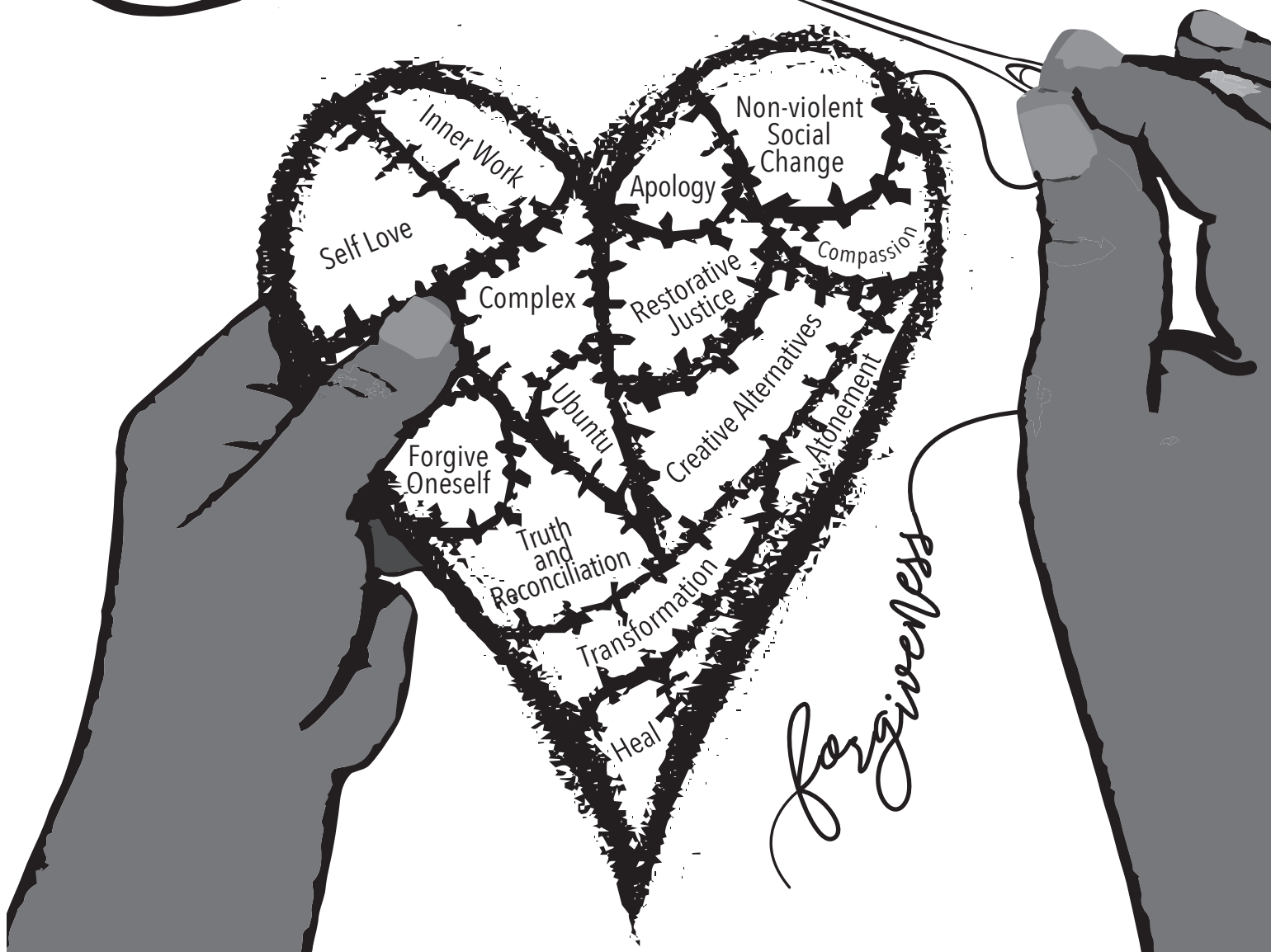


November/December 2019  
Vol. 8, Issue 5

# Free minds Connect



## FORGIVENESS

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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!

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**Next Issue's Theme:**  
**Remembrance**

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.

## BETTER TOGETHER Tara's Letter from the Editor

Happy New Year, Compassionate Free Mindsers!

Welcome to a new decade! May this year bring you awareness, clarity, and sharp focus. 20/20 vision in 2020! I believe being able to see ourselves clearly is the first step on a path of forgiveness, for ourselves and others. This issue's theme is a challenging, complex one. I want to stress that forgiveness is the release of anger or resentment; it does not mean reconciliation, excusing behavior, or pretending something didn't cause incredible pain and loss. But it's a powerful way to shift our inner view so that personal growth and change can happen. I've been reading a lot about how people forgive and the role guilt and shame play in self-forgiveness and the difference between the two. I like how one writer put it:

Guilt: I feel bad.  
Shame: I am bad.

Guilt is a healthy emotion that can provide motivation for change. Shame can be toxic and leave little room for new behavior and personal growth.

As always, I hope reading the *Connect* can help on the journey of emotional healing and self-compassion. Thank you for your submissions and the incredible stories of forgiveness you will find in this issue. KS learns the real reason behind his mother's incarceration and forgives her for leaving him as a child. Craig shows us how the experience of being forgiven by the father of his victim allowed him to forgive others. It's a chain reaction of lifted emotional burdens.

The newest staff member of the FM family, Melody, shares how she was able to support the release of the boy, now a man after twenty years behind bars, who took her husband from her and her two young daughters. You will read about some hopeful new developments starting to acknowledge institutional harm, like Georgetown University students' demand for reparations, Maryland's new Truth and Reconciliation Commission formed to investigate the history of lynching and racial violence in the state, and the new field of vicarious restorative justice. Along with different faith traditions on forgiveness, powerful poetry, personal essays, a travelogue to the Big Easy, and an employer's perspective on why she hires formerly incarcerated employees.

FM friend Ghani talked with Julia about Ubuntu (which translates to "I am because we are"), an amazing gathering in Philadelphia bringing healing and unity. Ghani says, "*Forgiveness is not letting go of regret but letting go of the hope for the past to be different. Understanding and resigning yourself to the way things are. Neither of us can change things, but now what do we do? Do we stay mired in a space where we can't grow as a society and as a species? Or do we find ways to grow in terms of creating a different future?*"

The other day, Kelli and I were able to attend an amazing event at the DC Jail. The DOC Education department recognized students taking college classes, Free Minds members, GED graduates, and the first person to earn an Associate's Degree. One of the student speakers received loud applause as he got his certificate and told the audience, "*Wow, the last time anyone ever clapped for me was my wife and kids when I told them I was moving out.*" His ability to use humor to acknowledge publicly the past pain he caused and to highlight his desire to change himself through effort and education was so inspiring to me.

We have a new partnership with a program called Pathways for young men most likely to experience or cause gun violence in DC. We held writing sessions, and they talked a lot about asking for forgiveness and trying to understand what conditions brought about their past actions in the streets. Here's an excerpt from a powerful poem by one of the participants about turning past shame into positive influence:

*School was easy, status was hard  
I would have not created a negative image  
I had to uphold in the first place  
Now I Can, Now I Will  
Use my power in the hood  
for good*

Until next time!  
Tara

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

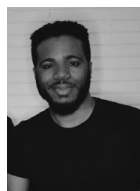
## FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

### Build Up Special Guest

Free Minds' weekly reentry book club, "The Build Up," received a very special guest. Nigerian singer and prison reformer Yinka "Lamboginny" Lawanson (pictured right) performed a small concert for our members! Lamboginny was born in Lagos, Nigeria; as a humanitarian, he uses his platform to advocate for youth in Nigerian prisons. His nonprofit, Saving All Lives Together (SALT), helps to raise bail money for youth imprisoned for minor offences such as "street begging," as well as for the wrongly convicted. With inspirational lyrics and afrobeat rhythms, Yinka "Lamboginny" Lawanson uplifts the spirits of everyone that hears his music. Lamboginny says his mission is simple: to make people who are incarcerated smile again.



of crime and doing what's right upon release, gave a book talk at the D.C. Jail, answering lots of questions about the book, his writing career, and his work in the TV industry. In the novel, Michael – the main character – leaves the jail and struggles to balance different forces in his life, including the debt he owes to the man who helped him get out of jail, and his desire to work, read, and find his place in a DC neighborhood that has changed tremendously during his incarceration.

### Free Minds Members Educate Future Police

Free Minds staff and Poet Ambassadors led an educational program with a group called Policing for Tomorrow. They spoke to over 100 future law enforcement officers with the goal of reshaping soon-to-be officers' assumptions and perspectives about the legal system and how it impacts people and communities. They read poems aloud and participated in a Write Night session, making connections with your poems and broadening their horizons.

### Author George Pelecanos Visit

George Pelecanos, author of *The Man Who Came Uptown*, a D.C.-based novel about a man who juggles between the temptation



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

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the September/October 2019 Connect On the Same Page.*

**ET:** I really enjoyed the "Family Ties" on page 5 of the recent *Connect*. The way Leonard talks about his 7-year-old niece, the innocence, that she is always trying to give her toys to other little kids! That is so precious. The sad part is about how she loves to play outside, but it not always safe to be outside.

**MH:** I like how FM member Leonard created a beautiful bond with his niece. That is rare nowadays because some people don't know how to open up to loved ones in life. Communication is the key to help young generation to better their self and also help the individual with the void that he missed with family and friends. And I commend Advice Man for giving good advice and lending an open ear to WW... I like how GD broke down media misrepresentation about incarcerated people. Also thank you Crystal for taking some time out and explaining what Write Night is about. I like the article when Imanee interviewed Schai about the Prison to Poetry Pipeline program. It's mass incarceration around the world from women, men, young, and old. But anyway, I love the way Imanee took time to learn about the history of languages and the culture with the languages. That's why I am thankful Imanee took some time to teach me and others who reading the *Connect: On the Same Page*. Also Lynn, FM Volunteer, thank you for encouraging us to see things differently with an open mind and your welcome for letting me and other Free Minds members open your mind to poetry and other things in the world.



## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"Forgiving is not forgetting; it's actually remembering - remembering and not using your right to hit back. It's a second chance for a new beginning. And the remembering part is particularly important. Especially if you don't want to repeat what happened."* - Desmond Tutu (human rights activist)

*"Conflict is not a problem that needs solving but a phenomenon that needs understanding."*  
- Dominic Barter (restorative justice practitioner)

*"Peace is not the absence of conflict but the presence of creative alternatives for responding to conflict - alternatives to passive or aggressive responses, alternatives to violence."* - Dorothy Thompson (journalist)

*"You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist."* - Indira Gandhi (first female Prime Minister of India, 1980-1984)

*"You have been criticizing yourself for years, and it hasn't worked. Try approving of yourself and see what happens."*  
- Louise L. Hay (Author, *You Can Heal Your Life*)

*"You don't have to forgive [people who have harmed you] to move on. You don't have to forgive them to take the power back. You don't have to forgive them if you don't want to. It's not that there isn't value in forgiveness. Of course there is. But it's up to you whether you want to forgive someone."* - Fortesa Latifi (Writer, ThoughtCatalog.com)



Desmond Tutu (human rights activist)



# FAMILY TIES

## Forgiveness: A Gift for All

By KS

My father was an alcoholic. My mother says she was in love with him, but he used to beat both of us when he was drunk. He took care of us, but he was unpredictable and so she never knew what to expect. No matter what he did to us, she'd always go back to him. He was also very over-protective in an unhealthy way. My mother had older children, but I was the only one that was his. He didn't want my sisters and brothers to be around me, or even see me.

When I was about four years old, my father told another member of the family that he was going to hurt me and my mom. That night, he came home drunk. My mom was standing at the sink, doing the dishes when he attacked her. They struggled and she fell to the floor with a fork still in her hand. My father landed on top of her and the fork stabbed him. He bled to death on the kitchen floor. My mom lost her mind. In that moment, I lost both of my parents. My father was dead and they took my mom to St. Elizabeth's Hospital because she couldn't handle her grief.

After leaving the hospital, my mom started getting arrested and locked up for drug possession. I was about eight years old then and living with my sisters. I wanted so badly to be with my mom. I talked to her on the phone whenever I could. My sisters told me our mother was "in school." Even when they'd take me to visit her, they'd try to pretend she was in school. I wasn't dumb though.

I used to ask my mom about my father, but she would never say anything bad about him. It was my siblings who told me the truth, about how abusive he had been to us. When I was 14, my mom came home from jail and she finally told me the whole story. She was so afraid I would believe that she'd killed him on purpose. To be honest, I was angry. But mostly, I was angry that she hadn't told me the truth. She didn't tell me what my father was like, how he died, or where she had been all this time. When my mom started getting arrested after my father passed, I felt like she didn't want me. I felt like if she loved me, she wouldn't keep going away and leaving me. I didn't understand. I felt like everything was my fault. I hated knowing what kind of man my father was. It made me afraid that I might have some of the same traits. In fact, people sometimes tell me that I'm like him. That really hurts me because I don't ever want to be like him.

