

February/March 2022  
Vol. 11, Issue 1

# Free minds Connect

## WELL BEING

FINANCIAL STABILITY

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

MEANING AND PURPOSE

PHYSICAL HEALTH

EMOTIONAL HEALTH

COMMUNITY

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Wellspring of Wellbeing FM members!

I hope you are all as well as you can be, and if you are going through sadness, illness, or loss, know that you are always in our hearts and thoughts. My wish for you is that this issue lifts your burdens, even if for just a short while.

As I write this, I am listening to the historic nomination hearings of Supreme Court Justice nominee Ketanji Brown Jackson – the first African American woman to be nominated to a seat on the country's highest bench. FM Newsman John will recount all that transpires in our next issue, but the words of Senator Cory Booker have brought me such a feeling of wellbeing. Tears slowly rolled down to Judge Brown Jackson's cheeks as he was sharing how she represents the promise of America yet to be delivered. He quoted part of Langston Hughes' poem, "Let America Be America Again":

*O, let America be America again –  
The land that never has been yet –  
And yet must be – the land where every man is free.*

Hearing these stirring words amidst the despair and war in Ukraine, and all who are suffering behind the walls, reminds me that we must focus on the progress and positive change that is still happening. I also had the opportunity this week to hear FM hero Anthony Ray Hinton, author of popular FM book *The Sun Does Shine*, that many of you have read. He called on us all to "reject hate and demand change." So it is in this spirit of striving for wellbeing that I recognize the many moving, searing words you will read inside these pages.

MR shares an intensely personal account of his family's journey to forgiveness after his brother's death. MR is now writing a letter to the court advocating for the young man who killed his little brother. It's an unforgettable story of courage and love. You will read about how Maji brings new meaning to the phrase, "Keep Your Head Up," with his insightful essay. His words really made me think and exercise my brain in a new way. Speaking of fitness, check out JoJo's tireless quest to bring health to the poorest neighborhoods in DC – which policy experts refer to as "care deserts" (because they have a lack of access to quality health care supports). Read through the experience of Carlos, who was forced into a strange land after being deported. Carlos' ability to transform a scary situation and create a home reminds us that home truly is where the heart is. The wise words of our

Advice Man to a member who received a major blow being denied resentencing should be read over and over again. He shares a recipe for life, outlining 7 areas to focus on for wellbeing. The mailbag is chock full of juicy content in this issue – thank you all for such thoughtful feedback! There's so much included in these pages, for example our book *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* winning national awards and recognitions! Celebration time!

I want to close by sharing what wellbeing means to some of our members in reentry. I love surveying folks to see how they view things, as I learn so much from them. Here is some of what they shared: "*Wellbeing to me is a total mental state – it doesn't matter what's happening around me, if I feel like I can handle the challenges, then I'm in a state of wellbeing.*" "*It's inner peace – an inside job where I feel good about where I am in my life. I'm stable, I can pay my bills, I have a roof over my head, and loved ones that I'm close with.*" "*It's a feeling that I can make a way for myself in the world.*" "*It's knowing I'm doing the things that make me feel happy and comfortable as much as I can in my circumstances.*"

I leave you with an excerpt from a poem by JH that sparked some super highs from the FM HQ team:

## Nourishment I Needed

*Through books, poems, and a bunch of love  
The nourishment they give is never served cold  
Filled with vitamins, protein, and a taste that's simply the best  
Then they hit you with dessert  
Which they call "The Connect"  
In that you'll feed off taste from different cultures  
And sweets from a variety of races  
They even give you a little legal news  
That can possibly help you with your cases*

If that isn't wellbeing summed up, I don't know what is. Thank you JH! And thank you all for contributing to the wellbeing of the movement that is Free Minds.

Until Next Time,  
Tara

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

## Next Issue's Theme: Sports

*The Connect is a bimonthly creative writing magazine 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.*



## THE CONNECT TEAM

Executive Editor  
Tara

Managing Editor  
Julia

Contributors  
*FM Team*

*FM Friends*  
Maji, John, Aiyah, Robin, B., Cynthia

*FM Members*  
ABC, AC, AHA, AR, AW, DB, DJ, DLJ, JA, JG, JH,  
JK, JP, JR, LW, MC, MH, MJ, MR, RA, RB, RL,  
SC, TA, TG, TP, TT, TTB, VC, WTJ, JoJo, MR, Carlos

## THE FREE MINDS TEAM

Tara, Co-founder & Executive Director  
Kelli, Co-founder & Book Club Facilitator  
Julia, Deputy Director  
Allen, Director of Finance & Operations  
Keela, Reentry Manager  
Melissa, Program Coordinator  
Melody, Reentry Coordinator  
Neely, Program Associate & Grant Writer  
Imanee, Prison Book Club & Poetry Specialist  
Tia, Reentry Coach  
Janet, Youth Education & Outreach Manager  
Craig, Peer Support Specialist  
Demetria, Reentry Coach  
Shannon, Advocacy and Leadership  
Development Specialist  
Gene, Congressman John Lewis Fellow  
Justin, Jada, Nakai, Miesha, Zoe, Interns

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

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

Free Minds Book Club  
1816 12th St. NW  
Washington, DC 20009  
(202) 758-0829

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## 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:*

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte J., Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold, Anthony, Donald, Bruce, Delonte K., Shawn, Roderick, Antoine

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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.*

# FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Imanee and Julia*

### **New Congressman John Lewis Fellow**

Free Minds would like to introduce our newest Congressman John Lewis Fellow: Gene! A Washington DC native, Gene has been a member of Free Minds since 2018. Even though Gene was released only two months ago, he has already made an impact on our organization and community! Gene is a prolific reader and writer, and has had his work published in our newest book, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us): Voices on Youth Incarceration*. His goal is to serve his community by eventually creating his own nonprofit organization that mentors youth while offering assistance to teen parents. Congratulations Gene!

### **Free Minds Poet Ambassadors Reach DC Youth**

Through our On the Same Page program, Free Minds Poet Ambassadors Gene, Doug, DeAngelo, and Carlos have recently brought hope and healing to DC youth. Gene and Doug have facilitated sessions with several classes at Archbishop Carroll High School in Northeast DC, sharing their poetry and personal stories and inviting the students to read and respond to poetry by Prison Book Club members, Write Night-style. DeAngelo and Carlos, along with Justin and Janet, also worked with teen boys at REACH, a group home for youth in the juvenile system here in DC. DeAngelo shared with the youth, "I am thrilled to be with you today, because I've been through everything. I recognize the precarity of your position." Together, Carlos and DeAngelo offered emotional support and guidance, providing a space for youth to seek wisdom and create dialogue around the issues they are facing.

### **Free Minds Books Gain National Recognition**

We're thrilled to share that *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* won the Independent Press Award for Social/Political Poetry, and is a finalist for the Foreword Indie Awards for Best Anthology. Congratulations, FM Fam! Meanwhile, the 10th Anniversary Edition of our first book, *They Called Me 299-359*, originally published in 2011, made this year's "Top Ten List" from In the Margins, a group that highlights books written by and for youth, in the categories of fiction, nonfiction, and

advocacy. Other books on the Top Ten List include *The Life I'm In (The Skin I'm #2)* by Free Minds favorite Sharon Flake, and *Run: Book One*, a new graphic novel by the late Congressman John Lewis and co-writer Andrew Aydin. We are honored to be in such good company, and this honor belongs to the whole Free Minds family!



# FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Due to mail delays, we're printing feedback from the last two issues of the Connect.*

**Joy:**

**TP:** I love this *Connect* and Julia, your 3 jokes were all awesome lol. #TalkingMuffin Imao. I love the DC Photos. DC's changed so much since 2016. I can't wait to get out so that I can really enjoy and check out some of the new sights. Every time I see a new *Connect*, the memorial gets bigger and bigger and it saddens me to the core of all the members we lost. May they rest in peace.

**TG:** As always, the *Connect* is awesomepudding (trying out a new catch phrase). I was inspired to pay it forward like JH. Some brothers and I are figuring out how we can start something like that on my unit. Thanks for the motivation. The Conversation with Sofia was thoughtful. I could see myself defining who I was by what I did. If I could not do them, I had no joy. I have to re-align myself to find that joy exists by helping others. The Free Minds poetry section was vivid, colorful, and played on my heart like the Devil Come Down to Georgia. I enjoyed each one. Black Joy Resistance was too deep to thread. I would like more information on this movement piece by Sofia. Joy by Maji sparked a bit of concern for me. He stated that he felt he needed to camouflage all his FLAWS by enhancing all his good qualities. I feel that people should see both our good and our bad so as to make an informed judgment about us. Yes, we can work on the bad to make the relationship work, but it should never start out as a secret. The Rule of Three by Julia sent me back to the basics, which I am glad I still adhered to with my article on the next page! Wow! I am always humbled when I see things I wrote printed. It tells me that people feel I created something others can benefit from. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

**AHA:** This issue was full of joy, so every piece I loved. Maji always comes with special pieces, and the one on joy is relatable since someone can bring joy into our lives when they least expect it in a way different than one may know of, so thanks to Maji for sharing. Paying It Forward by JH shows how a group of men who are like-minded can come together and present an idea for everybody to enjoy and benefit from while caring for others.

**Nourish:**

**JP:** I just received my *Connect* and I love everything about it. My favorite thing in this issue would be Spinning the Track and Ty's



piece, but I do love the poems and the updates, and I got hungry reading the recipes.

**TBT:** I really enjoyed all of the stories and columns. The stories that resonated with me the most was Joe's story about his daughter Netta and how she pushed him to want to learn how to read. I found strength in his determination to want to better himself for his daughter so that he could live up to being her hero. His success with learning how to read is inspiring and it really made me think that I have to put my all into my novel so that I can make my children proud of me and to live up to being their hero.

I enjoyed Ms. Keela's column, she is always lacing the tardy ppl with game, every time I read her columns I always leave with my tennis shoes laced. She is so wise. A Step by MR was like that! The lines that stuck out to me the most was, "Therefore, it never took a repetitive source of action connected to failures to make me convinced... Especially when I understood early on the best lesson in life were those experiences that made me repent..." I wish that I could say that my coming to prison the first time would have made me wiser then, but even so the experiences I have learned from my past mistake that landed me in prison this time has caused me to look deeply within myself, and when I saw what it was that I was looking for, I did repent. And I was forgiven by those who love me as I have forgiven myself because I love me also. With that being said, I enjoyed all of the poetry and columns by all of our FM family... Justin's story was deep. I like how he is connected with those who are in the struggle. I admire his character and I want him to know that we need more brave and strong ppl like him who see the truth about the world and their governments. Keep up the good work Justin and know that you are appreciated.

**VC:** The article by Aiyah, Around the World: If Lebanon Was A Woman... I really liked the creativity in that article. I also found Rest As Resistance by Courtney to be very enlightening too, along with Urban Farming by Justin, which I didn't even know urban farming existed in the city. I said long ago that I kinda wanted to plant my own garden and so for me that article and info just increased my want even more.

## A SPECIAL ANNOUNCEMENT FROM IMANEE

Hi Fam!

This is Imanee, Free Minds' Prison Book Club & Poetry Specialist. Many of you may have received letters from me as I've been a Free Minds staff member since 2019, which is the year I began as an intern! Free Minds provided a home to me when I felt homesick, and a family when I needed it most. Throughout my two and a half years here, I have grown tremendously. My mind has become so open to the world, to others, and to myself. Each and every Free Minds Poet Ambassador and staff has been an inspiration to me, teaching me life-long skills from providing emotional support, to interacting with people of all ages, backgrounds, and races at outreach events. I am so grateful to this organization as well as the individuals that comprise it.

It is with happiness, and sadness, that I announce that I will be starting my next chapter elsewhere, as I am turning my final page at Free Minds. Starting February 7th, I will be working at a media company in New York. I was born and raised in New Orleans and returned to New Orleans from DC at the start of the pandemic. It feels good to go back up North, although I don't know if I'm ready for the cold! I am excited to start this journey. My main goal is to pave a path for everyone looking up to me back home, and I'm proud to say that I'm doing just that. :)

Free Minds will forever be in my heart. Thank you to everyone reading this.

Peace and Hair Grease,  
Imanee ♥

# FAMILY TIES: NAVIGATING LOSS, GRIEF, AND FORGIVENESS FROM BEHIND BARS WITH THE HELP OF FAMILY

By MR, FM Member

I came into this world 39 years ago under a cloud of health complications. I was born prematurely, feet first with the umbilical cord wrapped around my neck, depriving me of oxygen vital to my brain. I also had a hole in my heart, and would later develop asthma. The doctors told my mother not to get too attached to me because I wouldn't live long. But I survived! That's why she's always affectionately called me her "miracle baby." I think the fragility of my initial existence may have contributed to the extremely close bonds I've shared with my mother and siblings over the years.

My father wasn't ever in my life. It was my mom, the single mother of six children who raised us. Ours was a Muslim household where the Islamic structure was implemented. This included etiquette, manners and respect for one's Ummi (mother). My mother had once been in the streets herself battling addiction and so she could spot the instant that I began to veer into the streets myself.

Growing up, I loved basketball, and I was good. As an AAU player, I was even scouted and recruited to play at a private all-boys high school with an outstanding reputation. Unfortunately, my dreams of playing college ball were shattered by a combination of circumstances. I struggled in school and despite recommendations for me to be placed in special education due to having autism, my mother wouldn't allow it. My grades fell. Around the same time, we lost our subsidized rent voucher and were forced to move to a rough neighborhood in Southeast DC. At the time, it was a totally foreign environment to me. A place where you prey or get preyed upon. Eat or get ate. Shoot or get shot. At least, that's how I viewed it through my 13-year-old eyes. After we moved there, one of my sisters was raped. What kid can focus on dreams of college scholarships at a time like this?

Being the oldest boy of the house, I sensed the need to protect my family. I fell in with the wrong crowd, picked up a gun, and the downhill spiral ensued. When I was 19, I was locked up for a shooting. My family was devastated! My mother started wearing my clothes just to deal with her loss. Her grief wouldn't allow her to miss a visitation or court date. Over the years, she took to America's highways and skies to visit me, no matter how far they sent me from home. I've been behind bars now for two decades. And I know this has come with an enormous toll for my family.

And yet, my family all have continued to love and support me during the hardship of incarceration. Of course, love as an expression takes on many shapes and forms. With each individual, and their financial means, their capacity to express their love varies. But they have always sent me letters and photos, visited me, taken my phone calls, put money in my commissary account and advocated for me. Beyond that, their thoughts and prayers for me are real! In short, I know how deeply they love me.

I've also worked hard to reciprocate and be there for them. One way is by being a trusted male figure to my nieces and nephews. My sisters are both single mothers. So, for example, when my 21-year-old nephew was arrested, he didn't know how to express his feelings in writing to the judge. I was able to share with him the importance of showing maturity and taking accountability for our actions. We talked about his emotions and his remorse. This helped him to find his voice and as it turned out, the victims, the prosecutor, and the judge were all greatly moved by his letter and he didn't have to do additional prison time.

