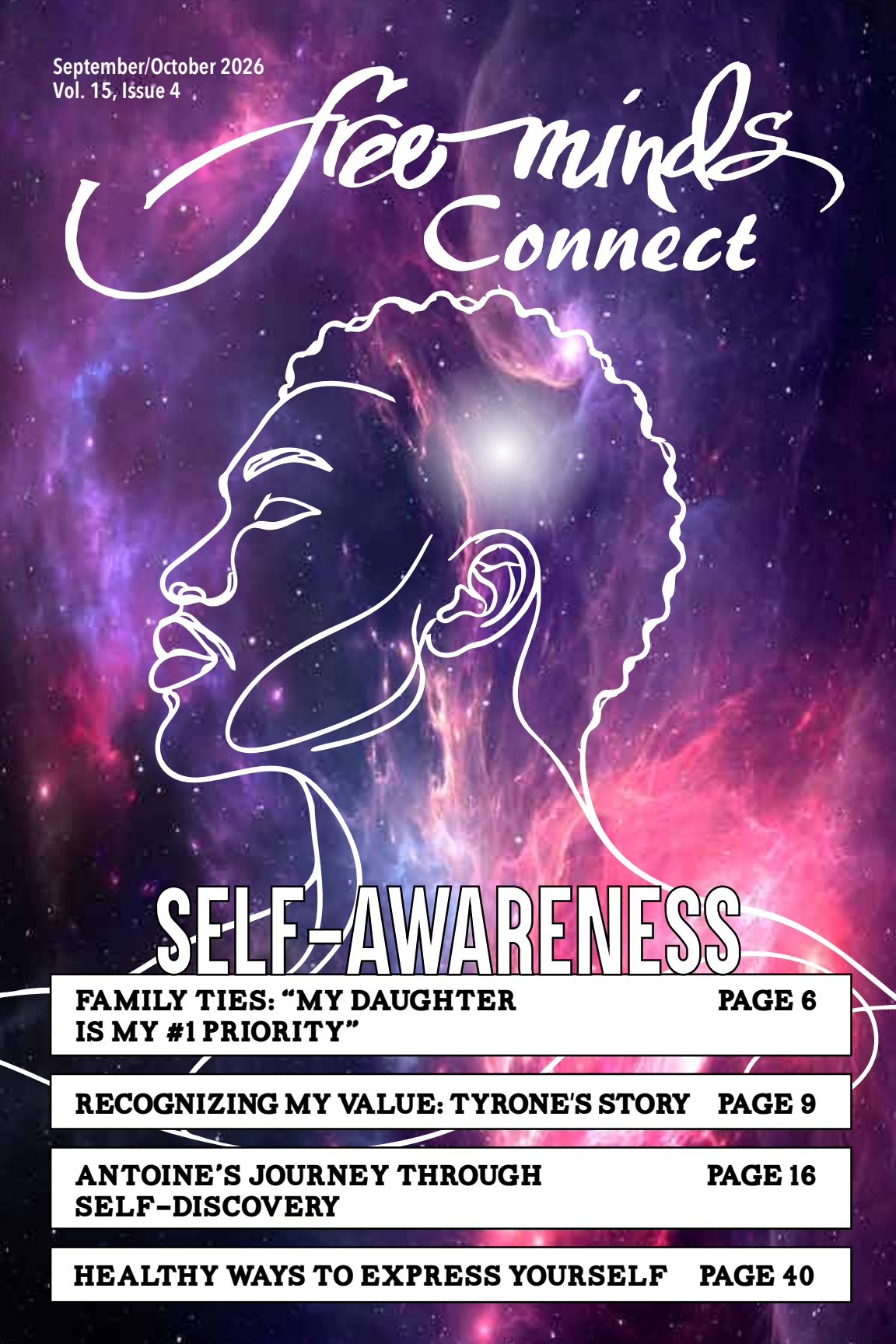
September/October 2026
Vol. 15, Issue 4

Free minds Connect



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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR: BETTER TOGETHER

Dear Introspective and Self-Aware Free Minds members,

We celebrated our 12th Peer Support Training Program Cohort last week with an emotional and joyous graduation. Graduates and guests shared meaningful remarks with a core theme about the great level of self-awareness gained through the program. They shared that the course taught them to look inward, and to better understand what triggers them, how they can manage their reactions, and the motivations behind their choices in life. This strong foundation of self-knowledge means they can better help their fellow Free Minds members as they navigate the many challenges of coming back home.

Edward, our trainer who is a licensed clinical therapist, provides tools to pause when a trigger may make you feel defensive, reactive, or angry, and decide how to best respond. The triggers don't go away but the responses can change dramatically. (You can read more about trauma triggers in Isaiah's "Did You Know" column). I recount this all to say the core of Free Minds is peer support and the core of peer support is awareness of one's own (as a FM member just told me) "triggers, traits, and talents."

There are many talents on display in this issue, and in these pages you'll read about FM members and staff's philosophies around and practices of self-awareness. In Joy's Reentry profile on page 16, Free Minds member Antoine shares about shifting out of habits that supported you in one environment but can hinder you in another. I love that Antoine stresses the importance of "[giving] yourself a chance to learn." Another Free Minds member on a learning journey is James, who immediately signed up to be a peer support partner following the end of his thirty four-year incarceration. James talks with Kelli about what it means to "now provide the kind of support he once needed himself" (page 34). He utilizes tools he learned in the Peer Support Training Program for emotional awareness and self-regulation when he's in need of a check-in himself.

Read about tools like that in Isaiah's "Did You Know?" column on page 40. Isaiah gives us an overview of what trauma triggers, where they can come from, and the relationship between triggers and flashbacks. He shares a short flashback-halting protocol that we can use when we become triggered. Carlos's strong self-awareness is on display every day when he's facilitating our community outreach program, On the Same Page. He shares how he started developing it while in prison in the bilingual Conversaciónes de Mentes Libres/Free Minds Conversations column on page 14.

In Kelli's Meditation, she offers up a step-by-step jaw-loosening, stiff-shoulder-relaxing guided meditation that she developed to ground herself in nature during a tumultuous time of parenting teenagers and dealing with intensely fluctuating emotions (page 29). Even though this meditation was created during what Kelli describes as a "very rocky spot," she tells readers that she still utilizes self-awareness practices like meditation every single day, not only in the midst of crisis.

The poems and essays are guaranteed to strengthen your self-awareness. I love reading how other people learn about themselves, as it never fails to turn on a lightbulb about my own self. Thank you all for this. GW's powerful sense of self showed him that he must focus on his future, as he shares in his essay (page 8):

There was a time when I focused on what life had taken from me. Today, I focus on what life is teaching me. I have learned that my mindset determines the direction of my future more than my past ever could.

Mindset is masterful! Lastly, I'll close with a few lines from TT's poem, Every Part of Me, where he reflects on the value of embracing all aspects of one's self, no matter if they would be considered "good" or bad."

I've learned to live,
with every part of me.
The intricate details,
that doesn't reach
every eye.
If you love it, love not
just a slice, but love
the whole pie.



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: Food

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.

Free minds Connect

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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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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, Jasmin

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

FREE MINDS HQ

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

By Rebecca

Author Nick Brooks Visits Members at YSC
In June, Nick Brooks, award-winning author, filmmaker, and rapper, met with our book club members at the Youth Services Center (YSC), who were in the process of reading Brooks's first novel, *Promise Boys*. Brooks engaged with the young men in an open and down-to-earth manner, sharing his journey from growing up in Northeast DC to graduating from film school, working as an educator through Teach for America, making music under the stage name Ben Kenobe, and of course, writing 5 published novels. Brooks also introduced his idea of the **Three P's**: **Passion** (what do you love to do?); **Purpose** (why do you want to do it?); and **Proficiencies** (what are you good at that you can build on?). Once you answer these three questions, Brooks says you'll be on your way to the fourth P, **Prosperity**! The young men were attentive and asked some great questions about Brooks's writing, including what made him want to write *Promise Boys*, how he manages to write the full length of his books, and what he wants to write that he hasn't done yet. We want to say a huge thank you to Nick Brooks and the staff at YSC for providing such an engaging and impactful experience for our young members!

Free Minds Black History Learning Group
At Free Minds, we read, write, and LEARN! A great example of our commitment to lifelong learning is our monthly, member-led Black History Learning Group. On the first Tuesday of every month, 10 to 12 members gather via Zoom to learn about and discuss Black history. These virtual gatherings consist of "On This Day in Black History" content, a reading, video, or podcast about the specific topic for the meeting, and time for discussion. This group has covered a variety of topics, from the Three-Fifth Compromise to the legacy and impact of Black music, with many topics drawn from books like Nikole Hannah-Jones's *The 1619 Project* and *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi. The August meeting focused on "Black August," an annual month-long commemoration observed primarily in the United States to honor the lives and struggles of Black revolutionaries and activists. Through communal learning and discussion, our members get to learn more about their history, more about each other, and more about themselves.

A Write Night for the Books!
In July, Free Minds hosted an in-person Write Night at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Capitol Hill. This event brought together community members, Free Minds members (including Poet Ambassadors), and Free Minds staff for an evening celebrating the work of Free Minds and celebrating all of you! Poet Ambassadors Damon, Deon, and KB gave powerful testimonies about their experience with Free Minds and the importance of providing support to those who are incarcerated and those who have returned home. Following the speakers, everyone spent time reading and reflecting on the poetry that you all have been sending in to us, writing heartfelt responses about what they got out of the poems. Longtime volunteers, college students, and families gathered around tables filled with poems and penned words of encouragement in colorful ink. It was a beautiful night of uplift, laughter, reunions, and continued dedication to what Free Minds is all about: fostering hope and connection. Keep those poems coming for more Write Night events!



FREE MINDS MAILBAG

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

DC: I love writing. It gives me a new way to express myself and it's pretty neat and cool to hear good feedback... Thank you to Kelli and Rebecca for coming to the DC Jail and opening up my eyes to a different world. I love you guys and the entire Free Minds family. Y'all saved me more than you know.

KS: Free Minds has changed my life in such a good way. Reading more books has opened me up to a better life, as well as viewing the world differently. Now, I do believe that Free Minds is igniting my passions to write.

DL: I've been a member for a couple of years now and you guys seem to always come through with educational work or books to my liking.

MH: I haven't read sci-fi or fantasy for a long time. When I read, I live in the book and its characters and environment. I can see it, I can feel it, as if I'm in it. I see and feel their expressions, faces, movement, feelings, emotions, places, objects, even physical. I feel like I am being transported into that world. I can feel the happy and joyful moments and the sad and painful moments. Makes me smile, laugh, pained and even tear up.

DS: Over the years I've been too busy to draw, write, and express myself. Even with Free Minds giving me the platform, just dealing with being incarcerated, family, and legal issues I've been distracted a bit. It didn't stop me from reading every Free Minds *Connect* that I receive... Each issue of *Connect* takes me home, through the city, even the parts of town that I never had a chance to explore. You know I'm from Ward 7 and have been stuck in that area for 26 years before my incarceration. So even for me to see parts of NE, NW and SW in pictures, I can tell certain things in each picture that's home.

FM: Thanks for the new Free Minds *Connect* issue, Imagination. My imagination goes a long way! Much is very appreciated, the new DC Photos were very cool. Inside Union Station and Malcolm X Park photos was very interesting. Also the mural nearby E and 7th St. NW... Wallo267 visited DC Jail and Youth Services Center – I know that was a cool thing. Wallo is a good mentor, he comes from the same place of our DC inmates come from.

QUOTE–I–VATOR



August Wilson

"Confront the dark parts of yourself, and work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing."
– August Wilson, American playwright

"Find out who you are and do it on purpose." – Dolly Parton, American singer-songwriter and actress

"People need to know that they have all the tools within themselves. Self-awareness, which means awareness of their body, awareness of their mental space, awareness of their relationships – not only each other, but with life and the ecosystem."
– Deepak Chopra, American author

"I am not what happened to me; I am who I choose to become." – Carl Jung, Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist

"At the center of your being, you have the answer. You know who you are and you know what you want."
– Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher

"The only questions that really matter are the ones you ask yourself."
– Ursula K. LeGuin, American author

"Seeing within changes one's outer vision."
– Joseph Chilton Pearce, American author

FAMILY TIES: "MY DAUGHTER IS MY #1 PRIORITY"

By Isaiah

For this issue's Family Ties article, I had the chance to interview Free Minds member Dwayne. He mentions that growth comes to mind when he thinks about self-awareness. We also had a special guest, his daughter, in our midst for a little bit! This article follows Dwayne and his interactions with his family before, during, and after his incarceration.

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

Dwayne: Initially, under IRAA, I came home in December of 2022. I went straight to work. I got off papers (Supervised Release) in February of 2025. Instead of doing the full five years, they took me off early because I hadn't missed a beat since I'd been home. However, I did go back to jail. So right now, I'm rebuilding my life. I've had a daughter since I've been home. She just turned two on August 1st. Now I have to get my own everything. I have to get my own place. I have to get my own car. I'm working right now as a Security Officer and as an Emergency Medical Responder. But that's what I'm up to right now. I'm just rebuilding.

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

Dwayne: I had a great family. My family members consisted of well-known figures in the DC community.

I remember our family reunions. The new family reunions are funerals. Whenever somebody dies, that's when everybody comes together. But we had actual family reunions back then. So, the last one I went to was fun. I played softball for the first time. I don't like softball because I didn't have any gloves, and I wasn't catching those pop-ups *(a ball that is hit high into the air with little distance)*. We played basketball. I played against my cousin who played for the Maryland Terps. His teammate came to the reunion, and they beat us bad, bro. I couldn't go to the last family reunion because of my impending incarceration.

But with my family, I always had a say-so. My words always meant something. My little cousins and everybody who was around me, I always kept them in line. I was the leader of my family. I was great with my family. However, after my sentencing, a lot of my family members were gone.

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

Dwayne: I was in for 27 years and four months before I came home on IRAA.

I wrote letters. I'd call all the time. I might take a piece of a cartoon coloring book, trace over it, then write a letter around it. Send it to the younger kids because they loved it. I believe that a person does not have to be physically present in order to be present.

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

Dwayne: Reach out to the people who you have ties to. Ask about other people. Ask like, "Hey, what's up with my cousin, or so-and-so?" Eventually, they will hear you're asking about them, and they might feel like, "Dang, I need to reach out to them," and "Yeah, give them my number." This is how you can start building that rapport back with people.

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?

Dwayne: Reach out. Just drop them a letter or some pictures. Show them that they're not dead to you. People on the inside – we call prison a walking graveyard, the living dead, and the walking dead. We call it those names because a lot of people are not just dead on the inside, but they feel that they are dead to society because everybody forgot about us. People on the outside have to understand that you were somebody who showed them love, and they showed you love when they were on the outside. So, don't forget them now. It's easier for you to find them than it is for them to find you. You can go to a government website, type their name and birth date, and find them, then write them a letter. It's going to make them feel good. It's not always about money. It could be a couple of pictures of their niece that was a baby when they were out, or their nephew who wasn't born yet before they went to jail. People feel like, "Oh, he's just calling because he wants some money, and I ain't got no money to send him." No, it's not that. Hearing a genuine, caring, and loving voice means a lot inside of a grim, dark wall.

Isaiah: Our theme for this *Connect* Magazine issue is Self-Awareness. What comes to your mind when you think about Self-Awareness?

Dwayne: Growth. You can't have self-awareness and say you are not growing because I didn't know who I was when I was pre-incarcerated. I thought I was a man. I was doing grown man things, but somebody once told me, "How are you a grown man? When you don't have your own apartment. You don't have anything in your name. How are you grown? You don't even work a job. You don't even pay taxes." I was like, "F***, I make more money than y'all make." Arrogance. But once I was incarcerated, I started growing up. I started reading more. I started studying certain things more. I took up a lot of courses. I learned what it meant to be a man. You can't learn what it means to be something of your true nature if you don't gain self-awareness of it. The only way you can learn something is by growing.

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

Dwayne: My family consists of my daughter. You know, you have other family members, but she's my top priority. My daughter is my number 1 priority, I'm my second priority, and my daughter's my third priority, also. I say that because what I do today is going to benefit my daughter's future, but what I have to do today still has to benefit my daughter's present. I don't want my daughter to have a hard transition into adulthood as I had. So, I want to make sure that my daughter benefits from the years I spent in jail learning how to be a man. Learning how to be a man taught me how to be a father before I became a father. For my daughter's birthday, I rented out a venue. I rented it out because it had some big bouncy castles and stuff in there. So, they had popcorn and cotton candy. She was scared of the bouncy castle and didn't want to get in it. We had a lot of food and drinks. But I had to blow a bunch of balloons up for her because she likes balloons. I had a bunch of Disney Princess balloons. Each balloon had a different princess on it, like Snow White, Ariel, and Elsa. So, I blew up probably like 15 of those balloons. Then I had to blow up some gold, burgundy, red, and pink colored balloons. I was just blowing up balloons like crazy.

