

November/December 2020  
Vol. 9, Issue 5

# Free minds Connect



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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings, purpose-filled Free Minds members!

I am thinking of you always and sending you strong, positive energy to help you withstand this time of great challenge. Know that you are not alone, and your Free Minds family is always here.

I'll always remember the first time I heard someone say, "Wow, that person is really on their purpose." It struck me as something I wanted to be "on" too. It sounded intentional, determined, and no doubt would result in great happiness at the end. So I did a lot of self-reflecting and noticing what activities gave me a lot of positive energy.

One of my purposes is building community and connecting people together, which is why I love Free Minds so much. I get to meet so many people from diverse backgrounds and help join us all together in this movement. Since shifting to virtual outreach during COVID, we at Free Minds are connecting with so many supporters from all across the globe.

If you haven't discovered your purpose yet (and it can change at different times), here are some tips I found really helpful. Ask your friends, family, and those around you what reminds them of you or what they think of when you come to mind (be sure to find allies, not adversaries, to ask this question to lol). When someone pays you a compliment or notices something about you, what is it about you that they're noticing?

Recently a friend invited me to a Zoom gathering (a common occurrence in COVID times) with the explanation, "We need to hear some good stories." So I thought, "Hm. Maybe I'm a good storyteller then, since it sounds like that's why she's inviting me?" I never really thought of myself as a good storyteller, but she did. That helped me to see one ingredient in my own "special sauce."

I have a feeling the articles, poems, and stories in this issue will ignite one purpose in particular for you, and that is to share with many people! The writing is that compelling and insightful.

You'll read an update from my nephew Jeffrey, who has been blind since he was a toddler, and has pursued his goals despite large obstacles. He demonstrates that no challenge can get in the way of his true purpose. Don't miss his best piece of advice: Focus on the outcome, not the steps! AH gives new meaning to the phrase "live your purpose" in his piece, as he shares a powerful story of learning to live for the things he wants instead of die for them. Maji shares how the memory of Congressman John Lewis, who lived with such a

strong sense of purpose, inspires him to reflect on his own purpose. From his cell Maji writes, "I'm not able to see the potential impact that this might have on the person who's reading it." Believe me, Maji: your impact is huge!

AC uses the Fourth of July holiday to reflect on purpose and his quest to add "my little grain of sand" to the positive work we all do. Every grain counts! And in this issue's Reentry Profile, Marius tells us about growing into self-love and learning to keep other's opinions from pulling him off his path to success.

JM, in his essay, shares that "my journey gave me purpose." From Marcos finding freedom, love, work and purpose after a harrowing journey to the US, to learning how a shared sense of purpose can actually lead to a longer life in this issue's Did You Know?, I hope reading this issue takes you on a journey of your own!

I recently took a course on personal development. The professor challenged us to find our unique flavor (comparing people to ice cream: each flavor is delicious in its own way, but we all have one, unique flavor or essence that is just our own). What is our true spirit?

The professor asked a question that I will pass on to you: *What is one thing you want to leave to the world?* My classmates shared different things like "love of self," and "a sense of curiosity." After much pondering, I decided I want to leave a feeling of "belonging." This question might help you too, if you have not determined your purpose yet. But don't put a lot of pressure on yourself either. Know that you already have a purpose: being in Free Minds!

As GD shares in his powerful poem on page 10:  
*If love is the essence of all humans  
Then our true purpose must be to spread love  
You can do it!  
We have to be a conduit*

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

Tara

**Next Issue's Theme:  
Renewal**

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*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.*



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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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# FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Imanee

### OTSP with Reading Partners

Free Minds joined (virtual) forces with Reading Partners for a shared community event! Reading Partners is a national nonprofit organization that "mobilizes communities to provide students with the proven, individualized reading support they need to read at grade level by fourth grade." Like Free Minds, Reading Partners believes that reading is the foundation for all future learning, and a great way to expand one's mind. Reading Partners connects volunteers to schools in the DC area to work one-on-one in helping students further their reading abilities. At this community event, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors shared to a group of over 45 volunteers how reading helped keep their minds free while incarcerated. Staff members also prepared a mini Write Night, teaching members of Reading Partners how to respond to poetry comments. All in all, it was a very informative and fun experience!



### 2020 Frederick Douglass Awards

This November, Free Minds members had the opportunity to attend the virtual 2020 Frederick Douglass Awards! The Frederick Douglass Awards are presented at an annual fundraising dinner organized by the Southern Center for Human Rights, who presented the 2020 Frederick Douglass Human Rights Award to Curtis Flowers. Curtis was tried six times for the murder of four civilians in Mississippi. His conviction and death sentence were overturned several times due to prosecutorial misconduct. After years of fearless advocacy, Curtis was released from prison in December 2019 and all charges were dropped! Ibram X. Kendi, author of *How to be an Antiracist* and *Stamped From the Beginning* was also in attendance. Free Minds staff members had a mini book club in which we read *How to be an Antiracist* together, so were ecstatic to see both Ibram X. Kendi and Curtis Flowers being honored at such a prestigious event!



### Literature for Justice: A Path Forward

In December, the National Book Foundation hosted a virtual event called "Literature for Justice: A Path Forward," in partnership with Free Minds and the Public Welfare Foundation. This event was the conclusion to a three-year program called Literature for Justice, which curates an annual reading list on the complex issue of mass incarceration. This year, the reading list was *Assata* by Assata Shakur, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion, and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771-1965*, by Kelly Lytle Hernandez, *Ossuaries* (poetry) by Dionne Brand, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration* by Nicole Fleetwood, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* by Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and *Solitary* by Albert Woodfox. Free Minds members read the book *Assata* in preparation for the event, and contributed discussion questions and poetry for the event, which was live-streamed to a national audience. Several attendees remarked that the Free Minds members' questions were the highlight of the program.

### Voting Rights in DC

In July, DC lawmakers voted to give incarcerated individuals the right to vote! The Board of Elections mailed registration forms directly to almost 2,400 DC residents who are currently in federal prisons. There was a short period of time for people to register and receive their absentee ballots, so if you are a DC resident and you did not get your ballot in time for this election, know that your voice will be heard in future elections! This landmark legislation will help amplify the voices of thousands of individuals who are incarcerated. For updates about another piece of DC legislation, the Second Look Amendment Act, turn to the News section on page 28.



## In Loving Memory

To honor our Free Minds members who we have lost, we dedicate every issue of the *Connect* to their memory.

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### *Rest in Power:*

James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Joshua, John, Delonte, Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras

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*If you know of other Free Minds members that we've lost who are not on this list, please let us know so we can include them in our memorial.*

# FAMILY TIES

## *An Interview with Norvelle, FM member*

**MICHAEL:** Who are you closest to in your family?

**NORVELLE:** I'm close to all my family: my mother, my nieces, their kids, little sisters. Because of my incarceration, I've got a lot of family that I'm just now getting to know. Me and my father, we weren't really too close before I went in. He had other kids, and in the 25 years I spent away I didn't really know them either.

Now I'm making new relationships with my siblings and their children. It's beautiful because I get to start over with the little ones. All the time that I've missed with the ones who grew up? Well, now they've got kids, so I get to start over – be there for them and go to all their games. I try to make time for everybody, since I've already missed so much. I don't want to miss nothing else.

**MICHAEL:** Have you been able to build up your relationship with your father?

**NORVELLE:** We rebuilt mainly while I was incarcerated. You get older and you start seeing things from a different perspective. I came to understand his perspective on how things were. After that it was easy for us to talk and once I came home, our bond was already there. We've spent time together and go places together; I spend time with my sisters and brothers and nieces and nephews on his side of the family, same as I spend time with my sister on my mother's side.

Even at the worst of times, I never didn't know where my father was at and he never didn't know where I was at. It's always been easy for us to communicate with each other, if we wanted to. The question was just always, "Are we willing to do it?" Once it came to the phase where we were willing to talk, we talked like men and came to understand each other. At the end of the day, that's my father and I love him to death. He's been there since day one.

**MICHAEL:** You mentioned having to play catch-up with some family, and even start from scratch with others. What has that process been like, now that you're home?

**NORVELLE:** Similar to how it went with my father, I made sure to be building relationships with everyone before I ever came home. So we wrote a little bit at first, then we emailed, then we eventually got comfortable enough to where we could talk on the phone. Once I came home, a lot of the family members who I didn't know in person, we already had a relationship from writing and all that. We just had never been able to meet physically. But once we were able to do that, the relationship was already there. It was a great period of coming together: "I finally get to meet you. I finally get to see the person who I've been talking to all this time."

*continued on page 39*

# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family.

Here are some of your thoughts on the September/October 2020 Connect Black Lives Matter.

CM: I'm proud of [Gary] for the work he is doing. We were cellies back in 07-08 and he said that's what he wanted to do, help the youth... Seeing how good he is doing is great. Also, I like how Shannon is taking the proper steps to help and ask those important questions to those of us who are still behind this vicious wall.

Due to mail delays and a tight publishing schedule, our mailbag section is shorter this issue. Please send in your responses and we may include them in the next issue!

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

**"If you can't figure out your purpose, figure out your passion, for your passion will lead you right into your purpose."** – Bishop T.D. Jakes

**"Life is never made unbearable by circumstances, only by lack of meaning and purpose."** – Victor Frankl, Author (*Man's Search for Meaning*)

**"The purpose of life is to discover your gift. The work of life is to develop it. The meaning of life is to give your gift away."**

– David Viscott, Psychiatrist, Radio Talk Show Host, Author

**"When your passion and purpose are greater than your fears and excuses, you will find a way."** – Anonymous

**"The whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows."**

– Sydney J. Harris, Journalist

**"You gotta dream like you've never seen obstacles."**

– J.Cole, Rapper, Singer, Songwriter, Producer



J.Cole, Rapper,  
Singer, Songwriter,  
Producer

## PAYING IT FORWARD

*By Imanee*

This month we are highlighting the work of our own members home in the community. Our COVID-19 response team is still nonstop providing care packages, medical supplies, and food items to their fellow members.

This month, they organized a blanket drive for people experiencing homelessness in DC. They have taken training on how to be a peer support specialists to learn ways to provide social emotional support for members coming home during the pandemic.

They are truly *Paying it Forward!*





## **DISCOVERING MY PURPOSE**

*By Maji, FM Friend*

Lately I haven't been having good days. You should know that because of this Covid-19 pandemic, our movements at this prison have been severely limited. We've been lucky to have no real outbreak of the virus in the institution, but the stress of lockdown has reached a boiling point. To be honest, I'm the one who's been stressing the most. Before I make this emotional admission: I understand that we are all going through troubling times, no matter what the situation is. It's just that most of the people on my allowed phone list haven't been answering my calls. No matter how many times I call, it seems as though people aren't trying to deal with me right now. I know that might not be their intention, but when you are incarcerated and have so much time to think, all types of thoughts run through your mind. For those who can relate: sometimes all we want is to hear from those on the outside, to distract us from what we're seeing and hearing on the inside.

