

March/April/May 2019  
Vol. 8, Issue 2

# Free minds Connect

MENTAL

SPIRITUAL

HEALING

PHYSICAL

EMOTIONAL

## RECOGNIZING AND RECOVERING FROM OUR WOUNDS

**FM MEMBER DAVON:  
GUNSHOT VICTIM  
STOPPING THE VIOLENCE**

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**HOW A MOM GRIEVES  
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**"WE REPEAT WHAT WE  
DON'T REPAIR!" HEALING  
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# Free Minds Connect

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

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

Free Minds Book Club  
1816 12th St. NW  
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Next Issue's Theme:  
**Adulthood**

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

## TALK BACK WITH TARA *Letter from the Editor*

Warm Greetings Free Minds Healers!

I hope springtime is bringing you belief in regrowth, no matter what hardships you may be experiencing now. I've been reading about recovery from trauma for this issue, and one of the most important components is *actually believing healing is possible* in the first place. Even when you are in the depths of despair, just knowing that there might be a possibility of feeling better helps to ignite that healing response. To assist in that process, I present to you, our Healing *Connect*.

It's an issue you'll want to keep by your bedside to read and *reread* to bring comfort and hope. Inside, you'll find stories of devastating tragedy and resilient recovery. Read about FM mom Rita who lost three sons to gun violence (p. 4). Find the story of FM member Davon, who is rebuilding his life after being shot eleven times (p. 10). There is also the inspiring account of Che, a gunshot survivor who rushed to help other victims in an innovative hospital bedside program (p. 9). The mother of our own Julia shares the emotional courage of a friend who helped to heal deep childhood pain (p. 16). And in "Healing from Trauma" (p.20) you will learn about the generational trauma 400 years of slavery has wrought that is passed down through genes. When you are ready, you can put healing into practice by reading (and sharing) Kelli's meditation (p. 25). Finally, as always, throughout this issue you will find relief in the cathartic words of your fellow FM members' poems and essays. I salute all of our contributors and you, our Free Minds members, for sharing yourselves so generously. You are Word Warriors!

One of the first signs of trauma is actually not feeling at all – a numbness. When the nervous system is overloaded with too many impulses like an electrical system, our body serves as a circuit breaker to shut things down for safety. Eventually you can reopen the flow of energy (feelings). One of my favorite sayings is, "We feel to heal." Being able to feel and heal together with you all as a community is a gift I am grateful for every day.

I want to end by sharing a powerful experience. Due to staff capacity and how many members we have (we are over 900 strong now! Yay!), we can't attend sentencings like we used to. Last week, I happened to have a free hour and so I went to the Courthouse and I experienced a profound moment of healing. A Free Minds member was being resentenced after serving over 20 years, starting as a teenager. The father of the victim – a young boy killed in a neighborhood street beef – was on the stand asking the judge for the Free Minds member's release. He had met with the man at the jail for several hours as part of a restorative justice program and believed he had true remorse. The father doesn't want any more young boys to be swept up into the system. Together, they will be speaking to the community about stopping violence. He wants to be a father figure to the man who killed his own son. Love has an incredible healing power. ♥

Until next time!

Yours in Free Minds,  
Tara

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

Another form of healing is laughter  
I love jokes and thought I'd share these. Hope they  
bring a smile. 😊

Who never minds being interrupted in the middle  
of a sentence?  
An inmate.

What kind of party do prisoners like most of all while in jail?  
A going-away party.

## FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Melissa*

### Live on C-SPAN

Our book club at the DC Jail was featured on BookTV on C-SPAN 2! It was incredible to see your FM brothers share their thoughts and experiences with the world. While discussing Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, a collection of linked short stories about a platoon of American soldiers fighting on the ground in the Vietnam War, the book club attendees drew connections between their own experiences and the experiences of the soldiers in the novel. FM member JG said, "Prison is hard to explain just like in the book and a lot of these stories. I can feel him



Footage depicting the exterior of the DC jail on C-SPAN2.

[Tim O'Brien] trying to express it in the best way he can and it still doesn't seem adequate. That's how I feel when trying to express what it's like to be in prison."

### Write Night in the BOP

FM member KB hosted the first ever Write Night on the inside, where they read poetry and wrote positive encouraging feedback on poetry written by FM members. We heard it was a remarkable event and we are excited to hear that it brought unity to the unit. Thank you, KB, for giving back and sharing the words of your FM brothers.

### Growing the Free Minds Family

We would like to introduce to you all of our new Free Minds: Joshua, Congressman John Lewis Fellow/FM Poet Ambassador, Crystal, Community Engagement & Communications Specialist, and Allen, Director of Finance & Operations. Welcome to the FM team, everyone! 🍷 😊

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the December 2018/January 2019 Connect on Journeys.*

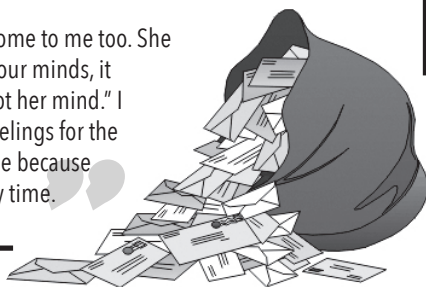
**JL:** EU's journey to America is a very interesting story. Glad to know that everything has

worked out well for him and his family. Being incarcerated, I pay much attention to what is written in the "Advice from the Inside" column. Something is always written there that helps me stay focused and gives me insight on certain matters in my bid. In this issue HF's words: "Your character will be judged more by how you handle defeats than how you handle victories" are inspiring and come at a time I probably needed to read them the most. Thanks HF!

In the Pay It Forward column, Mike mentions that he has a duty to fellow human beings, which is an attitude we all should embrace and put into practice, especially those returning to society. I've seen so many men getting released from prison that possess the opposite – they think the world owes them something! Wrong. If those of us incarcerated will adopt a paying it forward attitude we may find our transition back into society beneficial and less stressful. As Mike says, "And as for why I practice paying it forward, I believe that some things you can only keep by giving them away." We all should practice giving and paying it forward

**ET:** I do like the interview of Julia and Bereket. It kinda made me sad, but it also kinda made me appreciate what I do have. It made me sad that she misses her country and family, and, most of all, the food from her country. I don't know what that's like, but I miss my state ("Go Tarheels" North Carolina) soooo much, I miss all the people that I knew, don't know how many have passed away since I've been away. But my heart goes out to Bereket.

The "Journey" on page 7 by ABC (FM Sister) hit home to me too. She talked about how this incarceration messes with our minds, it really does! She says "her body is chained, but not her mind." I feel that way, too. I too overwhelm myself with feelings for the wrong things. It smacks me in the face all the time because when I try to be "friends" here, I get burned every time.



# DC REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Greetings all!

I want to ask you guys, when we hear the term healing, what do we think about? I personally believe that healing means different things to different people, but universally, healing is the process of making or becoming sound or healthy again. Now, the word that stands out to me in that definition is process, because we all go through our own unique process during the course of healing. Your process won't look like my process, and vice versa.

And healing doesn't necessarily mean returning to what one was before something went wrong. Throughout the healing process, we tend to discover things about ourselves that we didn't know before or didn't know was there before, and sometimes, these traits complement our character. You could also say that healing entails becoming whole even while still perhaps not functioning quite like everyone else. Or, becoming even better than before by accepting and being completely who you are with whatever limitation you may have.

Now, I cannot end this without giving a very relevant resource!

Check it out!

**The Wendt Center for Loss & Healing**  
4201 Connecticut Ave,  
NW, Ste 300  
Washington DC 20008  
202.624.0010

**WENDT CENTER**  
FOR LOSS AND HEALING

2041 MLK Ave SE  
Washington DC, 20020  
202.610.0066

The Wendt Center for Loss and Healing has helped people in the Greater Washington area rebuild a sense of safety and hope after experiencing a loss, life-threatening illness, violence, or other trauma. Nationally recognized for their expertise in grief, trauma, and mental health, they provide an array of holistic services for children, teens, adults, families, and local communities. The Wendt Center offers group and individual therapy.

Now, I'd like to end with an acronym for healing that summarizes our friendship (healing would have been too long because I have already exceeded my word count, LOL):

H - here for you always  
E - ever seeking to uplift you  
A - always believing in you  
L - lifetime friends

Until we **Connect** again,  
- Ms. Keela

# QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"We need to vaccinate each other with compassion so that we become immune to the infectious emotions of hate, envy, jealousy, fear, stress, and anxiety."* - Ronnie Bo, self-published author and aspiring hip hop artist

*"Words have the power to destroy or heal. When words are both true and kind, they can change our world."* - Buddha, a spiritual leader on whose teachings Buddhism was founded.

*"Poetry is not medicine - it's an X-ray. It helps you see the wound and understand it. We all feel alienated; because of this continued violence in the world. We feel alone, but we feel also together. So we resort to poetry."* - Dunya Mikhail, Iraqi-American poet and 2001 Recipient of the UN Human Rights Award for Freedom of Writing



Dunya Mikhail



## FAMILY TIES

# Healing from the Loss of My Sons

by Rita, Free Minds Mom, with help from Kelli

*The mother of nine children, Rita has experienced an almost unfathomable amount of loss and emotional pain in her lifetime. In 2002, Rita's 19 year-old son Marcus was shot and killed. Eight years later, her son Michael, 24, was also shot and killed. And tragically, on April 28 of last year, her son, our beloved Free Minds brother Isaiah was taken, also the victim of gun violence at the age of 23. It is impossible for most of us to even imagine persevering in the midst of such emotional pain. And yet Rita wakes up each and every morning determined to provide strength and joy to her beautiful family, as well as care for and comfort others who need it in her work as a home healthcare aide. Rita is a remarkable example of the extraordinary human capacity for healing. In this issue, she shares with us some of her hard-won wisdom.*

I was born and raised in Washington, DC. I've been out on my own since I was 15 years old. My mother was an alcoholic and she kept moving to all these different boyfriends' houses. And of course, you know what comes with that – abuse. I kept running away. My best girlfriend's mother finally let me come stay with their family. That was a blessing, because it wasn't long after that that I became pregnant with my first son. This family took me in and kind of adopted me. We all are still in each other's lives and love each other very much.

People can't believe it when they hear that I've lost three sons to guns. And I don't know how it's set up like this, but it's like every 8 years, I lose a child. It makes me feel on pins and needles. I've realized we just have to expect the unexpected. I've learned that my history of loss began way before my sons died. I lost the protection of my mother at a very young age. And then she died when I was only 19. I've had a hard life. I didn't even realize this until I started therapy. I had buried that stuff so deep down inside of me! It was like all of those years were just blocked off. And I think this is the case with a lot of people. We don't like to think about our losses.

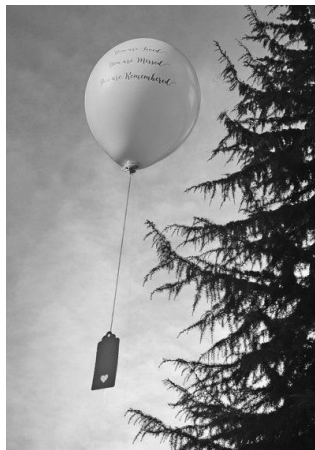
Therapy has been so helpful to me. I never went after losing my first son, but we did it as a family after my second son died. My kids really needed it and it has helped them deal with the loss of their brothers. And I'm going all the time now since Isaiah died. My therapist doesn't know me in the way my family and friends do, so I can just let it all out. I don't have to worry about people feeling sorry for me or looking at me all crazy.

The other thing that has been essential to my healing is my family. I keep them close and make every second and every minute of each day count. We have family functions and gatherings. I'll be honest, sometimes it's draining because I'm getting older and being around so many people can be exhausting. But the healing part of it is just to stay connected with them. They're always here. I try to share my strength with them. Everyone is going through it in their own way. It helps to have them around. I have to be careful though, because sometimes they want to share everything they're going through when they see me being so strong. I have to let people know some days when I just don't have anything left to give. It's easy to get overwhelmed when everyone around you is dealing with the loss too. It's important to let people know what you need. Even if it's space!

I look for little ways to take care of myself. Of course, I would love to just go out of town on vacation, but I can't afford to do that all the time. So I look for things like just getting outside and walking, or going to the swimming pool.

People care and want to help, but I know sometimes they don't know what to say to make it better. My advice is just to notice, pay attention to people who are trying to heal. When the actual loss occurs, everyone is there offering to help, but eventually they all go back to their own lives. That's hard for me. We've got to keep holding one another up. Check in on people regularly when they've been hurting.

