

Prisoner Express News-Summer 19

Welcome to Prisoner Express. I am so glad you are interested in the Prisoner Express [PE] program and I believe some or all the programs we are offering in this new cycle are of interest to you. My name is Gary, and I lead Prisoner Express in our mission to provide information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression to incarcerated men and women. PE is a program of the Durland Alternatives Library, located on the Cornell University campus in Ithaca NY. PE has been going more than 15 years and the direction PE goes in is influenced by the letters you, the participants, send us. It is not exactly that "your wish is our command" but we do read everything mailed to us and we try to find the best ideas shared with us in your letters and turn them into programs we can offer. We want to hear from you, and in this issue of PE news we have created a short survey that you can return with the registration form. The survey will help us figure out how to proceed so we can be effective and efficient in the work we do. Your response will also let us know your newsletter was delivered.

Please keep in mind that there is no regular source of funding for PE, and while the library provides a workspace and we get many student workers and volunteers, we must raise all the funds for postage and printing. When there are 5000 people participating, even a single mailing to all of you can get very expensive. I write that because it is not possible for PE to write back to you as an individual for every letter you send us. We are limited in what we can do. We try to follow through with the programs we offer, but often we cannot fulfill special requests some of you send. It isn't that we don't want to help, but usually, it is an issue of time and money. With so many people writing, it is easy for us to fall behind in all our correspondence.

We are located on a college campus. Most PE volunteers and leave town for the summer, and our ability to respond slows down accordingly. Come fall we should get right back in gear. For those of you who have been writing us for a while, this all makes sense. We gained a few hundred volunteers last spring, and they wrote many personal letters to the participants in some of our programs. They are back home now, and many of them may not return to Ithaca as they have graduated or stopped going to school. Don't be discouraged if you lose the connection to someone you wrote to at PE. Many of the students are just passing through. Sometimes you will connect with someone and exchange many letters, but many other letters are one and done. I tell you this as I know how important mail is, and I know many of you fret when you do not hear back from someone you wrote a letter to. It is the nature of our program as some volunteers only come a few times, while others come regularly. The key takeaway is that the volunteer has read your journal, poem or theme essay, your responses to our distance learning packets, or they have seen your art. They see you as a real human who deserves to be treated with kindness. They write you a letter to let you know, and they leave here with a new perspective on prisons and

prisoners. They know you're not much different from them. You are a fellow human being.

As these students go through life, I believe through their participation, we create advocates for prison and sentencing reform. The effect your words are having on the students may not show up overnight, but as I have been doing this for 15 years, I do see the difference it is making in the students' lives and how some of them choose to work advocating for prison reform and social justice. Your letters, poems and art are influencing these students and you are making a difference in how they see the world and the people they will become. I hope their letters are also a positive influence in your life. If you are new to the project as you read the newsletter and learn about the programs, we are offering this cycle, you can see how participation in the programs will bring you letters from PE volunteers.

I recently received an award from a radio show on NPR called eTown for my work in PE. There no special prize, but they interview me for a short segment on the program and can direct listeners to our website. There, they can learn more about our programs and see some of the writing and art you submit. Getting people to read your thoughts and understand you as humans rather than as people who should be out of sight and mind is a goal of ours, so this interview should help. More people in the "Free World" seem aware of the need to reform the criminal justice system.

It has been a wet summer here in Ithaca. Everything is so green. I am busy gardening , though this year instead of gardening in my usual country garden, I am gardening in a community garden in town. This garden is growing food for the local soup kitchen. It will also be used to teach youth how to grow their own food. I am a big advocate of gardens and people producing food. I am amazed how many people put a lot of energy in growing grass lawns that they regularly mow. I can't see the point and would rather fill most spaces with plants that are delicious to eat. My favorite greens are collard, kale, chard. I think eating fresh greens keeps me healthy. Back in the country I still have large garlic patch and some potatoes. I hope you get a chance in your prison to grow some food. **I would love to hear any stories you have about positive horticultural experiences you may have had.** I know many people think a farm is lower class work, better I say "work the earth," but for me it is meaningful and satisfying. I am living in town now after 30+ years in the country. I am a different human in town. The rhythms of nature are dulled. Town is a good environment for library work, which I do when I am not working with PE. I imagine the circumstances which you are in may make fieldwork less than fun, but for me it is the best. My other piece of news is that I went to a garage sale last Saturday and bought an inflatable kayak for \$20. I am excited to blow it up and get on the water. There are lots of creeks in town and they all lead into Cayuga Lake. It is one of the Finger Lakes and it is 40 miles long,

Other than gardening, garage sales and reading thousands of your letters, I keep busy cooking for my children aged 31, 20 and 16. They keep me on my toes, and I enjoy being a dad. You all share so much with me in your letters about what is going on in your life, I like to let you know what is happening with me. Now, back to the news.

For those of you who have participated in the last cycle of programing, I want you to know we are forwarding any letters about gratitude to Sara and your replies to short sentences to Skye. We are also saving the responses to Designing Paradise. I know many of you liked that packet. We just mailed out the latest installment in the Building a Book Series #4, and the good news is that Maia is willing to start the series over again. Poetry Anthology Vol 21 is at the printer and is being sent to 400+participants. Your response to our mailings is one way to know you received a mailing. We have been getting more mail sent back to us as undeliverable and we are trying to adjust practices to comply to individual state's new regulations. It seems complicated and may explain why some of our mailings didn't come to you last cycle. Treacy will update you on the art shows in her featured spot later in the newsletter. We have two traveling art shows of your work hanging up in regional libraries. One place of consternation is the Chess Club newsletter. We are falling behind on creating them. Robert, a high school student who is working at the library this summer is working on a chess packet and I hope all of you who signed up last winter for chess will have it soon.

Summer 19 Programs -signup sheet at end of newsletter

Expedited Books--This is our oldest program and continues to be very popular. It is also the one program we are unable to offer for free. We have a room of donated books. We take your requests and make the best matches we can for what you request. We ask for \$4 to partially cover the cost of postage for the books. If you sign up for this program, it is best to ask for broad categories of books. It gives us the best chance to make a good match. You can ask for specific titles and authors as well, but the more information you give us the better the chances you get books that interest you. All our books are donated so the selection varies all the time. Typically, there are 4 to 7 books mailed in a package. We do a good job of sending out quality reading material! Give us as much info as you can about what you like to read, and we will do our best to satisfy that desire. Often if we can't match your request to the books, we have we set it aside for a while and hope the books you want will appear. After a while if it doesn't happen, we make a package of books up that we hope pleases you. If you don't want us to substitute and you can only accept the books you want, then perhaps this service won't work for you. We don't want dissatisfied customers. It typically costs us more than \$4 to mail the package so be sure you are willing to accept our best effort, before joining. Let us

know of any special conditions that have to be met for you to receive a book package.

Journal Project--Hello current and future journalers.

Journals are a great way to gain insight and awareness about life. If you sign up for this packet, you will receive an introductory packet focused on the how's and the why's of journals. When the project first began, I was struck by the number of people who wrote about the importance of writing while in prison, and how it was a tool used to stay balanced and sane in a somewhat difficult environment. It became clear to me the positive benefits writing gave to the many people trying to make sense of their lives and the environment around them. Rather than staying stuck in negative circular reasonings of a trapped mind, they were using writing as a way to be free, to explore, and to grow. Writing thoughts down is a great way to open up and ponder life and all of its twists and turns. The main thing regarding journal keeping is that it is about you and your world, perspective, mind, and awareness. You choose what you want to write on and send in as often as you would like. All we ask is that you please date all entries. It is a fun project to consider joining, and I can promise you from my experience reading journals these past 13 years, that writing down your thoughts leads changes for both the readers and writers. We have student volunteers who read your journals, especially when school starts again in the fall. Besides all the personal growth you may acquire from keeping a journal, it also is a great way to get a personal letter from the PE volunteers who read what you write. Give it a try and see if it helps expand your mind.

Poetry Project--Consider submitting a poem[s] for consideration in our next poetry anthology. It will be our 22nd anthology. Right now, we are organizing the poems for volume 21. PE volunteers read the poems and select the ones that they feel should go in the anthology. Every issue is edited by different people. A team of volunteers reads through the poems and makes decisions on which to include in the anthology. Everyone who submits an entry, whether it is chosen for publication or not, will be mailed a copy of the Prison Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 22. Our previous poetry anthologies are online at www.prisonexpress.org. If you have had a poem featured in a previous poetry anthology it will be on the website. Thinking and writing can be great tools in self-discovery. Have fun and practice putting your thoughts down as words on paper. Poetry is a great way to reach outside of your current walls and share a bit of yourself. In the fall when the students return, they come to the library to read your poems.

Here is a short selection of recently received poems

“Next Spring, Mama Bird” by Al Coleman

I hope you will forgive them, mama bird.

Perhaps it was always there, in their hearts
the same flaw that brought them here
led to this

Or maybe it just clicked into existence
when they snapped those keys
on their belts;

Either way,
this malignant cyst grows and grows,
oozing poison into their veins
and into their brains—
Why expect anything else?

Whatever it was, console yourself with the truth that
there was no thought in this, mama bird,
No premeditation
No consideration
No rationalization
Just automatic cruelty
ossified in the tracks of daily routine
disdain and hostility
steel and ice and concrete that
gets them through the pay period.

What if this sacrifice had a purpose, mama bird?
Maybe there's hope in it, somehow
Perhaps as they stomp the scattered remains of your nest,
strewn about the sally port,
to take their posts—
Just maybe
they'll step around the shards of eggshells that are
all that remains of your family
instead of the usual grinding under boot heels.
And, with luck, those white speckled chips
Just might
reflect the light for an instant
so, the steel and ice and concrete thaws a bit
A tiny crack
spiderwebs outward
and brings down these walls
all of the walls
everywhere.

But if not, mama bird,
You can try again next spring

“The Wind Blows My Name” by K.D. Lovett

I live in a cocoon
of steel and concrete,
camouflaged
into the background of society.
Time has become silent.
Falling between

fear and peace,
I feel blurry.

My future hides
behind the hallucination
that I am broken,
trying to force
a square to a curve.
I soak in desperation,
inhaling change,
coughing uncertainty.
My shadow laughs.

Thirsty for hope,
snaring the sun,
I shed my skin.

“Close to tangible” by Geneva Phillips

Watching the moon grow
Like a fingernail until
Magically it turns into a coin
That eats itself down to nothing

Trees shed hopeful dressings
The grass withdraws from life
Birds flee through the air
Holidays are just small words
Printed at the bottom of the boxes
On the calendar
—days the bed can go unmade
The refuge of sleep, undenied.

Memories are mud
And you can get stuck in them
If you're not careful which paths
You take, which dreams
You dream

Everywhere the eye lights
On blue words and pictures
Tattooed on face and body
Telling their stories
Mine are told in scars
And in silences
I don't find uncomfortable
Or speak to fill
I spill them on papers instead

This is the part where I shape
My words into something
Close to tangible
That tastes like smoke and pills
And looks like frost glittering
On bars and fences and concrete
It sounds like a cricket
Lost in a vent

Day after night after day
It smells like burned brillo, fresh coffee,
Baked chicken, sex on dirty sheets
And warm spoons dark with

residue.

It feels like being too high
Driving too fast
The wreck
The morning after

It would tell everything
And change nothing

(I would seal it up in a box
If I could
And mail it to you
Wherever you are
So that it
Would trouble me
No more)

“Haiku in Main Yard” by David Bohm

Haiku in main yard?
What inspiration is there?
Amazingly much.
•
Green woods all around,
it would be nice to walk there.
At most, we may look.
•
A bug crawls along.
Does it know how slow it is?
Does it wish to fly?
•
Looking up at clouds,
what would a cloud think about?
Clouds look down on us.
•
Rain starts pelting down.
No shelter is to be found.
We will all get wet.
•
Winds blow free out there;
we cannot get out of here.
The wind comes to us.
•
The sun is shining,
photons destroy the shadows;
dark gives way to light.
•
Surrounded by the fence,
but our souls are not captive—
our minds are still free.
•
I just have a spoon;

you have bought too much ice cream.
Serendipity

“Spring Fever” by Robert Andrew Bartlett, Sr.

Young man sits alone,
With one unanswered question:
How to talk to her.

Young girl with a pail.
Young man with blood running hot.
Water spews from a hose.

Water everywhere.
But the bucket now is dry.
Still she ignores him.

Does the girl not know?
Is she really unaware?
He dares not ask.

Wet girl at the well:
Why is it hard to be kind
To the ones we love?



Art by Jean-Pierre Martin Francis

Spanish Language Program--Are you interested in learning Spanish? Do you remember a few phrases but want to brush up on your language skills? Do you already speak Spanish and want to participate in something entirely in that language? Hope, a college student, is creating these packets. Below is a description she submitted on what she will offer

The Spanish program will offer 2 options- the first "Lets Learn Spanish" will be lessons taught in English which will focus on Spanish vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. We will give special attention to writing skills and comprehension. At the end of the packet there will be a writing prompt which participants will be asked to complete and send in. Some entries will be printed in the newsletter and available online! This option is perfect for beginner to intermediate Spanish speakers- whether you've never read a word of Spanish in your life, or you want extra practice in the previously mentioned skills.

The second option is a program "Intermediate Spanish" which will offer a variety of readings, from poetry to short stories, that will come with comprehension questions, creative writing activities, and space for reflections. At the end of the program, participants will be asked to submit an original piece of writing, some of which will be printed in the newsletter and available online! This program is perfect for people who already speak intermediate to advanced Spanish and want to expand their creative writing and reading skills. It will be taught entirely in Spanish, with a Spanish-English glossary in the back with words that may be uncommon to ensure that all the readings are understandable

Winning Through Math-This is a program I

recommend you consider. Sam, a graduate student at the university has a plan to teach you about math and how the skills gained by understanding math can help you in decision making. Sam and a team of students will create a booklet of math lessons that will be practical. I imagine you will be asked to use your mind in new ways, and given the sameness of prison life, I think you will find it refreshing and stimulating to ponder some of the points "Winning Through Math" will raise. So many of you turned away from math in school and have bad feelings about math and your ability to do it. This packet is a chance to leave that notion behind and get a better understanding on how to use numbers to serve you and your interests. Below is Sam's introduction

Interested in seeing how math can be used in the real world? In building mathematical reasoning skills? This packet explores three areas where math is used to make better decisions:

- **Voting Theory:** Say 10 people are deciding between apples, bananas, and cherries for a snack. Should each person vote for their favorite fruit? What if each person instead votes against their least favorite? Will these different methods lead to different desserts being picked? Our first unit discusses the methods and math behind how a group of people make decisions.
- **Apportionment:** Say two groups of people share a TV and together get to watch five TV shows each week. If one group has 3 people and the other has 7 people, how many shows should each group get to pick? Should the smaller group get 1 or 2 shows? It turns out that the exact same question comes

up when deciding how many representatives each state gets in Congress! This is the kind of choice we'll look at in our second unit.

- **Gerrymandering:** Gerrymandering is a hot topic in the news and refers to a way that groups of people can use political power -- and math -- to give themselves a systematic advantage. This final unit of the newsletter will show you math so new that it's actively being debated in the U.S. Supreme Court!

This packet doesn't require knowing any math (or any politics) coming in. We'll get our hands dirty doing a few calculations along the way, but mostly we'll be focusing on logic, concepts, and ideas that build critical reasoning. We hope you'll join us!



