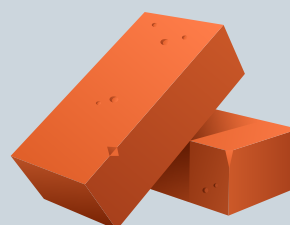




COVER ART
BY BRADLEY COLLIER





Feather Bricks Mission Statement:

We provide brave spaces to celebrate creative,
encouraging, and instructive expressions.

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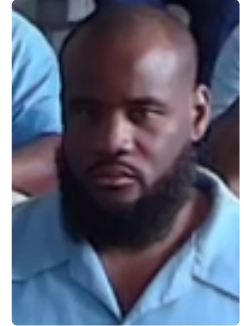
LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

2025! A New Year! New blessings!

This year, our convictions will be overturned. We will be resentenced. Our clemencies will be granted. Legislation will pass in our favor. We will be reunited with family and friends. We will create new memories that help wash the stain of prison. We will dream anew and watch these dreams come true.

Brothers and Sisters, Kings and Queens, Gods and Goddesses, Political Prisoners, Jailhouse Lawyers, Artists and Writers, Intellectuals and Academics, Spiritual Guides and Activists, Comrades. We are Freedom Fighters. If our chains are what bond us, let no oppression divide us. For what can break the spirit of a righteous people, moving for a righteous cause?

Faith without works is just flowery words. Works without faith is energy wasted. Faith with works and selflessness, faith with works and commitment, faith with works and togetherness makes a nation of 2 million incarcerated people who demand justice, equity, mercy, and grace. We are a brave people, a courageous people, spirited and resilient. -Devon Terrell



Devon Terrell

Dear Readers,

Bradley Collier's stunning cover art of the pagoda (which we can also call a gazebo) fits this issue's theme, "New Year, New Beginnings." The painting was submitted as part of a "Multi-Modal Remix" assignment for Lewis University's course "College Writing 1," taught at Kewanee Life Skills Re-Entry. Students were asked to reimagine the content of an essay written earlier in the semester and present their results to the class in a new way. Bradley's painting remixes ideas from an essay he wrote where he presented a case for the ancient classical text *Dao de Jing* to be studied in US schools today. This was the first time teaching ENG111 I received a painting and essay on content (the *Dao de Jing*) so foreign to me. We paired my course with Professor Ken Sawyer's Ancient History class, giving students the option to use sources from History class to write their argumentative essays. Offering this assignment in a new way got me attending History class, taking notes and reading up in order to be able to evaluate my writing students' essays effectively. I wish you all similar experiences in the form of new beginnings and new blessings in 2025, and I leave you with a quote I discovered along my journey:

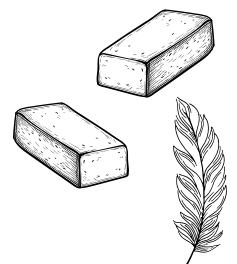
"The further one goes, the less one knows."

— Lao Tzu, *Dao de Jing*.

-Professor Melissa



Melissa Pavlik



WRITE ON!



I remember one of my former attorney's letterheads had Amos 5:24 written on it: "But let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream." I choose to write about the passage Amos 5:18- 27 not only because social justice is Amos' main theme, but also because it contains one of the earliest references of the day of the Lord (5:18-20) **1**. I feel Amos' cry for the poor and the oppressed. However, prior to my incarceration I had no deep insight into this prophetic voice; it was only when I experienced suffering that I could understand Amos' crying. The claim that the personal experience of solidarity with the oppressed is the necessary context for the responsible interpretation of scripture is expressed in the phrase "the hermeneutical privilege of the poor" **2**. In Amos, God speaks through the prophet about what true righteousness is and the hope in store for those who live ethically and love God and their neighbor fully.