Isaiah: Father of the Year!

Dwayne: I'm not going to lie to you. I don't want to be Father of the Year; I want to be Father of Eternity. I want my daughter to remember me for being there for her and knowing that I loved her.



TECH TALK: PRESENTING YOURSELF ONLINE

By Emily

Welcome back to the tech column! This month we are talking about self-awareness as it relates to job interviews. Below please find a few tips and tricks to come off confident in your interview and present yourself in the best light.

As we have covered in past tech columns, many things are online these days! This includes job interviews. While this may sound intimidating, you certainly do not need to be a tech expert to ace an online job interview. One of the most important things you can do ahead of time is get familiar with the video platform the company is using. Some common examples are Zoom, Teams, and Google Meet. While they all have the same basic idea, each platform looks slightly different. It is a good idea to log on ahead of time and maybe ask a friend or family member to do a quick practice video call with you so that you can get familiar with the features.

During that practice call you can also make sure that you have given your phone or computer permission to access your camera and microphone. While it is considered a best practice to use a computer for this type of video call, it is okay to use a phone! Just make sure you are in a quiet place and somewhere where you can prop your phone up on a surface. This will make the video less shaky and you will be able to position yourself so that your whole head and shoulders are in the frame. It is also important to quickly assess the lighting. If you sit directly in front of a window, for example, you will be backlit and the interviewer will have trouble seeing your face. It is often best to sit facing a window or lamp (with the light source in front of you and your device) so that you are well lit. You may also want to take a quick look behind you to see what is in frame. You would be surprised what you can see in someone's background! I normally choose to sit in my dining room with a wall behind me to minimize distractions and objects cluttering my video. It's best to use a private space if possible so there aren't other people talking or visible in the background.

Alongside doing a quick practice session on the video platform you will be using, it is a good idea to locate the link or method of accessing the meeting ahead of time. Often, the interviewer will send the link to the call in an email or maybe as a calendar invite. Practice finding it ahead of time so you don't find yourself scrambling at the last minute searching through your emails (I have been there before and it doesn't exactly set the mood for a stress free interview 😂). It is also a good idea to hop on the call a few minutes early for this same reason.

As for the rest of the interview, you can treat it just as you would for an in-person interview! Make sure to dress professionally (some people who work from home wear "Zoom outfits" with a professional shirt on top and pajamas on the bottom). This is fine, as long as everything in view of the camera is professional attire. Make sure also to silence your phone so that it won't make any noises mid-interview. Finally, try looking into the camera of your device while answering the questions. I know this feels strange and the temptation is to look at the screen to see the person you are talking to, but when you look at the camera it gives the feeling of making eye contact with the interviewer.

My last tip for online job interviews is to be kind to yourself. Sometimes something glitches or you make a small mistake. Even people who have been using computers for years can find video interviews a little bit awkward. Just roll with it and I am sure you will be amazing!

ESSAYS & STORIES BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Writing to Myself By DB

Past self: Oh, when we were young, wow, were we dumb. So crazy. We called the pointer finger a thumb. But through all that, I just remember when we were young.

Future self: Hey, I see you accomplished everything you set out to do and changed and became a great man before our time here is done every day. We used to wake up like we were lost. Well, I'm here to tell you we've already won!

Current self: Hey Dre, how are you? I see you've finally woken up from your slumber. I'm so glad because I don't know what type of spell you were under believing those years you wasted were a bunch of numbers; that's like saying it gets hot in the winter and cold in the summer. I'm glad you changed your life and didn't become a runner.

Self-Awareness By GW

Self-awareness is one of the greatest gifts a person can develop because it requires honesty. It is the willingness to look in the mirror and accept both our strengths and weaknesses. For me, self-awareness has meant taking responsibility for my choices instead of blaming my circumstances.

There was a time when I focused on what life had taken from me. Today, I focus on what life is teaching me. I have learned that my mindset determines the direction of my future more than my past ever could.

Self-awareness has also taught me that leadership begins within. Before I can inspire others, I must first discipline myself. Before I can build successful businesses or strengthen my community, I must continue building my own character everyday.

I no longer measure success only by money or titles. I measure it by the lives I impact, the opportunities I create for others, and the person I become along the way.

Everyday I learn something new about myself. Some lessons are encouraging, while others challenge me to grow. I have discovered that growth begins where excuses end. When I choose accountability over blame, purpose over comfort, and faith over fear, I become the man I was created to be.

Self-awareness is not about becoming perfect. It is about becoming intentional. It is the quiet voice that reminds me that every decision I make today shapes the legacy I leave tomorrow.

I believe the greatest journey any of us will ever take is not across the world, but within ourselves. And that journey is one I am committed to taking every single day.

Know Thyself By FAX

As I reflect upon the words "know thyself," I think about my first encounter with "myself." The first time I truly experienced myself was 2020 at 28 years old.

It may seem "odd" that I first met myself at 28 years old…Allow me the chance to explain. In 2020, I had been assigned to Administrative Segregation INDEFINITELY. My brothers and sisters currently/formerly incarcerated understand 23 and 1. Solitary confinement. It's been nearly 7 years, add up the months, weeks, days, hours, minutes, SECONDS, that have passed. I'm unable to do so for this has been my greatest struggle thus far in my short life.

Though difficult at times, I've been able to learn myself intimately throughout this experience. The banging, yelling, screaming, smells, etc, has not hindered my ability to tap into my mind and heart throughout this time that I've been housed in solitary confinement. I've been able to truly SEE myself and make adjustments when necessary.

Much of this year, the ENTIRE institution I'm currently housed at has been locked down due to short staffing. This means no recreation, no showers, and no phone calls. 24 and none. If it is the same where you're housed or if you've been in solitary confinement long term, I implore you to reach deeply inside of yourselves and KNOW THYSELF! Gnothi seauton (Greek). Nosce te ipsum (Latin).

"I BEGAN TO RECOGNIZE THAT MY LIFE HAD PURPOSE"

Tyrone's Journey of Self-Awareness

By Tara

In the Generations issue of the *Connect*, I introduced you to my friend Tyrone, the founder of the Alliance of Concerned Men, and an influential leader who has had a transformative impact on so many people. His book *The Man, The Message, The Mission* is on the next book ballot – cast your vote on page 41! I sat down with Tyrone recently as he reflected on his many decades of service to others and to the DC community.

Tara: In all your years of working with folks inside and home from incarceration, what do you see is the value of self-awareness?

Tyrone: The value of self-awareness is enormous. Once you become aware of yourself, you begin to recognize the value you can bring to life. You learn to understand situations, the people around you, and how you fit into the bigger picture.

For me, the greatest lesson I ever learned was the value of myself. I learned the importance of seeing myself as a person, as an individual. That became the first principle for me: understanding my own worth. At one time, I didn't recognize my value. But once I began to understand who I was, I could finally see how I could help others.

Tara: Why do you think at one time you weren't able to see your own value?

Tyrone: I didn't have a strong support system around me. I came from a household where we were struggling, and there wasn't much guidance or structure. My mother was raising us on her own, doing everything she could to take care of my brother, my sister, and me. She was trying to stretch a minimum-wage paycheck to meet all our needs. Money was tight, and time was precious. I rarely saw my father.

When I looked at other families, I saw children whose parents provided structure and guidance. I saw what I was missing. In my own family, I felt that I had to take care of myself and help take care of my brother and sister. I was always trying to figure out how to find a dime, a quarter, or a dollar to ease some of the burden on my mother.

My love for my mother was a major driving force in my life. I saw the conditions we were living in, and I wanted to do something to help. But at that point, I didn't necessarily know how to do that in a positive or constructive way.

Tara: What helped you begin to see yourself differently?

Tyrone: That understanding came later, when I found a great mentor and began exploring the spiritual side of life. I knew a man named Vernon who took the time to talk with me consistently. Those conversations began to make a difference. I started going to church, feeling the spirit of God, and developing a stronger sense of community and connection to others though I was still trying to find myself. Even while I was going to church, I hadn't completely left hustling behind. I was searching for something, trying to understand who I was and what my life could mean. When I went to prison, I made a decision to learn about myself. I began looking at my life from the perspective of the people I had hurt. That was a turning point for me. I started to understand the impact of my actions and to see myself differently. Being confined forced me to spend time learning who I was. Instead of seeing that time only as a limitation, I began to use it as an opportunity to grow. I started recognizing that there was a better version of myself I could work toward. I could move toward a higher understanding of who I was and what I was capable of becoming. In many ways, I grew while I was confined. I began to bring out the best in myself.

Tara: Can you share some of the things you discovered about yourself while you were incarcerated?

Tyrone: I discovered my own value. I learned that I had substance, that I had something meaningful to offer, and that I could help other people. I also began to understand the role I could play, even while I was incarcerated. I started seeing opportunities to contribute to the programs I was involved in and to help make those programs better. Some of the work we helped create on the inside eventually carried over to the outside, reaching people in the community.

That was important to me. I realized that my circumstances did not erase my ability to make a contribution. I could continue learning, growing, and helping others, even while I was confined. The more I learned about myself, the more I understood how I could be useful to others. I began to recognize that my life had purpose, that I had something to give, and that I could make a difference.

For me, self-awareness was about more than understanding myself. It was about discovering my worth and realizing what I could do with that understanding to help other people.

Tara: Thank you Tyrone. It's so clear that the work you put in to understand yourself better has had an enormous impact on others understanding themselves too. Thank you for sharing your journey of self-awareness.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Learning
By FT
I need to focus on my listening skills.
Keeping in touch with my inside being.
Taking one day at a time and coming out of my comfort zone.
If I truly want to overcome my difficult moments in my life.
I have overcome hopelessness and am being myself.
Learning is power, learning is wealth.

To My Past Self
By LR
Enjoy the moments;
embrace the energy of positive company.
Be free with the people,
regardless of how much you feel you need to be guarded.
You only live once, so let the real you be known to the world -
Enjoy the moments.

Inside Out
by LS
I smile with a frown, and still laugh with a tear;
The world's up is my down, I feel your there is my here;
I taste the tears of a clown, and my front is your rear;
What goes 'round comes back 'round, I can't drive what Karma did steer;

Here, what you fear, I find funny, hilariously so;
Because hell hath no fury compared to what I see and what I know;
Woah; That's too heavy, but you know what lies are really told?
I've seen a wolf wear sheep's and a sheep wear wolves' clothes;

You mean wolves in sheep's clothes, right? Demons and angels?
No, because some things look the same, depending on your angles;
It's a tangle; I'm strangled; I breathe with no air
And the one thing I never see is justice that's fair;

But, why care? Who's right is wrong? And who's wrong is right?
Because it all looks the same… under the right light.

Self Awareness
by JS
What is it that I see,
on the inside of me?
Where am I strong?
Where am I weak?
What do I need to grow?
What do I need to learn?
Do I really know what I think I know?
Where am I broken?
How can I make it whole?
Where am I hurt?
How can I heal?
Where can I move forward on my own?
Where do I need help?
What are my limitations that prevent me from being limitless?
In evaluating myself, can I see?
That it's never just about me.

The Truth
by SC
The truth is a word made flesh
A thought experienced
A deed done in love
A word spoken or passionately written
Truth is to know what you are
Here, there and everywhere
That's to be
Truth is harmony, free, peace
Truth is to be conscious alive
In a different state of mind
A place where actions speak likewise
Truth is the realm of the strong
Of those who have realized of being…wrong
Of those who come to realize between the truth and the lie
Truth is to be in love and to express nothing but IT
Truth is to feel loved unconditionally by Something Real
Truth is to be real human and yet divine
Truth is to perceive himself to be and not to be…
A miserable and powerless human being
But a human being living realities
The genesis of Truth is to realize that you are not
To know IT is to feel the Strength of Its power
Which Is sweetly imposed by one who is predisposed
Gladly received and enthusiastically executed
Truth is to live of the Light,
In the Light
With the Light
For the Light

Truth is the first thing that pops up in your mind
Once you have been realized
As soon as you open your eyes
You will welcome It with a thankful heart and
A wide open smile
Truth is love manifested in your soul
It is the joy to be alive and a hope for ever
It's that thing…
Something…a Substance…a realization
That which will make you extremely Happy
And able to freely experience all the above
Without Truth one is not.

Conflicted Heart
by TJT
After conflict there comes healing or neglect…
Filth left to fester in a wound
shall surely become infected.

I left you…
thinking by doing such I was healing from us.
I thought I was preventing infection by separation,
but shown I was, that you're my "wound"...
The "filth": my affections you made me neglect…
I left what needed to heal.
I gave up on my affection and I let it fester
and now I am infected with this conflicted heart.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

The Real Me
by RP

I'm pretty much a whole new person than when I was once a teen.
I'm more humble, extremely more.
I'm empathetic, not just sympathetic.
I'm extremely more open minded.
I take being healthy, fit, and honest seriously.
I'm extremely more helpful
I listen so much more and I'm great at inspiring
I like to clean, I love cleanliness
I have a real ability and blessing at strength
I'm very advanced in fitness
I can literally do 125 pushups straight without stopping and so much more
I completed over 120 programs, courses, and classes
I obtained my GED when I was 18
I obtained a certification in construction
I wrote a real good self help book and am waiting to publish after my hearing
I'm still trying to obtain more certification, degrees
do more publishings, start a personal training program, mentor, do real estate, interior design, import/export and so much more
I fear heights, deep water, etc.
I love scary movies, 90's music, pastries
I love the feeling that I helped someone
In my free time,
I would love to visit, entertain, and give gifts to sick and suffering kids in hospitals
Many always tell me I'm different
I verbalize my thoughts
it's a good and bad thing but also helpful
I wish people knew the new me only
Not comparing or thinking back to the old me

Every Part of Me
by TT

Scars to the body, from neglect to respect of self.
I've been on this journey searching for some direction, help.
I've been infected from birth, I guess it was God's design.
This infection has spread, all through this heart of mine.
Call it a crime, if that's what you see.
I've learned to live, with every part of me.
The intricate details, that doesn't reach every eye.
If you love it, love not just a slice, but love the whole pie.
There's divisions within, that conflict with others.
The circle of life, the first Earth is our mothers.
BabyBoy had some hard lessons to cradle.
Made a man out of self. Firm. Solid. Stable.
The route that was chosen, it's one of my own.
Some roads I've had to travel, all alone.
Still there's distant cheers from those that'd envision,
attention to detail, stick to the route. Precisely pinned in precision.
I've grown with my dis-ease, it's become a great part of me.
If you had it, what would grow from your own loyalty?
(Love yourself & every part of you that makes you uniquely you.)

The Real Me
by MCF

The real me fears heights.
But the real me isn't scared of scorpions.
The real me is at peace, happy, and a bit jealous of certain other people.
The real me feels at home when I'm reading a good book.
Reading a good book brings me a sense of accomplishment.
When I'm surrounded by my dad and sister I can be the real me.
My dad and sister make me feel loved and accepted.
I can be the real me when I'm at home by myself.
I can't always be the real me when I'm at work or my mom's place.
I wish everyone knew that I'd make a wonderful Sunday School teacher.
This is the real me.

Journal
by TH

The real me fears the quiet echo of my own inadequacy,
the sudden silence when the world expects a symphony.
But the real me isn't scared of the dark nor the fall,
nor the jagged edges of a challenge standing tall.
The real me is a sanctuary of resilience and quiet grace,
and a cartographer of dreams in a desolate place.
The real me feels at home when I'm lost in the
rhythm of a pen, where the ink bleeds truth and
I am whole again.
That act of creation brings me a clarity so bright,
It turns the darkest corners of my mind to light.
When I'm surrounded by the gentle souls who see without a mask,
I can be the real me, and I don't have to ask.
Those kindred spirits make me feel understood and free,
like a ship finding harbor on a vast and endless sea.
I can be the real me when I'm at the edge of the ocean's roar,
where the salt air cleanses and I need to hide no more.
I can't always be the real me when I'm at the podium of expectation,
Where I must perform a version of myself for the crowd's validation.
I wish everyone knew that beneath the armor and the art,
there is a fragile, fierce, and beautifully human heart.

That is the real me!

What I Feel
by KB

My body feels heavy, but I'm ready to move,
Carrying the bags of everything I went through
My shoulders sag, while my heartbeat runs fast,
But I'm still moving forward, no longer stuck in the past.
I'm spiraling in the air, like a crashing plane falling from the sky,
Searching for balance as the moments go by.
My mind whispers softly, "just trust where you stand,
you may be spinning now, but you're on point to land."

DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

As requested by our readers



Docks A & B along the Anacostia River in DC



Naval Sea Systems Command Building along the Anacostia River



Washington Mystics Mural on the side of Ben's Chilli Bowl on U St NW



Mural across the street from the dog park on 3rd & M St in NE



Corner view of 35th & O St near Georgetown University

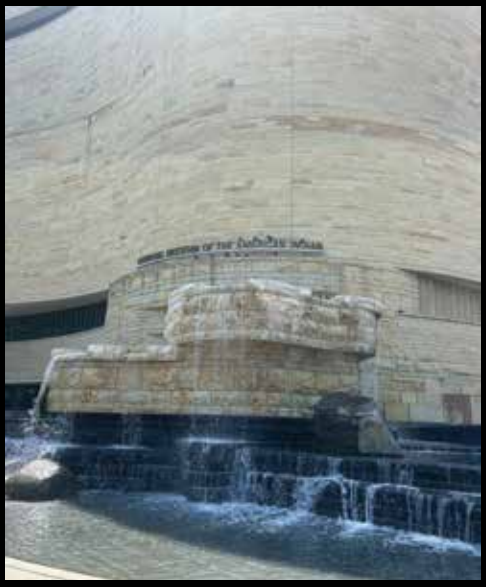
DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

As requested by our readers





Inside the Botanical Gardens





American Indian Museum

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. Como siempre y primeramente, deseo que al leer este artículo, se encuentren con la mejor salud, física como mentalmente. Espero que sin importar que paredes los tenga preso, que nadie pueda encarcelar su mente. Si esta es tu primera vez leyendo con nosotros, ¡bienvenido! En esta edición, el tema es La Autoconciencia. La autoconciencia significa mirarse sin máscaras, reconocer emociones, pensamientos y acciones tal como son, sin excusas ni justificaciones. Es como sostener un espejo frente al alma y atreverse a ver lo que aparece reflejado. No se trata solo de saber quién soy, sino de entender cómo mis decisiones afectan a los demás, cómo mis emociones influyen en mis actos y cómo puedo elegir un camino distinto. En otras palabras, es el arte de estar presente en uno mismo y aceptar tanto las luces como las sombras.

La autoconciencia es un concepto que descubrí en el lugar menos esperado: dentro de una prisión, donde pasé 25 años de mi vida. Al principio, la palabra me parecía lejana, como si perteneciera a un mundo académico o espiritual que no tenía nada que ver conmigo. Sin embargo, fue precisamente en ese momento de aislamiento y confrontación donde aprendí que la autoconciencia es la llave que abre una libertad interna, aunque las rejas cierran la exterior.

Cuando llegué a prisión, era joven y lleno de rabia. La condena de 25 años me cayó como un golpe seco. Al principio era muy negativo, culpando a otros, justificando mis acciones. Pero la prisión no permite escapar de uno mismo. El silencio de la celda, la rutina, la soledad, todo me obligaba a enfrentarme a mi propio reflejo. Recuerdo noches enteras mirando el techo, preguntándome: ¿Quién soy? ¿Cómo llegué aquí? Esas preguntas fueron el inicio de mi autoconciencia. No tenía respuestas fáciles, pero poco a poco entendí que debía dejar de huir. La cárcel me enseñó que el verdadero castigo no era la reja, sino vivir sin entenderme.

La autoconciencia llegó en pequeños momentos: una conversación con otra persona donde descubrí que podía expresar lo que sentía sin violencia, una carta que escribí y que me obligó a ordenar mis pensamientos. Cada experiencia era un espejo que me devolvía una imagen más clara de mí mismo. Aprendí que el enojo escondía miedo, que la dureza era una máscara para la vulnerabilidad. Al reconocerlo, empecé a cambiar.

En prisión, el tiempo se convierte en un recurso abundante pero pesado. Aprendí a usarlo para reflexionar. Empecé a usar la escritura como un espejo. Cada palabra que ponía en papel era un paso hacia dentro de mí. Descubrí que la autoconciencia me enseñaba a observar mis emociones antes de actuar. Cuando sentía algo negativo, me preguntaba: ¿De dónde viene? ¿Qué me está diciendo? Esa pausa era suficiente para evitar un conflicto. Comprendí que no podía controlar lo que otros hacían, pero sí podía controlar cómo respondía yo.

La autoconciencia no es solo un ejercicio mental; es una práctica que transforma la vida. En prisión, me permitió construir relaciones más sanas. Aprendí a escuchar sin juzgar, a pedir perdón, a reconocer cuando estaba equivocado. Esa humildad me abrió puertas: me integré en programas de lectura, participé en talleres, me convertí en facilitador/mentor para otros. Descubrí que mi historia podía servir de ejemplo, que mi dolor podía convertirse en lecciones para otros. También me dio esperanza. Aunque estaba encerrado, me sentía libre por dentro. Sabía que, al salir, tendría herramientas para enfrentar el mundo de otra manera. No podía borrar el pasado, pero sí podía escribir un futuro distinto.

La autoconciencia es esencial porque nos permite vivir con propósito. Sin ella, caminamos a ciegas, repitiendo errores, dañando a otros y a nosotros mismos. Con ella, podemos elegir conscientemente, podemos crecer. Es la base de la inteligencia emocional, de la empatía, de la resiliencia. En mi caso, fue la diferencia entre hundirme en la desesperación o encontrar sentido en medio del castigo de una celda. No es necesario pasar 25 años en prisión para aprender autoconciencia. Todos podemos cultivarla en nuestra vida diaria. Algunas prácticas que me ayudaron y que recomiendo son escribir un diario para ordenar la mente y descubrir patrones, meditar o reflexionar en silencio para observar nuestros pensamientos sin juzgarlos, escuchar a los demás porque a veces ellos ven cosas que nosotros no vemos, aceptar los errores en lugar de negarlos y preguntarnos qué podemos aprender de ellos, y practicar la empatía poniéndonos en el lugar del otro para entender cómo nuestras acciones impactan.

Hoy, después de haber pasado 25 años tras las rejas, puedo decir que la autoconciencia me enseñó que la verdadera libertad no depende de muros ni de llaves, sino de la capacidad de conocerme y transformarme. La autoconciencia me permitió salir de prisión con una nueva visión de la vida, con el conocimiento de que cada día es una oportunidad para crecer. Escribo estas palabras no solo como testimonio, sino como invitación. La autoconciencia es un camino que todos podemos recorrer. No importa dónde estemos, siempre podemos detenernos, mirarnos al espejo interior y preguntarnos: ¿Quién soy? ¿Qué quiero ser? La respuesta, aunque difícil, es el inicio de una vida más plena, más consciente y más libre. ¿Y tú? ¿Tienes un poema que habla de Autoconciencia? ¿Escribes tus pensamientos en un diario? ¿Alguna vez te has escrito a ti mismo como una forma de reflexionar y conocerte mejor?

FREE MINDS CONVERSATIONS

By Carlos

Greetings everyone. As always, first and foremost, I hope that as you read this article, you find yourselves in the best of health, both physically and mentally. I hope that no matter what walls may confine you, no one can imprison your mind. If this is your first time reading with us, welcome!
In this edition, the topic is Self-Awareness. Self-awareness means looking at yourself without masks, recognizing emotions, thoughts, and actions as they truly are without excuses or justifications. It's like holding a mirror up to your soul and daring to see what is reflected back at you. It's not just about knowing who I am, but about understanding how my decisions affect others, how my emotions influence my actions, and how I can choose a different path. In other words, it's the art of being present within yourself and accepting both the light and the shadows.

Self-awareness is a concept I discovered in the least expected place: inside a prison, where I spent 25 years of my life. At first, the word seemed distant to me, as if it belonged to an academic or spiritual world that had nothing to do with me. However, it was precisely in that moment of isolation and confrontation that I learned that self-awareness is the key that unlocks inner freedom, even though the bars lock away outer freedom.

When I arrived at prison, I was young and full of rage. The 25-year sentence hit me like a ton of bricks. At first, I was very negative, blaming others, justifying my actions. But prison doesn't allow you to escape yourself. The silence of the cell, the routine, the loneliness—everything forced me to confront my own reflection. I remember entire nights staring at the ceiling, asking myself: Who am I? How did I get here? Those questions were the beginning of my self-awareness. I didn't have easy answers, but little by little I understood that I had to stop running away. Prison taught me that the real punishment wasn't the bars, but living without understanding myself.

Self-awareness came in small moments: a conversation with someone where I discovered I could express my feelings without violence, a letter I wrote that forced me to organize my thoughts. Each experience was a mirror reflecting a clearer image of myself. I learned that anger masked fear, that toughness was a mask for vulnerability. By recognizing this, I began to change.

In prison, time becomes an abundant but burdensome resource. I learned to use it for reflection. I began using writing as a mirror. Each word I put on paper was a step inward. I discovered that self-awareness taught me to observe my emotions before acting. When I felt something negative, I would ask myself: Where is it coming from? What is it trying to tell me? That pause was enough to prevent conflict. I understood that I couldn't control what others did, but I could control how I responded.

Self-awareness isn't just a mental exercise; it's a life-transforming practice. In prison, it allowed me to build healthier relationships. I learned to listen without judgment, to apologize, to acknowledge when I was wrong. That humility opened doors for me: I joined reading programs, participated in workshops, and became a facilitator/mentor for others. I discovered that my story could serve as an example, that my pain could become a lesson for others. It also gave me hope. Even though I was locked up, I felt free inside. I knew that, upon release, I would have the tools to face the world differently. I couldn't erase the past, but I could write a different future.

Self-awareness is essential because it allows us to live with purpose. Without it, we wander blindly, repeating mistakes, harming others and ourselves. With it, we can choose consciously, we can grow. It is the foundation of emotional intelligence, empathy, and resilience. In my case, it was the difference between sinking into despair and finding meaning amidst the punishment of a prison cell. You don't need to spend 25 years in prison to learn self-awareness. We can all cultivate it in our daily lives. Some practices that helped me and that I recommend are journaling to organize your thoughts and discover patterns, meditating or reflecting in silence to observe your thoughts without judgment, listening to others because sometimes they see things we don't, accepting mistakes instead of denying them and asking ourselves what we can learn from them, and practicing empathy by putting ourselves in someone else's shoes to understand how our actions impact others.

Today, after spending 25 years behind bars, I can say that self-awareness taught me that true freedom doesn't depend on walls or keys, but on the ability to know and transform myself. Self-awareness allowed me to leave prison with a new vision of life, with the knowledge that each day is an opportunity to grow. I write these words not only as a testimony, but as an invitation. Self-awareness is a path we can all travel. No matter where we are, we can always stop, look in the mirror, and ask ourselves: Who am I? What do I want to be? The answer, though difficult, is the beginning of a fuller, more conscious, and freer life. And you? Do you have a poem about self-awareness? Do you write your thoughts in a journal? Have you ever written to yourself as a way to reflect and get to know yourself better?



REENTRY PROFILE: ANTOINE'S JOURNEY THROUGH SELF-DISCOVERY

By Joy

This reentry profile features Antoine, a Free Minds member and Poet Ambassador that I had the honor to meet with. We discussed the importance of introspection and how self-awareness impacts your life. Antoine offered insights on his reentry journey and shared these wise words: "Don't let your fear of being vulnerable paralyze you to the point where you're not making progress out here."

Joy: Could you tell me about how you first discovered Free Minds?

Antoine: I first discovered Free Minds through one of their members from when they only catered to juveniles, before their services were passed on to all our members. It was through one of their younger members where I became familiar with Free Minds through all the good books he used to get. It wasn't until the second part of IRAA (Incarceration Reduction Amendment Act) was extended (with the Second Look Amendment Act) that Free Minds extended its services to us. I offered my first poem to Free Minds, which I entitled "Free Mind," and they actually ended up publishing it in one of the *Connect* Magazines. I was kind of locked in from there. They were definitely there throughout the process of me filing for IRAA. When I came out, I was one of the Poet Ambassadors *(formerly incarcerated Free Minds members who represent Free Minds in public programming)*, and I had the honor of being one of the Congressman John Lewis Fellows at the Fellowship. I can't count how many events I've done with Free Minds since I've been out, but their whole team has been integral in my reentry on different levels.

Joy: What does self-awareness mean to you?

Antoine: I think the first step for me is knowing that even outside of your potential, your gifts, or whatever else you can do, and what you want to do out here–give yourself a chance, and understand that you're acclimating to a lot of things. And also people, your family, and relationships, they got to be acclimated to you too. I think the first part of self-awareness is understanding, and giving yourself a chance. Be ambitious, but also take the time to learn. Don't just rush into stuff; give yourself a chance to learn. That's important with self awareness.

Joy: How do you think introspection has affected your experience?

Antoine: It's very important, because this world, when you come out here, is going 1,000 miles an hour and it can become overwhelming for a lot of guys. Sometimes, the things that sustained you while you was in to manage a lot of stressful situations, you don't do that no more out here, whether it was reading, exercising, you know. So you can get basically caught up in that hamster wheel out here, and can't get off of it. But it's like, hold up, you gained back a life sentence. You're out, you know, no pressure, you know what I'm saying. So you really do have to remind yourself of that, and not get caught up in thinking you got to catch up. You can overwhelm yourself with what you think you might need, as opposed to reflecting on how it didn't take a lot to sustain us in there. So, yeah, introspection is important.

Joy: That makes sense. What's something about yourself that you think you've learned throughout your reentry journey?

Antoine: I think the biggest thing is understanding. You can't see things one way. It's not like you can come out and unconsciously look at it as if people are supposed to adjust to you because of your time that you did, as opposed to you making sure that you do your part in it being a mutual thing, you know? I'm saying you shouldn't be entitled. For a lot of people that we meet, even like with the On the Same Page programming *(community-based and public-facing programming commonly referred to in Free Minds circles as OTSP)*, a lot of times we are the first people they've met who've done a significant amount of time. And so they really pay attention, so it's not to be taken lightly, how we present

ourselves, because that can really truly impact those who are still behind the wall, and how people feel. We are a reflection of them, and so I take it seriously.

Joy: Thank you for that answer. I also wanted to ask, what is something that's helped you stay in touch with your emotions or helped you stay self aware?

Antoine: I think you have to be sure of yourself, in a sense. I think, like you should be asking yourself, are you ready for certain stuff before you take on certain things? You have guys who come from situations or environments where they're not accustomed to people standing close to them, and you can't make other people feel uncomfortable because you're trying to acclimate to society. You have to start taking the time to heal yourself. Give yourself a chance. It's like putting your toe in the water a little bit. There was a time where I was terrified of the thought of getting on public transportation, being boxed in, because I was in a cell, you know, so like being boxed in, where I can't get out and something goes crazy on the train, just the thought of it… But over time I had to overcome that, there's no way you can function with a fear of that. And now I love the train, I'll be all over on the orange line, the green line, and I have a job working for Metro as a shift supervisor, cleaning the trains. So give yourself a chance, you know? That's important. If they can do it, I can do it. That's how I look at it. But you have to tell yourself you already have your mind made up. This is how I'm choosing to live. Don't let your fear of being vulnerable paralyze you to the point where you're not making progress out here.

Joy: That's such beautiful advice. I really appreciate you sharing that. My last question for you is, what's a piece of advice you would give a past version of yourself?

Antoine: Man, what advice would I give myself? Pay attention more to what you see. You can care a lot, I was a person who dedicated a lot of my time and energy to helping other people a lot. But don't lose yourself in that. Sometimes you can care for things that hurt you too, that can be the plight of good-hearted people. And so you want to always maintain a good heart, but you want to be wise, that was something that I had to learn. Some people don't know how to have a good heart without being mean, it's like it's like one or the other, you know. So you want to get out of that. You want to maintain your good heart and make wise decisions. That's something I think I should have done more.

Joy: Thank you so much for interviewing with me. I really enjoyed talking to you and getting the chance to learn about your journey.

Antoine: I know the importance of this work, so I appreciate what you're doing too.

POEMS BY FREE MINDS MEMBERS

Three Versions of Me
by DK

To My Past Self:
I know you made mistakes.
I know there are things
you wish you could
change.
You carried anger, fear,
and choices you didn't
always understand.
But I won't pretend
you were only your
mistakes.
You were still learning.
You just didn't know yet
how much life would ask
you to learn.
I wish I could tell you
that change is possible.
That one day
you would begin
measuring your life
not only by what you had
done,
but by what you were
willing to do differently.

To My Current Self:
Look at you.
You are still learning.
You have spent nearly two
decades
turning time into an
opportunity
to become something
different.
You have learned patience
in a place where patience
is tested.
You have learned
responsibility
by accepting what cannot
be undone
and working on what can.
You have learned that
growth
is not one enormous
transformation.
It is a thousand small
decisions:
to listen,
to think before reacting,
to keep your word,
to help someone,
to admit when you're
wrong,
to try again.

To My Future Self:
I don't know exactly
who you will become.
But I hope you remember
where you came from.
I hope you continue
choosing
patience over anger,
honesty over excuses,
and compassion over
judgment.
I hope you learn
that saying no does not
make you selfish.
I hope you continue
helping people
without forgetting
yourself.
I hope you walk into the
future
with humility,
not pretending the past
never happened,
but refusing to let it
write every chapter that
comes next.

