



JUNE AND JULY 2021 | VOL. 6

# Feather Bricks

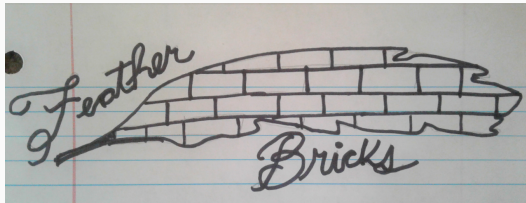
*The Official Newsletter of North Park Theological Seminary's  
School of Restorative Arts  
Cover Art by Michael Sullivan*

# Feather Bricks

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Logo by Steven Ramirez

## Letter from the Editors



Dear Readers,

The previous co-editors of *Feather Bricks* have done a great job in constructing our newsletter. Every volume has been packed with thoughtful and encouraging words from our community. Our newsletter has also assisted us in projecting and unifying our voices and keeping us connected during this pandemic.

Contemplating on our connection, the theme “whose shoes are you in” came to mind. There is always more than one way to look at things, and walking in someone else’s shoes allows us to share the same space, which is the foundation of community. “Those who love God must love their fellow believers” (1 John 4:21). Loving relationships is the character of Christianity. Continue in sharing your powerful stories.

--“Tall” Michael Sullivan

Dear Students, Writers, Thinkers,

The shoes I have been wearing around the house lately belong to my nephew. They are some really well-made sandals he was gifted right before his 13 year-old feet grew about two inches in two days. I originally called them my VIP flip-flops; now they are my “Zoom shoes.” When I look down at my feet in these A+ sandals, I feel grateful my nephew gifted them to me, and a little anxious at the same time, as these shoes do not exactly fit. I tightened the straps so they won't fall off, but the soles of the shoes are much too long for my feet, which makes them tricky to walk in. (And running is not really an option.)

Many of the pieces in this edition of our newsletter offer new ideas by writers and artists having their work published in *Feather Bricks* for the first time. We also have returning voices asking us to “try on” new ideas. Let's welcome this process in a way that expands our options for future footwear choices.

Write On! Professor Melissa





## *And When You Pray (Say)*

*by Ted B. "Country" Gray*

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Many people are familiar with the Lord's Prayer, (Mt. 6:9-13), beginning "And when you pray," but do they realize it could as easily be translated as "And when you say"? Is not prayer talking to our Creator? There are two forces listening to and empowered to act by our prayers (words): the Kingdom of light and the forces of darkness. Do we speak to our Father in Heaven, or do we empower the evil one? We can speak of Holy Spirit's indwelling strength in us or the enemy's power over us. Both are very real powers and will assist or destroy us as determined by our words. Neither have full power over us until by our words we delegate it to them. Every word we speak acts to empower the Holy Trinity or the powers of evil. Therefore, every word we speak should be in line with the things we truly desire.

Quite often I have misunderstood the concept of prayer (sayer). My words have often cancelled out prayers no sooner than I had made petitions to God. I prayed to the Father, then by my words said to my enemy, "You are too powerful, you keep me defeated?" So, it could be said, in all actuality, I pled to God, then prayed to Satan. I tied God's hands when I empowered Satan. I believed Satan's lies and did not believe in God's overcoming triumph and promises.

Questions to ask myself:

1. What are my words building up, the Kingdom of God or the strongholds of Satan?
2. Do I listen or give consideration to my words in the light of God's word?
3. Now that I know all of my words are prayers (have power), will I be more careful about how I use them?
4. How can I use my words today to bless and not curse?

Remembering always in all humility, it is not I but Christ in me who is my strength, in Him; I am more than a conqueror! On July 9, 2020, I was woke up by a loud voice on the gallery saying, "Tell me, Country," but there was no one there. Being as Holy Spirit has often spoken to me by the time lining up with scripture I wrote down, somehow I also knew it was John, but did not know if there was a John 6:43-44 at the time. John 6:43-44 reads "Jesus [...] said unto them, 'Murmur not among yourselves, no man can come to me except the Father which hath sent me draw him and I will raise him up at the last day.'" When we murmur or complain, we are not talking to God but to Satan. How can we believe God when we are complaining about Him and His power and complimenting Satan and Hell's powers? In all truth, our complaints are prayers to Satan and accusations against God, His provisions, promises, sacrifices, and love. Later that day, this message was confirmed to me when I opened the Bible to my daily reading portion in the Old Testament. Numbers 11:1-5 were the first verses I read. This was the strongest of confirmations on murmuring and complaining and the consequences of the complaining spirit.

On June 6, 2021, I went to North Park, then the doctor and on to yard. It was 2:00 pm before I got to my cell. I had tried to write this paper up 6-1-2021 but somehow it would not come together so I put my notes aside until tomorrow, 6-2-2021. I opened my Bible once more to my reading through the Bible. I had finished Numbers chapter ten the day before. My O.T. starting point numbers 11:1. I might see one coincidence, but this keeps coming to me over and over. I never even noticed where I was at the Bible and did not even know if there was a John 6:43-44.



Hey everybody,

It's been a while since I last saw or talked with many of you during this pandemic. It's obviously been a long and difficult road for all of us, but I want you to know that I love and miss you all and that I am praying for everyone in our inside/outside community. A big welcome to our North Park sisters at the Logan Correctional Center. We are so glad and excited to have you join us, and we are praying for you with encouraging words to stay focused in your studies. We are confident you will do great work! And we are looking forward to reading your writing! :)

I would like to take this moment to report on how my week has been going. My mother Marina had just survived a bout with B-cell Lymphoma cancer after undergoing chemotherapy treatment a few years ago. She was in remission and was doing well, thanks to all your faith-filled prayers and support. Well, this week my mom had to go to the Emergency Room due to pain and swelling she was having from what doctors discovered to be 2 gallstones causing blockage plus more stones in her gallbladder; they also found a cyst in her pancreas which I am just finding out from my family is cancerous. They are saying she may have to undergo chemotherapy again. In two weeks, the doctors are going to do surgery on my mom to remove her gall bladder. I am so scared, anxious, and worried about my mom's health condition, and I really need you all to please pray with me for my mother that God, please, heals her and saves her life. And pray for me and my family. It's been a difficult week for us.

My mom is the only one who has been in my corner during the whole 20 years of my incarceration; she is all I got! Please help me, my sisters and brothers, and pray with me for her healing and restoration! I love you all! Thank you and God Bless! Your Brother, Marcos Ramirez NPTS/SRA (Cohort 1)

## Wisdom Blvd by Mishunda Davis-Brown



My name is Mishunda Davis-Brown, and I'm a new student here at North Park that's creating a space for anyone to share and receive wisdom with me on Wisdom Blvd. So, whenever you feel the need, come take a ride down Wisdom Blvd. with me.

First, wisdom is knowledge, insight, a good sense of judgment, a wise attitude or course of action, the ability to make good use of knowledge, and the ability to recognize right from wrong.

Now consider yourself a car in route to a specific destination. However, during this you ran a few stop signs when you

should've stopped, made a few U-turns when you should've continued straight ahead, and crashed when you should've slowed down at the yield sign. However, you didn't pay attention to any of the signs, and this can cost you from something as small as a fine to something as great as your life. But it will cost you, which is why I'm here to tell you that "warning comes before destruction" and to "pay attention to the signs God places before you in any situation" because he's always trying to protect us from ourselves and those who want to do us harm.

**Wisdom Blvd by Mishunda Davis-Brown (cont..)**

Growing up, I was hard-headed and ran many stop signs (figuratively speaking) because I wasn't listening or paying any attention to God's warning signs, which has cost me 20 years of my freedom thus far. Yet I still grew and learned from my accident, which gave me knowledge and wisdom to know better and do better, which I chose. However, to choose not is to head for destruction.

This is why it's important to choose wisdom to learn from your mistakes or to begin paying close attention to not make the same mistakes or to prevent havoc. I now know that I could've prevented crashing had I paid attention to God's warning signs that he so lovingly gave me. Open your ears to the Lord.

So I encourage you today to use wisdom, which will surely pay off and protect you like new brakes on a rainy day.

"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline (Proverbs 1:7)."

***The Value of a Visit***  
***by John E. Taylor, Jr.***

Some years ago, I watched one of Oprah Winfrey's shows, and she stated, "Family is who treats you like family at the time." I have not seen any family member well over year due to Covid-19. Once I received my pass to attend my first Zoom meeting with the family of North Park, I experienced the same excitement as when my biological family members come to visit me.

"Listen, my sons, to father's instruction; pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. When I was a boy in my father's house, still tender, and an only child of my mother, he taught me and said, 'lay hold of my words with all your heart; keep my commands and you will live. Get wisdom, get understanding; do not forget my words or swerve from them. Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore, get wisdom. Through it cost all you have, get understanding. Esteem her, and she will exalt you; embrace her, and she will honor you (Proverbs 4:1-8)."

"Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them, but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease without fear (Proverbs 1:29-33)."

"For the Lord gives wisdom, and from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6).



The day and night before the Zoom visit, I was consumed with the idea of getting to visit with my academic and spiritual family.

In 2015, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom taught my first North Park class. Like only Professor Michelle can do, she immediately set the tone for a class community. Both inside and outside students shared things you would only share with your family. I

## ***The Value of a Visit by John E. Taylor, Jr. (cont...)***

had never been in a class to feel so vulnerable. The way Professor Michelle taught by using small groups, we got to know everyone. When Covid-19 hit Stateville in 2020, all classes were canceled, which left a great void for me. There are many men in the cohort I have known for at least 12 years. We know each other so well, we can tell if something is wrong with each other. It is the same bond I have with my biological family.

Unfortunately, I was not able to go outside for recreation for the entire 14 months of the pandemic during the modified lockdown, due to my medical permit, which stated, "No gym/yard." I was limited to seeing my North Park family on the gallery or in passing in Healthcare. Not being able to go to recreation, I went over a year without being hugged by my biological family and my North Park family.

