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Vol. 13, Issue 2

Free minds Connect



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Introspective Free Minds members,

I hope this issue finds you strong on a path of self knowledge and self compassion; if you are finding yourself veering off onto side roads, may you know that it is all a necessary part of the journey and most importantly, you are not alone on your travels!

Thank you to everyone who suggested this issue's unique theme as it has yet again spurred me to reflect, look inside, and emerge more enlightened and hopeful. It was sparked from the many letters we received detailing how you all transform time in solitary from a period of searing loneliness to personal growth. How time alone with yourself can bring a deep self awareness, which leads to self compassion – an essential ingredient to personal development. We all want to better ourselves, but all too often we leap to what we want to change, and forget about the needed first step: understanding ourselves and the reasons we act or think in a certain way. And most importantly, giving ourselves the same grace and kindness we would extend to a good friend.

We just welcomed FM member KM home after 50 years, with a majority of those years spent in solitary. I told him about this issue's theme and asked could he share about how he made it through. Without hesitation, he stated, "Keep those social connections going any way you can! And I include books as part of my connections." KM told me that it is hard to maintain social ties when in the hole, but if you are lucky to have books (and Free Minds can help there!), he recommends diving deep into those pages—connecting with characters, learning new places, and most importantly, discovering more about your inner self. Thank you KM for being such a wise elder to all of Free Minds.

I know that deep diving into this issue will bring those feelings of connection and insight too! Asking the question "who am I," while not easy, can bring a fullness and appreciation of "I like being friends with me." 😊

In Carlos's conversation with Deon on page 35, Deon went on a self exploration journey, as he says, "[a]fter one too many incidents that lead me to extended stays in the 'hole.'" He realized one way he could transcend his circumstances was through education. Carlos and Umar talk with Sofia on page 32 about their own experiences with the hole. Carlos realized that his own mind was something he needed to understand. Umar found solace in helping others. As he says, "Even though I looked at myself as helping them, I came to realize that it was really therapeutic for me."

On page 27, Emily reviews *Solitary*, a memoir by Albert Woodfox, who survived 40 years of solitary confinement. He forged a bond with another man named Herman Wallace, and this remarkable friendship helped him survive "because he knew that he was never alone." I want to commend each and every one of you who has made incredible connections like this. Whether or not you have a friend like Herman, know that like Albert, you are never alone. You always have your Free Minds family in your corner!

FM member Antoine demonstrates this in stepping up to the plate for our Advice Man this issue, while he is in transit, to make sure that IS gets a thoughtful response. Antoine shared the value of self-awareness and communication: "The more I understood myself, the more I understood others. Initial anger was replaced by empathy. I communicated better. My spirit felt better more days than not. Opportunities happened. I was ready..." (page 9)

Jae-lynn shares with us her journey to radical self-acceptance as well on page 34. As she writes, "When we set goals for ourselves we have to appreciate where we started and where we are now. Knowing that we are imperfect but loving ourselves anyway...*Grow because you love yourself enough to know that you deserve it.*" In the poem "Self," CD puts this into practice, writing, "I am not ashamed to embrace the softness of my soul" (page 10). In his essay on page 8, JL reflects on who he used to be when he was younger, who he is now, and who he may become in the future as well: now that's embracing *me, myself, and I!*

Lastly, I want to close with a few words from JM's poem, "Me, Myself, and I" (page 11).

*Me, myself, and I, are only one person so
everybody please come together and make this
world forever great.*

The more we know and understand ourselves, the better we can work together and build a world we all want to see. Let's keep that vision and movement strong!

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: Ancestors

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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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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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, Kavon, Damani, Kelvin, Melvin, Demetric, Jamal, James, Deangelo, Raequan, Roy, Anthony W.

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

FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Sofia

Free Minds Meets on the Same Page with a Typography College Class

This past February through March, Free Minds partnered with a typography class from George Washington University here in DC for their spring semester project. Typography is the art of arranging words to make written language readable and appealing when displayed. The students transformed poetry from Free Minds members that is featured in our book *When You Hear Me (You Hear Us)* into creative typography designs, rearranging the words and using different fonts and sizes to transform the poems into powerful images. The Free Minds On the Same Page (OTSP) outreach team and Poet Ambassadors visited the class several times throughout the course of their project to help guide them as they interpreted our members' poems. The students also left positive feedback on the members' poems they were assigned for their projects. At the conclusion of the project, the class invited us to a final exhibition where the students displayed their final designs and provided an explanation of their creative process. One of the designs that stuck out was the creative interpretation of a member's poem that had the words rearranged to mimic a glass that was shot at and shattered. This was a wonderful opportunity to connect our members' poetry with community members and see how two art mediums can come together to create an impactful product.

Free Minds Members Travel to Kentucky to Share Perspectives About Proposed Prison

In late March, Free Minds members and staff traveled 8 hours to Eastern Kentucky to join local community residents in a discussion about the proposed construction of a new federal prison in Letcher County, Kentucky. Free Minds met with local residents and with members of a coalition called Building Community Not Prisons to share perspectives about how this new prison would impact not just those living where the prison would be built, but also people from D.C. The isolated location has no accessible transportation hubs and is an 8-hour car ride from the DC area. Free Minds members voiced these concerns and more at a public hearing held by the BOP during their trip in Kentucky. Free Minds member James said of his time in Kentucky, "It was a great experience. I got an opportunity to witness democracy in motion."

Free Minds Brings Healing and Poetry to the National Association for Poetry Therapy Conference

Free Minds staff Antoine, Julia, and Sofia presented at the annual National Association for Poetry Therapy Conference held this past April in Bethesda, Maryland. Poetry therapy is the use of the written or spoken word to further therapeutic goals and enhance wellbeing. Prior to the workshop hosted by Free Minds, Free Minds staff had the opportunity to hear from speakers and attend workshops based around different topics in poetry therapy. There were over 100 attendees at the conference and attendees ranged from therapists to academics, non-profit staff, social workers, and more. Free Minds staff attended a workshop that focused on "advice poetry" in Somali culture where poetry is used for mental health in refugee camps and another workshop that went over how to get credentialed as a poetry therapist. Our workshop focused on how Free Minds poetry exchange, in which members who are incarcerated receive positive feedback on their poems from diverse volunteers, helps to build community and foster healing in the face of the isolating prison system. Participants in our workshop left feedback on members' poems and then wrote poems of their own, answering to writing prompts on the theme of "home". Participants in the workshop loved the chance to connect with our wonderful members through poetry feedback.



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the November/December 2023 Connect Resilience and January/February/March 2024 Connect Dreams.

MM: I enjoyed the part about pilates and its origins in the last issue of the *Connect* with the Resilience theme. Who would have thought that it was learned from a cat by an incarcerated person while incarcerated huh? Awesome man, I love it.

AM: Thank you, Free Minds staff, for the Resilience *Connect* issue. Well, it's obvious to me God has certainly blessed me with some resilience, for sure. Life will put us all to the test from time to time. All of our ups and downs! Some storms that life can bring. Loss of a loved one, loss of a good paying job or career. Out of a relationship, a break up with someone you really loved so much or health issues. Faith: You have to pray to God to give you the wisdom and strength to carry on.

RM: I've just gotten the new issue *Dreams*, and wow, I have to say it's one of the most powerful, meaningful, uplifting issue I've read to date!

JL: I really appreciate the column Julia wrote in the *Dreams Connect* sharing how she has been trying to find an agent for her writing(s). It helps keep me from becoming discouraged because I have had no luck in getting any of my books published, though I have had a teacher at a college use some of the info in one of my books for her class, and I think an essay. I am now working on writing a religious book... Keep trying and don't give up!

QUOTE-I-VATOR

When I'm trusting myself as fully as possible, everything in my life reflects this by falling into place easily, often miraculously.

– Shakti Gawain,
American Author



Khalid

There are lots of people I admire and respect, but I don't necessarily want to be like them. I'm too happy being myself.

– James D'arcy, British Actor

I would classify myself as an individual, that's what I try to stay true with - being myself, 100 percent.

– Khalid, American Singer

I'll always keep fighting, keep being myself and be as respectful as I can to stay true to myself as I can and stay humble.

– Anthony Johnson, American Actor and Comedian

"Defining myself, as opposed to being defined by others, is one of the most difficult challenges I face."

– Carol Moseley-Braun,
former U.S. senator

Be yourself, everyone else is already taken.

– Oscar Wilde, Irish Poet, Playwright, Aesthete

FAMILY TIES

By Antoine

My name is Antoine. I was born and raised in Washington, DC. At the age of 21 years old, I was sentenced to life in prison. After serving 22 years straight, I was released under the Second Look Amendment Act. I was immediately employed at an art gallery as their resident artist for poetry and as an assistant curator. I also worked with Free Minds as one of their Poet Ambassadors. I am now currently the Congressman John Lewis Fellow, using my lived experience and voice to highlight the injustices and ways to progress in our community. Most importantly, I'm a proud father and grandfather.

I was arrested two weeks after my daughter turned 2 years old and leaving my baby girl behind was extremely tough for me. Seeing her through a glass was even tougher. I'd been there to watch her birth. My little girl had been with me everyday. She was even with me the day of my arrest. I can still remember me cussing out the police for trying to play with her! Yes, my little girl was everything to me.

After receiving a life sentence, one could only imagine the level of longing I felt for my only child. How can I be there for her? What CAN I do for her from prison? Can I even have an impact on my daughter's life? What I learned first was that I first had to grow before I could properly water the beautiful seed that is my daughter.

As she grew, I had to first acknowledge that I was more than twice her age and I was still dealing with the same anger and bad decision making that I was instructing my daughter to do a better job of. And the more I learned how to better deal with my own emotions and developed much better communication

skills, the better I could guide her. Not through just mere talk, but by example. I could literally walk her through reigning in her anger, because I had to learn how to do it myself! She took note because of all the bad stories she'd heard about her Daddy. But then she heard me telling her about how I was a GED tutor in prison... How I got a ACT Gold Certification... How I became a Suicide Companion... or how her dad had been voted 'most in shape' on the compound lol. Considering my circumstances, my accomplishments were big for my daughter. It also solidified the respect she held for me from so long a distance. My 'good news' inspired her to give me 'good news' so to speak whenever we talked. Building that foundation of trust and personal growth at an early age proved vital in maintaining wonderful communication during the almost 22 years I was away.

I believe when communicating with your kids from prison; you can either talk at them or to them... or be the one they can talk to. I'd chosen the latter. And now my daughter tells me everything. Well, probably not everything! For the most part, establishing trust between yourself and your family is the best thing one can do under such conditions. Being there for someone emotionally, mentally, or even spiritually, can mean even more to a person's life than mere physical presence. My daughter and I have a very special and unique relationship. When other people hear how we communicate so freely after being separated for so long, they are amazed at our relationship. My daughter and I can now spend hours (not 15 minutes!) talking on the phone, building an even stronger bond. We plan to do a lot of traveling now! One thing prison did teach me was that your family ties will be as strong as you are!





JUST LAW: 2023 AMENDMENTS TO THE SENTENCING GUIDELINES *By Prince*

Discretion is one of the pillars of American legal jurisprudence. Judges exercise their discretion when handing down sentences based on crimes committed. A fair judicial system seeks to provide equal justice under the law. When judges are handling similar kinds of cases, equal justice will mean similar sentencing patterns.

Sentencing guidelines are designed to make judges more accountable. The issues of disparity and discrimination are the basis of the sentencing guidelines. The Supreme Court in *U.S. v. Booker 543 U.S. 220 (2005)* decided that the sentencing guidelines are advisory not mandatory, thus restoring broad discretionary authority to judges.

PROPOSED AMENDMENTS

The United States Sentencing Commission submitted to congress an amendment to the Federal Sentencing Guidelines in April 2023. Amendment 821, also called the "2023 Criminal History Amendment" stands to eliminate or reduce the prison sentences of thousands of Federal inmates (convicted of federal offenses) throughout the country. The new guidelines, not only applies to future defendants but also retroactively to defendants sentenced after November 1, 2023, as this is the date the amendment went into effect. It is estimated by the commission that over 10,000 incarcerated individuals could be eligible for early release, while over 7,000 could have their sentence reduced. For DC residents, this currently applies to people convicted and sentenced in DC District Court (federal), but not DC Superior Court (local).

The Amendments include:

- Sentence reduction for defendants with health risk factors
- Defendants who are primary health care givers may be entitled to a lesser sentence
- Defendants sexually abused while incarcerated by correction officers are eligible for early release
- Lesser sentence for first time offenders
- For defendants serving time for crimes whose underlying laws have changed will either be released or have their sentence reduced

The most important aspect of the amendment is that it allows eligible defendants to petition the court for sentence reductions. Also, there is a 2-point reduction to defendants who are incarcerated for offenses that are not sexual offenses, terrorism, Civil Rights' violation, violent offenses, involve a firearm, have aggravating factors or cause substantial financial hardship.

To be eligible, the court will consider the following factors:

- Risk to public safety
- Public deterrence
- Character of the defendant
- Nature of the offense to which the defendant was found guilty
- Prison record of the defendant.

Author's Note: The use of the word, Defendant as against prisoner, or offender was an intentional choice.

