

September/October 2022
Vol. 11, Issue 4

Free minds Connect



artwork by FM volunteer Cynthia

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Free Minds Community of Reader Leaders and Writer Fighters for Justice!

By the time this issue of the Connect reaches your hands, the midterm elections will have taken place. The recycling centers will be busy turning the millions of pounds of campaign literature that's been jamming our mailboxes for months into paper to be used for the next cycle, the TV production companies that bombarded us with the non stop ads will be tallying up the revenue they garnered, and first time voters will be saving their "I Voted" stickers in their scrapbooks. All of this got me thinking that political parties, campaigns, and rhetoric often boil down to the theme of this issue: Belonging. After all, don't we all want to feel like we are part of a group that understands, respects, and supports us? Unlike some of the campaigns that disparage their opponent and try to create divisions between people, Free Minds is the exact opposite. Free Minds is all about belonging to a very special community united by our deep care for each other and our love of learning and growing together. This is demonstrated so strongly in all of the submissions in this issue.

As EJ sums it up in his essay on page 23: *"Our interest is to make sure we push each other to learn, grow, and go home."* Part of that is being there for each other as IN so beautifully expresses in her poem "The Photograph" (page 11): *"I met people I can call family/We smile, we play/We help each other's pain go away."* Jordan writes about this – helping pain go away – in his essay on page 18 about our unique reentry book club called The Build Up: *"Many of us, including myself, felt that we belonged to the streets and the block(s) we grew up on at one point, but as I started to actually live and mature to who I am today, I realized that belonging to something with a greater purpose is what I was made to do."*

Check out Larry's story on page 6 about coming home after 31 years and adjusting to being with his family. He had always felt a sense of belonging with his family even though he was separated physically from them. Now he shares with us how important it is to continue to nurture those relationships but in a different way. For Charles, belonging means he has "roots somewhere," so when he came home after 38 years to DC he felt like he fit right back in (page 27).

Sometimes we can lose that feeling that we bring value and contribution, and dark days of hopelessness can bring on thoughts of ending our lives. On page 26, TS writes, *"For anyone thinking about engaging in any kind of this behavior, I'm asking you to hold on and just keep telling yourself 'There's still hope' and 'I always belong.'"*

We hope you know you always belong to Free Minds, and you can share all the Connects and books and poetry feedback with others who possess a free mind too wherever you are. Finally, my favorite saying is books and belonging, so thank you all for your awesome, insightful responses to *Concrete Rose*; I love hearing the personal connections to the book.

I'd like to end with Ms. Keela's poem (page 15). She captures the Free Minds spirit: it is truly a mindset and a way of being, to have a free mind!

*Safe secure help to endure
Not alone or own your own
Yes quite the opposite indeed
A community, a village, a tribe
That's more like our vibe
Free to be me
Free to be you
Acceptance is our glue
Holding you up
Like wheels do a truck
Has nothing to do with luck
Its intentional and focused
Because you matter
Because you belong
We flow together like a beautiful song*

Until next time,
Tara

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

Next Issue's Theme: Celebration

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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FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Yamini

Free Minds Welcomes a New Congressman John Lewis Fellow

Our new Congressman John Lewis Fellow James is on the team! Welcome James. Thank you to all the previous fellows for their service and dedication. Our full-time fellowship, inspired by the work of late-congressman John Lewis, allows a formerly incarcerated Free Minds member the opportunity to gain valuable professional, leadership, and advocacy experience while working as a staff member. The Fellowship Selection Committee had a tough job cut out for them with the many impressive candidates, but were thoroughly impressed with James' deep knowledge of Congressman John Lewis's work and his highly empathetic approach to youth outreach. Since starting in September, James has been a huge asset to the team and has represented Free Minds at community events, like the Fair Chance Youth Gun Violence Event and Free Minds' Write Night. He will also be leading the Free Minds' "On the Same Page" youth violence prevention initiative and assisting in various other reentry and community engagement programming. To hear more from James, check out page 25.

Free Minds at the Public Welfare Foundation's 75th Annual Celebration

The Public Welfare Foundation's 75th Annual Celebration took place this September to celebrate their efforts in advancing youth and criminal justice reform efforts. Free Minds member Joe joined a panel with other distinguished speakers, including Kristin Henning (author of *The Rage of Innocence*) to discuss hyper-surveillance. They came together to examine how normalized the presence of police is in the lives of Black and Brown children and how the criminalization of their adolescence leads to trauma. Joe shared his perspective based on his work at WeFitDC, his non-profit that works to reduce health disparities in communities of color, and offered his ideas of youth justice. He touched upon how approaching it from a public health perspective, including building community programs that center medical and physical wellness is vital. Another strong, yet often overlooked, point he spoke about was how the solution isn't to just empower the community, but we need to be empowering the youth and young leaders specifically. Together, the panelists urged for the development of policies that focus on creating safe spaces for children to play, and that partner with people from the community who are credible to the target audience, as they come from similar backgrounds and are better able to address the challenges being faced. We are so proud of Joe for all his hard work and are so grateful he was able to represent Free Minds.

Free Minds at the Palm Beach Reentry Summit

Craig and Tara presented at a three-day reentry conference held in Palm Beach, FL; the conference had over three hundred participants, bringing together reentry and criminal justice-focused organizations to share practices and identify opportunities for collaboration and reentry solutions. Beyond expanding our national network of organizational partners to better serve you, our members, Free Minds' workshop titled "Reading, Writing, and Reentry: A Unique Book Club's Pre- and Post-Release Success," was a chance to educate others on the mission of Free Minds, how we came to be, and how they could start a similar program in their own region. Craig shared how he taught himself to read in prison after being incarcerated in the adult system at the age of 17; his story elicited strong emotional responses from the audience.

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

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

FREE MINDS MAILBAG

We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on the July/August 2022 Connect Wealth.



AEC: I just got the latest *Connect* yesterday... When I saw my poem in there, it felt like I won an Emmy! Thank you so much for considering my work. Y'all have definitely inspired me to keep going. The others are great as well. Free Minds is very special.

DP: The *Connect* issue on Wealth was powerful and it gave me a sense that I may be broke but I'm wealthy. My wealth consist of life, personality, and god. God gave us life abundantly so we all are rich.

RP: The issue was nothing less than wonderful, informative, knowledge/wisdom, love, entertaining, and so much more. Advice Man never fails, speaking from experience, truth, and respect. The pictures... I can't stop looking at them. I've been in since March 3, 2009. DC has changed in so many ways.

CS: I like the poems from the great minds that's behind the walls as I am. It's good that they have a platform to express their creative side of themselves... You also give great stories on guys who came out doing great things in their communities.

QUOTE-I-VATOR

"Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance." – Brene Brown, professor, author, and motivational speaker

"Do more than belong: participate. Do more than care: help. Do more than believe: practice." – William Arthur Ward, poet

"A generous heart is always open, always ready to receive our going and coming. In the midst of such love we need never fear abandonment. This is the most precious gift true love offers - the experience of knowing we always belong."
– bell hooks, Black feminist activist and author

"Believing you are unworthy of love and belonging – that who you are authentically is a sin or is wrong – is deadly. Who you are is beautiful and amazing." – Laverne Cox, transgender activist and actress

"You cannot change any society unless you take responsibility for it, unless you see yourself as belonging to it and responsible for changing it." – Grace Lee Boggs, author and social activist

"A person with ubuntu is open and available to others, affirming of others, does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed."
– Desmond Tutu, first Black African Archbishop of Capetown, South Africa and anti-apartheid activist

"Tomorrow belongs to those of us who conceive of it as belonging to everyone; who lend the best of ourselves to it, and with joy." – Audre Lorde, Black feminist poet

"Today, if we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other—that man, that woman, that child is my brother or my sister."
– Mother Theresa, Albanian-Indian Catholic nun and 1979 Nobel Peace Prize Winner



Laverne Cox

FAMILY TIES: A CONVERSATION WITH FREE MINDS MEMBER LARRY

By Aneka

Free Minds member Aneka spoke with her fellow Free Minds member Larry about connection, belonging, and, of course, the importance of family ties during incarceration and reentry.

When asked "What does belonging mean to you?" Larry responded, "To belong is to be valued and treasured." I couldn't have worded it better than that! Luckily for Larry, his family made sure he felt included throughout his entire incarceration. Thanks to the advancement in technology, while incarcerated you may have access to Corlinks, texting apps, and video visits. But during the beginning of Larry's incarceration in the 1990s, phone calls and letters were the only means of communication.

31 years is a long time to be away from your family. Larry understood that life continued while he was away. He held no hard feelings for those who did not stay in communication with him. "Out of sight, out of mind" is something that we say a lot in the system. Larry believed that you have to forgive in order to move on. People may seem to forget about us and move on with their lives. Thankfully we sometimes have people in our lives that stick around like how Larry's family did, especially his mom. She did things like making sure Larry was on the phone during family reunions and helping him stay in touch with his children. Something that may seem small to a person on the

outside but means the world to us on the inside.

Receiving support from his family throughout his incarceration made him feel like he belonged. They didn't have to be there for him, but they were. Coming home after that much time was an adjustment. He said, "give people what they give you without holding grudges" and "go with the flow". That was his approach to meeting his grandkids, seeing his children all grown up, interacting with family and friends. It's different from talking on the phone, receiving pictures, and writing letters. Everyone is basically meeting for the first time. They are meeting the man he's grown up to be and not the person he was when he went in. He understands that he must build that relationship with the people he cares about. In the meantime, he's spending his time accomplishing his goals.

"It's not about fitting in, it's about getting back on track," he says, and that's exactly what he's doing. He has completed several certifications including both OSHA 30 and 40 hours, CPR, flagger, equipment operator, and asbestos training. He graduated from both Anne Arundel Community College and the Civic Works program back in August 2022. That goes to show, ANYTHING can be accomplished if you put your mind to it. Regardless of your past, you can succeed!

FREE MINDS ELIGIBILITY

By Yamini

Are you reading this issue, but not currently connected with Free Minds? To find out more about joining Free Minds, see below:

Free Minds Membership Criteria:

We get many requests to join Free Minds, so we wanted to take this time to let you know our current criteria for book club membership. We would love to be able to work with everyone who is interested in joining, but the following is based on our mission and capacity. Free Minds visionary Glen McGinnis, who was a youth in the adult system, specifically asked Kelli to bring the power of books and writing to youth charged as adults.

For that reason, Free Minds primarily serves the following:

- DC youth charged as adults
- Incarcerated young adults from D.C ages 18-24
- Anyone who is eligible for D.C.'s Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act (IRAA) or Second Look Amendment Act, also known as IRAA 3.0. The latest version of this act allows D.C residents (charged in DC Superior Court) who were convicted of a crime that occurred before they were age 25 to petition for resentencing as long as they have served at least 15 years of their sentence.
- If you have already been connected with Free Minds through any of our other programs at the DC Jail, juvenile detention center, or in reentry, you are eligible to be a member

If you are reading this and not in any of the above categories, please ask a Free Minds member to continue to share this issue with you!



JUST LAW: GUN REGISTRY

By DJ, Free Minds Member and Paralegal

Washington, D.C. has created a gun offender registry. The registry requires a defendant who was convicted and sentenced for a gun offense to register as a gun offender. In order to do so, the defendant must register with the Chief of Police for a period of two years. This gun offender registry law can be located in the D.C. Code Ann. § 7-2508.02(a). A longer period of registration may be required by D.C. Code Ann. § 7-2508.03 (registration period compliance) or § 7-2508.07(b) (mandatory release condition). If you fail to register, you can be incarcerated even if your original sentence and probation is totally complete.

So who can see this information? The law states in § 7-2508.05(a) that the registration information will not be public, and will not be made available unless authorized by the Chief of Police. Per § 7-2508.05(b), the Chief of Police is authorized to make this information available to other government agencies. Therefore, this registration should not affect employment, housing, or other situations that could include a background check.