Art by Jane Marzell

ARTknows--Treacy has been leading the art component of Prisoner Express for many years. She organizes your submissions into exhibits. Sign up for her next ARTknows newsletter if you are intrigued by what she shares below

Greetings!--We've been busy this past year with a number of exhibitions and weekly workshops.

Exhibitions: You had your annual exhibition at the Big Red Barn. It was well attended. For this exhibition we initiated a letter-writing workshop during the opening inviting the audience to write to you regarding your work. Hopefully, some of you have received these letters.

Traveling exhibitions: We now have assembled two traveling exhibitions; "Animal I Become" is now on display at the Watkins Glen Public library where it will be until the end of August. The second traveling exhibition is of the art that was originally on exhibition in April at the Big Red Barn is now on display in Trumansburg, NY for the months of July and August.

"Animal I Become" that is now currently at Watkins Glen will travel to Newfield Public Library, NY for the months of

September and October. It is not too late to send work for "Animal I Become" since it travels to Newfield in September and we can add work for that exhibition.



Above– the audience viewing art at the Big Red Barn, April 2019

If you send in art, it is a good practice to send in a bio and artist's statement. We have asked many of you to do this. If you have already, you don't need to send in another bio and statement – unless you want to change something in your previous statements. We will keep the bios/statements on file to add to exhibitions.

AND ALWAYS – write your name and a date on the back of each artwork. If you use a pen name, please **ALSO** write the name by which mail is sent to you...that is, your given name that we know and can respond to you. There are a number of very lovely works of art that we cannot identify because there is no name! Unfortunately, even if you hate your registered name, we cannot identify the artist if the only identifying mark on a drawing is the signature- "Rosy Ruby Lips"! Print your name on the back!

Monday evening letter-writing workshops: Some (hopefully many) of you have received letters from students regarding your artwork. Each Monday evening, students gather at the library and view the art that has come in during the week. The students get a lot from seeing your art. I overheard one student tell another that it was the highlight of her semester. The students are on summer vacation, so the Monday evenings workshops are on vacation until September. Regardless, please send in work you would like to share with the students and when they come back for the fall semester, we will have a large presentation for them.

NEW – Prison art archives. So, what happens to you work here at Prisoner Express? One, of course, is that the art goes on little journeys to different venues to be presented to the public; second; they are presented to the students; and third, now...we are starting an archive of the work. We hope that the archive will serve both for future exhibitions and for individuals who are interested in research or presenting the art in exhibitions in different places. We also plan to increase our posting of art on the website. Caitlin is an archivist with Cornell University who is working hard as a volunteer with PE on the archives.

The web has been a source for the public and institutions to see your work. In fact, a congratulations goes out to Nathan Riggs and Henry Haro, whose work has been selected for a Radical Art Review publication. The journal is doing an edition on prison art. The Radical Art Review is a non-profit cooperative platform for those who think art holds the potential for social transformation. They publish the thoughts, philosophies, and stories of all who dare to dissent.

I have no influence in any of these outside sources. These are institutions – museums, journals, and such – who surf the net and contact me regarding the art they see on the web. If you have given us permission to give them permission, we facilitate getting them images or the original work. Last fall, Christopher Bujanda and Jerome Washington were invited to exhibit a selection of their work at the Muckenthaler Cultural Center in California in an exhibition regarding incarceration and I sent out two boxes of their work to the museum.

ANIMATION: Thank you for the many submissions for the Naked Mole Rat's Journey. They are wonderful!! However, the poor little bugger is still limping along trying to find its way back home. Many thanks to Daniel Gest for putting in extra drawings and to "Kit" Kristopher Storey who offered to complete more drawings for the animation. Yes, more drawings are necessary. If you would like to draw more for the animation (or if you haven't drawn any before but would like to draw for the animation), please write a note on the mail-in sheet at the end of this newsletter for me to send you an animation packet. There will not be a specific checkbox for the animation, so please just write in that you want an animation packet.

Stephen Perry mentions in his letter accompanying his animation drawings how he created a model of a bird from which to draw. I love when artists create a model from which to draw instead of making things up. While the imagination is great, imagination is limited when it comes to understanding how form, light and shadow work if the artist does not spend enough time observing this phenomenon. Creating models from which to draw is what many of the Renaissance artists did – and why they are some of the greatest drawers. Artists make a plaster cast of friends' hands, faces and feet to serve as references when drawing the figure. My husband's studio is filled with such plaster casts – I refused to let him cast my face. And my studio is filled with taxidermy animals – albino fox,

crows, chickens as references for my paintings and sculpture. Even a simple thing like a coffee cup enables you to understand how form is created and casting a light on that coffee cup shows how light works. Thanks, Stephen.

ARTknows: This past newsletter focused on materials and techniques - the materials an artist uses and how those materials are used. Did you know that early artists used snail slime for pigment? Move over M&M blue.

In the ARTknows newsletter I take a theme or subject and reference that theme with examples of artists both historical and contemporary; giving you as much information as I can about a particular subject.

I haven't decided upon the subject for the next ARTknows - some of you have written in good suggestions. But whatever, I hope to continue introducing new artists and new ideas for creating art.

Just comments: A thank-you goes out to Rich Hasselburg for repainting the work of art that was lost in the mail. It's hard when a lot of work is put into creating art and then something happens to it. My husband was working on a commission of Mark Twain for Elmira College. He finished the very large over-life size clay figure of Mark, which took a couple of months to complete. He was planning to then cast the clay into bronze after we returned from a short vacation. On return home, clay-Mark had totally slipped off the armature and was a puddle of clay on the studio floor. This also happened to an artist friend of mine. Kate worked weeks on a piece of clay sculpture - again to be cast into bronze. During one hot week, the clay sculpture slipped off the armature into a puddle of clay mud. All three - Rich, husband-Gary, [different Gary then the editor of PE News] and Kate are congratulated on persevering in creating the work again. Who was the mythological figure destined to carry buckets of water up the hill, only for the buckets to slip down again forcing him to retreat the water and carry it up the hill again... infinitum?

Congrats to Dominic Marak whose artwork was recently published in the Cornell Sun, a student newspaper at Cornell. I haven't seen the article yet but will let you know more in the next ARTknows.

If you have access to email you can contact me directly at prisonexpressart@gmail.com

We do not sell artwork, nor can we be responsible if it gets lost, but we make our best to make sure everything is safe.

And thanks for all the supportive and kind letters!
Treacy



Art by Richard Hasselburg

Building a Book #1--Some of you have been working on the Building a Book course for the past 2 years and I know Maia has received some finished books to read. Two years ago, Maia and I began discussing how she could volunteer with PE. Maia is a book editor in NYC, and she wanted to help as many of you as she could write a book. She created the Building a Book course. In the two years she led this course Maia has learned a lot and she wants to repeat it and bring in all of what she learned to make it even better. Every six months Maia will offer another lesson in the process of Building a Book. She is not asking you to just sit and write, but rather she is teaching a lot of the preliminary steps authors take to develop and then complete the process of writing a book. Even if you have taken the course already feel free to sign up again. Perhaps you are still working on your book and receiving Maia's updated lesson may be the inspiration you need to finish your book. I know many of you joined in late and missed some lessons as well. Here is your chance to get in on the ground floor.

Here is a reprint [with a little editing of what Maia wrote the first time she offered the 4-part course.

Hello! My name is Maia, and I am so writing a piece of creative fiction. I worked for six years as an editor for an independent

book publishing house, shepherding manuscripts from the acquisition process through a series of edits all the way to the publication of a hardcover book. After working in this sphere and talking with hundreds of authors, I became frustrated with the numerous ways in which the traditional book publishing world inherently restricts access to those who are well-connected or from certain backgrounds. Over the course of this program, I hope to help you develop your own single piece of creative fiction in the form of a short novella or longer novel. Beginning a manuscript can often feel like an overwhelming prospect, so my aim is to help guide you through every step of the process. excited to have the opportunity to work with those of you who are interested in



Art by Abraham Martinez

The lessons will cover the basic steps of setting out to write a long work of fiction in a way that will hopefully make the endeavor fun and manageable: including brainstorming exercises to help you decide how to focus your ideas, worldbuilding, developing your characters, mapping out the major plot points and narrative arc of your piece, overcoming writer's block, setting reasonable goals for yourself, editing as you work, etc. Deciding to write a novel is a big commitment, so it's important that you pick an idea that you feel passionate about—you're going to be devoting a lot of time to this fictional world, so you'll want to write about something that gets you excited. Maybe you already have an idea that you've been kicking around in your mind for years now, or maybe you are interested in the challenge of building a piece from scratch. Either way, writing exercises will help you to tease out what it is precisely that you want to write about and help you to fill in the details that will make the piece really sing.

For the purposes of this program we are going to be workshoping the following areas before settling in to write: - Setting - Main Characters - Genre - Main Conflict/Narrative Arc. Deciding on a setting for your piece is a great starting point. There are no limits to the world in which you set your piece, as long as you are able to fill in the details that ground the piece to make it feel real for the reader. Once you've built up a world and started to think about what direction you would like your piece to take, you will have almost certainly begun to think about the individual characters who will be inhabiting this world (or perhaps characters that you've been mulling over in

your mind inspired the world to begin with—it's different for every author!), so the next step is to begin flushing out the particulars. Who will be your protagonists, or heroes? Who will be the villain, the creators of the conflicts? Successful characters, whether we are meant to root for them or pray for their downfall, are three-dimensional, with believable motivations. We'll piece together the likes, dislikes, fears, hopes, and personal histories of the important characters in your work to ensure that they are relatable, even if they may not be likable. Thinking about genre, or what fictional category your piece will take place in, is another step in putting together your plan, and will help you as you map out your narrative arc down the line.

The main genres in fiction are mystery, comedy, romance, horror, and drama (depending on who you talk to!), but the wonderful thing about fiction is that anything goes. Do you want to write a classic piece of contemporary fiction? Are you interested in a detective who travels through time solving crime? An apocalyptic dystopia? An autobiographical novel? A space opera sprinkled with lyrical poetry? If you're wondering if the idea that you have been mulling over will work, the answer is: absolutely! As long as it gets you thinking, we can make it work.

Figuring out what category of fiction you are planning to write brings us to one of the most important steps in planning out your work: the narrative arc. While works of fiction are infinitely diverse, successful storytelling (even in works of nonfiction) tends to follow a general pattern of exposition, or scene-setting; rising action, or a build in tension; a climax; falling action; and resolution. Before you begin to write in earnest, we'll put together a general map of the major plot points in your piece and how they will build and work together to create tension and keep the reader on the edge of their seat. After you've developed your world, your three-dimensional characters, and your basic narrative arc, you are ready to write. The last step in writing is always editing, which sounds like a bummer but can be fun—I swear! The tendency with authors is to finish writing something and then to shove it aside and declare it done, but revision is a vital part of the writing process. We'll work on the best ways to evaluate your own writing in ways that will ultimately strengthen your piece as a whole. Setting portions of your work aside and revisiting them later with a fresh new eye can reveal issues that you never anticipated as you were writing. Please note: if you are more interested in building a long-form piece of nonfiction, such as a memoir, we can make that work too—as I mentioned, successful nonfiction still contains the same basic building blocks of storytelling: a detailed setting, three-dimensional characters (maybe you?), and a narrative arc. The same strategy still applies! If you are interested in participating in this program, I would highly recommend that before we begin the writing exercises (and throughout your

process) you read, read, read! Absorbing quality writing is the best way to research what makes good books work: sentence structure, dialogue, plot, characterization—the whole shebang. The more you read, the more you will internalize the general cadences and rhythms of successful storytelling.

Together, we'll build everything from there! I believe that storytelling is a powerful tool that allows people to build empathy for one another, and I am passionate about hearing the stories of those who don't have traditional platforms on which to share their creative voices. I am very much looking forward to helping you develop your stories and providing you with informational materials and advice!



Art by David Partain

Chess Club-- We have been offering chess lessons from the very earliest times of PE and I know it is a vital tool in keeping you active and engaged. I apologize for taking so long on getting the last packet mailed. Each packet is full of chess puzzles, strategies, recaps of famous games and more. Chess can be a great way to fine tune your mind while having fun and provides a great distraction from everyday life. Sign up for this packet and join us as we explore this ancient game. The history of chess goes back almost 1500 years. The game originated in northern India in the 6th century AD and spread to Persia. When the Arabs conquered Persia, chess was taken up by the Muslim world and subsequently, through the Moorish conquest of Spain, spread to Southern Europe. But in early Russia, the game came directly from the Khanates (Muslim territories) to the south.

In Europe, the moves of the pieces changed in the 15th century. The modern game starts with these changes. In the second half of the 19th century.

Sign up for the next packet and learn more about this most special game.

Meditation-Tara has agreed to put together another packet focused on helping you begin to meditate or deepen your practice if you are already meditating. Her packets usually include techniques you can practice, articles by spiritual leaders, and inspirational quotes from participants and spiritual masters of different traditions. Meditation and contemplation are at the core of many religions. Tara brings samplings from a variety of religious traditions to give you a variety of practices to choose from. In the next issue, she hopes to also provide a list of resources (for Buddhist meditation and Christian outreach and contemplative prayer) so you get even more information and invaluable support on your chosen path. Please sign up if you want to explore your inner landscape. Given the sameness of the prison environment, it might be interesting to go on an inward journey and explore the infinite space inside yourself. Discover the unity and inner freedom that is often obscured by everyday life.

Book Club-The Meaning of Life -We have received a donation of 300 copies of this most important book. The author Marc Mauer contacted me to see about getting the books into your hands, he is hoping to gather your thoughts on the issue of life imprisonment as he is leading a movement to change life sentences.

On the back of the book it says 'Marc Mauer and Ashley Nellis of The Sentencing project argue that there is no practical or moral justification for a sentence longer than 20 years. Harsher sentences have been shown to have little effect on crime rates, since people age out of crime---meaning that we're spending a fortune on geriatric care for older prisoners who pose little threat to public safety. Extreme punishment for serious crime also has an inflationary effect on sentences across the spectrum, helping to account for severe mandatory minimums and other harsh punishments.

Below are Marc's words inviting you to read his books and send your thoughts to him at "The Sentencing Project" **We only have 300 copies so don't wait.** We particularly are interested in getting this book into the hands of those of you who have a long sentence. You are the experts. Here is Marc's description of the book.