For specific questions about your eligibility or filing a motion for sentence reduction, we recommend consulting an attorney.

**This information is available on <https://www.ussc.gov/>*

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

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: ME, MYSELF, AND I

Me, Myself, and I By JL

I really don't know how I would describe myself today. I do know that I am more patient than what my younger self used to be and a lot less self centered. I do not try forcing things to work out and simply let things be, if seeming out of my control. It is easy to do such when your desires are moderate and you believe in a positive outcome for your life. So I control what I can and thankfully live in a state of moderation. I also keep in mind that the world is bigger than any selfish desires that sometimes surface and remind myself that there are actually others out there in worse condition(s) than I am.

In the future I would like to be a little more resolute in mood and action. Distractions still cloud my visions and goals at times and I believe that is just part of my being incarcerated – prisoners do not have control over many circumstances that can throw off, hinder, or discourage a person from his or her goals. So maintaining a constant focus on my goals is still in the works for me. But for the most part I am improving and I give credit to God for allowing certain people and groups like the Free Minds family to come into my life while I've been incarcerated. Those are who help shape the person I am today.

My, Myself, and I By MJ

Me, myself and I; three interdependent aspects of the same reality. All three, to me, represent the spiritual anatomy of an individual. I like to think of "myself" as my behavioral faculty that corresponds to my physical and sensory reality. It is also my learning faculty and I feel like most people operate primarily through this aspect from infancy to around fourteen years old. Some people never fully transcend this stage in adult life. Sure, we learn throughout life, but this form of learning is based on learning from the outside in and not being able to perceive the deeper meaning in the things we think we learn. Have you ever met someone who seems to "hear their way through life?" Always speaking about what they heard, etc.? We all know someone who is very "well read," yet knows not the reality behind the subject they speak.

When I speak about "me," I like to think that I'm talking about that aspect of my spiritual anatomy that corresponds to my will. It's essentially a mid-point between "myself" and "I," receiving

input from both, and allowing me to make the best decision. If a person hasn't reached this level of spiritual development, their thoughts and actions are determined by their emotions and sensual energies.

The "I" in us all corresponds to the God in us all. It is the most important spiritual reality that I aspire to reach that I pursue with urgency. The influence experienced in "gut feelings" and our "intuition." We all know about those times when we don't know how we know something, we "just know." It is the indwelling intelligence that knows no limitations. This must be our collective aim if we really desire change. No one else is going to give it to us.

In closing, I say, face all challenges head on; throw your heart and soul into your life's work. Passion is a good thing. Seize the moment; contest everything! Nothing should ever again be easy for those who seek to harm or take advantage of us.

Me, Myself, and I By AHA

Me, myself, and I, a concept I have dealt with for years getting to know myself in this Supermax lockdown prison. Describing myself to a stranger, I would want them to know that I'm very intelligent, loyal, quiet/laid back, and very caring. Being quiet a lot, some may think you're antisocial, but you just observe a lot and have a laid back, patient demeanor. These are the aspects that may not be obvious upon meeting me, or knowing that I have a good heart usually out to care for others than myself.

Many people I have encountered, or experiences I've had, have shaped my identity with one being early and very young coming to prison was my uncle telling me, "look, I know this is new for you, but just be yourself and not someone you're not, and you will be good." The experience of being locked down in isolation as long as I have to find

and know myself better, so now in my life today, I'm wiser, more educated, and patient, with a sense of purpose in life, which has definitely changed from my younger self. That self was lost without a care in the world with no guidance which Allah changed by bringing me closer to what pleases him, planting that seed of faith and devotion in my life that shaped all aspects on its right course. Now I want to be that individual who has grown mentally, physically, and spiritually able to give back to my community from growth and experiences in my life along with what impacted me in life and such practices like reading, exercise, and education to become in tune with me, myself, and I overall. In the future I only seek to help others from such practices that have helped me while continuing to use what I've come to learn about myself.

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!

Advice Man T.S. is currently in transit between facilities, so Antoine offered to step in with his perspective for this issue!

Dear Advice Man,

What was the hardest challenge you have had to overcome during your incarceration? If that thing were to be removed, do you believe you would still be who you are today?

**Your FM brother,
I.S.**

Greetings brother I.S.! That was a very good question that you asked. In regards to what had been the hardest challenges for me during my incarceration? First, let me say that I received a life sentence at 21 years old. It was also my first and only conviction. To make matters worse, I was sent from DC all the way to Beaumont, TX, which at that time had a negative reputation. I'd entered the jail then prison with a terrible attitude and the mindset that I would not let anyone disrespect me for any reason, and if they did I wasn't going to respond in a friendly manner! Needless to say, my first 10 to 12 years I spent a lot of time within the confines of a cell. Even did a tour of the SMU program...

Sorry to venture off topic I.S... To answer your question as to what were my hardest challenges? It was definitely my emotions. I'm one of those people who feel very strong and passionate about what I truly believe in. Some might say stubborn. My way of thinking was the spark that usually lit the fires I too often found myself in. See, I really disdain injustice and wanted to fix everything wrong around me, even if it meant sacrificing my own well-being, rarely ever taking the time to consider how

irrational my own actions might have been during the whole process! I'm not going to say I was the 'Super Homie' but I was definitely frontline in times of conflict. And if you're from DC, then you know there was always plenty of conflict when it came to us. I would eventually come to realize that it is impossible to ever establish order out of chaos as even the 'order' would have to be chaotic. Simply put, you can't fix the unfixable. And I'd spent far too much of my life trying to do just that. I would also learn why my standards and expectations of others were completely irrational, definitely in prison. But most importantly, it was how my own thinking and approach to situations wasn't exactly fixing anything either and had actually only made it worse for me. But even in that awareness, I still had to overcome that still angry teenage urge to act out or as we call it 'demonstrate,' whenever I felt strongly about a particular issue. That 'ready for whatever' mentality had of course affected how I communicated with others, and I was so easily triggered when considering most interactions in prison don't necessarily involve positivity. After one too many incidents that lead me to extended stays in the 'Hole,' I was forced to reconsider how I processed and handled situations or else continue to suffer the consequences of emotionally driven decisions.

The more I understood myself, the more I understood others. Initial anger was replaced by empathy. I communicated better. My spirit felt better more days than not. Opportunities happened. I was ready...

Had I not learned to master my emotions I.S., I would not have given back the life sentence they'd given me. Nor would I have had the resolve to deal with the challenges that come with returning back to society after over two decades. I'll leave you with a quote I heard a while ago: "Never let your Emotions overpower your Intelligence."

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ 10 members in reentry completed Free Minds 12-weeks Peer Support Training Program.
- ★ JOS and FL completed a 10-week CORE Training Program with McCullough Construction.
- ★ MH completed 4 years of Apprentice training and passed his electrician certification test.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Me, Myself, and I

By RW

Me Myself and I

Fascinating affirmations love, peace and happiness
heals broken spirits. So many physical and mental scars
living contested behind these prison bars.
Praying for a glance at a second chance keeps me motivated

Tainted dreams painted visuals society
doesn't consider what we've been through
I would love to share my ideas with you too.

Immortal sins there's meaning behind my past will never end.
Open wounds hurt like unhealed tattoos.
Staying committed married to hope...
Wishing I could have seen the eclipse through a kaleidoscope.

Enjoying therapeutic songs and beautiful images of birds
chirping
outside my window.
Lost friends I never understood their lingo.
Change of habits in common places caveat signs
came to me the same way as strangers

Predestined images creating in my mind just for entertainment
sets me free
Agape with exuberance experience gives me my
greatest salvation. Staying guarded defying the odds.
Such a strong characteristic.

The struggle continues...
Me Myself And I

Me, Myself, and I

By JS

I'm stuck in a dark tunnels with many dips and turns the
way out is straight,
I feel the presence of others, but it's just me, myself, and I,
the tunnels are so long, I can't see the end,
the tunnel represents the number 35,
I've walked longer than I thought I could, honestly still a
distance I knew I would,
knowing others in their tunnels who didn't,
which sometimes has me doubt if I can finish,
I've come to what feels like a bypass.
I can almost see a faint light, that is straight and turns to my
left and right,
It's still me, myself and I.
The light represents 15.
I wake up heart pounding from a hopeful dream, I call out
and a voice tells me it's all on me.
It's just me, myself, and I.

Self

By CD

Hello Curt! Stubborn as can be!
Yet you'll contradict yourself for your child, grandkids or
loved ones.
Moving the earth is an extreme take compared to moving
mountains,
But it is ye who steadies course,
A sight that sees the beauty of the world or those who
personifies in character.

I am not ashamed to embrace the softness of my soul
for the hardness understands my worth.
I recall in 1999 you began your journey writing
99 pages of an espionage in one day,
But you stopped for a decade, and then never looked back.

Somehow within those years or before the coloration of jade
became the source of your love.
Indeed it flourished around you in life.
The grass, the leaves, flowers, part of the sea,
even a delicate beauty with those eyes.
You're such a sucker for them.
Okay!

Let's backtrack a little to my childhood self.
I know you love that color and have always been good at
many things.
Handyman is the word to correlate.
As time passes you've wrote letters to remind
yourself of the person you'll become or want to be.
Art, writing, cooking, loving nature, language and
psychology has become your thing.
I know you're ready for the balance of the world,
To create your own business,
To be in a relationship with one woman,
To have fun with family and friends,
But do remember to allow no one to disrespect your
balance,
Your chi, your spirit, your mission of the heart, the part that
yearns to breathe,
For you will face all sorts of challenges.
Yet, I believe in you.
In you!
For we are we!

On one journey.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

My Life

By DA

For 31 years my life hasn't been right,
For 31 years my life has been trife.
For 31 years prison has been my wife.
For 31 years this marriage hasn't been right.

I want a divorce.
A separation.
A leave of absence.
Just some time off from this nonsense.

But how can I leave my life?
Can a person just separate from him/herself?
Can a person cash out of their experience without
committing suicide?
Should a person leave their spouse their wealth even
though he/she hasn't been by their side?

My life....
What can it really be while in prison?
When you're constantly locked down and in detention.
And when you talk talk talk, but nobody listen.

I know life is all about good and bad experiences,
Of joyous days and troublesome nights.
Some moments are filled with smiles,
While others are filled with frights.

Yup, all of the above sums up "My Life."
And that's why I know I'm going to be alright.
Why?
Because I weathered the storm and made it through the night.

Penitentiary Blues

By DP

Outcasted by society, look down upon by peers
Abused by opinion, too afraid to face fears
Wants to be accepted, while invites get rejected
Resolution to my problem, still can't figure out its Methods
Not counting days, but yet, the years
Racism, Hatred, it hurts and always seems to bring tears
Corrupt a good heart, was doomed from the start
Home is the finish line. But I'm stuck in a jar
Shaken and rattled, hope it won't tear me apart,
My life, it matters and pride would leave you scared.
Confused by perception, Manipulated By ego
Silence is solitude, and peace is gone way out the window
How could the humble be meek, in a den full of lions
Don't shade my light or Try to keep it from shining
I dream of the duty, I finally could put this all behind me
Life lesson Learned that I wish on nobody.

Me, Myself and I

By JM

Me, myself, and I, often have visions of making a change
for the better, that will somehow help others

Me, myself, and I, would like to share my positivity with people
from all different walks of life.

Me, myself, and I, would like to become a Violence Interrupter
so that we can slow down the crime rate and prison
convictions.

Me, myself, and I, would love to share my wisdom with the youth
and become a mentor and help them make good choices
that would further them in life.

Me, myself, and I, would like to see more leaders be born,
so that the powerful speaking can motivate the people to be
motivated
by love.

Me, myself, and I, would like to see this world move off
the word LOVE.

Me, myself, and I, are only one person so everybody
please come together and make this world forever great.

I Am

By JRS

I Am Abdul Qawee (servant of the Most Strong)
I wonder how long it's going to take for us to fix what's
wrong.

I hear our youth crying out for help
I see that cry from the guns in their belts.
I want us as a people to encourage peace and to believe...

I am servant of the Most Strong (Abdul Qawee)
I pretend that I am free although this is not a secret
I feel happiness and love because I want others to be it.

I touch the gates of Heaven hoping I'll get in
I worry that I won't because of all of my sins.

I ask "Am I wrong?"

I am Abdul Qawee (servant of the All Strong)

I understand that life comes with test

I believe we'll be judged so strive to do your best.

I dream of being with those whom I love, the Muslim

I trust in Allah, the Creator of the heavens, the earths, and all
that's in them.

I hope for mercy and His forgiveness

I am a servant of Allah, the Most Beneficent.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Me, Myself, and I

By JY

Me, Myself, and I
are different pieces of the same pie.
Sometimes we agree on things
but sometimes, we don't see eye to eye.

"Me" is always the smartie pants
because "Me" claims to know everything,
but really, "Me" knows nothing at all,
and has no one to blame.

"Myself" is a little more cool
and can accept when "Myself" is wrong,
but "Myself" always seems to lose his mind
over things "Myself" may never control.

"I" is a totally different story
as "I" can mostly control situations most of the time.
But "I" also can be hard headed
and somehow always commits the most crimes.