On that first day I had my pass to go over to the School building for the Zoom visit, when we left the housing unit, we went to the dining room. In the dining room, fellows from throughout the prison were there for job assignments, law library, and school. My first hug in 14 months was with a North Park cohort student. We hugged each other like we were mutually glad to see one another. We knew God had kept both of us alive in spite of those whose lives had been taken by Covid-19. Some I talked to had lost family members, and we discovered talking how Covid had taken lives in prison. In the midst of our conversations, the officer shouted, "School! School!" It was time to depart for the School building.

The first person to greet us at the door was Vickie, the Assistant Director of the

School of Restorative Arts and a student as well, with a smile on her face. Vickie is definitely our Angel sent by God. She kept us connected with one another and our Professors by way of a brown envelope that came every Friday. Plus, each week Vickie had something to share with us, to inspire us. In fact, Howard made mention of how "the weekly brown envelopes helped" him during my first Zoom visit. I wanted to hug Vickie to express my appreciation, but it isn't allowed. So, we gave her imaginary hugs.

After we were seated in a way that everyone could be seen, Vickie explained what would happen regarding the Zoom before she connected us. I was filled with much anticipation to see my family, and it was my first experience with Zoom. I had watched people on Zoom from various talk shows, but I could not have imagined how powerful my first visit would be. Once everyone was connected, tears began forming in my eyes because I was so happy to experience this Zoom visit with my North Park family. The room went from being a classroom to a Holy Sanctuary. I felt the same peace and safety I felt in that first North Park classroom in 2015, a "peace of God that surpasses all understanding." I felt so safe in prison. Yes, safe in prison. Safe to be completely vulnerable. I felt the empathy from all of the outside members on Zoom expressed with us. Each of my North Park outside members assured me I was valued and cared for by their presence the same way my biological family makes me feel when I am with them.



***John E. Taylor, Jr. (cont...)***

The visit went by so fast. It reminded me of how quickly my annual visit with my mother and aunt go. My inside prison family member Robert John said after the visit, "Man, I feel just like when my family comes to see me, and then they leave." It hit me how valued a visit is in any way I can receive it. Robert John did not need to go into details about how he felt because I felt the same way. It was such an emotional high anticipating the visit and during the visit, but once the visit was completed my emotions plummeted into a short period of depression.

After the visit, it's like now I have to return to healthy. The daily grind of prison is tough, cold, and callous. It helps knowing family on the outside has to surrender to our prison sentences but gives us hope by visiting us, demonstrating there is still hope to return with the family.

Being in prison, there are so many things taken from us, for example, the freedom to see and talk with our family when we desire. Being able to take a shower when we want, to eat what and when we want, being able to wear clothes of our choice. There are countless privileges lost due to incarceration, and we know that from week to week something can arise to prevent the next Zoom visit. When small things such as a visit is experienced, that visit is valued so much. Thank each of you for taking the time to visit us by way of Zoom, along with any future visits. Each visit is valued and deeply appreciated.

***"Whose Shoes Are You In?"***

by Yarmale Thomas

When I pondered, "Whose shoes are you in?" I found this to be a very complex yet intriguing question. As I reflect on my life: the abuse, the hardships, the violence I saw and experienced, the good times (which were far and few), I've come to realize that for much of my life I wore other people's shoes, which hurt my feet (and many other areas of my life), which altered my walk and ultimately my journey (so I thought). Most of my life I was ashamed of being authentic to who God created me to be. I was embarrassed at being intelligent, inquisitive, compassionate, sensitive, eager to help, and being a nerd. However, growing up on the Westside of Chicago, being born into the family I'm a part of, this wasn't accepted. Because of this, I began to put on the personal "shoes" that I was told to wear (other people's ideas of who I was supposed to be because of where I lived, the family I am part of, and the hue of my skin).

Wearing those shoes made me miserable. It not only damaged my feet but it damaged how I viewed myself and the world around me. It also rendered me ineffective and extremely depressed, which affected those I came in contact with daily. During my maturation, learning from the hardships and successes, learning from other people's failures and successes, I can truly say it was good for me that I put on other people's shoes to recognize what

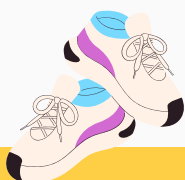


***"Whose Shoes Are You In?" cont...***

benefitted me and what did not, to understand that life is about making numerous decisions every day. Prior to being incarcerated, I owned numerous pairs of shoes, from formal to casual to athletic to lounging. None of them fit or felt perfect when I purchased them. It took time (maturation) and may wears (experience) to get the shoes to feel and fit just right. They needed to be worn and endure the elements (life experiences) to fit me perfectly. This is indicative of life and maturity.

When you make the intentional and deliberate decision of what shoes you will wear, then you can begin your daily walk and accomplish the tasks and goals you have set and enjoy what the day will bring on life's journey. After trying on so many shoes, now I understand what I needed, and, more importantly, what I wanted was an opportunity to choose my own shoes. The lack of opportunities and options forces us to settle and accept being less than who God created us to be. As I write this, the answer to my question, "Whose shoes are you in?" has become simple; the shoes that belong to me and fit me perfectly as God has intended, which are the shoes I now wear every day. Being comfortable in your own skin is very liberating, just like finding and wearing the right pair of shoes. Remember that lack of opportunities means lack of options, which will lead us to assimilation, which will lead us down a path that was not meant for us to travel. Be blessed and be safe!

Yarmale Thomas

**Visibility**

by Michael Sanders

Before I expound on the theme visibility, I would like to share the definition with the readers. Merriam-Webster defines visibility as: "capability of being readily noticed." Each human being has a God given right to exercise their visibility. During and even after slavery, Harriet Tubman exercised her visibility as the conductor of the Underground Railroad. Harriet Tubman led thousands of slaves through the Underground Railroad, to their long awaited freedom in the North. Tubman's valiant efforts earned her the name "Black Moses." Tubman's acts paralleled the Biblical Moses, who was commissioned by God to lead his people (Hebrews) to freedom from the nefarious hand of the Egyptian pharaoh. Likewise, Harriet Tubman had a premonition from God, which compelled her to lead the biggest slave crusade in American history. Harriet Tubman's visibility should act as a catalyst. When oppressed people are faced with insurmountable odds, yes, we must embrace Tubman's philosophy of "Never giving up!"

As I proceed with this topic of visibility, I would like speak on another heroic figure by the name of Frederick Douglass. Douglass was born a slave, but he died a free man. Douglass was taught the rudiments of reading from his master's wife. Reading opened a new world for Douglass. On one occasion, Frederick's teaching lesson was abruptly terminated when his master returned home and witnessed Frederick sitting on his wife's lap as she read to Frederick. Douglass's master berated his wife for teaching a slave how to read. Douglass's master told his wife that teaching a slave how to read would only ruin him because once enlightened, he would detest being a slave.

**Visibility (cont...)**

by Michael Sanders

Douglass’s master ended his rebuke with a profound lesson for Douglass: “If you give a n----r a inch, he will take an ell.” Douglass’s response was “It’s too late—they gave me a inch, and now I must take my ell!” Douglass eventually escaped from slavery and became a leading figure in the fight to abolish slavery.

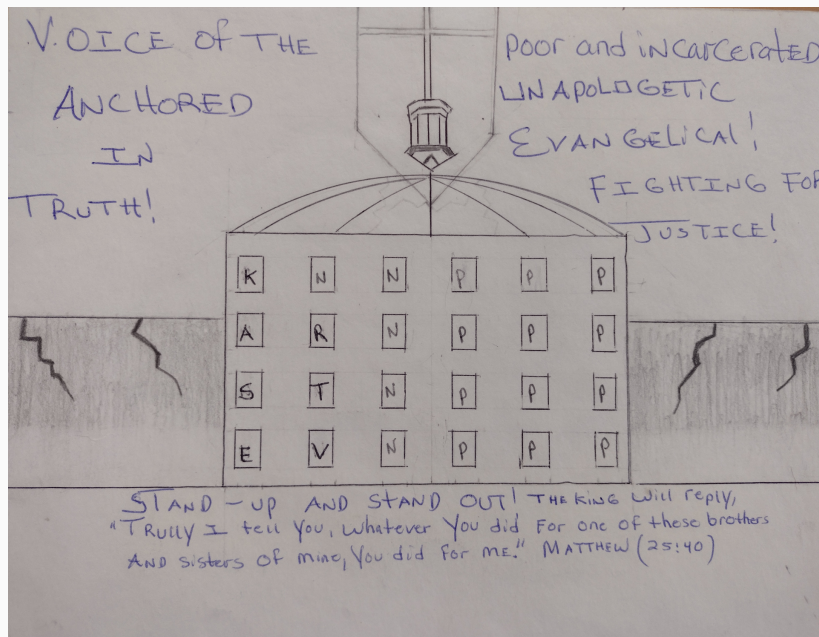
As we flash forward to the 21st century, we see another great individual emerge. The person I am referring to is Barack Obama. Barack’s visibility took motion as he became the first African American to lead the Harvard Law Review. Second, after Barack graduated from college, he operated as a community organizer. Moreover, Barack assisted residents on the South Side of Chicago in obtaining better living conditions from their “slum lords.” Third, Barack became a U.S. Senator who spearheaded laws to ensure that Black and Brown men were not physically abused during police interrogations, which led to numerous false confessions. Basically, all interrogations had to be tape recorded. Lastly, Barack took a quantum leap as he ran for the presidential race of 2008 and won. Barack overcame hundreds of years of white supremacy as he became the first Black president of the United States of America.

In closing, the visibility of Harriet Tubman, being the conductor of the Underground Railroad, and Frederick Douglass, escaping from slavery and becoming a key figure in abolishing slavery, paved the way for Barack Obama to exercise his visibility. Final thought: we as humans must also pick up the torch of these great figures and exercise our visibility with the objective of changing the fabric of America, i.e., to be an all inclusive country that provides freedom and opportunity for all.



**Voice of the Poor and Incarcerated.  
Anchored in Truth!  
Unapologetic, Evangelical!  
Fighting for Justice!**

by Antonio "Slim" Balderas



By Antonio "Slim" Balderas

The concept behind the steeple and F-house cell block is to show the steeple being used as a drill to power through the state of oppression from massive incarceration using holistic and evangelical approaches!