When I got locked up for my crime, I knew that I needed forgiveness for what I'd done. It was difficult, but eventually I was able to ask the Lord to forgive me for my actions. I felt so relieved, as though a burden had been lifted from me. And then I looked at my mother and I saw that if I could be forgiven, I also needed to grant her forgiveness. I needed to forgive her for not being with me, for getting incarcerated, and for not telling me the truth all those years. I forgave her for all of it. It was so big. My mom was so relieved. She started writing me letters telling me over and over how sorry she was. I feel so much closer to her now. That unforgiveness just isn't there between us anymore.

To forgive my mom made me feel like I'm actually growing and learning and understanding myself and how to live right. I know my mother loves me. We all make mistakes and we just need to do our best. I understand now that for me, forgiveness is a gift to both the giver and the receiver. I have my own child now – a 6-year-old daughter. And even though we talk on the phone, she's going through something because I'm not there for her. I already know what I need to do. I need to ask her for forgiveness.

# ADVICE FROM THE INSIDE

*Hey Free Minds Fam! As you know, we printed this question from WW with advice from TH in the last issue. We want to share as many perspectives as possible though, so we're reprinting the question along with advice from other members. If you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!*

Dear Advice Man:

**I need your help. I have a girl on the outside and she's stuck with me this whole time. We talk on the phone, and we write letters. But sometimes I feel like she has to be getting bored of me. Her letters are full of so many stories about what she is doing, what she's seen, who she's talked to, where she's been, etc. My life is the same-day in and day out. Same boring gray walls. Same old faces. Same old, same old. I feel like every letter I write to her sounds just like the last one! Do you have any advice on how I can talk to her where it doesn't feel like she's in drive while I'm stuck in neutral?**

Sincerely,  
W.W.

Dear WW:

Great question! Before I give my advice, you must first realize, accept and understand that any woman who chooses to commit to a relationship with an incarcerated man has willingly made the decision to share in the burden of your incarceration. She is in this with you. This means your lives are being lived through each other. So every thought and feeling each one of you has will have a profound effect on the other. So believe me, if you are feeling it, she will feel it too. And if your thoughts are always negative, that can be damaging to your relationship. Your feeling of being stuck in neutral derives from you actually being stuck in neutral. So you're going to need to get creative to get out of that habit.

Most likely you're one of the many men who is not in tune with the woman with whom they are in a relationship. So my advice is three things. First, listen to her. I know. Sounds simple. So why are so few of us good at it? Practice listening!

Second, engage with her. Try to come up with new ways to do this. Try reading a book together and discussing it in your letters. That's just one example. I'm sure you can come up with more. The trick is to take the relationship out of the prison environment. Talk about books, movies, ideas!

And finally, unify your thoughts. This means truly exchanging your thoughts – through genuine give and take – to get on the same page.

Good luck, WW.

Your FM Brother,  
LB

Dear WW,

Let me first start by saying that if you feel that your life is the same, then maybe you are not using your time wisely. Try utilizing your time on preparing for your release. Focus on creating your plan. Short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. Then try and research and acquire everything you need to put yourself in the best possible position to be successful. Share this with her. Include her in the process, even. This will give you something different and positive to talk about that has positive rewards for both of you.

Listen to the news, read the newspaper to learn about world events. This too will allow you to talk about issues that matter, instead of getting stuck in those boring gray walls.

And lastly, take interest in the things she likes so that you can be more supportive and engaged during your conversations. This will mean a lot to her.

I hope that I was helpful. And I wish both of you the very best.

Sincerely,  
Your FM Brother RB





# FAITH AND FORGIVENESS

By Janet

In September, Julia announced Forgiveness as the next *Connect* theme. Perfect timing! Yom Kippur, the Jewish holiday of atonement, my favorite holiday, was weeks away so I was already focused on forgiveness. Yom Kippur is the holiest day of the year. It is heavy. A solemn twenty-four hours of fasting, prayer, and long periods on one's feet reciting an extensive list of sins while literally beating our fists on our chests. This ritual is to atone for our individual sins and the sins of the entire community. It isn't an easy, fun, or upbeat day, but it can be powerful and transformative. The process we go through to prepare for this day of communal atonement never fails to leave me more optimistic about the world, conscious of my appreciation and love for people, and more at peace with myself. This day renews my commitment to try to be a positive force in relationships and to rededicate myself to work which aims to repair adversity in the world.



On Yom Kippur, a person may ask God to forgive sins she has made against the world. But when it comes to wrongs committed against people, action is required. The first step is to make a mental list of mistakes made, actions, or lack of action that has caused harm or pain for others. Facing hard truths about ourselves and feeling sorry for what we have done is not enough. We must communicate directly with the people we've hurt, apologize, seek forgiveness, and do what we can to make things as right as possible to repair the wrong. This process is called Teshuva which translates to turning. This meaning can be interpreted many ways, turning away from the past, turning toward a new beginning.

I did not grow up with religious teachings or rituals, but the importance of "doing the right thing" and "being responsible" were etched into my psyche. From a young age, I felt guilty about so many things. My list of wrongdoings grew and grew with no end in sight. As an adult, Judaism has been a helpful tool for breaking out of that cycle. Yom Kippur creates a deadline and a structure to approach repairing relationships that have suffered and to take responsibility for my actions. It's an invitation to be the person I aspire to be.

I was curious if other faith traditions have a holiday focused on forgiveness. I called upon two friends who, unlike me, grew up devoutly religious and were educated in religious schools. They agreed to share their experiences and understanding of the role of forgiveness in Catholicism and Islam with you.

My friend who grew up Catholic began her answer to my question by stating that there isn't any one holiday dedicated to forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness from sin is so central to Catholicism that it is embedded into everyday life. To understand the role of forgiveness, one must understand the way that sins are defined and the impact on individuals if they do not seek forgiveness for their sins.

She provided two examples from her faith: If a person does something minor to hurt another person (her example was a child sticking his tongue out behind his mother's back), that's defined as a venial sin. A venial sin only requires a person to feel remorse in order to be forgiven. If a person physically hurts another person, or suffers from despair which is defined as a loss of faith, that is a mortal sin. A mortal sin requires confession to a priest in order to be forgiven. Forgiveness for a mortal sin is essential to avoid eternal damnation.

If a person is dying and hasn't confessed his mortal sins, he still has a chance to go to heaven. The opportunity to be forgiven is available on his deathbed by receiving the Last Rites from a priest. My friend writes, "As a lapsed Catholic, who always hated confession, in my older age, I've really come to appreciate the concept of having to speak your confession in order to be forgiven. It takes a lot to admit that you were wrong, that your actions were wrong and that by acting on your weaker impulses, you separated yourself from your soul. Confessing is a powerful tool towards redemption of the self."

My second friend, who is a very important part of the Free Minds family, began her answer to you with the following quote and continued with a story, teachings and reflections from her own life.

"But if you pardon and overlook and forgive – then indeed, Allah is forgiving and Merciful." – Surat Al-Taghaabun 64:14

*When I think about Islam's approach to forgiveness, one of my favorite childhood stories comes to mind. As my elementary teachers regularly reminded us, Prophet Mohammed (Peace be Upon Him) was kind, patient and extraordinarily forgiving. As the story goes, the prophet had an older neighbor who despised him and sought to irritate him. She would throw garbage on his lawn every single day in hopes of riling him up. One day, the prophet noticed that his neighbor did not throw garbage on his lawn and he worried that she may not be well. When the prophet visited her to check on her well-being, he found that she was indeed ill. She was so moved by his compassion and capacity for forgiveness that she gained a newfound respect for the prophet and began to respect his religion, Islam, because of its commitment to preaching forgiveness. Additionally, when the Prophet was spreading Islam in Taif, the city where I was born, inhabitants of the city tormented the prophet and threw stones at him. Instead of seeking retaliation, the prophet sat under a tree and prayed for his tormentors, insisting to God that they acted out of ignorance and not malice. This degree of empathy and understanding is nothing short of inspirational and motivational.*

*Because I'm by no means as devout or religious as I could or should be, I'm constantly comforted by the plethora of opportunities I have to seek forgiveness of God. In each of the 5 daily prayers, there is room for praise, reflection, and repentance. In fact, a number of God's 99 names demonstrate his magnanimous nature. Al-Ghafoor (the most forgiving), Al-Tawwab (the acceptor of repentance), Al-Rahman (the most merciful) and Al-Raheem (the most compassionate) are a few. In addition to common daily requests for forgiveness, performing mandatory acts such as the pilgrimage to Makkah are opportunities to wipe the slate clean and start anew. The Prophet referred to those who complete the arduous pilgrimage as returning home as free of sin as the day they were born. Islam is a religion that acknowledges and accounts for the human tendency to make mistakes. Muslims are encouraged to ask forgiveness of God and to offer one another forgiveness and compassion.*

These are just a few examples of faith traditions and different approaches to forgiveness. If you are a person of faith, does your religion or spirituality approach forgiveness in a different way? Please write in and let us know – we would love to hear from you!



# REPARATIONS

## The Case for Reparations

By Imanee

After slavery was abolished in 1863 by Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War between the North and South ended in 1865, there was a promise granted to newly freed slaves, one that still echoes to this day: "40 acres and a mule." The case for reparations is that modern-day promise of "40 acres and a mule."

Reparations, which means "the making of amends for a wrong one has done, by paying money to or otherwise helping those who have been wronged," has been the topic of discussion amongst the House of Representatives and Senate. The case for reparations is founded on the notion that African Americans, the descendants of slaves, should be recompensed for the inhumanity their ancestors—who built America without pay – faced. From slavery, to Jim Crow, to mass incarceration, African Americans have faced countless injustices that have been virtually unaccounted for by the government. Therefore, to combat this lack of recognition, the bill H.R. 40, deemed a post-Civil War promise of "40 acres and a mule," has been proposed to the House of Representatives and Senate to compensate the descendants of slaves as a means of 'repairing that which is broken' as stated by Bishop Sutton of Maryland.

Senator Cory Booker, the first African American Senator from New Jersey, stated that the United States has yet to address the "persistent inequalities" still faced by African Americans. His argument is shared by numerous reparation supporters such as Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me*, who states, "the legacy of slavery and discrimination were tied together and [justify] recompense."

One approach for reparations to the descendants of slaves could entail payments from the government at the birth of a child; each year, the government would add \$2,000 to this account until a child's 18th birthday, at which it then could be used for educational or housing purposes only. This method of distributing reparations money is up for debate, as it does not include the 75 million African Americans currently residing within the United States. Another complication is that it can be difficult to prove whether or not someone is the direct descendant of an enslaved person. Other possibilities for reparations could include community investments.

Reparations is not a new concept, as Germany paid \$89 billion to Jewish people after the Holocaust. After facing extreme mental trauma, displacement, and virtual genocide, this compensation by the German government helped Jewish citizens create businesses, move, acquire education, and rebuild their community after suffering grave atrocity – the same reality can prevail for African Americans. To put the issue of reparations in context, one can look at the amount of wealth slaves generated within the United States: between \$36 billion to \$10 trillion dollars.

The reparations case is headlined by two opposing debates. Reparation supporters argue that reparations are necessary to truly "acknowledge and grapple with the racism and white supremacy that tainted this country's founding," as well as urging more economic inequality by creating legislation to limit the wealth gap. Actor Danny Glover, a firm advocate for reparations, believes that radical change is necessary to change the structure of American society as "White America" still benefits from the fruits of slave labor, while African Americans do not.

Opponents of reparations such as Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell argue that because no one from the antebellum (pre-Civil War) period is currently alive, they should not have to be forced to pay for the acts of their ancestors, regardless of the fact that African Americans are still suffering from the fates of their ancestors. NFL player Burgess Owens and writer Coleman Hughes, who are both from prosperous backgrounds, agree that the "American dream" can be achieved by African Americans if they simply work hard, and that reparations are not needed.

People may have opposing viewpoints on reparations, but one truth is prevalent: the American government has not atoned for the legacy of slavery. Whether America chooses to address its unjust past, which has been swept under a rug, and properly recognize African Americans is still up to debate. The reparations case is a step in the right direction, but may be a hurdle America is not yet ready to cross.

# DID YOU KNOW?

## Vicarious Restorative Justice: A New Way to Give, A New Way to Heal

By Janet

Vicarious Restorative Justice is an opportunity to promote emotional healing for individuals who have experienced trauma. Individuals who have harmed others are given the chance to provide insight, support and emotional relief to those who have suffered harm by volunteering to meet with them as surrogate offenders [*surrogate: a substitute, especially a person filling in for another*]. Victims who do not want contact with the person who harmed them, and are seeking relief from trauma, are paired with individuals who offended who want to give back to the community. These programs are not part of the legal system and typically take place in relaxed settings such as community based non-profit organizations.

Individuals who have harmed others also suffer trauma. They rarely have a meaningful opportunity to apologize or to communicate with the person who they harmed. This is damaging for their mental health and is a challenge to rehabilitation. A Vicarious Restorative Justice setting is a safe, positive and constructive way for an individual to take responsibility for his actions without re-traumatizing a victim or putting himself at risk. Participation is a genuine commitment to change. It requires training and the ability to put the victim's needs above your own in the session.

