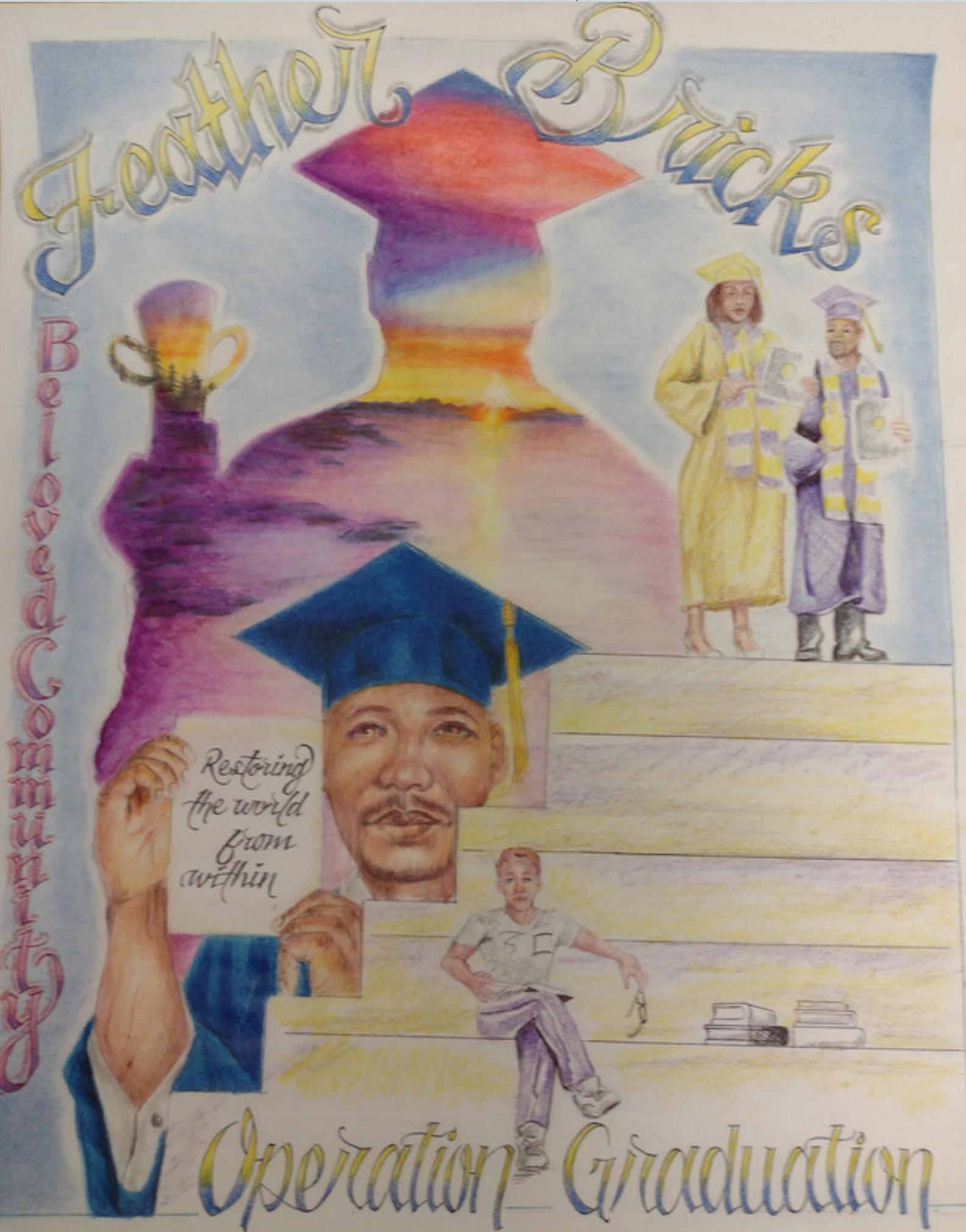


# Feather Bricks

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Cover Art by C.D. Everett, Benny Rios, and Michael Sullivan

# Feather Bricks

The Official Newsletter of North Park Theological Seminary's  
School of Restorative Arts



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**Michael "Tall Mike" Sullivan**



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## *Letter from the Editors: Scott Moore, Benny Rios, Jason Munoz, and Lydia VanderStelt*



What's up NPTS universe and Stateville class of 2022?!?!

The fact that we're writing this letter to all of you right now can only mean two things: 1. After years of trying, Melissa has finally found a way to "persuade" me, Benny, and Jason into being co-editors for an issue of *Feather Bricks* (though, persuading the three of us was a heck of a lot easier after someone suggested putting us on blast in bold print for all of the world to see, eh, Lydia?); and 2. We have actually made it to our graduation - "Operation Graduation!!" Hard to believe, especially if you consider where we started from.

I don't know about the three of you, but I can still remember how completely out of place I felt on the first day of the program way back in September of 2018. There we were discussing *On Christian Doctrine* as we sat in Theology 5110 with Professor/Doctor/Dean/Director extraordinaire, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom: Jason going on and on about love, Benny acting like he NOSE what St. Augustine is talking about, and me looking like a deer in the headlights. I mean, as far as I was concerned, Chapter 2 of the book might as well have been called, "What a Thing is and What a Sign...and What the H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks-Is You Talking about, Bro?!"

And who could forget our classes with Dr. Kenneth "The Man, The Myth, The...Librarian" Sawyer? Well, come to think of it, a bunch of my colleagues could probably forget his class since I had to constantly wake them up as Prof. Ken so eloquently delivered some of the nicest diatribes in the history of Christian History 5210! (Because it was 6:30 a.m., Dr. Ken, and definitely not because you were so boring 😊.)

Then, there was our Old and New Testament classes with Prof. Andrews where we all learned just how painstakingly tedious, yet rewarding - of course, oh so rewarding - an Exegesis paper can truly be. But if the benefit of learning how to contextualize and apply Scripture from Will the Thrill wasn't enough, his class was also where - thanks in part to the esteemed Andrew McKenna - I learned the distinction of "White Guy #2" (shout out to our Brother Morgan Hake. May God's grace and mercy keep you healthy and safe. You're in our thoughts and prayers).

Hmm wait a minute, wasn't that right around the time we began our journey towards becoming Writing Advisors through the Writing Center, featuring the aforementioned Melissa Pavlik and company? Where Jason and I ruined being letter partners for everyone? Talk about laughter being medicine for the soul, right Benny?...



...Yes, Scotty Pooh (in case some of you were wondering, Scott goes by "Scotty Pooh" or "SP" for short 😊), our journey together certainly has been filled with a lot of laughter, often at the expense of making fun of each other, AND we might've even learned a few things along the way! It's funny how SP mentioned feeling so out of place in our Theology class with Prof/Director/Dean/Rev. Michelle, because by the end of the course she called Scott a Scholar and a Theologian. So, what am I? Chopped liver?! And one last shot at SP before I get to the important stuff...Scott forgot to mention that Lydia is also a co-editor-adjacent along with us on this issue. Looks as if the patriarchy in him hasn't been weeded out as of yet. I guess it makes sense, though, if you look at his IDI development continuum - not that I would do that! Wait.... does Scotty Pooh need four more years at NPTS? NPU? Both?!?

Seriously though, we hope you all find this issue funny, inspiring, and uplifting. Yes, we laugh at and with one another (look no further than the way SP, Jason and I comment on the "Amplifier" piece in this issue from the homie Alex), AND our prayer is that this edition of *Feather Bricks* can be a tool used in the journey towards healing ourselves, our families, our communities, and our world. For me, these past six years have embodied that healing - like a roller coaster of sorts. But not like the kind of roller coaster where you feel like throwing up by the time it's over (actually I'll keep you posted on that 😊). No, this healing journey is like the kind of roller coaster that has always strengthened my resilience and sense of community through good times and bad. As such, it is truly an honor to co-edit this issue with Lydia, SP, and my

*Letter from the Editors cont...**Scott Moore, Benny Rios, Jason Munoz, and Lydia VanderStelt*

By the way, Jason is also my cellie now. This was not by our decision, but I think that the two of us landing in the same cell is God demonstrating a Divine sense of humor with this thought in mind: "Ha, let's see how strong and resilient your patience really is, Benny!"

So, it might turn out that I'm not quite as patient as I thought I was...

What do you think, Jason?...

...Well, considering that just before I started to write this letter you yelled at me without cause, I'd say you have no discernable patience whatsoever. However, I will pray for you and thank God for a Divine Design that keeps the two of us in such close proximity (once all my anger subsides 😊). So, Cohort 1: This is crazy, ain't it?! I keep feeling that at any moment I am going to be exposed as a complete fraud. This level of exposure to knowledge has been a very humbling experience. Everything I thought I knew about love and life and reality has all been challenged at different points throughout the program, and it's made me realize just how little I really know about anything.



Am I alone in that feeling? I can't be, right? Right?!? Nevertheless, here we are: ready to graduate and hopefully share with the world what we have learned so far. We love y'all and salute you in this historic moment of honor and achievement. SP made mention of our foundational teachers, but we'd also like to give a shout out to Dominique, Kim and Henry, Dr. Elizabeth, Michelle Dodson, David, Prof. Bates, Soong-Chan Rah, Hauna, Prof. Paul and Obed, Jules, Phil, and of course, Melissa. Then there's Mary V., Sue, Janice, Alicia, Sally, Sandy, Lance, Pastor Jeff, Rev. Cheryl LC, Dean K, and all of the other faculty, volunteers, and students who've made this into what it is today. (By the grace of God, am I right?) Are we forgetting anyone? Hmmm I've Virtually named everyone who is Vital or of any Value... Nope, I think we're all good here, right? Anything you'd like to add, lil' sis? (That's Lyds for those who know)...

Oh nowwww the woman can speak. Just as soon as there's no more space in this edition.

Classic 😊. Mental note to not suggest these three again... (If you made it this far into the letter/Ted Talk/dissertation from the co-editors, I would say you should go on ahead and write yourself a "Getting through the Co-Editor's Letter" Certification for it.)

Picking up where Jason left off, we of course couldn't forget the Queen herself: Vickie! I mean. From switching everything to correspondence, figuring out Zoom, and so much more, I think I can speak for all of us when I say - thank you for doing "all of the things!"



As Jason was saying, the past four years have blown away everything I've ever known about everything in the best way possible. As our classmate Mike P./Tony/Assistant Director of the Writing Center/Professor Pizarro joked with me, I was a "baby bird" coming into class. If SP was a "Deer in the headlights", I was that little bird peeking out the nest at the top of the tree, looking at the jump I had to take out of the nest to make sure my wings worked. (And, I gotta say, there were times where my wings were a little slow to start flapping.) But this is the exact community to take that jump and to realize, in many ways, more opportunities to step out in faith and take the risks are ahead of us.

Wherever you are at on your own journey—whether you are in this program or not, whether you are just wanting a degree or not, whether you are inside or outside—I implore you to laugh along the way—just as I have had the privilege of doing with Scotty Pooh, Benny, Jason, and the rest of our classmates. Laugh with one another, care for one another, and encourage one another—three necessary components to a beloved community.

We hope that this edition is the continuation of each of those things.



## Dialogue & Discuss



One step at a time.”

You’ll have to use the stairs.

“The Elevator to success is out of order.

-Joe Girard

A Goal is defined as “the object of a person’s ambition or effort, an aim or desired result.” I believe how much ambition you have and how much effort you put into achieving a goal creates a path that provides significant value to not only the goal itself, but every challenge and hurdle overcome along the way. We often set goals and think to ourselves, ‘what is the quickest path to reach my goal.’ The reality is the quickest path to achieving a goal often deprives us of extrinsic & intrinsic experiences and important growth opportunities. I don’t believe there are unrealistic goals, but I do believe we set ourselves up for goals to be unrealistic when we try to look for shortcuts along the path. Looking for a shortcut that isn’t there can create doubt, finding a shortcut and taking it only to find out a step was missed can create doubt. Both are also a waste of time and effort. I have witnessed each of you put forth tremendous effort to work through obstacles in your path and not waste effort to look for shortcuts around the obstacles. And during the process I have seen all of you stand a little taller and walk confidently, one step at a time.

The path to achieving your goal has been an uphill climb on rickety stairs while carrying on most days a 100-pound backpack. Some days that backpack was lighter, other days it was heavier. Some days you tripped on a stair, other days you smoothly took one step at time. Either way you advanced yourself closer to the goal you chose to achieve. Since day one of your uphill climb, I have proudly observed each one of you grow as

individuals and as a community, not only inside the walls of the Education Building but throughout the facility. Academically you acquired knowledge and skills in subject matter that expanded your mind, fed your soul, and strengthened your character. You have enriched your own lives, positively impacted the lives of those you interact with, and are exemplary role models for those who walk beside you and those who follow you on the uphill climb, one step at a time.

Graduation Day is right around the corner. On that day you will have reached a solid landing on the path of your uphill climb, and as you look ahead, you will see the path of stairs continues. You will choose new goals and the next set of rickety stairs will lead you on a fresh path of experiences and opportunities where you will continue to be a positive catalyst in your own life and the lives around you. The path ahead of you may challenge you more than the path behind you, but the path behind you prepared you to continue to succeed, and you know how to do it, one step at a time.

Congratulations Graduates!

EFA/Principal Costabile



### Ronald “Rusty” Rice by **Manuel Metlock**

You started this journey with us, but GOD sent His Angel to bring you home. We’re now about to enter into our destination, and it is only right to bring you with us. The joy and pain that you shared allowed us to be able to really get to know the many layers of your makeup. The happiness, laughter, truth, and growth you shared were amazing and allowed for a brotherhood to be established. The depth of your pain forced you to make strides to be a better person.

As a community, we all wanted to walk across the finish line together. However, GOD had a different plan for you. Therefore, as your brothers, we will “CARRY” you across that finish line with us, since you are unable to walk yourself. We hold your spirit, and memory, and celebrate you. Rest in peace, Rusty. RIP “Big Fella” and Mrs. Lauren Metlock.



### “Happy Memory of Rusty” by **Benny Rios**

We are very near the completion of earning our Master’s degree! These past four years have not been easy, especially since COVID hit us. In spite of that, we still trudged through the barriers that should have prevented us from continuing with our education. Unfortunately, the tumultuous events over the past four years have resulted in casualties. A few brothers who started out had to cease the program for one reason or the other, and COVID brought our brothers Ronald “Rusty” Rice and Joseph “Spanky/Big Fella” Wilson to rest with the Lord.

With that being said, I’d like to share a happy memory of our brother Rusty— one that always brings a smile to my face. Just before the pandemic, several of us from the first cohort were tasked with facilitating some workshops to educate some of the Evangelical Covenant Church leaders from across the country. We educated them on the importance of the church’s role in the prison ministry. We shared ideas on how they could help the incarcerated by advocating for humane legislation, providing resources for returning citizens, and we highlighted the humanity of the incarcerated.