For me, part of the healing process is to remember and honor my sons. On birthdays, we all gather in the graveyard and have a party and a balloon release. We put mulch down and have solar lights and I cook for



continued on page 5

## ASK HF ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

*This issue, James filled in to answer your questions.*

Dear H.F.

I've dealt with a number of women during my bid and had my heart broken more times than I can remember. Every single time, I promise I will never let it happen again. I tell myself I need to just do me and stop letting my feelings take over. And now here I am again. This time feels harder than ever before, probably because now I'm just mad at myself for letting it happen. I know better and I know it's not realistic to expect someone to ride with me till the end. And even though I know that, at the same time, I'm still angry at her for letting me down. LOL. I know, crazy right? So how would you heal a broken heart, and how would you stop going down the same road over and over again?

Thank you in advance,  
RD

Dear RD,

Let me start off by saying, I understand your grief! Given your current situation, it is easy to fall for any woman who shows the slightest amount of interest. You are not wrong for doing so, because you are only human and seek the feeling of being wanted. I've been there before, and I remember the feeling of hurt when every woman slowly but surely left my side. As a man, I acted as if it didn't faze me, but I was crushed. But where there's a will, there's a way!

I had a talk with myself and tried not to force the situations to progress. I figured if I didn't speak of a relationship, then maybe she wouldn't feel pressured to be there for me. When I let my relationships grow organically, it worked out better, family and friends alike. We all know at that time of incarceration, anyone is liable to abandon you.

I began to learn how to strengthen my coping skills for having less community. That way, I wouldn't rely on family and cause them to duck my calls. I taught myself how to have a neutral conversation with women in my life. That way the conversation flowed and I saw that they were a little more at ease with me. I had to realize I was not in the ideal situation and couldn't force a relationship on anyone. I also learned to take what people said with a grain of salt. People have a lot going on and I learned that they have good intentions but can't always make good on them. Once I put all of that into play, my bid went smoother, and it wasn't so much of a letdown when people came and went.

Wishing you the best of luck,  
James



# CONVERSATION WITH ALLEN

The column where different members of the Free Minds family – staff, volunteers, interns, members, and more – share their perspective on the theme

## How Burnout Led Me to Free Minds

Hello friends (as my favorite sportscaster Jim Nantz says at the beginning of each broadcast)! My name is Allen and I am the new Director of Finance & Operations here at Free Minds. I am responsible for the financial management and administrative operations of the organization. In other words, my goal is to make sure the FM engine is running effectively and efficiently.

As I sit here on a sunny Tuesday morning with a multigrain bagel and vanilla latte from The Coffee Bar (the café right down the block from the Free Minds office), let me take you back a couple of years ago to an anniversary dinner where my journey to Free Minds first began.

My wife and I were out a local restaurant celebrating our wedding anniversary. The conversation was minimal as I was lost in thought thinking about work (in my previous life, I was Chief Financial Officer at a media company). My wife then spoke words that would provide the **impetus** (motivation) to change my life.

"I want to bring up something. You are hardly around anymore. I had to plan our daughter's birthday party without any help from you. And when you are around, you act like a zombie. We need you present in our life."

Those words got my attention and struck at the core of my being. It was like a punch to the solar plexus. It was a wake-up call. My job at the publishing company was an all-encompassing affair, working long hours and handling difficult tasks such as responding to lawsuits, collective bargaining with unions, laying off employees, and managing a demanding boss. The job was a grind that was wearing on me both physically and mentally. After some reflection, my wife's words crystallized for me that working all of these hours and not being around for the family was a road that I did not want to travel on anymore. I needed to find an exit ramp off this undesirable highway.

A couple of days later, I walked into my boss's office and informed him that I was resigning. I told him I was burnt-out and needed some time away to think about what I wanted to do with my life.

I spent the next 18 months (a little longer than my wife would have liked!) in "retirement" mode. I became more involved in church and school activities such as going on mission trips to renovate houses and volunteering my time. I reengaged in activities that had fallen by the wayside (playing basketball, walking the dog, cooking, going to the theatre). In addition, I engaged in new activities such as learning how to play the bells and teaching the youth at Sunday School. Most of all, I used the time to think about what I wanted to do going forward. Did I want to stay in the accounting/finance world? Did I want to continue working in media? Did I want to stay retired?

What resulted out of this mental break was twofold: 1) resume working in the accounting/finance realm but switch to the nonprofit world, and 2) make work/life balance a matter of paramount importance. By moving to the nonprofit sector, I feel that I can make more of a tangible difference in people's lives.

I come to Free Minds fully relaxed, restored, and rejuvenated. I am so happy to be a part of the FM family and look forward to seeing and/or hearing from you down the road!



The bells that Allen plays

## FAMILY TIES (CONTINUED)

*continued from page 4*

everyone. I get hope and joy from Isaiah's little boy. He'll look up into the sky with a big smile and say "My daddy's up there!" It helps to honor their memories together with others who love them.

Isaiah's loss is still fresh. And I keep seeing visions of the night that he left. I'm working on it. I know I can do it because I did it with Marcus and Michael. It just takes time. And when I think of the two of them, I don't feel sad. It's true. Time does heal. It makes it a whole lot easier when the years done passed and passed, and you keep going on making new happy memories with your family and loved ones. Right now it's harder because I just got hit with the storm of losing another one. But I do know, time heals.

I know that a lot of Isaiah's Free Minds brothers – those of you who are reading this – have also experienced loss. I know that it feels like the pain will never go away. I would advise you to look to the God of your understanding. Whatever that means to you. Lean toward this. Talk to someone professional. Therapists know how to help you heal. If you're still incarcerated, I know it can be hard to always find a professional. In that case, look for those "big brothers" in prison you feel you can talk with and communicate with. Look for connection with good people. And don't forget about Free Minds! We can all give each other hope and strength to continue to move on. I know my sons wouldn't want me to just stop living. We can't break and we can't fold! We will heal.



# MEMBERS CONNECT: HEALING

## Transformation by Jordan

My name is Jordan, and I just turned 19 in March. I made mistakes and ran the streets at a young age, which led to my incarceration at the age of seventeen.

I transitioned from jail to college at the age of 18. My influencers came in the form of my mother, school instructors, and everyone in Free Minds.

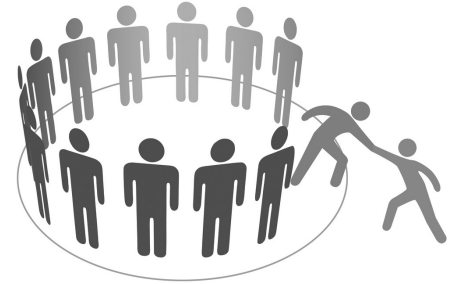
Free Minds helped me stay so focused and dedicated at my job that I didn't have time to run the streets again, but it didn't come easy. I haven't always had the best mental health, and jail made it worse. Dealing with things like depression and anxiety affected how I interact with other people. I found a way to deal with it by forcing myself to interact with others, because sometimes you never realize how beneficial it is to do so.

I also now speak to a therapist about my problems, something that I never used to want to do, but it has helped me with my interactions with other people when I'm doing community outreach work. I have since been able to connect with a lot

of people through Free Minds, graduate high school, and put my foot in the door of a college classroom.

When I'm not at school, I'm getting involved in communities across the world and helping others transform an aspect of their life. These days, I keep myself busy

by doing positive things because it helps me stay completely positive, and I've developed a newfound interest in serious topics such as juvenile justice reform and mass incarceration across the United States.



## Healing from Heartbreak by James

Hey Free Minds family! My name is James, and I'm here today to speak about dealing with being separated from your spouse while incarcerated and how I dealt with it.

This is a touchy topic for a few different reasons and some people may not know how to deal with the reality of not sleeping next to, waking up to, and living day-to-day with their companion.

Being in prison, there are many thoughts that pass through one's mind and some of them are more frequent than others. I was 18 when I got locked up, and I had a "girlfriend" that I was close to. I couldn't imagine not being with her, smh\*.

And we all know about *the talks*. The "I love you and I'll be home soon" or what about "I'm sorry, just wait for me," and let's not forget, "I know you may find somebody you like, just don't get pregnant." Yeah, I said that last one and have heard many others say the same.

I was a mature 18-year-old and after considering a few factors, I decided to try a different approach. I knew that I was going to do some time in prison, and it wouldn't be just a few months. I felt selfish asking her to "wait for me," when I was the one out here doing dirt, being reckless, and not thinking about her when I was breaking the law. She knew nothing about the street life and was torn apart when her childhood love was incarcerated and about to get sentenced to multiple years.

I wrote her a long letter expressing how I felt about her and what I did and didn't expect from her. I told her I loved her and understood that she was young and fresh out of high school, with many things to focus on rather than being a girlfriend to me. I told her I would not hold her back and expect too much from her – *just answer the phone every now and then and reply to my letters*, I wrote, to let me know that she was alright in the world and that all was well.

I had gotten into "bid mode" and I refused to put pressure on the ones who were not responsible for me and my actions. To me, the best approach is to not put too much pressure on the loved ones in your life. Help them understand your situation rather than make demands and be mindful of the impact your current situation has on their life. An understanding between the two of you can alleviate a lot of problems. Talk about what you do and don't expect from each other and be very clear. Time won't be wasted and feelings will be spared.

I look forward to reading about the way you all deal/dealt with relationships during incarceration.

P.S. Me and my young lady got back together after my time was over and now have a baby together! But, as time goes on, people change. We tried, but in the end, it didn't work out. We are now co-parenting.

\*smh stands for "shaking my head," a commonly used Internet and texting abbreviation.

# A SELF-CARE PRACTICE: FORGIVE YOURSELF

## By Josh

Hey FM family. My name is Josh and I'm the new Congressman John Lewis Fellow at Free Minds. Today, I want to share with you something that really helped me while I was locked up: forgiving yourself.

Don't be too hard on yourself for being incarcerated or feeling mental pain. A lot of us grew up in a community full of violence, drugs, and crimes. Some of us suffered from PTSD before prison by being exposed to these things. Prison just exacerbates this condition. The great news is that we can heal from this.

First, we have to understand that by being raised in survivor mode, we became immune to all types of conditions that are not normal.

We might have grown up in certain environments that left us traumatized and stressed. We lost friends and family to the system or the streets. We might come from a broken home or school system or community. Now is the time to stop playing on that and educate yourself.

Figure out how to not make the same mistakes that you did before by educating yourself on what you want. Think big.

You can do it. It's not going to happen overnight, but anything is in your reach when you put your energy into it. I believe you are all winners. Despite your body being incarcerated, your mind can be free!

# MEMBERS CONNECT: HEALING

## Anger and Fear

By JL

I don't believe that one only suffers from physical injuries, but from mental, emotional, and spiritual injuries as well. Sometimes a person's wound can heal quickly (like a scraping of the knee), but some pains take much longer to heal, if they're able to heal at all. Healing emotionally and spiritually is a journey that has taken me through deeper and oft-times more agonizing pains that are just now showing any promise of truly healing.

My earliest childhood memories begin at a hospital in Kentucky when I was 2 years old. I was hospitalized for just over 3 months after being placed in a bathtub full of scalding hot water. Someone probably should've paid a little more attention to me and my nine-year-old cousin as he attempted to bathe me, but his mother – my great aunt – stood in her kitchen cooking chili.

Anyway, there I lay in the hospital and I can remember feeling alone and angry at my cousin for hitting me and then placing me in that water. I also remember being angry with my mother for never being there. She was away at college (she gave birth to me at 18 years old) trying to get her life together. The induction of **ANGER** is the first true injury I had to heal from, but I did not realize it for many years to come.

**FEAR** would be the second injury. It encompassed my being so tight that my perception on life, even God, was warped to a point that sometimes it still embarrasses me when I think about it. While in the hospital for the burn incident, an old friend of my mother's – who I'll call Alvin – began re-establishing contact with her. His timing was perfect, since Mom was alone due to the family being a little upset with her. Not long after my release from the hospital, my mother and I lived together in a basement apartment. Alvin entered our lives shortly after that. He was very abusive to both me and mom, making me stay in the bedroom (and on my bed all day) just to keep me and momma separated from each other. I was so frightened of the man that whenever I faced any reprimand, all I could mutter was "Um, um, um..." in my defense, which usually got me punched in the stomach. Five years following Alvin entering our lives, Mom strategically left him, but now with two more children – my sister and brother.

**ANGER** and **FEAR** can be used in positive ways, like giving motivation. Or it can turn to **HATE** like it did with me. And twenty years later, this manifestation of **HATE** showed when I began committing crimes and became incarcerated. Healing emotional damage can be a tricky thing, because you have to remove layers of scarred and damaged emotions to get to what really hurts and is truly causing the problem. I thought I was committing crimes because my wife and I were very short on money, when in reality I was also still suffering from some things that had happened to me over twenty years earlier.