Many victims of sexual offenses experience guilt. They believe that they are responsible for what happened to them. Surrogates are able to explain to victims that it is not their fault that they were harmed. Surrogates answer questions to help victims understand more about what was going on in the mind of a person doing harm. Surrogates listen to the stories of the victims and respond using "I," sentences as in "I knew you couldn't stop me from doing it." Surrogates listen, respond and apologize for the specific damage and consequences that the offense caused the victim. Hearing the words, "I'm sorry you suffer from depression, anxiety and difficulty trusting others or forming relationships as a result of what happened to you. It is not your fault," has the power to provide great comfort and alleviate pain. It has the potential to provide relief and hope for healing for the person saying the words as well as the person hearing the words.

Vicarious Restorative Justice has the potential to change culture. It is a humanizing experience that requires significant empathy and education. Participating in this kind of program takes courage and the ability to listen to the experience of victims without removing oneself from their pain and experience. Surrogates and victims come through this experience changed and in a position to educate others in the community to prevent future violence.



# CONVERSATION WITH MELODY

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

Hi Free Minds! My name is Melody and I am the new Reentry Coordinator here at Free Minds. Let's imagine that we're sitting down for a nice cup of coffee at the Starbucks on 13th Street near our office. I'm drinking a caramel cappuccino. What's your drink?

I am originally from New York City, born and raised, up until my family moved to DC when I was in high school. I went to Howard University and started a family here in DC. I have two beautiful daughters and a son, and a cute little husband. My oldest son is a building engineer. My oldest daughter is training to be a police officer, and my younger daughter works for a law firm. When I'm not at work, you can find me watching movies, shopping (I love shopping!), or walking my dog Polo.

I was introduced to Free Minds through a man named Tyrone who runs the organization Alliance of Concerned Men. I talked to Tara and we just hit it off from the start. As the Reentry Coordinator, I work with the members re-entering back into the community, with things like job opportunities and even little things like professional clothes because that helps a great deal. I'm always busy, which I like. I set up a room in the office that we call the Reentry Hub, and it's got all kinds of resources in it, including books, interview clothes, and job postings.

The theme for this issue is forgiveness, and that's something that I've thought about a lot. You see, about 20 years ago, there was this young man I'll call Jose.\* He was 16. He looked up to my husband at the time, my kids' father, whose name was Jay. Jay took Jose under his wing, tried to show him how to stay out of trouble. One night Jose was at our house and they got in an argument about some money. My husband got mad and grabbed him. Jose had a gun in his pocket, so he pulled the gun out and my husband smacked him, and when he smacked him, the gun went off. Jay was shot. Jose ran out, and I called the ambulance. My kids came out of their room. Jay told us he loved us, and later on that night he died.

Jose went to prison. Over the years, his brothers and them would write me and show me pictures how Jose's doing good, but I didn't care. I wanted Jose to rot in hell. He took away my kids' father. I just had no sympathy for him.

My daughters never forgot their dad. We would always go and put flowers on his grave. We would sit there with a blanket and talk to him, have a whole conversation, and have us a nice day. When my daughters were teenagers, they asked me, "Mom, are you ever gonna forgive Jose?" They said, "We forgive him." I said, "No, I'm not forgiving him, your dad's dead."

Eventually Jose got a new lawyer who got in touch with me. I started getting all this literature about what he's done. He started getting his life together. He ended up getting married, doing what he could do as far as being in jail. He had all these good letters from wardens and stuff. Then he wrote me a letter. He wrote me a letter, my daughter a letter, and my other daughter a letter. He wrote Jay's son, Little Jay, a letter. When Jose was getting ready to go back to court because of IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act), I asked my daughters and Jay's son, "How do you feel about him being released?" They said, "Ma, I forgive him. Dad would forgive him." So I had to think if Jay would forgive him, and he probably would. I had to take all that into account.

I had to look him in the eyes in court. I looked at him, eye to eye contact. If he was acting, he was a damn good actor that day. So I decided to forgive him. The judge took his time back, put him on probation. He still lives in the same



neighborhood, and I'm always in contact with him. My husband works out with him at the rec center. Jose's more focused now. He's more of an adult. I just don't want him to get sidetracked. So far so good.

My youngest daughter got married this summer. When she got married, I just bust out crying because her dad wasn't there. She held the bouquet up to the sky and said, "Mom, he's looking down on us." That was the hardest thing for me because he always talked about the day that would come to walk her down the aisle and he wasn't here to do that. My husband that I have now, he's been there for my kids. He and Jay's dad walked her down the aisle. Jay was a great guy. Wherever he is, I know it's a part of him that can see his kids, and he would be so proud of them and his granddaughter. He was a basketball star, and his 11-year-old granddaughter is following in his footsteps now.

Jay was an exceptional dad. My oldest daughter remembers her dad, but my younger daughter turned 2 just after we buried her dad. I remember when my older daughter told her "Daddy's in Heaven, Daddy can't come to your birthday party." I said, "No, he can't, but he's here." My daughter touched her heart. I remember that to this day. Jay would always say, "Touch your heart with your fist and that's me loving you." So that's what we do to remember him. Put your fist on your heart. And my husband now, he taught the kids, "Put your right hand on your left side, take your left hand and put it on the right side. Squeeze real tight, and that's a hug from me." That's what he would do with them, if we were saying bye, or when he was in jail or on the phone. He'd say, "I'm giving you a hug." That's how he bonded with my kids, and how they stay connected to their dad.

It's been a long journey, and it's not over. I still have one more daughter to get married and I'm gonna break down again, but I'm fine. I'm happy. Jay's happy. He's in a peaceful place.

As for Jose, no matter what he does now, I did my part. My kids did their part. If my kids had felt differently, maybe this wouldn't have ended this way. But I don't regret it. When I looked Jose in the eyes that day in court, I felt inside my body that I was doing the right thing. So I have forgiven Jose, but I will never forget.

Forgiveness is a powerful word. It involves so many people, so many lives. Jay was such a good person and he had so much to give. We miss him. But I have no regrets.

*\*Names have been changed for privacy.*





# THE WRITE WAY

## What is it REALLY like to sell a novel?

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

*By Eliza (Author, All That's Bright and Gone)*

Hello, friends!

I am feeling lucky today as I write to you to talk about a subject I have learned so much about this year: the business side of writing novels.

Like many of you, I grew up loving stories and dreaming of writing one of my own someday. But I didn't really know anything about the process of selling a book. Nobody I knew growing up had ever written a book or worked in the publishing field. And for a long time, that was just fine – I didn't need to worry about any of that until I actually finished a novel I was proud of! That took a lot of learning all on its own, and the help of some great groups to give me feedback and advice. But eventually, I did finish a book, and I felt like it was good enough that I wanted professional people to look at it, and give me their opinion, and help me make it even better. It took me until I was 30 years old to get to that place. Maybe you can get there a lot faster!

Around this time, I went to a writing conference where the speaker told the crowd, "Finishing the novel is the easy part. Everything after that gets harder and harder." Jeez, it already didn't seem very easy to me! But us writers aren't easily discouraged.

The next step to getting published "traditionally" (meaning, by a publishing house – as opposed to self-publishing) was to find a literary agent who was willing to represent me. An agent is connected in the publishing field – unlike me! – and has a good idea of what kind of books different publishers are interested in buying. Most agents are open to being emailed directly with a description of your finished novel called a "query letter," which is like a resume for your book. There is lots of great advice online about how to write a good query letter and where to send them. Agents agree to represent you for free, but they will take a cut of any sales down the line. If the book doesn't sell, you don't have to pay them anything. *[Editor's note: if you would like more information about how to write a query letter, let us know!]*

It took me a long time to find an agent, and I got turned down many times. In fact, the first novel I finished never got an agent. I had to write a second book before that happened. Many writers query for years. But eventually, I found someone who understood what I was trying to do with my book, and they had

suggestions to improve it. To go the traditional publishing route, you have to expect to keep revising the book many times – in fact, many of us have a slogan, "writing is rewriting!"

The day my agent agreed to represent me was one of the most exciting days of my life. But I knew that didn't necessarily mean that we'd sell the book. My agent would do their best, but a publishing house had to buy it before I'd see my book in a store (or make any money). It took almost another year before that happened. But finally one day I got a call that a publishing house was willing to take on my novel. That meant another round of revision – writing is rewriting! – and another year. Publishing is sloooow! But finally, just this fall, I was able to hold a copy of my own novel in my hands. And it felt amazing.

When a publisher buys your book, they give you some money up front, called an advance. But for the most part, it's not a lot of money. Mine paid for maybe a month's rent. If a book sells a lot of copies, you might get some more money from what is called royalties, but of course there's no guarantee you'll sell a lot of copies. The author will be expected to do what they can to get the word out there, and the publisher will help as much as they can, but most books don't become best sellers. In fact, most writers don't make a living writing novels. It's not that it never happens, but it's increasingly like becoming rich as a big time Hollywood movie star. I still have my day job, and I probably always will.

It's always been tough for us writers. For most of history, artists of every kind have needed a wealthy patron or another job to make ends meet. But we keep doing it because we love it, and because we know all the work that we put into becoming better is never wasted.

So keep at it! I can't wait to read all the wonderful things you are going to write.

*Eliza is a local author whose first novel ALL THAT'S BRIGHT AND GONE was released in December from Crooked Lane Books.*

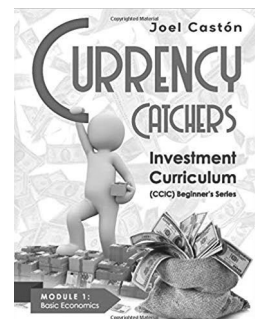


## SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHED AUTHOR

Many of our Free Minds members have published books, and we'd like to celebrate their accomplishments! If you have published a book, please send us the title and a short description that we can print in an upcoming issue of the Connect. All books must be available in paperback on Amazon.com. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

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# PAYING IT FORWARD

## Restorative DC

By Imanee

In this "Paying It Forward" column, we're talking to Tarek, a lead trainer for Restorative DC, an organization that supports DC schools and agencies in implementing restorative justice practices and culture change. Restorative justice is a practice that emphasizes accountability and repairing harm. Restorative justice practitioners traditionally bring together the person who has been harmed and the person who caused the harm, in order to create a space where they can express themselves and reach understanding and healing.



RestorativeDC

### 1. What experience led you to being committed to radical nonviolent social change?

I have had the privilege to travel internationally and at the same time be embedded in the local D.C. community. What I've seen is the degree to which we have such different realities on this planet of ours, and how tightly interlinked the realities are in terms of social, economic, and political forces and how inequitable it looks. DC is caught up in the dynamics of gentrification, white supremacy, economic stratification [*stratification: the arrangement or classification of something into different groups*]. It's an ongoing set of experiences of being exposed to the many different realities that have hardened and reinforced my commitment to a world that I think could serve everyone much better. I believe we can do much better for everyone.

### 2. Outline the history and growth of Restorative Justice efforts in DC.

My efforts are riding off the work of others. There have been works by Ivy and Saleem Hylton who for 2 decades have been training for restorative justice in D.C. and working with the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services. From there, the major milestones I'm aware of and involved with start around 2012. I helped convene what became a regular meeting group known as the D.C. Alliance for Restorative Practices where Free Minds was a core attending member. Then, I found funding and a team of people with the experience we're looking for, and that's how Restorative D.C. was born. We started the first year with 4 schools that we're supporting, and now we're on our 4th year and supporting over 60 schools. We do lots of training for the district. Two years ago, we started a diversion program where youth that are arrested are offered restorative options. We do a restorative conferencing process to address that situation for the people most directly involved. What's really exciting about D.C. is that in the last 5 years, we came to adopt restorative justice. The Office of the Attorney General supports it and developed their own in-house restorative justice program. D.C. has a lot of high level support and real financial and

programmatic involvement that you don't see many other places.

### 3. Can you share any specific examples of reconciliations?

For us, the goal of restorative justice is not reconciliation. It's great when it happens but fundamentally for me it's creating *an authentic space for people who are involved in harm to have agency to do what they need to move forward*. Because of that, reconciliation is not what happens or what the participants are interested in. For them, healing might look like being able to say their piece and not see the other person again. Recently, we had a meeting between participants where [the man] touched her in ways that affected her for years. They were colleagues. The man vaguely remembered what happened. The woman remembers very well [what happened] and has had trouble with jobs, relationships, and depression after it. We got to a place where he was quite genuine in wanting to listen fully and hear her story and help her heal but we weren't confident he really acknowledged his actions because he didn't really remember. We took steps to make sure everyone was aware that he had a different version but still could choose to move forward. So we met, he committed to listening, and she spoke for over an hour. In that moment she found a voice that was eloquent and strong. She was also very firm about what happened and helped him understand in a nuanced way, especially since the thing was minimized by her mother, the police, and she had an issue with a therapist, so she went constantly unseen. Then there was silence. You can imagine the suspense. We wondered what he'd say. His first words were, "I believe you." He said, "I respect you, I'm sorry, you are so strong." But when he said, "I believe you," she melted into tears. They both held hands across the table and she was sobbing for a couple minutes. They talked a little more and it shifted for 20 minutes where they caught each other up on life.