Rusty participated in this event, and he was a part of the group that I was in; our group educated our guests about what could be done for returning citizens. Before the actual event, we spent a couple of months preparing for it. Rusty loved to contribute with his ideas; throughout most of the preparation and into the event, he relied heavily on a book he had just received, authored by Chuck Coulson. In every meeting, he brought that book, and when it came time for him to give feedback, he’d often open up the book and offer up his suggestions with “Chuck Coulton said...” or something similar to that. Whatever the case, Rusty mentioned Chuck Coulson often.

In the actual event, Rusty did not hesitate to mention Chuck Coulton as we met with each small group from the E.C.C. I couldn’t help but smile about his enthusiasm for this book and its contents with regard to returning citizens and the incarcerated. Toward the end of the workshops, everyone got together, and we sat around the large room in the chapel. We used this time to reflect on everything that took place and on what was said. This offered the opportunity to share some words with the entire group. Rusty was moved to share something, so he raised his hand. When he was called he started off with, “Chuck Coulton said...” and we couldn’t help but laugh about the enthusiasm he had about Chuck Coulson’s book.

Thank you Rusty for keeping a smile on my face. Rest in peace.

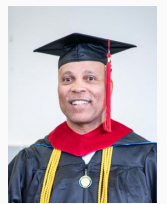
### Remembering Ronald Rusty Rice by **John E. Taylor, Jr.**

**While attending Virginia Union School of Theology in Richmond, VA, I had received an invitation to preach at my undergraduate classmate Rev. Anthony Moore’s church at 8:00 AM, and another historical Baptist Church in Washington D.C. at 11:00 AM. In the Seminary’s Dormitory at Virginia Union, only one shower was in use for all students. Time management was very important on Sundays; I was running late and had to do everything quickly. If I’m not mistaken, Washington D.C. was only about 60 to 80 miles away from Richmond, VA, and Washington D.C. I stopped at the rest area and ran to the restroom. When I got to the door a huge sign stated, “Out of Service.” Needless to say, I was very disappointed.**

**One thing I remember about Rusty, he was always ready to serve. In fact, Rusty enjoyed helping anyone who wanted help. Rusty didn’t know how to say no, if someone needed help. Our last conversation in the dining room, Rusty asked me, “JT, what happened? You were supposed to be in the writing class with me!”**

**I said, “Rusty, are you really taking the Writing Advisor course, Will’s class, and Church History at the same time?”**

**Rusty responded, “I must be crazy, but whatever I can learn to help others is worth the sacrifice.” What a valuable lesson for the graduates who have been academically trained for service. I’m sure Rusty would tell each of us, “Make sure you are never Out of Service.” Thank you, my Brother Rusty. Shalom & Agape! --J.T.**



# Here's a Thought

## with DeCedrick "LFD" Walker



Viktor Frankl, a celebrated Austrian psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, described humor as “another of the soul’s weapons in the fight for self-preservation.” Such a weapon has the power to transcend any circumstance, including an imprisoned one. However, I, as an incarcerated person, have found it difficult to muster the humor to crack jokes as of late. To be clear, my lack of energy is not because I’m incarcerated, though it could be assumed such is the case. Neither is it because I lack a sense of humor (like some of my peers have suggested). Most certainly it isn’t because there’s not enough social content available to develop jokes out of either. Quite frankly, I believe it’s difficult for me to crack jokes because of the ubiquitous nature of wokeness.

“Go-to” jokes like joking about a friend’s weight, appearance or breath are now considered cruel. Obviously, jokes are cruel if they intentionally or unintentionally cause someone to feel a sense of shame. Wokeness doesn’t consider the nuance of intent. Instead, if you’re found guilty of shaming someone, even a friend, by joking about their weight or looks, you become subject to being canceled from positive social spaces or attacked on stage in front of a nationally televised audience. Now, I could recognize the cruelty in intentionally shaming a friend or anyone over their weight or appearance. I personally have identified with being shamed over my appearance. However, my challenge concerning wokeness is its ineffectiveness in undoing the psychological damage jokes could have caused while at the same time making crucial the opportunity for a person who felt shame to respond in kind.

Now, I am not advocating for an unrestrained cruelty. However, I am advocating for wokeness to create some basic guidelines or consideration that would provide us jokesters with a general sense of what kind of jokes and methods of joking could be classified as funny. For example, would it be ok if I simply imagined a joke instead of saying it out loud? Can I imagine sending an overweight friend a gift basket full of green tomatoes and steamed Brussel sprouts as a way to say “eat healthy”? Or, could I imagine offering a friend a piece of peppermint, a Tic Tac, or an N95 face mask to let him know that he forgot to brush the back part of his mouth? I mean, can I point out the fact that one of the best things that came out of wearing N95 face masks for over two years due to the pandemic is not smelling bad breath?

Wokeness without guidelines and expressed considerations threatens the simple art of cracking jokes because it translates the self-consciousness of the person who the joke is being cracked against—whether they’re self-conscious about their weight, looks, or breath—into a would-be joke cracker’s supposed malicious intent against what they’re self-conscious about. Ultimately, we conclude then that the one who cracked the joke deliberately attempted to make someone feel a sense of shame. Although there are those who actively find humor in someone’s shame or pain, my heart tells me that most jokes come from a place of pure humor, where the soul of the joker spreads humor into the soul of others to assist in their self-preservation.





## *Wisdom Blvd.* *By Mishunda Davis-Brown*

While driving down Wisdom Blvd. I notice that my “gas tank” (soul) is about on “E” (empty). How in the world did I allow my tank to get this low? OMG! My car (being) begins having difficulties moving forward. I look up and can see a gas station sign not far off. Will I make it? I continue tapping my foot on the gas although it seems my car is dying on me. This becomes a critical situation because my car (soul) needs “gas” (God) in order to function. I eventually make it to the “gas pump” (Word of God/Bible). I grab the pump, after paying, and “fill up my gas tank” (feed and nourish my soul), which restores my car (being) back to its useful state.

There have been times where I was too busy to take out time for God and nourish my inner being. I began to feel weak and empty inside even when things were going well. My soul didn’t care about the good things going on in my life; it was sad and only longed for God. I realized I had neglected my soul, which had become malnourished, and only after consuming the Word of God did I feel refreshed and full. Please learn from me and try not to get to this empty state by neglecting your soul. Only God can nourish and restore our souls, so continue to feast on His Word.

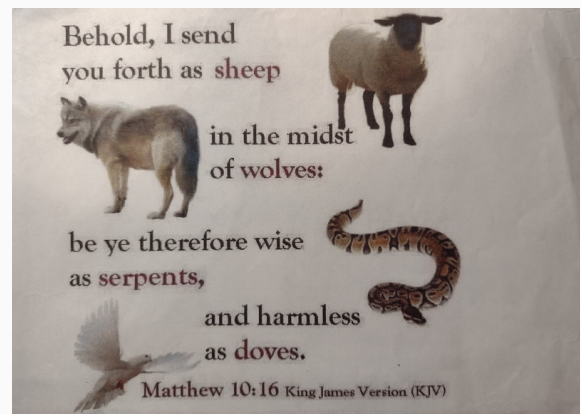
“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God...” -Psalms 42:1-2

“...He restores my soul...” -Psalms 23:3

I thank everyone who visits Wisdom Blvd. and has shared. Thanks Antonio “Slim” Balderas and Phoenixx for your input, wisdom, and enlightenment in the last two issues of Feather Bricks on Wisdom Blvd. I always look forward to not just giving but also receiving, so whenever you feel the need, take a trip down Wisdom Blvd. with me.



Dear Class of 2022,

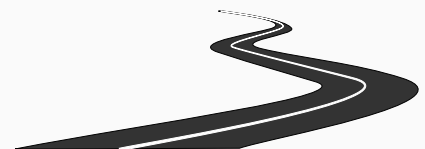


I dedicated my life to God’s holistic liberation because of you. As I reflect on our journey, our learning community has experienced conflict, isolation, and death as well silliness, joy, and freedom. The images I invoked at Convocation 2022 were ‘overtures of reconciliation,’ ‘hospitality to difference,’ the ‘opening of intellect,’ followed by a ‘responsive feeling in the heart.’ I also offered this quote from Jewish author Marianne Williamson: “It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us. As children of God, we were all meant to shine. This light is not just in some of us, it’s in everyone. As we let our light shine, we unconsciously give other people the permission to do the same, and as we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others from theirs.”

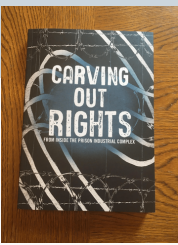
Over the last four years, your lights have prevailed! You created a community in which moral formation and learning met, because you are strong enough to own your education and vulnerable enough to let it shape you. You demonstrated passion for ministry in contexts impacted by injustice, violence, and oppression. It is my honor and joy to teach and learn with you. Our work has just begun. And, because I have dedicated my life to holistic liberation, I will always fight for your lives as though they were my own.

Class of 2022, congratulations and God bless you!

Professor Michelle







Review of Benny Rios' essay "Are Rights Truly Self-Evident?" By Ryan Wendt

Benny Rios' essay, "Are Rights Truly Self-Evident?" comes from the PNAP (Prison & Neighborhood Arts and Education Project) book project, *Carving Out Rights: From Inside the Prison Industrial Complex*. This anthology was published in 2021 by Hat and Beard Press.

*Carving Out Rights: From Inside the Prison Industrial Complex* is a collection of 30 crafted prints created in a PNAP art class based on the Universal Human Declaration of Human Rights, with corresponding articles and poetry about human rights. In many prisons today across the U.S., incarcerated people struggle for their human rights daily. In this book, many of the contributors ask key questions about what it means to be human in culture from below as opposed to the institutional rights coming from above. This PNAP project begs the question: What happens when human beings are denied their rights and then begin to dream and reimagine what it would like to have them back? Therefore, this PNAP book project is a call for the very people whose rights have been taken to speak out and be heard.

In our world today, the rights of human beings have been distorted. We have lost sight of what it means to be human. Our systems and structures have contributed negatively to the violation of human rights. In his essay, Benny Rios points out that we have come up with our definition of what it means to be human (Rios 164). In other words, we have historically lost sight of what it means to be human. In Benny's essay on human rights, he observes that our rights as human beings have been violated (Rios 166). I agree with Benny's observations, meaning that we've let the sins of racism, and violence against marginalized communities strip them of their humanity. As human beings, in my humblest opinion, our laws aren't built upon the principle that "all men are created equal." If we did live out this principle today, our world wouldn't be riddled with its horrible atrocities.

As a Christian, I believe that we are made in the image of God. This means that God created us in his image as human beings. Over time, as human beings, we've distorted the biblical doctrine of the Imago Dei. The Imago Dei comes from Genesis 1:26-28. Genesis 1:26-28, says that God made mankind in his image, and in his image, he made them, male and female he made them. God, then, told us to be fruitful and multiply. Although the Christian Scriptures teach that everyone is made in God's image, I think that these biblical principles have been tainted and distorted by other Christians. We've been judgmental and wronged others as believers and followers of Jesus Christ. We've failed to treat others as God's image-bearers. Our churches have also redefined and expanded the meaning of human rights.

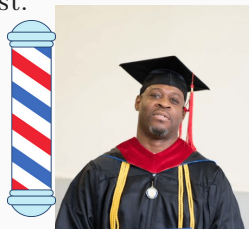
I, therefore, find myself in agreement with Benny's argument that humans deserve to be treated with fairness because that's their God-given right. Everyone deserves a chance at life, as Rios observes in his essay (Rios 162). However, the systems and structures in place in America fail to live up to what the Declaration of Independence says about everyone being created equal. In closing, I will leave you with this: If human rights are self-evident, how can we give everyone the dignity and respect they deserve as human beings?

#### Works Cited

Rios, Benny. "Are Rights Truly Self-Evident?" in *Carving out Rights: From Inside the Prison Industrial Complex*, eds. Tara Betts, Aaron Hughes, and Sarah Ross. Vol. 1, (Los Angeles: Hat and Beard Press).

My name is **Antonio Balderas**. Everybody calls me Slim, and I am okay with that because it fits. I was raised in Chicago and lived on the South and West-Side. I am a second cohort student at N.P.T.S, a Writing Advisor and a poet laureate...I was totally moved by Phoneixx (Tameka Newson)'s piece "The Depths of Me" that was in Volume #10 of *Feather Bricks*. I too have sincere compassion for the homeless and down-trodden. If there are any two things in this world I know a lot about, it's poverty and prison (mass incarceration). From the ashes of poverty and despair you've risen again, Phoenixx, bound by the holy spirit and the love of God and his people. I sincerely admire you and your expressions (God bless you Phoneixx). -Antonio "Slim" Balderas, VOPAI

What's up, Family!?! My name is JASON MUÑOZ. I am 40 years old and a co-editor of this edition of *Feather Bricks*. I'm in my final semester of the Master's program here in Stateville and am excited about what the future may hold for all of us. I am a music-head. For sure! Although I wouldn't say of myself that I am beholden to any one genre, neo-soul is one that definitely gets a lot of play on my speakers. I try not to plan too far ahead, but I am hoping to take and to build upon all that I have learned from NP and to use it to better determine my calling in Christ. What I do know for certain is that I am called to love in every context with the love of Christ.



**Howard Keller Jr.** is a registered barber, GED tutor, published writer, writing advisor, and justice policy advocate. "One of the things I'm most looking forward to after graduation is putting into practice the things I've learned around the issue of trauma and healing, specifically where it intersects with the criminal legal system. I really want to raise awareness about the incredible lack of mental health and trauma resources in disadvantaged communities that are susceptible to violence."

Greetings everyone! My name is **Benny Rios Don Juan**, and it's an honor to introduce myself (for those of you who don't know me 😊). I just turned 44 this past February, and I'm the youngest of three siblings. I'll be graduating after this semester, and I'm excited to reach this milestone with my brothers and sisters who journeyed with me to earn our Master's Degrees. I have been with my loving wife for over five years, and we have two wonderful daughters and four grandchildren. I have the honor and privilege of being a writing advisor, student advocacy officer, a published writer, and a member of the choir. My plans for the future include coming home first and foremost, but while I'm here I will put my skills to work as an advocate for policy change that leads to freedom, building our church here in Stateville, and hopefully getting started on a Doctorate Degree. I want to do justice with love by serving God and helping people. God bless you all!

My name is **Jamal Jalal Bakr Jr.**, and I am one of many graduating master's degree students, but I have still yet to graduate from self-doubt. I am a published author and poet, but my destiny is still being written. I am a husband and lover, but I have broken more hearts than not. I am a proud father but I missed out on my children's first steps, words, and most of their lives. I am my parents' first born, but the last of my siblings to realize their full potential. I am a protective brother, but I can't shelter my siblings from any harm. I am a Christian, but I have been a sinner my whole life. I am considered a career criminal, but I have only committed one crime in my 38 years. I am a human being, but I am caged like an animal. I have a de facto life sentence, but only God can judge me. I am a prisoner, but Jesus will set me free!