I AM

By KOL

I wonder when my people will wake up
I hear my ancestors' call
I see the promised land from the wilderness
I want to see the land of milk & honey

I am the grandson of my ancestors

I pretend that I am leading our people to the promise land
I feel overflowed with joy & purpose to be a servant to my
people
I touch the ground of our promised land
I worry my people don't hear our ancestors' call
I ask what will it take to wake us up

I am the grandson of my ancestors

I understand not all of us will wake
I believe that most of us will
I dream I will be amongst them on the day
I trust in Yah
I hope to see the day come to pass

I am KOL

I Am

By PD

I am Peter.
I wonder if AI will ruin our society more than it already is.
I hear my grandmother's laugh.
I see waves from the ocean.
I want to be successful.
I am Peter.
I pretend I am back in DC walking through the cherry blossoms.
I feel sad.
I touch a pink rose petal.
I worry about Trump being reelected.
I ask, why has it taken so long for me to fight my internal demons?
I am Peter.
I understand that my situation is temporary.
I believe my family loves and supports me.
I dream of the beach on the fourth of July.
I trust that love can change almost anything.

Me, Myself, and I

By CMK

Me, myself, and I
My world consisted of one block
Since age 10, I've been running from city cops
A lil Black boy who grew up without his pops
Back then, only time you danced was to beat your feet at the
Go-Go or on the block, but never Tik Tok
When you hear gunshots, you drop to the floor and never
look up 'til it stops
I kept my deepest fears buried inside a safety deposit box
Alone, scared, brave, ambitious, and lost within me, myself, and I
Now it doesn't make me soft 'cause I cry!

Me, Myself, and I

By AW

Me, myself, and I
lives upon an
Island where no one
can live alone.

Me, myself, and I
is an island upon
which no man
no woman
no child
is an Island unto
Themselves
alone.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

I Am
By AHA

I am AHA
I wonder how adjusting to society will be.
I hear my inner thoughts saying don't worry.
I see the sky outside my window that makes me smile.
I want to see the trees, nature, and cars as people go about their day.
I am AHA

I pretend I'm in a big boat at sea enjoying the view of the ocean.
I feel happy, elated, and free.
I touch the water as the waves flow.
I worry if the wind is too strong for my journey.
I ask, how long can I stay?
I am AHA

I understand my past doesn't define who I am now.
I believe I am wiser than I once was.
I dream I could change the direction of many youths.
I trust in my faith in Allah to continue to guide me.
I hope for forgiveness from all whom I've hurt or wronged.
I am AHA

Walking Contradiction
By ER

I am a multifaceted collection of hodgepodge pieces.
For every trait I possess, closer examination reveals an antithesis.
Often I find myself laughing only to keep from crying.
In my mind, I'm truthful, but in my heart, I feel I'm lying.
Where others see me as daring, brave, and bold,
Deep down I'm afraid to get into trouble, so I mostly do as I'm told.
For all my turmoil and run ins with the police,
I'm nothing more than a human being in desperate search for an inner peace.
For every high, there is an equal low and every ebb,
preceded by a gliding flow,
confined and caged, my being stagnated. However, the solitude allows my mind to grow.
My love, mercy, and grace have always been outside of your statistical prediction.
Despite your cynical view with regard to my human condition, I find solace
albeit uncomfortable
being a walking contradiction.

I Am
By MF

I was raised to face my fears
So I turned to God and told Him He's the Only One.
And I'm man enough to admit when I'm wrong
but don't be saying s*** when the police come.
Am I the only one who wonder why we
park in a driveway and drive on the parkway?
Please make it make sense without accumulating debt
And I step!
Now forreal, I step on any stage and use knowledge as my
weapon against
the evils of ignorance while y'all play the block like y'all on
special teams.
Simone Biles on a beam couldn't balance my Libra scale
but I weigh it well.
"IT" being the complexity of life and the intimacy of death.
Swerving in the cash lane while drunk off success.
Who am I to judge when literature my gavel?
Inspired by intellectuals who's only regret was that
they couldn't learn more throughout their travels.
Smoking loud with a deaf chick while cultivating my vision
with the blind.
I'm different!
My life in D.C. wasn't a comic, but to my people, I'm a Superman.
Uplifting my culture without straining my back.
Given a Head Start by LBJ and that's facts.
Presidential when I move around, I'm Ms. S's son
born in a country of corruption who has the gumption to
incarcerate me for
something they initiated, I bar none!
Rosa Parks took a seat to make a stand and got the job done.
Her wages wasn't minimum.
If Durk the voice, I'm the vocal cord
The First Amendment taught me to speak my mind until my
throat get sore.
So why I got to tailor what I say just to please you?
Y'all overturned Weinstein's conviction
What about ME TOO?

The Story of Me, Myself, and I
By MS
Me...

Was lost, to Trauma that stalked me,

Myself... Trapped in an
Emotional Prison and,

I was barely living...
Treading Sanity's edge...

But this Pen...
Declared that I belonged to more,

Welcoming Myself
I
Embraced Me, Myself, And I
Found Forgiveness Within and
Splintered pieces became whole again

This is the Story of Me, Myself, and I.

PAYING IT FORWARD: THE REDEMPTION PROJECT

By Kelli

In 1993, Anthony was a 16-year-old boy, living in Vancouver, Washington when he was charged with a murder and sentenced to 77 years without parole. Ten years into his sentence, Anthony committed himself to learning who he was, and turning his life around. He created a ground-breaking program inside of prison called The Redemption Project. With the assistance of pro bono lawyers, Anthony was granted early release in 2019. He has committed his life to serving others. This is his story, in his own words.

The house I was born into became one of the first crack houses in Portland, Oregon. We eventually moved across the river to Vancouver, Washington. A lot of the kids from the inner city of Portland were moving because their parents were trying to get them out of gangs. But that just moved the gangs to another area!

My older brother and I were incarcerated for murder when I was still 16 years old. I received a 77-year prison sentence. They didn't care that I was a child, they put us in with the adults. At first, I went to the state penitentiary at Walla Walla. At one point, that prison had the record for the most murders in a one-month period of any prison in the United States. There were stabbings, riots, and assaults on officers on a regular basis.

I spent my first decade of incarceration getting into trouble. Then a good friend of mine was murdered in a domestic violence situation. To be honest, she was more like a sister to me. I'd lost friends to gang violence, but this one hit me differently. After she was killed, I decided to turn my life around.

One day, I was talking with a friend of mine on the inside. He asked my permission to bring an ounce of meth inside. He said he'd give me \$500 if it worked out. I spent an hour telling him how stupid that was given he'd been in prison four times for the same thing! I was able to change his mind. It made me realize the influence that we have on each other inside, and it convinced me we needed to use that to change the social dynamic inside of prison.

So, I set out to change the culture in prison. Sounds ambitious, right? I didn't realize how ambitious it was! When I was 31, I created something called The Redemption Project. I was already in with all the different races and gangs, so I got everybody on board. I even wrote the curriculum. The Department of Corrections was like, "Who you think you are, writing a curriculum?"

But I had confidence, right? My curriculum ended up being the most successful ever used in the Washington state prison system. I ended up teaching over 2,000 people and the program spread to every prison in the state.

The Department of Corrections asked me to go back to Walla Walla after I'd been transferred to try to help prevent violence there. That one prison had more violence than every prison in the state combined. I was putting my life on the line by going back, because people were getting stabbed just for *supporting programs*, and here I was trying to start a new program! But within five months of my going there with The Redemption Project, it went from being the most violent to the least violent prison in the state. Riots ceased. Staff assaults ceased. It worked!

The curriculum covers five areas:

1. Getting to know yourself
2. How to build strong family ties from prison
3. How to develop a good work ethic
4. How to cope with incarceration by talking about our emotions instead of just experiencing them
5. Preparing for release

Some people might ask, why prepare somebody for release when they have a decades long sentence? Well, even if you have a long sentence and don't think you're going to get out, laws change. It is a possibility! Look at me, I had 77 years.

I wanted to help people succeed in reentry. So I spent a year talking with people who had been released from prison and then came back. I wanted them to help me understand the pitfalls that led them to come back. I learned it came down to three main things.

The first was getting into a relationship that pulled them back downhill. The second was trying to "catch up." That means seeing other people with cars and houses and thinking they can be a criminal for the short term to catch up to where they think they should be. But it doesn't work, and they land back in prison. The final trap occurred when people decided to "reward" themselves. A person who maybe had a substance abuse issue before they went to prison comes home and stays clean. Right around the one-year mark, they'll decide to reward themselves with a drink or drugs. And they find themselves right back in the old cycle.

I believe that understanding what these pitfalls are can help us design reentry programs and set people up for success instead of failure.

Running a new program wasn't all easy. I encountered resistance. People would talk against it, saying it was a "snitch program." When I had someone who responded, "Nah, I'm not signing up for that," I'd watch to see who his friends were. Then I'd have them go talk to him. Then I'd have somebody else go to him a few weeks later. Finally, I'd go close the deal. By the time I got to him, he wouldn't know it had been organized, right? He'd be like, "Yeah, everybody's talking about this. I'm gonna give it a try."

My perception of myself has changed since I first landed in prison. I have learned that anything is possible. When I set out to change the prison culture, people told me that it was impossible. When I wanted to build out a reentry system, they said that wasn't going to happen either. I believed in my vision though, and worked hard until I made it happen. I have so much confidence now in all that I can do.

Getting to know yourself better plays a part in everything. In prison, every night I would go over my day. I'd ask myself, "Why did I respond like that? What was my motivation? How could I respond better next time." The longer I practiced looking back at each day, the more I started thinking about my responses in the moment. I would notice more about other peoples' body language, and reactions. I became so in touch with myself and others, that I could almost understand what somebody else was feeling. That allowed me to adjust my own response so that I could connect with people in a better and more positive way.

I love the title of this column. Paying it forward matters to me. I've been home for nearly five years now and I've turned down a lot of opportunities to make more money. The mission statement for The Redemption Project is to repay society for the negative acts committed against it by helping to prevent others from repeating similar acts. This means acknowledging the harm that you did to the community

and to your victim. Even though we can't go back to the past to change what already happened, we can help somebody else turn their life around, so they don't go out and victimize somebody else. You can keep someone else from having to go through what your victim or your victim's family went through.

To any like-minded Free Minds members who want to start a program in prison, I'd suggest you start by joining the Toastmasters International Program or starting a club in your prison (if you don't have one). Toastmasters is a nonprofit educational organization that operates clubs to help people develop communication, public speaking, and leadership skills. Toastmasters will give you skills that will benefit you enormously, now and in the future. (For more information, ask a case manager or educator at your facility to look up how to start a club at: www.toastmasters.org).

Also, remember to work with the administration. They are the ones who run the place. It's not going to function if you don't work with them. That doesn't mean telling on people or anything else. It just means you're working with them in a professional capacity. You're submitting a proposal and they're helping you make it happen.

Now that I'm home, everything I do is about giving back. I'm the president of a nonprofit in Vancouver, the town where I committed my crime. We opened a youth center and a reentry apartment complex for people getting out of prison. I'm the first ever formerly incarcerated person on the Board of Trustees for the Legal Foundation of Washington supporting equitable civil legal aid programs across Washington State. Each legislative session I work with legislators to help change bills to bring a different perspective and give people in prison the opportunity to get back home to society.

In 2021, I launched the American Equity Justice Group, a nonprofit working towards the goal of making comprehensive data on sentencing available to the public and the courts to tackle the disparity in sentencing that so often happens in this country.

Finally, I work with the Seattle Clemency Project to increase access to justice for reformed individuals serving lengthy sentences that no longer serve a purpose and to prevent deportations that fracture our communities.

I feel good about the work I'm doing.

EDITOR'S NOTE: So do we, Anthony! Thank you so much for all you do, and for paying it forward. You are a role model. Just like all of our Free Minds members who have started different programs in facilities across the country. If you have a program that you'd like to write about for this column, let us know!

REAL WORLD OF WORK

By Makenna

Discipline, determination, and attention to detail: three values that have made all the difference in the success of Free Minds member Deontae's work in quality assurance and his prospective career as a therapist. I had a chance to connect with Deontae and get to know more about his work life as a junior supervisor at a meal kit and food delivery company, a job he obtained shortly after he returned home in October 2023. Deontae's strength of character and purpose truly shined through our interview as he gave insight into his leadership role and future plans.

It's so nice to meet you, Deontae! I've heard you work in quality assurance. What is your typical workday like?

Okay, so, when I come in, I do scale verification. I verify that the scales are weighing everything properly. Then I got a set of 12 tasks that I have to do when I go onto the floor after my pre-operations. So I work in the lab, and what we do is we go out and make sure the air temperature is at 35 degrees at least, except the freezers... the freezer is -1 sometimes. Sometimes it gets really cold in the freezer.

I check the temperatures from the floor... and I make sure the temperature is proper there and before any other production of liquids can start, I have to verify that the portions are properly measured. So I take my scale that I verified when I first came in and I weigh the portions, then I'll sign off on it. Before any production can be started, it has to be signed off by quality assurance.