### 4. What specific social things do you want to change?

It's clear to me that this vision for radical change is something that will happen through collective effort and it'll need to happen through different fronts. One area will be in school systems, another will be reform of our democratic institutions, another will be our international institutions and multilateral institutions and their effects on trade and global regulation. I know that the best I can do is find my particular pressure point and make sure I am self-reflective about how the work I do actually has an impact and doesn't play into perpetuating racial and class dynamics. I have a few specific things I advocate for such as zero tolerance policies, climate activism, and looking at D.C. government politics around the global issue of climate change, and mass incarceration. I'm building alternatives around mass incarceration, like supporting church communities who were rocked by racial tensions so they can better hold their members. Many of them are advocates in their own struggles.



# REENTRY PROFILE

## Two and a Half Hours that Changed My Life: The Power of Forgiveness

By Craig

I was 17 years old when I got charged as an adult under Title 16 and locked up for my role in the killing of a 12 year-old boy named Brian\* over a neighborhood beef. I was sentenced to 35 years to life.

To be honest, for a lot of years, I didn't feel nothing. Coming up the way I did, I just don't think I looked at the seriousness of what I'd done, or of me being in prison, with a life sentence. Every day I was around people that had that kind of time, so that was just the norm. I was still so young too. It's crazy to say it, but it was all just normal to me.

As I got older though, I started to understand the impact of what I had done. I wanted to write to that family. Even before I really started living in a positive way, I still wanted to write his family to let them know I apologized, and explain how, as I had gotten older, I understood how much pain I caused them. But I never had a way of getting in contact with them. I didn't know anybody who knew them. It was something that just weighed on me.

So I wrote a letter. I started off telling them that over the years I realized what I took from them. I took away birthdays, family gatherings. I caused pain, taking a boy away from his parents, away from his brother. I told them I was deeply sorry and that I don't blame anybody but myself. My actions led to their pain and I told them I understand my words don't change anything, but I wanted them to know I'm sorry. I told them I didn't expect them to forgive me. I wanted them to know I took responsibility for what happened. It was me. I was responsible.

In 2017, when the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) came out, some lawyers came to introduce themselves to me in prison. I gave them the letter I'd written to the family. They hired a man that specialized in bridging the gap between the families of victims, and the perpetrators of crimes. His name was Mr. Rivers, and after his own brother was shot and killed in Pittsburgh ten years ago, he became an advocate of restorative justice. Mr. Rivers found the family of my victim and reached out to them, telling them that he had a letter from me. At first, they didn't want to talk to him. But eventually they called back. Mr. Rivers gave them my letter. Not long after that, I heard that Brian's father, Mr. Woods\* wanted to visit me.

The night before he came, I couldn't sleep. I was so nervous and just didn't know what to expect. I had never heard of this being done before. The next morning, I sat in the visiting room and waited. Finally, Mr. Woods came in with Mr. Rivers. Right away, I just blurted out, "I'm so sorry!"

He was like, "Man, we'll get to that. But first, I need to ask you, why'd you do it?"

The only answer I had for him was that it was just two neighborhoods beefing. I tried to explain how coming up where I did, we were taught to

deal with stuff in a certain type of way. And how nobody pushed us to do it, and I knew it wasn't an excuse, but it was what we saw every day.

Mr. Woods told me he was from the same neighborhood, and that he spent his time trying to help younger guys like me. As he was explaining that, I broke down crying. I felt so vulnerable. I lost all control and just broke down. But that's when he just grabbed my hand, and he said, "I gotchu." We were just sitting there at that table, the three of us, Mr. Rivers, Mr. Woods and me. He said, "I gotchu. I forgive you. And I love you." That was just so much weight taken off of me in that single moment. He didn't come there to forgive me. He came to ask why I'd done it. But something in him allowed him to forgive me. He told me, "I don't blame you anymore. I forgive you. I understand that so many people failed y'all. All of you that came up around that way, you needed help."

I couldn't believe what was happening. We were having a conversation and he had forgiven me! His son was taken, and I was responsible for that. When I got myself together, he was still holding my hand. We started talking like we was old classmates. We were laughing and talking about other people from the neighborhood. It was just so much. Before he left, he hugged me and promised me, "I'm gonna stay in contact with you no matter what happens." That meant so much to me.

A few days later, my attorney called to tell me that Mr. Woods wanted to testify for me in court. I was shocked. When the day came and he got up on the stand, his family looked at him like he was crazy. The boy's mother and grandmother didn't forgive me. The grandmother even testified against me, saying I should never get out of prison for what I'd done.

When Mr. Woods testified, the judge asked him how he knew I was sincere. He answered, "I looked at him in his eyes. I talked to him for 2 and half hours. I know he is sincere."

Receiving forgiveness has changed me forever. I think about Brian every day. I'm still being penalized and punished mentally for what I did. Forgiveness was something I needed.

It takes a lot to forgive. But holding onto something, being mad and angry—it doesn't change whatever happened. You've got to let it go. When you sincerely forgive somebody, you're going to feel better. I've witnessed it firsthand. A man forgave me for taking his son off of this earth. How can I hold a grudge and not forgive somebody, when that man forgave me?

*Craig was resentenced under IRAA and was released from prison earlier this year. He and Mr. Woods still talk several times a week.*

*\*The names of the victim and his father have been changed.*



# DC PHOTOS

*By Yusef*

Hey, guys! These are pictures of City Center D.C., which happens to be located at 10th and H Street N.W.! This is D.C.'s answer to upscale shopping that Washingtonians have had to go to other cities to experience. Depicted are also condos new to the area. No longer do we Washingtonians have to travel to Atlantic City, Las Vegas, Miami or NYC to access premier shopping or living. What do you think? Is it exciting to see new developments like this in the city, or is this another example of gentrification?



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!

## JG'S WORDS OF WISDOM

*By JG, Free Minds Member*

My journey toward forgiveness has been a long one. For years I grappled with the crimes I committed that landed me here in prison, trying to understand why I did what I did, carrying an immense amount of guilt and confusion. For a very long time, I simply tried to avoid thinking about any of it. But I couldn't. Every time I was locked in that cell I was haunted by my past.

I found an escape in books. I learned I could get lost in someone else's world completely, living vicariously through the characters. For hours at a time I didn't have to think about the things I'd done, the harm I'd caused, the trauma I'd experienced, none of the pain. I could simply escape into another reality.

However, it was partly due to my very means of escape that I was able to find a road to redemption. Many of the characters I was reading about had had similar experiences varying in degree; many of them had committed heinous acts and were suffering the consequences for those acts. The way in which they processed their thoughts, emotions and behaviors so brilliantly and vividly was nothing less than inspiring. *Makes Me Wanna Holler*, *Down These Mean Streets*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* are a few examples of books that helped facilitate my own process toward forgiveness. I learned from these examples that I had to acknowledge my past and everything it entailed in order to begin practicing introspection and seriously reflecting on it all, accepting the things I could not change, but doing my very best to create a much brighter future.

Though it took a long time, and a lot of inner work, I can finally say that I forgive those who have harmed me, and I forgive myself for the harm I've caused. It was all worth it.



# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## **I'm Setting All of Those Who Done Me Wrong, Free** **By DK**

Seeing the eyes of my parents during their  
first visit, in county, 12 years ago was  
heart breaking  
Knowing their son would be gone, no longer  
in their company, 'cause he'd been taken  
I've never seen that look in their eyes before,  
it was so haunting  
I feel they knew that my future was going  
to be daunting  
I felt their pain, hurt, and embarrassment  
from my arrest  
It's a gut deep feeling, something that  
I can attest  
I'm now striving and working to be a much  
better man  
I've got to do this first for myself, and to  
prove to my family that I can  
From a lot of my family and friends, I am  
now estranged  
This is something that I accept, I assume  
all the blame  
If I were in their shoes, and I have been before  
I wouldn't want to be around someone that  
I was; but I am no more

See I used to be quick to accuse, so quick  
to judge  
For 28 long years, against my sex abuser,  
I held such a strong grudge  
I recently forgave him, now I'm going to  
put that abuse in the past  
Trying so hard to rewrite my memories,  
with things that will make me laugh  
I'm learning that in order for me to ask for  
forgiveness for the crimes I committed  
No one who's done me wrong...  
can forgiveness be omitted

So here I go; I'm setting all of those who've  
wronged me free  
I need now to forgive myself, but that sounds  
so easy  
So I've got to really learn what forgiving  
myself is really all about  
Do I say, 'DK, I forgive you' or do I get mad,  
scream, and shout?

So to all those who are reading this poem,  
please leave feedback on how I can  
forgive myself  
Please, truly, I need your help, to put my  
hurt, shame, and burden on the shelf!

## **Perdonar** **Por JJ**

Pensando en esta palabra  
Siento que mi corazón ha acumulado  
Mucho resentimiento así a mi madre  
Y gente que me ha tratado mal  
Pero de un tiempo para acá yo decidí pasar  
la pagina  
Y perdonar empezando con mi madre  
Pidiéndole perdón por lo mal que la he tratado  
Y perdonándola por a verme dejado solo  
Por eso y por muchas cosas más  
Esa palabra es muy dura para mi

## **Forgiveness** **By JJ**

*Translated by Lupita*

Thinking of this word  
I feel my heart has accumulated  
A lot of resentment towards my mother  
And people who treated me bad  
But some time ago I decided to turn the page  
And forgive, starting with my mother  
Asking for forgiveness for how badly I treated her  
And forgive her for leaving me alone  
For this and for many other reasons  
This word is very hard for me

## **I Forgive You** **By MH**

I just want to let you know I forgive you...

I forgive you;  
Even though you only took me in as a  
foster child for financial gain.

I forgive you;  
Even though you tried to make me believe  
horrible things about my biological  
parents, which caused me psychological  
and emotional pain.

I forgive you;  
Even though you spent my social security  
money on yourself all those years.

I forgive you;  
Even though you neglected me and caused  
me to shed all those tears.

I forgive you;  
Even though you lied to social services so that  
they would keep me locked up in psych  
wards and other institutions.

I forgive you;  
Even though we lived on property  
contaminated with PCB pollution.

I forgive you;  
Even though you exaggerated negative  
aspects of my mental health.

I forgive you;  
Because now that I have forgiven you, I can  
move on to forgiving myself.

## **Forgiveness**

**By NH**

To be hurt, I feel a pain that I wish to go away  
A pain that seem to breathe through my  
Spinal cord, the vessel of my veins, my  
heart and soul  
It a pain that follow me everywhere I go  
As if it my  
Shadow that I can't shake  
This burning sensation of pain that I feel  
Make me wish that it was a dream  
But yet it is what keep me awake  
Give it time they say  
But as the days come and go  
It seems that part of me is facing away  
While I fight for my mind to not go astray  
My lower self is filled with pride  
It doesn't love or forgive  
It is unbalanced and seek to hurt  
Hoping that the pain I feel commit suicide  
While my higher self, the divine part of me  
Scream to not give in to it hatred  
But instead to forgive  
That it would set me free  
From what weighs me down inside  
Forgiveness is where the healing  
Begin they say  
It what bring strength to the hearts  
That gives it  
Where has this world  
Wandered off to  
To look down on another person wrong  
And think superior  
As if they are perfect, as if they never has  
done no wrongs  
As if they are God to decide whether a person  
Should live or not  
Forgiveness is universal, it is a divine love  
That is needed as a first aid kit  
To be whole again

## **Forgiveness**

**By KM**

Forgiveness - what does it really mean?  
One could define it using Webster's, but  
Regardless of the human definition it is given,  
God is the only One who can truly forgive.  
It's true we must forgive those who've  
done us wrong.  
Vindication begins with such a heartfelt deed.  
Everyone who desires to be forgiven must  
first forgive;  
Nothing in this world will bring greater peace.  
Eventually, the world will see that this is true.  
Still, there's no need to wait until then.  
So, won't you join me in forgiving others  
so we can be forgiven?





# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Forgiveness

By JA

If not given by you,  
then by who?

should there be none?  
it giveth,  
back everything  
you've taken away from you

If not you, then who?

Can turn back on the light  
Can get you back on track

This forgiveness can  
get you right  
shine you so bright  
illuminate your whole

Temple lit even at night  
This forgiveness can

## Forgiveness

By MT

*What inspired me to write this poem is my situation for the damage that I caused... I was currently denied early release. People, please be mindful that your decision today has a very strong potential to affect your tomorrow in ways that you could never begin to imagine. I destroyed myself, my family + others' family because of a very, very poor decision that I have to live with for the rest of my life... I have now been incarcerated for 22 years since the age of 16 with a 2043 parole date so ask yourself what's worth your life, what's worth the life of another. Nothing!! I hope!!*

I was 16 with a attitude  
living out life in matters of truth or dare  
I never received help  
because I honestly believed that no one cared  
I know what I done  
that I became deserving of a cage  
But I don't believe that I'm that much of a savage  
to be sentenced to a de facto grave  
I fought with myself for many years  
and that rebellious spirit while incarcerated  
Was a veneer to hide my fears  
When I begun to embrace manhood  
I put away childish things

I seen life for what it was worth  
and made out plans to build upon my dreams  
Education, elevation, self-actualization, became  
a part of my daily preoccupation  
I never looked back but continued to move forward  
hoping that a day would come  
That I could be forgiven for the damage that  
I caused  
I'm truly sorry Mrs. M. I'm truly sorry Mrs. H.  
Be strong and may God bless you with the life  
to help you carry on!!