In my case, I just need to hear a familiar voice (other than the ones I'm forced to hear every day). I'd rather people on the outside to just answer and say, "Hey, I'm sorry I can't talk right now, but you can call me when I'm not busy." So as I was in my cell writing a serious "F-U" letter to send home, my attention was interrupted by the BREAKING NEWS coming across my TV screen. This is where I initially learned of the passing of our iconic Civil Rights hero, Congressman John Lewis. I remembered how here at Free Minds, in a dedication to the congressman, one can be named to a leadership position, promoting, restoring, and maintaining healthy conditions within the Book Club (shout out to Shannon and Jameon). After watching endless tributes to the late congressman on TV, I realized that my life in general



means much more than surviving to see the next day. It brings me to write about what PURPOSE means to me.

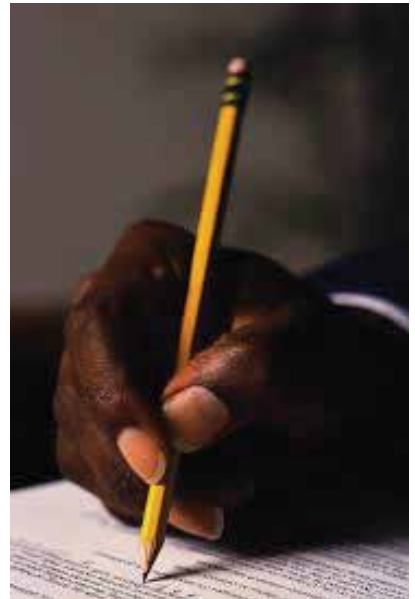
I'm currently having to write this essay from inside a prison cell. I'm not able to see the potential impact that this might have on the person who's reading it. A majority of the people on the outside seem to go dark, not on the subject of mass incarceration and prison reform, but they have to totally focus on that one person they know who's locked up. It becomes even more personal to see someone they love trapped behind prison walls because of a justice system that they're supposed to believe in. As much as they try to support, people sometimes can't take on the added responsibility that comes with it.

This is where I find the motivation to not only encourage myself but others to keep visualizing the role one would want to embark on, once given the chance to re-enter society. It's humbling to know that the doors of freedom are just a few short steps to walk through. Every other step after that should be totally focused on serving others. So appreciate all of the struggles, even the constant oppression coming high up from the court system all the way down to some of these correctional officers, who see us as a waste of life and treat us accordingly.

I feel as though my purpose is to leave behind these words for future generations to accept, which many of us would like to accomplish. If WRITING from a prison cell can potentially change the lives of those considered hopeless or overhaul the power system of white supremacy, then I can DIE happy, knowing I contributed towards liberating those who are oppressed.

I know that I won't be accepted in some circles because of the way people criticize and judge based on my past, especially the reason behind why I was incarcerated. But if I show tremendous success in the constructive work that results from changing lives, then it will result in changing peoples' perceptions of me. So when you hear them say that I was FORMERLY INCARCERATED, I will wear it as a badge of honor, knowing that I came out of prison with a mission, a vision, and a purpose. I believe that your purpose is what gives your vision direction. It steers you to make things happen with the best intentions.

For those of us coming home soon, we have to make the world believe that we can put them back on their feet if ever there's a need to get back up again. Everything you do from here on out must serve a purpose. Thank you for allowing the words I write to free your mind.



# DEAR MR. ADVICE

*Do you have advice for TG? If so, write in and we may print your advice in the next issue. And if you have a question for the FM Fam, please send it to us. We want to hear from you!*

**Dear Advice Man:**

I've been incarcerated for 21 years. I have two sons. One is 21 years old and the other (who I've recently learned about) is 22 years old. Neither one has ever met me. When I learned about my second son, the older boy, my fractured heart shattered. I realized just how sorry a man I was. Since then I've been scrambling to find ways to make money. My goal is to give them and their mothers compensation for me not being in their lives. They can either use the money for college or donate it to their favorite charity. I'm not trying to pay for their love or buy their forgiveness. I want to at least leave them more than what my father, whoever he may be, left me. I've been drowning in waters of ideas and even after five years I've not reached the surface.

Because of the dead ends and the slowness of the process, my mind has started to wander. Sometimes I feel as though I'm using my kids like bait to get people to help me. Other times I feel like I'm using my kids as a crutch to try and make money for myself too. I am no longer able to tell if my original motives were pure. So I guess the advice I'm seeking are answers to these questions:

**How can I evaluate if what I'm struggling for is really for me or for my kids?**

**As I've mentioned earlier, neither child knows me personally. (When I learned I had an older son, my baby sister somehow got them together to meet their great grandmother). Should I just give up and stay hidden in obscurity?**

**If the advice is to keep fighting, what can I do to keep the focus on them and to not feel like I am using them as a manipulation device to earn money? I await my FM family's verdict.**

**Love Y'all,  
TG**

Dear TG,  
Stay focused upon what's important in your life: your freedom, your mindset and above all, your love for your sons and the kind of relationship you wish to build with them!

Money can't buy you love, happiness, or peace of mind. Love comes from within, and I'm more than sure you have some within you, my brother. You just have to tap into it to allow your sons to know who their father is as a man. We all make mistakes in life. It is learning to change the mind that brings tremendous joy to life! So reach out to your sons

and let them know all about who you are and the mistake you made in life. And most of all apologize to them for not being there in their lives. That will go a long way when it comes to showing love. Give them some time; they will come around. Oh... and never forget to Pray. Peace. I hope this has helped you in some way.

Sincerely,  
WH

*Do you remember the letter to Advice Man in our last issue? LB was hurt and frustrated that his family often failed to follow through on promises made. FM member AC wrote in with his own thoughts to share with LB:*

Man, I read the great advice given to LB in the "Mr. Advice" section of the June/July 2020 *Connect*. I love it.

I do feel I need to chime in by saying that probably every inmate has felt that feeling of neglect at some point in their incarceration. Sometimes it's for a brief period. It may be from one person in particular. Whatever the case may be, I believe we've all felt it.

What I'm about to say next might hurt, but I say it in good faith, in the hopes that it helps fight recidivism: One time, after having a heated conversation with one of my brothers over the phone, I asked him point blank, "So what's with you saying you'll do things and you never do them? I'm still waiting on those pictures you said you'd send. I'm still waiting."

He answered, "Where were you when I came back from the Marines? Where were you when I graduated from college? Where were you when I needed to talk to you? I'm still waiting. WE are still waiting. You ever thought of that?"

What I'm trying to say is that added to the inconvenience of writing letters, added to the fast pace of the world out there, added to the many things our loved ones have going on, we also need to add that the more they love us, the more they hurt to have us in prison. Sometimes it hurts to write a letter to someone you love and wish was near.

Just a thought.  
AC

*\*\*\*Thanks, AC! We love to get input on this column from you all. As a family, we often have valuable wisdom based upon our unique experiences to share with one another.*





# JUST LAW: IT'S THE LAW

By DJ, Free Minds Member

Have you ever wondered how laws are created? I certainly have. So, I decided to learn about the process of lawmaking, especially in the District of Columbia, since its law is what I have encountered the most. And, because the process was so easy to understand, I'm writing all about my learning experience for your benefit!

Recently many DC residents have been getting an early release from imprisonment. This early release is permitted under a DC law called the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA). This law is amazing, so I decided to use it in my explanation of how a DC law comes to life.

I discovered that the IRAA law started just as a simple idea by someone like you or me. This particular law started with the thoughts of a woman named Crystal. She works for the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth. She had a strong dedication to getting her brother released from prison and became a key proponent for the IRAA law. Her brother was serving a long-term sentence imposed on him as a juvenile.

The next step after the idea for a law is to get the idea documented and structured. After this structure is there, the written document is officially a bill. A member of the DC Council presents this bill to others by filing it with the Secretary to the Council. Once this happens, the bill gets assigned to a committee within the Council. Normally, this committee is made up of people who have expert knowledge about the subject of the bill. This committee must hear the bill within two days or it dies until a new Council convenes. If a committee reviews the bill, it conducts hearings and listens to testimony from the community and government regarding the bill. If this committee determines that the bill should be a DC law, the members of that committee vote to have it presented to all 13 members of the DC Council.

The thirteen members together work as a "special committee," referred to as Committee of the Whole or COW. When the bill reaches this level, the COW prepares it for a vote during the appropriate time. Normally, that vote takes place at a set time in the future when the Council addresses all pending matters before the Council. This happens during what is called the Council's legislative meeting period. During the legislative period, the bill is discussed by the

Council and even amended if necessary! If the majority of the Council members vote in favor of the bill, it is placed on a second legislative meeting agenda for the Council, which takes place fourteen days after the first legislative meeting.

If the bill is approved by the Council during this second meeting, the bill is next sent to the mayor for consideration. At this stage, the mayor can either endorse the Council's position; permit the bill to become law even without a signature from the mayor; or challenge the bill by what is commonly referred to as a veto. If the mayor vetoes the bill, the Council would have to meet again and reconsider the bill. Two thirds of the Council must approve the bill in order to override the mayor's veto. However, when a bill is allowed to move forward, it is assigned a special number called an act number.

Now, it seems like this idea would become law after becoming an act. But there are more steps that must be taken before this starting idea becomes DC law. The next step is that the act must be presented to the U.S. Congress for at least thirty days before it can officially become DC law. The thirty day count does not tally weekends and holidays. If the act pertains to the criminal aspect of DC law, it must remain before the U.S. Congress for at least sixty days. If Congress does not object to the law approved by the DC Council, it becomes law after the thirty or sixty day congressional review period ends. If for some reason Congress disagrees with the law during the congressional review, it can do what is called a joint resolution along with the president of the United States and terminate the law enacted by the DC Council.

Wow! That is a bit to absorb, but trust me, I did the hard work for ya by trimming this process down enough so you can grasp the most important parts. After learning all this, I asked myself: should more or less be done when enacting a law? I'm curious to know what your answer to this question would be. I'm still undecided. Please share.

Until next time, please keep your mind free!!!  
Free Minds member DJ

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## My Higher Purpose

By GD

Not everyone knows their purpose  
Because they know not their worth  
From birth  
We were all put on this planet to execute an imperative mission  
A vision!  
That has been seen before we opened our eyes  
Every path, laugh, worry, fear, and cry  
Leads to our truth  
If love is the essence of all humans  
Then our true purpose must be to spread love  
You can do it!  
We have to be a conduit  
Intuit  
See, the way to recognize your purpose is to reflect on your past  
And ponder what you have consistently done  
With absolute LOVE  
For a long time I didn't see that my love and purpose  
was to teach  
I did it so effortlessly, without concern or stress  
In fact, I felt blessed  
To be able to share my wealth of knowledge  
And embark on an educational journey with my students  
I felt that I was doing exactly what I was supposed  
to be doing  
Even though I was serving a life sentence  
But when you are fulfilling your purpose and are worth it  
Your circumstances will be perfect even if to you  
They seem imperfect and dire  
I know my purpose and  
It's higher  
It's teaching

## Meaningful Purpose

By CM

I was meant to be a father  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to help others  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to repent  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to speak through poetry  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to go through hardships  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to be competitive  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to fight for my freedom  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to love all  
It's my purpose  
I was meant to share these words  
They are my meaningful purpose

## Live Your Dream

By JJ

Living your dream is like writing a book  
You are doing things that make you happy  
Like going to the club or a party  
You are having fun meeting new people and listening  
to the songs

Living the dream is like buying a house you want  
I'm talking about 5-bedrooms with 6 baths and a big  
yard with a pool  
Or a car that costs over \$70,000  
That is a dream for me

I am going to try to live my dream  
Because I have God in my corner  
And the willpower to get what I want

To live a dream is to have some goals  
When you set some goals in your life  
And fulfill them  
You are doing one of your dreams

If you did all of your goals  
You are living your dreams

## Purpose of My Path

By VM

Plans I had  
But they were terminated because God had even better  
plans for me  
A stable mind and a mysterious morning that led me  
on a road  
For a lifetime journey that I would not regret  
Arriving in a place where there seems to be no light for me  
Until I saw the most beautiful, lovely lady of my life  
The moment I saw her my day was filled with joy  
She is a blessing from God  
And I'm thankful and grateful for what my Lord has  
blessed me with  
The purpose of my path had led me to a beautiful lady  
And a superior chance to live a better life  
Sweetheart, you are my savior  
My Lord, thank you for blessing me with your angel

## My Purpose

By SH

My purpose is to set a free mind  
Way for many generations and to  
Become an underwater welder. To  
Have a free mind is to change  
Your way of thinking first then plan  
For your future and make your Legacy  
For the next generation.