Our family was truly tested in 2012 when our beloved Ummi died of cancer. This loss could have upended me and my siblings' world if we had let it. She was the nucleus around which we had all revolved as a family. This new reality meant we needed to redefine our roles and distribute the burden evenly, so as not to overwhelm any one person. As anyone who has lost a parent knows, the grief never goes away. But the support of loved ones eases the pain.

Tragedy struck again in 2020, when our little brother "E," a talented and successful local DC rapper, was shot and killed in the streets of DC. When I learned of his death, I felt like I'd stepped on a landmine with nowhere to take cover. Initially, I won't lie, I wanted revenge! By the grace of Allah though, I realized that we couldn't let traumatic grief consume us. We had to seek higher ground. Personally, I knew I had once been in the shoes of the young man who pulled the trigger. But now I realized my siblings and I had been thrust into a unique position of breaking the cycle of gun violence.

There is a quote that in some form, has been attributed to everyone from Saint Augustine, to Nelson Mandela, to poet Maya Angelou: *"Revenge (or unforgiveness) is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die."* I can sincerely say that I have forgiven my brother's killer. I hope that this in turn will allow them to forgive themselves and foster within them a greater appreciation for human life. I will be writing a letter to his judge advocating for him. I have urged my family to go to his court date and sit with his family. We've all lost something. But we can choose to use my brother's death as a legacy to promote life.

I think my family and I have been able to nurture our bonds despite the bars that separate us by learning to cultivate patience, empathy, unconditional love and understanding. Of course, even when committed to a daily practice of this, we are all bound to come up short at times (I know I do!). But that's where the spirit of forgiveness comes into play.

A supportive family (whether it's your biological family or your "found" family) makes weathering the storm of incarceration so much easier. For any of my Free Minds brothers and sisters wanting to forge stronger ties with your people on the outside, I would suggest finding creative (and inexpensive) ways to celebrate others' achievements in life. Learn to be open to each other's views and outlooks. And remember, that doesn't mean you have to accept them as your own! But you will be surprised at the fascinating things you will learn if you open yourselves up to one another.

Some of my favorite wellbeing practices:

- Listening to or reading melodious poetic prose! I find that it soothes me.
- Listening to NPR radio broadcasts. It satisfies my love of language and my hunger for ideas!
- Cultivating a diverse social network. It raises everyone's consciousness!
- Practicing genuine self-reflection which has allowed me to chart a positive course and mindset going forward.





# JUST LAW: UNDERSTANDING THE DC YOUTH REHABILITATION ACT (YRA)

By DJ, Free Minds Member

What is the jurisprudence on the District of Columbia Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA)? The answer to this question is a mystery to many individuals that use the DC YRA. This law applies to individuals sentenced in DC Superior Court who were under 25 at the time of the offense. This does not apply to first or second degree murder, first or second degree sexual abuse, or first degree child sexual abuse.

Below we explore some of the decisions by the DC Court of Appeals that you can review in order to help you gain more understanding about the purpose of the DC YRA. In 1991, the DC Court of Appeals issued a decision in a case called *Latimore v. United States*, 597 A.2d 363, 366 (DC 1991). The *Latimore* decision issued by the DC Court of Appeals settled a lot of dust regarding the true purpose of the DC YRA. In the *Latimore* case the DC Court of Appeals made the following statement in its decision:

"One of the three stated purposes of the YRA, perhaps the most important of the three, is to provide an 'opportunity for a deserving youth offender to start anew through expungement of his criminal record.'" *Latimore v. United States*, 597 A.2d 363, 366 (DC 1991); *see generally Ferguson v. United States*, 157 A.3d 1282, 1290 (DC 2013) (acknowledging that YRA grants Superior Court flexibility with sentencing of deserving youth).

FACTS!!!! As they say. It is amazing to find legal support from the D.C. Court of Appeals for such a great law. And, to rule out any doubt about the importance of the DC YRA, the DC Court of Appeals reaffirmed its reasoning by stating the following in a case called *Halloway v. United States*, 951 A.2d 59, 65 (DC 2008):

"The legislative history of the YRA 'demonstrates that its purpose was threefold: (1) to give the court flexibility in sentencing a youth offender according to his or her individual needs, (2) to separate youth offenders from more experienced offenders, and (3) to give a youth offender the opportunity to start anew through expungement of his or her criminal record.'" *Halloway v. United States*, 951 A.2d 59, 65 (DC 2008).

It is imperative to understand the DC YRA. Keep track of the law because it can help you change your own life by obtaining a suspended sentence; fair sentence; and an opportunity to set that conviction out of public view with a set aside once the sentence is complete. These are all perfect benefits. So, don't miss out. Continue to learn all that you can about the DC YRA!

Until next time, keep your minds free!!

DJ

**NOTICE THIS DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE!  
YOU MUST STILL CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY**

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# DC PHOTOS



Statues at the National Harbor: Famous jazz musician Louis Armstrong; Rosie the Riveter representing the woman from World War II who became the symbol of women's empowerment; Protecting Your Freedom



Chesapeake Bay



This sculpture called *The Awakening* was installed at the National Harbor in 2008. Do you remember where in DC it was before then?



# DC PHOTOS



In celebration of Lunar New Year, the Kennedy Center hosted a winter lantern display celebrating the Year of the Tiger with colorful animals and flowers.



Newly renovated Ballou High School field



The HerStory 5k celebrated Women's History Month

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!

# SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

*Do you have advice for the Advice Man? 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 recently went to court for a possible resentencing. I have been doing everything right for more than three years. I was working hard, taking classes and staying out of the way. I was motivated because I thought I was going to be able to go home and raise my children and do all the things I've been dreaming of doing. The judge denied me. I'm not even gonna lie, it made me feel like giving up hope. Even when you do everything right, they can shoot you down. I don't want to fall back into my old negative mindset, but I just can't climb out of this dark hole. What can I do?

MJ

Greetings FM family.

*This present Connect we are tackling a tough, but common reaction from our brother MJ about how to calm and focus our emotions after a disappointing setback. Hold on, MJ! We got you. One setback, even a few setbacks, has never been able to stop us as a people from moving forward in life.*

*Right off the bat, I'm here for you, MJ, and any soul who may be struggling with negative thoughts. After reading your post, my first reaction was I wanted to hug my brother and second pick you up with some uplifting and positive feedback ASAP.*

*"What can I do?" you asked. In my hypersensitive replay, I would like to point out that it's right there in your post: "Even When You Do Everything Right." People, when we encounter discomfort and setbacks we maintain a balanced wellbeing by continuing to do everything right. MJ, most times one or a few losses isn't the championship, Champ! It's just a setback.*

*Every successful person didn't look at a setback and feverishly spiral downhill and fall off the cliff. They were steadfast and proactive, and made small goals and plan As and Bs and climbed the same mountaintops Dr. King and our ancestors been to. Wellbeing is adding something new and positive to our old stale routine. MJ, if you want to live your dreams, you have to stay the positive course of wellbeing, which I break down into something called a "Well Balanced Lifestyle." At the end of my advice I'll share 6 elements to focus on for wellbeing.*

*You and your children's future still depends on you staying well and ready, then when the chance comes you won't have to get ready for the next law change or your next legal petition you may want to file. I believe in you, if you are sincere in salvaging and redeeming your life. I want us all to keep/make our future bright, and at this point I suggest we focus on a structured, well-balanced lifestyle. But patience is key!*

*There's no ducking setbacks and disappointments, because so*

*many things aren't perfect. To stay on track, I would like to share these 6 elements in our life to aid us with the foresight and strength to look our battles in the eye and conquer each of them:*

- 1. Physical Health:** without maintaining this one can do nothing; work, finish your sentence sane, worship, etc. These are the 3 elements in physical health: Activity, Nutrition, Sleep.
- 2. Emotional Health:** because never is drug use, violence, or criminal behavior the answer to cope with your problems and emotions. Readers, please! We have to seek out education and professional & trusted allies' assistance; while being open and willing to identify and express our emotions honestly without causing harm to ourselves or others. Wilding out won't solve problems, they'll create more.
- 3. Healthy Relationships:** which here plays a major role in either making the right or wrong decisions. Let it be known this type of relationship can assist us in making wise choices on a daily basis. Learning to mend and build healthy relationships is crucial to peacefully serving time and a successful reentry.
- 4. Financial Stability:** focus on finding your gift and doing what you like, to save up and provide for the present and future. Taking advantage of work benefits like bonuses, medical, paid vacations, and retirement. Starting and maintaining good work habits in prison creates great work character, that will follow you throughout.
- 5. Finding Meaning and Purpose:** an important part of Wellbeing is having a sense of purpose, which guides and directs our choices, steps, and behavior. What that may look like on this side of the fence to us is being vigilant and studying more law, reentry education, faith, and engaging in programming. With all roads leading to being persistent in being a better human being and doing the right thing upon release. Here are 6 keys to having strong meaning and purpose: Hope, Commitment, Integrity, Calm, Belonging, Service.
- 6. Community Involvement:** for us this area of our lives speaks volumes, builds character and relationships, and makes a contribution to the community in which we live, and perhaps even in the one we may have harmed. It offers us the chance to be a positive influence, be a role model, and to make positive change.

*MJ and readers, I believe doing any kind of sentence we all come across some type of challenge. I just ask then, who dares come with me and level up to their rightful position in life with their family and community? Believe me, we can get there by buying into and applying the tools I've just shared with you here. I hope with all my heart we can level up together, even here in prison.*

My Best Wishes,  
TS

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Therapeutic Poetry

By AR

"When we're hurting, we say hurting things  
the rage, its madness causes confusion  
look at the disaster it brings"

Heal, take it one day at a time.

This is your prescription,

rest, recuperate, rejuvenate –

From working, a medicated refill, in your faith, will,  
your strength, a therapeutic drill.

To face what you have to go through.

Stay focus in the valley of hills

Closing up will button up "the silence"  
is an over hill.

The frustration bothers your concentration

But remaining strong shows your determination

Develop communication skills

learn how to encourage yourself

Acknowledge the good times about you,

Which is your self-preservation

Stay calm, relax and chill

Pay attention, monitor your thoughts

Make the arrangement that are needed

So that you won't become

Mentally-ill.

look around with management

healthy adjustments, clean decision will

wipe up the anger spills,

At the table makes things stable

Lay them out like piled up bills

*To be continued*

## Nourishment I Needed

By JH

Nourish means to promote growth

Which is what Free Minds aims to do the most

Growth to our minds, bodies and souls

They aim to feed us all young and old

Through books, poems and a bunch of love

The Nourishment they give is never served cold

Filled with Vitamins, Protein and a taste that's simply the best

Then they hit you with dessert

Which they call "The Connect"

In that you'll feed off taste from different cultures

And sweets from a variety of races

They even give you a little legal news

That can possibly help you with your cases

Free Minds has given me the Nourishment

I need to survive in these harsh situations.

## Apologetic (For Ms. Ebonee)

By WTJ

*After Ebonee's story in the book*

When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)

I read your story and cried because of the reality in your truth

The pain, the fear, the grief you feel is unnecessary proof

That gunfire through tight jaw and clench fist hurts

more than the target

One family is hurting from the lost, the other from the charges

I've done things in my youth never thinking how actions

play the role of recruiter

Therefore, I'm very sorry if I've ever influenced the influencer

who influenced a shooter

I pray for your strength, your family and your dedication

for peace. And that God would one day open our

eyes to another's pain that we may truly see

## Fruit that Fills

By JK

I crave the kind of fruits that fills

The kind that with just one bite

My heart begins to feel

Full of life, from the type that's ripe,

Where kindness wins the fight,

Where I'm gentle with all my might.

I want to enjoy the patience

With my taste buds

Reverse all this hatred with tons of love,

Swallow the peace that comes from above.

I become humbled as I stare at the tree

That bears the fruit that transform

Me from weak to meek,

I connect with you the vine that

makes me complete

The sweet nectar of

Goodness and Faith

let's me experience joy

in a whole 'nother way.

I consume the passion,

The natural essence of

Fruits that never goes

Bad or grows old

I live by the roots of the tree

That produces discipline and self-control

I am now led by the seed that perfect

The fruits of my soul

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Soul, Mind and Heart

By MH

The soul ever wanting to be nourished  
Feed it from the fountain of knowledge and understanding  
Our souls, minds and hearts are a form always thirsty  
Needs always to be taken care of and nourished  
Irrigate the soul with the beauty of the world and nature  
Plant the seeds of knowledge and understanding in the mind  
Harvest in the heart the love of humanity  
Never stop cultivating your form  
Keep it ever green, fruitful and nourished  
As long as you look after it  
It will in return produce for you the sweetest fruit

## Behind My Closed Eyes

By TT

My heart casts a shadow;  
The only darkness inside me.  
The night flows,  
But it's bright behind my closed eyes.  
Reality is cold, cold as ice.  
These memories are fire...  
Melting my plight.  
For thus I smile, I laugh and cry...  
I've hurt, I've loved – a thousand times.  
These vivid images soar behind my closed eyes.  
I'm still alive in these stories...  
A hundred faces and voices –  
A hundred hands reach out...  
And I'm touched by my past as if it were poetry.  
Although the night surrounds me...  
These memories NOURISH me.

## Nourished

By LW

I feel good today! ... and many ask why?  
It's because my yesterdays are now history and time  
continues to fly  
Smoothly and elegant like birds or paper planes pass by  
Leading me to another day... closer... to laughter  
to true tranquility... to comfort... to home...  
A place where I can be free as a dove or once trapped smoke  
A place where my mind can truly have the liberty to roam  
At last! My soul feels hydrated and nourished  
By all the new beginnings and endless possibilities life can give

A soul once starved of felicity and positivity...  
A soul once scarred and marked by tragedy and shortcomings  
Can now live or better... swim  
victoriously like Olympic divers in a pool  
Soul shares that same glee, full of life and happiness  
Refreshed and reluctant to break.

## The Wonder Of Creation

By JP

I wake to beautiful mornings, birds chirping, the smell of trees, a breeze cool to my face, the wonder of life awakening to a new day...

I often think of things beyond this earth like the night where the sky is ablaze with shining stars, one shining brighter than all, the moon hangs full wondering what it would be like to live amongst the stars becoming one with the universe...

God's creativity leaves me in awe from mankind, to the animals, plants, and the breath that we breathe all beautifully created. The birth of a child, the call of the wild. the growth of it all to see the manifestation of life in that we are and do...

The Wonder Of Creation like the water that quenches our thirst, the plants and vegetation, meat that nourishes our bodies, to help us grow. The flowers that bloom, seasons of Mother Nature's wonderful gifts, life all entangled into one another, one not surviving without the other...

God's love each day learning to understand the Wonder of Creation...

## Nourishment

By TG

My heart is deeply famished.  
It's starving for a hug.  
Are you so cruel  
to deny a belly full?  
Please don't shoulder shrug  
because I have not energy  
to jitterbug.  
Slow dancing's better.  
I'm nourished in  
your arms.