United Poor People’s Movement: 10-Point Pledge

1. End homelessness in the United States.
2. Abolish the prison pipeline system by ending massive incarceration of the poor.
3. Always speak out against racism and injustice anywhere.
4. Support a living wage for all Americans, citizens, and residents.
5. Support equality towards all races and genders.
6. Speak out against the militarization of all state and federal agencies.
7. Demand more funding for public schools.
8. Teach history in schools according to the God-created human race that’s officially documented.
9. Restore humanity by writing a new constitution.
10. Support legislation to curb global warming.



## *Can I show my Faith at Work? by April Stalworth* (Excerpted and reprinted with author permission)

After speaking at a conference for administrative professionals, a woman came to thank me for what I had said, specifically, for mentioning that I was a woman of faith. "I'm always afraid that I'm not supposed to say anything about that in the corporate environment," she said, "it feels so polarizing."

"Faith is such a huge part of my life: I don't know how I can keep it out of the conversation," I answered, "God wants people of faith in the marketplace!" Sometimes Christians feel that to really express their faith, they would need to change jobs and work in a church or a nonprofit or be a full-time missionary. That's fine if that's where God's called you, but I've found more often God isn't calling us to change work environments, he's calling us to change the environment we're in.



### **SHARING JESUS WITHOUT SAYING HIS NAME**

As I've had the opportunity to coach and train others in secular environments (both in business and education), I always base my advice on Biblical principles, even if I don't ever get to mention God by name. I have confidence that God's word is true and his wisdom works for all people in all places - His advice is GOOD advice, and I can coach and encourage others professionally based on his truth.

For example, when asked to give a keynote address at a summit for Black teens in our public high schools, the title of my talk was "What on earth am I here for?" I spoke to the teens about developing their purpose in life: you are put on this earth for more than paying bills and dying; you are here for a reason! I talked about living a life of SIGNIFICANCE, not just a life of success. Significance is about discovering your gifts, perfecting them, and then spending the rest of your life-giving them away. I was totally sharing Biblical principles from Ecclesiastes. They got the message, without knowing they got the message. Wherever God puts me in my job, I am a seed planter.



### **GOD IS AT WORK IN MY WORKPLACE**

So I've come to see that my workplace is a place of assignment: somewhere God has chosen to put me for a reason, to reveal himself through me. But my workplace is more than a place of assignment, it is also a place of formation - God revealing himself TO me in that role. In every job, there has been something God wanted to show me and teach me. The toughest assignments have been the ones with the biggest amounts of growth. Everything there was used by God to train me and prepare me for the job I'm in now. Sometimes I was there because there was one person in that job who needed to know Christ, and I got to make the introduction!

## *New Balance* by *Marcos Ramirez*



These are the shoes of a man who was bed-ridden at the infirmary where I worked. He could not do for himself what you and I would probably take for granted daily: basic things like brush his teeth, bathe, cook and eat, change the channels on his TV, or simply walk. I used to help him. He'd call me as I walked by his cell every day, mopping the floor or passing out food trays. He often expressed his gratitude with great enthusiasm for the littlest thing I did for him. A couple of times he had a craving for some better tasting food than what he'd been getting at the Health Care Unit, so I secretly fixed him some meals while he not so secretly gobbled it all up and left incriminating chili-stains all over his hospital gowns and sheets. I was so nervous—he was happy. He was so grateful that he offered to get me a brand new pair of New Balance gym shoes that he had in his box (which just so happened to be my size) and that I actually really needed at the time. My shoes were all jacked-up from working in them every day, and I couldn't afford to buy a new pair of shoes at the commissary, so this was a God-send for me!

I felt bad about just getting the shoes for free, so I offered to buy the shoes from him with some commissary food, which is exactly what he wanted all along. Long story short, I think I gave him like ten bucks for the shoes and put the food in his box next to his other pair of gym shoes. We both parted ways in satisfaction, and I was eager to put on my new pair of shoes!

It's funny how throughout this pandemic, I found myself feeling a lot like that bed-ridden man at the infirmary. I was so detached from my body that I could not do the things that I normally wanted or desired to do for myself and for others, things like fully engaging in my studies and with my North Park community via correspondence courses in small groups, reading, writing, and being creative—investing my gifts and talents in

service to my school and church community. All I could do at the time was get up and go to work at the Health Care Unit every day. But it was there that I found my purpose.

It was in that place that I was able to get out of my head (where I was completely distracted and detached from my Covid-invaded and ravaged body) and get into my heart where I found Jesus: my healer and redeemer, who gave me a new pair of shoes to walk in! As I walked in that man's shoes that now became my own, I started regaining a new sense of balance in my being. As the days and weeks progressed, I realized that it was never really "his" New Balance gym shoes, but rather, it was "Jesus' shoes" of peace and love that I was walking around in that whole time I was in the infirmary, helping the sick and ministering to their needs, that truly restored the holistic balance to my spirit, soul, and body!

I still have the New Balance gym shoes. In fact, I'm wearing them right now 'cause they're the most comfortable pair of shoes I've ever had while in prison! 😊 But I'm also wearing these shoes of peace in the readiness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, as the apostle Paul exhorts believers to "be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, and to put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand the schemes of the devil (Cf. Ephesians 6:10-20). These shoes of peace are the only shoes that can restore true shalom, healing, and restoration in our lives during our dark and challenging times of sickness.

Let's continue to walk in the Good News and to proclaim it over each other's lives through our thoughts, words, and actions of love. Let's get some New Balance on our feet and walk it out!

## Book Review



(Available through Amazon, Barnes and Noble, IVP, Christian Books, and anywhere else great reads are sold)

### **Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope**

By Ryan Wendt

In the book *Reading While Black: African American Biblical Interpretation as an Exercise in Hope*, Esau McCauley claims that the Black ecclesial tradition has a distinctive message of hope arising from its reading of the scriptural passages that are found in the biblical texts. This is a message of hope that is not a thing of the past. Rather, it is living, active, and provides a way forward for Black believers who are continually turning to the Scriptures for guidance. Additionally, Dr. McCauley writes from his experiences throughout his book as a Black man and demonstrates this way forward through his scholarship as an African-American man. This book is truly an exercise of hope.

Throughout this book, Dr. McCauley demonstrates his scholarship by posing questions that are pressing to him. These questions include:

- What does the Bible say about the creation of a just society in which Black people can flourish free of oppression?
- How does the Bible speak to the issue of policing – that constant source of fear in the Black community?
- Does the Bible provide Blacks with the warrant to protest injustice when they encounter it?
- Does the Bible value Black ethnic identity? Does God love blackness?
- What shall Blacks do about the pain and rage that comes with being Black in this country?
- What about slavery? Did the God of the Bible sanction what happened to Blacks?

As a privileged white man, this book was eye-opening to me because it gave me new insights, perspectives, and language about the Bible that I never had before. In other words, Dr. McCauley's scholarship helped me to re-think and re-examine some of the biases I had about biblical scholarship before reading this book. It helped liberate me as a white man from these biases through reading this author's reflections on the Black experience. Reading this book aided me in my ability to continually develop more of an intercultural mindset as a white man. For me, reading this book was truly an exercise in becoming liberated as a white man.

In my humblest opinion, the white church needs to be liberated in its view of biblical scholarship. The white church needs a fresh perspective and new insights into biblical interpretation. I believe that the only way to do that is to learn from Black scholars and theologians alike. In other words, we white folks have much to learn from the Black ecclesial tradition. The only way to do that is to acknowledge and let go of our biases and begin to listen and learn from the experiences of our black brothers and sisters, embracing the commonalities and differences that are included in God's beloved mosaic community.





## WE NEED A MED-TECH IN 443 BY JAMAL BAKR

A significant number of my family and friends work in the medical field in different capacities. Their occupations range from physician's assistant to the lead Registered Nurse in an ER clinic. Like most men in Stateville, I have lost some beloved members of my community. All of that and more influenced my advocacy for vaccinations. This is not to say that I didn't have trepidations. I learned about the Tuskegee experiments and how authorities in Flint, Michigan willingly ignored toxic lead levels in the city's drinking water. I was in segregation in Pontiac when some of the incarcerated population experienced psychotic episodes, gastrointestinal problems and liver failure because of experimental medications given to them in a study. This is not misinformation. This is fact.

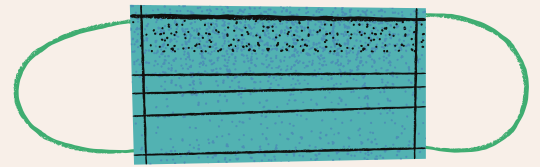
Despite this knowledge, I had confidence in the science and efficacy of the vaccines. And once I made it through the first 48 hours with minimal arm and shoulder soreness, I was relieved. Then the Monday night after the vaccine, I began feeling tightness in my chest and pain in my left underarm while I was in the shower. I realized my entire left pectoral area and my underarm were extremely swollen. It looked like I had half a 12-inch softball in my chest and a baseball under the surface of my underarm. I did like most men that I know, and I tried to tough it out. That lasted all about 40 minutes! I started to feel faint, Shortness of breath, Stabbing pain and my whole cell felt as though it was spinning. Luckily my cellmate was in the cell. He got the attention of our cell house worker and he called for the med-tech. When the nurse came to the cell house, I answered her question, "What's the problem?" by taking off my T shirt. She saw the obvious swelling and maybe even the grimacing on my face. She came back later with some Tylenol and said, "If it gets worse, let someone know." Two hours was about all I slept that night. And in the morning, I could hardly move my arm from the pain and swelling. So, I yelled for help.

It took 6 days for the pain and swelling to subside. In that time, I was shown support and care by a big portion of the community. Yet there were a few guys whose first statements to me were judgmental and sarcastic. One of our fellow North Parkers told me that what I went through still gave him the confidence to get his first vaccine.

My ordeal had given me the perspective that it wasn't just the history of malpractice and distrust between the government and people of color that was fueling the paranoia in Stateville. There are very tragic realities that all came into play during my ordeal, and I know moving forward if nothing changes in the system, patterns of neglect and malpractice will continue long after the world puts COVID-19 in the history books. In our minds, we know that some of the lives lost could have and should have been prevented. We will never forget them. Rest in peace to them all!



