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2201 P St NW
Washington, DC 20037

Free Minds Connect

No matter what... keep your mind free

SO MANY POWERFUL STORIES

By Tara, Executive Director

This Month's Theme: **FORGIVENESS**

Dear Wide Hearted Free Minds Readers and Writers,
Greetings from Free Minds Central! Are you sitting down?

You will need to, when you read this amazing issue of your *Connect* on the theme of **Forgiveness**. A big thank you goes out to our writers who opened their hearts and shared their incredible stories of pain, courage, and finally, emotional freedom with us. I can't believe how lucky I am to be able to know and work with so many inspiring people who are part of our Free Minds family.

I will keep this story brief since we are packed with so many gems of wisdom but, as most of you know, I was a TV news producer for many years before Kelli and I started Free Minds. I covered a lot of tragedies and saw a lot of harm done during those years, but two people have always stood out for me and now I realize why: They were able to forgive when everyone else was calling for blood. One was named Bud Welch, and his daughter was killed by the Oklahoma City bomber Timothy McVeigh. The other was the Unabomber Ted Kaczynski's brother David. Both of these strong men continue to work with people affected by violence. If you want, write to me and I can share more about my experiences meeting them.

There is another thing I want to share: being forgiven isn't a free pass for someone to continue harmful behavior. I learned this first-hand when a close friend was being emotionally and physically abused by her boyfriend. She told him she forgave him, and he thought that meant he could continue the abuse. She got help and got away, but I think he still doesn't understand. Her forgiving him didn't mean that she didn't also have to keep herself safe and protected.

It is important to say what forgiveness is **not**:

Forgetting/Denial

Time passing/ignoring the effects of the wrongdoing.

Condoning (accepting and allowing behavior to continue)

Saying: "Nothing that bad happened. It was only this one time. It won't happen again."

Excusing: "The person did this because.....it wasn't really their responsibility."

Read on to hear powerful stories of forgiveness and let us know what you think about it all. Finally, news from the home front: Our Writing Blog online is going viral. So many groups are finding your poetry and sharing it. Yeah! We are also getting many requests to read poetry in the community. We just went to Eastern SHS to share your poems and they loved them. Keep up the good work.

Until next time

May the longtime sun shine upon you

All love surround you

And the pure light within guide your way on



Original Art by S.N., a Free Minds Member in DC Jail

Tara



Free Minds Connect

is brought to you by...

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Want to be on this list?

Write up something and send it to us!

Free Minds Book Club

2201 P Street NW

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The theme of the next issue is

♪ **MUSIC!** ♪

Read more on the back page.

THE MAN WHO KILLED MY FATHER

By G.B., a Free Minds Member Home in the Community

Supposed to let it go when you forgive.

My father was killed before I could meet him. They caught the suspect and the judge asked me and my family what we wanted done to him. First, I was like so many of you, I wanted revenge! I had so much hatred for that man because of what he put my family through, and taking something I been looking for for years: a father. The hatred I had for that man was so passionate I wished I could have been the one to pull the lever to fry his a**, but that hatred built up to the point where I couldn't even recognize myself.

That's why I had to grow up and realize people make mistakes and God will handle that part. It took me a long while to forgive him, but I did and that's what I want to give back to you all. The feeling that came over me the day I forgave was the best feeling I had felt in a long time, it was like a weight had been lifted. Nobody is better than anybody else, remember that. Plus it takes a man or a woman to be able to forgive... Think about it.

What's up Free Minds members? My name is Jeffrey, and I did a total of 15 years in prison, at Lorton and the feds. I've been home six years to this exact date, so it's a blessing to be able to write you today. Ain't never had no infractions or nothing. I want to share what I've learned with you.

My son got killed in 2004, when I was still incarcerated. He was my oldest son, and he looked just like me. Our birthdays were just a week apart. He had my name and everything. I forgave the guys that killed him, and I'm glad I did. The thing was, before I could forgive them, I had to feel remorse for the things that I've done.

The other guy that killed my brother back last April, I forgave him too. In fact, I had two brothers that got killed, and I forgave all three of the people that killed my family. I had to forgive all of them and move forward with my life. God was a healer.

Sometimes forgiveness has to be learned and practiced- it doesn't always come easy. When my friend Tyrone lost his oldest son, I learned to forgive by watching him. We have to learn from people we respect, and not let others persuade us down a negative path.

It's been a journey for me, forgiveness. I lost a lot of loved ones, and not only that, I had to teach my mother and them how to forgive as well. My brother had just stepped out of the house, and one of his best friends killed him, just like that. For me it was easier to forgive, because I had experienced so much.

The thing is, first God (whoever the God of your understanding is) had to forgive me. That's how I learned to forgive someone else. You also have to keep moving forward. If you took a life, you need to write to whoever is left. A lot of people don't know how to forgive people. They stay in anger. What I would say to you young folks is to go back and ask your parents to forgive you for the pain you caused them, being incarcerated. Being a parent trying to raise a kid, it's hard. And if you ask for forgiveness, then you have to be forgiving... it's like that.

Finally, what I would say to you, if you're inside, is take advantage of all the educational programs and opportunities you can. That will open the door for you to walk through to a forgiving heart.

THE JOURNEY OF FORGIVENESS

By Jeffrey, a Free Minds Mentor



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



PRACTICING

By Juliana - Editor in Chief

What's good, Free Minds?? We're sending out this dispatch from a real hot summer here in DC- I hope this latest finds you well and growing, whatever your circumstances.