Dear Friend, we're pleased to share this complimentary copy of our book on life imprisonment and hope you will find it informative and useful. Thanks to the generosity of the Open Society Foundations, along with our publisher, The New Press, this special edition is for the use of people who are incarcerated. We wrote this book for several reasons. First, in our many visits in prisons over the years, we came to realize that the experiences of people serving life sentences are rarely

acknowledged in public discussions about mass incarceration. And, to the extent that policymakers make note of those serving life imprisonment, it's generally just to affirm the severity of the crimes for which most people serving life have been convicted. We're also concerned that the issue of life imprisonment is too often kept out of policy reform discussions. As the movement to challenge mass incarceration gains momentum, we know that it will be successful only if we reconsider how much time people spend in prison for all offenses, including the most serious ones. Along with the publication of our book, we've also launched a Campaign to End Life Imprisonment. Through this campaign we hope to work with policymakers, advocacy organizations, litigators, and people like you who are impacted by mass incarceration to engage in public education and advocacy for change in the scale of punishment. We hope that this book resonates with you and provides you with a useful outsider's analysis of these issues. But we'd also like to ask you for help. Our campaign to end life imprisonment needs to incorporate the ideas and voices of people in prison. We'd value your feedback on the proposals we lay out in the book. Are they a good guide for reform? Please share with us other ideas for how to change public opinion on these issues. We, in turn, will spread your insights and recommendations to better direct the campaign's advocacy work. So please drop us a note in the mail to let us know your reaction to the book. As you probably know, we can't provide legal advice on your case and we can't promise to respond to all the letters we receive, but we can commit to reading through your thoughts on how to shape our advocacy campaign. We receive a lot of mail. To ensure your note goes to the right place, please write to us at:

Attn: Campaign to End Life Imprisonment: The Sentencing Project. 1705 DeSales St. NW, 8th Floor. Washington, DC 20036

Theme Writing

Every month we offer you a word theme and ask you to write a short story/essay on the theme. This project originally started as so many of the PE participants wrote that mail was so important to them. I knew I could not write a personal letter to all the participants, so this project was started as a way to get you interesting creative mail. Here is how it works. If you send in an entry for a given month, your entry is typed along with all the other entries that month. The packet of all typed essays is sent to everyone who has taken the time to write.

On the word themes we ask that the stories be true, they can be musings on life or remembrances, but not made up stories, and that you limit them to 700 to 800 words. We have many people writing these days and we can't accept long essays, especially ones that are off topic or not based on a true story. We select a few themes and reprint them in this newsletter. Below you will see a list of the upcoming themes and then a sampling of themes that we received on topics posted in our last newsletter. If you send in a word theme that is not based on truth, it will not be included in the packet. The good news is that there is a picture theme project described

later in this newsletter where you can write fiction or nonfiction. It too is limited to 800 words. Please know I struggle to fit as many of these themes into the newsletter as I can fit. We receive so much interesting writing that it becomes a challenge to pick only a few to share with you all here in this issue of PE News. If you enjoy reading these themes, then try your hand at writing and you will get a complete month's packet. It makes for good reading, and it also helps to see how others who are also incarcerated are thinking.

Upcoming themes topics

Tricky Business due 8/1/19

A Close Call due 9/1/19

Sisters due 10/1/19

Flying due 11/1/19

My Body due 12/1/19

Finding Inspiration due 1/1/20

I Admire due 2/1/20

Arguments due 3/1/20

Previous Theme -Ancestors

by Rick Anderson

Back in the day, before computers and the internet, (mid to late 60s), my grandmother was a member of the American Geological Society. She spent years researching our family tree. She did this by sending many letters via "snail mail" and countless hours on the phone all over the world. By the time she completed this enormous task, she had dated my dad's tree to the early 1200s and my mom's side to the mid-1600s. There is royal blood in my lineage, but by the time I came along, any trace of it was long gone. She then put all this information into book form. It wasn't available to the general public, but, as each grandchild turned eighteen, they were given a set with any updates needed added to the side margins.

In my opinion, the greatest of all my ancestors is and was my grandfather, Leigh (pronounced Lee). He was born in 1899; he lived a good life and received many rewards for the work he did, the man he was, and his numerous donations of handmade games and toys to the local charities and children's hospitals. He spread his work across southern Michigan and around our summer cottage in upper Michigan, along the beaches of Lake Michigan.

As I was growing up, he was a source of strength for me. He always made time for me when we went to visit them, either at their house in Ann Arbor or the dunehouse. He had woodworking shops in both houses and was always working in them. He had duplicate tools in both places, from small screwdrivers to large power tools. He could start a project at one house and finish it at the other without missing a beat. Most of the games and toys he donated were duplicated so that all the kids could enjoy them. Each one was handmade and had their own minor flaws so that no two were exactly the same.

I can remember many times at the dunehouse, sitting in his shop with him and watching him work. Occasionally, he would let me help by holding things while he worked on them. We were always talking and laughing. He provided a safe haven for me. Even while the rest of the family was off doing something else: hiking on the property, swimming in the lake, in town, my favorite times were in his shop.

During my childhood through my mid-teens, I was beat physically and mentally abused. Whenever we went to visit, I did everything I could to spend time with Grandpa. I was safe around him. He used to take me fishing on one of the smaller lakes, just the two of us. I never caught anything worth keeping except the quality time with him. We always had something to talk about. We never talked about the abuse, although he knew about it. We'd talk about my school, friends, what I wanted to be when I grew up, and ideas he had for more games and toys. My opinions and suggestions were accepted and occasionally worked into the item.

As I grew into my teens, our connection got deeper. He asked more serious questions and gave me more advice. We had conversations that most boys have with their fathers.

I always looked forward to the summer road trips to the dunehouse. My jobs in the shop were becoming more adult-oriented. I was allowed to do more with each game or toy. He trusted me like no one else ever did. He taught me to use care when creating something, and that minor imperfections were okay. It made the end result unique in its own way. It was a great feeling, seeing the finished product and knowing that I had been involved with it. Our time, effort, and love went into each piece. Knowing that the patients in the hospitals and those helped by the charities were going to enjoy them was a great, prideful feeling.

Thanksgiving 1982 was the last time I saw my grandfather: a family gathering at the dunehouse. I was the only one of my siblings to be there. I was going through some rough personal problems and so I took leave and joined the family, away from the problems. November in upper Michigan is usually rather cold. Fortunately, the weather was rather nice while I was there. It allowed Grandpa and I time to sit outside and talk. We'd sit on our boathouse near the lake, watching the waves roll in and out, and talk. He offered me advice and words of wisdom in handling my situation. Spending time with him made the week I spent there, and how I faced my issues, so much easier. When I left, I knew it was the last of those conversations we would have.

Leigh Charles Anderson passed away on February 2, 1983: his 84th birthday. His funeral was held two weeks later at the University of Michigan chapel in Ann Arbor. My parents tried to convince me not to come, but all their efforts failed. Again, I was the only one of my siblings present. It was a solemn ceremony. I cried the whole time, saying goodbye to Grandpa, but hello to my guardian angel.

I think about Grandpa often. I also carry his name as my middle name. I can still feel his words and see his smile.

I'm truly blessed to have him as one of my ancestors.

by Catherine Lafleur

My ancestors were immigrants to this country. They came over on royal charter looking for wealth and managed to make it through farming cotton, indigo, and rice. However, they were also guilty of exploiting people. For the times in which they lived, my family were considered fine and moral. Today that image does not hold.

I read a book by Ursula Hegi, in which she interviews the children and grandchildren of Nazis. Most of the descendants have mixed feelings towards their ancestors. They wanted to divorce themselves from the horrible crimes of their parents and grandparents. A few felt a sort of guilty pride at how successful or notorious the relative was.

What do you do when your history for over a hundred years is rooted in an evil and immoral institution? Sometimes I think my life may be cursed and like Jacob Marley I'm dragging the sins of my ancestors behind me.

by Chad Frank

On my mom's side,

My great grandfather was a bootlegger and a bankrobber
My grandmother had a penchant for abusive men
My grandfather, a wife beater and child molester.

On my dad's side,

My grandmother was a drunk and a compulsive gambler
His father a deadbeat
Who didn't even give my dad his name.

After my dad died

When he was eighteen and I was two,
My mom married a man named Bobby,
Who beat her
In front of me and my sister.

Is it any wonder

Why I've become
Who and what
I have?

by Natalie Lugo

Those whom we are descended from speak volumes into who we will become. The stage, standards, and expectations are set by our predecessors. What we strive for or how far we are driven to go was already predestined by our forefathers. The influence of each generation attributes to the youngest generation to follow. Our characteristics, we think, help identify us as a single person or an individual in our own category, but the truth is, it was all inherited from our ancestors.

The Spanish blue eyes of my grandfather left the impression of conquest imprinted in my brown eyes to leave me believing I came to see and conquer every obstacle. The ways of my Apache/Comanche father gave strength to my humble heart, and fed my warrior spirit a boldness to face the unknown of every single sunrise. My grandmother's Mexican roots instilled in me a respectful form of pride to honor my culture and bilingual language. The virtuous woman that gave

me life left me with wisdom to love the arts and invite education from the books.

Those I come from once were enemies as a superior people versus barbaric savages. The union of both superpowers in their own right evolved to leave the product of me. I am what both cultures loved in and of themselves. I am what they despised in one another. I cannot love one and hate the other for their ignorance and choice to want to destroy the unknown. Nor can I be angry in wanting to stay to preserve their own beliefs and way of life. I can only hope to enlighten all the shaded areas of the past to instruct my descendants through my own offspring. Prayfully, the successors of my generation will view me as one of their ancestors that led the way in respectfully merging both cultures. After all, I am my ancestors

by Cesar Hernandez

If your two parents hadn't bonded just when they did- possibly to the second, possibly to the nanosecond- you wouldn't be here. If their parents hadn't bonded in a precisely timely manner, you wouldn't be here. If their parents hadn't done likewise, and so on, obviously and indefinitely, you wouldn't be here.

Push backwards through time and these ancestral debts begin to add up. Go back just eight generations to about the time that Charles Darwin and Abraham Lincoln were born, and already there are over 250 people on whose timely couplings your existence depends. Continue further, to the time of Shakespeare and the Mayflower pilgrims, and you have no fewer than 16,384 ancestors earnestly exchanging genetic material in a way that would, eventually and miraculously, result in you.

Twenty generations ago, the number of people procreating on your behalf has risen to 1,048,576. Five generations before that, and there are no fewer than 33,554,432 men and women on whose devoted couplings your existence depends. By thirty generations ago, your total number of forebears- remember, these aren't cousins and aunts and other incidental relatives, but only parents and parents and parents in a line leading ineluctably to you- is over one billion (1,073,741,824, to be precise). If you go back sixty-four generations, to the times of the Romans, the number of people on whose cooperative efforts your eventual existence depends has risen to approximately 13,000,000,000,000,000, which is several thousand times the total number of people who have ever lived.

Clearly something has gone wrong with our math here. The answer is that your line is not pure. You couldn't be here without quite a lot of related people mating albeit at a genetically discrete remove. With so many millions of ancestors in your background, there will have been many occasions when a relative from your mother's side of the family procreated with some distant cousin from your father's side of the ledger. In fact, if you are in a partnership now with someone of your own race and country, the chances are excellent that you are on some level related. Indeed, if you look around you on a bus or in a park or cafe, or any crowded

place, most of the people you see are very probably relatives. When someone boasts to you that he is descended from William the Conqueror or the Mayflower pilgrims, you should answer at once: "Me, too!" In the most literal and fundamental sense, we are all family.

We are also uncannily alike. Compare your genes with any other human being and on average they will be about 99.9 percent the same. That is what makes us a species. The tiny differences in that remaining 0.1 percent are what endow us with our individuality. There is no such thing as "the" human genome. Every human genome is different. Otherwise we would all be identical. It is the endless recombination of our genomes- each nearly identical, but not quite- that make us what we are, both as individuals and as a species.



Art by John Ponder

Previous topic -Jealousy

"Perceptions and Definitions" by Carl Branson

Through the course of my life I have all too frequently found that the colloquial usage of a word is either in conflict with the dictionary definition or limited to a specific aspect of use. The term, "jealousy", has proven to fall into this category. My Oxford American Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus defines "jealousy" as "1. Jealous state or feeling, 2. Instance of this."

My lifelong perception of "jealousy" has been associated with the romantic scenario of an interloper desiring the affections of one or the other member in an existing relationship. The interloper satisfies my dictionary's third definition of "jealous" - envious or resentful (of a person, etc.) - while the existing members satisfy the first two. "1. Fiercely protective (of rights, etc.) 2. Afraid, suspicious or resentful of a rivalry in love."

Armed with these definitions I now realize, nearly 40 years after the fact, that I experienced this form of jealous reaction with respect to my late wife.

It all started when I sought out the driver of a car displaying a square dance emblem in the rear window. Square dancing was a high school hobby of mine and I thought I could get recommendations about local groups or clubs. Turned out that Pam had been away from dancing for a few years as well. Together with my coworker, Roger, we attended weekly refresher lessons at a local club - Pam and I were not dating as such.

Over the course of time Pam and I found we had a variety of shared interests - including activities that her two teenage boys would enjoy (e.g. hunting, target practice, shotgun/clay pigeons, rifle/misc. targets, miniature golf, bowling, etc.). At best, we were friends without any of the romantic overtones or activities that might occur between adults (Read: no "making out" or sex). About six months into our dance lessons Roger asked me if it would be alright to ask Pam out on a date. He thought Pam and I were a couple! My rational response was "That's Pam's decision, not mine." Emotionally it was "Maybe I need to rethink my relationship with Pam." Pam turned Roger down and we had a serious discussion about where our relationship was at and where we saw it going. We scheduled our first "official" date (something without the boys) and were married six months later.

In retrospect, although there was nothing overly romantic between Pam and me at the time, Roger's overture threatened the comfortable companionship that Pam and I were enjoying; something I wanted to protect against change. By the same token, Roger's intervention made Pam and I acknowledge what we had been denying due to our respective prior divorces : we had a form of love for each other that did not originate in, or have a need for, all of the stereotypical romantic trappings like candle lit dinners and moonlight walks (we did incorporate and enjoy those later).

In a more contemporary vein, I must admit that I experience a twinge of jealousy in the form of envy of others. This arises in two primary areas: 1. Sketch and painting artists, and 2. My fellow prisoner-authors who do such a delightful job with the photo prompts. For the first category the envy is unfounded because I know that I am just too lazy to work at developing any latent talent that may exist in that realm. For the second group, I work at developing my skills by periodically going back through my archived newsletters and writing photo prompt short stories. As such, I internally reassign the emotional response from envy to gratitude. That is, I am thinking of, and for, my fellow authors who challenge me to expand my horizons and develop my skills.

"A Hidden Monster's Face" by Jason R. Glascock

Within me lies dormant, a sleeping beast. When awakened it can slither or jump, crawl with talons or claws with nails. This beast, monster of the id is jealousy. It is an alien living inside me taking up residence where love, compassion, and tolerance should be. It is a rent-less tenant, freeloading, squatting and thieving my life.

This monster awakens when my eyes look through a television or pages of a book to see happy people living with comforts denied to me. That car, I want it. Those nice fitting

clothes, I want them. That smile of a pretty woman meant only for me, I want THAT. Then this creature rears a face only I can see. My own ugliness reveals itself as needy, immature, wanting, grasping for things to make them mine...my precious...I become, within, a greasy little Smeagle.

Be you gone, Evil One. I rail at myself in shame, at my vile character, my hidden slime of the true Jason. Aha! I knew I was evil, defective, wrong, and corrupted. The world is right to beat me down and punish me by enslavement. Yes; I tell myself I deserve all this.

Then, one day after decades of self-hate, of hiding my inner demons from others, I find a circle of men willingly revealing the secret monsters haunting their inner sanctums. My understanding of my tormentor grows, and I see the illusionary mask fade away to reveal the unexpected: a wounded little boy feeling unloved and unwanted trying to protect himself in a dangerous world. I discover that I am not a reject unworthy of my parents, that those are lies I've told myself because Mom and Dad can't be wrong so I must be. The reasoning of a child.

Now, the monster's face is clear, it's lies are known. The power has been given unto my hands. The jealousy of wanting is not so shameful as I understood that little boy still wants to fill this world with pretty, precious things, but I can talk to him, now. The boy Jason listens and settles back knowing that I love him, and that is enough.

