. What do you think?

I'm running out of space but I want to share one more thing. Between 1976 and 1983, Argentina had a military dictatorship in the country. Part of what happened was that many people were “disappeared,” as they called it, and their bodies were never found. Many were young people who had opposed the military government. Even today no one knows exactly how many people were tortured and killed, but it was a lot—some say 30,000. As you can imagine, it was a terrifying time. Most people were too afraid to say anything because if you did, you might be the next to “disappear.” But then, you know what happened? It was the mothers who were the bravest of all. They tied white scarves over their heads embroidered with the names of their missing children, and they went to stand in front of the president's house. They stood there every Thursday, demanding that things change. Gradually, other people began to speak out as well. Even though many of the mothers are very old, they still stand every Thursday. It has been over 1,800 Thursdays now. I have so much respect for these moms, who stood up when no one else would.

I could go on and on but I don't want to take up this whole Connect. Just know that I'm thinking of you all, from all the way on another continent. And as always, keep your mind free!

—Juju



*Pictures from left to right: (1) Buenos Aires Graffiti (2) El Ateneo, a beautiful old theater that was converted into a bookstore! (3) A mother holding a picture of her missing son in the late 1970s*



# The Write Way

Hey Free Minds, Julia here with our new page dedicated to writing tips! This month we have a wonderful guest writer, Christopher, who is a published poet and a long-time friend of Free Minds. Christopher has been coming to our Write Night events for a while now, so you may remember reading his wise comments on your poems. Now he's sharing his wisdom with all of us in this column about finding inspiration. I hope this will inspire you! Write to us and let us know what you'd like to see on this page in the future. Do you have writing tips to share? Do you have questions you'd like answered? Just let us know and we'll do our best.

## Inspiration Is Everywhere

By Christopher, published poet and FM friend

Hello Free Minds! I just wanted to say I have been coming to Write Nights for months now because I am in awe of the creativity, honesty, depth and inspiration I experience in your poems. I am a published poet and I write poems with several different inspirations, moods, themes and purposes. Nonetheless, your poems always inspire me!

Speaking of the word inspire... let's talk a little about inspiration. Before our pens ever hit the paper, an idea or circumstance has to inspire us in some way. However, few people realize that inspiration also exists in the small details of life. Don't know what I mean? Well, think about it.

I want you to look up right now. Do you see a ceiling? I see a ceiling as well. However, this is more than just a ceiling. It can be seen as a limit or a restraint. Can you think of any ceilings in your life that you just can't break through to see the sunrises of life?

Look at the floor beneath your feet. What do you see? Do you see tiles? Or perhaps you see some dust or dirt? A poet can look at the floor and find inspiration for writing. To me, the floor can represent you staying grounded in your faith and morals. No matter how far you may jump away from who you are and the goodness of your heart, your feet always return to the floor. You stand firmly on the floor. You stand firmly on your morals, teachings and faith. The floor is more than just dirty tiles or cold concrete; it is what keeps you from sinking under. It is your foundation of greatness.

Whew! Okay, enough abstract thinking for the night. However, I hope you get my point. Inspiration for life is everywhere. You just have to find it.

Challenge yourself this week and find inspiration in a place or an object that you normally wouldn't pay attention to. Then write a poem about it. You just may be surprised!



## QUOTE-I-VATOR

Here are some quotes to inspire your writing!

Energy and persistence conquer all things.

—Benjamin Franklin

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others.—Nelson Mandela

For in the true nature of things, if we rightly consider, every green tree is far more glorious than if it were made of silver or gold.—Martin Luther

Once you learn to read, you will be forever free.

—Frederick Douglass

## Renewal Word Search!

N T L T G Q R Y U S O B T R Q  
O B X R H E R V G A H U N E R  
P I S E C B W E S R E A L F F  
E P E Y N Q F U N D E B I R V  
E R C U E W G A N E A N A E O  
T L T S O P M O C N W E E S E  
E M E D I T A T I O N A K H X  
Y P A Q K P C A H W Z W L P J  
N L M C I B T O K N J O Q R C  
Z V W O R S M X T E K Q Q Z T  
U V R Y U O P L U E A V H S Y  
E F L S O Z V P L R U N O N R  
Q X P J B Q Z B W G X G W L E

COMPOST, ENERGY, GREEN,  
MEDITATION, RECYCLE, REFRESH,  
RENEWAL, SUSTAINABLE, TREE

## Changes

By CW, FM member in  
federal prison

There comes a time in our lives  
When we reach the point  
Of adulthood  
Where we get rid  
Of our childish mentality  
And grow up