We're moving into new territory with this latest issue of the *Free Minds Connect*.

This is a deep newsletter, so I urge you to take the time to really read it, and absorb. I'm going to keep my piece real short because I want you all to hear from all the brave minds here, but I want to say that putting this issue together has taught a lot and has pushed me to examine my own life in new light.

It's a tradition by this point that I quote Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude," and I think that's worth thinking about. It's not something you declare once and then wash your hands of; it is something you are always choosing. Since we started putting this issue together I've been trying to practice this in ways big and small- from looking for real at hurts I'm holding on to, to taking a deep breath and forgiving that car that cuts me off when I'm driving on the Beltway. I'll be honest and say it hasn't all been successes, but it *has* been good practice.

I'm going to end this here, but know that we're thinking of y'all. Keep those minds free!

As always, *Juliana*

ELDER'S COLUMN: STAYING IN MY GRANDSON'S CORNER

By D.O., a Free Minds Grandmom

track.

I tell

him

to

go to his

P.O. I say, "You don't

need to go back there."

He will tell me, "Grandmom, I'm grown!"

I tell him, "You may be grown, but you don't know what to do that's good for you." I just feel he needs someone in his corner to try to pull him out. Maybe he's depressed, but I feel so bad when he acts up still. Sometimes I cry. The other day I cried so much I couldn't go to church, because my face was so swollen. I try my best. I love him to death I just try to put all things behind. I want to pull him forward.

I told him if you mess up again this time I'm done. I'm tired, he's done so much. I'm not doing it no more. But you know, I'm not done. I'm just telling him that. I can never give up on him.

AN ACT OF HUMILITY

By J.G., a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

What's up Free Minds? I usually contribute to our newsletter by writing a book review, which I love doing. We all know how powerful reading is. It changed my life. Literally. But if you all don't mind, I'm gonna free-style this one. This month's theme is forgiveness. Forgiveness

was, and still is at times, a very difficult concept for me to wrap my mind around.

All of the scriptures and spiritual literature that I've had the opportunity to read speak of forgiveness. As a matter of fact, they stress forgiveness because as I understand, it's one of the most powerful acts of humility, and perhaps the best way to honor God. Forgiveness comes in three phases. First, we must seek forgiveness from God with sincerity, and know that we are dealing with a merciful God, a just God. And know that we are forgiven. Second, we must seek forgiveness from whoever it is that we've done wrong. But we should be prepared as well because it takes time for wounds to heal, so everyone might not be willing to forgive us. It might come sometime down the line, it might never come. Therefore we shouldn't depend and/or wait on another person's forgiveness. That's completely out of our control; we must continue to move forward. And third, we must forgive ourselves. Only then we can truly move forward with our lives. When we don't forgive ourselves we give people the power to use our pasts as weapons against us whenever they feel like it, and that alone can be very instrumental in holding us down and keeping us from prosperity. So it's very important that we forgive ourselves.

There's actually one more phase of forgiveness. We should forgive those who wronged us. We shouldn't carry that heavy load around on us. When we don't forgive others, we hold on to a certain amount of bitterness that stunts our growth and holds us back from prosperity as well. Forgiveness comes with a certain level of maturity, and everything happens in its own time. Let's just remember that without forgiveness we hurt ourselves. Forgiveness is for our own individual improvement, so let's start the process.





FORGIVENESS BEYOND A SHADOW OF A DOUBT

By Lauren and Bernard, Free Minds Friends

Hello, Free Minds members.

My name is Lauren, and I the work I do humbles me more each day. I have the privilege of facilitating conversations among people who are in conflict (often as a result of a crime). These conversations, called Community Conferences, allow everyone affected by the incident to come together, sit in a circle, and find ways to heal and to learn and to move forward in a better way. Most of the Community Conferences provide an alternative to court for young offenders and their victims and families. But sometimes—like in cases of murder—we facilitate a “Serious Crimes Conference” *after* court and sentencing has happened. But the idea is the same: provide the victims and offenders a chance to talk, to heal, and to learn.

Bernard participated in one such meeting, asking to talk with the man who killed his 17-year-old son 15 years before. Bernard is a man, I believe, of true courage and integrity. Maybe you will agree after reading this little bit about his journey to forgiveness.

Bernard had been torn up about his son’s murder. It seemed so senseless. Some kids had been damaging Mr. N’s car for some time, and he hoped to scare them away this night. He left a gun by his bedroom window to do so. But when Bernard’s son “Beethoven” and his friends were walking by the car, one friend pushed Beethoven into the car. It set off the alarm, Mr. N shot, and one of the bullets found Beethoven’s back and killed him.

Fast-forward 14 years. Bernard was at his daughter’s high school graduation when she pointed out her classmate—Mr. N’s daughter. She told Bernard how they had both decided to not let what happened affect their

friendship. She also told Bernard how much the girl struggled because she didn’t get along with her mother and her father was in prison her whole life. Bernard decided that “this girl needs her father.”


He prayed about it a lot, and realized that he was ready to forgive Mr. N. He needed to go talk to him, tell him that, and see if there was some way that this girl’s father could be restored to her life.

Bernard ended up going to the prison two times to talk with Mr. N. The first time he was with his own family members. The second time, he went by himself. “This time, I just wanted me and him, one on one,” he said. “I was going there this time to see if he was genuinely remorseful.”