## Food for Thought

By TA

A mind is a terrible thing to waste,  
that's what I've been told.  
So I feed it a variety of tastes,  
spiritual, non-fiction, history, self-help, autobiographies, and fiction.  
Often contemplating – locking the knowledge in  
Holding it hostage  
Til' it's time to pay homage.  
And show what's been on my mind  
when I write between these lines  
Must exercise it  
Because it stays on go mode  
as the knowledge comes in by the boatload.  
to say the least  
obviously my mind is obese

Let's Get Cooking  
Art by Cynthia,  
Free Minds volunteer



# BLACK BOYS OM

## PAYING IT FORWARD: BLACK BOYS OM *By Imanee*

I interviewed B.Reimoku, a member of Black Boys Om, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the wellness of Black men through yoga and meditation. The name of the nonprofit, "Om," symbolizes the sound chanted at the beginning of a yoga or meditation session.

### What are the benefits of yoga and how has it helped your individual wellness?

Yoga helps me in a variety of ways. Firstly, my body feels more limber, my spine is more flexible. Overall, there is a general sense of wellbeing once I'm done. While I'm in the middle of it, its torture! Once I'm done, it feels amazing. I sleep better, I typically experience insomnia so it helps with that. I feel energized, I feel healthier in every aspect. It touches every single aspect of my wellness.

### Can you describe Black Boys Om and its mission?

Black Boys Om was started by a dear spiritual brother and friend of mine, Danny. The mission is to bring yoga and wellness practices to Black boys and the Black community. Danny started it with that intent. It has grown incredibly! Now, it's the biggest hub for Black practitioners of a contemplative tradition or yoga. It gives us a space where we can come together and support one another with different initiatives, both in our personal businesses and for Black Boys Om too. So, it's a beautiful organization that is necessary.

### For individuals that are incarcerated, what are some simple yoga techniques that they can do?

I like to frame it as *movement*. Just move. I think we know intuitively what our bodies need. If we try to stand on one leg or stretch out our hamstring, we know what our bodies need. I would say the 26 Bikram Postures are highly recommended because they hit pretty much every place in the body that needs to be worked out.

### What are common misconceptions that individuals may have about wellness and yoga in particular?

I think there is a public perception that is still very strong that yoga is for white women. I think with more Black men joining the yoga and wellness industry, we're seeing that that's not true. We're actually seeing that it's necessary to have representation. I think for a lot of

male-socialized folks, there is this stigma that yoga is something feminine or yoga is something not for 'us.' I think that's in part due to the fact that we often don't see ourselves represented. That couldn't be farther from the truth: we know that yoga is for everybody. We can let go of any erroneous notions of, "This is for you, or this is not for me." This is for everybody. I encourage Black men in general to try it out and see. One way we measure youth is through the flexibility of the spine so yoga is one way to stay young too!

### What advice would you give to individuals that are hesitant to start yoga?

Get out of your comfort zone. Just try it. Try something that you haven't experienced before. You can't grow in your comfort zone. Because yoga is such an ancient practice, it can take you on this never ending path of growth and self-development. If you apply it that way, spiritually as well. It addresses many of our human needs in terms of spirituality, movement, and community. Doing yoga in a community setting (of course socially distanced) is one of the best ways to make use of the practice.

## 26 Bikram Yoga Poses





# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey guys hope you are all doing very well!

Ya'll know I always try to incorporate the theme into my greeting so that I am not so redundant each month, hope I'm pulling it off LOL! So I want to pose a question to you guys, and please feel free to send me a response to the office. The question is, what does wellbeing mean to you? I feel like wellbeing means different things to different people and it's super important because without it, quality of life decreases significantly. To me, wellbeing means being physically, mentally, and spiritually content, and also being able to effectively manage stress, because let's face it, we all have life stressors. It also means to be at a point where you are okay with yourself and state of being and I believe that wherever you are in the world physically or spiritually, you have the ability to create wellbeing for yourself. I say this because your wellbeing is all about YOU, not others, because it's based entirely on YOUR thoughts and feelings, YOUR own state of being. I think that this is so important to note because too many times, we allow others to dictate our dispositions and we only get one life, so it seems pretty selfish of us to allow others to shift our perspective of ourselves but trust me, I'm just as guilty so I get it, it just comes with the territory of being human. So let's switch gears and talk about how we nurture, develop and protect our wellbeing. I believe a very important first step to this is recognizing how valued you are as a human being, and being very vigilant about not allowing anyone to make you question that. We are all unique, not one of us has the same DNA or fingerprints, we were all created with a very individual, intricate, intentional and specific blueprint, and that my friends makes each and every last one of you special! Believe that fact, embrace it and then holistically incorporate some soul enhancing practices such as getting proper sleep and consistent exercise and creating healthy habits to look after your physical health. Also be sure to keep company with like minded folks, people who will see your value as a human being and treat you with the dignity and respect that you deserve, who will also pour into you and not tear you down, this is vitally important to your sense of wellbeing. Lastly, you could try checking in with yourself at the end of each day and ask yourself:

Did I take care of myself today? If so, how? If not, why?

Did I treat others around me the way that I would like to be treated? If not what prevented me?

Did I do something just for me that I really enjoyed? If so, how? If not, why?

Did I strive to be the best version of myself today? If not, why?

This could help you foster and maintain a sense of healthy wellbeing, as you track you can always go back to see if there are patterns or any areas that you need to adjust to ensure that you are developing, nurturing and maintaining your well being!

Now on to some exciting information! You guys know that I always try to keep you up on opportunities here in the DMV that would greatly benefit you once you're home. Well today is a little different, today, I want to let you know about a group made up of your Free Minds brothers called the Planning Committee. The Planning Committee was instituted in 2019 because we wanted Free Minds members to feel more invested in giving back, we also wanted to empower members by giving them a voice and a chance to help make concrete decisions about ways in which they could collaborate and share their thoughts and ideas about peer engagement, empowerment and community development. Some examples include sponsoring donation drives to buy items to distribute to the homeless, coming up with special topics and vetting and inviting guest speakers to give presentations at our weekly Build Up sessions and coming up with ways in which they can support their fellow Free Minds brothers as they face the challenges of reentry. Every Free Minds member is eligible to be a part of the Planning Committee and interested parties have an opportunity to join every four months by submitting a two paragraph letter/email explaining why they would like to join, and that's where you come in! We are now officially inviting our Free Minds family on the inside to join the Planning Committee! We just started a new session last week, so interested parties can send in a letter letting us know why you're interested as well as any talents or gifts that you would bring to the Planning Committee before May to be considered. Please write Free Minds Planning Committee on the envelope. We are looking forward to hearing from you!

Until we *Connect* again,  
Ms. Keela



# KEEP YOUR HEAD UP

**By Maji, Free Minds contributor incarcerated in Maryland state facility**

"Knowledge is like a garden, if it is not cultivated, it cannot be harvested."  
– Cameroon African Proverb

It seems as though whenever I talk to certain friends or family members and as our conversation are about to end, once we confirmed any plans to talk in the future, that person usually end the conversation saying these magic words:

"Hey, I want you to KEEP YOUR HEAD UP in there, okay ?!"

At first, I just would go along with what they were saying and reply back with a sincere response. But closing in on 16 years of being incarcerated, the message itself sometimes seems to be an excuse for the shortcoming that person has been displaying as far as being supportive in my situation. Nowadays, I normally remain silent when anyone tells me to keep my head up. Honestly, the expression irks me to the core. Not because of whose it's coming from but I wonder why it's being said in the first place.

I tried my best over the years to explain to my loved ones about what it took and what it's taking to stay mentally strong while INCARCERATED. Sometimes I be wanting to take them back to when I first was arrested, and how due to me not having the funds to retain a decent criminal defense lawyer, I was forced to sign up with a court-appointed public defender. Being young and unaware of how severe the charges were against me, the court system took advantage of that. Especially after the state's attorney handed down an INDICTMENT superseding the original charges, knowing it wouldn't be contested by the court appointed defense attorney. The "public pretender" did enough to save himself from negligence because he knew I was naive to how the court worked (Maryland state court system).

I fell victim to the tricks and the back door politics that was going on between him and the state's attorney, that once it was all over the JUDGE handed down an egregious LIFE sentence and I'm places on a bus being shipped off to prison. Watching all this play out in front of me, I kept asking those around me questions and how to get out of this situation, but nobody could give me the right answer. At that moment, it was the first time I felt ALONE. I felt DEFEATED. I was walking around the prison compound with my head low and the only thing anybody could tell me was:

"Bro, you're going to be alright. You gotta KEEP YOUR HEAD UP."

Then as time was going by, I started to lose contact with people whom I thought would be in my corner. The greatest challenge was keeping my name clear of any foolishness or B.S., that someone else was trying their best to put me in. People think it's easy to isolate yourself here and focus on doing your time to eventually get HOME. But there's always somebody who is so used to being miserable, they want everyone else to live in that misery with them. I have to place a "SERIOUS LOOK" on my

face and use that as a repellent to drive away these types of individuals. Incidents like that can leave you stressed-out, agitated, troubled, irritated and upset; which usually lead to one having a mental breakdown. And I'm still supposed to KEEP MY HEAD UP, right?????

There's many other problems I could go on and on about what I go through here, but it will look as if I'm starting to complain. For every problem, there has to be a solution. The worst (or best) thing they could've done to most of us sitting in a prison cell, is give us time to think. Gaining insight to how you want to change and do better in life, you begin to enhance your awareness and sharpen your perception. Once the thoughts in my head started changing, I saw myself becoming a different person. And in order for me to survive these conditions, I had to take care of my mind above everything else.

To nurture those new ways of thinking, I allowed myself to do something for the first time ever in my life: SIT DOWN. After accepting the fact that no one put me in this position but me, the next step was to do a thorough evaluation of self. What helped me to develop consciousness was the fundamentals of reading and studying. In his book, *Urban Philosophy: Thought and Behavior System*, Baba Imhotep Asis Fatiu explains the significance of study when he writes:

"The process of study should not be an empty endeavor but more so a promising pursuit. It should feed our intellect, nourish our psychology, enrich our spirit and nurture our emotions. Our studies should empower us."

Now that I was coming across this newfound knowledge, it was time to put forth what I learned into action. It started by getting rid of the notion that there wasn't any light at the end of the tunnel. If I wanted FREEDOM, I knew I had to focus on behaving as if my number could be called tomorrow. Knowing that the struggle is real in prison, I couldn't allow myself to become institutionalized. As time went by, I recognized my attitude changing seeing what used to get me fired up, I now let it all go with a smile. As a result, that LIFE sentence was vacated and reduced to a number. Even though I still have a lot more growing to do, I'm proud of the person I see when I look in the mirror.

My story alone is no different from the many others who have ever dealt with being incarcerated. There's always that fork in the road and most of us have to choose which path to take. Are you going to keep following the path that leads to destruction? Or are you going to run towards possessing full liberation? Remember there's a whole new generation coming up whose sounding off on the injustice that the criminal justice system has done to us and our families. It's now our job to utilize our position to grow and develop.

So the next time you talk to me, please don't tell me to KEEP MY HEAD UP, rather tell me to KEEP FIGHTING until I'm physically FREE. Without a doubt, that's what is going to motivate me to want more and do more.



# REAL WORLD OF WORK

with JoJo

*Free Minds member JoJo was arrested at the age of 16 and served five years. He was released in 2015. He is the Co-founder of ##WefitDC, a company dedicated to closing the health and wellness gap in the District, and shining light on native DMV wellness professionals. He is currently a fellow at the Georgetown Pivot Program\* a one-year business and entrepreneurship program created specifically for formerly incarcerated individuals at the Georgetown University School of Business. Recently, Kelli sat down for a conversation with JoJo about his life and his life's work.*

**KELLI:** I remember meeting you on the juvenile unit back in 2009. And look at you now! Can you start by telling us about your childhood and what things led up to your incarceration?

**JOJO:** I was a Ward 8 baby. My mother fell victim to the crack epidemic. She couldn't really take care of me and my little brothers so our 19-year-old sister got custody of us, even though she was still just a baby herself. She and her husband did the best they could. They made sure we had shoes, we were fed and had a roof over our heads. But as soon as I went outside, or went to school, I'd see violence. Then my sister had kids of her own. Around that time, she suffered a mental breakdown, and Child Protective Services got involved again. This time, they placed me with my biological father, who lived in an underserved neighborhood in Southeast. I was named after my step-father. I'd met my biological father before, but my mother told me he didn't believe I was his child. It was confusing as a kid. So going to live with him, I felt a lot of anger and hatred for him. At 13, I felt like, "You can't discipline me!" and "Don't put your hands on me!" Instead, I'd be getting caught up representing my neighborhood, fighting, missing school, and robbing people. I was doing all the things that eventually landed me in jail.

**KELLI:** You served five years. Is there a particular time you can identify when a transformation happened in your life?

**JOJO:** Absolutely. It was during the last part of my bid. I was about to fight this guy and his cellmate pulled me aside. The cellmate had been locked up for 19 years. My nerves went up and I thought he was going to try to hurt me. But he said: "JoJo, look man. You telling this man you gonna spit in his face. Are you gonna keep doing the same things that got you in here? Because if you gonna go home with the same mentality and keep talking to grown men like that, you gonna get killed, young brother."

Basically from that day on, everything changed. In that moment, I just connected with the guy. We ended up becoming cellmates. He went to jail in 1993 at the same time I was being created in my mother's womb. I went to pick him up when he was released in 2016. He's 47 now and we just have a bond. He's my business partner!

**KELLI:** When you were released, did you know you wanted to start a fitness company?

**JOJO:** To be honest, I didn't know what to do with my life! I just wanted to do the right thing. I'd been reading, talking with my mentor, and reading Free Minds literature, but I still had no idea. To be honest, I was nervous and scared. I went in as a little boy, and I was coming home as a grown man. I decided wherever I could get a job I was gonna take it.

My very first job was selling tickets to tourists from all over the world for Big Bus Tours - those double-decker buses you see taking people to the monuments and memorials in DC? "Hop on, hop off!" I became one of the top sales agents of the company and got promoted. I wasn't satisfied with that though. I wanted to drive the buses! I ended up taking a labor job out in Virginia. It was hard. I felt like a slave cutting grass, and there were rats running around, but I did it so I could get

experience driving their big trucks. Between the experience and studying on my own, I was able to pass the CDL test and get my license. They couldn't believe it when I came back to Big Bus Tours with my CDL and started driving the double decker buses! Then I got offered a job in PG County driving people to medical appointments. I got really close with all these older people who were on dialysis or going through chemo, that were really suffering. They started dying left and right and that really hurt me. My own mom had died of AIDS. Between watching my mom suffer and seeing what was happening in my own community, I just developed this passion and decided I wanted to address the disparities in access to quality health care, fitness and wellness in DC.

**KELLI:** So when exactly was #WefitDC born?

**JOJO:** When COVID started, I saw that while Wards 7 and 8 didn't have the most cases in the city, we still had the most deaths. COVID was affecting a predominantly Black population that already had underlying health conditions because of the healthcare desert.\*\* I wanted to do something about that for my community. I knew that we had a really strong base of fitness trainers in the DMV, and yet the DC government was overlooking them and bringing fitness people from the outside to represent DC. So I was like, you know what? I'm gonna create a team. I called a few people, like-minded wellness professionals who I felt would be good at this. I set a meeting in the Benning Terrace area to brainstorm. There was literally a shootout happening in the area while we were having this meeting, and we didn't budge. We were determined to continue the meeting! And that's how the movement began.