**Note: *Feather Bricks* applauds Jamal on his receiving this year's academic excellence award in Theology.**



## “Get to Know My Cellie” - By Timothy Ray Giles

My Cellie, **Scott Wesley Moore**, is a man who has known many names and titles over the past forty-five years of his life: Scotty-Pooh, SP, Scotty Doesn't Know..., Scotty Don't!; Father, Grandfather, Brother, Uncle; Ex-Husband/Next Husband/Son of a... (I want to say Avid Fisherman?), Friend, Confidant, teammate; Phone Guy, Cable Guy, Dish Guy; Theologian, Scholar, Published Writer; Comic book Nerd, Movie Nerd, Sports Nerd, and Nerd-Nerd, just to name a few. Of course, Scottie 2 Hottie is also a man who has been called many names and titles over the past four-plus decades of his life. However, that list is twice as long (and three times as inappropriate), so I'll just skip to the good-ish stuff.

Scott-Bear hails from Granite City, Illinois, which is directly across the Mississippi River from St. Louis Missouri; where, according to him, the greatest baseball and Hockey teams in the world play their home games. My Cellie grew up in church, and he gave his life to Christ at the age of twelve. Then, after a stint in puppet ministry as a teenager, Scott had some kids, got married (in that order), and did a bunch of other stuff over the next twenty years or so- mostly good, some not so much (see: mullet, naval piercing, and what stays in Vegas).

Scott-ish is one of the friendliest and most easy-going people you'll ever meet, and he always makes himself available to listen, pray, and/or offer pastoral care to anyone in need. Furthermore, my Cellie loves to entertain people. Yep, ol' Scotty Maas has no problem spinning a yarn or two about one of his many adventures in life, oftentimes unsolicited and at the drop of a hat. Some of these stories, like negotiating the “Lasagna clause” in his divorce settlement that states he is entitled to his ex-wife's delicious pasta dish upon his release from prison- even if it's poisoned, so long as that doesn't affect the flavor- are even kind of funny.

In closing, my Cellie would like to parlay his educational training through NPTS and beyond into a ministry that provides trauma and healing counseling and/or address the root causes of addiction. Personally speaking, I'd like to say that there's no doubt MooreScott has been called into this line of work for God's Kingdom. After all, as someone who has overdosed from hearing entirely too much talk about professional wrestling over the past few years, I can think of no one who is better suited to help me metabolize through all of the pain and suffering I've endured than the man responsible- Scotty “The Body” Moore.



P.S. My Cellie also enjoys playing video games, reading sci-fi novels, crying about “The Notebook” (see his previous work in *Feather Bricks*), and riding horses- when not in prison.



Plus, Scott has been bitten by a horse. Think about that for a minute. How many people do you know who've been bitten by a horse? Weird, right? But that's my Cellie!

My name is **Chester Arthur McKinney III (C.Mac)**, and I've been part of the North Park Community for the past 4 years as a student of Restorative Arts and Christian Ministry. I'm 52 years old and was born and raised in Aurora, IL, the second to the youngest out of 10 siblings and a father of 2 adult sons. I'm a graduate of Aurora West High School from the class of 1987 and completed two years of academic studies on the collegiate level at Lincoln College. I'm a Christian who was baptized in the Lord at a very early age (C.O.G.I.C.), but somehow I lost my footing amid my journey in life, which eventually led to my incarceration in 2005. Remarkably, the trajectory of my journey has shifted, and I was able to redirect my steps due to the contribution of my education at North Park Seminary. Through my academic studies I was able to reclaim my Christian identity, shape my social life, and embark on my ministry and vocation. As a leader in my context amid the global pandemic that surfaced in 2020, my education was instrumental as I evangelized the word of God in a practical application. I was able to use the tools and skills that I'd acquired from my training in conflict resolution, trauma, healing and restorative practices by providing pastoral care to individuals who were suffering from the impeding crisis in my community. It was in this context while I was being discipled as a servant of Christ that I found joy being a servant to others and my calling in the vocation of holistic community healing, grief and genetic counseling with a focus on addictive and compulsive behaviors. Consequently, after I obtain my M.A.C.M. degree from North Park this spring, I will be furthering my education in the pursuit of a B.A. degree from Northeastern Illinois University in the field of neuroscience to fully develop my skills and talents as a servant of Christ and leader in my community.

## Poetry Corner !



Happiness by William Jones

Happiness comes to all, both you and me.  
 Happiness even comes to the blind who can't see.  
 Happiness can't be bought or sold  
 Happiness don't come with just gold.

Happiness is a feeling felt in the heart.  
 Happiness is where love gets its start.  
 Happiness is watching flowers grow.  
 Happiness is also reaping what you sow.

Happiness is the love for you, God  
 Happiness is in us never being apart.  
 Happiness is a deep feeling shared by two.  
 Happiness to me, mother, is being with you.

### Author Note:

The poem "Happiness" was written to give thanks to all the poor, struggling mothers and fathers in this world. But "Happiness" is mostly written for my mother who struggled so hard with me and my brothers and sisters. Happiness to me is being with my mother and family.

I hope and pray the whole world finds Happiness,  
 for we are all one big family.

Larry Bird by Ryan Miller

White boy on the court  
 His shorts are way too short  
 Looks like a mini skirt  
 Man, this is not your sport  
 Golf course is over there  
 What's up w/ that hair?  
 Go home 'for you get naired  
 & there's feathers everywhere (bagawk!)  
 Pigment deficient skin's translucent  
 Pale complexion but my car's fuel-efficient  
 Lead the division in state blue ribbons  
 Egg albumin but I ain't no chicken  
 Alabaster albatross hard as gerber applesauce  
 Galifianakis Hasselhoff y'all don't want the  
 When I fly the coop go straight to the hoop  
 Swoop off the stoop w/ a skyhook scoop  
 Tucan fruity loop looney toon alley-ooop  
 Aghh! What is this, pigeon poop?!?  
 Peacock strut cuz' I got big nuggets  
 Top rope launch hacksaw Jim Duggin  
 Carrion vulture I'm feelin' peckish  
 Jim Henson Muppet gotta get them buckets  
 No- not that piece from KFC  
 Hate the colonel's recipe  
 Hatchery menagerie  
 I'm from the streets of sesame  
 Yellow & feathery  
 Mustachioed & leathery  
 Hulk hogan mixed w/ Big Bird-  
 & a porn star from the '70s (somebody order delivery?)





State Pen by Rayon Sampson



This state pen embodies the stagnation I have once felt coursing through my veins  
This state pen is the antagonist to my aspirations of productivity  
This state pen wants to shake my sense of being... my sense of belonging  
This state pen wants to skip over my ideas, not allowing my expressions to flow  
This state pen wants to disrupt my connections, thwart my communications  
This state pen desires my existence to be void of love, compassion, and understanding  
This state pen tries to convince me that I am unworthy  
This state pen is firsthand...before the pages in my diary  
This state pen has witnessed my struggles, my pain, my hunger  
This state pen is always courtside for practice after practice, after practice  
everpresent for failures after failures after failures  
This state pen rejoices in my downfalls  
This state pen is callous  
This state pen thinks I will lose my grip on reality and spiral out of control  
This state pen sneaks its dark shadow upon my formulative space  
I swear that this state pen is a work of the devil  
This state pen stands secular to my faith  
This state pen would not stop Frederick, Maya, Langston or Toni  
This state pen could not stop Nelson, Malcolm, Martin, or Marcus  
This state pen believes that I am feeble, that I am weak  
This state pen is wrong...This state pen doesn't know my God  
This state pen seeks to diminish me, causing me to lose all hope  
But this state pen has not choice, as an unwilling facilitator of my voice  
This state pen is a reluctant co-conspirator to my success  
This state pen lies averse while I scribbled to a mastery of my craft

Unmirandized by Tasha Kennedy

I have the right to remain silent, but in my silence  
You put the case together however you see fit,  
Not how the evidence leads it.

Anything I say can and will be used against me  
In the court of law.  
Although the words that I say won't set me free  
Instead they are disregarded or denied in testimony  
As for the court of "law," that system's flawed to me.

I have the right to an attorney and if I  
Can't afford one, then one will be appointed to me.  
I'm appalled at the thought of entertaining an attorney when before a court appearance  
I was found Guilty.  
So now I have the right to "unmirandize" me.



War and Peace by Antonio "Slim" Balderas

War and peace, the messaging seems so very clear  
because the  
WORLD is so violent and no one seems to care!  
GOD commands us to love our neighbors as we  
love our-Selves but no one seems to hear...

I pray for world peace but due to new escalation  
of  
WAR in Ukraine it seems that war will never cease  
Today I believe world war three is most likely  
where we're Headed, the proof is the bodies that  
continue to pile up In the streets of Bucha Ukraine  
all mangled, mutilated  
And shredded!

The real war is between good and evil, so we must  
pick,  
A side because in God's eye we cannot hide.

Antonio Balderas (V.O.T.P.A.I.)  
Voice of the poor and Incarcerated

## From Seminary to Visionary

I have a vision of us ministering in our community  
It's my duty to prevent these kids to prevent these kids from landing in the bin  
God intervened and showed me there were plans for greater things  
A living testimony, never give up on your dreams

Before I was Motivated by grace, I was Molded  
Through broken glass, shattered windshields - my life was stolen  
My Story, Re-taught and Re-told, labeled as grown-ish  
If reconciliation's unreached, please take this moment  
For Big Fella, Rusty, and Lauren, Let's represent them well  
Through Mobilizing Justice for freedom outside these prison cells  
Our ministries for youth in the trenches, Not 23 and 1  
We're stimulus like reality checks, We all needed one  
The media still false, They say looting's a violent assault  
When Trump's Jan.6 rhetoric led QAnon's revolt  
This ceremony's reppin' more than you and I  
I worship one God, I'm like Manny - Alhamdulillah  
Tony, Smiley, Dave - Y'all made it out, That's what I'm talking 'bout!  
From life without parole to impossibles being left out  
Y'all my breath now, y'all what I see in my self now  
And *Feather Bricks* inclusive for women, Oh we have depth now  
Let's stay on one accord, Let's keep Christ-centered while moving forward  
The Church Without Walls is the Vision I'm seeing going forward  
My benediction is my mission statement  
It's till we all free, I pray they recognize our faces  
We are the class of '22 - Give us a standing ovation  
Nah, we're not colored blind, the Church don't need color coordination  
Come as you are, Move at your own pace, We're covered with grace  
Let's celebrate earning our Master's let that stimulate

I have a vision of us ministering in our community  
It's my duty to prevent these kids to prevent these kids from landing in the bin  
God intervened and showed me there were plans for greater things  
A living testimony, never give up on your dreams

Reimagine your view of me, My flesh as your flesh  
Proceed prudishly and leave no regrets  
I'm from the land of rejects. On Father's Day I called my father, but he ain't answer collect  
Made me Counter-Imperialistic now I'm Counter-Bigot  
Counter-Hierarchic, Counter-Patriarch, Counter-Regret  
Counter-Redlining, Counter-Gentrifying, Counter-Neglect  
Though every encounter with this system was like Russian roulette  
I'm for eradicating systems that are built to oppress  
Idealized, Internalized, I'm Institutionalized  
I'm screaming there's no "I" in Team but there's one "I" in Lie  
Inside-outside student Alumnae Alumni  
Our Alma-Mater's Viking Pride - So am I till I die



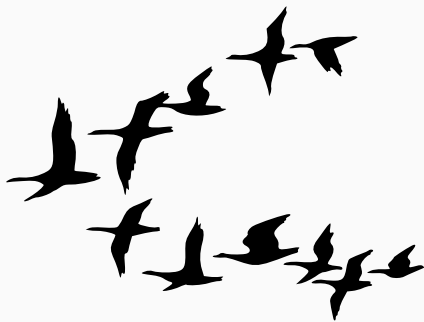
**By Brandon "B" Lewis**



Two Kinds of Fate by David Nazeeh Bailey

They'll tell you that you're useless  
And that you'll never amount to  
much; the words they use are abusive,  
so your feelings they have touched.

They'll say you'll live a life of  
crime and that you would be put in jail;  
they said that you would get a  
lot of time, because at life you've failed.  
But you've chosen to rise above  
all of that evil non-sense.



I Am So Proud by David Nazeeh Bailey

For him whose body that may walk across the  
stage that "Glow," may his  
Heart and thoughts glow ever more.

For is it not to be proud to walk across a stage  
that "Glow"?  
For with a smile that everybody see and hear,  
and know.

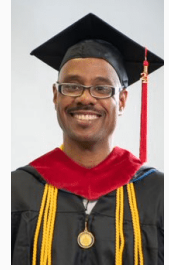
I'm proud, I'm proud for all to see, I've made  
another accomplishment  
that counts so much to me.

For especially, whereas all could see, not just  
here, but everywhere,

Because I want you to see to know,  
Sometimes people think they can hold  
you down, but today, I'm proud after all.

So, I love you – me with all my heart,  
because I'm still doing my best,  
and making accomplishments after all.

Michael Sanders – Freedom



Freedom appears to be so close but yet it's so far.

Is freedom free, or is it an item that must be  
bought?

I often ask myself, is freedom an optical illusion?  
Like a man wandering in the desert who thinks  
He finds water, but discovers that it's only a mirage?

Is lady justice an advocate for freedom or is  
She an adversary who stands by the doors of  
freedom  
Blocking passage?

Sometimes I wish I was as free as a bird, with  
The ability to fly above walls and obstruction.

Sometimes I wish I was an airplane with no  
destination  
in mind, wandering through the skies embracing  
freedom from a different vantage point.

Sometimes I envision myself as a lion protecting  
My freedom from any poacher trying to infringe  
upon it.

Can I call on God to end my captivity and part  
My red sea of injustice granting me safe passage  
to freedom?

Can I march around the nefarious walls of the  
Judicial system seven times, like Joshua expecting  
God to destroy the walls of injustice?

Do I start a revolution like Nat Turner trying  
To obtain my freedom or do I take my freedom like  
Harriet Tubman in the face of peril?

Do I acquiesce that freedom is a mental state  
Regardless of where ever I am? Or do I embrace  
2 CO. 3:17 – where the spirit of the Lord is  
there is liberty?

## On a lighter note...

One Sunday night a burglar breaks into the home of a Christian family while they were at church. So, after going through a window, he spots a stereo, which he quickly starts to move towards the window.

All of a sudden a voice from the dark says, "Jesus is watching." The burglar stops dead in his tracks and looks around, but he continues to move the stereo, and the voice says again, "Jesus is watching you!" He then takes out a flashlight and shines it in the directions of the voice. In the corner of the room, the light hits a cage with a parrot in it, and the parrot says, "Yes!"

"What is your name," the burglar asks the parrot.

And the parrot says, "Moses."

The burglar says, "What kind of owner names a parrot 'Moses'?"

And the parrot says to the burglar, "The same kind of owner that names his 150 lb Rottweiler 'Jesus'."



-STEVEN FEAGIN

Q: How do you know for sure that Jesus was Jewish?

A: He worked in his father's business, and his mother thinks he's God's gift.

A younger man, a middle-aged man, and an older looking man were all golfing together. The middle-aged man stepped up to the tee first. When he hit the ball it was a fantastic first shot right down the fairway, the kind of shot you'd see a seasoned pro make.