Having facilitated both meetings, I can personally say that the second conversation was one of the most intense face-to-face conversations I’ve ever seen between two men. They spoke from their hearts for 45 minutes, never turning away from each other, never attacking each other. Simply, and powerfully, they spoke their truth.

By the end of it, Bernard said to Mr. N, “I want you to be able to be in your daughter’s life. I’d like to speak at your parole hearing on your behalf so that can happen.” Mr. N was moved beyond words. He spoke about how painful it has been not to be able to see or even talk with his daughter. He has been so ashamed at what he did. But before this second meeting, he actually called her for the first time.

Bernard held true to his word, and Mr. N has been released from prison. One of the parole commissioners commented that in his 19 years of service, he has never seen a victim speak on behalf of an offender.

Many people have been touched by Bernard’s courage, faith, and forgiveness. Bernard hopes that maybe you will be too. 

By A.M., a Free Minds Friend in Federal Prison

IF ONLY...

If only I had been loved as a child,

then maybe I wouldn’t have grew up wild.

If only they’d given me some guidance and attention every once in a while,

then maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t feel it was cool to think and speak foul.

And maybe, there would be a chance that I’d know what it feels like to genuinely smile.

If only...

If only I’d gotten more compliments and congratulations, then maybe I would’ve made it through school and graduated.

If only I didn’t get addicted to weed, maybe I wouldn’t have ran out on the mother of my seed.

If only money would’ve been a want, and not a need, maybe I wouldn’t have fell victim to greed.

If only I would’ve not sold drugs.

If only I would’ve been more influenced by Tupac’s “Unconditional Love,” instead of his “Shorty Wanna Be a Thug.”


If only I would’ve taken that positive advice, then maybe I wouldn’t have picked up that gun or knife and took a life.

If only...

If only I had my grandmother back, she’d say, “Grandson, you’re better than that, so get your life back on track!”

If only I didn’t make so many mistakes. If only I’d taken advantage of being given all those breaks.

If only...

If only something in this poem can be beneficial to a troubled child, then this would truly make me proud. 



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

POWER INTO STRENGTH: MOVING BEYOND JUST SURVIVING

By Juan, a Free Minds Friend

Free Minds Friend Juan did 7 years behind bars, from age 15 to 22. When he came home, he began working with youth and elders in his community to help build the change and healing that he wanted to see. He recently took a job working to shape laws and policies, so that he can take that change to the state and national level.

When you think about forgiveness, you gotta real dig deep. You gotta dig into your biggest fears, your shames, your hurts, and you gotta have an intent to let it go. All those things that you hold on to? That's what's holding you back. The way I see it, forgiveness allows for self-actualization and transformation. When you're mad about something little, you're feeling your ego. And your ego is looking for a sucker.

Listen. I came up from the hood: from chronic adversity, always at a disadvantage, poor, colored, and male. The only way that I could make it was to keep moving forward. A lot of people that come from those backgrounds, they're pissed off! Trust me, I was too. They're pissed off at the system, at the judges, at probation. And I'm like, hey man, you can be pissed off all you want, but it's not gonna do s*** for you. For me, coming from all that, I had to remind myself not to get stuck on it.

I'm going to be honest, I'm not asking you to forget. But we have to move beyond just surviving. But learning to forgive is learning to let go and GROW, and that's when you move from power into strength.

In our constant attempt to not want to forgive, we feel like giants in our own little kingdom, but to the world, and to opportunity, we're just midgets. We have to let go and grow.

That little thing that's bothering you? That's part of the cycle of self-sabotage. To forgive is not weak, it's actually righteous. It takes a lot of courage, know what I'm saying?

Coming up as men, we have to take it upon ourselves to learn emotional endurance and stamina. A lot of times, we have a lot of other people telling us NOT to forgive. But you can't have an individual or group controlling your true meaning and purpose. It's up to you to reconnect to what that is. I encourage all of you to stop holding on to nicknames, let go of someone else's doctrine, and re-connect to and manifest who you truly are.

Real talk. I'm out.

Greetings, my fellow Free Minds friends. I am the mother of a Free Minds member. I am honored to be a part of this month's publication. I just wanted to drop you a few lines about the important principle of forgiveness. For me, forgiveness is letting go of any bitterness or thoughts of revenge associated with any wrong that I feel has been done to me or my loved ones.

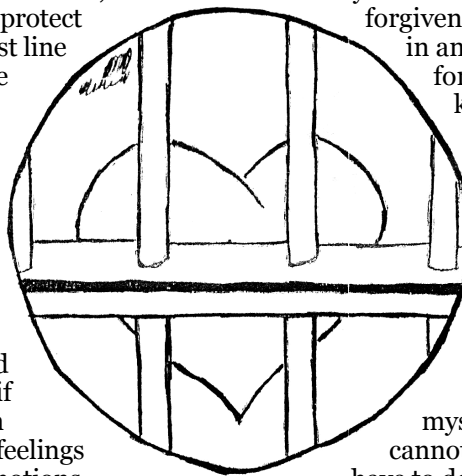
Again let me reiterate: it is not easy. However, it is necessary. As humans, it is our nature to protect ourselves and for most, revenge is our first line of defense. This is why I believe that since forgiveness does not come naturally, we have to make up our minds to forgive. I think that forgiveness is necessary because of the emotional damage that comes along with not forgiving. If we decide not to forgive and hold on to our feelings of resentment toward someone, that unforgiveness has control over us. It's like we are held hostage by our feelings of resentment and this is just simply not healthy. However, if we make the choice to forgive and I mean *truly* forgive, it frees us from those toxic feelings and they no longer hold sway over our emotions.