Past me taught me
what I need to change.
Present me is doing the
work.
Future me will live
with the choices I make
today.

And maybe that is what
growth really is:
not becoming someone
I have never been,
but becoming the person
I always had the potential
to be.



THE WRITE WAY: I WRITE, THEREFORE I AM!

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

By Ruby

Whether you're writing a distinct narrative centered around a protagonist of your creation or crafting a piece that tells a story from your life, knowing how to write in first person is a key skill to have on your writer's belt. Even outside of writing, understanding how to properly engage in first person is critical for good storytelling in conversation. First person is a form of writing in which the point of view centers the speaker, primarily using pronouns such as "I", "me", "mine", and so forth. By contrast, second person focuses on the person being spoken to ("you"), whereas third person centers a person, place, or object that is not directly involved in the conversation ("she", "he", "they", "it", etc.). Think about a book like *The Only Good Indians* by Stephen Graham Jones, which switches between perspectives, including using second person ("you") during the Elk Head Woman section. Knowing how to effectively utilize different points of view in writing is easier said than done, especially if your story flips between characters across chapters. While I have always been able to handle writing an academic paper by relying on a classic formulaic layout, I've always had a hard time writing pieces where I had to talk from my own perspective or that of a protagonist I crafted. Like many other writers, I've frequently struggled with how to effectively introduce a protagonist in a way that captivates readers. Throughout this edition of The Write Way, we'll learn some tips and tricks for effectively incorporating first person narrative into your writing. As always, these are merely suggestions that are intended to help guide you on your writing journey, not strict guidelines that you must adhere to as you craft your story.

TIP #1: HI, MY NAME IS…

One of the frequently more challenging aspects of writing in first person is figuring out the best way to properly introduce your character. Writing in third person or even second person allows an introduction to flow more smoothly with the support of exposition in ways that don't always work for first person. There are a couple of different roads you could take to introduce your character and alert your audience to your usage from first person. From the get-go, you could do an immediate self-introduction like Herman Melville does in his famous novel, *Moby Dick* with "Call me Ishmael." Or like in *Long Way Down*, the novel in verse (a book-length story told through connected poems) by Jason Reynolds, which has a poem titled "My Name Is" on just the second page. This instant introduction to the main character tells your reader who to pay attention to from the very beginning (Masterclass, "How to Write in First-Person Point of View," 2021).

Another tried and true method for introducing a character is through the action introduction, where the author depicts the character in the midst of a high-stakes situation rather than taking the slow and steady route. Lee Child, who penned the *Jack Reacher* series, is well-known for introducing the main character who is the namesake for the series in the midst of a police chase where readers don't learn the character's name until page 22. This method shows your readers who the main character is, what they get up to, and what they're capable of rather than starting off by merely telling them.

The final method we'll name is the reflection/introspection introduction, where the readers are introduced to a character via observations about their experiences that provide insight into who they are. J.D. Salinger famously takes this approach at the beginning of *The Catcher in the Rye* where readers are introduced to a seemingly unrelated jumble of thoughts from the then-unnamed Holden Caulfield. Although young Holden's train of thought might not make sense at first, it is that specific amount of intrigue that pulled so many people into the story to figure him out (Browne, "How Ten Bestselling Authors Introduce Protagonists in First-Person Narratives").

TIP #2: IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME

A crucial point to remember as master of the story is that you might know which character is the point of focus at any given time, but unless you specify otherwise, then your readers do not. Using first person can be especially tricky because repeatedly using the pronoun "I" might make it easier for you to slip from writing in the

character's voice to your own. Author Jerry Jenkins cautions against what he calls "head hopping," which consists of jumping back and forth between different characters without properly transitioning between them. Jenkins cautions writers to remember that using first person "should remind you that you're limited to your narrator's perspective." While it is one thing to have your main character ponder what another person is thinking, "you can't unequivocally say what's in the other character's mind" (Jenkins, "5 Tips to Mastering First-Person Point of View," 2025). Maintain your character's consistent voice and unique presence as long as you're writing in the first person. If you want to transition to a different character, find a way to explicitly indicate the transition to your audience. One of my favorite ways authors do this is by stating the name of the character whose perspective is being highlighted at the beginning of a chapter. George R.R. Martin does this throughout his series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, one of my favorite fantasy series when I was younger.

TIP #3: EVERYONE LOVES A SIDEKICK

Crafting an effective first-person narrative requires a great deal of thought and planning, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the other characters in your story don't deserve their time to shine. Masterclass talks about the importance of a main character having a multiplicity of people that they interact with in order to effectively "support, challenge, and illuminate" the key traits of your protagonists. Charlotte Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre* is cited as an example of a work whose narrator is made more interesting due to the "diverse and dynamic group of supporting characters" that are also integral to the story (Masterclass, "How to Write in First-Person Point of View," 2021). Think about books like *Washington Black* by Esi Edugyan where the main character interacts with a diverse cast of characters throughout the book. Depending on how you choose to write your story, these characters may only ever be seen through the perspective of the protagonist. This presents a potential opportunity to develop the "unreliable narrator" trope, which I think can be quite compelling in the right storyline. Or, if given their own spotlight with shifting chapters and perspectives, they will have the opportunity to tell things from their own point of view. Regardless, it is important to develop other characters in your story in order to develop the plot, develop – or even expose – certain traits about your protagonist, and enrich the story overall.

CELEBRATING MEMBERS' ACCOMPLISHMENTS

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

- ★ CJ, RC and SK have new apartments.
- ★ JC and MT are excited for their new pay raises.
- ★ JG, JM, DB, MG and TB received their high school diplomas while on the YME unit at the DC jail.
- ★ MP got married.
- ★ DB was interviewed by a journalist
- ★ SS just got accepted into college.

Please share your accomplishments with us to be featured!

CONVERSATIONS WITH CRAIG

My name is Craig, and I work as a Peer Support Specialist at Free Minds Book Club. I was released under IRAA seven years ago after serving 22 years, a sentence that started when I was a 17-year-old kid sentenced to 35 years to life. When I think about that as a 47-year-old man, I still ask myself, where does a kid start when he is told he may spend his whole life behind bars? Where does any man start with something that heavy sitting on his shoulders? I can only speak about how I started, and I let my sentence decide how I lived each day. I got in trouble, I did not program, and I asked myself, how could I program when I had a life sentence? I was in a maximum security prison, surrounded by men who had sentences like mine, so it was easy to believe nothing I did would make a difference. I had other guys read my family's letters to me and write letters back for me because I did not know how to read, write, or spell. Learning and programming gave me something to work toward, even with a life sentence. It did not erase my sentence, but it helped me see I had choices about the man I would become.

Over the years I started to understand that if I did not change my mindset, I would stay the same uneducated kid inside a grown man's body. I was still young when I got sentenced, my brain was not fully developed, and I had a learning disability, but I could not let that be the end of my story. So I taught myself how to read, write, and spell, and I enrolled back in school when I was 35 years old. I passed my GED test on the first try after 4 months of studying. My GED ceremony was beautiful for more reasons than I can explain. It happened on my sister Crystal's birthday, August 5, 2015, and it was the first time I had seen my mother and sister in 17 years. I had not seen my family in all that time, and now I could stand in front of them and show them the man they had heard through phone calls and letters, the man I was growing into. After I came home, I kept showing up for my mother, sisters, brothers, son, nieces, and nephew, and for my Washington, DC community. I did not do it alone, I did it with a group of men who became my brothers. Together we mentor young people we see ourselves in and fight for the people we left behind, while learning to enjoy each day and each moment. My sentence tried to tell me who I was going to be, but it did not get the final say. I started by changing my mindset, then I took one step, and then another, and that is how I began building a life I could be proud of.

REENTRY CORNER WITH MS. KEELA

Greetings to my Free Minds Family! As we near the end of summer, I want to encourage you to tap into that inner sunshine that is with you through every season of life and is the reason why self-awareness is so vital. So happy I found an interesting way to introduce our theme and the fact that it is true makes it all the more satisfying! When we think of the term self-awareness, it sounds pretty self-explanatory; one would think that it means just basically being aware of yourself, that you are a person with certain physical features and attributes. However, throughout my life experience, I have come to find that I am always discovering new things about myself, which increases my own self-awareness. To put it into perspective, self-awareness is having the fortitude to clearly understand who you are, your mind, your will, and your emotions along with understanding the experiences in life that shaped those things like your upbringing, your culture, your beliefs, and your family history. These realities form and shape who you are at the core and how you became who you are.

As I ponder on self-awareness, I must say that it is definitely one of those things that develops over time. This is because we have so many different experiences in life that shape our personality and change our perspective on views or opinions on things that we previously held. I believe that humanity will always be in one stage of self-awareness or another throughout this life experience. I also believe that self-awareness has to begin with honesty and transparency because it requires us to look at ourselves without making excuses, but also without believing that our worst decision defines our entire identity. It can be difficult to admit when we have hurt other people, made poor decisions, acted out of anger, or allowed circumstances to influence our behavior. However, acknowledging these things is not a sign of weakness. It is a sign of courage. We cannot change what we refuse to recognize.

One of the great benefits of being self-aware involves coming to recognize our individual strengths. We don't have to always highlight the negative or focus on our mistakes, weaknesses, guilt, regrets, or the consequences of a mistake. Those strengths that we all possess can be practiced, grown, developed and used for our good and the good of others.

One of the greatest things about self-awareness is that it can be developed, shaped and changed but it has to be done intentionally. You have the power to decide what kind of person that you are or are going to be, the past cannot be changed, the consequences of past actions cannot always be avoided, however, your future is still being written. Every day there is a new opportunity to practice and implement patience, honesty, responsibility, self-control, empathy, and respect.

Now, let me make you AWARE of some very helpful resources!

Emma's Torch Culinary Training Program
2212 Rhode Island Avenue NE,
Washington DC, 20018
917-316-1806

EMMA'S TORCH

Emma's Torch offers an 11-week, paid apprenticeship program for persons 17 and up. They offer up to 440 hours of culinary training and professional development. Their curriculum has two complementary components:

- On-the-job culinary instruction, designed in consultation with the Culinary Council
- Professional development and career readiness workshops to ensure long-term success, independence, and adjustment to the American workplace, including English classes, job readiness workshops, and mock interviews.

Until we *Connect* again
Ms. Keela

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES DISCUSSION QUESTIONS
with Neely



The votes are in and our next Books Across the Miles selection will be *The Water Dancer* by Ta-Nehisi Coates. When young enslaved Hiram Walker's mother is sold, he finds himself gifted with a mysterious power. Years later, when he almost drowns, this power saves his life. In escaping death, Hiram becomes determined to escape from the only home he has ever known. As he becomes entangled in an underground war between slavers and the enslaved, Hiram never stops seeking to rescue the family he left behind. A profound exploration of freedom, free will, and memory, we are eager to hear your reflections.

1. Memory is one of the novel's central themes. We see it manifest in many forms, including storytelling and repressed memories, which are memories that have been pushed out of conscious awareness in response to the traumas associated with those memories. What role does remembering, in its various forms, play in the novel? Can storytelling help people process these kinds of memories?

2. In Chapter 14, Hiram reflects on his fears of going up north to the unfamiliar city of Philadelphia. There is a part of him that would rather stay in the environment he knows, even if that environment also causes him harm. Have you ever done something that initially made you hesitant, but you knew it would ultimately be beneficial for you? If so, what was it like? How did it make you feel to push through your fears?

3. Throughout the novel, the characters grapple with how the war against injustice should be fought. For example, Corrine, Hawkins, Micajah, and Hiram have very different opinions on how to respond to Georgie's betrayal. What do you think would have been the "just" response to Georgie? Do you sympathize with Georgie? Why or why not?

4. When Mars gives Hiram a slice of gingerbread, the smell immediately transports Hiram back to a long-forgotten childhood memory. Have you ever smelled or tasted something that conjured up a long-lost memory?

5. Why do you think Coates decided to include the real-life historical figure of Harriet Tubman in The Water Dancer, instead of creating a fictional character in her likeness? What do you think about his decision to write her as a character with supernatural powers? If you were creating a character with powers like her, what powers would you choose and why?

6. Towards the end of the novel, Hiram reflects on the importance of telling our stories as a way of becoming liberated from them. What impact has telling your story had for you?

Name _____ **Date** _____

NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: FOOD (VOLUME 15, ISSUE 5)

Hey family! Here are some writing prompts to help you get started on submissions for our next issue on **Food**.
We also want to give you a heads up for the issue after that. Volume 16, Issue 1 will be exploring the theme of **Music**.

(1)

Write a poem that is an ode to your favorite comfort meal, detailing why it is so significant to you.
An ode is a traditional, beautiful poem of praise that is dedicated to something meaningful.

(2)

Write about a food you ate growing up that signifies your culture, family traditions, or reminds you of your hometown.

(3)

If you could have a meal anywhere in the world, where would you go? What would you eat?

Send your responses to Free Minds Book Club, P.O. Box 73618, Washington, DC 20056

(4)

Write about how you experience food through senses other than taste–the various smells, the sound of a meal being cooked, the feeling of steam rising from a meal, etc.

(5)

Write a poem or story that centers around a family recipe card being passed down through generations. What has the card seen? What stories does it have to tell about nourishing so many people?

(6)

Write an acrostic poem that describes your favorite food or meal. To format the poem, the first word/phrase of each sentence should begin with the consecutive letter of the word.

Ex:

M	C	B
A	H	R
N	I	E
G	C	A
O	K	K
	E	F
	N	A
	S	S
	O	T
	U	
	P	

*BONUS PROMPT

Share a recipe for one of your favorite meals you make for yourself behind the walls.

REAL WORLD OF WORK: SALEEM'S CAREER TIPS

By Jennifer

Saleem is a busy man, so I was grateful that he carved out time to chat with me after clocking out of his Quality Assurance Specialist (QA) job at a local DC Government agency and before he clocked into his favorite job–being a dad to his 2-year old son, who was eager to get his father all to himself!

Jennifer: What's a typical day on the job like?

Saleem: I contact clinical homes or mental health provider agencies to make sure they are in compliance with policies and procedures and meeting governmental standards of care. My team also communicates with consumers, which is what we call the people who receive these types of mental health and addiction services, to find out from them if the agencies are doing what they're supposed to be doing to support DC residents in these areas.

Jennifer: What do you like about this work?

Saleem: I like the fact that there are checks and balances in place and I am in a position to help make sure that people receive what they really need and that those in power do not abuse their positions, commit fraud, or make it harder for people to get well. So the information I find out and the reports we create about how well agencies are serving their consumers has an impact on who gets funding from the DC government.

Jennifer: Wow, that's a lot! Is there more to the job?

Saleem: Yes! I also facilitate groups to train people on how to interact with individuals who have been justice involved, have mental health challenges, or substance abuse issues.

As a facilitator, I contribute to ushering in the next cohort of competent, informed mental health providers. It feels important to prepare these certified peer support workers to help connect people with services around family issues, legal matters, and wellness resources based on their lived experience.

Jennifer: You've been home for over 4 years, have you worked in this position the whole time?

Saleem: No, my first job was as a waiter at a steakhouse, then I did security at apartment buildings until I got accepted into the Georgetown MORCA Paralegal Program in 2024. This program is designed to prepare returning citizens for careers in the legal field. For over six months I studied multiple forms of law–civil, torte, property, and some criminal law, but mostly civil. It was a very good experience since most people don't have a clue about civil law and what you don't know could cost you. Georgetown was able to align my lived experience with legal training.

It was a very good program, but it was a LOT of work! The training was so rigorous and the professors were not lenient; we had to keep up with our assignments and maintain a certain grade point average. Those professors made us earn the Georgetown name! The skills I learned there are very transferable, not just in understanding the law, but also about people and life. I would advise anyone who fits the criteria to apply. My biggest takeaway is that everything has a law!

Jennifer: You speak so passionately about your work, do you think you'll stick with this field?

Saleem: This work definitely feels important and I want to build on the peer support credentials I earned, so whenever I leave the government sector, I'll continue in this field but in the private sector.



Saleem completed the MORCA-Georgetown Paralegal Program, part of the Georgetown University Prisons and Justice Initiative.

Jennifer: This *Connect's* theme is Self Awareness. How does that play a role in your career?

Saleem: Self awareness is interwoven throughout all my work. I came home with the knowledge of myself. If I didn't understand me so well, I wouldn't be able to operate so successfully in corporate America. I am always mindful of my mentality and of the words I choose to use, but most importantly, I am vigilant about knowing what I don't know. These are the elements I use to gain more self-awareness. It's constantly evolving. Being aware of myself has a different vibrational frequency.

Jennifer: What reentry advice do you have?