The younger man stepped to tee off and when he hit the ball, it was an even better shot than the middle-aged man. It landed right on the green next to the hole. This being a par 4, he's a shoe-in for an eagle. This is the kind of 1st shot that's even rare for the best pros to make.

The older looking man steps up to the tee, wielding a rake instead of a club. He hits the ball but it flies right towards a pond, hits a turtle in its shell, bounces up into the air where a hawk swoops down and grasps it in its talons and carries it all the way to the green and drops it. The ball hits the green and a squirrel runs up to the ball, grabs it with its freaky squirrel hands and slam-dunks it into the hole, making the shot a hole in one.



Then St. Peter turns to Jesus and says, "You know, I really don't enjoy the game as much when your father plays with us."

-LUIGI ADAMO

Martin Luther and Erasmus of Rotterdam go on a camping trip. After a good dinner and a bottle of wine, they agree to put aside their conflict regarding the freedom/bondage of the will and retire for the night. Some hours later, Erasmus wakes up and nudges his former adversary. "Luther, look up in the sky and tell me what you see."

"I see millions and millions of stars, Erasmus," replies Luther as he wipes the sleep from his eyes.

"Hmmm. And what do you deduce from that?"

Exhausted and impatient, Luther gathers himself for a minute then says, "What do you want me to say, Desiderius? That astronomically speaking, it tells me there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets? Or, maybe you're hoping that in my stupor I might inadvertently reveal how I secretly ascribe to the pagan foolishness of astrology by stating how Saturn is in Leo so I'm about to smell the stench of reality in regard to our budding bromance? Perhaps meteorologically speaking I suspect that we will have a beautiful day tomorrow and the desert mothers and fathers shall rejoice? Surely, dear Erasmus, your not looking to revisit our theological debates? What then shall I say, that I can see how God is all-powerful and that we are a small and insignificant part of the universe? Therefore, when it comes to serving God, our freedom of the will can do nothing in and of itself? So, no, please, tell me, O' Prince of Humanities, what does it tell you?!?"

"Luther, you idiot. Leave the diatribes to me," Erasmus replies dryly. "Someone has stolen our tent."

Moral of this story: Being a genius is great and all...but smarts aren't always a substitute of common sense. - SCOTTY MAAS



Stop Me if You've Heard this One: Sir Isaac Newton Walks into a Prison Writing Center  
by "Scholar" Scott Moore

## Abstract

This article examines some barriers facing educators and students involved in higher education in prison work while exploring theoretical ways in which the field of writing center studies may be implemented behind bars in order to enhance postsecondary education in prison programs. By practicing both centripetal writing theories, which accentuate community and highlight commonalities among students and writing processes, and centrifugal writing theories, which focus on the needs of individuals and help them discover their own unique voices, a prison writing center and its incarcerated Writing Advisors can provide writers the confidence and tools necessary to express themselves in any particular subject of study. This claim is supported by scholarly work in the field as well as firsthand experience amassed over the past years the author has been an incarcerated student and Writing Advisor enrolled in a graduate degree granting higher education program at a maximum security prison.

The United States of America has been in the business of mass incarceration since at least the 1970's. Profits made by the prison industry skyrocketed from the eighties until the mid-nineties, and this country decided it more advantageous to lock up citizens considered irredeemable by the justice system and throw away the key than to invest in their rehabilitation through proven forms of equitable practices such as higher education; in other words, our country chose retributive punishment over restorative justice (Reyes, 2016). Sure, some of the men and women incarcerated and deemed expendable by society have been offered a variety of scholastic programs over the past half century, but to this day most prisoners have been denied a post-secondary education of any kind. Times, they are a changing, though.

Recently, with more emphasis than ever put on the benefits of higher education in prison by many reputable universities around the nation, and increasing evidence to support the claim that educational programs in prisons reduce recidivism and prepare students for meaningful work upon

release, the demand for a more informed level of writer has presented itself (Northwestern Prison Education Program, 2020). Fortunately, the field of writing center studies has the resource supply needed to meet this demand head on. If one were to define a particular field of higher education, in the technical sense, as any arena of expertise whose specialized work has the ability to enhance the realm of law, science, or humankind in general, then an argument could be made that a writing center is the one arena of expertise where all others come to play. Not only is writing center studies a field in and of itself, but the vast array of services writing centers can provide, by their very nature, encompass any and all post-secondary education found on a college campus. However, as incarcerated Writing Advisor (WA) Benny Rios (2020) points out, "While universities have a long history with writing centers, the history of writing centers in prison is a new concept." For proof of how rare the idea of a writing center in prison is, one need only look at the work being done by Professor Melissa Pavlik and the North Park Writing Center inside of Stateville Correctional Center located in Crest Hill, Illinois, one of the first of its kind. Over the past 6 years, the prison has allowed higher education behind its walls in the form of varying credit-bearing classes and degree programs from North Park Theological Seminary (as well as Northwestern, Northeastern Illinois, and DePaul Universities, respectively), and the seeds of writing practices being planted by North Park's rag-tag group of incarcerated Writing Advisors have begun to take root.

Because we Writing Advisors are made up of a community of peers who understand all too well how the everyday rigors of prison can inhibit the writing process, the newly formed Stateville writing center is perfectly positioned to help students develop their voice, regardless of university affiliation or field of study; moreover, we recognize that any writer seeking our tutelage will only bear fruit under the proper conditions. As such, it will be up to any prison writing center following in our footsteps to provide similar conditions for other incarcerated students by, as writing scholar Elaine Maimon (1988) puts it, "responding generatively and generously to these students' works-in-progress" (p. 735). Any given center can look to accomplish this objective in numerous ways, but there are two main theoretical writing views that best apply to the unusual circumstances found inside a prison classroom: 1) centripetal writing theories which

"emphasize community by focusing on the commonalities among writers and writing processes" and 2) centrifugal writing theories, which are "those that emphasize individualities among writers...or, the uniqueness of each writer and writing occasion" (Fitzgerald & Lanetta, 2016, p.29). Both of these theories speak to incarcerated writers because, as a group of outcasts living on the fringes of society, we have been conditioned to believe who we are doesn't matter—that our voices as neither a community nor as unique individuals are meant to be heard. Therefore, a prison writing center can enhance the field of higher education by emphasizing a combination of centripetal and centrifugal writing theories in order to address prisoners' needs for communal expression and personal growth, so long as its advisors are flexible enough to work around the barriers found within the penitentiaries.

Because a prison environment is anything but traditional, any educators of higher learning offering specialized fields of study inside will quickly realize that with this unconventional opportunity also comes its own set of challenges. Besides the obligation to adhere to institutional rules and regulations at all times, the very real condition of writing atrophy amongst prisoners must be contended with. When speaking about the perceived image of a writing center in "Revisiting the Idea of a Writing Center" (North, 1994), the most commonly used descriptions of a center are that of "hospital, prison, and madhouse" (p.15), and while each of these metaphorical images resembles what the field of writing center work can look like behind bars, it is the idea of the center as a hospital which addresses this wasting away of an author's abilities. This need for healing speaks directly to the incarcerated writer in me and serves as a reminder that due to multiple contributing factors, be they from environmental circumstances beyond their control, self-inflicted suspension/expulsion from misguided youthful exuberance, or PTSD (Post Traumatic Writing Disorder) as a result of the red pen marks from an overzealous English teacher who highlighted every little grammar and spelling misstep they ever made, the writing practices for most men and women behind bars have been on life support since their teenage years.

For many incarcerated students, their adolescent journey through an educational wasteland was a decade ago or longer. The only writing feedback they remember failed them miserably in the sense

that it placed their identity in a box and discouraged any form of expressing themselves unless it fit academic or societal "norms." Author and writing teacher Peter Elbow (1973) points out that schooling makes student writers such as myself obsessed with the "mistakes" we make in writing, and it is because of this negatively reinforced fixation on the craft that the practices of many potential incarcerated authors have withered up and died over the years (p.5). These men and women are in desperate need of advisor-to-advisee resuscitation, and that's where prison writing centers can incorporate the different types of centripetal and centrifugal theories in order to bring a student's writing prowess—their gray matter—back to life.

According to Fitzgerald & Lanetta (2016), centripetal writing theories include, but are not limited to, the praxis-oriented work of collaborative learning ideals such as normal discourse, race and ethnic studies, and writing process theory, as well as queer and rhetorical theories, respectively. The underlying theme in all of these theoretical lenses is that individual writers are made up of multiple identities, and though each one of us is the sum of all our many parts, our shared experiences are that which have the ability to bring us together (Fitzgerald & Lanetta, (2016, p. 29-41). This relationship of togetherness is crucial as it relates to any prospective writing center in prison because, while all of us in the department of corrections may have "got off the bus by ourselves" (to paraphrase a term used in prison when expressing independence), each of us brought our cultural, educational, and social baggage along for the ride. We then entered a carceral environment which has historically discouraged and/or punished any form of positive expression such as writing. As a result, we formed a certain kind of community which, as Stateville Writing Advisor Rayon Sampson (2020) explains in his article "Building with Someone," is "designed to serve others" and whose goal is to help rehabilitate and restore one another through this seemingly lost art.

Centripetal theories are essential to our restorative objective, and prison writing centers have the capacity to build on commonalities across incarcerated individuals in order to produce the kind of writing which encourages growth among its students and their chosen field of study. Whether it is sitting in a classroom listening to a writer focus on

their methods such as drafting, prewriting, and editing (process theory) or breaking down the traditional binary construct of advisor/advisee relationship (Queer theory) in order to better learn from and with our peers (collaboration theory), these practices will provide both insight and credibility to any higher educational work being done inside a given prison.

Furthermore, as author John Trimbur (1985) points out, "By socializing the process of learning to write, collaborative learning also promotes important kinds of affective, social, and cultural change" (p. 98). By addressing some of the well-known challenges many of the marginalized men and women being warehoused throughout this country are facing, the manuscripts produced by imprisoned writers can help lend a much-needed voice to the organizations and movements working towards bringing equity and justice to the disenfranchised communities which most incarcerated students come from today. (This idea is supported by applying the centripetal theory represented by Race and Ethnic Studies). That said, if a prison writing center chooses to only focus on the benefits which come from viewing students as a community at large, then it fails to understand how every situation is different and how certain fields may require a more personalized approach; that is when centrifugal theories come into play.

Centrifugal theories recognize how all students are different and "prioritize the individuality of each writer" (Fitzgerald & lanetta, 2016, p.34). Any prison writing center should understand how our shared experiences can bond us together, but it must also acknowledge all the ways in which the daily grind of the environment can compel a prisoner's inner voice to cry out in personal expression. Our identity and individuality are lost in a system which labels us not by name but by the inmate ID number we were assigned at intake, a number that may very well be reassigned to someone else after we die. Our lives are then micro-managed right down to the finest detail. We are told what to eat and where to sleep, when to go outside and come back in, how long to shower and what to wear afterwards. Our phone calls are monitored and recorded, our email and snail mail are put under a microscope, and there is no privacy whatsoever. The few possessions we have can be taken away at any moment, and we are treated as if incapable of any independent thought or action that does not involve nefarious

undertones. In other words, it is impossible not to notice the rather large and oppressive pachyderm sitting in the corner of your cell at all times. Compound that ever-present pachyderm with the fact that many universities offering higher education inside of prisons are themselves inextricably linked to the ideology of oppression as it relates to those who have historically attended, taught, and wielded power on campus (white men), and the weight of that big ol' elephant in the room with the tattoos of censorship, hierarchy, patriarchy, and racism down to its trunk becomes unbearable for the majority of students in both men's and women's prisons alike. (Big ups to incarcerated writing advisor Ignacio Alvarez for so elegantly describing the struggles which many marginalized writers of color face, both inside and out.) It stands to reason, then, that there will be times when a writer's assignment requires a working knowledge of their inner voice, and that is when a prison writing center must mimic the practices of writing center scholar Andrea Lunsford (1991) by "helping students get in touch with their (inner) knowledge as a way to find their unique voices, their individual and unique powers through listening, giving encouragement, and essentially serving as a validation for the students I-search" (p.10). Not only will emphasis on an individual's voice help prisoners form successful writing practices, but it will also build a strong sense of self-worth in a criminal justice system designed to deny incarcerated students this feeling. The centrifugal theories of expressivism, (focused on writing as a means to discover one's own individual truth and the expression of that truth in writing), and feminism (which places "attention on individual experience, a valuing of personal voice...and emphasis on writing as a journey of self-discovery") will be integral for any incarcerated student seeking to rise above their torment (Fitzgerald & lanetta, 2016, p.34-36). After all, there are few things more therapeutic to those (like myself) seeking their freedom from an oppressive atmosphere than uncovering a personal truth on the journey to independence through writing, even if we don't always like what we find.

However, the harsh reality of a penitentiary life does not just affect its residents; any field of higher education in prison will also be subjected to this systemic oppression and the barriers it creates.

When speaking about the challenges facing most centers in the free world, writing tutor-researcher Jonathan Doucette (2016) states that “In very practical terms, a given writing center may be constrained by a lack of...institutional support (and) time commitments/constraints on the part of both student and tutor” (Fitzgerald & Lanetta, 2016, p.351). Well, any prison writing center and/or higher education program in prison will undoubtedly face these barriers and more because they’ll be located inside of an environment which places the value of security above all else, and whose absolute control overrides any and every aspect of field work behind its walls.

As incarcerated Writing Advisor Benny Rios (2020) observes, “There is no way to decentralize the authority of the prison administration; as a result, we (Stateville’s writing center) are confronted with barriers that include...limited mobility for students...no internet access...(limited) communication with peers, tutors, and teachers...(and) possibility of lockdowns.” Now, to be fair, Stateville’s writing center is located inside a maximum security prison, so the barriers we face may not apply to other postsecondary educational programs residing in lower security facilities. That said, there is no getting around the fact that an institute of higher education’s jurisdiction will end, rather abruptly, at a penitentiary’s front gate. Melissa Pavlik reflects on this lack of control in saying, “Experiencing this restriction emphasized the reality that my credentials as a professor meant nothing in terms of granted authority once on prison grounds. I could not control when classes began, ended, or whether my students would miss because of an unexpected visit...or simply not being in the right place when officers moved the line” (M. Pavlik, personal communication, September 5, 2019). No doubt the existence of these carceral impediments will require a shift in traditional pedagogy in order to ensure a program’s effectiveness, and that’s how incarcerated Writing Advisors have home field advantage, so to speak.

Because they are students themselves, incarcerated Writing Advisors can help monitor a peer’s assignment during the times a professor cannot be present, regardless of genre or field of study, so long as the prompt is available. For instance, as I write this, Covid-19 has put a severe strain on the traditional student/teacher dynamic

across all schools and programs. But, while those in the free world can use technology as a stand-in for the classroom, the vast majority of incarcerated students are not afforded the same luxury.