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Purpose Vs. Evolution

By MR

Fame and fortune versus pain and torture is a coalition, and that's only to name a few

Things associated with the greed we worship until its shame and extortion

That stagnates our attempts to explain the truth

Dreams are long lost, and that once helping hand that was then priceless now costs

Because loyalty is expensive whether it's concealed or mentioned Is an inevitable exchange like Dow Jones

Told to chase a theory and follow a fairytale To understand the rules of success and happiness

Because the division amongst race is a strategic anomaly of freedom for sale

And political stress caused by capitalists

Criticized for my message to inspire the people And silenced in my pleas to be seen as equal

Considered a threat to society so judgment may cascade a wave On this dose of knowledge they've deemed as lethal

Aside from the wounds to my pride, I still find time to wonder if change will ever come

Or will the universal laws of life cause some to forfeit their dignity to fight

Tuck their tails and then run

What is extreme power without acceptance?

What is phenomenal strength without protection?

What is divine prophecy without confession?

And what is the entirety of life without perception?

Victory is in the eye of the beholder Who can withstand the weight of sacrifice on their shoulders

And comfortability is nonexistent because life is a never-ending battle

We must approach with strength and focus

## JR's Purpose

By JR

Even though I woke up in a jail cell

I still have a purpose

To come home a changed man renewed in the mind

I still have a purpose

To feed, care, and love two wonderful kids

I still have a purpose

To maybe find a smart, caring, sensitive lover

I have a purpose

A purpose to take care of the love of my life, my mother, During these cold, hard, aging times

A purpose to raise my children the right way

Whose mother is still young and immature

A purpose to forgive, forget and s\*\*\* on

Those who betrayed and turned their backs on me

A purpose to prove everyone wrong

Who thought that I would be nothing

A purpose to find and follow Christ

Knowing I will never lose with Him

A purpose to grow old and find a wife

Something I think I'll never do!!!

## Everyone Has a Purpose...

By SHA

In life we are given a purpose,

We all aim to seek.

A resolution, a determination,

A result at what we set out to be.

The road we take is what is

Meant to be. The goal is the aim

We strive to reach.

Without a purpose one's life

Is not complete, until we find

That one thing that makes us complete...

The path can be rough or bumpy

At times, but no one never

Said it doesn't take effort or time.

Time is of the essence and

Efforts are applied through

One's life choices if only

We realize giving up hope

May destroy us.

Finding it can be unexpected

But you'll live to accept it

And enjoy its blessings.

Take the signs as lessons

And run with them, we only

Live once, so all will come

To know what theirs are

Meant to be and never take them for granted...

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Family!

Sending you greetings on purpose (please humor me, I had to get that out)! I love this month's theme. I know I say that about all of our themes LOL, but it's true! I happen to know that every human being on the face of this Earth was born with purpose and for a purpose. Let me explain: the dictionary states that the meaning of purpose is "the reason for which something is done or created or for which something exists." So when I say that we are all born with a purpose, it means that we were all meant to be here; we are not here by accident but by design, for a reason. Then, once we are here, we all have a purpose, a mission, an assignment if you will. Sometimes people find their purpose at 10, some at 30, and some at 90. But it's never too late to pursue your purpose.

Our specific life purpose usually consists of the motivating aims of our lives, like the reasons we get up in the morning. Purpose can also guide our life decisions, influence our behavior, shape our goals, offer a sense of direction or create meaning. Purpose can also be connected to meaningful, satisfying work. I often tell people that my landing here at Free Minds was destiny; it was supposed to happen. My son became a Free Minds member in 2006. However, it wasn't until 2012 that I started working here. I'm not going to tell my age, but I joined the Free Minds family in 2012, eight years ago, which means I have very recently found my purpose – and let's just say, I am no spring chicken! My point being: you can be young or not so young when you discover your purpose.

I did some research on purpose and discovered that most people discover their purpose in three general ways. They are: Vocation (see my personal example above), Social/Familial (aligning relationships with family, friends, and our community with our personal values), and Spirituality (seeking meaning and fulfillment through our religious and/or spiritual beliefs).

Finding our purpose is a process and it won't happen overnight. However, life purpose is something that resides inside each of us. It is typically not something we choose, nor can someone else give it to us. It is something we nurture and coax to emerge from deep within ourselves through self-exploration and figuring out what we value most. So whether you have already found it or are still on the journey to discover your purpose, you are only human because every human being is on that same journey, just at different stages.

As usual, let me leave you with some helpful information that could very well help you discover your purpose!

**Power Design Electrical Apprenticeship Program** is a returning citizen-friendly apprenticeship program in Washington, DC that is consistently looking for apprentices to complete their program. Electrical apprentices are able to earn a paycheck while learning the trade through firsthand experience. This position has a clear career path to becoming an electrician, with the potential and opportunity to become a manager of a team with a larger scope of work. Interested applicants must have a GED or HS diploma. All interested parties should **visit <https://bit.ly/PowerDesignInc>** in order to apply. Of course, you can always count on us to assist you with the application process. We happen to have a Free Minds member working there right now! He completed the apprenticeship, has his electrical certification, and is working full-time. We helped him to apply!



Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms Keela



# CONVERSATION WITH DEMETRIA

Greetings!

If you don't know, I'm Demetria – better known to our team and many members as “Ms. Dee.” I'm one of the Reentry Coaches here at **Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop**.

I am a native Washingtonian, which means I was born and have lived in DC or the suburban area my entire life. I'm old enough to remember when the Metro Rail system was put into place (no, that \*that\* old 😊). And I lived or hung out in some of the most dangerous parts of the city during parts of my young life.

I can say that I come from a so-called two-parent home, but I can also say that living in a home with two parents doesn't mean you won't have problems. I had my share of problems. I was abused as a child and as a teen, have been in a violent marriage, and “yes,” even been subjected to imprisonment!

Which brings me to why I am so honored to share my story:

Purpose is defined, simply as the reason something is done or created; or for which something exists. It could also mean to have as one's intention or objective. My 'purpose' for joining the Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop was because I wanted to be a part of something that added true value to the world – to be involved with a group of people who dedicate themselves to facilitating a new path and way of living for those who were taken away before they ever began truly living.

I joined because being a part of this organization is as much a help to me, as it gives me the chance to help others. When doubt creeps into the mind of someone, I am now empowered to assure them that things will work out if they stay true to their purpose. Let purpose be the guiding light: the determination to win back your family; the goal of securing that elusive career; the desire to be great at something.

I believe what makes me effective in what I do is finding parts of myself within the stories of those I strive to assist. I understand loss. I have suffered the disappointment of parents who I felt didn't protect my innocence as a youth. I know full well the challenges of having to “start over,” and the anxieties that come with trying to meet the expectations of others.

Most of the people I help have to find employment; they face the difficult task of having to convince someone to give them a chance, and then having to prove themselves. I have been there! And because of this, I can both relate and also provide strategies I have used to help myself. These strategies do not require anyone to be disingenuous in order to “get a foot in the door.” Sometimes, it is just a matter of proper wording.

Finding and building on your purpose is not easy. But when you have the means to work with others who truly understand what it takes to get to those next levels, it makes the journey more achievable – and I believe that I am a valuable part of the process.

# THE WRITE WAY: POWER OF THE OP-ED

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

*By Eyone*

The pen is mightier than the sword! As a youngster, I didn't fully understand that statement. I had no idea how a pen could be mightier than a sword, nor that words had the power that they have. The power of the "op-ed" has been a huge topic and tool used in the struggle for prison reform all across the country. We'd like to take a moment to shine some light on the power of the "op-ed."

For starters, an op-ed, which is short for "opposite the editorial page," is an essay in a publication (like a newspaper) expressing the opinion of the author, who is not affiliated with the publication. The objective is to afford greater opportunities for exploration of new insights and new ideas by writers and thinkers who don't have connections to the publication as a whole.

Recently, a man was freed from prison after serving 22 years for a wrongful conviction. His name is Sean Ellis. A journalist by the name of Elaine Murphy saw the case of Sean in a newspaper years ago and remembered him from childhood; he used to go to school with her son. Looking into his case, Murphy believed his innocence and wondered what she could do to help Sean. Being a writer, she researched the case thoroughly, wrote an op-ed about how she'd known the young man, what type of person he was as a child, and how the evidence in Sean's case didn't point to him as the person who committed the crime.

Murphy was surprised by the response to her op-ed. Powerful people from Boston began to note the injustices in the Sean Ellis case. It took close to 25 years to get the victory they all wanted for Sean, but as far as Murphy's contribution, it started with her pen and her writing an op-ed about a young man who was not what the media made him out to be. Murphy later explained that she had no idea how powerful her op-ed would be, but she used her knowledge to get the op-ed placed in the *Boston Globe*, and that alone opened up countless doors for Sean Ellis to get the support so desperately needed in his case.

We Free Minds members who have a love for reading and writing, as well as first-hand knowledge of what the justice system has to offer, have a voice and a duty to be heard—and we have a family at Free Minds to assist us with being heard. This month alone, I have been challenged to write an op-ed about how the justice system treated me as a juvenile. Tara, our favorite motivator, inspired me to do so. I encourage all of us to step up and be heard. Try it! Write an op-ed.

*Here is an example of an op-ed that I wrote and submitted to a newspaper for publication:*

## **THE MARTINSVILLE SEVEN DESERVE A PARDON BY GOVERNOR NORTHAM**

*I know the harms of being found guilty simply for being black – it happened to me as a child.*

The newspaper said I was armed and dangerous. Before I even walked inside a court room as a 16-year-old, I was already guilty. The people in my community believed I had done a horrible thing. The police that arrested me believed the same thing. When the officer stopped me on that cold evening in October 1993, she ran my name and then immediately pulled her gun and pointed it at me. She informed me that I was under arrest. She didn't know the details of why I had a warrant, all she knew was that it was for murder. I was placed in the back of a patrol

car and taken to the local police station and was told I was going to be treated like an adult; I didn't know what that meant and I didn't know any of my rights. This happened more than 27 years ago – but the feelings of being tried by the press, feared instead of listened to, and having my childhood lost to an extreme sentence fits squarely with the 70th anniversary of the Martinsville-Seven case in Virginia.