Malcolm X said that to really get to know a person, one has to understand that person's life experiences, because each experience is an ingredient to a person's character and the way they are. For those of you who may be reading this article, take time to reflect on your life – both past and present – to try quelling any damaged emotions that may be negatively affecting you and your relationship with others that love you. I believe God gave us life to enjoy, not to be tormented by it. If you are unhappy with life like I was, then something is wrong.

We humans are tough and it is normal and sometimes easy for us to move on despite any physical impairment. I'm permanently scarred from the waist down due to the hot water in the bathtub many years ago, but that or the abuse did not stop me physically. The emotional damage had to be conquered, and by reading, writing, reflecting on my life, and trying to help others, I am undergoing the healing process.

## On Meditation

By RB

Hello to all my friends in the Free Minds universe. I'm a former army ranger now on year 23 of a 30-year sentence.

As every single person who's been incarcerated, or is now incarcerated, knows very well, one must stay in tip-top physical shape for health and survival. We know that physical exercise is one of the main ways to relieve daily stress. What most of us inside or outside of prison aren't aware of is that you **MUST** also exercise your mind to stay mentally fit. Without proper mental exercise, your mind will do the same thing your body does when the body is not exercised. The mind will become "fat" and "heavy" and more difficult to deal with. Without proper mental exercise your mind will "gain weight." Emotionally and intellectually, you will slow down. Your stress levels will also be elevated, and, as a result, you will age more quickly.

Thankfully, there are ways to exercise the mind and reverse the negative effects of lack of proper exercise. I want to highlight two meditation types that I've benefited from.

### 1. Shamatha Meditation

Shamatha meditation is actually just sitting still and holding the mind on a single object or subject. It can be anything from a simple pencil on the table in front of you to an image of a religious object or person, as long as you do your best to keep your mind on your meditation object for 10 minutes or so. Pretty simple.

### 2. Vipassana Meditation

Vipassana meditation is also sitting meditation. The difference here is that instead of concentrating on keeping your mind/attention steady, like in Shamatha meditation, here in Vipassana meditation, you're actually looking at the way the mind works. Understanding how the mind works helps us understand why we behave the way we do, and why everyone else behaves the way they do.

So Shamatha meditation makes your mind leaner and meaner and more perceptive, and Vipassana meditation shows you how the mind works. With these two tools, Shamatha and Vipassana, you can gradually develop a healthy, calm, stable, focused mind.

I'm an African Buddhist, but also know that you don't have to be part of any religion to learn how to meditate properly. There are many secular or non-religious systems that teach meditation correctly. Remember this: meditation is simply the mental version of burpees, jogging, or lifting weights. And when practiced properly it works. Period. No gimmicks.

Best of luck to all of you, and yes you can do it.

*If you would like more information about meditation, please write to the Free Minds office.*





# THE WRITE WAY

## How to Write a Coming-of-Age Story

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

By Jessica

Long time no chat, my dear Free Minds members! I hope you all feel the positive energy I am sending your way – it's the happiness I feel when I get to write to you all. ☺ Today's Write Way will set you up to brainstorm on the next *Connect* issue's theme: Adulthood.

First, let me take you back a few years with me. When I was in school, I usually did not like English class. I would finish our assigned books before we finished them in class, and then I'd face a few weeks of pure BOREDOM. It seemed to me that English class could take a perfectly good book and ruin it by dragging it out and making us stare at it until we found all the deeper meanings that supposedly existed in them. (I now see more value in what we were doing, but as an impatient young person, I was not always sold on the merits of dusty books, and I think my teachers could've done a better job of encouraging my love of learning instead of killing those vibes).

But my LEAST FAVORITE books were always the **coming-of-age** stories (fun fact: the German word for the genre is *Bildungsroman* if you want to sound fancy), the stories about one's *formative years*, the years when a child leaves childhood and gets grown.

I didn't like them because the ones we read in school didn't always seem relatable – for example, *Catcher in the Rye* by JD Salinger was about a weird angst-y white boy whose struggles and cares seemed very, very different from my own (Have you read this book? Did you like it? Let me know your thoughts about it, too). I haven't re-read it and maybe I'd feel some other way about it today, but in high school, I didn't see its value.

This is not to say that the main character has to look like me or grow up like me for their stories to be relatable or enjoyable. In fact, I recently learned a lot of books I have enjoyed, like *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami or *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou or *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini or *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, are considered coming-of-age novels, books that I thought were more engaging, that had more depth to them than the unrelatable angst of a white teenage boy, even books that were graphic novels like *Persepolis* by Marjane Satrapi or books that are fictional and fantasy, like *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss and the *Harry Potter* series by J.K. Rowling.

So I decided I was unfair in thinking that I don't like all coming-of-age stories when the truth is that I do, because they can have some of the most amazing and deeply engaging storytelling in them. Even one of my FAVORITE movies, *Moonlight*, which won the Oscars for Best Picture in 2017, where the character development is dynamic, the emotional content is powerful and moving (I cried three times), and where the storytelling carries you into the world on screen, is a coming-of-age story.

So... how do you write an *enthraling*, deeply engaging, one? What makes the story?

**THREE THINGS: (1) the set-up of who you were before some experiences that made you grow up, (2) experiences that contributed most to a certain aspect of your maturity, and (3) who you are after those critical experiences.**

**1. SET UP** Most of these stories do a fair bit of setting up who the protagonist (main character) is as a child, highlighting elements of their environment, life circumstances, and perspectives of the world that most emphasize their youth and serve as contrast to who they become. If you've read *Slugg* by Tony Lewis Jr., you can see that he chose to explore his relationship with his parents when he was little and how those roles changed as he grew up, and after his father's incarceration.

**2. TURNING POINTS** Then comes the one or two (or many more!) experiences that lead to changes that make the protagonist feel like they've grown up or become more mature, like they've reached a different level of understanding of life. Oftentimes, these experiences are turning points that depict a loss of innocence, that the world is more complicated than initially thought, or that thrust the protagonist into a more grown-up situation and where they're faced with growing up fast. These experiences can reflect an internal struggle that no one else knows is taking place or can be caused by external conflicts, or both.

**3. LIFE AFTERWARDS** Ultimately, the protagonist is changed and different from who they were before the experiences happened. Typically, they've changed their perspective about their reality or their character has fundamentally changed. The character feels older and wiser, for better or for worse.

Can you think of books or stories you've read that remind you of this structure?

**Better yet, I'm curious to read your own *bildungsroman*, albeit (although) an abbreviated version. Do you think you can in 500 words or less tell a coming-of-age story about yourself? Don't try to tell everything about your life. Just try to illustrate one way you've changed. One way you've grown up. For an extra challenge, try to think of something as small a difference as possible and really hone in on it!**

Have fun and I look forward to reading your responses.





# PAYING IT FORWARD

## Interview with Che, Violence Interrupter

By Neely, FM Intern

*FM friend Che works with patients at Prince George's Hospital Trauma Center's Capital Region Violence Intervention Program (CAP-VIP). As part of this pioneer program, Che works with young men being treated for violent injuries such as stabbings and gunshot wounds. A survivor of a violent injury himself, Che works to transform and inspire the lives of the patients he works with by informing them of resources that help address traumas. He also helps patients set goals for themselves and identify their needs. Once the only program of its kind in the area, Che now consults with hospitals across the DMV area that are looking to implement similar violence intervention programs.*

**Neely:** Can you tell us a little about yourself?

**Che:** I grew up in Southeast, DC, basically in the streets. A few years ago I was stabbed 13 times and was treated at PG Hospital where I met Dr. Joseph Richardson who was studying men who are violently injured. When I was released from the hospital, he gave me the opportunity to speak to his class at the University of Maryland (UMD). It was one of the most motivational moments of my life because I felt like I had a voice.

Afterwards, I knew I wanted to get into public speaking and live in service to humanity. A few months later, I flew down to Florida to guest lecture for another class and all of the expenses were paid for, plus a stipend. All of a sudden, I went from hustling in the streets to something legit. That's when I knew going back to the streets wasn't really an option.

Afterwards, I interned at UMD. Around the second year of my internship, I got the opportunity to speak at a high school. There was no transportation to get to the school, so I ended up walking about an hour and a half in the rain with my suit on. As I was walking, the bottom of my shoe started wearing away and a car drove past and soaked the bottom of my pants. But I had a goal to speak and that walk was worth it because the kids loved me.

Dr. Richardson later got a grant to start the Capital Region Violence Intervention Program at PG Hospital and he came to me. My job was to go into the rooms and be the first contact for individuals who had been violently injured. I was the link between the target population and social services.

Every time I walk past the room where I was first treated, it triggers me, but it also gives me the confidence to share my story with the individual. You have to give up part of yourself so they can give you part of themselves. For instance, I tell them about losing my mom at a young age and my best friend being killed and they then tell me about their lives.

**Neely:** How do you deal with your own trauma when triggered on the job?

**Che:** PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is a mental illness. Being stabbed 13 times is a mental illness. I wasn't too fond of talking to a counselor, but talking to a mentor, Dr. Richardson, meant something to me because I could actually talk to him about how I felt. But at one point, I knew I needed professional help. There is this stigma about going to counseling, but everyone needs a shoulder to cry on. It's not as malicious as it seems. Walking with a chip on your shoulder is dangerous so counseling and mental health treatment is important.

**Neely:** What does violence intervention mean to you?

**Che:** Violence intervention is about letting the individual know that they have choices in life. The one thing you have to do is jump off that front porch, though,

and make a choice. You can go and get revenge or use it as a stepping stone to become a better person. It's that simple.

**Neely:** What is your favorite part about your job?

**Che:** One of my best buddies is a surgeon. Never in a million years would I have thought, coming from my community, that I would have a buddy who is a surgeon. So I've enjoyed tapping into social networks and forming bonds with guys outside my community. I also enjoy taking guys who have been violently injured to UMD and letting them sit in a class. Afterwards they ask, "What do I have to do to go to school here?" and that is very rewarding.

**Neely:** What is the most challenging part of your job?

**Che:** Dealing with the political world of a corporation. Because of my history, when I first step into a hospital people have an opinion about me. They don't always understand the bond I have with the patients coming into the Trauma Center and the fact that I didn't learn about all this in a book. People in the political world don't have an understanding. How can you speak on something you have no experience in? They don't have in-field experience like I do.

**Neely:** Do you have any advice or anything you would like to share with Free Minds members on ways they can begin to address their own traumas and begin a path towards healing?

**Che:** Greatness is in everyone. You have to tap into it and you have to develop that hunger for success. You don't build the Great Wall of China overnight. You have to focus on laying each brick, one at a time, as perfectly as it can be laid. Life's not easy and nothing worth having in life is easy. I had to look myself in the mirror every day and go to the pit of my stomach and look at what I didn't like. That's how I knew what to change. Now I look myself in the mirror every day and say, "Che, I love you," and that is what's important.





# REENTRY PROFILE: FM MEMBER DAVON: GUNSHOT VICTIM STOPPING THE VIOLENCE

*by Davon, Free Minds member, and Kelli*

*Davon has been a Free Minds member since he was 17 years old. He served four years in prison and came home in 2017.*

I know a lot about healing. I'm 22 years old. In a span of just seven months, beginning in January 2018, I was shot 11 times in three separate incidents. People are always amazed when I tell them that. They ask me if I ever thought I was going to die. The truth is that for a long time, I just didn't even think like that.

I grew up in NE Washington, DC. I was nine years old when my cousin was shot and killed. He died when he was 16. Growing up and seeing people get shot? That was just the norm. There have been a lot of deaths in my family and I have so many friends who have been killed by gun violence. Violence has become something we adapt to and think of as normal. But what we do and go through is not normal.



The first time I got shot, I was hit seven times. The doctors were trying to send me home after a week. But my body was full of staples and it got infected. I ended up spending more than a month in the hospital healing. To be honest, the only thing I thought was traumatizing at the time was not being able to move like I wanted or needed to in order to get back on the streets.

It was only a few weeks after I got out of the hospital, that I got shot again. This time in the forehead. And to tell you the truth, it didn't really affect me that time either. I got stitches and got back out there. I just never really thought about the danger.

Then in July, I got shot again. It was really bad. For the first time, I really did think I could die. I had to use a catheter. My leg was broken and just completely shattered by bullets. I realized I really needed to make a decision. You know, everybody I used to hang with has been shot. *Everyone*. I decided I wanted to put my all into doing something different.