Instead, we (again, this is Stateville) have to rely on sending and receiving our scholastic correspondence via the institutional mail on designated days, and our professors pick up homework and send in assignments in weekly exchanges that happen in the prison parking lot. This arrangement is far from ideal, as I have had one of my own papers end up on a completely different campus and have heard rumors of other students’ homework altogether vanishing into thin air. Now, whether the latter was related to a hungry dog or not, I couldn’t say, but my point is, communication of any sort is rather tricky at the moment. However, since they are peer tutors who live alongside other students, incarcerated Writing Advisors can still provide a centripetal-esque type of dialogue known as normal discourse. Normal discourse is a collaborative learning model which can give a writer the means externalize their internalized thoughts and ideas about a particular field of study. As Kenneth Bruffee (1984) points out, this normal discourse is “pointed, explanatory and argumentative, and its purpose is to justify belief to the satisfaction of other people within the author’s community of knowledgeable peers” (Bruffee, p.330). Furthermore, “teaching normal discourse in its written form is thus central to a college curriculum because the one thing college teachers in most fields commonly want students to acquire... is the ability to carry on in speech and writing the normal discourse of the field in question” (Bruffee, 1984, p.330). Well, provided they are in close proximity and capable of a little ingenuity, an inside student can get their papers to an incarcerated Writing Advisor literally by hook or (reformed) crook and engage in a version of normal discourse through an abnormal version of what we in the writing biz call a “drop-in conference.” Usually, this tutor/tutee meeting, where writing support of all kinds is provided, would in a more conventional face to face setting, but therein rests the effectiveness of a prison writing center: neither pandemic nor quarantine, nor absence of teacher nor lack of traditional classroom, can separate advisor from advisee, or vice-versa.

That said, as long as its advisors are flexible enough to work around the barriers found within a given penitentiary, the field of writing center work

can be implemented inside of any prison in order to enhance higher education so long as the center provides a student the training necessary for community and individual growth by emphasizing a combination of centripetal and centrifugal theories. A prison writing center has the ability to be all-inclusive in the sense that it can foster and develop a student's innate qualities so as to provide the confidence needed to begin the writing process while simultaneously educating them in the many ways their writing can affect change in both the communities they come from and the world beyond. Case in point, the business of mass incarceration has been booming in the United States for at least the past fifty years, but if a prison writing center is able to imbue other fields of higher education behind bars, the transcripts they yield will help rewrite the narrative surrounding criminal justice reform and nullify the need for America to invest in a prison industrial complex during the next half-century to come. Plus, the various theories a center can offer will prepare an incarcerated individual for their return to society and provide them with the confidence and skills needed to be a leader in the battle against all forms of injustice, oppression, and systemic punishment throughout the land.

By emphasizing centripetal theories, specifically those of the rhetorical variety "which focus on how communication creates meaning and influences the world," a center can crank up the volume on the voices crying out from the margins: the voices of men and women whose stories and experiences can help shed much a needed light on the connection left between racism and mass incarceration in this country (Fitzgerald & Ianetta 2016, p.31). To support these first-hand accounts, an incarcerated Writing Advisor can also accentuate centrifugal theories such as expressionism and feminism, which will enable a student to better understand both their strengths and limitations together and inform the aspiring teacher, lawyer, prison abolitionist—insert field here—that they matter as a human being and can begin telling the entire world about a chosen craft in their own unique voice, a voice that, if properly cultivated, has the power to reframe the future. Of course, if this future world where penal institutions utilize the field of writing center studies has an equitable means of restoration is to become a reality, a complete overhaul in both thought and practice throughout the entire justice and academic systems is necessary--a call to action, if you will. In other words, engaging centripetal and

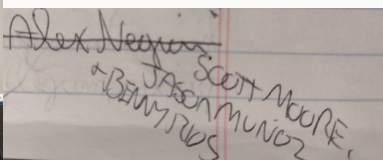
centrifugal theories is a moot point unless a collaboration takes place between the universities seeking to rehabilitate prisoners through higher education and the very institutions who have historically resisted most forms of post-secondary schooling behind their heavily guarded walls, not to mention a compromise of ironic proportions between those same institutions of oppression and the advisors being warehoused inside of them who are seeking to redeem their fellow students through the healing process of writing.

Am I naïve for believing this future is possible? Perhaps, but one could argue that it is also naïve for a person to believe that the man responsible for coining the terms "centripetal" and "centrifugal," Sir Isaac Newton, formulated the law of gravity after an apple fell on his head as he sat under a tree in a literal field of grass. Either way, the application of writing center work in prison and the barriers we face are all relative because while there are elements of Newton's legend which may very well be true, his theory about gravity and the centripetal and centrifugal forces it can produce eventually became law. Since that is the case, I am quite sure Sir Isaac would agree that a few elements and theories are all we need to put the field of prison writing center work into motion in order to enhance other fields of education. Hopefully, it will not take another five decades to find out if our theories can change the unequal laws of justice that govern this country, but only time will tell.

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## *The Amplifier with*



**Jason:** “I was high.” These three words by Alex carry so much weight that to try and process all that they encompass (especially for those like myself who struggle with addiction) is an overwhelming task. Where to begin? This was a great piece by Alex because it was comical yet tragic. How many of us as incarcerated persons can relate? We find ourselves trapped in such an oppressive system with the memories of how we got here a blur. I remember my first time being processed through NRC (Northern Reception Center) and how overwhelmed I felt by it all, officers yelling at you and fellow prisoners trying to ignore their own fears by turning their attention towards each other and you. Alex very accurately describes the process that eventually leads to a mental health evaluation, and I agree with him that this part was especially perplexing! Hell no, I’m not “O.K.” ! That’s like me slapping you hard across the face and then asking if you’re O.K., except it’s much worse, consisting of de facto life sentences and generations of trauma and heartbreak. Kudos on a great piece, Alex. We appreciate your sharing this work with our North Park Family.

**Benny:** As I read this script about when Alex realized that he was an alcoholic and a drug addict, I was smiling all the way through. Not because I find alcoholism and drug addiction humorous, but because I remembered how Alex and Scotty Pooh rehearsed this scene. I remember all of us laughing when Alex reenacted the discussion between him and the “half-assed prison shrink” (played by SP). Alex was asked, “Did you do drugs?” and his answer was, “Yeah, I did drugs. Shit, I’m high right now.” The way Alex said it and the face that he made was comical, but he really did come off as high as he rehearsed that scene.

In writing about community storytelling, Casey Donahue states, “If we know why you care about this story, then we will care too.” I believe that Alex did a great job on informing us why he cared about sharing this story with us, both in his writing and his reenactment of the story. Alex was in denial of his addictions, and in black and brown communities, this is a common thing. Drugs and alcohol are commonplace in many households, and our youth grow up believing that it’s normal.

As a reader and observer to this story being told, Alex’s language and delivery made me care about this story just as much as Alex cared to share it. I was reminded of my own exposure to weed and alcohol when I was four years old. I was reminded of the many people within my household and in my community who were addicted to drugs and alcohol. This story reminds me of the work that needs to be done to combat drug and alcohol addiction because it still plagues our communities.

**Scott:** What stands out to me in this scene (besides the line about “the local guy at the dive bar”- who could very well be a close relative of mine- “picking a fight with the dartboard”) is just how much Alex pours himself out onto the page. YES, much of the experience is presented through a somewhat humorous lens, AND Alex is still able to emphasize the denial and complete lack of self-awareness he embodies as an addict on his first day in prison.

This dramedic approach reminds me of how playwright and formerly incarcerated writer Sarah Shourd points out, when developing characters in a scene or play, its focusing on the deepest desires and motivations that propel the story forward. “It doesn’t matter if you’re writing about something you’re directly experiencing or not; either way, you’re going to have to



crawl inside the experience and understand it” (Shourd 60). YES, as someone who spent months working alongside Alex during his writing process, AND chasing the dragon straight into prison myself, I can attest to the fact that re-creating such an intimate and personal scene like “I Was High” was not done easily.

That said, why do I find it both heartbreaking and hilarious that these six years of Alex’s life played out like a bootleg version of an Afroman song? I can hear it now:

“Duh, uh, uh, uh-uh-uh... (music notes add)

Alex was gonna do some good, until he got high

Duh, uh,...

Instead he hung out in the neigh-bor-hood, and he got high

Dum-dum-dum-dum-dum-dum... (music notes add)

Suddenly, he’s talkin’ to a shrink in prison, now he knows why...

Yeah, yeah... (music notes add)

Because he was high...

Because he was high...

Because he was high.”

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Shourd, Sarah. *PEN America: The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer’s Life in Prison*, Caitis Meisser, Ed. Haymarket Books. Chicago, IL 2022.

Act 1, Scene 8: “I was high” By Alex Negrón

*A cubicle inside the prison’s mental health intake office.*

*ALEX and others are lined up outside the cubicle. Lights up.*

ALEX

[To the audience] I can define six years of my life in one short phrase: I was high. From the moment I turned fourteen until I was twenty, drugs and alcohol devoured my life and it spearheaded my voyage to prison. Even today, my high volume of drug usage dictates my ability to remember. I either forget because I was high or I remember because I was really high.

*MR. JOHNSON steps out of the cubicle, motions for the next person, and the line ALEX is standing in moves up.*

*[Resumes talking to the audience]* I was in total denial about my addictions. I believed it was normal to do as much drugs and alcohol as I wanted. Everyone around me did so. I figured that as long as I didn’t smoke crack or heroin, I wasn’t an addict. As long as I wasn’t some beggar looking for their next pint of Wild Irish Rose and I wasn’t the guy at the local dive bar looking to pick a fight with the dartboard, then I wasn’t an alcoholic. I bet you are asking yourself: When did I realize I had a problem and what kind of addiction did I have? It’s funny you should ask because it happened right here in Joliet prison.

**ALEX** (Cont...)

I had just been found guilty for first degree murder and was sentenced to fifty years in the IDOC on October 31, 2002. On November 15th, it was time to pay the piper and take my bus ride to Joliet. I smoked a joint to help ease the pain of having to bear so many years on my shoulders. My high allowed me to flow through process with a mellow attitude.

*An OFFICER in the background yells at an INMATE (who is played by MALCOLM). The INMATE argues back.*

**ALEX** (Cont...)

Sure, officers were barking orders to establish their authority, but I didn't care [shrugs shoulders] – I was high!

*INMATE in background is cuffed, stays and watches the scene play out.*

**ALEX** (Cont...)

Some of them got hauled away and never seen again, but I didn't care – I was high.

*INMATE walks up and stares aggressively at ALEX.*

**ALEX** (Cont...)

I also got mean mugs from rival gang members, but, like I said, I didn't care because I was high. I breezed through all the medical examinations, and the hours flew by until I got to my last stop.

*ALEX walks into the cubicle. At the desk is MR. JOHNSON, an African-American male in his 40s.*

**ALEX** (Cont...)

[still to the audience] I'm guessing Mental Health is some departmental façade to convince taxpayers that all inmates are mentally stable because I still can't understand how I was cleared. So, after spending some time zig-zagging my way through a maze of human warehousing, I end up in a make-shift office with [motions to JOHNSON] this guy inviting me in.

**JOHNSON**

Please come in and have a seat.

*ALEX grabs a chair with a cold stare in a drug-induced state and sits in it.*

**JOHNSON** (Cont...)

Okay. My name is Ontario Johnson. [*He flips through some papers.*] You're Alex, right? Do you mind if I call you by your first name?

**ALEX**

That's cool.

**JOHNSON**

What are you locked up for?

**ALEX**

A murder.

**JOHNSON**

Where are you from?

**ALEX**

The city.



**JOHNSON**

What area? Pilsen? Little Village?

**ALEX**

Logan Square.

**JOHNSON**

Oh wow! That's becoming a nice area! Do you have a family?

**ALEX**

Kind of. Just me and my mom, but she lives on in the island.

**JOHNSON**

Island? Do you mean Puerto Rico?

**ALEX**

Yeah.

**JOHNSON**

So, no siblings?

**ALEX**

I have a sister, but she's not around much.

**JOHNSON**

Is she older than you?

**ALEX**

I'm older.

**JOHNSON**

Did you do drugs?

**ALEX**

Yeah, I did drugs. Shit, I'm high right now.

[Addressing the audience] I guess I caught him off-guard because he tilted his head back while he paused for a moment to think. I focused on the Newton's cradle and got them to click back and forth while he rubbed his chin deep in thought.

*Johnson snatches the contraption and gets it to stop clicking and moves it out of Alex's reach in an annoying fashion.*

**JOHNSON**

When was the first time you got high?

**ALEX**

Let's see... I was fourteen.

[To the audience] The first time I got high ended up with me getting arrested and receiving a beat-down from the police for hanging out with the guys in my neighborhood.

**JOHNSON**

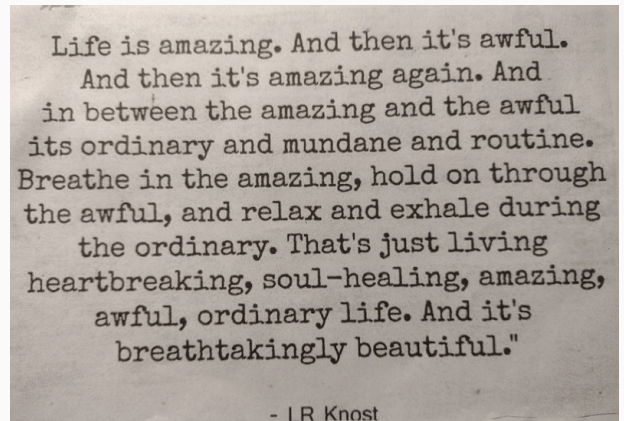
What kind of drugs did you do?

**ALEX**

Mostly weed, and cocaine occasionally.

**JOHNSON**

Have you tried other drugs?



**ALEX**

Yeah.

**JOHNSON**

Do you mind naming them?

**ALEX**

I've tried acid, 'shrooms, liquid G, nitrous...

*JOHNSON laughs.*

**ALEX**

[*To the audience*] I couldn't believe this shit! While I was in the middle of listing the drugs I've tried, the bastard had the nerve to laugh! [*fists balled, addressing JOHNSON*] Hey man, what the fuck is so funny?!

**JOHNSON**

Oh, no [*he waves his hands*] ... I'm sorry! But you just reminded me of this Western, are you familiar with them?

**ALEX**

[*to the audience*] He was lucky that I liked watching Westerns growing up. So instead of cracking him upside his head, I sat down and I listened to what he had to say.

**JOHNSON**

Have you watched the one where the cowboy rides into town and the town has a no gun ordinance? The Sheriff confiscates his weapons from him until he's ready to leave town and the cowboy pulls his revolver from his two holsters, then the rifle from his back, and then the pistols from his boots, and he keeps pulling them from everywhere...

*ALEX smiles and nods.*

Well Alex, that's how you are with the drugs you've tried. You keep pulling them out.