"Jealousy" by Robert Downs

I must admit that as I'm writing this I am filled to the brim with jealousy, that green-eyed devil. I try every day to fight this feeling, this debilitating disease, but my efforts are purely nugatory. This green-eyed devil's torment is incessant and always without fail, always hitting its mark. I would've never thought this perfect form of punishment could easily be diverted, effortlessly parried with a simple letter of words- a lover's billet-doux, a mother's loving words, or a father's guidance.

As I sit in my 7x9 abstract aviary I hear the mindless drones discoursing about having to take five minutes out of their busy day to write family and/or friends- the very people who love them enough to write, send their hard-earned money, and answer the phone when they call. They act like their days are filled with so much that taking five minutes out of their day would really inconvenience them. What!? It makes me physically sick to hear how these drones take their family, friends, and mail for granted. If only I could send them this feeling of emptiness that has swept over me; this feeling of loneliness, despair, and sorrow that has overtaken my benighted psyche. Would they then realize how lucky they are? Would they know how envious someone like me (who doesn't have contact with his family) is of their letters filled with vowels and consonants? Do they even know how powerful a letter really is? I wish I could show them that a simple letter written with letters, words, and sentences has the power to save lives.

Every time these guards of pestiferous oppression pass my door with mail in their hands, I die a little on the

inside, my heart petrifying a little more day-by-day. To know beyond all doubt that I am the reason (me alone) that my family turned their backs on me beats me down, never failing to put me into submission. I took advantage, used, stole, and hurt everyone around me, anyone who lets me get close enough. What else can I expect now that my mind is drug free, my eyes unclouded? What else do I deserve?

I wish I could tell my family that I'm sorry for not only my actions but my whole damaged childhood. I would like to show them the steps I'm taking to ameliorate myself physically, mentally, and spiritually; the numerous times a day that I wish I could hug my mom and daughter, hang out with my brothers, or get some much needed advice from my grandfather. The list is never ending- my constant demons and their many forms of torture. At the top of the list: I want to show my family that I truly miss them.

If only these mindless drones knew just how lucky they are maybe they would cherish their family and/or friends- their life. Maybe then everyone would be sure to make time for the ones who matter the most. Maybe they would think twice about stealing, using, or hurting the very people who love them enough to write them while they're in this prison of hate, fear, racism, ignorance, and oppression.

There are many things that I want to do, that I need to do before I die. I pray every night for the chance (just the chance) to make amends- to begin rebuilding my pathetic excuse for a life. These are the things I must face when jealousy makes its presence well known, my green-eyed nemesis.

Previous theme- Holding a Grudge

by Mark Daigre

For decades I woke up each and every morning thinking about the harm that Bill had done to me. Thinking about how my life would be so different if he hadn't abused me for all those years. I thought that because I had been so severely abused that I could do almost anything and get away with it. I was the victim, right?

When it came to prison, I had a neighbor down the tier. He had the same mannerisms, the same vocal inflection, the same pitch and tone of voice as Bill. He even looked the same in body and face, down to the choice of facial hair. The only difference was that my neighbor was black, and Bill was white.

Freaked me out a bit. I somehow transferred all the rage and disgust and ill-will that I had for Bill to this guy, who I didn't know, and if left alone, would never know. I had a grudge against someone who had done nothing to me, just because of who he looked like.

Later (like seven year later), I lived next door to him again. This time I gave him the benefit of the doubt, let him be who he was, not who he reminded me of. It turned out that the grudge I held against him was crap. He was really an okay guy and worth getting to know.

by Tamara Angelique Allenbaugh

Why do we hold grudges? Despite the core belief that grudges empower us, this sadly is not the case. It is said by Nelson Mandela, I believe (or was it Ghandi?), that holding a grudge is drinking poison and expecting it to harm our enemy. In reality, when we hold grudges, we allow the person that we are holding a grudge against to control us and have power over us. Forgiveness is liberating. It isn't about leaving an offender off the hook. It's about letting go of the chains that bind us. How can we truly be free when we're holding a grudge against someone? Want inner peace? Forgive and let go. I had to learn this lesson. I was abused in every conceivable way by my family. I held a grudge for years, allowing my anger to control me, leading me to commit crimes that have led to where I'm at today. The Native American Chaplain at my first institution, this state bid, taught me that in order to experience inner freedom and peace, I must forgive ALL who hurt me. I've found that inner peace and tranquility. So next time you find yourself feeling revengeful or grudgeful toward someone who has hurt you or offended you, ask yourself, just how important peace of mind is for you. Holding that grudge will strip away any peace you may have and enslave you to the person the grudge is toward. It's not easy, but it can and must be done to experience peace. May you be abundantly blessed!

"Burning from Within" By Jason R. Glascock

Have you ever been offended, hurt, targeted, or harassed? What came of it? What happened within you? How did it end? Is it still there, deep inside you, burning away?

Not long ago, there was a glowing ember of anger in my belly. For years, that coal caused me to fear myself and the world around me. Worry over losing control, of hurting others, of being stained and defective, poisoned me with shame. I was burning from within, burning away myself.

What could I do? Nothing seemed to work. A concept that repeatedly came up in my search for answers was forgiveness. Professionals harped on the idea that I had only to give up and forgive; to let go. So I did.

However, it didn't work. I followed right along with the professional guidance, reconstructed myself, my beliefs, my values, so why didn't it work? What did I do wrong?

Only everything! I'm not sure what kind of situation forgiveness is used in, but it doesn't work in any that I've come to because of a fundamental flaw in the rationale: the need to give up on one's self-value. That clashed with a very primal part of my being that I couldn't root out. I couldn't recreate a self that lacked honesty and worth.

I spent my time hating myself for my flaw of not being able to figure out how to accomplish this forgiveness thing. I must be the one wrong if all these inspired people, spiritual leaders, and professionals say so. Who am I to challenge their age-old philosophies? I'm a nobody. The grudge intensified as I struggled with this knowing I was wrong and broken.

Meditation has been a source of great self-discovery for me over the years. Answers seem to spontaneously come into existence or present in mysterious ways. A powerful tool to find the truth.

It was in meditation that the answers arose within me. My grudge wasn't toward the people harming me, first, but toward the philosophies barring justice and demonizing violence. It was the self-assumed shame-state for imbibing these philosophies that said I was the sick and diseased one that created this beast within me. Time and time again this realization shone in the dark and each time I rejected it was an evil corruption. Each time my shame grew.

One day I decided to reach out and look at this gleaming idea. Doing so changed my world from one of anger and shame to a vibrant, peace-filled calmness where strength and stability reside. I've discovered happiness. Forgiveness... No, not forgiveness, but the complete acceptance that I have the right to meet out justice in order to defend myself and doing so is by divine right.

My grudge disappeared, evaporated, as I grasped the truth within me.

by Chad Frank

I guess it's the wrestling fan in me, but I love a good grudge -- the more dramatic and nasty, the better.

I'm obviously not the only one. Try keeping track of the latest celebrity beefs. Who is President Trump feuding with this week? And what about the PC police who cry for boycotts, firings and protest over the slightest controversy? That's not even taking into consideration #MeToo, and people dredging up often decades' old offenses.

What about the "justice" system? How many of us are paying with years of our lives for comparatively petty crimes? I'm fond of saying, "If Uncle Sam can hold a grudge, then why can't I?" And I do. I'll beat a point into the ground until my foe rues crossing my path. Why? I don't bother anybody, so I don't want anybody bothering me. So when somebody does, I make sure they don't make that mistake again. I also have borderline personality disorder, which makes me an asshole by nature. I tell people that "I'm a good friend, but a better enemy," by which I mean I am loyal to my friends to a fault, but if they cross me

by Dana Scott Bennett

I sit here in a maximum security wondering about people that I have hated! I seem to be at the top of the list, followed by my baby's mother, my mother and father and a few other mostly women that have been in my life or have betrayed me in some way or another. But most of all, I hold a grudge against myself for trusting the wrong people or for being so self-centered that I didn't realize how I have hurt or betrayed them!! But today is about forgiveness of myself and them, I don't want hate in my heart. I want love to be what shines out of me. I've been reading some materials from the Human Kindness Project by Bo Lozoff and am trying to meditate and be an example of love even here locked up. Hopefully I can apply love deeply in my being and share that with others and learn to forgive myself and others like an old hippy. Peace, love, and happiness, I'm about to be 56 years old in January 2019 and hope this will be the last time to be incarcerated. My daughters are 15 and 18 and have missed the last two years of

their lives. So, my biggest grudge is to me. So, I'm going to learn to forgive and be a better person and hope they let me back into their lives. No more grudges, no more hate, only unconditional love.

Previous Theme- Helping Out

"Helping Hand" by Jason Stallcup

Sometimes you just take notice of someone. Something catches your attention, your eye, piques your interest. "Oscar", I'll call him. I have forgotten his name; he was a young guy, about my own age, mid-20s or so, average height and weight, short dark hair, just another guy on a packed Greyhound bus rolling down a snow-covered highway. My mind was heavy with worry and anxiety; I had a lot to consider and my fellow passengers weren't a priority. But as we crept deeper into the middle of the country the bus thinned out to the point that many of us had our own seats. I had already taken notice of Oscar by then, just as anyone would look over those who rode along with them. Mind working through my anxiety by distraction. You see, I was on the run, having just escaped from a psych evaluation. A county jail sent me to a state hospital. Having warrants in a couple other states, I was a wanted man, (all of which has been resolved, and years gone by), with a few hundred one dollar bills I managed to amass before I got away, nothing else to my name, nowhere to even go, at least not anywhere safe.

Oscar, as usual, stood off, alone to one side during a stop to eat. He always stood off by himself whenever we had stopped for refreshments and to stretch our legs, never even going inside whatever store or fast food joint we happened to be at. This time I listened to that little inner voice and I went over to introduce myself.

"Man...I would appreciate that, yes," Oscar had replied when I had asked, with a jerk of my thumb toward the brightly-lit, warm restaurant, if he would care to have a meal. "On me", I had added. It as an interesting story I heard that day as we sat at a table and had burgers and fries. Oscar was on his way to upstate New York where he was to spend the next five years at a monastery. Without a penny in his pocket he was crossing the country. To one day, perhaps, be a monk.

Over the years I have sometimes wondered how Oscar fared, curious to know if he made it through the five years and what path his life followed. I've wondered, too, if I should've shared my story with him, as he shared his with me. For several reasons I wouldn't have, mainly because of the shame of where I knew my path was going. It is the way it is, I think, at least for many of us, to be shameful of our station in life, or of the wrong path we are on, when with someone who is walking a good, honest path...with a good, honest future ahead of them! One thing I am sure of, though, is that "Oscar" remembers the friendly stranger who bought him a meal. Just as I remember those who have fed me during times of hunger, well...at least the act if not the person.

Karma exists. In my case that circle came around, a couple times...we should all help others as often as we can, even in the smallest ways...

“Serving Moral Time” by Gary K Farlow

Part of the Jaycee Creed reads that “Service to humanity is the best work of life.” Today’s rising crime rates and an ever-growing prison population make it easy to overlook the many inmates who put forth the effort to “give back” to the community.

Earthquakes are fairly common in California, but typically only the major tremors make the news. The quake that rocked San Francisco in the early 1990s occurred while I was at the Caledonia Prison Farm in the coastal plains of North Carolina. At the time, and unlike many other prisons in the state, Caledonia did not have an “Inmate Service Club” such as a Jaycees chapter. But it did have two inmates named “Big Sam” and “L.A.”

Obviously, L.A. was a native of Los Angeles, who had grown up in the streets of the East Side Barrios in the City of Angels. Big Sam’s name suited him well. At more than 250 pounds, Sam was a former jeweler from St. Louis whose love for gold must have had to do something with the “golden heart” he possessed toward his fellow man.

“Hey, L.A., wake up Man,” I heard Sam say early one morning. “A big quake rocked San Francisco last night, and the city’s a mess. L.A. bolted out of bed and sat mesmerized by the scenes of utter devastation playing across the TV screen. As the horror of what a major earthquake could bring sank into the minds of the inmates gathered around the TV, the minds of L.A. and Big Sam were already focusing on the aftermath.

“Hey, Man! What’s up?” came the cries of protest as L.A. stepped up and flipped the TV off. He calmly raised his hands. Amazingly, the protests ebbed to hear what he had to say. “Look, guys, most of you know I’m from Los Angeles. I don’t know how many of you have ever lived through an Earthquake, so let me tell you. There’s no fear like it. Those people out there have lost everything. They’re gonna need some help.”

“Help?” said one young inmate. “Hey, Dude, that’s what the government’s for.”

“Yeah,” spoke up another. “They got the Red Cross and stuff, that’ll help ‘em out.”

“Right,” still another said. “And we’re just a bunch of convicts. What can we do anyway?”

Not discouraged, L.A. listened to what everyone had to say, then he spoke. “Fellas, I’ll grant that we’re all prisoners who society feels have little to contribute, but this is an opportunity for us not only to prove such a belief wrong but also to give something of ourselves. To serve some ‘moral time,’” L.A. stated.

“Moral time?” asked one of the gathered inmates. “What are you talking about, L.A.?”

“What I’m talking about is doing something for someone else. Not because we have to but because we want to. Doing the right thing. Helping another person in need.”

“Just how do you plan for us to go about it?” asked Big Sam, his interest clearly reflected in the faces of about 30 fellow inmates who had been listening to the exchange.

“Well,” began L.A., “none of us has a lot of money.”

This statement was quickly met with nods and groans of agreement. The typical inmate in North Carolina earns an “incentive wage” of either 40 or 70 cents a day.

“But,” L.A. continued, “we can raise some money.”

L.A. and Big Sam put together a fundraising campaign that included the sale of donuts, pizza, and even a car wash where prison staff could get their automobiles washed and waxed. The entire prison, inmates and staff, were quickly galvanized into unity with the goal of raising money to provide some relief to the victims of San Francisco’s recent quake.

In just two months, a little more than \$2000 was raised and sent to the San Francisco Earthquake Relief Fund. A sense of positive accomplishment prevailed over the prisoners who learned the pleasure of giving selflessly to others and the joy and peace it brings. Random acts of kindness replaced acts of violence as prisoners shared a common goal, working with prison staff to help the suffering thousands of miles away.

On the day that the check was placed in the mail, the warden had the kitchen serve a special breakfast to celebrate the achievement. As inmates sat down with the staff to share donuts, ham biscuits, and fresh fruit, everyone was reminded of the brotherhood of mankind. Such a brotherhood supersedes the superficial divisions of man from man, inmates from free citizens, one status from another status. We all learned that “service to humanity is the best work of life.”

by Kevin Hale

Growing up like I did was a struggle from day to day, so once I landed myself in prison I was used to adversity and maintained my “go get it” outlook on life. With that said, help was a foreign subject to me. Both giving and receiving.

Becoming a mirror image of the gangsters in my neighborhood led me to become someone else; not myself. Time spent away from everyone and everything I know led me to the realization that I didn’t know myself. When asked who I was I could only answer with the name of the gang I belonged to.

I saw families on television and thought, “Is that what it’s really like?” I wondered what would have been if I were one of them, leading me to want to find the me I never had the chance to be.

In this process I studied many religions and philosophical views; however, I always felt like an outcast. One day I picked up a Pagan Newsletter and that’s where I found myself. I’ve since read anything I could find on Asatru, Odinic beliefs, and the Norse Gods and Goddesses. Through doing this I learned about my Nordic Ancestors, and this in turn taught me about myself.