I want to be sure to express the fact that forgiving someone does not mean pretending that there was never an issue. That's impossible. However, you can acknowledge that something happened and work through it. Forgive and move on. The part about working through it is purely a personal choice but it has to be done to bring about closure and forgiveness. Trust me, folks- learning to forgive can take some time but it is worth

it. I have seen so many young men lose their lives to senseless acts of violence and I know that so many of those precious lives would still be here today if one would have chosen to forgive.

Last year I had the biggest test ever when it comes to forgiveness. My son was stabbed and nearly died, in an altercation over a football. I will never forget that call. The first thing I wanted to know was, "Who did it?!" When I finally got all the facts, including who stabbed my son, I struggled with so many different emotions. I was hurt and very angry at that person. Every time I looked at my son lying in the hospital bed with every tube known to man in his veins I became enraged. How dare this person do this to my son and my family? My anger had a hold on me.

Finally, I had a conversation with myself: "Keela, your son needs you and you cannot help him like this. You know what you have to do." I made up my mind, as hard it was, right then and there, to forgive the person who hurt my son. All feelings of anger and resentment went away and I have not looked back. It was not easy, but it was so freeing and I'm glad I made that decision. The main thing I want to say about forgiveness is that it's a choice: it's not natural and it's not easy but know that when you hold on to that resentment it hurts you more than the other person. Think about trying to free yourself from that.



Original Art by E.C.,
a Free Minds Member
in DC Jail

MAKING THE CHOICE OF FREEDOM

By K.H., a Free Minds Mom



A BURDEN LIFTED

By X.E., a Free Minds Friend
in Federal Prison

Forgiveness is the best blessing that we could ever receive! Let me tell you about my story: In 1997, I found myself in the worst circumstances I could've ever imagined. I was 16 years old and I was a wanted man! In a 6 month time period, I had been chased by police, helicopters, state troopers, and even police dogs! During one chase, I went so far as hiding in a doghouse for 3 hours. The feeling of relief that I felt when I got away was nothing compared to the feeling I got when I knew that I had been forgiven.

When I was captured, I was placed into an isolated cell by myself. In that cell I had to deal with a number of different emotions and feelings that I had never come in contact with, making the situation extremely difficult. It was enough to drive me insane. I remember thinking: "How can I go on with my life when I've committed a major sin and a huge crime?" I really felt that my life was over!

The day that I was sentenced, the judge asked the victim's mother if there was anything that she would like to say to me. "I forgive you," she said. At that moment to be over, and that's when I was hold resentment against ourselves those words, I felt the biggest burden experience, I learned that in order to understand the power and importance we will all be faced with situations where remember that everyone deserves to be to appreciate the gift of forgiveness, whether we are giving or receiving.

"The feeling of relief that I felt when I got away was nothing compared to the feeling I got when I knew that I had been forgiven."

judge asked the victim's mother if there to me. She answered "yes," and turned exact moment I knew my life was not able to forgive myself. A lot of times, we without being aware of it. When she said lifted from my shoulders. Through my grow and progress in life we must of forgiveness. At some point in our lives we look to be forgiven. I believe if we forgiven at some point, we will be able

FORGIVENESS OF SELF

By D.C., a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

They say everything starts with self, so how can I forgive someone else if I don't forgive myself? Every day, there's something to be accomplished and something to be learned. So every day I forgive myself for my mistakes and most of all try to learn from each and every one. I know it's hard, so most just say f*** it, it is what it is. But the strong analyze the situation to try to get as much as he/she can out of it. You always have to start somewhere, so any start is a good start, if you ask me. I live to be great, but every great person goes through his/her trials and tribulations, so I forgive myself to become greater. Greatness is the category I'll love to reside under. Forgiving self is a sign of maturity, growth, self discipline etc...

CHARACTER IS STRENGTH

By M.S., a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

Sometimes you have to put your pride to the side and forgive a person for their mistakes or faults. We're all human and are subject to do things we later regret. Sometimes, you forgive a person in order to avoid future confrontation or hard feelings toward one another and relieve both sides of a guilty conscience. Sometimes forgiveness may feel too costly, but knowing who you are and what you did was right is what counts.

A SMALL EXAMPLE

By K.H., a Free Minds Member Home in the Community

It takes a quick second to get mad and max out on someone, but takes time to forgive someone for what they have done to you... I was walking when someone bumped into me and scuffed my shoe. It could've been easy for me to whip out and do something I will forever regret, but in that moment I thought about all the stuff I've been though in life and how I came too far to go back. I could get into a fight which can lead to something else, or I could forgive the person and keep my freedom. People can do some things they don't mean, so I forgave the person and kept my freedom.

LOVE AND FORGIVENESS

By J.W., a Free Minds Member Home in the Community

I remember somewhere where it said a few things love does not do and one of those things was "love remembers no wrong." Forgiving starts with yourself which means we have to forgive ourselves before we can forgive others. Forgiveness isn't easy to define. It's hard to grasp and it's not easily done even in the best of circumstances. Forgiveness is about making the decision to move forward. It means we allow ourselves to be released from what has happened in the past. Holding grudges only causes bitterness to consume and paralyze us. Forgiveness is a positive action that comes from truly loving.