## THE PANDEMIC AND TRUMP BY RAY FERGERSON



The pandemic and Trump is what I have been saying in my 2 Zoom sessions that are oh so amazing to be a part of. Seeing technology, I had been wondering how it was for America's school kids. Hey, and now I think that I know: a person or a kid got to want it, or some may need the parents' guidances—that little push—that helps us out in life.

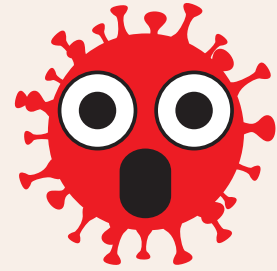
As for myself in this pandemic, well...my pandemic kind of started on Feb. 14, 2020, at the U of I where I had a double hernia surgery, where the doctor must have not liked me much because he used just one hernia mesh patch which he stretched from my right side of my body to the left, instead of using a mesh patch for each side. Like I informed him after over a year had gone by, had I been a toddler—you know, a small baby whose body is so small—he could have maybe gotten away with such an operation, but due to the fact that I'm not (I am 66 years of age, I weigh 230 pounds, and I'm at 5'11"), such a surgery has my lower body where he did the hernia surgery feeling like an accordion down there—which really plays a very painful song. The farther I walk around, or try and do some form of exercise, then things down there feel like it be growing! And as for the follow-up appointments, there were none. I was written back to the U of I in mid-March, not long after the surgery—where I was still in the dark that I had even had a double surgery, because in the last talk that I had with the doctor right before surgery, he informed me that I had nothing to worry about, and he drew a circle on the left side of my stomach, I think, to show where he would go in. And when I came back in about two or three weeks, I was so medicated due to all of the pains and discomforts that I knew something was very out of order, as well as wrong, but the doctor was saying give it time to heal. This was the same something that the doctors back at Stateville was saying as I began to complain about something being very wrong—they put me on more meds—wherein they think that Stateville's entire prison population are drug addicts, and they seem to care very little about what I was claiming to be an emergency that needed immediate help. They kept saying, "Give it time to heal, Ferguson"—Seeing that no one was listening to me, I had no other choice!

Okay, now there is talks of a lock-down coming up due to a virus, and much uncertainty, because at the time, none of Stateville prisoners or staff seemed to think much about the Coronavirus that was surging across Europe. Nevertheless, these Coronavirus talks are becoming breaking news on a daily basis—that for some reason seems like it won't go away—which is making it oh so strange—to myself, something like Donald Trump, I began to think—but to constantly see thousands of people in Europe who are said to be infected by this coronavirus, and that their hospitals are being overrun.

# *Let's Get Real COVID!*

## THE PANDEMIC AND TRUMP (CONTINUED...)

BY RAY FERGERSON



My thoughts in no way could process what was yet to come upon the shores of America, and even now after 589,224 (as of 5/23/21) deaths—along with a president who said to drink disinfectant, despite the fact that now the National Guards have been inside of Stateville Prison doing daily Covid-19 testing—and the entire planet has been on lockdown. Needless to say, I no longer bother to complain, or even ask for a follow-up appointment about a mess-up hernia surgery, especially after seeing that this coronavirus that had Europe on lock-down has now brought its devastation to America. Seeing prisoners go by being carried off by Stateville medical staff, and then hearing that so-n-so did not make it, contrasts to what was coming

### ***Trump on 9/9/20, 11:45 am, Breaking News:***

Bob Woodward, in his interview with Trump, revealed that he knew how dangerous and how highly contagious, airborne, and deadly coronavirus was back in February, and to top off the loss of so many lives, Trump says that he liked playing it down! Furthermore, that he did not want people to panic...

Yea, like what the world saw on Jan. 6, 2021, preceding a speech that Trump gave to a crowd of thousands—a distinct effort from Trump that put those protestors in a panic like none America has seen before—just like this pandemic, it's my first, and watching the siege on our Nation's Capitol, was also a first for me!

And being in a prison such as Stateville, which seems to go out of its way to make prisoners feel like we are the causing of the coronavirus pandemic.

It was Lt Anderson who came to work and killed himself out in the Stateville parking lot. May he rest in peace.

But yet still, Stateville locked-down its prisoners, where they're allowed NO movement for well over a week; anything that happens in another cellhouse, a fight of any kind, they put us on lock-down. The only kind words came from the TV memo channel, and Vickie, and North Park. Always words of prayers and strength, which have been very helpful to myself over this past year of Variants and pandemic! Nothing happens without God's will or his knowledge! Are we a better people now? I hope so!

*Ray Ferguson*



WITH SPECIAL GUEST MICHAEL "TALL MIKE" SULLIVAN

## A Writing Advisor's Journey

Two years ago, it was a humble and joyful experience for me to become a writing advisor for me. It meant that I had been endowed with the responsibility of helping my classmates write Standard American English (SAE). After looking at my task through an academic lens, I thought to myself, assisting someone with correctly writing a language they already spoke (English) should not be too challenging. However, what I could not foresee were the cultural speed bumps in terms of language which exist in the undercurrent of the awareness of some of my classmates.

One of the most important lessons I had to learn as a writing advisor was being able to adjust to the individuals I was helping by becoming proficient in more than SAE, especially, since the majority of the individuals were people of color such as myself. These individuals of color are bilingual speaking people whose mother's tongue was not SAE. For example, most of us acknowledge that if someone speaks Spanish, German, Arabic, or French as their mother's tongue and English as a second language, they will be recognized as bilingual. Yet, those like myself and many of my classmates whose mother's tongue is Ebonics (a language which means "black sound" and was created by African Slaves) and speak SAE as a second language will not be recognized as bilingual. The rhetorical question is, why are things this way? Why is Ebonics only seen by most as a social dialect of English, rather than as its own language? Being sensitive to this reality set in motion an event of awakening.

I reflected on the fact that most of my Ebonics-speaking classmates had written Ebonics beautifully. Their grammatical structures were a reflection of the loving mental system developed in their homes, while their phonology and morphology were rhythmically superb. These terrific writers, although efficient in Ebonics, struggled with proficiency in SAE. Seeing the problem manifest itself in real time, I understood that this was a problem that, as a writing advisor, I had to learn how to solve. I remember my writing Professor Melissa Pavlik teaching me that every language has its own deep structure that consists of words, phrases, and sentences that express writers' experiences. These rules apply to Spanish, German, Arabic, French, and Ebonics. These teachings compelled me to learn more about Ebonics as its own language. I learned that Ebonics is academically sound, having its own IPA Rudimentary, Pronunciation keys, International Phonetic Alphabet Transcription, and English Orthographic Spelling. Having obtained this knowledge, I believe that I am better equipped teaching how to write SAE to those whose mother's tongue is Ebonics. Our job as writing advisors is to help people become better writers of SAE while preserving their mother's tongue. With this being done, writing advisors will help people become their full self by recognizing their mother's tongue, an act which also means to recognize their humanity. Recognition of one's humanity may motivate a person to be proficient in two languages.



## Resurrection: A Rap by Marcos Ramirez

Mass Incarceration, how could we allow this?!  
They're closing down our schools and building up  
these prison houses!  
2.3 million locked up most are minorities.  
More than Russia?! More than China?! What A twist of  
irony!  
Let's iron these wrinkles out, no more gerrymandering  
No disenfranchisement laws, no civil death, no  
banishing  
Languishing, suppressing my vote cause "I'm" a Felon?!  
Now that's that New Jim Crow, Manipulate Elections  
With war on crime, War on Drugs, three strikes out,  
Doing Life  
It's not making sense though! It's not deterring crime!  
They are not preventing lives from falling by the  
wayside  
Invest in my education, don't leave me dumb when  
blind!  
Give me drug treatment, I need some job-training  
Coordinated support groups to help me re-integrate  
Don't let me recidivate in this Race to Incarcerate.  
Just because I am brown or black?! You racists should  
be ashamed!  
These racial disparities, they give me more clarity  
Abusing your powers from slaves to felons, like  
Pharisees  
You hypocrites! Brood of Vipers! Government  
syndicates!  
It's-not-till-it-hurts-your-pockets-that-you-are-decising-  
to-recondider-this?  
And while you're at it STOP manufacturing votes!  
We're not your constituents! We don't share the same  
interests!

We want prison reform and more logical  
sentences  
Make sense of this! Restoring us back as useful  
citizens  
Reach-them-and-teach-them-to-vote; Breed-  
them-to-meet-every-goal  
To-redeem-us-succeeding-deleting-the-evil-Jim-Crow  
And so, we Mobilize to reform  
dis-pre-por-tion-al-ized  
Last-that-were-formed-to-paralyze-us  
Prison-to-industrialize-us  
It's complex! Like schools-to-prison projects  
Cabrini to Stateville, they've got us stacked like objects!  
In this process, "we've" got the power  
To put down them guns and pick up ballots in this hour  
To pick up these books with North Park in these classes  
Acquire the knowledge and pay it forward to our  
families  
I thank God for Michelle and Vickie  
Melissa and Lyds keep it "Litty!"  
Alicia Reese, Cheryl Lynn, Sara Woody, and Katie  
DJ, April, Cheyenne; Acacia, Will and all our  
friends  
Forever we will Fend for all the poor and the  
oppressed!  
Together "we" can make a difference  
Strategize deliverance  
Restoring our voting rights and political might in  
this  
Typical fight it gives us spiritual sight and if  
We can persevere, watch the miracle rise and  
spread!

## RESURRECTION!!!



# The Poetry Avenue!

## Be the Voice

by Jami Anderson



Be the voice heard whispering upon the dawn  
 As the sun gains height  
 Let your voice grow strong.  
 Those days of tortured silence  
 Are now long gone.  
 It's time for you to realize  
 You had the fight in you all along.  
 The struggle for equality  
 Is not over yet.  
 Pull your bootstraps up  
 We've barely gotten our feet wet.  
 We can be as one voice  
 Crying in the wilderness.  
 One voice starting a movement  
 That can bring about togetherness.  
 As the sun goes down,  
 Don't let your voice wane  
 Though under this burden of truth  
 You can feel your shoulders strain.  
 We can help each other  
 Stand for what is good.  
 Even if your voice gives out  
 At least you know you stood.