In this passage, Amos directly addresses three issues that might be false sources of hope for the people and nation of Israel. First, the prophet poses two rhetorical questions to the audience about their beliefs about the Day of the Lord, because some Israelites doubt his prediction of doom; they think that on the Day, God will intervene in history, defeat Israel's enemies, and invite the Israelites, no matter their conduct, to enjoy the eternal kingdom. They thought the Day was punishment for pagans only. Amos states the Day will be a day of darkness for Israel (5:18- 20). Amos predicts that disaster after disaster will happen to the Israelites, and it will be impossible to flee from Gods' judgment (5:19) **3**. Second, Amos tells his audience that it would be deceptive to think that their worship would gain any favor with God, for God hates their worship (5:21). God does not accept their sacrifices / songs because righteous behavior does not rule their lives (v. 22-23). Amos tells them what they might do; they need to let justice flow out of their lives like a river (v. 24). This means that God wants to see the results of repentance in the way people live. Earlier in 5:15, Amos mentions what repentance leading to true righteousness looks like: "Hate evil and love good; establish justice in the city gate" (CSB). When the rich deal honestly with the poor; when there is justice in the courts; when oppression, like slavery, has ceased, then true righteousness has come to the people **4**. The third issue Amos addresses is the deceptive pagan worship that some Israelites followed. Amos asks a third question (v. 25) about the sacrifices the people brought to God during their wilderness journey. The prophet asks this question to use the Exodus as a point of reference. During the wilderness wanderings, the nation of Israel did not bring sacrifices to Yahweh. By asking this question, Amos reminds the people that Israel's covenant relationship with God is based on Israel's worship of God with all their heart and soul (Deut 6:5) and not just on the external, ritual act of sacrificing to God **5**. The combination of ritual performance and the daily embodied act of righteousness is an issue addressed in Psalm 50. One cannot bow down to other Gods such as the Assyrian star god, called Sakkuth (5:26), and still claim to be honoring the one true God. Because Israel has done this, Amos warns that the God of Armies will send Israelites into exile, "far beyond Damascus," into the land of Assyria (5:27) **6**.

Amos, originally a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees, lived in Judah before he was called by God to preach to the Northern Kingdom during the reign of Jeroboam II. Israel was at its zenith, and Amos arrived at a time of great prosperity and splendor in the land. The Israelites were prideful and a central power, whereas Assyria was weak and no immediate threat to them **7**. Yet, spiritually Israel was rotten, because it combined ritual and piety with iniquity and social injustice **8**. Historically, Jeroboam I's sins were connected to worship, not justice, issues; whereas, Amos arrives at the time when the conditions were opposite. Jeroboam II's sins were connected to the not-so-well-hidden oppressive structures – not religiosity **9**. Israel at Amos' time thought itself a religious

nation and took its economic success and stability as proof of God's blessing. Israelite religion's cornerstone was the belief that God had chosen them. However, the prophets, Amos especially, were sent to Israel to remind the people that chosen-ness cannot be mistaken for divine favoritism or immunity from chastisement **10**.

Amos predicts a remnant will survive the Day of the Lord. This remnant is composed of people who seek God intently (5:46) and live ethically (5:14-15); they will be restored, blessed and enjoy God's presence (9:14-15). King writes that "The Day is neither solely a time of judgment nor salvation. It is a time of salvation through judgment; purification and blessing through purging" **11**. Thus, Amos also sees hope in the Day of the Lord. Amos used many literary methods to drive home his prophetic points. One of the methods seen in the passage is the use of rhetorical questions. The second is sarcasm. This is especially seen in the previous chapter (4:45) where he challenges the people to persist in their sacrifices: "This is what you love to do!" (CSB). Amos is stating how the Israelites bring all sorts of sacrifices before God, yet their lives are full of sin. A third method is in 5:1-3 when the prophet signs a lament, a funeral song for Israel, in order to shock the people into understanding the reality of God's coming judgment, which is inescapable **12**.

In conclusion, those who belong to the ruling class in Israel were "good" people who were faithful in their religiosity, yet they reconciled their worship practices with an economic system that benefited them at the expense of others. Amos informs them that God hates their rituals and finds satisfaction only in the establishment of justice. Biblical justice means that righteousness (good intentions to benefit another) is distributed to the many and the marginalized **13**. Just as Amos was dealing with Israelites that put sacrifice before caring for the poor, Jesus was dealing with Pharisees and the rich (Matt 19:21), who did the same. Today many Americans attend church and consider themselves "good," yet they fight their government giving aid to the needy. This is libertarianism, which is a political theory that claims that a legitimate government can have only three functions: enforcing contracts, protecting private property, and keeping the peace- which includes protecting the borders. Missing quite conspicuously is any mechanism for caring for members of society who are in need, because its central concern is the preservation of individual property and wealth. Some libertarians consider governmental assistance to the needy as theft: an illegal use of taxpayers' dollars **14**. In this regard libertarianism is the antithesis of biblical ethics and righteousness **15**. God through the prophets- especially Amos- mandates governments have a responsibility to provide safety nets. In fact, God through Jeremiah praises King Josiah for doing just this: "He defended the cause of the poor and needy and so all went well. Is that not what it means to know me? Declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 22:16, NIV). The current issues of helping the needy in the US and other countries are complex, but it is important for Christians to be aware that this is what God truly values (loving our neighbor). This can be practiced, even in prison, in an individual manner, with the more fortunate meeting a need of the less fortunate and in this way, God will truly be pleased with our worship.