And we're put into rough situations  
That we're mature enough  
To think our way out of  
We learn

How to conquer those situations  
And not depend on someone else  
To always be there  
To pick us up when we fall

There are a lot of obstacles we face  
That determine our maturity  
And when we overcome them  
We know that we've changed

## How My Son and I Found Common Ground

By Gale, Free Minds Grandmother

My son started getting into trouble at the age of 14. Like most mothers, I was hurt and disappointed, yet I refused to act surprised. We lived in an area where “hustling” was the thing to do, and young men all around us were getting killed and locked up on a daily basis. I wanted my son to learn a hard lesson and refused to go and pick him up from jail for a couple of days.

When I finally went to retrieve him, he was so angry at me. He said that I didn’t love him and asked me how I could have let him sit there all that time. I explained that I wanted him to learn his lesson; he was not only affecting his own life but mine as well. Being only 14 at the time, this point did not resonate with my son, and he continued to get into more and more trouble.

His grades were falling fast, and he was in danger of getting kicked out of school. I made the very hard decision to send him to live with my sister in Pennsylvania. I knew that when I told him what I had planned to do, he would freak. All of his friends and immediate family were in DC; he loved our neighborhood too much, plus he was always a mama’s boy.

I waited until a week after my son’s birthday to break the news. I sat him down and told him that he was not going to be happy with what I had to say, however, my mind was made up and there was nothing he could say to me to change it. After all, I

was a mother trying to save her kid’s life.

I explained to him that he would be joining his aunt and uncle in Pennsylvania. Before I could get the rest out, he bailed. I chased after him and tried my best to pin him against the wall, but he was too strong. He ran out of the house, and I told his brother to go after him. Finally, his brother caught up with him and convinced him to come back in the house.

My sister and her husband had already arrived and were staying in a hotel nearby. The plan was for them to arrive at 1am when he was asleep and groggy. They showed up as planned and we got his bags and put them in the car. My older son and my ex-husband (his dad) woke him up and told him it was time for him to go. It was a really sad scene, and I stayed in my room so that I would not cave and let him stay.

My ex-husband promised him he would not be there too long, but didn’t give an exact time frame. My son ended up staying for 2 years, and within that time at least 10 of his closest friends lost their lives to violence. I knew in my heart that if I had not sent my son away, he would’ve been one of them.

By the time he returned, I had relocated and he got into a program and obtained his GED. He did not straighten out his act right away, and even had a few more brushes with the law. But today he is 38, alive, and has no interest in the “street life.” We had a conversation about 2 years ago in which he thanked me for making such a drastic decision back when he was only 15 years old. He said he knew that it had saved his life. And that is how my son and I found common ground.

## For the Love of Trees

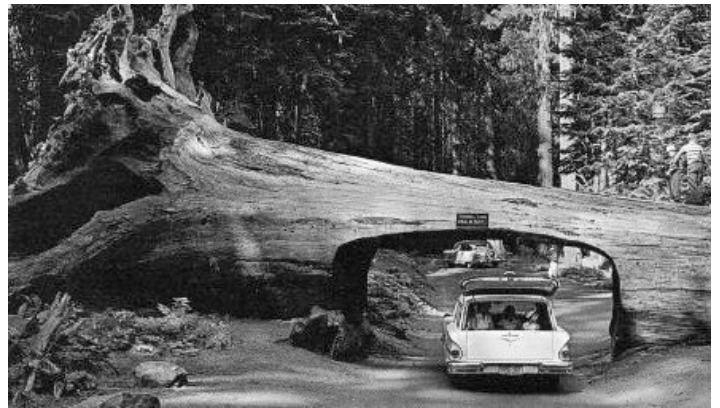
By Andy, Free Minds Friend

I majored in Forest Science in college because I love hiking, camping, hunting, and being outside. Forest Science is the study of trees. Each tree has a scientific name in Latin. This way no matter what language you speak, everyone around the world can know exactly what tree is being talked about. I can know the Latin name of almost any tree. For example the oak tree (one of my favorite trees) is *Quercus velutina*.

So why do we need trees? Well for one thing the paper you are reading this on is made from trees. Softer woods are sent to paper mills which grind the wood into saw dust. Combined with chemicals and high temperatures, they roll the dust into huge rolls that look like toilet paper rolls. Now, there is more emphasis on recycling used paper to make new paper instead of cutting down trees, but that’s still only a small part of the industry.