**KELLI:** What does #WefitDC do exactly?

**JOJO:** We started in 2020 by offering free workouts in different neighborhoods that a lot of people are scared to go into. We came consistently, every single week. We partnered with organizations to bring free nutritious food in (oranges, apples, fresh vegetables, water... etc.). We'd have a 45 minute workout with some of the best trainers in the city volunteering their services. At our first workout, more than 90 people showed up! One of the DC Council members even came out. The Bureau of Parks & Recreation tried to shut us down because the crowd was so big and we didn't have a permit. When that moment happened, I just knew this was what it was supposed to be! This is what I gotta do!

**KELLI:** And how has #WefitDC grown?

**JOJO:** Because we came every weekend consistently, people were like *who are these people that just keep showing up?* We have quality services too! Certified trainers, yoga instructors, a full-blown curriculum where we educate the community on every factor of wellness. We have guest speakers on subjects like mental health, etc. And the workouts are for all fitness levels, all ages, kids, people with physical issues, we welcome all of them!

It really exploded through word of mouth and social media. We've also been featured in the media, including on National Public Radio and in Men's Health Magazine. Right now, I'm participating in the Georgetown Pivot program so that I can learn everything I need to know to strategically build the business. I came to this program to learn new ideas. I'm like a great white shark. I'm serious! I just want to keep learning. We are building partnerships (we already partner with Giant Foods, Martha's Table, and others) so

that we can pay our trainers what their services are worth. We've also developed a #WefitDC apparel line. Everyone's been asking for apparel. They want to wear the #WefitDC name! I don't want to do anything prematurely, though. I am learning so I can market it correctly and do everything the smart way.

**KELLI:** What goals do you have for #WefitDC and your own career going forward?

**JOJO:** I want #WefitDC to focus on healthy activations (the free workouts) and use apparel sales and our partnerships as a funding stream. We also partner with corporations to do virtual and in-person fitness services for their employees. I've got a nonprofit organization and plan to develop a trainers' certification school. I've already been approached by people around the country asking me how to bring the concept to their cities. Ultimately, I'm working to get #WefitDC in other communities and just continue to grow the brand.

But my life isn't just #WefitDC. I'm also studying acting. For the last six years, I've been studying acting at The Theatre Lab (a dramatic arts school in DC). In fact, I'm starring in King Lear next month! I love acting. I've also had a few small roles in HBO productions. I want to dominate the acting industry too!

My most important title though is "Daddy." I have two boys and a girl. My family means everything to me. I love them very much. They see how I'm a go-getter. I bring them out to the workouts. They see me speak. They see my leadership. I'm so grateful to God, that they can see both the hard work and the grind, but also the good things that come when you're doing the hard work to help others.

**KELLI:** Okay, JoJo, you're starting to make my head spin with everything you do! In closing, what would you say you love most about your work?

**JOJO:** Honestly? I love the opportunity to give back to my community. There was a time when I used to think of myself as a monster. That's definitely how the government saw me. So for me to see myself differently now, to be giving back is great. During the colder months, we've shifted our teams to doing environmental cleanups in the hood. And one day this kid walked up to me and said, "Look, Mommy! It's WeFit!" I was like, "Wow, we're looked at like superheroes!" It was an amazing feeling to have someone see me that way. This all started from passion. It's a business now, but that wasn't the ultimate goal. I saw it as a movement to help people. This is my baby.

*\*The Georgetown Pivot Program was featured in The July/August 2019 "Adulthood" issue of the Connect. If you would like more information, write to the Prisons and Justice Initiative, 37th and O Streets NW, Washington, DC 20057.*

*\*\*Healthcare desert refers to areas across the U.S. where people lack adequate access to six key healthcare services: (1) pharmacies, (2) primary care providers, (3) hospitals, (4) hospital beds, (5) trauma centers, and (6) low-cost health centers.*

# #WEFITDC



# THE WRITE WAY: THERAPEUTIC BENEFITS OF WRITING

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

*By Imanee*

*All information provided within this article has been backed by scientific sources.*

Have you ever considered how much impact words on a page can have on your physical, mental, and emotional health? Writing is no stranger to therapy. It can have a profound impact over our lives! Here's how:

For years, practitioners have used journaling, logs, and other methods of writing to help patients heal from internalized trauma and reduce stress. With Covid still surging, the world has experienced heightened stress. A plethora of stress can be detrimental to an individual's health. Writing, specifically journaling, is an amazing (and scientifically backed) stress reliever and has a positive impact on one's mental health. Journaling about stressful situations detoxes the mind of pent-up negative emotions and feelings. Writing helps relieve the mental weight that some situations may put on our lives, such as Covid for example.

To further prove the positive mental benefits of writing, one scientist performed an eye-opening experiment: He split a healthy undergraduate class into four groups, asking each group to write for a period of 15 minutes for one week. Three out of the four groups were asked to journal about traumatic life experiences whereas the other group wrote about minute matters. These professors tracked all four groups of students for the next six months and made a profound discovery: the groups asked to write about traumatic events had less visits to the university's health center overall!

In addition to one's mental health, writing improves physical health. Research by psychologist James W. Pennebaker shows that "suppressing negative, trauma-related thoughts compromises immune functioning... and that those who

write visit the doctor less often." Writing about specific emotions such as illness-induced anxiety or stress can actually improve patients' immune systems. "By writing, you put some structure and organization to those anxious feelings," Pennebaker explains. "It helps you to get past them."

Moreover, writing strengthens your emotional functions! Diarists are more in tune with their emotions as journaling "evokes mindfulness" and allows writers to better regulate their emotions as writing adds structure to the most complicated of emotions. Personally speaking, I relieve stress by writing! Writing allows me to release emotions that are pent-up within my mind. Poetry is my main mode of writing; whenever I feel a negative emotion intensely, such as sadness, anger, confusion, etc. I write. As I write, I physically *feel* the stress leaving my body.

Writing is therapy as it allows us to better process our feelings and hence- our lives. Whenever you are stuck in between a rock and a hard place, try writing, and you'll find yourself freed.



## 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.*

### **Mind Diamonds: Shining On Your Mind By Bobby Bostic**

*Description provided by the author:*

*Throughout its content, it is full of inspiration and each poem relates to people on a personal level. This book covers topics of love, pain, family, work, inspiration, war, poverty, etc. The reader feels the verses as they are being read. They are an inspiration for each and every life occasion.*





## **BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

### ***THE BODY KEEPS THE SCORE***

*with Neely*

The next BAM book is *The Body Keeps the Score* by Bessel Van der Kolk, M.D. An expert in trauma-informed therapy, Van der Kolk discusses how trauma literally reshapes both body and brain. *The Body Keeps the Score* exposes the tremendous power of our relationships both to hurt and to heal – and offers new hope for reclaiming lives. Both a profound and vulnerable read, we are eager to hear your thoughts.



1. Van der Kolk talks about imagination as critical to wellbeing, allowing us the opportunity to envision new possibilities (p.17). Is imagination important in your life? What role does it play?
2. On p.240, Van der Kolk discusses the practice of “free writing,” where you look at an object and start writing whatever comes to your mind. Have you tried this before? If not, try it out. What object did you use, and how did you feel after completing the exercise?
3. How common do you think trauma is in our society? Do you think the main audience for this book should only be therapists, or is it important for everyone to know? How might society benefit if more people were trauma-informed?

4. Which of the techniques mentioned on trauma healing (in Chapters 13-20) stood out to you the most? If you are comfortable sharing, are there any techniques mentioned that you would like to try or have already tried? How did it affect you?

5. Were you surprised to hear about the lower crime and incarceration rates in countries that prioritized affordable health care (p.169-170)? How do you think crime and incarceration would change in the United States if we started prioritizing health and wellness?

6. If you are comfortable sharing, did reading *The Body Keeps the Score* provide any clarity or insight into your own life? Did your understanding of the connection between trauma, the mind, and the body change?

**P.S. Please write in with your votes for the next books from the Book Ballot on page 33**

1st choice: \_\_\_\_\_

2nd choice: \_\_\_\_\_

## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: SPORTS (VOLUME 11, ISSUE 2)

Hey family! The theme for the next issue of the Connect is Sports. Here are some writing prompts to help you get started. And we want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 11, Issue 3 will be exploring the theme of **Wealth**.

### (1)

Point of view, the voice of position from which a story is told, is important in all forms of literature. Try writing a poem or a story from the point of view of a sports broadcaster narrating their favorite game!

### (2)

Athletes are known to use their platforms to advance particular causes. For example, during the 1968 Olympics, first and third place sprinters Tommie Smith and John Carlos raised their fists in protest against racial discrimination faced by African Americans within the United States. A more recent example is football player Colin Kaepernick kneeling during the national anthem in protest against police brutality. Write an opinion piece or poem about how sports and politics may intersect.



### (3)

The lyrics below are from a famous song entitled "Basketball" by Kurtis Blow. Try writing a song about your favorite sport! For an extra challenge, try using the same rhyme scheme *aabb* as Kurtis's song. That means that the first two lines rhyme (sport/court) and the third and fourth lines rhyme (hoop/ooop).

"Basketball is my favorite sport  
I like the way they dribble up and  
                    down the court...  
I like Slam dunks take me to the hoop  
My favorite play is the alley oop"

### (4)

Write an *ode*, a poem dedicated to a particular person or thing, to your favorite player!

### (5)

Try coming up with a brand-new sport. Write about the rules of the sport or how you would teach others to play it.

### (6)

"Never say never because limits, like fears, are illusions," is a quote from the famous basketball player Michael Jordan. Write a poem about a time you pushed yourself past a limit and how this helped you in the long term.

# MEMBERS CONNECT: WELLBEING

## What Nourishes Me?

By RL

What nourishes me? Hope. When I think of what nourishes my soul, what keeps me from collapsing in spiritual exhaustion, it has to be hope. Just like any meal, sometimes it is good for me and sometimes it just needs to be eaten with an eye towards the next meal. Too much hope can be like too much food, poisonous. I know I am losing track of realistic hopefulness when I invest too much of my future on a parole board, only to be let down, or when I invest in a relationship behind these walls only to watch as my good friend leaves after a few years. I also know when I am starving for hope, those days where I don't want to get out of the rack, when anybody I run into is one word away from my bad mood, officer or inmate. In order to stay healthy and enjoy what nourishes me, I have to keep perspective. We all have bad days. Watching a friend leave may be hard but they are hopefully (see how I did that?) moving on to freedom and something better. Parole can give me a no, but one day there will be a yes. Every day brings a chance to consume a healthy dose of hope, so I try to find the good things in most situations. It is not easy but it has gotten easier.

As far as physical nourishment, who doesn't love a good old prison rice bowl? Here is my recipe:

- 1/2 bag of brown rice
- 1 cap full (top of the container) of dried vegetable flakes
- 1 small spoon of olive oil (the small spoon in the utensil kit)
- 1 pinch of salt
- 1 mackerel filet
- 1 handful of Fritos or other chips
- 1 tortilla shell
- 1 big spoon of cheese

Put the rice, salt, olive oil, veggie flakes in a bowl, add hot water until just the top of the rice is covered, cover and let sit. Add hot water to a jug with the mack inside, let sit for about ten minutes, open and drain. Rice should be done by now so add mack (I break it up in the pouch) to rice, stir well. Put the cheese on the tortilla shell and cover the rice with it, let sit covered for a few more minutes, crush up chips and put on top or serve whole for a nice crunch, then serve. Serves one fat guy or two skinny guys.

Enjoy my brothers and sisters. Keep up the hope. Stay nourished in mind and body because that's the one thing they can't steal from us.

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## Find the Beauty in the Storm

By JP

It was 2006. I had been incarcerated for 10 years at the time and in a level 7 penitentiary prison. It was my first time doing time and I had a lot of it to do. That day, I had just seen the most gruesome beating I had ever seen. Through it all the atmosphere was so calm but for me I was dumbfounded because everyone acted and moved like it was so normal. In that moment something spoke to me, and it was like my inner self saying to the present me, is this who you are and is this what you want for your life to be like? But the next question to myself was, is this what you want to become? I sat on my bunk and I didn't pray. I spoke to God and asked him to forgive me for what I have done and become. I asked for a new start in life and I said to myself and God that I knew I was in prison but asked that he help me to not allow prison to become me. That day after all the blood was cleaned up, they took the guys out, one to the hole and the other to the SHU (Special Housing Unit). They let us out as if nothing happened and I walked to the education department and I told my teacher that I needed

special help because I wanted to get my GED. That day I began to see myself in a different light. Change happened in me. 15 years later, I have stayed the course and each day I strive to be and do better, not just for myself but for others like me. I learned that my crime wasn't who I was, and that I can be all that I was raised to be. When I sent that GED diploma home with my graduation picture, to hear my Mom's voice on that phone was a long time coming. It is what I live for, the sweet sound of my Mom's voice saying I am proud of you. Now that diploma hangs in my room in my Mom's house.

It is hard to find good when all you know is bad. You begin to think it is normal for you to do bad and be bad and bad things happen. The good that does happen is like finally something good happens for me, but it seems short lived, but I have grown to see that finding good is not hard at all. It is believing in yourself and working toward good things and being around good people and creating your good.

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## The Beauty in the Storm

By AHA

For over 16 years now, I've been locked down under the most strict conditions only known to some in the BOP. Coming into prison was like a sandstorm; young and troublesome, never looking towards what was to come. Once in a cell alone, I had to grow and nourish my mind and soul, change my ways and become wise. In a situation, that is tough for most. I began to read, write and exercise daily to grow the most. Along came patience, dedication and sacrifice without thinking when I was out and free again to roam as I please. Realizing it was all in Allah's plan to shape me into what I was meant to be. A lesson I learned is that it's never hard to find the good in any situation if you are in pursuit of what's good for a better you. Making it through any storm that falls upon you.



# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: WELLBEING

## To Nourish, To be Nourished

By AC

It is easy to think of a mother nursing her newborn baby, or a person caring for a pet in need whenever we try to visualize the meaning of the word "nourish." And yes, that would be absolutely correct, but there is just so much more behind the meaning of that word.

To nourish, as I see it, is what thousands of people do to their hopes and dreams as they walk thousands of miles towards a seemingly unreachable goal to cross a border or a gate that symbolizes the end of their current life and the beginning of the next one in a world they don't yet know, in the unknown.

To nourish is what little boys and little girls practice as they go on living through life, filling the shoes of those who came before them in search for the passion and calling they heard so many decades ago. The doctors of tomorrow, the lawyers of tomorrow, engineers of tomorrow, nurses of tomorrow, leaders of the community, and leaders of the world. All of them sit patiently today nourishing the greatness that lies within them. All of them and so many more.

To nourish is to contemplate the idea that tomorrow will be a better day. It is to imagine that despite our faults and our mistakes, we can still reach our full potential and our greatness if only we continue on a good path, living patiently day by day. It is to close our eyes and see today for the future it can become.

To nourish, in my view, is to have the power of foresight, the power to see the good that lies ahead on this road that we call life, the power to have faith, to have hope, to have patience, and to dream. It is to see what exists within our hands and see it for what it will become as we release it, let it fly into the sky. It is to have patience, show perseverance. It's to love. It is to struggle and fight.