Saleem:

- Take full advantage of every and any opportunity that will help you grow, especially since DC offers SO many educational opportunities, especially for returning citizens!
- We have access to unlimited resources on our phone/computer, so seek out even more classes and certifications beyond just the reentry services.
- Don't allow what you don't know to prevent you from what you can learn.
- Never stop learning or being content there.
- Don't get complacent. Keep your options open.

Jennifer: Great tips! Got anymore before you finally get to play with your son?

Saleem: The good news for members coming home is that many employers understand that returning citizens have a stronger work ethic, probably because we appreciate the opportunity to work a lot more than people who have not been away. I've found that we outshine most people on the job. Whenever I leave a job, I do so in a professional way, giving plenty of notice and every employer has told me that I'm welcome to come back and work for them anytime. That's a great feeling.



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

By Tim

This is a continuation of Just Law: Appealing a D.C. Superior Court Denial of an IRAA Motion, which can be found in the Imagination Connect (Vol 15, Issue 3).

Common Appellate Issues in IRAA Denials

One common issue is whether the Superior Court treated the seriousness of the original offense as effectively dispositive. IRAA assumes that many applicants committed very serious crimes; otherwise, they would not have served 15 years or more. The offense remains relevant, but an appeal may argue that the court failed to account for youth, immaturity, peer influence, trauma, impulsivity, or the applicant's growth over time.

A second issue is mischaracterization of rehabilitation. If the record shows decades of programming, work history, mentoring, educational achievement, restorative efforts, family support, low-risk assessments, and a concrete release plan, the court must grapple with that evidence. It may reject the motion, but it should not ignore substantial evidence or describe the record in a way that leaves out central mitigation.

A third issue involves disciplinary history. Prison infractions can matter, especially recent or violent ones. But the court should consider timing, context, seriousness, patterns, improvement, and the difference between youthful institutional misconduct and current dangerousness. An old or isolated infraction may not support a present-danger finding if the overall record shows sustained maturation.

A fourth issue is improper treatment of innocence claims, appeals, or postconviction litigation. A person should not be penalized simply for having exercised legal rights. If the Superior Court treated the applicant's prior litigation as proof of dangerousness or lack of remorse without a careful factual basis, that may be a strong appellate point.

A fifth issue is the release plan. Courts often look for housing, employment or benefits, treatment, medical care, family support, supervision, and reentry services. But a release plan should be evaluated realistically. Few incarcerated people can prove every detail of life after release with certainty. The appellate argument should distinguish between a genuine gap that affects public safety and an unrealistic demand for perfection.

Frame the Brief Around Legal Error, Not Just Disagreement

The opening brief should begin with a concise theory of the case. A useful structure is: the applicant was eligible; the record showed rehabilitation and reduced risk; the Superior Court denied relief for specific reasons; and those reasons were legally flawed, unsupported, or insufficient under IRAA. The statement of facts should be accurate and candid, including the offense and adverse evidence, but should organize the life history around the statute's central concerns: youth at the time of the offense, maturation, institutional conduct, accountability, community support, and safety.

The argument section should avoid scattering too many weak claims. Three well-developed errors are usually more persuasive than ten underdeveloped complaints. Each issue should identify the ruling, state the legal principle, cite the record, explain the error, and show prejudice. Prejudice matters because the Court of Appeals may disregard errors that do not affect substantial rights. The brief should explain why the mistake could have changed the outcome or at least undermines confidence in the denial.

The reply brief should answer the government's strongest points directly. If the government argues harmless error, the reply should show how the trial court's mistake affected the dangerousness or interests-of-justice analysis. If the government emphasizes the offense, the reply should explain that IRAA requires a present-focused assessment informed by youth science and rehabilitation, not a second sentencing based only on the original crime.

Possible Remedies
The usual remedy for a flawed IRAA denial is vacatur and remand for reconsideration under the correct legal standard. The appellant may ask for outright reversal and sentence reduction, but appellate courts often prefer remand unless the record permits only one lawful outcome. A remand can still be meaningful. It may require the Superior Court to reconsider ignored evidence, correct factual mistakes, apply the proper statutory framework, or explain its reasoning more fully.

If the appellate issue concerns an unlawful sentence after a partial IRAA grant, the remedy may include instructions to impose a sentence consistent with the governing sentencing scheme. If the issue concerns denial of release based on a legally improper reason, the remedy may direct the court to reconsider without relying on that reason. The requested relief should match the identified error.

Practical Considerations for Prisoners and Counsel
Because an IRAA denial may delay renewed review for years and because the number of IRAA applications is limited, appeal strategy should be coordinated with future litigation strategy. A prisoner should preserve documents, maintain programming and employment records, continue building a reentry plan, and avoid conduct that could be used to argue current dangerousness. Counsel should also consider whether any new evidence belongs in a motion for reconsideration in Superior Court, a limited remand request, or a later IRAA application rather than in the first appellate brief.

Finally, the tone of the appeal matters. The brief should respect the harm caused by the offense while explaining why IRAA exists: to recognize that people who committed crimes as adolescents or young adults may become fundamentally different people after 15 or more years. The strongest appeal does not ask the Court of Appeals to ignore the past. It asks the court to ensure that the Superior Court applied the statute faithfully, evaluated present danger fairly, considered the whole person, and gave the applicant the individualized review that IRAA requires.

Good luck on starting to write your winning appellate brief!

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

CONNECT ON CORRLINKS *By Aneka*

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



Free Minds Corrlinks Info:
Corrlinks First Name: Free Minds
Corrlinks Last Name: Connect
Corrlinks Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

Free Minds Getting Out Info:
Getting Out First Name: Connect
Getting Out Last Name: Free Minds
Getting Out Email: connect@freemindsbookclub.org

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

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

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

ADVICE COLUMN

SPINNING THE TRACK WITH THE ADVICE MAN

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

Dear Advice Man,

I'm about a year away from the halfway house and while I'm excited, as is my family, I'm aware there'll be a change between who I was coming in and who I am coming out. How would you advise that someone handle that impending change with self and by extension loved ones in the run up to reentry and the actual release?

Sincerely,
N.L.

Wow! Greetings N.L. and my FM folk. I'm wowed and interested at every moment we get together and share Connect's themes and members' inquiries, and how we make them correlate. Currently here we are combining Self-Awareness with preparing ourselves along with family and loved ones, for the changed versions of all us upon our release. This sets the stage for a very deep conversation, with the potential to assist so many. Please forgive me if I miss something someone is seeking and if my format sounds like it's just addressing the male gender. For I believe my advice is for all genders who will struggle with these types of issues. So with this topic moving forward, I need everyone to keep in mind and visualize all the individuals you will have to have interactions with upon your release. For example they are: PO's (Supervised Release officer), employers, family & friends, the youth, community members, support network, household, coworkers-workers, etc.

Self-Awareness is the preparation of not just knowing your own journey, but also understanding others' journey as well. As both journeys more than likely have been filled with joys and pains, and gains and losses. Despite the circumstances, awareness turns into a quest for meaning, more so, through the effects of the traumatic experiences many of us have survived from. For me, I don't just see what I've suffered through, I also see and take account of what others have endured, especially by my own actions. Going home, we all have to get to know and learn each other all over again. We can't even think about jumping out there trying to move fast and catch up, when our best solution is to take it slow and just try to fit back into our new lives with family and in society. Truth be told, self-awareness is an interpretation of all sorts of our past that helps move us forward individually and together.

Scholars' wisdom shares this: "One of our greatest challenges in changing who we are, as in our bad habits, is maintaining awareness of what we are actually doing. Many of our failures in performance are largely attributable to a lack of self-awareness" (James Clear, Atomic Habits*). The jewel to be taken away on how to change and break bad habits is this: awareness of how the environment and the products of the culture where we like to be, are the invisible hands that have in the past, shaped our behavior. Yeah! That's right, it's time to start self-checking things moving as usual. Let's really start to sit down and share who we don't want to be anymore and let those who we love hold us accountable to keep us where we need to be.*

N.L., is a year or two truly enough time to change a lifetime of counter-social behavior before one is released? I guess "it's better later than never" to dig deep and learn, to gain the good things that will change us. One is some stress management skills that will improve our reactions to what life throws at us. Self-check or self-awareness is the only antidote to our lifetime of developing unhealthy habits and relationships. The keys to success are healthy attitudes, beliefs, character, and applicable skills to wipe away all our desire to react in dysfunction and to counter the effects of abnormal environments we are unaware of rubbing off on us.

Some examples of healthy behaviors might be discipline, communication, follow through, compromise, self-control, learning how to express yourself, or learning anger and stress management skills. Always be proactive in planning. Look at life outside of yourself. Do the right thing when no one else is looking. A mature person is wise, honest, trustworthy, and dependable. Govern yourself accordingly so no one else has to. Include family in your health treatment plans and be aware of theirs. Find meaning and purpose in morally sound service and hobbies. Struggle in all the right things if you have to.

Be that as it may, and shame the devil and tell the truth you guys. Which dawg will you feed the most in prison, are you really releasing? That's the dawg that wins. Meaning all the beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors one exhibits most in prison will be the person we reveal upon release, especially in uncomfortable situations. Self-awareness will help us keep all that junk in check. Me, I get it, who we sometimes become through our self-medication and application of beliefs, while we try to survive through our traumatic events and hostile environments. Many just don't get this, but the key now is we share our past and pain together to get on the same page and break this vicious cycle our community was once plagued with. So I mourn that we had to live through this curse of circumstance that we're "damned if we do, and damned if we don't" when it comes to the approach to how we've survived. Awareness of self and the things around us lifts the curse and helps place us in our rightful positions.

Brutal honesty is, we've wasted enough of our valuable time when the key to life is our health, healthy connection, and communication within our relationships. In this type of unit, leaders sit down and get to know everyone they must be connected to for everyone's success, rather than take risks and be thrill chasers. For us, they are our: spouses, children, PO's, employers, etc. Our advocates and support network is vital and it is necessary we lean on them for our success.

In these next chapters of life, I want to challenge everyone when faced with discomfort to remind ourselves of the mantra, "I'm Different." Meaning we all are capable of being trail blazers like Malcolm, Martin, or Harriet and being a true leader of our community and families. Let your self-awareness be your guide to evaluate and choose the best solutions, when it comes to our positive change. I hope my breakdown improves the torchbearers of our future.

My Best,
TS

Carlos also had advice for N.L.:

Dear N.L.,
Great question. It's a major thing to prepare for reentry. Remember that being incarcerated exposes one to trauma, while at the same time, restricting us from life. Post-prison healing has no time limitation. This includes learning who you are in freedom. I was incarcerated at the age of 17 and spent 25 years inside. I've been out for 5 years now and I still find myself adjusting. Freedom came with things and responsibilities that I never had to worry about before and it can be overwhelming at times. So the first thing I would advise is to take your time. Stay close to those that strive for the same and understand your trauma. Being patient along the way is key, but also remaining resilient.

When it comes to our loved ones, most likely, they have not gone through the things that you have while incarcerated. I would say to be patient with them, learn to communicate your trauma as best as you can while never neglecting to listen to them as well. You may feel obligated to be there and help those that have been there for you. You have to find a healthy balance between your loved ones, you, and your newfound freedom. Create healthy boundaries while explaining things as best as you can. None of this is easy; what has worked for me is to keep these things in the forefront of my mind. But at the end, I would advise to put yourself first. This is not being selfish, it is just self-care = self-awareness.

Carlos, Free Minds Community Outreach Facilitator & Member

MEDITATION: WATCHING THE LEAVES FLOAT BY *By Kelli*

Hey Free Minds Family,

I hope you are thriving and feeling peaceful. I wish we could all be together in a big gymnasium today. We'd each have a cozy mat to lie on, and we'd have calm Zen lighting. Since we can't all be there together, we're going to do the next best thing. Let's gather on this page. You know the drill: enlist a partner and take turns reading, or if you're solo, read through it a few times before closing your eyes and meditating on what you've read.

Today, I want to share a practice that has been enormously valuable to me. Several years ago, when my husband and I were in the throes of parenting two teenagers, we hit what I like to call "the very rocky spot." During that season of our lives, every day felt like riding on a Six Flags rollercoaster named "The Emotional Whiplash!"

One moment, I thought we were all chill and content, but I was WRONG! Nope, we were in crisis! We were jealous, or angry, or scared! My adrenaline rushed in, and I was ready to fight or run. Then, just as quickly, it turned out we were all good again. For anyone who has spent time around humans between 12 and 18, you know what I'm talking about. Their emotions were all over the place, and before I knew it, mine were too. And that, my friends, is not only exhausting, but also unhealthy.

Learning to practice self-awareness is what got me through. But it's not just teens who can get swept away by emotions. Our kids are young adults now, and I still use these skills every single day. The key is learning to notice what we're feeling without letting the feeling take over.

Let me show you what I mean...

Start out by finding a comfortable position. Starting at your toes, I want you to focus on each part of your body, intentionally relaxing it as you work your way all the way up to your neck, face, and the top of your head. Take the time you need to feel fully relaxed...

Take a deep breath in...and release it. Take a deeper breath in...hold it for a moment...and exhale. Continue breathing. Notice what the breath feels like entering your lungs and then releasing.

Now, imagine it is a warm day in early fall. You are sitting on the edge of a small wooden footbridge that crosses over a babbling creek. The clear water runs swiftly under the bridge, flowing down a long winding path lined by tall trees. The sun feels warm on your skin. You can smell just the hint of the coming autumn. Breathe in... and exhale.

Look down through your dangling feet at the water emerging from under the bridge. You notice a big red leaf, carried by the water. It bobs up and down with the current. At one point, it gets pulled under the water momentarily before popping up again and rushing down the stream. Now two yellow leaves appear, moving in tandem. One of them hits a snag on a broken branch poking out from the water's edge. It gets stuck while its buddy, the other yellow leaf, continues down the creek.

For several long minutes, you watch the fallen leaves travel through the water. Some move quickly. Some spin in circles. Some get caught for a while before breaking free and continuing downstream.

Our emotions can be like those leaves. Anger. Fear. Sadness. Joy. Jealousy. Hope. They arrive, sometimes without warning. We can't always control what we feel. But we can learn to notice what we're feeling without letting that feeling take over.

As you watch the leaves now, simply notice each one. There goes a greenish-yellow leaf...a bright red one...another yellow one. Notice each leaf. And then let it go...

Now imagine that each leaf carries an emotion you've felt recently. You don't have to search for one. Just notice what comes to you.

Maybe one leaf carries anger. Watch it appear. I'm feeling angry. You don't need to judge the anger. You don't need to push it away. Just notice it. There it is.

And then watch the leaf continue downstream.

Maybe another leaf carries worry. Or sadness. Frustration. Loneliness. Happiness. Hope. Whatever appears is okay. Name it if you can. I'm feeling sad. I'm feeling worried. I'm feeling hopeful.

Notice it. And let it float by.

Notice that you aren't saying, I am angry. You're saying, I feel angry. You are not the leaf.

You are the person sitting on the bridge, watching it pass.

Maybe some feelings will float away quickly. Others may get caught for a while, like that yellow leaf snagged on the branch. That's okay. You don't have to force them away. Just notice them. Be curious about them. And remember that even a feeling that sticks around is still only a feeling. It is not all of who you are.

Take another slow, deep breath in...and let it go.

Feel your body where you are sitting or lying. Listen to the sounds around you. And when you're ready, slowly open your eyes.

As you move through the rest of your day, remember the leaves. Notice what you're feeling. Name it if you can. And then give yourself a moment before deciding how to respond.



IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

DEEP DIVE: DATA CENTERS



Inside of a data center

Since the dawn of the internet, the world has become increasingly virtual with every year. Searching for information, shopping, gaming, communicating and working are all primarily done in the virtual world that parallels our human existence. And that is before you get to artificial intelligence, or AI, technology, which carries the potential for exponential growth in what can be done by computers.

But while the virtual world often seems seamless and simple, the reality is that it's built on an infrastructure that relies on electricity and water to run. And with increased demand to do more and bigger things, comes more need for both of those utilities.

Every time you use an AI chatbot, stream a show, scroll through social media, or run a Google search, something happens behind the scenes that most people never think about: a massive building somewhere on the other side of the country–or the world–fires up a bank of powerful computers to handle your request.

Those buildings are called data centers, and they are becoming one of the most hotly debated topics in American politics. The reason? They devour enormous amounts of electricity and water, and communities are increasingly being asked to pay the price.

A data center is essentially a warehouse for computers. Inside, row after row of servers–specialized computers designed to store and process information–run around the clock, seven days a week. They never sleep. Companies like Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Meta own hundreds of these facilities around the world. They use them to power everything from email to cloud storage to, increasingly, artificial intelligence.