Trees also provide lumber for all types of construction and furniture. One of the most important things trees do is keep the air clean. They have natural filters that take toxins like carbon dioxide (produced from car exhaust, factories, etc.) and convert it back to oxygen we can breathe. There is a big movement in the US to plant trees in big cities like NYC to cut down on pollution. They reduce asthma rates and keep cities cooler in the heat.

The big issue is it takes a long time for a tree to grow. You can



tell how old a tree is by its growth rings, which are rings around its trunk. Some of the oldest trees in the US are the Redwoods in California. They can live to be 2000 years old! The Redwood Forest is a place everyone should try to see. The trees are huge! Some reaching over 200 feet tall and 20 feet in diameter. You can even drive your car through the trunk of one of them!

One thing about trees is they often get hit by lightning and burn up. But this is nature’s way of renewing itself. The ash from a forest fire puts nutrients into the soil so stronger trees can grow. We need fires to keep forests healthy. If a forest never has a fire then it will stop growing because the undergrowth will prevent nutrients from getting in. It seems odd to burn something down to make it grow better, but I like this because I apply it to my own life. Sometimes I go through hard times, but I know I will be healthier and will grow from it just like the trees in a forest fire. I hope all of you work hard to preserve trees. A world without trees is a barren, unhealthy place.



# CAREER CORNER

Coming home in the next 6 months? Write us a letter or give us a call at 202-758-0829 so we can help you plan for reentry!

Welcome to the Career Corner! Each month the Connect will feature a variety of programs and organizations that offer assistance in housing, job readiness, education, vocational training, job attainment, and a host of other areas that may assist you in successful reentry in the community. We will also feature interesting careers you may not be familiar with!

## VOTEE PROGRAM

The VOTEE Program works with ex-offenders to become productive members of the community. In order to participate in the VOTEE program, you must get a referral from your probation officer. Participants undergo an assessment to determine your needs. The assessment will then be used to create an Individual Development Plan (IDP) or an Individual Educational Plan (IEP). Once you are accepted, VOTEE offers each participant a stipend for the duration of your involvement in the program. VOTEE offers a wide range of services including: Information Systems Technology training, job readiness training, learning labs, education and GED classes, life skills programs, educational referral services, occupational training services and referrals, job placement, job coaching, and computer aided instruction.

## LAYC PROMOTOR PATHWAY

The Latin American Youth Center's (LAYC) is a multi-cultural community-based organization. Its mission is to "support and transform a diverse population of underserved youth to reach their full academic, social, and professional potential." LAYC offers multi-lingual and culturally-sensitive programs that focus on education, community wellness, social services, workforce investment, art and media, and advocacy. One program that Free Minds members should consider using is the Promotor Pathway program. Youth between the ages of 16 and 22 are offered mentorship until they are 24 years old to help them get education, employment, and skills to lead a healthy and happy life. Participants work with individual mentors who guide them through other programs and services.

*If you'd like to suggest or request an organization, or have a question about one of the organization's mentioned above, please write to us at the Free Minds office!*

## The Battle is Not Yours Alone

By LW, FM member

Sometimes your heart can lose its joy  
And you wonder if you'll ever find it again

Sometimes your spirit gets weak from the stress  
and strain of life  
And your load seems too heavy to bear

But at times like this, I want you to remember  
That the battle is not yours alone

## Career Spotlight:

### Environmental Engineer

By Anne, a Free Minds Friend

**Environmental engineers use engineering principles to solve environmental problems such as pollution.**

I decided to become an environmental engineer because I always liked math and I wanted to help clean up our natural environment from the pollution that is poisoning us. Our world is overloaded with toxic chemicals from all of our manufacturing plants and I wanted to be a part of helping to clean it up. Engineers design systems that help take toxins out of the air we breathe, the water we drink, and the soil we play on.

One example is plastic water bottles. Did you know that they take forever to decompose and harm the fish in the ocean? The plastic gets brittle and the tiny plastic is eaten by the fish. Then we eat the fish and all those toxins that are used to make the plastic in the first place are passed onto us! Environmental engineers have designed systems to recycle the plastic water bottles to be reused for other purposes such as park benches!

As one of my professors used to say, "the solution to pollution is dilution." Dilution means to make something less concentrated (like adding water to orange juice, if you add enough water to orange juice it isn't orange juice anymore). So, this means that to solve the pollution problem, you need to dilute the pollution somehow. If its air pollution, add more clean air. If its water pollution, add more clean water. Coming up with good phrases to remember things always helped me in school and in life. I like this saying because I apply it in my own life. If I have negative thoughts I "dilute" them with a lot of good thoughts and they are less toxic :)

Here's a to a cleaner planet.