In a way, I look at that third shooting as a blessing. It really forced me to make the right decision. They wouldn't let me go back to where I was living and barred me from my neighborhood because it was too dangerous for me. I was supposed to have a home health aide when I was released from the hospital to care for me around the clock. But nobody was willing to do it. They all were scared to be around me because I'd been shot so many times. So I had to take care of myself. I used a walker, and then eventually crutches. I couldn't work or anything. I just had to focus on healing. And that gave me a lot of time to think. Because they forced me to move, I saw a different part of the city. When you're in the streets, your whole life can literally be your block. Getting shot gave me the opportunity to slow down and see how much more there is to life. Jobs and paychecks and vacations. What I had been doing just really wasn't living. Healing was stressful, but I am strong and I kept my focus on the bigger picture. I knew what I wanted now and wasn't going to let this get in my way.

It wasn't easy to change because when you're in the streets, you're getting so much money. And trying to get a job after you've been incarcerated is hard. I was in Project Empowerment and got a job making \$9.50/hour. The money isn't the same, but I've always had a strong mind frame, and once I make up my mind, that's it.

I haven't fully healed. It's still hard for me to get around and all. I can't take pain. Now even the smallest pain will feel 20 times worse to my body. And the truth is, the emotional wounds are there too. I feel anxious and on edge 24/7 because I know that I better be ready to get you before you get me. The littlest thing can have me with the mindset to attack. So I know I still have more healing to do. But I believe the key is just to keep that big picture and your loved ones in mind. I figure, if I'm not dying from it, I'm still here. No matter what you go through, you can still be a boss and be successful. So I gotta keep going!

*Davon works full time doing custodial and maintenance work. His goal is to go to college, get a business degree, and own several franchises. He plans to own his own car and house and have a credit score of at least 700. He will take care of his good men and his family.*





# THE DANGER OF GRIEF IN SOLITUDE

*by Anne, Julia's Mom and FM Friend*

When I was growing up, I was pretty alienated from my parents and the society around me. The things they cared about seemed ridiculous to me. They were socially and politically conservative, and I was neither. But I had something really precious – a best friend. Have you ever had a best friend? Someone you were close to for many years, even as life changes both challenged and enriched the friendship? If you are lucky, you've had a friend like mine. I have no recollection of my youth without Betsy. We went through ups and downs, but we were always Annie and Betsy, like that was our collective name.

When I was 18 years old, I spent a summer in Mexico. It was a really cool experience, and I wrote Betsy letters about it a few times every week. One day, I woke up to find a letter from my father on the bed. I still have that letter somewhere. It began something like this: "Dear Annie, I can't think of any way to tell you this that will soften the terrible news..."

Betsy was dead – killed in a train accident three weeks earlier. My parents weren't going to tell me until I got home, but Betsy's parents said they had to, since they kept receiving my letters to Betsy, and it bothered them that I didn't know she had died.

My parents thought they were doing the right thing, but they didn't realize how much their decision to keep the news from me hurt me and delayed my healing. When I got home, Betsy's funeral was long past. Almost no one would talk to me about her; our conservative society seemed to think grieving was a sign of weakness. Their absolute silence made it feel as if Betsy had never existed. Instead of dealing with my feelings, I just became numb.

Grief is profound and frightening. But it is a process that can't be cut short and it shouldn't be handled alone. Without sharing my sadness with others who loved Betsy, I missed out on an essential step toward healing. Instead of grieving, I edged further each day into anxiety and depression, consumed with thoughts of those I loved dying. All I could think about was death and all I could feel was alone. What was the point of talking to anyone, if they, too, could die?

One particularly desperate night, my friends took me to the school infirmary. That was the first step on a very long road towards recovery. From there, three things helped me put my life back together. First, recognizing that I had a problem that a therapist could address. Therapy helped me rise above my sense of hopelessness, recognize the signs of grief cut short, and get back to the business of living, with all the joy as well as sadness that entails. Medication also helped me heal. The third and most precious thing was to discover that one of my friends had the courage to step up and talk with me about what to me were terrifying feelings of desperation. His emotional courage amazed and comforted me – and it still does 42 years later.

# STREET JUSTICE, RESTORATIVE JUSTICE, OR CRIMINAL JUSTICE

*by Lashonia, FM Friend*

*Have you ever heard the term, "restorative justice"? Restorative justice views crime as more than breaking the law – since it also causes harm to people, relationships, and the community. So a just response must address those harms as well as the wrongdoing. If the parties are willing, the best way to do this is to help them meet to discuss those harms and how to go about bringing resolution. These meetings can be life-changing.*

The Restorative Justice approach makes accountability attractive and allows those who cause harm to take responsibility for their actions while keeping their self-esteem intact. The goal is to ensure that harmful behaviors are not repeated. Restorative responses allow the community to solve its own problems and empowers those who are harmed. This process humanizes people to one another. When we see one another as fellow humans, it is more difficult to cause harm to one another.

Restorative justice can also be used for community building. Recently I sat in circle with a group of Violence Interrupters and asked, "How did you learn violence?" There were 15 participants in the circle. One hour later I learned that 97 percent of the people in the circle learned violence as a child in the home. These remarkable men and women were able to treat their trauma, build resilience to trauma, and now they work to reduce the spread of violence in communities where they live that have been plagued by violence for decades.

What we know is that violence is a disease and we can reduce the spread of violence using the same strategies that epidemiologists use to treat other infectious diseases. It's a simple model: interrupt the spread of violence, treat those at high risk of becoming infected, and change unhealthy community norms.

Recently, the women of the WIRE (Women Involved in Reentry Efforts) experienced the power of the circle process, and it served to move them closer to healing from the devastating impact of incarceration. This is critical because the women of the WIRE are community leaders, practitioners, mothers, grandmothers – the backbone of their communities.

During a time when many people are convinced that punitive policing, intense monitoring, and over incarceration will solve the problem of harm, I stand in quest of peace in our neighborhoods. I am relying on a community-centric approach that will move us toward healing and restoration.

In the words of my esteemed colleague, Ameen, ask yourself, "When a harm takes place would you prefer street justice, restorative justice, or criminal justice?" Many of the people we know choose restorative justice, a humane approach to resolving harm.

*Lashonia is the Executive Director of the WIRE. She also serves as a Restorative Justice facilitator at the DC Office of the Attorney General (OAG). Lashonia and her team at OAG facilitate conferences with youth who cause harm and those who are harmed. The youth, the person who was harmed and their supporters sit together in circle to discuss what happened, how they were affected and what needs to happen to make this right.*

*As a formerly incarcerated woman, Lashonia is passionate about helping young people build resilience to trauma. She understands that this will enable young people to build empathy and help disrupt the pipelines that lead to the mass incarceration of women and girls.*



# AROUND THE WORLD

*The column where we explore places near and far on our wondrous planet. The writer is the guide and the readers are on "vacation via imagination."*

## Morocco, Amsterdam, Spain, and Portugal

*By Crystal*

How did I spend Valentine's Day? In my durag, sweats, and New Balances, binge-watching only the finest of shows and action movies – on a flight! Accompanied by my mom and two older sisters, we spent the day flying towards Morocco with a few layovers along the way (Amsterdam, Spain, and Portugal).

We first landed in Amsterdam, a city in the Netherlands, for a few hours. Scared that we might miss our connecting flight to Madrid if we left the airport, we opted to stay put. It didn't hit me that we were in a totally different country until the sounds of Dutch (and a multitude of other languages) came from every direction, and I mindlessly started playing the "let me count how many black people I see" game. Clearly, I was not the only one because as we stopped into a restaurant for a quick bite, a Black waiter (originally from the Democratic Republic of the Congo) who saw us from across the room, joyfully and energetically made his way to our table, and said, "So glad you guys are here! Welcome!"

His reaction emphasized the "oh, my goodness. More people that look like me!" comfort-feeling is universal. (Have you experienced that?)

Next stop: Madrid, Spain. I was taken aback by the Spanish architecture, historic buildings, narrow side streets, sidewalk cafes, and colorful graffiti. The fact I was in a new country started to dawn on me even more once we reached our hotel and headed to the elevator. It was so tiny that we had to go up two at a time to make space for our luggage. Moreover, when all four of us came down the elevator together, I am sure we were all standing close enough to hear each other's thoughts!

Our hotel was in the San Bernardo district of Madrid. There were boutiques and vintage shops on every corner that my sisters, mother, and I did not hesitate to check out. After a few hours of walking around, taking selfies, and shopping, we landed in a restaurant for dinner. Our first stab at Spanish cuisine: grilled octopus, crispy chicken, shrimp, paella, and grilled vegetables.

Our last stop before Morocco was Lisbon, Portugal. Unlike Madrid, we had about four hours to spare, so we didn't get to stay very long or go very far, but we were not let down. This city was beautiful and a personal favorite! We arrived in the morning, but quickly caught on that our idea of a "traditional" breakfast was very much so American. There, breakfast consisted of small pastries and shots of espresso. Walking around Lisbon, we saw colorful, rustic buildings, narrow streets, beautiful views of the water, steep hills, and a streets-long outdoor flea market.

Finally, jetlagged and sore, we landed in Casablanca, Morocco. We quickly sought out a taxi driver to drive us an hour out to our beachfront condominium in Rabat-Sale, Morocco. Upon arrival, we were eager to go outside on our patio, which overlooked the ocean. There, we saw herds of sheep passing by on the beach. It was a sight. After only being in Morocco for a few hours, we befriended Hussein, a surf instructor out of work due to the season, who became our driver for the entire week. Hussein would spend the entire day with us – he would eat with us, introduce us to natives in the area, give us tours, take us to hidden gems, and so much more.

The parts of Morocco we saw were not extravagant, but we appreciated it for its modesty. Cars were not super fancy, but they got everyone from point A to point B. There was not a Whole Foods on every corner, but the country was extremely agricultural and the vast majority of people grew their own fruits and vegetables. There was no meat market, but butchers would grill meat on the sidewalk that filled the air with hearty aromas. There were not three boutiques per quarter mile, but there were *souks* (marketplaces) that sold handmade clothing, tools, leather shoes (made out of goat and sheep skin), rugs, spices, argan oil, pottery, jewelry, and so much more for extremely affordable prices. Everything was simple, the food was so fresh, and everyone was so nice and patient with us. As traveling Americans, especially ones who are only fluent in English, you never know how people will receive you but we felt SO welcomed. Kindness is a universal language!



A flea market in Lisbon, Portugal. Vendors sold mostly used items like jewelry, clothing, shoes, hats, silverware, and more.



Camels hanging out around Meknes, Morocco, a northern imperial city with beautiful views and so much farm land.





# DC PHOTOS

This issue, we have teamed up with our neighbors, whose office is a few floors above ours, to share these photos of spring in DC. Critical Exposure is an organization that trains DC youth to use the power of photography and their own voices to fight for educational equity and social justice. These photos, and their captions, are creations of the youths that Critical Exposure work with. Thanks, Daniel from Critical Exposure, for curating these photos for us!

Let us know what you think of their work. 😊



**OPEN OR CLOSE (2018)** – Bela A., 10th Grade

"You see this? The flower above, what do you think about it? Is it just a flower? Or something deeper. Well, I'm about to turn it into something deep. This flower isn't fully developed yet, but still growing. As we are growing, things may change, but things may not change. Time will tell."



**PINK (2018)** – Sanera P., 12th Grade

"The delicate prosperity of a flower is both serene and peaceful showing the veins and thins of one petal truly show how delicate all life is."



**OVER THE GARDEN (2018)** – Elizabeth C., 10th Grade

"What's over the garden? I want to know what's over the garden. Nobody knows."



**FROST (2018)** – Maria G., 11th Grade

"As spring comes in after winter and the trees start to bloom, beauty can be found where there once was snow. The flowers represent a new beginning of a new season and adventures to come."

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!



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Free Mind

By LM

I found solace in the solitude  
of solitary confinement  
Where human companionship is absent  
Left with only my thoughts to occupy the  
void of silence  
I explored the malice, accompanied by misery  
Adding stimulus to the madness, of the  
laughing madman  
Dwelling behind the smile of my reflection  
Medcall!  
Time to take remedies for the disorderly diagnosis  
That renders me aloof to the sympathies  
of my peers  
Oblivious to society fears and opinions  
Realist without feelings  
Only over-standing and complete  
consciousness of my dire situation  
Liberation within the realm of incarceration  
Lock my body, not my mind!  
FREE Mind in motion like Tarzan swinging  
from vines  
FREE like those who finished their time  
FREE Mind connects  
FREE Mind connections  
FREE Mind connected, back to that from  
which it derived

## Oh How We Dream

By KW

This illness... This infection... This disease!  
Sickening an entire society with its poison.  
Weakening our moral constitution.  
Crippling efforts made at unification...  
by those who...  
Who dare to offer the cure?  
Oh how...oh how we dream of healing.  
Oh how we TRY to apply remedies to treat...  
This... This... This virus... This affliction...  
This plague!  
How many more victims will it claim?  
Claimed at another school? Church?  
Synagogue?... Tweet?  
Collapsing hearts breaking down the trust  
is dying.  
We are dying! From...  
This... This... This madness... This disorder...  
this cancer!  
Called Racism.  
Called us to attention because  
We, the people are sick and tired,  
Of its vicious grip on the moral fabric in a  
free society  
Creating hate where none would exist.  
Henry Highland Garnett said,  
"No oppressed people have ever secured  
their liberty without resistance."  
Resist! Resist! Resist!  
This... This...

