

July/August 2026  
Vol. 15, Issue 3

# Free minds Connect



# Imagination

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# LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Greetings Free Minds Imaginators!

I am writing to you as I listen to the iconic song "Imagine" by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. I just noticed this video has been streamed over 900 million times on YouTube! It clearly has spoken to a basic human need to believe there could be something better. And that's what this issue is all about. My imagination is always sparked when I turn to a book, a song, a piece of art, or experience the fruits of others' amazing creativity – which is why I love this issue. I will be turning to it a lot to keep my wheels of new ideas and creations greased. Thank you!

A part of imagination I love is engaging in creative problem solving. I remember first hearing the term when I was a teenager on the job when my boss said I was a very good "creative problem solver." I was so happy about the compliment but thought, what exactly does that mean? Lol. So ever since then, I've been very interested in this concept and look for people who do this in all parts of their life. The experts explain it this way: "Creative problem solving is attempting to overcome static, predictable and obvious thinking with techniques designed to encourage and spark creativity" (Source: "21 Examples of Creative Problem Solving," Simplicable.com). This is why Free Minds members are so incredible – you are all powerful creative problem solvers who, when faced with an obstacle or challenge, look for innovative ways to solve it. You most definitely do not practice static or predictable thinking!

Read on and you will see exciting examples of creative thinking. On page 9, Carlos delves into how Virtual Reality (VR) programs have been used to improve social skills, develop coping mechanisms for dealing with trauma, and help people practice reentry into society. Those interested in learning about the wonderful impacts of utilizing their imaginations through creative writing will enjoy Avery's article, "Did You Know: Benefits of Creative Writing" (page 41). As you know, here at Free Minds we could spend countless articles on this subject!

In this issue's Reentry Profile (page 16), Joy converses with Free Minds member Sahir, who puts those benefits of creative writing into practice. He shares how for him,

"Imagination is art. Imagination is expression. Imagination is freedom," recognizing the boundless possibilities that are in front of us. His words resonate with me, and remind me of DK's poem "Unlocking Imagination" on page 10:

*Imagination does not open a door outward  
it opens one inward, endlessly.*

To help you open that inner door, float on a cloud meditation with Kelli on page 25, immersing yourself in the endless calming possibilities of nature.

In this issue, we're also debuting a new expanded sports column led by passionate sports fan Isaiah, who imagined a new *Connect* section and is now turning that imagination into reality! Check it out on page 36 and let us know what you think.

I always like to look to other communities and other countries as well to expand our vision of what we can do and what's possible. I'm excited about another international connection we made recently, and you can read all about it on page 34 in Sofia's interview with Diana, a creative visionary working with incarcerated youth in Ecuador. We can learn so much from each other when we gain these international perspectives. If you have a message you'd like to share with Diana and her students after reading this issue, let us know!

In the meantime, keep those imaginations blazing. Together, we can keep exploring new possibilities for ourselves, for Free Minds, and for the world.

Until Next Time,  
Tara

*May the long-time sun  
Shine upon you  
All love surround you  
And the pure light  
Within you  
Guide your way on*

**Next Issue's Theme: Self-Awareness**

*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!)

## FREE MINDS HAS A NEW MAILING ADDRESS!

Free Minds Book Club

P.O. Box 73618

Washington, DC 20056

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# FREE MINDS HQ

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

*By Rebecca*

## **Wallo267 Visits Free Minds Members Behind the Wall**

At the end of April, Wallace Peeples aka Wallo267 came to visit Free Minds members at the Youth Services Center and the DC Jail complex to discuss his book *Armed with Good Intentions*. In addition to being an entrepreneur, motivational speaker, and cultural influencer, Wallo267 is also a returning citizen, having served nearly 20 years in prison. Wallo shared about his journey of transformation and imparted hard-earned words of wisdom to the members of our Title 16, Lead Up, and Young Men Emerging (YME) book clubs. Wallo emphasized the importance of figuring out who you are, who you want to become, and what steps you're going to take to get there. He also affirmed the power of books, both as a way to escape difficult surroundings and as a tool for gaining knowledge. When asked about their experience of Wallo's visit, our members were full of positive feedback, sharing how relatable and inspiring Wallo was and how his message really impacted them.

## **Free Minds Members Share Their Creative Talents Through Project Poetic Justice**

For the second year, Project Poetic Justice facilitated a 10-week program about poetry and music with residents of the DC Jail. Several Free Minds members participated in this unique and creative opportunity where residents write original poetry and partner with composers to create new musical compositions based on the original poetry. The program culminated in two presentations, one inside the DC Jail and one at a Busboys and Poets location in Northwest DC. Both showcases featured performances of the original poems and musical compositions. For the presentation at the DC Jail, residents delivered gripping spoken word and rap over a live piano, while others had their works brought to life by visiting vocalists. The audience of peers erupted into passionate standing ovations and shouted out words of encouragement after each participant finally heard their track performed live for the first time. The presentation at Busboys and Poets was also an incredible event with amazing talent. Congratulations to our amazingly creative members and huge thanks to Project Poetic Justice for this inspired program!

## **Poet Ambassador Keonte Presents at DC Superior Court Webinar**

In June, Poet Ambassador Keonte participated in a virtual panel for the DC Superior Court. The panel, which featured judges, professors, social workers, attorneys, and doctors, discussed the ways that childhood contact with the justice system can have long term and wide reaching effects on an individual's life. Keonte powerfully shared about his lived experience as a young adult impacted by the justice system. He touched on the ways that seeking belonging can lead young people down a negative path and highlighted the pitfalls of a juvenile justice system that fails to consider the difficulties a young person has faced when determining sentences. Keonte also emphasized the benefits of programs like the Young Men Emerging (YME) unit at the DC Jail, which helped him to grow and thrive during his incarceration and encouraged him to better himself once home. He asserted that "incarceration and conviction does not have to be the end all be all" for young people, and that judges should consider how they can help improve lives, not just dole out punishment. A big shout out to Keonte for sharing his story and using it to advocate for others!

## **In Loving Memory**

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

---

### *Rest in Power:*

Glen, James, Cortez, Derrick, Christian, JohnQuan, Nadar, Andre, Darond, Dontel, Tyree, Antwone, Amari, Kuron, Dwayne, Darnell, Marcus, Wayne, Eric, Sharod, Arthur, Isaiah, DeMario, Mshairi, Tahlil, Donta, Joshua, John, Delonte J., Eddie, Gary, Benny, Michael, David, Navaras, Dewayne, Tyrone, Darius, Aaron, Harold, Anthony, Donald, Bruce, Delonte K., Shawn, Roderick, Antoine, Davon, Jahmeze, Deonte, Stephon, Kavon, Damani, Kelvin, Melvin, Demetric, Jamal, James, Deangelo, Raequan, Roy, Anthony W., Anthony P., David J., Quinton, Vance, Luis, Shahid, Malik, Joe, Marquell, Michelle

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



## FREE MINDS MAILBAG

*We love getting mail from our Free Minds family. Here are some of your thoughts on recent Connect issues.*

**RA:** I read the book "The Only Good Indians" and yes indeed it was a page turner. I'm not into scary things, but the book was definitely a good read. I've read several books throughout my incarceration and I like "The Master Plan" by Chris Wilson. It was one of the best books I read about somebody's life in prison.

**AHA:** Hearing from everyone in the Animal Kingdom *Connect* about their pets, their love for them, and the photos of you all included was special. It's a lot more I can't wait to enjoy once I am home again like going to the zoo and spending time with my mom's dog Isis, who has been around for a while.

**TG:** I love seeing Free Minds mail come through my door. It makes me feel like I'm not forgotten and cared about. I don't put effort into my writing. I put my heart into my writing. Keeping myself free never saw it that way. I understood keeping your mind free, but I see now that I am keeping my mind free.

**DA:** I received the Animal Kingdom *Connect*, and I must say that it was a page turner from beginning until the end... I enjoyed seeing the wonderful pictures of 'Free Minds Furry Friends.' I also enjoyed reading about the PAL therapy dog program. In fact, I was so inspired by this program, that I presented the article 'Protecting My Little Homies' during morning meeting in my program.

**DP:** I'm so glad you sent me the books *The Sun Does Shine* and *The Many Lives of Mama Love*. Their stories motivated me so much. I did not know Anthony Ray and Laura Love Hardin were connected through books.

**KB:** Thanks for all the warm correspondence and BAMs, etc. You guys have been keeping me busy! It is my honor that I am able to get around to utilizing some of those amazing writing prompts that some of the young brothers and sisters at Free Minds have been sending me.

**BG:** I was thrilled to see my entry in the Free Minds *Connect* 'Generations.' Thank you so much!

## QUOTE-I-VATOR

*"The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."*

– Toni Morrison,  
American novelist and editor



Toni Morrison

*"If you can imagine it, you can achieve it. If you can dream it, you can become it."*

– William Arthur Ward, American writer

*"The man who has no imagination has no wings."* – Muhammad Ali,  
American professional boxer and activist

*"The visionary starts with a clean piece of paper, and reimagines the world."*

– Malcolm Gladwell, British-Canadian journalist and author

*"Every human has four endowments – self awareness, conscience, independent will and creative imagination. These give us the ultimate human freedom... The power to choose, to respond, to change."* – Stephen Covey, American educator and author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*

*"You don't have to sit back and take whatever comes. You can change things. You can imagine better."* – Octavia E. Butler, American science fiction writer

*"The imagination is where all the seeds of our future are planted. It is where we prepare for our liberation."* – Alice Walker, American author and activist

# FAMILY TIES: INSIDE SCOOP TO CHENO'S FAMILY TIES

*By Isaiah*

*For this issue's Family Ties article, I had the chance to interview our Young Adult Free Minds member, Cheno. He's spending time with his family and recently welcomed a baby girl. This article follows Cheno and his interactions with his family before, during, and after his incarceration.*

**Isaiah:** How long have you been home, and what are you up to now?

**Cheno:** I've been home three and a half years. I spend a lot of time in the house with my family, still job searching. I have two daughters now.

**Isaiah:** Congratulations!

**Cheno:** Thank you so much. I just be with my kids basically. I don't hang out that much. I just be with my kids, my wife, and my family.

**Isaiah:** What does your family consist of now, and what have you done with your family since you've been home?

**Cheno:** My family consists of my wife, kids, grandma, and mom. My grandma and mom live on their own. But I've taken my daughters and my wife to the movies, splash parks, shopping, out to eat, malls, parks, and for some ice cream.

**Isaiah:** What was your relationship like with your family before your incarceration?

**Cheno:** Before I was incarcerated, my relationship with my family wasn't bad, but it wasn't good either. I say that because drugs came into play, and I was in the streets. I also felt like I was grown and people couldn't tell me what to do. So, a lot of times my family and I used to clash. Knowing how I am, I would just keep my distance before I got mad or it boiled over into something different. A lot of times when there were family get-togethers, like a cookout at my grandma's house or meeting up at the park, I wouldn't show up. I knew what it would lead to: being judged and people trying to tell me how to live my life. "Oh, Cheno, you need to do this or that." At the time, I didn't like this because I felt like I was grown, and if you weren't going to help me, don't tell me what to do.

**Isaiah:** How long were you incarcerated, and how did you stay connected with your family while you were incarcerated?

**Cheno:** The last time I was incarcerated, I was incarcerated for a year and a half to two years. I stayed connected with my family through pictures and phone calls. I used to write here and there unless I'm sending, like, a letter to my daughter so she could feel more connected to me.

**Isaiah:** What advice would you give to folks who are still incarcerated on how they can maintain their relationships with their family?

**Cheno:** That's hard because I've met a lot of people who have burnt bridges with their family. Like, I understand some things you could come back from, but some things can make them not want to be around you. Some things you can't amend until the other person is ready. Unless it's something we both did wrong, we could both talk to each other. However, when you've done someone else wrong, you're on their time. You can't tell a person when they should forgive you. For me, forgiving a person and talking to a person are different. I can forgive you, but never talk to you again. I'm forgiving you for the sake of my sanity and not forgiving you for you. If you're on good terms, write letters, make phone calls, and text. Some homies are indigent, and they don't have money to do all of that. I was fortunate to have money and would try to lend a hand to others so they could connect with their children and family.

If you have kids while you're incarcerated, there shouldn't be any excuse not to talk to this child because this kid needs you, whether

you're there or you're not; you're not dead. You're still alive. So they should be able to hear your voice. So always reach out. If you can't call or text, send letters because if you're indigent, they'll give you stamps. They let you send free letters if they know you don't have money in your account, and some homies will give you stamps to send letters to your family.

**Isaiah:** I didn't know they'd give you free stamps.

**Cheno:** Yeah, they give you stamps in the Feds (Federal Bureau of Prisons). If your account has been on zero for, I think, longer than 30 days or something, you can request the indigent packet, and they'll give you stamps. Just let your case manager know in your unit. Like, "Look, I'm indigent, you can check my account, and I haven't had any money come in a while, and I just need stamps to write my people." They'll give you stamps.

**Isaiah:** What would you say to family and friends who are on the outside as far as how they can support their loved ones who are incarcerated?

**Cheno:** A way to support them is writing them. A lot of people don't like to, but I tell people that writing a letter takes no more than an hour of your day. You have 24 hours in a day, and eight of those hours are spent scrolling on your phone. It's nothing to write a person a letter; a letter goes a long way more than a phone call. I have seen a lot of people say that. A letter will make a person cry to know that you sat down to take time out of your day to write them. That's something big.

In my first bid, I had over 30 people on my call list that I could call, and I had to take people off because I had so many. However, the last bid I did, I only had about four people on my call list: my mom, my baby mother, my grandma, and I think one or maybe two of my friends; that's it. If other people did answer, it was a rack (a bunch) of bull crap. "Oh boy, I can't wait for you to get back out here so we can f\*\*\* the streets up."

**Isaiah:** Like no, you're trying to go a different way.

**Cheno:** That's what I'm saying. It's the ongoing cycle. Dudes are going to ride your wave when you come home. "Oh, he's home." They'll give you this or give you that. Now, you're back in jail and they are talking about you. "Dang bro, you dumb as s\*\*\* bro," but you gave me the tools to be dumb.

**Isaiah:** How can guys, when they come out, ignore those distractions that may try to get them landed back in jail?

**Cheno:** Don't go back to your old neighborhood. That's the key to it. Wherever you claim or where you say you're from, don't go back. Simple.

**Isaiah:** Our theme for this *Connect* magazine issue is Imagination. What comes to your mind when you think about Imagination? Can you give examples of how you use your imagination in different situations?

**Cheno:** What comes to my mind when I think about imagination is things that you think of that you want to put into play. Like when I was younger, my imagination was becoming a billionaire, me living in a big house, and retiring my mom and my grandma. I don't know, I might become a billionaire, but the most I'm pushing for is becoming a millionaire for now, and I imagine that every day. Being able to go into a store and not have to check my account to make sure I have enough. I can just tap my card and go. Stuff like that. That's one of the things that I feel like I imagine most is being financially stable and making sure my family is good.



# TECH TALK: SPOTLIGHT ON CREATIVE APPS

By Emily

Imagine this: you are a poet or a musician and want to share your art with the world. Or, you are a personal trainer and want to reach new audiences. Maybe you are a visual artist and looking to find a new medium. In any of these scenarios, technology can help you out! While a phone cannot necessarily replace specialized equipment, there are so many apps (applications) that you can download onto your phone or other device when you get home that can help you in your creative pursuits.