## RECYCLING BIN

By SH, FM member in Federal Prison

Your brain is like a recycling bin  
You get out what you put in  
From water bottles to curse words  
One more saved or not used  
Is better for the future  
Let's all chip in to save the economy  
By doing this we're a better candidate than Mitt Romney



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



## MIND AS MUSCLE

By James the Yoga Guy

Life is stressful. That's the simple fact for us all. Negotiating relationships with family, trying to get a foothold in the economy, confronting prejudice

and injustice, even just the hectic traffic is enough to make anyone tweak out, at least a little. That's why it's critical to get in great shape now to prepare to come home—but maybe not in the way you think.

Have you ever been to a weight room with no benches, no machines, no barbells or dumbbells or treadmills? You're about to enter one. It's the weight room of your mind. Like any muscle, the mind needs a workout to get strong and stay strong. But how do we flex the mind? Through breathing and meditation.

For thousands of years, many different cultures have known the benefits of breathing and meditation. They're only now becoming known to us. Modern science is now proving beyond a doubt the benefits of meditation—studies show these practices make us calmer and help us make better decisions.

So how does it work? No one really knows for certain HOW it works, but thousands of years of experience prove that it does. But you shouldn't take this, or anything, as sacred fact. You have to try it out for yourself. Here are 2 simple mind exercises to get a taste:

### 1) Calming Breath

Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Let your spine be long. Without changing it at all, notice your breath. Feel the air passing the nostrils or the lips. Maybe feel the rise and fall of the chest or belly. *Then, to the count of 5, take a slow breath IN*

## Then and Now

By LN, FM member home in the community

*Then, I had in my mind that in my near future I would be in a casket*

*Then, death was a constant thing so things didn't really matter*

*Then, I used to try to make my momma proud*

*But my actions only made her sadder*

*Now, I see life for what it really is*

*Now, I'm furthering my education*

*So I can set a good example for my kids*

*Now, I'm going to live my childhood dreams*

*Of becoming a math teacher*

*And calculating dollars instead of calculating dead*

*That was then....*

*This is now*

*through the nose. HOLD for a count of 3. Then slowly exhale OUT to the count of 5. Then HOLD for a count of 3. Repeat several times. When you stop, let your breath return to normal. Notice if there's any difference in how your breath or body feels.*

This technique can be used any time—whether you are alone, in the middle of a crowd, or during a job interview. You can always breathe in this way, and no one even needs to know. This technique can also be useful when we are caught up in negativity, aggression, or other destructive thoughts.

### 2) Mindfulness meditation

This is a more challenging but also more rewarding practice. Sit or lie down in a comfortable position. Let your spine be long. Your eyes can close or gaze down at the floor. Without changing it at all, notice your breath. *Then, continue to watch the breath and feel the body. IN. OUT. IN. OUT. Concentrate only on your breathing. If it's helpful, repeat those words silently to yourself: IN. OUT. IN. OUT.*

Thoughts will arise as you breathe. This is normal—thinking is what the brain is made to do. When you notice you are caught in thought and have forgotten to focus on your breath, simply and gently refocus your concentration. If it helps, say "thinking" to yourself silently in your head. Continue to watch the breath—not controlling it, just observing.

This technique is best done in a free moment, when there's 5 or more minutes to practice. It's good to make a regular habit of it. This is what makes our minds stronger and gives us more freedom to choose our own path through life. When we come back to our breath and drop the thoughts, we are exercising the ability to rule our own worlds—to be kings and queens of our own minds.

Hopefully, these techniques will be useful for you. The mind is the most important muscle we've got. Take good care of it, and help it get stronger. Breathe. Practice patience and humility—sources of true strength. And never give up in the fight to liberate your mind.

## This Time is to Better Ourselves

By GB, FM member in federal prison

My definition of renewal is to correct your wrong. I believe that anybody can change after making a mistake. It's about learning how to avoid making our mistakes again. That's why we are in jail: to reflect. But we seem to forget that. Why, I don't know. Where I'm doing my time, there are a lot of young guys talking about how when they get back out there how they are going to "hustle." Those guys are not thinking about renewing themselves, and those are the ones we must distance ourselves from. They don't want to change, so those are people I don't want to be around. Because I want to change my ways. Not just for me, but for my son, my fiancée, and my family. So yes, anybody can change, but they have to want to. We have this time on our hands so this is the time to better ourselves in three ways: mentally, physically, and spiritually. You got to strengthen those simple things before you get released back to society.