## Forgiving Myself

By MAH

At times, I wonder if people forgave their self  
Maybe they can learn how to 4give the next person.  
My past self would say 4give me Allah (GOD)

4 I wrong myself  
And teach me how to let go of my past  
So I can 4give who did me wrong and 4give  
me when I did wrong.

I am still here open arms and heart  
To move forward with the difficulties I had  
and coming.

When I look up, I see better days 2 come my way.

Inside my heart I hear cleansing and faith.

My heart desires change and love.

My circumstances don't define me.

Forgiveness is wealth then money and hate,  
that's why I love myself.

## Make The Choice To Forgive

By QS

The weak can never forgive, forgiveness is the  
attribute of the strong.

It's an act of cleansing your inner spirit from  
all the toxic emotions buried deep inside your  
heart, against those who have done you wrong.

Holding anger is a poison. It eats you from the inside,  
which creates conflict and turmoil – a living hell.

Hating is not a weapon that attacks the  
person who harmed you, it's a curved blade  
and the harm we do to ourselves.

The ability to forgive is a weapon that God has given  
us to survive in this cold, cruel world we live in.

It has the power of turning your worst  
enemy into your most trusted and loyal friend.

The basic aspect of life that's most important is the  
choices you make. Each choice you make is a choice  
of intention that creates the life you will live.

So choose a life lived with love, peace and happiness.  
All you have to do is make the choice to forgive.

## Forgiving Myself

By ET

At times, I wonder why I hate myself.

My past self would say, "What are you doing?"

I want the courage to love myself more.

When I look up, I see sadness ☹

Inside my heart I hear crying, crying.

My heart desires to love, to make it.

My circumstances don't define me.

Forgiveness is wealth beyond my dreams.

If I will forgive myself, I love myself.

## F.O.R.G.I.V.E.N.E.S.S

By AME

Find a solution to healing the hurt or damaged caused.  
Owning the wrong and learning to strengthen  
the unforgiven.

Render and even if your help isn't wanted but needed.

Give a listening ear to those hurt and encourage them.

I'm willing to make things right no matter what.

Vowing to never bring hurt nor pain into your life again.

Everlasting love is needed to be forgiven.

Nice and positive energy is needed during  
this entire process.

Effort! Do it!

Sincere.

Safety! Make sure comfort is present.

## Forgive Me

By KW

Forgive me W.E.B. Du Bois, I became aware of  
our crisis too late.

I didn't understand the souls of black folks was  
beaten so far, out of shape.

Forgive me Timothy T. Fortune, I endured  
without protest.

Forgive me Ralph Ellison, I am an Invisible  
Man – nothing less.

Forgive me Mary M. Bethune, I silenced the  
African drums in my heart and

I forgot what the Negro wanted.

So, when the opportunity came...I didn't play my part.

Forgive me Nannie Burroughs, I didn't see my gifts  
of greater value.

I measured my worth through material possessions  
and couldn't take it back  
when I later tried to.

Forgive me Nikki Giovanni, I didn't accept Black  
love as Black wealth.

Forgive me John O. Killens, I was okay with the  
hand I was dealt (second-class citizen).

Forgive me Claude McKay, I ignored Human  
Dignity for prestige.

I overlooked moral for immoral while... my...  
people...grieved.

Forgive me Phillis Wheatley, I wasn't impatient  
enough in the face of oppression.

Forgive me Jean Toomer, I received some  
information but dismissed the lesson.

And forgive me Joshua Samuel, for not always  
finding the "What more can I do" drive,  
but instead the "I did all I can do" lies I told myself.  
Forgive Me.

*Editor's Note: If you would like to know more about  
the historical figures mentioned in this poem, let  
us know!*



# 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."

## New Orleans

By Imanee

Can you guess the official dish of a city so festive, so flavorful, so *fascinant* as New Orleans? If you said gumbo, you guessed right. Gumbo is a melting pot of chicken, crabmeat, *andouille* sausage, shrimp and okra – if you dare – all simmering within a savory *roux* (roo) of seafood broth and butter served on a soft bed of steaming rice. In this city, the "Holy Trinity" takes on a new name: celery, bell peppers, and onions are the father, son, and holy spirit (from Christianity) of our food – no matter the dish, it'll make you want to praise something. Like gumbo, New Orleans is a melting pot of African American, Spanish, French, and Creole culture, which is a blend of all three. Echoing from the golden rims of a saxophone, jazz music soars through the ears of natives and tourists alike, all crowding around the shuffling feet of tap dancers whose shiny shoes "*tap tap*" to the heartbeat of the city.

New Orleans isn't called The Big Easy for just any reason; we mastered the voodoo of "*laissez les bon temps rouler*," "*letting the good times roll*," a popular French phrase you'll hear roll off the tongues of many hospitality workers and natives. Though grand, New Orleans is much more than the tourist paradise it's portrayed as on TV. To me, New Orleans is home. I grew up in an area called the "East," which is a large region on the East bank of the city in the Upper 9th Ward. The East straddles the coast of Lake Pontchartrain and dewy forests colored gray with Spanish Moss swinging from the branches of cypress trees. Though there's much to see on the ground, from baby gators swimming in nearby canals to rainbow-colored beads stranded after Mardi Gras, noses are always in the air as the smell of spicy boiled crawfish from an infamous restaurant, Castnet Seafood, wakes up the East every morning, preparing for long lines of hungry Southerners eager to buy fresh shrimp, crab, or poboys – meat or seafood sandwiches on French bread.

During my trip home in August, I spent much of my time gazing at ferries cruising on the Mississippi River along the Riverwalk, a long pier that stretches in between the river and French Quarter. From the Riverwalk, you can hear the huffs of donkeys pulling tourists along Bourbon and Frenchman street to popular strips near the French Quarter filled with reggae bars, vendors selling artwork, and the voices of workers telling you to "pass a good time" in their restaurants. After a long day of sweating in the city, I always head to City Park, our state park, to cool down with a snowball. A snowball is not the mound of ice you throw at your brother's face during the winter – rather, it's food and the closest thing we have to snow. Snowballs are *entirely* different from snow cones: they are made from fluffy shaved ice and drizzled with sweet cane syrup of multiple flavors such as chocolate, Piña Colada, wedding cake, mango, praline, pecan, etc., all topped with a choice of condensed milk, gummy worms, or even ice cream.

Lastly, if you ever come to the Big Easy, be prepared for the influx of smells that might disrespect your nose. From magnolias to fried food, rotten eggs to seawater – the smells of New Orleans are just as diverse as the people. Be prepared to give hugs to strangers, to sweat until it looks like you've been swimming and to be called "bebe" by older women crossing the street. Be prepared to be fed till your chest bursts, to listen to stories of aunts and uncles under the cool shade of a shotgun house porch. Be prepared to peel your own crawfish, to never be stuck in traffic, to glue your eyes on the most amazing red, orange and purple sunsets – best seen from atop levees or floodbanks. Most of all, be prepared to learn, to be remembered, and to be loved with a love that is better than any soul food.

*Laissez les bon temps rouler.*



Bayou: (in the southern US) a marshy outlet of a lake or river



Crawfish with sausage, corn, potatoes



Typical day in the French Quarter



Snowball with condensed milk



Gumbo



Castnet Seafood: a famous restaurant in New Orleans



# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Salutations!

It is so wonderful to link with you guys again! My hope is that your minds are free through hope, as each new day is another chance to begin anew! I'm grateful to write to you today about forgiveness, something that we all need to give and get from time to time throughout this journey called life.

Forgiveness can be a touchy and contentious topic; however, the power behind giving and receiving forgiveness is enormous! It can change the very core of a person. Because we are imperfect human beings, we will fail someone at one point in time and vice versa. The act of forgiveness is first and foremost for ourselves. It lets us move on from the past instead of leading bitterness and anger to perturb our emotional well-being. Research shows some very beneficial elements of forgiveness: Forgiveness has been shown to elevate mood, optimism, and guard against anger, stress, anxiety and depression. If this sounds promising, we can imagine that receiving forgiveness is equally as effective. Personally, when I know or perceive that I have offended someone, even when I try to justify it, there's this overriding sense of guilt or regret that nags at me until I make it right. It's also important to note that the offended party may not be ready or able to accept the olive branch that is extended; however, if offered in sincerity, you have done your part, and now, the ball is in their court.

Equally, and perhaps more important, is learning to acknowledge your missteps, acknowledging your humanity, and forgiving yourself. Self-forgiveness is often the first step toward a more loving and positive relationship with yourself, and therefore with others.

I bid you Adieu, until we Connect again, however, check out a new resource in the city!

– Ms. Keela



**The Ready Center**  
1901 E Street SE,  
Washington, D.C. 20003  
202.790.6790

The Ready Center is located just outside of the DC Jail. It is intended to serve as a one-stop shop where returning citizens can access critical post release services such as housing and employment assistance as well as educational and health care supports and opportunities. You can also get referrals to treatment programs for substance abuse and mental health.

## MEDITATION

*By Keela*

Start by rolling your shoulders back and breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth. Breathe in, and then out.

*Today we'll be floating in the ocean. You face the water and take a deep breath before sighing calmly. The sun is shining down on your skin, and reflects off the white sand. You feel comfortably warm, and sink your bare feet into the sand. You stand for a few minutes, stretching and feel the cool breeze across your face. Eventually, you start walking towards the calm waves, and enter the water. You can glide on your back, or your side, whatever you prefer. This water is perfectly buoyant, and keeps us afloat without having to wear a lifejacket or move our arms all around. You feel the water through your hair, your fingers, and your toes. It's completely quiet and tranquil, and there are no distractions around. The waves are peaceful and perfect, and your mind finally feels calm. No more thoughts of things that need to be taken care of, no stressing about dates and deadlines and curfews—just you and the water. You look up at the sun and the bright blue sky, and smile as two birds fly and chirp above you. The water continues to move you gently towards the shore, until you feel yourself being carried onto the cool dry sand. You stand up, shake yourself off, and grab a warm towel that happens to be sitting on the sand. You dry yourself off, smile to yourself as you open your eyes.*





# GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY AND REPARATIONS

By Max

In the 18th century, the Society of Jesus in Maryland, the local Jesuit association (Jesuits are an order of Catholic priests), held large and profitable plantations. Whenever the Jesuits had more enslaved people than they needed, they would sell people down to the Deep South, creating a general fund out of these excess profits. It was from this fund that Georgetown University, the school run by these Jesuits, was paid for in 1792.

So, when that same university fell on hard times in the 1830's, the Jesuits paid for their debt with the sale of 272 people to a slave trader. These enslaved people were bought by a doctor to grow sugar, near Maringouin, Louisiana, where the descendants of these people by and large still live.

And then Georgetown moved on. The leadership of the Jesuit became abolitionist (opposing slavery), and moved its focus from plantations to education to reach the new Catholic immigrants of the 19th century, as well as teach much of the elite planter class that maintained slavery.

Georgetown's history with slavery remained largely hidden until the 2000s, when Lee Baker of Maringouin began to investigate his roots and learned that he was a descendant of enslaved people sold by Georgetown. Later, a Georgetown Alumni, Richard Cellini, discovered the sale and began looking for the descendants. He began to inform descendants of their history, and reached out to the *New York Times*.

Soon after, the *Times* ran a piece about Georgetown's dark history of slavery, which stirred the University to action. They created a working group of students and professors to decide what to do about this history. They suggested a delivery of an official apology to the descendants, renaming of buildings to honor former slaves, and admission advantages for the descendants as well as other African-American students.

After the report, Georgetown's president issued an official apology to descendants, renamed multiple dormitories, and gave descendants legacy status as applicants, which gave them a boost when applying for Georgetown. Many were frustrated with these actions, saying that they did not actually amend the financial damage caused by enslavement, and alluding to the fact that educational and financial achievement of the average resident of Maringouin and average student of Georgetown were vastly different. The median annual income for a family in Maringouin is \$28,519; the median annual income for a family of a Georgetown student is \$229,100.

While Georgetown remained inactive, students and descendants of the 272 took matters into their own hands. Student-activist Jessica R. (Class of 2020) noted that "even though we as students were not responsible for owning or selling people, we benefit from the fact that it happened by being students at Georgetown." As a result, the GU272 advocacy team came together in the Spring of 2018 and began to write a referendum to be voted on by the student body, suggesting a student fee adding \$27.27 to their tuition to pay for reparations to the descendants of those sold by Georgetown.

To get the vote out, students knocked on each other's doors to talk about reparations, created buttons, and used social media to encourage their fellow students to vote on the referendum.

When it came time to pass, students overwhelmingly voted yes for the referendum. However, Georgetown's board of directors did not agree to raise tuition the following year for students. In response, students have maintained their action. The next school year, students picketed the Board of Directors meetings and sat in on the President's office to encourage them to act on their vote.