Though growing up as I did, I viewed any kind of codependency as a weakness, so my growth came to a halt. This older gentleman put it to me in words as such: “Them Vikings you love so much weren’t all warriors, some of them had to row the boat! Everyone needs help sometimes.” Even

though I viewed this man in a state of respect, I couldn't bring myself to talk to him and ask for his help.

In the religion of Astru there is a big emphasis on ancestors, so I took my plea before the Ancestral Spirits. I asked them to help me find myself and shortly thereafter started corresponding with an Asatruar Holyman. He himself went through similar trials of not knowing one's self, and in turn helped me to find Kevin.

Now that I know who I am as a man, life is a lot smoother and easier. Codependency isn't a weakness and in order to help others, we must first help ourselves out of our own way. Since Drighten Joe's helping me and the Gods and Goddesses intercession in my life I now know me. I found the boy inside and the man no one got to see.

Giving a Helping Hand" by Dillon James Gresham

Myself personally, I enjoy being able to help. It feels good helping somebody who needs help and expects nothing in return. The feeling it creates is amazing and it's my opinion that it works magic on a person's self-esteem. I know it does for me. One day I may be having a bad day, and only negative thoughts rolling in my mind. Then I'll roll across someone who needs help in any way that I can help and for some reason, it feels like all the stress, pain, etc. I experienced that day, was all worth it.

My personal belief is that we all should be helping each other. As people of the struggle, it's more or less all of our duty. Though there are many who don't see eye to eye with this belief, I'd like to point out the fact, that we are all equal, we are all human, we might look different and in a sense none the same. However, in that same sense, we are the same in form that we all exist. Even so, there may be no two exactly alike; we are all human. Regardless of differences, it's good to remember that we all need help sooner or later, and it's best that the same way you'll need help from somebody, that when somebody needs help, you aid and assist with no expectations.

Previous Theme-Good Advice

By Steven P. Arthur

My father taught me many things about life, the world, and my place in it. He taught me that very little was fixed and that things were changing all the time, but my principles didn't have to. He showed me the meaning of integrity in all of his dealings regardless of who the person was. He didn't see the job or title when he dealt with people. He saw people and the frail, fragile feelings that human beings put on masks to hide from the public eye.

I asked him once why and how he could treat everyone the same. He simply replied, "It's what I do." Over the years, he continued to teach me to be an example and a role model. When I became an adult, he mostly gave me advice, sometimes solicited. And every so often, I would still ask why he did the things he did, and his continued response was the same: "It's what I do." I didn't realize until many years into adulthood that that was the most valuable lesson, he

would ever teach me. It was his way of demonstrating integrity. He demonstrated and lived his principles in everything he did and anyone he dealt with.

My dad is gone now. He passed away in 2016, but his teachings and example live on through me. I hope that in the little time I had with my children, despite my own failures, I imparted some of what my father had taught me. When my children ask me why I do something that seems so remarkable, I say, "it's what I do."

By Kristopher Storey

After a brutal divorce, my mother went back to college when I was in the first grade. We often rode the city bus to my school, and she would walk the other few miles. One day we were riding along, and a clown got on at the stop. Being seven, this was rather exciting. I did not like clowns, but they intrigued me. The bus continued its route and a few stops later three clowns got on all together. The clowns sat separately seats and did not speak to each other. After a few turns and stops one clown got off the bus. In no time, a different clown got on the bus. I could only stare in wonder. I asked my mother why they just sat there... why didn't they sit together... is the circus around... why don't they talk to each other... where are they all going... why did that one clown leave... I was mystified that clowns just sat like normal people and seemed to be going along with their day. We got off the bus at the elementary school. Away from the clowns' ears, I asked my mother all these questions. "Just because people may look alike doesn't mean they are all the same. Let's not judge people based on how they look and then come up with ways to say they're all the same. Maybe we should look at them not as clowns, but just people living their life exactly the same as us. And son, it's not polite to stare." I had more questions of course, but she helped me to understand. Years later I found out that it was her drama class staging a social performance "happening" to teach about racism and such. It always stuck with me these people dressed as clowns and the good advice my Mother gave to explain.

"A Piece of Advice" by Moses Valdez

"Would you care to hear a piece of advice?"

Not really, I thought. "What," I asked brusquely.

The old man studied me with discerning eyes and mine lowered in shame. My life had taken a turn for the worse and I couldn't find a reason to smile or entertain an old convict that had done more time locked up than in the free world. That's going to be me in twenty-eight years, I brooded resentfully.

He turned to the window and watched the passing cars through the quarter-sized holes in the steel slots that covered the blue bird window. I didn't attempt to peek over his shoulder because forty-five North was taking us through my city, and I wouldn't see it as a free man for a long time.

Instead, I watched the raucous inmates on the bus, taking time to observe the morose ones. Those were the ones that regretted their mistakes, the ones who wished they could

change, the ones with the most time that wouldn't be going home anytime soon.

The rest didn't care. They had little worries. They'd only miss a couple of years out of the lives of their kids and that wasn't bad at all.

I turned back to the old man and he said, "I was in your position before." Quickly, I glanced back at the other inmates thinking, here we go again. "School, you don't even know my position."

"I got thirty-five done on an aggravated fifty. I was nineteen years old," he responded. I grimaced. He'd discharge my sentence. Still, it's always easier to 'say' than 'do', especially when you are done, and you've done nothing you said in the beginning. In my fifteen months in Harris County I'd heard enough "do-good" prison talk from guys that had been down numerous times. If they couldn't help themselves, how could they help me?

School was slightly different though I reasoned with myself. He'd been gone since his first mistake. He wants a repeater. "What did you do?" I asked, sure that he was about to give me his life story. It took him a few minutes to answer, eyes glossy with tears that had done his whole time with him. He didn't allow them freedom as he answered, "I gave up when I shouldn't have."

For the next thirty minutes neither of us spoke. I couldn't imagine the thoughts going through his mind. The years of burden that he'd accumulated. My demons were fresher.

My last month in the county was spent in a haze. My celly got pills called Thorazine and I'd been taking them twice a day, refusing to roll out of bed, not bothering to eat. I'd sleep the day away - I didn't have to be around other inmates. At night, when they slept, I'd cry begging God to take my young life. That wasn't the beginning. I remember the tears in my mama's eyes as she watched her beloved boys grow into criminals that had no respect for life. I remember the hate I'd feel towards myself for causing her this pain but not a trace of hesitancy as I'd pick up my .38 special and leave her to worry about the safety of me and my brothers. I remember the evictions, the lights being turned off and all six of us going to sleep hungry. What choice did I have?

I look at school again, undecided if I should interrupt his trip down memory lane. "School, what advice did you get for me?"

He searched my face again, this time finding what he was looking for. "Life ain't over with. You have the chance to turn the biggest mistake you ever made into your greatest triumph. It ain't going to be easy," he said, rearranging himself to get comfortable. He leaned on the window indicating our conversation was over.

Over the years that saying would become my mantra, helping to remove the fog that I had encompassed my being. Life ain't over. My life changed. Same situation, different perception. My biggest mistake ever is my greatest triumph. If you wish to change, it starts with changing the way you look at the world. It ain't going to be easy. I still have the opportunity to do better.

Life ain't over. For none of us.

By James Bauhaus

If you can't keep up with the big dogs, stay under the porch.

Don't wrestle a pig: you both get dirty, but the pig likes it.

Don't stretch a rubber band so far that it breaks and pops you in your eye.

Don't leave crime or valuable stuff in plain sight where any cop or thief can see it.

Find the cops before the cops find you.

Record stock crashes allow record-selling stock buying to occur.

Positive thinking is like hyperbole: too much faith occludes reality.

Never forget that corporate media and the U.S. government are in cahoots. Take nothing they say at face value.

Don't run unless you want to be chased.

If your engine is acting funny, ease up on the gas pedal.

Spend some time trying to figure out what your female friends are trying to tell you.

First you get an education, then you get the money, then you get the family!

Seriously, education is life; stupid people die early and often painfully.

Smart beats beauty.

Skill beats luck.

Ignorance is not bliss; it's painful, embarrassing and often, it is fatal.

Don't be petty.

Don't sweat the small stuff.

Give your enemies plenty of rope.

Teach; but don't help idiots cheat.

Don't feed moochers or support dopies' habits.

Make them learn to buy what they need before they buy what they want.

You are not the bank, so don't give out loans.

Be charitable, but realize that charity draws a crowd, and that it doesn't involve giving to the same people every day.

Beware of glib people, as they are often exploitative.

With great power comes great corruption.

Crime is directly proportional to the opportunity to commit crime and protection from being caught and prosecuted for crime; hence, the most prolific criminals are the ones enjoying the government power and cover.

Skepticism and cynicism are social survival traits best used in private. Above all, the more ignorant you are, the more easily others can exploit, manipulate, and steer you. Your mind is like a muscle; use it.

"Good Advice from my Sensei" by Teddy Osceola

Advice comes in many shapes and forms, but "Good Advice" comes from the heart, not only from the hearts of our

friends and family, but also from the heart of our experiences and observations of life.

"Greet what arrives, escort what leaves and rush upon loss of contact," this axiom is the heart of Wing Chun's philosophy, and can be summed up into one word "Compassion," for mental, physical, and spiritual stability.

Life has many gifts to offer, and with our free will, choose what we may, for it's not what we take, but what's given, for what's given should be well received and pondered for what we possess, reason invades.

Greet what arrives, in the civility of compassion, for compassion courts all alike, the small and the great, the wise and the ignorant, for appearances are fleeting, out of the art of conversation, the motives of the heart appear, cut of the art of conversation, the motives of the heart appear.

Escort what leaves, with acts of kindness and generosity, for anger blinds the eyes, and we lose sight of the small things, that make the whole and bitterness, bars the door of our heart, thus the gifts of adversity are lost.

And with the speed of lightning, we must rush upon any loss of contact, never to waver in setbacks, like the air, parted by the flight of an arrow, immediately resumes its oneness, in the wake, of swift and sudden discomfort.

Life is full of wonders and beauty but the pleasure of perfection, can never be attained or obtained, without work, for the time appointed, the hardness of reality appears, to test the worthiness of all alike in life.

The principle of Wing Chun states we must "Be like water," patient, absorbable, fluid and very conformable, but never surrendering our will and essence to the trials and tribulations we undergo in life.

For the softness of water, strengthens its body and any disturbance caused ripples outward upon its surface, only to be gathered in from whence it came, thus the fluidity of water, endures the hardships of earth.

Just like Tao, the water embodies the elements, and they alike, embody water just the same, for all have one source and one beginning, but the permanent state of meditation, water upholds, it's a jewel of discipline.

Be swift as the air, fierce as the fire, hard as the earth, and patient as water, and all things will show its heart in time to come, mountains will become pebbles, oceans will dwindle into puddles, whirlwinds a breeze.

My sensei used to tell me moderation in all things develops equal self-control and enables the lotus of discipline to blossom fully and the many things I have learned at the hands and feet of my sifu, have helped me to avoid and to avoid many problems in my life, we all learn that some things are unavoidable very deniably, but we should never lose hope, nor surrender our will, sweet dreams are made of hard times, everything has its place and its season, my sifu always reminded us, "to never let anger spark unchecked life fire. It'll consume all in its path and leave nothing to sustain its own self for its own freed, it lacks self-control, so we must never let the flame of anger increase no bigger in size than what rest upon the head of a match stick for a slight breeze, a drop of water,

or for you to lick the tips of your fingers, is all it'll take to extinguish it." Love conquers all.

Previous Theme- Believe it or Not

"Facts, Statistics, Theories, You Decide" by Jeremy Brown

The universe expands and contracts like a living organ. Beyond our Universal Bubble are other Universes called The Multi Universe, not so much a Theory anymore. Alternate Realities exist all around us and we can tune into them through meditation. 13,000 waves enter our physical bodies at all times. We only recognize 13 or 14 of them. The human brain thinks 80 to 10,000 thousand thoughts in a 23 hour period. Voyage II is still operating after 30 years in commission, its beyond Pluto now and very soon we will leave our known solar system. I have 65 pen pals: 15 of which are family, 3 friends, and the rest, organizations I am helping. I average 60-115 personal handwritten letters a month. I average 3 books a week if I'm speed reading. I've been keeping 3 journals for almost 8 years, one is personal, one is public, one is for my family. I listen to 14 hours of news per week give or take. I've read almost 150 books a year for 10 years sometimes more although I've lost track now. In my entire life I've read almost 30,000 books watched 20,000 movies and have consumed 5 pounds of dirt every year. I've seen 200 people get killed in front of me by beatings, stabbings, gunshots, electrocution, drug overdoses, suicides, being lit on fire by someone else or by themselves. I've spent 2 ½ years altogether in a 12 by 12 box creating my own multiple personalities of which I have about 6 or 7 give or take. I am antisocial when I want to be sometimes spending two weeks not speaking to anyone including myself. I have meditated formally for 2 hours every day for 10 years. Thus equaling 7300 hours although it's probably much more, I can only approximate. At 10,000 hours I will have passed my apprenticeship stage and will be a master unto myself, my own guru. Each human body has enough power inside to power New York city for one day if we knew how to tap into it. This is called Potential Power not yet actualized. The brain can form an almost infinite array of neural synapses and connections. I have 2 and a half bowel movements a day the half is extra. I now have accumulated over 500 tattoos of signs and symbols of the world's hieroglyphs and religion onto my entire body. I have drunk an average of 5 cups of instant chemically altered fake perfume sprayed coffee every day for 10 years; that's 18250 cups of coffee costing me \$3,421.875, that aren't back by the gold standard since 1933. Thus, costing me inflation, my time, and energy. In 2016 me and a con artist exploited and conned child molesters on the street for a total of \$95,000 split 4 ways. The Feds investigated us took all our money (or most of it) and told us don't worry, we aren't going to charge you we think you're doing society a favor, and they laughed it out with us. We were reported 45 times for impersonating a Federal Agent who didn't exist, so technically they knew what we were doing, and allowed us to do their jobs for them. Still we were punished by D.O.C In House. I snuck back \$50 of canteen every week through cheeseburger bribery. In 2017 officers found a drone

that landed at Everglades Correctional Institution, it contained 30 knives, pounds 5 of cocaine, 20 pounds of weed, and a thousand ecstasy pills. I may or may not have had something to do with that incident. No one got caught because when they hacked the onboard computer hard drive of the drone, a time encryption program disassembled all information in less than a nanosecond. I may or may not have had something to do with that.