The same instinct that allows us to care for those who are in need is the same instinct that allows us to help heal the heart and souls that are partly broken, and we do that by simply being kind. We nourish the souls of those around us, and even our own not by taking pills or eating some special kind of meals but by practicing what the good books of many cultures have been recommending us to do for thousands of years. And just so, we can continue for a thousand more.

In my humblest opinion, the best kind of nourishment that anyone can give and receive is love. We can love, we can believe, we can hope, we can persevere, we can dream, we can endure, and any of these things are just the same as taking the best of pills, eating the best of meals, or drinking the best of potions because in the long run, they yield the same results: a better tomorrow. Just a thought.



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## What Nourishes Me?

By DLJ

It's so much, first being a DC prisoner and having the staff and all the other races against us gives me the strength to carry on day by day. Your magazine nourishes me because I am a loner. I read an article about someone who said his only talk was with his mother and I feel his cry because I hate to be asked, "Are you okay?" or "what do you need?" And when you say, "Well, I just need some pictures of the city," they don't pull so your magazine gives me an idea of what's what in the city. Hope for the future is that I have good people backing me so the sky is the limit. And pizza day puts a smile on my face because I'm a pizza head.

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## Find the Beauty in the Storm

By TT

Sometimes, it can be more than difficult to find the beauty in an ugly situation. Oftentimes, when we go through tough circumstances all that we can recognize is the truth of the moment. Usually, it's in hindsight some period after the struggle that we figure out what good came out of the ordeal.

I myself had one point during my incarceration spent several consecutive years in solitary confinement. The front window of my cell faced a wall, and the back window was covered from the outside so the isolation felt complete. My only avenues for escape were my own thoughts. During those 5 years in total, I fed my intellect avidly. Reading about history, politics, economics, law, real estate, and business expanded my knowledge of the world beyond my confines and allowed my mind to travel and to be nourished. Strenuous exercise helped

to maintain my body and mitigate some of the stress of the overall situation, but learning about so many different subjects is what kept me mentally stable. The trade off for psychological pressures was having ample time to enhance my intelligence. Though I possess no formal degrees, I am unequivocally educated on a collegiate level because of the experience. In the end, I successfully navigated my legal hurdles and exited the circumstances as a generally stronger person.

The lesson I took from that journey is that it's not the obstacle in front of us that we need to focus on, but the manner in which to overcome said obstacle is what we should absorb into. There's always a formula to find a solution to any problem. Answers reveal themselves in different ways as long as we are open to pursuing them.

# MEMBERS *CONNECT*: WELLBEING

GED  
By JP

I worked hard to get it, though it was a task. I often wondered how I love to count money but I didn't know math? I knew how to multiply, add, and subtract. 5 months everyday in the same ole room, a class they would say, 6 others and myself trying to understand formulas and graphs in Advanced GED because all we had to do was just learn math...

To me it was hard. Did I have my moments and give up? I did, but Ms. Hobbs believed in me more than I believed in myself. Only my Mom had ever made me feel about me getting my GED the way that I felt. That was the spark that lit the fire to conquer math and to achieve higher. I studied hard because I didn't want to let Ms. Hobbs down. I put in the work, feeling ready to get my GED, but first I had to test my readiness and slay that PRE. The pre-test came and slayed it I did. Ms. Hobbs said with a thumbs up, "You are ready to take it." I said come with that GED that math be faking...

I was nervous but excited, but remained calm and focused. I opened up that book and began to read questions of multiple choice. Sally had 5 apples. She ate 1 and gave away 3 on the way to school. How many apples did Sally have when she got home? I said that would be 1, this math stuff sweet. I answered each question with ease but when I got to that geometry and

graphs I had to slow my speed. No need to panic; I studied this math. No time to burn, so I just answered each question with everything that I've learned...

The wait wasn't long. The results were in. I remember like yesterday. I was in UNICOR doing my job. I looked up from my work to see Ms. Hobbs. She came toward me looking kind of sad. I spoke first. "Dang! Ms. Hobbs, I did that bad?" She shook her head and broke out in a smile and said, "No you did that good, and I am so proud of you because I knew that you would."

I got my GED!

Getting my GED changed the way I seen myself. I knew I could do and be better. I just didn't know where to start, and getting my GED was the beginning of the change process in the way I viewed myself and my life. I knew I could do anything if I put my mind to it. Also, having someone believe in me the way that Ms. Hobbs did, who didn't really know me but cared enough to not give up on me because she seen something in me that I couldn't see in myself. My Mom was so proud of me, and that GED hangs in my room in her house right now. I haven't seen the streets in 26 years and having her so proud of that GED makes me so happy.

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Looking After One Another  
By JR

I grew up abused mentally and physically to the point it became a way of life. And in that time being an introvert allowed me to develop an inner strength. I taught myself how to take care of myself. And by doing so, it gave me the ability to take care of those around me. I feed off of being there for those who can't take care of themselves. I spend time with them by talking to them and teaching them that they too can learn to be strong mentally and physically. For me, being a source of love, trust and friendship to the people in my life nourishes me. I have a 5-year-old grandchild who wants to be smart so he can teach his grandfather to read and write. I encourage him every chance I can to do good in school whenever we talk on the phone. He can't wait to tell me about school when I call.

It nourishes me to encourage my children to be great in whatever they're doing in life. That they can do more than one thing at a time. And my 3 children are doing well for themselves.

I gained nourishment from showing the boys and girls of my neighborhood what it's like to have a real friendship. It encouraged them to look after one another, whether they were family or not, and still to this day we are both friends and family. I have all my childhood friends who have become my brothers and sisters. I gain strength and encouragement in knowing that those same friends that are now my brothers and sisters are out

there waiting for me. To give me that fresh start. They already have a car for me. They already have a job for me. And they have even been there for my children all these years.

What and who nourished me throughout my childhood was my mother, for always encouraging me, by telling me I can do things I didn't believe I could. She taught us, her boys, to cook and how to be gentlemen to the women, period. She gives us the tools to survive, to be humble and grateful.

I took what nourishes me and shared it with my friends. I feel that we can nourish each other by coming together as a community in creating jobs and a place to come to when we are in need of help or just someone to talk to. I was a person who didn't always have clothes or shoes on my feet. Who didn't always have something to eat. I want to build a place for people to come when they are hungry. To teach them to do for themselves and to show that there is someone who cares about them. What gives me strength and builds me up is seeing someone's face light up when I've taken someone fishing and they have caught their first fish or have gotten their first bike. I love being there for people, seeing someone happy is what builds me up and gives me strength. That knowing the people in my life know in their hearts, they can count on me to be there for them.

# forgive

## CONVERSATION WITH CRAIG: TWO AND A HALF HOURS THAT CHANGED MY LIFE: THE POWER OF FORGIVENESS

*This was originally printed in Connect Volume 8, Issue 5 (Forgiveness), back in 2019. Craig decided to bring it back for this issue as we think about the connection between restorative justice, forgiveness, and wellbeing.*

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

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

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

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

I didn't expect them to forgive me. I wanted them to know I took responsibility for what happened. It was me. I was responsible.

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

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

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

The only answer I had for him was that it was just two neighborhoods beefing. I tried to explain how coming up where I did, we were taught to deal with stuff in a certain type of way. And how nobody pushed us to do it, and I knew it wasn't an excuse, but it was what we saw every day.

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

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

A few days later, my attorney called to tell me that Mr. Woods wanted to testify for me in court. I was shocked. When the day came and he got up on the stand, his family looked at him like he was crazy. The boy's mother and grandmother

didn't forgive me. The grandmother even testified against me, saying I should never get out of prison for what I'd done.

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

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

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

*Craig was resentenced under IRAA and was released from prison in 2019. He and Mr. Woods still talk several times a week.*

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

## CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

We would like to congratulate the following Free Minds members who shared with us the following accomplishments since our last issue:

- JA amazingly read 410 books in 2021
- RA passed his GED
- MH passed his GED
- TT graduated from a paralegal program
- BG published his own book of poetry

Please write to us with accomplishments to be featured!

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

***"Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation."***

– Audre Lorde, self-described black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet

***"Keeping your body healthy is an expression of gratitude to the whole cosmos – the trees, the clouds, everything."*** – Thích Nhất Hạnh, Vietnamese Thiền Buddhist monk, peace activist, and writer

***"Wellness, I came to realize, will not happen by accident. It must be a daily practice, especially for those of us who are more susceptible to the oppressiveness of the world."*** – Jenna Wortham, culture writer for The New York Times Magazine and co-host of the podcast Still Processing

***"Healing justice is an emerging movement that seeks both collective healing and well-being, and also transforming the institutions and relationships that are causing the harm in the first place. Rather than viewing well-being as an individual act of self-care, healing justice advocates view the practice of healing as political action."***

– Shawn Ginwright, Professor of Africana Studies at San Francisco State University, author, and activist

***"Defining wellness in terms of justice reminds us that we, agents of change, can alter configurations of injustice. If we are to do justice to... our history... we better put justice back into wellness, right where it belongs."***

– Stephanie Reich, professor and community psychologist in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine



Audre Lorde

# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

## DEEP DIVE: VOTING RIGHTS

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

From local school boards all the way up to President of the United States, the leaders who represent people in the United States are all sent to their jobs in the same way: winning votes. And over centuries of history, the privilege to be one of those voters has evolved from something that only white males could do to a nearly universal right for American citizens... with one very notable exception.

In 1789, the United States Constitution took effect, and it left states in charge of setting up their own requirements around who could and could not vote. The next year, Congress passed a law limiting U.S. citizenship to "free white persons."

Nearly 80 years later the nation entered a half century in which several amendments helped to level the playing field. The 14th Amendment guaranteed citizenship to all people born in the U.S. in 1868; two years later, the 15th Amendment prevented states from denying the right to vote on grounds of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." And in 1920, the right to vote was guaranteed to women.

These amendments were far from a perfect fix. After the abolition of slavery and the Union's victory in the Civil War, many southern states developed what are known as Jim Crow laws, designed to limit who can vote by charging a tax to do so, or a literacy test. These rules disenfranchised poor people in general, and Black citizens more specifically.

Those states' efforts to keep Black people out of the voting booth were at the heart of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson. The law strictly forbade literacy tests and other Jim Crow tactics, and it required certain states and jurisdictions with a history of disenfranchisement to "pre-clear" any changes to their voting laws with the Attorney General of the United States.

In 1971, the 26th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution made the most recent major shift to voting rights in the country by setting the minimum age to vote at 18. Before its passage the age floor was 20, and this had become a point of controversy during the Vietnam War because teens were being sent off to battle overseas, but could not vote for the people who decided to send them.

As mentioned, there is one group of American citizens who are still routinely prevented from voting, and that is people who are

convicted of certain crimes. It is up to states to determine which convictions lead to the loss of a person's vote, and for how long. An estimated 5.2 million Americans were prevented from voting in the 2020 elections as a result of restrictions on the voting rights of people with criminal convictions.

Here is the most recent breakdown, according to the National Council of State Legislatures:

In 21 states, people lose the right to vote while they are incarcerated. In 16 states, the ban on voting continues for a period of time after release, often the length of their parole. In 11 states, people can be stripped of their right to vote forever for certain crimes.

There are three jurisdictions whose citizens never lose the right to vote while being incarcerated for a crime: Maine, Vermont, and the District of Columbia.

## WORLD

Free Minds News will do a deeper dive next issue on the War in Ukraine, where Russia has invaded its neighbor to the west in the first unprovoked attack of one nation on another since Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990. For now, here is a bit of an explainer on the recent history that led to this war.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, is a military alliance between dozens of European countries, Canada and the United States. The alliance was formed in 1949, in direct response to the Cold War ambitions of the Soviet Union.

In 2008, NATO first took up the idea of bringing Ukraine into its ranks, a former part of the Soviet Union and Russia's largest European neighbor. This drew loud and immediate opposition from Vladimir Putin, who at that point had been Russia's president for eight years.

Six years later, Russia seized Crimea, a part of Ukraine on its border where the population are largely ethnic Russians. The annexation is condemned by world powers and leads to serious sanctions.

Conversations about Ukraine joining the NATO alliance continued, but never formalized. Then, in December of 2021, Putin deployed a large contingent of the Russian army to the Ukrainian border and issued demands, the biggest of them being that NATO agree never to admit Ukraine.

In late February, Russia announced that it considered two regions of Ukraine near the border to be independent. And three days later, Putin began an invasion of Ukraine that has already decimated several of the nation's cities and led to thousands of casualties.

## SPORTS

Last summer, the Los Angeles Rams made a big bet in the hopes of finally getting past playoff disappointments and winning the Super Bowl. It dealt several draft picks and its former franchise quarterback, Jared Goff, to the Detroit Lions in exchange for Matt Stafford. Months later, as the trade deadline neared, the Rams made another big move, acquiring Odell Beckham Jr. (pictured right) from the Cleveland Browns.





# IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

The bets paid off, and big. In mid-February, playing in their own home stadium, the Rams bested the Cincinnati Bengals in Super Bowl 56 by a score of 23-20. Winning the MVP for the game was a gifted young pass catcher the Rams actually drafted in 2017, Cooper Kupp, who had posted one of the best years a wide receiver has ever posted in the NFL.

On the hardwood, the NBA season is winding to a close, and it is shaping up to be one of the best postseasons in league history. The number of teams led by young or veteran stars is perhaps at an all-time high.

In the Eastern Conference, two title contenders shook up the league in February when the Brooklyn Nets (led by the lethal duo of Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving) traded James Harden to the Philadelphia 76ers for troubled young phenom Ben Simmons and sharpshooter Seth Curry. Both teams will have to bring it if they want to get past the defending champion Milwaukee Bucks and their leader, Giannis Antetokounmpo, aka The Greek Freak. Also in the mix: a red-hot Boston Celtics squad, and the Miami Heat, who are actually 1-seed in the East right now.

It's anyone's guess who will emerge from the Western Conference. The preseason prediction was of course the Los Angeles Lakers, but injuries to LeBron James and Anthony Davis along with a weak supporting cast have thrown their playoff hopes into jeopardy. The energy seems to be with the conference's young stars, including: Devin Booker and the Phoenix Suns, Ja Morant and the Memphis Grizzlies, and Luka Dončić and the Dallas Mavericks.

That said, nobody will count out a team with LeBron James until it's actually lost a postseason series. The King is currently averaging 30 points a game to go with 8 rebounds and 6 assists; he will still be the most dominant single player in any series the Lakers end up in. If they make it!



## DEEP BREATHING FOR MORE CALM, MORE ENERGY & BETTER HEALTH

*By Robin, Free Minds friend and National Board Certified Acupuncturist*

*"Every disease challenge and every personal goal can be improved when we have more energy and better physical and emotional function. The one thing that we can all do – anytime and any place – is to practice deep breathing! It's FREE and can be done while you continue to do everything else in your day. Breath modification is the easiest, most accessible thing you can do to activate 'The Medicine Within'! – Roger Jahnke, Doctor of Oriental Medicine & author of 'Healer The Within'"*

Did you know that by slightly changing the way you breathe, you can actually reduce stress, boost energy, improve sleep and protect your wellbeing? There are many incredible health payoffs by doing gentle-deeper-breathing...and it's free! It can also be done anywhere and at any time. I personally practice gentle-deep breathing to help me get to sleep...and also, first thing in the morning, before I get out of bed to start my day with a sense of calm, to pump more oxygen into my body and its trillions of cells. I also use slower-deeper breathing throughout the day to stay calm. It helps me avoid emotional ups and downs, and allows me to deal with stress better. If I'm ever feeling upset, I can stop and take a few deep breaths, and calm myself down before I say or do anything I'll regret later. Controlling your emotions is a very powerful tool, and by controlling stress you're also boosting your health.