**ALEX**

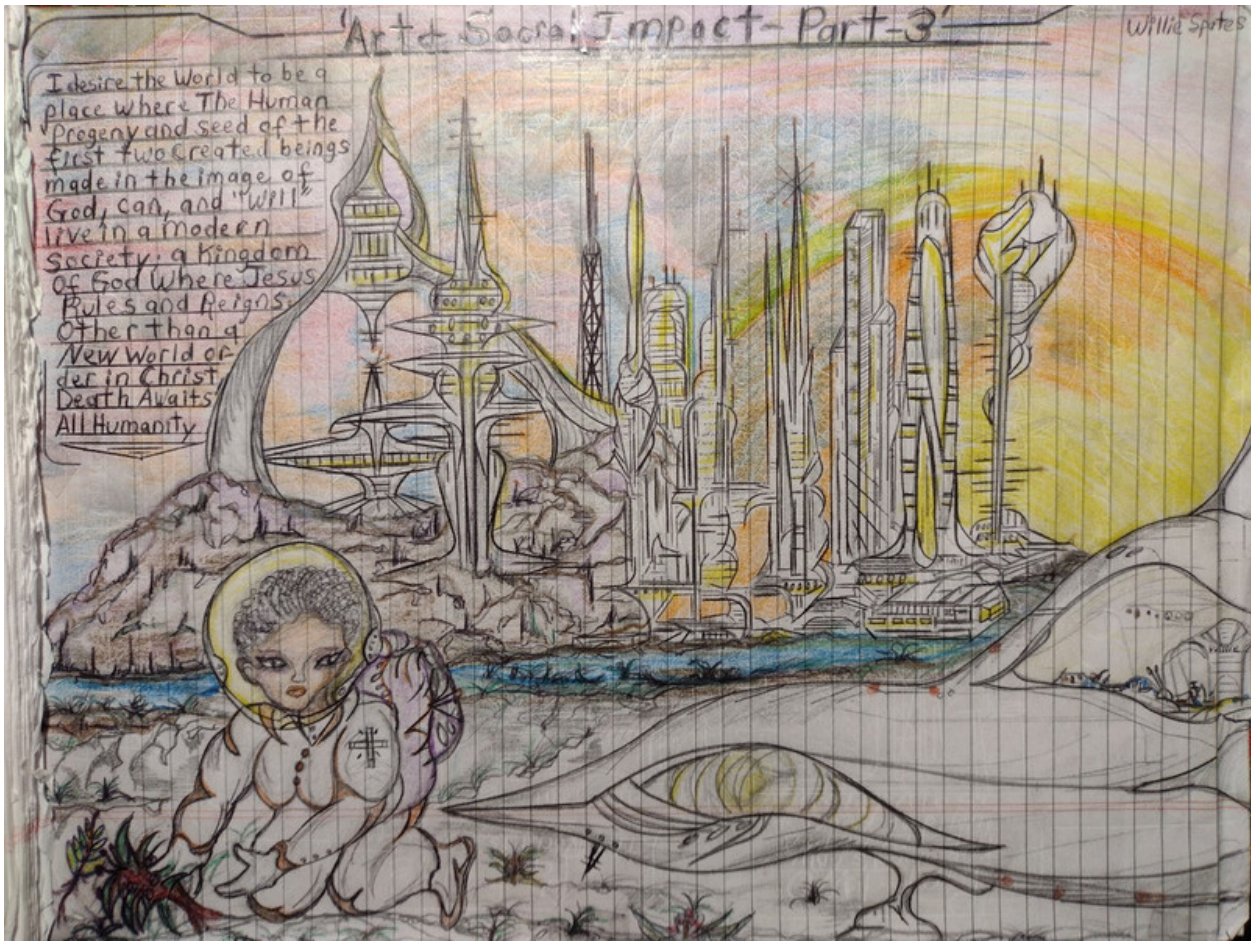
[*To the audience*] That's when it hit me in the back of the head like a Corona bottle in a drunken bar fight: I am an addict and an alcoholic. The more I reflected on my life before imprisonment, the more I realized that I was enslaved to a lifestyle that caused me to spiral out of control and consume more drugs. It's taken me a lot of years to overcome my addictions, and I can honestly say that the road to my recovery began that day, November 15, 2002. Yeah, it took some half-ass prison shrink laughing at me to finally look at who I've become due to my addiction.

Lights down.



**Father retires at 60,  
But **Mother** never retires  
She **works** for her Husband  
She **works** for her Children  
he **looks after** her Grand children  
She **looks after** everyone  
Everyone retires  
But **Mother** never retires**

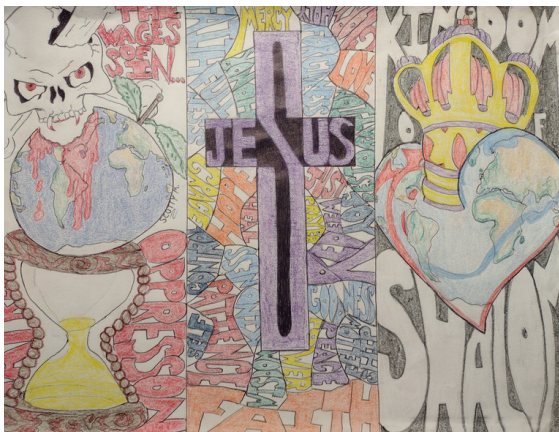
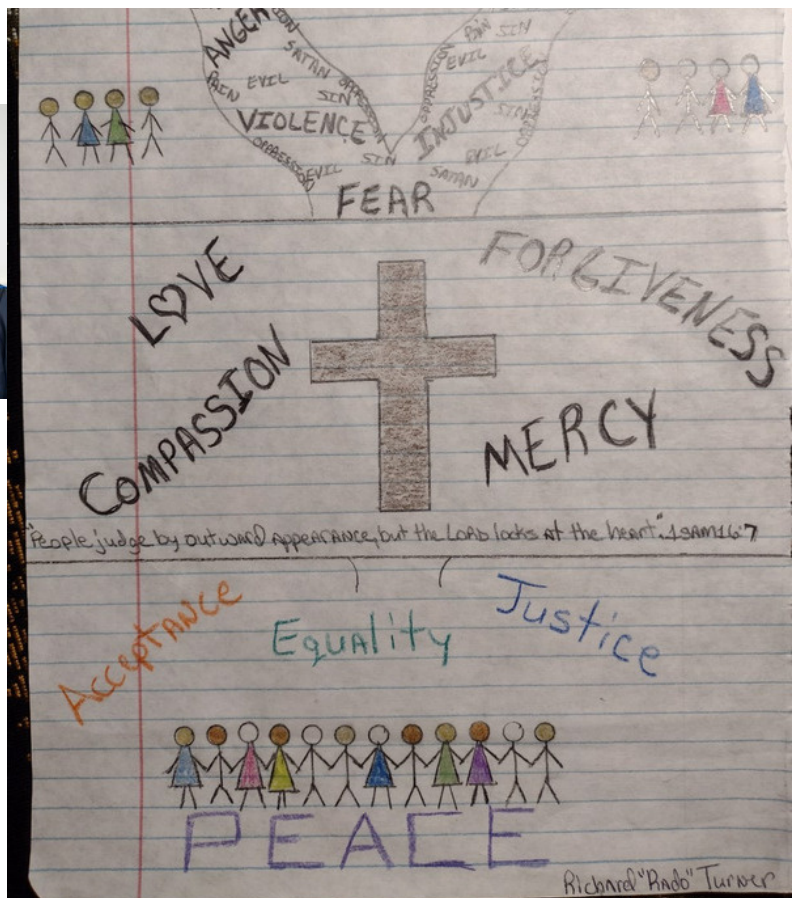
Humor, compliments of Lonnie Smith



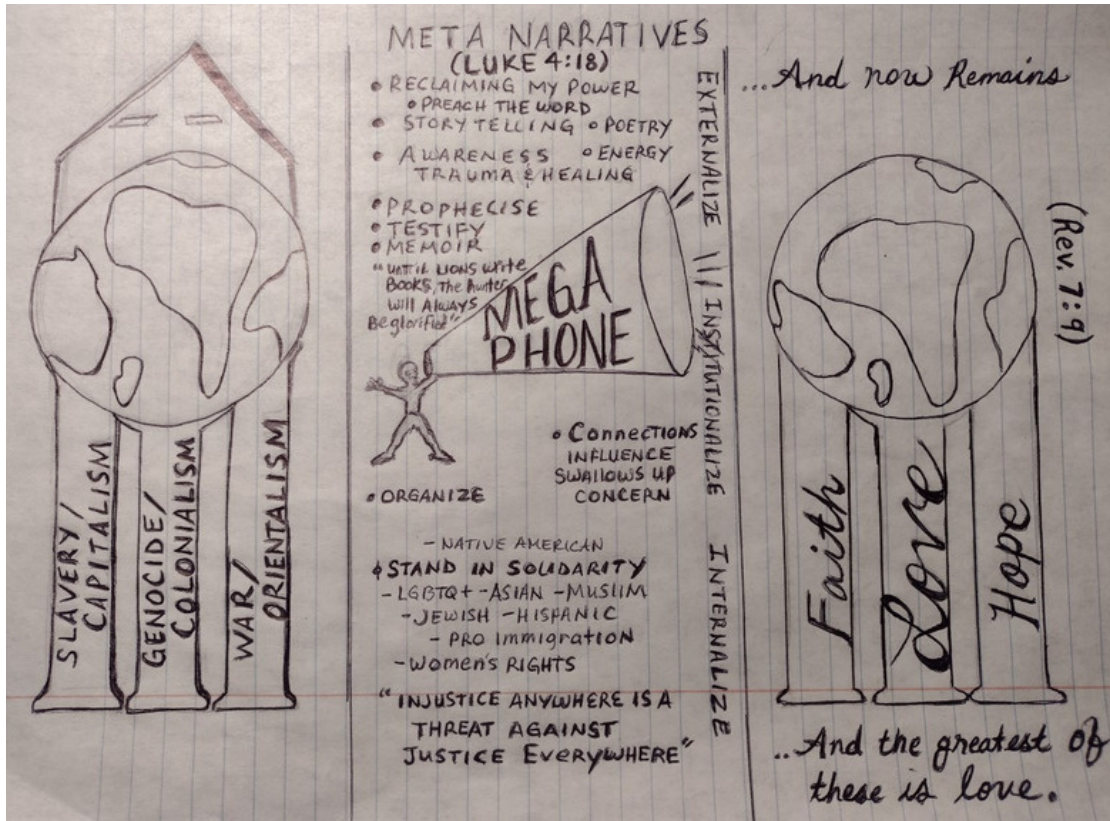
Willie Spates



Richard "Rado" Turner



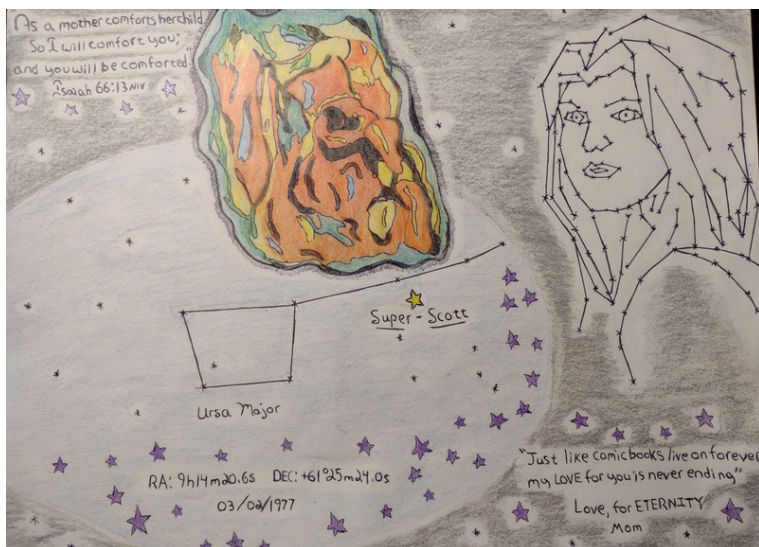
Scott Moore



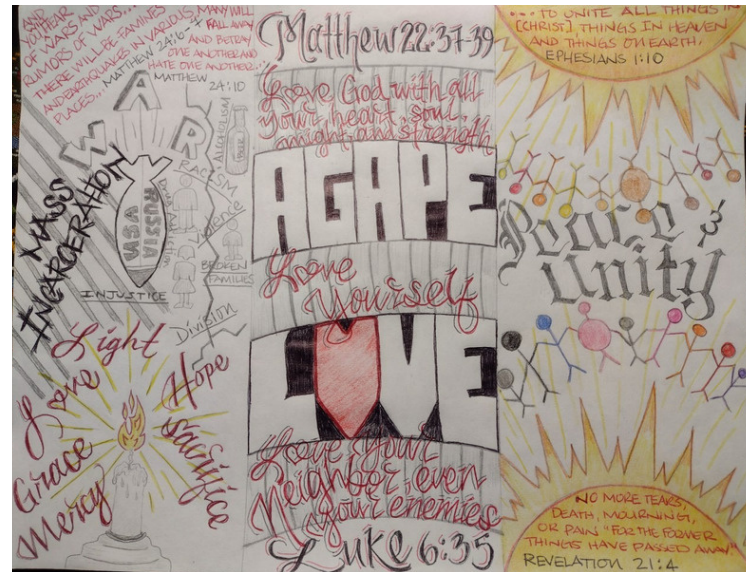
Michael



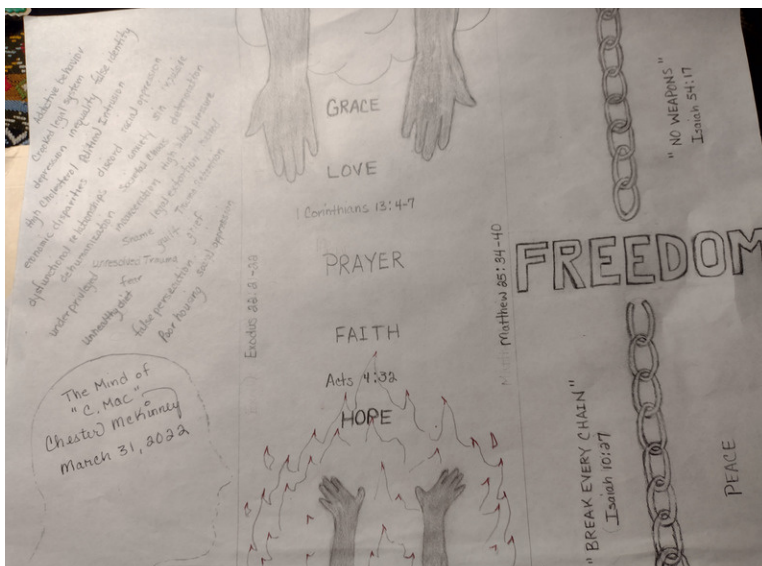
Simmons



Scott Moore

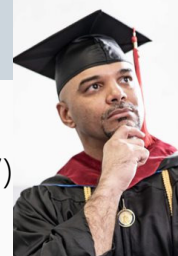


Benny Rios



Chester "C. Mac" McKinney

# Maxims and Memes with Marcos...



Opening Word: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (NIV – 2 Corinthians 5:17)

We are cohort 1 from the North Park SRA program here at Stateville, a beloved community planted (like a church) by Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom (our Pastor) who helped to transform our lives with the love of Jesus through her vision of God's justice in our prison context. Together, we are a new creation in our graduation class of 2022, ready to serve, lead and teach wherever and in whatever context God sends us! Go North Park! The new is here! Let's pay it forward i.e. Michelle's vision, love and dedication out into the world. We love you, Michelle!!!