According to the law, which uses the term "gun offender," this applies to any person: 1) convicted of a gun offense within the District; 2) convicted of a gun offense and resides in the District; or 3) who has as a mandatory condition of release a registration requirement in the District. If you fall into any of the above categories, the gun offender registry law further requires that registration is required "[w]ithin 48 hours of: ...the time sentence is imposed, if the sentence does not include imprisonment." Section 7-2508.02 (a)(1)(B). Further, the length of the registration period begins to run "when he or she is sentenced" § 7-2508.03. Therefore, the court must order registration at the time of sentencing.

"Gun offense" means: 1) a conviction for the sale, purchase, transfer, receipt, acquisition, possession, use, manufacture, carrying, transportation, registration, or licensing of a firearm under District law (D.C. Code Ann. § 22-4501 et seq.), or an attempt or conspiracy to commit any of the aforementioned offenses; 2) a conviction for violating D.C. Code Ann. §§ 7-2502.01 (the District's registration requirements), 7-2504.01 (prohibitions on the manufacture of firearms, destructive devices and ammunition and license requirements for gun dealers), 7-2505.01 (prohibitions on certain sales/transfers of firearms, destructive devices and ammunition), or 7-2506.01 (prohibitions on ammunition possession); 3) a conviction for a firearms-related violation of the provisions § 22-402 (assault with a dangerous weapon), § 22-2603.02 (unlawful possession of contraband), or § 22-2803(b) (carjacking); or 4) violations in other jurisdictions of any offense with an element that involves the violations previously listed. D.C. Code Ann. § 7-2508.01(3).

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

Free Minds **Connect** | September/October 2022



The Shrimp Boat Plaza on Benning Road and East Capitol Street NE. It originated in the mid 1950's as a hotspot for some of DC's favorite seafood.



The Robert F. Kennedy (RFK) Memorial Stadium was once home to professional football, baseball, and soccer teams. It officially closed in 2019, and will soon be demolished.

DC PHOTOS *By Aneka*



Ben's Chili Bowl, a landmark restaurant in DC, on H Street.



The Atlas Performing Arts Center on H Street.



A sign for the DC Streetcar, which began operating in 2016.

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

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

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

Dear Advice Man:

How do you refrain from violence in a violent environment? I know lots of people/men that don't have these problems cause they ain't involved but if you're involved and you know you have to keep your head high. How does that work?

**Sincerely,
MJ**

I salute you MJ, FM Family and Us all for if we are reading this we have not bent or given up at overwhelming times, and we as a people will continue to endure all mental, physical, and spiritual wars together somehow. MJ and readers, have you ever heard of the phrase "It Takes A Village?" Part of the phrase is about you and I MJ, but also another part of fixing the problems is about coming together. In moving forward I hope you guys won't mind, if I incorporate advice from "like minded" (LM) men, who today sincerely care about the breaking of the vicious cycle of violence in our communities. There's a win/win here getting more of us involved solving our problems.

Thank you MJ and FM for this Connect theme and question, they are just what we needed to think about to try and solve our violence issues. What it looks like for you MJ and us trying to break away from the primitive instinct of violence is, realizing we either want to keep our heads high in sensible things or low in unreasonable endeavors. Whichever one we feed the most wins.

LM (Like-Minded) KC: *A man once philosophically shared in a men's group with me that "If someone did what I did to myself, I would kill him." I took his analogy for myself to mean, "I need to extinguish the old hot headed and bad beliefs dude within me." What is valuable to us and what is true Wealth? With our future dreams, hopes, and many lives on the line; I know wealth and violence just can't coexist.*

The solution on the Homefront for us starts with the men of impact here in prison. It starts particularly with self and then with our own right down to the youngest family member.

LM DG shares: *First as to how you keep your head above or out of violence, men have to be critical thinkers about our emotional beliefs, encounters, and actions. Our thoughts, values, and actions have to be centered around solutions and desired outcomes for all parties when violence rears its nasty head. There's always a common ground to reach a positive solution.*

LM EG: *MJ, if you mean keeping your head high up out of avoiding street violence, the answer is easy: leave the violent environment for a better one. More importantly, leave the violent mindset behind. Prison violence can be avoided by staying in your lane; that is refraining from hustling or using drugs, gambling, having inappropriate relationships, stealing, and blowing up, turning anger into aggression about things out of your control. Focusing on the positive such as education, a trade, etc. will keep a brother out of negative territory. Your respect level will soar, and your loved ones as well as your peers will see you in a positive light.*

LM RP wanted to add: *Make sure everyone who is in your company thinks and acts like you. There isn't any room for fakin'! As someone who shook out during the first 5 of these 30+ yrs. I'll tell you now it wasn't worth it. Plus when you visit the hole a lot, you lose too many privileges like visits, phone, commissary, and property. The most important thing to think about is, you can most definitely make your stay a whole lot longer or perhaps end your existence. So, now that you are armed with this info, the choice is yours. Make the one that you'll be happy with.*

LM LW shares: *Well MJ, the best way that I can tell you to deal with this is first to take a step back and*

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

see if you can remove yourself from being a part of the problem. Next, maybe try to watch and see how the men that are in the same environment conduct themselves, so that the violence does not affect you. Last, look and take notes and begin a new chapter in your life, and flush peer pressure down the drain.

*Our last piece of advice comes from **LM BTM**: First, prison is an environment where if you start off with good friends or a respected celly, this gives you a good hold on learning to get around the violent nature of the place. If you don't have positive men around you, then stand tall, ask positive questions about programs, school, recreation, jobs, law library, etc. This lets other problem-causing people know you have something on your mind that keeps your thoughts from violence. If I had the choice, I would not get involved in the violent culture in prison because as you know when we hurt others, we also hurt their family, we hurt our family, and the ripple effect runs deep.*

MJ and my fellow men behind the fence, I will add that education raises self-esteem, builds character, and makes communities safer. Education really helps us sidestep violence in and out of prison through achievements, which in turn gives us greater wealth and self-confidence to set larger goals and plan for a better future.

MJ and FM Family, mark what's valuable to you in life moving forward, subtract all violence, and level up to truly do what we was created for.

*My Best,
TS*

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Author

By DAT

I got your hug today
Not with your arms but my shoulders
As always I'm astounded by how far
It raised my spirits and hopes
You crush the loneliness and sadness of being shut down
But also give me a high that you can't but
Compare to the lost being found
A note to tell me that I am loved and thought of
A moment of your time to make my day
I thank you for your care and love
And that same love I convey
A love that break the barriers of aloneness
And causes my heart to remember:
Beside friends, God, and loved ones,
My life can go on.
I am never alone.

The Photograph

By IN

I tried to smile and make everything seem like it was okay
But as time went on, I knew I was leaving my babies
And going away to a place called jail
Even though I never been to heaven
I have descended to hell
But I know one day, God will allow me to prevail
I met people I can call family
We smile, we play
We help each other's pain go away

Family

By JOS

Flames that never go out
Always there no matter what
Miles can never break us apart
I love y'all
Loyalty is everything
Years apart but always in my heart

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Someone

By TJT

Someone is there
Someone is waiting.

Someone to talk to
Someone to be heard.

Someone who will hold you
Someone who will be held.

Someone that will change you
Someone that will change.

Someone will love you
Someone will be beloved.

Someone that cares about you
Someone that you care for.

Someone who you'll kiss
Someone who will kiss back.

Someone to live for
Someone to be alive for.

Someone is there
Someone is waiting.

Someone...
I'm waiting on someone.

Inside a Thug's Heart

By EB

Inside my heart are many things,
Some for the good, some for the bad
Yet I still stand as a loving man,
Yeah they say Black is but dirty evil
And wicked, People of the African race
Yet when you look at black it's the
Most profound color because it takes
Other colors to make it, yet none can
Override it, so this makes me stop
To ask myself: do they hate me for
The evil within theyself or is it because
I'm strong and refuse to give up ?

Is the inside of my thugged out
heart so bad that they can't see my
Love for all or is they hate so high
They only can see smoke, which is my
Way to keep peace ? Do I have to do
As they say in order to fit in or can
I do as I see fit for what's right
For my life. Then I ask who needs
To be in my heart:

God or the devil?

Real Friends

By HH

In the fast paced society we live in,
the word friend is bestowed easily.
A simple click of the mouse and we're friends.

All we know of such a friend
is what they decide to share.
That's not a real friend.
A friend knows the bad
as well as the good about us.

Friends don't just share the joy,
they experience the pain.
They ride and flow through our lives,
as we do the same for them.
It's harder to end a real friendship
than to unfriend them.
A real friend causes heartaches
when they're out of contact too long.
And when reconnected
the pleasure is akin to finding a lost love.

The belief that friends never hurt us is fallacy.
Human nature itself makes that impossible.
But real friends will still be there when the hurt is gone.
-Be clear-
Real friendships can be developed through social media,
but the key word is developed.
It takes time to be friends.
A friendship is a living organism, like a plant.
It needs fertile soil to take root,
and water, nutrients, and sunlight to grow.
Most importantly, it takes time and attention to blossom.

Home

By CJ

Home is a place that's warm, home is a place that makes
you feel safe, home is your heart, home is your mind, home
is your shield, home is within matter, home is dark void,
home is space, home is the mother womb, a place that
your mother knows you're safe home. Home is the deep
ocean; home is your temple – the body you're in. Home is
the mouth that your fang lives within, home is your lungs,
a place where the air comes and goes. Home is earth where
all mankind have laid there spread a place where we are all
safe but yet not do to our own plots greed and selfishness
not from hunger for power, stress for fame, a place where
our spirit cant remain. Why not!?

'Cause it's not home, it's a place they say it came let's go
home self, lets go, but wait self, feel the rain. Let's go home
self, let's go home self, what about this plan, let's go home
self, let's go home self, why can't we stay wif fame, 'cause
it's not a place they're things, let's go home self,
let's go home.

Look to the stars and tell me what you see our (home)

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

What Are We Now?

By APA

We ain't field niggas no more!
Massa' moved us into the big house
White walls, aluminum toilets, stale food and gray doors

We don't work the mines no more!
We on welfare now
5 kids, absent father; no income; gang communities

We ain't colored no more!
We wear jumpsuits now
Chains on our wrist, shackles on our feet

We ain't field niggas no more!
But, what are we now?

I'm So Happy

By JJ

I'm so happy!
I'm so happy that I have a true friend.
I'm so happy I have somebody to talk to.
I'm so happy that life is going well with me.
I'm so happy that I found somebody that makes me happy.
But sometimes I get sad that I can't be with the person that
makes me happy.
I cannot be with her for the rest of my life.
I have tears in my eyes just thinking about it
So I try to stay happy all of the time so I will not think about it.

Belonging

By FJ

When you try to fit in,
That's when you don't fit in.
When you be yourself, that's when you fit in.
Care for and loved, that's expected.
So alone out here I don't feel accepted.
No love my way it's not reflected.
If you have love 4 yourself then you're not neglected.
Needing a father to feel accepted.
When you respect yourself, then you're being respected.

Belonging

By RP

I describe belonging as a feeling of being where you feel loved
essential
feeling it's where you should be,
where you were destined to be.
By remaining objective, caring, respectful, willing, honest,
grateful, humble, open-minded, and determined
I try my best to strive with the same structured individuals
feeling this will guide me where I am supposed to be

Did You Know?

By ET

Where one sees race, did you know I choose to see a human?
Did you know I choose to see diversity, where one sees confusion?
Did you know where one sees skin color, I choose to be color blind?
Did you know in all matters, I choose an objective mind?
Did you know I continue learning, journeying my path?
Did you know I choose to judge by character and by the
heart, not what they identify as? When things go
wrong and circumstances burn,
Did you know I choose to see a lesson learned?
Did you know I choose to love, teach, and heal?
Rather than see situations how I want them, did you know
I choose to see the real?
Did you know I choose to respect all as the days move on?
Did you know I choose the responsibility to admit when
I'm wrong?
Did you know I chose to be prepared for what life entails?
Did you know, I choose, to refuse, to let failure prevail?
Did you know I choose to be a role model to youth
around the globe?
Did you know I choose to be flexible, adapt, and grow?
Did you know I choose to believe I do not know it all?
But did you know I choose to reach for the highest, not
the lowest star?
Did you know since we're all humans, we're all family,
yes him and her, you and me?
So did you know to never give up and be the best that
you can be?