Then, I go into the main production floor where they actually prepare the meals that are going to be shipped to the customers, so I gotta verify that each ingredient is correct. And I have to make sure that every ingredient that goes in the meal is in the bag... then, I sign off on that meal. My next step – and this is just when I come in – is to go down the shipping line and make sure all the proteins and the meal bags are in the correct slot.

And I do all this before 7:00am. I get to work by 5:30am, and I leave at 4:45pm.

Wow – that's a long day. Do you ever work in a team or are you mostly working by yourself?

[Laughs] That's a good question! I'm supposed to work with a team, but as of right now there's only really two quality assurance people on my shift... some people don't like working in the cold... 35 degrees all year round. I wear a scientist lab jacket, and I have my head covered and a full mask to keep your face covered.*

What's your favorite part about your job? You have a huge leadership role as a junior supervisor.

It's a lot of responsibility, but I like it. It's an awesome job. The only thing is the cold but... you get used to it.

I get to use a lot of stuff I learned inside in the real world. I worked the entire time I was incarcerated, so I learned a lot of different trades while I was there. It lets me know that if you use your mind that you can make a change. You know there's a stigma, and they usually wouldn't have someone from prison doing this job, but now they let us do it, so I'm glad.

Have you experienced any challenges being in the position of a junior supervisor? It seems like you have a lot of responsibilities on the team and so early in the morning.

Yeah, dealing with the GMPs, which are General Manufacturing Practices. I have to enforce rules, so like if I see a person that doesn't have their vinyl gloves on or if I see a person without their hair net... or I see a person on their phone, I have to enforce the GMPs. Sometimes people are like, "are you gonna snitch on me?" And I'm just like, "I'm just enforcing the rules." It can be rough sometimes because not everybody has that working mentality.

What has your job taught you? About yourself or about life in general?

It taught me that progress takes time, but if you apply your skill set and do a good job, you can move fast because I moved up pretty fast. Also, I value insight that you can learn from one another.

How do you maintain a work life balance? What is that like for you getting up so early – how do you find balance?

I'm not gonna say it's difficult, but once I get off everything I try to do within maybe three hours from 6:00 to 9:00. So I try to eat when I'm out, come in, work out, take my shower, and read.

It's a lot of discipline, but what I've learned is that this is going to be necessary for anything in life. Anything that you want to earn in life, you have to work with.

I found there's a lot of job opportunities out there. But I'm in a good position now because I think the quality assurance and quality control, and the pay is really, really good. And I'm building up my resume.

Do you have any advice you'd like to offer folks who are getting back on their feet, who want to do something similar to what you're doing?

Just stay focused and make a plan. If you don't make a plan, it's gonna be hard for you, very difficult, because there's so many obstacles. Whatever it is you want to achieve, you have to work on it. I would say take it a step at a time. Count the little things, the blessings that you have.

I've been home since October 18. I got my social security card, my birth certificate, and my IDs all done and was working the next week. So it wasn't even a month before I started working.

I'm focused on my goal, so once you stay goal oriented it'll help you build like a template, how you want to do things, how you want to achieve your goals.

Can you tell me about your other career goals?

Right now I'm going to work here for a while and I'm doing a certification to be a therapist. I'm in the third part of my training. It's a year-long program, and they provide housing and everything, so I'm going to stay out here and I'll probably take some online classes.

I like doing what Free Minds does, helping people.

That's wonderful. Best of luck to you in this program and at your current job. Thank you so much for speaking with me today!

**At the time of printing, five people have joined Deontae's team. He is now training them.*

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS

By Aneka

If you have access to Corrlinks or Getting Out, you can now send in your submissions and receive writing prompts and other Connect related updates via Corrlinks or Getting Out. Members without Corrlinks and Getting Out access can continue to send in Connect submissions via mail. New email requests are responded to once a week. **This email correspondence will be solely for the purpose of exchanging Connect related information. We will not respond to emails that are not Connect related. All personal correspondence will continue to be through mail.**

Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

*If you're not already a member, below is a checklist for our eligibility criteria.

- I am a youth charged as an adult from DC and/or an incarcerated young adult from DC, currently between the ages of 18-24
- I am eligible for D.C's Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act or Second Look Amendment Act (also known as IRAA 3.0) which allows D.C residents who were under 25 at the time of the offense to petition the court for resentencing after serving 15 years or more. As a DC law, this only applies to individuals sentenced in DC Superior Court.

Do you fit into one of these categories? If you do, please write us back and let us know so that we can send you the form needed to join the Book Club. Our address is 1816 12th Street NW, Washington, DC 20009.



REENTRY CORNER WITH JENNIFER

Dear Free Minds Family,

Please allow me to share some ID resources with you while Ms. Keela is on leave this month – so you can establish your “Me, Myself, and I” when you come home. While we all know Keela as an avid reader, talented poet, tireless advocate, funny jokester, creative resource-finder, consistent supporter, and inspiring column writer, I’m honored to also know her as a kind and encouraging supervisor I enjoy working with every day as a Reentry Coach.

One way I support the members of the Reentry Book Club as they come home and work towards their goals is by helping them navigate the critical – but sometimes confusing – DC Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) process of getting a Real ID card (then a Learner’s Permit, and finally a Driver’s License). Each of these credentials is like a key that unlocks more opportunities! This is especially true in DC where many resources are exclusively for DC residents, so the requirements for getting the golden ticket of a DC credential are often evolving and getting more stringent. The good news is that you don’t have to memorize these rules–Free Minds is here to coach you through it.

When you get home, we can share all the detailed steps with you to get your ID on your own, or if you prefer, I meet groups of members at the DMV so we can navigate the paperwork, tests, and celebrations together. In either case – and with apologies to Naughty By Nature – I’m here to say, “you down with DMV? Yeah, you know me!”

TIPS for getting your DC ID as quickly as possible when you come home:

- Try to get your birth certificate and social security card before you come home.
- If you can’t get your birth certificate, make sure you hang on to your BOP or some other government ID that you can take to the DC Vital Records office (if you were born in DC).
- The Vital Records office recently moved from North Capitol Street to Shannon Place, SE (behind the Big Chair) and if you answer all the identity questions correctly and have the BOP or CSOSA profile sheet, you can leave with a freshly printed copy of your birth certificate. It costs \$23, but MORCA (the Mayor’s Office on Returning Citizen Affairs) can give you a voucher to cover it.
- Since almost nobody has two utility bills or government mail in their name as soon as they come home, you’ll need to establish your DC residency with a Social Service Proof of Residency form, which you can apply for when you bring your birth certificate to one of the approved social services agencies that allows you to receive mail. Free Minds members have had success at:
 - SOME (So Others Might Eat) at 60 O Street, NW
 - Samaritan Ministries at 1345 U Street, SE or 1516 Hamilton Street, NW
 - Downtown Day Services Center at 1313 New York Avenue, NW
 - Friendship Place at 4713 Wisconsin Avenue, NW
- Once you have your birth certificate and the signed Proof of Residency form, you can take them both to the DMV to get your ID. The DMV no longer requires proof of your Social Security Number. You will provide your SSN and they will verify it directly with SSA.
- You’ll walk out of the DMV with a temporary paper ID using the address of the social service agency at no cost to you and your hard copy ID will be sent to that agency two weeks later.
- In the unfortunate event that you lose your ID, you can replace it online for \$20 if you know your ID number, so I always recommend you take a picture of your ID before you leave the DMV
- Although some banks and employers require the hard copy ID to open accounts or begin working, the paper ID works to apply for SNAP (food stamps), Medicaid, many training programs, and other resources.

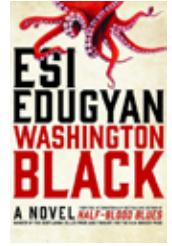
While this process may seem a little daunting, you’ll only have to complete these steps once, so when you have your ID – and eventually your license – you’ll be able to conduct most future business (like renewing your ID/DL in 8 years) online! Therefore, you won’t likely have to go back into the DMV building – unless you want to say hi to me and the Free Minds members I’m probably there with that day. :)

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who sent in their vote for our next Books Across the Miles selection!

It was a close race, with *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan eventually coming out on top. This novel follows the story of George Washington Black, as he escapes slavery on a Barbados sugar plantation and travels from Canada, to England, to Morocco in search for his true self and what it means to really be free. We are so eager to hear your thoughts on this novel.



1. Wash wanted to capture everything about Bridgetown in his memory so he could draw it later. If you could capture a place you've been, or a memory you hold, forever, what would it be?

2. A book's "setting" refers to the time, place, and environment where a story takes place. What impact do you think Esi Edugyan's choice of settings had on this story?

3. The perspective of *Wash* is written by Edugyan, who is a female author. Do you think this impacted the way his narrative was told? Do you think it might have been any different if *Wash* was written from a male perspective?
4. What do you think happened at the end of the book?
5. Edugyan shared in an interview that, "I didn't want these abolitionists to be viewed as the great white saviors. It's not just black and white." What do you think of, when you think of abolitionists? Did this book challenge or support the way you view them? If you were unfamiliar with the word before, what does it mean to you now?

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ANCESTORS (VOLUME 13, ISSUE 3)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Ancestors**. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 13, Issue 4 will be exploring the theme of **Liberation**.

(1)

Think about the traditions or rituals in your family that have been passed down through generations.
How do these traditions connect you to your ancestors? What significance do they hold for you personally?

(2)

Reflect on the challenges or hardships your ancestors may have faced in their lives.
How do you think these experiences have shaped your family's story and your own identity?

(3)

Imagine having a conversation with one of your ancestors. What questions would you ask them?
What do you think they would want you to know about their lives and the world they lived in? Imagine the voices of your ancestors echoing through time, sharing wisdom, and guiding your path.

(4)

Explore the concept of ancestral healing. Are there any unresolved issues or traumas from your family's past that you feel called to address or heal? How do you think this process could benefit future generations?

(5)

What do you want your legacy to be for future generations? What values, stories, or traditions do you hope to preserve and share with your descendants?

(6)

"Bio Poem" Instructions: A bio poem is written about one person. It's a way for you to introduce this person to your audience. While using this template, take time to think about a past or elder family member - their thoughts, feelings, and beliefs.

Line One: first name	_____
Line Two: 4 descriptive traits (use what you know of this person for this)	_____
Line Three: Brother/Sister of... (or daughter/son of...)	_____
Line Four: Lover of... (people, ideas)	_____
Line Five: Who feels... (find out what is important to him/her)	_____
Line Six: Who needs... (ask what 2-3 things that person needs)	_____
Line Seven: Who gives... (ask what the person gives to those around them at home, work, church, or anywhere else)	_____
Line Eight: Who fears... (1-3 things the person fears)	_____
Line Nine: Who would like to see... (what would they like to see? It could be a place, an item, a person, etc.)	_____
Line Ten: Resident of (city he/she lives)	_____
Line Eleven: Last name.	_____

*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 (**Ancestors** and **Liberation**) 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*

TECH TALK *By Emily*

Hi everyone! My name is Emily and I recently started working for Free Minds as the Digital Literacy Trainer. Some of you may know me from when I used to write letters as the host of the Letter Writers Circle during the pandemic or even way back when I used to mail out poetry feedback as a Free Minds intern in 2018. As Tara always says, the Free Minds family is forever, and I am so excited to be writing to you all from my new role!

You may be asking yourself "what is a Digital Literacy Trainer"? Literacy is used in this context to mean the understanding, competence and knowledge of a specific topic. So in this case, it means helping Free Minds members (and staff!) become familiar and comfortable with the technology that we use in our everyday lives. Now I am certainly not some sort of IT genius, but I do know a little bit about using phones, email, Zoom (an online video meeting platform), and laptops.

The majority of my work so far has been with Free Minds members who are already home, so I am thrilled that I can also work with you all as well through this new column. This column is to assist you in your planning for reentry. Today we are sharing information about a tech tool that is essential when you come home: the cellphone. The number one challenge our members who are home say they have is getting up to speed on using a phone, so we want you to get a head start!

If you have any tech questions that you want answered or concerns about using technology when you come home please write in and I will try to address it in a future issue. Last time, Carlos wrote about setting up an Android so we figured that this time it would only be fair to write about setting up an iPhone.

The iPhone versus Android debate has been going on for many years, and I have been staunchly team iPhone. However, I have an Android for work, and I have to admit that I have grown to like using it much more than I originally thought! All that to say, each of the phones have their own benefits and drawbacks. If you would like to see an in depth column in the future comparing the two, please write in and let us know!

Now, let's get into how you set up an iPhone. So, you are home and have purchased your iPhone and taken it out of the box. What next?

First, you will need to turn it on! To do this hold down the button on the right side of the phone for a few seconds. If nothing is happening, you may need to plug your phone in. After holding the button for 2-3 seconds, a black screen with a white apple should pop up. You can let go now. Then, the word "hello" should appear on the screen.



You will need to swipe up to open the phone. This means putting your finger on the screen and pulling it up while maintaining contact with the screen. Next, the phone will ask you to move a sliding scale to determine how large you want your text. The text will get larger or smaller depending on where you drag the scale. Once you feel that it is a good size, click the blue continue button.

