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Free minds Connect



IN THIS ISSUE EXPECTATIONS

**LIVING WITH FAMILY
AFTER INCARCERATION**

PAGE 6

REAL TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

PAGE 16

**EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES
OF COMING HOME**

PAGE 24

WALKING THE HILLS OF PORTUGAL

PAGE 38

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Happy Spring, Free Minds Members!

I hope this issue finds you well in body, mind, and spirit! In thinking about all the many topics this issue's theme of Expectations brings up, I had to reflect on the challenges of unspoken or unrealized expectations. This made me think of one of the most un-challenging relationships in my life: my senior dog, Diego (who has gained a lot of wisdom in his almost 20 years of living!).

Diego doesn't assume I know what he needs, and if I don't anticipate his needs, he doesn't get resentful about it. Every morning and every evening, he happily trots over to his food bowl at the required time to let me know he is expecting his breakfast and dinner! He doesn't expect me to read his mind and provide treats; he gets my attention each time. If only humans were as communicative and transparent about their needs. Now I'm not suggesting you have to constantly remind others of what you've already communicated as a request. I'm just saying the trap of unverballed resentments is deep. One can fall hard into that trap; I know because I've done it so many times in my life. As our wonderful FM therapist Dr Jackson shares on page 16, relationships are hard!! Sometimes, people expect those who truly know and care about them to automatically know their expectations, but this can be unrealistic and unfair.



Diego always expresses his expectations very clearly 😊

My relationship with Diego is simple, and his expectations of me are clear and easy for me to do. Human beings are not so simple, of course. Healthy relationships may be complex, but they are worth the challenge. This issue is full of thoughtful poems and essays reflecting on being intentional about setting expectations or responding to unexpected situations.

When we asked members in the reentry program what expectations they may have had when they were coming home, we had a rich and varied discussion, which you can read on page 24. One member shared that before his release, he asked his loved ones directly about what expectations they may have had for him. Even if people may have different expectations, this awareness could help make the situation easier to navigate.

Of course, we may have the best intentions for ourselves and for others, but life still doesn't always go the way we planned. Jamal opens up on page 6 about his experience living with a family member after incarceration. He says, "We must remember that our family members want to be there for us. For that reason, they may say they will do things that they simply aren't able to do." It may be easier said than done, but

I think we can all practice giving ourselves and others grace and compassion in these situations.

Our friend Eddie, who leads workshops at Free Minds on dealing with stress and anxiety, shares this invaluable advice about setting healthy expectations: "Be realistic with yourself, first and foremost. Set short-term goals, whether it's trying to monitor how you're responding to things, seeking professional support, or finding a comfort buddy. Be willing to listen, to express yourself when you're feeling good and bad. Learn to destress, to take a few minutes to relax, breathe, think through what you're feeling, and acknowledge it" (page 30).

Carlos writes on page 35 about readjusting his expectations after an unanticipated expense led to disappointment. It can be a challenge to practice adaptability, but this skill can help us prepare for those unexpected situations that we all may face in the future. As BK writes on page 9, we can "embrace the unexpected." Words to live by!

On page 27, James offers these words of wisdom for those preparing for reentry: "everything won't happen all at once so be patient and enjoy the huge blessing of being free... Find people of the same mindset who they can relate to because I honestly don't know where I'd be without some of the stories expressed by my fellow Free Minds members."

No one is alone in dealing with expectations and the disappointment that sometimes arises when things don't go as planned. Know that you can always turn to your Free Minds family for a listening ear.

Finally, I want to leave you with these words from MH, in his poem "What to Expect" (page 13):

Expect the best from yourself
Expect to reach old age
Before every endeavor begins
Expect to win

May MH's words be a reminder to all of us to keep dreaming, to keep striving for new and greater heights. And know that we are not alone in this journey. I find comfort and inspiration in that; I hope that you do too.

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: Balance

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.



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the Editor	2
In Loving Memory	4
Free Minds HQ	4
Free Minds Mailbag	5
Quote-i-vator	5
Family Ties: When Expectation and Reality Don't Match Up	6
Just Law	7
DC Photos	8
Members <i>Connect</i> : Expectations	9
Spinning the Track with the Advice Man	10-11
Poems by Free Minds Members	11-14
Conversation with Jennifer	15
News You Can Use:	15
Submit Writing to the <i>Washington City Paper</i> Paying It Forward: Talking Mental Health	16-17
with Dr. Jackson	18
Reentry Corner with Ms. Keela	19-20
Books Across the Miles Discussion Questions	21-22
Writing Prompts	23
Members <i>Connect</i> : Expectations	23
Free Children's Books!	24-25
Reentry Book Club Members on Expectations	26
The Write Way: Celebrating Yourself in Writing	27
Reentry Profile: Expectations, Communication, and Patience	27
Spotlight on Published Author	28-29
In the News	30
Give Yourself Grace	31
Meditation: Letting Go of Expectations of Others	32
Did You Know? Disappointment and the Brain	33
Real World of Work: Gordon's Story	34
What We're Reading	35
Conversaciones de Mentes Libres	36-37
Free Minds Conversations	38
Books Across the Miles Discussion Questions:	39
<i>An American Marriage</i>	40
Around the World: Visiting Lisbon, Portugal	41
The Great Transfer	42
Celebrating Members' Accomplishments	43
Preview: Next Issue's Theme - Balance	44

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

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

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Club & Writing Workshop, 2023



FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Jordan

Chris and Colie Inspiring Change with the NFL

The entire Free Minds family has been working hard to build new partnerships and reach new audiences with our message. Last year, Free Minds won a grant from the NFL Foundation's "Inspire Change" program to partially support a new initiative in our reentry program, a 12-week training in peer support. This winter, the NFL chose Free Minds to be included in a commercial about the Inspire Change program. Free Minds board member Chris and Poet Ambassador Colie were featured in this video – with our book, *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* – that aired for a week during the NFL regular season, reaching millions of viewers! We look forward to continuing to build up this partnership.

Free Minds Members Take the Stage

Free Minds has also once again partnered with the Theatre Lab, a local nonprofit and acting school. As part of their Life Stories Project, members bring their stories to life through acting. Each cohort with Life Stories lasts 3 months, with a final performance during the last week. The team of Free Minds members led by Reentry Coach Demetria held an amazing performance on January 31st that left members and the audience raving about it for weeks afterward. The auditorium was so full that only standing room was left while the performance was going on. As someone who has experienced Life Stories in the past, I must say that creating those memories and new partnerships gave me the confidence not just to act, but to get out of my comfort zone and share my story. I'm sure the members of this cohort felt the same way and we congratulate them once again on their amazing work and performance.

Free Minds On the Same Page by Janet and Carlos

We want to share with you a few ways that your voices contributed to powerful, timely conversations at Free Minds On the Same Page events in communities all over the country in January and February. Free Minds Poet Ambassadors read aloud your poems and shared their own life experiences related to reading and writing before, during, and after incarceration which motivated reading tutors working one on one with children in under-resourced DC and Baltimore elementary schools to build up their skills after missing so much learning time during the pandemic. Then Black Lives Matter at School, a national group of teachers, students and parents invited Free Minds to kick off their 2023 BLM Week of Action. The poems you wrote about Black History, police brutality, racism, injustice, resistance, resilience and hope were just what we needed to hear together as a group so soon after the murders of Tyre Nichols and Keenan Anderson. In addition to healing, Free Minds poetry is a source of greater understanding and awareness. Two high school students created clubs at their schools that now have hundreds of middle and high school students responding to Free Minds poems and educating themselves about incarceration.

In Loving Memory

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

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, Davon, Jahmeze, Deonte, Stephon, Karon, Damani, Kelvin, Melvin

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 MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the September/October 2022 Connect Belonging and the November/December 2022 Connect Celebration.

On Belonging:

AHA: Well this *Connect* issue on Belonging is another well done issue showing how belonging to our very special community with Free Minds demonstrates how we all felt on this topic and relate. All of the stories reflect a sense of belonging. As RP said in his poem, belonging is "a feeling of being where you feel loved, essential." All of the stories was excellent and stood out in its own way. Larry's story, I could relate a lot since family ties mean a lot and for some who use the out of sight, out of mind mentality, you hold no hard feelings towards. 31 years is a long time to be away from family and now I have been for 21 years. For those who stay close, we appreciate.

Charles gave a solid perspective on belonging too since our home and where we come from is where our roots lay, so feeling at home after however long is not new looking at it from his point of view. Everything in this issue was great.

JP: I received my *Connect* yesterday and it was masterful, inspiring, and so amazing that I plan on sharing it with a Drug Treatment group that I volunteer for here at the institution to show examples of how change is made and how we must start and continue to believe it the change in ourselves because there is no limit on what we can do or accomplish if we believe in ourselves and open our mind and our hearts.

SC: Tell the brothers to keep up the good advice. I read the questions and answers and just smile. I think it's wonderful that we have someone to give us positive advice and that the brothers are not afraid to ask for it. Thanks for the photo section too, DC is looking great now.

On Celebration:

CS: I love reading all of the poems and seeing the DC photos. I haven't seen the city since 2001 so it's great to see it in that light how it's becoming something wonderful... When I read my poem in the Free Minds magazine I felt a sense of great joy and accomplishment, reading my work and allowing others to read it. I want to do it more.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"When you learn to accept instead of expect, you'll have fewer disappointments."
- Robert Fisher

"I'm not in this world to live up to your expectations and you're not in this world to live up to mine." - Bruce Lee, Hong Kong and American martial artist

"My expectations were reduced to zero when I was 21. Everything since then has been a bonus." - Stephen Hawking, British theoretical physicist

"Peace begins when expectation ends." - Sri Chinmoy, Indian spiritual leader

"If you expect great things of yourself and demand little of others, you'll keep resentment far away."
- Confucius, Chinese philosopher

"Over time, I have learned to focus on the things I want to focus on in the time frame that I set. I no longer have to work based on someone else's expectations or pressure. I put enough pressure on myself!"
- Beyoncé, American singer/celebrity



Beyoncé

FAMILY TIES: WHEN EXPECTATION AND REALITY DON'T MATCH UP

By Jamal, FM Member

I'm fresh home! I just came home in September 2022. When you're just coming home after 25 ½ years in prison, the last thing you want to have to do is continue to depend on someone else. I was so excited! I was focused upon being independent. I was ready to take care of myself. That said, I knew I would need a place to lay my head just for a little while. I try hard not to have expectations of others, but I'll admit, I did expect my family members would be there with emotional support, encouragement, and a temporary place to stay. And at first, it was all good.

I got a warm welcome from everyone, initially. My aunt had two houses, and she invited me to stay in one of them. I didn't realize her daughter (my cousin) would also be there. When I got that warm welcome, I was like, "Okay, looks like things are going to be okay! This is a good environment for me." I found out I was highly mistaken. I'd been away for a long time. And my actions seemed strange to my family members. In prison, you don't have any understanding of not running the water and cutting off lights because you don't have to pay the bills! I was also used to being in prison where everyone has earphones in, the TV is on, everybody's talking at the same time, and so we're all used to yelling. I wasn't doing anything intentionally; I just didn't know. But what I learned is that people take everything more personally out here. In prison, if somebody doesn't like something, they'll let you know directly. But out here, you can be doing something without even knowing it's offensive and a person will take it as straight up blatantly disrespectful. That's what baffled me. They started complaining about everything. I stayed in the basement and I always texted before I came upstairs. But they still complained about not having any privacy. I felt like I was on eggshells on my tippy toes. Not only did I have to watch where and how I moved, I had to watch what I said and my tone of voice. After 12 days staying with her, my cousin asked me to leave.

First, I slept on another cousin's couch, but she had Section 8 housing, so I couldn't stay long. From there, I moved to a hotel. I bounced around a bit before I landed on my feet. I will admit to feeling saddened by the way I was treated. But I don't have hard feelings. My relationship with my family members is intact. I take pride in being a man who doesn't let my feelings dictate how I treat other people. I know that they are proud of me. And people out here are struggling in our communities just to pay the bills. And then you're talking about putting another grown person into their living area. I can't fault them. I understand.

Yes, my expectations of what it would be like coming home were different from the reality. As human beings, we tend to think that what I would do is the same as what any other person would do in a given situation. But that's not true. Everyone is different. So, you can't make those assumptions and have expectations of how others will act. If I can share anything with you from my new vantage point, I would say

this: Do not be disappointed in other people. Whether it's your mother, your brother, your sister, your best friend or your partner. You can only be disappointed in yourself if you don't come out here looking to be successful and stay free. Set your expectations for others low. And then if they exceed them, you can be pleasantly surprised! And when that happens, I recommend giving them crazy props for being there. And on the flip side, don't hold grudges. Grudges are a waste of time!

We must remember that our family members want to be there for us. For that reason, they may say they will do things that they simply aren't able to do. This includes promising financial support that they aren't in a position to give, or emotional support that they aren't equipped to provide due to mental illness or other issues. They want to be able to do these things. But their inability to deliver can result in disappointment. So, we are better off if we don't hold these expectations to begin with.

In contrast, it's important that we set extremely high expectations for ourselves. I know my potential and what I want to accomplish. I want to take steps that lead to me procuring generational wealth, not just for me, but for future family members. I believe that if I'm just doing something for myself, that's not enough. I have to push even harder so that my family and even people I don't know will benefit from me doing something great!

I've been home five months and it has been wonderful. I am just enjoying being me. I wake up so optimistic that opportunities are coming. Opportunity smells like winning. So, if I keep trying, I just know eventually I am going to hit it!

UPDATE: As soon as he arrived home, Jamal enrolled in Project Empowerment, the DC government initiative which partners with businesses to recruit, train, match, and coach candidates for successful employment. As well as attending their classes, Jamal rented a car and has been driving for Lyft to pay his bills. Project Empowerment offers a financial incentive to any of their participants who secure a job on their own. In February, Jamal interviewed for a security guard position and got the job! Huge shout out to Jamal from the entire Free Minds family.



THE YOUTH REHABILITATION ACT

By DJ, Free Minds Member

This article was originally printed in the Connect Volume 9, Issue 2. We are re-printing it here for your information.

The Youth Rehabilitation Act (YRA) in Washington D.C. gives the court greater latitude when imposing a sentence on a person who was under the age of 25 at the time the crime was committed. The law sets out at least two vital benefits to a sentence that is imposed under the law. Number one, in cases in which there is a mandatory minimum prison sentence, the law permits the court to dish out a sentence that is below the mandatory minimum! Next, the law permits the court to "set aside" a conviction (that is, to seal it from public view) upon successful completion of the sentence. Check out D.C. Code section 24-901 to 906.

The law was first enacted in 1985. In 2018, the law was amended in three main ways. First, the definition of "youth offender" changed. This is important because only a "youth offender" can get the Youth Act. "Youth offender" was changed to mean a person who was under age 25 at the time that he or she committed an offense other than first and second degree murder; first and second degree sexual abuse; and first degree child sexual abuse. Second, the law made clear that the judge could sentence you below the mandatory minimum if you were a "youth offender." Third, the law separated the decisions on the sentencing portion of the Youth Act and the set aside portion of the Youth Act.

One goal of this law was to distinguish youth from more mature, experienced adults and to provide an opportunity for a deserving youth to start over with his or her criminal record expunged.