As reported by the Washington Post last week by Rachel Weiner in her piece “Virginia governor asked to grant posthumous pardons to seven Black men executed for 1949 rape,” these seven young adults were executed by the state of Virginia in 1951, were all black, did not receive their due process rights, and were convicted by the press. They are long overdue to receive a pardon by Gov. Northam.

Sadly, our similarities didn't end there. I was the only person arrested for the crime in 1993, although it was known by police that more than one person was involved. I was told I was facing 90 years based on all of the charges they stacked up, and it was clear to me that I would be taking the blame for everything that occurred. The system was closing the case, and my plea offer wasn't to paint a picture of justice; it was to get a conviction and be done with the matter. This goes on in courtrooms all across the country to this day. The truth gets lost in the bureaucratic procedure of criminal justice. The 7 men in the Martinsville case were also tried in the court of public opinion before they ever walked into a courtroom, and even when they walked into a courtroom, they didn't stand a chance against the system. Regardless of their role in the activities of

the fateful day they were charged with their crimes, they were equally guilty and all sentenced to death. Their true roles in the crime, or to what extent they participated in the crime was never given due attention in their defenses.

Because of my charges and what I was accused of, I was confined at the DC Jail with adults in the worst cell block in the jail. While in jail I was brutalized by the officers, I was exposed to extreme violence, I was stabbed in the neck and had to be rushed to the hospital. I was placed in a facility where no child should ever be.

I ended up doing 17 years in prison. I plead guilty due in part to being afraid of the 90 years of time I would receive if I declined the plea bargain; which offered a 15 year to life alternative. The deck was stacked against me and the story that was told was that I was a cold-blooded murderer at 16. Today, more change is needed. As the Virginia legislature reconsiders the death penalty, I reach out to Gov. Northam to do what he can to right these past wrongs, and pardon the Martinsville Seven.

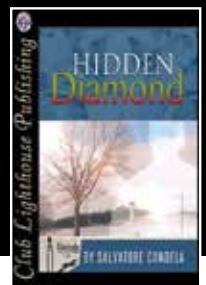
At the very least, I feel that as a young Black male the system treated me, and the seven young men from Martinsville unfairly. Neither of us received the protections of the law; neither of us were housed in places where we could be rehabilitated; neither of us needed to be exposed to the dark side of the adult carceral system. While laws have begun to be reformed, we also need to remedy our past wrongs to set our country on the right path forward. Governor Northam can take that first step today.

## 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.*

### **Hidden Diamond by Salvatore Candela**

*Hidden Diamond is a collection of poetry by Brother Salvatore Candela, an international author whose works have been published in multiple countries. He is a lover of God and specializes in transcendental meditation. He loves to teach and preach about this, love, and spiritual truths. He is fluent in Italian, English, Spanish, and French.*







# STAYING ON MY PURPOSE, EVEN WHEN OBSTACLES APPEAR

*By Jeffrey, FM Friend*

*We checked in with Tara's nephew Jeffrey, who last wrote for us about graduating from college and graduate school and not letting his blindness stop him from his goals. Despite some obstacles showing up since he last shared with us, Jeffrey is still fully pursuing his purpose: to become a licensed therapist to youth.*

Hey, Free Minds! Hope you've been staying strong.

To catch everyone up: I graduated with my master's degree in Clinical Mental Health Counseling and took my comps, which is a big final exam that covers all the subject areas of the courses you have taken. Luckily I attended an accredited school, so what I was taught was covered on the test. I'm not saying it was easy, but it was all the subjects that I had studied. Now, in order to receive my own license and one day have my own practice as a therapist, I need to pass what is called the National Counseling Exam. It has 200 questions and covers all six categories of human development. It's more about applying what you learn. For example, a question might be: "if a client has Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, what kind of treatment would you apply?"

As a person who is blind, I can receive what is called an "accommodation" to assist me with taking exams. I went to the exam location in August after doing some power studying, only to find out that they weren't prepared; the person who was going to assist me was

only able to read the questions, but wasn't allowed to record my answers. So, I did what I've had to do my whole life as a person living with a visual impairment: I pulled out my handy extra dose of patience and signed up for the next exam.

I just recently took it again. The person was able to record my answers, but it was such a stressful process to have a person there waiting for your answers; I didn't score high enough. What's that saying? "The third time's the charm!" This time I am going to find a different online prep course, as I think the one I took wasn't very helpful. I'm also hoping to have a screen reader, which is software that makes the computer talk.

Aunt Tara has asked me how I keep going when I keep facing obstacles. Here's basically how I view it all: First it was a big fight to get my associate's degree, then my bachelor's, then my master's, so I see it as just another hurdle to get over. I've been blind since I was a baby. I've come too far to give up now.

I try to think about the outcome instead of all the steps to reach my goals. For example, I think about how having my license one

day will give me the freedom to open my own therapy practice for kids. I could be a counselor without getting a license, but then I'd have to work under another practice and could be limited in who I treat and how I work.

Whenever I hit a roadblock, I think of all the kids who are suffering and how I can't give up on helping them. I know my purpose and it keeps me motivated. I had a rough childhood and I don't want other kids to go through what I did. I think kids don't have enough safe spaces to talk about their feelings. If you bottle them up, then you might begin to act out or become unable to function. I want to be there for kids during their hard times.

While I'm studying for my exam – again! – I've been looking for a job, but during COVID-19 people just aren't hiring. I finally got one interview but haven't gotten a call back yet. So I apply my well-tested attitude of "it will all work out; I just need to keep trying." That's the report from my world. I hope you are all believing in yourselves and not letting any obstacles stand in the way of bringing your unique gifts to the world. Until we talk again, stay safe!



# MEDITATION: THE ROAD TO LIVING LIVES OF PURPOSE

By Kelli

This issue's meditation has a preface to it. Basically, it's my two cents!

I (Kelli) don't believe that each one of us has just one single purpose in life; I believe that we have many. Some of them may be big things, such as what career will be most fulfilling and allow us to use our unique skills to have an impact. Other purposes may seem smaller.

For example, maybe you are the kind of person that is able to defuse tense interactions between others. Let's say two people are angry and are about to get into a stupid fight, and you are there with your laid back nature, or your sense of humor, or whatever skill it is, to bring them down and help them come to an understanding. You are likely a person to whom peace and harmony matter. And for that reason, you have just served a very important and noble purpose!

My point is, if we don't feel an overarching BIG purpose for our lives, that's okay. Maybe you do know, and that's wonderful! But either way, we can still *live lives of purpose*. In other words, we can make sure that the things we invest our time, skills, energy and selves into truly matter and have meaning to us. Our world is so noisy and cluttered that sometimes it's difficult to hear our own voices. We are so bombarded with messages from society of what we should want, what *should* make us happy, what *should* matter to us, that honestly, sometimes our true selves get a little bit lost.

Spending just a little time each day in meditation and reflection can help to clear and quiet our minds so that we can hear our true voice and see our true self. When we get to know ourselves better in this way, we break through the noise of the outside world and become aware of what genuinely matters and is important to us. This is a first step to living a life of purpose!

So with that in mind... let's meditate! (As a reminder, the best way to experience a guided meditation is to have someone else read it aloud to you so that you can focus on your breathing and your mind. If that's not possible though, just read it through a few times, then put the paper down, close your eyes and do your best to recall the themes of the meditation.)

*Find a comfortable position. Close your eyes and take a deep breath. As you exhale, feel the weight of your body sink into your chair or bed... Now breathe in, feeling your body rise and lighten... and*

*exhale, sinking again. Breathe in... exhale. Sink... and rise.*

*As you continue breathing, feel your mind begin to clear. Allow the thoughts that cluttered it just moments ago to gently float away... Breathe in... and out. Look for any areas of tension in your body. If you find a spot that is tense, picture your inhale delivering air and lightness to that area, easing the tension... and exhale. Breathe in... and breathe out...*

*Now, allow your focus to go inward, focusing on the space around your heart. We imagine the heart as the place where love and joy are found... Maybe you haven't felt these emotions recently. But potential for love and joy are there inside of you. Try to visualize the feelings of love and joy in your heart... What color do you see? Go closer and closer into that image so that it actually surrounds you... how do you feel? Breathe in... and breathe out, staying in this place of love and joy. Who are you when you feel happy and fulfilled?*

*Feel your inner being, your soul, who you **really** are... Listen to it speaking to you through your heart.*

*Picture the moments in your life when you feel fulfilled... what are you doing in those moments? Who are you with? What are you pursuing? Or working on?*

*Become aware of who and what you really are. Follow your good feelings, what makes your inner being sing, what makes your heart feel happiness. This is a hint at your purpose...*

*Feel the love, the joy, the happiness, just in being, in acknowledging your true inner voice and your true self.*

*This is where everything starts.*

*From the inside out...*

*Breathe in who you are, and all that matters to you.. and exhale...*

*Continue breathing and being in this quiet place for as long as you like...*

*And remember that you bring something amazing, unique, and meaningful to the world!*



# BOOK BALLOT!

We hope you're excited, because it's time to choose our upcoming Books Across the Miles book! Our first book of 2021 will be *The Man Who Came Uptown* by George Pelecanos, but we want to hear from you about what we'll read together after that. Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. If you have a book in mind that you'd like to see on the next ballot, let us know!

1		<p><b><i>Free Cyntoia: My Search for Redemption in the American Prison System</i> by Cyntoia Brown-Long</b> [Nonfiction – Memoir]</p> <p>Cyntoia Brown was sentenced to life imprisonment for a crime she committed at the age of 16. After gaining support from celebrities and activists with the hashtag #FreeCyntoia, she was granted clemency in 2019 and released after serving 15 years. This book contains her words, written over the course of her incarceration – a powerful demonstration of how she found the strength to thrive. This is a powerful look at conquering a family's legacy of addiction and abuse and finding the transformative power of love, forgiveness, and self-discovery in a system that was designed to fail her.</p>
2		<p><b><i>An American Marriage</i> by Tayari Jones</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>Newlyweds Celestial and Roy are the embodiment of the American Dream. Just as they begin to build their new life together in the American South, they are ripped apart from each other when Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Although fiercely independent, Celestial is devastated by Roy's absence and turns to her childhood friend, Andre, for comfort. When Roy's conviction is overturned 5 years later and he returns home hoping to resume his normal life with Celestial, he finds a completely new way of life. This is a stirring love story about people who must reckon with the past while moving forward.</p>
3		<p><b><i>The Poet X</i> by Elizabeth Acevedo</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>As Xiomara begins her journey into womanhood, she has learned to let her fists do the talking. But Xiomara has plenty she wants to say, and she spends her time writing her words into a notebook. With her mother determined to keep her obeying the laws of the church, Xiomara understands that her thoughts are best kept to herself. But when she is invited to join her school's slam poetry club, she knows her mother would never approve. But she can't stop thinking about her passion to perform her poems in a world where she refuses to be silent.</p>
4		<p><b><i>Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood</i> by Marjane Satrapi</b> [Nonfiction – Graphic Memoir]</p> <p>Through comic strip images, Satrapi tells the story of her childhood in Iran, during which she witnessed the overthrow of an oppressive regime, the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, and the devastating effects of the war in Iraq. As Satrapi walks us through her childhood of dethroned emperors, state-sanctioned whippings, and heroes of the revolution, the reader is invited to learn about the fascinating history of Iran. This is a story of growing up and a reminder of the human cost of war. It is also a reminder of how we can carry on, with laughter and tears, in the face of absurdity.</p>
5		<p><b><i>How Long 'til Black Future Month?</i> by N.K. Jemisin</b> [Fiction – Short Stories]</p> <p>The short stories in this collection include spirits haunting the flooded streets of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. In a parallel universe, a utopian society watches our world, trying to learn from our mistakes. A Black mother in the Jim Crow South must save her daughter from a fairy offering impossible promises. And in the short story "The City Born Great," a young street kid fights to give birth to an old metropolis's soul.</p>
6		<p><b><i>The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma</i> by Bessel van der Kolk</b> [Nonfiction – Psychology]</p> <p>Dr. Bessel van der Kolk, one of the world's foremost experts on trauma, has spent over three decades working with survivors. In <i>The Body Keeps the Score</i>, he shows how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain, compromising sufferers' capacities for pleasure, engagement, self-control, and trust. He explores innovative treatments – from meditation to sports, drama, and yoga – that offer new paths to recovery. <i>The Body Keeps the Score</i> exposes the tremendous power of our relationships both to hurt and to heal – and offers new hope for reclaiming lives.</p>

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES

*with Neely*

By now, you should all have received a copy of *Never Caught* by Erica Armstrong Dunbar. This book follows the real-life story of Ona Judge, a woman enslaved by George and Martha Washington. With the Washingtons determined to do everything in their power to keep Ona, and Ona determined to do everything in her power to become free, this is the story of one woman's strength and determination to risk everything in order to gain everything. We have enjoyed reading your thoughts on this book so far – keep them coming!