Who Do I Belong To??

By CS

Who do I belong to?
I belong to a great nation of people
people who have got through all the hardships of slavery,
segregation, war
and people trying to kill us off.

Who do I belong to?
I belong to a family that loves me
with all that they have in them to love
a family that has stood with me
through my trials and tribulations
pushing me to be great and conquer all that's before me.

Who do I belong to?
I belong to a community of good men who strive for
greatness out of each other
who never gave up on what is important, their "freedom"
knowing one day that they'll get it
so I know that I belong to a lot of great things and people.

So my question to self
Who do I belong to??

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Country Boi Lost

By WR

As I open my eyes to the smell of my grandma's cooking
I hear the noise so familiar to me:
my uncles and lil' cousins grabbing bikes,
running through the house to get outside,
wanting to get the best one to ride.
The life of a Country Boi...

I finally make it to the table in time.
Grandma Bett makes the best homemade maple syrup
to go with the softest maple pancakes – so good the pancakes,
at times I don't even use the syrup.
The life of a Country Boi...

My life was fun and carefree in the country.
Our only chore was fetching water from the well,
riding to the store for grandma,
going to catch fish or softback crab if there was a bike
around,
and hunting to put food on the table.
The life of a Country Boi...
Country Boi Lost

The sound of my mom getting off work,
walking into the house telling my brothers
to go out to the car and bring in the food.
Country Boi Lost...

Five mouths to feed including hers,
barely making ends meet plus rent.
A young boi the age of 12 who won't eat
unless his mom eats from his plate.
Country Boi Lost...

I leave home to find a way to help my mom.
I want to get enough food to feed my mom.
Country Boi Lost...

Now I wake up to the sound of jingling keys,
voices over police radios,
popped tray slots with my morning breakfast,
a breakfast that makes me want to be with my grandma
and her maple pancakes.
Country Boi Lost...

I Belong

By DP

I belong at the top cause I'm tired of the bottom
Claim my rightful spot and stop crawling around like a toddler.
I belong to something good, cause I did too much bad.
No more should've, could've, would've
and break this curse left behind by my dad.
I belong in that house on the hills, with that white picket fence.
Living the American Dream Life

Sweet to the bitter end
I belong free as an eagle, that's soaring sky high
But I'm hidden in the shadows of its wings
Now I understand why caged birds sing
I belong to God, and to Him I shall return.
Do my best to have good deeds,
so my soul won't forever burn
I belong

Concrete Rose*

By JP

**Inspired by Concrete Rose by Angie Thomas*

I struggle, embedded in the pavement
My fight is everlasting
The elements are against me
But my will to survive is far greater
Than the obvious destruction around me
The things that are supposed to destroy me
I use to strengthen my resolve
I call on God when I am weak
He answers my prayers because in him I place my faith
To rise from the bricks of this concrete jungle where it
seems no one cares

I grow through this hectic life
I face all fears that try to strangle my existence
I weather the storms, the rain quenches my thirst
and washes me clean
When the sun shines bright I smile with hope
Feeling at times the light is on me and I'll be seen
I perk up, thorns sharp from a hard life
But beautifully created, battled tested and strong
Yet alone, yearning for a place in this big ole world to
call my own
My will to win on display for someone
Anyone to take me away from this concrete jungle I
call home

I stay warm hearted as I shake and shiver
Because in the concrete it's cold outside, no place to run,
no place to hide
I grow into the best me I can be
My trials and tribulations prepared me for life's ills
The growing pains makes me hungry with a purpose
to starve no more
My roots remain planted from which I came
The life I once knew no longer the same
Uprooted but forever from the bricks
Timeless moments of my past now shape my future
I see why God chose me
My life now a living testimony for all to know and see
A product of my environment
A Beautiful Rose I grew from the Jungle, the Bricks,
the Concrete

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Greetings Kings and Queens!

I'm so lucky to be writing to a circle of people that literally embodies this month's theme Belonging. When I think of the word belonging, I think of the act of being a part of something that feels totally natural, something that's not forced, something that fits with something perfectly like a puzzle piece. Knowing that you belong brings about a sense of security, which in turn can bring peace. Belonging is defined as "the feeling of support when there is a sense of acceptance, inclusion, and identity for a member of a certain group," and that is what we wholeheartedly want you guys, our Free Minds family to feel. We want you to feel supported, accepted, secure, and included, and we want you to know that we are a safe and accepting place for you. I think I feel a poem coming on...

Safe secure help to endure
Not alone or own your own
Yes quite the opposite indeed
A community, a village, a tribe
That's more like our vibe
Free to be me
Free to be you
Acceptance is our glue
Holding you up
Like wheels do a truck
Has nothing to do with luck
Its intentional and focused
Because you matter
Because you belong
We flow together like a beautiful song



I hope this brings home what I am trying to convey. Now on to some resources to make your day (I know that was mad corny but I just can't turn it off LOL)

Washington Area New Automobile Dealers Association (WANADA)
5301 Wisconsin Avenue N.W. Suite 210
Washington DC 20015
202.237.7200
info@wanada.org



The Automobile Dealer Education Institute scholarship is a free, NATEF certified, 2-year technician-training program sponsored by the Washington Area New Auto Dealers Association (WANADA) that combines structured classroom, shop and interactive curriculum teaching with full time, paid on-the-job training. To apply you need a High School diploma (or GED), a valid driver's license, a clean driving record and most important, a commitment to excel.

Until we *Connect* again,
Ms. Keela

REAL WORLD OF WORK: JEREMIAH'S STORY

Interview by Tia

Hi everyone. My name is Jeremiah and I am a returning citizen. I was recently released from prison after serving 24 years, 5 months and 9 days. I went to prison at the young age of 19 years old and left at 44. Prison was very challenging and with the new mindset I developed, rewarding.

I found a measurement of belonging inside amongst the rare men who were striving to give birth to their new self, to a self that was willing to make a contribution beyond their worse mistakes that tried to hold them captive to a place of definition to which they daily fought against.

I left my daughter when she was 18 months old. (I make no excuses nor try to cushion the blow when I say I failed her as a father!) Today our relationship is growing slowly and we are both learning to accept each other in our respective and God given roles. We are both strangers to each other in many ways, but we both want our relationship to work and know we belong to each other!! What more can I ask for??

I often reflect on what I wanted as a child, which helps me understand her and most youth better. Here are my childhood dreams: I always wanted to be an actor, lawyer, and psychologist. And strange as it sounds, I found myself in prison being all three. After living out my dreams inside those walls, I decided I wanted to impact people's lives and decided that I would start working with kids. So to get a feel for the youth of today, I started interacting and really listening to them. I also knew I needed the mental tools to help them in ways that others failed. So I adopted what I called "The Robber's Mentality." What do I mean? I started "robbing" the prison of every educational opportunity they had to offer. Whether it was Victim Impact, Alternative to Violence (AVP), or Conflict Resolution. The more I learned those skills, the more my desire to learn increased! It also was inspiring that people were asking me to write to their son or daughter while I was incarcerated. I dedicated so much of my time to helping others that I was honored with the President Gold Star Volunteer Service Award while in prison. I left prison armed with new tools and a desire to leave my mark upon those I encountered.

Upon my release, I enrolled in a free funded program called Byte Back that equipped me with some tech skills, and Project Empowerment, which gave me some job training skills. Both programs paid me for attending. Project Empowerment also found me a job with Mission First Housing Group, where I was a Peer Supporter and Assisted Youth Mentor. I also took a few other programs.

After striving in the right direction, I was hired as Youth Development Representative (YDR) in the DC Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services at New Beginnings (the youth facility where Oak Hill used to be). A friend of mine contacted me to say that the YDR Job in the DC government had an opening and told me to apply. I applied online and went through two interviews and was hired in June of 2022. I know it was God that aided me to be in this position.

My day-to-day work activities consist of arriving for work at 2:30 PM for what's called "roll call." It is there where I am filled in on what happened concerning the youth on the AM Shift. Then I fill out some paperwork, do a daily room search, and hold a group with the kids. After the group, they are free to do as they please within the rules. They usually play cards or watch movies. Sometimes they horseplay and I have to put a stop to that because that can lead to fighting. The kids also get daily grades based on their behavior for the day, which affects the privileges they get and their potential eligibility of going home sooner.

This job as a Youth Development Representative is where I see my greatest impact! Youths who had fallen victim to the criminal justice system for various reasons. I also get to design workshops that highlight some of the potential pitfalls we all face. And believe me when I tell you there is nothing more rewarding than seeing someone embrace and build upon the lessons and experiences you share with them.

My workshops consist of lessons I have learned and knowledge I have gained over the years. I strive to pick targeted messages and topics that hopefully give them some meaningful tools that

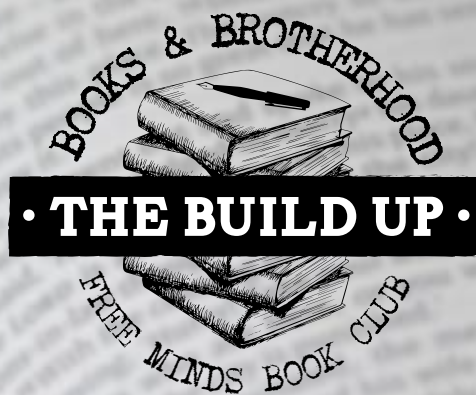
are relevant in their world today. The youth want to see results now so I let them know application is the fastest way to see them.

My life has been enriched from this work. They needed me as much as I needed them. The youth need guidance, a listening ear, and someone with relatable experience. I needed a vessel to impart the lessons learned from my experiences and to operate in my purpose on the planet. The thing is, I have always hungered for the "When" (i.e. how was I going to be of use concerning the youth) and upon seeing their growth I was privileged to see their "Win."

Do I think the youth can create belonging while at New Beginnings? Yes I do! We find belonging when we are living out our dreams in harmony with the many people and forces around us. Imagine being in a group where everyone is striving for the same thing. There's something powerful and connecting about that. In this case, it's a better version of themselves and morality & selflessness is the standard that holds us all accountable. I also encourage them to look within themselves to some of the answers they seek. One of my quotes is "Whatever you are going to do, know why you are doing it first!" This gives them a pause to examine the reason for their action and sometimes it leads to them making a better decision.

This is what I wanted and was seeking out as a kid. A place where I really belong!!





BELONGING AND THE BUILD UP (REENTRY BOOK CLUB)

By Jordan

Belonging is a critical part of every one of our lives, whether we know it or not. Belonging is a sense of fitting in or feeling comfortable with a certain group of individuals. Many of us, including myself, felt that we belonged to the streets and the block(s) we grew up on at one point, but as I started to actually live and mature to who I am today, I realized that belonging to something with a greater purpose is what I was made to do.

Our weekly Reentry Book Club, or the 'Build Up,' serves our members that have returned home, hoping to find refuge in something good rather than bad. My first time attending, I was as nervous as an introverted person usually is, but I followed along with the discussion and really saw how things operated. Being in a space full of like-minded individuals looking for change encouraged me to stay focused, motivated me to keep coming back, and helped me learn new life lessons to get through some of the toughest times in my life.

For others, it may be a haven: to talk about life's hardships, accomplishments, and other things that you might need advice for. For longtime Free Minds member Carlos, he described it as "a place where I feel safe." He continued by saying, "I am among those that shared the same pain while living in the freedom that we have always wished for. It is a place where I can talk and not be judged and listen as a reminder of those

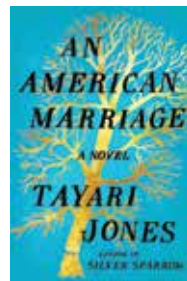
dark days. I find support and counseling." He went on to say that it provides "a natural feeling of belonging," which many of our other members can attest to. The Build Up has provided guys with a sense of belonging long before the COVID-19 outbreak, but since then, Free Minds has been able to connect with members in different parts of the world for different reasons. Carlos is one of those members, and to hear him say he belongs while being across the world (in Honduras) speaks volumes to the impact that Free Minds and the Build Up has had for countless years.