The process for relief unfolds in two steps.

Step 1: The sentencing judge can agree at the sentencing to sentence you in accordance with the YRA. In doing so, the sentencing judge must weigh a multitude of factors. The final decision must be in writing.

Step 2: After you finish your entire sentence including probation or supervised release, you can file a motion asking the judge to set aside your sentence. The judge looks at the same factors for both decisions.

Factors:

- (A) Age at the time of the offense;
- (B) The nature of the offense, including the extent of the youth's role in the offense and whether and to what extent an adult was involved in the offense;
- (C) Whether the youth was previously sentenced under this chapter; (meaning whether the individual previously received a YRA sentence)
- (D) The youth's compliance with the rules of the facility to which the youth has been committed, and with supervision and pretrial release, if applicable;

- (E) The youth's current participation in rehabilitative District programs;
- (F) The youth's previous contacts with the juvenile and criminal justice systems;
- (G) The youth's family and community circumstances at the time of the offense, including any history of abuse, trauma, or involvement in the child welfare system;
- (H) The youth's ability to appreciate the risks and consequences of their conduct;
- (I) Any reports of physical, mental, or psychiatric examinations of the youth conducted by licensed health care professionals;
- (J) The youth's use of controlled substances that are unlawful under District law;
- (K) The youth's capacity for rehabilitation;
- (L) Any oral or written statement provided pursuant to § 23-1904 or 18 U.S.C. § 3771 by a victim of the offense, or by a family member of the victim if the victim is deceased; and
- (M) Any other information the court deems relevant to its decision.

The change regarding when you can get a set aside is really important. When the law was amended in 2018, they made an important change regarding this "set aside" option. Before, if the judge didn't apply the YRA at sentencing, people had no opportunity to have their conviction set aside, even if they had a spotless record and never got a single shot. Now, anyone who fits under the definition of "youth offender" can apply to have their conviction set aside after they have completed their sentence (including probation or supervised release). Judges will look at a person's accomplishments in the years since their sentencing. This is an opportunity for people to demonstrate through their actions who they really are and who they can be!

Setting aside your conviction does not obliterate all records about the conviction, but the records are hidden from the public for observation.

If you ever got in trouble again and had to be sentenced, the new judge would know of the prior conviction and use it against you at the new sentencing proceeding. But having your conviction set aside should really help with employment opportunities. Finally, even when the conviction is set aside, it is still your responsibility to file a motion in court to seal your arrest records connected with the case. Check out D.C. Code section 16-803.

Hope this info was useful. Until next time, keep your mind free.
Free Minds Member,
DJ

THIS ARTICLE DOES NOT CONSTITUTE LEGAL ADVICE; CONSULT YOUR ATTORNEY!

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*



Mural on the side of Liff's Market on Alabama Avenue SE.



Businesses on Good Hope Road.



The Anacostia Library.



Entrance to the United States Botanic Garden.

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos?
Write us at 1816 12th St NW, Washington, DC 20009 and let us know what you'd like to see!

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: EXPECTATIONS

The Two Sides of Having Expectations By BK

When going deeper than the surface to think about a word, our minds drift to either positive, negative, or both connotations. The word "Expectation" can be a bit controversial. I can see the debaters preparing their arguments on both sides of the aisle.

The optimists might declare it's a tool on the road of preparation. A strategy to prevent possible unwanted surprises. An epiphany beacon to green-light the flawlessness of ideas.

The pessimists may rebut that expectations are wishful entitlements to future occurrences that may never occur. They are the mountains and seas of wasted time spent trying to calculate a perfect life that never runs into barriers. An insane method that leads to a circling cycle of disappointment.

In my experience, expectations are hit and miss. I have nailed pivotal targets, avoided life-threatening demises, and made memorable moments because of the right

expectations. In those cases, I believe that God directed me. On the other hand, I have been stopped in my tracks while carrying out a ten-step plan, because I miscalculated expectations for step one. So, I try to find the proper balance of expectations that is satisfying for me.

Expectations are our way of playing out the most efficiently acceptable possibilities in our minds, while incorporating how to deal with all the fathomable challenges that may pose a threat to that reality (AKA, a well thought out plan). But taken to the extreme, expectations can lead to failure. Some people fail because they were either convinced that the expectations of their plan failing outweighed their expectations of it thriving. They get stuck trying to solve every possible expected challenge imaginable; or a previous painful unexpected variable may have scarred them so deep that fear won't even let them start.

No one knows the future though. Have faith and embrace the unexpected.

Expectations By AHA

I always expected to do what was best for me to better the situations I lived in within my community. I had expectations of removing myself from this environment that I knew wasn't good for my growth. The end result was prison since I only pulled myself into things more rapidly thinking I was in too deep to remove myself from a lot I created and started within my community. So everything that I wanted to do or set out to do with myself didn't go as expected. These types of expectations I see for myself in the future and upon my release I intend to act on and

not make the same mistakes. Before I had to overcome my disappointment in myself when my expectations wasn't met by accepting the consequences of my actions and decisions I made. When I am able to meet my expectations I feel good since I set out to do what I sought to do. I know I've set realistic expectations when I'm able to accomplish them and unrealistic ones when I can't accomplish them or know I'm overstepping my reach in something. So I try to set expectations I know I'm capable of doing.

Expectation By AD, Reentry Book Club Member

Expectations are something I've always embraced, though expectations upon release are something one coming home from prison cannot truly fathom. But, it is a must to have expectations because expectations are much more similar to that of a dream (or goal), and dreams have its place in life. But, sometimes, with life... it is all determined by what hand you've been dealt, for good or bad, with the latter being that for which no one wishes to own.

As I've noticed upon my release, with the grandest plans, one would be remiss to believe in them. The unexpected turns in life predicated by the deals I've mentioned previously would lead one to believe that life is a mercileless mercenary waiting at every opportunity to knock one off their square. But, in fact, it is the total opposite. Unexpected circumstances that we have no understanding of steer one in the appropriate direction, where the keys to success really lie, unbeknownst to our lack of patience and foresight. We fight against the foundation of success that has been laid

out for our benefit, often going against the grain toward our own demise.

Upon my release, after having served 29 years in prison, my expectations in my mind have been as sound as a pillar, unlimited in their structure. But that wasn't the reality of the situation. Often, I failed to realize that there had been other clues that had to have been paid. But, one's dreams are still there for the taking, spring boarded by the reality of that which has to come beforehand, by the hand that had been dealt that one must play by, or simply to take the road of least resistance. And that road is one we rarely bounce back from.

So, even from our lack of understanding, which I've been made to experience, I must respect the reality that has to pay its due. It is there, and it demands its acknowledgement.

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 will soon be transferred to the BOP to serve my sentence. I am a very social person, but to be honest, I've never been all that good at maintaining relationships. I know that this will be especially important while I'm doing my time. What would you advise me as far as the best ways to communicate with my family and young children while I'm incarcerated. I want to build better relationships not just with them, but even with my distant family. What are your tips? Thank you!

Sincerely,
R.C.

RC,

At the beginning of another year, I want to wish all FM's family and readers "peace & blessings" moving forward. I feel a much needed "THANK YOU ALL!" is appropriate for the past stimulating questions and advice to the hunger we have to connect and reach out to get solutions for our community. Our sincere appreciation goes out to our rock, the FM staff, for all their hard work.

RC, so glad you asked your question as many members of our community have or will unfortunately embark on a pilgrimage through the BOP. We understand re-entering society as a positive, impactful person can't happen overnight. It starts the 1st day one steps into the BOP arena. However, be careful as each arena is vast in what one can make of it. The lowest it can be is a wasteland for doing dead time, or on the other hand one can make their environment a campus of higher learning, where the sky is the limit to assist their release and re-entry.

So RC, you are concerned and would like to build upon your skills at maintaining good healthy family relationships. "Expectations Minus Reality Equals Disappointment (E-R=D)." Prime example: growing up believing one can solve most issues with others through lashing out verbally or physically with anger or aggression. Take every program you can at your facility that will personify you while you craft your skills at hobbies, careers, and future business plans. Don't be one of them dreamers who come through the BOP who refuses to go to G.E.D. classes if they are available or any type of class! A lack of preparation also equals disappointment. RC and my friends getting off the bus,

the first thing I suggest you do is get and stay connected, involved, and be highly concerned about your loved ones. Second, forgive yourself as well as all others where bridges may have been burnt in the past. Third, take a self-inventory and correct or check all old irrational beliefs and actions. When you can, sign up and take advantage of classes like: parenting classes to be a skilled mentor to the youth in your family and communities; communication or anger management classes through psychology services to give you the knowledge to hone your healthy relationship skills. These are the types of classes that will help us to read each other better, de-escalate situations, and understand emotions better so we'll use our beliefs, words, and actions in a more prosocial rational manner. My personal example that I've learned through classes over the years with relationships is when I have a situation with someone, I approach them with where I think I went wrong first to calm things down. I let them know where they crossed the line with me and tell them how that made me feel. As a man comfortable with myself, I don't get hung-up with what people think about me. With my second nature, I know I need to create a boundary to let others know when they are in fact crossing the line with me. And if they do, I need to know my triggers to side-step a bad situation.

So yes! RC, it's especially important to build these types of relationships you are wanting. These relationships ease everyone's minds; they allow us to never get institutionalized, go insane, or spiral down into the wastelands of prison through new or past harmful behaviors. Moreover, these relationships are going to be our new foundation that assist us, hold us accountable, and co-sign for the new and wonderful things waiting for us on the other side. Well that's all I have for you. With that shared I'm handing this off to some seasoned and like-minded men who care about the past and present march of our community:

Greetings RC: As always thanks for sharing and thanks for allowing me to share. Sounds to me like you want better for yourself as well as for your loved ones moving forward. That in itself is growth, and something to feel good about. One of the greatest forms of communication comes by way of honesty and transparency, and once we make the decision to move forward with both, can't nothing get in our way. Understand nothing that contains worth and value will ever come easy. Nor will it just be handed to us. Growth takes focus and commitment. It will also require for you to stay focused. Meaning shut

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

*down and stay out of all the distractions the BOP will put forth. Create for yourself a purpose: communicating and staying in touch with your children and family. Dedicate your time to carrying out your purpose (focus on outgrowing the old you). Change starts with you, and even more importantly, you can work on it anywhere...
Best Regards! BM*

Mr. EG adds: Being that family and (real) friends are an inmate's most reliable source of support, it definitely makes sense to maintain a consistent line of communication with them. But understand that our loved ones require our support, love, advice, and counsel, too. In other words, we as parents, spouses, sons, and daughters can't afford to neglect our parental duties because of our confinement. I suggest that you keep a consistent line of communication via the phone system, visitation, and mailing cards off on those special occasions. Keep the focus on your loved ones – not on prison politics...

Mr. LW says: I would advise you to condition yourself mentally to realize and respect that the people you wish to have a deeper relationship with have a life of their own simultaneously while you are adjusting to your momentary life in prison. They also are making their adjustments to life in society without you (more than likely with you in mind), so you have to learn how to respect their time and space. In this effort, you do not become a burden to them. I believe your relationship can grow with all of the love and friendship you want (w/much sincerity, LW).

FM's family, in a nutshell all we're attempting to do is try to encourage everyone to absorb getting keen and harnessing the right skills that promote coming together with family and our community without conflict with others and promote the skills of comfort, encouragement, and support. Our ancestors are begging for this from their graves as our communities are witnessing in live color an ongoing terrible cycle of violence in which the elders are begging for relational-ship change. That change that values, above all else, life and the pursuit of us to come together, strive, and get along for the better of our community strength. I thank you for this platform and for everyone reading this.

My Best, TS!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Poem Dedicated to My Little Cousin (Tyson)

By AHA

I thought you would listen to me and learn from my mistakes.

Even though you looked up to me and wanted to be like me I expected you to be better than me.

When I heard of your passing it was a sad day,
with me more than once blaming myself for your demise
from what you saw and followed in me.

The streets took you from me when I expected more
so the sadness of losing you is felt daily
as I grow in life and keep your memory alive even more...

Expectation

By DAJ

Why should I have faith and trust in you?

When you ask me if I need anything you never pull through.

When you tell me you're coming to see me but never show up.

Expectations

By RP

I have been let down and felt someone didn't meet my expectations, several times....

You were supposed to be my friend, the one that I 'pose 2 go 2
After all the time we spent together, it's clear to see I don't know you.

After all the cruddy things you did to people, why did I think I was an exception?

Though you hurt me terribly and put me in danger, I appreciate the life lesson.

I've been in here since I was 18 and am now 32, SMH. All thanks to you.

I've missed so much of my sisters' lives and cried so many times 'cause I didn't say you.

I'm supposed to be with my family, with kids, a wife,

I'm 'pose to be a husband

With a friend like you, my enemies now seem like nothing.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

To Be Great

By AB

Stay consistent! You have to be observant.
Whatever field you are in life, whether it's prison, working, music,
Whatever you're doing or want to do,
You have to observe the greats.
The people who are doing it, that are good, consistent,
and successful in doing it.

The meaning of great – being beyond the average.
Markedly superior in character, quality, or skill.

So get up! Go and keep on going to be great!

Everyone has made mistakes and has failed.
But it's the one who gets up and keeps going, who becomes great!
Key word: Consistently

Real Love

By EJ

Real Love loves you unconsciously (involuntarily)
Real Love you get butterflies when you hear that person
name, see that person face, and when you're away from
that person you call before they answer butterflies
Real Love makes you blush when hearing that person name
Real Love will force you to compromise
Real Love changes selfish to selfless
Real Love turns a hardened killer to a lover of all humanity
Real Love gives you courage
Real Love is when the makeup is gone, the eyelashes are off,
and her hair is all over the place she's still beautiful to you
Real Love opens your heart to forgiveness
Real Love lets you know you belong and add purpose
(determination)
Real Love builds self worth to the point where you know
that you're priceless
Real Love is trust, caring, understanding, faith, bliss
Real Love crying while smiling because you're happy
Real Love words at times can't be defined
Real Love limitless, boundless, nonstop, everlasting
Real Love I lost, found, destroyed, neglected, found,
rejected, humiliated, and lost again
Real Love allowed me to hurt, mourn, weep, and at times
moan but most of all
Real Love made me heal, forgive, lust, and be able to love again
REAL LOVE TAUGHT ME TO LOVE MYSELF!

Expectations

By JH

Kin mourn my passing, yet I stand among
their shadows.
My heart tells me it's winter, yet the Earth
scorches my feet.
The wind moans among the trees, yet
leaves blind my eyes.

When You Was Born!