1. While both Martha Washington and Ona were upset about having to leave Mount Vernon, only Martha was allowed to express herself while Ona had to hide her feelings. Have you ever been in a situation where someone else was allowed to express themselves and you couldn't (or at least you felt like you couldn't)? How did that affect you?

2. After experiencing the lifestyle of the free Black community in Philadelphia, William Lee insisted people call him by his full name. Why are our names important? What does your name mean to you?

3. Ona feared that by seeking freedom, she would be mis-labeled and perceived as a "criminal" (p.112). How is the word "criminal" used to mis-label people today?

4. What are some **characteristics** (a distinguishing feature that describes a person, place, or thing) about George Washington that we are often told? How does this book challenge those?

5. On p.137, Dunbar emphasizes that "small tokens of kindness" towards enslaved people did not matter. In any situation an enslaved person preferred freedom. Why do you think it was so difficult for Washington to understand that even if Ona was "treated well," she still wished for freedom?

# NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: RENEWAL (VOLUME 10, ISSUE 1)

Hey, family! The theme of next month's *Connect* is Renewal. Here are some prompts to help you start sorting out your thoughts.

## (1)

Renewal has three meanings:

1. To resume an activity after a period of interruption; 2. To repair something that is worn out; 3. The process of being made spiritually new.

Looking at these definitions, what is one activity you'd like to resume, one thing you'd like to repair, and one thought or habit you'd like to start in order to feel more internally renewed? Try looking at yourself from the outside in when writing this poem!

## (2)

Palindrome poetry or mirror poetry is a poem that reads the same backwards and forwards. Though it may seem difficult, there are three simple rules for a mirror poem:

1. You must use the same words in the first half of the poem as the second half, but; 2. Reverse the order for the second half, and; 3. Use a word in the middle as a bridge from the first half to the second half of the poem.

With these rules in mind, try writing your own palindrome (mirror) poem that reflects on a sector of your life you wish to renew.

Here is an example of a palindrome poem:

Reflections  
Life -  
imitates nature,  
always moving, traveling continuously.  
Falling leaves placed delicately;  
foliage touching the echoing waters,  
clarity removed -  
Reflections distorted through waves rippling;  
gracefully dancing  
mirrored images  
Reflect -  
images mirrored.  
Dancing gracefully,  
rippling waves through distorted reflections -  
removed clarity.  
Waters echoing the touching foliage;  
delicately placed leaves falling -  
continuously traveling, moving always,  
nature imitates  
Life.

### (3)

A *haiku* is a short poem originating from Japan, that consists of three lines: five syllables in the first line, seven in the second, and five in the third line. Here is a haiku poem from Matsuo Basho, who is considered to be one of the greatest haiku poets. After reading, try writing a haiku poem about a dream you wish to renew.

An old silent pond...  
A frog jumps into the pond,  
splash! Silence again.

Autumn moonlight –  
a worm digs silently  
into the chestnut.

In the twilight rain  
these brilliant-hued hibiscus –  
A lovely sunset.

### (4)

At Free Minds, our motto is to free your mind through the powers of poetry and reading. Imagine you are older and writing to your present self. What advice would you tell your present self, in order to start renewing your mind now? Be creative!



### (5)

#### **“Life begins at the end of your comfort zone”**

Imagine this path as your comfort zone. At the beginning of the path, write things you are most comfortable with. As you continue down the path, write down things you are less and less comfortable with, but want to try. This could range from a new job, a hobby, singing, starting a business, etc. Reflect on the things you are least comfortable with, then write a poem about how you can break free from your comfort zone!





# DC PHOTOS *By Shannon and Julia*

This fall, the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Library on G Street NW re-opened after extensive renovations. Check out these photos below with the library's new look!



continued on page 31

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!

# MEMBERS CONNECT: PURPOSE

Purpose  
By AB

When this seven-letter word is used, heard, or asked to be defined, often people are stuck. It's almost like you are being asked, "Why do you exist?" For me, it took a very long time to find my purpose in life and who my purpose matters to. In Islam, one's purpose for living is to work and glorify one God to enjoin the Good and Forbid the Evil. My purpose is to call those who are spiritually and mentally misguided to a safe place. This safe place will help them to understand who they are and why they must find their purpose for living, this is one reason why we see such turbulence in our homes, schools, workplaces, streets, and country.

Growing up in Southeast DC as a young, lost soul, I look back with the eyes of a 41-year-old man... you either lost your purpose, felt you had no purpose, or didn't know your purpose. I went through all three stages. Now my purpose is to prevent the youth from experiencing them... by showing them.

AB  
The Imam of the Streets

# MEMBERS CONNECT: PURPOSE

Purpose  
By JM

Purpose can be, perhaps, best realized when serving as the seat of forbearance and tolerance. Purpose can not be obtained by looking back at how we may have gotten to a certain place, nor by looking forward and speculating on where we may be able to wind up. Maybe it is the journey itself that is the most dominant feature of its manifestation.

I didn't come from good stock. Before my fifteenth birthday, I would have told you that I'd already discovered my purpose. Outright. I found it on the bright red cherry tip of a Philly Blunt filled with marijuana. I found it through a microphone: projecting my voice through a Peavey, subwoofer speakers, telling my Go-Go Band what to play, taunting the crowd with a good time. I found it stashed in the waistband of my shorts. What I knew then to be power. Every time I reached inside, to grab a piece of cocaine to sell to somebody, I bumped it. The handle of false courage. I gladly accommodated my purpose each time I surrendered myself as a slave to my reputation. My purpose was relative to my interest. It served me best when everything went my way. When my emotions informed me that I was right, that I was justified in restricting my purpose to myself. I lied loudly. I lied to myself. My purpose. Me.

Look towards the best amongst you for motivation and look to those who are less fortunate than you for a reminder to be grateful, but do not look down upon anyone. Shortly after my incarceration I realized that the conditions of my childhood were in no way unique. In fact, it was normal. It would have been unique had I not grown up under circumstances typical of where I grew up, and the placement of my generation. I am Generation X, marked by an onslaught of systemic and structural racism. Social oppression and the eradication of intimacy, giving way to Nomophobia. These cultures, which I could not opt out of, conditioned the way I saw myself for the majority of my formative years.

The most forthright human function is to survive. My childhood informed me that surviving went hand in hand with my purpose. Prison showed me that while looking down to remain grateful because of what I had not been tested with was a struggle (but doable) at times, there were people who were not able to recover on their own. I encountered men who could not read or write. I encountered men who could not tell you or express what they meant without falling into an aggressive, emotion-filled rage, out of fear of rejection or not being understood. I knew men who were trapped, who wanted a way out but did not know where to start. They couldn't relate.

As a child, I wanted nothing more than to help my parents get off drugs. I did everything. I stuck letters under their bedroom door in the middle of the night, while they were getting high, begging them to quit. I acted out and fought in school because other children made fun of them. Never did I have the courage to acknowledge my parents' drug use directly and speak to them, to their faces, about it. I was afraid. I feared that I would see in their eyes the same shame they saw in mine when I encountered them walking up the steps, or in the hallway, or in the kitchen while they were still under the influence. I felt shame when someone asked me, "Are those your parents?" I felt even worse when someone knew that they were. But still I wanted my parents to be proud of

me, even though I was ashamed of them. Back then, I couldn't separate who they were from their illness or what they did. I believe they knew this and used it as a barrier. They stayed away. No football games or basketball games. No support. They chose the other way. When I grew older, it became easier for me to give them the drugs I hated rather than confront them about their use. Was this compassion, or simply the result of growing up in a culture of drug abuse where participation gave you a way to be whoever you wanted to be?

I discovered in prison that it was the direct opposite. There were no barriers. Everything, every emotion or musing, was transactional and blame was immediate. In prison, choosing to do the opposite of what led me to prison revealed that I was a man with a heavily fortified capacity for empathy. I seized the disappointment and shame of not being brave enough, or smart enough, or strong enough as a child to confront my parents about their drug addiction. I knew it was not my fault. I knew I was a helpless feature of their misery and their illness. Now and then the misery was resuscitated. The wanting to do something flourished within my purposes. It inspired me to use whatever skill I had developed along my journey to reach out to people wherever they were, and to offer a helping hand. And I was not afraid. Somehow, I faced it with the forbearance and tolerance that I cannot claim to have acquired by intent.

My journey gave me purpose. Every nick and scratch and abrasion conspired to erode any false concepts. I recognized that all actions are based upon intent. It was the consequences I had yet to conceive, that have now grown as my repurposed pain. It serves as a beacon, guiding my moral compass. Any premature amalgamation of what I thought and acted out to be was properly preserved, categorized, and stored away until later, for what would be much needed sustenance. My purpose came to be my journey and my journey, right here, right now is me:

I am a helper. A husband and father. A best friend, friend, and brother. An incarcerated citizen who cares a lot about the state of affairs of our country. I serve with a valid voice as a mediator and liaison, my response tempered by substance or reflection. Beyond reason. I am kidnapped and enslaved. Beaten and raped. Crushed yet I am still here.

Brainwashed, miseducated, tricked. I have assimilated and become the model of worldly influence and intention, and yet! I am targeted, poisoned, drugged, and abused. Experimented on and engineered.

Then shot in the fields, choked in the fields. Shot in the veins, shot in the face. Choked in the heart, shot in the head. Castrated, manipulated. Emancipated to be emasculated. Choked, estranged, chained. I am Dread.

Shot in the street, shot in the car. Choked in jail. Shot in the bar. Shot in my house. Shot in the bed. Choked by the car, shot in the back, not dead. My purpose has to be to rectify all of that, with tolerance and forbearance. Forever Black.



# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: PURPOSE

Purpose

By AH

Purpose: to propose as an aim to oneself

If there is one word that holds value for me, it's purpose. I have struggled over the years to find my purpose in life – so much so that I once thought death was the answer. I thought my only purpose in living was to die. I felt like then maybe people would love me more, instead of judging me and crucifying me for my worst act. To some this may sound strange, but to me it was very real.

I couldn't look my mother in the eyes and feel like a son. I couldn't look my daughter in the face and feel like a father, because I felt hopeless. Those two are my only purpose for living and fighting through this whole situation. Yet the feeling I got every time I walked out of the visit room or hung up the phone with them was unreal pain. I hated myself more than I hated the bars I am locked behind. That self-hate almost led to my own demise.

Then one day, I called home and spoke to my daughter. God had to be trying to reach me through my daughter, because out of the blue she asked me: "Daddy, are you okay?" For a second I said nothing, immediately becoming emotional because that was an unusual question coming from her. When I regained my composure, I told her I was now. The call ended with her telling me how much she loves me. Since that day I've realized that the same thing a man is willing to die for he should also be willing to live for. So you see, I have come a long way and still have a million more miles to go. But I still got a purpose in life as a man, father, brother, friend and son. Not only that I need to shine a light on mental health, because so many of us are too arrogant to admit that we suffer from it. Thank you!!!

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Purpose

By AC

For *Connect* V.9, 5, the theme will be "Purpose." What better day to write about purpose than on the Fourth of July? The Fourth of July is the anniversary date of something, some paper, somewhere, signed by some people. I wonder if what those people signed and what they believed still holds true today. Do we still hold truths to be self-evident? Do we still have the same definition of tyranny? Are we still a "we," or is it just you and me? Has the original purpose survived the test of time?

Of course, the view of purpose at a national level is exponentially bigger and more abstract than an individual's. However, it allows for a better dissection. At the personal level, Viktor Frankl suggests having a meaning in life, having a purpose to live for, is the most mentally beneficial thing a person can have. I guess the trick, then, is finding our purpose in life.

It is so easy to spend a lifetime living just to live, but I can picture myself reaching the end of an empty and meaningless life and asking myself, "What did I accomplish?" Was it worth it, knowing it served no higher purpose than to entertain myself? Many people fall victim to this end-of-life epiphany due to the simple fact that we just don't know when that end will come.

I firmly believe every human being has a basic purpose to assist and serve the world that surrounds them. I firmly

believe that if I was brought into this world, it was so I can make it a better place than it was before I got here. In my mind, adding my little grain of sand to this world's vast beaches is the only way my existence will have any real significance. I want to be remembered for the hugs I gave, for the times I said "I love you," for the times I turned someone's frown into a smile, for the times someone used my shoulder to lean on. I want to be remembered for doing good.

I see scars on my body, calluses in my hands, wrinkles on my skin, and gray in my hair as a measurement of the inaudible ticks and tocks of time. I see these as reminders of my own mortality and as such, these are fuel that propels me to do something good in my life. The most basic of purposes: just to do something good. And with that basic, simple purpose in mind, doors open by themselves to reveal which way I should go.

Hopefully, in time, my basic purpose turns into a clear life meaning and hopefully, in time, this basic purpose can be viewed as something good that can withstand the test of time; like a paper signed by someone, somewhere, holding true, centuries after it was written. A purpose, after all, like an idea, lasts much longer than the mortal who possessed it. Hopefully, "we" as individuals and as a world society can someday, in time, find our own ways to do good in order to fulfill our most basic purpose in life. I hold this truth to be self-evident.

# REENTRY PROFILE: MARIUS

By Kelli

*In January 2019, after spending nearly 25 years behind bars, Free Minds member Marius was resentenced and released under DC's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA). Marius has been free for more than a year now. Kelli caught up with him by phone to talk about his sense of purpose and where it comes from.*

**KELLI:** Hey Marius, how is life in the Big Apple? (Marius now lives in Brooklyn with his significant other)

**MARIUS:** (Laughs) It's as good as it can be during these crazy times!

**KELLI:** So you know, Marius, I know that you grew up in the Virgin Islands, but we've never talked much about what your childhood was like?

**MARIUS:** I grew up on the island of St. Thomas. It is a diverse, beautiful and vibrant place, just like all of the islands in the Caribbean. It is summer all year long there! The food is amazing. What I miss most though is swimming in the ocean! There are so many gorgeous beaches. The people there are also very loving. They welcome outsiders with open arms. Now don't get me wrong. Everyone and every place has its good and its bad. There was another side of the islands – the streets. There is definitely some violence there.

**KELLI:** So when you were growing up there, what did you believe your purpose in life would be?

**MARIUS:** As a child, I always wanted to own my own record store, because I love music, and music is such an important part of my culture.

As much as I wanted the record store though, to be honest, that wasn't my dream. My dream, and the number one thought on my mind was to become the world's biggest drug dealer! That dream came from a very young age. I saw what the drug dealers had as far as the jewelry, the cars, the women, the fancy clothes. We admired drug dealers, everyone did – especially the women. They were attracted to drug dealers because of their income. So yeah, that's what I believed my purpose in life was!

**KELLI:** So what happened when you moved to DC?

**MARIUS:** I was 15 when we moved to Washington, DC. But as I said, I already had a goal in mind. When I was 17, I was arrested, charged as an adult, and sentenced to 65 years in prison. It didn't seem real until the judge said, "15 to life!" The hardest part was seeing how it affected my family. I come from a very loving and supportive family. I have 11 siblings! And we are all close. But after that, there was so much pain in my mother's voice. I felt like everyone in my family was so upset with me, asking me, "Why would you put us through this?"

I want to be clear about one thing. I was very young, but I knew what I was getting myself involved in. I understood what would happen if I got caught doing what I was doing and I chose to do it anyway.

**KELLI:** Why do you think you did that, even when you had a family that loved you so much?

**MARIUS:** Because I didn't understand or truly appreciate the importance of my family and taking care of each other back then. I didn't value it then like I do now. But after what I've been through, I appreciate the love of my family so much.



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# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: ELECTORAL COLLEGE

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

This year's presidential election included the most votes ever cast in American history, and Democratic candidate Joe Biden earned far more of those votes than the incumbent Republican: about 81 million votes for Biden, and 74 million for Trump.

So why was this such a close election, with a difference of 20,000 votes or less in a handful of states deciding the winner?

Because in America, the president is not actually selected by the popular vote; we use what is known as the electoral college, a system built to ensure that each state has some amount of power in selecting the president. Here is how it works.

Each state has a certain number of "electors" based on how many members of Congress it has, which is roughly dictated by the state's population. For example, California has 53 members of the House of Representatives and two senators, so it has 55 electoral votes. DC is the one place in the United States that has electors (three of them) but no members of Congress.

Every four years on Election Day (or before using mail or early voting), voters choose state and local leaders and cast their votes for president. Each

state's popular vote total determines who wins that state, and the winner of the state gets the electors.

Each party in each state gets to choose its own electors, people they are very sure will support the party's candidate for president. Whichever party's candidate wins the state, that group of electors goes to what is called the Electoral College in January to officially vote for a president.

So, for example: let's say one candidate gets 300,000 votes in a state that has 20 electoral votes, and the other earns 290,000 votes. That's an incredibly close margin, but the first candidate has won the state's popular vote and so he or she earns all 20 of the electoral votes.

In order to win the presidency through the Electoral College, a candidate must obtain at least 270 electoral votes. If no candidate gets to 270 – which is possible, because of the presence of other candidates on the ballot – then the House of Representatives elects the president, and the Senate elects the vice president.

You may have heard that electors are free to "go rogue" and pick whoever they choose. That is true in some states, and false in others. Some states require an elector to vote for the candidate that they were selected to vote for. Others permit what is called a "faithless elector," permitting that person to go to the Electoral College and choose who they wish.

This does happen with some regularity, typically by electors of the candidate who did not meet the threshold of 270 electoral votes.

But President-elect Biden has won 306 electoral votes, the same amount that Donald Trump won in 2016 and 36 more than he needs to secure the win. The likelihood of 37 of his electors choosing to switch sides and vote for Donald Trump is essentially zero.



# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *By John, FM Friend*

## WORLD NEWS

Worldwide, but especially in Europe and North America, the coronavirus pandemic continues to wreak havoc on global health and on the economy. As of early December there were nearly 70 million documented cases of the virus worldwide, and 1.5 million people have already died from COVID-19.

While the winter months in some countries have helped fuel a fresh round of outbreaks, there is finally real hope on the horizon.

The clinical trials of three vaccines for the coronavirus have been completed and show tremendous results in immunizing people who receive them from the potentially deadly virus. Two of the vaccines have been shown to be more than 90% effective, which is pretty much unheard of. Another vaccine that might end up being easier to distribute on a global scale appears to have 70% effectiveness. For comparison purposes, the flu vaccine we all are used to getting is generally around 40% effective.

The looming challenge for national and local governments now will be determining who will receive the vaccines and in what order. It will be a while before children are immunized, because there will need to be special trials to make sure it's safe. Frontline health workers, teachers, the elderly and people with chronic lung and heart conditions are likely to be among the first to receive the vaccine, which involves getting two shots over the course of a few months.

## NATIONAL NEWS

The presidential election has been settled, and former vice president Joe Biden will be sworn in on January 20. But as of our printing of *FM Connect*, the makeup of Congress is still yet to be decided.

As it stands, there are 50 Republican senators and



Hope is on the horizon for the Coronavirus, as three vaccines have completed their clinical trials.



President-elect Joe Biden and Vice President-elect Kamala Harris.

46 Democrats, along with two independent senators who generally align with the Democrats. There are two seats up for grabs, and both are in Georgia.

As is the case in some other states, Georgia requires a second runoff election if no candidate gets 50% or more of the vote. So in early January, Republican Kelly Loeffler and Democrat Raphael Warnock will face off again, as will Democrat Jon Ossoff and Republican David Perdue.

If Republicans win either seat, they control the Senate. If both of those seats go to Democrats, there will be a split Senate and Vice President Kamala Harris will serve as a tie-breaking vote, thus giving the control to Democrats. The outcome will have a huge impact on lawmaking for the next four years.



# IN THE NEWS (CONTINUED) *By John, FM Friend*

## DC

In early December, the DC Council approved a massive criminal justice reform bill that includes the initial passage of what's called the Second Look Amendment Act, an attempt to give a chance at early release to people who were under 25 at the time of the crime.

Basically, the law says any person convicted of a violent crime before they turned 25 would be able to petition the court for early release after they've served 15 years of their sentence. There is no guarantee of early release, but it enables a person who made a horrible mistake early in life to demonstrate that they have learned and grown since the incident. The DC Council approved this bill, but as of this writing, it is awaiting a signature from Mayor Bowser. If approved, the bill will then be subject to the 60-day congressional review period (see DJ's article on page 9 for more information on how a bill becomes law in DC).



Councilmember Charles Allen, who is chair of the Judiciary Committee and one of the authors of the Second Look Amendment Act

## SPORTS

There are some exciting athletes in the District of Columbia these days. Alex Ovechkin has been among the most electric NHL players for a decade, and Juan Soto is emerging as one of the best sluggers in baseball. Elena Delle Donne is perhaps the greatest player in the WNBA, and has already delivered a title for the Mystics.