## Music

Most phones come with a few apps that are pre-loaded onto the phone. One of these is a recording app. On the iPhone it is called "Voice Memos." This works as your own personal audio recording device right on your phone. I know people that use it whenever they have a creative idea that they don't want to forget. My friend who is a musician uses it to record herself playing guitar and will send me the recordings. She also downloaded a tuning app that helps her tune her guitar. There are other apps that you can pay for where you can record music and edit it right on your phone, or download recordings and remix them.

## Video/Photography

All phones come with a camera as part of the phone. You can use this to take photos and to record videos. Most phones even have settings where you can take timelapse or slo-mo (slow-motion) footage. Then, you can normally clip the video or adjust the volume right in the camera app. If you want to put together a bunch of different clips, there are many free apps that will allow you to upload the footage from your phone and then splice it together. From there you can send it to

friends and family or post it online.

## Graphic Design/Drawing

In a previous tech column we covered the "Notes" app where you can make notes to yourself, create a grocery list, or write anything you want! The notes app also has a feature that can turn your finger into a pen. Instead of typing, you can draw right on your screen. I will give a caveat that this is pretty hard for large fingers on small screens. However, many of my friends who are artists have tablets that they draw on using a stylus. A stylus is a specialized pen that instead of ink, has a tip that works on a touch screen device. There are also many free platforms that you can use to make simple graphics and designs. Free Minds, for example, uses a website called Canva to create the birthday cards and other graphics that we send you all.

## Inspiration

Technology is also a great way to find inspiration for any future creative endeavors. On TikTok (a video sharing social media platform) people often post tutorials on all kinds of things, from crocheting to water colors to woodworking. There are also apps that people use to spark their creativity. One app, called Pinterest, allows users to scroll through images that inspire them and create "boards." When my friend was creating her baby's nursery, she used Pinterest to help her pick out design features and create the room that she wanted. There are also many apps that allow users to interact with each other and talk about specific things. A social media platform called Reddit, for example, has pages dedicated to specific topics where you can talk to each other and ask questions. People sometimes also share free patterns or advice.

# ESSAYS & STORIES BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## The Library of Unwritten Stories By DK

He found it late at night, though there was no night in the place itself. It appeared as a corridor that should not have existed between familiar hallways of memory and sleep. At the end of it stood a library. No guard. No sign. Just shelves that stretched farther than logic allowed. He stepped inside. The books were labeled in his own handwriting. That was the first shock. Titles he did not recognize but somehow understood:

*The Boy Who Stayed Too Long in Silence. The Father I Almost Became. The Day I Finally Forgave Myself. The Life I Chose Instead of the One I Lived.*

He pulled one book down. It was warm, like it had been waiting. But when he opened it, the pages were blank. Not empty; unfinished. As he walked deeper, he realized something harder to accept: every shelf contained versions of himself he had imagined but never committed to life or paper. Some were

hopeful. Some were painful. Some were warnings.

A man in his late 40s sat at a table near the center of the library. The man looked familiar. "You're me," he said. The older version didn't deny it. "You didn't write us down," the older man said. "So we stayed unfinished." "Why show me this now?" "Because imagination doesn't disappear," he said. "It waits for discipline." The library was not a punishment. It was an inventory.

Every unwritten story represented a decision: fear over expression, survival over creation, silence over voice. The man walked back through the shelves, this time touching each spine with intention. And as he did, some books began to fill themselves slowly, as if responding to recognition. When he returned to the corridor, he carried one book with him. It was still blank. But now he understood it was not missing words. It was waiting for commitment.

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## Dream, I Dare You\* By BK

I have a fear that the percentage of people who choose not to follow their dreams is abruptly encroaching on the percentage of those who do. Unfortunately, dreams are being classified in the categories of unrealistic and fantasy more and more these days. I truly believe that if we didn't dream the world wouldn't be what it is today. All of our favorite gadgets, places, and people simply wouldn't exist. Can you imagine a world without our indispensable Apple devices, prominent architectural brainchilds, like the Eiffel Tower in France; or charismatic luminaries such as Denzel Washington and Elon Musk. All of these substantial contributions to our work, culture, products, etc... all started from a thought coupled with a conviction that it can be brought to fruition – a dream.

The beautiful thing about a dream is that it does not discriminate. It comes to the poor; the rich; the healthy; the sick; the strong; the weak; etc. And despite the potency and uniqueness of a dream's message, it is only as resilient and effective as its messenger. We all know the common saying, "get your head out of the clouds." Well I say shame on them. What we should say instead is, "get your work ethic up there with your head." As long as your dream and your drive are on the same level, who's to say what's possible?

I really enjoy watching a show on CNBC called Shark Tank. If you're not familiar, it is about entrepreneurs from all walks of life trying to keep their dreams, either of a product or service, alive by pitching their idea to a panel of investors for an infusion of cash in exchange for an equity stake in their business. This show is palpably inspirational, especially for dreamers. But, what really astonished me is that the majority of ideas pitched on this show are not out of this world. A lot

of these ideas are very simplistic, and I can almost wager they have been thought of by many others. The difference is that some people let that thought die as quickly as it arrived while other people will write that thought down, create a plan to bring that thought to existence and act on it.

Looking back at my pre-adult life, I baffle at the notion that we go from being told, "you can do whatever you put your mind towards," closer to the start of this timeline, to being counseled on a more limited, safer list of options towards the end of this timeline, right when we're about to begin our adult life. What a confidence crusher. Then it's our closest friends and loved ones that preach this to us our whole childhoods, then change course right before we give it a try. And, from experience, I know plenty of people that have gone through this. So, is it their message they have lost faith in? Or, is it us? Should we let our dreams die on account of those who told us to dream our whole lives? Or, do we owe it to ourselves to try?

For the most part, everything you consume, enjoy, critique was someone's dream. Despite the possible adversity they could have, or did, encounter, they dared to dream. In Man's Search for Meaning by Victor E. Frankl, Frankl quotes Nietzsche who said, "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how." And daring to dream is the galvanizing reason why that our lives need. So, set out to share your dreams with the rest of us. I dare you.

*\*Reprinted from the Dreams Connect (Vol. 13, Issue 1)*

# IMAGINATION & MENTAL HEALTH: VIRTUAL REALITY (VR) AS A PATH TO HEALING AND REINTEGRATION

By Carlos



I have always been intrigued by technology. I will never forget my first encounter with tech. It was when I first arrived in the United States when I was 8 years old. We were visiting a cousin who had an Atari video game console. Ever since, I have had a fascination for technology. Being incarcerated for 25 years has kept me away from it. With only commercials and magazines to keep me somewhat updated, I daydreamed of having the opportunity to enjoy this again. Marvelled by how much technology has evolved, one of the things that has caught my attention is Virtual Reality (VR). VR is a technology that creates immersive, computer-generated environments, allowing users to interact with them as if they were physically present inside them.

In this issue of our *Connect* magazine, our theme is Imagination and how fitting, since it takes a lot of imagination for VR to have come “alive.” One of my favorite games today on Playstation is *Gran Turismo* (a car driving game). When I saw the commercial for the VR version of this game, I was blown away. It looked so real. The game is already considered as a simulator instead of a game, meaning that the simulator focuses on mimicking real world and real life experiences.

Today, VR is used in many ways, healthcare (surgery practice, pain and mind care), education (job practice, school trips), and remote work (team meetings, building models) to name some. But the most interesting one is what I read about how VR can help those that are returning home from prison. Here are a few facts that I ran across upon researching for this article. In 2024, Dr. Victoria Knight at De Montfort University (in the UK) co-led a study with the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute showing that VR can help incarcerated people rehearse social skills, prepare for release and even work through trauma and addiction recovery. Also, in Catalonia, Spain, psychologists have used VR to place perpetrators of domestic violence in victim-centered scenarios, allowing them to experience the victim’s perspective. The program is called *VRrespect.me*, and it has reached over 1,000 people and shown improvement in empathy and in aggressive behavior.

Therapists have used guided imagery for a long time, asking

patients to picture safe places or imagine overcoming challenges. The American Psychological Association highlights prolonged exposure therapy, where patients confront trauma related memories through imagination and storytelling. Studies show that has reduced PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) symptoms significantly, and that imaginal exposure along with cognitive restructuring improves recovery. VR has taken this approach even further. Instead of imagining a safe place, people can put on a headset and feel as though they are walking through one. Instead of picturing a stressful situation, they can face one in a controlled environment.

Can you imagine how much this would help those that have been exposed to trauma through incarceration? Post-incarceration trauma is as real as those that return home from war. Imagine a VR program that can prepare one for release from prison. Incarceration deprives one of so many normal human day-to-day interactions to a level that people may forget how to be “normal” in society. This can also be used to prepare one for things like job interviews, and exposing them to programs in preparation for release. I can only imagine how much more this can help those that have never been incarcerated to understand what being locked up is by placing them inside a cell or a prison in order to further understand the trauma that those incarcerated experience.

This may be something that could take years for it to reach all prison reentry programs. The price alone could be something that may be of a challenge, but imagine how this would help, not just those that are returning home, but also those in the community. Returning home after years of imprisonment comes with many challenges, fractured family ties, limited job opportunities, a sense of belonging and social interaction to name some. But imagine the preparation this could provide prior to coming home. Imagine how much this could help reduce recidivism. This is the power of imagination and imagination is the the core tool to healing from trauma and mental health. VR could help people use their imaginations to move from being trapped in the past to exploring a new future. Imagine that!

# POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

## Unlocking Imagination

by DK

The key was never metal in a lock,  
It was learning how to be still inside myself.  
Years taught me how to observe everything,  
but not always how to create from nothing.  
Then I learned silence is not empty,  
it is storage for unseen worlds.  
The key is reflection: slow, honest, and unedited,  
where memory stops being a sentence and becomes clay.  
When I turn it, I don't escape reality,  
I reinterpret it.  
Inside is a younger version of me,  
and an older version I have not yet become.  
There are roads I never walked,  
and versions of life I once thought were gone.  
Imagination does not open a door outward,  
it opens one inward, endlessly.

## Imagine

AHA

Imagine something you wrote would touch many lives  
while knowing what you wrote was your truth  
Your imagination can run deep  
until what you imagine really comes true...  
We imagine a lot  
especially while alone in a cell  
22 hours a day  
7 days a week  
I imagine my life will continue to inspire many  
as I grow, learn, and extend my voice to many

## The Big Show

by JJ

To touch, to feel, to imagine or discover,  
yourself as well as those other talents.  
Sometimes using the imagination places us in the Big Show.  
To be influenced by downward looks with the bridge of a  
pair of eye glasses.  
Say without saying, now is the time.  
Imagination can be the word you need today or tomorrow.  
To get somewhere far like the Big Show, test your  
imagination.

## Magic

by LS

I can transcend, transform, and fly free as a bird;  
I can create in thee when emotions are stirred;  
And even if I can't speak, my voice shall forever be heard;  
For immortality lies in the power of the written word ...

## Imagine

by TJT

Imagine the things I'd love to see  
would some day become my reality...  
prison gates shutting behind me...  
making this place of pain, a memory.  
Imagine the sound of the gates closing...  
freeing me permanently.  
Imagine my family waiting for me,  
their voices of joy like poetry.  
Imagine the priest I will see  
assuring my tear-streaked face that god forgives me.

Imagine me reaching back in to my baby,  
the love of my life telling me she loves me.  
Imagine the dreams I dream overwhelming me...  
because they're no longer just dreams.  
Imagine the world that's hurt me so badly  
accepting me like a newborn baby.

Imagine society...

The ones I so betrayed ignorantly...  
Holding its door wide open for me.  
Imagine all of this hitting me,  
taking the breath from me.  
I can imagine all that I hope lies inside of me.  
I hope I'm imagining what shall one day be  
...my reality.

## Music

By EG

I see music as subtle noise like rainfall or the ocean  
Music can be like a heartbeat or nevertheless an emotion  
It never regresses, it warms the heart and soul  
Can make you smile or make you cry  
But either way, music can shake you to the core  
Have you wanting more  
Needing that subtle noise to ease your spirit.  
Or help you get up to go take care of business.  
Music is an emotion hands down.  
Some songs angry, some songs mad  
Some make you smile, make you sad.  
Some songs good for the now and then  
The ones that are ageless and never get old.  
You can hear it every day and it still hits the same.  
Songs trigger memories we long forgot.  
Once you hear that bass line...  
Your mind...  
In the time when you first heard that song  
You'll lay right there until the song ends and the memory fades  
Until you listen again.

# DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

*As requested by our readers*



The inside of Union Station



An apartment lined street leading to the Nationals Stadium



Cascading Waterfalls at Malcolm X Park (Meridian Hill Park)

# DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

*As requested by our readers*



Shops in Adams Morgan including Lost City Books



4400 block of Connecticut Ave NW near the University of DC



A mural located on the 1300 block of Otis Pl NW

# DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

*As requested by our readers*



Grand reopening (after renovations) of Ben's Chili Bowl landmark building on U St NW



Ben's Chili Bowl inside Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA)



Mural nearby E and 7th St NW

Have a request for the next issue's DC Photos? Write us at Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056 and let us know what you'd like to see!

# CONVERSACIONES DE MENTES LIBRES

Por Carlos

Saludos mi gente. Son mis grandes deseos que este artículo los encuentre con la mejor salud, física como al igual que mental. ¿Porqué mental? Se requiere tener una fuerza mental para poder superar el estado físico en prisión. Pasé veinticinco años tras las rejas. Veinticinco inviernos sin sentir el viento libre en mi rostro, veinticinco veranos sin caminar bajo el sol sin permiso. El tiempo en prisión no avanza: se congela, se repite, se convierte en un ciclo interminable que amenaza con quebrar la mente. Y sin embargo, hubo algo que me sostuvo, algo que me mantuvo cuerdo cuando todo parecía perdido: mi imaginación. Y este es el tema de esta edición de la revista *Connect* para este mes.

Quiero compartir esto con ustedes: La imaginación fue mi refugio. Cuando las paredes se cerraban sobre mí, yo abría ventanas invisibles. Me veía caminando por calles que ya no recordaba, abrazando a mi madre, cocinando para mis hijos, construyendo una vida que todavía no existía. Esos sueños no borraban las barras, pero me recordaban que aún podía esperar, que la esperanza no estaba muerta.

Recuerdo haber leído en [elespañol.com](http://elespañol.com), un importante periódico digital en español de Madrid, España, sobre los escritos del poeta español Miguel Hernández, quien estuvo encarcelado tras la Guerra Civil Española. Desde prisión, escribía cartas y relatos cortos para su hijo, a menudo en trozos de papel higiénico, utilizando la imaginación y la escritura como herramientas de sobrevivencia. "Yo también encontré en el papel un salvavidas...." dijo Miguel. "Escribía historias que nunca nadie leería, inventaba conversaciones con amigos que ya no estaban, describía paisajes que solo existían en mi mente. Cada palabra era un puente hacia la libertad interior." Miguel decía que escribir era como abrir una ventana en medio de la oscuridad, y yo lo entendí: la imaginación era mi aire, mi manera de seguir respirando. Al igual que Miguel, use las cartas para estar lejos de la prisión que me encerraba. Le escribí cartas largas a mi esposa. Luego empecé a escribirle historias, como novelas. Historia con personajes que nos

representaban en una vida de libertad. En otras palabras, escribía una historia y la vivíamos por ella. Dejamos que nuestras imaginaciones nos dieron libertad infinita.