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POETRY ABOUT FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness

By D.J., a Free Minds Member in DC Jail

Every day I ask for forgiveness
From my unborn seed and my son that's here
I made mistakes, but you show me a human that don't
And I will show you someone that's perfect
I know me, DJ
I am far from that
But everybody deserves a second chance
Maybe a third and fourth
So you want to play God and tell me you can't show forgiveness
You can't show compassion, sympathy
You don't care about my life or what I have going on in my life
Sometimes I wish I could turn back the hands of time
Way back to when I was a child without a care in the world
No bills or care in the world
It's easy for society to forgive a child
But an adult, you better be perfect

The Forgiveness

By S.H., a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

I forgive my dad for walking out on his only son
I forgive the people who think they get over
Because they assume I'm dumb
I forgive life for dealing me this hand
I forgive my inner boy for not becoming a man
I forgive the man who bumped me
Because he couldn't see
I forgive...
I can't forgive everything...
Because I've yet to forgive me...

GET YOUR SHINE ON

By K.A., a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

To forgive is one of the hardest things to do but it's worth it. Wouldn't you want to be forgiven? I know I do. You could forgive but it doesn't mean you have to forget. If you learn how to forgive someone, you will feel much better. Why? Because if someone hurt you and you still holding on to the hurt because you ain't forgive them, all you're doing is hurting yourself with your bitterness or however you feel. Let it go but learn from it. There is no point in keeping vengeance or stubbornness. Also, it's not just other people we should forgive, we must forgive ourselves for all that we didn't do and all the things we should have done. We shouldn't get stuck on regrets. We need to make peace with ourselves and the people around us. We grow when we forgive. It's hard, but we don't have to have a cold heart. Let it be warm. Find the true you. Get your shine on with the light that's in you. Pray, and if you don't pray, meditate, and if you don't meditate, try to. Do it because you are human and we humans make mistakes. Do it to bring peace to yourself and others. Do it for yourself.
Love, Your brother K.A.

Quote-i-vator

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you." --Lewis B. Smedes

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." --Mohandas Gandhi

"Nobody can go back and start a new beginning,
but anyone can start today and make a new ending." --Marla Robinson

"Anger makes you smaller, while forgiveness forces you to grow beyond what you were." --Cherie Carter-Scott

"Resentment is like a glass of poison that a man drinks; then he sits down and waits for his enemy to die." --Nelson Mandela, when asked why he was not resentful for his imprisonment

"What we forgive too freely doesn't stay forgiven." --Mignon McLaughlin

"It is easier to forgive an enemy than to forgive a friend." --William Blake



FIVE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT FORGIVENESS

By K.V., a Free Minds Mentor in Federal Prison

I'm a member of an Islamic Culture and History Study Group and one of my jobs is to clear up misconceptions. So, I'm honored to do so concerning the topic Forgiveness.

I believe we all need a healthy understanding of forgiveness. Learning how to forgive and removing the misconceptions concerning forgiveness is essential to our growth and development.

First, we need to understand that forgiving is not forgetting though we are taught this at a very young age. It is unrealistic. The mind never does forget. We may repress a memory, but it is still there, often operating beneath the surface. The mission isn't to forget the past, but rather to learn from it.

Second, forgiving does not mean condoning. It does not mean that we are okay with the offense. Forgiveness in no way condones, denies, or justifies the offensive action or behavior. However, forgiveness allows us to deal with the past more effectively. It minimized the effects that the past has on the present and future.

Also, it should be noted that forgiving does not exonerate the perpetrator from responsibility for their actions. It doesn't "let them off the hook." We cannot grant absolution, even if we wanted to. The individual must take responsibility for his own actions and make peace within himself.

The third, and perhaps most common, misconception about forgiveness is that forgiveness is simply pretending that everything is fine, when we know it is not. We often confuse forgiveness with denial, or repression of anger. To plaster a smile on your face and make like everything is okay is not forgiveness. Either we forgive or we don't, there is no halfway in forgiveness. It is better to

acknowledge the pain, and admit your feelings and deal with them, then to pretend they don't exist. Self-denial undermines personal growth. For many people it is often easier to deny their pain and pretend. Some people actually pretend to forgive, because they think it makes them look mature. Pretending doesn't solve anything, it only delays the healing.

Fourth, forgiveness is not a sign of weakness. It is actually an indication of strength. When we forgive we understand that we don't need our anger and hatred to protect ourselves. We don't need the pain as a crutch any longer. Forgiveness does not depend on who hurt us, what they did, or whether they are sorry for their actions. We don't forgive out of weakness but out of strength.

Fifth, forgiveness can not be forced. It must come willingly, and it often takes time. It is not something we can plan to do on a specific day or at a specific time. Sometimes, it is a lengthy and difficult process, but well worth it. The peace of mind we achieve is the ultimate reward.

Forgiveness deals with reality. It doesn't deny, minimize or justify what other has done. Forgiveness erases nothing of the past. It allows us to cut the cords that relentlessly hold us in the past. It sets us free. It allows us to put the past in its proper perspective. It allows us to take an honest appraisal of the offense and think about how much time and energy we waste on not forgiving.

Forgiveness means no longer wanting to punish others. It breaks the cycle of revenge - no more getting even or dreaming of how to make them suffer. Inner

peace replaces an "even the score" mentality. We realize that nothing we do to punish others will change the past, or heal our pain. Clinging to anger and hatred actually hurts us more than it hurts them.