Add to this list Russell Westbrook, who the Washington Wizards have acquired in a trade with the Houston Rockets. Westbrook's entrance marks the exit of John Wall from DC, as he was sent to the Rockets in the trade.

Anyone who has watched Westbrook knows he is one of the toughest and fastest players in the game, and among the few players in history to average a triple-double for an entire season – something he has done three times. Paired with Wizards sharpshooter Bradley Beal, the Wiz might now have the best backcourt in the National Basketball Association. Can the franchise put a competitive squad around those two? That remains to be seen.



Clockwise from top left: Alex Ovechkin, Juan Soto, Elena Delle Donne, and Russell Westbrook.

# DC PHOTOS *By Shannon and Julia*

*continued from page 23*



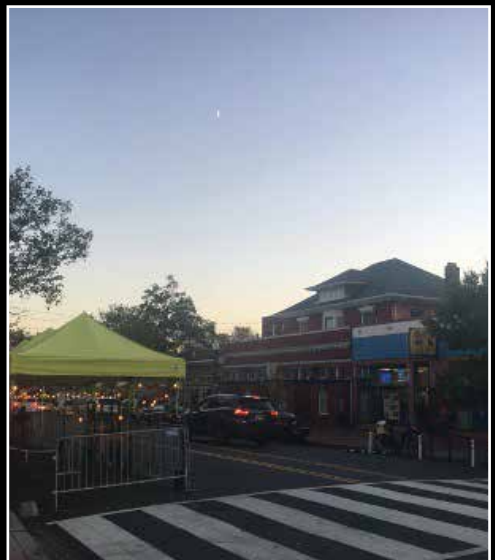
Outside the Howard Theatre in the Shaw neighborhood.



Activists and organizers have decorated this fence near the White House. This poster features the late Congressman John Lewis.



Due to COVID-19 safety measures, many restaurants set up outdoor dining in closed off lanes on the street. It remains to be seen how businesses will adapt to colder winter weather.



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!



## DID YOU KNOW?

### On Literacy and Finding Your Purpose

By Araba,  
Free Minds Intern

Free Minds often holds outreach events called On the Same Page (OTSP) in the community, during which members of the public give commentary on Free Minds members' poetry and hear from Free Minds poet ambassadors. During a recent session, our Congressman John Lewis Fellow, Jameon, shared the summary of one of his favorite books, *Man's Search for Meaning* by Viktor Frankl. In his description, Jameon shared that the book challenges us to think. Instead of asking, "What is the meaning of life?" one should ask, "What meaning can I bring to life?"

Thinking about one's purpose in life is completely natural; having a sense of purpose has a basis in our biology! "A sense of purpose appears to have evolved in humans so that we can accomplish big things together – which may be why it's [also] associated with better physical and mental health" (*Greater Good Magazine*, 2018). That is, when people have worked as a collective with a common goal, it has helped them to survive.

Reading and literacy are such crucial foundations to the work Free Minds' staff and members do together. Sources have called purpose "an act of the imagination," a description that goes hand in hand with the act of reading (*Greater Good Magazine*, 2018). A Harvard professor of English, Amanda Claybough, wrote a book called *The Novel of Purpose*, wherein she argues that social reforms throughout the 1800s depended on the circulation of print materials to "act on readers" (books, newspapers, leaflets, etc.) (Claybough, 2007). Advocates of abolishing slavery, such as Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth, and Ida B. Wells relied on the circulation of their writing amongst whites and free Blacks in order to popularize the movement towards abolition.

I remember the first time I read *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. Du Bois and learned about what he calls Black folks' "spiritual striving: the travail of souls whose burden is almost beyond the measure of their strength, but who bear it in the name of an historic race, in the name of this the land of their fathers' fathers, and in the name of human opportunity" (Du Bois, 7). The book challenged me more than many things I have had to read on the road to my PhD. It was so powerful for me to be told that oppressed people's purpose is not necessarily to win but to find purpose in the fight.

You may be familiar with Ta-Nehisi Coates, author of *Between the World and Me*; Coates's first memoir about his journey with his father is entitled *The Beautiful Struggle*. Inspiring books like these have influenced my belief in literacy as a motivational force, one that shows us that action is possible and gives us histories of actions taken before.

Can you relate to the phrase "the beautiful struggle"? Which books have you read that changed your outlook on life? What did those books teach you about your purpose and how to follow it? As always, let us know your thoughts and your reading suggestions.



# REENTRY PROFILE: MARIUS

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**KELLI:** So you are 25 years older now than when you were first incarcerated. How are you different?

**MARIUS:** I am very different. I took the time to educate myself in many ways. Through reading and writing and studying, I was able to truly elevate myself. I've always loved reading. But now, my comprehension of what I read is at a completely different level. I also dealt with my attitude. After I got sentenced, I began to have anger issues for the first time. It took a lot of work, but now I think about things before I do or say anything in response. Also, I didn't know what self-love was back then. I love myself more now and that makes such a difference. I have worked on myself. I'm much more happy and more willing to help others. It seems like after I went to prison you know, my heart, it got a little bigger, as far as extending my hand to other people.

**KELLI:** Would you say that has affected your sense of purpose in life in any way?

**MARIUS:** Definitely. I love children and I believe that helping guide them is my calling. It's my true purpose. Young people need to know that someone cares about them, that someone is listening to them. I feel so good when I can be that person. After my release, I lived with my family in Florida. I had the opportunity to go share my story with students at three different high schools. When I spoke, I really had their attention, they were really listening. I told them, "I'm not here to make any false stories, or tell you all something that didn't happen. If I'm telling you, then it really happened, and I'm begging you all not to go down that road."

**KELLI:** What would you say your three most important goals are in life?

**MARIUS:** Well, that's one of them. To guide and help young people. I also want to get married and launch my own landscaping business. Before the pandemic hit, I was in school studying to become a licensed massage therapist. A lot of the professional sports teams in New York are looking to hire licensed massage therapists. Ideally, I'll be able to have that business at the same time after I get my landscaping business up and running and I'm able to hire employees. But all of this will take time. I'll have to put in a lot of hard work. Until then, I'm working in a restaurant doing food prep. My significant other and I are buying our own house. I stay busy and positive... and always full of purpose!

**KELLI:** What is one lesson you've learned that you'd like to share?

**MARIUS:** Stop worrying about what other people think or say about you. I once thought it was important to have a reputation for engaging in violence in prison. When I started to change, people told me I was getting soft. But I knew that I was changing for the better and I had made that commitment to myself and my family. You know what you want for yourself. So continue doing what you're doing, moving forward. Don't ease up. Continue knocking on that door and it will open.



# REAL WORLD OF WORK

By Marcos, FM Member, as told to Kelli

*This is the story of a very successful and hard-working young man – one whose purpose at the age of 14 was simply to save his own life.*

*Marcos was just seven years old when gangs killed his father in Honduras. He came from a big family, and most of the people in his family were gang members. When Marcos was 14, he was confronted by someone at school who gave him two choices: "join the gang, or we will kill you." When he told his mother, she gave him all of the money she had and told him to escape to the US. She asked a cousin in Washington, DC (whom Marcos had never met) to help him when he arrived in this country. Marcos left immediately.*

**KELLI:** Was that a difficult decision to make?

**MARCOS:** No. I told my mother, "I'm going to leave because I'll die if I don't." So I left. I didn't know anything. Somebody gave me a map on how to get out of the country. I just followed the map and took buses and taxis. I did the same in Guatemala. I was only 14 and I was by myself. The hardest part of my trip was in Mexico, because I ran out of money and I didn't know nobody. I was lucky to meet some older people. They said, "Stay with us and we won't let anything happen to you." In Mexico, if you are traveling alone, somebody will do something bad to you. With no money, we had to take the train. They call it *La Bestia* (The Beast) because of how dangerous it is. People sneak up to ride on top of the train. I was very little. It took me a full month just to travel through Mexico and get to the US border.

**KELLI:** And how did you get across the border?

**MARCOS:** I met people who had come from Honduras. They knew all of the tricks to getting across. I walked four days and nights with them and we made it across. I called my cousins and they made the trip by car to pick me up and drive me to Washington, DC.

**KELLI:** Do you realize how crazy that experience is for anybody, much less for a 14-year-old child?

**MARCOS:** Yes, I realize what a crazy story this is!

**KELLI:** So what did you do first when you got to Washington?

**MARCOS:** My only plan was to work. My mother gave

everything to get me out of Honduras and I needed to help her now. I got a job at a restaurant in Georgetown. I worked every night in the kitchen until 3, 4, and 5 in the morning. One day, the police pulled up and asked why I wasn't in school. I told them I didn't go to school. The next thing I knew, I was in a police station. They told my cousin I was too young to work and if I wanted to stay with him, I had to go to school.

**KELLI:** That sounds like a good thing, to get to go to school?

**MARCOS:** In my case, it wasn't a good thing. My new friends told me to do bad things like do drugs and drink alcohol. When you're young, you never think about the consequences. You just want to listen to your friends. So that was my biggest mistake. I started to forget how hard it was to get here. I started going out with friends and making bad decisions. I ended up in jail following friends who were bad for me. The gangs were still trying to recruit me. I was 17 when I got arrested. I was locked up almost a year.

**KELLI:** That must have been very difficult: to come this far and then land in jail.

**MARCOS:** Being locked up really affected me. When we are younger, we can make mistakes. We all are human, nobody's perfect. I was very sad because nobody came to see me. I felt my family abandoned me. And I didn't know anybody in jail and didn't speak much English. It was very lonely. The only thing I could think about was that they were going to deport me to Honduras and then I would be in trouble because they'd kill me.

**KELLI:** What happened when you got released?

**MARCOS:** I was always afraid of being deported. But I had a very good lawyer. He is a hero to me because he fought so hard. I had an uncle in California. I knew and trusted him. He's never been a gang member. He signed papers to get custody of me when I was released. He told me, "Don't feel sad. I'm your uncle and I will help you. You are my family." That meant everything to me. My uncle believed in me and helped me to change my life.

**KELLI:** Wasn't it difficult to start all over, again, in a new place?

**MARCOS:** I got a job right away in a Mexican restaurant. But a few months later I found out that my little brother was killed. He'd been trying to get out of the gang. He

went missing and then the gang sent a message to my mother that they killed him. They said, "This is what happens when you break from the gang." My mother was very scared. It was so hard for me because I had come here to do something different and be somebody in life. I was so sad, because he was so young – just 14.

**KELLI:** Wow, that must have been devastating. How did you get through that time?

**MARCOS:** I had been going to church. I fell in love with a young woman I met there. I felt I should go back to Honduras, but she was afraid for me and she asked me to stay. Her father was the pastor at my church. He helped me to understand what my new purpose in life was. He told me I could change my life if I would stay away from people who didn't want good things for me. He said if I wanted to be a good person, I had to just do it. Don't wait for it. And so that's what I did. He helped me get a job as a laborer in his company. Eventually, my girlfriend and I got married. We now have a beautiful six-year-old son. And now I understand my purpose in life – to love, take care of and support my family! I had a terrible life as a child and now I can make a better life for my son.