Notes

1. Greg A. King, "Day of the Lord," Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible, Ed. David Noel Freedman (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 234.
2. Daniel L. Migliore, Faith seeking Understanding- An Introduction to Christian Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 62.
3. Gary V. Smith, "Amos," Baker Illustrated Study Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 1667.
4. Ibid.
5. Cleotha Robertson, "Amos," The Africana Bible-Reading Israel's Scripture from Africa and the African Diaspora, General Ed, Hugh R. Page, Jr. (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 2010), 1777-178.
6. Gary V. Smith, "Amos," Baker, 1667.
7. Abraham J. Heschel, "Amos," The Prophets (New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001), 33.
8. Ibid, 37.
9. Bruce C Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim and David L. Petersen, A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 263.
10. Abraham J. Heschel, "Amos," Prophets, 39.
11. Greg A. King, "Day of the Lord," Eerdmans, 325.
12. Bill T. Arnold, and Bryan E. Beyer, Encountering the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2015), 438.
13. Bruce C. Birch et al, A Theological Introduction, 309.
14. Obrey M. Hendricks, Jr., Christians Against Christianity, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 139.
15. Ibid.



Lewis University Squad 3 (Con Air): Letter to Our Ancestors

Note: ENG110 Teaching Fellow Alex Negrón facilitated an in-class writing workshop at Sheridan C.C. that resulted in the composition below. Each member of the class had the opportunity to contribute one sentence, including the Professor. Can you tell which sentence belongs to which member of the squad?

Dear Ancestors,

I'm sorry to have failed you. Every day I feel my strength is tested, but I understand your struggle may be harder than mine. What kind of man were you? Grandson, I don't know; I was simply a man. Although I made daily mistakes, you always tell me it's ok. I'm here with you. Even if you have the best possible outcome, you're probably going to second guess yourself, so in this way every mistake is the best mistake you'll ever make. Are you ready to become an unstoppable force in corporate America? What did you leave behind when you came to this country? You're not the person you used to be. I'm happy to see the man you are today. Carry on the family legacy with pride and determination. What am I doing wrong in the struggle, and what should I be doing? My greatest accomplishment was being a father and a husband. I live in times where we have toilets — ha ha! How do I become more in tune with my higher self? How do you feel about what we became? My ancestor responded, "We are a strong people." My answer to them was, "Even though I am where I'm at right now, the struggle is not in vain." Where are my royalties? Ignore the cuneiform tablets, the hieroglyphs; see burial sites as texts. Keep searching for deep answers.



My Skin Tells a Story by **Jabril Harmon**

Some look at my skin and see beauty, others look and see trouble, some see my skin and see failure, while others look and they see struggle. But does anyone see the story? Does anyone see the story attached so deeply within my skin? The compelling narrative of the ups and downs of all black women and men. Prejudice and racism makes it easy for people to be blinded. So look at my skin and don't just see color, but see the story that's behind it.

Can't you see the great kings and queens of Africa when you look down at my hand? The greats all over the world standing tall upon the land, standing tall for every man. It was hands that looked similar to mine in 3700 B.C.E. that made the hieroglyphic writings. Similar hands that aided Hannibal in the Punic wars when on the battlefield fighting. Those hands that had fallen to the Romans amid a sea of blood and panic, looked just like the ones that were in shackles being shipped across the Atlantic. So when you look at me, I hope you see, the pain and glory, so you can look past just the color, and see my skin tells a story.

Can't you see the strength of my ancestors when you look down at my arms? The strength from carrying bundles of burlaps, and burdens, as they labored on the farms. It was arms that look similar to mine in 1947 that allowed Jackie Robinson to be the 1st black man in MLB. Similar arms were used by Eli Whitney when he invented the cotton gin in 1793. The arms that help many blacks build this country using picks, and axes, and shovels, look just like the ones raised in the air in victory by Jesse Owens in 1936 when he brought home 4 gold medals. So when you look at me, I hope you see the struggle and the glory, so you can look past just the color, and see that my skin tells a story.

Can't you see the look of determination I have when you look at me in the face? The same look as Usain Bolt in a race, or on the 1st Black Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall when he cited a case. It was a face that look just like mine on Crispus Attucks' in 1770 at the Boston Massacre just seconds before the British were meant to shoot. A similar look was held by Booker T. Washington in 1881 when he founded the Tuskegee Institute. The look that was on Nelson Mandela's face in February of 1990 when he was released from behind those walls, look just like the face of Dr. Martin Luther King when his dream inspired us all. So when you look at me, I hope you see the triumph and the glory so you can look past just the color, and see my skin tells a story.