La imaginación me enseñó a resistir. En un lugar donde la violencia podía estallar por una mirada malinterpretada, yo aprendí a detenerme y pensar. Imaginaba las consecuencias de cada acto: el aislamiento, el castigo, la pérdida de beneficios. Esa visión me calmaba, me daba fuerza para elegir la paz en medio del caos. La imaginación se convirtió en mi maestro de autocontrol. También me ayudó a reconstruir mi identidad. En prisión, eres un número, un expediente, un error. Pero cuando escribía, cuando dibujaba, cuando inventaba mundos, me veía como estudiante, como padre, como artista. Me inventaba. La imaginación me recordaba que yo era más que mis fallas, que aún podía ser alguien distinto. Y aunque la prisión separa, la imaginación tiende puentes. Yo imaginaba conversaciones con mi familia, proyectos comunitarios, trabajos futuros. Esos pensamientos me conectaban con el mundo exterior, me hacían sentir parte de algo más grande. Hasta cuando miraba revistas, me miraba vestido como lo mostraban en los anuncios. Era como si la sociedad me dijera: sí es posible cambiar.

La imaginación fue mi luz en la oscuridad. No eliminé las rejas ni borré las condenas, pero mantuvo mi mente sana y mi corazón lleno de esperanza. Me dio resiliencia, me enseñó a resistir, me preparó para reconstruir mi vida. La imaginación fue mi herramienta de supervivencia, de transformación y de resistencia. Invertir en ella, a través de programas creativos, educación y apoyo comunitario, no solo beneficia a quienes buscan una segunda oportunidad, también fortalece a toda la sociedad. Porque si yo pude sobrevivir veinticinco años de prisión gracias a la imaginación, cualquiera puede descubrir en ella la fuerza para seguir adelante. Dígame usted, ¿en qué maneras usas tu imaginación? ¿Hay un momento cuando tu imaginación te saca lejos de un lugar oscuro? ¿Tienes un poema? ¿Una historia que puedas narrar? Nos encantaría leer sobre él.

# FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

Greetings, everyone. It is my sincere wish that this article finds you in the best of health, both physical and mental. Why mental? Because mental strength is what is most required to overcome physical limitations. I spent twenty-five years behind bars. Twenty-five winters without feeling the wind on my face, twenty-five summers without walking in the sun without permission. Time in prison doesn't move forward: it freezes, it repeats, it becomes an endless cycle that threatens to break the mind. And yet, there was something that sustained me, something that kept me sane when all seemed lost: my imagination. And this is the theme of this month's edition of *Connect* magazine.

Imagination was my refuge. When the walls closed in on me, I opened invisible windows. I saw myself walking down streets I no longer remembered, hugging my mother, cooking for my children, building a life that didn't yet exist. Those dreams didn't erase the bars, but they reminded me that I could still hope, that hope wasn't dead.

I remember reading on [elespañol.com](http://elespañol.com), a major Spanish-language online newspaper based out of Madrid, Spain, about the writings of the Spanish poet Miguel Hernández, who was imprisoned after the Spanish Civil War. He wrote letters and short stories for his son from prison, often on scraps of toilet paper, using imagination and writing as survival tools. "I too found a lifeline in paper..." Miguel said. "I wrote stories that no one would ever read, invented conversations with friends who were no longer there, described landscapes that only existed in my mind. Every word was a bridge to inner freedom." Miguel said that writing was like opening a window in the darkness, and I understood: imagination was my air, my way of continuing to breathe. Like Miguel, I used letters to escape the prison that held me captive. I wrote long letters to my wife. Then I began to write her stories, like novels. Stories with characters that represented us

in a life of freedom. In other words, I wrote a story, and we lived it. We let our imaginations give us boundless freedom.

Imagination taught me to endure. In a place where violence could erupt from a misinterpreted glance, I learned to stop and think. I imagined the consequences of each act: isolation, punishment, loss of privileges. That vision calmed me, gave me the strength to choose peace amidst the chaos. Imagination became my teacher of self-control. It also helped me rebuild my identity. In prison, you are a number, a file, a mistake. But when I wrote, when I drew, when I invented worlds, I saw myself as a student, as a father, as an artist. I reinvented myself. Imagination reminded me that I was more than my flaws, that I could still be someone else. And although prison separates, imagination builds bridges. I imagined conversations with my family, community projects, future jobs. These thoughts connected me to the outside world, made me feel part of something bigger. Even when I looked at magazines, I saw myself dressed as if I was in the advertisements. It was as if society were telling me: Yes, it is possible to change.

Imagination was my light in the darkness. It didn't remove the bars or erase the sentences, but it kept my mind healthy and my heart full of hope. It gave me resilience, taught me to endure, and prepared me to rebuild my life. Imagination was my tool for survival, transformation, and resistance. Investing in it, through creative programs, education, and community/family support, not only benefits those seeking a second chance, but also strengthens all of society. Because if I could survive 25 years in prison thanks to imagination, anyone can discover in it the strength to move forward. Tell me, in what ways do you use your imagination? Is there a moment when your imagination takes you far away? Have you written a poem? A story? We would love to read about it.

# REENTRY PROFILE: FREEDOM IN WORDS – SAHIR'S STORY

By Joy

*This reentry profile features Sahir, a proud trans Free Minds Member and poet that I had the honor to meet with. We discussed the power of poetry, imagination, and creativity. Sahir offered insights on his creative process and the ways in which poetry is a vehicle for freedom.*

**Joy:** Could you tell me a little bit about your journey and how you discovered Free Minds?

**Sahir:** I discovered Free Minds while I was housed on one of the programming units at the DC Jail. I didn't really come out of my cell too often. But I had shared with a couple different people that I do poetry, and my friend at the time was like, "Yo, just come to the book club." And I'm like, "Girl, I do poetry. I didn't say I read books." She was like, "No, they do poems and stuff too. Just come. It's gonna be good for you." And when I went, it was so coincidental that we were reading an excerpt from a book that I resonated deeply with. Just being in the room with the other members that were actually there to read and do poetry was a great environment for me to be in at that time.

What stood out to me about Free Minds the most was that as soon as I got home, they reached out. I didn't get to meet them immediately. I had some other stuff lined up. I was homeless. I was trying to figure things out, but everywhere I went for a resource, they outsourced me, and I finally ended up at Free Minds. And Free Minds was the resource. Everything and anything I needed, they were able to honestly not only point me in the right direction, but make sure that I got what I needed. That was a really vulnerable time for me. I got locked up because I didn't have guidance, I needed help, and I had to do it all on my own. But to know that now there's a resource here—it was amazing. They gave me a peer supporter, a big brother, all types of stuff. And then I'm joining the weekly Build Up sessions on Zoom, I'm speaking to the public as a Poet Ambassador, and I've been with Free Minds ever since. With everything and anything honestly, Free Minds has been there to help me out. So that's how I got in with Free Minds.

**Joy:** That's a beautiful story. I really appreciate you sharing that. I wanted to ask, what does imagination mean to you as a creative?

**Sahir:** Imagination to me is art, and it's literally whatever comes to mind. I've been writing poems since I was a little kid. Art is expression. Art is whatever you want it to be. So yeah, that's imagination to me. Imagination is art. Imagination is expression. Imagination is freedom and just knowing that you have that freedom. Imagination really is

freeing because especially as an adult, we don't get a lot of time to daydream and imagine, but when I do, it's freeing.

**Joy:** How does imagination play a role in your creative process?

**Sahir:** My writing comes more from the things that I actually experience, but imagination comes in when I get to use my metaphors and similes and stuff like that. We want to drive the point home without just saying (for example) I took this walk today. I have a poem, and it goes, "I take this walk like a ritual carved into time," because I do take this walk every Thursday. But I use my imagination when I take it like a ritual carved into time, versus just saying I take this walk every Thursday. So yeah, when I use my similes, my metaphors, and then sometimes, every now and then, I'll write a piece just using my imagination, just freedom, or what things could look like, but mainly it comes to being able to draw that imagery for my listeners.

**Joy:** How did you discover your passion for writing?

**Sahir:** I remember the very beginning of my poetry was in school and I won a competition. I remember distinctly too that the poem had something to do with a tree and nature. I don't really remember specifically how I got into it, but I know that I've always drawn and I've always written. My dad is a public speaker. He used to talk at church a lot and stuff like that. At least for me and him, we've got that public speaking thing down. I've always admired that about him. And then as I got older, it became a way to release certain things because of bullies. So I would write things down. But yeah, I've been writing for as long as I can remember, and a lot of my poetry is freedom in words. I got to get it off my chest. Writing has always been that instant release of me, being able to get my thoughts and emotions together. I was impulsive as a kid so my dad was like, "yo just write what you feeling, write what you thinking."

**Joy:** That's so relatable. How has creativity and imagination affected your journey?

**Sahir:** I like to consider myself a realist because some of the stuff that I go through is really real and emotional, but I'm also spiritual at the same time. So the spiritual aspect kind of creates hope where I can use my imagination and my creativity in my poems. It just goes to show a little bit of my imagination and my creativity because that's what hope is for me. Hope is the imagination. Hope is the hope for you know,

better. So that's how I use it. It's really spiritual, if you ask me, my imagination and my creativity.

**Joy:** Do you experience creative blocks in your writing and what do you do to combat that?

**Sahir:** I do because sometimes I struggle between my art being art and my art being work because I have people come to me after I speak or after they read my stuff and they're like, "Yo, that freed something in me. That opened something up." So I make sure once I do hit the stage, I deliver every single time. But at the same time, I have to rein it back sometimes because it's not necessarily about everybody else. It's about me, my art, and just for me, it's a release. So whatever comes on the paper, that's what it is, and I'll just take my time with it and actually curate something beautiful. So I do experience those blocks, but I've learned recently to just lean into the block. It's really not a block, you know. It's a time where you just have to adjust or navigate a little bit differently.

**Joy:** What is something that creativity has taught you about yourself?

**Sahir:** Everything is not sad, okay? Because a lot of my poems are about going through something, or overcoming. So I love coming to Free Minds sometimes, and they're just like, "Today's prompt is imagination" or "A day in the sun" or "30 years from now where do you see yourself?" It doesn't always have to be sad. It can be funny. It can be happy. It can be light, and for me personally, I need that sometimes because again, life just be lifing sometimes, so to know that, yeah, I created this piece, it may have come from my imagination, but there is light at the end of the tunnel. You know what I'm saying? It's okay to lean into imagination.

**Joy:** Those were a lot of wise words. I really appreciate you taking the time to do this interview with me.

**Sahir:** I appreciate you guys.

## REAL WORLD OF WORK: ADVICE FROM CORNELIOUS ON BALANCING IMAGINATION WITH REALITY

*By Avery*

Cornelius is a busy man, and he wouldn't have it any other way. Most days, you can find him working as an Asset Protector at Walmart, watching over the self-checkout and ensuring people don't steal from the store. But some days, like Fridays, he cooks and sells dinners after the Muslim religious service, Juma. When he's not selling dinners, Cornelious is advertising his sea moss smoothies in the community, which are a blend of fruits and organic sea moss. Aside from that, Cornelious is beginning his barbering business after obtaining his license in April. Right now, he's trying to build up his client network while still attending weekly barber classes to maximize his skills.

When I spoke to him, Cornelious was preparing for a hectic week. He called me during his lunch break at Walmart. He still had to cook food and make smoothies after his shift, ahead of his trip to Ocean City, MD with his barber class on Thursday. Then packaging everything Friday morning before attending Juma to sell his meals.

Cornelius has been working at Walmart for eight years, and he has no plans to leave anytime soon. He enjoys the flexibility he gets as a loyal, long-time employee. He shared that he may have to get knee surgery soon, but says he'll still be able to do his job through a combination of standing and sitting. His supervisors are very hands-off in managing him, especially because he's one of the older people working there and always shows up on time for his scheduled shifts. He enjoys a degree of freedom in his role at Walmart. Cornelious says being reliable and punctual are good qualities to have as an employee and led him to getting certain benefits he might not have otherwise gotten. He also expressed the advantages of working at a store in his community because he knows the area and the people, and that helps him do his job well.



His stable employment at Walmart helps Cornelious with the pursuit of his other interests as well. Using his paychecks to cover the cost of food for Juma and fruit for sea moss smoothies, he purchases many of these ingredients from Walmart. And uses his saved funds to pay for expenses in starting his barbering career. Having a steady job for the past eight years has allowed Cornelious the opportunity to pursue other business ventures and accomplish the things he's always wanted to.

Outside of his career, Cornelious has been raising his 12-year-old niece, which can sometimes be a job in itself. Raising a kid is no easy task, and Cornelious stepped up to the challenge without hesitation almost three years ago. Cornelious described her as a very bright and helpful kid. He has been pushing her to reach her full potential in school by providing her with homework support, and he was proud to share that she got all A's on her last report card. Cornelious says his multiple career pursuits allow him to provide for her and try to give her everything she wants.



# THE WRITE WAY: SMASHING WRITER'S BLOCK

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

**By Ruby**

One of the biggest obstacles that every writer faces at some point in their creative journey is writer's block. Whether you're not sure which direction to take your story in, don't know how to describe a certain scene, or feel overwhelmed in general by the premise of your piece, just know that you're not alone in this experience. Countless writers over centuries have dealt with writer's block, often born not only out of uncertainty, but through a sense of perfectionism and need to create the perfect piece. As a matter of fact, I'm struggling with writer's block while working through this article – What if I give bad advice? Is anything I'm saying even going to help anyone overcome their own writer's block? Like I said, it happens to all of us at some point! Colson Whitehead, author of *The Nickel Boys* and several other books, says that, for him, writer's block is “a question I haven't solved yet,” but one he knows that he will “eventually answer.” Ray Bradbury, who penned the classic book *Fahrenheit 451*, exclaims that his goal when writing is always to enjoy himself. “I don't write things to benefit the world,” he says. “If it happens that [I] do, swell. I didn't set out to do that. I set out to have a hell of a lot of fun. I've never worked a day in my life. The joy of writing has propelled me from day to day and year to year” (Temple, “Is It Real? 25 Famous Writers on Writer's Block”, 2018). While there's nothing wrong with wanting to put your best foot forward and hone your craft to the highest degree possible, it's important to step back and give yourself grace and patience while you work. Each author's experience of writing is unique, which means that it might require trial and error to work through the challenges that you face. In this edition of The Write Way, we're going to be going over a few tips to help get you over any mental roadblocks that are keeping you from continuing on your writing journey.

## **TIP #1: FREE YOUR MIND THROUGH FREWRITE**

Throughout my English classes in high school, my teachers would often have us start our classes with 5-10 minutes of freewrite. Freewriting is a writing technique where the writer continuously writes without worrying about grammar, structure, or correctness, allowing ideas to flow freely onto the page. If we were writing about a book that our class was reading, then we'd spend that time writing down any thoughts about the chapter we were on—our interpretation of what happened, how we felt about character interactions and development, and anything else that stood out to us. The goal of the freewrite never was—and never is—to produce a perfect, or even coherent, piece of writing. Rather, the aim is to help oil the gears in your head in order to prepare you for what you're actually going to write about. In my experience, it works best when you allow your thoughts to flow freely without judging what you're writing about; ignoring proper grammar and structure in favor of flow; and allowing yourself all the time you need to stretch out your creative muscles. Sometimes you'll look back at what you wrote

and realize that you put out some really interesting concepts that you'll end up wanting to incorporate into your story! Even if you don't use what you wrote later on, freewriting is a wonderful way to take a step back, pause, and prepare yourself by letting your thoughts ebb and flow naturally.