**KELLI:** Wow, that's really beautiful. Can you tell me more about the work that you do?

**MARCOS:** At first I was a laborer. I did a lot of physical work and helped wherever I was needed. But I really wanted to learn how to weld. Everyone I asked told me that the key to becoming a good welder is to practice. I took every chance I could get and always looked out for ways to learn. I learned on the job, welding tanks. But I needed more practice. So I started doing small side jobs welding. Eventually, I got a new job with the company I'm with now.

Right now, I'm doing a very specialized job. The company produced and sold 300 pumps across North America (including Canada), but they made a mistake in the factory. Now every single one of those 300 pumps has been recalled and needs to be fixed. I am one of just three welders that is certified to fix them! It's much more difficult and complicated than the welding I used to do.

**KELLI:** What do you love most about being a welder, and what is most difficult?

**MARCOS:** (Laughs) It keeps me warm in the winter! What I love the most though is that with practice, I am able to keep moving up. Now I am a subcontractor. That means the company hires me to do a job, but I don't work for anyone. I am my own boss. I have my own truck and I

travel across the country. It's really interesting to see new places and meet new people. But I miss my family when I am away. Nothing is difficult when you really love what you do. But I will say, it's very dangerous. A few years ago, I fell 24 feet at a job site and landed on my back. I ended up in the hospital but it could have been much worse!

**KELLI:** What advice do you have for your FM brothers and sisters who might be reading this from behind bars about finding a purpose?

**MARCOS:** Life is important; don't take anything for granted. I feel blessed to be in a country where you can have a second chance – you can change and be something in life. In other countries, sometimes you cannot because of the corruption and danger. No matter how hard it is (and jail is very hard), you have to stay positive, not negative, because one day you're going to come out of jail. I always keep that memory of how hard jail was in my mind, so I will never do anything wrong again. I believe in second chances, but my advice is to appreciate the chance.

*Marcos and his wife bought their own house. He now has a "green card," making him a lawfully permanent resident in this country!*

*Free Minds gives a huge shout out to Marcos for never giving up, even when his own life was threatened, for pursuing a meaningful purpose, and for sharing the invaluable life lessons he has learned with the Free Minds Family!*



A vibrant sunset over the ocean, with a silhouette of a person in the foreground. The sky is filled with colorful clouds in shades of orange, red, and purple, reflecting on the water. The person is standing with their back to the camera, looking out at the sea.

## AROUND THE WORLD: WHERE AMERICA'S DAY BEGINS

*By Lalaine, FM Friend*

When someone asks me where I'm from and I say Guam, they may ask how I learned to speak English so well. Or they may want to know exactly where in South America it is located.

Or, they tell me that they know it's a US military base, or they may say something like, "I heard it's a beautiful country."

But I may be the only person from Guam they have ever met. And that's why I take every opportunity to tell people about Guam. While I personally may be amused at some of the questions I have gotten ("Do you live in huts? Do you own a grass skirt?"), no question is too outrageous or basic. I am HAPPY to answer any and all questions and want the world to know about Guam.

The basics: Guam is a US Territory, and has been since 1898. For 300 years before that, Spain "owned" the island, and when the US went to war with Spain (the Spanish-American War), it took Guam as a sort of stepping stone in trying to conquer the Philippines, which is nearby (about 1,500 miles, or the distance between DC and Houston). Because of the long-time Spanish rule, Guam culture is similar to Hispanic culture; it is very Catholic, and the language sounds a lot like Spanish. The indigenous people of the islands in the area are called Chamorros. But anyone who lives on Guam, regardless of your ethnic or cultural background, can call themselves Guamanian.

The island is small – about 212 square miles, with about 160,000 residents (by comparison, DC is 68 square miles and has 700,000 residents). The US military occupies about one-third of the island with Air Force and Navy installations. US aircraft carriers, nuclear submarines, fighter jets, and bombers do rotations on Guam, protecting and defending the interests of America and our allies in Asia and the Pacific.

While those born on Guam are US citizens, we can't vote for president. Just like DC, Guam (and the other US territories) can elect one member to the US House of Representatives who doesn't get to



vote. The main language on Guam is English and we use the US dollar as our currency. The school systems are set up like anywhere else in the states, as are the courts, hospitals, and even the shopping malls, with Macy's, the Gap, and even Taco Bell.

I don't mind the hot and humid DC summers because that's exactly what the weather is like on Guam. Imagine 90-degree temperatures with 70 percent humidity year round. Aaaaah, as winter approaches and the cold sets in, I will be homesick.

They say Guam is where America's day begins because of its location on the other side of the International Date Line; it is 15 hours ahead of the East Coast and the first US land to see the sun come up.

I hope you've learned a little bit about my island home. And if you do meet up with someone from Guam, don't be shy – we are very friendly! Say hello and ask whatever you'd like to know about Guam. And don't forget to say Hafa Adai\*; it's how we say Hello!

\*It's pronounced hoff-a-day



# WHAT WE'RE READING

By Neely

#OwnVoices is a hashtag on social media used to highlight books that were written by authors who share the marginalized identity of the main character they are writing about. Free Minds is dedicated to reading these types of books, uplifting the voices of communities that are often silenced. Have you recently read a book like this or any book that left an impression on you, good or bad? We want to hear about it! Send us your thoughts (approximately 100 words) and we may feature your book in the next "What We're Reading."

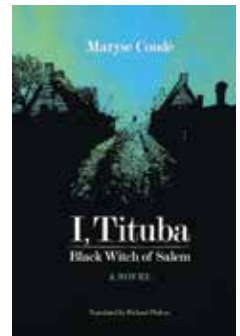
- **TG: *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* by N.K. Jemisin**

*How Long 'til Black Future Month* nailed it! I hated for the book to end. Jemisin's creative imagination had no bounds. I would love to try and add to some of her side characters. She inspired me so much with her different sci-fi/fantasy concepts.



- **Kelli: *Fruit of the Drunken Tree* by Ingrid Rojas Contreras**

I just finished reading *Fruit of the Drunken Tree* by Ingrid Rojas Contreras and loved it! The book tells a story of Colombia during Pablo Escobar's reign of power through alternating perspectives: a seven-year-old girl from an upper middle class family and the 15-year-old girl from the slums who is hired as her nanny. The plot is based on the author's own experience being kidnapped as a child in Colombia. The book is thrilling and the writing is amazing!



- **MH: *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee**

I enjoyed reading this book and I like the way the author writes. She took me through five generations of a family's journey. It showed the suffering and struggle of this family to survive, and despite everything they pushed forward. The author especially tried to highlight the strength and suffering of women, like in this sentence: "A woman's lot is to suffer." It's unfortunate, but almost everywhere around the world there's discrimination, racism, and bias. Whether it's color, ethnicity, tribe, nationality, etc. We always put a title on things and create a bubble. And our false hubris is creating this division.

- **Neely: *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* by Maryse Condé**

This book is based on the real-life story of Tituba, a woman from Barbados who was enslaved and the first person to be accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch trials (a period during the late 1600's in Massachusetts, in which more than 200 hundred people, 20 of whom were executed, were falsely accused of practicing witchcraft). While the witch trials are often talked about, Tituba has largely been left out of the conversation. Little is known about what happened to her, but in this writing of resistance, Condé creates an imagined beginning and end to her story, breathing into life the power and magic of a woman that has too often been erased from history.

- **DJ: *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom**

*Tuesdays with Morrie* is a special story about author Mitch Albom having this new opportunity to live life through the circumstances of the death of his sociology professor, Morrie Schwartz. Morrie was diagnosed with ALS. During a bevy of visits with the professor, Morrie and Mitch tackle a powerful array of topics about the meaning of life and death. It's a short memoir that is so powerful. I think it would be a good read for the members.

# FAMILY TIES

continued from page 4

**MICHAEL:** It sounds like you had a really good sense of patience and let those relationships develop.

**NORVELLE:** I did 25 years in prison. Over 25 years, I had to realize that my physical presence was becoming a more and more distant memory for the people I left behind, especially if I wasn't communicating with them on the regular. Many people who are locked up don't have people who stay in their corner for very long. Your people might have some things going on out here that keep them from picking up on their end and being able to reach out to you as much. Some people get bitter because of that.

Me myself, I always kept in mind that I put myself in the situation of being locked up. No one was obligated to be there for me or do this or that for me. I did this to myself, so anything that anybody ever gave me, any time someone would write, I always appreciated it. Wasn't nobody obligated. Anything that was done for me was done out of the kindness of peoples' hearts, and that's exactly how I took it.

**MICHAEL:** How has your family helped you find your purpose?

**NORVELLE:** My family has really been there for me; they've sacrificed a lot for me throughout my incarceration. After seeing them sacrifice so much, now it's all about me coming out here and repaying them by doing everything I can to make them proud of me. They know that when I was locked up I talked about doing this and that. But me coming out here and showing them that it wasn't just talk, that I'm really fulfilling the promises that I made to them, it makes me feel good.

I'm changing my narrative. People used to see my mother and they'd probably think, "Oh there she goes, you know her son is a murderer." Now I'm changing my narrative. Now people see my mom and it's: "Did you know her son been home for a minute? He's been doing a lot now, he's helping out," those types of things. I want my people to be proud when they walk down the street, because I'm no longer known as the person I was in the past. Now I'm known for doing better things.

For me, that's the most important thing. I told my people that when I came home, I was going to do the best that I can to be the person that they want me to be. All they want me to be is me, but I know who I am and that I'm capable of doing even more. I'm going to keep putting myself out there and trying to do as much as I can.

I come from a background where it's easy for children to get caught up in the same things that I got caught up in. So I'm

out here now, trying my best not to let those kids become me. Whatever it takes for me to do that, whatever I have to go through or do, that's what I'm doing.

**MICHAEL:** What advice do you have for guys who want to fulfill their promises when they come home too?

**NORVELLE:** People have to realize that when you come out here, everything's going to seem so fast to you at first. But you don't have to move at the same pace as others. Take your time and just enjoy being home for a second before you even think. Not everyone comes out here with the same purpose of wanting to continue the fight. Some people want to come home and just live their lives with their families, and that's cool too. It's your choice.

The most important thing is to come home and take your time. You don't have to rush to do anything, because rushing and being impatient is what got us into negative situations to begin with. So take your time and have patience. If you waited as long as you've already waited to come home, you can use that same patience to wait as long as you need, until it's time for you to make your mark on this world, however you choose to make it—whether that's giving back in a particular way, or if you want to focus on being a family man.

**MICHAEL:** How will you and your family celebrate the holidays?

**NORVELLE:** Last year I split my Thanksgiving between my father's family and my mother's family. This year because of the pandemic, there won't really be any gatherings. So I've switched my thing around: me and one of my friends will be taking food over to two homeless shelters, one shelter for females and one for males. We're planning to bring food out to a few tent encampments as well. We've got some coats for kids, other things like that, which we'll be giving out too. That's how I'll be spending my Thanksgiving. That's my purpose: giving back.



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## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: RENEWAL**

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This year has certainly been one for the history books in many ways, but now we're turning our attention to the new year and the idea of *renewal*. Some people consider the new year an opportunity for a fresh start, a new perspective, or perhaps a renewed sense of purpose as we work towards whatever our goals or hopes may be. What would you like to change? *Renewal* can also be about what energizes us, what makes us feel refreshed or restored. What does this idea mean to you?

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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