After months of inaction, Georgetown's president sent an email to students, which said that projects to help Maringouin would begin to be funded by Georgetown tuition in the fall of 2020. While student activists are not sure what happens next, Jessica promises that "we will continue to be creative and persistent in our collective action to hold the University accountable and make sure that they listen to descendants and students."







# ON TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION COMMITTEES AND MARYLAND

By Max

On April 22nd, 2019, Maryland Governor Larry Hogan signed HB 307 into law which created a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would investigate the history of lynching and racial violence in Maryland and issue recommendations on how to heal from these findings. The bill was supported by every single voting member of Maryland's House and Senate and is the first example of a statewide commission of this nature.

The job of a Truth and Reconciliation Committee is to investigate and discover past harms and then suggest ways communities and countries can repair those harms done. *"Truth provides an opportunity for repair for reconciliation,"* says Jonathan K of the Equal Justice Initiative, *"one leads to the next."* But truth comes first. *"There is a power in acknowledging that trauma occurred. It creates an opportunity to restore, but it does not necessarily mean things will be reconciled for sure."*

This method of healing and community-repair were initially performed in pursuit of transitional justice: the need to apologize and repair for past wrongs while a government transitions into a new form, generally from a dictatorship into a democracy.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa in the 90's after the end of their apartheid state is the most famous example. The commission took testimony from around 22,000 witnesses, over a thousand of which were delivered publicly, and were televised across the country. It was also divided into three investigations: the Human Rights Violations Committee, the Reparations and Rehabilitation Committee, and the Amnesty Committee. The first was to investigate crimes ranging from killings to torture to disappearances, the second was to provide recompense for victims, and the last was to determine which perpetrators to grant amnesty, or legal forgiveness, to. Ultimately, many people were punished, but leaders like Nelson Mandela felt that to move forward, it was important to forgive and know the truth of their nation's past.

This amnesty committee was controversial because many people felt that the people who perpetuated apartheid should not have been forgiven the way they were. Many people support transformative justice instead of transitional justice. Transformative justice suggests that there is not an original relationship which can be reconciled towards or returned to. In the example of South Africa, there was not a society in South Africa where people of European descent and African descent lived together in harmony and equality prior to the 90's. As a result, someone practicing transformative justice would say that we need to build a new society that apologizes for past harm but does not work within the system of the past. However, this is difficult to perform in a court, or with the practices of Truth and Reconciliation committees, and so is not common on a wide scale.

Jonathan is Rwandan, and grew up in the United Kingdom after his family fled from the genocide in Rwanda during the nineties. Part way

## MARYLAND LYNCHING MEMORIAL PROJECT

through his childhood, his parents decided they would move back to the country. *"I was very confused, because I had only heard stories of extreme genocide, but they were talking about how there was now an opportunity to rebuild,"* he described.

*"In Rwanda, there was a crisis for our courts after the genocidal government was defeated. When looking at the traditional model, it would have taken 200 years to get through that many caseloads. So how do we achieve justice creatively?"* The answer for Rwanda was the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, which produced findings for Rwandans about the genocide, as well as established homegrown initiatives which would facilitate mourning, reconciliation, and truth-telling.

These committees have also been used at the community-level, instead of the country level. Even in the US, this has happened. The first formal truth and reconciliation commission in the US happened in Greensboro, NC. In 1979, five people were killed by KKK and American Nazi members at an anti-Klan demonstration; no one was charged. Twenty years later, the community wanted answers and healing for their racial divisions. In 2000, the committee of important community-members performed investigations and received testimonies. This was the first time those affected by the killings could publicly express the impact on their lives. After the investigation, a memorial which documents the events was created and discrimination into the local police department was investigated and assessed.

The goal of Maryland's committee is to amend the psychological and familial trauma left for the surviving family members as well as understand the involvement of government entities and news media in the process of lynchings.

But for Jonathan, this is just the beginning. *"At the Equal Justice Initiative, our goal is to move people beyond just one commission or one tribunal. We are talking about centuries of native genocide, slavery, and lynching. That's why we are pushing for an era of truth and justice in America. It is going to take all of us."* With this committee in Maryland, we have a start.



# IN THE NEWS by John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: POLITICAL PROTESTS IN ETHIOPIA by Max

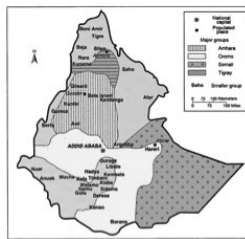
*In every issue, we will bring you an in-depth analysis of a particular topic.*

In October, at least 86 people have been killed, and more than 200 injured, in protests that spanned across most of central Ethiopia. This recent unrest comes days after media mogul Jawar Mohammad, also a critic of the ruling party in Ethiopia, posted on Facebook that police were conspiring to attack him in his home. Mohammad is a very popular voice in Ethiopia, with nearly 2 million social media followers.



Jawar Mohammad talking to protesters in Addis Adaba, capital of Ethiopia

Last year, Mohammad was a supporter of Abiy Ahmed, Ethiopia's current leader. Both men are members of the Oromo ethnic group, Ethiopia's largest, which attained primary power in the country for the first time in its history.



Map of ethnic groups in Ethiopia

After Ethiopia became a parliamentary democracy in 1991, it was ruled by a multi-party coalition called the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF). This group was a partnership between parties based on the major ethnic groups in Ethiopia, Amhara, Oromo, Tigray, and a solidarity of different groups in the southwest of the country.

However, protests began in 2015, as the EPRDF's monopoly over power in parliament became larger than critics were comfortable with, and power began to concentrate in the hands of the Tigray minority, who formed EPRDF in the first place. Anti-government protests seriously contested the legitimacy of the EPRDF, and in 2018, then Prime Minister Desalegn resigned.



Abiy Ahmed speaking to a crowd

Abiy Ahmed took his post that spring. His platform was one of political reform, and reconciliation. He resolved tensions with Eritrea, formerly an annexed part of the country which they had been at war with for many years. At home, he welcomed banished political parties, appointed women to half the positions in his cabinet, and released thousands of political prisoners.

These moves earned him broad support at home and abroad but came with unintended consequences. Because geography and politics in

Ethiopia are split along ethnic lines, Ahmed's attempts at unification and greater understanding in the country frustrated some of his Oromo base, who felt that his time in power was an opportunity for their group.

In the summer of 2019, Ahmed had to squash a coup attempt seeking to overthrow the government. It was led by an Amhara militia. The leader of this group was shot, and many political arrests followed, seemingly undoing many of the reforms that Ahmed wanted.

The protests in October are the most recent manifestation of this tension. Ironically, Jawar Mohammad was one of the exiles who Ahmed granted clemency to, and now his dissent is threatening the comfortable rule Ahmed could have had.

However, the violence that was initially anti-Abiy protests spiraled into ethnic conflict. Because the different states of Ethiopia are divided between ethnic groups, inter-group relations are strained by the bridging efforts of Ahmed. Further, because the Ethiopian Orthodox church was closely connected to the Amhara ethnic group, many churches have been burned and threatened by this latest wave of violence.

Now, Abiy has a difficult road ahead navigating the path forward for his country.

## WORLD

2019 will surely be remembered as a year of protest around the globe, with citizens taking to the streets to push back against powerful national governments.



Protesters, Police Clash as Hong Kong Tensions Rise

In Hong Kong, hundreds of thousands took to the streets when the local government approved a law that would allow people arrested to be extradited to China. Hong Kong was a part of the British empire, but in the 1990s became a sovereign territory under the umbrella of China. The protests have continued for months, and the demand now is a broader commitment by China to honor Hong Kong's independent and democratic status.

Protests in the streets of Chile this year in a movement that also started with a tipping point – the increased costs of riding the subway in the country's biggest city, Santiago. But millions have marched in the streets to challenge the increased cost of living and economic inequality.

Other nations that have seen large, mostly peaceful protest movements include Spain, Iran, Iraq, Bolivia and Venezuela.



# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED)

by John, FM Friend

## US

As you read this, President Donald Trump is awaiting a trial held by the U.S. Senate to determine if he will remain in office or be removed. That is because this December, he became just the third president in U.S. history to be impeached.



President Donald Trump

Here are some basics on the process and what led to this happening.

First, the House of Representatives is the body of Congress that determines whether or not to impeach a president. In general, the motivation for impeachment must be an action taken by the president that goes against the best interests of the country.

If the House does vote to impeach the president, it is similar to a grand jury indicting a defendant. It means there will be a trial, held in the Senate, and that will determine whether or not the president is "guilty."

The other two presidents who were impeached by the House were Andrew Johnson and Bill Clinton. Neither of them were convicted by the Senate, so both remained president. President Richard Nixon likely would have been impeached and convicted after the famous Watergate scandal, but he resigned to avoid that outcome.

So why was Trump impeached? Over the summer, he held a phone call with a man named Volodymyr Zelensky, the newly elected president of Ukraine. He asked Zelensky to do him a favor and investigate the link between two things:

- A gas company called Burisma and Hunter Biden, son of Democratic candidate and former vice president Joe Biden. Burisma add Hunter to their board, and paid him handsomely for it during the Obama administration.
- Whether or not an American company called CrowdStrike had stored information in Ukraine related to the hacking of the Democratic National Committee during the 2016 election.

And after asking for these favors, those who favor impeachment argue, Trump withheld an official visit to the White House, and hundreds of millions of dollars in aid, to Zelensky. The president has maintained that there was no connection between the two things.

## SPORTS

Washington, D.C. went through a long title drought after the Washington Redskins success in the early 1990s. The drought is over.



Washington Nationals win Game 7 for their first World Series title

In 2018, the Washington Capitals took home its first ever Stanley Cup. In October, the Washington Mystics won the WNBA Championship, led by the league's best player, Elena Delle Donne. And later that month, the Washington Nationals captured the city's first World Series title since 1924. All three of those teams are poised to compete for more titles in the years to come.

On the outside looking in are the Washington Redskins and Wizards, both suffering through one of the worst periods in their history. The Redskins have squandered draft picks and mismanaged players for years now, and this year fired head coach Jay Gruden in the middle of the season. Home games have become reunions for the fans of opposing teams, with few DMV-ers willing to pay to see the product on the field.



Bradley Beal

Things aren't so dire for the Wizards, who have a rising star in Bradley Beal and have assembled an array of decent young talent in the last two years. But the team is saddled with the contract of the oft-injured John Wall, who is likely out for this entire year. Wall is virtually untradeable because of his tendency to get hurt and because he makes nearly \$40 million per year.

Elsewhere in sports, the NFL playoffs are about to begin and the Baltimore Ravens are a clear favorite to win it all. The Ravens have built around young quarterback phenom Lamar Jackson, who has become an effective passer and can crush teams with his running ability perhaps like no QB before him. Armed with a stout defense, the Ravens are in good shape to take on some of the league's other powers. That list includes: the San Francisco 49ers, New Orleans Saints, Seattle Seahawks and of course, the New England Patriots.





# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: FORGIVENESS

## Forgiving the Unforgivable

By BB

Sometimes we do things and then we say to ourselves: "I can't believe that I did that." Nevertheless we can never take it back. We do things that hurt people. For instance look at me. I did something that is hard to live with. When I was 16 years old I committed a horrible crime that changed my life forever, and it also changed my victim's life forever.

When I came to prison at 16 I was surrounded by murderers. I was the youngest on the yard. My crime: robbery. So since I did not seriously injure anyone we used to say that my crime was not so bad. But I knew it was. I robbed people who were in my neighborhood passing out Christmas gifts to needy people. I was so wrong. God forgive me. I got arrested in 1995. Fast forward 24 years later. One of my victims wanted a face to face visit. I agreed. I thought it would be easy. It was not easy. Now let's talk about forgiveness. How do you ask for forgiveness when you have done the unforgivable?

When I saw my victim it was humbling. Sitting there with her face to face I felt her pain all over again. She went through a lot of trauma from that robbery. I cannot explain this visit in words. But it takes a lot to heal when you interrupt someone's life. Crime is real and it hurts. Twenty four years later she was still living with the emotional turmoil of that crime. That crime altered her life in a lot of ways. People get real traumatized from robbery. She no longer went out by herself no longer. She was cautious around people in public now. Her nerves sometimes get bad. In prison we may say it was just a robbery but it changed that lady's life. We did more than take her money, we took her peace and security. We need to understand what we are doing in those streets and how our actions impact people's lives years later.

I felt lower than the earth when she explained how this crime affected her this many years later. Talk about forgiveness. Do I deserve it. I hope I am worthy of it. We have no right to forgiveness. It must be given to us. Then we must make ourselves worthy of it. What have we did to change our life? What have we did to help society? Have we

atoned? Let's ask God to forgive us.

Seeing how my actions hurt this lady really hurt me. I felt her pain. It was right there in my face. Nothing in the world could have prepared me for that. Hearing her pain makes it hard to forgive myself. I feel so guilty. I got a college degree in prison but none of what I achieved really meant anything to me knowing how hurt she was. All my achievements cannot take away from what I did. I will never feel whole until she heals. Only then will I be okay. I want to be forgiven by her. She says that she wants the best for my life. But forgiveness, do I deserve that knowing that she is still in pain?