Even beyond the Build Up, Free Minds holds groups such as our peer support group that has been a pillar to mental health and healing for countless Free Minds members, including myself. We also have a leadership and planning committee that puts members in positions to make decisions that benefit each member. That type of opportunity makes it easy to be involved in something positive, while belonging to something with a good purpose. When I feel down, Free Minds is there to pick me up mentally, even without asking. This type of support has made me feel like I belong for numerous years, and it has kept me out of dark places mentally. Members have come home after many years and still remember when Free Minds first made them feel like they belong, and those same members tell those stories daily in appreciation for making them feel like they belong, and this is why Free Minds continues to grow.

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

with Neely

The time has arrived to announce the next book you all voted on! Thank you to everyone who voted on the next Books Across the Miles selection, we are excited to share that the next BAM book will be *An American Marriage* by Tayari Jones. This story follows the journey of newlyweds Celestial and Roy, who are just beginning to build their new life together when they are ripped apart from each other after Roy is arrested and sentenced to 12 years for a crime Celestial knows he didn't commit. We can't wait to hear your thoughts!



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

2. Roy says: *"You can't pick your home any more than you can choose your family. In poker, you get five cards. Three of them you can swap out, but two are yours to keep: family and native land."* What do you think of this quote? Would you swap out either if you could? How much do our families and where we come from shape who we are?

- 3.** In a letter, Roy says to Celestial that he has nothing to offer her. Do you agree? Have you ever felt this way? What might he have to offer? What might you have?
- 4.** Why do you think Celestial starts to distance herself from Roy? Have you ever experienced someone important falling away from you while you did your time? How did you deal with it personally?
- 5.** Roy and Celestial both had secrets from each other. Do you believe they should have kept these secrets about their past as long as they did? Do you believe that when you are in a serious relationship (ie considering marriage) that you should share everything? Why or why not?

Name _____ Date _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: CELEBRATION (VOLUME 11, ISSUE 5)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on Celebration. We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 12, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme of **Expectations**.

(1)

If you could create your own holiday to celebrate what would it be? Who would you invite to your celebration?

(2)

Do you believe celebrations are an important aspect of your life no matter what your circumstance is (including being incarcerated)? Why or why not?

(3)

Imagine you are celebrating your favorite holiday; write a haiku poem based on the scene. Haikus are poems composed of 3 lines, each a phrase. The first line typically has 5 syllables, second line has 7, and the 3rd and last line repeats another 5. In addition there is usually a seasonal reference included.

Example:

Light of the moon

Moves west, flowers' shadows

Creep eastward.

(4)

Think back to a time when you were celebrating an obstacle you overcame. Remember the way you felt the scenery surrounding you.
Write a poem based on that experience and the feelings you can remember.

(5)

An ode is a kind of poem that celebrates a person, place, thing, or idea. Write an ode to yourself celebrating what makes you special!

CELEBRATION

By _____

Write a poem about your most memorable celebration. Make sure to add as many details as possible!
Let's visualize that moment through your words! Here's a template to help you get started.

My most memorable celebration was when I celebrated _____.

I was _____ years old at that time.

The celebration was held at _____.

I remember it smelling like _____.

The decorations were _____.

The people I celebrated with were _____.

The funniest thing that happened was _____.

The craziest thing that happened was _____.

If I could relive a moment from that celebration, I would go back to the time when _____.

MEMBERS *CONNECT*: BELONGING

My Affinity Group
By EJ

BELONGING! That's a good one. I never thought about belonging or what it meant to me. Before I came to jail I was really anti-social so I didn't belong to any group. I did belong to my family, so I guess that was my group. To belong to my family meant to just be there, like for example, I might get up in the morning to call around to them to see how they're doing or what they were doing. At times I'd just pop up at their house to spend time with them, that's what I meant by just being there. Okay, so my affinity group is the DC car in here, which is all of the guys from DC. We all identify with each other because we all are from DC, love gogo, talk alike, and must have a pair of New Balance shoes. Our interest is to make sure we push each other to learn, grow, and go home. This got me thinking...because I'll connect in here with almost anybody now as long as we can build with each other. Now I feel like I belong to the world. It's a saying, not sure where I picked it up, but it's, "you get what you give," so I give love, not expecting anything back in return, but love always finds its way to me. Sorry if it seems like I'm all over the place. I didn't organize my thoughts. This prompt on belonging is hard for me. I'm sitting here smiling because I know I belong, but I don't have my own meaning for me to belong. I do feel like I connect with some people's stories, but I don't feel as if I belong when it comes to them, unless we really got to know each other and shared how we dealt with similar situations. I want to one day join a yacht club, I'd like to belong to that. I'm investing my money so once I'm free from this jail life I can afford to buy a yacht. I'd like to get with others that own yachts, talk about each other's yachts, check/visit each other's yachts, have our own yacht days where we can grill on the yachts, meet each other's family and friends, and let our family and friends visit all the yachts. Just a weekend of fun. That's all I got right now.

Where I Belong
By JY

Where do I belong? That's a question that I ask myself everyday and do you want to know what the answer is? I don't know. The more that I think about where I belong I think about the choices that I have made in life that got me to where I am at today and that's prison. Belonging is understanding you and your way of thinking, understanding, and putting to use your choices in life. One thing that I can say is that no one deserves prison, but the choice we make is what put us here. Do I belong here is a question that I need to ask myself. But the more I ask myself this question, the more I get the same answer.

Defining Belonging
By CS

I would describe belonging as being a part of a community or something life-changing. Belonging to something gives you a sense of being loved or wanted by someone other than yourself. My present dilemma tells a tale about belonging to something "family"... I know through their letters and visits that I'm missed. I seek or find belonging through mail, visits, and telephone calls to my family.

A Good Community
By RP

My stance on a community with good characteristics is one that shows/gives positive support, love, respect, kindness, willingness, honesty, open-mindedness, etc. among each other. A community that is trustworthy, safe, and more. I'd define a safe space for expression as a place free of judgment, experience, wisdom, open-mindedness, respect, and honesty, as well as love.



THE WRITE WAY: THE WRITER'S BLOCK TOOLKIT

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

By Meg

Do you ever sit down to write, and suddenly you can't put your ideas into words? It happens to me all the time – it even happened to me several times while writing this! Each time I'm faced with a blank page that won't write itself, I have several resources in my "Writer's Block Toolkit" that always help me get my thoughts a little more organized.

The first thing in my toolkit is a list of my favorite words. I often return to the word "essential" when trying to write, which Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines as "of the utmost importance". The word references anything that is completely necessary, and it provides such a rich jumping off point. What is essential to me? It can change from moment to moment. Your favorite word can change too! Sometimes my favorite word is "sun" or "wrist" or "ring." Even the smallest of things can be a big help. Whatever your favorite word is – focus on that word, and start with what comes to mind from there. Your mind is a web of words, so use it!

Similarly, sometimes I try to make the first line of whatever I'm writing about what I want most at that moment. In the past I've used this idea to come up with things like a clean slate, something heavy to anchor me, or a way to turn all my mixed-up feelings into something tangible – which is what writing often does anyway! Like your favorite word, this want can be anything. I once wrote a poem about how what I wanted most in the world was a bowl of soup. You might start with one thing and realize you've taken it in a completely unexpected direction by the end. And what you start with does not have to be the finished product. I like to return to lines that I love but don't have a full poem for yet. These can in turn become something else in your "Writer's Block Toolkit."

The next thing in my toolkit is a list of things I'm grateful for. Oftentimes when I'm writing, I'm in a place mentally where I don't feel very good. I used to think the only way I was a good writer was if I drew on these negative emotions. And while writing is an incredible way to give your negative feelings an outlet, it's also important to let yourself focus on positive things too. One way to get the good-hearted ideas flowing when they don't want to

come is to focus on things that make you feel good. I usually start small, with tiny things I'm grateful for like the letter K or the word "disobey." This, in turn, spreads outwards to usually encompass different aspects of my community. A friend who showed up when I needed them or a stranger who told me a compliment and really meant it. Any moment when you don't feel so alone is huge – the world can feel big and small at the same time, so anything that helps you feel grounded can be turned into motivation. And it's okay if you're grateful for something you used to have but don't have anymore, or something you've found only recently that you can't imagine going without. I like to say I'm grateful for my plans for the future, too, even if they scare me.

This works even better if you don't censor yourself. The ideas don't have to be related, and they don't have to make sense. Sometimes a desire for a bowl of soup turns into a poem about all the things you'd change about the world if you could. Sometimes the word "essential" helps you describe the feeling of all the places your feet have taken you. A list of all the things you're grateful for can make you realize just how much conviction you have when you speak. You can start with the phrase "cats and bananas" and end up with a realization that whatever words you write are yours and just because of that, they mean something.

Finally, If you're still struggling with writer's block or just looking for other sources of inspiration, I like to pull from other things I've read. What's your favorite book? Is there a scene that really stuck with you? Sometimes I write my own takes on books or poems that have already been written in order to find my voice. From there, it's not as hard to bounce around to other ideas or find what your mind really wants to write about. Just remember, if you're using someone else's ideas, make sure you're giving credit to the original author. Using other people's writing as a jumping off point can be really helpful, but it's important to give credit where credit is due.

No matter what, writing is a space to let yourself bloom. My motto is and always will be: slow progress is still progress.



CONVERSATION WITH JAMES

Hello everyone my name is James and I'm the 2022 Congressman John Lewis Fellow with Free Minds Book Club. It is truly an honor to have gotten the opportunity to work in this capacity. Ironically, I was able to walk the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama this year. The Edmund Pettus Bridge was the site of the brutal Bloody Sunday beatings of civil rights marchers, joined by the late Congressman John Lewis, during the first march for voting rights in 1965. That may not sound like a big deal at first glance, but coming from where I came from it is an unbelievable feat to walk across that bridge. I was released after serving 24 years in prison. For the majority of that time, I did not know that I would be coming home. The only airplane that I had ever ridden on was "Conair." Who would have known that I would fly to Alabama and walk on a historic bridge, and take pictures with other guys with my same background. It was a surreal moment. We all belong to a unique group of returning citizens.

I also got an opportunity to visit the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. For those who don't know, the Legacy Museum is a museum that focuses on the legacy of slavery and mass incarceration. In terms of belonging, it is humbling to belong to such a resilient group of people. Belonging to a national network of people who were fighting for my release and others like myself without even knowing me ignites a sense of responsibility within. I understand that some of the opportunities that I've gotten were put in place due to the sacrifice of others, so I recognize the greater struggle that I belong to. Belonging is one of the best feelings that any person can have.

SUICIDE PREVENTION: IN HONOR OF DEAR FRIENDS I'VE LOST

By TS

FM family, hey - hi you! Today please bear with me on this heavy issue I've so humbly been tasked with to enlighten us all on this current theme of "Belonging." Everyone deserves to live a long, free, and full life. In the past, as the Advice Man, I've seen some questions that concerned me. We do hear you and see a light in each one of your expressions of words. At times, we all struggle with hope and how to keep a state of peace. Therefore today my advice to this audience will be centered on suicide prevention (death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result to the behavior) and mental health.

With this I don't claim to be any kind of expert. I purely just want to address this subject as a loving FM family member.

We have to overcome unconsciously overlooking, misunderstanding, and failing to give the impacts of suicide and mental health their proper attention. The answer to identifying signs of suicide and mental illnesses, first and foremost, is to seek out mental health assistance and education. Why? Because the impact of suicide is a major health concern that not only impacts those who die. It often deeply affects their family and friends.

For this audience, moreover, people involved with the correctional system have a higher suicide rate than people outside of it. So before we get to the nitty-gritty, lets address FM's audience and where we come from, because I feel suicide comes in many different forms. Speaking of which, criminal lifestyles like daily carrying guns, or drunk driving are in fact "Calling Court in the Streets." These activities are mentally and physically engaging in a learnt "self-directed injurious behavior with any intent to die as a result of that behavior."