## How Do I Recover

By SR

Wounded beyond all recognition  
Hurt so bad I feel like I'm gonna die,  
Life as I knew it is over!  
  
She's gone, never to return.  
She's always been there,  
She won't be anymore.  
My world will never be the same.  
  
For more than 46 years we were a team.  
Through it all, cheering, crying, booing,  
celebrating, mourning, laughing;  
*always* laughing!  
Without her, I wouldn't be me.

How do I go on?  
How will I recover?  
How am I ever going to be me again?

Pray...  
Remember...  
Honor...  
Do my best...  
Take time...  
Reach out...  
Follow the example...  
Avoid self-pity...  
Strive, always strive!!

Will I ever fully heal?  
Right now it's hard to imagine I will.  
Faith says the pain will ease -  
The loss will always be felt.  
I want to laugh again like we did.  
So I'll pray!

## Do Grown Men Cry?

By DM

All things, it seems to me, must we test  
Accept the truth, reject the rest  
So we must investigate or try to see what  
makes a grown man cry  
Macho, big, tough, and strong  
To admit their tears they think is wrong  
But let me tell you on the sly  
Yes!  
These "real, grown" men do cry  
Mom is gone now - that's very tough  
Didn't hug her near enough  
She's with her maker in the sky  
Forgiveness causes a grown man to cry  
Leave your homeland - perhaps forever  
Start a new life - forget home never  
You may in this new land die  
Memories may cause a grown man to cry  
Blanks filled in?  
Now take a good look, what have you  
written in your life's book  
If for reasons you come up dry...  
That alone should cause your grown  
a\*\* to cry...

## A Walk By Myself With My Own Thoughts\*

By RJ

Today, I took a walk with my thoughts  
To get to know myself  
And I asked my body and mind  
About its aches and pains

Physical afflictions and emotional pain  
Are things we all feel,  
Instead of ignoring the hurt,  
We must confront what makes us ill

My body told me prison is giving me pain  
But don't worry because the cure is me being  
The man God created me to be  
A person starts to heal by not holding on  
To past injustice  
I can heal from my wound by coming to  
Terms with people who wronged me

My medicine is reading, writing,  
And listening  
My medicine is to change

When I am not able to heal, I only pass on  
A highly contagious sickness  
Because I know that me being ill is like ebola

Now that I know what I have to do,  
I can help others, too, by seeing me in all  
Of the other little bros and sisters  
In society and giving them the antidote  
The world can help me to heal by staying as it is,  
It's the people who help and need help

I can help the world heal by not thinking  
it's the world,

But realizing it's the people in the world

## How I Feel

By DC

See, when I was 12  
I felt like my mother left me  
Because she didn't like me  
'Cause I was bad in school all the time  
And if I start doing good  
She will come back home  
But she didn't come home  
And it's been three years  
And that's when it hit me  
That she was gone  
And she was never coming back

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## My Mind is a Rainbow

By DJ

My mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
even if I don't always show them on my face

Today, my thoughts are blue  
blue thoughts feel like gun and stab wounds  
these thoughts sound like dangerous waves  
at sea  
when I have blue thoughts, I exercise hard

But tomorrow, my thoughts might be yellow  
yellow thoughts are like the sun shining bright  
these thoughts feel like a good vacation  
these thoughts sound like slow R&B music

I have green thoughts when I think about  
the time I'm serving and being released after  
green thoughts make me feel satisfied

I have red thoughts when I think about  
the time I spent away from family  
red thoughts make me feel disappointed

I wish I had more yellow thoughts  
those blue thoughts are like hurricanes  
those thoughts make me want to start fights  
those thoughts sound like trees falling  
those thoughts make me feel bitter and give  
me headaches

But I accept that my mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
each one with a special role to play

## Smiles

By SH

Have you ever sat back and thought of all the  
forced smiles that's been brought on by others?  
I know a lot of us don't even think about it  
because it's become a part of who we are  
We smile 'cause of what one says or does, we  
smile because of things they ask or tell us to do  
But how often do we as people analyze our true  
feelings behind them smiles?

To all my readers take a second and ask yourself  
When was the last time you smiled because of  
something you said or did  
Or just for the simple fact that you are proud  
of yourselves

We must stop depriving ourselves of the joy  
we deserve people  
We got to take a chance and stop loving  
everything else so much and love ourselves  
It's sad because it's so many of us that don't  
even know who we are  
Because we are so busy living through  
someone else  
Let's smile for ourselves for a chance  
You never know you might enjoy the feeling  
of being free and loving yourself  
We only got one mind, one body, and one soul  
So let's start to enjoy it now before it's too late  
and we leave this world  
Not knowing who we are or what we ever lived for

## My Mind is a Rainbow

By BKC

My mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
even if I don't always show them on my face

Today, my thoughts are white  
White thoughts feel like nothing  
These thoughts sound like "outer space"  
When I have white thoughts, I am being creative

But tomorrow, my thoughts might be yellow  
Yellow thoughts are like bright sunny days  
These thoughts feel like Mid Spring  
These thoughts sound like "Spring Break Festivals"

I have blue thoughts when I think about resting  
on a beach shore  
Blue thoughts make me feel relaxed

I have purple thoughts when I think about royalty  
Purple thoughts make me feel like I am King Koopa

I wish I had more red thoughts  
Those red thoughts are like my lover's heart  
Those thoughts make me want to love  
her repeatedly  
Those thoughts sound like "boo bump,  
boo bump..."  
Those thoughts are warming to me

But I accept that my mind is a brilliant place  
filled with all the colors of the rainbow  
each one with a special role to play

## The Reality of Healing

By KJ

My mother died on this month's first day  
eighteen days before my birthday  
I found out on the fifth day  
which was a Tuesday

Was it a sad day?  
nah, it was just like any otha day  
top bunk, rec call, chow time  
like any otha day  
but hey!  
you'd think I'd feel a different way  
more grief stricken and not so blasé  
honestly speakin': I swear upon my eye  
that any tear I cry  
would be a lie  
a horrible contrive  
as real as the sorrow from Brutus  
over Caesar and at Brutus' hand  
Caesar died

A festering maggot-filled wound, a gash  
that leaks yellow pus and emits a noxious gas  
remains present due to events I won't let pass  
suppressed emotions hidden away like a  
drug dealer's stash  
that acts as an anticoagulant giving gangrene  
a clear shot at my a\*\*

You shaking your head, but  
I remember when it was worse  
and I was a walking open wound  
blaming every misadventure  
on the accursed womb,  
cursing the womb  
snarlin' and snappin' at reconciliation but  
howlin' in loneliness at the moon

But then I grew a pair  
had to put on them big boy draws  
stopped my excessive speeding past  
mirrors and took a long pause  
focused my eyes on my twin  
and discovered the true cause

And I said to myself, "Self,  
you are a grown a\*\* man, in  
this here man's penitentiary  
and crying about not getting hugs  
from mama is damn sickening!  
I know you wish the love was  
more forthcoming  
but it ain't and the more time  
you waste on it  
you will be denying "your-self" love  
which is the ultimate form of torment."  
And from that day forward, bleeding  
ceased, scabs formed and holes closed  
bones mended and muscles knitted  
and painful sleep became a relaxed doze

But I'm not 100 percent  
my PTSD hits me now and then  
and I still walk with a limp  
but I'm a lot more content  
despite the fact that she brought me here  
and without doing right by me, she... went

But still I hurt  
and some maladies never heal back right  
but I've learned to deal with it  
bear and grin it  
so I think I'll be all right

*continued on page 23*





# REPRINT: *THE PLAYERS' TRIBUNE*

## What the Hell Happened to Darius Miles?

by Darius Miles, former pro-basketball player

*This is an excerpt from a piece by former pro-basketball player Darius Miles that he wrote for The Players' Tribune and first published October 24, 2018. The Players' Tribune has given us permission to share it with you all. Please let Free Minds know if you want a copy of the article in full - we are happy to send it to you!*

It's crazy to think about, but six years after we were at the peak with the Young Clippers, I was basically out of the league. I was 27 years old, and I had doctors telling me that my knee was too messed up to play basketball ever again.

My whole life, I used basketball as an escape. When you grow up how I grew up, I think you're probably bound to have some kind of PTSD. I ain't a doctor, but when you grow up running from gunshots all the time, I think there's something inside you that never leaves. I used to feel this pressure on me - I'm talking like a physical pressure, you know? But I used to be able to go out onto a basketball court and just unleash it. You could let it all out. You could dunk the s\*\*\* outta that motherf\*\*\*\*\* in front of 100 people or 20,000 people and feel good for a minute.

Basketball got taken away from me at 27, and I was lost. I was just kind of going through the motions. Then a couple years later, my momma got taken away from me, and I pretty much went insane.

When you're in the NBA, people think you're a superhero. Maybe you think you're a superhero, too. But there's all kinds of stuff going on under the surface that nobody has any idea about. My momma battled three different cancers while I was in the league - liver cancer, colon cancer, bone cancer. When I think about all the teams I played for after L.A. - Cleveland, Portland, Memphis - what I remember first is the doctors and the hospitals in all those cities.

I was dealing with all that for most of my career, and I was just... burying it, you know? I prided myself on standing tall through it all and never breaking. I never cried - not once. My people were dropping like flies when I was in the league - homies, cousins, my grandmomma - and I never cried, not one d\*\*\* time.

I lost my granddaddy to throat cancer. Lost my grandma to heart disease. Lost my best friend Geracy to the streets. He got stabbed to death in 2004, when we came back home for the summer.

I'm not saying that for sympathy. Everybody goes through darkness. I'm just saying that I kept my head up through *all* of that. But my mom was a different story.

I don't care *how* hard you are... your momma is your momma.

I remember when she was near the end, she was doing chemo twice a week,



and she couldn't even put her hand in the refrigerator. She couldn't even have a cold glass of water. She went to pick the dog up one day, and her arm broke. She was kind of disappearing right in front of me. That's my momma, you know? When a dude pulled a gun on me, this was the woman who went and got *her* gun.

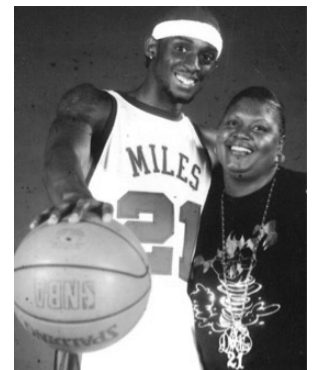
She was the one person who always had my back, no matter what I did.

The last two weeks, she couldn't talk.

We didn't have to say anything, though. She was with me the whole way. The whole d\*\*\* ride. She *knew*.

When she died, I ain't gonna lie, it broke me.

After the funeral, I was supposed to clean out her house, and I just couldn't do it. I didn't leave her house for an entire year. I never made it past the front yard, for real. I just didn't have the will to do anything. I went Zero Dark Thirty on everybody. I wasn't answering anybody's texts. I wasn't even answering Q's texts. And it wasn't like people weren't trying to help me, but I didn't want the help. I was just... *gone*.



I would sleep in the daytime then stay up all night drinking wine and smoking weed, just to try to get out of my head. I was paranoid. I had my concealed carry permit, so I had a gun on me at all times. The worst part was that I had people who owed me a lot of money, and I just got to a point where I was seeing red, for real. I felt like I was gonna hurt somebody, or I was gonna wind up in jail.

I know dudes like me aren't supposed to talk about depression, but I'll talk about it. If a real motherf\*\*\*\*\* like me can struggle with it, then anybody can struggle with it.

I was stuck in my momma's house in East St. Louis for like three years. I worked my whole life to get out of there, and I was back. Just... trapped. Carrying my gun with me everywhere. Couldn't sleep. Couldn't escape my own head. Couldn't find any peace.

Then one night, I just had enough.

I called up Q.

Q had been living down in Florida for years.

I said, "Q, it's nice down there?"

Q said, "Hell yeah."