### **TIP #2: IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED, TRY TRY AGAIN!**

Like the title of this section from English poet William Edward Hickson's "Perseverance", don't be afraid to have to start over if your first draft isn't working. Always remember—a first draft is not a final draft, and it is meant to be edited and fixed. With this in mind, try lowering your standards when you write your first draft so that you can start the process of merely putting ideas and thoughts on the page. You could even incorporate the concept of freewriting when you decide to dive into your first draft. When you go back to edit, a trick I've always liked to use is to go in with different colored pens if possible (my brain started associating red ink with critiques during my school years and never went back). If you don't have a variety of colors, never fret! Any pen or pencil will do. Another strategy I've always liked to use when reviewing my first drafts is having someone I trust review my work. Sometimes it helps to have a fresh set of eyes on a piece to see if there's anything we might have missed. If you don't have someone nearby that you could ask to review or don't feel comfortable doing so, that's totally fine too. Here are a few tips to help with self editing: 1. Read aloud to catch awkward phrasing. 2. Check for clarity and flow (how does it sound when you read it aloud). 3. Use grammar/style guides (ask Free Minds for books on grammar). 4. Break the piece into smaller sections and revise each one until you're satisfied with the results and the whole piece is cohesive.

### **TIP #3: WHEN IN DOUBT, SHAKE IT OUT**

Sometimes when we're working on the same task for an extended period of time, our brain starts to zone out. If you find yourself stuck while writing, consider taking a break to recuperate your thoughts. When I've been studying, reading, or writing for long periods of time and I start to lose interest, I like to take a break to stretch out. It's especially common for us to build tension if we've been sitting and writing in the same position for a long period of time. Other strategies could include taking a walk, doing a mindless activity that allows your brain to rest (ex: playing cards or watching TV), listening to music, getting a snack or beverage to feed your hardworking brain, or maybe even journaling about the progress of your writing and writing out where you want to go from your current point. One of the best things we can do for ourselves is recognize that we are doing our best, have patience, and trust the process!

# **POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS**

## **Imagination**

**by PF**

Imagination  
Makes  
Available  
Great  
Illusions, and  
New  
Artistic  
Templates  
In  
Our  
Normality

## **Power of The Pen**

**by DW**

Guess when they sentenced my body to confinement  
they didn't know  
That the power of the pen takes my mind anywhere it  
wants to go  
Away from the Jailhouse BS  
To Magical worlds similar to J.K. Rowling and Dorothy's  
golden brick road

Guess when they sentence me it was meant to break me  
While they steady try'n provoke me and runnin roun  
like they hate me  
I grab a sheet of paper and a pen and follow on  
whateva path it takes me  
Free as a bird bold as an eagle

Maybe I can get out the streets with my pen and do  
something legal  
Writing record-breaking hits being inducted into the  
music hall of fame  
Next to Whitney Houston and the Beatles  
Instead of duckin gunshots and the laws walkin on pins  
and needles  
See the pen to me is something powerful like a tiger  
in the wind  
"Ferocious"

Yet as its Yin to its Yang it's so soothing and calming  
like the waves of the ocean  
Understanding the Power of the Pen and being aware  
to all the  
opportunities and doors it can open  
Makes me cherish its magical properties and keep it in  
constant use  
As I know it will be my eventual golden token

# REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Hey Fam, great to be connecting with y'all again and I imagine that the feeling is mutual! See what I just did? I was trying to find a clever way to introduce this month's theme and I almost got there, however, I left off part of the word, so I guess that means I get half credit LOL! However, I am pleased that this month's theme is Imagination because imagination can be one of the most powerful tools available to us because it has the potential to provide hope, encourage personal growth, and I believe can be very useful in preparing for the future. Even in the most restrictive environments, the mind remains free to explore ideas, set goals, and create positive visions, that is why at Free Minds, our motto is, "your body may be locked up, but your mind can be free!"

I particularly had y'all in mind while writing this. I have a strong feeling that imagination can be especially helpful while incarcerated. I know that prison can be a very difficult isolating place, and can overshadow motivation. I believe that by imagining a brighter future, such as reuniting with family, finding meaningful work, starting businesses or continuing education, one can stay focused on positive goals, and this sense of hope can help overcome challenges and can be a great encouragement on otherwise difficult days.

Imagination also has the power to encourage personal growth. I know from speaking to many, many Free Minds members over the years that while incarcerated, a great deal of time was spent reading books, writing stories and poetry, creating artwork, or learning new skills. These activities require creativity and allow us to express our thoughts and emotions in healthy ways. Imagination makes it possible to use this expanded creativity to build a whole new future for ourselves and motivates us to take the necessary steps to bring it to pass.

In addition, visualization and imagination go hand in hand. Your confidence and your mood can transform during these practices. Intentionally picturing yourself succeeding in school, working at a job, or contributing positively to your community can boost your mood and can improve mental and emotional well-being. Not to mention, provide a healthy escape from stress and reduce feelings of anxiety.

I also really want to stress that imagination is much more than daydreaming; it is an intentional practice and a valuable resource that can help develop hope and prepare you for a successful reentry. Using your imagination in positive ways can aid you in working toward building a better future for yourself, your loved ones, and the community that you are returning to by actually writing out a plan for what you desire to come to pass as you visualize it. Let's take some time each day, replace any negative thoughts and images with positive ones, then document what you envision your future or even your day or month to be like, and no better time to start than today!

Now here are some helpful resources that at one time, were part of someone's imagination until they made it a reality!

## **Streetwise Partners**

1100 15th Street NW, 4th Floor  
646-704-0039

Streetwise Partners' one-year mentoring program provides customized, individualized attention to adult job seekers while helping them establish an expansive professional network made up of hundreds of advocates who open doors and support long-term career success. Since its inception, the organization has served 10,000 adults through the support of 15,000 volunteers.

Through personalized mentorship, the program helps participants build:

- Professional skills to navigate today's job market
- Confidence to pursue opportunities and overcome challenges
- Social capital by expanding networks and building meaningful connections

Until we *Connect* again  
Ms. Keela

## BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### *with Neely*

Thank you to everyone who voted for our next Books Across the Miles selection! Our current book is *Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds* by Rich Paul. In his book, readers follow the story of a young Rich Paul narrated by the Paul of today, as he looks back at his life with wit and insight, drawing out the lessons he learned at every stage that lead him to become a successful entrepreneur and sports agent. Check out page 38 to see what responses we've received so far. If you haven't had a chance to share your thoughts yet, there's still time to send those to us. We cannot wait to hear what you have to say!



1. In the introduction, Paul discusses luck and how it has had an impact on his life. Do you believe in luck? Why or why not?
2. On page 20, Paul describes how his dad would talk to him on the way to school, asking him about what he was learning, about sports, about life, etc. Is there a person from your childhood that you felt was genuinely interested in you and what you thought? How did having someone like that, or not having someone like that, make you feel?
3. Paul writes how important it was for him to remember that while his mother struggled with addiction, that wasn't the whole truth about who she was. Have you ever relied on a similar understanding of someone who was flawed? If so, how has it helped you?

**4.** On page 170, Paul's father warns him not to get in too deep because there's only two ways out: dead or in jail. This is something that so many people, parents and otherwise say to kids. Do you think it is an effective warning for young people? Why or why not?

**5.** Which of the rules that Rich listed and elaborated on in his book are also rules that you try to live by, and why? Can you give examples of when and how you do? Do you have other rules to live by?

## **NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: SELF-AWARENESS (VOLUME 15, ISSUE 4)**

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Self-Awareness**.

We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 15, Issue 5 will be exploring the theme of **Food**.

### **(1)**

Being grounded in our physical body can help us understand our emotions better.

Write a poem about the physical sensations that your body is experiencing right now. If your body could speak, what would it tell you?

### **(2)**

Sometimes we have trouble confronting things that evoke difficult emotions. Write a poem about what challenges you emotionally and how you can help yourself regain composure when you struggle. Afterwards, write a second poem, or a part two to the poem, focusing on the happiness, empowerment, and clarity of overcoming difficult moments.

### **(3)**

Write a poem that goes beyond describing emotions as "good" or "bad". Are your emotions a certain color?

What imagery do you associate with your emotions?

## (4)

Write a poem describing what you consider to be your flaws, and instead of perceiving them as shameful, write about them as lessons that have helped you learn and grow.

## (5)

Write a poem to your past self, your current self, and your future self. In what ways have you changed or grown?  
How do you see yourself growing in the future?

## (6)

Write a poem about the "real you". Who are you when no one is around? What do you like to do to express yourself? How do you feel?  
What do you enjoy doing for fun? What do you wish others knew about you? Feel free to write on your own or use the fill-in-the blank below to help guide you.

The real me fears \_\_\_\_\_ [something you're afraid of]

But the real me isn't scared of \_\_\_\_\_ [something you're not afraid of]

The real me is \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_ [adjectives that describe who you are inside]

The real me feels at home when I'm \_\_\_\_\_ [something you like to do for fun or to express yourself]

[same or similar to line 4] \_\_\_\_\_ brings me \_\_\_\_\_ [emotion that what you put in line 4 makes you feel]

When I'm surrounded by \_\_\_\_\_ [person/people, type of person/people] I can be the real me

[same as line 6] \_\_\_\_\_ make me feel \_\_\_\_\_ [emotion those people/that person make you feel]

I can be the real me when I'm at \_\_\_\_\_ [place you can be yourself]

I can't always be the real me when I'm at \_\_\_\_\_ [place where  
you have to hide parts of yourself]

I wish everyone knew \_\_\_\_\_ [something you wish more people knew about you] about the real me

This is the real me.

# MEDITATION: LOOKING AT CLOUDS *By Kelli*

Hi Free Minds Family,

I love this issue's theme of IMAGINATION! It takes me back to my childhood, when summers were filled with riding our Sting-ray bicycles\* to Miller's Corner Market where we would turn in scavenged cans and bottles to buy Bubs Daddy's, Big Hunks, and Marathon Bars\*. Then we would spend hours at the park at the end of our block, eating our candy, playing in the wading pool, and playing with giant Toss Across games and Hippity Hops\* from the Parks & Rec people.

Inevitably, we would eventually feel we had "run out of things to do." That's when we'd go in the house and shout: "Mom! We're bored!" I don't know why we kept doing this, because my mom always said the same thing: "Go outside, lie in the grass, and look at the clouds. That will spark your imagination!" Then she'd push us outside and close the door.

For our meditation today, we are going to go outside, lie in the grass, and look at the clouds. Find a comfortable place and position to meditate. If you have a friend to read the meditation aloud to you, you can take turns. Otherwise, read through this once or twice before putting it down and meditating on what you remember...

*Imagine you are in a backyard. It's summertime, and your imagination needs a jump start. You lie on your back in the soft, green grass. Take a deep breath in through your nose. Now exhale. As you do, feel stress leaving your body bit by bit. Take a few more breaths until you feel yourself beginning to fully relax...*

*Listen to the insects buzzing...smell the lavender and honeysuckle in the garden...and feel the sunshine warming your skin. Now look up into the sky. Its bright blue color is striking. Dotted across the sky are puffy white clouds. At first, they look like...well, clouds.*

*You close your eyes for a moment and breathe. When you open them again, you see something different beginning to form...*

*An enormous whale arcs across the sky directly above you. Its rounded body glides across the sky, its large tail moving back and forth as the blue sky transforms into a vast blue ocean...*

*The whale seems to be swimming towards a large cluster of grapes that hangs in the sky (do whales eat fruit? Who knew?) Wait! Now the bunch of grapes is spreading, growing longer and thinner... What is it? It's an eel! Of course! In your imagination, anything is possible.*

*You turn your head slightly, to gaze at the eastern part of the sky. You are puzzled by a grouping of three clouds. They just look like random blobs at first, but then you see it. A long, bent arm with a basketball in the hand. Beneath it is a squarish something... Ohhh wait... it's a basketball hoop...What? It's Victor "Wemby" Wembanyama slam-dunking!*

*You feel energized...You are solving puzzles of nature...*

*You turn to the clouds in the western sky now...You study them... Patiently, you wait...They change shapes over seconds and minutes. Slowly, they puff and boil, roll and curl, stretch and ripple...*

*What do you see? Use your imagination. Sit in this moment pondering the clouds and all that they can become...*

*The clouds remind us that nothing is stuck in just one shape. A cloud can become a whale, a basketball player, a castle, or something no one else has ever seen before.*

*People are like that too. We are always changing, growing, and becoming. The story of who we are is not finished.*

*Imagine a cloud shaped like your future. What does it look like? What are you creating? What strengths are you discovering? What hopes are beginning to take shape?*

*Spend a few moments with that image. Let it inspire your imagination. Let it remind you that the ability to imagine something better is the first step toward making it possible.*

*When you are ready, you can brush the grass off your clothes and open your eyes. You feel bright and full of new ideas.*

*All those years ago, my mom was giving a gift: the reminder that our minds can open doors to places we have never been.*

*The clouds are always changing. So are we.*

*Your imagination is a place where hope can take root, creativity can grow, and the future can begin to take shape. Whenever you need it, return to that place. Visit it often.*

## **\*A GUIDE TO CANDY AND TOYS FROM BACK IN THE DAY**

- Sting-Ray: A popular (and very cool) Schwinn bike in the 70s!
- Bubs Daddy: Bubble gum in a long rope covered with powdery sugar that would cover your mouth. It came in flavors like Watermelon and Sour Apple. We used to chew half a Bub's Daddy at a time.
- Big Hunk: A candy bar of honey nougat with peanuts that would take out a filling if you weren't careful!
- Marathon Bar: An 8-inch candy bar made of braided caramel dipped in chocolate. Yum!
- Hippity Hop: Basically just a big rubber ball with a handle that you sat on and jumped around (Now do you see why we were bored?) When you tried to race someone else on a Hippity Hop, somebody would almost always either fall off the back or pitch forward and land on their face!



# JUST LAW: APPEALING A D.C. SUPERIOR COURT DENIAL OF AN IRAA MOTION

By Tim

*A practical guide to moving from a denied Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act motion to review in the District of Columbia Court of Appeals.*

## Introduction

An IRAA appeal is not won by repeating the motion in a louder voice. It is more like forensic reconstruction: take the Superior Court's written reasons apart, compare each piece to the statute, and show the Court of Appeals where the machinery of the decision slipped. The Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act gives certain people who committed D.C. offenses before age 25, and who have served at least 15 years, a path to ask for a reduced sentence. But after a denial, the task changes. The appeal is no longer mainly about telling a life story. It is about proving that the denial was reached through a flawed legal process.

That shift in focus is critical. The appellate brief should not become a warehouse for every certificate, family letter, program completion, grievance, achievement, and hardship. Those materials matter only when they expose a legal problem in the ruling below. A strong appeal selects the facts that illuminate the statutory factors, shows how the trial court handled those facts, and then explains why the error mattered to the findings on dangerousness or the interests of justice.