From there, you will be prompted to transfer any information from an old device to a new one. If this is your first phone, you will just need to click "set up without another device." The next step is to connect to your wifi network by tapping your network and entering your password. After this, your phone will ask you to set up Face ID and Touch ID. This is essentially using your face or your fingerprint as a password. If this makes you uncomfortable, you can opt out of them and just use a numerical passcode.

At this point, the phone is going to ask you to enter your Apple ID. Your Apple ID is an account that you will make so that you can download apps from the App Store. You will tap the "Forgot password or don't have an Apple ID?" and put in your email address and a password of your choosing.

That's it! Once the phone is activated, there are plenty of other fun features. Write in and let me know if you would like a step-by-step guide for adding contacts, signing into your email on your phone, or anything else. I hope this column was helpful and not too overwhelming. I know new tech can be a lot. Remember that Free Minds is here to help!

CONVERSATION WITH TONY

So, to give you a little about *Me*, my name is Tony. I'm a husband and father of three, I'm a reentry coach, and I'm a returning citizen. I appreciate the work I do, because I know what it's like to return home, after incarceration and have to "figure it out." For *Myself*, I never knew what it was like to be successful. I began getting cuffed up by the police when I was 11, and it didn't stop until they removed the handcuffs and waist-chains after being escorted down to receiving, the morning I was being released in 2016. However, it's amazing what a difference determination, motivation, and the right people like Free Minds Book Club can make to help guide me in the right direction towards success, and freedom from those prison walls! So, my main two things I do at Free Minds, is help

with employment opportunities, and prepare members to get that job! With those employment opportunities, I assist with everything from building a resume for you, and helping search for the right employment, one that feels good for you, and then assisting you with applying to that position, uploading the resume online, creating a profile for that organization, and following up with the interview process as well. Then, I will suggest other community partners for referrals to assist in your reentry and getting you reacquainted with the community. In closing, I pledge, if given the chance to work with any of you members reading this, that I will work as hard as I can to connect you to opportunities that others connected me to when I came home. I look forward to working with you all!!

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



Solar eclipse as was visible throughout much of the United States this spring



14th & Upshur Rec Center



Mural on 14th & Crittenden

DC PHOTOS *By Antoine*

As requested by our readers



Sculpture at the 14th & Upshur Rec Center



The DC Wharf sign atop the floating barge located just off Transit Pier, where performances are often held in the Wharf

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!



THE WRITE WAY: UNDERSTANDING POINT OF VIEW

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

By Makenna

"Point of view" (POV) refers to the perspective from which a story or article is written. One's point of view affects the way they experience the world: thoughts and feelings, their own actions, others' behavior, life events, navigating relationships, etc.

The first person point of view is the perspective of the individual "I." For example, *I* am currently writing this article for the *Connect* magazine. The first person POV also uses, "we" as in, at Free Minds we create content for the *Connect*. Though I am referring to more than one person, I am still writing from the perspective of myself – on behalf of others. "I," "we," and "our" are all first person pronouns that can be used in speech or in writing.

First person narratives are very common because they speak directly to the perspective of the narrator, creating familiarity with the reader. First person POVs are common in the genres of fiction, young adult, science fiction, memoirs, and poetry.

The second person point of view pulls in the reader as part of the story, using "you." The author shares the reader's background, actions, thoughts, and events in their story by referring to the perspective of the reader. An example of the second person point of view would be, *you* are reading "The Write Way" or *you* are almost finished with a good book. The second person perspective is less popular in narrative writing, but can be found in speech and text that give advice, directions, or explanations.

The third person point of view only refers to characters using third person pronouns, like he, she, they, them, or theirs. The idea behind the third person perspective is that the author is choosing to show the reader what is happening in the story instead of telling them. It opens up the reader to multiple perspectives and descriptions of events, actions, and feelings. For example, if the author is telling a story about a family, they may use phrases like, "Kendra is different from her sisters," or "they all enjoy going to the beach during the summer, but Nicole especially loves the water."

The third person point of view is especially popular as it can be used to tell a complete narrative of everyone involved in the story and allows for character development. This perspective is often used in poetry, fiction, young adult, thriller/horror, mystery, and romance.

All three points of view offer a different experience to the audience: the first person point of view gives a subjective and personal perspective, the second point of view gives a more intimate perspective, and the third point of view gives all characters and subjects their own perspective to create a well-rounded narrative. You may prefer to use one point of view over the other, particularly as each point of view affects the story and how it is understood differently. What is your favorite point of view? Challenge yourself to write a poem or short story from a point of view that you don't use often, either first, second, or third.

BOOK REVIEW: SOLITARY BY ALBERT WOODFOX

By Emily

Content warning: This book discusses the experience of solitary confinement.

Albert Woodfox's *Solitary* is a memoir that recounts his more than 40 years spent in solitary confinement in Louisiana. Woodfox begins by detailing his childhood growing up in extreme poverty in New Orleans in the 1950s and '60s. After a few stints of incarceration and freedom, Woodfox is found guilty of armed robbery and sentenced to 50 years in prison in the early 1970s. While serving his time in Angola, he is falsely accused, faces trial, and is found guilty for the murder of a prison guard. He then spends the next 44 years in solitary confinement, the majority of it at Angola, which has long held a reputation as a place of extreme brutality and violence.



his co-defendant in his murder trial following the death of the prison guard. While they were confined on separate units, they were able to pass notes, yell out to each other from the yard, sometimes arrange to be sent to the "dungeon" (Angola's SHU) at the same time, and even coordinate coinciding contact visits so that they could speak.

On page 329, Woodfox beautifully explains his bond with Wallace:

"The extraordinary, mysterious, and inexplicable success of our friendship was based on something else. In different cells, on different tiers, sometimes in different buildings, and now in different prisons, our keepers could never come between us. Herman had my back. I had his. If I needed him he was there. Not physically, but instantly. I'm not religious. I don't believe in God. But I believe in the human spirit and I believe human beings have a greater capacity than we understand."

In his 400-plus page book, Woodfox shares his experiences with racism and poverty while growing up, his introduction to and involvement in the Black Panther Party, his deep friendships and hardened mental fortitude that allowed him to survive solitary confinement, and many details about the horrendous racism, corruption, and legal ineptitude that led to his wrongful conviction.

The portions of the book about Woodfox's introduction and commitment to the Black Panther Party were particularly fascinating to me. Early on in the memoir he says his "politicalization" that happened as a result of joining the party changed the way he saw the world as well as his attitude and convictions towards violence, collective power, and justice. This same commitment to the Black Panthers led to him being charged and found guilty of the murder of a white prison guard despite numerous contradictory testimonies and no physical evidence, as he writes in his book that the prison staff saw him as a threat and a potential instigator who needed to be controlled. Despite this, Woodfox maintained until his death in 2022 that if he could change anything about his life, he would change "not one thing."

Throughout the memoir Woodfox shares insights into how he was able to maintain his sanity while faced with prolonged solitary confinement, which the United Nations says is psychological torture. Early on in his incarceration Woodfox met a man named Herman Wallace who would grow to be his comrade, confidant, and best friend. While the theme of this *Connect* is *Me, Myself, and I*, the main message Woodfox conveys in *Solitary* is that he was able to survive the unthinkable because he knew that he was never alone. Wallace was Woodfox's partner in fighting the Angola administration for basic rights and subsequently

While Woodfox had his friend Wallace and another close friend, Robert King, he still experienced indescribable pain and suffering. He dealt with many bouts of claustrophobia while in his cell. He often found himself pacing, awake at odd hours, and arguing with himself to not let go of his sanity. On page 206, he reflects on some of the realizations he had about his ability to survive. He writes, "I saw how I had transformed my cell, which was supposed to be a confined space of destruction and punishment, into something positive. I used that space to educate myself, I used that space to build strong moral character, I used that space to develop principles and codes of conduct, I used that space for everything other than what my captors intended it to be." In order to do this, however, he explains that he had to detach from any emotional connection to his current reality. He says that he "didn't feel the highs and lows that people in society feel anymore. I lived in the middle of every emotion" (335).

By no means a light read, *Solitary* deals with the heartbreak and infuriating frustration that results from reading how so many officials and people in power were determined to break a person's spirit. While Woodfox does emerge unbroken, he certainly carries a lot of pain and trauma with him. I found the book to sometimes be a little too detailed, particularly in the minutiae (small details) of his case that were difficult to follow as someone without a legal background. I would recommend this book to those who are looking for inspiration to survive the unthinkable, but caution that a lot of Woodfox's story is very difficult to read.

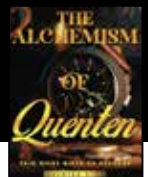
If you would like to read *Solitary*, please write to us and let us know!

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 Alchemism of Quenten: Pain Gives Birth to Purpose by Quenten Sims

Description provided by the author: Quenten Sims scrutinizes life as an excursion filled with intriguing people, prodigious places; and thought-provoking things that have left him with remarkable memories. He further articulates that one's true character is revealed by the clarity of one's convictions, the choices one makes, and the promises one keeps. Besides this, he points out that one must put God first in every aspect of life, be in the vicinity of genuine people, stay humble, and appreciate the little things in life. Thus, never forget: "Every saint has a past and every sinner has a future."



IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: CONGO AND "CONFLICT MINERALS"

Have you ever heard of coltan? Most people have not, but it's a vital part of a product used by billions of people around the world. And it's value has put it at the heart of the seemingly endless civil wars wages between government forces and rebel militias in the 11th largest country on Earth, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Coltan is actually short for columbite-tantalite, a metallic ore that is mined from the ground. It has a heat-resistant property to it that makes the substance indispensable to manufacturers of electronic devices with complicated wiring or chips which, were they to overheat, could catch fire and be extremely dangerous to their owner. The number one product associated with coltan is cell phones, which have become a staple product for people the world over.

There are a few countries where coltan can be extracted from the earth and then sold for large profits: Brazil, China, and a few other large countries are able to get it. But the biggest source by far for coltan is the Democratic Republic of Congo.

So why then is Congo's tiny neighbor to the East, Rwanda, actually the biggest exporter of coltan? The answer is tied up in decades of conflict in both countries.

The Congo, home to more than 100 million people, first became an independent nation in 1960. Its former and longtime leader, Mobutu Sese Seko, changed the name to Zaire, though it was changed back in 1997 after Mobutu was overthrown in the First Congo War. A second war broke out almost immediately and lasted until 2003, with an estimated 5 million people dying as a result of the war.

Civil war continues in Congo today, with the March 23 Movement (or M23) fighting against the government of Félix Tshisekedi. M23 controls a wide swath of land in an eastern region of the country known as Kivu, which serves as the border between Congo and its neighbor, Rwanda.

Rwanda is just a few decades removed from one of the most horrific conflicts in history, during which the minority tribe in the country, the Tutsi, were nearly exterminated in an attempt at genocide by a government that was led by members of the majority tribe, the Hutus. A Tutsi rebel group, led by the current president of Rwanda, Paul Kagame, defeated the government and halted the genocide.

The M23 Movement in Congo is also led by ethnic Tutsis, and it is widely believed that the rebel group is financed by the sale of coltan to Rwanda. While Rwanda is a top producer of coltan itself, it has recently become the top exporter of the mineral. Kagame, the Rwandan president, has disputed that his country pillages coltan from Congo, but has acknowledged that Rwanda is a hub for smuggled coltan coming out of its neighbor.

Conflict minerals, like conflict diamonds in other countries, is an extremely difficult challenge to address. The international

community has sought to develop better transparency rules to prevent smuggled coltan from making its way into cell phones and other products, and to ensure that the sale of the mineral is not supporting military endeavors.

But as the conflict in Congo makes clear, those efforts are far from foolproof. And that's before you get to the fact that such policies implicitly endorse the sitting government as the "right" party in conflicts, which is probably never 100% true or false. And while the sale of conflict minerals most benefits the smuggling party, there are small businesses and one-man mining operations that rely on the trade to live.

The seemingly never-ending conflict in the Congo, and how it is financed, is sadly emblematic of the situation for many African nations that are rich in natural resources like diamonds and coal, oil and gas, or precious minerals. The oppressive history of colonizing in Africa, along with present-day predatory business relationships between dictators and other countries or corporations, have contributed to a landscape where instead of those resources benefitting the citizenry, they are often weaponized to sew division and conflict.



NATION

As we mentioned in the last edition, the candidates for the two major political parties have been set. President Joe Biden will face former President Donald Trump, who was just recently found guilty by a New York jury on 34 charges that stemmed from payments made to conceal an affair he carried out with porn star Stormy Daniels. Joining them on the ballot in many states will be Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., nephew of former President John F. Kennedy.

Kennedy is getting just below 10% in major national polls, which is of course not nearly enough support to become president. But his presence in the race may very well decide which of the other two contestants emerges victorious: Trump holds a slight lead over Biden in national



President Joe Biden will face former President Donald Trump

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

polls and leads him in many of the "swing states" like Michigan, Arizona and Georgia. So a third candidate sapping votes from Biden or Trump could dictate the winner in some of these battleground states.

Voters will soon get a first look at the two major candidates going head to head, and hopefully exchanging views instead of insults. Biden and Trump have agreed to two debates, the first of which is slated for late June; as of now, Kennedy has not been invited to participate.