I said, "I think I'm gonna come down there."

Q said, "Hell yeah."

I packed up a U-Haul, and I drove 14 hours straight through the night. I had to do *something*. I had to make a change.

I hear people talking, like, "What the hell happened to Darius Miles?"

They ask about the money, but they don't ask about my momma.



# REBUILDING TRUST

by Melanie, FM Friend & Board Member

*At the Free Minds weekly reentry book club, Melanie's wallet was stolen. We were all heartbroken that it happened in our own space built on community and brotherhood. The following week, we devoted an entire session to talking about how to create a safer space. The members made a verbal agreement. Going forward, if one of them is struggling, they will not succumb to temptation to do something desperate! Instead, they agreed to reach out to one another first because FM members are all here for each other. This is Melanie's story.*

What's good Free Minds Members? Melanie here, proud Free Minds Advisory Board member and longtime supporter. As many of you know, I have a passion for criminal justice reform. I am dedicated to doing all that I can to support you on your journey. Each of you are uniquely special and have so much to offer. Know that I will always be rooting for your success.

Earlier this year, I conducted a presentation for Free Minds members at the Thurgood Marshall Center. At the time, I was keeping my business cards in a case inside of my wallet. After the presentation, many different people came up to me to ask questions and exchange contact information. I was distracted at times as I was navigating multiple conversations and handshakes. At one point, I placed my wallet down on the table. When I went back to grab more business cards, I noticed my wallet was gone. I paused for a moment and tried to think of where else it could have been. The room had pretty much cleared out by then as there were only a couple people left. I started to panic. I asked if anyone had seen it, started digging through my bag, opening up drawers, and looking under the table and chairs. I wondered if it was accidentally thrown out with the trash and even went outside in the freezing cold to check the dumpsters. I thought I was losing my mind.

It did not occur to me that there was a possibility it could have been stolen until someone else mentioned it. Never in my life have I had my wallet stolen. This was incredibly hard to process. I thought I was in a safe space among my Free Minds family. I was numb. I simply could not believe it.

As I left the Thurgood Marshall Center and called my mother, it hit me. I had no driver's license. No credit cards. No lip gloss! My whole life was in that wallet and I felt hopeless. Tears began streaming down my face. I was not sad that I had to go through the hassle of ordering a new license and cancelling my credit cards, but that someone from the organization I love dearly and have dedicated countless years to would take something from me. It hurt me to my core.

I am grateful for the support of Free Minds staff and members as I could not have healed from this traumatic experience without them. My friends and family asked me whether I was going to continue working with Free Minds. While they probably expected the answer to be "heck no," I am more eager than ever to come back. It would not be fair for me to judge the entire organization based on the actions of a few. Healing is an essential part of personal growth and I truly believe that everything happens for a reason. This situation has made me stronger.

Keep pushing! I am looking forward to seeing you soon.

Melanie

*Melanie is an attorney based in Washington, DC. She has a passion for criminal justice reform and believes that poverty, lack of education, and other social issues should not feed the pipeline to prison. Through consistent advocacy, she desires to alleviate the factors that force many people to become a part of the criminal justice system. The views expressed here are her own.*



## REPRINT: THE PLAYERS' TRIBUNE (CONTINUED)

They don't ask me where I came from, and all the things I've seen.

I done it all. I made it and spent it. Went from The Pink Slip to the L'Ermitage. I rode in all them limos. I lived a life, boy.

Now, I live down the street from Q in Florida. I like it down there. For the first time in years, I can sleep at night. I don't have to carry a gun. I can finally get a little bit of peace. I'm just trying to get better, day by day. Trying to be a better person, day by day.

Me and Q, we don't got the matching trucks no more. We're not living that lifestyle. But you know what? You can say whatever you want about us, but you can't take away a real simple fact. It don't matter who we run into - MJ, Paul Pierce, Shawn Kemp, some random dude on the street...

They *know*. They know what we did.

Matter fact, I was checking into a hotel just the other day. Bellhop is going about his business. Loading some bags or whatever. Then he looks over at me.

He's like, "Is that... are you... yooooo!"

He don't have to say anything else. He just looks me dead in the eyes from across the lobby, and he throws it up.

Two taps to the head.

He *knows*.

So, *What the hell happened to Darius Miles?* Man, a lot. A lot happened to Darius Miles.

But it's 2018 now - and I'll tell you one thing.

He alright.



# WE REPEAT WHAT WE DON'T REPAIR!

By Edward, FM Friend and Licensed Clinical Social Worker

According to Dr. Judith Herman, the author of *Trauma and Recovery*, "unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events involve threats to life or bodily injury, or a close personal encounter with violence or death." Therefore, **psychological trauma** can best be defined as an experience that involves emotional, verbal, sexual, or physical abuse and as an experience that leaves its victim fundamentally changed and altered after the traumatic event is experienced.

Trauma can be a single event, for example, a house fire, a serious car accident, or being robbed at gunpoint. But it can also involve multiple events – for example, being physically abused by a parent on a daily basis, being shot or stabbed multiple times, or just witnessing multiple violent incidents even if you aren't the victim of that violence. For example, being a soldier in a war zone who witnesses civilian deaths, or being a civilian who lives in a war zone and who becomes a refugee because of the destruction caused by war.

Trauma changes us; we are never the same after trauma because it is stored in both our minds and our bodies.

Throughout the history of America, there is no group that has faced the amount of trauma, psychological pain, grief, and loss that black people have experienced since our forefathers stepped off the first slave ship that landed in Point Comfort, VA, in 1619 with "some 20 and odd Negroes" on board (this fact is from an article in *USA Today*, from February 2019 titled "1619: 400 years ago, a ship arrived in Virginia, bearing human cargo" by E.R. Shipp).

Imagine for a moment, if you can, the sheer terror, fear, sadness, pain, and confusion that these enslaved Africans (people who had been taken hostage on the shores of West Africa from multiple ethnic groups and who didn't speak the same native languages) must have felt after surviving the Middle Passage, which was a 3-month long journey by sea and arriving in a strange land barely able to stand or to walk due to the horrible conditions they endured while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. They came in chains... chained, shackled, and huddled together barely clothed, poorly fed, and confined to the bowels of a slave ship with no ability to communicate in the language of their captors and with no knowledge of where they were going nor of the horrors that awaited them upon their arrival in the "land of the free and the home of the brave."

This was the foundational trauma experienced by Africans in America, and I would argue that there has been a 400-year-long unbroken chain of trauma from 1619 to 2019 that has been transferred from one generation to the next because "we repeat what we don't repair." From slavery, to Jim Crow segregation, to lynchings, to the assassinations of Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Dr. King, and Fred Hampton, to urban poverty and chronic unemployment, to prejudice, discrimination, racism, and white supremacy, to the epidemic of gun violence that plagues many of our communities, to the crack epidemic, to the "War on Drugs," to mass incarceration, to chronic fatherlessness, to police brutality and the killings of innocent black men like Trayvon Martin and Mike Brown, to underfunded urban schools, to the disintegration of the black family unit and to gentrification. This unbroken chain of trauma inflicted on and experienced by black men and boys during the past four hundred years has left many of us psychologically and emotionally wounded and in need of healing.

In psychology, there is a concept called "**repetition compulsion**," which means that when a person experiences trauma, they are likely to relive and recreate the traumatic experience repeatedly until they become aware of the need to heal from it. The trauma is repeated in our behavior towards others, in our self-destructive habits (substance abuse and addiction) and in our dreams, nightmares, and flashbacks. When we re-enact our trauma, we either play the role of the perpetrator or the prey; either the victim or the victimizer. In other

words, we typically, but not always, do the opposite of the golden rule: we do unto others what was done to us!

So, the question becomes: *how does a man heal the wounds of his past trauma?* Although you are not to blame for the trauma you experienced in the past, you are 100% responsible for taking ownership over the process of healing from it! Let me say that again... although your trauma is not your fault, it's absolutely your responsibility to do the work of healing from it. **We heal from trauma when we begin the process of gaining control over our lives, our behaviors, our self-destructive habits, and our self-defeating beliefs.**

Psychotherapy, in the form of both individual and group-based sessions, is one of the most effective tools for healing that is available to us. Therapy has one basic goal and that is to help a person understand how the past lives on in the present and to help the person learn to make new and better choices by becoming fully aware of how the past influences their present-day behavior, thoughts and feelings. However, one can also start the work of healing from past trauma by working on oneself when the support of a mental health professional is not available.

Here are three ways to start working on healing your trauma:

1. **First, learn to recognize the symptoms of trauma and to notice what triggers you.** Common symptoms of trauma are (hopelessness, depression, irritability, substance abuse, feeling numb, feeling helpless, feeling suicidal, anxiety, insomnia, flashbacks, and nightmares). Some common triggers are anger, being disrespected, being yelled at, being in a stressful environment, etc.

2. **Second, when you are triggered, learn to calm, relax, and soothe your body.** The body sends signals (increased heart rate, tension in the neck and shoulders, butterflies in the stomach, sweaty palms) when our trauma is triggered. You must develop a routine way of responding to your body when it signals you and tells you that you are experiencing the stress response.

3. **Third, the most effective and readily available tool that you have to calm your body is deep breathing.** When you notice that you are triggered, breathe in to the count of four, hold your breath to the count of seven and then exhale to the count of eight. This is called the **4-7-8** breath and it is scientifically proven to reduce stress and tension in the body when practiced. Meditation, yoga, physical exercise, and stretching are also effective tools that can be used to reduce and manage the symptoms of trauma when you are triggered.

Most of the problematic behaviors that we struggle to overcome as adults were once the strategies we used to survive the traumatic experiences we faced and endured as children. However, the strategies and behaviors that we used to survive our childhood trauma will not and cannot help us to thrive as adults. If we want to thrive, then we must be willing to get to know ourselves at the deepest possible level so that we can uncover the parts of ourselves that have been wounded, shamed, humiliated, violated, and unloved!

Until we meet, embrace, and heal those wounded parts of ourselves we cannot be whole, and we cannot heal. Healing is our birthright... it was wired into our DNA because we were born with everything that we needed to live and thrive during our journey here on earth. We are spiritual beings having a human experience and through our willingness to face and embrace our pain, our spirits spur us on to grow, evolve, and to become our best selves. It is possible to heal from trauma because as Paulo Coelho wrote in *The Alchemist*, "when you want something the Universe conspires to help you achieve it."

# THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

## "Along the Way, Somebody Helped Me"

*A Profile on Robert, FM Member, by Meena, FM Intern*

*Hi! My name is Meena, and I am an intern at Free Minds Book Club. In March, I got a chance to speak with Robert, a dedicated Free Minds family member. He told me about his job as a Program Assistant at Catholic Charities, where he works mentoring and helping other men find proper housing and community resources. Robert spoke about positivity, reflection, and giving back to others as forms of healing that he employs in his everyday life.*

**Meena:** Can you tell me a little about yourself?

**Robert:** I was 15 when I started to really think that I knew everything in the world there was to know. Unfortunately, when I was 17, I got incarcerated for second degree murder and various firearm charges. I ended up doing 21 years. While I was incarcerated, I had time to finish high school, go to college – I didn't graduate, but I do have a lot of credits! I just think that somewhere along the way I started to grow up, and I started to realize that it was more to life than just being a young, asinine kind of person.

**Meena:** How did you end up at Catholic Charities?

**Robert:** A friend of mine came down to Lucky Strike [it's a bowling alley where Robert was working at the time] and he worked for Catholic Charities. They had a meeting in Lucky Strike, and he introduced me to his boss. I had a situation where I had to ask a guy who had had too much to drink to leave, because he was being boisterous. The friend of mine and his boss saw the exchange, and the boss said, "He seems like a nice guy, tell him to give me a call because I have an opening at one of my SROs (single room occupancy programs)."

**Meena:** So, what does your day-to-day job look like?

**Robert:** I come in and basically, I do everything – as far as make sure the trash is taken out, and make sure every guy in here is OK for today. Anything that he may need help with – if he needs something, if he needs taxes done, if he needs something fixed. Even though I don't know how to fix anything, we have facilities, and all I have to do is put in a work order. I stay taking care of these SROs. I am also on call, because we have a lot of lockouts.

**Meena:** How do you think that you practice a sense of healing while working at Catholic Charities?

**Robert:** I still think about where I could be, where I was just four years ago. I just came back from the store. I walked to the store, I got something to drink, and it was so pleasurable. I try to stay ever mindful of the shoe being on the other foot. That's why I care for my residents like I do. I don't know what they've been through, so healing for me is being able to do for them, to help them. Because along the way, somebody helped me.