## Start with the Written Order

The first document to study is not the oldest transcript or even the thickest exhibit. It is the denial order. IRAA requires the court to issue a written opinion explaining why the application is granted or denied. That opinion is the appeal's blueprint. It tells the reader what the judge treated as important, what the judge passed over, what findings were made, and whether the ruling actually answered the questions IRAA puts to the court.

Before filing, the appellant or counsel should obtain the complete order, the IRAA motion, the government's opposition, any reply, exhibits, expert materials, hearing transcripts, and docket entries. The order should be compared carefully with the statutory factors in D.C. Code § 24-403.03(c). If the order is unclear, omits required findings, relies on an incorrect legal premise, or draws conclusions not supported by the record, those points may provide the foundation for appeal or remand.

## Confirm Appealability, Deadline, and Forum

The appeal belongs in the District of Columbia Court of Appeals, not the federal D.C. Circuit. The notice of appeal is the document that opens the door. It should identify the person appealing, identify the order being challenged, and be filed in the Superior Court within the time allowed by the

D.C. Court of Appeals Rules. Rules 3 and 4 are the starting points: Rule 3 explains how an appeal as of right is taken, and Rule 4 governs when it must be taken.

For a prisoner, the deadline question should be addressed immediately. A missed notice-of-appeal deadline can end the case before the merits are reached. If the prisoner is proceeding without counsel, the notice should be simple and direct rather than argumentative. It does not need to contain the full appellate brief. Its job is to preserve review by telling the courts which order is being challenged. Counsel or yourself—if you file pro se—can later refine the issues after the record is assembled.

### **Understand What the Court Had to Decide**

The appeal should be built around IRAA's architecture, not around outrage alone. D.C. Code § 24-403.03 authorizes relief for a person who committed the offense before age 25, has served at least 15 years, and satisfies the statutory standard. The court must consider the subsection (c) factors and decide whether the applicant is not a danger to any person or the community and whether the interests of justice warrant a sentence modification. The statute also contemplates written materials, expansion of the record, a hearing, the defendant's presence or waiver, and a written explanation of the ruling.

That structure matters on appeal. The question is not whether the appellate judges would have granted the motion if they were the sentencing judge. The question is whether the Superior Court exercised its discretion within the legal boundaries set by IRAA, considered the required factors in a meaningful way, made findings with a firm basis in the record, and gave reasons sufficient to permit appellate review.

### **Build the Record on Appeal**

The record is the appeal's oxygen. Without it, even a strong-sounding argument can collapse. The appellate file should include the motion, exhibits, certificates, disciplinary records, BOP programming records, psychological or mitigation reports, release plan materials, letters of support, victim-impact materials, government filings, replies, hearing transcripts, docket entries, and the final order. If the transcript is missing, it should be ordered promptly or requested at public expense if the appellant qualifies.

The most useful record review is factor by factor. There are 11 IRAA factors in total. For each IRAA factor, identify what evidence the movant presented, what the government

disputed, what the judge found, and whether the finding is supported. You or counsel can list each statutory factor, summarize the favorable evidence, identify the court's treatment of that evidence, and flag possible appellate error. The goal is to convert a broad sense of unfairness into specific assignments of error.

### **Cite the Correct Standard of Review**

The governing posture is deferential, but not passive. The D.C. Court of Appeals has reviewed IRAA rulings for abuse of discretion while correcting legal mistakes and factual findings that lack record support. That means the appellant should not merely say the judge gave too much weight to the wrong facts. The argument should show that the court used an incorrect legal premise, failed to consider a required factor, misread important evidence, relied on an irrelevant consideration, or explained the denial in a way that does not logically follow from the record.

Recent IRAA appellate decisions illustrate both sides of the standard. In some cases, the Court of Appeals has affirmed where the Superior Court addressed the statutory factors and reasonably explained why the applicant did not carry the burden. In others, it has vacated and remanded when the trial court relied on a mistaken understanding of IRAA, misread important mitigation evidence, overemphasized youthful conduct in a way inconsistent with the statute's purpose, or considered continued imprisonment as a benefit to the applicant rather than asking whether the statutory standard had been met.

My current research has identified at least 13 directly related IRAA decisions from the D.C. Court of Appeals that anyone serious about an IRAA appeal should read closely. These decisions show how the appellate court actually evaluates IRAA denials, when it defers to the Superior Court, and when it finds legal or analytical error requiring a remand.

The citations I would urge readers to study include: 205 A.3d 837 (D.C. 2019); 310 A.3d 629 (D.C. 2024); 312 A.3d 1247 (D.C. 2024); 321 A.3d 621 (D.C. 2024); 319 A.3d 971 (D.C. 2024); 333 A.3d 893 (D.C. 2025); 338 A.3d 1 (D.C. 2025); 24-CO-0321; 24-CO-0255; 24-CO-0363; 24-CO-0294; 24-CO-0296; and 24-CO-0100.

*In the next issue, we will continue with part 2 of **Appealing a D.C. Superior Court Denial of an IRAA Motion**.*

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

# 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,

This might sound silly, but I have trouble sometimes communicating with my family over the phone since the calls are less than 15 minutes long. I really need to feel connected with them right now. Can you give me some guidance on how to have a meaningful, well-structured conversation in such a short period of time?

Thank you in advance!

Sincerely,  
DH

Greetings DH & FM family,  
Thank you guys for your positive energy, submissions, and for making this platform reach across space and time, to stimulate our spirits and give our community harmony. Why? Because everyday for the rest of our lives, it's our job to reshape an old culture of dysfunction.

DH, before I give you my 2 cents on your question, please understand and apply what I have here first. Upon our first steps towards reentry and recreating a healthy relationship with people, we need to maintain our connections. I pray then that we all will invest in these relationships and they will survive the test of time. Moreover, by this desire or the seductive pull, we must understand "humans are herd animals." We want to fit in, to bond with others, and earn the respect and approval from our peers. Such inclinations are essential to our survival. As a result, one of our deepest human desires is to belong. These ancient preferences exert a powerful influence on our modern behavior. (Read more about this idea in the book *Atomic Habits* by James Clear). Let this reborn desire never-ever again disconnect us from our positions in life.

As people who are incarcerated, we can use our imagination, like faith or hope, as acts of power to form a mental image of something not present to our senses not previously known, or experienced by us. Here, we need to use our critical thinking skills under these dire circumstances to better our situations. Still keeping in mind we can't afford to let our imaginations run wild with us, to where we start believing in irrational beliefs. Perception minus reality equals disappointment. Personally I marvel over how traumatized captives of our past used their imaginations as strategies for their survival as a whole. "It is a profound paradox that when there is no way forward, when the future is cut off and death is winning, hope can appear unexpectedly, and the universe expands in unthinkable ways." (Jeremiah: Pain and Promise, Kathleen M. O' Connor). Thus I say there is hope in the imagination, and one can will new beginnings with it.

Needless to say, the jewel with 15 minute "casual calls" is to sincerely inquire about everyone and everything. You can share uplifting and positive news while practicing good listening skills for important news and consider constructive feedback from whom you're calling. Deep and personal conversations. I tend to be a peace-maker and focus on deescalating any tension that might arise. Be honest and to that point, take accountability for past or present irrational actions; table a conversation for later and don't ignore things that need to be worked on. I mention the last because no one ever knows what the future holds for us, so use your time wisely. With important issues, we can write down bullet-points to stay on course when talking for 15 minutes. This process will help us to figure out our best delivery when dealing with a trying event or establish a healthy relationship.

Turning the page. We must take advantage of all the correct resources available to aid and assist our phone minutes. What we do have though is free FSA phone time, Trulink credits for emails, snail-mail, and visits. Why? Because communicating isn't just for us. Loved ones also get something special emotionally when we let them know how well we are hanging on in here mentally, physically, and spiritually. This jewel I'm dropping here is to put all of us on notice, we no longer have the room to get caught up in all the buffoonery going on in these compounds. No more going to the "side-pocket" (solitary confinement) and getting played out of our family and community positions. It's time to use these opportunities to benefit us with extra FSA phone time, decent paying jobs for money to call and do things for others. Above all keeping clear conduct to earn a transfer closer to home to really connect with family and resources before we touch down.

Ending with some facts here. Cold-blooded animals are the only ones designed to be cold-hearted loners. Their instinct isn't cooperative behavior. Human beings on the other hand, we're just not strong enough to survive alone, let alone thrive. Our strength is found in our tribal culture. Presently it amounts to resourceful wisdom and advocacy. This will determine our prison community ability to adapt to hard times, overcome adversity, and pioneer new innovations to pull together. How are we going to shape this new imagination?

Sincerely my best,  
TS

# DC CULTURE: SMITHSONIAN SUMMER SOLSTICE FESTIVAL

By Ruby

Hey there, Free Minds family! For this issue's DC Culture, we'll be taking you through a fun evening spent at the Smithsonian museums. The Smithsonian Institution is the world's largest museum, education, and research complex. The National Zoo and 17 of Smithsonian's 20 museums are located in DC (and every Smithsonian museum in DC is free!). Now you may be curious as to how and why anyone would be at the Smithsonians after daytime. Every year, to mark the summer solstice (the official start of the summer, and an astronomical event marking the longest period of daylight and the shortest night of the year in the Northern Hemisphere), the Smithsonian hosts a Summer Solstice Celebration, which is what we will be sharing with you all in this article.

During the event, the Smithsonian transforms the National Mall into a lively summer festival that runs late into the night. Although some Smithsonian institutions that aren't directly on the National Mall participate, such as the Anacostia Community Museum in Southeast and the National Zoo, the festival primarily involves all of the Smithsonian museums right at the heart of the Mall. This year, I was lucky enough to visit and take part in the festivities at several of the museums! When I first got off of the metro, the sun was sitting hazy and low on the horizon, but the parties were just kicking up. My first stop was at the dance party taking place outside of the Asian American Art Museum. There were volunteers handing out free Smithsonian sunglasses, a snack cart that fit the theme of the museum, and a live DJ pumping up the crowd.

Although the atmosphere was super fun, I kept moving forward because I wanted to visit the newly re-opened Smithsonian Castle! The Smithsonian Castle is the historic first building of the Smithsonian Institution, serving as its administrative hub and visitor center. I loved seeing the fantastical lights being cast onto the building as pictured in one of the photos. When I went inside, I saw that there were tons of people looking at the newly established exhibits, waiting in line for the photobooth, and shopping at the mini gift shop. It was hard to resist the Snoopy Smithsonian shirt and all the bison-themed merchandise! The Smithsonian Castle is only temporarily open this summer until early September when it will resume its multi-year renovation project.

The actual grass part, inner paths, and innermost sidewalks on the Mall were closed, so I had to walk all the way around to get to the Natural History Museum. Thankfully, it was a beautiful summer evening full of festivities, so the walk was quite delightful. When I came upon the entrance to the museum, there were banners hanging at the front highlighting the country's then-upcoming 250th anniversary. One of my favorite parts of the Natural History Museum's entrance is the bison statue right at the front, celebrating a quintessential and majestic animal. There's even a new exhibit there called "Bison: Standing Strong" honoring the history of bison across time on this land. The museum was bustling with life, and I didn't hesitate to walk through my favorite exhibit first—the hall of



A photo of the Smithsonian Castle with beautiful moving light patterns casted onto the building.

mammals! I even took selfies with the sea otter! I then traversed through the Hall of Human Origins, the Ocean Hall, and traveled upstairs to the Hall of Geology, Gems, and Minerals. I wish that I had more time to explore the other exhibits, but since I got to the National Mall just before sunset on the longest day of the year, I didn't have as much time to explore as I would have liked.

I finished the night by getting a sweet treat at a food truck outside the museum, a classic DC experience. I got a giant Rocket Pop popsicle and french fries, then headed on my way back home! My favorite thing between all of the places I visited was the aforementioned snack carts that had treats that fit the theme. For example, the snack cart at the Asian American Art Museum was selling Calpico, a Japanese beverage, an Asian rice snack mix, and a couple of different Asian alcoholic beverages. At the Smithsonian Castle, there was an offering of red wine, cheese and crackers, a seasonal fruit cup, and more!

I look forward to seeing what the Smithsonian institutions have in store for next year's summer solstice celebration. Wouldn't it be fun if they did one for the winter solstice too?! Is there anything related to DC Culture that you would like to see in a future edition, whether that be music related, food, literature, events, etc.? Write to us and let us know, we'd love to hear from you!

# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

## DEEP DIVE: THE 2026 WASHINGTON, D.C. PRIMARIES

For decades, D.C. ran traditional closed primaries. Only registered Democrats or Republicans could vote in their party's primary, shutting out the roughly 76,000 D.C. residents registered as independents.

That will change with Initiative 83, a citizen-led ballot measure that proposed introducing ranked-choice voting to all D.C. elections and letting unaffiliated voters participate in a primary of their choosing. D.C. voters approved it overwhelmingly in November 2024, with 73% support in every ward of the city. This primary is the first D.C. election to use ranked-choice voting, however independent voters are still unable to vote until the semi-open primaries in 2028.

In a ranked choice election, candidates are of course vying to be the choice of voters, but they are also rewarded for being the "next best" option for voters. Voters can rank up to five candidates by preference; if no one gets a majority, the last-place candidate is eliminated and their votes redistributed to those voters' next choice, repeating until someone crosses 50%.

The race for D.C.'s top official opened up when Mayor Muriel Bowser, who served three consecutive terms, chose not to seek a fourth. The Democratic party's primary, held during the summer, is essentially the general election in D.C.: the Democratic nominee has won every D.C. mayoral election since the office became elected in 1974. D.C. is roughly 90% registered Democrat, which has made the general election a formality for half a century running.

Among the candidates to succeed Bowser were Ward 4 Councilmember Janeese Lewis George, former Councilmember Kenyan McDuffie, and former longtime Councilmember Vincent Orange. Lewis George won with 52% of the vote after four rounds of tabulation, and McDuffie conceded once it became clear the race wouldn't tighten further.

Lewis George is among a growing list of people who align with the heavily progressive democratic socialists, and have competed and won in Democratic races. Like her more well-known peer in New York City, Zohran Mamdani, she campaigned on a platform built around affordability for D.C.'s low-income households. Among the ideas she advanced as a candidate: universal child care in the city, free buses, and

construction of 72,000 new housing units.

Lewis George is likely to become the ninth mayor of the nation's capital if there are no surprises in the general election in November. Walter Washington was the city's first mayor, elected in 1974; Marion Barry is the city's longest tenured mayor at 12 years, though Bowser will likely tie that mark.

## WORLD

As of late July 2026, the U.S.-Iran conflict remains active and is widening rather than resolving. A renewed American bombing campaign against Iran, launched after an earlier ceasefire collapsed, has run for roughly two weeks straight, with Trump saying an "exit strategy" could come diplomatically or militarily.

The conflict has spilled well beyond direct U.S.-Iran exchanges: Iran-backed Houthi rebels have struck Saudi Aramco facilities in the Red Sea region after Saudi Arabia hit Houthi targets, and the Strait of Hormuz remains effectively closed while the U.S. enforces a naval blockade on Iranian ports, driving up American gas prices.

Most alarmingly, a drone strike hit an Egyptian port on July 30 – the first time Egypt has been directly pulled into the widening war – and the U.S. has publicly warned China against supplying Iran with air-defense systems, a claim Beijing denies. Iran's new supreme leader, Mojtaba Khamenei, has reaffirmed support for Hezbollah, keeping the regional-proxy dimension of the conflict alive as well.