AI is the key word here. The explosion of tools like ChatGPT, Google Gemini, Claude and many others has sent demand for data center capacity through the roof. Running an AI model requires far more computing power than a regular internet search–and that means far more energy. In 2024, data centers worldwide consumed roughly 415 terawatt-hours of electricity–about 1.5% of all electricity used on the planet. By 2030, that figure is expected to more than double, reaching nearly 945 terawatt-hours. Here in the U.S. alone, one major report predicted that data centers' total energy demand will nearly double between 2025 and 2028.

All those computers generate enormous amounts of heat. To keep them from breaking down, data centers have to cool them continuously–and many do this using water, the same basic principle as a car's radiator. A single large AI data center can consume between 1.5 and 3 million cubic meters of water per year. In drought-prone areas of the West, this has become a serious concern. Engineers face a frustrating tradeoff: the cooling systems that use the least electricity tend to use the most water, and the ones that use less water tend to consume more power.

Not long ago, most Americans didn't have strong opinions about data centers. That has changed dramatically. A survey earlier this year found that 63% of Americans now oppose data center construction, up from 42% just a year before. A separate poll found that 7 in 10 Americans oppose having a data center built in their own community. The opposition crosses party lines: 69% of Democrats oppose them, and so do more than half of Republicans and independents.

The reasons are clear: people don't want higher electricity bills, they don't want the noise and traffic, and they have growing environmental concerns about water and power use. This conversation is very much ongoing in the DMV, where Maryland consumers could be exposed to rate hikes and other cost increases related to a lot of data centers being constructed in Virginia.

The central question is: who pays? When a massive data center moves into an area, it can strain the local power grid. Utilities have to build new power lines and generating capacity–and historically, those costs have been spread across all ratepayers. In other words, everyone's electric bill goes up, even if they never benefit from the data center at all.

Some states have decided that's not fair. Oklahoma passed the Data Center Consumer Ratepayer Protection Act this spring, requiring large data centers to cover the full costs of the grid infrastructure they need–rather than passing those costs to regular customers. Alabama and Arizona have introduced similar bills. Massachusetts went a step further, requiring that companies seeking to build data centers negotiate what are called "community benefits agreements" with local towns–basically contracts committing to contribute something back to the community–before they can even apply for a state permit. And at the federal level, the White House secured voluntary commitments from major tech companies that they would cover their own energy infrastructure costs.

None of this has resolved the debate. Data centers bring jobs and tax revenue, and some communities welcome them. But the era when they could be quietly dropped into a town without much pushback appears to be over.

INTERNATIONAL

Earlier this year, the United States and Iran appeared to be on the verge of a historic peace deal. That deal fell apart in July, when Iran resumed attacks on commercial ships in the Strait of Hormuz–the narrow waterway through which about a fifth of the world's oil supply passes. The conflict that had seemed to be winding down flared back up.

On September 2nd, U.S. forces carried out their largest wave of strikes in Iran since late July, hitting roughly 100 Iranian military targets around the Strait, including air defense systems, radar stations, missile launchers, and drone facilities. Iran responded by firing approximately 25 ballistic missiles at U.S. military bases in the region. Meanwhile, the Trump administration has announced a sweeping campaign of economic sanctions intended to squeeze Iran into submission, threatening other countries with consequences if they refuse to cut ties with Tehran (the capital of Iran).

Iran and Oman have proposed a joint plan to clear mines from the Strait of Hormuz and establish a temporary shipping corridor. But no ceasefire is in place, and the conflict–which began earlier this year–continues to reshape Southwest Asia and global energy markets.

IN THE NEWS *By John, FM Friend*

NATIONAL
On November 3rd, Americans will head to the polls for the midterm elections, in which all 435 seats in the House of Representatives and 33 Senate seats are up for grabs. Right now, the political environment looks favorable for Democrats.

The "generic congressional ballot," which asks voters which party they'd support – shows Democrats ahead by roughly 6.6 percentage points. If the election were held today, polls show 47% of voters would choose a Democrat in their district compared to 42% for a Republican.

A major driver of these numbers is President Trump's approval rating, which stands at just 37% – with 63% of Americans disapproving of his performance. The ongoing conflict with Iran, economic anxieties, and controversies over data centers and other domestic issues have all weighed on Republicans. To flip the Senate, Democrats need to gain a net of four seats; the likeliest path to that happening is if they flip Republican-held seats in Maine, Ohio, North Carolina and Alaska.

Note: DC's General Election is November 3, 2026. Incarcerated DC residents are eligible to vote. All mail in ballots must be postmarked on or before Election Day and received by November 13, 2026. If you are incarcerated at the DC Jail, you can register to vote or update your registration in person when you vote at the jail. If you are incarcerated in the Bureau of Prisons, you can contact the DC Board of Elections to confirm your registration at 202-727-2525 or via Corrlinks at outreachspecialist@dcboe.org.

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This past September 11th marked a quarter century since the deadliest terrorist attack on American soil. At 8:46 in the morning–the exact time the first plane struck the North Tower in 2001–bells rang out at Ground Zero in lower Manhattan, where families of victims, former presidents, and elected officials gathered to hear the names of the 2,977 people killed that day read aloud.

For the first time, a seventh moment of silence was added to the ceremony–honoring the thousands of people who have since died from illnesses related to their exposure to toxic dust and debris at Ground Zero in the days and months after the attacks. First responders, construction workers, and residents of lower Manhattan were exposed to a toxic mix of asbestos, lead, and other chemicals–and many have spent years fighting for medical benefits and recognition.

Ceremonies were also held at the Pentagon and at the field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania, where United Flight 93 crashed after passengers rushed the hijackers. President Trump attended the Pentagon ceremony; former Presidents Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Biden gathered at Ground Zero.

DC
The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts–home to the National Symphony Orchestra, theater, opera, and decades of D.C. cultural life–is facing an uncertain future. President Trump has pushed to rename the building after himself as part of a major renovation plan, arguing that his name on the building is necessary for him to support the project financially. A federal judge disagreed, ruling earlier this month that adding Trump's name to the Kennedy Center requires an act of Congress.

Hours after that ruling, the Center's board voted to close the building. Congress has already allocated $257 million for renovations, but Trump has suggested that money won't flow without the naming rights. The closure would put hundreds of arts workers out of jobs and shutter one of the most storied venues in the country. The situation is still unresolved as of this writing.



The Kennedy Center

D.C. has a new local news outlet: The Washington Sun, which launched on September 9th. The publication grew out of another outlet called NOTUS, a national politics and policy site, but has dramatically expanded its scope and staff–more than doubling its newsroom to 110 journalists in six months.

"We launched two years ago…as a news site focused on national politics and policy," said a statement from leaders of the Sun. "But as we watched others pull back on Washington coverage, we knew our hometown deserved better. So we invested–more than doubling the size of our newsroom in just six months."

ENTERTAINMENT
The Emmy Awards–television's biggest night–were held on September 14th, and they delivered some history.

The biggest story of the night was Welsh actor Matthew Rhys, who made Emmy history by winning two Lead Actor awards in a single evening: one for the comedy Widow's Bay, and another for the limited series The Beast in Me. No man had ever won lead acting awards in two different categories in the same night. Rhys has now won across all three lead acting categories in his career–comedy, drama, and limited series–another first.

Jean Smart also made history, winning her fifth Lead Actress Emmy for her role as Deborah Vance in Hacks on HBO Max. Smart has now won the award for every single season the show has aired–something not even Julia Louis-Dreyfus managed during Veep's celebrated run. At 64, Smart has become one of the most decorated performers in Emmy history.



Actress
Jean Smart

On the program side, Widow's Bay had a dominant night, taking home 14 Emmys in total–a new record for a comedy series. The Pitt, the medical drama on HBO Max, won Outstanding Drama Series for the second year in a row.



AROUND THE WORLD: HOW ESTHER IS TRAVELING THE WORLD IN HOPE OF BUILDING A BETTER SYSTEM *By Avery*

The Oakland Skyline

From the United Kingdom (a sovereign country in northwestern Europe, made up of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland) to California, Esther has been traveling the world in search of information to help the mass incarceration problem. She shared with me that her home country of England has been catching up with the United States in terms of sentence length and the severity of punishments. Esther has been troubled by the recent conservative trend in the U.K, a country that has never been as "tough on crime" as America. As a result, she is undertaking a lengthy research project to understand how other places view incarceration and the reconstruction of hope, person and identity in reentry.

"I've been in the States looking at the ways in which those who have served time have been impacted by long-term incarceration," Esther said. "I've been meeting with organizations who do amazing work in supporting them, and the goal is to learn from some of the amazing things that they do and implement them in the U.K."

Esther visited D.C. and the Free Minds office in June. While she was here, she participated in our Thrive Under 25 leadership meeting which works to end the damaging legal system in D.C. for people who came in contact with the system when they were under 25. The leadership team shared their recent initiatives in advocacy and strategies for improving the carceral system. They also shared their experiences with incarceration and some of the barriers to change we face in D.C., such as not being a state.

During her stay in the nation's capital, Esther says she was surprised by the cleanliness and accessibility of the Metro, compared to other public transportation like the New York City subway or the London tube (the city's underground transit system). She was also surprised by the lack of tall buildings in D.C., saying it felt much more open compared to other cities.



The Fox Oakland Theatre

Apart from Free Minds, Esther met with many amazing organizations across the country. During her meeting with the Second Look Project in D.C., she learned about the Second Look Act (also known as IRAA 3.0), a D.C. law allowing someone to petition the court for resentencing if their crime was committed when they were under 25 and they have served at least 15 years. While in New York City, she visited the Columbia University Center for Justice, where she learned about a new report looking at the data for mass incarceration, as well as Monroe University which is located in the Bronx neighborhood in New York. After this, she traveled to the West Coast where she met with organizations up and down California. One of the programs she was introduced to was Get on the Bus, which provides people with transportation to visit their loved ones in prisons across California along with meals and other resources. Another program she met with was InsideOUT Writers, which conducts writing circles for people who have been impacted by the justice system, both currently and formerly incarcerated. She also met with Impact Justice, based

in Oakland, which grows and provides healthy food to prisons.



Palm trees at Palisades Park along Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica, California

Esther flew to Los Angeles from D.C., and when she stepped off the plane, she felt like she was in a different country after seeing all the palm trees and coastal views. This really put things into perspective for her of how diverse America really is, not only geographically, but also in how laws are created and implemented. Each state has its own prison system and set of laws that informs how each person interacts with the justice system. She says she now has a better understanding of why individual experiences vary so widely based on where you are.

She then took a bus, which was about a six-hour drive through forests and mountains, to the "Bay Area" to visit San Francisco, Oakland, and the San Quentin rehabilitation center. Esther was shocked at the altitude during the drive, traveling up to 4000 feet in the air, so high that her ears were popping.

Another thing that surprised her about the American justice system was the immense number of people who served over 30-year sentences. She understood that long sentences are a problem in America, as it's a focus in her research, however, after hearing so many stories from impacted people, she was really struck by the prevalence of the issue. She was amazed by the strength and resilience of all the people she met, after the system has tried continuously to break them down. The hope that was displayed even after all the things they endured was inspiring and a reminder that these men and women are why she's doing this project.

"There was a man who was 80 and he was like 'I'm still here, I'm still strong' after doing 45 years," Esther said. "That's the spirit you can't break."



The iconic California Street Cable Car Line in San Francisco, California

For the next part of her project, Esther will be traveling to New Zealand and Australia, who have much more progressive justice systems than the U.S. and U.K. She will be looking at different restorative justice initiatives there and how they can possibly be implemented in her home country in the future. She hopes her research will expand the understanding of emerging adults, people 25 and younger, in England and how their developing brains are affected by their interactions with the legal system. One of the goals that Esther has for this project is to minimize the harm for people who made mistakes when they were children and ensure that incarcerated voices are centered more prominently in England.

"Because prison does not make places safer, nor does it bring about any form of accountability or healing," Esther said. "I would love to see [in the U.K.] a platform where [incarcerated] voices are heard and they have an outlet where their stories are told."

Thank you Esther for sharing part of your journey with us!

DC PHOTOS *By Isaiah and Avery*

As requested by our readers



Mural across the street from the dog park on 3rd & M St in NE



DC History exhibit featured in the MLK Jr Library

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!



PAYING IT FORWARD: "YOU CAN'T PUT A TIMELINE ON TRANSITION"

JAMES ON HIS ROLE AS A FREE MINDS PEER SUPPORTER

By Kelli

It was early 2022, and James was within 18 months of release after more than three decades in prison. Someone on his unit passed along a copy of the Free Minds *Connect*. Reading it inspired James to write a poem called "3,000 Miles Away" and send it to the Free Minds office.

"I wanted to get those feelings out because this was a major transition phase in my life. I finally felt comfortable trying to reach out to society. That poem was the first step in my journey of being able to articulate myself through writing."

When James came home in June 2023, he connected with Free Minds staff, and he attended a Reentry Orientation, where he was surprised to find a folder with his name on it. Inside was a copy of "3,000 Miles Away."

"That made me emotional!" he says now.

In early 2024, James enrolled in Free Minds' Peer Support Training Program, a 12-week program that equips formerly incarcerated Free Minds members with social-emotional and leadership skills to support others through reentry. After completing the training, participants can serve as peer supporters, checking in regularly with members returning home and helping them navigate the challenges of the transition.

Kelli recently sat down with James to talk about what it was like to come home after 34 years in prison, what he learned through the training, and what it means to now provide the kind of support he once needed himself.

Kelli: You came home in 2023 after 34 years in prison. What do you remember about those first days and weeks?

James: Before I was released, I was scared. I had learned trades in prison, but I didn't know how to navigate life outside. The day before I left, I cried, laughed and cried again just from looking out of my cell door. I would see people and think, "I'm never going to see you again."

Outside, everything was different. At the airport, everybody had a cell phone, but I didn't. Once I got on the plane, I sat there watching other people's phones, trying to see their movies. In prison, if something is playing on the television, nobody better touch it. I was watching the movie *Creed* over this man's shoulder, and he paused it. I almost yelled, *"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"* I had to catch myself! (Laughs) That was when I realized institutionalization was still in my mind.

When I got home my state of mind was low. Housing wasn't easy. Jobs weren't easy. People tell you, "Just get here. Just get here." But it's not as easy as that.

Kelli: What made you want to take the training and become a peer supporter for other Free Minds members coming home?

James: Everybody used to ask me, "Why are you staying in the halfway house for nine months?" Everybody else was trying to rush to get out. I had to be honest with myself and admit I wasn't ready. Everything was moving so fast and it was overwhelming.

Free Minds helped me navigate a lot of things out here. When I was invited to join the training, I thought, this is what's supposed to happen. I know what so many people go through when they come home.

Kelli: What did you learn through the Peer Support training that you wish you had known when you first came home?

James: It helped me understand that I'm not by myself. I learned how to slow down. Being able to understand how important processing is. And knowing that there are remedies and coping skills to help you deal with it.

Going through the training with nine other men, the most important thing I learned is connection. Everybody can be an asset. There are no big I's and little you's. The person who is usually quiet might say, "I want to comment on this because I was feeling the same way."

Kelli: What specific tools from the training have stayed with you?

It's the small things. One that always gets me is the deep belly breathing. You don't realize how important breathing is, or that you haven't been giving yourself the opportunity to take deep breaths.

Another tool we learned is that you have a meter inside of you. A lot of times, we don't understand what's happening inside us. You might get into an argument with somebody, and your anger meter is at a 1. You walk away. You're trying to calm down, but then the person starts walking behind you. That causes the meter to keep going up. Then, suddenly, you blow.

When you understand those factors, it helps you develop an exit plan.

Kelli: Now you regularly check in with about 11 or 12 people as a peer supporter. Can you give me an example of a time you knew you were making a difference?

James: I always tell people, "Put my number in your phone. Don't hesitate. I'm here to make sure you have every opportunity to make it out here. If you feel a certain way, don't be afraid to express it." I get calls all the time. They call me because I take it to heart to be able to talk somebody through something, even when I might also be going through it myself.

So this one member had only been out for about 90 days. It was a Sunday during the winter. He was going through something. I told him, "Listen, you came home with a lot of hopes, dreams, and aspirations about how everything should go. But you can't put a time limit on your transition."

As we talked about some problems he was having in his relationship, I didn't realize his partner was right there with him. The things I was saying to him were some of the same things she had been trying to tell him, but he viewed her as being combative. Then she suddenly chimed in, asking questions. I was saying things to her that he had been trying to explain. Sometimes you just need the right messenger. When we finished, both partners felt heard and both had a tremendous sense of relief.

In that moment, when he called me on that Sunday, it really mattered.

Kelli: You spend a lot of time supporting other people. How do you make sure you're also taking care of yourself?

James: I have to give myself some space to pour something back into myself. When you take in everybody else's concerns and thoughts, it's going to do something to you. It's like a drop of water hitting the same spot. It seems like no harm at first, but over time it's going to erode the concrete.