## OVERCOMER

by Deborah "Dee Dee" Sims

Changing my thinking  
 can change my path  
 allowing me to overcome  
 my struggles and worries.

God's saying No More

He gives me the Power

to move mountains,

to break strongholds,

to know beyond a doubt

that He is in Control

My life isn't my own

I belong to Christ

He doesn't want me

to dwell in the past

but instead to move forward

in faith with no doubt

as to what He has called me

to be and to do

God's strength and mercy are more than enough for me!

He will give me all I need!

Don't worry my daughter

I do not condemn you

I cleanse you from those

Things which the enemy

Tries to bury you under.

Trust in Me!

Lean on Me!

Turn to me at all times

for all things

I love you my child.

And gave my all for you.

# Two Poems by Antonio "Slim" Balderas

## Ole Jim Crow



## Free Spirit

Ole-Jim-Crow where You go?  
 Ole-Jim-Crow You ain't gone no where!  
 Ole-Jim-Crow you still the same with all  
 Your racist comments and names!  
 Ole-Jim-crow folk say you showed up at  
 The United-States Capital building and shoved  
 Out, now tell us what's this really all about.  
 Ole-Jim-Crow when are you finally gonna let me go...  
 Ole-Jim-Crow why you keep showing your  
 Ugly character every generation or so?  
 Ole-Jim-Crow I simply can't take your  
 Racist bull-shit no'-mo!  
 Ole-Jim-Crow I am tired of you controlling  
 The social and political agenda, so why  
 Don't you pack up your MAGA hat and flag,  
 And let your racist ass hit the door.

High above the crowd and clouds I soar,  
 Reaching out to the heavens and more.  
 I only seek uncharted and unchallenged,  
 Shores.  
 I go forward destination unknown,  
 So I roam the clouds above the sky where  
 My mind can be free.  
 In the clouds among other birds of prey  
 I search my mind for a clearer path and  
 A Brighter day.  
 I Am high above the heavens where Free Spirits  
 Soar I reach out to allow my true destiny  
 To bravely roar.



## Visibility by Writing Advisor Jamie Thomasson

What is visibility? The definition states it's the capability of being seen.  
 Is there visibility is one's vision's or in one's dreams?  
 Is it like a speck in the horizon, something you know is there but cannot  
 yet be fully seen?  
 Depth perception is the key to visibility in a dream, the closer we get  
 to reaching it, the more of it we can see.  
 My dream may be far off, still just a speck in the sky, but I know one  
 day it will come true and that's the reason why  
 I cling to visibility.  
 Some people have tunnel vision, so focused on one thing,  
 they lose their visibility and give up on all their dreams.  
 Visibility can be sometimes blurry, I once was told,  
 out of focus lived lives, a mirage on a road.  
 Although we have not seen the lord, we still believe in a sight unseen.  
 The greatest gift God could ever give is the gift of visibility.

## Why Use Gender Inclusive Language?

By Antonio "TK" Kendrick

From the beginning of time and from one civilization to the next, societies have been dominated by patriarchal cultures. In past patriarchal cultures (and some present ones), where hegemonic masculinity was the norm, women had no real rights and were, often, looked at as second-class citizens. Women couldn't inherit property. They couldn't vote, and they had no leadership roles in public life. When women did challenge socially restrictive customs of their day, they were rebuked by their peers and scornfully rejected by the men.

To this day, there are some countries where women still can't get an education or drive. These antiquated ways of thinking and living are very hard to change. Why is that? Because males have been conditioned to think and feel in ways that enforce male gender superiority. Much of what we think are not even original thoughts. They are someone else's thoughts that have been externalized, institutionalized by society and internalized by us.

Growing up, I never thought about things like gender inclusive language. Why would I? After all, like James Brown sang, "It's a man's world." Right? Wrong! It's time for us to be more mindful of our conditioned behavior and start practicing the truth that we were all made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). There's not one human being in the past nor in the present that was not made in God's image. So, why do we feel compelled to minimize and marginalize the existence of other people who may not look like us or share our perspectives about life?

Some of you who took Professor Armida's Theology class may remember that she insisted that we use gender inclusive language in our writing assignments. Professor Armida wanted us to acknowledge and embrace the divine right of equality for all. Instead of saying "all men are created equal," does saying "everyone is created equal" change the meaning? Instead of saying "man was made in the image of God," does saying "humanity was made in the image of God" change the meaning? No, it doesn't. It just makes our language more "INCLUSIVE" and reminds everyone that they are not on this earth by chance and that they have a place in our beloved community.

Did you know that the word "man" is used in the Bible 2563 times and the word "woman" 340 times? Insane, right? For those of you who have women and girls you love in your life, how do you think that fact would make them feel? What statement is that making? How can we explain that?

Someone once told me, "when you know more, you owe more." We can't change the past, but we can do better and be better going forward. So, when we write, talk, and pray, let us include everyone. You do that by using gender inclusive language.

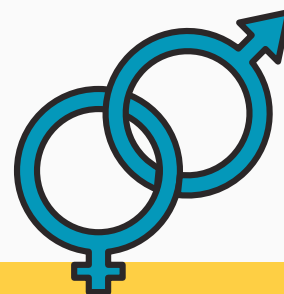
As a black man, I know that there was a time when my people weren't considered human to some. There was a time when the dysfunctional theology that my people were not made in the image of God was espoused. There was, also, a time when the U.S. Supreme Court in *Dred Scott v. Sanford* held that black people had no rights that a white man was bound to respect. We knew that we were human and that we were made in the image of God – even when our oppressors refused to acknowledge it. We knew that we had God-given rights – even though some white men in black robes said that we had none.

The practice of using gender inclusive language is not a meaningless expansion of your social and academic lexicon. It's a declaration of our respect for others. It is a declaration of our love for our neighbors.

And lastly, it's about never forgetting what it feels like to exist in the margins of society knowing that our oppressors pushed us there. For any person of color – especially a black person – to devalue the life of a human being after what we have gone through as a people is hypocrisy of the highest order. Remember what Professor Cheryl Lynn Cain said: "It's not about our position. It's about our posture."

Your position is about you and what you may or may not feel comfortable with. However, your posture is about God and the love he commands us to demonstrate in order to grow his Kingdom.

So, what will you choose: your position or your posture?





## American Democracy under Fire

by Vaughn Washington

I for one like the idea of democracy. I think most people do; even young kids when trying to settle a dispute will say let's vote on it. Most people like to have a say-so in the events that concern them. Democracy has been a form of government that has been around for a long time, and the ancient Greeks tried it out before the birth of Christ.

Democracy really got popular in the 17th century when the people of Europe got tired of taking orders from the Kings and the Popes of that continent, so they decided to leave and form a democracy in America. Some of these freedom seekers, however, were White Supremacists who thought they were the only ones worthy of living in a democracy as a free human being, in spite of what they wrote in their declaration that "all men are created equal." They perhaps took that phrase straight out of the scriptures because Genesis 1:26-27 says, "God created Humankind in the image of God; male and female were created in the image of God."

The founding fathers left the female part out of the Declaration, along with the Blacks, Native Americans, basically anyone else who was not white, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant. They sort of looked upon themselves as God's chosen people. So the women had to wait about 150 years to vote, and Black people under Jim Crow had to wait about 200 years, but finally everyone got the right to vote. Then in 2008 a lot of Black, brown, and white people voted for Barack Obama as President of the United States. This, of course, infuriated the White Supremacists. Donald Trump, a man who really had nothing in his "wheelhouse" and nothing in his background to recommend him for President of the United States, sensed the mood of the White Supremacists and others who were discontent with the economy, cultural changes, and other grievances against the government, and he started feeding them lies.

Donald Trump started out with the birth certificate lie—that Barack Obama was born in Kenya. His lies were mostly "attack-lies." He next attacked the immigrants,

then the Press—with which he had great success—everything that the Press wrote that was unfavorable to him was "fake news." And even when his lies were exposed, he just kept lying and people kept believing. Surely, he must have adopted this strategy from Adolf Hitler who was purported to have said, "If you tell a lie big enough and long enough, the people will believe it."

Some of Trump's lies are so unreasonable they border on absurdity. For instance, it is inconceivable that the IRS do not know who is a citizen of the United States, yet even today some Trump supporters believe that former President Obama was born in Kenya. So, why do so many people believe Trump's lies, even church people?

One answer may be found in Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah's book *Unsettling Truths* which states, "For the church, the social imagination can be influenced by the theological imagination..." (33). The diseased theological imagination (such as Christendom, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the Myth of Anglo-Saxon Purity) contributed to a dysfunctional social imagination (white supremacy) that has perpetuated unjust leaders, systems, and structures.

I fear that Trump's last big lie has dealt our democracy a blow that it cannot recover from. Right now, his big lie about winning the election is spreading like wildfire and causing voting changes in all the states run by Republican legislators. Americans that heretofore would have accepted the election results without a qualm now believe that it was stolen from them without any proof or evidence that it was—they are just taking Trump's word for it. Which, by the way, years before January 6th he boasted that if he lost the election of 2020 he would not accept the results.

Before January 6th, people could say, "Well, it is just politics. All politicians lie—" but after the loss of six lives and an assault on the Capitol Building of the United States of America by its own citizens, I think this is a bit more than politics as usual. You

have some people saying, “It’s over with” and “let’s move on,” especially Republicans. One Republican Congressman said with a straight face that January 6th was just another tourist crowd strolling through the building. This same Congressman can be seen cowering behind a barricaded door while rioters/insurrectionists were storming the building with shouts of “Hang Mike Pence.”

President Biden said the worst threat to our democracy is white supremacy. He said this while speaking at the one-hundred anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre. Some people are just learning about what happened one hundred years ago in Oklahoma. It was swept under the rug. They want the January 6th insurrection swept under the rug also. They say no to a bi-partisan commission, let’s just move on, the country needs to heal, they say, but 100 years of silence has not brought healing to the residents of Greenwood, Oklahoma.