I cry right now thinking about what this lady has been through. Prior to seeing her face to face I thought she got over that crime years ago. I never knew her side of the story until she came up here a few months ago and told me face to face. Seated at the table right across from her is something that I will never forget. How can I rob a soul like hers that is so kind. Why do we do the things that we do in the streets? Forgiveness. That is something that I will be working on the rest of my life. I am 40 years old now and with maturity I can see the impact of my crime now and how much I took from people and myself with my crime. Forgiveness, I long for it. That is the only path to healing for me and my victim. Some of the other victims forgave me, and wrote letters supporting my release. But the face to face with the other victim that I robbed is what sits with me right now. It sits heavy on my heart. It really weighs down on me. I felt so low after she spoke her truth. Pain is real. Crime is real. Forgiveness is not something that we can ask for. It has to be given to us by those who we have victimized. God every day I seek that forgiveness from you and hope that the victims of my crime can forgive me. So for all of those who have done something wrong I implore you to keep changing your life and do all that you can to atone for wrongdoing. Even at our worse we can find our best selves and then people will maybe forgive us for doing the unforgivable.

## How I Finally Forgave Myself

By DK

I have struggled with how to forgive myself, how to move on from my mistakes, the very inexcusable mistakes that led to my 25 year sentence. Life's twists and turns seemed chaotic and unrelated while I suffered them, but in retrospect, even the most unlikely events can be seen to hold cohesion. Looking back, my trials and troubles have become perfectly placed learning experiences. Each have built upon the other to provide my maturity.

For over a decade, I wasted so much time abusing myself. I couldn't let it go because I felt obligated to write in it. It seemed I had no other option. Since my incarceration, I had been living with perpetual guilt. Thus I was miserable most of the time. I would feel the onsets of a mood, and proceed to get angry, sad, hate-filled, fearful, or any mixture of these four.

I would lay in my bunk thinking about my family, reliving the pain and humiliation I had caused them. My mind would play an elaborate daydream starring my Momma as she sat at home alone, crying and praying for me; I would picture my Daddy rubbing his forehead, hunched over in sadness, wondering what he could have said differently to have prevented all this.

As I was recently walking on the rec yard, I suddenly experienced the eye-opening understanding that I could think whatever I wanted. I was under no obligation to

anyone to perpetually recreate this mental hell. Before, I had subconsciously considered it my duty to feel terrible when these thoughts occurred. I, wrongly, believed I owed these feelings to the people I had hurt. It was as if I was punishing myself on their behalf, but at this point, I had the quiet realization that this was my life. My thoughts belong to me, no one else. In fact, my loved ones didn't want me to be miserable. They didn't want me to beat myself up on their behalf. These thoughts were a completely private experience. They were a product of my mind. I didn't have to think these things. I didn't have to remind myself what I had done in the past. ***I realized the only way I could help my family was to show positive change.***

I realized, ultimately, I could stop blaming myself for how others felt due to my actions. Their feelings were their own responsibility. At first glance, this seems cold and selfish, especially considering how much suffering I've caused in my life, but this understanding did not void empathy. I took a lot of advice from others; past advice from a dear friend and here recently fellow Free Minds brother SC with his questions and perspective, that in order for me to truly forgive myself, I first had to accept that what I did was wrong, I had to rid myself of the guilt, and cease blaming myself, and I had to make a promise to myself to NEVER do it again, and it was after that, that I finally forgave myself. (eyes tearing up) It was such a relief because for over a decade, my crimes ate at me. My mind is finally free to move on!

## How to Move On Without Forgiveness

By JL

I've learned to forgive the pain caused by my parents' pride and ignorance that caused me to be abused by a stepfather when I was a child. I've forgiven other family members and old friends in my life. I've even forgiven the people who made statements against me all those years ago. But there are a few things that I haven't been able to let go of and forgive: my childhood, myself, and maybe God. It's convenient to say, "just move on," or "get over it." However, letting negative things that may have happened in life go isn't always as easy as it sounds, especially when those things are constantly reinforced in one way or another. My prison experience and some of the negative situations that happened in my childhood are sometimes so parallel that it's uncanny. Don't get me wrong, not every day is a day with the ex-stepfather or other bad situations, but those

parallels do show themselves often. An oppressor is an oppressor, I guess. And just because I am incarcerated now doesn't mean there weren't comparisons when I was free as an adult (the anger caused from childhood is what helped propel me towards crime. I didn't even realize it until getting incarcerated). It is simply hard for me to forget what happened back then because it is always in my face. And I cannot forgive myself for that sometimes. The only thing that helps out is trying to give a tentative ear to some of the guys in here and listen to their stories, plus reaching out and helping others the best way I can. That makes me feel good. And maybe that is how I am supposed to "move on" and maybe one day forgive myself.





# THE REAL WORLD OF WORK

## An employer who "walks the walk" on the importance of forgiveness

*A conversation with Carla, employer and FM Friend*

*By Kelli*

Carla is the Apprenticeship Assistant for an award-winning, woman-owned painting and wallcovering contractor based in the greater Washington, DC area. She coordinates projects for the company, including recruiting, training, and developing a strong team of employees. Her job entails juggling many moving parts! Recently, Kelli spoke with Carla about the importance of forgiveness on the job.

**KELLI:** At a time when many companies disqualify individuals with a criminal record from employment, your company often hires returning citizens. Why do you do this?

**CARLA:** None of us is perfect and sometimes we learn the most from our mistakes in life. Our owner doesn't just consider it. She deems it necessary to hire individuals who deserve a second chance and the opportunity to work. I work as a human resources specialist and I go out to hiring events to look for potential candidates. People will say to me, "I have something on my record," or "my background isn't exactly squeaky clean." They're expecting to get turned down. I always say, "That's not going to hinder you from possibly being hired here." I see how relieved this makes them.

**KELLI:** Can you describe how admitting a mistake at work can play a role in being successful on the job?

**CARLA:** Being able to ask for forgiveness sets you apart. When you make a mistake or an error on the job, the truth is that it may cost something to your employer, another colleague, or the client. But the good news is that mistakes can be turned around. If you apologize and acknowledge it, most likely, your employer or supervisor will respect you more and give you an opportunity to get it right. It's so much better than just trying to sweep it under the rug without addressing it. We're not perfect, we will all make mistakes. That's just the reality of life. But if you're man enough, or woman enough to come forward, an employer is going to appreciate you for being honest about it. It allows everyone to move forward together and get the job done. And you will learn from it.

In my experience, when an employer grants forgiveness, others on the job site witness that and it sort of sets a tone where people aren't closing the door on people just because they make a mistake, or don't know how to handle a certain situation. A lot of times, these are innocent mistakes.

**KELLI:** Why is forgiveness important between coworkers?

**CARLA:** Let's say you are part of a group of three employees working on a project together and all three of you have a different idea of how to get the job done. Rather than allowing this to become a problem



and having to bring a supervisor in to mediate your dispute, the best thing you can do is just agree to disagree. But if you can figure out a way to work together, move forward, and get the job done anyway? That makes you a valuable employee.

The techniques of painting are different. You might be doing a job and one foreman instructs you to do it this way, and then you might be on another jobsite and another foreman instructs you to do it a different way. As an employee, it's important to just do the job the way your foreman at your current jobsite wants it done.

**KELLI:** It seems like a lot of it just comes down to good communication?

**CARLA:** Yes. Once it's explained, just say, "Okay, I understand where you're coming from, I can do it your way." At the end of the day, the finished product is the same.

**KELLI:** What advice would you give to Free Minds members?

**CARLA:** Look at where you are now. Give yourself a chance to adjust and learn the reality of the working world. There are going to be times when you feel as if people are disrespecting you, or people don't understand you. Forgiveness doesn't happen overnight. It's going to be a process. It will take some time and you'll need help to become acclimated to daily life and forgiveness. When you are in an environment like prison, where people don't trust others, it's difficult.

My advice would be that once you feel comfortable with someone else, whether it's a coworker or a mentor or supervisor, you can share part of your story with them. Once we know and understand another person's journey, what they've been through, we are much less likely to hold biases or pass judgment. It's hard for all of us to ask for help, but it's so important. This is how we create an environment of trust so that when mistakes are made, forgiveness happens.



# FREEING OUR IMAGINATIONS AND HEALING OUR COMMUNITIES

## An Interview with Ghani, one of the founders of Ubuntu Philadelphia and the Redemption Project

By Julia

*In November, I had the opportunity to attend the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth national convening in Montgomery, Alabama. I met Ghani at this convening and after hearing about the incredible work he's doing, I knew I had to share his story with you all! We spoke on the phone – me at the office in DC, and him in between meetings and phone calls at his home in Philadelphia. Ghani is one of the founders of Ubuntu Philadelphia, a forum designed to unite people with different voices, perspectives, and experiences related to incarceration, harm, and injustice. The first Ubuntu Philadelphia forum took place in 2016. Ghani was paroled and released from prison in 2017.*

### **Tell me a little bit about yourself. Where does the name Ghani come from?**

Ghani is what I've come to be known as, since my prison experience anyway. It means "rich." I doubt that at nineteen cents an hour the people who gave me that name meant rich in finances.

I was born in Trinidad & Tobago in 1972. My mother left me in Trinidad at the age of 2. She came to America to make her way – in search of what she thought would be a life of increased possibilities for herself and for me. In 1979, she sent for me, and I joined her in Brooklyn, New York. At first, I did well in school, but when I was going on 15, my grades started plummeting. I was cutting school and stuff like that. My high school wasn't in the best environment. I ended up running away from home in 1987, about a week short of completing the 9th grade. I ran all the way to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with a childhood buddy, and joined a gang. For the next few months, we were holed up in row homes selling cocaine. Then in one of those houses, a tragic act of violence took place between 3 of us who worked for this organization. Me and my buddy got into an argument that escalated into a scuffle with one of the other guys. He was 2 years older than us, but in hindsight he was a child as well. He was a runaway too. He ran away from Florida, leaving behind an incomplete mural on American history. I left behind dreams of being in theater. He left behind dreams. We converged in this unfortunate situation, not loving ourselves, not loving each other. The result of this fight was a murder that I was directly involved in. I believe I was the worst person in the room. The one who was the most insecure, had the most to prove, to show that I wasn't a chump or whatever the case may be. My codefendant and I were arrested and automatically certified as adults. We were tried and convicted. I turned 16 in county jail before we went to trial. I was sentenced to mandatory life without parole, or what I would call death by incarceration.

### **You told me before about three books that you read early in your incarceration.**

The whole time I had been in Philadelphia, my mother had no idea where I was. I had no idea what I was putting her through. But when I got in trouble, she was the first person I called. Even after what I did

to her, she didn't yell, she just came down from New York on a train with my great aunt, and she brought with her all these things that she thought I would need. Clothes, shoes, all this stuff, and 3 books: *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *Long Walk to Freedom* (Nelson Mandela's autobiography), and *Kaffir Boy* by Mark Mathabane. It was really those books that started raising my consciousness and maturing my way of thinking with every turn of the page. It would lead to me over the years devouring hundreds of books. Maybe thousands. Those three books gave me a thirst for education. I had already abandoned the pursuit of education a long time ago, I think because my perception of education was flawed. It was the perception of education that we were given, that we were learning what we needed to learn so we could get a good paying job, the American dream (presented to us as a few things: nice house, nice car, for the men, nice wife, picket fence and security). Education is not just about getting a good job. Education is about something more – about being an upstanding member of your community, and enhancing your ability to contribute to the best interests of your community. If I had understood the moral substance of education when I was young, then maybe when somebody asked me to sell crack cocaine, I might have said, "How is this going to contribute to society?" But that didn't happen.

When I read those three books, it was something about their stories, the power they had to not just transform themselves, but also other people and their environment. This was the kind of juice I really needed. Not the respect and dignity among my peers because I could shoot somebody or I'm tough. If you want to be tough, fight for justice! That's tough. Malcolm and Mandela were both intellectuals par excellence. It was really meaningful to be able to identify with someone like Malcolm who made that transformation from being a liability to your community to being an asset.

So now education became something that I loved for myself. Not because my mother wanted me to do it. Something that I took ownership of. Educating myself rigorously, aggressive scholarship, aggressive study. Plunging myself on the path of erudition so I can change and become better. I wanted to grow out of this shameful thing that was a part of my narrative. Ultimately I realized I could never shed that – the act of violence will always be a part of my past – so education became about how do I serve, how do I give back, how can I educate myself to a level where I can offset some of the things that's leading people down the path to harm towards themselves and others.