The key to this breathing technique is to make your breathing **longer, slower and deeper**. Gently breathing in the air through your nose and letting it flow down into your belly – your belly expanding like a small balloon, your chest expanding a little too. So, as you inhale the air through the nose, you are deliberately guiding the breath into the belly first – feeling the belly expand, then the chest. Then, exhaling as you feel the belly and chest fall. Once you practice a few times, it will get easier and feel more natural. Remember, to always stay in your comfort zone.

Let's do the practice:

**1. GETTING READY & RELAXED** – If you can, find a place where you can sit or lie down comfortably for about 10 minutes. If you are sitting, gently straighten your spine (sitting up tall) so that your lungs and belly can expand freely. Tucking in your chin slightly will also help to straighten your spine. With your straight spine, relax all of your muscles from head to toe – relax your forehead, eyes and

jaw, shoulders, arms, hands, torso, belly, legs and feet. Some people like to add a subtle smile, which helps the body to relax even more, but a smile is optional. You can choose to close your eyes. And, remind yourself to stay relaxed.

**2. BREATHE IN** – Gently put one hand on your belly, on your navel and the other on your chest. Turning your attention to your breathing, calmly breathe air in through your nose and gently guide the air into your belly, expanding your belly. Feel the belly rise and expand as you inhale. Now pause for a second before you slowly exhale through the nose.

**3. BREATHE OUT** – as you slowly exhale through your nose, feel the belly and chest fall as the air slowly travels back out through the nose. Consciously allow yourself to relax deeply each time.

**4. REVIEW** – breathing in-and-out of the nose... inhale, belly rise / exhale, belly fall.

**5. "4-6 BREATHING"** – Once you clearly feel your hands moving up and down with each breath, try gently inhaling to the count of four (4)...counting 1-2-3-4 as you inhale into your belly – and then, adding the count of six (6) to the exhalation 1-2-3-4-5-6. Some people call this "4-6 breathing," four on the inhalation and six on the exhalation. When you breathe out, make it slightly longer than when you breathe in so that you are expelling more carbon dioxide, which is a waste product. If you'd rather not count, no problem! Just continue with the deeper breathing with a longer exhalation.

**6. OPTIONAL** – some people like to imagine that they are breathing in a radiant healing light into the body on the gentle inhalation, infusing the body with positive emotions like peace, calm and joy. And then as they exhale, imagine a cloud of grey smoke or butterflies carrying out any stress or illness from the body. This can be a powerful healing visualization.

So, do yourself a favor and consider setting aside some time everyday to practice this simple yet powerful breathing practice. Your breath is always with you so why not use it to strengthen your vitality, feelings of peace and to activate your inner healer?



# MEDITATION: WELLBEING AFFIRMATIONS

By Kelli

Have you ever heard of affirmations? Saturday Night Live used to have a goofy character named Stuart Smalley who would look in the mirror and say to himself: "I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!" Even though the actor was using it for laughs, this is an example of an affirmation. It's a positive statement that can help us to challenge and overcome self-sabotaging and negative thoughts.

The impact of practicing positive affirmation is based in scientific fact. Studies show that practicing affirmations – these positive mental repetitions – can literally reprogram our thinking patterns so that, over time, we begin to think – and act – differently.

Let's meditate, practicing positive affirmations of wellbeing for ourselves and others. As always, you can have a friend or cellie read the script aloud to you (as you repeat the affirmations that are in bold), or you can read it through a few times on your own before closing your eyes and remembering key points.

*Let's begin by taking a moment to settle your body into a comfortable position. Close your eyes. Allow your neck, shoulders, arms and legs to relax...*

*Today we will affirm our wellbeing, and the wellbeing of others...  
Take a full breath in... and a long slow breath out...  
Feel yourself seated, grounded, rooted, and present in this moment...*

*As you repeat the following phrases, envision them being true...*

**May I be well...**

**May I be safe, and free from suffering... May I be happy...**

*Repeat these phrases and invite your heart to open to accept them...  
When you're ready, bring to mind someone close to you that you care about deeply... Maybe a friend, or a family member, or maybe someone who's helped you. Imagine that person sitting in front of you right now. Repeat the following phrases to them, envisioning them to be true...*

**May you be well...**

**May you be safe and free from suffering... May you be happy**

*Imagine them receiving your words...*

*Now bring to mind someone who's having a difficult time... perhaps someone who has experienced loss, or is struggling with illness, or*

*having a hard time at work or home. Imagine that person sitting in front of you as you repeat the following phrases...*

**May you be well...**

**May you be safe and free from suffering... May you be happy...**

*Now bring to mind someone with whom you've had some difficulty – maybe you've argued, or avoided one another – and offer them the same words...*

**May you be well...**

**May you be safe and free from suffering... May you be happy...**

*Finally, let's extend beyond the place where you are, beyond the people you know, to extend over the entire earth, all people, all animals, all life...*

**May you be well...**

**May you be safe and free from suffering... May you be happy...**

*Feel this sense of wellbeing extending out from you in all directions...  
Notice how you feel in this moment, the sensations in your body, and the wellbeing of your mind*

*Now, place a hand on your heart as you once again say to yourself...*

**May I be well...**

**May I be safe and free from suffering... May I be happy...**

*Breathe in fully... and breathe out fully... Take a moment to just be present, right here, right now... noticing your breath...*

*Whatever your experience was during this meditation, this practice offers benefits... Even if you weren't always able to feel the well wishes... or experienced some resistance that's okay...*

*Simply come back to your intention to practice and experience love and kindness in whatever way you were able and in whatever way feels right to you...*

*Finish with a full deep breath in...and a long slow breath out...*

*And... be well!*

# REENTRY PROFILE: WHEN FREEDOM MEANS DEPORTATION TO A COUNTRY YOU BARELY KNOW

*Interview with Carlos by Kelli*

*Free Minds member Carlos served 25 years of a 35 years-to-life sentence. In 2020, he was resentenced under the Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA). Because he was not a US citizen though, rather than returning home to DC, he was deported to his native country – a place he hadn't seen in 33 years! Kelli caught up with Carlos over Zoom to talk about his experience.*

**KELLI:** Tell me about your country.

**CARLOS:** I was born in Honduras, a Central American country that's about the size of Pennsylvania. Honduras is an extremely poor country, with more than 2/3 of the population living in poverty. My grandparents raised me and my sister because my parents were just so busy working. When I was 9 years old, my grandparents decided to bring us to the United States.

**KELLI:** What was that like?

**CARLOS:** As a kid, crossing into the United States was both nerve-wracking and exciting. It was hard to leave our parents and there were a lot of things that I just didn't understand. We came to Washington, DC first, but settled in the Maryland suburbs. Despite my grandparents' best efforts, I fell victim to peer pressure. I started getting into trouble and by the time I was 15, I dropped out of school. My grandfather told me, "You either go to school, or you leave this house." Bold as I was, I left the house. My grandparents were crushed. I take responsibility for the choices I made then. I was so busy trying to please others, that I made poor decisions and eventually committed a crime that led to my being charged as an adult at the age of 17.

**KELLI:** You were locked up for 25 years – that's a long time. When and why do you feel like your mindset changed?

**CARLOS:** It happened right away. It was the moment the judge sentenced me. I realized I'd messed my life up! There was no going back. So I decided I wouldn't let these walls stop me from becoming a better person. Within one year, I got my GED. That was the beginning of my dedication to education. In the next 25 years, I took about 39 programs in an effort to become better. That mindset enabled me to weave and dodge a lot of the negativity in prison.

I also had the support of the woman who would become my wife. We've known each other since we were 14. She was my sister's best friend! But what do you know when you're 14, right? (laughs) She came to see me when I got locked up at DC Jail. We fell out of touch, but ten years later, I reached out to her and we've been together ever since. I don't mind sounding mushy. My sun rises and sets with her! What else can I say other than, I am in love?

**KELLI:** What was it like to balance the excitement of being released with the apprehension of being sent to Honduras?

**CARLOS:** I knew I would almost certainly be deported to Honduras. In order to stay in the US, I would have to prove that I feared for my life if I were deported. It could take years, and since the chances of winning were slim, I decided to go back. I was released in the middle of COVID. And if you remember, in 2020, we were seeing all kinds of things in the news and really didn't know very much about the disease, so it was scary. They'd closed down the main airport in Tegucigalpa (the capital of Honduras) because of the pandemic. So I had to land in a smaller town, five hours away. They had imposed curfews and you couldn't travel anywhere without a special permit. I had to stay at a government refugee center for three days until a friend of my aunt's, who drives an 18-wheeler, was going to be passing by the town. He scooped me up and drove me to Tegucigalpa.

*Fear is the best word to describe how I felt. I can't lie, I was spooked. First of all, my mind had completely adapted to being in prison. So just coming back to the free world was hard. And then, you have to understand, I'd been in the United States since I was 9 years old. I was fully Americanized—the music, the culture, everything! And now I'm being sent to a country that I know nothing about? Honduras is among the top five most violent countries in the world. It's dominated by gangs. I look like I'm a member of a gang. I've got tattoos. I look like I've been in prison. My biggest fear was being confronted and asked, and then being killed over the answer I gave, whether it was the truth or a lie. Even now, sometimes I'll go to a mall or something, and I see people who look at me hard. Because we're in a secure environment, nothing has happened. But I've had to learn where I can and can't go.*

I stand out here because of my accent, my clothes, and how I talk. As soon I start talking, people ask where I'm from. I've had to pull out my ID to prove that I'm Honduran. It's still like a culture shock every day. You go down the street one way and you got a highway, go the other way and you got chickens and horses! It's like, *Hold up! What happened?* The only thing you can do though, is embrace it!

**KELLI:** How do you embrace it?

**CARLOS:** Despite how challenging it has been, reconnecting to my culture and my country has been a joy. I have family in Honduras, and even though I was basically a stranger to them, I feel so blessed for the chance to get to know them. And I'm trying to ask for help more. I'm learning that in order for me to be successful in reentry, I've gotta lean on others. The country is beautiful. I am surrounded by mountains, and the weather is always warm. The food is amazing – I'm constantly tasting new foods and new flavors. (I think I've gained 15 lbs.!) These things just remind me that I am free.

**KELLI:** Are you working?

**CARLOS:** Unfortunately, COVID has made an already bad economy in Honduras even worse. I haven't been able to get a job. My wife and I hope to move together to Panama where there are more opportunities and we both can work. For now, I'm just grateful for the support of my wife and family. I'm also lucky to have opportunities to work as a Poet Ambassador with Free Minds.

I truly embrace being a Poet Ambassador. Sharing my experience with the public (on Zoom) is my way of giving back to the community, educating them about people who are, or have been incarcerated. There's a stigma. I tell them just because I did something wrong it doesn't make me a bad person. And there are a lot of us out there. In prison, it's easy to get trapped in a negative environment. Anytime you're doing something positive, you're going against the grain. So a person that sits down with a pen and expresses hopes, fears, and dreams, to the community to get some feedback? This is a person that is going against the grain in a good way! I know, because I did it!

**KELLI:** What are your dreams for the future?

**CARLOS:** I'm living my dream. To be free with my wife, when once upon a time, we only hoped and dreamed to have such moments. My dream is also to keep sharing my story to anyone who needs to hear it. To help even one person change, help them find a better way, help them understand that reading and writing are tools that help you through prison. Because I believe in change. I believe in becoming better. And by telling my story, maybe I can change someone else's story.

**KELLI:** What else would you like to share about your experience with your Free Minds family?

**CARLOS:** Of course it's challenging to have been deported. I'm far from the only one though. I'm sure there are other Free Minds members who are citizens of other countries reading this inside the BOP right now, who will also be deported when their time is served. I want to use my own experience to help anyone who feels anxious. Trust me when I tell you, the more information you can get, the less fear you'll feel. The best advice I can give is to educate yourself and ask questions. Ask for help! And once you arrive in your new home, keep educating yourself.

After every storm there is sunshine. Whenever I think back about the fears I had, I smile, because I realize that I am learning to live in the very country I feared coming back to. I've learned to move around the hurdles that, as real as they are, cannot take away from this blessing of freedom that I have been given. Getting to know a family that I left behind has been a joy. Seeing and experiencing things that I once could only imagine. Sometimes even the simple things like a sunset have helped those fears fade away. And I will not lie to you... the fears still arise at times, but that's when I remind myself of the joy of being free and choose not to live in fear.





## DID YOU KNOW? Natural Remedies

*By Jada*

Did you know that people have been relying on natural remedies to help treat and cure illnesses for centuries? Most people have heard that herbs and plants are the basis and foundation of traditional medicine. In fact, it is likely that you have used some form of a natural remedy at some point in your life to treat an illness. Some natural remedies can also be used to speed up recovery from an illness while some remedies can be used as a preventative measure. Since natural remedies are sometimes representative of people's culture, the natural remedies that some people use reflect the environment they live in. Additionally, natural remedies can be a great way to preserve one's cultural beliefs and values.

An important aspect of wellbeing is physical health and natural remedies provide people with the opportunity to control the care they provide for their bodies. For some people, it is very empowering to treat your ailments with natural remedies that have been passed down for generations. Additionally, natural remedies can be more accessible than traditional healthcare because of the high financial costs associated with modern medicine. However, it is vital to seek professional medical assistance when needed because natural remedies are not always a substitute for medical intervention. However, when used properly natural remedies can be great tools to prevent illness and speed up recovery. Some are even supported by scientific evidence which demonstrates their effectiveness.

One of the natural remedies that my family uses a lot is unfiltered apple cider vinegar. My grandmother would take a cap full of vinegar every morning because it would help lower her blood sugar. Although she still takes her medicine for diabetes as prescribed, she swore that the vinegar helped her regulate her blood sugar after meals. In fact, there is some research that shows that apple cider vinegar has the potential to lower blood sugar and improve insulin function. Although I am not diabetic, I take the pill version of the apple cider vinegar and have noticed a positive change in my metabolism. If you can't stomach a spoonful of vinegar, there are capsules and gummies. Although all of my family still takes a

tablespoon or two of the apple cider vinegar before bed, it is vital that this not be used as an alternative to diabetes medical treatment.

Another awesome natural remedy is ginger because it can be used to treat nausea, headaches, and pain. Brewing some tea with a few tablespoons of grated ginger is the first thing I do when I begin to feel sick with a cold. Although ginger tea is widely used for sore throats and nausea, ginger also has some hidden anti-inflammatory properties. Ginger has anti-inflammatory antioxidants that have been known for centuries to soothe aches and pains. Ginger can be used to treat a variety of pain from muscle soreness to menstrual cramps. To make ginger tea, boil two cups of water with a knob of freshly grated ginger. After boiling for 15 minutes, add honey or sweetener of your choice and enjoy.