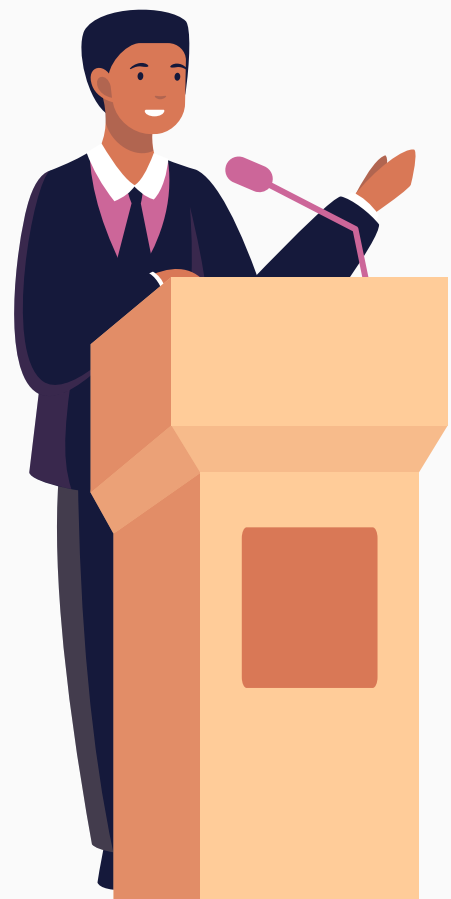
In the year 2000 the Supreme Court decided that President Bush had won the presidency over Al Gore. It was one of the closest election counts in history, but Al Gore accepted the Supreme Court’s decision and conceded. In 2020 the Supreme Court ruled that Joe Biden had won the election over Trump, but Trump refused to concede. What happened in the 2020 and 2000 elections is analogous to the story of the two women in Scripture that both claimed the ownership of a baby (1 Kings 3:16-17).

The two women had given birth at the same time. They were sleeping in the same bed with their infants. One of the women rolled over on her child while sleeping and killed her child. When she awoke and saw what she had done, she switched her dead child with the live one. When the other woman woke, she noticed the switch and demanded her baby. The two women were brought before King Solomon, both claiming the child. King Solomon ordered the child cut in half and one half given to each. But the real mother said give the baby to the other woman because she could not stand to see her child cut in two. But after the Supreme Court declared Biden the winner, after the votes in all 50 states had been counted and recounted, Trump is still

hacking away at our democracy.

Most politicians hold our democracy sacred. America’s democracy has been a light on a shining hill to the world. It cost thousands of lives to establish it in the Revolutionary War, and hundreds of thousands to preserve it in the Civil War. America’s democracy, though fragile at times, has weathered the storm of fascism so far—how dare he, Donald Trump, tamper with our democracy in such a casual fashion? If America’s democracy fails, nothing would please his pal Vladimir Putin and the rest of the despots of the world more.

Our greatest weapon in this fight for the soul of America is truth. We have to tell the truth, no matter how unsettling it may be. No congressperson or official should be able to lie to the people with impunity. Lies are not free speech when coming from our legislators; they carry a threat of a “clear and present danger.” What happens to a democracy when its people have lost faith in its elections?





## *The Amplifier* with Alex Negron and Leanne Childs

**From Alex Negron:** *One of the most important aspects of writing is being able to look at a particular subject from every possible angle. Donald Murray calls it circling the subject. In *The Craft of Revision*, Murray says, "I just don't plunge in and write the obvious response to an assignment or writing task even when I am on deadline. I stand back and study the assignment or my writing idea from different points of view...the way a candid photographer circles around a rock star to snap pictures from every possible angle" (10).*

*When it comes to the subject of pedagogy in an incarcerated context, Maggie Shelledy did not circle the subject in a way that fully represents incarcerated citizens. As members of a writing community, sometimes we must push back when one does not properly circle a subject about a particular group or community. Leanne Child's response does just that. Leanne highlights and reemphasizes the goals and standards by which the School of Restorative Arts stands by when it comes to prison education and rehabilitation. She does a great job of pushing back against Shelledy's notion of prisoners making their captivity a home, and I enjoyed reading her claims that supported her argument. Thank you, Leanne, for that amazing piece; it definitely brought to light a most important angle missing in Shelledy's article.* **And now...here's Leanne:**

I'm a new student with North Park Theological Seminary's School of Restorative Arts, and I am taking courses within a women's prison in Lincoln, Illinois with a group of 19 others. We were supposed to start our course work about a year ago, but Covid came, and as you know, ruined EVERYTHING. That being said, we were thankful to finally get our first class, "WRIT5000," started a few months ago with Professor Melissa. Don't get me wrong, I personally have been frustrated to say the least with "correspondence only" course work and have felt that I am missing out in huge ways by not being able to have the full classroom experience that goes along with higher learning. Nevertheless, I can actually feel my brain pumping blood and doing sit-ups, so that part makes me happy and grateful for the opportunity to be part of this school, despite the circumstances.

This leads me to the article I am speaking on. Our main focus in this class, and most of our assignments, has been to address an article by Maggie Shelledy which is more or less about education in a prison setting. I live on the same unit with a few of my classmates. I think most of us have not been in any formal learning environment for at least 10 years—some of us more—so to say we were each initially overwhelmed with the lengthy article, its jargon-filled content and expansive vocabulary, is an understatement. We had no dictionaries, no internet, nothing but, possibly, each other. Initially, none of us wanted to admit to each

other that we were lost in understanding what Shelledy was even talking about, but then I decided to ask one of my classmates if she'd mind if we bounced ideas off each other to at least see if we were getting the same understanding. Another of our classmates saw us and asked to join, then a fourth. (As a side bar, I think it took a level of trust from each of us to believe that we could talk openly about our thoughts and not worry about the other purposely or inadvertently taking those thoughts as her own—but our desire to complete our assignment, gain understanding, and find reassurance in our own intellect and comprehension skills overrode that hesitation.) Each of us had our own insights to contribute. Overall, our individual summaries of what Shelledy was writing about seemed to match each other, which allowed us to walk away from the table with the confidence we needed to not quit the class but instead complete the first assignment (summarizing the article).

Each week moving forward, we were required to complete various assignments concerning the article for the purpose of making sure we were leveled up to NPU writing standards because we will be beginning our "real" course work in fall. (Why am I sharing all this? I'm getting there, so stick with me.) Ultimately, we each had to come up with a thesis and response to Shelledy's article. And then, 6 weeks later, Professor Melissa advised and encouraged me to submit my paper to this newsletter, which I was very hesitant to do, if for no other reason than I'm not





Leanne Childs (cont...)

confident in being critical of someone's work who is clearly far more advanced in her education than I am. Plus, I do not ever intend to discount another person's opinions, let alone the respected scholarship Shelledy has relied on in completing her own analysis. However, I will say that, as an inmate, I happen to have first-hand insight she could only glean from the other ex-inmates she interviewed.

This is not by any means a thorough "break down" of her article, nor my thoughts, on the matter. This is merely an exercise in thesis writing that morphed into an essay of sorts, backed up by my personal "expertise" as a long-time inmate who has always taken an interest in my education as well as observed those around me who haven't. Overall, Shelledy is correct and accurate in her assessment of the benefits of in-prison education, but there are certain points in her writing (and I believe also in the minds of most scholars) that should be noted as wrong.

## Resilient Dwelling vs. Homemaking: Where Shelledy Went Wrong by Leanne Childs

Maggie Shelledy's article, "If It Hadn't Been for Writing, I Think I Would Have Lost My Mind: Resilient Dwelling and Rhetorical Agency in Prison Writing," reaffirms the growing belief that higher education within prison, specifically writing instruction, aids in rehabilitation. Shelledy questions, though, how the progressive view from which this idea originates fails to accurately reflect the prison classroom and the precise roles incarcerated people play in the rehabilitative process. She introduces a concept of resilient dwelling as the incarcerated person's everyday efforts to maintain who they are and stay focused in an environment designed to be abusive and indifferent. Shelledy suggests that in this struggle, the incarcerated are not just surviving, but making a home within the prison walls. She insists that this act of homemaking is practiced with or

without higher education in her warning against assuming that pedagogy gives "a voice" to a person who otherwise would not have one; moreover, she challenges the idea that in-prison instruction is less about academia and more about providing the incarcerated with a means to be able to self-reflect, find growth, and further develop within that education. Through analysis of various studies and her own interviews of incarcerated men, Shelledy determines that despite the systemic oppression created through imprisonment, the incarcerated individual is formidable in his own autonomy as well as in maintaining human connections. Shelledy's position is that one of the many ways resistance and resilience are achieved is by the individual creating her own conversations of empowerment through different agencies of writing. Shelledy urges that formal instruction should be viewed only as one type of format that can be utilized by the incarcerated as they continue in their resiliency.

When scholars argue that pedagogy should not be recognized for giving a voice or imparting knowledge, or they translate that finding ways to remain resilient indicates that a prisoner is settling into his prison life, a false assumption is created that all incarcerated individuals have the same overall exigencies at any given moment. This seems to be counterproductive to the goal of the social reform and empowerment for which Shelledy is advocating. Although I agree with her overall conclusions, I argue that in challenging and splitting hairs over the discourse of theoretical perspectives related to the classroom's specific role versus the incarcerated's experience, Shelledy perpetuates the very dehumanizing effect she speaks against by being dangerously suggestive that the incarcerated are embracing their captivity and do not need formal in-prison education.

Shelledy determines that the incarcerated have plenty of opportunities to express themselves and to find reflection and growth outside of formal in-prison instruction; therefore, she claims pedagogy should be careful not to



# *The Amplifier*

Leanne Childs (cont...)

elevate itself above the incarcerated as an agency of change. It seems her concern is that not recognizing that an inmate already has that power (even without educational agency) perpetuates the idea that an inmate is “lesser-than” by societal standards (Shelledy, 2019, 3-7). I argue that there is no fallacy in allowing proper credit to be given to pedagogy for imparting knowledge and giving voice to someone who otherwise did not have that voice or knowledge. However, there is fallacy in lumping all incarcerated individuals into a single category rather than recognizing their differences and their different needs and abilities as well as inabilities.