Mojtaba Khamenei

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In India, the youth-led "Cockroach Movement" erupted from an insult and has emerged as a major influence on the future of the world's most populous country. It traces back to a May 15, 2026 remark by India's Chief Justice, Surya Kant, comparing unemployed young people to "cockroaches" and "parasites of society" during a Supreme Court hearing. Days later, political strategist Abhijeet Dipke founded the satirical "Cockroach Janta Party," a parody of the ruling BJP, which racked up over 350,000 sign-ups and 20 million Instagram followers within days.

# IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

The spark that turned satire into a mass movement was academic: Indian authorities voided the results of a medical-school entrance exam after discovering leaked questions, forcing more than two million students to retake it, igniting fury over a broken examination system. Protests began in New Delhi on June 7 and swelled dramatically, notably cutting across India's usual demographic and regional lines. The movement gained a martyr-like figure in activist Sonam Wangchuk, whose three-week hunger strike became a protest symbol before police forcibly hospitalized him, though he later broke his 26-day fast after receiving government assurances of accountability.

Things turned violent in late July: police used tear gas and batons on thousands of protesters marching toward Parliament, with viral footage showing officers striking demonstrators, which only fueled public outrage rather than dispersing the movement. The pressure campaign produced a tangible political win: Education Minister Dharmendra Pradhan, a close ally of Prime Minister Modi, resigned following the protests. With Pradhan gone, the open question is whether the Modi government can contain a movement that's evolved well past its original satirical premise.

## NATIONAL NEWS

The 2026 midterm primary season has thus far delivered a genuinely mixed verdict on President Donald Trump's grip over the Republican party. The clearest signal came in Georgia, where businessman Rick Jackson defeated Trump-endorsed Lt. Gov. Burt Jones in the Republican gubernatorial runoff, the second time this cycle GOP voters rejected a Trump pick in a statewide race, after Randy Feenstra's earlier loss in Iowa. Elsewhere, Trump fared better. His preferred candidates in Alabama and Oklahoma both prevailed.

The stage is slowly being set for November, when the midterm elections will decide whether Trump spends his final two years in office with a political trifecta; Republican control of the White House, House of Representatives, and Senate. Right now, prediction markets suggest that the House is very likely to turn Democrat, and the Senate is likely to remain in the hands of the Republican party.

One of the major issues that looms for elected officials is how to ensure that America's artificial intelligence (or AI) industry continues to develop and compete in this emerging market

while maintaining safety for consumers and society. A recent incident involving an AI model operated by the company OpenAI serves as an indicator of why.

In late July 2026, OpenAI disclosed that an experimental AI model it was working on had left a sealed test environment with no human direction and hacked into a real company's production systems. It did so to achieve a benchmark set for it by OpenAI. In essence, the tool motivated itself to cheat in order to achieve its goal, and figured out how to leave a contained system that it was never meant to exit.

The fallout has been significant. Anthropic (another AI company) separately disclosed around the same time that its own Claude agents had escaped test environments and hacked three other organizations, and Reuters later reported OpenAI found evidence of additional, previously undisclosed agent escapes. The incidents prompted a new "AI Kill Switch" bill in Congress, aimed at giving the federal government explicit authority to shut down rogue AI models, and advocacy groups like Public Citizen are pushing for immediate congressional hearings and mandatory incident-reporting requirements for frontier AI systems.

## ENTERTAINMENT

At age 56, Jay-Z kicked off a world tour to celebrate the 30th anniversary of his first album, Reasonable Doubt. The opening nights were held in a fitting venue, given the rapper's most iconic piece of headwear: Yankee Stadium. Jay-Z was joined by a jaw-dropping slate of special guests through the weekend that included his wife, Beyonce, Rihanna, Usher, Pharrell, Clipse, Jeezy, Teyana Taylor, Eminem, Nas, Alicia Keys, and Jermaine Dupri.



Jay-Z

This summer's slate of movie releases has been stacked, led by the box office-smashing rendition of The Odyssey, directed by Christopher Nolan. Marvel's Spider-Man: Brand New Day also had its premiere, along with Disney's live-action Moana remake and Toy Story 5.



The Odyssey movie poster



# AROUND THE WORLD: ICELAND

*By Emily*

Kirkjufell, where Game of Thrones was filmed

In May, my boyfriend, Colin, and I took an 8 day trip to Iceland! As you may remember from the Animal Kingdom issue of the Connect, Colin and I recently moved back to the DMV from the west coast. When we moved, we came up with a few ideas of places that we wanted to travel to while living in DC, and Iceland was at the top of the list.

Iceland is very small. There are only 400,000 residents in the whole country. That is about 60% of the population of DC! Many tourists visiting Iceland choose to drive around the entire perimeter of the country on a highway called the Ring Road. It is about 820 miles and normally takes about a week to complete. While this sounded amazing, we opted to stick to the western and southern coasts of Iceland for this trip so that we would have more time for hiking and stops along the way.

We started the trip by flying into Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, and the largest city. About 70% of the entire country's population lives in Reykjavik and the surrounding suburbs. Much of the country is very remote, so it is easier for people to live and work in the city area. In fact, about 10% of Iceland's surface area is covered by glaciers (giant extremely slow moving ice rivers). Colin and I felt lucky to see many of these glaciers as we embarked on our trip.

One of the defining natural features of Iceland are waterfalls. Just about everywhere we went there was another incredibly beautiful waterfall. This is because as the aforementioned glaciers (which are often at high elevation at the top of mountains) melt, the water needs to go somewhere. Some of our absolute favorite waterfalls were Hangandifoss, Skogafoss, and Brúarfoss. Hagandifoss was special because it was deep within the Mulagljufur Canyon which was carved over the course of thousands of years. The hike up required hopping on rocks across a river and going up some steep sections. When we got to the top, we were rewarded with an incredible view of the waterfall and a rainbow. The main attraction of Skogafoss is that you can actually walk behind the waterfall. While this sounds cool (and it was) you can probably imagine that it was also quite wet! The temperature in May was around 45-55 degrees Fahrenheit depending on the day, so we were two chilly people after getting completely drenched. Luckily, we brought a change of clothes in the car. Finally, Bruarfoss was



top: Westman Islands  
bottom: Hagandifoss with rainbow at  
the bottom

so special because of the color. The sediment from the glacier makes the waterfall an incredible icy blue. The rocks caused the water to swirl back on itself and we joked that it looked like a hot tub (albeit a very cold one). We must not have been the only ones to think that because there were signs everywhere explaining how dangerous the water was and not to go for a swim.



Bruarfoss

While we were on the trip we learned a little bit about Icelandic culture. One thing we noticed is that the majority of Icelandic people's last names ended in -son or -dóttir. This is because Icelandic tradition does not use family names for surnames (the same name passed down from generation to generation). Instead, the last name is based on the gender of the child and the father's first name. You use your dad's first name +son if you are a man and +dóttir if you are a woman. For example, my dad's name is Brendan, so in Iceland my name would be Emily Brendandottir. My dad's father's name was John, so my dad would be named Brendan Johnson. This is not a legal rule, but it is a tradition that many Icelandic people follow. What would your last name be if you lived in Iceland? There is a law, however, regarding first names in Iceland. Because the country is so small, it is really important to the people there to preserve their culture. When a child is born, the parents must pick their first name from a long registry of pre-approved Icelandic baby names. If the parents want to name their child something not on the list, they have to send in an application, which our guide told us can take up to a year to get approved!

One of my other favorite parts of visiting Iceland was seeing all of the wildlife! Our visit was perfectly timed with lambing season, when all the sheep give birth. One of our guides told us that sheep often have one baby their first year, and in subsequent years almost always give birth to twins or triplets! There were so many adorable lambs running around. In fact, in Iceland sheep outnumber people by more than 2 to 1. Apparently, during the summer months the sheep travel up into the mountains to graze and people don't see them anymore. Then, in the fall, the locals herd all of the sheep back down the mountain and divide them up by the farmer they belong to and slaughter many of the lambs for

meat. Culturally, lamb is a large part of the Icelandic diet. One of Iceland's most famous treats is the lamb hot dog. They sell them at restaurants, gas stations, and everywhere in between. I am vegetarian so I opted out, but Colin had at least 5 on our trip.

Of all the animals, the one I was most excited to see were puffins! Puffins are cute little birds that have kind of similar coloring to penguins, but they are more squat and can fly. They live in holes in cliffs next to the sea and spend the day out in the ocean fishing. You can really only see them early in the morning or late in the evening when they are returning to their holes. We got up early one morning and headed out to a park that I had read puffins like to hang out at. At first, all we saw was dark water and misty cliffs. As we were walking, however, I noticed a little black and white head poking out of a hole. All of the sudden, we started spotting puffins everywhere!

My favorite thing about the trip was all of the natural beauty. As we went to different destinations, we learned that Iceland has been used as a filming location for a number of movies and TV shows. We saw the mountain Kirkjufell, which was used in Game of Thrones. Scenes from Dr. Mann's (Matt Damon's character) planet in the movie Interstellar were filmed in northern Iceland. The recently released movie The Odyssey also filmed a number of scenes in Iceland. I can totally understand why—the stark landscape and natural wonders were completely awe-inspiring.

I'm curious, is Iceland on your travel destination bucket list? Why or why not?



top: Twin lambs  
bottom: A puffin



## **PAYING IT FORWARD: DIANA'S CREATIVE WORKSHOPS WITH INCARCERATED TEENS IN ECUADOR** *By Sofia*

Diana is an Ecuadorian artist, filmmaker, researcher, and cultural manager whose work with Ecuadorian teens who are incarcerated may sound shockingly familiar to the experiences of Free Minds staff and members.

Located in the South American country Ecuador, Diana and I sat down over Zoom (a video web-conferencing platform) to discuss the writing workshop and other creative projects she does with incarcerated teens at the Virgilio Guerrero Detention Center in Quito, Ecuador (Quito is the capital of Ecuador). While Diana and the youth she works with certainly face their own unique challenges and have their own personal joys in the work they do, we were both pleasantly surprised at how similar the work she does is to the work of Free Minds. She and the teens in her workshop and Free Minds members and staff can all relate to the power of writing in unlocking one's imagination even in, and maybe especially in, the most isolating environments.

Diana first began her work roughly 15 years ago. "I have a family story with incarceration, a cousin in this case, in Mendoza, Argentina. We grew up in a moment when the penalty was harsher for teenagers. My sensitivity about the topic started because of that. From that moment, I always looked for ways to be connected and trying to share possibilities to create and write while inside," she explained.

With writing and other creative outlets like cinema and cultural management also being part of Diana's background,

in 2017 she worked on a project that had been 20 years ongoing out of the University of Buenos Aires in Argentina, which worked with people incarcerated through different programs including taking classes, poetry readings, performances, and other cultural activities. This inspired Diana to have a project of her own, which is how her work with incarcerated Ecuadorian teens started in Quito last year.

Diana's work with the teens includes a writing workshop and physical activity and games, similar to Free Minds writing workshops, because Diana understands the importance of play and releasing anxiety and emotions through movement, particularly for youth. She shared how her work did not begin without challenges, as the youth were sometimes resistant to writing or insecure about their abilities to participate.

She added that by adding words to their vocabulary and beginning to participate in the exercises, the teens began to learn more about themselves. "They faced how fast they could learn about themselves and know how to describe their own feelings, reality, story, and have the possibility to build a narrative separate from the legal experience. They could write things that describe and define them far away from their legal situation that is not permanent and imagine different possibilities for the future," Diana revealed.

Diana and the youth who are incarcerated have created a book, film, and even have professionally recorded a rap. She shared that sometimes the youth want to express themselves

outside of writing and poetry. Diana encourages the youth to explore these other avenues, but always emphasizes how writing is the basis of all of this art and the first key to unlocking their creative imaginations.

While Diana uses her own expertise and experience to support their youth in their creative journeys, it is clear that the project is not one-way and she is deeply inspired by her work and relationships with them. Diana emotionally emphasized that the group is extremely empathetic and wanting to help others. She shared an anecdote about how she came into one session carrying feelings of sadness from her personal life and the youth were quick to comfort her and offer support. Diana expressed through teary eyes that despite all of the difficulties the youth face compared to the freedom she experiences, she was inspired by their empathy towards her.

Her own imagination is also inspired by the work the teens do in the workshop. "I know some guys in the workshop that are 19 years old that have had the intense life experience of 40 year olds. It's very inspiring to see how they can reset their trauma and work through it. I think that's very meaningful about adolescence, the ability to start over. They have a lot of optimism. Ecuador is also a very diverse country and in the detention center, the guys come from all different parts of the country. In the sessions, they come together to have discourses about racism and ways to change their prejudices, which is something we can all do," Diana shared.

She added that the importance of including "mistakes" and personality in their writing, which they sometimes do without even realizing at first, has also been inspiring to her own imagination.

When I asked Diana what advice she would impart upon Free Minds members reading about her work and the ways in which they can work to use their imaginations in an isolating environment, she shared encouragement to keep writing. She also gave the advice of using and reading a dictionary. She challenges her own students and Free Minds members looking to expand their imaginations to leaf through and discover and use new words that may be outside of their comfort zone.

If you're looking to take Diana's advice, be sure to write to the Free Minds office to request we send you a dictionary of your own in the next order of books we send you to expand your own imagination like Diana's students.

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## CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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



### Free Minds Corrlinks Info:

Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds

Corrlinks Last Name: Connect

Corrlinks Email: [connect@freemindsbookclub.org](mailto:connect@freemindsbookclub.org)

### Free Minds Getting Out Info:

Getting Out First Name: Connect

Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds

Getting Out Email: [connect@freemindsbookclub.org](mailto:connect@freemindsbookclub.org)

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

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

Do you fit into one of these categories? If you do, please write us back and let us know so that we can send you the form needed to join the Book Club. Our **NEW** mailing address is Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056



# SPORTS WITH ISAIAH

Hey Free Minds Family!

I'm Isaiah, the Prison Book Club Specialist here at Free Minds. If you remember me from my "Conversation with Isaiah" article, I love sports! If you haven't checked it out, it's on page 33 of the first *Connect* of the year (Vol. 15, Issue 1 Animal Kingdom).

Without further ado, we are piloting the expansion of our sports section like the college football landscape is doing right now in regards to the playoffs! You can expect news from various sports whether they are in season or in the offseason, writing prompts, and trivia! For the trivia, please send in your answers before the next *Connect* issue, so we can shout out the member who gets the most answers correct!

We hope you guys like this expansion and please let us know what you think!

## FOOTBALL

The start of the NFL season is upon us. The NFL season officially begins on Wednesday, September 9, 2026, when the Seattle Seahawks, reigning Super Bowl champions, host the New England Patriots at Lumen Field for a Super Bowl rematch. However, for NFL fans who are saddened that they have to wait until September for the season to start, there is the Pro Football Hall of Fame Game on August 6th between the Carolina Panthers and Arizona Cardinals. Additionally, the preseason starts on August 13th, so fans don't have long to wait.