It's healing because I'm able to say, look what I'm doing. Look at me now! It's healing just being able to be out here and be in this position that I'm in. I see a lot of guys that I've been incarcerated with, or in a halfway house with, and they're not doing so good, they come out, they don't have the support team, they don't have Free Minds. It's healing knowing I can be an example for my residents.

**Meena:** How do you take care of yourself and your mental health?

**Robert:** Rule of thumb: I always try not to be reactionary, because that has never gotten me anywhere. Especially at my night job, where I had to deal with so many guys who are intoxicated. It's a bar, and it's a club, and I'm called for every problem. I try to deal diplomatically. When I'm going through something, it's nice to have solitude. It's nice to be able to turn my own key. It's nice to be able to get in my car, even if I just sit there, and reflect. Let me tell you something, if I think about things, the chances of me getting it right are very good. Give yourself a chance to just think.

**Meena:** Do you have any other advice for any Free Minds members who are still incarcerated and are just having a hard time focusing on healing?

**Robert:** You have to know that I try and take care of at least 20 guys that are still in jail now. They call, I send money, I send pictures. The guys that I spent all those years with, they became makeshift family when my family became so distant. I tell guys when they call me all the time, try to find something to live through – someone to live through. If you live through me, cool. Call me every day. Find something to do to take your mind away from what you may be struggling with.



# IN THE NEWS by John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: UNDERSTANDING A GOVERNMENT SHUTDOWN

Congress has a process for setting the amount of money spent by the U.S. government each year. It starts with spending bills written by bodies known as Appropriations Committees in both the House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate. Those bills are passed by the committees, and then move to the full House and Senate to get approved. Any big differences between the two versions are worked out in what's known as a Conference Committee.

After spending bills are passed by both parts of Congress, and differences are ironed out, it is up to the president to sign those bills or veto them. This is all supposed to happen by September 30, the last day of each "fiscal year."

That is how it is *supposed* to work. But the politics around government spending have intensified in America, and what actually happens is much more erratic.

Usually, September 30 comes and goes without anything close to a spending deal reached by the House and Senate. So to keep the government (or at least part of the government) open, they agree to what's called a "Continuing Resolution." This is a short-term law that keeps funding the government for a week, or a month, or three months, while they work on permanent deal.

But the president has to sign off or veto those short-term plans too. And because he has that power, he can try to insist that these spending bills include things he wants. If he won't sign it, and Congress runs out of time, some or all of the federal government will have to shut down.

That is what happened this winter. President Donald Trump told Congress that he would not sign a continuing resolution, or a longer-term agreement, if it did not include several billion dollars to continue building a wall along the southern border of the United States. The House is controlled by the Democrats, who oppose the wall and had no intention of supplying money for it.



President Donald Trump

So on December 22, 2018, several agencies of the United States government closed until an agreement was reached. This includes the Department of Homeland Security, the Justice Department, the Treasury and many other agencies.

Most public spending in America is done on a local level, through state, county, city, and town government. But the federal government is an important partner in funding many of the services that citizens in this country use every day.

Our national parks are protected and preserved every day with federal money. Our airports are guarded by the Transportation Security Administration, or TSA, all federal employees. Healthcare for young

children, low-income adults, and the elderly are paid for through federal partnerships with states. When people retire, they are paid Social Security checks to live on in their old age, all distributed by the federal government.

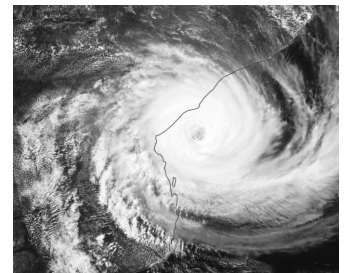
Some of these services stopped immediately when the government shut down. Others, like TSA agents, were forced to work for more than a month without a paycheck. Thousands of workers were told to stay home, not knowing when their next paycheck may come.

The shutdown lasted until January 25, 2019, making it the longest government shutdown in U.S. history. At the end, Trump agreed to sign a spending agreement without the funding for the wall, and shortly after announced that he would use his emergency powers to pay for the wall construction. That decision is now being contested in court.



## WORLD NEWS

A massive storm, and the flooding that came with it, has devastated the East African nation of Mozambique. Tropical Cyclone Idai displaced tens of thousands of people and killed more than 1,000 in a nation with a long Indian Ocean shoreline that leaves it prone to cataclysmic weather.



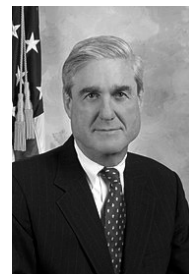
Topical Cyclone Idai

Mozambique isn't the only place suffering the effects of flooding. Unusually large amounts of snow and rain have forced thousands in the Midwestern United States to flee their houses and towns, and experts predict that flooding will be continue to plague states like Missouri and Nebraska for several months.

## UNITED STATES NEWS

The long-awaited "Mueller Report" has been handed over to the Justice Department by special prosecutor Robert Mueller. This was an investigation into whether the Trump campaign worked with Russia to disrupt the 2016 election, and then obstructed justice as the FBI looked into the possible collusion.

As of the publication of this issue, the full report had not yet been made public. Attorney General William Barr has stated that Mueller found no evidence that the Trump campaign had colluded with Russia. Mueller declined to give an opinion as to whether Trump and others on his team had obstructed justice after the FBI began to probe possible ties with Russia.



Robert Mueller



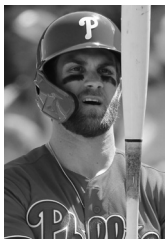
# IN THE NEWS

## SPORTS

The NCAA Tournament was won by #1 seed Virginia in a thrilling overtime game against #3 seed Texas Tech. The two teams, arguably the best defensive teams in the country, were rather new to the Final Four; Virginia last appeared in 1984 while Texas Tech never had. Virginia's victory represented coming full circle from last season's debacle, in which they lost in the first round to 16 seed UMBC, the first #1 seed ever to do so in the men's tournament. Arguably the biggest shocker this year was #1 team overall Duke's failure to make the final four, losing to Michigan State in the elite 8 despite the efforts of 6'7" 285 pound "point center" Zion Williamson, the consensus best player in the country and effectively a lock to be drafted first in the NBA Draft this June.



Zion Williamson



Bryce Harper

The Major League Baseball season is about to begin. And for the first time in seven seasons, Bryce Harper will not be in the outfield for the Washington Nationals. Instead, he will be playing for the hated division rival, the Philadelphia Phillies.

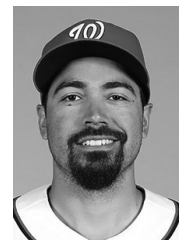
Harper, by far the Nats greatest offensive weapon, became a free agent at the end of last season. In March, he signed a 13-year contract with the Phillies that will pay him an eye-popping \$330 million.

The Nationals prospects are still bright for the year, though. They begin the year with perhaps the best starting rotation of pitchers in the league, led by Cy Young winner Max Scherzer. And the lineup still includes the speedy shortstop Trea Turner, hard-hitting third baseman Anthony Rendon, and the future of the franchise, outfielder Juan Soto.



Max Scherzer

The 2019 NFL Draft will begin on Thursday, April 25. The Arizona Cardinals, who hold the first pick in the draft, are expected to select quarterback Kyler Murray, who won the Heisman Trophy while playing at Oklahoma last year. Murray was selected ninth overall in the 2018 MLB Draft by the Oakland Athletics, but has chosen to focus on his football career.



Anthony Rendon

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

*continued from page 15*

**Anthony Bourdain**

**By AW**

Anthony Bourdain  
In his face often  
While watching his show *Parts Unknown*  
I would say to myself  
"S\*\*\* this dude looks  
like I feel."  
Hidden in the shadows  
Of a smile hides  
That pain that isn't  
Seen by the naked eye  
It is that third eye's  
Sight that picks up that  
Ache that cannot be  
Relieved with anything  
Short of an immense  
Insight in to the workings  
Of that Great Depression

Sensitive insights  
Braveheart and true  
Assertions helped  
Us enjoy and love the wonderful  
Workings of that beautiful soul  
Known as Anthony Bourdain

*Note: Anthony Bourdain was a celebrity chef, TV show host, and author, who died by suicide.*

**Sometimes I Cry**

**By VC**

Sometimes I cry  
From emotions packed inside  
From pain that I can't hide  
From anger that wanna collide  
Excruciating head pain  
I can't think straight  
Fear reaching out  
They won't relate  
No healthy allies  
No safety net  
I fret

Sometimes I cry  
From all the heartache and pain

Sometimes I cry  
Jori (niece) only knows my name

Sometimes I cry  
From all the guilt and shame  
I took someone's life  
I can't give it back

So sometimes I cry  
Behind that fact  
That's not who I am  
I wanna change

Sometimes I cry  
Knowing sorry's not enough  
I made other's life rough

Sometimes I cry  
For a better day  
Wishing God would just lead the way

Sometimes I cry  
Asking myself "Why???"  
I believed the lie  
That a man wasn't supposed to cry





# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club*  
by Julia

Hey Free Minds readers! By now, you should have received a copy of the book *Men We Reaped*, if you are at a facility that allows books. If you haven't, please let us know! *Men We Reaped* is a memoir (a true story from the author's life) by Jesmyn Ward that focuses on a period in her life when five of the men in her life, including her beloved brother Joshua, died unexpectedly. The book discusses racism, poverty, grief, and much more. Here's what some of our readers had to say about it:

**1. The title "Men We Reaped" comes from a quote by Harriet Tubman that is at the beginning of the book. Why do you think the author chose this title? What does it mean to you? [To reap means to gather (a crop), to harvest, to bring in, to receive]**

**MT:** She chose it because it stands for her loss. It means heartbreak to me.

**RJ:** I believe all Black men are a harvest. 100x more valuable than cotton. Prison is modern day slavery. Either men are going to come to prison and provide labor or be gunned down in the street. Black and poor men.

**2. When Jesmyn looks at the memorial t-shirt for Rog, many things about it trouble her. What are your thoughts on this tradition? Have you ever been bothered by the way someone was remembered or memorialized?**

**MT:** It's the street way to remember someone. No, I have not been bothered by anyone being memorialized.

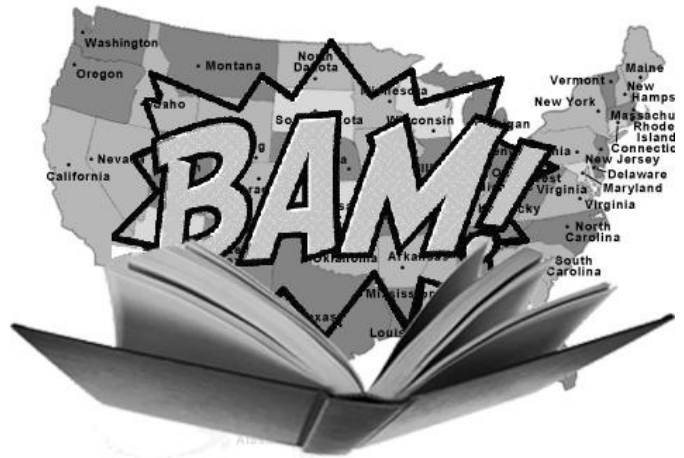
**RJ:** I myself have never worn a memorial t-shirt. I don't think it is bad because we should remember our loved ones in a good light. Same thing with obituaries. They get padded with all kinds of accolades: church, college, job, volunteer work, etc., etc. And in most cases, these are over-stated, but it is making the loved one feel good.

**RR:** No, because I have grown to know and over-stand that as long as that person, be it family or friend, has done good to me, I will always carry him or her in good grace. Everybody could be saying bad things, but I am going off of how I was treated.

**3. What were some of the stories of Jesmyn's childhood that she chooses to detail in the book and why do you think she shares them? If you were writing a memoir, what is one key scene from your life that you would include? Why?**

**MT:** Her father cheating on her mother. It reflects on her struggles. My life - the many times I've come close to death - lets me know how fast your life can end.

**RJ:** I would include in my memoir how at sentencing there were seven men handcuffed and shackled in a small, stinky, stagnant toilet cell waiting to be sentenced to a harsh prison sentence when their only crime was they was Black or poor. And oftentimes both!



**4. What role do alcohol and drugs play in the lives of Jesmyn and her sisters and their friends? How can a person know if they are self-medicating? Do you think they all knew, or was it only later, as Jesmyn looks back? (see page 68) [Self-medicating is an attempt to alleviate the emotional pain of depression, anxiety, grief, or other mental health issues, without the supervision of a medical professional through the use of drugs and/or alcohol]**

**MT:** They used drugs to cope with their stressful problems. They knew.

**RJ:** I am having to deal with the same thing because I have self-medicated for almost all my life because of undiagnosed and untreated issues.