By CS

When you was born, I saw myself in you
From the look in your eyes.
Eyes so bright with life and possibilities that
I wanted to make sure you had the chance to do so.
When you was born, I felt the love in my
Heart and soul that I never felt before, I wanted to
Cherish that moment for life.
When you was born, I was just a young man
Myself but I knew that I had to be a father for you.
When you was born, you mother and I knew that
We had one of God's gifts that we brought into the world.
When you was born the funniest thing is I was trying to be
tough but I almost passed out.
But I can't let you down not being there for you...
So, when you was born
I was so relieved that you came out healthy
Now you have started our next generation
With my grandson
When you was born life gave me something,
Or better yet, someone
Who depends on me to make it

Dear Expectation

By BM

Dear Expectation,
I wonder if you understand how much value I place in you
How proud I am when you deliver, and how disappointed I
am when you fail
So unfair, right
I get it!!
I know a delay is not a denial, or a setback isn't final
I know sometimes I can set the bar exceedingly high
Give you no room at all for letdown, be really impatient,
and oftentimes extremely hard to deal with
Above all, I know your intentions are good
I know it's never a thing of underachieving on your part
In fact, I'll raise my hand first to attest to how unrealistic
and unreasonable my measures can be
Or how I can mis-use and abuse you at times
Somehow through it all, I hope you can see that I truly mean well
I'm getting better with my dealings
Even learning to fix and expand my focus, lining them with reality
Sometimes wearing the same shoes I ask others to wear
so I can be better at understanding
Am I seeing results?? Absolutely!
Am I still a work in progress?? Absolutely!
That's why now when I place expectation or picture myself
being "Expectation"
I do so respectfully, equally grasping both sides of the spectrum
You've gotten me through a lot, be it good and bad!!
I know we are far from the end!
So humbly, I'd like to say thank you, thank you, and
thanks again!!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Expectations

By AD

Expectations are a luxury in life that we are all made to be responsible for;
it is a part of life that we are all made to face in some form that is governed by life itself, which can represent a degree of expectancy that will drive one's inner strength into an outer dimension; leaving one left feeling satisfied by an accomplishment that even you were unsure to exist; having giving one more confidence as to life and the possibilities that every humankind is able to withstand; allowing one to feel as if the world isn't as vast and intimidating as believed, understanding that you are one to be relied upon to which humankind trusts one's judgment, similar to a team of professions; everyone's role is accounted for to which team work will surely make the dream work, and that is the gist of stepping out to the forefront of expectations.

In Your Eyes

By MZ

In your eyes when you look at me from your vision
what do you see?
Do you see a father, son, brother, uncle, or friend when you look at me?
Or do you see my black skin, long dreads, with tattoos & think I'm a hoodlum?
When your eyes meet mine what do you see?
Do you see a man striving towards being successful or do you see me as just another criminal?
When you see me don't just envision me as an angry black man with no regard for human life.
In your eyes I want you to view me as a human being who isn't perfect or flawless but also as a person who desires Love & Respect!
In your eyes see me as a caring, loving, kind hearted man with patience, integrity, & loyalty!
In your eyes you can see me for whatever you please because at the end of the day I know who I am!

Expectation vs. Reality

By DS

When a person is doing work for a salary expectation will conflict with reality.
Conviction and passion produce purpose
Which it clashes against expectation
because it goes past the surface on purpose.
Reality is created from the perspective of our lens.
And we need others to rub against our skin. To help kill the conflict at times that rage within.
My lens can be obscured from my point of view,
so I always need you.
Humanity inspires me to be complete.
And true purpose produces salary.
That's expectation vs. reality.

Parade of Storms

By KW

I might not be a meteorologist,
But... I know when to expect a... Storm.
Something out the ordinary is brewing,
I can feel it in the air.
Too many clouds of doubt are forming,
Gather strength.
Common sense is diminishing,
Periods of severe injustices seem endless.
Flooding the rooms with questions of... "How?"
"How do we prevent another Robb Elementary from happening?"
"How do we promote racial justice and deliver?"
"How do we allocate \$45 billion for Ukraine but do not invest to bring down gun violence for ourselves?"
And I can't lobby from prison.
There is a sprawling chain of issues,
Sprawling out of control.
Like a devastating storm.
The news seems an endless onslaught,
Mounting fears.
Those in power reaffirm their commitment,
But it's hard to be heard from the eye of the storm.
Something out of the ordinary is brewing.
Let us pray.

What to Expect

By MH

If nothing else
Expect to rely on your education
Expect reality instead of wishful thinking
There may be sunshine but
Expect thunder with lots of rain
Expect there to be growing pains
It is what it is and life's hard
Expect nothing being easy, yet
Expect to learn from your mistakes
Take challenges head on, face to face
Expect steady winning the race
Expect rising above all pitfalls
Stay humble, remember before you walked, you crawled
And stay on guard
Expect a snake, given the chance, will bite your back, but
Expect to survive fully intact
Don't crash and burn or go out in a fiery blaze
Expect the best from yourself
Expect to reach old age
Before every endeavor begins
Expect to win

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Placing Expectations

By VC

It hurt so much
That you weren't around
You can't imagine
How much your absence
Kept me down
I needed to see you say
You love me
By way of action
That would send
My spirits sky high
Yet all I was
Left with were
Unanswered "whys"
Emotional scars
But I forgive you
Although my hurt
Still doesn't exist
Very far
In all honesty
You left me for dead
I spent decades
Depressed by the
Suicidal thoughts
That ran thru my head
Was I wrong for placing
Expectations on you
Since I'm the one
That did what I did
Causing this all
To manifest
I'll still always
Love you!
But I hurt too.

Expectation

By CL

What is expectation?
Expectation is when someone
hold you to high standards.

Expectation is when a person
look for more out of you
than you may produce.

Expectation is you get what you give
nothing more
nothing less.

Expectation could
bring out the good in you
as well as the bad.

When all eyes are on you
your performance is what
they looking for.

Expectation is existentialism,
exhibitionism, disciplinary and
refinement and a reflection
of one's self.

Expectation can also
cause and lead to
exhaustion

One can only set a standard
of oneself no one else

So what is your expectation
for yourself?

I set my expectations high
when I get out I want
to be able to touch the sky

There is no limit to the height
I'm going to try to achieve
That means longer days and sleepless nights

My goals are extravagant to others
but realistic to me
I know I can accomplish if I put my mind to it

I will never sell myself short
for anyone ever again
aim for the moon reach for the stars

Self-preservation is # one by far
they put a man on the moon
why can I not walk
on Mars.





CONVERSATION WITH JENNIFER

Career Expectations

Whenever a grownup would ask Little Jenny what she wanted to be when she grew up, I always proudly answered, "a DOCTOR!" It was fun to watch their eyes light up at that response. I must have been pretty convincing too because I remember getting medical-inspired gifts along the years – like a Fisher Price blood pressure cuff, Dr. Barbie, and the game "Operation" where you have to remove the poor patient's plastic bones using impossibly small tweezers without touching the metal parts and lighting up his red buzzer nose! In front of the TV, I studied shows like MASH and St. Elsewhere for "doctor decorum", perfected the messy handwriting needed for prescription pads, and played dress up in white coats.

However, all those doctor dreams went out the window

when I realized that I faint when I see needles, blood, and most medical procedures. Over the years, I may have been woken up by smelling salts more often than some boxers. :)

In having to pivot to a career that's a better fit, I realized what actually drew me to healthcare was the idea of coaching people toward their health goals by connecting them to knowledge and resources. Throughout my career in workforce development, I have coached the staff of youth programs on the positive youth development approach, coached teen moms into fields that support their families, and coached job-seekers into construction careers. Now I am grateful for the opportunity to serve as a Reentry Coach at Free Minds—helping members connect to resources and supports to meet their reentry goals. I look forward to working with members to find the career paths that best fit them.

NEWS YOU CAN USE: SUBMIT WRITING TO THE WASHINGTON CITY PAPER

Washington City Paper is preparing to launch a column that will focus exclusively on the perspective of DC residents currently or formerly living in jail and prisons. The column will take on a variety of different forms, including personal essays and reports by residents, profiles and reports written by WCP staff, Q&As, investigative reports based on tips from inside these facilities, and more. Those who want to write, who are interested in being profiled, who have a news tip, or who have an idea for a story that they want to develop further, should contact managing editor Mitch Ryals at mryals@washingtoncitypaper.com or 314-497-8461. The idea behind the column is to highlight all aspects of life inside jails and prisons: the ordinary routines, the conditions, the relationships, the programming, the food, the recreation, the abuses, the successes, the failures, and anything else you can come up with. Ideally, most of the content in the column will be driven by the people living inside these facilities. WCP is aware of the potential for retaliation against those who speak out against wrongdoing and harm inside these facilities, and is willing to grant anonymity in circumstances where such risks exist.

PAYING IT FORWARD: TALKING MENTAL HEALTH WITH DR. JACKSON

By Araba

Dr. Jackson, DSW, LMFT, LMSW is a counselor and the Clinical Director at a private counseling practice in Washington, DC. Dr. Jackson's practice is a psychotherapy practice that specializes in meeting the therapeutic needs of individuals, adolescents, couples, families, veterans, and community-based organizations with positive social impact initiatives. Free Minds members in our reentry program are eligible for up to 3 free sessions with Dr. Jackson.*

ARABA: Can we start with an overview of who you are – what's your name, where are you from, and what you do?

DR. JACKSON: Sure, so my name is Dr. Jackson. I was born and raised in Washington, DC. I am currently the Clinical Director for a private practice that I started in 2013. I work with almost every segment of society that you could possibly think of. I do a lot of work with veterans. I did work in the school system, I've done work with Child Protective Services – almost every aspect of serving the community I've done some type of support services with.

ARABA: In your opinion, why is mental health important, and why is counseling important, specifically?

DR. JACKSON: Well, mental health is important just like your physical health is a part of our being that has to be maintained. If it is not in balance then it could disrupt every aspect of our lives. Our mental health has to do with the way I engage you, the way we engage our family members, the way we show up and present ourselves to the world. Mental health serves the same purpose as your heart, but it's your psychological way of expression. So if your mental health is imbalanced, if it's in disarray, if it's not maintained, you can't operate in your full self.

I think [counseling] is important because it's a part of a support system. It's a way in which we could get the type of wisdom, knowledge, and feedback to deal with certain challenges. One of my mottos is: "Sometimes we need a different perspective on life." And sometimes that's what counseling can offer. It also is a way in which we could have a check and balance, so to speak. When you get counseling, people can tell you if the path that you're headed, if it's not the way in which you in your mind you think that you're going to meet this objective or obtain this goal, counseling can help either confirm or validate and/or help guide you to achieve the type of goals that you want in life.

Life is stressful. We have a generic understanding of stress that there has to be an incident, an extenuating circumstance. Well, living in these bodies is stressful. That's the real truth. Life is stressful, you know! But there's some good stress and there's unhealthy stress. So that's why mental health is so important, because it helps you to understand that you're going to have some high stressful moments in your life that need to be managed differently. There are moments where as human beings we do become overwhelmed, and that's where counseling can come into play: to support you during those moments where life is somewhat overwhelming or to come up with a plan because you're going through a very stressful moment or having a stressful life experience. Having someone help guide you through that process so that you can maintain a balance in your life.

ARABA: What would you say is the most rewarding part of your work, and what would you say is the most challenging part?

DR. JACKSON: So the most rewarding, of course, is seeing people have a sense of peace when they come, and [being] able to share what their concerns are. It's rewarding to see how the interactions that you have with someone, that they've found a place where they can trust a person, that they can be totally transparent, where they know there's some confidentiality – like they can share and no one's going to disclose their personal concerns



to other people – and that they can grow. I've seen people grow emotionally and eventually they grow spiritually and they have a healthier lifestyle. That's the most rewarding part, that you see the positive impact that you make on their life, and not only for that person, right? Because I believe if you support an individual, then you are supporting a family. If you make an individual become healthy, then the family becomes healthy. If the family becomes healthy, then the neighborhood becomes healthy, if the neighborhood becomes healthy, then our community is healthy. So that is the other part, because it may be a small role that it appears that you're playing, but the chain reaction is tremendous.

[The most challenging part] has always been when I've had to refer people for medication management evaluation, particularly those that are really fearful of being prescribed medication. In all honesty, historically there have been many communities, underserved communities, they may not have always gotten the best recommendation for medication, and if they did the follow-up wasn't so great. And so they had these negative side effects and no one told them how to mitigate those side effects. So they just kind of give up. So historically, underprivileged communities, they've [often] had some type of negative experience with being prescribed medication, or someone in their family.

ARABA: This interview will be featured in the Connect issue on "Expectations." With that in mind, what advice do you have for incarcerated members that may be struggling with managing expectations in their relationships, whether those are romantic, platonic, familial, etc.?

DR. JACKSON: I think that on expectations, 1) having somebody in their corner that they can trust. That's going to tell them the truth, that the world that they are re-entering, the community that they are re-entering? There have been a lot of different changes that may not align with what they were anticipating when they were away. And that disappointments are a part of life. So how to manage those disappointments is a huge part for individuals re-entering the community. They have these expectations about what family is going to look like and how they're going to be treated, how intimate partners are going to treat them, how the community is going to receive them. So knowing that disappointment is a part of life but it's also a growth process, and it doesn't mean failure, right? We also have to recognize that some of our expectations aren't met because of things we are not in control of. Some expectations aren't met because of things we don't have any control over at all.

One thing I'd like to add about romantic relationships is even if they knew that person for the last forty years, coming back into a community where the community is not the same, that person may have had their own life experiences. All of us, if you live on Earth long enough you're going to have some degree of trauma. But what I've discovered is that the gentlemen who are re-entering into the community, they may have trauma and then family members and loved ones, they've had different types of trauma as well. And until they both recognize that, don't try to do a comparison to the trauma, just accept that you have both had traumatic experiences. That helps. Because then you can begin to build, saying, "Okay, we've both had these horrible things. How are we going to move together in spite of it?" That is one of the challenges, recognizing that really no trauma outweighs another trauma when you're trying to establish a relationship with someone after years of incarceration.

In terms of managing relationships, sometimes the gentlemen I work with, they'll want to have a session with their intimate partner or their companion. And sometimes what becomes apparent is that it's not the appropriate timing for couples, as much as it is they may

need to do some individual work first to deal with some of their stuff that shows up in their relationship but is not because of the relationship. It's hard to distinguish it when you're just focusing on each other, and that may be a part that some may be uncomfortable with. Because they be saying, "Okay, I can do counseling as long as I'm not going to be by myself, as long as my girl is going to be with me." Right? But they may need to do some work on their own to prepare for the counseling piece. And even their partner! Sometimes their partners need to do their own individual work, because a lot of them come and it's a honeymoon stage when they come home. And then as time goes on, the ritual of maintaining life kicks back in. And then this person is trying to figure some of this stuff out like... I'm home! And they have these different expectations.

ARABA: I have one last question: What advice do you have for someone who is seeking help, but is hesitant to seek counseling?