Sometimes I get bombarded with calls. I try to give everyone the best advice possible. Then I finally lay down, and my subconscious mind starts processing everybody else's problems and issues. Even when you're able to make somebody else feel at ease, afterward, the blows start hitting you.

Peer support helps you understand that it's okay to let go sometimes. I know that if I really need support, I can contact Ed *(one of the peer support trainers)*. But I also talk to the same people who call me. I reach out to them. Just because I was incarcerated for 34 years doesn't mean somebody who was incarcerated for five years has nothing to offer me. You don't know what you might be able to teach me. We're one and the same.

Kelli: What would you say to a Free Minds member who is thinking about participating in Peer Support?

James: The most important factor is that it's free. Anytime you can get a good, free self-help program, take advantage of it! You have everything to gain.

We need to learn how to open up. Know yourself and know what your capabilities are. If you're not a good speaker, be open about that. They're not going to push you away or make things harder for you. There's no harm and no judgment.

It's like boxing. You can stand in the middle of the ring and keep fighting, but sometimes you have to step out, step to the side, reset, and reinvent your tactics. There's nothing wrong with that. That's a strategic move that helps you win.

Starting over doesn't mean you gave up.

Kelli: Thank you, James, for being a stellar role model of compassion and empathy, and for always paying it forward!

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD: PUBLISHING OPPORTUNITIES

Two opportunities for incarcerated writers from the organization Solitary Watch:

1. Solitary Watch is accepting proposals for grants to incarcerated and formerly incarcerated journalists through the Ridgeway Reporting Project. To receive the full application instructions, including the deadline for the next funding round, write to: Ridgeway Reporting Project, Solitary Watch, PO Box 11374, Washington, DC 20008. Please do not send proposals without first reviewing the full application instructions.

2. Solitary Watch is also accepting submissions for the Voices from Solitary series, where we publish firsthand accounts from people surviving the lived experience of solitary confinement. To submit a piece for consideration, formerly and currently incarcerated writers can send their piece in the mail to Solitary Watch PO Box 11374, Washington DC, 20008 Attn: Voices from Solitary or by email to valerie@solitarywatch.org.

Note: These opportunities are not affiliated with Free Minds Book Club. Please reach out to Solitary Watch directly for any questions!

BOOKS ACROSS THE MILES!

The Free Minds long-distance book club





Lucky Me: A Memoir of Changing the Odds
by Rich Paul

with Neely

Thank you to everyone who has shared their thoughts on our current Books Across the Miles selection, *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. 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?

JS: I believe in luck because it is part of my faith. It's considered magic as some people go through different rituals to improve their "luck". Although magic is forbidden, it is acknowledged and very real.

DS: No, I don't believe in luck. There's no such thing as good or bad luck. You see, everything that happens to us in life, rather good or bad, has already been recorded for us. Some things that happen in life, we may have answers, others we may not. Which, if you understand it, is a blessing from Allah (God). Think of it this way: if we had the answers to all of our problems, what would we need God for?

DAA: I used to believe in luck, now I just believe everything was written before we were here. Now we just living out the story/chapter of our lives. Whatever was meant for you or going to happen to you, or for you, is going to happen. No matter your current state, it's about timing. Everything happens when the time is right or wrong, but regardless it was written before your time on earth was here.

TF: Yes I believe in luck because some things have to be sheer luck versus divine presents.

AHA: No, I do not believe in luck, viewing it as a superstitious thing. I believe if something happens then it wasn't any luck involved when something goes your way or not.

DA: I would say that I do to a certain extent. But given that I'm also religious, I attribute some things to luck and God's will.

FAX: I don't believe in "luck" per se. I'm thinking of another word that may apply to one's trajectory in life. "Gamechangers," maybe good decision making skills. I believe that we are born into circumstances outside of our control. As we grow, we can set goals and change our outcomes though.

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?

DAA: When I was growing up, on the morning drives my then-stepdad would take me to McDonald's and we'd listen to Birdman and Lil Wayne. Stuntin' like my daddy. That was our every morning ritual. And it always stuck with me and was the highlight of my school mornings. As a child, when someone shows interest or that they care about what's going on around you or in your life.

TF: I did not have a person like that in my life. I can say I feel kind of numb from not having someone like that.

FAX: One person that I felt was genuinely interested in me and what I thought is a residential counselor named Vince. Having Vince around daily was a relief regarding the "institutional" feel of being where I was.

AHA: There was a lady who used to look after me who I spent a lot of time with and did a lot of activities with who was always genuinely interested in the youth in my neighborhood. Having her taught me a lot and showed me how to use my time wisely. It made me feel I could achieve anything I wanted as long as I stayed focused and gave my all in whatever I liked.

DA: Growing up, I can't say that I had a positive male figure who took interest in these types of things. Of course, my mother asked. My cousin Boo was my inspiration, although he was involved in the same lifestyle that I was involved in. However, he was also supportive of my decisions, especially positive ones.

JS: No, I don't think I did, but I had a couple people who like to put eyes on me every now and again. Having that be my experience, it made me more self-reliant, and it also made me internalize that no matter how much someone loves you, a lot of things you have to do for yourself.

DS: Truthfully speaking, no. I never had people dedicate that amount of time into me. Not even my mom. Not saying that she didn't want to. It's just that she was more worried about keeping food on the table for us.

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?

AHA: I relied on a similar understanding with my aunt, my mother's sister, who I was very close with and who had addiction problems. She passed away from it when I was young. Having this understanding made me see the good I really knew her for while always looking at her in this light.

DA: Being as though I sold drugs, there were times when I would ask my runners/workers who were in their 40's and 50's how their life came to this. Many of the responses kind of blew me away at the tender age of 18-20. However, the moral of this story is that I never judged those guys because they were full of wisdom that kept me on my toes.

DAA: Yeah, myself. But we all have flaws and if they're not physical, then they're personal. I struggle in prison every day, I'm depressed. The conditions in here don't help.

FAX: Yes. I've had to give myself grace occasionally during this journey of being incarcerated. I came to prison flawed and while in prison I've picked up a few more flaws. Giving myself grace has helped me to have empathy and understanding for others.

DS: My mom, although she never used drugs. She was addicted to making others happy and working all the time, sometimes to the point where she would put herself at risk. I could never figure that out. However, I did learn to be more compassionate with others.

TF: Yes, I feel my father was flawed. It helped me to know it was a disease he has, and when I fell into addiction it helped me to see well what he dealt with. It helped me to see myself and not want to be flawed for my daughter.

JS: More recently I have, and it gave me more inner peace. Before, I just would deal with the person who was flawed accordingly to protect myself, but still be frustrated with their actions even though I knew that was them. Now I've dropped the frustration or I ignore it while everything else stays the same.

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?

DA: I would say that it is an effective warning. Nevertheless, whenever I heard this it was usually someone screaming and yelling it to me, which caused me to become resistant. The way I learn/understand things is by explanation. For example, explain why my actions can lead me to death or jail without screaming or yelling. Also, once I got up in early adulthood it just seemed like people were afraid to tell me things. But now that I've gotten older, I totally understand. I just wish I would have gotten the message a whole lot sooner.

FAX: Only if they listen is it effective. But the fact is, when you're young and it's normal to see people go to jail or go to an early grave, one does not realize the severity of the consequences associated with the street culture.

TF: Yes, but I feel it can be enforced better by the people telling them. Just saying it and not doing anything to deter that person to not go down a certain path is not all you can or should do.

DS: No. Just telling a child not to do something never really worked, nor has it been effective. At the end of the day, if a child's environment isn't changed, that child will most likely become a product of that environment.

JS: No, I don't think it is an effective warning for young people because although I didn't want to die, and I didn't want to go to jail, those were consequences that I was prepared to face.

AHA: I believe it is an effective warning when it is coming from the right person who that young person will listen to. So many young people don't think about being in too deep since they are living in the moment, making them only focus on what benefits can be gained at that moment and time.

DAA: I believe it is a good message and it's most definitely true, but it doesn't get across to everyone, or some people get it later than others and before it's too late.

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?

FAX: "Move with intention; be ready to improvise." This is one rule that I live by because if I'm not doing this, then that means I'm not focused on my goals.

JS: Loyalty is a rule that I lived by because I understood that to love myself, I had to be loyal to myself, and for me to really know what loyalty was, I had to be loyal to someone else, so that I could really love myself. Along with that, my number one rule was to treat people how they treat you. An example of being loyal is my right hand man had a friend I didn't like, but he used to deal with him so I refrained from doing something that would damage their relationship.

AHA: One of the rules Rich listed I always tried to live by is, "Take care of your people." It was something I was taught from my grandmother who always cared for all in our area. She had a hair salon so the more time I spent with her, the more she instilled in me to live by this. Even now I will always help someone in need or assist when possible. I also live by rules like stay focused and disciplined to always stay on a positive course and not repeat bad habits young.

DA: I would say 1.) Neutralize your anger; and 2) Build on ecosystems of empathy. The reason why I choose these two rules is because prior to coming to prison, my anger was totally out of control and I had no empathy or compassion for anyone else besides those in my inner circle. The end result was me treating everyone as if they were beneath me and simply an object instead of what they were: human beings with feelings. As a result, these are two important rules that I try to remember and adhere to during my daily interactions with others.

TF: Yes, one that I try to live by everyday is to be calm in stressful situations. One example is how the correctional officers are understandably having a bad day and try to project their stress towards me. I stay as calm as I can. Another rule I live by is giving a person the benefit of the doubt. One that my grandfather taught me is always pay your debt regardless of when it will leave you.

DS: I live by Islamic and Sunni ruling to the best of my ability. If it's not about that, it's not worth my time. Being a Sunni Muslim is my life.



SPORTS WITH ISAIAH

Hey Free Minds Family!

Here's the 2nd edition of the expanded sports section!

If you're new here, 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!

*Please note that all stats are accurate at the time the article was written and may change prior to you receiving this issue!

FOOTBALL
Cue the NFL on Fox music

The NFL and college football (CFB) seasons are here!! Super Bowl LXI at SoFi Stadium will end the NFL season on February 14, 2027, and the College Football Playoff National Championship at Allegiant Stadium will end the CFB season on January 25, 2027. Fans are ecstatic for nonstop football and the opportunity to root for their team until the season ends. Some fans are already "facing the music" that their football team will not be championship contenders or even be competitive this year.

In NFL news, the Seattle Seahawks came out victorious against the New England Patriots in the Super Bowl rematch. Aaron Donald, a future Hall of Famer, came out of retirement and will be playing on the defensive side of the ball with Myles Garrett. However, this soon-to-be unstoppable and scary duo is on hold because Garrett was placed on injured reserve with a knee injury. The New Orleans Saints walked into M&T Bank Stadium and beat the Baltimore Ravens 24-17. In a thriller, the Kansas City Chiefs beat the Indianapolis Colts 33-30 in overtime.

In CFB news, after a controversial call to add 1 more second to the game clock, the Michigan Wolverines beat Western Michigan with a Hail Mary pass. Next, the Texas Longhorns rallied from behind and scored 21 unanswered points against the visiting #1 Ohio State Buckeyes in the 4th quarter. Then, unranked Oklahoma State Cowboys shocked the world by beating #6 Oregon Ducks. Lastly, Ole Miss got its revenge against former head coach Lane Kiffin after his tumultuous departure from Ole Miss to coach the LSU Tigers. After Week 3, the top five teams in the nation are the #1 Texas Longhorns, #2 Georgia Bulldogs, #3 Notre Dame Fighting Irish, #4 Ole Miss Rebels, and #5 Indiana Hoosiers.

In the District, the Washington Commanders lost both their games against the Philadelphia Eagles 24-22 and the Dallas Cowboys 37-20. To make matters worse, Jayden Daniels reinjured his elbow in the game against the Cowboys. The team is monitoring the severity of his injury and Daniels' projected return. However, in his absence, the Commanders beat the Seahawks 33-31 after Kain Medrano's pick-six (a defensive interception returned for a touchdown) sealed the Commanders' first win in their home opener. The Commanders are 1-2 and are 4th in the NFC East. The upcoming opponents for the Commanders are the Indianapolis Colts (October 4th), New York Giants (October 11th), and San Francisco 49ers (October 19th).

SOCCER
All international soccer fans' eyes will be on Brazil as they host the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup. Speaking of the FIFA Women's World Cup, Malawi, a country ranked 153rd in the FIFA Women's World Ranking, made its debut at the Women's Africa Cup of Nations (WAFCON), where it won a silver medal and secured a World Cup spot for the first time. This historical feat was led by two sisters named Tabitha and Temwa Chawinga. The United States women's national soccer team has its eyes set on winning its fifth World Cup title next year.

In the District, DC United lost to Charlotte FC 2-1, and their playoff hopes are fading away. If the United do not make the playoffs this season, they will extend their postseason drought to seven seasons. In NWSL news, the Washington Spirit are currently in playoff position despite recent injuries and dropped points. Recently, the Spirit defeated the Chicago Stars FC 3-0, but lost to Angel City FC 1-0. The Spirit sit in third place (46 points) behind the San Diego Wave (48 points), and the reigning champions Gotham FC (54 points) with a very strong chance to make the playoffs this year.

BASKETBALL
Cue Basketball by Kurtis Blow

Basketball is HERE!! The NBA and college basketball teams have released their full schedules for the 2026-2027 season. In times

like these, basketball fans have come out of hiding to dismiss football's importance and trade funny banter about why basketball is better than football. The NBA regular season officially begins on Tuesday, October 20th. The NBA games slated for opening day will be for the ages. The defending champions, the New York Knicks, will host LeBron James and the Philadelphia 76ers. Next, the Detroit Pistons will host the Boston Celtics. Lastly, the Oklahoma City Thunder will face off against the San Antonio Spurs for a Western Conference Finals rematch.

The WNBA season has resumed after the 2026 FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup, where Team USA claimed their 12th title. Team USA is known for their dominance in the basketball world. In 2024, they claimed their 10th Olympic gold medal. The WNBA is entering the playoffs, and the teams that have clinched playoff spots are the Atlanta Dream, Dallas Wings, Golden State Valkyries, Indiana Fever, Las Vegas Aces, Minnesota Lynx, New York Liberty, and Washington Mystics.

In the District, the Washington Wizards' preseason opponents are the New York Knicks (October 8th), Detroit Pistons (October 10th), Brooklyn Nets (October 12th), and the New Orleans Pelicans (October 16th). Anthony Davis, Trae Young, and A.J. Dybantsa make their regular-season debuts for the Wizards when they take on the Milwaukee Bucks on October 21st. In WNBA news, the Washington Mystics set a new franchise record for most wins in a single season (27) and have clinched a playoff spot. They are making history as the youngest playoff team in WNBA history. Hopefully, the Mystics can shock the world and bring home the championship hardware again. The Elena Delle Donne-led team won the franchise's first-ever WNBA championship in 2019, and this year's team is on a mission to win another one.

BASEBALL

The MLB postseason has arrived. The MLB teams that have clinched playoff spots are the Tampa Bay Rays, Milwaukee Brewers, Los Angeles Dodgers, New York Yankees, Atlanta Braves, Boston Red Sox, Houston Astros, Philadelphia Phillies, San Diego Padres, Cleveland Guardians, Chicago Cubs, and Chicago White Sox.

In the district, the Washington Nationals were eliminated from postseason contention in mid-September, and played their last game of the season against the New York Mets on September 27th. They finished 4th in the National League East and ended the season with a 77-85 record. Hopefully, the Nationals can bounce back next year and make the postseason with the hopeful return of their young stars (CJ Abrams and James Wood).

WRITING PROMPTS:

1. Write a poem or essay about sports.
2. If you woke up today as a professional athlete, what professional league (e.g., NBA, WNBA, NFL, MLB, etc.) would you play in, and why? What position would you play, and in what city?
3. How can someone be called "The Greatest of All Time" (GOAT) of their sport? Which former or current athletes do you consider as GOATs and why?

SPORTS TRIVIA

Send in your answers before the next* Connect *issue

1. The NBA regular season starts October 20th. A. True B. False
2. The following teams are upcoming opponents (as of this writing) for the Washington Commanders except:
   A. Kansas City Chiefs B. New York Giants C. San Francisco 49ers D. Indianapolis Colts
3. The Washington Mystics clinched a playoff spot. A. True B. False
4. How many World Cups have the United States women's national soccer team won?
   A. Four B. Eight C. Five D. Six
5. The following teams will be playing in the WNBA playoffs except:
   A. Las Vegas Aces B. Seattle Storm C. Minnesota Lynx D. Golden State Valkyries
6. Super Bowl LXI will be played on February 14, 2027, at SoFi Stadium. A. True B. False

*We will reveal the answers in the next Connect issue, which is Food.