Dear lord, forgive me for all the justified sin I've committed. Not that I care anymore, I mean I already have a life sentence, and I damn sure aren't doing it struggling and poor. I'm telling this because I've already been punished for these misdeeds. And since I'm at a disciplinary camp it would be best to tighten up my act due to the Rent A Cops beating and killing people for literally no reason at all. O well, believe it or not this is the life I live, time for my 18,251st cup of coffee, although who's counting, surely not me...., I have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, Schizophrenia, a Messiah Complex (google it!), Obsessive Compulsiveness, Sociopathic Non Emotional (sometimes), Anti-Social Disorder. I have been on a number of psychotropic (Big Pharmaceutical) medicines, Prozac, Xanax, Vicodin, Opioids, Psilocybin, LSD, DMT, Methadone. I have tried to kill myself 15 times, 2 of which were successful, but I guess not since I'm still here. And after all of this, I'm here, I'm okay, I don't have any STDs thank Jesus, and I've been with 52 women, relationships, prostitutes, dancers, exotic and around 60 or 50 men. And now I've just gone celibate because I've realized sex is another Illusion. Yet, I'm still here, I'm okay for the moment and damn this feels good being honest to yourself. I mean, I don't feel crazy. I may have done some oddball shit but I know people way more fucked than I am. Hopefully one day I can like unfuck myself (wait that didn't sound right, lord forgive me and pray for the pygmies in New Guinea) (Comic Break) And well, believe it or not there's your sign. Oh, I forgot to tell you, I have a radio frequency identity tag above my right eye, thanks to an experimental surgery I was forced to agree to in 2009 that saved my life, yet I had to sacrifice my privacy as well. Believe it or not I am a walked experiment literally... This was a fun exercise let's do it again.

"Believe It Or Not" by Raymond Springs II

Believe It or Not, is a certain phrase that I've been hearing most of my life. In the 1980s I believe it was the name of a popular sitcom or at least words sung in one of their theme songs.

Either way this catch phrase has a much deeper meaning for me now that it's connected to this theme writing program done by the student at Cornell University. See what I am about to share is an emotional but true story about a tragedy that eternally painted my reality darker.

Readers, you can believe what you are about to read or not. If you are a student at Cornell University, you can verify the facts easy enough. This I'm sure of. Well the events I'm sharing took place in South East San Diego's notorious most dangerous street. "Ozark" in 1993 or 1994. The reason why it is hard to remember perfectly, is because at the time of these

terrible events I was a teenaged shermhead/Lincoln Park Blood Gang Banger.

One night in early June, my father and stepmother Stephanie, were fighting physically at our house on Trinidad Way, which is situated in an urban neighborhood surrounded by palm trees, canyons between streets and also in the middle of adjoining backyards. This particular evening it was warm and breezy, when my father told me to go sit in his old Chevy Van, I was annoyed with all of their fighting and responsibility shirking. Board with sitting in the van's seat, I turned around and began to climb into the back area so that I could lay down and nap until my father was ready to leave or have me come back into the house. Supremely unexpected was the snub nosed 38 caliber, the thirty odd six deer rifle with single bolt action, and the several boxes of each guns ammo. My heart was beating harder than African Congo drums, and I had grabbed the 38 cal and got out the van before I could even think about the consequences of my actions. I was scared to death because I had stolen one of my father's weapons, so I ran into the canyon almost directly across my street where Trinidad Way and Santa Maria fork in the road. By the time I entered the Canyon, I had a plan of what I was going to do: first I'd go hand out on Ozark, learn to shoot the pistol in the canyon between the bottom of Ozark and the neighborhood 47 crips. I would spend the night at my big homie Cappie's apartment on Gloria. The next morning which was Saturday I'd go catch the number 55 bus at Euclid Trolley going to El Cajon Blvd., where I get off and catch the number 15 or 115 bus east going towards 67th Street where I'd hold up a music trader because I knew that it dealt with lots of cash regularly.

Instead I ran inside the canyon to the end of my block crossed Euclid into another canyon that I exited on the dead end of Ocean View. Walking past the bottom of Ozark on the other side of Imperial Avenue from my usual hanging, banging and slanging area which was in the view of the fire station. I looked up and seen my relative's car it was a gray older model Ford with dark tinted windows. As I got closer, I noticed he was leaning up against it. While speaking to a pretty girl. Once I was right in front of him, I shook his hand and said, "What are you doing over here relative?"

He answered; "Over here at a graduation party before I leave to college tomorrow morning." I asked him what college he was going to? He told me; Cornell University in New York, he told me he was going to be a surgent one day and he'd be the first black brain surgeon with a tattoo on his scalp which he planned to get once he made it. He asked me if I wanted to go inside the party, which I declined due to the fact I was carrying a pistol plus I was not dressed good enough for his crowd (Nerdy Jocks and Mack Players)

So, I began walking up to the top of Ozark and when I reached Holy Street, I made a detour over to my homegirl Jackie's house, we talked on her back porch for hours. I showed her the 38 cal which I then noticed had some kind of lock on the trigger area that I didn't have keys for. After we scammed, I went to the Ozark, looking for some homies and a smoker who knew how to take off the lock. Instead I found Diana, a grown sexy older homegirl who had a reputation of

robbing sailors. She got me drunk off some rum and Coke, they gave me some taco shop money and told me to go home after I got a bit in my stomach. She said be careful walking home because in the summer it's killing season when anyone gets caught slipping, they're ah gonnah. Well instead of spending the doe on carne asada fries I kept it for the bus fare I'd need the next morning. I left Ozark on my way to Big Cappies apartment on Gloria Street. Which is a short yet dangerous walk due to being completely exposed the whole way there. I arrived there tired and hungry. Cappie let me in and I let him know what was up. He asked me for the pistol to hold until I was ready to leave in the morning, and once I gave 'em the pistol he handed me two blankets and a comforter plus four microwave burritos. I ate and passed out. Waken up around 9:40 that Saturday morning to rasta music and weed smoke densely in the air. Cappie said "Here hit the irie then eat the pancakes and eggs I just fixed because I got some things to do." After smoking the Dunker weed Cappies was always having, I cleaned up myself in his restroom, grabbed the pancakes and eggs and poured a healthy amount of syrup on them both situated on a paper plate, then asked for the pistol back on my way out the front door, which he gave to me and asked me if I wanted to be dropped off anywhere? I replied yes, the Euclid Trolley station. Once he dropped me off, I was waiting for a bus that is when I was approached by this dude I went to school with, he was a pretty boy and I didn't like him even though he'd never did anything wrong to me. His name is Jay R.

Jay R said: "did you hear what happened last night? Someone shot and killed a wrestler who just graduated from Lincoln Prep High School at some party?"

I asked him, "What was the boy's name who got killed?" Jay R said "I believe it was Willie" I could not process anything else. So, I ran the phone bank, picked up a phone, and started dialing my mother's number. When she answered her receiver crying, I knew my hero and relative Willie James Jones Jr. had been murdered at the party I had seen him at the night before 'believe it or not.'

In the many years since Ozark Street was renamed Willie James Jones Blvd. in his honor, a wrestling tournament is named in his honor, a POTUS collected shoes in his honor, a scholarship is given in his honor and Cornell University graduated him honorarily. So, when I write to your essay writing program and know at least one student will read it, I know my relative is also reading it through each and every one of you. Because your programs are his way of telling me "I caught the flight and made it and I want to hear from you" Believe it OR NOT!

[Editors note] I googled this story and there is a scholarship for William James Jones

"Believe It or Not" by Chad Campbell

Believe it or not but I think prison may be the best thing that could have happened to me. From 18 to 21 years old I was homeless. I traveled up and down the west coast for a year and a half of it. My girlfriend and dog traveled with me. Sounds like fun, sometimes, but most of the time it sucked. A

new town, with new faces sometimes shady ones, suffice it to say I was a piece of shit for thinking it was okay for my girlfriend to live this way. It's dangerous and we all know why.

I loved my girlfriend, we eventually got married when I was in county jail awaiting my final sentence. I thought she'd make it, she left after a while, but I'm not mad about it. She needed to live, not pay for my mistake. We are actually talking again (wonder how she knew where to look!).

So why is prison the best thing that happened to me? Today at 30 years old I am sober, by choice at that, and I'm proud of it. October of 2016 was when I had my last drink. That's one reason. Another reason, I care my health and the health of others, mental and physical. I care about staying healthy and helping others stay healthy or get there. A third reason, I am able to attend college, an otherwise pipedream had I even wanted it on the streets. Overall, the theme is that I give a shit about things. I care about people and the planet not just myself. I am a better person now. I have no reason to believe that I would have otherwise ended up different had I not come to this place.

Believe it or not these changes have only occurred over the last three years. Which is the same amount of time I've been sober. I know correlation is not necessarily causation, but I think there is something there. For anyone reading this who is a drug addict or alcoholic you cannot stop using for any reason other than yourself. I tried to get sober for my girlfriend, for my mom, my family, for the system it didn't work. I finally got sober because I wanted it, I needed it. You have to want it, to crave it. Believe it or not, you have the strength to do it. Rise above destructive addictions and live your life, don't be controlled by substances.

Believe it or not, it's okay to let prison be the best thing that happened to you if you do it right.

"Believe It or Not" by David M. Brown Jr

Believe It or Not, prison isn't a bad place. But then I guess that all depends on how you look at it, who you are, and what you call yourself (Prisoner, Convict, Inmate). First, you have to accept responsibility for your crime, criminal addictive behavior, your temper, your addiction, or your defenses (if you took someone else's charge). And for those that are innocent, and "Believe It or Not" there are a few people that are innocent (I'm not one of them). But to the innocent: stay strong and spiritually inclined, justice will prevail. Spiritual not as in a specific religion, but whatever doctrine that keeps you grounded and connected to your inner self.

Who are you? Believe it or not, some of us are still asking ourselves that question. And there's nothing wrong with being lost. I will be 41 years young tomorrow, and I'm just now in the position of finding myself. The older you get, the younger you want to be, and when you're young you want to be older. Funny, but true. Now in a position to find myself is not in relation to the physical, but the mental. Believe it or not, some of us have heads as hard as the concrete we walk on every day. And prison is the only place that we can sit still long enough to work on ourselves. I once told my lady that I

commend her for being able to change on the outside - her inside. If you think about what I just said, it makes a lot of sense and evidently, she has more sense than me because she doesn't need prison to change. But in my world - I do. We all start out as your mom's baby. But who you become is up to you. Who are you?

Prison can be the place where you blame everybody for you being here, where nobody is here for you, where you don't get fed right, where all the guards pick on you and nobody else, where it's always hot - always cold, and everything else you can find to complain about. Or you can do the opposite and turn it into nothing but a positive experience with a little negativity, instead of all negativity with a little positivity. It's up to you. It's only as bad as you make it. Or as good as you make it.

I create my own lane and drive my own car. And I only allow certain passengers to get in my ride. And you have to be qualified and certified to ride. Believe it or not prison can be a great experience if you use it according to your plan. Your plan for release that is. See you're doing two things right now whether you know it or not. You're either preparing to go home, or you're preparing to come back. You have to give yourself a chance in order to have a chance. Don't waste your chance to change because if you're not going to change you might as well give someone else your chance to go home because you'll be back.

If you consider yourself a real convict, then act like one. Believe it or not, it takes some prison time to become a convict. And as a convict, it's our job to educate the inmates because for (1) someone did it for us real convicts and (2) they make it hard on us. We all know what I mean, from the guards to the game.

If you're an inmate, wise up and take notes. Everyone starts as a student, then one day the student becomes a teacher for another class. It's a cycle, but don't get caught in the recidivism cycle. Hopefully, you don't have to do as much time as some of us to learn your Life Lesson, let this lesson be the start of your life and not the end. Believe it or not, it gets worse.

by Ashley Law

Believe it or Not, just because I was raised up right, went to church and was loved. I still felt unwanted, unloved and alone.

Believe it or Not, though you see me with a smile and hear my laughter, inside there is more pain than I can handle.

Believe it or Not, I'm sensitive and vulnerable and my heart is so caring. Prison just causes me to put up a front.

Believe it or Not, I'm afraid to let anyone get close to me, not for fear of being hurt, but for fear of how I may hurt them because of my past hurt.

Believe it or Not, I'm a changed woman-I'm confronting my demons, opening up my soul, and letting the light shine in. Because if I continue in the dark, I can't grow. And to all those who know me, Believe It or Not, no matter how many times I go down, just like the sun taught me, I'm going to keep on rising!

Picture Theme Writing-I know a picture is worth a 1000 words, but in this case please try to keep it to 800. Some of you respond well to word themes, but others find pictures more evocative. Here is a listing of upcoming monthly picture themes. If you send in a submission we will send you a packet with all the writing we receive on the topic, minus any writing we think might get the packet censored by prison officials or writing that is meant to generate hate against people who you think are different from you based on religion, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation. There is enough hate in this world and in prisons and we don't want to increase the anguish in this troubled world.

After the listing of upcoming picture themes there is a selection of some themes from previous months. Send in your own submission to get a full copy of each month's theme essays.



Due 8/1/19



Due 9/1/19



Due 10/1/19



Due 1/1/20



Due 11/1/19



Due 2/1/20



Due 12/1/19



Due 3/1/20

Here are some themes written from previous picture cues. Writing on these pictures is a great way to exercise the imagination.



“Water Drop” by Wesley Plater

Like ripples in a pond, the smallest deeds
 Can have an effect in the biggest ways.
 As ripples in a pond, you don't have to be big
 To create a wave.
 As a drop in the water, your small deeds can
 Pay it forward to the next, like ripples in a pond.
 So don't think for a second you are insignificant
 Because you are magnificent.
 You don't have to be famous or have money
 To make a difference in this world.
 You only have to have the courage and
 Motivation to be that drop in the water
 That creates the ripple and turns it into a wave.

“Ripples on the Pond” by Kenneth Baker

I love this photo because it captures perfectly an axiom I have heard all my life: Be mindful of your words and actions for they can have long lasting effects.

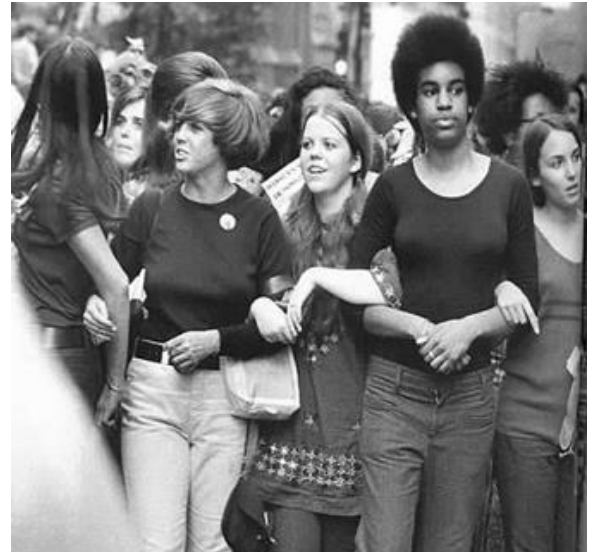
In my mind, I am standing next to a large pond that winds and stretches to places I can't see. It is a beautiful summer day; still and silent the water is a pane of glass. I throw in a rock and the result of my action is captured in the photo, as the ripples begin to expand outward. It's not a grand gesture, something as simple as a compliment on a drawing an inmate is working on in the dayroom, asking someone you as we call them, providing a sympathetic ear to someone dying to talk, or giving a neighbor 15 cent bar of soap because you know he just used his last one and is too proud to ask. These actions can have a considerable impact. Your wave of positive energy is immediately apparent as it passes under and lifts up the boats (people) who observe it. Maybe the action is to pick up a piece of trash or straighten up your chair and the chairs around you as you leave the library. And as the ripples spread, more and more areas of the pond are touched by your words and actions.

Take care, however, before casting that stone. As our photo so wonderfully captures, there is a negative part to the wave, the valleys in front and behind it, that can have just as much, if not more, of an impact as the positive aspect of the

wave. Unfortunately, it's the negative comments and memories that tend to stay with us for longer and more intensely than any others. A snide or sarcastic remark made to a child or significant other on the phone or in a letter, not following through on something you promised to do like wake up a friend for Rec., or simply no longer continuing to do or say something for/to another inmate without explanation can be enough to turn your little ripple into a tsunami of negativity, having lasting detrimental effects on your relationships.