DR. JACKSON: I guess I would ask, who is in that person's life that they trust, right? And say for instance if it was my sibling that needed some help and I'm not that close to her, or she don't listen to me, or we don't have the best relationship, but I'm close to my cousin, then I would tap my cousin and say, "These are my concerns. He/she listens to you, could you make this recommendation to them?" So go to the people who they trust, that's one. Sometimes we have to be transparent, like in my profession, I have to self-disclose things about my own personal relationship if it's going to be beneficial for that person. The other thing is addressing whatever those stereotypes are, because that tends to be the reason why people are hesitant. That's why when I do my sessions initially with first-time clients, I explain that sometimes you may have heard that counseling and therapy is not effective, and it's true if it's not a good fit. Some people have gotten to counseling and they know of other people who said it didn't work for them. Or they saw them on the meds with these unhealthy-looking side effects, and thinking that this is what it looks like. Because sometimes you have to address what those stereotypes were/are and even some real unfortunate circumstances. To say that, "What is your concern?" because it's probably based on a fear more than anything. And then being able to address it with some realistic narratives or examples. So I guess the big things, I would say then, "What is the fear?" or "How do you think it would benefit you?" Or if they are in a relationship. Or if they are a parent. Or if they live in a home with their family members – if you got some support, how do you think it would benefit them? Because sometimes it may be the fear mixed up with a little bit of selfishness. But fear is probably the bigger thing, so I would probably just address those stereotypes and let them know that the world has changed. There's accountability. And I tell people, "You are not married to me, you do not have to stay in this relationship with me if it doesn't work for you." I think they think they kind of get stuck in a place with people who do not have their best interests at heart. And you can ask them! I say "Well, what would a counselor look like that you possibly could trust? Do you need a man? Do you need a woman?" Just kind of explore what would be their preference, what perhaps that would look like, and get an understanding of how they perceive, how they think counseling is going to look.

Editor's Note: When you get home, reach out to Free Minds staff if you would like to connect with Dr. Jackson or another counselor.

**Doctorate of Social Work (DSW), Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist (LMFT), Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW).*

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey good people!

I'm honored for another opportunity to connect with yall again, and wanted to give some thoughts on this month's theme EXPECTATIONS. As I see it, there are two sides of expectations – what we expect from others and what we expect from ourselves. I also think that how we manage those expectations is critical to how we view our experiences and pursue our goals.

I once read somewhere that there is a physiological reason we are disappointed when life does not meet our expectations. The neurotransmitter dopamine is released in our brain and makes us feel good when something positive happens and when our expectations are met, it's a great feeling and of course our brain wants to visit that place again and again.

Let's think about something as boring as making it across a green light in time right before it turns yellow. The light changes, it takes maybe 10 seconds to get across and then there's a pleasant release of dopamine, and a general feeling of satisfaction, even if it's only fleeting.

The downside is that when our expectations are not met, let's say we get stuck at one of those blinking red traffic lights and not sure whether to wait or go, our negative feelings are much stronger than the good feelings we get when expectations are exceeded, not to mention that when things like that do happen it is very irritating!

So when we have instances where we don't hit our expectations (and every human will experience this) our brain doesn't just get slightly unhappy, it can sometimes throw our whole day off. This is a very light example; we know that some unmet expectations can lead to a great deal of anger, disappointment and frustration. Because life can be so unpredictable, I think it's best to manage our expectations and leave room for possible let downs so that experiencing disappointment won't be as stinging. This makes me believe that the cliché "hope for the best but expect the worst" may hold a little merit after all, but thankfully not in all instances.

I also think that keeping in mind what is in our control and what is not is crucial in managing expectations. Setting high expectations may be a good strategy, if you can also allow the experience to be different from what you imagine," so it's wise to have flexibility in our expectations and being willing to change track without self-blame.

All in all, it really seems like there is no clear template for managing expectations, therefore It seems as if it is best to have low expectations of things out of our control, realistic expectations of things we can control to some degree, and high expectations of ourselves. However, it appears that the most wise path to take as it relates to expectation is to always expect the unexpected!

And now onto some helpful resources that I am hoping will meet and exceed your expectations!

Department of Small & Local Business Development
441 4th Street, NW, Suite 850 North, Washington, DC 20002
Phone: (202) 727-3900
Email: dslbd@dc.gov



The Department of Small & Local Business Development has Free Entrepreneurship classes for returning citizens!

DSLBD provides cohort-based training for returning citizen entrepreneurs, including both new businesses or aspiring entrepreneurs and established businesses. Over twelve weeks, participants will gain essential skills to build and grow a business.

The Dream Pitch Program is an 8-week cohort-based training program for microbusinesses culminating into the Dream Pitch Competition. The Dream Pitch Competition is an opportunity for participants to pitch their business to a panel of judges, showcasing the knowledge gained through the program resulting in a pitch award between \$2000 to \$7500.

Microbusinesses accepted into this competitive program will receive business development training in 4 areas:

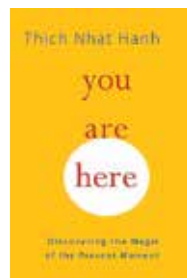
- Business Pitch
- Financial Projections/Accounting
- Marketing & Branding
- Mentorship

Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

We've counted the votes, and I'm excited to share that our next Books Across the Miles selection is *You are Here: Discovering the Magic of the Present Moment* by Thich Nhat Hanh. A renowned Zen monk, Thich Nhat Hanh uses this book to provide the reader with insight into how we can use mindfulness to overcome suffering and achieve joy. Even though he talks from a Buddhist perspective, his perspective can be applied to everyday life, regardless of religious/spiritual belief. We hope this book gives you some tools to tuck into your self-care toolkit, and we can't wait to hear your thoughts!



1. "Home" is a loaded word that often has several different connotations. On p. 37, Thich Nhat Hanh defines home as the here and now. Do you agree? What is home to you?
2. On p. 74, Thich Nhat Hanh uses cows as a **metaphor** (when a word or phrase symbolizes something else) for things in our lives that cause us suffering. Do you have any "cows" in your life? Are there some "cows" that are harder to let go than others?
3. A major theme throughout this book is the concept of impermanence, and how important it is to acknowledge and appreciate that everything in this life is impermanent. Why do you think people are so afraid of change? Do you think applying the idea of impermanence to your own life would help you in overcoming adversities you are currently facing?

4. Martin Luther King, Jr. was an acquaintance of Thich Nhat Hahn, who educated Dr. King on peacebuilding by sharing his own experiences with the anti-war movement in Vietnam (where Thich Nhat Hahn is from). Do you think any of the practices shared in this book could be used in larger movements for social justice? What role might they play?

5. Thich Nhat Hahn has a positive outlook on death because, according to Buddhist teaching, it's not an end but a continuation. Is this convincing to you? Did his perspective change your own perspective on death?

Reminder: We are still accepting votes for the books we will read together after *You Are Here*. The choices are *The Master Plan: My Journey from Life in Prison to a Life of Purpose* by Chris Wilson, *Eden Mine* by S.M. Hulse, *Felon: Poems* by R. Dwayne Betts, *Bird Uncaged: An Abolitionist's Freedom Song* by Marlon Peterson, *Velvet Was the Night* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, and *IQ* by Joe Ide. See the ballot in Volume 11, Issue 5 (pages 19-20) for the full descriptions and to send in your top two choices.

**NEXT ISSUE’S THEME:
BALANCE (VOLUME 12, ISSUE 2)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Balance**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 12, Issue 3 will be exploring the theme of **Hometown Pride**.

(1)

Do you believe in the importance of balance in your life? How do you strive for it?
Are there activities that help you find balance and embrace your self-awareness?

(2)

Imagine yourself leading a life that is in perfect harmony, where everything is in balance; describe where you are in this moment.
Use as many senses as you can. What can you see, hear, feel, taste in this imaginary scene?

(3)

Balance is something that you can achieve. What are three core life values/ goals that helped you find balance in your life?

(4)

What advice would you give someone – or yourself! – about finding balance in their life?

(5)

Some people say that there are 7 main areas in life where we need balance: (1) social and family relationships, (2) career and educational aspirations, (3) financial security, (4) physical health or leisure, (5) society and contribution, (6) life's routine responsibilities, and (7) mental, emotional, and inner well-being. What areas in your life do you feel needs balance?

Friendly Reminder: Your Free Minds Family would like to thank you all for your continuous participation and contributions for the Connect magazine that you all enjoy receiving so much. As much as we would like to include every submission that we receive, space limitations and mail delays prevent us from doing so. However, know that all of your submissions will be shown to our dedicated volunteers and you will receive comments on your poetry, which we will mail back to you. We encourage you to mail in your submissions for the upcoming Connect issues (**Balance** and **Hometown Pride**) as soon as you receive the current Connect so that you have a better chance at being included in the next issue. – Your Free Minds Family

MEMBERS CONNECT: EXPECTATIONS

Expectations By MS

What is (the nature of... expectation to you? We often know what expectations are, because we are constantly reminded of all the ones that we haven't lived up to. But I think the greatest sin that we can commit is not living up to the expectation(s) that we have for ourselves.

Expectation(s)... another way of saying what are your goals? What is the thing that you want to achieve the most? What is stopping you from fulfilling it? Is it you, or the faulty notions, concepts, and the thought processes that have gotten us (the incarcerated) to where we are.

Naturally, we have expectations of what we believe our life is/was supposed to be. What we are supposed to be?

What happens when these expectations aren't met, broken, or left by the wayside?

We get lost, try to find things that fill the void of who we thought ourselves to be... because expectations weren't met.

Expectations are inherent (meaning they are a natural part of our beings i.e., breathing, heartbeat, the sun

setting and rising... etc.).

And there are learned expectation(s) (like we'll get burned by fire if we touch it, trial & error etc.).

There is an overlap between the two forms of expectation(s) (duality).

We have the ability to shape the nature of our expectations every day that Allah allows us to wake.

It starts with how we see ourselves, because the only expectation(s) that should hold sway, are those that we have for ourselves. "To thy own self be true." How do you do that? Know your strengths & weaknesses and know that you are the whole of the universe distilled into this fragile physical form. You are the seed of greatness, nurture your will, and grow the forest of your expectation(s)... each tree, bush, all of the overgrowth... precious... like you.

What is your idea (nature of) expectation(s)?

Expectations By VC

My daily expectations for myself consist of incorporating by way of engaging in activities that provide strength and peace of mind. Such as, reading, writing, meditating, prayer, exercise, honesty, gratitude and others of that nature. Another daily expectation I place on myself is praying close attention to my perspective while trying to be objective. I also have golden rules that are a part of my daily expectations in regards to incorporating them into my daily activities and adhering to them strictly.

- 1) Keep to your principles in prosperity as well as in adversity.
- 2) Be firm in faith through life's tests and trials.
- 3) Guard the secrets of friends as your most sacred trust
- 4) Observe constancy in love
- 5) Break not your word of honor whatever may befall.
- 6) Meet the world with smiles in all conditions of life.
- 7) When you possess something, think of the one who does not possess it.
- 8) Uphold your honor at all costs
- 9) Hold your ideal high in all circumstances, and do not neglect those who depend on you.



FREE CHILDREN'S BOOKS!

Building Bonds Through Books and the D.C. Public Library are partnering to offer a **free children's book** to parents/guardians/caregivers and their children that speaks about parental incarceration and some additional resources. **You may pick any one of the four books for yourself and your child(ren):**

In addition to picking one of the books above, the D.C. Public Library is offering a **bonus book** from their program, Beyond the Book! Beyond the Book is a literacy program centered on developing readers.

This bonus book is available only for children ages 5-8 who live in Washington D.C., Virginia, or Maryland. In order for the child to be eligible for this book, the requesting parent must be a D.C. citizen or located in D.C. It will be sent along with the book you request for your child!



"Visiting Day" (Ages 5-8)



"Ruby on the Outside" (Ages 10+)



"Cuando No Estabas Conmigo" (Ages 3-12)



"Rocko's Guitar" (Ages 4-8)



"Milo Imagines the World" (Ages 5-8)

Please write your request to:

Building Bonds through Books
ATTN: Emily, George Washington University
Phillips Hall, Office 409 G
801 22nd St. NW
Washington, D.C. 20052



Please include the title of the book you are requesting.

If you wish to send the book to your child, please also include their name, age, their guardian's contact information (phone/email address), and mailing address. We will be asking for their guardian's permission before sending the books, so make sure to include this information!

I am only able to send two books per request (one for you and one book per child) so please make sure to only request your favorite book! The bonus book is only available while supplies last.



REENTRY BOOK CLUB MEMBERS ON EXPECTATIONS

For this issue, we asked members in our Reentry Book Club to share some of their thoughts about expectations they had coming home, and what their experience was like. Here is what they had to say (some chose to remain anonymous but wanted to share their perspective):

"My expectations were different when I came home. I want to do a lot but you gotta take it one day at a time. I'm still trying to transition back into society, and I have met some good positive people in my short time home. Now it is good. You have to crawl before you can walk... I'm proud of myself. I got my flagger certifications and my forklift certification and my license all in two months, and a job!"

"My expectations coming home were that I'd be able to rewrite my story by quickly implementing the plans I had made for years while reconnecting with family and friends, allowing them to be proud of the man I've become. The reality is the communication gap separating me and my loved ones and those in the workforce has made things more difficult than I thought."

"I knew I wanted to work in the reentry field and mentoring, but didn't know who would help me get in. By the grace of god, I met the right people in the YME [Young Men Emerging unit at the DC Jail] who introduced me to the right people."

"I placed a lot of expectations on myself naturally, and when I came home, I had a lot of plans for certain things in a particular time frame. However, that didn't happen. The reality of what life throws at you is so much different from the things we expect. That isn't to say that you can't finish your expectations. Life presents challenges and obstacles that, most of the time, we don't consider until we face them. Our expectations are different than reality. You can always make plans, but always prepare yourself for obstacles that may come your way. That's life."

"Finding a job and finding ways to grow. The problem was they only see the crime and not the person." – DEJ

"My expectations coming home was to get a good paying job, get my own car and apartment within my first six months of being a free man. It didn't come as easy as I thought and spoke about while still behind those concrete walls towering around me. I did get me a good paying job within my first few months home working for Verizon Fios, doing customer consulting. But I left that job because going around knocking on people's doors trying to convince them to change over to the system that I'm pushing on them, in all different types of neighborhoods, was a high-risk situation to be in. Especially when you're six foot seven, and black. But I was able to get with this company that had a contract with Metro. I was able to get my own apartment but wasn't making good money with this job. The reality of coming home and beginning anew isn't what I used to think that it was before coming home. But, it wasn't as hard as one might believe either, that is if you allow people to be there for you. Going back to dealing drugs, and running the streets was an option for me, an option that so many have taken after receiving that blessing of coming home. I wasn't going to repeat the life path that I have already journeyed on, just because I think I'm smart enough to move within. The things done as a boy will never be repeated as a man by me. By allowing myself to be helped with the adoption of society in an era that I'm just becoming a part of, and just using the good sense God has given me, I am making it without still trying to live my life trapped in a teenager mindset. I'm now a licensed security officer before I made it to my year mark home. A job that I never had expectations of having, holding on to a prison mentality free here out in society. But it's me that has to live my life, and having bills won't be paid by themselves. Having honor amongst society is a better feeling than having it in those streets. I don't have to watch out for the police jumping out on me, or someone jealous over my pockets being full. But even though honor is a different feeling, sad but true that the principles are the same. I now place many expectations on myself to succeed with the chance to live life out here in society, than to live life in prison with a life sentence thinking about what I would do in society. No expectation is the best expectation to have until you face what reality has waiting for you."