The story of Chad, the story of Ghana, Sudan and Zambia, the story of Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tanzania. The stories of Rosa Parks and Malcolm X are ones I'll always possess because these are the stories I carry with me, right here on my flesh. But there's many hurdles and many more triumphs and many more words to be given so the story of my skin isn't over...it's still being written!



The following is a story shared by a student who just completed a course at Lewis University entitled, Practicing Faithful Justice. She originally shared this powerful Thanksgiving experience during a visit by two impacted individuals to class during the last week of the semester.

Brenda's Story

Being in this class has changed my perspective a lot I would say. I've had three of my uncles on my mom's side be sentenced to prison. I was really young when they got incarcerated, and we were pretty close to my uncles, so I would pray all the time as a little kid that my uncles would be able to get out soon. I would repeat what my mom would always say in her prayers "that God may protect them from all ill-intentioned people." As I grew up, these feelings changed. I have always considered myself a pretty empathetic person, but under the influence of some of those around me, I learned that I shouldn't reserve the same feelings for my own uncles. I saw how many problems and arguments they caused in my family, and I came to believe that they deserved their punishment. I saw how my aunts and my mom grew up in the same household and how they turned out to be 'good' people, so I didn't think my uncles deserved empathy; they chose to be that way, and they weren't choosing to change, so they deserve to stay in prison.

My grandma suffered the most during all these years. All of my mom's family lives in Indiana, but my uncles got incarcerated in Tennessee. My *abuelita* would have to ask all her daughters to drive her to Tennessee once a year to visit my uncles, and no one ever wanted to go except for my mom. So, as kids we would drive about six hours just to visit them in prison and drive back. I remember that made me hate Tennessee. My grandma is from Mexico so she only speaks Spanish, and she would have to ask her daughters to send my uncles money to be able to call her, and no one wanted to do it but my mom. So, about once a week my uncles would call my mom to add my grandma to the three-way call. My aunts

would always argue with my grandma, telling her to stop sending them money and that she shouldn't be going to Tennessee as often; that's where my anger towards them started. No one wanted to help my grandma so my mom had to do it, and I would always hear the disagreements.

After about three years, one uncle got released. He had five kids, a wife and a big, beautiful house in Tennessee before. When he got out, he lost everything: his wife divorced him, his kids hated him, they lost the house, and he could not find a job. He also didn't have any support from his family in Indiana, because, although we were happy he was out, we felt that he did that to himself so he should figure it out himself.

After another three years, my other uncle got out. He decided to restart his life in Oregon and started his own food truck. He calls my grandma every single day to talk to her. Sometimes my mom and my aunts find it annoying because she has to take time out of her day to be on the phone to talk to him.

I saw my grandma suffer the most with my third uncle. He was the baby; he was about 20 when he went to prison. After about 10 years, there was hope that he might get out, and I remember my grandma being excited, but he would get into more trouble and get more years added to his sentence. For a couple years no one wanted to drive her to Tennessee to visit him. Only my mom and my grandma would talk to him when he called. Everyone lost hope for him because he just "didn't learn his lesson." That's how I felt towards him too. I thought he was there as a result of his own actions. He was never going to get out if he didn't decide to do better for himself and finally change.

Then about four years later, he finally got released. No one went to visit him or really seemed to care other than my grandma. It was more of a "finally" moment for everyone. My cousin got married a couple months after, and my uncle was able to get permission to come to Indiana for the wedding. I was able to see how excited he was to see everyone. My brother, who had been a baby, was now a 6'1 high school student. My cousin, who was a middle schooler when my uncle was



incarcerated, now had two kids of his own. My uncle, who was a teenager when he got locked up, was now 34 years old and missed all of us growing up. Everyone looked at him differently, but he was just so happy to see everyone. It wasn't that big of a deal for us because we were living our lives the entire time while he was going through who knows what as an adolescent in the current prison system of the United States.

After a couple of weeks of being in the class, I started to sense a difference in my views, but I never connected that change of perspective with my own situation. That was until I was talking to my mom, who is pretty religious, about a conversation I had with one of my correspondents for the Practicing Faithful Justice course, about his view on forgiveness. I am now on my own faith journey and was very excited and surprised how much insight I got from him and wanted to share it with my mom. While explaining to her about my class, I realized that I now felt like I have the moral responsibility to advocate for people who have no voice and are constantly disrespected and belittled,

robbed of their innate human dignity. I realized that I had participated in judging some of my own family members. I was blinded by societal narratives that I now want to change. While talking to her, she shared with me that my uncle had conversations with her about the things he's had to go through in prison that were so bad he doesn't even want to talk about it. The conversation made me realize again that not only did I witness my grandma's suffering, having no one listen to her or have compassion for her sons, but I played a part in it because I too didn't care about their suffering.