But it's the ripples on the water that land on shores we may never see that have the most impact. These are the stories passed on from one person to another and live on in the memories of the people we interact with. I see it all the time in the people I talk to as I recall stories my parents and grandfather told, in the wisdom my pastor shared, and in the lessons my favorite teachers taught me. These waves are STILL finding shores and making an impact decades after they were launched.

So what kind of waves are YOU setting in motion? I ask myself this question all the time. And now I have this awesome photo to serve as a reminder: Be clear that your words and actions are of a positive nature so that they may raise up all who are impacted by them, regardless of how distant the shore is.



“Beauty United” By Dillon James Gresham

Nothing can be more beautiful than woman of all shapes, sizes, colors, ages. Getting together. It's good that they stand together against oppression, it's good that a chain is created unbreakable by the world. There is no greater beauty for one race, or ethnicity. A person may have their preference, but that shouldn't change the equality. To stand up is to stand strong, and to stand together is even better. Sadly, these women can do what men will never be able to do, that's the beauty united of it. Men will never be able to put all differences aside and stand in an unbreakable chain. I see it too much in the days. Everyone is worried about skin color, or gang relations, or where they're from. Nobody hurt us as one. Women aren't as blind as us, if anything they got the eagle eye and see exactly what we seem to miss.

By Matthew Tomlinson

Look at our bond of such sisterhood. Look at the way we stand up for a cause.

Today we are the greatest love / And we know it / so nothing else matters.

The world watches closely yet the effect will last so long cause we are so strong /

Many will come after us and many came before us but today you can perceive the truth for what it really is.

Look at the way we stand for a cause / Now look inside of you and consider it.

Peace.

Whether it was outrage, frustration, or need for change, this fearless multitude united in arms. They understood that as a group, they were as strong as its next link. - Yes. Strength in numbers is powerful, just as beauty is manifested in different colors, shapes, and forms... like rainbows after the rain.

Out of the storms of life, a sea of dreams and hopes were assembled on this day. Like a tide during a full moon, high as it may be - so is a cause worth reaching the shores of its destination. A deep ocean of feminism, flooded and made up of many drops of sweat and tears of injustice - At last, concentrating and erupting like a gentle tsunami. Only this wave's momentum was not on a path of destruction, but on a headed course to wash over and cleanse the land ahead... To plant seeds of equality and to provide opportunities for the future.

The sky is the limit when the glass ceiling is within reach. - United in arms - Go get 'em girls.



by Cesar Hernandez

What if everything just passed right through you? When you're driving down a highway, you probably pass thousands of trees. They don't leave impressions on you.

There's just a momentary impression that allows you to see them. Though they do come in through the senses and make impressions upon your mind; as quickly as the impressions are made, they are released. When you have personal issues with them, impressions process freely.

This is how the overall system of perception is meant to work. It is meant to take things in, allowing you to experience them, and letting them pass through so that you're fully present in the next moment. While this system is in a working, operative state, you are fine, and it is fine. You're simply having experience after experience. Driving is an experience. So are trees and cars passing by. These experiences are gifts that are being given to you, like a movie. They are passing into you, awakening and stimulating you. They are actually having a profound effect on you. Moment after moment, experiences are coming in and you're learning and growing. Your heart and mind are expanding, and you are being touched at a very deep level. If experience is the best teacher, there's nothing that comes close to the experience of life.

What it means to live life is to experience the moment that is passing through you, and then experience the next moment, and then the next. Many different experiences will come in and pass through you. It's a phenomenal system when it is working properly. If you could live in that state, you would be a fully aware being. That is how an awakened being lives in the "now". They are present, life is present, and the wholeness of life is passing through them. Imagine if you were so fully present during each experience of life that it was touching you to the depths of your being. Every moment would be a stimulating, moving experience because you would be completely open, and life would be flowing right through you.

But that's not what happens inside most of us. Instead, it's more like you're driving down the street, here come the trees, here come the cars, and it's all passing right through you with no trouble. Then, inevitably, something comes in that doesn't make it through. There was this one car, a light blue Ford Mustang, that looked like your girlfriend's car. As it passed by, you noticed two people hugging in the front seat. At least it looked like they were hugging, and it sure looked like your girlfriend's car. It was a car just like all the other cars, wasn't it? No. It wasn't just like all the other cars to you.

Look carefully at what happened. Surely for the camera of the eyes there's no difference between that car and the others. There's a slight bouncing off of objects, passing through your retina, and making a visual impression on your mind. So at the physical level, nothing different is going on. But at the mental level, the impression didn't make it through. When the next moment comes, you no longer notice the rest of the trees. You're not seeing the rest of the cars. Your heart and mind are fixated on that one car, even though it's gone. You've got yourself a problem here. There's a blockage, an event that got stuck. All the subsequent experiences are trying to pass through you, but something has happened inside that has left this past experience unfinished.



“Why are you looking at her when you have me?” By Leonard Marquez III

“Are you kidding me? You’re holding my hand and you look at her. Do you not think about my feelings?” she said.

‘How do I explain this to her, when I don’t even understand?’ he thought.

The pain, misery, jealousy and breakups. How do you explain to someone who doesn’t know? Bad choices over sexuality, having the perfect girl yet not satisfied. These are some of the symptoms of bipolar. To have the feelings of grandeur, feel all important. Sometimes before she says what’s wrong with him, stop and see if something is “wrong” with him. Take him somewhere and talk, find out what is going on. You see, I know the before and after of bipolar 2, when not treated and when treated. The difference is like night and day, you see the world differently, you finally have control. So before you have the pain, misery, jealousy and breakup find out if there are things you can do to fix it.

“When Ms. Teri met Ms. Taken” by Tom Farlow

You know me, but you don’t know me. You stand there, sneer, and turn your head in disgust, all while claiming some vast moral superiority, looking down from your high horse while thinking I don’t deserve what I have.

Don’t hate me because I’m beautiful but hate me because I cannot be ugly. In your mind, you assume beauty is some marvelous bestowment graced upon me without a trace of recompense. You could not stand further away from the truth. For starters, jealousy such as yours is but a small entry on the long list of penalties I must confront because of my face.

Overshadowing even your envy is the arrogant disregard your boyfriend has for my feelings, and even thinking I could possibly want him. He isn’t even my type. He and his ilk treat this world as a meat locker. I continually work my way through dodging their lusty and catcall bullets; sometimes successfully and sometimes not.

A room full of pain sits upon the second story of an unassuming brownstone somewhere in American suburbia, the home of an aging middle-class couple. Littering the walls are scores of tarnishing trophies, framed and matted certificates, and first place medallions all hanging as a testament to my pain.

Pain that I have endured earning wins at beauty pageants, cheerleading contests and gymnastics meets where my endowments could be recognized.

Pain that I have endured, because even multiple first places weren’t good enough for Mom, who said I could always do better and would see that I did next time.

Can you possibly know what it is like to win and still be told you didn’t do well enough? You would have been lucky enough to find yourself handed a participation ribbon, yet your parents would have remained all agog, heaping praise over how awesome you had done.

Not me.

I have since left that shrine of pain and moved forward. No longer do I seek to please people with my looks or bat an eyelash to woo an inebriated judge. I am, instead, in the real world doing it the old fashion way: hard work.

Yet, there is your boyfriend, serving himself up as a reminder of the past I long to outdistance. So, slap him and wake him from his pigheaded fantasy.

Just don’t hate him because I’m irresistible. Hate yourself because you aren’t.



“The Prison Railway” by Kevin Murphy

There are many directions one’s life can go, and once set upon one of them, there are many ways to go in that direction.

At this time of my life I’ve set myself upon a set of tracks leading to only God knows where. They’re laid out before me but fade into a mist in the distance. They lead in a direction that I’ve no choice but to follow.

Looking back on the tracks I’ve been on, there are many junctions that I’ve taken that have placed me on the set before me. Each junction a choice that I’ve made or that has been made for me. The tracks before me, the ones I call the Prison Railway, are laid out in a straight line and while I must follow them wherever they go I’m learning that there are different ways for me to travel down this line. There are junctions that will lead me down different pants, even as they follow the same railway.

The easiest way is to follow the straight path, the old line, to go with the flow. To become a part of the environment, conform to the prison way of life, become a prisoner, learn to talk the talk, walk the walk, live the prison life, the prison lifestyle.

That's the easiest way, it takes the least amount of work, but this isn't the way that I've chosen to travel. The way that I've chosen is a different way. It isn't conformity, it isn't following the norm, and it isn't the easiest way. The way that I've chosen is a way that betters me mentally, a way that will change me on the inside. It's a way that will make me a better person, a better father, son, and husband. It's a way that will strengthen my mind and spirit.

Following the path that I've chosen isn't the easiest way, not in a world where the strong prey on the weak. A world where prison rules have been in place for decades to protect the hard-core prisoner's way of life.

As I travel down the tracks laid before me, I spend my time reading and writing. I'm not the best at either, but I learn something new each day in hopes that one day I'll be great at them. I write my story, sharing with those who'll listen to what life is like for me, a prisoner who doesn't want to be.

The tracks are laid out before me, the distance shrouded in mist. I don't know where they go only that they do, and I must follow them. My only comfort is knowing that I still have some control of how I travel down them, the tracks I call the Prison Railway.

"Riding the Rails" by Lindsay White-Cockran

As a child I grew up with tracks right out front of our house. It took a while to get used to sleeping through the conductors blowing the whistle because it was a Rural Railroad crossing without a crossing gate. So they were required to always blow their whistle. You get used to it though and eventually can sleep right through the sound. But the sound and sight of the tracks used to make me think one day I'm going to ride out on a track and never look back. I felt back then as if I could go anywhere, do anything. Now to look at tracks I just want to take them back home. Back to simpler days, easier times. To the days of youth and innocence. To the days when anything was possible. Then, I have to stop, rearrange my thoughts, and know that anything is still possible. Those same tracks, the one's inside my thoughts can still take me anywhere I want to go. Today just as much as 20 years ago it's time to ride the rails, and always blow the whistle.



Finding Myself by Leo Cardez

When I was 30 years old, I travelled alone to Europe. I started in Budapest, Hungary and planned to visit as many cities as possible in two months over the summer. I was a dream come

true. I spent a week hopping back and forth across the Danube river visiting Buda then Pest the back again. Did you know Budapest is actually two cities? I didn't. I do now.

I spent a few days in Austria visiting beautiful buildings and eating schnitzel (thin, breaded chicken). Then Prague — the women there were gorgeous — it's all I can remember. I was fulfilling a life long dream, but somehow I was missing something. I took photos, enjoyed the sites, but it all lacked... flavor. It felt cold, insipid, and pointless. My favorite part of my day was during my brief calls with my family and friends back home. It's not so much that I missed being home. I wasn't homesick. I just missed not having them there to share these experiences. In Dubrovnik, Croatia (a beautiful, walled city on the Adriatic seashore), I found myself looking out to the sea watching the sun set over an archipelago including Hvar, a party island I planned to visit the next day with a melancholy heart. I immediately knew what I had to do. Within 48 hours I was back in the States renting a small beach house on the Michigan shore. I invited all my friends and family to come visit over the summer. We swam, drank beer, ate hotdogs off the grill, and shared old memories while creating new ones. Part of growing up is finding out who you are in the world. I thought I had to go to exotic far-away lands to find myself. As it turns out, I wasn't far at all, just a couple hour drive surrounded by the people I love.

"The Plot on the Pier" by Bobby Bunderson

As I stepped out of the camper and onto the serene desert floor, I experience an overwhelming sensation of peaceful tranquility. Although it was just past midnight in Arizona, the stark beauty of the barren landscape was evident. Looking down from the sloping hillside of our campsite lay the mighty Colorado river, a long expanse of black nothingness; invisible to the night if not for the large swath of river illuminated by the silvery moonlight.

The only sounds were the soft rustlings of the leaves of the blossoming oleanders as they danced softly to the warm breath of desert breeze, their blooms permeating the campground with their perfume. Standing as still as you could while quieting your breath, you could also hear the rippling sounds of the river as the boats bobbed sleepily in their moorings. I was keenly aware of self, in harmony with the rich blessings of nature. I was at this moment, happy to be alive.

Quick, heavy, footfalls abruptly shattered my serenity. Before I could react, the large fist of an airline mechanic landed brutally on my left temple. I dropped to my knees, my vision faded away. I cautiously opened my eyes just as the pointed end of a cowboy boot smashed into my ribcage, breaking two ribs. The pain was excruciating and I fought mightily to stay conscious.

"Get up! Get up you little smart mouth son-of-a-bitch!" my father screamed down at my crumpled form, flecks of saliva and cheap vodka spewing from his rage contorted mouth. I made an attempt at standing but half-way upright I was greeted by another crushing blow to the cheekbone. The force of the punch spun me around 180 degrees, I was in

mortal fear for my life and my instinctual fight or flight response kicked into gear. I made a hasty retreat down the hill towards the marina. I ran to the boat docks and onto the long floating pier. Once I reached the end I seriously contemplated diving into the river and swimming across to the far shore and to safety, but my broken ribs kept me from doing so. Instead, I sat down, removed my shoes and soaked my bare feet in the cool healing waters of the Colorado.

I sat there with my feet in the water and contemplated my next move. I did come to one non-negotiable conclusion: this was the last straw. The beginning of the end. Right then and there I made a solemn oath to myself that I would never play the role of the victim again. This marked the period in my life when I stopped depending on anyone, when I stopped trusting anyone. It was me against the world. My father's abuse- physical, mental and emotional -was irreparable. My mind, body and soul had been decimated; systematically and sadistically laid to ruin. My childhood was officially over. No more innocence, no more carefree laughter, no more blind faith in anyone. I had in that instant begun assembling a wall around my heart.

Had I known at that moment of despair, the hopelessness and the soul-stripping loneliness which would plague me for decades to follow, would I still make this conscious decision? I doubt it. But I didn't know. So for years I carried them scars with me into every relationship I encountered. I became selfish, prideful, codependent and violent. Low self-esteem and low self-worth were temporarily extinguished by the never-ending assortment of drugs and alcohol I craved and consumed. My resentments burned in my heart like the flames of a dragon's breath. I learned to hate myself with a fervor which culminated in two failed suicide attempts. I couldn't or wouldn't allow myself to see that there were people around me who did in fact loved me, who cared for me and who tried to help me. I rejected them all. I forgave no one.

It took me four terms in prison (the fourth of a 25 to life sentence) to finally come to grips with myself, with society and with the ability we all possess to simply forgive. Nearly 30 years wasted trying to keep that oath I made to myself while I sat on the edge of that pier.

Side note: Usually I use these picture themes as a way to compose some creative work of fiction. However, this is sadly a piece of nonfiction. I saw this picture and, although it is set in a different geology and built differently, it was a reminder to me of that pier at Cottonwood Cove on the Colorado river and the last beating my father gave me.

P.S. my sin that night was that I was overheard wishing to run away.

"At the Edge of the World" by Alecia Davis

So here I am. I feel like I'm at the edge of the world with my feet hanging off with nowhere to go. How did I get here? At which fork in the road did I choose wrong? Now I wonder, how many times did I take the wrong road? A road where I end up with no one here but me. Alone, alone on this road, alone at the edge of the world. Someone might yell "Hey!