"For me, my expectations were minute. You see, after 20 years of prison you learn that you cannot expect much out of most people. Everyone has a core group of family and friends that they know they can trust, depend on, and expect the best from. You see, upon regaining my freedom, I completely forgave everyone that I felt had wronged me or had not been in my corner when I really needed them. For a very long time, I was highly upset with a lot of people but I realized that all that had happened in my life was my fault and was the reaction from my actions and my actions alone. And from there I began to grow mentally. My expectations are of me and what I want to do with this life I have left. The one thing that did throw me for a loop was the fact that, like I said, I learned to forgive, so I reached out to some people and they cried, shouted, and a few other words of joy, but what threw me for the loop was that most of those same excited people still have not seen my face... God bless the Free Minds family for doing work that makes men who have not had a lot of people care about them feel cared for. God bless all of the folks that recently regained their freedom, especially the ones who at one time couldn't even see the light." - **GY**

"Coming home after serving nearly two decades in prison was by far one of the biggest miracles ever. With a healthy relationship with GOD and witnessing first hand HIS grace and mercy, an amazing support system coupled with a clear understanding of the challenges that lie before us returning citizens, the patience that's necessary for progress, and a tenacious spirit, I set my expectations high because of my faith. Though the reality was that I am a returning citizen convicted of a felony needing employment, transportation, and other resources, I didn't allow myself to become bogged down with the what-ifs and negative thinking. My thought process was that if GOD could deliver me and reestablish my purpose then HE would surely provide me with the resources necessary to sustain myself and my family. I was expecting to win and overcome even before it became a reality, and I try to keep that same mindset with every challenge that I'm confronted with. Though realistically the odds are stacked against us, I still try to remain positive and take full advantage of every opportunity to advance toward success. If you expect nothing, you get nothing. And that's the reality." - **GB**

"I expect to start my own home appraisal business, publish my books, and get my certification in law, which I have done. Also, I expect my own home."

"I have been home since 2020, and my expectations coming home was kind of mixed and matched because COVID had just hit and everything was shutting down, [workforce development program] Project Empowerment was my go to, but I ended up renewing my DC security licensing, and went from there."

"When I was in prison, I thought when I got out it would be a big celebration... not in the form of a party or night scene, but in the sense of feeling the joy and seeing the excitement... but the reality is that people out here are consumed with problems and some people try to make their problem yours... so after seeing all of the people I wanted to see, I've learned to keep my circle small and tight because everybody is not happy for you." - **MP**

"One of the MAIN expectations I think for me was that I was going to get the financial support (money) when I came home. Don't get me wrong, I did have some support for which I'm very grateful, but I believe all I might have is the number we're expecting to come to. That was my experience." - **JD**

"I would have to say my expectations coming home were that things were going a lot easier than I expected them to be. I thought I would already have all my books out. But the reality of it all was that trying to juggle a full-time job, going back to college, and having some type of social life, along with me having to deal with my probation officer and all my probation requirements have really taxed me as far as me trying to get my literary workout. But all in all, it's been a beautiful struggle that I meet head-on every day. My worst day out in society is better than the greatest day I could imagine incarcerated. ☺" - **QS**

"Prior to coming home, I asked my family what their expectations of me were. I asked these questions to see what expectations they placed upon me and was I able and willing to fulfill them. Some had secretly designed a plan for me without asking what was mine. Others had minimal or none, which I accepted as reasonable service. The expectation I had of myself was for me to live life on life's terms. Which entails finding meaningful employment, saving some money, establishing my credit, and being an asset to my family and my community. What I've learned about expectation if placed upon oneself is that it sets a standard; when you place expectations upon others you undeniably invite disappointment into your life by the failures of others. I like to think of expectations as a double-edged sword with unlimited benefits."

"Some say that expectations are the mother of disappointment. However, I offer a different perspective for this month's theme. Expecting a child can be the greatest expectation a person ever experiences. My baby boy will be here any day now and I don't think I've ever been as excited and nervous at the same time as I am now. It's a life changing experience, one that I'll always appreciate." - **JG**



THE WRITE WAY

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

By Meg

Writing something you know is going to be seen by others is no easy task, especially when you don't know who's going to see it. It can be hard to manage your audience's expectations if you don't know exactly who your audience is going to be. When it comes to poetry, when you're writing something particularly vulnerable, it can be incredibly difficult to let your words be seen and known by other people. Let's run through a few common examples of fears that can come up when writing for others, and we'll see how we can turn those around into positive motivators, or simply quiet them to make room for more productive thoughts.

1. What if I'm not a good writer, and the people reading my work are expecting more from me?

Well, to start, you are not a bad writer. There is no wrong way to write. Writing is subjective, and it means different things to different people. With poetry, there aren't really any rules. Your voice offers the world something it's never seen before, and that is valuable, no matter your experience with writing. More often than not, people are just excited to hear your story.

Something that has helped me in the past is reading my writing from the perspective of someone else. As an audience member, I wouldn't be critical of a person's writing skill, so why should I be critical of my own? The fear that your audience is expecting more than you're ready to give can be debilitating, but it helps to try to pinpoint specifics to make them seem less scary. If the fear is that your audience is expecting a piece of writing that is grammatically perfect, it helps to remember that poetry allows you to be flexible. Everything can be chalked up to creative choice. No punctuation? That's your choice. If the fear is that your audience is expecting something grand and profound, it helps to remember that people are different. Something you think of as small could mean the world to someone else. And even small realizations can make a big impact.

2. I'm not feeling very creative right now. What if someone out there is expecting me to always be at my best?

There are a few approaches writers take to tackle this. Some writers will insist that writing has to come naturally, that you can't force it. If you're not feeling creative, it can help to take a

break and come back to it later. Other writers will say it's just a matter of persevering until inspiration strikes in the moment. Either way, even if you don't feel like a piece of writing is your best, it still makes up a valuable part of your process and growth as a writer. As humans, it's not sustainable to always be at our best, and the measure of what counts as our best is fluid. Sometimes just putting words on paper is all you can do at the time, and that still makes it your best. The vast majority of your audience will just be glad to see your progress.

3. What if people can't relate to something I've written, or it comes across all wrong?

This brings up the question of who you're writing for. Even if you're sending out your writing to be read by someone else, the first person you always write for, no matter what, is yourself. The fear of misunderstanding is difficult to overcome. That fear might tell you to write a different story, or to make your story more "acceptable," but that wouldn't be authentic to you. Most audiences celebrate authenticity over acceptability, especially those seeking out poetry.

It's important to remember that writing is an art form, and audiences interpret art as it relates to their understanding of the world. It's hard to tell in advance how your audience will read your writing, and sometimes they take away something entirely different from what you intended. That's not necessarily a bad thing. People often look for themselves in the writing of others, which can lead them down paths you never thought possible. In the unlikely event that a piece of writing is taken the wrong way for an interpretation that is less than positive, you always have the opportunity to write more! No matter what, though, there is always someone out there who has taken your writing to heart. As a writer, you have the opportunity to change lives for the better.

It's important to try to remain realistic when considering expectations, and to remember that everything is relative. It's easy to get bogged down by pressure, so remember to ground yourself in what you know: your message. And when in doubt, there is always room to grow.

REENTRY PROFILE: EXPECTATIONS, COMMUNICATION, AND PATIENCE

Interview by Jamilah

Greetings, I am Jamilah, Free Minds Reentry Coach. I was honored for the opportunity to interview one of our newest Free Mind members, James H. When I initially met James, it was by way of Zoom Conferencing, which is a virtual platform used to connect to others when you can't meet in person. Well, James could not meet me in person because he was working. I remember he had to use his lunch break to complete a virtual orientation for Free Minds. He seemed very excited to be home and showed much gratitude to be working.

I decided to interview James on the subject of expectations due to a phone call from him five months after his release. This call led me to believe he was adjusting to life on the outside not being what he expected.

Jamilah: James, please tell me about yourself and what were your "expectations" in the days before coming home?

James: My name is James. I'm a 40-year-old Black man. I was released from federal prison last September through compassionate release after serving over 19 years. My release came unexpectedly, so it's hard to explain exactly what I expected. I felt like my being a willing, hard worker and the fact that I'd achieved what I believed was more than enough to put me in a position to succeed once I was released, and would make things transition smoother for me than all the stories I'd heard from others who had troubles in their return to society.

Jamilah: So, was your transition smoother? What actually happened once you were home?

James: Once I got home, I felt overwhelmed because once all the hugs from family and friends were done, I saw that we had to communicate and it's like we were just not understanding each other. I was not okay with how things were going. It was like I was always the person in every room or situation that was speaking a foreign language. It made me feel alone.

Jamilah: What advice would you give a fellow comrade looking forward to coming home with great expectations of life after incarceration?

James: I would tell that person to take their time. Find some time to go out and move around alone just to take everything in. Being home is a huge change and I found that doing something as small as going grocery shopping seemed to overwhelm me. Also, everything won't happen all at once so be patient and enjoy the huge blessing of being free. Don't allow all the changes in your surroundings or your family to smother you. Find people of the same mindset who they can relate to because I honestly don't know where I'd be without some of the stories expressed by my fellow Free Minds members.

Note: We encourage members in our reentry program to reach out to Free Minds staff if you are interested in exploring mediation or counseling with your loved ones.

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.

The Blue Print: Why Young Offenders Need to Be Aware of Racketeering Charges by Andre Cooper

Description provided by the author: The BluePrint is a sordid history of the RICO Act told by federal racketeer Andre "Dre" Cooper. Andre explains how this law is weaponized against young offenders from poverty-stricken cities of America. How young black and brown teenagers are charged, convicted then given long-term sentences - such as life without parole for crimes that spanned from their early teens to mid-20's.

In the late 60's and early 70's, the lawmakers were concerned about the sophisticated structure and secrecy of the Mafia. Therefore, the legislators came up with a broadly-worded and ambiguously defined federal offense named the RICO Act. Once focused on the Mafia then the tide shifted towards young black and brown teens who the federal government stated were America's crime problem.

Andre provides a Blueprint on the RICO Act along with advice on how young offenders need to be aware of this federal offense so that they can avoid the same fate as others who fell victim to this offense.



IN THE NEWS By John, FM Friend

DEEP DIVE: EDUCATION, CRITICAL RACE THEORY, AND AFRICAN AMERICAN STUDIES

There are currently about three dozen high-level courses, known as Advanced Placement or “AP” classes, that high school students can take to earn college credit before they ever get to campus. In 2017, the College Board – which develops and approves these courses – began working on a new addition to its list: AP African American Studies.

The board worked with the University of Notre Dame and Tuskegee University to develop the curriculum and test it out at a few schools around the country. After years of development and piloting in hundreds of schools, the plan is to officially begin to offer schools around the world the African American Studies course in August of 2024.

But in 2020, former President Donald Trump used an Independence Day speech – delivered just a few months after the police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota – to excoriate schools for teaching kids “to hate our country.” The not-so-subtle implication of his comment was that teaching white children about the lingering effects of slavery and racism in America was meant to inflict shame and sow a rejection of American ideals.

While Trump did not mention the new AP course directly in his remarks, the administration of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis – who may take on Trump in pursuit of the Republican nomination for president in 2024 – took the course head on. After communicating to the College Board several parts of the curriculum that it found objectionable, the state announced that it would ban schools from adopting it.



Ron DeSantis
Source: CNN

The focus of the governor’s objections were the inclusion of “queer theory” and “critical race theory,” two relatively modern schools of thought about the intersectionality of discrimination and civil rights and about the ways in which system racism remains pervasive in American society. The College Board has sought to mollify those concerns by making those

elements of the course optional.

The ban of AP African American Studies in Florida is far from an isolated incident. Several states have passed or are considering legislation to ban the teaching of critical race theory. Others have pursued so-called “don’t say gay” legislation that prevents teachers and students from ever engaging in discussions or lessons that broach the topic of homosexuality.

There is a reasoned discussion to be had about what students should be learning at various ages. Are elementary school children prepared to comprehend lessons about slavery? Can high school students grasp the complexities of modern legal and social theories, or is that best left for college? Advanced Placement courses exist to some extent as a way to bridge that question: whereas not all high school-age learners are equipped to follow such lessons, those who opt for AP classes might be.

Some trace the acute focus by some conservatives on limiting the teaching of race history in schools to Trump’s remarks back in 2020. And as with so many of the former president’s provocative comments, he helped make what could be a helpful and reasoned discussion about the best way to ensure America’s students learn into a political culture war flashpoint.

WORLD

A series of massive earthquakes struck the nation of Turkey in early February, leveling major parts of the city of Gaziantep, which was at the epicenter of the quake. As emergency workers continue to clear the debris of buildings leveled by the catastrophe, the death toll has reached 50,000, making it the fifth deadliest earthquake of the 21st century.



Source: Unsplash

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

Meanwhile, an incident involving a spy balloon ratcheted up tensions over the winter between the U.S. and China. A Chinese balloon was observed crossing Alaskan and Canadian airspace before being seen over the continental United States. The balloon was shot out of the sky by an F-18 fighter jet, and the incident prompted Secretary of State Antony Blinken to cancel a planned diplomatic visit to China.

LOCAL: DC

In recent weeks, there has been a great deal of conversation in DC around a piece of legislation passed by the DC Council called the Revised Criminal Code Act (RCCA), intended to modernize DC's criminal code. Because DC is not a state, Congress has a certain amount of time to review and act on local laws passed by the DC Council. In February, the US House of Representatives voted to prevent the RCCA from becoming law. As of this writing, the Senate has not yet voted on the bill. If the Senate follows the House of Representatives, it will be up to President Biden, who has indicated that he will follow the will of Congress rather than DC's own elected officials. This story is still developing; we will check back in with additional information in the next issue.

SPORTS

In what is sure to go down as one of the greatest championship games of all time, the Kansas City Chiefs led by phenom quarterback Patrick Mahomes edged the Philadelphia Eagles in Super Bowl 57 by a score of 38-35.

It was a tale of two halves. Mahomes came into the final game of the season coming off an ankle injury that nearly ended his season during the AFC Championship Game against the Cincinnati Bengals. In the first half, Mahomes was hit again on that ankle and limped off the field gingerly, though he never left the game. But the Eagles dominated the early stages, with its own rising star, quarterback Jalen Hurts, running and tossing for touchdowns. At the half, the Eagles led 24-14 and had all of the momentum.

But after a long halftime performance by Rihanna, who used the show to reveal that she is pregnant, the Chiefs came out of the locker room a different team. After a relatively quiet third quarter, the Chiefs scored 17 points in the final frame to secure their second Super Bowl title of the 2020s.

MUSIC

A shameless promotion in this issue for one of FM Newsman's favorite groups of all time, the pioneering rap trio known as De La Soul. After decades of their creative work being suppressed by record labels, the world again has access to their entire brilliant catalogue, available on all of the major streaming services.

De La Soul – which consists of rappers Posdonus and Trugoy along with DJ Maseo – formed on Long Island in the late 1980s. They were one of the many creative acts loosely joined under the banner of "Native Tongue," which includes such other legends as A Tribe Called Quest, Black Sheep and Queen Latifah.



Dave/Trugoy the Dove of De La Soul
Source: Wikimedia

Between 1989 and 1996, the group released four iconic albums, their biggest hit coming early on with the track Me, Myself and I. Later, when streaming services began to replace CDs and other forms of music delivery, a record label owned the rights to their music that would not pay to seek the necessary legal approvals for De La's music to be streamed.

After six years of legal haggling and back and forth, De La Soul was able to secure ownership of its music. And on March 3, 2023, new listeners were able to access their music for the first time in years. Sadly, just weeks beforehand, one of its members, Trugoy, passed away at the age of 54.