This thanksgiving I went back home and was able to have a conversation with my grandma about how I now empathized with her. Her teary eyes showed appreciation, and I know that she was glad to talk about it and have someone understand what she had to go through. Taking this class has not only changed my own perspective in many ways, but it has also healed a part of my grandma as well.

By **Sam Wells**

Faith and spirituality are really tough for me to discuss. Yeas ago I asked a mentor about it, and her response was the subject of my presentation for my fall "Search for Faith" class. She gave me a quote that reminded her of me and has served to remind me to live.

"The only way to truly live in an unfree world is to be so undeniably free that your very existence is an act of rebellion." -Albert Camus

When she said it, I recognized it immediately. Not the quote, but the act. It's how I choose to live my life, uncompromisingly free. I do this because no one makes it out of life alive. I am this because I refuse to live my life in an attempt to live more life. I enjoy what I have; I earn friends and cherish them; I lose friends and appreciate them; I invest in the actualization of potential rather than its existence; I am the faith in humanity that I want to see. So while loved ones struggle to fathom who I am and friends discuss and debate the way I am, in every way I remain **me**, undeniably free. An open act of rebellion. Mosaic Beauty on 2 feet.

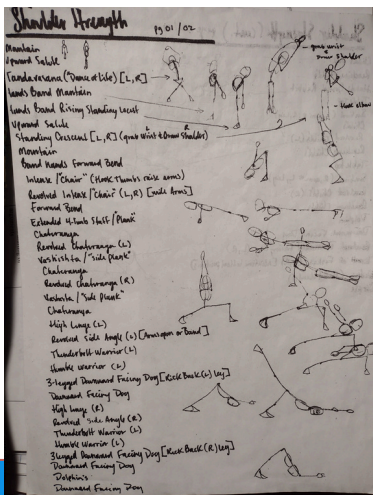




(with drawings by **Antonio Espino**)

After I was released from seg, I was moved out of “JTC” this “sweet” joint. I was on a disciplinary transfer to Illinois River. This is where I was introduced to yoga. The instructor was a friend I knew from Pinckneyville. To be honest, I was reluctant at first because I thought yoga was only something that white women from suburbs did. But I gave it a shot and started attending classes.

After about a year I began instructing classes myself. There have been different practices that have assisted me in my faith journey, but I'll say that practicing yoga has allowed me to better cope with stress it brings a sense of calm to me. It has also opened up a space to have compassion and love for myself. In turn, I'm able to reflect these qualities to others. Also, through yoga practices such as mindful awareness and meditation, I have been able to stay on this positive path, maintaining myself aligned with the Universe-Truth-God, and not against it. I still struggle, but I am better equipped to handle those struggles, and I haven't been in seg since 2021, not because I haven't been caught, but because I have a new outlook in life.





“My Journey Back to Faith” by Justin Altherr

I'll start by giving you all a little back story to my faith before we get into my journey. Growing up, I was raised in a strict Catholic Church. We had to dress a certain way, and I couldn't express myself like I wanted. As I grew up into my teens, I started to attend Christian churches around my town and had found them to be more open and welcoming for me. They had a worship band, and I as a teen could relate to music and praise. During worship times I could feel the power of God. I was active in prayer and tried to stay strong in my faith, but I ultimately succumbed to peer pressure and got into drugs and being a rebellious teen. So, I lost my faith somewhere along the way. That was my faith up until 2022.

Nov 29th, 2022 was the day I hoped would never come. That day I would be forced to say goodbye to my family and my life. It was also the start of my journey back to faith in the Lord, but I didn't know that at the time. That day I was to appear before the judge at 2pm for sentencing. I spent that day with my wife and son as I had done for my 2 years out on bond while fighting my case. In that time, I spent more time with my son. I do love my wife, but at the time I could only think about my son. How would he be able to handle not having his dad/best friend? I had even at one point questioned my wife's love for her stepson. The 2 years leading up to my incarceration, I spent my days when I wasn't working with my son. We would play and practice baseball, football, wrestling and my failed attempt at basketball. (By the way, this white boy can't play.) We would even go on hikes at Mammoth Cave and Starved Rock. I adored those moments to just bond and be present in the moment with him, listening to him talk about video games and memories we made over the years.)