Incarcerated people! It's very important to know and observe when we are in crisis mode who we need to be dealing with for assistance as it comes to corrections staff and fellow inmates. It doesn't matter what they are wearing, some people are naturally decent and rational people and will do all they can to help, true indeed; on the other hand, some people don't care and are bitter warmongers who look for every opportunity to escalate a crisis situation. For us, there may be few sincere decent people that want to help, but you can find them in prison in psychology, chapel, education staff, and your role model big homie inmates. I implore us not to allow each other to spiral away to the point of no return. We can't just read a article and scratch its surface, we have to be proactive and dig deep and know about suicide and mental illness prevention. The part of knowledge that we very well may be taking too lightly.

Example: Two very different inmates are sentenced to ten

years apiece. The first one loses all his loved ones over the ten years, and the second inmate came to prison struggling with depression since childhood. They both end up in the SHU/hole due to struggling without adequate support. As one can imagine for inmates in crisis, things for them can go bad to worse in a blink of an eye. So what we don't want for people like this is for them to say "F#\$% It!" and cut people off to enable their fall into a state of suicidal behavior. If someone finds themselves or a friend on this path, seek assistance. If you're not sure of this risky behavior, then here are some identifying predictive warning signs one may exhibit: Hopelessness; withdrawal from others; anxiety, agitation, sleep problems; reckless & risk-taking behavior; giving away possessions; planning the end. These should trigger an immediate assessment with mental health professionals.

For anyone thinking about engaging in any kind of this behavior, I'm asking you to hold on and just keep telling yourself "There's still hope" and "I always belong." If you are at risk, there is still something the professionals and FM have for you. That is called "Protective Factors" that one can consider, which includes behavior, characteristic, and relationship skills that offset risk of suicide. Here is a list to be learned and developed: Strong family relationships & social support; good problem solving & conflict resolution skills; willingness to seek help for one's problems; easy access to effective care for mental health problems; following prescribed treatments, including counseling & medications; create a daily positive routine/schedule; join a religious and/or cultural beliefs body that discourages suicide; restrict access to the means for suicide; cling to healthy allies. "It's important to remember, the positive resistance to suicide offered by protective factors are not permanent. Resources and their availability will change over time. Thus, providing support for existing protective factors and nurturing the development of new ones is important."

You know Advice Man pushes for education/knowledge and a constructive daily routine schedule as in work and positive activities to fortify our future. In my last several years of my 20 year journey doing my life sentence, I've worked and trained for a prison inmate suicide watch program, in honor of dear friends I've lost to this ill. In doing so that's the only reason how I could contribute to this request, which now I hope one day will help those who need help. In here I've seen those being watched gain knowledge and turn around and gain a job in the same program and give back to their community. What have you done today on this subject to give back and contribute to those who deserve to belong?

With All My Best!
T.S.

REENTRY PROFILE: CHARLES'S STORY

By Demetria

My name is Demetria, aka "Miss Dee," and I am here speaking with Mr. Charles, a returning citizen who is a thriving member of Free Minds Book Club & Writing Workshop. Like each of us, Charles has a story to tell, a compelling story.

But I wanted to provide a platform for him to share what his experiences have been like in interacting with other people and family since his return, and how he has empowered himself to feel a true sense of belonging in society.

Miss Dee: Charles, please share a little about yourself. And then in your own words, share what "belonging," as it relates to your return to society and connecting in your community and family life, means to you?

Charles: My name is Charles and I am 58 years old. I was released after 36 years of imprisonment. I was given 35-years-to-life imprisonment. I made parole on June 10, 2020, and since then I have been trying to acclimate myself into society as a regular civilian.

And getting to the word "belonging", when I think of belonging, it is, to me, it brings to mind, you know, of where I should be. I need to be. Where my roots are. Where there's a pull. You know, there's always something in you; there's an innate thing that says, 'You should be here.' So, to me, the word "belonging" denotes having roots somewhere, or having roots with someone. Having a place in the world. That is what "belonging" means to me.

Miss Dee: How does it tie into reentry where you have to find your place among others at home and the community?

Charles: Well, as it relates to reentry, "belonging" means that I shouldn't have been there; that this is where I should have been all along. I am a person, as they say, I am a regular citizen now.

But for so many years, I was always a citizen. So, I always felt a pull to society. Even while I was there [incarcerated], I felt a pull here [society] because this is where I should be. There was no reason why I should have been there to begin with.

So, as it pertains to reentry, "belonging", it's a deep feeling one has as it pertains to living a normal life. Being a normal person. You know, a person not stigmatized. Not in chains, or not set about certain rules like having to go to bed at a certain time or eat at a certain time. And these are the things I had to deal with while I was incarcerated.

All the time I was having to go through these things like when to eat and sleep, all that felt wrong to me. So, I knew that I didn't belong there. In reentry, it's almost like there is no more pull, you know, I am where I should be.

To that extent, I have done everything I could to be that person that I always was anyway. Being out here is as natural as living and breathing and eating and sleeping. Life for me is beautiful now! Because I know I'm where I belong.

Miss Dee: Thank you so much for sharing, Charles! This has been very insightful to me, as it will so many others. I wish you well in your journey and may you continue in good health and wellness.



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.

Rebecca's Child by Lewis Collins

Description provided by the author: Rebecca's Child, his name is Lil James. He only knows one mother, but there are two women who can be called that name. Which name is correct, Rebecca or mother? Both, if you let either one of them answer that question. This story takes place in the Washington, DC area, as well as a brief stint in Ft. Lauderdale and Miami Florida. Two young women, who were friends since childhood, now, they both claim they have a child of their own. Find out who is the mother of Lil James, or decide for yourself.



IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: ELECTION SECURITY



Source: CNN Politics

In November, the election contests widely referred to as the “midterms” were held. This includes lots of local contests for state offices, including governor, along with hundreds of Congressional races for seats in the U.S. House of Representatives or the U.S. Senate. It’s called a midterm election because it marks the halfway point of a presidency.

In any year, a key aspect of the election process is security and integrity, because in order for a democracy to work, voters must have faith that their votes are counted fairly and accurately, and that the winner is indeed the winner.

We have seen several presidential elections in the past two decades that left a large swath of the country believing their candidate had been robbed. The elections of 2000, 2004 and 2016 all featured various claims of compromised elections ranging from improper recounts to voter suppression and misinformation campaigns.

But those paled in comparison to the aftermath of the 2020 election, in which President Joe Biden defeated the incumbent candidate, Donald Trump. But before Biden was sworn in, there were months of upheaval with millions of Trump supporters pushing since-debunked theories about how the election was stolen.

Many of these theories centered on voting machines being hacked, or on fraudulent ballots sent in on behalf of dead people, non-citizens or even fake voters. And on January 6, under the banner of “Stop the Steal,” some of the most violent election deniers stormed the U.S. Capitol in an attempt to prevent Congress from finalizing the electoral process.

There are all kinds of efforts that could be considered

part of election security. We will describe here on three major types of security that have become necessary in the modern political environment.

Vote Integrity: Making sure that all votes are recorded, that they are recorded correctly, and that nobody can manipulate the totals when it comes time to tally them up. This begins with a voter identification process that seeks to guarantee the person casting a ballot has the right to do so and is the person they claim to be.

This became even more important in the 2020 election because due to the COVID-19 pandemic, most states rushed to develop a process for allowing voters to mail their ballots in or leave them in secure drop boxes. We have long offered an absentee voter process for members of the military or people living outside of their home state, and some states like Florida and Colorado have featured mail-in voting for some time. But in 2020, lots of states with no experience in that situation were tasked with receiving, validating and counting millions of mailed-in ballots.

Very close results in several swing states prompted audits of the vote. Every one of those audits showed that indeed, President Biden’s vote count was accurate.

Vote integrity also requires that voting machines are protected from tampering or interference. The best practices around this include use of locks and seals, cameras built into the machines, and system testing before and after use. And for electronic machines, which have become increasingly popular, cybersecurity controls are essential to avoid any possibility of a person, group or foreign adversary from “breaking in.”

The integrity of voting machines – particularly those manufactured by a company called Dominion Voting – was also questioned by some Trump supporters, including several prominent figures in conservative media. There has been no evidence to support claims of tampering, and Dominion has sued several of those people, and their respective networkers for defamation.

Voting Rights/Access: While ensuring that voters are eligible is important, it is equally important that every citizen who is eligible to vote can do so. This is particularly important in America, where we have a history of intentionally putting obstacles in the way of poor voters, especially Black ones.

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

The Jim Crow laws of decades past used literacy tests and poll taxes to keep these voters away. Such practices were outlawed by the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which put in place national protections on the right to vote and also required certain states with a history of voter suppression to get special clearance before changing any rules.

Still, there remains a lot of debate about the balance between voter eligibility and suppression in America. For instance, requiring identification or a driver's license is contested as discriminatory of the poor or elderly, who have a harder time obtaining and maintaining current IDs. The right of formerly incarcerated people to vote is another modern debate in America; in 2018, Florida voters overwhelmingly supported a ballot proposal that permitted formerly incarcerated people to vote.

Disinformation and Misinformation: As recently as the 2000s, most people got their news from a newspaper or the evening news on television. Today, print newspapers make up a tiny percentage of the news feed, and TV news has gravitated away from straight reporting and towards 24/7 analysis and punditry. Neither are the primary source of news: that would be the wide spectrum of news sources on the Internet. Eighty-six percent of Americans get their news from websites or apps; some of them connected to reputable outlets and newspapers, but the digital landscape offers a rich environment for those wishing to create fake news stories or simply publish innuendo, rumors and conspiracy theories as though they were fact.

How to distinguish fake information from true? We discussed that in a previous Free Minds issue (See Volume 9, Issue 3), but when it comes to managing that at election time, the burden lies with the gatekeepers of digital content like social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc) or search engines, in particular Google. These companies can use algorithms, code, and their own workforce to patrol for clearly false information that could sway voters through lies, and do so with varying degrees of success. But ultimately, the antidote to this scourge must involve a healthy objective news ecosystem and people who are educated in how to read and interpret news, separating fact from opinion and valid reporting from questionable work.

WORLD NEWS

As winter creeps closer in most of Europe and America, we are going to see the commitment of the global community tested when it comes to supporting Ukraine against the invasion by the Russians. Already this year,

gas prices have been driven up to prices that make the average consumer question that next vacation, or whether or not to buy a new car... the type of spending decisions that can help drive a national or even world recession if they are sustained for long enough.

With winter comes the need to heat more households, which requires more gas, which means more oil and natural gas getting extracted and sold. Boycotts of Russian oil and gas have limited the amount of this product, and



President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy
Source: Flickr



Gas prices continue to stay high as the war of Ukraine and Russia wages on. *Source: Go Banking Rates*



IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

the colder weather piled on top of everything else will create a major gap between supply and demand. And that, in turn, could drive fuel prices up. And when fuel prices rise, the cost of pretty much everything else does, from airplane flights to cereal in the cabinet.

Sadly, there are few glimmers of hope at the moment for a diplomatic solution to the war. Fighting has remained intense, and Russia has claimed annexation of Ukrainian territory on its border, claiming that the citizens of those areas voted for that in a free and fair forum. Nobody has recognized the annexation as legitimate.

NATIONAL NEWS

The Supreme Court heard arguments in November for two cases that could decide the fate of a long-running social experiment in American education: affirmative action, the practice of favoring individuals belonging to groups known to have been discriminated against previously. Many universities have used affirmative action policies to ensure that despite historically unequal academic opportunities, Black students in particular are given the chance to attend high-quality schools of higher education. Two of those schools are the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and Harvard University. Both saw their policies challenged in the lower courts by the same group, Student for Fair Admissions. That group has argued that UNC discriminated against white and Asian students by placing a preference on Black, Hispanic and Native American candidates, and that Harvard's admission standards specifically discriminated against Asians.