GIVE YOURSELF GRACE

Interview with Free Minds friend Eddie By Meg

Free Minds friend Eddie recently facilitated a 4-week workshop series on coping with stress and anxiety for members in our Reentry Book Club. Meg caught up with Eddie to hear more about his approach to this important subject.

Meg: How long have you been doing the Stress and Anxiety Workshops for Free Minds?

Eddie: I've been partnering with Free Minds and doing these workshops for a year or two. Some of this extended from the work that I do with the Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth around self care and community care.

Meg: What does a typical workshop look like?

Eddie: A typical workshop is really to check in and see how people are doing and to talk about stress factors. It's pointing out to people that if we can control these things, we can help our health. Some people start to recognize how anger and stress affect their bodies and everyday living. We're trying to get people tools to use to live their lives in a healthy way.

Meg: If there is one thing you want someone to get out of a workshop, what would that be?

Eddie: To listen and absorb what's being said, to feel a part of the process of the workshop. It's new to a lot of people, and a lot of people deal with shame and not knowing how to immerse themselves in the conversation. We want people to know automatically that they're safe in this space to talk about what you're feeling. We have to make sure people feel respected and safe.

Meg: You talked about shame. How would you tackle balancing feelings of shame with expectations from others?

Eddie: I normally go into my own personal experience. I was diagnosed with anxiety when I came home, after spending 15 years in prison and 10 years in solitary confinement. I was also diagnosed with PTSD, and I was ashamed. I didn't know how to talk about those things. I felt like something was wrong with me, and I didn't know how to express that to anyone. Once I started talking about it, people said, "Wow, Eddie's being vulnerable, and he doesn't feel ashamed of being vulnerable." This is the energy we pass to each other in those spaces.

Meg: What tools would you recommend for setting healthy expectations for yourself?

Eddie: Be realistic with yourself, first and foremost. Set short-term goals, whether it's trying to monitor how you're responding to things, seeking professional support, or finding a comfort buddy. Be willing to listen, to express yourself when you're feeling good and bad. Learn to destress, to take a few minutes to relax, breathe, think through what you're feeling, and acknowledge it.

Meg: Has your mindset shifted from when you started these workshops to now?

Eddie: Of course. Sometimes the mindset we're in allows us to learn and receive more. I'm continuing to learn as I'm teaching, and I understand that everybody is in a different space. As a community, we care about each other. It's a continuous learning experience for me that I love because I'm noticing more organizations realize that these things are very important if we want to see our community continue to be healthy.

Meg: If healing is a continuous journey, do you think there's an end goal to reach?

Eddie: There's parts of the ocean that humans will never touch. And that's how I see healing. As human beings, we evolve. I would never want opportunities to heal to end. When we find a new person who wants to come into these spaces, we're helping them grow. Some communities that folks live in have a lot of harm that takes place. I grew up in DC. You hear gunshots when you go to sleep, when you get up. Those things are traumatic and affect the body in ways we don't realize as children. These children are now young adults and adults in Free Minds trying to do the right thing. I believe we will continue to heal as long as we're alive.

Meg: If someone told you, "I think I'm going to be in therapy for the rest of my life," what would you say?

Eddie: I would say give it a shot. I'd rather be in therapy for the rest of my life than in prison. When I first saw my therapist, I didn't know what to say or what to do, but that person helped me save my life. I was dealing with so much anxiety, stress, and trauma from being in prison, especially from being in solitary confinement for 10 years consecutively, and he helped me look at life differently. He helped me appreciate who I am, helped me give myself grace and realize that I'm worthy of this support.

Meg: How would you go about making sure you're giving yourself grace in light of everyone else's expectations for you?

Eddie: Make sure you have "no" in your repertoire. It's hard to say "no," because we want to be a part of the change. I've done this work for so long. I was trying to be everything for everybody, and I realized that I couldn't. Learn to give to yourself, to have space for yourself. Learn to apologize to yourself, and in turn forgive yourself. I took someone's life. I apologized, as a 16 or 17 year old child for what I did. My life was in danger, and I defended myself. I apologized for my actions, and I meant what I said. I forgave myself, and I live my life everyday with no guilt, no shame. The work I do is out of respect for my family, the community, and the honor of the person who lost his life. But I do it for myself first. These workshops are messages of encouragement, hope, change, and healing.

Meg: Something that has helped me in my therapy is the idea that forgiveness is not necessarily excusing the action, it is acknowledging that the past can no longer be changed. Would you agree with that?

Eddie: I totally agree with that. I can't change what happened back then. I'm not letting it become a weight. This is the conversation we have with people. You have to learn how to take your bolt cutters and cut that chain, to allow that weight to fall into the ocean and free yourself. In the midst of freeing yourself, pay attention to how you're living your life. We have to show people outlets. Whatever you do to help people that makes you feel good, that's self care. We let people know they're not alone in this fight.

Meg: Is there a certain set of words that you live by?

Eddie: Love yourself. Honor yourself. Give yourself grace. Allow the child in you to continue to live, and allow yourself to be free. Be respectful to others, and enjoy life while you're here.

MEDITATION: LETTING GO OF EXPECTATIONS OF OTHERS

By Kelli

We don't usually think of expectations as being a negative thing. In fact, people often brag about their "high expectations." A lot of self-help gurus will say that if you want to see results, you must have high expectations. And of course, that's true to an extent. But when it comes to peace, balance, and freedom... well, expectations—especially expectations of other people, around things over which we have no control—can really upset the apple cart! You're all probably familiar with the "serenity prayer?" It asks for: *the serenity to accept the things we cannot change; the courage to change the things that we can; and the wisdom to know the difference.* We're not talking about accepting things that are unacceptable, or not standing up for what is right. We can let others know how we feel, but we cannot control what they do. We're simply acknowledging that none of us can control the actions of others. We're embracing the value and power of accepting those things that are out of our personal control.

This is particularly important when we have expectations of the important people in our lives. When they don't do what we want, when they don't meet our expectations, we feel angry, disappointed, and hurt.

So, let's meditate on letting go of our expectations of others. As always, if you have a buddy to meditate with, take turns reading the meditation aloud to one another. If you don't, read through the script one or two times before closing your eyes, and contemplating what you've read.

Now, find a comfortable place to sit with your feet planted on the floor. Imagine you are a big strong tree... you have roots. Let your arms hang at your sides, your hands resting in your lap.

Take a deep breath in... and exhale, allowing your body to relax even more deeply into itself.

Bring your attention to your breath... feeling your chest rise and fall as you breathe naturally. Continue focusing on your breath until you feel a sense of calm.

Now, I want you to think about an expectation you have of someone in your life.

*Maybe you expect your cellie to keep your shared space clean and tidy.
Or you expect your partner to write you a letter every week.
Or you expect a family member to put money on your books for phone calls.
Or perhaps it's even that you expect your friend to work out with you every day.*

Whatever it is, just identify it.

*See that expectation, like a scene from a movie playing on a screen...
Now notice how your body feels as you realize that maybe the movie isn't exactly how the situation played out...*

*Your cellie didn't clean the sink out after he used it.
Your partner didn't write as often as they'd promised.
Your family member said they couldn't give you money this month.
Your friend had something else to do, and didn't meet you to work out.
Notice the emotions you feel in your body.
Anger... Frustration... Resentment... Fear...*

Just recognize any emotion that comes up for you.

Without judgment. Without labels.

Notice how your body feels.

You may notice your muscles have tensed; or your breathing has become shallow...

Let's focus on returning to our relaxed state...

Take a deep breath in...

And on your exhale, feel yourself releasing those emotions

Breathing them out of your body, one by one...

Another deep breath in...

And release the emotions...

Last deep breath in...

And release... letting go of all those emotions...

Feel your breath to its regular rhythm...

Keeping your attention on your breathing, notice how much lighter you feel.

You remember that you don't know everything your loved ones may be dealing with...

You move your focus back to yourself... to those things you can control...

Imagine yourself cleansed... and bathed in a warm light...

And with renewed eyes, look back at that movie scene.

And notice what you now see.

Your cellie.

Your partner.

Your family member.

Your friend.

You see their humanity.

You see that their behavior is theirs.

You cannot control it.

You accept what you cannot change. You accept what IS...

The emotions over unmet expectations... have dissolved.

And all that remains is calm, peace, and acceptance

Breathe in... and exhale...

Continue breathing and resting in this peaceful acceptance...

When you are ready, open your eyes and return your attention to the room.



DID YOU KNOW?

Disappointment and the Brain

By Aneka

Have you ever wondered why disappointment hurts emotionally and physically? Have you ever noticed yourself feeling tiredness, heaviness, numbness and the feeling as though the world is going too fast while trying to process disappointments? Wonder no longer, I have you covered! Listed below are 4 facts that will explain the science behind why feeling disappointed hurts so much.

Disappointment VS. The Brain:

- Disappointments significantly alter the balance of the neuronal universe in your brain. From a neurochemical point of view, disappointment is almost the same as frustration.
- Neuroscientists discovered that a neuronal "jolt" happens before every disappointment. There's a sudden decrease in serotonin, dopamine, and endorphins. These 3 molecules are responsible for your well-being and they momentarily leave your brain during this "jolt."
- When you're disappointed, glutamate and GABA are immediately released into the habenula. If the brain sends a high amount of these neurotransmitters, the feeling of disappointment will be greater. Your brain interprets the impact of the experience and modulates the intensity of your emotional pain.
- Even though your brain interprets disappointment as an impact against emotional balance, it doesn't respond with endorphins as it does with physical injury. Instead, you end up somatizing (manifesting through physical symptoms) the frustration as physical pain, migraines, and muscular tension.

Now that we've covered what happens to the brain when you feel disappointment, let's talk about how to reduce the impact of these experiences. One method is to direct the experiences towards your cerebral cortex (a specific part of your brain that deals with cognition). You must reason them and focus on them from a more objective point of view. That's easier said than done, especially when you feel betrayed and the trust that you value so much falls apart.

You can work on it by controlling negative thoughts and by not looking for guilty parties. Do it also by adjusting your expectations and by being more realistic and accepting what you can't control.

Have you ever heard the saying, "Expectations are premeditated resentments"? This 12-step program saying is derived from 2 psychological facts: 1) Expecting something to happen will not make it happen; 2) Human beings have a natural tendency to pin their hopes for happiness on fulfilled expectations. Let's dig into this a little more.

As a child, we believe that our thoughts can directly cause things to happen. This belief, according to developmental psychologist Jean Piaget, is called magical thinking. Piaget suggested that we all outgrow it by around age 7. For example, thinking angry thoughts about your little brother can cause him to fall down the stairs. For many of us, even as adults, it is difficult to let go of the idea that expecting something to happen will make it happen. Especially when other people are involved. We expect people to meet our expectations when we ask things of them or when we think that they will follow through with an agreement and they don't. We end up feeling shocked, morally indignant, and resentful.

Regarding the phrase, "Expectations are premeditated resentments," Steve Lynch writes, "The expression should actually be phrased as 'Unrealistic expectations are premeditated resentments.'" It is important to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic expectations. Expecting that doing what in the past has reliably brought about a result you want is realistic. Expecting others to do what is in your interest, but not their interest, is often unrealistic. Expecting others to do what is in both of your interests can be realistic. Let go of expectations and find something to be grateful about, even when things do not turn out the way you hoped, and you will experience serenity rather than resentment.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: GORDON'S STORY

Interview by Jennifer

About Gordon

In May 2020, Gordon was released from prison after 25 years. Gordon received his BA in Literature and Curricular Specialization in Public Health from Bard College, and a Masters in Professional Studies from New York Theological Seminary while incarcerated.

When released, Gordon served as a consultant for a nonprofit organization called FinEquity, where he would help prisoners build their credit scores while still on the inside. Gordon also held the position of Director of Impact & Community Engagement for Thrift 2 Fight, a public benefit corporation that sells thrift clothes and donates the profit to grassroots organizations that are fighting for a better tomorrow. Gordon has also been an intern at Rise Up Kingston, and he was working to create a program where community members would be trained as first responders for the crisis response team he was working to develop. Gordon also worked at The Center For Law and Justice, where he was the executive assistant to Dr. Alice Green. Gordon is well known in many communities for volunteering or helping to give out food or clothes to those in need.

Recently, Reentry Coach Jennifer caught up with Gordon over the phone. Here is his advice for those preparing for reentry:

The job interview is very important

Face-to-face interviews can be challenging because you are working to persuade the employer to hire you, but you also have to be asking yourself, "does this job deserve me?" Meaning, is this a good fit for you. Reading facial expressions during the interview is helpful because they can tell you if your answers are in line with the employer's expectations. One should also learn about and research companies before the interviews, so you can prepare detailed questions and leave the employer thinking, "he checked up on us". After the interview, I recommend sending a thank you email. Though this is a small task it really sets you apart from other candidates, who may just walk away from the interview waiting to hear from the hiring manager. I learned this tip and many others while studying with Bard College and participating in reentry classes.

Seriously consider taking a short-term job as you look for your long-term position

When I came home, I was under the impression that due to my many years of working prison jobs (by the way, those go on your resume too!) and my college degrees, I should be able to earn a high salary, so I turned down many "little

jobs" that I was offered. I was searching for that "big job." In retrospect, I wish I had taken advantage of those entry-level employment opportunities as soon as I got home so that I could get working right away. These entry-level positions would have helped me 1) start earning money immediately, 2) build relationships with supervisors who could be my references for future jobs, and 3) increase that work muscle by learning about workplaces outside of prison.

You have to be open-minded

Many of us learned how to survive abnormal conditions in prison and how to manage relationships with people from diverse backgrounds; yet, survival in the workplace outside of prison is different because the average worker is trying to feed themselves and/or their families and not trying to get over on you or pull the wool over your eyes. In one of my experiences, I was hired as an executive assistant to the director of a non-profit and suddenly, I became the boss of a staff who had been there way before me. During my first week, the boss told me that if I need to know something, I should ask a staff member, "John". However, whenever I tried asking John any questions, he blew me off. I took this as an offense thinking he was trying to play me and I eventually got angry with him and checked him. John later apologized and explained that he was not helping me because he was actually frustrated with the director and the job and it had nothing to do with me at all. That's a difference between workplace and prison mindsets.



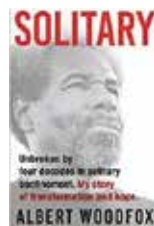
WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

- **MC: *Solitary* by Albert Woodfox**

A friend of mine sent *Solitary* to me. I guess he felt like it was something I needed to add to my "toolkit." *Solitary* is an autobiography by a formerly incarcerated Black man who spent 40 years in Angola's solitary confinement unit. I spent 3 years in solitary confinement. Reading *Solitary* confirmed a lot of the feelings I'd developed over the 3 years. The trauma. It also taught me a new degree of humility and gratitude. Just when I thought I'd been through it all, I read about someone who experienced far worse atrocities and still prevailed.



- **Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up":**

***You Owe You: Ignite Your Power, Your Purpose, and Your Why* by Eric Thomas**

This book is a roadmap for people to pursue their life goals, something Thomas wished he had when he was growing up homeless and struggling in school. Rather than focusing on the injustices he faced as a Black man in America, he decided to focus all of his energy on his strengths. This book is a tool to help you get started on your journey to success, with the first step being learning to deeply understand yourself. As Thomas writes, that is the most important thing that you owe yourself: becoming fully and authentically you.