During the 2 years out, I only attempted one time to attend church. But for some reason I went to a Catholic Church with my son. That reminded me why I didn't like that church: people looking at you with judgment in their eyes, staring at my tattoos with disgust. My son even said, "Dad, I don't think we are welcome here." I just played it off that it was because they didn't know me.

My major problem was that I didn't know how I would be without my family. Then that day came, November 29th, and it was 1:30PM when my wife and I had to drop my son off at his biological mother's house. I didn't want him at court seeing his whole world be sentenced and cuffed and taken away. It would be a failed attempt at saving him heartache. As soon as we pulled up, we got out and we were standing there. Mind you, up to this day my son had not expressed any emotion to my knowledge about his feelings, I don't think he fully grasped the idea that I was going away, no matter how many talks we had with him. So, we are standing there, and I just wrap my arms firmly around my son and just completely lose my shit. It felt as if it could be my last time to hold my son.

Tears are pouring from my eyes, my wife's, and my son begins to cry as well. But at the same time, he is trying to wipe my tears away and calm me down. It's truly remarkable that an 11year-old boy is more worried about dad crying than losing me at that moment. We went to say goodbye, but we both agreed to say "see you later" instead. Then we hugged once more and I gave him a kiss on his forehead and said, "Dad loves you so much bubba; you're my everything!" I was holding him so tight and trying not to hurt him, his arms trying to wrap all the way around me.

Then my wife and I got into the van and drove away, blowing kisses to my son. At that exact moment is when I felt like a failure as a father. I was leaving my son and not knowing when he would get to see and hug his dad. Not even 3 minutes later my son called me, and I answered with tears still in my eyes, "Hey bubba." All I heard was him bawling his eyes out on the phone saying, "Daddy please come back I need you please dad don't leave me please dad don't go dad please!" At that moment I broke even further and said to myself: why, God, does he have to suffer? I wanted nothing more than to turn around and get my son and just run away. But I told him I had to go to court and face this day, that when we make mistakes, we must be accountable for them, no matter how big or small they are. I spent 5 minutes or so trying to calm him down and myself, while also my wife. Really, we had all lost our shit. So, we arrived at court, and before we went in we sat in the van holding each other. I was telling my wife how much I loved her and apologizing for leaving her on her own.



“My Journey Back to Faith” by Justin Altherr (continued...)

Then we headed in and started the sentencing.

An hour later and after many back and forth talks from my attorney and the state’s attorney, the state offered me 8 years at 85%. I asked my wife and we agreed to take the deal. Then it was over. In that small moment I lost my freedom, liberties, and my faith.

Fast forward to January 2024, just when I thought I’d been through enough heartache by leaving my son and wife for prison, only to find out my marriage also failing, and it was leading me into an even darker side of myself that I didn’t want to become. I had so much built-up anger, stress and worry. My wife and I decide to end our 8 year-long marriage because she had moved on and found someone else. I questioned God a lot during that time. Through that period of struggle, my celly at the time, being a Christian, kept telling me verses out of the Bible and trying to guide me through my darkness, depression, and anger. Then one day when he went on a call pass, I dropped to my knees and began to pray. That moment I gave up trying to control my life. I gave all my life to the Lord and let him carry the weight of my stress and worries. After that every day became a little bit better slowly.

On Oct 12th of this year I had my baptism, and that is just a public showing that I have given my life to Christ. Now today and every day I read my daily devotional and a chapter out of Proverbs. I now have a couple of verses that are helping shape my faith in the future. Here is one of them:

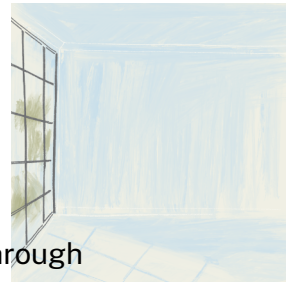
Heb II Verse I says, “Now Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” If you have ever watched *The Santa Clause* with Tim Allen, his son’s character Charlie says, “Seeing isn’t always believing.” My second favorite is 1st Corinthians chapter 13 verse 4 through 7, and 13. It says, “Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it’s not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” It’s such a powerful verse that I try to use it every day. By loving, sometimes believing is seeing. I think that view makes more sense to me,

instead of showing hate or anger. But at times I’m foulable, as we all are. Verse 13 says, “So now faith, hope, and love abide these three but the greatest of these is love.”