The nation has been rocked by a man made catastrophe and several weather calamities in the past few months. In late March, a ship called the Dali that was pulling out of the Port of Baltimore when it lost power several times and careened into the Francis Scott Key Bridge. What happened next was caught on video and shocked everyone: the impact buckled nearly the entirety of the bridge, destroying one of the main thoroughfares in the metro areas and jeopardizing business around the port likely for years to come.

Meanwhile, this summer has seen a slew of deadly tornadoes rip through the middle of America. More than 500 tornadoes were documented in the month of May, with major damage and some fatalities recorded in states that included Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky and Michigan.



Deadly tornadoes rip through America's heartland.

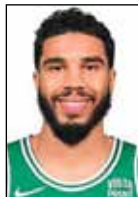
Photo credit: New York Post

SPORTS

As we go to print with this edition of Free Minds, both the NBA Finals and the NHL Stanley Cup Playoffs are days away from starting.

In the NBA, the Boston Celtics emerged out of the Eastern Conference after a 64-win regular season in which they dominated the conference for most of the year. The Celtics are led by the two-headed monster of Jayson Tatum and Jaylen Brown, who are surrounded by a dangerous complement of veterans and role players.

The Western Conference victor was a bit surprising: coming in as the 5 seed, the Dallas



Jayson Tatum and
Jaylen Brown

Mavericks got hot at the right time and mowed through some stiff competition to set their date with Boston. Led by one of the current and future megastars of the league, Luka Doncic, the Mavs took out the top seeded Oklahoma City Thunder and then ruined the party for the Minnesota Timberwolves, who seemed destined for the finals after they beat last year's champ the Denver Nuggets.

Last year it seemed like the Mavericks' decision to pair Luka with the brilliant-but-quirky Kyrie Irving might have been a mistake, as Dallas missed the playoffs entirely. But with a year under their belts, the duo now looks like one of the best backcourts in NBA history.

In the NHL, the Florida Panthers shocked the world in 2023 as they upset the Boston Bruins (best regular season record ever) on their way to the Stanley Cup Finals, where they eventually lost to the Vegas Golden Knights. This year, the Panthers are back, and have a new opponent out of the Western Conference: the Edmonton Oilers, who are led by Conor McDavid, widely considered now to be the heir apparent to Wayne Gretzky in the "who's the greatest" conversation.

Fun fact: No Canadian team has won the Stanley Cup since 1993! Will Edmonton break the drought?

Finally in sports, the Summer Olympic Games are set to begin in Paris this month. There will be all kinds of storylines as the games get underway, but for Team USA, the most exciting will surely be the return of the legendary gymnast Simone Biles. Biles won five medals at the 2016 Rio games, four of them gold, and it was widely expected that her Olympic career would end at the 2020 games in Tokyo, which were delayed until 2021 due to Covid-19.



Simone Biles

But the Tokyo games did not go her way, with Biles withdrawing for most of the competitions due to the "twisties," psychological phenomenon causing a gymnast to lose air awareness while performing twisting elements. Now, at the ripe old age of 27, she's back to try and end her Olympic career on a higher note.

ENTERTAINMENT

The Academy Awards were held in March, and as predicted the film Oppenheimer (about the man who developed the atomic bomb) dominated the night. But there were also some new faces bringing home Oscar statues: Da'Vine Joy Randolph won Best Supporting Actress for her electric performance in the film The Holdovers, and writer Cord Jefferson got the nod for Best Adapted Screenplay for his magnificent film American Fiction.

DC CULTURE: THE SMITHSONIAN'S THE FUTURE OF ORCHIDS EXHIBIT

By Sofia

Every year in Washington, DC, the Smithsonian Gardens and the United States Botanic Garden put together an annual orchid exhibit. This year marked the 28th anniversary of this annual floral exhibition. DC has 42 free museums, including the museum where this exhibit was held!

The annual orchid exhibit began in 1996 as a collaboration between the Smithsonian Gardens and the U.S. Botanic Garden to highlight the rich diversity of orchids and both institutions' impressive collections of the flower. The Smithsonian also believes that public garden plant collections are vital for conservation efforts as they protect the species from habitat loss (Source: Smithsonian News Desk). It is also a way for the broader public to engage with diverse plant collections.

Orchids belong to the family Orchidaceae, a diverse and widespread group of flowering plants with often colorful blooms. Orchids have a distinct look as they are usually very tall and the male portion of the flower (stamen) fuses into the female portion (pistil) into one structure called the column that protrudes from the center of the plant (englishgardens.com). These unique flowers can be found in just about every habitat, except glaciers.

This year's exhibit, which I had a chance to check out, was housed at the Kogod Courtyard in the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery, just a few hundred feet outside of the Gallery Place/Chinatown metro stop. Titled "The Future of Orchids: Conservation and Collaboration," the exhibit focused on the obstacles facing wild orchids today in a world of climate change and deforestation. The powerful exhibit offers a glimpse into the work by scientists and conservationists to protect the future of orchids, which can teach audiences a more general lesson about sustainability.

The Kogod Courtyard was decorated with large and elaborate orchid displays, with signs at each display detailing the types of orchids shown and work that is being done to conserve them around the world. The colorful displays intertwined art with the large flowers, featuring beautiful and futuristic sculptures that surrounded and held some of the plants. The installations were created by multimedia artist, Phaen Howng, to help audiences see the future of orchids and be inspired to act more sustainably. Howng's sculptures took unique abstract shapes and were brightly colored in pinks and purples that matched many of the orchids.

This year's exhibit did not disappoint and comes at a crucial



time when the world's climate is rapidly changing and our earth's biodiversity is under threat. While the exhibit made for great pictures, it also gave plenty of food for thought.

What cultural topics or events happening in the district do you want to see covered in the next *Connect*? Write to us letting us know!

MEDITATION: SELF-CARE AND ACCEPTANCE *By Kelli*

Everywhere – in magazines, on TV, on YouTube, etc. – people are talking about the importance of “self-care.” There are juice cleanses, yoga retreats, stress-relief candles... blah blah blah. And don't get me wrong, all these things can be good. But sometimes, I'm not sure we really focus on the bottom line to self-care.

Personally, during difficult or challenging periods in my own life, I have to remind myself to care for myself. Yes, that means getting enough sleep and good, healthy food, etc. But I think it's also super important to focus on love and acceptance. Something my mom used to say to me and my siblings when we were going through something was, “Be gentle with yourself.” I LOVE this. In my mind, it means sometimes treating yourself like you would a wounded puppy (kitten if you're a cat person!). Because the truth is, at our core as human beings we are all just a little bit broken. Consequently, I think we all just crave that basic kindness, gentleness, and nurturing. So, this time, I thought we could meditate on the basic idea of caring for, loving, accepting, and being gentle with SELF.

If you are not used to meditation, you may find it seems a little woo-woo on the surface. But will you still give it a try? I promise you, the positive impacts of meditation on our physical and mental health are well-documented. There are mountains of evidence that meditation can improve management of stress, pain, anxiety, depression, inflammation... the list goes on. If you're still not convinced, just humor me. Remember, you have nothing to lose! 😊

As usual, this meditation works great if you can have someone read it aloud to you first, and then give your buddy a turn. But you can also just read it through a few times to yourself and then just close your eyes and meditate upon what you've read.

First, make yourself comfortable. Yes, we know, options are limited when your bedroom is a cell. But here are some ideas: You can lie on your back with a rolled-up towel or clothing under your knees and a folded blanket behind your head; or sit comfortably, perhaps just on a folded blanket. For additional support, you can sit against a wall or in a chair.

If you are lying down, feel the connection between your body and the floor or mat. If you are seated, lengthen your spine, broaden through your collarbones, and let your hands rest on your thighs.

Once you're settled, close your eyes, and focus upon your breath. Notice your breath, without trying to change it. Just breathe...

Inhale through your nose and then exhale through your mouth. Continue to take deep, full breaths in through your nose and out through your mouth. As you breathe, become aware of the state of your body and the quality of your mind. Where is your body holding tension? Do you feel closed off or shut down emotionally? Where is your mind? Is it wandering or is it at home within the breath? Is your mind at ease or filled with restlessness, negativity, and doubt?

Place both hands over your heart and continue to inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Think about your heart... this source of life, and this tender place where we experience love for self and others...

Let your breath become smoother and more effortless and begin to breathe in and out through your nose. Feel the air as it moves down to your lungs, and then back out into the world.

With each exhale, imagine you are releasing any negative thoughts that may be lingering in your mind.

Continue to focus on your breath. On each inhale, say to yourself, “I am worthy,” and on each exhale, “I am enough.” Let each inhale draw in self-love and acceptance, and each exhale release what is no longer serving you. Take a few minutes to breathe and recite this mantra internally. Notice how you feel as you say these words to yourself.

If your mind wanders at any point, it's okay. It's natural for the mind to wander. Gently bring your attention back to the breath. Notice how your thoughts come and go, whether positive or negative, and simply allow them to pass on by like leaves floating along on top of the calm waters of a lake.

Cross your arms placing each hand on the opposite shoulder... Hold yourself gently...

Now visualize yourself looking into your own eyes in a mirror... What do you see? Sadness? Pain? Love and joy? Numbness?

Regardless of what you see, tell yourself: “I love you,” “You are beautiful,” and “You are worthy of gentle care and happiness.”

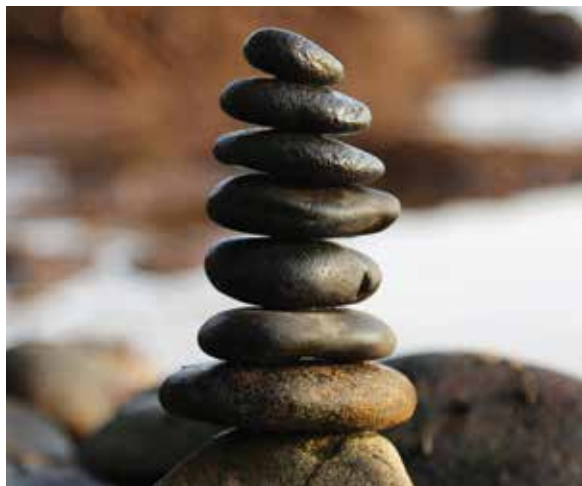
Imagine now that you could breathe gentle love into your heart... inhale that love...

Let this love warm you and then spread to fill the rest of your body.

Feel a sense of comfort and calm traveling up through your chest into your neck and head, out into your shoulders, arms, and hands, and then down into your ribs, belly, hips, legs, and feet.

Allow this warmth to fill you from head to toe. Breathe it in and know that this sensation of gentle love is always available for you when you need it.

When you are ready, you can return your attention to the room. But let's not stop caring for ourselves just because the meditation is over. Let's try to make it a part of everything that we do, until it becomes a matter of muscle memory and habit. And with that, in the words of my mom, Loie, “Be gentle with yourself!”





SURVIVING SOLITARY: A CONVERSATION WITH FM MEMBERS CARLOS AND UMAR ON EXPERIENCING THE SHU

By Sofia

The idea for this current issue was sparked by our members who have experienced or are currently experiencing time in solitary confinement, which is known as the Special Housing Unit (SHU) in the federal prison system. We've heard from you all about the experience of being in the SHU, where you have little to no human interaction, limited access to reading material, an hour or less spent outside, and limited communication with the outside world. I sat down and had a conversation with two members, Carlos, and Umar, who are now home, but who were sent to the SHU several times during their incarcerations. Carlos spent about 7 out the 25 years he was incarcerated in the SHU, with the longest stretch being 9 months. Umar also spent about 7 years in the SHU out of the 22 years he was incarcerated, with 5 years being his longest stretch. Read our discussion to see what advice they have about surviving the SHU, both for those inside the walls, and the loved ones supporting them.

SOFIA: I was wondering if you both could share some of the most difficult things that you remember experiencing or witnessing in the SHU, any specific memories?

CARLOS: I was in the SHU when I found out through a letter that my grandfather had cancer and was about to pass. The difficulty came in where I felt like I was stuck and couldn't do anything. I had to wait 30 days for my next phone call and you get 15 minutes. That's your one phone call. Letters were slow and I had no visits because I was on punishment. All that stuff to me was overwhelming because I can take on anything except family going through something. Everything was so slow and I wanted to know how he was doing and what his status was, so that was the hardest part for me. I used to get angry too because I would write every day, and of

course on the outside people are busy, they have work and other things going on. That used to make me angry and I was thinking, did they not know I care? But it was all off because of the reasons I described. The hardest part for me was not having control over my situation.

UMAR: I've seen death in the SHU, I've seen a cellie harm another cellie, and more. But as you know, you kind of get used to that in federal prison. I knew it had affected me when one day my mother asked, "Baby, are you going crazy?" I was on long-term segregation. That's when they put you in solitary confinement and they leave you there for an extended period of time. Number one, I can't see out the window because they have a long black flap on it and zip it up. They shut the TV off most days and there wasn't much to listen to on the radio. Me and my mother have had the most dynamic relationship, she was like my best friend. That was my best friend. We talked on the phone everyday, but of course in the SHU you can't. I would send her self addressed envelopes with the letters I sent her to make it easier for her when she wrote to me because I wanted to hear from her about once a week. So that was kind of like the most harrowing psychological experience that really impacted me.