There are all types of people in free society, each with varying personal motives, ambitions, and levels of intelligence and confidence, and those are just some of the many characteristics that go into choosing self-improvement, choosing not to improve, or not being aware that there is a choice. I think it is important to keep in mind that this is no less true of the assortment of people in the incarcerated world. That being said, those inmates who are active participants in seeking education and awareness of agency are the people who are consciously striving towards betterment, and it is likely because they have realized they are missing something or in need and cannot achieve this endeavor independently.

Having been sent to prison shortly after my 18th birthday, I do not believe I have always possessed a conscious level of self-reflection as is suggested in Shelledy’s article (2019, 2-7). If I had, I would have made choices that were more evident of that and probably not be in prison. Very early in my incarceration, I came to understand that most inmates are not afforded the everyday life experiences that allow people of free society to naturally round into maturity as they age (such as going to school, entering college, working for a real paycheck, paying bills, and having all the life effecting responsibilities, connections, and relationships that go into the natural progression of ‘growing up’); therefore, I needed to make a conscious effort to find examples of what it means to be an adult in order to then consciously

model my thinking and behavior. I was able to find most of my examples through Christian “teaching” books, my in-prison college teachers, as well as the school experience and structure itself of test-taking and homework. These were the places I relied upon for solid information as well as to understand proper communicative skills, responsibilities, and prioritization of those responsibilities, all of which goes hand-in-hand with Shelledy’s examination of the classroom as a catalyst of agency (2019, 5-7).

However, my point is that I am an active participant in seeking my education as an avenue to grow and learn **because** I recognize, as does most of society, that people rarely learn from themselves. There is almost always someone else involved in the process; pedagogy’s very purpose is to bring enlightenment, knowledge, and power (or, in essence, give voice). If this were not true, why do we depend on schools to not just “give” our children the beginning blocks of their entire lives, but also to carry them through their formative years, and continue to support through vocational and university studies, well into adulthood? Shelledy’s error is in the fact that she is isolating teacher-student interactions to “in-prison” education instead of recognizing that imparting a voice and/or knowledge is what should and does occur in all healthy student-teacher interactions. These relationships are neither subjugating nor dehumanizing but are merely the nature of that specific liaison.

In keeping with that ideal, inmates who are not actively seeking education are the ones who I see time and time again through recidivism. It stands to reason that these individuals do not have the reflective abilities or the willpower to change and grow on their own, which is in opposition to what much of Shelledy’s perspectives seem based upon. I believe that most scholars and incarcerated women (and I will assume, for now, men) would readily recognize that the majority of people who are in prison have suffered in multiple degrees of traumatizing events throughout their lives, which

likely contributed to their choices to engage in criminal behavior. (Furthermore, it is likely that these people do not even recognize their life experiences as traumatically impactful.) Therefore, they are probably lacking important components that prevent them from finding betterment. If society is going to continue to use prison as the response and answer to every delinquent decision, a more accurate viewpoint for a prison educator or penal system, to begin from in providing the appropriate agency for change is to see a person for exactly who and what they are in that moment: a person who is deficient. By assuming that a person (locked up or otherwise) should have, or does have, a voice without it being supplied through any formal instruction, one could mistakenly denote that all inmates should know, and therefore do, better, which then implies that all people are at the same level of autonomy and self-awareness. This ideology creates the potential to overlook a person's needs and the opportunity to help them find growth and ultimately justifies punishment over rehabilitation and reform.

I challenge that it is incorrect to assume that those who are not seeking education, but instead are choosing to stay in their dysfunction, could not benefit from an extra push towards empowerment. This idea holds true to its practice in free society; therefore, why would it not carry at least equal significance where, as Shelledy notes, negativity, trauma, and every known psychological risk factor exists within the world of incarceration (2019, 4-10)? I agree with Shelledy that a convicted criminal is no less a human being, capable of making better choices, and is likely practicing positive behaviors congruous with humaneness without being "shown the way" by someone else. However, if Shelledy's model is adopted, how will teachers perform their profession when they are not permitted to recognize an individual's inability to make conscious decisions toward self-improvement?

The bottom line is that those who want better will do so, but that does not excuse us from leaving behind those who do not, as well as those who

## *The Amplifier*

Leanne Childs (cont...)



are somewhere in the middle, which could happen if we are letting people believe that they already have all the answers and cannot benefit from the input, guidance, and leadership provided by pedagogy. Giving education its due credit as having the ability to impart on the unlearned, and sometimes unwilling, does not demote a student in such a classroom to less of a human being. It makes the pedagogue the teacher and the inmate the student. This dynamic should be considered a necessary requirement in the penal system and seems at risk of being lost in Shelledy's argument.

In Shelledy's dispute over the specific role of the prison classroom in achieving reformation, she explains that a person experiences social death when he loses dignity, hope, and his overall selfhood through violence and duress. She illustrates rhetorical agency and in-prison education as tools of resiliency and resistance against this social death (2019, 9-10). Shelledy makes the argument that it is through resilient dwelling that "...the prison classroom and its attendant ways of being support the everyday struggle to not only survive prison, but to inhabit it, to make a kind of home there" (2019, 2). Her position is that higher education is not as much about finding ways to be able to temporarily adapt as it is about taking up residence as well as using agencies of the classroom while in prison as a means of growing and developing towards personal betterment. She determines that inmates are making a home by forming relationships, helping and encouraging each other, finding ways to mature, and just overall fostering creative ways of getting along, getting by, and remaining connected despite their limited means and subjugated environment (2019, 9-18). I agree that these interactions are practiced in prison, but in explaining this theory, Shelledy ultimately misses the mark by implying that resilient dwelling is tantamount to making prison "a home."

Leanne Childs (cont...)



As I earlier illustrated through my own experience, rehabilitation often begins with a person recognizing that she no longer wants to subject herself to the people and environment she finds herself encompassed in, and she needs growth and change to achieve that. In my many years of personal observation, conversations, and experience, educational programming (including rhetorical agency) serves the incarcerated for all things related to outside the prison walls, whether that entails using instruction to get days in order to make it out sooner, for the purpose of staying out by creating options that the person recognizes he may not have had otherwise, or even just for the sake of finding distraction from not being out. It is in the action of focusing beyond the walls that one finds the strength and will to keep going while being held in captivity and **not** in looking at, interacting with, or living amongst the oppressive environment surrounding that person.

Resilient dwelling is a concept used by all individuals in survival mode. It is well-documented that the Jewish people suffered horrendous torture and oppression while caged inside the Nazi concentration camps, yet those who survived found their strength to hang on to their humanity, help each other, and find recovery despite the atrocities they endured. I believe I can reasonably assume that none of them ever considered that environment as their home or even "living." They did what was necessary for survival while focusing on the hope of release and reunion with their loved ones..."going home." As an inmate who has served over 23 years alongside others who have sometimes served longer, I insist that this resilience comes from a struggle in order to get through or past a circumstance but never to welcome that circumstance by making it a home. Despite all of our capabilities as human beings to connect with others while incarcerated and to find ways to make do, I do not agree that incarcerated people should find appreciation in anywhere that they are being held against their will and away from their

loved ones; if they do, I question if they are suffering from an unfortunate incidence of some form of Stockholm syndrome. It is more dehumanizing and demoralizing for me as an incarcerated mother of one serving a natural life sentence that a person would suggest that I should, could, or would get comfortable with where I am because that translates that I belong in a cage, away from my home and son, as well as other civilized people. It seems that this is Shelledy's implication in her translation of resilience as habitation, and to believe this would cause my social death faster than anything else.

Society already views the incarcerated as criminals who are exactly where they belong getting exactly what they deserve. If the incarcerated find ways in their personal survival experiences to maintain their humanity (or find it) and be empowered, reflect, and grow without education or other forms of outside agency, then it can be argued that higher education is a waste of time and resources that could be going to individuals who are not learning to live in and accept a prison as a place of permanent residence. Likewise, if pedagogy is not given its proper credit as being not just a form of educational agency, but as passing on to a person something they otherwise would not have had, that lack of credit could ultimately justify not using higher education as a resource in reformation.

It is not dehumanizing to recognize an inmate's ability to be resilient and maintain her connections to herself and to humanity with or without higher education. But it is dehumanizing to mistake an incarcerated person's resiliency for being comfortable with inhabiting the prison she is being held captive in. It is not dehumanizing to recognize another human being's need for help, guidance, and leadership. But it is dehumanizing to split hairs on discourse, thereby analyzing the incarcerated as if they are not even an assortment of lab rats, but rather one singular lab rat that needs in depth study and multiple theories of rationale in order to be understood simply as a human being. I agree with Shelledy that resilient dwelling and rhetorical agency are helpful tools in maintaining sanity and human connections (2019, 17); however, my

# The Amplifier



Leanne Childs (cont...)