**RR:** Alcohol and drugs played a major part in Jesmyn's life. It's not self-medicating. Most just get caught up doing what they like. People on the outside looking in will say that person is self-medicating when that person is going through a crisis or something. If that person goes through life doing good and people see that person using drugs, now that person is a junkie, crackhead, etc.

**5. How are lives and the roles of men and women different in DeLisle, Mississippi? What explanation does Jesmyn come up with for the reason the men in her community were womanizers (See pages 83-84)? Do you agree with her? If not, what are the reasons you think men become womanizers? What is a womanizer?**

**MT:** There aren't as many opportunities in Mississippi. They were womanizers because they had no say in the South. I agree with her.

**RJ:** I think almost all men are womanizers. And use women for selfish reasons and get mad when a woman turns to someone else. But men don't treat them like queens and respect them. I have six sisters and have never disrespected a woman, never hit one, never cheated.

**RR:** Some are egos, some get caught up with just living life weak-minded; what Jesmyn sees and over-stands is what she see going on in her community. Jesmyn's truth is not everybody's truth. Some can relate.

# MEDITATION

## Healing from Grief

By Kelli

*\*This is a guided meditation script. See if you can find someone to read it aloud to you so that you can close your eyes. When you're finished, you can trade places and read it aloud for the other person. If that's not possible, try to find a quiet place to read it to yourself – realizing that you'll need to keep your eyes open, of course! 😊*

If you are grieving the death of someone you love, you know firsthand that grief is not something you can "fix" or make "go away." This isn't about trying to change reality. You can't. But what you *can* do is cultivate compassion for yourself, learn how to control the things you can (your attention, for example), and learn how to take care of yourself given the reality of the situation. Meditation can help you sleep better and manage the physical symptoms of grief such as muscle tension, headaches, and stomach aches.

We tend to associate grief mostly with the death of a loved one, but other types of loss can also be very difficult to deal with. A divorce, the loss of a job, loss of freedom, moving to a new place, the end of a relationship, illness – these all represent a loss.

Whatever your situation, your grief is real, and your loss is important.

Close your eyes, and just sit quietly. Breathe slowly in... and out... In... and out... Let your breathing relax you.

Imagine that your body is floating on top of warm water... gentle waves move your body. You get out of the water. You lie on the concrete in the sun. Feel steam rise from your body, warmed from beneath by the warm concrete, and from above by the sun. The water slowly evaporates... You become lighter and lighter.

Feel your whole body becoming lighter... relaxed... calm. As your body relaxes, let's focus on healing from grief.

You may be feeling exhausted, stressed, and burned out lately. It is normal to be short-tempered and have problems with concentration when you are grieving. These symptoms are normal... and will go away. You will gradually get back to feeling like yourself. Right now, you are healing.

When a physical injury occurs, the body needs time to heal and recover. Dealing with grief is no different. The mind needs time to recover and heal. You need the time to cope, and deal with grief. Be kind to yourself, and give yourself this time.

Take a deep breath in... and let it go.

There are several stages of grief, and it is normal to experience these stages... in any order.

You may feel numbness, a time where you do not feel very much at all. This does not mean that you don't care. It is just the mind's way of protecting you. Numbness and shock are a normal reaction to your loss.

You may experience anger. It is okay to be angry when you lose something that is important to you... Not all of the anger is rational, and that is because you are grieving. This is okay. Your thinking will become clearer in time as you cope with grief.

You may go through a stage of wondering why this happened. You may try to make things go back to the way they were before the loss happened. These too, are normal parts of dealing with grief.

You may feel lonely and sad. You may have low energy, feel slowed down... maybe even depressed. It's normal to feel this way. You are grieving. These feelings can be very intense and painful. Even though it may feel like the sadness will go on and on, you will not feel this way forever.

Acceptance is another stage of grief. As you begin to re-create a new life in the aftermath of the loss. You begin to accept that things have changed. Your life is different... maybe not better... maybe not worse... but different. Acceptance is the act of coming to the realization that the loss has occurred, but you can move on.



You can get through this.

You will feel better, and you will make a new life. Your new life may be different. But you can grow and become stronger, even though there is no good explanation as to why you had to go through such difficult times.

Even after you have dealt with the grief, you will have times where you feel like you are right back where you started. This is normal. Allow yourself the time you need.

Now if you want to, take a moment just to be with the feelings you have... and accept that you are grieving. Just relax and breathe deeply, and feel whatever you feel.

Now let's take a break from the grief you are going through.

Focus on your breathing for a few moments... breathing slowly in... and out... Slowly breathing... relaxing...

Create a picture in your mind, imagining a beautiful and peaceful place.... Breathe in and release your worries as you exhale.

This is a place where you can completely relax... you can take a break here... even just for a few moments... to get away. You can return to this place in your imagination when you need a break... whenever you need to relax.

Whenever you feel sad and you need a rest, you can picture this place in your mind.

Now, slowly count down from five to one.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

One.

You are a strong person. You are taking care of yourself. And you are healing.

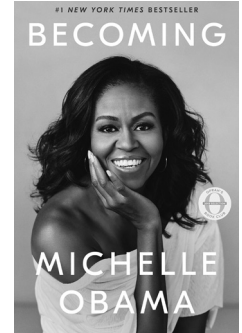
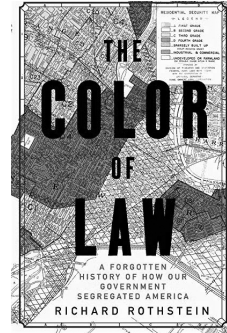


# WHAT WE'RE READING

Are you reading something you have really strong feelings about and want to share your thoughts with other Free Minds members? Send us your impressions (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

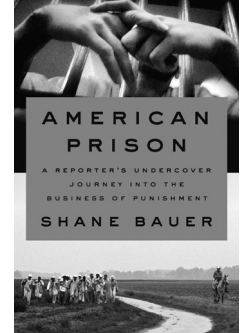
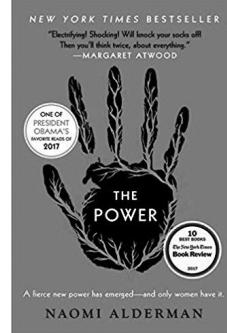
- **JL, FM Member: *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America* by Richard Rothstein**

*The Color of Law* really opened my eyes to how deeply racism and discrimination are interwoven into the fabric of our society here in America. I like (and agree with) some of his solutions to try correcting this problem, especially when saying that those who are blind to this problem need to become aware, and that any damage done to African Americans is going to have to be forgiven so we all can move on to find common solutions. *The Color of Law* is definitely an eye-opener and an excellent book.



- **Frances, FM Friend and Volunteer: *Becoming* by Michelle Obama**

Michelle Obama tells her story from childhood on the South Side of Chicago to time in the White House. With humility and genuineness, she lets the reader into the joys of her childhood and how she learned to see the world, the insecurities of growing into adulthood, the stresses of being a parent and a highly competent and educated woman, and the unique role of FLOTUS (First Lady of the United States). A great read.



- **Lisa, FM Friend and Volunteer: *The Power* by Naomi Alderman**

Set in the UK, teenage girls suddenly wake up to what seems an inherent biological ability to use their hands to transmit electric shocks. (Some grown women also suddenly discover they have this ability, too.) The book traces how social and cultural dynamics shift dramatically given that girls now have an ability to inflict pain and mortal wounds at will.

- **Julia: *Tell Me How It Ends* by Valeria Luiselli (Spanish edition: *Los Niños Perdidos*).**

This short nonfiction book is about the author's experiences working as a translator for unaccompanied minors seeking asylum in the United States. The author is herself a Mexican immigrant to the US, and she writes openly and thoughtfully about what this experience was like for her. She shares her insights about the children she met who fled violence and poverty in Central and South America, and came to the United States in search of safety or their families. I found this book moving and inspiring, and would recommend it to anyone who wants to learn more.

- **Jasmine, FM Friend and Board Member: *American Prison* by Shane Bauer**

Shane Bauer is an undercover investigative journalist and had been detained in Iran before. He takes a job as a guard at a CCA prison and reports on the racism, violence, and poverty guards and prisoners experience. He connects how for-profit prisons were made (to recreate the workforce needed after slavery ended) in the North and the South, and today.

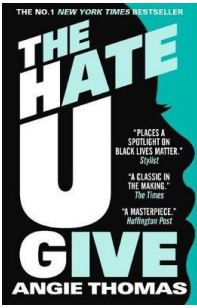
# NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ADULTHOOD

When I was a little kid, I used to think that adults just knew everything. Like at some point I would be a grown up, and I would know the answers and know what I'm supposed to be doing. Imagine my disappointment to realize that's not how it works! At what point did you feel like you were an adult? Regardless of age, what does it mean to be grown? As you know, Free Minds started as a program for juveniles charged as adults in DC. Whether or not you received this charge, what do you think it means to be held accountable like an adult? What is responsibility (response-ability)? What does it mean to be responsible for yourself or for another? Current research shows that our brains continue developing well into our twenties; many people believe that children and young adults shouldn't be held to the same standards as adults because their brains are still developing. What do you think?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



## Books Across the Miles (BAM!) Discussion Questions



By popular demand, the next book club book will be *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. This book came out in 2017 and was at the top of the New York Times bestseller list for more than 50 weeks, which is pretty impressive! It was adapted into a movie in 2018, which some of you may have seen—but the book came first! *The Hate U Give* is a novel about a young woman named Starr who witnesses her friend’s murder at the hands of the police. The book (and the movie adaptation) has been a major topic of conversation since it came out 2 years ago. We’re excited to read what you have to say!

1. According to Tupac, THUG LIFE stood for: The Hate U Give Little Infants F\*\*\*\* Everybody. Can you explain what it means? Who is giving the hate? How does this affect everybody? Do you agree?
  
2. Starr says “I’ve seen it happen over and over again: a black person gets killed just for being black and all hell breaks loose...I always said that if I saw it happen to somebody, I would have the loudest voice, making sure the world knew what went down. Now I am that person and I’m too afraid to speak.” Why do you think Starr was afraid? Have you ever been afraid to speak or act?
  
3. Throughout the book, Starr wrestles with having two identities: She calls them “Garden Heights Starr” (the girl she is at home in her neighborhood) and “Williamson Starr” (the girl she is at her mostly white and affluent high school across town. This is sometimes called “**code-switching**.” Have there been times in your life where you have to code-switch? Do you believe it’s just a normal part of life? Or do you feel it’s because of racism or other problems in our society? What does it feel like when you do it?
  
4. Starr’s parents disagree about staying in Garden Heights or moving someplace safer. Do you feel more like Lisa, that your family’s safety would be most important; or more like Maverick, that you can and should stay in the community and make it better? If you were in their shoes, what would you do?
  
5. The ending of the book, and what happens with King and the police at the grocery store, has been controversial. What do you think of the ending? Did you like it? Why or why not? If you didn’t like it, how would you have written the ending if you were the author?

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Next Issue's Theme: **Adulthood** (Volume 8, Issue 3)

When I was a little kid, I used to think that adults just knew everything. Like at some point I would be a grown up, and I would know the answers and know what I'm supposed to be doing. Imagine my disappointment to realize that's not how it works! At what point did you feel like you were an adult? Regardless of age, what does it mean to be grown? As you know, Free Minds started as a program for juveniles charged as adults in DC. Whether or not you received this charge, what do you think it means to be held accountable like an adult? What is responsibility (response-ability)? What does it mean to be responsible for yourself or for another? Current research shows that our brains continue developing well into our twenties; many people believe that children and young adults shouldn't be held to the same standards as adults because their brains are still developing. What do you think? (Theme written by Julia)

Send us a poem or essay of your own, or try our prompts!

**The Curious Case of \_\_\_\_\_** [Your Initials]\*  
by \_\_\_\_\_

You have been given the opportunity to go backwards. You can pick an age and start over again from that age. Do you pick one or not? What age would you go to? Describe your first week with your "old person" memories in your younger body.

**When I Look in the Mirror**  
by \_\_\_\_\_

Imagine you are looking into two magic mirrors: one that shows you before you became an adult and after you become an adult. How old are you in both? What are the differences, if any? Do you look different? Do you look the same? Are the differences physical or internal or both and what are they? Does one mirror reflect the you in reality more than the other? Write a poem describing what the mirrors show you.

\*The poem title references "The Curious Case of Benjamin Button," short story written by F. Scott Fitzgerald about the life of a man who ages backwards – he looks 80 when he is born and becomes younger throughout his lifetime. The story was made into a movie starring Brad Pitt, Cate Blanchett, and Taraji P. Henson in 2008.