### **How did Ubuntu Philadelphia come to be?**

In 2012, when the Miller v. Alabama Supreme Court decision came down [ruling that mandatory juvenile life without parole was unconstitutional], it was a jubilant atmosphere. A lot of people were celebrating. Our families, our friends, our supporters. But that decision





was tied up in a 4-year legal battle over the question of retroactivity, with states like Pennsylvania saying it's not retroactive. Basically saying, "It's wrong what we did to you, we won't do it anymore, but you have to stay in prison with this death by incarceration sentence." In 2016, in *Montgomery v. Louisiana*, the Supreme Court decided that it was retroactive. So once again it was jubilation in the prison. Calling home to our families, we heard nothing but joy. But listening to radio talk shows in my cell, I heard panels with family members of people who were murdered by children. That was the voice I had not heard before. That's when I realized that everybody wasn't celebrating. There was a segment of society who did not look at these rulings as justice. They looked at it as justice being taken away, as re-traumatization. It struck me that this conversation about the rulings was an adversarial conversation of winners versus losers. I don't see how our community could become better in this space of winners and losers. I started to notice that most of the conversation was about how do we help people to reenter society, and very little of the conversation was about how ready was the community to receive us, about the pain and loss and grief that was still out there, connected to us. We were facing a unique situation in this country, with hundreds of people associated with murder, on the verge of release en masse. If we did not address the very real loss and pain, it would be problematic. The abolitionist movement can't succeed without reaching this segment of the community who have lost loved ones to violence. We cannot say this ship has sailed. That would be saying that how people feel doesn't matter, and that the lives of their loved ones who were murdered don't matter. So the movement is not home to people who have lost loved ones to violence – it doesn't feel like a welcoming space. I realized that and I knew that our communities need to heal. There is very little precedent in this country for addressing that, but there is precedent in other parts of the world.

I looked to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in post-apartheid South Africa and the Gacaca courts in post-genocide Rwanda. According to Desmond Tutu, the principle of truth and reconciliation is **Ubuntu**. Ubuntu is an ancient Nguni Bantu word that roughly translates to humanity or humanity to others, but is often translated as, "I am because you are."

After the genocide in Rwanda, those days of unfathomable violence, the state courts didn't have the capacity to deal with what had happened. The state is a hammer and views every problem as a nail, but what the country needed in the wake of those atrocities wasn't hammering, but healing. The entire nation needed to heal, but that wasn't built into the system. That's why in South Africa and Rwanda people had to go back into their traditions and cultures and draw out something from their roots. In South Africa, they turned to Ubuntu, and in Rwanda they turned to the traditional Gacaca court system, which is loosely translated as "justice among the grass." [Editor's Note: Let us know if you'd like to read more about South Africa or Rwanda!]

Our imaginations are under arrest in this age of mass incarceration. The way we imagine work, our relationships, the future, the family, everything is locked down. In the clock of human evolution, prisons may have popped up in the last microsecond, but already we can't imagine another way. We forget how we dealt with things in the past before prisons. In the Gacaca courts, they had to 1) admit to what they did, 2) apologize for what they did, and 3) ask forgiveness for what they did. We have to heal as a community.

Ubuntu Philadelphia was about creating an all-day forum of reimagining justice. Freeing up our imaginations and building a new model that renders the existing model obsolete. We didn't want a traditional forum where we have panels and throw out data and statistics. We wanted to create a model of the kind of justice that we needed.

I was still incarcerated, so I called in from the prison. My mother was at the forum. For the first time, I was able to apologize to my mother over the phone, and apologize to the family of the boy who died, and publicly apologize to the community, everybody. I didn't know what that was going to do, but it set the tone for what Ubuntu Philadelphia was supposed to be about. We had a panel about families enduring, with families who had lost loved ones to violence, to prison, and to both. They were able to have a discussion about their pain, the differences, and the sameness. We don't need to be divided into different camps. It's not winners and losers. How do we evolve this conversation to a higher level that can free us from the cycle of violence and incarceration and help us to heal?

#### **What role does forgiveness play in Ubuntu Philadelphia (if it does play a role)?**

Ubuntu Philadelphia is not a forgiveness agenda. Forgiveness is not a requirement. A lot of people are just not going to participate if they feel as though this is a "forgive my victimizer" agenda. We don't want that to be the perception of what we're doing. It's something that a person has to arrive at on their own, not something that should be required of them or where they feel as though they have to. Forgiveness shouldn't be required in order to believe in and support second chance policies and sentences.

But then you have those on the other side that was saying, you know, forgiveness is not something that we need to bristle at every time we hear about it. It's not something that means you're letting anybody off the hook. One definition of forgiveness is letting go of any hope for the past to be different. I don't think it means not regretting things that happened and not wishing that it didn't happen. Certainly it's natural to wish that your loved one was still here, or to wish that a violent experience never happened to you. It's natural to wish that. **Forgiveness is not letting go of regret but letting go of the hope for the past to be different.** Understanding and resigning yourself to the way things are. Neither of us can change things, but now what do we do? Do we stay mired in a space where we can't grow as a society and as a species? Or do we find ways to grow in terms of creating a different future? We can't change what happened in the past, but we may be able to change the narrative, to stop that from happening again to someone else.

#### **Usually when someone says "letting go of hope" that sounds so negative, but in this definition of forgiveness, that's positive.**

Hope is about the future. So you never want to give up on hope because that's the real hope – that's the hope that shapes the future. But when you start hoping for a better past, that's a futile hope. That's wasted energy, energy that you could use to shape the future.

We're planning the next Ubuntu Philadelphia for 2020. We hope Free Minds will be there!

**We hope so too!**

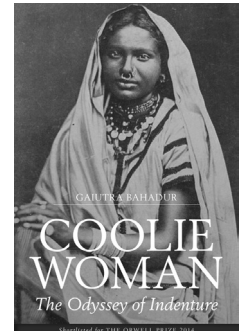
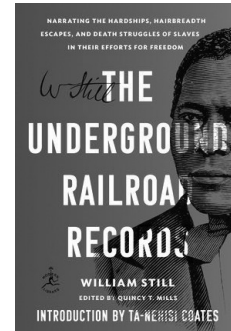


## WHAT WE'RE READING

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

- **Keela: *The Underground Railroad Records* by William Still**

I just started reading this, but this is a book about William Still, who not only helped hundreds of people escape enslavement, but also collected letters, memos, ransom notes, and biographical sketches from them. These items are brought together in this book which serves as a narrative of the voices that passed through the Underground Railroad.

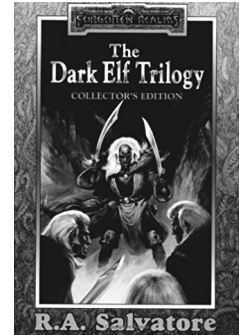
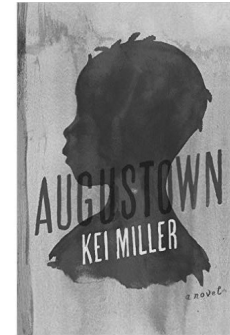


- **Max: *Coolie Woman* by Gaiutra Bahadur**

This book tells the history of the author's great-grandmother, who emigrated from India to Guyana (in South America) as an indentured laborer (when a laborer signs a contract to work for a certain amount of time in exchange for food, transportation, etc.) At the same time, it's a retelling of the mass movement of around 2 million Indians into the Caribbean/Latin America after the abolition of slavery. Her discovery of her great-grandmother's story is powerful, and the book as a whole is really well-done and helps explain how abusive power structures create long-lasting effects on families.

- **Imanee: *Augustown* by Kei Miller**

Kei Miller is a Jamaican poet and author of *Augustown*, which is a gripping novel centering around the spiraling consequences of a flying preacher and a teacher cutting a young Rastafari's dreadlocks. Inspired by the real events, this novel discusses how issues of identity, politics, sexual orientation, racism, and gang violence can shake a small city and its civilians. With vivid imagery, familial characters, and pieces of Jamaican dialect thrown in, Miller sets the reader in the heart of Augustown, allowing them to navigate between each character's individual struggles. The attempts by civilians to bring justice to their community and stay uplifted in the midst of a classist society speak volume to the realities many face today.



- **KC, FM Member: *The Dark Elf Series* by R.A. Salvatore**

This series is about Drizzt, who grew up in his homeland deep underground and is cousin to the elves who live up on the ground where the sun shines. The dark elves live underground because the sun would burn them. It's what they are preached all their life growing up. Drizzt wanted a different life to live and made it to the upper world to find out all the stories he heard growing up was a lot of lie. He made a living in the upper world where nobody trusted the dark elves. He made friends with dwarves, humans, wizards, and all types of assassins from different walks of life. Drizzt is my favorite character because no matter the history of his kind, he always proved he can be a real friend and never betrayed those he met.

- **Julia: *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* by Louise Erdrich**

Louise Erdrich is one of my all-time favorite writers, so I'm excited to dig into this novel that is set on a remote reservation, where members of the Ojibwe Native American tribe live. This novel follows a priest, Father Damien, and a mysterious young woman on the reservation who seems to be able to perform miracles. Meanwhile, the priest has a secret of his own that he's been keeping since he first came to the reservation many years ago. I'm about halfway through the book right now. I think Louise Erdrich is a really beautiful writer, so I'm enjoying this book a lot and look forward to reading the rest of it!

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: REMEMBRANCE

*By Julia*

The Free Minds community suffered a tragic loss in September when Joshua Samuel passed away. Since then, we have thought a great deal about how we – as individuals and communities – remember those who are not with us anymore and carry their legacies forward. A couple years ago, when my grandmother passed away, I met with a grief counselor who spoke about the importance of finding ways to connect with our loved ones who we have lost – ways to remember them and keep them present in our lives, in some form. One thing that I did to remember my grandmother was read a book that I knew she had particularly loved. Grief and loss can be not only for people, but also for ideas, places, or even a state of being. A person might grieve the loss of their home, their ideals, or their liberty; this loss is as valid as the loss of a person, although they are not the same. Think about traditions people have – like monuments, memorials, murals, t-shirts, funerals, repasts, or epitaphs (poems written in memory of people who have passed). How do you remember who or what you have lost? How do we as a society honor and remember people? How can we do better?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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



## Books Across the Miles

By now, you should have received the book *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. This 2017 *New York Times* bestseller follows Will on his 60-second elevator trip where, once he steps off, he plans to avenge the death of his older brother, Shawn. On each floor, the elevator stops and someone gets on that is somehow connected to the death of Shawn. Will soon finds out that bullets miss and these missed bullets can impact an entire community. We hope you enjoy this book, and we are excited to read your thoughts!

Free Minds member TJ wrote in and had this to say about *Long Way Down*:

"*Long Way Down* was a first for me. I never read a book composed of poems that vividly told a story like that before. It was a good book that I plan on sending to my son that is 11 years old. The ending was different and great...Not many books can pull the reader in to that level."

Free Minds member DS said this:

"I think Reynolds's use of poetry is to get the reader to look at his words as a work of art. He gets you to look at Will's situation with the eyes of someone looking at a picture. This is why I think it impacts the reader in a way normal sentences wouldn't. For instance it doesn't read like a novel, it reads like a series of poems that turn into a story."

We are still collecting responses to these discussion questions, so if you haven't sent yours in yet, we can't wait to hear from you!

- 1.) Throughout the book, Will talks about the importance of following the "rules" of the neighborhood (see pages 31-35). Were there rules in the neighborhood you grew up in? What happened if you didn't follow them? Is following them your only option? Who sets these rules and why? How would you go about changing them?
- 2.) Reynolds uses poetry to narrate the story. Why do you think he does this? Do you think it impacts the reader in a way that normal sentences would not?
- 3.) Will says that no matter the tough situation he finds himself in, he is always comforted by the moon (page 21). Is there someone or something in your life that you always rely on to give you comfort during difficult times?
- 4.) One of the rules in Will's community is, "Don't cry." Why do you think this is a rule? Do you think when people refrain from crying it has an impact on them and the larger community? Has a rule like this had an impact on you or people you know?
- 5.) The ending of the book is **ambiguous** (open to more than one interpretation). What do you think happens? Why do you think the author ended the book this way? If you were writing the sequel, what do you think would happen after this?

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

Next Issue's Theme: **Remembrance** (Volume 9, Issue 1)

The Free Minds community suffered a tragic loss in September when Joshua Samuel passed away. Since then, we have thought a great deal about how we—as individuals and communities—remember those who are not with us anymore and carry their legacies forward. Grief and loss can be not only for people, but also for ideas, places, or even a state of being. A person might grieve the loss of their home, their ideals, or their liberty; this loss is as valid as the loss of a person, although they are not the same. Think about traditions people have—like monuments, memorials, murals, t-shirts, funerals, repasts, or epitaphs (poems written in memory of people who have passed). How do you remember who or what you have lost? How do we as a society honor and remember people? How can we do better?

And a preview of Volume 9, Issue 2: *We want to make sure people have time to write in with their submissions, so here's a heads up for the next-next issue! We'll be writing about **Loyalty**.*

**Epitaph**

An **epitaph** is a poem or phrase written in memory of a person who has died, especially as an inscription on a tombstone.

Kendrick Lamar, a famous conscious rapper from Compton, California, has a song entitled "Sing About Me" in which he asks his loved ones to still "sing about him" after he passes away. Try writing a poem or epitaph remembering a deceased loved one, based off what "singing about them" means to you.

**A Step in the Right Direction**

The first step towards healing from a loved one's passing can be a hard one to take. But, healing does not mean you are forgetting them. The beauty of *remembrance* is that their memory can bring you joy and nostalgia, versus the pain you feel at the time of their loss. On each line, write a step towards healthy coping and remembrance of a loved one.

Here are some suggestions!

- Exercise
- Writing
- Meditation
- Positive Self-talk

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Take your first step here.