Forgiveness is moving on. Energy spent hanging on to the past is better spent improving the present and preparing for the future.



Original Art by K.H., a Free Minds Member Home in the Community



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We here at the Free Minds office were amazed to hear about this incredible project of forgiveness happening in the war-torn African country of Rwanda—and then delighted when we were able to meet the young filmmaker herself! She was so moved to hear about all you Free Minds Members and the work that you are doing. We wish we could share the film itself with all of you, but here, at least, is a sample of her experiences that she wanted to share.

FORGIVENESS WORLDWIDE

By Laura, Director of the Documentary Film
As We Forgive

On a trip to Rwanda in 2005, I heard a story that astonished me even more than the nation's devastating 1994 genocide. Beginning in 2003, the Rwandan government began releasing from prison tens of thousands of genocide murderers who had confessed to their crimes. With an overwhelming backlog of court cases, Rwanda's leaders saw little choice for full justice and turned their sights instead to reconciliation. When I heard this, I wondered, "Can this even be true? Is it possible for survivors of genocide to forgive the killers?" This question haunted me so much that I decided to spend the next year raising funding for a documentary that would explore the lives of ordinary Rwandans who were on a journey to forgive the neighbors who'd slaughtered their families.

Upon returning to Rwanda in the summer of 2006, I realized the need to tell multiple sides of the story. Every survivor had experienced profound trauma and horror, but I was surprised to find that so had some of the killers. Many claimed to be pressured by extremist government militias to kill or be killed. I came away from those interviews struggling to define these people, for I could not hate them like I'd wanted to. They committed unthinkable atrocities, but I wondered if, put in their shoes with no education but vicious government propaganda, might I have done in the eyes of these executioners. It incredible goodness and profound evil—all

Beyond the stories of genocide, reconciliation from two different and one who had not. Rwandans, although reconciliation campaign, are mostly stoic. One of the most unexpected obstacles I when discussing something unimaginably a coping mechanism; strange, yes, but nation of people who've been crying for the

I eventually discovered two incredible of *As We Forgive*. The first was Rosaria, a her siblings and her parents during the unborn child in her womb, a daughter she later named Cadeaux or "gift." Rosaria had forgiven Saveri, the man who viciously murdered her sister and her four nieces and nephews. When I met Saveri, he had just completed a new home for Rosaria, which he called a "practical sign" of his remorse. How the two live together today as peaceful neighbors remains a hopeful mystery in my mind.

Paralleling this story was another extraordinary survivor named Chantale. Her father's murderer, John, had recently been released from prison for having confessed publicly to his crime, but he had not yet approached Chantale to ask for forgiveness. What unfolds is the film's tension-filled climax, as the two characters encounter one another on camera for the first time since John killed Chantale's father in the genocide.

So many incredible things happened during the production of *As We Forgive*, there are too many to number. Suffice it to say, producing this documentary was the most transformative experience of my entire life. I looked into the eyes of genocide murderers and saw humanity staring back—a stark reminder of the dualism of our nature, a nature in need of ultimate reconciliation. Even more, I barely scratched the surface of understanding the pain of these survivors, yet they were teaching *me* about forgiveness. Who knew a person could be so humbled and awed by the strength of these suffering Africans? Viewer, be prepared to be changed by the hope arising from the most unlikely nation on earth.



the same? I was humbled to see so much humanity convinced me of people's capacity for both springing from a single human heart.

however, I wanted to explore the concept of perspectives: that of a survivor who had forgiven most of them pay lip service to the national when it comes to discussing matters of the heart. overcame was realizing that many Rwandans *laugh* devastating, like the loss of a loved one. Laughter is understandable when you realize Rwanda is a past 14 years.

Rwandan women who would become the subjects widow who'd lost her four children, her husband, genocide. The only person she had left was the

genocide. The only person she had left was the

genocide. The only person she had left was the

SAYING GOODBYE

By Josh, Former Program Coordinator
position is only for a year! He's moving on, but he wanted to tell you all goodbye himself.

I don't actually know a good way to say "goodbye." Everything I think of sounds cheesy. "With a heavy heart I bid farewell?" Honestly, that one occurred to me for a second – so let me just be straightforward: I'm leaving Free Minds, and I'm really sad about it. The things I've learned here, working with you and your fellow Free Minds Members, are gonna change how I see the world and work for the rest of my life.

You may not realize this, but a big chunk of the time that goes into creating the *Free Minds Connect* is a process called "layout," and that's my job. Every month, I take all the submissions, decide which article goes on which page,

We were lucky enough to have Josh through a program called AmeriCorps, but the position is only for a year! He's moving on, but he wanted to tell you all goodbye himself.

what picture goes where, and I do my best to make this look as cool and professional as possible. I used to do this with my college newspaper too, and putting together a publication like this is probably one of my favorite things to do because I love being creative with other people. It means a lot to me when I get to take something that someone else worked really hard on – like your *Connect* article – and make sure others get to read it.

Basically, I want to say thank you. Thank you for giving me this chance to work with you. Thank you for trusting me with your writing. Above all, thank you for doing your part to keep all of our minds free. I hope you guys keep this going for a long time because even though this is probably the coolest thing I've ever done, and even though I'm super proud of the work I put into it, I know I'm not the most important part- it's you all! Take care of yourselves, alright? I'll be thinking of you.