#1 (LEFT)

"The Four Musketeers shall forever be ALL FOR ONE, ONE FOR ALL!" -Marcos Ramirez

"Jason was clearly not done chewing." -Jamal

"I'm just glad Ray didn't photo bomb us!" -Alex

"Uh-oh. This is what Master's Degree graduates look like?...North Park needs to up its standards!" -Benny

"Quick, let's hurry up and get a picture together before they realize we're a bunch of idiots and kick us out of the program."

Scott

"At North Park Seminary, even the janitors get love." -Howard

#2 (BELOW)

"The Real Outlaws" -Benny

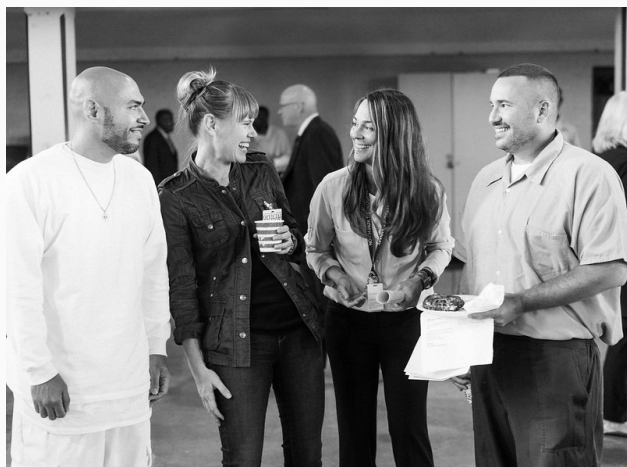
Michelle: "Apparently, some people think feeding me pastries will get them extra-credit!" -Mike Simmons

Jamal: "I wonder if Scott is going to eat the rest of that." -Jamal

"Is Michelle a model teacher or is everyone a model at a shoot?" -Ray

Vickie: "If 2018 is any indicator, the next four years are going to be nothing but smooth sailing."

Michelle: "Too soon." -Scott



#3 (RIGHT)

"Everybody, Jazz Hands on Three." -Jamal

"If you could find Dave Denson and Tall Mike in this pic, you will get extra credit on your next paper." -Benny

"That guy with the skull cap and glasses looks like a retired Rastafarian." -Ray

"Clearly RÓ is attempting to participate in Deborah's call for jazz hands." -RÓ

"Come on, the janitor again?" -Howard

"(My lizard brain back then): Danger! Big Black man has his arm around my shoulder! White fragility power activate: FREEZE!! (My lizard brain now): Brother!" -Scott

"Little did Scott know, Steve is whiter than him." -Alex



## A Word (or 396) from "Mike P.":

Hello everyone,

It has been a long, tumultuous journey. Yet, we have made it to graduation. I was asked what was my vision for graduation. I always think back to Chaplain Adamson's remarks. He said if we made it to the end then we would get a graduation unlike any ever presented at Stateville. Afterward, I went to Northeastern's graduation and began to dream. I saw the camaraderie of the graduating class and the joy of their accomplishments.

Eddie Brown was correct that the creation of a "beloved community" is an accomplishment. We have come together as random individuals with various backgrounds, faiths, and personalities. Yet, we have come to love and respect one another. The greatest teaching that Eddie has given to all of us is his humility and transformation by submitting to the word of God. I have seen Eddie teach through his actions and convictions how to stand in truth and faith. Thank you, Eddie!

This "beloved community" was "the brainchild of two visionaries named Vickie Reddy and Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom." (RÓ Zavala). RÓ's vision as he describes it goes beyond the cap and gown. His vision is of the laughter and smiles of families and friends alike. These smiles and sounds of laughter represent hope and transformation, the continuing stories. Never forget that it was through standing, walking, and sometimes even disagreement that we solidified our community. Together we have combatted "the systemic stigma that has labeled us irredeemable" (RÓ Zavala). I would even go one step further and state that our humanity has been placed on a hill as a light to the world of grace, redemption, and restoration.

I began with one vision of graduation being on the inside. Now that I am free, my vision is walking across the stage representing each individual in my cohort. I can't tell anyone else's story, but I can tell a story about second chances and demonstrate possibility and equal opportunity. I will invite as many supporters, friends, and family members as I can. I will see the joy on my family's faces. There is a part of me that wants to finish the race with the family I began with, to tell all the naysayers that these guys will go further than me but need an opportunity. My vision of graduation is one of peace, love, and joy! Congratulations Class of 2022!

### Michael Simmons



Wow. Graduation. O.K...Y'all know that I tend to get emotional sometimes. The thought of reaching this milestone after everything we have been through, individually and collectively ...it's humbling, and for those who know me, I see humility as an immense power. But before I leave, allow me to take this moment to say thank you to all NP/SRA students, staff, and faculty who took the time to vote for me: the most handsome seminarian, class of 2022. I know I had it in the bag, but I want to share this award with my classmates. Very humbling. Yes, I started the sentence above with a conjunction, and this one as well, on purpose! When I teach, I'm allowing my students to do the same as me. Wait... did I say, "My students?" Something about teaching?! A few years ago, I wouldn't have fixed my mouth to say such a thing, but there is no longer any limit to my imagination. I'm looking forward to meeting the families of my family at graduation, and to all of you tasting my mom's good cooking on the other side. Congrats!

### Johnny Marizetts



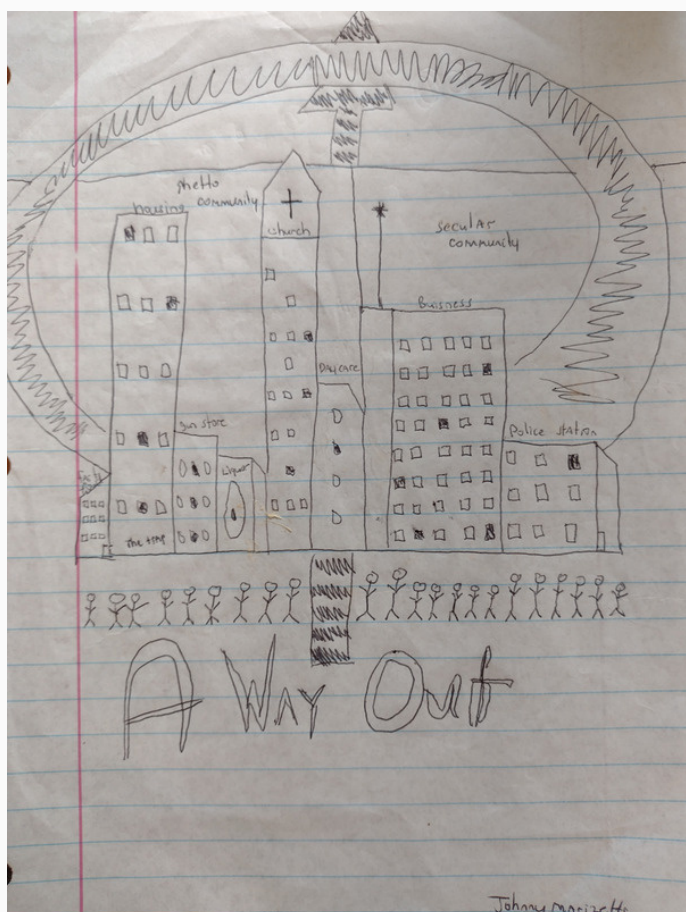
In today's world, and even as far as history will allow us to remember, poverty has always been a major atrocity for mostly urban communities. It is my belief that the cause of poverty is simply too much diversity. There are so many diverse dimensions that divide us to the extent that when it comes to the goods of the land that are supposed to furnish and nurture us, these same goods are also divided in disproportionate rates among the rich and the poor. These diverse dimensions include gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, age, family background, abilities/disabilities, religion, educational background, home/geographic roots, socio-economic status, sexual orientations, work experience, and other known or unknown diversity dimensions (Diverse dimension list taken from an Intercultural Development Inventory Summary of 2022). These barriers that keep us from all beings treated equally and having equal sharing of the goods of our land result in the rich versus the poor. These dimensions also become ramifications that are used mostly to mistreat, neglect, and violate urban communities. Since we can't take back what has already taken place, we should strive to make our future

# Mike P.'s Grammar Corner

Johnny Marizetts (cont...)

better now and tomorrow. Since our land and our youth held the keys to our future, we should be aiming at restoring our land in an equitable fashion and working with and for the youth towards development as well. Personally, I have witnessed and experienced poverty at a young age. Part of this struggle became my personal fight to dedicate a movement surrounding urban and youth development since they possess our future.

Huey Newton once voiced the belief that the Black people in America are the only people who can “free the world, loosen the yoke of colonialism, and destroy the war machine” (“To Die for the People” by Huey Newton, 2009). Just as the black panther party demonstrated a coalition of people in order to push to equality, I too believe that a movement like that should be driven by the youth. Also, I have been inspired by the struggle of my poor upbringing that consisted of being forced to live in demarcated ghettos, sometimes without water supply, without food supply, and without a variety of clothing, even sometimes without a home. Surrounded by drugs, guns and alcohol. (Name some of the things you see in white neighborhoods that you don't see in black ghettos? 1. Nicer homes. 2. Newer cars. 3. Better stores/fewer liquor stores. 4. More luxury. 5. Nicer schools.) A way out is my artistic vision that I have for all urban communities. We must place our faith in the concept of inter-communalism with all of humanity, with the youth at the forefront. Only those who are from an urban community can serve the great family of humankind, and not secular or rural environments since they would lack the education and the experience of what's needed in our “third world ghettos of America” (“To Die for the People” by Huey Newton, 2009). A way-out organization would be a nationwide movement designed for the youth and the at-risk adolescents ranging from ages 8 to 24 years old since these age ranges are the phase of life between childhood and adulthood. These same phases of life are crucial times to gain the necessary educational and social assets for future employment, empowerment, health and well-being that a way-out movement would ensure. Research in neurobiology and developmental psychology has shown that the brain doesn't finish developing until the middle 20's. Young adults are more similar to adolescents than fully mature adults in important ways. Most importantly, they are more susceptible to succumb to peer pressure, less future-oriented and more volatile in emotionally charged settings. These settings are manipulated by old European rulers who have made it almost impossible to reform and deconstruct those in urbanized places. However, I personally believe in the power of God's transformational word which says, “Direct your children unto the right path and when they are older, they will not leave it.” This proverb as a philosophy towards our land and youths' future: aiding, assisting, and advocating for our land of urban communities and our youth throughout the (re)developing stages in a humanitarian effort is necessary for equality and unity.



**Art by Johnny Marizetts**



## Oscar "Smiley" Parham

It has been an amazing couple of days! From graduation to celebration! God is good and I thank Him first and foremost. I would also like to thank my wife, who is the love of my life, my family, and my friends who showed up and supported me this weekend. You all played a part in making this weekend special for me! After everything I've been through, I got my Master's Degree! But guess what, this is just the beginning!!!! And I would like to give a special shoutout to Professor Michelle who played a big part in myself and many others getting our degree. You are the true Pioneer.



## RóDerick Zavala: “An opened mind beyond bars”

Long before I developed the mental image of a cap and gown, there was a shift in my disposition that set forth a gradual change in how I saw my life. I began to believe that I could be more than what my trauma had pressured me into becoming. I looked around for life, and lives that mirrored my open mind. And I found a community of people that believe as I believe: that an accomplished life is more than just divided into categories of standards and non-standards. That stumbles are not falls, and that falls are not permanent positions to remain stuck in. We began our journey from a place that society had given up on. We pressed alongside one another, as we were led by the courageous efforts of two visionaries that would not quit: A steely-spine ethics professor by the name of Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, and a starry-eyed tactician named Vickie Reddy. These women relentlessly gathered the support of the ECC and the North Park community, and they somehow managed to merge a free society with one that had been in bondage for years.

What is my vision for graduation? I see more than just some ceremonial receipt for our academic endeavor. You see we have accomplished much more than that in this sacred space. I’m looking beyond the formalities of degrees being handed out, which mark the completion of our studies. I mean yes, there will be words from staff and students alike. And of course, why wouldn’t we invite a few honored guests to attend and become privy to how far we’ve come. Make no mistake, this is an official moment vested and validated by state law. As well, it is not lost on me how we are breaking ground in terms of Illinois prison reform through higher education. Though, for us who have trekked this arduous journey together, our graduation, our leap from one level onto the next, begins when we amongst one another, as college graduates, introduce our fellow cohort to the families behind the people we’ve grown to know. Our true ceremony starts when the room is filled with laughter and smiles that help us strip away the systemic stigma that has labeled us irredeemable. This ceremonial day of love and community is only possible because we have banded together in our united struggle. Because we have stuck close through it all together while leaning into the heavy moments. It is because we have believed in ourselves, and one another, that we are now, and forever, considered North Park Alumni.

And my vision for life after graduation is filled with the concept of each one-teach one being lived out in the form of classes being instructed by SRA graduate degree holders until minds become so open that bars and concrete walls can no longer contain our bodies. Until those who are on the inside are released to the outside, and those who are on the outside come inside spreading their activism until these inhumane facilities become completely evacuated, for the lack of viable human product. These bars may still imprison our bodies; despite that reality, we have broken free our minds...

### Melvin Centeno



“And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). “Congratulations!!! Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much” (Mathew 25:21).

As I began readying myself to write these few lines, I was truly overwhelmed at the resilience of all the brothers and sisters in Cohort 1 who, through good days and bad days, responded to their gift and completing their Master of Arts in Christian Ministry. We went through personal losses, (I lost my mother to Alzheimer’s disease on November 4, 2018), and we also lost our brothers Rusty and Big Fella to the beast of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many days we didn’t know if death would be knocking on our own doors. However, God had begun a good work in us, and He surely has brought it to completion. Glory to His name!

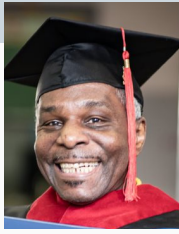
We also experienced the spirit or patriarchy try to besmirch our adorable and loving sisters. Know that God got you and that weaponizing spirit is the lesser, and you are the greater in Jesus’ name (Isaiah 54:17).

Many are wondering what comes next! Well, God has equipped every one of you to take the tools infused in you to be that loving servant who God is, calling to build loving community. The task of building is never easy, yet the desire and vision to do so is tangible, only if we build on the right foundation. The Word of God is clear: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (Psalm 127:1). God sees all of you as master builders, and we have a responsibility to not flaunt our degrees in pride but use them to represent kingdom work with integrity.