- **Julia: *Run: Book One* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin**

I read *Run: Book One* by John Lewis and Andrew Aydin, and illustrated by Nate Powell. This is a graphic novel by the late civil rights icon John Lewis and the same team that worked on the March trilogy before. *Run* takes place after the events of *March*, focusing on John Lewis's experiences in the Civil Rights Movement after the March on Washington. I found it really interesting to read about the difficult decisions that the movement leaders like John Lewis were wrestling with at the time. I would recommend this book to anyone who liked the *March* books, or anyone who is interested in learning more about the Civil Rights Movement.

- **Neely: *Almanac of the Dead* by Leslie Marmon Silko**

With 37 characters and almost 800 pages, this book has been one of the most interesting and unique books I've ever read. Silko is a member of the Laguna Pueblo tribe, in what is today called New Mexico. Her book is the tale of the colonization of the Americas from the people who were most impacted by it: indigenous people. The novel centers on Lecha, who is tasked with the duty of transcribing ancient notebooks that contain the history of her own people, a Native American Almanac of the Dead. Along the way, the story touches on Marxism, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Vietnam War veterans, the global impact of drug trafficking, the exploitative nature of plasma centers, Native American spiritualism, and so, so much more. If you feel like you still have no idea what this book is exactly about, I feel the same way after reading it. But it was still truly capturing, and took me on a journey unlike any other. Silko is an incredibly talented writer!

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES/ FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

UNA COLUMNA NUEVA EN ESPAÑOL, A NEW COLUMN IN SPANISH

By Carlos

Bienvenidos a "Conversaciones de Mentes Libres". Esta será una sección regular de la revista Connect, donde ofrecemos un artículo escrito en español y luego lo traducimos al inglés. Como sabrán, en 2019 lanzamos Mentes Libres, un club de lectura en español en la Cárcel de DC. Free Minds trabaja para trascender todos los desafíos hacia la verdadera conexión humana y la autoexpresión creativa, ¡incluyendo las barreras de los idiomas! Es nuestro deseo que disfruten de esta columna. Si hablas español y te gustaría contribuir a esta columna, ¡escríbenos y déjanos saber! Y si no hablas español pero te gustaría aprender, puedes solicitar para poder obtener un libro y comenzar tu aventura de aprendizaje de este idioma.

Welcome to "Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" (Free Minds Conversations). This will be a regular feature of the Connect magazine, where we offer an article written in Spanish, and then translate it into English. As you may know, in 2019, we launched Mentes Libres (Free Minds), a book club in Spanish at the DC Jail. Free Minds works to transcend all challenges to true human connection and creative self-expression—including language barriers! We hope you will enjoy this column. If you speak Spanish and would like to contribute to this column, write and let us know! And if you don't speak Spanish but would like to learn, you can request a book and start your language learning adventure (that's "aventura" in Spanish!)

Expectativas

Primeramente, un saludo a toda mi gente de Mentes Libres. Que estén disfrutando este año nuevo en las mejores maneras que puedan. Y que por lo menos, hayan hecho en sus mentes y corazón, una meta para este año que les traiga muchas bendiciones en libertad.

Hoy estaremos hablando de algo que no solo tiene que ver con metas, sino también con la gente en general y las acciones de la gente. Y eso es Las "expectativas". En mi propia experiencia, siempre que espero o deseo ciertas expectativas es ponerme en el camino del fracaso. Me explico:

He tenido la experiencia de que espero ciertos resultados de algo que he planeado o espero que la gente actúe de cierta manera, solo porque así es como lo miro yo o como yo lo hubiese hecho. Pero ese es el problema para mí. Que pongo mis expectativas tan altas, que me molesta mucho cuando las cosas no salen a mi manera. Y ese es mi fracaso, porque al fin del día, nadie me debe nada. Nadie tiene que cumplir ninguna obligación. Y nada tiene que, a la fuerza, salir a mi manera. He tenido que recordarme de esta realidad estando afuera en libertad.

Les doy un pequeño ejemplo; después de estar encerrado detrás de esas cuatro paredes por tanto tiempo, he tenido muchas cicatrices mentales. Cosas que, después de tanto, solo el tiempo podrá sanar (pero este es otro tema). Una de las cosas que se me viene fácil es pasar el tiempo solo. Me he acostumbrado a mi propia compañía. Mi familia siempre quiere que pase el tiempo con ellos. He tratado de explicarles lo mejor que pueda que se me viene fácil estar solo y que muchas veces, encuentro paz dentro de mí. Les explico que después de tanto tiempo algo así se me viene naturalmente y no es no tener el deseo de estar allí con ellos, sino, simplemente, deseo estar solo. Siempre dicen que me entienden pero regresan a los mismos comentarios... que ya he estado afuera lo suficiente para poder superarlo. Dentro de mí, estos comentarios causan ciertos efectos. Primero me enojó por dentro porque pienso ya se los he explicado varias veces que no es así de fácil. Pero del lado mío, ese es mi error, el tener la expectativa de que ellos van a poder entender algo que ellos no han podido imaginar o experimentar. Me molesto por la falta de ser entendido y esto hace que me aleje aún más.

Lo mismo me pasa al ponerme una meta a mí mismo. Cuando esas metas o planes no salen como yo lo he planeado, me pongo mal... Estresado, enojado. Pero de igual manera, este es mi error. Mis expectativas de que las cosas van a salir a mi manera o como yo he pensado que el resultado va a hacer. Esto me pasa más cuando mis planes son más allá de la realidad o de lo que mi realidad pueda alcanzar. Les doy un ejemplo:

Nosotros siempre hacemos planes con nuestro dinero. Tienen planes de ahorrar para poder comprarse una Playstation 5. En este país, eso es muy caro. Pero me puse a ahorrar de todos mi sueldo y apartaba un poco para ese regalo propio. Se me presentó una situación donde tenía que moverme de mi apartamento. Para hacerles el cuento corto, tuve que usar el dinero que tenía guardado. Me molestó porque había ahorrado ese dinero por tanto tiempo, y casi logré mi meta. Pero la vida tiene maneras de forzar cambios. Así que no me quedé de otra y usar ese dinero. Mi expectativa era no esperar que una emergencia se me pudiera presentar. Y en ese momento fallé! Porque así no es la vida. Tuve que reajustar mi manera de ver las cosas cuando tiene que ver con mis expectativas.

Al fin, mi punto es este: tener expectativas puede ser mal cuando nos apoyamos en que todo va a salir en la manera que lo pensamos o deseamos. Olvidar que confiar en una perspectiva y una posibilidad es un fracaso desde el principio. He aprendido en hacer mis planes o tener metas sin tener o esperar esas expectativas que mentalmente me pueden poner mal. Cuando yo he podido mirar las cosas así, solo como una probabilidad, no me molesta mucho. Porque ya no me apoyo tanto en que las cosas van a salir como yo pienso o como otros lo piensan. Tengo mis planes y metas como siempre, pero ahora trato de no pensar como que si el mundo tiene que dar vuelta a mi manera ni con mis propias expectativas. La vida siempre trae cambios y no todos pueden ver la vida de la misma manera. ¿Cómo es que yo tengo el derecho de ponerme mal cuando entiendo esta realidad? No hay nada malo en hacer planes, metas ni sueños. Estoy aprendiendo a controlar mis expectativas en el resultado de mi vida, mi vida las cosas con una sana realidad y me ayuda a aceptar las cosas como tienen que ser. Casi como tener la esperanza sin tener la expectativa de nada.

Expectations

First of all, a greeting to all my people from Mentes Libres. May you be enjoying this new year in the best ways you can. And that at least, you have made in your minds and hearts, a goal for this year that brings about many blessings in freedom.

Today we will be talking about something that not only has to do with goals, but also with people in general and people's actions. And that is"expectations". In my own experience, whenever I expect or want certain expectations, I set myself up for failure. I explain:

I have had the experience that I expect certain results from something I have planned or expect people to act in a certain way, just because that is how I see it or how I would have done it. But that's the problem for me. That I set my expectations so high, that it bothers me a lot when things don't go my way. And that is my failure, because at the end of the day, nobody owes me anything. Nobody has to fulfill any obligations. And nothing has to, by force, go my way. I have had to remind myself of this reality being out in freedom.

I give you a small example; after being locked behind those four walls for so long, I have had many mental scars. Things that, after so much, only time can heal (but this is another topic). One of the things that comes easy to me is spending time alone. I have come to enjoy my own company! My family always wants me to spend time with them. I have tried to explain to them as best as I can that it is easy for me to be alone and that many times, I find peace within myself. I explain to them that after so long something like this comes naturally to me and it's not wanting to be there with them, but simply wanting to be alone. They always say they understand me but always come back to the same comments... that I've been out long enough to get over it. Within me, these comments cause certain effects. First I get angry inside because I think I have already explained to them several times that it is not that easy. But on my side, that is my mistake, having the expectation that they will be able to understand something that they have not been able to imagine or experience. I get annoyed by the lack of being understood and this drives me even further away.

The same thing happens to me when I set a goal for myself. When those goals or plans don't turn out as I have planned, I get bad... Stressed, angry. But still, this is my mistake. My expectations that things will go my way or how I have thought the outcome will be. This happens to me more when my plans are beyond reality or what my reality can permit. I give you an example:

We always make plans with our money. I had plans to save so that I could buy myself a Playstation 5. In this country, this is very expensive. But I started to save from my salary and set aside a little for that little gift to myself. I was presented with a situation where I had to move from my apartment. Long story short, I had to use the money I had saved. I got upset because I had saved that money for so long, and I almost reached my goal. But life has ways of forcing changes. So I didn't have another choice and used that money. My expectation was not to anticipate an emergency to come my way. And at that moment I failed! Because that's not life. I had to adjust my way of seeing things when it has to do with my expectations.

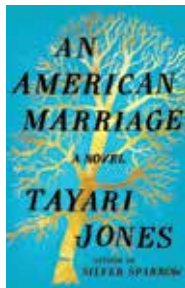
In the end, my point is this: having expectations can be bad when we rely on the fact that everything is going to turn out the way we think or want it. Forgetting that trusting a perspective and a possibility is a failure from the start. I have learned to make my plans or have goals without having those expectations that can make me mentally ill or emotionally unbalanced. When I have been able to look at things like this, just as a probability, it doesn't bother me much. Because I no longer support myself so much on the fact that things are going to turn out the way I think or how others should act. I have my plans and goals as always, but now I try not to think as if the world has to turn in my way or with my own expectations. Life always brings changes and not everyone can see life in the same way. How is it that I have the right to feel bad when I understand this reality? There is nothing wrong with making plans, goals or dreams. I am learning to control my expectations and in return, I look at things with a healthy reality. Sort of like hoping for the best but not expecting anything.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

An American Marriage

with Neely



Thank you to everyone who shared their reflections on our current BAM book, *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones. This story follows the journey of newlyweds Celestial and Roy, who are just beginning to build their new life together when they are ripped apart after Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. We loved reading your powerful responses. Here is what some of you had to say:

1. How would you describe Roy and Celestial's marriage in the first 50 pages of the book? Is it a good marriage? Why or why not? What do you think are the most important qualities for a healthy marriage?

AHA: I would say it is a good marriage because they both love each other a lot, with the same ambitions, and are able to work through things when problems arise in disagreements. They are able to reevaluate things and support one another through good or bad times. The most important qualities for a healthy marriage to me is first love between the couple that is unconditional, their views on what they both want in a partner, and the care and support shaped throughout their lives.

JH: I would describe their marriage as young and unsure. Now as to whether the marriage is good or bad, I don't wish to be hasty, after all it's only been 50 pages. But I will say that it seems precarious. The most important qualities for a healthy marriage are trust, loyalty, and affection.

JDH: I honestly believe to have a healthy type of relationship, moreover a marriage, you must have honesty, to be honest with your significant other you're establishing complete and total trust. If you're not completely honest with the woman or man you love, then how can you expect for them to give them to you totally? I would never hide or lie to my wife, that would be a sin.

RP: I would describe Roy and Celestial's marriage in the 1st 50 pages as fairly normal. The love, with some misunderstanding, fights, etc. The man trying to provide, etc. I look at all relationships, (well majority) especially marriage as a realist, not optimist. There will be problems eventually, every day won't be a walk in the park, but that's OK. When those problems do come, that's when you show how strong the bond, love, relationship is, by working/getting through it. The easy thing to do is leave. The most important qualities I think a marriage should have are definitely honesty, patience, willingness, humility, gratitude, open mindedness, objectiveness, (actual love not something from just, obligation, habit, comfortability, convenience), care, respect, spontaneity, etc.

RB: I think Roy and Celestial's marriage is very normal in the first 50 pages of the book. All their problems in the first 50 pages are ordinary issues. To me the most important qualities for a healthy marriage are personal maturity on the part of both husband and wife before they become married. They both should be in a "good long term relationship" with themselves before getting married. Marriage should not be used as a cure for a poor relationship with yourself.

2. Roy says: "You can't pick your home any more than you can choose your family. In poker, you get five cards. Three of them you

can swap out, but two are yours to keep: family and native land." What do you think of this quote? Would you swap out either if you could? How much do our families and where we come from shape who we are?

JH: To be honest I think the quote is kind of iffy. Everyone has heard the phrase, "You can't choose your family," and that's real. Because what you get you were probably born with like your skin, and ain't no changing that. But native land, come on now, we're all pilgrims here. Whether it was from the primordial waters or from the garden of Eden. Hell my ancestors are Berbers, a culturally migratory people. So I was taught that home is where the heart is. And if I would swap out either the answer is no. I think that your family/your people and where you dwell imprints itself up on you. As a child you are nurtured, influenced, and indoctrinated to be as or as much alike your family/people as possible. And I think that is significant in the development of a person's identity. And who would want to go fooling around with that, a person could lose themselves.

RP: I love the quote and the way it's formed, but I don't fully agree with it. Your native land (where you came from) can't be actually changed but, you can change where you're at/be, we always have a choice, some are easy decisions, some are not, but we always have a choice. Your family can't fully be changed but, you can make/build your own. I wouldn't want to swap my sisters out for nothing or some of my cousins. Far as where I'm from, hell yeah. Our families play a major role in the shape of who we are. Like how we learn to deal w/ life issues, our focus in life, how do we deal w/ our emotions and feelings, etc. That comes from what took place in our household I believe.

JDH: Your family is a true reflection of who and what we represent as a whole, starting with the father, to the mother, all the way to the children. They represent who we are, a family! And absolutely not, I would never swap either one of my options, it's always been for better or worse with me once I say I do, I'm with you until my dying day!

RB: Our families and where we're from have a profound impact on who we are at the beginning of our lives, but as we mature that affect lessens and we come to a point where we're able to make a choice to evolve beyond our circumstances of family and environment or we can choose to be what our environment and past dictates. That choice; to evolve or conform is the core decision everyone has to make in life.

AHA: I see a lot of truth in it since you have no choice in the matter. I wouldn't swap out either even if I could since I know it was in God's plan to be as such. You may choose to change a lot of circumstances but beyond that, it's meant to be. Our families and where we come from shapes who we are a lot since our families are who we learn from coming into our household. So with this, and who we are around in our culture, where we are from can be leading factors in our lives.