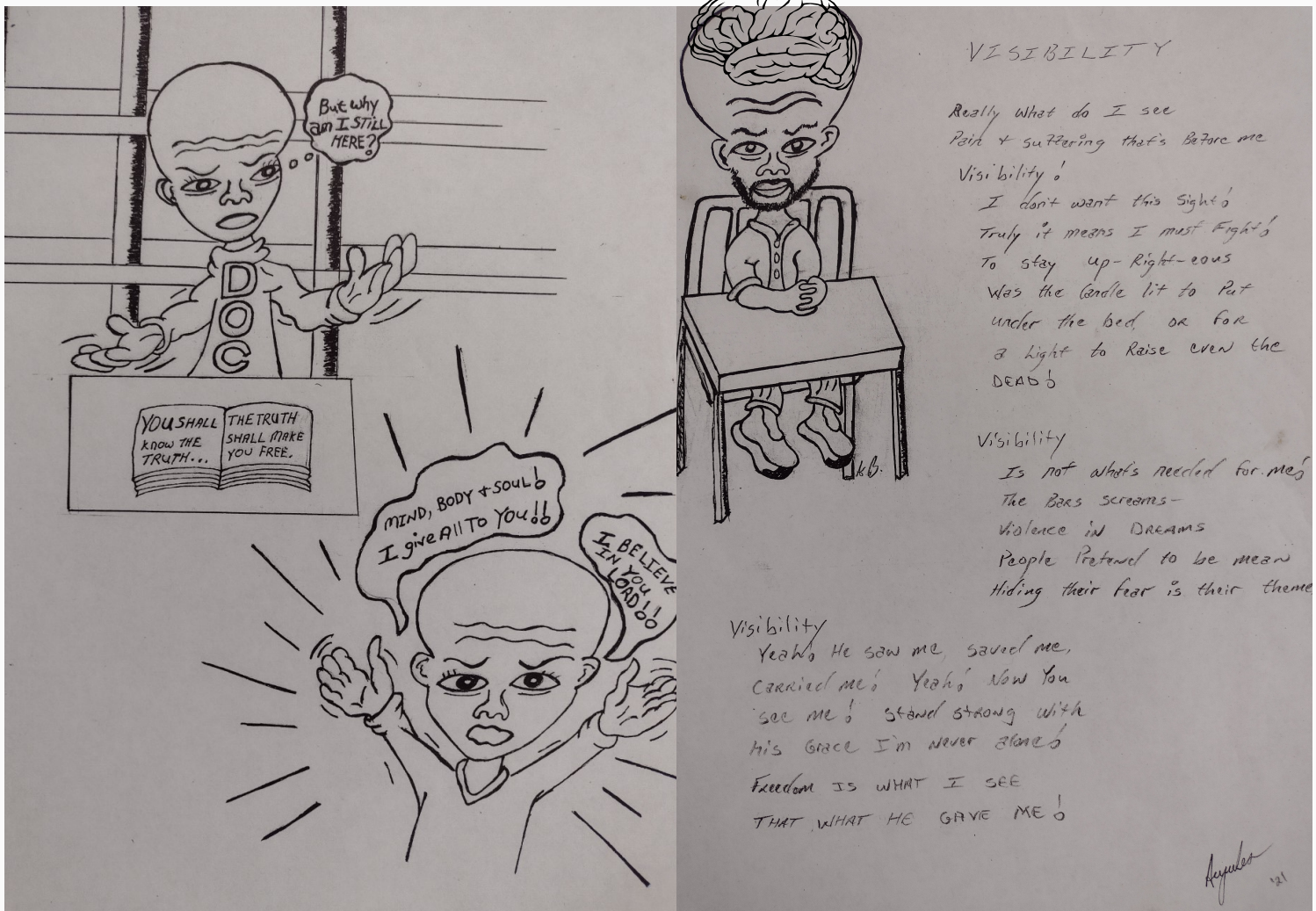
agreement is limited in that it does not allow for the incarcerated to mistake the prison life their true and free life that they know as their only home, nor does it allow for others to believe that the incarcerated make this mistake. The incarcerated do benefit from rhetorical agency as a means of self-improvement as well as in opening doors for opportunities, but the fact is

that all incarcerated people are individual human beings, and so, while one may seek these opportunities, another may benefit from someone forcing (or coddling) in order for him to recognize his own potential. That, to me, is not dehumanization but rather social work bringing social change in its purest form.

## Work Cited

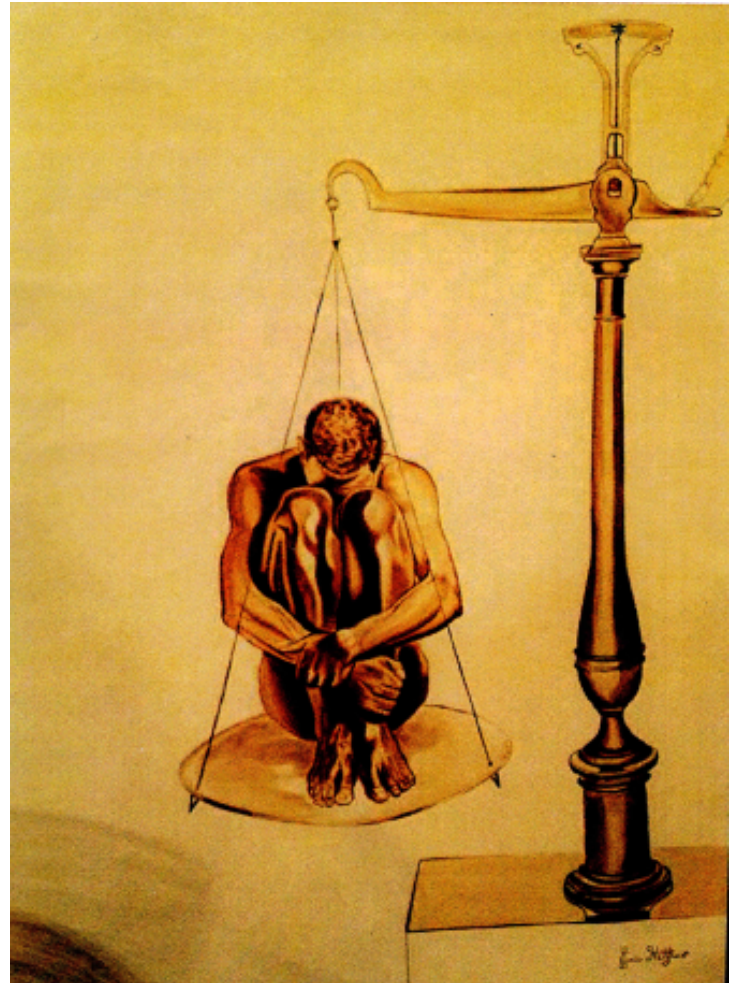
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# The Artist's Space!



By Aryules Bivens

By William Jones



By William Jones



“Imbalance: The Need for Restorative Justice”

Author: **Eric Watkins**

Medium: Oil on Canvas

Meaning: Figures: There are 3 major figures in my painting: a nude human being, a single scale with an unequal sign at its center, and a large powerful finger. When a human being is judged, convicted, and sentenced, they are placed in a powerless—stripped of their power—liked the unclothed naked human being. They are placed on an uneven, imbalanced scale of ‘justice.’ Wherein, those with power have the upper hand and with a single finger accuse, shame, and judge the value of other human beings. This imbalance is commonly seen in courts of law and courts of public opinion. Retributive justice perpetrates victimization, while restorative justice works to end victimization by valuing all human beings. What do you see?



The visual art below is a sermon in itself. Can you identify specific elements?  
(Hint: New Testament)

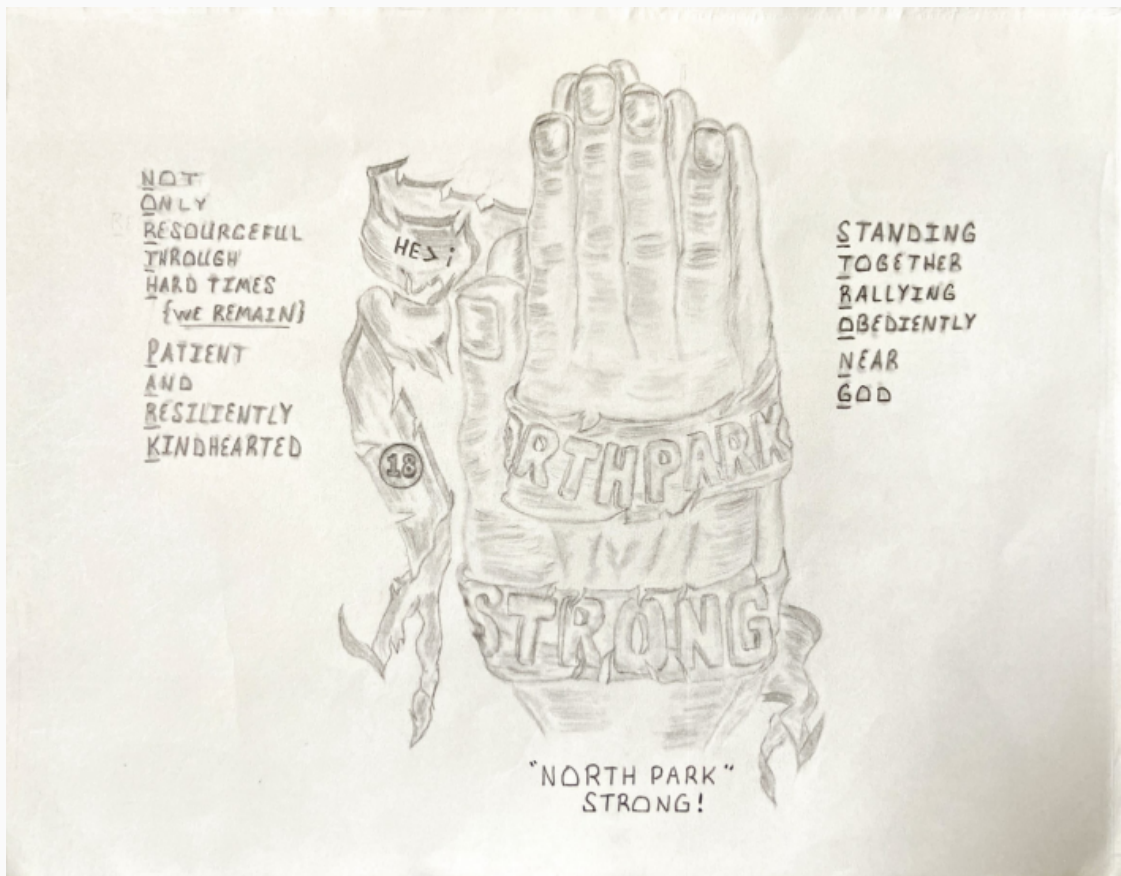




## *Closing by Katie Williams*

As I was ruminating on this theme, I was reminded of this African Proverb: “if you want to walk fast walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.” By stepping into one another’s shoes—by learning with and from one another and opening ourselves up to other people’s stories—we are able to walk further together. At the beginning of this publication, our incredible co-editor Tall Mike introduced this issue's theme by stating that “walking in someone else’s shoes allows us to share the same space, which is the foundation of community.” As I read on, my heart swelled with gratitude to all of the contributors in this issue for allowing us to share space with you; for allowing us to walk in your shoes! We will all go further because of it. Thank you for your vulnerability, your thoughtfulness, and sharing your talent with all of us; that is such a gift.

-- Katie (aka “Katie With The Cool Kicks.” What an appropriate nickname for this issue!)



By Ro'Derick Zavala