Now my journey isn’t done by any means. I’m sure we can all attest to always needing to work on our faith and spirituality, regardless of religious affiliation. My biggest takeaway here for me is that God has been with me through everything. Even though I would rather be home with my son but I know God has a reason for me to be here: to grow and learn. To be continued...

Glass

by **Steven “Keystone” Lopez**



Since 2003 my life has been seen through glass. Entering Cook County Jail, I was first introduced on my first visit. A person who just days ago I was allowed to kiss on the forehead, give a big bear hug, and hold in my arms, a person who I loved so much — I had to see them through glass. This would go on for 3 years and no day was any more easy than the next. Moving to my next destination I watched the Chicago city disappear through the glass of the bus; riding at a fast pace with lights flashing, the trip was quick. Arriving at Stateville NRC there was no way to see the outside. I was stuck inside a concrete box, longing to have that glass I had been now accustomed to, just to get a peek of something I was used to. This would now be my life for 3 months.

When my transfer day came, I waited with anticipation for that glimpse out into the free world, but it came at an expense. I was put on a bus like cattle and driven to a place I had never heard of. It was a long bus ride with 2 transfers to a different bus again. Again, taking in all the sights, all of a sudden, things began to get dark, the bus going deeper and deeper. Trees now were looming above the bus branches, hitting the window. I cannot see much because the windows on the bus are so high.

The bus comes to a stop. We all begin to file out and I get my first look at my surroundings. I am welcomed to hell! I’m scared as it is my first time in a maximum facility. I’m then placed in a cell high in the air on 8 gallery.



I am behind steel bars in the heat with nothing but a mattress and pillow, but in the distance are glass windows. It's pretty dark so I can't see much but I know that when I wake up something that brings me comfort, in the form of my loved one being on the other side, the city disappearing watching the cars go by. Something nice will be on the other side of that glass. So, I close my eyes and go to sleep.

When I wake up in the morning, I walk to the bars to look out at the sunlight coming down over a sheer rock wall, trees of in the distance and a cemetery! Will this be my final resting place? Thoughts go racing through my head. If I die before my 50 years are up do I finish my time up there, and when I'm done do they give me to my family? Why would God do this to me? I found beauty in looking out of the glass window, but now it's ruined. I am now stuck in this sunken place but I continue to keep hope because this glass window has at one point been my view to beautiful things like the person that I love so much in this world, the view of the city that I love. But it has also shown me bad. I know my God would not let this be the end for me, so I stay steadfast and know that my view will one day, become beautiful again. Behind my glass.

Editor's Note: *The following two autoethnographies were written for the Lewis University course ENG110 "The Essay" last fall semester at Sheridan C.C. Special thanks to the writers whose published articles were used as sources in these papers, and to PEN America and Haymarket Press for donating copies of The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison.*

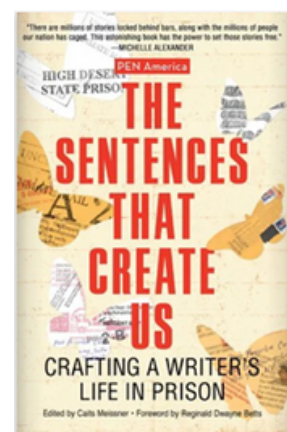
What Can Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison Teach Someone Who Doesn't Identify as a Writer?

By Lee "Moses" Lockheart

Have you ever felt inadequate, like you just weren't cut out for some particular task? How about being asked to do something you have no affinity for? It's ok to agree. I'm sure we've all felt this way at one time or another. Though, let's focus on those of us who do not enjoy writing and/or have a difficult time with it. When I first heard the phrase "crafting a writer's life in

prison," I was curious about how that could benefit my life. Not to mention, how was I to achieve this when I'm far from a writer? After researching this phrase, I was enlightened by the various practices of writing. They clearly illustrated what crafting a writer's life in prison could teach me, someone who is appalled by writing. During my journey, I ascertained that it's okay not to know what to write about initially, or not immediately being able to answer a research question. I learned that writing not only benefits others, especially when sharing our experiences, but also how it's helpful for non-writers to use strengths from our other areas to perfect our writing. I examined how "collaborative learning" has a very effective role in shaping us to become better writers, and how writing shouldn't solely focus on the positive, but the entire process. Most importantly, I learned how writing in itself benefits the writer as well.