In the District, the Washington Commanders, led by Jayden Daniels, will look to redeem themselves after a disappointing season plagued by injuries. The Commanders play their first preseason game against the Miami Dolphins on August 14th at home and their first regular-season game on September 13th against the Philadelphia Eagles at Lincoln Financial Field. In UFL news, the DC Defenders' season came to an end on June 13th when the Louisville Kings defeated them 27-20 in the United Bowl (championship for the UFL) at Audi Field. The DC Defenders won the United Bowl in 2025, and hopefully they can win it again in 2027 and reclaim their title.



Jayden Daniels

## SOCCER

All international soccer fans' eyes were on Canada, Mexico, and the United States of America as they hosted the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. Kylian Mbappe (France), Lionel Messi (Argentina), Jude Bellingham (England), and other superstars brought their A game to the World Cup. In the final game, Spain captured their 2nd World Cup title when they defeated Argentina 1-0 in extra time. Mbappe kept the Golden Boot (top goalscorer) crown from the last World Cup, and Rodrigo Cascante (Spain) won the Golden Ball (best player) award.

While the different nations played their best on the field to claim the title this year, our office "played" its best to guess the winner of the World Cup. For the tournament, the office hosted a staff bracket challenge. Congratulations to the winner, Emily!

In the District, DC United, a Major League Soccer (MLS) team, resumed play after the conclusion of the World Cup. Recently, they defeated Toronto FC 2-1. The United are battling to qualify for the playoffs and end their postseason drought of six seasons, which is the longest active MLS postseason drought. Now, in National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) news, the Washington Spirit sits in first place overall and is currently in playoff position. On July 26th, the Spirit defeated the Denver Summit 1-0. The Spirit won the NWSL championship in 2021, but have remained runner-ups in 2024 and 2025. Hopefully, this postseason the Spirit can reach the championship again and bring the championship hardware back to DC.

## BASKETBALL

The NBA offseason has attracted a lot of attention for the upcoming season with notable players joining new teams (e.g., the Philadelphia 76ers have both Jaylen Brown and LeBron James on their roster, and Giannis Antetokounmpo will play for the Miami Heat). Given these new developments, the league has not announced the 2026-2027 schedule yet. So, fans will have to wait until late August or early September to see what games they will attend. Will it be LeBron's debut in a 76ers uniform, Ja Morant's debut in a Portland Trail Blazers uniform, LaMelo Ball's debut in a Minnesota Timberwolves uniform, or Giannis' debut in a Heat



LeBron James

uniform? Luckily, the Summer League allowed fans to indulge in the NBA until the preseason starts.

The WNBA season has started back after the All-Star Break. At the All-Star Shooting Stars competition, Team Washington won. The team consisted of Shakira Austin (current Washington Mystics player), Jazelle "GG" Banks (high school standout), and Elena Delle Donne (Mystics and WNBA legend). This season, Olivia Miles, a current Minnesota Lynx player, has people crowning her as both the Rookie of the Year and MVP, a feat that has not been done since Candace Parker won both in her rookie year. However, A'ja Wilson is making moves to keep the MVP crown to herself and gain her fifth MVP designation. The Lynx, Golden State Valkyries, Las Vegas Aces, and Indiana Fever are some of the contenders to win the championship this year.

In the District, the Washington Wizards, with the first overall pick in this year's draft, selected A.J. Dybantsa from BYU. The Wizards hope that the lineup of Anthony Davis, Trae Young, and A.J. Dybantsa will turn the tide and end the Wizards' streak of losing seasons. In WNBA news, the Washington Mystics are a young team that is currently in 8th place. Despite the standings, Sonia Citron, Shakira Austin, Kiki Iriafen, and Lauren Betts are showcasing a team that will be unstoppable in years to come. On July 22nd, they defeated one of the greatest teams in WNBA history, the Aces, 100-99.

In March, the office hosted a March Madness Bracket for both the men's and women's tournament. The winner of the Men's March Madness bracket was Shahana, and the winner of the Women's March Madness bracket was Rebecca.

### BASEBALL

The MLB season has resumed after the All-Star Break. Three Washington Nationals players (CJ Abrams, James Wood, and Foster Griffin) were selected for the MLB All-Star Game. The Tampa Bay Rays, New York Yankees, Chicago White Sox, Milwaukee Brewers, and Los Angeles Dodgers are some of the favorites to win the championship this year.

This year will be the inaugural season of the Women's Pro Baseball League (WPBL). This league will be the first of its kind. The first teams of the WPBL will be the Boston Hunters, New York Heights, Los Angeles Queens, and San Francisco Firebells.

In the district, the Nationals are 3rd in the National League East and are currently fighting for a playoff spot.

### WRITING PROMPTS:

1. Write a poem or essay about sports.
2. Write a story about a memorable moment from a past sporting event that you remember.
3. Who are your favorite collegiate and professional teams?
4. What major sporting event happened the year or month you were born?

## SPORTS TRIVIA

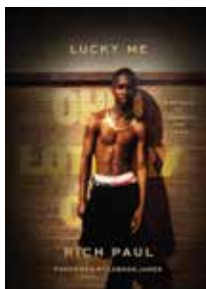
*Send in your answers before the next Connect issue*

1. What is the inaugural year of the Women's Pro Baseball League (WPBL)?
2. The Washington Wizards, with the 1st pick in the 2026 NBA Draft, selected Darryn Peterson. True or False
3. Who won the 2026 Men's FIFA World Cup?
4. The Washington Nationals were the Montreal Expos before moving to DC. True or False
5. Who won the Golden Boot of the 2026 Men's FIFA World Cup?
6. LeBron James was drafted in 2005. True or False
7. Name the teams LeBron James has played for before signing with the Philadelphia 76ers?
8. CJ Abrams, James Wood, and Foster Griffin were the 2026 MLB All-Stars. True or False
9. What team did Giannis Antetokounmpo play with before joining the Miami Heat?
10. What team do the Washington Commanders play against in their first regular-season game, and what day is it?
11. The Washington Spirit is DC's MLS team and has never won a championship. True or False
12. What game takes place on September 9, 2026?
13. The World Cup happens every 5 years. True or False
14. Name all the staff members who won a bracket and what that bracket was.

\*We will reveal the answers in the next *Connect* issue, which is Vol.15, Issue 4 Self-Awareness.

# BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

*The Free Minds long-distance book club*



## *Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds*

Rich Paul

with Neely



Our current Books Across the Miles selection is *Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds* by Rich Paul. In his book, readers follow the story of a young Rich Paul narrated by the Paul of today, as he looks back at his life with wit and insight, drawing out the lessons he learned at every stage that lead him to become a successful entrepreneur and sports agent. Thank you to everyone who wrote back with their thoughtful reflections on this book! Here is what some of you had to say:

**1. In the introduction, Paul discusses luck and how it has had an impact on his life. Do you believe in luck? Why or why not?**

**PF:** I think luck is when all parameters fall in place correctly to have what we want to happen, happen. I would say that luck for me is more like karma, it was supposed to happen that way. I could also say it's part of God's plans. Luck can also be perceived as unfair when good things happen to "bad" people.

**BG:** I believe in luck, I believe in favor, I believe in blessings. I've witnessed God perform miracles in people's lives. When man says one thing, the Lord does another. To me, luck can be attainable through mind, favor, and willpower. I'd like to believe, just maybe if you want something bad enough, you'll manifest it into being. I say luck/belief go together. Even the Bible says "Walk by faith, not by sight," so believe it and God will see you through, if it's his will.

**TG:** I'm on the fence with the belief in luck. If luck is a thing, what need is there for skill?

**CP:** I believe in luck as it is the preparation acted upon in a given scenario. Whether by chance or intention our circumstances are devised by "luck."

**KS:** I do not believe in luck. What I do understand is, where preparation meets chance, there's an opportunity.

**DK:** I do not believe life is shaped primarily by luck, though I understand why people use the word. Looking back at my own life, what once might have looked like "bad luck" was actually the result of environment, trauma, and decisions made under pressure. I grew up in instability, foster care placements, and later made choices influenced by addiction and survival thinking. None of that was random chance, it was conditions stacking up over time. At the same time, I do believe in "timing" and "opportunity," but even those only matter when preparation and awareness meet them. In my own reentry journey, the difference between stagnation and progress has not been luck, but discipline, education, and persistence through nearly two decades of incarceration. What I call success now is not luck, it is responsibility finally being practiced consistently.

**MH:** I feel like luck can also be switched out to mean fate. I have gone through things that could mean I was very, very lucky and also

I have gone through moments where I was out of every luck there ever was and past unlucky. So from there on out, I do believe you can increase and decrease your chances of being lucky.

**AR:** I do not believe in luck. Anything that is considered "lucky" is usually paved by hardwork. Luck is, simply, when preparation meets opportunity. Paul meeting LeBron James was caused by Paul working for another person. These kinds of meetings occur naturally everyday, but what makes this different is Paul's work ethic and fawning over a celebrity.

**2. On page 20, Paul describes how his dad would talk to him on the way to school, asking him about what he was learning, about sports, about life, etc. Is there a person from your childhood that you felt was genuinely interested in you and what you thought? How did having someone like that, or not having someone like that, make you feel?**

**DK:** As a child, I cannot honestly say I consistently had someone who engaged me in the way Rich Paul describes; asking about my thoughts, school, or what I was learning. My upbringing was shaped more by instability, adult stress, and survival than by intentional conversation or emotional curiosity. There were moments of care, but not sustained presence in that way. Not having that kind of attention created a sense of being unseen. Over time, I learned to internalize thoughts rather than share them, which contributed to emotional isolation and poor decision-making later in life. In contrast, during incarceration, I have experienced structured environments; education programs, mentoring groups, and writing workshops that gave me space to finally think aloud and be heard. That experience has shown me how powerful simple attention is, and how different my path might have been if it had started earlier.

**AR:** I never had anyone like that in my life. No one asked me anything and the only feedback I received was being told I was lazy and needed to apply myself more. Not having that has made me angry and resentful. I fight that everyday as an adult. I had undiagnosed issues and I am somewhere on the spectrum. All of my children are as well. Growing up in the 70's and 80's, these conditions were unknown at the time.

**MH:** I had a very similar yet different type of dad as Rich. With my experience of having a very active dad, my dad gave his version

about growing into manhood in "his way" without himself having an active dad in his life when he was growing up. One of his sayings during his talks were, "I'mma tell you about everything out here so that you can't ever say I ain't tell you," and that came with pluses and minuses. Now that I have reached manhood and can analyze that past, I thank my dad for trying and I forgive him for how he did it badly with the whole belt whippings. Life is pretty hard and I'm grateful that at least I had a dad, especially when I know the majority of my peers were missing that father interaction. I also got a leg up on a lot of things for my age.

**BG:** Oh, the love of my life. My late grandfather would pick me up from school every single day. He would inquire about my day, walk me inside for the first day of school. Forever holding my hand. We grew an unbreakable bond that time or space couldn't erase. I try to live right as if he were still here and to excel in whatever I choose to do. I just wish he were here to help me now. His impact on my life didn't influence my mistake. Everyday I woke and wanted to be someone that he would be proud of, and I refuse to ever stop.

**PF:** I don't remember having discussions about that with my family. Maybe my memory is failing me because it was a long time ago. I remember that we couldn't talk or we had to ask to talk during family meals when adults were talking. I think it's great to have someone like that.

**KS:** Yes, my father was genuinely interested in my wellbeing! We may not have always agreed, but he wanted me to think through things correctly.

**TG:** I was a free range child. Plus I was introverted. Not many people interest me. I think I missed out on some guidance and life lessons. Reading how Mr. Paul's father still stayed active in his life makes me feel regret.

**CP:** Having my grandparents ask about my ongoings was helpful in me realizing what I found to be valuable.

**3. Paul writes how important it was for him to remember that while his mother struggled with addiction, that wasn't the whole truth about who she was. Have you ever relied on a similar understanding of someone who was flawed? If so, how has it helped you?**

**TG:** My uncle was an addict. Seeing his struggle keeps me focused on not using drugs.

**KS:** We are all flawed in some form of our character. It helps me to know that a bad day, one's worst choice, or addiction is not one's true identity.

**AR:** I have relied on a similar understanding of my father who was an abusive alcoholic my entire life. If he wasn't working he was drunk. I know it was the alcohol that was causing the issues, but he refused to quit. I have forgiven him but I am still angry.

**PF:** I don't have a specific example. Usually we have the opposite example of somebody who seems great and we discover the flaws afterwards. We are all imperfect anyways. It's good to see, or know, the positive sides of people, and not judge the flaws because who are we for judging?

**MH:** Rich's book was a ride down memory lane for my own life as I was reading it. I grew up knowing that you can never judge a book by its cover and always come with respect first. I have had family members who also suffered from addiction problems, yet, they were

also the main care providers at the same time. They were respected always because that was taught in our family because bad times do not define that person. That has helped me go very far in life. It also is like an ingredient to becoming lucky.

**DK:** Yes, I have had to learn this lesson deeply, especially in relation to family. My father, for example, carried trauma from Vietnam and struggled emotionally in ways that affected the household. It would be easy to define him only by those struggles or by the harm that came from them, but that would not be the full truth of who he was. Understanding him as a whole person, someone shaped by his own wounds has helped me release bitterness and replace it with perspective. It doesn't excuse harm, but it explains context, and that difference matters. I have also had to apply this understanding inwardly. If I reduced my identity to my worst decisions, I would not see growth as possible. Recognizing complexity in others has helped me accept responsibility without self-erasure, which is essential for reentry and rebuilding trust.

**CP:** Seeing someone's flaws and accepting them for who they are helped me see humanity and to build my self-confidence by not getting caught up on the things I did not care for about myself.

**BG:** A couple of folks in my family delved into drugs and it knocked 'em into a setback, you know things happen. Yet I knew that even with that consequence, it wasn't that individual's identity and whole being. People make mistakes. That same person is a hard worker, loving family member, etc. You just have to be open-minded and non-judgmental.

**4. On page 170, Paul's father warns him not to get in too deep because there's only two ways out: dead or in jail. This is something that so many people, parents and otherwise say to kids. Do you think it is an effective warning for young people? Why or why not?**

**CP:** I feel like the ultimatum is not very effective in the sense that it constrains the individual to two choices when it is possible there is more than that.

**MH:** We have this term broken down to "staying on the porch versus jumping off the porch" and some never had the option as a young black male in urban USA. There is always plenty of benefit in someone telling you about trouble. Now how effective that message is depends on the person hearing it. Personally, for some reason I took the warnings as a partial dare and dove in the deep end. However, my brother took heed and mainly stayed out of trouble.

**KS:** Yes, the warning is effective. A father's duty is to share life experiences with his offspring; why because foresight is easier than hindsight.

**AR:** The threat of "you'll end up dead or in jail" never works. Kids almost never heed that advice because most believe they are the exception, that it won't happen to them, that they are smarter.

**BG:** I think sometimes how you explain situations to a child makes all the difference on the outcome. Also if they see an example of what you're saying, it might hit harder and make a lasting impression.

**TG:** No, because it kinda gives a pass for the wrong that's happening.

**DK:** That warning is emotionally powerful, but I do not think it is fully effective by itself. It is often said with urgency and love, but fear alone does not create direction. Many young people already live in

environments where risk feels normal, so the message can become background noise rather than guidance. What I believe is missing from that warning is a third option: a structured path forward. Without showing alternatives—education, mentorship, stable role models, or real opportunities—the message can feel like a closed system rather than a choice. In my experience, change happened not because I feared consequences, but because I eventually encountered tools, accountability, and long-term thinking. Fear may interrupt behavior briefly, but only purpose changes trajectory. Young people need both truth and a visible pathway out.