Justice Elena Kagan expressed concern that an end to affirmative action would prompt a "precipitous decline in minority admissions" to elite universities, which she called "the pipelines to leadership in our society."

SPORTS

It appears that after multiple investigations of corruption and decades of losing seasons, Dan Snyder might finally be poised to free Washington Commanders fans of the burden he has become in their lives. The Commanders announced that they have retained the services of Bank of America in connection with the potential sale of the team.

There are sure to be many bidders interested and it is widely expected that the Commanders will sell for a record-setting price, likely over \$6 billion. And in all likelihood, any ownership group that acquires the team will look to find an arrangement with the District of Columbia to move the franchise out of Landover, MD, and back within the city limits.



Washington Commanders owner Dan Snyder is exploring the possible sale of the team. *Source: CNN*



Takeoff, member of Atlanta rap group Migos, has died at 28
Source: NPR (image of Takeoff, top), The FADER (image of group).

MUSIC

The hip-hop world mourned the loss of another bright star in its orbit in November. Kirshnik Khari Ball, better known as Takeoff of the group Migos, was killed by gunfire at a late-night dice game hosted at a Houston bowling and billiards hall. At press time for FM News, no arrests have been made, though it appears that Takeoff was shot multiple times in crossfire and that he was not a target.

"Senseless violence and a stray bullet has taken another life from this world and we are devastated," said a statement from Quality Control, the Atlanta record label that distributes Migos' music.



MEDITATION: BELONGING

By Kelli

VOCABULARY WORD FOR TODAY: *Kinship*. This is a beautiful word. It comes from the idea of being related to someone by blood. But its definition has expanded to mean “the state of being in relationship with others.”

We are wired for belonging. All of us. As human beings, we crave connection. We want – no, we *need* – to be part of something bigger.

Belonging while incarcerated certainly presents some challenges. Because the first part of belonging is to feel like you are in the physical space where you belong. So, for example, if you were a fish, but you were flopping around on a sidewalk, feeling a sense of belonging would be tough! The good news is that you can still experience belonging wherever you are. Think about it. You can belong to your biological family, to your faith, to your neighborhood, to the community of Los Angeles Lakers fans, to the world of artists, to the International SpongeBob Fan Club (okay, I made that one up!). You get the idea. You are a unique individual with your own likes, dislikes, talents, challenges, beliefs, and values. And through each of those things, you are connected, and belong to others. But belonging goes beyond that. We belong to the human race and to the world.

Let's do a little meditation today on kinship and belonging... You can start where you are...right now as you're reading this, no matter where you are, become aware of your breath, the flow of air. And gradually, extend that awareness to what is happening in your body. Slowly, move your awareness around, perhaps to your heart beating or to the sensation of your muscles relaxing. But whatever you bring your awareness to, don't try to

change, or control it, simply observe it. Breathe in... hold it... and exhale...

A sense of belonging is something that each one of us wants. So, let's bring our attention to all the people we know in our lives, as well as the people we may not know. Yep, everyone. Let's release any grudges that we've been holding on to... Focusing instead on all the things we share. We are all having the human experience... Imagine all of us on the journey of life. We exist in a sea of other souls... All of us laugh... all of us love... all of us cry... We all experience truth... And we all have some blindness to that truth. We feel joy... and sorrow. We all experience achievement and challenges... Beyond all the differences we may see in each other at first, still, we are all fellow travelers.

We ALL belong... I belong to you... and you belong to me... We have kinship. Hold on to this feeling as you continue to breathe in... and out. Enjoy this feeling of belonging. And when you are ready, let's imagine sending light and love to all the other souls – our fellow travelers. Remembering that there is GOOD in each one of us... and wishing all a safe and beautiful journey.

Before we close, I want to ask you to try this meditation more than once. Try it when you are feeling isolated or alone. Try it when you are feeling confident and at peace. Try it when you are feeling angry or upset. Use it to connect with your sense of belonging. And no matter what, remember this: you belong to the Free Minds Family – now and always!



DID YOU KNOW?

The Housing First Model

By Keela

Information from Pathways to Housing DC (pathwaystohousingdc.org):

The Pathways to Housing DC was founded to positively transform the lives of people experiencing chronic homelessness, who are also living with serious and persistent mental illness and challenging health conditions. For the past decade, they have successfully engaged, housed, supported, and treated over 850 adults who had been living on the streets for years. As an alternative to a system of emergency shelter/transitional housing, their model is simple: provide housing first, and then combine that permanent housing with a client-centered approach that includes supportive treatment services in the areas of mental and physical health, substance abuse, education, and employment.

While their model is simple, the Housing First Program is very complex and requires dedicated staff to coordinate all aspects (outreach, housing, healthcare, treatment and case management) of the program in order for the people they serve to be successful in their recoveries. Housing First means there are no conditions that have to be met before the person moves in. Housing is provided in apartments that are spread throughout the District, with each client holding their own lease. Using "scattered sites," they are able to give each client choice in where they would like to live, helping to foster a sense of home and self-determination. Stable, supportive housing is merely the first step towards reintegrating into their community, rebuilding family relationships, reconnecting with their faith fellowships, and experiencing an improvement in overall physical health and psychological wellbeing.

After receiving housing first, every client is matched with a support team (Assertive Community Treatment Team, Veterans Housing First Team and/or Permanent Supportive Housing Team) comprised of psychiatrists, nurses, social workers, certified addictions counselors, employment specialists, and peer health specialists. The Pathways to Housing DC team works together to provide a client-centered, comprehensive community-based treatment and support services around the clock, with a focus on integrating both health and social well-being into the recovery plan. These vital interventions are designed to empower client choice and support successful independent living. Using this model, the program has been able to maintain a housing retention rate of at least 91% with clients. Pathways to Housing DC believes that housing is a basic human right, that anyone who says they want a safe place to live is "housing ready," and that virtually all people can be successful in housing with the proper combination of supports. The success that comes with using the Housing First model demonstrates that the vast majority of people that they connect with permanent supportive housing stay in that housing and on the path to recovery, and what could be more great than that!

PAYING IT FORWARD: PATHWAYS TO HOUSING DC

By Araba

Andrea is a co-facilitator of Free Minds' book club for Spanish-speaking members, called Mentes Libres, held at the DC Jail. Full-time, however, Andrea works for Pathways to Housing, an organization that helps connect people struggling with housing insecurity to various resources throughout the city. Free Minds Program Specialist Araba spent some time talking with Andrea to find out more about her work.

ARABA: Tell me a little bit about yourself, and how you got involved with Free Minds!

ANDREA: I'm a recent graduate from [George Washington University], and I got involved with Free Minds through the university, actually. They posted a flyer, and I thought it would be a really good opportunity because giving back to the community is something I always wanted to do.

ARABA: How did you get involved with Pathways to Housing?

ANDREA: It was another thing I wanted to do with the community, with one-on-one engagement. It was a lot of applying to jobs and it happened to be something that was really aligned. I want to at some point do therapy, which is very similar, and [this work] connected to my passions and my interests.

ARABA: What work does Pathways to Housing do in the community?

ANDREA: We are an organization that directs services towards the homeless population in DC. We help clients get documentation or things that are pretty much needed for everything, such as social security cards, birth certificates, IDs, which are crucial for a lot of housing. A lot of the times people [can't get housing] because they don't have the right documentation. We also offer other services such as mental health counseling, case management, food, and just basic services, which is something really great that I think that they do, and then just help people get on the right path.

ARABA: Is there a success story that sticks out to you since the time you've been working with Pathways?

ANDREA: We had a client recently who was chronically homeless for the past couple years and they'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness and although we have a medical team in the same center that we provide services at, they needed long-term support. We managed to put them in a nursing home that was a long-term care facility, and I would say that was an accomplishment. It's usually a very long process—doing the referrals—due to the nature of DC housing unfortunately, but I was surprised by how expedited the process in that particular case was.

ARABA: What would you say makes housing in DC different, or more difficult to access than other places?

ANDREA: I wouldn't particularly say it's more difficult than other places, but I would say it's the waiting time that's pretty long. We tell clients that for rapid rehousing, which is short-term housing, there's a 90-day waiting list. That creates problems for clients that do need long-term housing but are staying with friends, who want to get off the streets and have a place of their own.

ARABA: What would you say is the importance of housing for vulnerable individuals?

ANDREA: Shelters are difficult. People don't have personal space which can cause safety or mental health issues, like anxiety and depression. They may lack access to needed treatment, so they could feel even more agitated. Many [people experiencing homelessness] are working, they're doing their best, they just need help.

ARABA: What's something you want our readers to know about the people you work with?

ANDREA: Most of our clients are really trying to get back on their feet. Social work has a high turnover and burnout rate, so sometimes when caseworkers leave, clients are left not knowing what to do. Most of our clients want to better themselves but it's really hard to find a place on their own. We just have to be a little aware of the care people need to get back on their feet.

ARABA: Is there anything else you wanted to say about homelessness or Pathways to Housing?

ANDREA: We're connected to a lot of other agencies that have really great resources. Because we can't provide everything to every one of our clients, we do referrals to agencies that offer housing like Project Reconnect, a low barrier shelter.

If you or someone you know is experiencing homelessness, e-mail the Pathways to Housing office at info@pathwaysdc.org. If you'd like to be connected to mental health services, contact Access Helpline at 1 (888) 7WE-HELP.



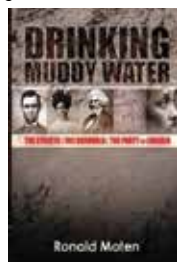
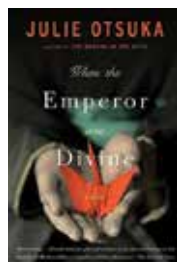
WHAT WE'RE READING

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."

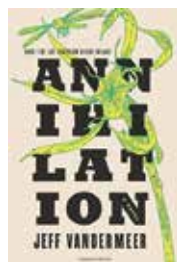
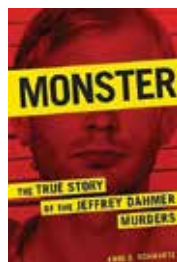
- **Julia: *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka**

I read *When the Emperor Was Divine* by Julie Otsuka, a novel about the Japanese internment camps in the 1940s. During World War II, the United States government forcibly relocated and incarcerated over 120,000 Japanese Americans and immigrants from Japan. *When the Emperor Was Divine* tells the story of a family (a mother, father, son, and daughter) who were forced to leave their home and spend several years living in an internment camp. The father, who the US government considers to be "disloyal," is incarcerated separately from his two children and their mother. This book of historical fiction is short but powerful, and illuminates an often overlooked part of American history.



- **Demetria: *Drinking Muddy Water: The Streets, the Scandals, and the Party of Lincoln* by Ronald Moten**

This book follows Moten's growing up in the '80's and '90's DC, during the height of the crack cocaine era. After getting sent to prison, he decides to commit his life to helping others. Since his release, he has become a passionate activist for DC, working to reduce violent crime and gang intervention.



- **Melody: *Monster: The True Story of the Jeffrey Dahmer Murders* by Anne E. Schwartz**

I learned a lot about Jeffrey Dahmer, an American serial killer, after reading this book. Jeffrey was described as being a happy kid, but when he was 4 he had surgery to fix a double hernia in his head. The surgery seemed to have a negative effect on Jeffrey, because shortly after his mood and demeanor changed. As the years went on, he became quite withdrawn and detached. I feel sorry for his dad, who was a chemist and who blames himself for Jeffrey's actions.

- **Meg: *Annihilation* by Jeff Vandermeer**

This science fiction book tells the story of a biologist's journey into an environmental anomaly called "Area X". The book is her journal, in which she describes her past in a dysfunctional marriage and her present among Area X's unnatural phenomena. As she goes, she finds her DNA evolving to mirror the landscape around her. So many questions remain: What is the leader of their expedition hiding? What is the creature that moans at dusk every day? Why is there a structure that tunnels down into the earth, and where does it end?

BOOKS HALL OF FAME!