I want you to pride yourselves in dying to self and raising up a people. I ask that you bring validity to lives of all you come in contact with. Love neighbor as yourselves, as this is the true beauty of our calling (Luke 10:29). Everyday, ask yourself: How can I be a loving neighbor? Disciple, disciples!!! I am so proud of all of you and wait anxiously to see the journey we will take on to make community a reality in the midst of it all. And yes, “We Can.” My prayer is that God will continue using His spirit to prune daily and lead us to be greater men and women: “I ask God to remove the veils of indifference and that we will treat every soul just as He would. May we enter this gate with thanksgiving and His courts with praise (Psalm 100:4).” In Jesus’ name, I declare liberation, freedom, purpose, intentionality, and breaking through. Allow Him who began the good work in you to bear witness of that completed ministerial work. Love you all with the love of Christ. In His Service, Melvin Centeno



# Eddie Brown



Look mom, we made it, top of the world! Master's degree recipients. I offer congratulations to the 2022 graduating class, both inside and outside students. We began our journey four years ago, and I am thankful that God has granted me the privilege to study and learn with each of you and from each of you. This phase of our education journey has come to an end, but the friendships and beloved community that we have built will continue; at least, this is my prayer! In our four years studying together we have covered many subjects and discussed many topics, but for the purpose of this article, I would like to address our mission—what we plan to do with our degrees.

We have been equipped for mission. Our gracious God has poured gifts into each of us and called us to exercise them to bring His body—the church—to full maturity (Eph. 4:12-13). As we exercise our gifts, we can also change our communities by allowing God's grace to shine in and through us. I don't know about you, but the mission that I believe that I have been called to seems like an enormous task. The closer we moved to graduation, the more I feel overwhelmed. I believe that I have been called and have now been equipped to teach God's word. When I think of this mission, my first thought is the passage of Scripture of James 3:1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." This passage humbles me and strikes me with some fear. It may (or may not) help explain why I was the way I was in class. Teaching is a huge responsibility because it helps to shape and model lives. For me, teaching God's word is even more important because now you're dealing with the eternity of someone's soul. Therefore, I must be careful not to lead people astray.

I believe that I am qualified to teach God's word, but I feel that I am unqualified in temperament. This causes me to question my calling. In our journey together, you have all witnessed occasions when, in my zeal for the Word of God, I have become angry—which has led me to be called unloving many times. This is something that I regret and that strings, yet it tells me that there is so much more work that God needs to do in me. I praise God that His mercies are new every morning (Lam. 3:22-23). There have also been times where I have wanted to quit, to just do a Jonah and run in the opposite direction. But a passage of Scripture prevents me: "And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a times as this?" (Esther 4:14). Sometimes I'm just not able to believe that I am capable for the mission because in my flesh, I can't get out of God's way. Because of this, I just want to hide out, live my own life, and try to forget about this calling. Yet, it haunts me. I then feel like Jeremiah felt, when he said, "The word of the Lord was within me as a burning fire shot up in my bones" (Jer. 20:9). I wanted to be transparent before you, just in case someone else is concerned about walking in their mission, to let you know that you are not alone. And now, operating in my ministry, I offer these steps to help each of us exercise our gifts and bring glory to God.

First, pray! We need to always lift up petitions to God. I am praying for myself, as well as each of you, that we will all become the vessels that God has chosen to work in and through, that there will be less of us and all of God. I pray that everything we do will be for our good, the good of our communities, and God's ultimate glory. Praise God, because He describes His plan for our lives not in our terms, but in His. That's how it should be, because God is the only one who knows who we really are, and what His power can accomplish in us, but we will not accomplish our mission if we don't believe. We must operate in faith because without faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6). Secondly, we must truly embrace who we are in Christianity. We must know and understand our true identity and remind ourselves of our unique place in God's historical story. Third, know that you have the power of the Almighty God at your disposal—so there is nothing to fear. God has promises to never leave you nor forsake you. I don't want to see us retreat to the shadows of the world or behind the locked doors of the church. No, we are and must be different. We must engage the world in boldness, knowing that we have been equipped to help meet the needs of this hurting world. We have learned empathy and compassion in our Pastoral Care class and are now given the opportunity to exercise what we have learned. We must stand as people who not only have the appearance of godliness, but also demonstrate the power thereof! Fourth, for answers, where do we begin? I believe that all our ministries begin with our families, then to others in the church, then to our neighborhood, then to our city, then to the country, and ultimately to the whole world.

Whatever our individual gifts or mission may be, I believe that they all in some way will engage the same mission God gave to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. I hold this belief because Scripture teaches us that we are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 3:12; 11:1-2). Adam and Eve's mission was to widen the boundaries of the sanctuary (for us our sphere of influence) in ever-increasing circles by extending the order of the sanctuary into the inhospitable outer spaces—this includes the goal of spreading the glorious presence of God.

There are crowds of hurting souls who need the gifts that God has poured into us, so we can't hide. No rather, we must put our North Park Master's degree education to work. We must be that light on a hill—let your light shine. Matthew 5:15 tells us, "Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the



# Mike P.'s Grammar Corner

(Eddie Brown cont...) house." If we fail to exercise our gifts or choose not to engage the world, to show empathy and compassion to the crowds of hurting souls who need the gifts and knowledge that God has entrusted to us, it would be similar to Adam and Eve's failure to extend the garden sanctuary.

Finally, in Mark 8:18 Jesus asked three questions: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" As servants of Christ, when you are out and about in the world, fully equipped with the gifts and knowledge God has given you, do you see the need of the people? Do you hear their cries of anguish? Do you remember that Jesus welcomes the marginalized—such as you were? We need to look at the world through the eyes of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, and bring peace, love, and sustenance to it through the power of the Holy Spirit and our presence being with them.

The world may look bleak through our human eyes; it may seem a daunting task, but through our spiritual eyes we see God in control, using and directing us, working out everything for our good and His glory. The amazing thing continues to be that He invited us to join Him in this work. One thing I like to say is "Always have an attitude of expectancy when serving God, because you never know when He will choose to do something in you or through you for someone else." This makes life exciting.

Dear brothers and sisters, let's get to work and give God the glory for the changes that are made in our families, our churches, our neighborhood, our city, our country, our world!

May God's peace continue to abide upon you. Love, Eddie

What a joy to be a part of the 1st cohort class. I have seen and learned so much in the classes from Professors and students. Yet my joy comes in the moment now; we have made it to the final line. Yes, this reminds me of the verse, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." It's well done in all of the commitment we have put in, and good and faithful in completing the job. Yet we are just beginning. Love, David Denson

**David  
Denson**

## The End of a New Beginning by Raymond Nesbitt

"Wow!" is how I'd describe my 4-year experience at North Park. It's like a roller coaster ride at Great America, with its peaks and valleys, exhilarating, thrilling, tumultuous, humorous, sadness. Alas, all good rides must come to an end, but it was fun while it lasted.

I recall Chaplain Adamson giving us a pep talk at the Cohort 1 initial convening. He said to expect obstacles to hinder us from learning. Man, that was the understatement of the year. We've went on quarantine lockdown for 2 years and lost some of our peers (Rusty & Big Fella) to Covid. I would want these two men to be memorialized as Martyrs. The lockdown affected all of us to varying degrees of stress, loneliness, and other family members falling victim to the pandemic. Despite these setbacks, Michelle, Vickie, and Melissa shined like the North Star by guiding us through the correspondence courses. It was fun writing to my other cohorts because I found I was a much better writer than speaker.

I will never forget the love Michelle has for the school, the ministry, and for us. Although I'm older than her, she commands a lot of respect. I told her about an old Chinese proverb where a student could not learn until he emptied his cup. Well, I emptied (o.k. I left about ¼ in the cup). But I allowed the courses to fill in the rest. Michelle passed the torch to Vickie like in a relay race and boy did she run! Who else could have managed a Masters correspondence course in prison, which that method of learning hadn't been tried or proven successful. While Melissa our esteemed English professor helped uncover my latent talent for writing that had been dormant for decades. I was even allowed to momentarily be a writing advisor and a co-editor. These are experiences that will remain etched in my mind forever.

I truly believe that the creator has brought us all together as a family to serve his purposes. I love all my cohorts and am thankful for those that helped in my time of need. I hope to pay it forward. The main theme I'd like to leave with my constituents is to be empowered, not by words, written or verbal, but the Spirit of God. I believe we will go on to do greater things as Christ wanted us to (Matt 21: 21).

It is my hope and prayer we can have a reunion and talk about our ministries and what we've done to advance the Kingdom of God on earth. Let me leave you with the scripture that has empowered my life and hopefully yours if you believe, Joshua 1:8:

"This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous and then you will have good success."





## Ignacio "Nacho" Alvarez

1. The question that I pose to you is: "Who are you?" Now before you rush to answer this, keep in mind the way you define yourself is either going to encapsulate you within a bubble or render you limitless. You're either going to insulate your identity within restrictive parameters that don't leave room for growth, or you're going to see yourself in the light of unending possibilities. The individual that comes to mind that best reflects what I'm saying is Gideon. Why? Because he chooses to embrace or accept his present reality that doesn't leave room for growth or change, an oppressive and restrictive reality that has seeped into the fabric of his thinking and imagination. He sees himself as one thing, but he's much, much more than that self-imposed restriction.
2. What I find so interesting about Gideon is that his name actually means "feller" or "warrior," and yet he's living far beneath that untapped potential. Now, what he's doing, threshing wheat, isn't wrong, by no means, but he's embraced a singular dimension that keeps him wondering: "What if?"
3. Interestingly, Gideon, in threshing wheat, reveals his imaginative ingenuity. How? Well, he's managed to thresh wheat in a winepress so as to conceal it from the Midianites. He hasn't allowed his restrictive environment to hinder an action that's vital to his physical health. He's managed to find a way to provide sustenance not only for himself but for family, and those within his proximity.
4. But in the midst of all this, how does he see himself? Well, in a restrictive and self-insulative fashion. You see when he's called by God to be a deliverer to his people, he fights against that vision and notion even though his very name tells us otherwise. This "warrior" is essentially saying that he's not a fighter...The verse actually declares: "O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house." This might indeed be true, but these facts shouldn't have defined him, nor should they have restricted his potential.
5. Think about this for a moment: when God initially addresses Gideon, He says: "The Lord is with you, you mighty man of valor!" This statement reveals God's unadulterated presence and His perspective of Gideon: mighty man of valor. He's identifying Gideon as something much, much more. He's actually, in a sense, challenging him to live up to his potential and moniker that defines his identity: warrior.
6. So, I ask you the question again: "Who are you?" Are you a Gideon who is living beneath a suppressed potential? If so, then take heed to the words: The Lord is with you, you mighty man/woman of valor. Embrace this truth and walk in such a way that impacts your environment, atmosphere, and community. Many of us are on the cusp of receiving our Master's degree, but is that the ceiling or the floor? For me it's only the beginning. Receiving my Master's is just the first rung in my limitless ladder of potential. I believe that there are bigger and greater things in store for me, and not because I'm this great man, but rather because I come from a "small" and "weak" clan in which I'm the "least," but because of this, God has called me in order that I might reveal His glory and put to shame that which is rendered as strong and wise. As a matter of fact, that's what God is calling each and every one of us to be--limitless innovators that refuse to be defined and refined by our physical and generational restrictions. We are Gideons, we are warriors, and fellers of institutions and life-restricting laws and policies. We are deliverers of our people, but we must believe it. Do you believe it? If so, then walk in that limitless potential you mighty man/woman of valor and courage!

Don't be defined by your weaknesses and failures, but also don't be restricted by your accomplishments--there's more to us than these. Live limitless...!



## Cohort 1

by Lydia VanderStelt



## Vickie Reddy

Last night I walked at our outside Commencement Ceremony on North Park's campus alongside David, Smiley, Tony and Lydia in person, and alongside all of our inside students' amazing photos as all our names were read and our Master's Degrees conferred! To be with David, Smiley and Tony as they walked freely across that stage will be a moment I remember forever and I pray is symbolic of all that is yet to come.

I want to share a portion of my final presentation from Ministry Identity & Practice as my contribution to this Operation Graduation edition of Feather Bricks. My past four years have been defined by 3 words (which were preached in a message by my friend Sandra Van Opstal right before I began classes at Stateville): PROXIMITY, MUTUALITY and SOLIDARITY. I used to think these words were linear, but I have come to realize that they are actually cyclical, and, if we lean into them, keep moving us to deeper levels.

A lot of my life I've used media to tell stories - dropping into communities for a moment.

Asking questions to get sound bites and quotes that pull on the heart strings, and then piecing it all together to get an audience to care about a people group or issue. I've listened to other people tell their stories, heart wrenching, devastating stories, stories that I've never, and will never, have to live. I listened to those stories and thought I understood a reality that I knew nothing about. And then I went home. And I tried to convince people to care. My efforts, however well-intentioned, were not based on proximity, mutuality and solidarity. They were trying to fix a problem without really understanding it, without knowing what was wrong with the system, and without taking the time to feel the real impact.

bell hooks teaches us that when we hear and know one another in the difference and complexities of our experience - and create a space for that to exist - a mutuality emerges. I've learnt a lot about hearing and knowing others in our differences and complexities these past four years. I caught on pretty early to what it meant to be proximate with others. To how proximity actually doesn't just change the narrative, but seeing the power it has to change systems. No clearer has that been for me than when the Lt. Governor and other legislators came and participated in a listening circle with us, and it was us that day. I was sitting with you as you held your stories in your hands - giving them an education through your pain and trauma, the onus on you to convince them of the brokenness of so many systems that had done you so much harm. For once, I was on this side. I was not hearing the stories and walking away leaving behind the hopes that the people telling stories bring to those encounters. I felt what it meant to be proximate. And proximity (without saviorism, or colonization) should lead to mutuality. It should lead to each of us knowing that we need the other. That has certainly been my experience. My faith, my understanding of self, my understanding of the world, has been expanded because I sit in the difference and complexities of our experience. And solidarity means we keep showing up for each other - I realized that it's not actually until the chaos or the crisis really hits in community that you know the depth of your commitment to it. And then it's choosing to continue to show up when it gets messy and hard, and you struggle to trust. When you feel disillusioned and let down. And you show up anyway. And you keep showing up...

Because what I realized is that my strength, freedom and flourishing is tied up in yours, through the good the bad and the ugly. My freedom, my humanity, my value, my faith - has all been found and expanded in this place. And that kind of solidarity does something to you. It doesn't let you walk away. The media and the storytelling matters. Changing the narrative is absolutely necessary and is an important piece in the work. But I think Jesus calls all of us to more than that. He calls us to follow his example, to get close to others. Really uncomfortably close. Because only then can we see what each other really needs. Only then can we be for the other what they really need. And then we each bring what we have to the table - and that might include storytelling to change the narrative, but it will come from a different place.

For me, the story telling will continue, changing the narrative is what I committed to. Be it through media or building relationships with those who hold the power to bring change, but now it's because it's about "us," not about "you." Now I still go home, but I come back again the next day. Now I put my body on the line. Now I tell the stories through a different lens - because I am invested in the outcome.