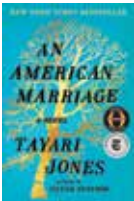

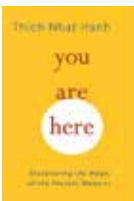



Aromatherapy is another natural healing treatment used to treat and prevent illnesses using aromatic essential oils. Aromatherapy works by the scent stimulating receptors in our nose that communicate to the rest of the body and brain. An essential oil diffuser can disperse the oil in the open air, but aroma sticks are great for personal use. Eucalyptus oil, one of the key ingredients in Vicks VapoRub, is great for pain relief and congestion. Lavender oil has been shown to ease migraines, lower anxieties, and relieve stress. Both lavender and eucalyptus oil have proven to be effective herbs for aromatherapy, but inhaling these oils might affect people differently. It is imperative to do preliminary research when using a natural remedy because there are no specific instructions for dosage like on a bottle of Advil.

Are there any natural remedies that you will try the next time you catch a cold or get an ache? Take control of your wellbeing and try a natural remedy if you are able to. I recommend keeping a short journal to reflect on how I feel after trying a new remedy so I can keep a written record of my wellness.

*Note: This does not constitute medical advice; please check with a doctor before making decisions about your own health, as some remedies could have different effects depending on other factors like medications, or other medical conditions.*

# BOOK BALLOT!

Alright Free Minds readers, get your pens ready because it is time to choose the next Books Across the Miles book! Please write to us with your 1st and 2nd choices from the list below. Also, if you have a book in mind you'd like to see on the next ballot, please let us know!

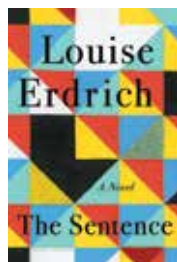
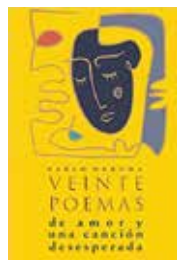
1		<p><b>An American Marriage by Tayari Jones</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>Newlyweds Celestial and Roy are the embodiment of the American Dream. Just as they began to build their new life together in the American South, they are ripped apart from each other when Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. Although fiercely independent, Celestial is devastated by Roy's absence and turns to 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 who must reckon with the past while moving forward.</p>
2		<p><b>Becoming by Michelle Obama</b> [Memoir]</p> <p>As the first Black woman to serve as the First Lady of the United States, Michelle Obama created a welcoming and inclusive White House. Her memoir is a powerful reflection on the events that shaped her life: from her childhood in the South Side of Chicago, to her years of balancing the demands of becoming a working mother, to her time in the White House. Warm, wise, and revelatory, Becoming is the deeply personal reckoning of a woman of soul and substance who has steadily defied expectations – and whose story inspires us to do the same.</p>
3		<p><b>You are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment by Thich Nhat Hanh</b> [Self-Help]</p> <p>Based on a retreat that Thich Nhat Hanh, a Zen monk, led for Westerners, You Are Here offers a range of effective practices for cultivating mindfulness and staying in the present moment – including awareness of breathing and walking, deep listening, and skillful speech. These teachings will empower you to witness the wonder of life and transform your suffering, both within and outside you, into compassion, tenderness, and peace.</p>
4		<p><b>Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison</b> [Fiction]</p> <p>In this deeply compelling novel, a nameless narrator describes growing up in a Black community in the South, attending a Black college from which he is expelled, moving to New York and becoming the chief spokesman of the Harlem branch of "the Brotherhood," before retreating amid violence and confusion. It addresses many of the social and intellectual issues faced by African Americans in the early twentieth century, including Black nationalism, the relationship between black identity and Marxism, as well as issues of individuality and personal identity.</p>
5		<p><b>Love in Color by Bolu Babalola</b> [Short Story Collection]</p> <p>Bolu Babalola retells the most beautiful love stories from history and mythology with incredible new detail and vivacity. Focusing on the magical folktales of West Africa, Babalola also reimagines Greek myths, ancient legends from the Middle East, and stories from long-erased places. With an eye towards decolonizing tropes inherent in our favorite tales of love, Babalola has created captivating stories that traverse across perspectives, continents, and genres. Love in Color is a celebration of romance in all its many splendid forms.</p>
6		<p><b>Concrete Rose by Angie Thomas</b> [Fiction – Young Adult]</p> <p>If there's one thing seventeen-year-old Maverick Carter knows, it's that a real man takes care of his family. As the son of a former gang legend, Mav does that the only way he knows how: dealing for the King Lords. With this money he can help his mom, who works two jobs while his dad's in prison. Life's not perfect, but with a fly girlfriend and a cousin who always has his back, Mav's got everything under control. Until he finds out he's a father. When he's offered the chance to go straight, he takes it. In a world where he's expected to amount to nothing, maybe Mav can prove he's different. When King Lord blood runs through your veins, though, you can't just walk away. Loyalty, revenge, and responsibility threaten to tear Mav apart, especially after the brutal murder of a loved one. He'll have to figure out for himself what it really means to be a man. (Fun fact: this is the prequel – meaning it happens before – to the book <i>The Hate U Give</i>)</p>

# WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

Have you recently read a 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."

- **AC: *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* by Pablo Neruda (Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair)**  
This is a book that uses language that evokes reality. The poems are full of symbolism that reads as clear imagery to create sensuality, love, and desire. Great book, amazing work, amazing author.
- **Justin: *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* by James Cone**  
What is the meaning of the cross in America? This is the question Cone – known as the father of Black liberation theology – poses to the reader. It's a piercing yet beautiful read. Cone traces how the brutal execution of Jesus by the Roman Empire has reflected back to the Black Church God's solidarity with the most insidious arm of white supremacy, lynching; and yet amidst lynching's various evolutions, how impossible it has been for the white Church to understand Jesus through his ongoing, modern crucifixions. Cone challenges Christians to see the criminal justice system as Jesus' cross in America today.
- **Julia: *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich**  
This novel is about a woman named Tookie who discovers the power of reading while incarcerated. After her release, she goes to work in a bookstore. When one of her most loyal customers mysteriously dies, the woman's ghost seems to take up residence in the bookstore. The book is also set in 2019-2020, in Minneapolis. I'm about halfway through right now, and it's February 2020 in the story; I'm interested to see how the real-world events of 2020 will play out in this story. Louise Erdrich is one of my favorite authors, and so far this book is fascinating and haunting.
- **Neely: *Passing* by Nella Larsen**  
This book, written in 1929, is about a young Black woman who decides to pass as white. Marrying a rich, white man, who is very verbal about his racist beliefs, she decides to sever all ties with the Black community she grew up with. One day, she bumps into a childhood friend, who is also light-skinned. While she sometimes passes as white so she can be allowed into restaurants and stores, she ultimately chooses to remain in the Black community. Upon meeting each other, they are fascinated by the other's chosen identity and the life they have created around it. This book is a reflection on the socially-made construct of race, and questions its concreteness and the consequences it has on us all.



## ANNOUNCEMENT: BOOKS HALL OF FAME!

We welcome you all to send in your favorite book titles! We will tally up your submissions and will announce the top favorite books from you all in the next *Connect* – SPORTS. You will find the results in the "Books Hall of Fame" column. We are excited to hear all about your all time favorite reads!

## MEMBERS CONNECT: WELLBEING

Find the Beauty in the Storm

By TA

It was after I had surgery on my right-knee. I was in a wheelchair for about 3 weeks. Therefore, I had to get pushed around; to the cafeteria, pill line (for the pain medication), to and from the rec-yard, and helped up the stairs whenever I had to go to my cell. Out of the week, I had a different guy pushing me around at least 3 different days. Now, I know that I'm a well-liked guy. However, I didn't know that different guys from different walks of life and varied backgrounds; some that I rarely even spoke to or with. They were willing to give me a helping hand on more than one occasion. I learned that although we are in prison and everybody has and is dealing with their own individual issues, coupled along with unwritten prison rules, and preconceived notions. That we are still

human beings that given the opportunity, most times – we will show compassion, sympathy, and consideration of others. And have no problem with giving a helping hand.

Is it hard to find the good? Yes, sometimes. Especially, considering the circumstances (being incarcerated). Because there are prison rules that you have to abide by – some written, some aren't. And like I've mentioned before, preconceived notions, and the uncertainty of someone's motives and or hidden agendas. All these things have to be navigated correctly, and sometimes outrightly overlooked or ignored, to find the good.



# WELLBEING AND WRITING A LIBERATION STORY

By Justin

For the Means family, activism runs in their blood. In 1969, Russell Means and his father, Walter, a Navy shipyard worker, took over Alcatraz Island encased in canoes alongside fellow activists from the American Indian Movement (AIM); Russell ignited the American Indian Movement, channeling his people's discontents with slum housing conditions, unemployment, police harassment, and discrimination by employers and landlords as well as in the schools, foster care, and criminal legal systems. Drawn to the tactics of the Black Panthers, AIM's demands for the restoration of their land and federal Indian policy reform rapidly garnered national attention as they made visible the country's nearly invisible minority.

AIM was deeply invested in local issues of language, culture, spirituality, and identity. In Minneapolis they began what were known as "survival schools," which were led and sustained by women and, as Ojibwe historian Brenda Child notices in her book *Survival Schools*, the labors of women "laid a foundation for new institutions of education and social welfare that have been extraordinary long-lived in the Indian community."

Russell Means was not only a revolutionary. To Tatewin Means, he was her father. Tatewin grew up on the "Rez," but because "his first love [was] the movement," it was not until she attended Stanford University, and later the University of Minnesota for law school, that she forgave her father for not being present like a "normal father." Russell died the same year she was elected as the Attorney General of the Oglala Lakshóta Nation, the post she held before becoming the executive director of the Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation.

In 2019 I had the privilege of spending time on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation; and in the time since, my memory has been pulled back into the riptide power of their work. Only in hindsight could I see: Thunder Valley, this so-called "regenerative community" was attempting to create healing and wellbeing on a community level. Back in April, Ms. Means agreed to speak with me about how her organization sought to address multiple, evolving legacies of colonization on her people, and what place she envisioned wellbeing in their emancipation struggle.

It all began when Lakshóta elders posed a question: are we going to continue to let others decide our fate? They challenged their tribe to be protagonists in their future. To claim the power circulating in their own way of life. Dictated by extensive community input and imbued with Lakshóta worldview, Thunder Valley is the result.

With eco-friendly designs that will ensure the wellbeing of both the Oglala Lakshóta people and planet at-large, the 34-acre site features initiatives intent on alleviating the persistent personal, cultural, and social effects of colonization. In Pine Ridge, the size of Connecticut and home to more than 40,000 people, where there is a shortage of 4,000 homes, Thunder Valley is building affordable, energy-efficient housing. Where unemployment hovers around 85% and the reservation remains one of the poorest counties in America, Thunder Valley is empowering members with trainings and workforce development. Where there is a food desert, some of the highest rates of diabetes in the country, and life expectancy is equal to war-torn regions, Thunder Valley is leading a food sovereignty initiative to construct a local food system and increase access to healthy foods and economic opportunity. Where the tactical erasure of Lakshóta language by government and church-run boarding schools has left only 3% of tribal members fluent in Lakshóta, Thunder Valley is energizing a movement to restore the language to its past prominence in daily life: Lakshóta language-only daycare; children's books, videos, apps, and other web content, all in Lakshóta; a four-year, adult Lakshóta language learning program; and a youth athletic mentoring program emphasizing wellbeing from a Lakshóta perspective, in the Lakshóta language. And where 50% of the reservation population is under the age of 18 and battling endemic rates of suicide, Thunder Valley's youth leadership development programming strengthens the cultural identity of young people.

"We are in the process of defining what liberation is," Tatewin told me. "But what we do know is that it starts with healing, and it starts with self. Once we have that healing, we can once again have that hope. And when we get that hope, we will once again be on the path to liberation. This is how we are writing our liberation story."



# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club*

## *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)*

*with Neely*



Hello Free Minds Readers! To each one of you who read Free Minds' third publication and our latest book club title, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)*: thank you! The book features poetry, prose, and personal reflections from young people charged and incarcerated in the adult criminal legal system, as well as from the community around them: the parents, loved ones, correctional staff, public defenders, and many others harmed and left with unhealed trauma. Here's what the Free Minds Family had to say since our last *Connect*, and wanted to share them with you all. Thank you for being open and sharing your thoughts, y'all continue to amaze us with your powerful reflections:

**1. The goal of this book was to show readers the reality and community impact of youth incarceration. Do you think the book achieved this goal? Why or why not?**

**TA:** I believe that the book has created a thought, a spark to a debate that will unfold and speaks of the issue. Especially, because of the many different personal reflections and conversations with the book's contributors on youth incarceration and the impact it has on the community.

**MC:** No. Before you start to wonder how I could say that about such a beautiful project, read on. I say no because I feel like it captured so much more than the reality and community impact of youth incarceration. It showed that the people that the criminal justice system and the community threw away, are people. They are people – people who matter. It shows how much work is still left to be done regarding the system and in our communities to prevent incarceration.

**SC:** Yes, I do believe that this book achieved its goal. *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* provided a platform for the voiceless and unseen to be heard and seen. It has shed a much needed light on the lives of juveniles charged as adults and the system that enforces these punishments. It takes its readers inside of the mind and psyche of those affected by the struggles, strifes and social ills that are regarded as normal in certain environments. The words of this book give the reader, especially those who are unaware – with us understanding – a chance to grasp at an understanding, a different culture, a different mentality, a different struggle. This is obvious to anyone that reads this book.

**RB:** The book communicates the pain and triumphs of many people. Each of those stories will touch and help thousands of people. It always helps me to see my problems through someone else's experiences. It helps me to remember that the universe is not conspiring against me, that suffering is universal and that I have a choice in how I react to my experience.

**DJ:** I do and I don't. I do because a lot of us know them or know of them – I do not because I think a few of them could go deeper as far as their train of thought.

**AW:** I just received this beautiful book of poetry today, December 20, 2021, and I must say that the book did achieve its community directed purpose. I felt at home, within my heart and my mind, to have my voice, my struggle, my humanity tied together in hope and in love with the voices of so many others. The blight of incarceration, the criminalization of our BLK youth, is made flesh and bones and life breathed into the rejected, misunderstood. "When You Hear Me" reflects our lived experiences, our raised voices. I hear you all, as you all done.

**2. What was your favorite poem and why? (Challenge: If your poetry is featured in this book, try to pick one written by someone else!)**

**ABC: "El Salvador" by Ever** – I was born there and lived there to the age of 11. That one for me is real. I live what he spoke of, and see the corruption even away from El Pulgarito. I still suffer from violence.

**JG: "Hidden Within the 13th" by Kendrick** – It highlights the key source of the problems that people of color face by the word "except" being contained in the 13th Amendment. That "except" rekindled America's ability to use slavery not only as a business model, but to impose other social limitations that were designed to prevent our communities from flourishing.

**RB: "A Poem From a Father to His Youngest Son" by Timothy** – The poem reminded me of how crushed I was the first time I was able to see my son through the glass door in DC Jail and we were unable to visit as the court didn't clear. My son was only a few weeks old at this time.