Turn around! Go back!" But once you're here, there is no going back. No matter how hard you try, for you can't live life in rewind. I can do nothing at all and live right here at the edge of the world. Stuck lost in time, stuck alone in a prison of my mind full of regret. With no hope. And just give up. Allowing the past to repeat itself day in and day out. Or I can choose to see the day where the fog goes away, and clear skies remind me not all is lost. And with the sunshine on my skin I may just want to take a swim. Yes, I can choose to look forward to better days. To break free from the prison within myself. I can choose to swim. And swim I will. I will swim as far as I can and when I can't swim any longer. I will float as far as I have to, but sinking is not an option. I will keep swimming and floating until I hit solid ground and when I arrive, I may have to crawl to shore. With two shaking legs I will take the slow and careful steps, but with each step I will grow stronger. So strong that I will never look like I had to swim, float, and crawl from the edge of the world. I will always remember my journey from the edge of the world, but I will never look back nor will I ever wonder what might have been.

New PE Survey. Who are we and what do we want.

PE has multiple missions, and our primary effort is to provide you with information, education and opportunities for creative self-expression. Your thoughts matter and the words you write can influence others. We want to know more about you and how PE can best deliver services that help you both now while in prison and hopefully later when you will have more choices and opportunities to explore life.

We created a short survey. It will help us plan our future offerings. Please send it back when you send in your registration form

The first 1000 responses will receive a copy of the two cookbooks created from recipes sent in by PE members during our last survey done in 2016. ["The Sweet Life" and "Meals, Sides and Sauces". The recipes are created using ingredients many PE members can get through their prison commissary

We have been unsure about how many newsletters are delivered and by returning the survey you will help us get an idea on how many of you received this newsletter. It might also help us with funders, so there is every reason for you to complete this. More donations will mean more programs and opportunities we can offer.

If you don't want to rip your paper just handwrite the answers and the programs you wish to join

1. What best describes your age? Please check one box or circle answer.
 - ☐ Under 20
 - ☐ 21-30
 - ☐ 31-40
 - ☐ 41-50
 - ☐ 51-60
 - ☐ 61+
2. What best describes the prison facility you are in? Please check one box.
 - ☐ Juvenile
 - ☐ Minimum Security
 - ☐ Low Security
 - ☐ Medium Security
 - ☐ High Security
 - ☐ Other (please write in): _____
3. What is the duration of your sentence? Please check one box.
 - ☐ 0-2 years
 - ☐ 3-5 years
 - ☐ 6-10 years
 - ☐ 11-20 years
 - ☐ 21-30 years
 - ☐ 31 years to life
4. How long have you been receiving Prisoner Express mailings? Please check one box.
 - ☐ Less than a year
 - ☐ 1-2 years
 - ☐ 3-5 years
 - ☐ 6+ years
5. How many Prisoner Express programs have you participated in? Please check one box.
 - ☐ 0
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5 or more
6. If you've participated in a Prisoner Express program, how much time did you spend on the program? Please check one box.
 - ☐ I have not participated in any programs yet
 - ☐ 0-3 hours
 - ☐ 4-6 hours
 - ☐ 7-10 hours
 - ☐ 11 or more hour
7. If you've participated in a Prisoner Express program, how would you rate its quality? Please check one box.
 - ☐ I have not participated in any programs yet
 - ☐ Bad
 - ☐ Fair
 - ☐ Good
 - ☐ Excellent
8. What types of Prisoner Express mailings do you most enjoy? Please check as many boxes as you would like.
 - ☐ General newsletters (those that describe Prisoner Express programs)
 - ☐ Art programs
 - ☐ Cooking programs
 - ☐ Programs about books, poetry, or literature
 - ☐ Programs about chess or other games
 - ☐ Programs about science and mathematics
 - ☐ Other (please write in): _____
- ☐ 9. How did you find out about Prisoner Express? Please check one box.
 - ☐ By a Prisoner Express newsletter and/or program sent to another inmate
 - ☐ From another inmate
 - ☐ From a family member or friend outside of the prisoner system
 - ☐ Other (please write in): _____
- ☐ 10. Have you shared Prisoner Express materials with another inmate (either showing them a program, newsletter, or your work as part of a program)? Please check on box.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- ☐ 11. Have you discussed Prisoner Express materials with another inmate (either showing them a program, newsletter, or your work as part of a program)? Please check on box.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- ☐ 12. Have you shared Prisoner Express materials with family or friends outside of the prison system (either showing them a program, newsletter, or your work as part of a program)? Please check on box.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- ☐ 13. Have you discussed Prisoner Express materials with family or friends outside of the prison system (either showing them a program, newsletter, or your work as part of a program)? Please check on box.
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
- ☐ 14. Please describe any impacts of the Prisoner Express program. Please check as many boxes as apply, and feel free to write additional responses.
 - ☐ Fostering a sense of community with other inmates
 - ☐ Providing materials to help pass time
 - ☐ Providing materials that teach a new skill (e.g. art, poetry, chess, etc.)
 - ☐ Providing an opportunity to reflect
 - ☐ Other (please elaborate): _____

If you have more to say about any question, please send in answers on additional paper

REGISTRATION FORM

Please Note: If you received this newsletter, you are on our mailing list through Feb 2020. This form or a letter should be returned in a timely manner if you want to sign up for programs.—and If you don't want to cut up your newsletter, you can write a list of programs you wish to join and send it to us . Please don't hesitate too long in responding or you may miss your chance to join this series of programs. We use Bulk Mail services at the USPS, and that requires we mail each lesson in one batch. In exchange for doing it that way the cost of mailing is reduced to about 18 cents per mailing. It makes a big difference as we are cash poor but full of energy and ideas. So, sign up before enrollment period ends, sometime in mid Sept or early Oct depending on the unit.

Programs – Please check the box of each program in which you wish to participate. Carefully read the requirements of each program before signing up.

☐ **Expedited Book Mailings** – Check with the administration of your facility to be sure you are allowed to participate. If yes, please send check for \$4.00 or some other means that is allowed at your prison to cover postage. Books are free, but the mailing cost is not. We have a good selection of donated used books List types of books you want, and we will make the best match with our existing collection of books.

Please fill in this if you order expedited books

_____ **Number of books allowed**

_____ **Soft cover only**

_____ **Hardcover and soft covered both allowed**

☐ **Poetry Project** – Please send me the next Prisoner Express Poetry Anthology Vol. 22. I understand that to receive the anthology I am required to submit a poem for consideration in the anthology.

☐ **Winning through Math-** Please send this packet which will show me many ways in which I can better navigate life with my new and improved math and reasoning skills

☐ **Journal Project-** I will keep a Journal for a year, and may share my entries with PE. Please send me a Journal Starter packet.

Two Spanish Language Opportunities

☐ **Let's Learn Spanish-** Please send the introductory language packet. Have fun, gain skills and become a better communicator.

☐ **Intermediate Spanish-** Fine tune your comprehension of the Spanish Language with reading and writing skill building exercises

☐ **Chess Club-** Yes, I want to receive mailings on how to improve my chess game. This packet will also explore the history of the game in detail.

☐ **Art Knows-** Come explore the world of art with Treacy. Treacy will continue to expand your art horizons with tips, insights and her care for you and your artwork

☐ **Meditation Project-** Tara is opening this project to all who wish to delve inward and discover the freedom and truth within us all. offering is appropriate for all people. It is not religion, but rather a personal practice leading to positive action rather than the usual cycle of unconscious reaction to the stimulation around us.

☐ **Book Club-** Please send me a copy of the Meaning of Life: the Case for Abolishing Life Sentences. This project is geared for all those doing serious time. We have 300 copies to send. The author is looking for you the readers feedback, and if you sign up we hope you will answer critical thinking questions we will include with the book

☐ **Building a Book-** yes send me the new and improved 1st packet in the Building a Book series. I want to write a novel!

You do not need to sign up for the Theme and Picture Writing programs. By submitting your writings and art, you are automatically included on all future mailings regarding those individual projects.

NAME: (PLEASE PRINT)

ADDRESS and ID #

I give the Alternatives Library permission to post my writings and artwork on the web

SIGNATURE:

DATE: _____

Final Notes-Over the years we have collected so much writing, and my filing cabinets are stuffed. No one has access to my filing cabinets full of journals, and I am unsure where I will store additional writing. Fortunately a new volunteer, Caitlin, has surfaced, and she is an archivist by profession. She is passionate about the archiving and making available for future use, the submissions many of you send. We can't save everything for more reasons than I can list here, but we can start going through our back paper, organizing it and get it ready for a permanent storage space that will be accessible to researchers. Below are Caitlin's words introducing you to the new archiving project

Prisoner Express Archive-Hello folks, my name is Caitlin and I work with the Cornell University Libraries. I have recently started volunteering with Prisoner Express to create an archive of the work that you all have been sending to us. An archive simply is a place for historical documents to be safely held and viewed. The team here has done their best to find storage and preservation for all the art, poetry and writings that are sent daily, but there has become too much for our small facility. As part of my role in this project I will be assisting in the transfer of a selection of your art and writing to a permanent archive here at Cornell University. Some things are there already and as we send more and more to the library, people will be able to come and view your work here at the university. This is a great opportunity for the stories told in your work to live on. There are collections in the library that tell the lives of Americans from so many backgrounds, and the work sent to Prisoner Express would add a new perspective.

Before we send anything to that location though we are going to spend time scanning, photographing and adding information to a large selection of your work to be shown on our website. Some of your work is already up there, but we are going to put a larger effort to get more work accessible for people to view. This is another platform for your voices and artistry to be heard, seen and shared. I am very excited to be part of a project that will outlive us all and connect people from across the country.

As we get going I will be adding a section in the newsletter called "From the Archives". I will be selecting art and writing that have been sent to us in the last 15 years to be featured. So keep your eyes open in the future for some work found in the cabinets. Maybe you'll recognize them as your own.

As we wrap up another edition of Prisoner Express News I ask again that you fill out the survey and sign-up sheet in a timely manner. I have had more trouble with returned mail in the last 2 years than I have had in the 15 years of mailing out PE materials. I know rules in some states are changing and no mailing labels are allowed on the packets we send in. I am figuring we will switch to envelopes to those states where the most mail is most often returned. Your feedback and knowledge of the rules in your facility is most appreciated.

While many of you write to let me know how the program is benefiting you, I have not shared with you some of the stories I have heard from students who volunteer with PE, and how working in this program and writing letters and sharing stories with all of you is effecting them. Students often feel like they are under great stress due to the volume and difficulties of their studies. Cornell, in particular is a demanding university, and the bright students who come here are not used to struggling academically. Reading about your struggles helps them put into perspective some of their issues. Writing letters and packing books for you gives them a chance to step out of their lives and into a place where they are doing something useful for others. It raises their energy and instead of the constant pressure they live with, they feel good about sharing and supporting you in your journey to improve yourselves.

At its heart PE is about communication. Once people communicate with one another, the barriers we believe exist can fade away as we realize we have way more in common than difference. We all have been born into a fractious world, where people are taught to compete rather than cooperate. While that has some advantages, there has to be as much encouragement for cooperation as there is for competition. There are many ways society could improve through cooperation rather than competition. In cooperation the good of the whole is a prime consideration. In competition, it is the person at the top who seems to benefit while everyone else becomes expendable. I encourage you to look around the scene you live in and consider when cooperation could be a benefit. Please send me any stories about people cooperating in your prison and what effect the cooperation had.

If you have any updates on the mailing regulations at your facility, please share with us. I know here and PE and even more you at ground zero get frustrated when our packets are denied due to us not following all institutional rules. We try, but sometimes rules change and we don't know it.

Here's hoping this newsletter makes it to you. From all of us at Prisoner Express we wish you the best,

Gary

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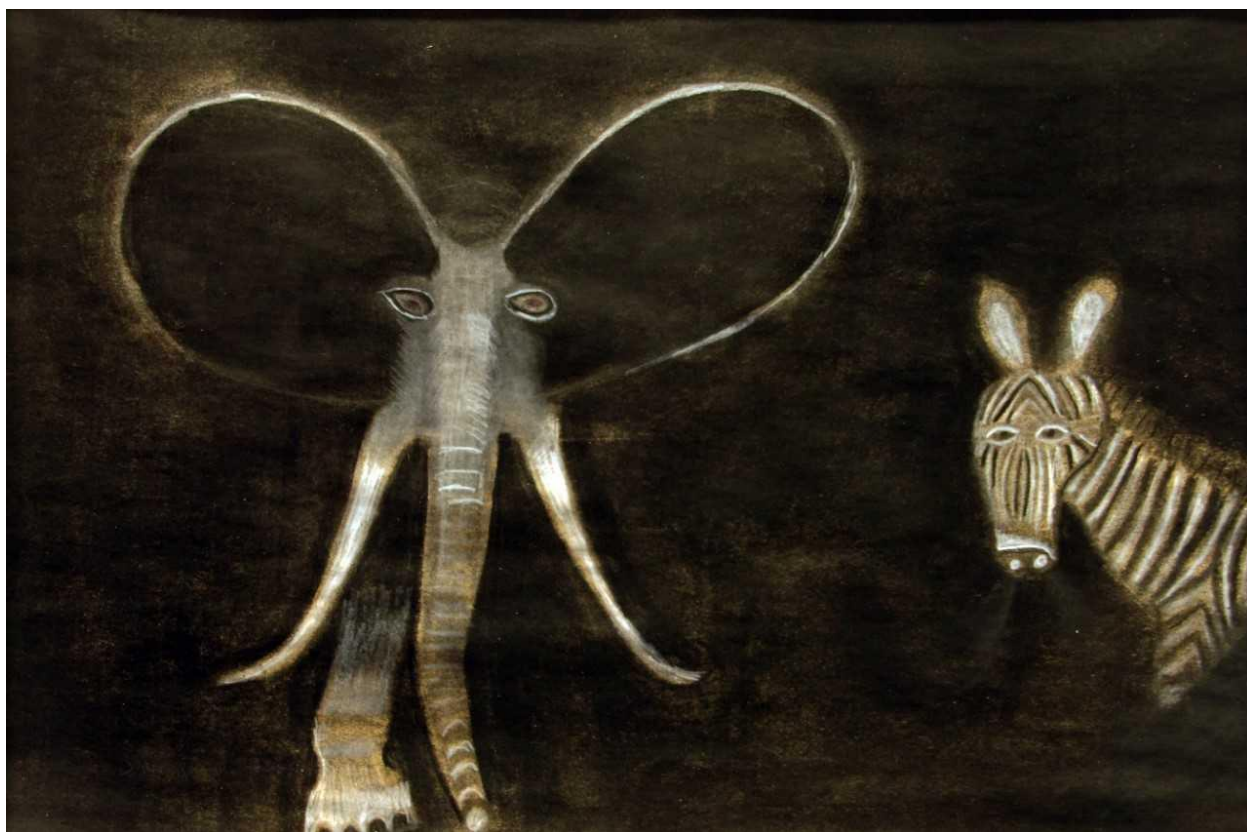
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Subscriptions are free to prisoners.

The Durland Alternatives Library, which funds Prisoner Express, is a project partner of the Center for Transformative Action. Additional Support comes from the Cornell Public Service Center and the Office of Academic Diversity Initiatives



Art by Nathan Riggs