SOFIA: Yeah, I'm sure seeing how you were struggling and how difficult it was for you was really hard for her. Thank you both for sharing. How did you both personally get through being in the SHU? What were some strategies you used to cope with the isolation?

CARLOS: For me, it was developing a program or routine to help kill time. Starting with going outside and I made that my business. We only got one hour outside, Monday to

Friday and not including holidays. That hour was good for me mentally to get that fresh air and so I could know what was going on around me. Reading and writing became crucial, and working out. If I had a good cellie and depending where I was at, I would play chess, cards, stuff like that to distract the mind, and that would help keep difficult thoughts away like what was going on with my grandfather. It was important to me to have things where I could look elsewhere, because you'd be surprised to know how little control you can have over your mind. Even the strongest person could fall in a situation like the SHU. That for me was crucial to keep my own balance, having a program.

UMAR: The way I got through it was helping others, and I've always been like that since I was a kid. I wanted to help the dudes around me that I knew was having a hard time. In the evening when it would quiet down a little bit, I would play Jeopardy. I would get Jeopardy games going on the door and I would ask who wants to play Jeopardy. A lot of people would run to the door and want to play. A lot of people would want to engage in that and have a good time. Somebody might call out to me too and ask me to hop on the vent for a minute and I would talk to them about whatever they were going through. Even though I looked at myself as helping them, I came to realize that it was really therapeutic for me because I needed somebody to talk to in that situation too.

SOFIA: It seems like for both of you, it was a lot about taking your mind elsewhere and trying to stay in control of what was going on in your mind. It also seems like you were trying to interact with others as much as you could to help with the isolation. What advice or tips would you give to any of our members who might be in the SHU right now?

CARLOS: My advice is, no matter what, don't let it break you down and just use it to make you stronger. Whether that is to educate yourself, exercise more, or just take the time out to think. That's one thing that I did appreciate about the SHU, being able to just lay down to be within myself.

UMAR: It should be a time of reflection and also time to reset. Use that time to have a little moment of introspection with yourself and think "maybe I'm doing stuff man that I shouldn't be and engaging in activities that I shouldn't be engaging in that has me in the SHU." Do whatever you can to stay out of the SHU and remove yourself from the people that might be bad influences. Change something up and do things differently so you don't end up in that situation again.

SOFIA: You both mentioned taking the time to reflect. I was wondering if either of you remember any sort of specific revelations you had or the reflections you had while in the SHU?

CARLOS: It didn't happen in the SHU but when I was incarcerated I was young and the one piece of advice that somebody gave me that I took and ran with was "if you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything." At a young age, I interpreted that in my own way to being aggressive and I always ended up in the SHU. I would always look at myself and ask, "man, what did you do that for?" In hindsight, you look back and everything's perfect because you see everything perfectly. So I got tired of it. I got tired of going to the SHU and asking myself the same question. So as opposed to me looking at myself in the mirror with hindsight, I decided to try to have foresight and say okay, these situations are because of specific issues so I have to weed out the causes. I was about 18 when I started doing time, so by 21 or 22, that's when I had that rude awakening of going back and forth to the SHU. It was gradual and each time I got better at making choices as I grew up.

SOFIA: Thanks for that. My last question is what advice would you give to somebody whose loved ones or even for those of us at Free Minds, who are supporting people who might be in the SHU? How should we best support people in the SHU?

CARLOS: From what I've experienced myself, I would say giving that person something to do. It's like you run out of time out here, right? I have one piece of advice for both loved ones and those still inside. For those that are behind the wall, understand that life moves real fast outside and I didn't know that when I did 25 years. I say that only because I used to get sour and bitter internally when I didn't get a response from my family for a while. But there's not a lot of time out here and people have a lot going on. So try to understand that. But on the other end, try to understand the needs of the person incarcerated and how they want to hear a few words. Things move fast and there's not enough time but think about how much time we do waste sometimes and use that time. There's so many ways you can write a letter, use technology to your advantage. For instance, Flikshop is a mobile app that allows users to send postcards to incarcerated loved ones. Users can send photos, short notes, or a combination of both, and Flikshop converts the photo into a printed postcard that is mailed to the recipient. You could also write a quick letter in the office on the back of a piece of paper. So try to be understanding and patient on both ends, be aware of what each other needs.

UMAR: Send books, send magazines if you can. Anything that can help the person in the SHU consume time constructively and books are a very great tool. Not only do we individually learn from it, but we can pass that learning down to somebody else once we finish reading that magazine or book, you know.

I made a
mistake.

Mistakes help
me learn.

DID YOU KNOW? Mindfulness

By Jae-lynn

Hello, Free Minds Fam!

It's Jae, checking in from Northern Virginia. For this issue of the *Connect*, I will be delivering to you a short informational piece about connecting with yourself physically, mentally, and emotionally. Because of my own journey with these practices, I feel that it should be presented in a more personable and informal way. So I'll begin by telling you a little bit about my experience discovering and practicing self-acceptance and mindfulness.

Growing up, I was an anxious kid with low self-esteem. I had no difficulties making friends but insecurities within myself around my intelligence, my appearance, and my likeability make it hard to fully be comfortable in my own skin and to trust that people around me really cared for me. I've always been an extremely motivated person. Even as a kid, I took "self-improvement" to an extreme level as I tried everything in my power to make myself better than who I was at that moment, never fully enjoying the current point of my existence—never fully loving who I was with all of my flaws. The strict and fast-paced life of being a military child and constantly moving around the country meant that from a young age, my mind was overactive as well as hyper-critical about maintaining perfection in my day-to-day life. I developed generalized anxiety and came to have extreme difficulties with making mistakes.

I originally sought out therapy almost two years ago because I was motivated to be more efficient in my day-to-day life. I wanted to be the best student, the best worker, the most likable person. I wanted to "fix myself" in any and all ways possible. Instead, through my journey I learned something that I didn't expect to. I learned about the dark side to self-improvement that people often don't talk about. That there is a line that once crossed becomes self-hatred, which can stem from feeling like you're not enough. I am so grateful to my therapist for introducing me to a new perspective and new challenges – of mindfulness and radical self-acceptance. In this article, I hope to share some of what I've learned over the past few months that resonated with me as I've heard and read so many of our members' stories of growth and personal development.

What exactly do *mindfulness* and *self-acceptance* mean in relationship to this idea of self-improvement? I don't mean to make the statement that self-improvement itself is a bad thing. But I urge you to think deeper about what improvement means to you as an individual. Remember that we are all human beings. From the first day on this Earth till the last, we are continuously learning how to be human beings and figuring out who we want to be, what we want to cultivate, and where we want to go. We won't figure it all out at some arbitrary age when society tells us things will be different—that everything will make sense and our life will be perfect when we turn 18, or 21, or 35, or 50. We are always changing, always growing.

This is where radical self-acceptance comes into play. When we set goals for ourselves we have to appreciate where we started and where we are now. Knowing that we are imperfect but loving ourselves anyway. Without this, our growth is coming from a place of self-contempt. *Grow because you love yourself enough to*

know that you deserve it, not out of disdain for your current self. Mindfulness is a productive tool to develop self-acceptance. A practice. When I began this journey I thought that self-affirmations alone would help me feel better. However, after weeks of telling myself in the mirror, "I like myself," "I am intelligent," "I am kind," "I am pretty," I felt no different. I felt like I was lying to myself. My subconscious wasn't buying it. I was missing a huge part of the puzzle.

Practicing mindfulness is the act of being intensely aware of your senses, feelings, and thoughts. A meditation practice where you take note of your feelings and how your brain and body respond to them and then intentionally do the inner work to calm your nervous system. Spending too much time planning, problem-solving, daydreaming, and thinking negatively about yourself can be incredibly draining and disconnect you from your body and mind. Overactive thoughts can cause anxiety, high blood pressure, depression, and insomnia. Not only is mindfulness so important as a meditative tool but also when you are completing activities and moving around in your day-to-day. Practicing mindfulness can improve attention, sleep, mental health, and your ability to truly focus on your goals and aspirations in a healthy way. Although the benefits of mindfulness are a fairly new interest in Western psychology and mental health psychology and practice, some cultures and religions have been practicing forms of it for centuries. Some of the oldest Eastern religions, such as Buddhism and Hinduism included mindful meditation as fundamental concepts to their core practices. Today, Western science has begun to introduce mindfulness as an instrument for maintaining mental health.

Here are some simple ways to begin implementing mindfulness in your every day that I've practiced myself and that have been incredibly crucial to the positive changes I've made in my life. **Pay attention.** When you are doing an activity or task do not let your mind wander. Focus fully and intentionally on what you are doing and appreciate the process and experience through touch, sight, sound, and smell. **Focus on your breathing.** Both when you have negative thoughts about yourself and when you are navigating the mundanes of every day be aware of your breath. I learned in yoga that proper breath is the key to being physically and mentally productive. A good breath is 5 seconds long and travels all the way down to your gut. In moments of anxiety and stress notice how your breath is maintained in your upper chest and correct it. **Live in the moment.** Bring an accepting and open attention to everything you do. Fully enjoy the simplest of pleasures such as having a meaningful conversation with a friend, eating your favorite candy, or reading a book. And lastly, the processes of mindfulness and radical self-acceptance are interwoven and circular. In order to accept yourself you must be mindful and in order to be mindful you must fully accept yourself. **Treat yourself the way you would treat an endeared friend.**

REENTRY PROFILE

By Carlos

I have had the privilege of getting to know a lot of folks that are returning home from prison. Today I sat down in conversation via Zoom (virtual platform that allows video exchanges) with Free Minds member Deon, who I have met virtually (due to the long distance between us) since he was released under IRAA in February of this year (on a leap year – the 29th) after serving 18 years. Deon and I tackled the theme of this month's issue, "Me, Myself and I," and how it relates to his imprisonment and reentry back to freedom.

Carlos: Welcome home Deon, let me say that first. 18 years! That's a lot of time. How have you dedicated those years for the betterment of you?

Deon: My main thing all of the time has always been physical health first. I always believed that if my physical was good, it makes my mental prepared for whatever comes my way. You know how it is in prison, you have to have that balance to be able to take care of yourself. I stayed disciplined to my workout because it helped me stay balanced and I say that putting Allah first in everything.

Carlos: You mentioned your mental and staying balanced. And I completely understand the need for that balance and sanity. How does education play a role in keeping sane and healthy mentally?

Deon: I'm not going to lie, when I was younger, I used to get frustrated a lot. But my frustration came from not fully understanding what I was going through as a man. Like being held accountable for my actions. I had to put myself first. Because I'm the one that has to do the sentence. My choices led me to prison and I had to re-correct myself. I learnt to be objective and open minded and it came from me learning things and discipline. I knew that my family and loved ones were doing time too, but I had to put myself first to understand the entire picture. I began the journey to better myself as a man. Education allowed me to communicate and move about in prison better. Navigating past the negativity and anything that would hinder my betterment or release.

Carlos: How has that helped you upon your release?

Deon: I'll give you an example. I had a job set up for me once I came home. I was guaranteed \$52,000 working for the youth, but it would have put me in an area and around people where I felt I could have easily fallen victim to my old ways, my old thoughts. Taking the time to educate myself and be disciplined in those ways and putting myself first allowed me to make the decision and not take the job

because it was not for me. I had to slow down and take my time to find something better. I did not want to rush into something that would jeopardize my freedom. Putting myself first allows me to do it on my own time and I can adjust better into society. It might be slow, but it is going to be better for me. In putting myself first, it helps me adjust to being where I'm at today, being comfortable and happy in every decision I make upon my release and being back in society.

Carlos: That's a strong example you gave us because one of the things that many go through once released is that, like from one day to the next we want to be successful. But that's not being realistic. But your understanding of yourself and your own triggers helps you even more to continue to put yourself first. And I know it may sound selfish, but you have to get yourself together first. Some sacrifices come with it and knowing yourself helps. Last question Deon, what drives you to continue to put yourself first?

Deon: Just knowing and remembering everything that I fought for on the inside. I fought for me being home and being a different person. Not putting myself in harm's way in any type of way nor my freedom at jeopardy.

Carlos: One last question that we would like to dedicate to the folks that are housed in Segregation. When you were in Segregation, how did you apply the me, myself, and I concept and what advice would you give to our members that are housed in segregation now?

Deon: The longest time that I was placed in Segregation was for 18 months. I did it by getting into a program. When you are in the SHU you, you have to be better mentally. You have to be able to be together mentally, if not you will end up battling yourself the entire time. It's a lot of things that take place in the SHU that affect the mental. I worked out, read books, and I stayed in a consistent program day in and day out. I would advise anyone that is in the SHU to make sure that you take the time to better yourself. Don't get down, don't get negative. Create a program of things to do to better YOU. Working out, reading, studying/ learning something, and communicating with your loved ones is important because they are also doing SHU time with you. All of these things will help you block out the noise in order to retain a peace of mind no matter what goes on around you and these things will help you to keep the focus on YOU.

Carlos: Thank you Deon, it has been nice talking to you and getting to know the changed man now. Thank you for putting yourself first.