--Josh

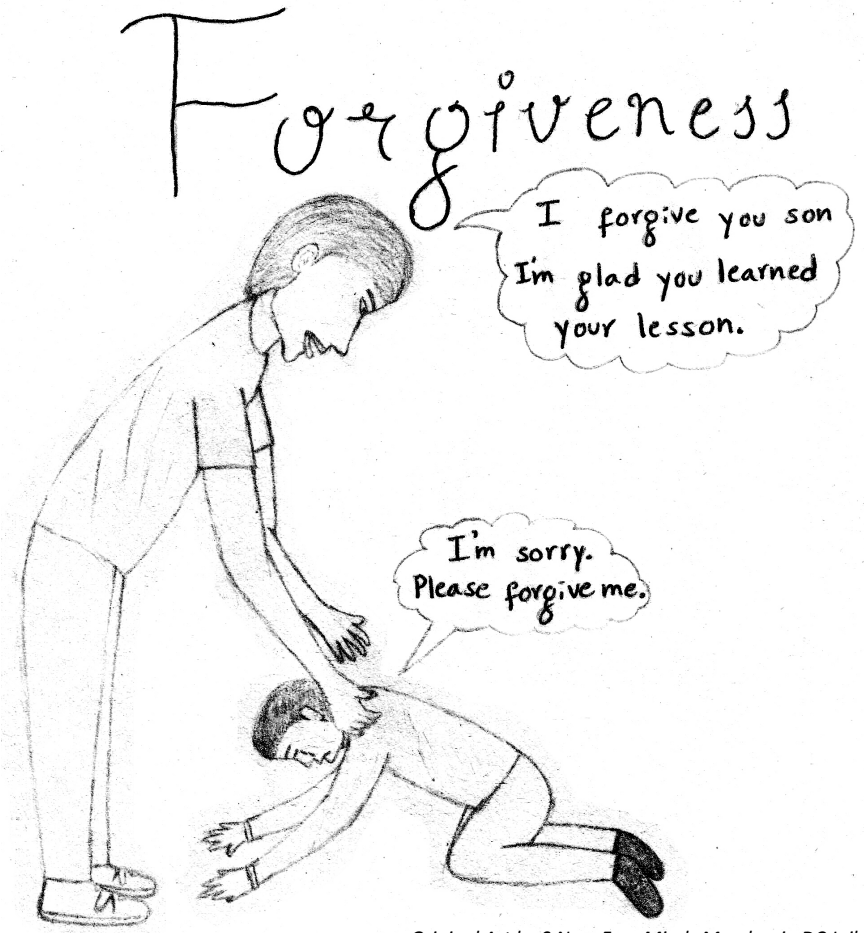




IN MEMORY

By C.V., A Free Minds Member
Home in the Community

On June 10th my life was over
That was the day my mother died
And that whole day I was broken
hearted
My family told me that it was God's
work
But at the time I thought that it was
my fault
Because I got locked up
But everything will be alright
Because the last thing I told her was
I love her.



Original Art by S.N., a Free Minds Member in DC Jail

*Forgiveness starts with oneself. Once we've forgiven ourselves, we can forgive everybody else.
Forgiveness isn't hard, so the next time a situation calls for us to forgive, give it a shot.*

~Words from a forgiver~




THEME FOR NEXT ISSUE MUSIC!

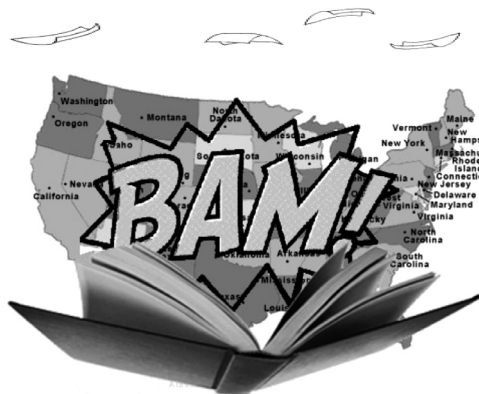


The theme of the next issue is... MUSIC! We know y'all have a lot to say on this- here are some ideas: What do you think is the power of music? Where does it come from? When is music a positive influence? When is it a negative influence? What is your favorite song, and why? What song brings back memories? What do you listen to to calm down? To comfort you when you are sad? Send us your writing, and we'll print it here.

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WELCOME TO BAM! *

(*BAM! stands for "Books Across The Miles!"...
but it's more fun to say "BAM!" don't you think?)

BAM! is a virtual book club made up of more than 100 Free Minds members who are now in federal prisons across the country, all of whom will read the same books and discuss them through the *Free Minds Connect*.

Hey Friends,

It's your discussion leader, Kelli Taylor writing to you from Arlington, VA. If you'll remember, we like to start book club with some deep breathing. So close your eyes and imagine yourself in a calm and peaceful place...breathe in...now breathe out...Ha, ha, I'm just kidding, I'm not going to make you do a virtual yoga session (but don't put it past Tara!)

I'm writing you today open up the discussion on the play **RUINED**, by Lynn Nottage, which all of you received in the last month. Many of you mentioned that this was the first play you have ever read. This is so exciting. We hope it will be the first of many. I think reading a play is an entirely different experience than reading a novel. Do you agree?