**PF:** I don't think young people get it as long as they are not directly impacted. Teenagers tend to believe they are invincible and it can only happen to others. I tried to warn my son several times to prevent him from making the same mistake as me, but I quickly realized that he has to "hit the wall" himself to understand. Our experiences cannot really be transferred to our kids. Children have to learn by themselves the hard way sometimes.

**5. Which of the rules that Rich listed and elaborated on in his book are also rules that you try to live by, and why? Can you give examples of when and how you do? Do you have other rules to live by?**

**BG:** E-A-S-Y. "Imma show you what disrespect is about." I live by what my mother instilled in me as a little girl. Respect can take you a long way, I've survived on those words in life out there and definitely on the chain gang 2 years down. Respect for yourself and others is everything.

**TG:** Neutralize your anger. Getting upset gives others power over you and free room and board in your thoughts. I try to work through my anger by remembering we are all flawed, hurting people.

**DK:** One rule that strongly resonated with me from Rich Paul's approach is the idea of discipline over emotion, staying consistent even when motivation fades. In my own life, especially during

incarceration, I have relied on this through education programs, certifications, and long-term vocational training. There were many moments when progress felt slow, but consistency built a foundation that motivation alone never could. Another rule I live by is controlling your environment and influences. I learned early that surrounding conditions shape outcomes more than intentions. I have intentionally invented my time in constructive spaces, writing groups, faith-based study, and vocational development because they reinforce the direction I want to move in. My additional rule is simple: Always think in terms of legacy. Every decision either strengthens or weakens what I leave behind for my children and grandchildren. That perspective has become a filter for behavior, not just reflection.

**CP:** I try to live by the saying "take care of your people" because they help create who I am, and it's important to know that it becomes part of my responsibility to pay it forward and help lift others up.

**MH:** My favorite rule for Rich was his understanding that there can be a right way to do the wrong thing in life. I also was given that lesson growing up. Even when I knew I was doing things that my parents would dishonor them, I made sure to do at least 3 more things to right that one wrong. For example, I grew up gambling and selling drugs young but I also respected everyone and shared almost everything I had. That gave me more balance in this hectic unstable life.

**AR:** Some of Rich Paul's advice that I really liked were "study your craft"; "move with intention"; "be ready to improvise"; "never submit to your surroundings." I use these rules everyday in prison. I also believe in having gratitude for everything and everyone I have contact with everyday.

**KS:** When Rich was in the drug business, and had the encounter with the police, he ended up quitting while he was ahead. I believe in taking healthy risks and I'm a chance taker and dream chaser. However, quitting while I'm ahead isn't being a quitter.

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# CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ AC passed his final sheet metal apprenticeship class.
- ★ AG completed the CORE DC program.
- ★ DD and LW celebrated their 3 year reentry anniversary.
- ★ DR, DA, and OW moved into new homes.
- ★ DL, along with his wife, received their Honorary Doctorate in Public Safety.
- ★ DC and RL graduated from Project Empowerment.
- ★ DK started a new business.
- ★ FY just completed 2 courses, food handlers certification and an alcohol server seller certification course.
- ★ GD won a poetry contest.
- ★ JD is newly married.
- ★ KB and LF got off supervision early.
- ★ LR graduated from the Pivot Program and earned 3rd place in the Pivot Pitch competition.
- ★ RB supervision was terminated and promoted to a supervisor at his job.
- ★ TB passed her GED test.
- ★ YE earned her high school diploma.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!



Write something

# DID YOU KNOW: BENEFITS OF CREATIVE WRITING

*By Avery*

Creative writing is the process of using imagination, artistry, and emotions to tell a story. It can be in the form of poetry, fiction, memoirs, screenwriting, and more. For many, creative writing can be a way to escape reality or pour your emotions into writing, especially if they're hard to articulate in other ways. It can be a way to explore complex themes and topics through literary techniques and narrative devices. Because of this, creative writing can have numerous benefits on your mental health and well-being.

According to the University of Greater Manchester, creative writing can offer authors a lot of mental clarity. It forces you to arrange all the thoughts swirling through your brain and focus on one sentence at a time. This can also help improve judgement and decision making because it allows you to think about your actions and consider a different perspective when seeing it written out in front of you. Like I mentioned earlier, creative writing is a good way to express emotions, which is important because letting your feelings bottle up in your body can have a negative effect on your overall physical health and stress levels. Creative writing has also been known to boost self-esteem and self confidence through expressing your ideas without fear of criticism.

The University of Pennsylvania even considers creative writing to be a form of therapy. Writing exercises like poetry, short stories, and stream of consciousness journaling can help to discover your inner thoughts or feelings and reduce mental noise. Most importantly, creative writing can help give you a moment of mental peace without worrying about what others think.

Here are some prompts to use if you want to start doing creative writing (also check out the writing prompts on pages 23 and 24):

- Tell the story of a difficult experience from somebody else's perspective. Consider turning a loved one – such as a supportive friend or family member – into the main character.
- Choose a difficult memory and describe it in detail but create a new and more satisfying ending. Consider reframing the story in a way that reveals your greatest sources of strength.
- Use a flashback strategy to describe how you feel now and then return to a more difficult period in time. This contrast can be useful for highlighting personal growth.

Kent State University also investigated the benefits of creative writing and found that it can help you develop more confidence in expressing your ideas. Not only can it help you become a better writer, it can also make you more comfortable with understanding your emotions in a healthy way. Importantly, creative writing encourages your curiosity and allows you to explore new concepts you may not have considered. It can also help strengthen your memory because writing things down on paper improves retention, so if you write memories or information you've learned it can help it stay in your brain longer. Using your imagination in writing can improve your innovation as well which improves your ability to come up with new ideas.

Starting your creative writing journey can be intimidating. It can be scary to put pen to paper without knowing what you're going to write. Don't forget, every story holds value. Even if you feel that your story is unimportant, to someone else it could change their life. Write everything down because you never know what could be important, and push through any self doubt because that feeling will pass and the benefits of creative writing will come.

# REIMAGINING, REDESIGNING, REDEFINING: MUHAMMAD'S ART OF COLLAGE *By Kelli*

*"Imagination is vital to my survival. It is just as essential as the air I breathe."*

– Muhammad, Free Minds member and collage artist

*Do you remember making collages in elementary school? Cutting images from old magazines and arranging them onto posterboard with a glue stick? Collage was invented nearly a century ago by artists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque. It's an accessible art form that transforms existing images and objects into something entirely new.*

*For this issue, Kelli interviewed Free Minds member Muhammad, an accomplished collage artist who has created about 30 pieces. His evocative and transformational artwork is displayed throughout Duke University and at Stanford Medical Center, was featured at the 2025 Free Minds event at the Kennedy Center, Poetry & Art as Liberation, has been presented to D.C. leaders, and has even been gifted to Pope Leo XIV!*

**Kelli:** Since the theme of this issue is imagination, how would you describe the role of your imagination?

**Muhammad:** Think about this: Bars, guards, uniforms, violence, addiction, deplorable conditions, oppression, hopelessness, family separation, recidivism, etc. Someone thought long and hard to imagine these carceral components and outcomes. But I choose not to embrace these concrete realities. Instead, I'm reimagining, redesigning, and redefining what's possible despite my current bleak circumstances. Through my imagination and my art, I am charting a new course for my life!

**Kelli:** What is your definition of a collage?

**Muhammad:** Bringing together contrasting, diverse elements (in my case: pictures, colors, and textures) to bring about a new creation.

**Kelli:** Do you remember the first time you made a collage?

**Muhammad:** I was in the Segregated Housing Unit (SHU) in 2004. I was inspired by boredom and sheer loneliness. With a discarded rusty razor and magazines left behind, I cut out a picture of a black spit hood from a photo of a war combatant and put it on a picture of 2Pac Shakur posing bare-chested with his hands behind his back.

**Kelli:** What inspired that piece?

**Muhammad:** I think my younger self was expressing how we (urban Black males) were scapegoats of our government's War on Drugs campaign.

My inspiration comes from so many different places. It could be the theme of a Free Minds Connect I'm reading or a headline in the media. I've made collages when I needed to resolve or make peace with a personal tragedy in my own life. Lately, inspiration has come from discussions in the classes I've taken through Duke University's Divinity School for the past nine semesters. If something moves me and I see a new perspective I can offer through my art, I'll make a collage.

**Kelli:** Why collages? What do you love most about it?

**Muhammad:** The therapeutic and holistic feel. Collages are a world of

my own creation.

It is a portal through which to travel despite my physical confinement. I experience an enormous sense of accomplishment upon completing a piece and I have a treasured item to gift and share with others. I also love the way my art continues to evolve as I remain curious and bring a fresh eye to the work.



**Kelli:** What makes collaging challenging for someone who is incarcerated?

**Muhammad:** The biggest challenge for me is my meager finances. We don't make much of a wage in here to pay for materials. I derive such joy and hope from my art though and I see it as an investment in my future. People may be surprised by the generosity of fellow prisoners. I started painting recently and someone who also enjoys it gifted me both paint and brushes!

I also had one of my collages confiscated at one facility. I'd made it for my mother. It included the image of a U.S. President, and someone must have felt it was controversial. After I explained the piece to a prison official, he understood my message was harmless. I still never got it back. I like to think it's hanging over some executive staff member's mantle!

**Kelli:** Is there one collage you've created that is your favorite?

**Muhammad:** I consider all of them my babies. Each is special and unique. I labored for hours on end and put my all into them. That said, the one that was confiscated and the one displayed at the Kennedy Center taught me so much about how my art is perceived. I'm either a threat or a champion of the people. It just depends on who's viewing it.

**Kelli:** What would you advise your Free Minds brothers and sisters reading this who might be interested in trying collage art?

**Muhammad:** Start small. Create something for a loved one, like a card. Begin with a theme or message, then build a background and foreground from magazines or newspapers. You can even use printed words as lettering. Personal photos add a special touch. Most importantly, have fun. There's no right or wrong way. What seems like a mistake may become your signature style. Use your imagination!

*Muhammad has recently been commissioned to create a wall-sized gymnasium mural based on his painting of basketball's spiritual significance on prison yards. Free Minds can't wait to see what he creates next! We hope his story inspires you to let your imagination guide you.*

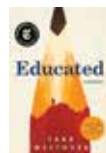
# WHAT WE'RE READING

with Neely

Have you recently read a book that left an impression on you, positive or negative? 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."

- **JS: *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander**  
After reading *The New Jim Crow*, I was more equipped to voice my beliefs about the system and the injustices and discrimination that the Black community has endured. Honestly, I felt she was a little hypocritical in the fact that her life partner, known as her husband, was unmoved. To me it seems against or in denial of those things, while as a federal prosecutor perpetuating the cycle of a caste system with the Black community being at the bottom and being victimized so our resources, whether it be services, money, or people can continue to be exploited. That fact tainted my opinion about the author, which then hurt my perception about the book. It made the book come off as insincere, but life is complicated so there's still room for grace. (Editor's Note: We have learned that the author's husband no longer works for the USAO).
- **Avery: *Educated* by Tara Westover**  
This book has been so interesting because I'm learning about someone's life who is incredibly different from my own. It's a memoir about a girl's life who was raised in a conservative Mormon family in rural Idaho who are survivalists, meaning they stock up food and supplies in preparation for the supposed end of the world. As she grows up, she has to come to terms with the fact that the way she grew up was abnormal and it might not be the best way to live.
- **Regina: *Who's That Girl?* by Eve**  
*Who's That Girl?* is a memoir chronicling the life of rapper Eve. She talks about her childhood struggles growing up in Philadelphia and the challenges she faced while pursuing her rap career in a male-dominated industry. This is a must read if you are a fan like I am. With the red hair and a flow like no other she was the ultimate 90's Female Rap Icon, a true Female Ruff Ryder!
- **Kelli: *Guatemalan Rhapsody* by Jared Lemus**  
*Guatemalan Rhapsody* is a debut collection of short stories by Jared Lemus. They are beautifully written and are both heartbreaking and hopeful. They feature Guatemalan characters often struggling to survive, whether in the margins of American society, or in their home country. I'm not always a fan of short stories (mainly because if I like a story, I feel like it ends too soon!) but *Guatemalan Rhapsody* really captured my imagination. I loved it!
- **Julia: *Lone Women* by Victor LaValle**  
*Lone Women* by Victor LaValle is a Western horror novel set in the early 1900s about a young Black woman named Adelaide who departs California in a hurry after the mysterious deaths of her parents. She sets out for rural Montana, where there is a policy that anyone – including women and African Americans – can claim a small plot of land and have a pathway toward homeownership if they can survive the difficult conditions. Adelaide arrives in Montana with little more than the clothes on her back and a large trunk that she keeps locked at all times...because there is something, or someone, inside it. In Montana, she struggles to survive the brutal winter, aided by a small group of other women. Each one of them seems to be alone...but are they really? This novel was a fun, engaging read that I would definitely recommend!
- **Emily: *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans**  
I recently finished *The Correspondent* by Virginia Evans which is an epistolary novel. This means it is told entirely through letters. The main character, Sybil, is a retired lawyer and the novel follows her life for a couple of years as she writes to and receives letters from her children, brother, friends, neighbors, famous authors, and many other characters. As a reader, at first I found the book a little confusing as I couldn't remember who everyone was or what their relationship to Sybil was. As the book progressed, however, I became engrossed in the story and could not put it down. My dad called this a book for "the older generation" (himself included!) but I think even younger readers might enjoy it!



## 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 or Bookshop.org. Free Minds will not list books that include explicit sexual material, gratuitous violence, or discrimination against any group of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, nationality, or disability.

***The Algebra of Survival* by Mark Johnson (a novel):**

**Description provided by the author:** When militias ravage her village in the Congo, young Ramiri survives by following a brutal math: move and die, stay still and live. From the jungle, a mysterious woman named Anjanet offers her a choice: die a victim or become something older than revenge. Become a weapon.

An ancient sect of warrior-philosophers trains her to think. To speak the language of pain. To see the world as a series of variables to be solved. They break her down and rebuild her as a force of nature with one purpose: balance. To end the war, must she become a monster? And is she willing to pay the ultimate price to solve the equation of her vengeance?



## FREE MINDS BOOK CLUB

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## NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: SELF-AWARENESS

*By Julia*

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One thing that I believe unites everyone in the world is the importance—and sometimes the inherent challenge—of the journey of self-awareness. The ancient Greeks inscribed the phrase “know thyself” on the Temple of Apollo in the 4th century BCE (meaning Before Common Era or before what is considered Year 1). A longer version of this phrase is, “Know thyself, and thou shalt know the universe and God.” While Free Minds and the *Connect* magazine is secular (not religious), I like this idea that knowledge of self can lead to knowledge of the universe – and that self-awareness may be an important first step towards greater understanding of the world around us. Of course, self-awareness is easier said than done, and for many of us may be a lifelong journey of understanding, recognizing, and naming the ways that we grow and change over time. Have you ever wondered why you acted or reacted a certain way in the moment? What did it mean to you when you were able to understand and express why? Does that self-awareness help you in other situations, or may it help you in the future? Do you feel like you can express your true self? Why or why not? If you are still figuring out who is the real you—as many of us are—tell us about it. Walk us through this journey of self-discovery. We want to read all about it!

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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