Imagination Trivia Answers:

1. 2026, 2. False, 3. Spain, 4. True, 5. Kylian Mbappe, 6. False, 7. Cleveland Cavaliers, Miami Heat, and Los Angeles Lakers, 8. True, 9. Milwaukee Bucks, 10. The Philadelphia Eagles on September 13th, 11. False, 12. The Super Bowl rematch (Seattle Seahawks v. New England Patriots), 13. False, 14. Emily (FIFA World Cup bracket), Shahana (Men's March Madness bracket), and Rebecca (Women's March Madness bracket).



DID YOU KNOW: THE IMPACT OF TRAUMA TRIGGERS AND WAYS TO HEALTHILY EXPRESS YOURSELF

By Isaiah

As human beings, we can recall how past events evoked feelings of hope, confidence, love, peace, joy, happiness, safety, and other positive emotions. At the same time, we can recall how other past events produced feelings of pain, sadness, hurt, unforgiveness, doubt, fear, and other negative emotions. Between the former and the latter, we will choose the former and relive the more positive events rather than the bad ones, as anyone would. **Why would anyone want to reminisce about those traumatic or painful past experiences?** Even with calculated attempts to **bury** or **ignore** those negative emotions, those **invasive** feelings will never leave.

For this article, the goal is to share information about trauma triggers and what they are, how holding in feelings can negatively impact you, and the best way to express yourself healthily.

So, you might ask, what are triggers? According to the American Psychological Association, a trigger is a stimulus that elicits a reaction. When a trauma trigger occurs, memories and thoughts associated with a traumatic event or events come back without warning. You can feel helpless, sad, unsafe, upset, fearful, or scared. These triggers can also make you panic, which can be overwhelming. Most importantly, these triggers make you feel like you are actually reliving the trauma again (Wright, 2021). Each person's triggers can look different from someone else's. Person A can get triggered by sounds; Person B by sights; Person C by smells; Person D by a certain location or area; Person E by certain situations; Person F by an emotion that is associated with a past traumatic event (Wright, 2021). If the following examples describe your trigger or triggers, do not be ashamed or embarrassed when this happens; it means you are human and have dealt with traumatic experiences before. When a trigger occurs, you can use the flashback-halting protocol. As mentioned before, triggers can make you feel like you are back in time, experiencing the traumatic event again. The goal of the flashback-halting protocol is to stop the flashback and help you realize that you are in the **PRESENT** (Wright, 2021).

The **Flashback-Halting Protocol** is below:
When you are triggered, try reading and answering these questions to yourself:

- Right now, I am feeling _____ (scared, anxious, panicky, sad, etc.).
- And I am sensing in my body _____ (shaking, sweating, dizziness, etc.).
- Because I am remembering _____ (the bad event, the vehicle, the war, etc.).
- And at the same time, it is now _____ (say current date and time).
- And I am here at _____ (name the place).
- And I can see _____ (name five objects around you).
- And so I know that _____ (the trauma) is not happening now.

Hopefully, the flashback-halting protocol can be useful when you experience a trauma trigger. Just know that you are **NOT** alone and everybody has their own triggers, whether they talk about it or not.

Not only can trauma triggers affect you negatively, but holding in feelings can do the same. In your formative years and even after, you might have endured situations where your voice and lived experiences were silenced; as a result, maybe you stopped expressing your feelings (Selter, 2024). For example, when asked how you are doing after a traumatic event now, you might reply, "I'm good." When pushed further, maybe you say, "I'm fine…leave it alone." Or, "Stop asking me questions…I'm good." However, in this scenario you are anything **but** good. These moments of repression seem fine at first, but those buried feelings will show themselves…eventually. Holding in feelings can cause you to "blow up," be harsh toward yourself, cause addiction, and lead to medical problems (Taibbi, 2024). I'll discuss a few of these. First, holding feelings in can lead to "blowing up," meaning an individual exhibits aggressive behavior in a situation that never required that kind of reaction. Because of pent-up anger or other emotions, a small disagreement can go awry. Second, holding in feelings can put you at risk of developing addictions that are formed to numb the pain or calm your emotions. These addictions can be drugs, food, alcohol, sexual relations, and other avenues that can be used to push the emotions down. Lastly, holding feelings in can lead to medical problems. Scientists have been researching the link between emotional repression and the immune system (Raypole, 2024).

After learning about trauma triggers and the importance of not holding in your feelings, you may ask, "How can I healthily express myself?" The answer is journaling, creative writing (e.g., writing poetry and essays), books, art, and healthy discussions! In journaling, you can write what you are feeling, what you want to feel, what's going on in your world today, what you are excited about and not excited about, future goals, your life, and anything you want to write about. Next, you can write poetry or essays to express yourself. Also, you can read books. You can make paintings and drawings or use coloring books. Lastly, you can have healthy discussions with a person you trust, a reputable mental health organization, or a therapist/psychiatrist about what's going on in your life. There are so many other ways to express yourself healthily that aren't mentioned here.

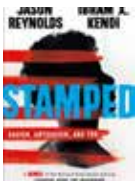
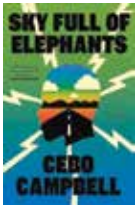
The road to expressing yourself healthily will be a journey, but we believe you can do it!

I'll end by saying this: if no one has said these things to you today or in a while, I'll say it for them. **We** love you. **We** support you. **We** are your cheerleaders. **You** are seen. **You** are heard. **You** are somebody. **You** are amazing. **You** are creative. **You** are smart. **You** are YOU. **You** are healing. You are growing. You are a champion. You are important. You are a warrior. You are an overcomer.

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BAM BOOK BALLOT

I hope you have your voting pencils at the ready, because it is time to choose the next Books Across the Miles selection. Please write to us with your top 3 choices from the list below!

1		***The Monsters We Defy*** *by Leslye Penelope [Fantasy]* It's Washington, DC, 1925. Clara Johnson has the gift of talking to spirits, which is a power that has come in handy at her darkest moments. Now, it has become a curse that has left her in debt to the spirit world. When a powerful spirit gives her the opportunity to gain her freedom, Clara seizes the chance. To do so, she must steal a magical ring from the richest woman in DC. Clara comes to rely on an unlikely team to help her gain her freedom, including a handsome jazz musician and an aging actor. As they race along DC's legendary Black Broadway, conflict in the spirit world begins to mix with the human one–which could cost Clara her life and change DC forever.
2		***The Man, the Message, the Mission*** *by Tyrone Parker [Memoir]* Parker's novel details his life as a young person and adult who has experienced countless challenges, including the killing of his son. In 1991, Tyrone co-founded the Alliance of Concerned Men with a group of formerly incarcerated men, and went out on the streets of DC to stop the violence and spread messages of peacebuilding and healing.
3		***The Office of Historical Corrections*** *by Danielle Evans [Fiction - Short Stories]* In this collection of short stories, author Danielle Evans zooms in on moments and relationships in her characters' lives in order to examine larger issues revolving around race, culture, and history through the universal feelings of love and grief. Stories include a white college student who attempts to reinvent herself after a photo of her in a Confederate-flag bikini goes viral and a Black scholar from DC who is drawn into a mystery spanning generations that puts her job, love life, and oldest friendship on the line. The stories work together to provoke the reader into thinking about the truths of American history, and who gets to tell them.
4		***Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You*** *by Jason Reynolds and Ibram X. Kendi [Nonfiction]* The construct of race has been woven into the fabric of the United States as a tool to gain and keep power, while also separating and silencing. The first step to building an antiracist country is to acknowledge the country's racist past and how racism plays a role in the present. This book takes the reader on that journey, showcasing the origins of racist thought and how it has spread into the modern day. A deep exploration on the many forms of racism, this book is a roadmap to how the reader can identify and stamp out racist thoughts, leading to a better future.
5		***Sky Full of Elephants*** *by Cebo Campell [Science Fiction]* This novel takes place in the aftermath of a profound event: all white people in the United States have walked into the nearest body of water. Fast forward a year, Charlie Brunton is a Black man who has served time in prison after being wrongfully convicted of a crime. He is now working as a professor at Howard University when he receives a call from his daughter, Sidney, who was left behind by her white mother and step-family. Traumatized, scared, and desperate for help, Sidney has turned to her father who she has never met, and the man she has always resented. Charlie and Sidney join forces as they embark on a journey across a "post-racial" United States in search of answers. They soon learn that neither of them are prepared for this new world and how they see themselves.
6		***Concrete Cowboy [Previously Published as "Ghetto Cowboy"]*** *by G. Neri [Young Adult]* When Cole's mom dumps him on the streets of Philadelphia to live with a dad he has never met, the last thing he expects to see is a stable full of horses. Cole might not know much about cowboys, but one thing he does know is that they aren't Black, and they don't live in the hood. He soon comes to learn that in his neighborhood, horses are a way of life. When the city threatens to shut down the stable, Cole realizes it is time to stand up for what is right. This book is inspired by the real-life urban riders of Philadelphia and Brooklyn.

First Choice _____

Second Choice _____

Third Choice _____

WHAT WE'RE READING

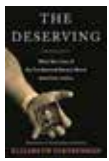
with Neely

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."

- **Free Minds Reentry Book Club "The Build Up":** ***Pride*** **by Ibi Zoboi**
  Pride is the modern retelling of the 1813 English novel, *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, remixed into a love story between two Brookleyn teens. The story is one of a gentrifying neighborhood and the fight to save it, all set amidst the blossoming love between a boy from a wealthy family who moves into the borough and a girl whose family has inhabited the neighborhood for as long as she can remember. Discussions on this book during our weekly reentry book club called, "The Build Up," have inspired members to reflect and participate in meaningful conversations with each other on topics about neighborhood identities, building community, adapting to change, and finding ways to preserve community history, ownership, culture, and connection.



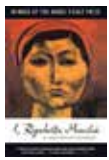
- **Julia:** ***The Deserving: What the Lives of the Condemned Reveal About American Justice*** **by Elizabeth Vartkessian**
  The author is an experienced mitigation specialist and the Executive Director of the nonprofit Advancing Real Change, an organization focused on expanding access to mitigation. In this book, she shares stories of her experiences as a mitigation specialist primarily representing clients on death row, and what she has learned from her clients and their journeys. It's a hard read, delving into a lot of traumatic experiences, but one that I found very insightful and compelling. I would recommend this book to readers who are interested in examining the factors that lead to people being on death row and what we could do differently as a society.



- **Emily:** ***Yesteryear*** **by Caro Clare Burke**
  Yesteryear is about a social media influencer who lives the "trad wife lifestyle," which is a current trend on social media where women promote traditional views of women as homemakers and wives while making videos of themselves doing "traditional" women activities such as baking bread and taking care of the farm. One day, the main character wakes up and realizes that she is now living in the 19th century and has to actually perform these tasks. What follows is a sometimes fascinating and sometimes very strange exploration of the performativeness of social media. This book wasn't my favorite, but it definitely made me think!



- **Neely:** ***I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*** **by Rigoberta Menchú**
  This book is the result of a series of interviews between anthropologist Elisabeth Burgos-Debay and Rigoberta Menchú, an Indigenous (original people to inhabit a specific region of land) woman from the Central American country of Guatemala. Throughout the pages, Rigoberta details the harsh injustices and oppression she, her family, and all Indigenous people have repeatedly experienced in Guatemala. From being forced to work at coffee and cotton plantations as a child, to losing her brother, father, and mother to state-sanctioned violence at the hands of the military, to becoming a leading figure in Indigenous rights around the world, Rigoberta's story is one of strength, defiance, and determination.



- **Kaylee:** ***Getting Me Cheap: How Low-Wage Work Traps Women and Girls in Poverty*** **by Amanda Freeman and Lisa Dodson**
  This book shares real life stories about single moms who are trapped in cycles of poverty. You read about the reality of low-wage labor and the impact this has on children, and how it can create cycles of poverty. You also get to read about how broken our welfare system is and how the system is set up to ensure that individuals can't make things better for themselves. It explores the reliance affluent families have on low-income mothers, specifically women of color. Truly an amazing read.



- **Yasmine:** ***The Jakarta Method*** **by Vincent Bevins**
  The Jakarta Method was published in 2020 and tells the non-fiction story of the United States' backing of a mass murder program in Indonesia that not only led to the radical right-wing shift in the political landscape of Indonesia, but became the blueprint for similar violent campaigns in Latin America. I became interested in the book after learning about the Indigenous people of West Papua, often described as a "hidden Black colony," and the parallels between Indonesia's political imprisonment of West Papuan freedom fighters and the United States' political imprisonment of Black activists here on Turtle Island.



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.*

Midnight in Paris by Eric Gardner:
Description provided by the author: *In the infinite land of possibility, Midnight is given a gift that even he could never see coming. After coming home from a 17-year sentence, his uncle is mysteriously murdered, and then two attempts are made on his life. Certain details of those attempts let him know that it was somebody close to him. He eventually meets a young woman by the name of Paris, who suffers so much torment, disrespect and lack-of in her life. After facing death two times and reigning triumphant, Midnight brings a great serenity to her life, but sometimes that serenity could turn deadly.The question will be in what way? For her, or against her? Everyone's lives are already written, and you can't change the past…. But can you change the future? If given the opportunity.*



DC CULTURE: ART ALL NIGHT

By Sofia

Hey Free Minds family! This is Sofia, the Community Engagement Coordinator checking in for another edition of our DC Culture article where we discuss all things art, food, music, and more going on here in Washington, DC. For this issue, I'll be doing a recap of DC's 2026 Art All Night.

Art All Night is an annual citywide free and public festival that takes place in all 8 Wards. Each year, artists, performers, businesses, and residents come together across neighborhoods to celebrate the diversity of DC's creative community. The festival brings together people of all ages and has a wide array of artistic experiences for people to enjoy, including live performances, visual art showcases, interactive art activities, and more.

This year the festival took place on the nights of Friday, September 11th and Saturday, September 12th and had the biggest turnout yet. It was the 15th year that Art All Night took place so it was bigger and better than ever, even launching an app (application that can be downloaded on smartphones and tablets) so that attendees could keep track of all the events going on. I myself didn't get a chance to see everything that was going on but had friends who attended various events in different neighborhoods. I also passed by the huge block party that was being thrown to conclude the event outside of the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial DC Public Library.

One friend stopped by the Foggy Bottom neighborhood's iteration of the event. She told me it was the first year that Foggy Bottom actually participated in Art All Night. Foggy Bottom had a live DJ set, market, textile museum, and beer garden for the festival. The highlight for her was the indoor night market where local businesses and artists sold different types of art and gifts. Some of the vendors included people selling curated secondhand clothing, records and CDs, and her personal favorite, crocheted plushies.

Another friend of mine attended Shaw's Art All Night which is one of the bigger neighborhood celebrations of the festival. Shaw is actually where the festival began in 2011. Shaw's version of the event include indoor and outdoor performances, video projections, a short parade, dance performances, acrylic and watercolor painting, live music, fire dance performances, dance parties, cabaret performances, mural illuminations, live painting by noted DC artists, wrestling matches, an outdoor art market, and art installations.

One of the other big events of the festival was the block party held outside of the flagship DC Public Library branch, the MLK Jr. Memorial Library in downtown DC on the last night of the festival. I intended to attend this event but the event was so crowded that a line to enter wrapped around the block! From outside the party though, I could see vendors selling art and could hear a live DJ. There were also live performances, and it wouldn't be a DC arts festival without Go-Go music and some of the performances included The Chuck Brown Band and Black Alley. The block party also included a silent disco which is when people wear headphones but a sound system has everyone listening to the same music with their headphones, so everyone can dance along together without any music playing out loud. I attended one of these during the Art All Night Tenleytown in 2019 and it was a silly and fun experience!



An example of what fire dancing can look like



Outside of the MLK Library in downtown DC

The event was a wonderful celebration of the DC arts scene bringing together people from all neighborhoods. Is there something specific about DC culture that you want to see in a future issue? Write in and let us know, we'd love to hear from you!

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NEXT ISSUE'S THEME: FOOD

By Julia

For this next issue, we're talking all about that which nourishes and sustains us: food! Whether you're a chef or just someone with an appreciation for the products of the culinary arts, please write to us with your favorite recipes! For so many of us, food can also be deeply tied to memory. Do you have a favorite meal or comfort food from when you were growing up? What about your first meal home–what will it be? Are there foods that remind you of a specific person, or a specific memory from your life? Maybe it's a holiday meal, something your grandmother used to cook, or something you cooked for yourself or a loved one. I once read a famous Mexican novel, *Like Water for Chocolate* by Laura Esquivel, that tells the story of a young woman named Tita who has a gift; when she cooks, she shares her own emotions through cooking, so those who eat her food feel what she feels, whether it's sadness, joy, loneliness, or love. What does it mean to you to eat a meal cooked with love, or to express your own love and appreciation through cooking? Tell us all about it! Be descriptive. Let us imagine that we're sitting across the table from you and taking in this delicious meal.

Until then, take care and KEEP YOUR MIND FREE!



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