So here's what some of you said:

I just read "RUINED" by Lynn Nottage, and I can honestly say I just got back on this compound. I was just in that small town in Congo at "Mama Nadi's" LOL. I really did just zone out because I didn't put the book down until I finished it. At first I was gonna read a certain amount of pages and call it a night. However, the suspense kept me reading from start to finish. I was gonna get some rest and answer these questions when I woke up, but I'ma just knock it out the way while my mind is still ...or should I say coming down from this "high" from having a Free Mind. -M.A.K.

These books are so good, especially RUINED it's kind of like a movie to me or something! -V.M.

This play is about a lot of things, but I'm just goin' to elaborate about the women in general. To me, I think that the natural state of mind of these women, or women in general, has been lost by being experienced to so much anguish (physical or mental pain, or both). The essence of a woman's being is powerful and filled with the potencies of unity and love. Women are filled with emotions so deep that it enables them to connect to that energy that's embedded in her heart. The frame of a woman should be touched with the delicacy of a painter's stroke, and her mind is bright like the sustainer of life, the sun. A woman is man's reasonable companion but somehow that knowledge has been forgotten and she's become the slave to his passion and a tool to gratify his loose desire. Somehow the glory and the shame has been misplaced. Think about that Free Minds family. Until next time, keep your mind free. -R.B.

WHY WERE SOPHIE AND SALINA WERE WILLING TO BE PROSTITUTES?

I think the belief system of the culture greatly influenced Sophie and Salima's decision to be prostitutes at Mama's Bar. Both had been rejected and betrayed by their families and villages over something that was completely out of their control. That can create a very intense feeling of worthlessness. And they literally had no place to go. So, 4 them I think they felt as tho it was their only option, and at least they would be taken care of on some level. -J.G.

WHY DID FORTUNE REJECT HIS WIFE AFTER SHE WAS RAPED? AND WHY DID HE THEN COME BACK?

Fortune rejected Salima because he felt as though what he loved and valued was "ruined." This tells you that once something appears to have no value it becomes useless. Fortune came back because he felt kinda guilty for leaving his wife to die when in the first place, it probably wouldn't have happened if he never left to get that pot. And the only reason he left to get that pot is because he loved her. So he came to his senses and went back for the one he loved. He was caught up on how his family would view him instead of sticking by the one he loved as a wife. -M.A.K.

Fortune rejected Salima because she was raped/ violated by rebels of war. Due to how Fortune felt about Salima, I believe pride is valued strongly in society because it has the power to make you disown a person you love. Fortune later came back for Salima because the love he had for her outweighed the fact that she had been violated. -A. G.

(continued on next page)

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WHAT KIND OF A PERSON WAS MAMA?

Mama was a deeply hurt, guarded, manipulative, pessimistic, no-nonsense, all-about-a-dollar type of woman, with every right in the world to be that way. But she also had a good heart. To her she was caring 4 her girls, providing food and shelter 4 them in the unusually cruel times they were living in, and she genuinely cared 4 them I think. She was gonna pay 4 Sophie's surgery, and let her go to the city, even after she caught Sophie stealing from her. That alone showed that there was still a big, caring heart beneath all the pain and hurt and rough, indifferent exterior... -J.G.

Mama was a good woman; however, she was so emotionally scared from her childhood watching her mother be a prostitute [I'm assuming this because on page 35 Mama says, "Yeah and my father was whoever put money in my mama's pocket!"] Also, she felt as though she was "Ruined" which means to me she got raped. By her being so emotionally out of tune she made some decisions that may seem crazy to everyone else but to her, it was what it was. -M.A.K.

WHAT DOES SALIMA MEAN WHEN SHE SCREAMS "YOU WILL NOT FIGHT YOUR BATTLES ON MY BODY ANYMORE"?

I think Salima is saying that Fortune can't use his willpower and strength to form a mental drive, which is the only thing keeping him alive and willing to get through battles and reach Salima. -A.G.

WHAT IMPACT DOES WAR AND VIOLENCE HAVE ON PEOPLE?

Anyone in the path of war could become victims of war and it alters people lives by breaking up families by violence. -M.A.K. Times of war tend to bring out the best and the worse in people. I think the play was called "**RUINED**" because all of the women had been ruined in some way, shape, form or fashion. It seems as though the whole country had been ruined by the war on some level. -J.G.

Victims of war are casualties; men not involved, the elderly, and children. The war alters people because it reveals a sense of fear in people. A.G.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? We want to hear from you!

If you haven't read **RUINED** yet, I hope sitting in on this BAM! session has you intrigued and you will pick it up! Read it and then write down and send us your thoughts for the next issue of the *Connect!* Let's keep the discussion going! And for you artists out there, send us your suggested design for a cover for **RUINED**! We'll print it in our next issue. Finally, we asked you to write a poem or essay about your own life using the word **RUINED**:

"Youth Ruined"

By MK, a Free Minds Member in Federal Prison

Ruined
My youth being snatched away from me
Before I ever had a chance to embrace it and enjoy it
Ruined
My father being snatched to the grave
When I was just ten years old
Ruined
Me thinking I was the man of the house
When I was just a boy
Ruined
Me spending my 16th, 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st birthday in a prison cell
Ruined
Me looking back seeing what I've missed as a child
Now I see why people say they wish they was a kid again
But it's crazy because I never had a chance
To be a kid
Ruined my youth



The writings in this newsletter reflect the views and opinions of the individual authors and not necessarily those of Free Minds as an organization.