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."

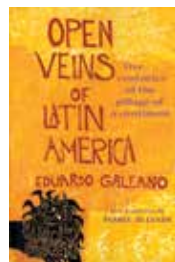
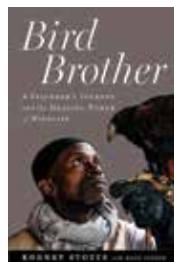
- **Emily: *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang**

I recently read *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang. It is a fast-paced novel about a young woman named June and her friend, both of whom are writers. June witnesses her friend's sudden death and, in a moment of impulse, steals her near-finished manuscript. The rest of the story follows June's meteoric rise and all of the tribulations that come with it as she navigates social media, the publishing world, and accusations of racism and cultural appropriation. June is a fascinating (and maddening at times) character and I couldn't put this book down until I finished it!



- **Julia: *Moon Witch, Spider King* by Marlon James**

I recently read *Moon Witch, Spider King* by Marlon James, the second book in the Dark Star fantasy trilogy (after the first book, *Black Leopard, Red Wolf*). This series is set in a fictional fantasy world inspired by African mythology, and it follows a group of unusual characters who are brought together in a quest to find a missing boy. Each book is from a different character's point of view and in the second book, we dove deep into the character of the "Moon Witch," a woman with mysterious powers on a quest for revenge. I really enjoyed both of these books, especially the second one, and am looking forward to the third book when it comes out. It was also exciting to read an Afrocentric epic fantasy, and one that features LGBTQ characters as well.



- **Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up": *Bird Brother: A Falconer's Journey and the Healing Power of Wildlife* by Rodney Stotts**

Bird Brother details Stott's life growing up in S.E. DC during the crack epidemic when guns, drugs, and the threat of incarceration were an accepted part of daily life for nearly everyone he knew. Determined to create a new path for himself, Stotts shares his story of escaping his environment through metro rides to the Smithsonian National Zoo and his journey to becoming a conservationist and one of America's few Black master falconers.

- **Neely: *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* by Eduardo Galeano**

This book explores the history of colonization and exploitation across Latin America, including through industries such as gold, silver, cotton, coffee, and iron. Galeano shows how European countries (and later the United States) exploited the lands of Latin America, and its people, to benefit their own respective countries. This book was written in the 1970s, but still offers powerful insight into the socioeconomic and political history and present day situations of Latin America.

CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES/ FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

Por/By Carlos

"Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" es 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! 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.

"Conversaciones de Mentes Libres" (Free Minds Conversations) is 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! 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!)

Yo y yo Mismo

Como siempre, empezamos con un saludo a toda la Familia de Mentes Libres. Que el presente lo encuentre fuerte, mental al igual que física. Para quien esté con nosotros por primera vez. Me llamo Carlos. Después de haber servido 25 años en prisión y liberado bajo la ley de IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act), tengo el privilegio de escribirles desde Honduras. Fui deportado y en Abril 27 estaré celebrando 4 años de estar en esta libreta.

El tema de este artículo es una frase. Y lo más cercano a español que tenemos es "yo y yo mismo" que es una frase que se usa para darle énfasis a uno mismo. El enfocarse en sí mismo. No para ser malinterpretado como que no necesitamos a alguien a la ayuda de otros, pero solo para enfocarnos en nosotros mismos sin distracciones.

En 2017 cuando la ley de IRAA fue aprobada y era elegible como candidato, decidí enfocarme aún más en mí mismo. Digo aún más porque antes de que existiera la ley de IRAA, yo ya me encontraba en rumbo a un mejoramiento de mí mismo. Para ese tiempo había aprendido que había destruido mi vida por medio de mis acciones. Y aunque en ese tiempo estaba sirviendo mi sentencia original que era 30 años a vida, estaba dispuesto a ser una mejor persona. Educando en varias cosas que en ese tiempo me hacían sentir libre por estaba haciendo algo para mí.

En 2017 tomé programas que me ayudaron a entender la falla en nuestras manera de pensar. La sociedad donde vivimos dicta como una debe conductarse. Como en prisión, todos pensamos que nuestras respuestas deben de ser con agresión o violencia. Esos programas me ayudaron a entender más de mí. Había aceptado que después de haber estado en prisión por tanto tiempo, tenía que cambiar mi manera de pensar si quería estar preparado para ser retornado a la sociedad. Programas como the Challenge Program, M.E.N of Influence, and RDAP se enfoca en la cognición, razonamiento y el entendimiento que el crimen y la violencia son comportamientos aprendidos y uno si se puede reeducar a reaccionar diferente a todo lo que se nos presente en la vida y no haber malas decisiones que nos traen malas consecuencias.

Empecé a implementar las cosas que estaba aprendiendo para tener mejores resultados. Especialmente cómo comunicarme efectivamente con alguien sin tener conflictos, y eso me ayudó mucho a sobrepasar el tiempo que me quedaba en prisión sin arriesgar mi oportunidad de ser liberado. Al ver claramente estos resultados, también empecé a compartir esa información con mis compañeros. Especialmente a los jóvenes. En dos de esos programas me que como mentor al terminarlos. Porque quería ayudar a otros a entender esto.

Estando aquí en libertad también ha sido un proceso. No ha sido fácil. Después de tanto tiempo todavía me cuesta no tener una reacción por dentro de como es la gente de ruda (por ejemplo) y tengo que ignorar muchas cosas para no tener consecuencias y eso para mí es todavía ponerme a mí mismo primero porque amo mi libertad mas.

Todos llegamos a un punto donde queremos cambiar, queremos ser mejores personas. O nos ponemos metas y retos que tenemos que cumplir sea como sea. Y es en esos momentos que uno tiene que ponerse a uno mismo primero.

Me, Myself and I

As always, we start with a greeting to the entire Free Minds Family. May the present find you strong, mentally as well as physically. For those who are with us for the first time. My name is Carlos. After having served 25 years in prison and released under the IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act), I have the privilege of writing to you from Honduras. I was deported and on April 27 I will be celebrating 4 years of being given Freedom.

The theme of this month's Issue is a phrase. And the closest thing we have to Spanish is "yo y yo mismo" which is a phrase used to emphasize oneself. It is to focus on oneself. Not to be misinterpreted as if we don't need anyone's help or that we can do everything alone. But only to focus on us at certain moments without any distractions.

In 2017 when the IRAA law was passed and I was eligible as a candidate, I decided to focus even more on myself. I say even more because before the IRAA law existed, I was already on the path to improving myself. By that time I had learned that I had destroyed my life through my actions. And although at that time I was serving my original sentence, which was 30 years to life, I was willing to make myself an even better person. Educating myself in various things that at that time made me feel happy because I was doing something for myself.

In 2017 I took programs that helped me understand the flaw in our ways of thinking. The society where we live dictates how one should behave. Like in prison, we all think that our responses must be with aggression or violence. Those programs helped me understand more about myself. I had accepted that after being in prison for so long, I had to change my way of thinking if I was to be prepared to be returned to society. Programs such as the Challenge Program, M.E.N of Influence, and RDAP focus on cognitive reasoning and the understanding that crime and violence are learned behaviors and one can be re-educated to react differently to everything that comes our way in life. And there should be no bad decisions that bring us bad consequences.

I started implementing the things I was learning to have better results. Especially how to communicate effectively with someone without having conflicts, and that really helped me get through the rest of my time in prison without risking my chance at release. Seeing these results clearly, I also began to share that information with those around me. Especially the young people. In two of those programs I serve as a mentor upon completion because I wanted to help others understand this.

Being here in freedom has also been a process. It has not been easy. After so much time it is still difficult for me not to have an internal reaction to how rude people are (for example) and I have to ignore many things to avoid consequences and that for me is still putting myself first because I love my freedom more.

We all reach a point where we want to change, we want to be better people. Or we set goals and challenges that we have to meet no matter what. And it is in those moments that you have to put yourself first.

AROUND THE WORLD: THAILAND

By Aneka

Hey FM fam! It's your travel buddy Aneka here, back with another adventure from around the world! This April I had the pleasure to visit Thailand during their Songkran Festival which takes place April 13-15. Songkran is Thailand's New Year festival where many cities including Bangkok, Chiang Mai, Phuket, and Koh Phi Phi, turn into a giant water fight! Imagine walking down the street and EVERYONE has water guns, buckets, and water hoses. There's no way to stay dry during Songkran besides staying indoors lol. The holiday's main focus is about moving forward and the splashing of water washes away the previous year so that people can get ready for the next year. Songkran comes from a phrase in the Sanskrit language that means "passage of the sun," which represents the passing of the year. Although this sounds like a kid's dream come true, it can be quite dangerous to drive during Songkran. People on mopeds, Tuks Tuks (taxis without doors), and those transporting gallons of water on the back of pickup trucks, are spraying people or dumping buckets of water on people while they're driving! The roads being slippery and windshields being randomly splashed are recipes for disaster. And let's not forget the tradition of Din-Sor-Pong where everyone is smearing a paste made from natural talc derived from limestone mixed with water on people's faces and bodies to ward off evil. That made the ground even more slippery! But luckily I safely survived the 2024 Songkran festival.

One of my friends just so happened to have lived on the island of Koh Phi Phi back in the day so she recommended that I experience Songkran there vs larger cities like Bangkok or Phuket since Koh Phi Phi is an island without cars. What makes Koh Phi Phi so great is that it's a small walkable island



Wat Traimit Temple in Bangkok

with so much to do! You can literally walk anywhere within 5-15 minutes. Koh Phi Phi is what some like to call a "party island." It's filled with lots of bars and restaurants that stay open late and are filled with young adults looking for a good time. I spent 3 days on this island and I must say, the atmosphere is freeing! I had a lot of fun on this little island about an hour's speedboat ride away from Phuket. Another cool thing about this island is that it has a lot of boat tours and one of the locations that the tours visit is Maya Bay. Maya Bay is where the movie "The Beach" was filmed with Leonardo DiCaprio. Maya Bay is a huge tourist attraction, so when I got off the boat to enter the island, there was a long line from the entrance at the top of the steps all the way down to the dock



Maya Bay Beach located in Koh Phi Phi

where boats were dropping off groups of people. The island was beautiful but maybe since I've never seen the movie "The Beach," I didn't understand the hype outside of the island's beauty. The complete boat tour consisted of snorkeling, visiting Monkey Island, visiting Maya Bay, and watching the sunset in order to see the glowing plankton underwater once it got dark.

I enjoyed one day of Songkran in Koh Phi Phi before heading to Bangkok to enjoy the rest of the festival with one of my friends who just so happened to be in Bangkok at the time. If you've read other Around The World articles written by me, you'd notice that I have a knack for running into friends when visiting other countries lol. This particular time we just decided to go to Thailand around the same time, but visited different places and only ran into each other twice during our separate vacations. Songkran in Bangkok was chaotic and unhinged and I loved every second of it! Literally everyone participated so the streets were filled with people, music, and laughter. Despite language barriers, we all understood the fun of wetting strangers and laughing when someone randomly



The view from my hotel's gate during the Songkran Festival

sprays you in the back of the head with water when you least expect it. Me being a little troublemaker, I would spray someone with a way more powerful water gun than mine and squeal with laughter when they sprayed me back. My friend told me to stop picking fights with people who have bigger water guns, but of course I didn't listen!

During my entire 2 week stay in Thailand, I visited Bangkok, Pattaya (an hour and a half drive from Bangkok), Phuket, and Koh Phi Phi (an hour speed boat ride from Phuket). Each place was a unique experience and I met some interesting people along the way. My favorite place would have to be Koh Phi Phi since I saved so much money being able to walk everywhere, but the only downside is that it's an old island so the lodging was hit or miss when it came to cleanliness and plumbing. I also really enjoyed Pattaya because the location I stayed in was extremely walkable and the people were so friendly and helpful. The beach was down the street from me and I spent one afternoon watching people play volleyball in the sand, which was so impressive to me. I'm not athletic but I love watching people who are. I also took pictures with tigers while in Pattaya! That was the scariest thing I've ever done in my life! They were so huge standing next to me! I'm so excited to see what my next adventure around the world will be. Until next time, take care fam!



Me petting a tiger at the Tiger Park in Pattaya

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: ANCESTORS

By Kelli

"If we stand tall, it is because we stand on the shoulders of many ancestors." – African Proverb

Dear Free Minds Family,

In our next issue we will mine the deep and rich topic of our *ANCESTORS*. What do you know about those who have come before you? How have you come to learn about your ancestors? For many people, especially those whose ancestors were enslaved, we may not know our family history beyond a few generations. For this issue, you can think about family members who you do know, or think about the idea of ancestors in general. You can even imagine an ancestor. Either way, how has their history shaped you and your life? Are there any traits in your ancestry that keep showing up? Maybe you come from a long line of artists... or problem solvers... or philosophers? What spiritual or cultural guidance do you take from your ancestors? What meaning do their history, their food, their music, their beliefs, and values have to you in your own life? What do you think your ancestors might say if they could speak to you now? And finally, it may be hard to imagine, but one day, YOU will be someone else's ancestor! What sort of ancestral legacy will you create in hopes that future generations can learn from you and your life?

We look forward to hearing from you!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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