3. In a letter, Roy says to Celestial that he has nothing to offer her. Do you agree? Have you ever felt this way? What might he have to offer? What might you have?

RP: I'm half and half with Roy on having nothing to offer. Overall yes I agree though. Now what hinders me some is, he can still offer his love from a distance, he can offer his wisdom, knowledge, etc. Just as Celestial ran with several things that originally thought of, I know he had more wisdom and insight. In a place like this you got to reflect on the usefulness you did you, analyze yourself and search for your best qualities. Once you find/know them, you spread that greatness to as many as possible, especially your supporters. Yes, I have felt as Roy before several times. Those many people I try to stay in constant contact with seemed to just grow on me when I stayed stuck. Like they didn't want to talk on the things we used to, find as much funny anymore, etc. I started to feel I was out of league. What I have to offer is my care, honesty, willingness, respect, ear, insight (I have been told by many I give some great advice), my knowledge I have on many things, etc.

JH: No I don't agree with Roy, that he has nothing to offer Celestial. Although he is incarcerated, which limits his physical presence. He does exist, his mind endures, he can be relevant if he's resolute. For myself I've never felt that I didn't have anything to offer. My grandfather taught me that to be useful as an asset, to only extend your hand in friendship to a man once, and to love who loves you. So what I have to offer is this, my friendship which is unwavering. My usefulness which has allowed me to put a child through college. And my love which is reciprocal, altruistic, and steadfast.

AHA: I can agree with how he felt after being falsely convicted, and then losing all he did with his career, mom, and his wife eventually, along with these five years he can't get back. I never felt this way myself but it is only so much you can offer in this situation. Only thing he can offer is hope in getting out sooner, giving her a feeling of peace that his problems shouldn't become hers. I may just have advice since no one is prepared to face a situation like this, so you have to pick up the pieces and learn from it.

RB: When Roy says he has nothing to offer he's speaking from a lack of life experience and necessity. He does not have enough time in prison behind him to have developed the valuable life skills he can teach to others. Where he is mentally when he writes that letter, is the "injury from the shock of incarceration" phase. He has to go through that phase and come out of it to be useful to himself and others. Sometimes that never occurs. And he has a necessity to let her go free. He feels, rightly, that he's become an obstacle to her happiness and so the necessity to let her go, even though he loves her.

JDH: He was falling on hard times, as long as he has his love for her, then he as we say has the world to offer her, people dream about pure love, true love, I would give her my soul if I loved that woman. Women respond to strength and loyalty, never make a real woman feel you're becoming weak, it's your strengths and security she loves the most. I would have given her so much love, that the only cure would have been my death itself!

4. Why do you think Celestial starts to distance herself from Roy? Have you ever experienced someone important falling away from you while you did your time? How did you deal with it personally?

JDH: She started to drown in his sorrows. Women need to feel joy and a type of happiness you can provide, real men must learn to suppress their emotions, a man & a woman that are both emotional is always a bad combination, you have to be the rock in her life, not saying to not show emotions to her, but there are some things you just have to tough it out. He led her to becoming depressed and lonely. Give her love and true support and she'll never leave or distance herself from you! And yeah, I had a wife before, it hurt her more for me to hold on to her than if I would have just let her go! So I couldn't stand seeing her hurt, so I let her go. Now she's happy. Even if it's not with me, she's happy!

RB: Celestial is a young, middle class woman with no experience of

having family members in prison and she needs to get back to normal which for her is what she was doing before Roy was incarcerated. I've always been a pretty solitary person, even when I was very young so I've never really gone through separation anxiety. Also I understood that this was the life I chose.

AHA: I think she couldn't face him how she was feeling and how some things was taking a toll on her like she was in prison herself. Then her feelings for Andre grew. I would say my daughter's mom is someone important I experienced falling away from while I did my time due to the close relationship we had. I felt a lot of emotions; sad, angry, upset but her moving on was best.

RP: I believe Celestial starts to distance herself, honestly, cause Roy ain't on nothing locked up, (he's what I call levitating). He ain't talking about nothing, etc. He keep talking/dwelling on the past, need this need that, ain't making nothing happen, ain't sending no \$ out, complaining, etc. All the stuff I constantly did my first 10 years locked up doing, that pushed many people away, especially with me always in the hole unable to reach out properly. Everyone from my sisters, father, grandmother/uncles/cousins and friends all became distant. I got into fights, arguments, I got high, ate a lot, slept a lot, etc. I basically did everything negative instead of changing myself to change my situation. I'm now completely different, for the better, so many see a big turnaround and I'm very proud of it. I'm proud of myself, this is the most on track, focused, objective, and determined I been in my life.

JH: I think Celestial started to distance herself from Roy for a couple of reasons. First, she still wanted her life, the life she had designed in her head, regardless of Roy's situation. Second, she didn't love Roy truly, I think he just fit some sort of niche. And once his incarceration prohibited him from serving a purpose she moved on to someone she had sitting in the wings who would. No, fortunately I haven't had anyone important pull away from me while I've been away. It could be that I give of myself just as much as I receive. I truly care for the people who are important to me. I want them happy, and secure in the knowledge that I will do everything in my power for them.

5. Roy and Celestial both had secrets from each other. Do you believe they should have kept these secrets about their past as long as they did? Do you believe that when you are in a serious relationship (ie considering marriage) that you should share everything? Why or why not?

AHA: I don't think they should have kept past secrets that long. I believe you should share everything up front. So it won't come out later to mess up their marriage due to lack of trust.

JDH: People keep secrets because they don't want to hurt the people they love and care about the most, but nothing good ever comes from secrets, do they? Secrets ruin lives and destroy worlds, yet everyone has one or two. We try to keep them from the world.

JH: Yes, your secrets are yours to govern as you see fit otherwise they would be public. No way do you share everything, and the why of it is, because it's counterproductive. Ever heard the phrase (what I don't know, won't hurt me).

RB: Each person has to decide what they can share with the other person. However, if your secret is something that would affect the other person's life if it was known, then you must tell that person before they make a commitment to you.

RP: No, I do not believe Roy & Celestial should've kept their secrets for so long. I do agree, in a real relationship/marriage everything should be shared. If an individual is in a relationship for the long term, such as a marriage, then honesty and open mindedness should be in that relationship, if the opposite cannot except you the real you and except you with your past/flaws, etc., then they are not truly for you, I believe. If you can't be you around the one you plan to be with and around for a long time, how long will that really last, the acting I mean.

AROUND THE WORLD: VISITING LISBON, PORTUGAL

By Neely

Olá! That is Portuguese for "Hello," and in this issue I want to take you all on a journey with me and spend a day exploring Lisbon, Portugal. Portugal has become a hot spot for tourism over the past few years, and many people in Portugal speak English to cater to the growing number of visitors that come every year. However, it's always courtesy to learn a few words of the country's language you are visiting. People of that country will appreciate that you took the time and effort to learn a little of their language! So, before we hop on the plane let's learn a few phrases: "Bom dia" is "Good morning," "por favor" is "please," "de nada" is "you're welcome," and, the most important one of all, "obrigado/a" is "thank you" ("obrigado" if you identify as a male, and "obrigada" if you identify as female). Alright, now that we have our essential phrases down pat, vamos lá! (Let's go!)

Portugal is on the west coast of Europe, and its capital is Lisbon, or Lisboa in Portuguese. Lisbon is actually the second oldest capital in Europe, after Athens in Greece, and this is where I stayed for a week this past January. I decided to stay in a hostel, which is an excellent option for someone who is traveling on a budget (me, hello). Hostels used to get a bad rap for being unsafe and unclear, but they have come a long way in recent years. Most hostels have lockers to lock your belongings in, and some even include free breakfast. They have different accommodation options, including dorms and private suites. Dorm options are pretty affordable, with some places being as cheap as \$20 a night. Hostels are also a great way to meet people from all over the world, many who are traveling by themselves and are looking for buddies to explore the city with. While at my hostel, I met some really cool people from countries including Brazil, Sweden, and Ukraine who I got to explore Lisbon with.

Alright, so now that we have our accommodation set, it's time to go exploring. What exactly is there to do in Lisbon? Build calf muscles. Lisbon is incredibly hilly, and you will be hard pressed to walk anywhere in the city where you don't find yourself breaking your neck as you look at the incline of the street you're about to walk up. That being said, Lisbon is best explored by walking, and the steep streets are worth it for the views you will find at the top! Walking around the city, you will find several of the buildings covered in "azulejos," which is the Arabic word for polished stone. These beautiful ceramic tiles cover the city, and come in several different styles and colors. Their Arabic name points to the history of the region, which was ruled by the Moors of Northern Africa in the 13th century when the tiles first came to be used.

We've probably worked up an appetite from all of this walking, so

it's time to grab a snack! Let's go grab a pastel de nata, which is the beloved pastry of Portugal. This egg custard tart is a national delicacy, and you can find them in almost every bakery. We're going to go to Manteigaria, which some argue has the best pastel de nata in the entire city. The cool thing about Manteigaria is that once we get our pastel de nata (which if you are wanting a little extra oomph, you can sprinkle it with some cinnamon or powdered sugar), we can watch the workers actually making them as we enjoy them! Looking through the glass, we get to watch as they form the crust to fit the pans, pipe the filling into each one of them, put them in and take them out of the oven, and repeat. It's actually pretty hypnotizing, and I could watch them all day.

But we have to snap out of it, because you and I have somewhere else to be! Our day is coming to an end, so let's go to the Tagus River to watch the sunset. We are in for a special treat, because we get to watch the sun go down over both the Golden State Bridge and Christ the Redeemer, just from one spot! Okay that's an exaggeration, but from the Tagus River we can see two very important Lisbon landmarks: the 25 de Abril Bridge and Christ the King. The 25 de Abril Bridge connects Lisbon to the city of Almada, and has a striking resemblance to the Golden State Bridge in San Francisco. Christ the King is a much smaller monument modeled after Christ the Redeemer in Brazil (considered one of the seven wonders of the world, this statue is 98 ft high!), and was constructed after World War II to express gratitude for Portugal not experiencing great destruction from the war. As the sun goes down, I'm also feeling gratitude for Lisbon sharing their beautiful city with me, and for getting to take you along with me. I hope you enjoyed your day in Lisbon, obrigada!



A building in Lisbon featuring "azulejos," ceramic tiles

THE GREAT TRANSFER

By Maji, Free Minds Friend

So after 14 years of being holed up in the mountains, it was a real blessing to finally get word that I'm getting transferred to another institution in Maryland that's closer to the city I'm from. It's been a huge turnaround in terms of now having the chance to be in an environment that's not as violent as where I was just at. With the demographics of the new location being made of mostly younger dudes, I now have the opportunity to give those youngins a glimpse to what this prison system had done to me and how I remained SOLID through it all.

Once I got to the new location and was placed in general population, one thing I expected is the dramatic change in how a Maryland prison normally moves. I could sense that the rules were a little looser by the way the men carried it around here. It might be because most were trying to get accepted into the treatment program that the institution is best known for. The politics surrounding all the incentives you can receive from just being accepted was all the buzz. Maybe it's why everyone was on their best behavior. Learning this made me believe that I had a lot to look forward to getting the most the institution had to offer. Compared to the old location where there were no programs that were designed for those dealing with long-term sentences. And a lot been going on here that you usually don't see at other facilities especially in the Western Maryland region. Being that an election season was in full swing when I got here, I witnessed a lot of moving parts. I had to remember that this was the same location that once housed Chris Wilson (the renowned author of the book *The Master Plan*). To read that he walked through here before makes me take this experience a little more serious.

This is also the same place where the brother Adnan Syed resided as part of the Georgetown University college program that's held here. That's before he got released back in September by former Baltimore City state attorney Marilyn Mosby when she exonerated him of a murder from 23 years ago. Me knowing the brother personally, I got the chance to see up close an innocent man be free from all charges and the whole world embraced him.

A real moment came on the day before he left. I got to meet

up with him down in the gym. Once he seen me, he made it his business to come over and talk to me. As I told him congratulations, as humble as I always known him to be, he gave me direct eye contact when he told me, "You're next!" Indicating that I'm going to one day be the next to finally be FREE from all this. It gave me more motivation to assume that if I played my cards right, I could truly make the most out of this latest situation. Really understanding that this might be my last chance of earning a second chance to be back into society.

So why not expect great things to go my way once I'm accepted in the program? I'm banking on utilizing every resource from in here and out here to really have my voice heard from behind these walls. I know there will be obstacles and challenges along the way because I don't want to get ahead of myself seeing that I'm now in a less intense environment. If I could get in that position to showcase my talents and skills, these prison gates might start cracking open for me to walk through towards FREEDOM.

Those of us who are incarcerated will always have SO many ideas we would want to implement when we get back in the real world. Reality is, if you aren't accomplishing goals while inside, then it only gets harder as you try to work towards achieving bigger goals on the outside. I'm not saying one won't be able to accomplish any goal that they set before them. But if you aren't putting into practice achieving certain feats while locked up then it would be ludicrous to think you will have the same skills uptown (home).

And I also expect this message to be read by those who really believe in us becoming formerly incarcerated and having a true redemption story. I'm telling you at this moment the stars are aligned for all of us to put our imprint on prison reform. If I have to start gaining momentum through the work I'm putting in for this organization, I can promise you that you will hear from me until there's no more words left. Because my biggest goal right now is to write the right words that could potentially have me walk right out of prison. Allow me to set the bar high with that EXPECTATION because it's no looking back now.

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Here are a few of our members' many accomplishments since our last issue!

- ★ JG off probation early thanks to successful probation officer relationship management and continuous employment achievements.
- ★ ES completed the Introduction to Telecommunications for the C-Tech certification.
- ★ SR who came home after over 30 years through IRAA earned the Top Driver award at Amazon (out of 256 drivers!) in his 3rd month on the job.
- ★ The following members earned their Flagger & Forklift certificate: AMI, JB, RH, MP, NM, MS, GS, AD, DB.
- ★ SM started a residential and commercial cleaning company



Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: BALANCE

By Julia

What does it mean to you to lead a balanced life, or to achieve balance in your mind/body/spirit? When I think about the idea of *balance*, there are a few things that come to mind. Have you ever watched a gymnast walking (or doing flips!) on a balance beam?

I'm no gymnast myself, but I love to watch the Olympics and I'm always amazed to watch the way the athletes can be perfectly balanced on a narrow beam. Imagine that life is like the balance beam; what are the different parts of your life that you may be carrying with you, that you need to keep in balance to keep on your feet on the balance beam? Another thing that comes to my mind when I think about balance is the saying, "all things in moderation." Have you heard this before? To me, it means that it's good to have a balance of different elements—like food that isn't too salty or too sweet, but just the right amount. It also makes me think of recipes, where you need just the right amount of each ingredient. If you were writing a recipe for a balanced life, what would it be? What sort of ingredients might you include, like friendship, family, community, creativity, meaningful work, exercise, hobbies? Often, we may have a lot of things in our life that are important to us, as well as things that just need to get done, and it's not always easy to achieve a healthy mix. Write a poem or essay that describes your recipe for a balanced life.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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