In our first issue of the year (Wellbeing), we asked you, our readers, to nominate your all-time favorite books to the Free Minds Books Hall of Fame. Please continue to send us your book nominations or votes for the nominees along with your reasons why you think it belongs in the FMBHoF! We'll announce the top choices at the end of the year.

Our current nominees for the FMBHoF:

- *The Giving Tree* by Shel Silverstein
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X As Told to Alex Haley*
- *David Walker's Appeal* by David Walker
- *Blood In My Eye* by George Jackson
- *The Throne of Glass* series by Sarah J. Maas
- *The Godfather* by Mario Puzo
- *Unbroken* by Laura Hillenbrand
- *Standing at the Scratch Line* by Guy Johnson
- *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker
- *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones
- *The Richest Man in Babylon* by George S. Clason
- *The Matarese Circle* by Robert Ludlum
- *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- *Long Walk to Freedom* by Nelson Mandela
- *The Nightingale* by Kristin Hannah



What books would you recommend for the Hall of Fame?

PERTENECER/BELONGING

UNA COLUMNA NUEVA EN ESPAÑOL, A NEW COLUMN IN SPANISH

By Carlos

Primeramente, quiero dar un saludo a todos los miembros de Mentes Libres. Mi nombre es Carlos y es un placer estar con ustedes por estos medios. Quería compartir con ustedes estos pensamientos:

En mi juventud, pertenecer a algo ha sido la cosa que me llevó a la destrucción de mi vida. Mi error siempre ha sido complacer a otros y hacer lo que sea para poder sentirme parte de algo, parte de ellos. Para mí, esto comenzó en mi niñez. Llegué a Estados Unidos a la edad de nueve años con mis abuelos y el dinero siempre hacía falta en nuestra casa. Pasé esos momentos donde me hacían burla por mi ropa y mi manera de hablar. Para ser aceptado, vendí drogas y con el dinero empecé a comprar las cosas que, en ese tiempo, pensaba que me harían parte de algo. De pertenecer y ser aceptado. Mis errores me llevaron a la prisión, donde pase 25 años.

En esos años entendí las cosas que verdaderamente tienen valor. Soñé volver a pertenecer a esa libertad que había botado como un papel de basura. Quería pertenecer nuevamente a mi familia, al amor, el privilegio de poder escoger lo que yo quiero. Pertenecer a la sociedad, a la vida del trabajador... quería volver a pertenecer a MI libertad!

Después de veinticinco años pertenezco a esa libertad. He estado libre por casi tres años y no hay cosa mejor que volver a pertenecer a esta libertad. Estoy disfrutando al pertenecer a todo lo que pensé que nunca volvería a poder ver otra vez. El poder ser parte de mi familia ha sido lo máximo. Poder estar con ellos y volver a conocerlos, apoyarlos y ayudarlos. El poder estar junto con mi esposa y pertenecer al amor sin límites ni restricciones. El poder ser padre y criar a mis hijos en la manera que no cometan mis errores. Siempre he pertenecido aquí donde estoy hoy día. No lo valore en mi juventud, pero es aquí donde pertenezco... en mi libertad.

First and foremost, I want to give a special greeting to all of the Mentes Libres members. My name is Carlos and it is a pleasure to be with you through this means. I wanted to share the following thoughts with you all:

In my youth, belonging to something has been the thing that led to the destruction of my life. My mistake has always been to please others and do whatever it takes to be able to feel part of something, part of them. For me, this started in my childhood. I came to the United States at the age of nine with my grandparents and money was always lacking in our house. I had those moments where they made fun of me for my clothes and my way of speaking. To be accepted, I sold drugs and with the money I started to buy things that, at the time, I thought would make me part of something. To belong and be accepted. My mistakes landed me in prison, where I spent 25 years.

In those years I understood the things that truly have value. I dreamed of belonging again to that freedom that I had thrown away like trash. I wanted to belong to my family again, to love, the privilege of being able to choose what I want. Belonging to society, to the life of the worker... I wanted to belong to MY freedom again!

After twenty-five years I belong to that freedom. I have been free for almost three years and there is nothing better than to belong to this freedom again. I am enjoying belonging to everything that I thought I would never be able to see again. Being able to be part of my family has been the best. Being able to be with them and get to know them again, support them and help them. Being able to be together with my wife and belong to love without limits or restrictions. Being able to be a father and raise my children in the way so that they do not make my mistakes. I have always belonged here where I am today. I did not value it in my youth, but this is where I belong... in my freedom.

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ TG passed his college class on Greek Translation.
- ★ DM completed the Challenge Program and an anger management class.
- ★ SM completed the Flikshop School of Business training program.
- ★ KL enrolled in the Georgetown Pivot Program (business and entrepreneurship certificate program for formerly incarcerated individuals).
- ★ RN, GD, and LP were selected for the Break Free fellowship (on-the-job training program for formerly incarcerated individuals under IRAA)
- ★ LW earned his driver's license less than a month after coming home.
- ★ RH received his CDL (Commercial Driver License).

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club

Concrete Rose

with Neely



Hello Free Minds readers! Our latest BAM book, *Concrete Rose* by Angie Thomas, follows the story of seventeen-year-old Maverick, whose life forever changes when he finds out he's going to be a father. Thank you to everyone who shared their meaningful responses with us, we enjoyed seeing what you all had to say:

1. Maverick goes through numerous challenges over the course of the book – any one of which would be traumatic – and yet he is dealing with them simultaneously. With everything he has going on, who in his life do you think had the most positive influence

on him? Why? Who has had the most positive influence in your life, and why?

AHA: Who stood out to me was Mr. Wyatt. He was tough on him, but wanted what was best for him, instilling in him opportunities, responsibilities, and growth. He even taught him something that he would excel in and love with growing plants, so he gave him a lot of tough love which worked out in the end. The most positive influence in my life was one of my uncles who always sought to guide me in a different direction. He would always try to teach me through his actions and from his own mistakes. He passed away once I was incarcerated, but his advice led to many changes in my life I will forever live with!

FJ: His baby mother, because he has a child on the way and she wants him to do right by his child and be there to see him/her grow up. My cousin, because he made his mistakes and learned the right way of life, and now he's motivating me to do the right things in life. To look forward to a long future in a positive way of living.

MH: There are positive influences around him such as his mother, his girlfriend, his neighbor/store owner, and his son. However, I believe he's had the most influence on his life. For me, I had positive influences in my life when I was outside. My wonderful big family, friends, neighbors, faith, everybody in my city/town back home know each other. I was never a stranger.

RP: I believe his cousin that was killed had the most positive influence on him, though Dre participated in the negative activity. Maverick still knew he wanted him to do something different, be different from him, hence Maverick always saying to himself, that's what Dre would want. Maverick's son also played a major role in Maverick's decisions. Mine was my mother and my female cousin, who was shot and killed when she was 15. My mother always stayed on me to do right, as well as showing what was right. She did so much good, such as making and delivering meals for the needy, making sure me, my sister, and my cousins did not need anything, and keeping my family together. She died when I was 16 years old. My cousin that was killed lived with me since I was 5. She was like my sister, always did right/good. She walked the step.

SW: I think he had 3 major people be a positive influence on him: his mom who is a single Black parent raising a child who is misguided by the streets, but she knows he is capable of good; Mr. Wyatt who has

been a father to Maverick, and has drilled good morals into his head since he was a child; and Dre, who was a father who wanted the best for his kid, and also wanted to limit Maverick's exposure to the streets. My grandmother has been the most positive influence in my life. She showed me what hard work looked like, and she showed me love. She didn't have to do it, but she wanted to do it.

2. King's relationship with Maverick is complicated, and when they disagree, Maverick feels like he doesn't even know King. How do you feel about their friendship? Did you ever feel forced to choose between what you believed in, and a friendship? How did it make you feel?

FJ: He's trying to change his ways to positive from negative and he doesn't like it. No! I didn't have to go through that.

SW: You could see holes in the friendship from the start of the book. They were tight, but as the story progressed, King wanted more of the street life, that fast life that claims many people at a young age. King lost both of his parents, so to him the streets are all he has. We don't know if King had positive influences like Maverick. They were brothers, but in the street life that's only a word. I was never forced to choose between what I believe in and a friendship. My 3 closest friends from childhood to this day all have roots in the church, so we all have been pretty similar in what we believe in.

RP: I feel there really was no friendship on King's end. Someone isn't truly a friend if they're only backing you on something negative, but when things get devastating, etc, they switch up or do not give the same energy. Yes, I did have to make a choice between what I believed in and friendship. It made me feel stuck. Really a bit bad, like I can't leave my friend off and I can't go against what I think is best for me. Making the choice to choose friendship has had me here since I was 18, I am 32 now.

MH: Who we spend most of our time with, those we call friends, companions, etc., have a big influence on us and who we are. In Islam it says (I am paraphrasing) if you spend time with a blacksmith, you will get the smell of smoke on you, but if you are in the company of someone who sells perfume, you will smell of perfume. The point is, who we chose to be with reflects on us. So we must know and be wise about who to have around us. Of course sometimes I feel I had to do something just because I felt I would look bad, and sometimes a person loses his/her focus and just goes with the flow that's created by the environment those who he/she surrounds themselves with. It makes a person not in control of his/her own lives and future.

AHA: Their friendship to me feels like two people going in different directions. They are not in agreement with a lot. Some relationships drift apart when one doesn't see what the other is doing as good for them, so



King is on one thing and Maverick another. I never felt forced to choose between what I believed and friendship, since I chose to think for myself in situations.

3. How does learning that he is a father change Maverick's life? Does he see his life differently? If so, in what way? What is an event in your own life that changed the way you viewed things? How did/does it make you see things differently?

AHA: It changes his life drastically since now he has to provide and raise a child while he is still young, and had to learn new things as a parent he never knew. With this change he sees his life differently as those around him stress the importance of fatherhood and responsibilities as a parent. And due to his child just being left with him once, finding out he is a father, having to think and adjust to being a parent, is out of the norm for him. An event in my own life that changed my views and thinking was having my daughter, which made me view life differently and worth more than before when I did not view it as such and was living recklessly. So it opened my eyes and helped me change the direction my life was on.

FJ: Changing him to do right for his child. Yes, now being a man and now a father. Knowing I have a child, I got to make the right decisions, not just for me, but for my child as well.

MH: When Maverick became a father his life changed. He was already at a crossroads in his life, not sure which way to go. But when he became a father, he was no longer only responsible for his own life, but also his sons. A son who forced him to choose the right way and brought a fire of love in his heart that he never felt before. There are many events that changed my life completely. One of them, the war, the invasion of my home country Iraq by the USA. All the war and the things that came with it, at that time I was 15 years old, life changed. Everything is no longer the same. The second I left my home country, it was hard and my incarceration, despite the hardship of that, I believe I became better in knowing the world and myself. Although I still struggle with myself, it opened my eyes and I learned a lot. Of course there were many events that happened in my home country during the war, like seeing all the chaos and death of people I know and care about.

SW: As any 17-year-old, he thought his life was over with Ilesha running off and leaving a 3-month-old baby with him. He thought he couldn't do it. But with his mom's help, he knew he had to man-up and do it. This made him into a real man, and he started to think better for himself and Seven. Too many events in my life have changed the way I view things, but being at the DC Jail incarcerated for 3 and a half years changed my whole view on life and people. It's a place that can destroy you if you let it, but I refused to let that happen to me. I started to read and write, and that changed my life forever. I learned that a book can give you ultimate freedom, it frees your mind.

RP: I feel like he realizes it's not just about him anymore. He really has someone that is from him, a part of him, by him, that can't do anything but depend on him. Yes, he sees his life differently. He knows that all normal routines and lifestyles have to change if he calls himself a man and a father. He knows in order to make sure his son grows right he has to give his all financially, mentally, morally, physically, and emotionally. When my mother died, I definitely saw things differently. It makes me see no matter how good or young you are, you can leave at any time.

4. On the drive home from visiting Markham's campus, Lisa lets Mav know she has no intention of pursuing a relationship with a "gang-banger." Mav is devastated. On p. 279, he writes, "Since I ain't shit, I ain't got shit to lose. I may as well kill the person who killed Dre." What are your thoughts on this reaction?