**SC: "Absent Father" by Andre G** – The one that is short and not so simple that I felt in my chest was "Absent Father." I felt every line. I could have written the exact poem. I'm almost certain that this poem doesn't just describe my thoughts and feelings about my Absent Father but the thoughts and feelings of every young boy who grew up wishing that their father would come when he said he would come and do what he promised to do.

**WTJ: "Tears" by Sylvester** – As a tear, I'd like to travel to the lips because a kiss is the autograph of love. The lips are also the outward expression of the heart. The last line is key, though. We hold in so much when we walk through these doors. We try not to cry because it's an admittance of our reality: that we lost in the game we played, lost friends and even family.

**3. Was there a profile of someone who was interviewed in the book that resonated most with you? Who was it, and what about their story meant so much to you?**

**ABC: Conversation with Eyone** – I would say Eyone's, who started losing people at a very young age and all the struggles he went through in life. He made it to the other side. He made it. He motivates me to try and do it too. I grew up with my grandmother, so not having both of my parents was a loss; but the real loss came when my mother got killed, which motivated me to hang out with the wrong group of people. Just like Louis' story – I got that story too. I lost many people from 2016 to last year. Two natural deaths, and three to gang violence.

**LW: Conversation with Ebonee** – Gun violence altered her, her children's lives, and their family dynamic in so many ways. Not just the physical wounds but the emotional wounds are vividly apparent. It is saddening that this once fun-loving, joyous mother now expresses essentially an eye-for-an-eye mentality. I do not in any way criticize, condemn, or find fault with how this woman feels after going

through so much trauma. It's just heartbreaking how the victims of violent crime – how their idealism and outlook on life changes. I pray that she finds peace. I actually want to give Ebonee a hug.

**TG: Conversation with Caroline** – Caroline is an inspiration of love, faithfulness, commitment and strength. I was touched on so many emotional levels that it is difficult to process them separately. The one emotion that screams above the rest is *shame*. Shame that as men (we call ourselves “men”) force our women to be strong not because they want to be, but out of necessity they have to be.

**AHA: Conversation with Antwon** – Antwon's profile resonated with me the most since, like him, at the beginning I knew the judge would give me a lot of time knowing the life I lived in in the streets and how we valued it. Even though I did not get as much time, I got 47 years – close to half of it at 18 years old. So it was all the same realizing this but it did not hit me until I got back in the bullpen. Going through stints of solitary because I was deemed too dangerous and a threat. I had to change no matter how I was viewed. Antwon's story meant so much to me since he found a sanctuary in reading and writing like I did and inspiration from Malcom X, which is the first book I ever read and changed my ways. So may this take Antwon a lot of places and give some of his time back like I did and make becoming free again a reality. He is a changed man.

**TP: Conversation with Nick** – I resonated with his story the most. As a child also taken from his mom at a very young age, I faced almost the same things he faced in the foster care system: abuse, hatred, everything. It made me cry and think about my past. Foster care and the justice system is broken. What meant so much to me is that after all that hurt, he's not bitter and wants to give back to foster youth. And so do I.

**4. This is our first collection featuring the stories of family members, friends, and others involved in the legal system in different ways. What do you think this adds to the narrative (“a way of understanding a situation that reflects a particular point of view or set of values”) of the book?**

**AW:** I believe it fills out the blank spaces, giving a clear view that this is a cultural blight called “The Criminalization of a Race.” It adds 3D to what this anthology sets out to reflect. Our humanity is reflected holistically as a community, city, nationwide criminal act against we who are the direct descendants of the enslaved people that made amerikkka great and are now rewarded – or should I say, hoodwinked – with the 13th amendment.

**JG:** It provides different viewpoints, which allow the reader to fully grasp the effect that the legal system has on people.

**RB:** It illustrates vividly how incarceration doesn't just affect the victim of the crime but how it affects the whole community.

**TT:** It gives the book a multifaceted vibe of struggle in this vein. A vein perspective of what it's like to rise and fall in that corner of the world, as well as how to aid the relief of such circumstances.

**TG:** For me it was the pictures, putting faces to the stories enhances the realism of the narratives. It says: “This is me. I'm real.” Thank you for that.

**5. Many of the poems and stories tackle different and painful subjects, such as Ebonee's story of her two sons surviving gun violence in “Takin' Losses.” What do you think we can do to bring about safety and healing? What has brought you hope and healing in your life?**

**DJ:** People like myself and others have been through this struggle only to be locked in a cell and ride it out with the same person who you were tryna inflict pain upon, and vice versa. But the Second Look Act has brought hope to me.

**TP:** We need more awareness. Like Ebonee said, we remember the ones lost, but not the survivors. Survivors need to start speaking up more. All cases should be treated the same, whether the victim died or not. We need to start more restorative justice so victims can get healing. Also, what brought me hope is that I'm getting out soon and have a second chance when a lot of people don't get second chances.

I'm still healing my own wounds. But writing has become the biggest part in my healing process.

**WTJ:** Making things safe and healing starts before someone is shot, robbed, or assaulted (the way I see it). We focus on troubled youth when we should or could focus on the living conditions of poverty. A child is happy with a dead battery as a toy until he learns that other children have cars that roll. I'd like to get things back to when we were a village raising our children and not just my child. That starts with the parents, teens, and babies.

**LW:** I believe we must break this never ending cycle of crime and violence. This, I believe, should start with our children before they become at-risk. We must play a proactive role in their upbringing. We must find out their interests and help them to develop their latent talents and abilities. The way I believe we do this is by developing the best that is in a person through appreciation and encouragement. We nourish the bodies of our children, but how seldom do we nourish their self esteem? Be liberal with encouragement, make things seem easy to do, let our children know we have faith in their abilities to do it, that they have an undeveloped flair for it – and they will practice until the dawn comes in the window in order to excel. We must also find and enroll them into activities and programs of their interests to further develop these talents and abilities. No child can be expected to know how to find and enroll in such programs without an older concerned person's assistance. If we keep our youth engaged in productive activities, they will not have the time to form self destructive ideas.

**RB:** Becoming aware that you can change your quality of life through self-education is the sole solution to all our problems. Once a person realizes that they are not stuck being the person you are right now – even if you're on death row – you have infinite power to improve your mind and benefit those around you. Then you begin to realize that you're free now, right where you are. But you have to do the work.

**TA:** Let's stop being quick to incarcerate like that's an absolute answer. Let's create more and better programs, opportunities, and situations that will lead to safer communities and the healing of those living in those communities. And don't stop with these programs out in society, but fight for better and more meaningful programs in these prisons and juvenile detention centers also. We need programs, and not just for sports programs, as referenced in Jordan's profile. We need academic, vocational, technical, cosmetology, architectural, agricultural, culinary, chess, debate, nursing, technological, financial, writing programs.

**6. What does the title of the book mean to you?**

**AHA:** To me it means that you hear the voices of the youth and people who have been affected by the system in some way, shape or form telling their story from their point of view. It shows that people can grow and succeed and become a voice to be here for generations to come. Even if you did not have a profile or piece in this book, you don't just hear one voice, but all as a whole.

**MC:** We all share a common struggle: the judicial system and the consequences of poverty and colonialism.

**DB:** We are all affected by the same drama. So when I speak, you hear the story of us.

**WTJ:** The title, to me, means my voice is a part of a choir. We may share different sides of the stage, yet we're singing the same song. My voice may not reach the ears of Congress, but the “Us” will. We have our respective roles in reaching the people; mine may be doing my best to help someone in the trenches with me, while yours is to help us out there. However the goal is the same: Change!

**TT:** There is a star amongst all crowds who exposes the truth behind the stories you don't know.



# AROUND THE WORLD: EGYPT

*By Aiyah, Free Minds Friend*

*I am a poet, filmmaker, and Arabic calligraphist, currently based in DC. I have spent a lot of time on the road, and much of my art and writing explores the ways in which traveling can serve as an avenue of healing in our lives. I am also a volunteer with Free Minds and a travel writer. For this article, I decided to write about Egypt. I had traveled there earlier this winter, and decided, rather impulsively, to stay for far longer than I had intended.*

*This is my attempt to share with you my experience in Egypt, and to understand the strange sequence of events and coincidences that lead us towards a variety of unplanned destinations.*

**"He sees the landscape as something altered, no longer so familiar that it is invisible to him."**

**– In the Skin of a Lion, Michael Ondaatje**

SINAI PENINSULA, EGYPT – The bus nears a checkpoint, dims its light. We move cautiously through the desert...towards lit outposts and dark shadows of military men violating the desert's simple request to be left alone. And the travelers' too.

A soldier approaches, tells us to get down from the bus, open our bags and stand beside them. We form a line outside, open our bags, and wait. The soldier leaves. Another comes, glances over us from where he stands, orders us to pack our things and move on.

That's it. A performance of authority that doesn't bother playing its act well. He could have walked along, glanced over our belongings, reached out for an item. Just to pretend, to feign purpose. No one questioned the absurdity, not this time, nor in the eleven times that followed as we made our way through the desert. The driver lied when he could, evaded questions when he couldn't. When asked, he'd say there were no foreigners in his bus. And if they took our passports, he'd step out of the bus, talk his way out of the obsessive caution they took with any traveler who wasn't Egyptian.

It's the middle of the night. I try to reason with myself at each checkpoint. I say, it's nothing, there's plenty of them along the

way. The 3-foot rifles are nothing. The pair of eyes searching me in the darkness, nothing. But I'm a terrible player in the game of indifference, and each time the bus slows down, and the barricades appear, the terror rises, urgent and despaired with the lack of rest. Each half hour, an outpost announces itself. Just as often, the drifting child of fear within me is shaken violently awake.

It could have been otherwise, for all of us. We could stay where the grocery store's a ten minute walk and every item on the shelf looks familiar.

I could be lying in my little efficiency near the river, my blue bird waking me in the morning, my easel by the window. I could be watching the sun rising over the city, the rush of cars. Or I could see it break over the rust colored desert in the backseat of a speeding bus.

And this is where everything changes for me. I will meet travelers and locals who'll irrevocably alter the way I travel. Almost everyone will surprise me with their tragedy, their private wars that spill easily into the ear of a stranger. And when the sun sets and the cold air finds us, we will wrap ourselves in blankets, lay beside each other. Our camp will be by the sea. The huts will be no warmer than the open shores...

Then, because I am traveling with travelers more daring than I, I find myself in the water, a breathing tube in my mouth, swimming along the borders of The Blue Hole. To my right is a long and curved trail of white coral. To my left is a deep, terrifying cliff that drops eternally into black water. I am caught in an endless tug between bravery and mindless fear. Some moments, I am swimming alone, entranced by the colors, the colonies of timid wildlife. Then, my eye catches sight of the deep cliff, and I swim back in a hurry to the line of girls holding onto a life float. I spend the next half hour this way: a few minutes of courage, followed by a senseless and embarrassing terror. I could not understand. It was the same sea, how could so much fear and just enough confidence exist so closely together?

When there's no money left, and I'm not ready to leave Egypt, I do something I've never tried before. I ask a camp by the sea if I can paint their huts in exchange for a bed. The next week, I am further north, working with animals and taking care of a garden in exchange for a bamboo hut by the sea and three meals a day.

On New Year's Eve, I am on a flight back to DC. It's been three months. The night before I was bracing against the cold in a hut with no door, the next night I am in the basement of my grandmother's house, in the bed I've had since I was a little girl. It is warmer here. I can throw my clothes into a machine. I can take a warm shower.

But I'm unhappy. I am a stranger in the life of another woman. I hold her paintings, her art, her notebooks. I can't imagine doing it all again. I can't imagine ever having done it before.

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I am writing to you from the basement overlooking the neighbor's driveway. Sometimes, the neighbor comes out to drag the trash bins to the side of the road. Only his legs appear in the small parting beneath the window blinds. Otherwise, I never see him.

The Sinai Peninsula in Egypt passes before me too, a desert and a dream, the red scars in its sky, the sea holding the colors of a country. The mountains appear and retreat from dominant browns to shy silhouettes, and the people come with intention to leave, then stay. The Californian man decides to sell rice pudding from his bike. A man loses his son in childbirth, then finds his way out of his grief spending six months in the desert. A Canadian who was once homeless comes to search for something here, he isn't sure what.

And me: A woman with blue strands of hair, the same one who stood alone by the shores of Beirut, walks out of her hut, paces the shore while all the others sleep, watching her last sunrise in Sinai, a strong blush of pink spreading across the sky, the mountains vague and grey-blue in the distance.



All photos taken by Aiyah, Nuweiba, Egypt

<sup>1</sup> "The Blue Hole is a 120-metre-deep sinkhole, five miles north of Dahab. Its nickname is the 'divers' cemetery". (The Guardian)

## MEMBERS CONNECT: WELLBEING

Wellbeing  
By MJ

*"Unless you know your mission and have aligned your life to it, your core will feel empty... without a conscious life purpose. A man (or woman) is totally lost, drifting, adapting to events rather than creating events... But if you don't know your deepest core, then you can't align your life to it." – David Deida, "The Way of the Superior Man"*

Now that I've got your attention;

I began with this quote because I felt compelled to highlight the relationship between one's wellbeing and their life purpose. Therefore, I ask the question: What is one's "wellbeing" without the purpose? Or, what is the purpose of one's wellbeing? And, what is wellbeing exactly? Perhaps wellbeing is food, clothing, water and shelter from the elements, or maybe culturalism has placed a higher standard on our wellbeing and what we believed it should be (SMH). If your output is greater than your income, then your up-keep becomes your downfall! But that's a whole 'nother story.

To me, since humans are social beings, then our wellbeing

depends on others' wellbeing. The wellbeing of the sum depends on the whole. We must come together as a people to secure our wellbeing (mentally, physically, spiritually – holistically, economically, etc). As a people, before we can have a nation. It is long past the time to be real with one another and to heal each other!

With that being said, this is my life's purpose. I don't have all the kinks worked out, but I'm certain that I need to promote oneness of all - starting with Africans, no matter where they are in the world. I mean, what else is there to do with one's life? May as well make an effort of securing a wellbeing for your future. Everyone else is doing it. Why not us? Might as well leave something positive behind before we're "double-bunking" up in harmonies.

In closing, peace and blessings. This message was done in love. I wish I had more to offer, but right now I can only extend my best wishes to The FM family. Nehast (awaken to a higher existence/wake up) people! Listen to the whispers and you won't have to hear the screams.



# **FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP**

1816 12th Street NW  
Washington, DC 20009



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



By popular demand, our next issue will be all about Sports! Do you have a favorite sport to play or watch? What is it, and why? (If you don't have a favorite sport, tell us why not!) Are there any athletes that you look up to? For many people, sports are not just a physical activity but a way to develop leadership or team building skills, to practice discipline, to express yourself...and of course to boost your mental or physical wellbeing! Are there memorable moments in your life when playing a sport helped you? Describe the game and what it meant to you in that moment. Let's stretch our creative muscles and write poems or essays that take the reader to that pivotal moment when you made the perfect pass, or hit the ball just right...what did it look like? What did it sound like? Use as many of the five senses (touch, taste, feel, sight, and smell) as you can. We can't wait to read all about it!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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