That's how you renew yourself.

## Environmental Justice and the Movement to Stop Pollution in Minority Neighborhoods

By Michael, Free Minds Friend

**"The Environmental Justice [EJ] movement is an inclusive movement . . . EJ movement is an anti-racist movement and I don't think you can get any more radical than fighting racism. Because when you talk about fighting racism, you make a lot of enemies because racism permeates everything." – Robert Bullard, 1999**

Hello. My name is Michael and I just got a degree in Urban Planning in London, England. I think it is important to learn about environmental racism because too often the inequalities of our world go unnoticed and unchallenged.

The clearest and most visible examples of environmental racism can be found in poor, black, and immigrant neighborhoods where the majority of America's trash dumps, toxic waste sites, and polluting power plants are located. Environmental racism is the way environmental decisions and problems unequally impact communities of color. For example, in Louisiana there is an area along the Mississippi River called "Cancer Alley" because big industrial plants dump their waste there, which makes people living in local communities

sick. 3 out of every 5 Black and Hispanic Americans live near an uncontrolled toxic waste site. Poor and minority communities disproportionately suffer from the effects of pollution—not to mention that the pollution is from power plants and waste sites that serve neighboring richer and whiter communities. Often with limited resources, these communities face an uphill battle against the harmful placement of toxic industry.

Although this has changed in the last 10 years, the black community has often criticized environmental orgs. for being too elitist and not addressing important social justice issues like the illegal dumping of toxins near schools in poor neighborhoods, which increases the risk of cancer.

Over the next few decades we will hear a lot about climate change and sustainability. The message tends to be universal: we are *all* under threat from climate change. While it may be true, it is minority and poor communities who are most at risk from and least equipped to adapt to environmental changes. Hurricane Katrina is a perfect example of how minority neighborhoods often suffer the most from environmental disasters. As Robert Bullard notes at the top of this article, the Environmental Justice movement is an anti-racist move-

ment. Any vision for a sustainable future should put social justice at its heart.

The struggle for a sustainable world needs to be filled with voices from communities of color—for they are the ones who are at most risk to suffer from the impacts of climate change.

### RENEWAL

By Heather, FM Reentry  
Social Work Intern

I want to pretend  
That each day is my birthday  
And celebrate the fact that I'm alive

I want to accept this is as a blessing  
And seize this opportunity

For renewal

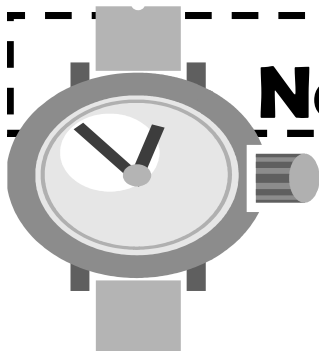
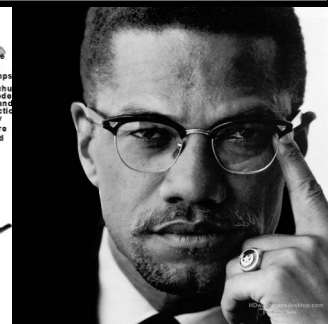
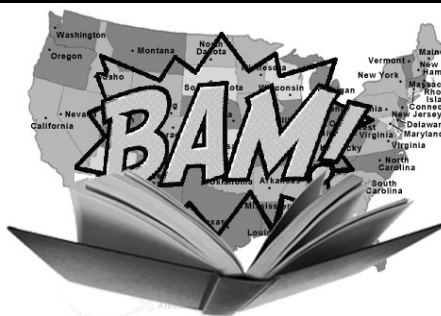
I'm frustrated with the old  
So I will learn to embrace the new

Although I am afraid

I will take a breath  
And accept the challenge

## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

We just sent out a book order recently, so active members (those of you who have written to us asking for books) should have received your order! Write to us in the office if you didn't receive any books or if you would like to receive books in the future. We're reading *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* right now for Books Across the Miles, our "virtual" book club for everyone in the Feds. Send us your thoughts about the book and we'll post them here in the Connect!



## Next Issue's Theme: Patience

You know the old saying, "patience is a virtue"? Well it's not always as easy as it sounds. That's why next issue we're tackling the theme of patience. What are some of the benefits of waiting for the right time for something? What are some of the frustrations? What things are worth waiting for? Send us your thoughts, drawings, and poems about what this word means to you!