FJ: He's going down the wrong path, and he's going to lose his relationship with his woman.

SW: It's the classic, "Why try?" response. Red was the reason why he was in so much pain. At that point, he wasn't finishing high school. The love of his life didn't want to be with him. So he knew what he had to do. He

acted on impulse and anger, but it made complete sense to me. It's what the streets teach so many young men, and they do it.

MH: I believe when Mav heard what his girlfriend said, he felt rejected and that he is worth nothing and that is hard on a young man who is already struggling with what happened to his cousin Dre. His struggle of avenging his cousin's death and other events in his life.

RP: I immediately had thoughts of several times I felt like I did not have anything to lose and not a thing or a goal. When you've been in for over a decade, your mail isn't coming in or going out, no phone to call people, or ain't going home anytime soon and it's looking like you'll do at least another year on lockdown. You'll get into this type of mind frame.

AHA: He is speaking in his feelings since Lisa, who he loves, is not gonna put up with his mess trying to make him change. He feels like if you're not by my side, I have no one, so I'll do me.

5. How did you feel about what happened with Maverick and Red, and the decision that Maverick made about his plan? Did his choice show weakness or strength? What motivated his decision? Have you ever made a choice that others might have seen as weak, but that in reality, took a lot of strength on your part?

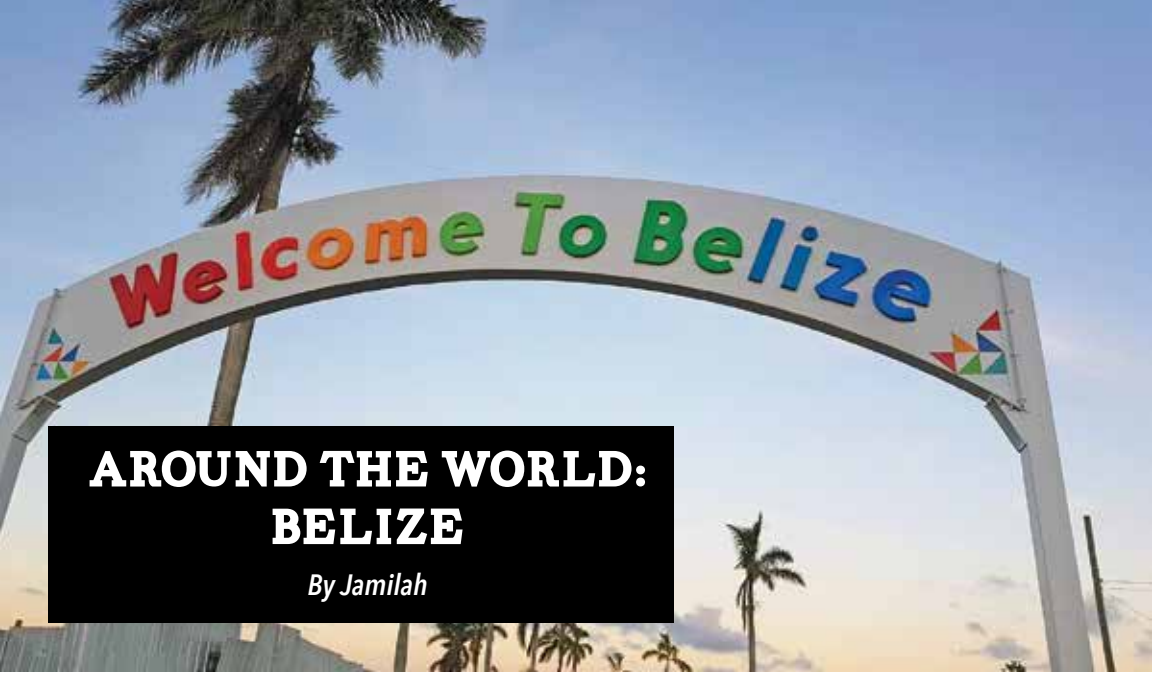
MH: It showed great strength. It is easy to destroy, but it is harder to build. If he did what he intended to do, he would have destroyed his life. Instead he chose to build his life for his son, mom, dad who's in prison, girlfriend, and the neighbor Mr. Wyatt who all believed in him. I believe his son was the motivation. Myself and others in the prison system, we go through these choices almost daily. In Islam, it says that the strong is not the one who wrestles, but the strong is the one who controls himself when he is angry. In prison people lose their lives over stupid things that are absolutely worth nothing. But people lack the courage to see it, instead they only see and think, "if I don't do something, everybody will think I'm a coward," and a person loses his whole life. This type of mentality must be changed. There is a big difference. They, including myself, must see and know that our lives are way more valuable than the prison stupid stuff and the crimes in general. We must value ourselves, our families, our communities, and humanity.

RP: I feel it was the right decision and the best one for him. Many will definitely say it was weak if they were in the street, but I feel it was strength to love his cousin the way he did, to feel Red did it, and was able to let him go, and he is going to have to live with that too. He's strong. Yes, I had to make a decision (this is the crazy part). It was actually the same situation as Maverick and more.

FJ: He's making the wrong plans. Weakness. Thinking he can do what he wants and not lose his relationship. No...

AHA: I felt it was a complicated situation knowing who you think killed your loved one was in your presence. He really didn't know, but had an idea, so the decision he made was a plan he felt he was obligated to do. So he rushed into it and was hit with a lot of thoughts and emotions. To me he showed a lot of strength to think and choose the right choice in a tough situation. I think his kids motivated him not to do it and be in prison like his father if he was caught. I have made a lot of choices others may not have agreed with. It was my choice that may have been weak in others' eyes, but I was taught to be strong and do what I want.

SW: The plan that Maverick planned out showed me that he can in fact plan out a future event for himself, although a stupid one. The choice not to kill Red proved that he was a plan he felt he was obligated to do. It showed that he has a heart, because just like himself, Red is a father, and he is growing up without his father. His motivation to not kill Red came from himself. He was motivated to not be like his father in jail, and didn't want blood on his hands. At some point, I didn't want to live anymore. Growing up was so hard, then at 32 I got locked up. Killing myself was an option, but I didn't do it. If I did, that would have been the easy way out. But I use my story as a source of strength, and I'm proud to share it.



AROUND THE WORLD: BELIZE

By Jamilah

I was blessed this year to visit the beautiful country of Belize, particularly San Pedro, Belize.

In July, my three besties and I embarked on a journey to visit the soon-to-be home of one of my best friends for her birthday!

She really wanted us to see why she purchased land there and was so excited about her big move to Belize. Well, after many conversations about the land's vast beauty and simple way of life, I was eager to visit it and learn more about the culture so we joined her for this four-day vacation.

Before I get into more details of my experience, part of what I learned while there was the rich culture of the Belizean people. Many people I met were either Mayan, Creole, or Chinese, and there were many Caucasians there as well. What we would refer to as Black or of African descent, were the Creole people, while the Maya people were comprised of the native people and descendants of Latin American countries.

Belize is a country of exploration and it is a major attraction for lovers of nature. Most tourism consists of travelers wanting to snorkel, dive, and fish its plentiful waters. Located in Central America with 240 miles of Caribbean coastline and over 400 islands, and many ruins, it's a prime location for people wanting to explore the jungle or the sea.

The town of San Pedro where we spent most of our visit, is the largest city on the island of Ambergris Caye, in northern Belize.



Its sandy streets are lined with wooden houses, seafood restaurants, and beach bars. As the travel blog Exploratory Glory wrote, "As with most keys (a low island or coral reef) in the Caribbean, Ambergris Caye has nothing in terms of mountains or even hills and is essentially completely flat. That being said, this spectacular island has so much to offer, such as; pearly white-sand beaches with turquoise blue waters, super-friendly locals with a uniquely blended culture, delicious food with a Mexican-Caribbean twist, and interesting wildlife like large iguanas and crocodiles." (exploratoryglory.com)

When we arrived in Belize, we saw firsthand what my friend experienced during her exploration of this beautiful land. The way of life was slower-paced, as the main mode of transportation, specifically for San Pedro, was golf carts. Only a small portion of the roads were

paved, while much of it was limestone and difficult to navigate. Despite the rough terrain, it was still a pleasure to experience such a different way of life. The visitors and local people blended together as everyone seemed to be in tune with the environment.

I experienced for the first time the small passenger plane (called a puddle-jumper) from the airport in Belize City to San Pedro, which was a very scary situation for me! It was quite different from the commercial flights I'm more familiar with. It was only a 15-minute flight, and the puddle-jumper flew very close to the ocean. Although the views were amazing, it was scary at the same time. Once in San Pedro and after picking up the rental golf cart, we headed to our beautiful four-bedroom villa that overlooked the lagoon side of Ambergris Caye. Although the water was much calmer, it set the tone for a peaceful vacation full of amazing sunsets and sunrises. The view was amazing, day and night!



My favorite part of the trip was the day visit to Secret Beach, located on the west side of the island where the water is crystal clear with a sandy bottom beach that you can walk out approximately a mile before the water even touches your face. We enjoyed fresh and tasty grilled local food, amazing quesadillas, and "un Belizeable" cocktails that were delivered directly to us while swimming in the amazing turquoise waters. We met other vacationers from all over the mainland US and some other sister islands and exchanged stories about our stay in Belize. While this was a great place to rest, relax and soak up some sun we had to get back to the villa due to the mosquito bites I endured during our commute to the beach. That was the not-so-good part of my trip. On our last full day of vacation, we decided to take a day trip back to Belize City by way of water taxi. It was a breezy hour and a half ride both ways, which gave me a sense of appreciation for the puddle jumper 15-minute flight we experienced on our first day. Once in the city, we were approached by many of the natives to either purchase jewelry or the beautiful artifacts made from the country's most lucrative trade, mahogany wood. We were also approached by many tour guides to purchase their services. This was a bit overwhelming but we quickly chose a reputable guide who provided an interesting background of the history of Belize and showed us the way of the locals. We learned that the Belizean school system modeled the US school system for the most part, although largely operated by the Catholic Church using a church-state partnership. Public schools are free to all citizens of Belize; however, we were told that most non-natives utilize a private school system.



Source: Encyclopædia Britannica

We witnessed what most tourists probably don't usually get – which was just what we wanted. Our guide took us to some of the most urban areas including where he lived. He then took us to his favorite restaurant that served good authentic Belizean food. Last but certainly not least, we toured the famous Belize City Rum Distillery, where we learned how the Creole Africans were called "Rum Runners" and were used to travel by sea and land to get the alcohol/rum from Belize to the U.S. during the prohibition era (the period from 1920-1933 when alcohol was banned in the US). Of course, the U.S. government wasn't happy about this, so rum runners had to figure out how to get it there without getting caught.

All in all, it was a beautiful day filled with history, culture, and great knowledge of the country.

On my flight home, I took that time to reflect on our stay. I thought of my friend's excitement to buy land and move to Belize and I thought of the Belizean flag and all that it stood for. Representing the independence from Great Britain with two men referred to by the locals as the "Yellow Man and the Chocolate Man," making it the only national flag in the world with humans on it, and the mahogany tree and the national motto, "SUB UMBRA FLOREO" (Under the Shade, We All Flourish). At that moment I thought, she will thrive there and I would always have somewhere to escape to.

FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB & WRITING WORKSHOP

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: CELEBRATION

By Julia

As we look ahead to the start of the new year, we want to take time to celebrate YOU! For the next issue of the *Connect*, let's all give ourselves a collective pat on the back for being here and being a crucial part of our Free Minds community. At our weekly Free Minds staff meetings, we have a little tradition we call "glows," which is where every member of the team is encouraged to share their glow for the week: something they're proud of, something they did exceptionally well, something new they learned or tried... what's your glow? What do you want to celebrate about yourself? Let's think too about all sorts of celebrations – favorite memories of celebrations with friends or family, or things we plan to celebrate in the future? No dream is too big! Let's take this time to uplift and celebrate each other.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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