For those like myself who experienced growing up poor on the southside of Chicago, school had always been a challenge due to overcrowded classrooms, neighborhood violence, and a lack of educational resources. Yet, art was the only subject that truly interested me. Writing has inevitably inspired an unpleasantness from grade school to college, though I endured it. I figured why write when it was easier to convey verbally, or artistically draw whatever needs to be said. It wasn't until my incarceration that writing became important, when it fused with my efforts at communication with loved ones. After getting incarcerated at the age of 24 and having served 24 years of my sentence, writing letters had become essential for restoring, building up, and maintaining vital relationships, especially those with my children and grandchildren. This was the





only writing I began to enjoy, and the only writing where knowing what to say and how to say it came easy.

During my research, I began reading a book called *Can I Use I? Because I Hate, Hate, Hate College Writing* by Catherine Prendergast. I found this resource to be helpful with my research on writing because it helped me with the first complicated question concerning my research paper: “What should I write about?” In the second chapter, Prendergast stresses the point of finding your own way to a topic, and not just choosing something disputable such as political concerns or environmental issues, to name a few, the reason being that people’s minds are already typically made up about such matters. That’s why she encourages students to pick topics they genuinely care about and want others to care about as well. She expresses how more information breeds a change in beliefs, and how that change can give birth to action. Not only does she want students to be open to all alternatives, she suggests that students should not immediately know the answer to their question. In fact, they should be just as surprised as the reader, questioning their own beliefs. I took heed of her advice on what I should be doing, as well as what not to do. Meanwhile, I found it comforting that as a beginner it was ok not to know the answer to my question, let alone the research question itself. Encouraged, I began to dive deeper into my research, extracting as much information as I could.

As I read multiple articles by incarcerated individuals, I began to see a pattern of shared experiences. These articles gave me a fresh and raw view on how writing can be used to help others, which addressed another question of mine, “Can a stranger benefit from my writings?” One of the best examples was an article by Alex Negrón, “Oh, To Have a White Picket Fence.” In Negrón’s article, he begins to recognize in a fellow (incarcerated) student a change from past mistakes/choices to a man in the process of correcting his life. Negrón acknowledged how this person (named Scott) helped him to become a better person through Scott’s mentorship and lived example. Because of Scott’s resilience, Negrón was able to use his life story as a blueprint for his own growth and transformation. That said, this article demonstrated a valid reason to write from behind these walls: we can help

others by sharing our stories and experiences. And unbeknownst to me, I had been doing just that by writing my loved ones. Although, to perfect my writing, one of my professors pointed out that my strength in writing very well may come from my enjoyment of writing letters. Even now, I’m still practicing translating that strength into my papers.

Upon further research, I came across an interesting article called “Collaborative Learning in a Prison Context” by Scott Moore. He insists that collaborative learning is imperative for any type of growth, particularly within the penal institution. He also expresses how from his own experiences with collaboration, a variety of individual experiences and views emerged from within is group. This allowed him to gain a better understanding of his subject as well as his peers. Although Moore claims the pros outweigh the cons, he does admit several drawbacks of collaborative learning, such as classmates dominating the discourse and discounting the opinions and beliefs of one another. Yet, he explains that having the right peer tutor makes all the difference. While having been a peer tutor himself, Moore highlights how collaboration creates more opportunity for discourse, while also changing the norms of student performance. Initially, I would have argued against collaborative learning, but after experiencing it firsthand, I too can see the benefits. Just brainstorming amongst my peers is yet another tactic for becoming a better writer.

While learning so many different ways to craft a writer’s life in prison, one tip stood out to me. It was an article called, “Great Stories about Self-Transformation Distract from Greater Truths” by Michael Simmons. In the article, he reflects on how one truth can take away from a more profound truth. He narrates how a man he’s known for over 20 years, Bernard McKinley, was debuted on “Good Morning, America” for his admission into Northwestern’s Pritzker School of Law. Although this was good news, Simmons pointed out how the media not only focused on one individual from one prison, but they ignored a larger truth. Though the media portrayed Bernard’s achievements as extraordinary, an unlikely victory, there are many more men and women in prison who have also rehabilitated themselves through education and hard work. But



these individuals lacked opportunities like those that were afforded to Bernard. The truth is, there just aren't enough programs like "Northwestern Prison Education Program" in prisons today, and that was omitted by the media, along with how Bernard coped with prison life while attending school, knowing full-well the numerous obstacles against prisoners obtaining degrees. This article was an eye-opener to me because it gave credence to something I had not realized was occurring. It enlightened me to the fact that to be a good writer means not just to mention the good of a thing, but also the overall process, including background. Again, this was a good tip for writing a great paper.

Another article that surprised me was "Our Home Outside These Walls: My Love Letter to You, Son" by Devon Terrell. He offered readers an inside look into the rawness of an incarcerated father's thoughts, revealing initial excitement, new-found love, limited parenting time, and a desperate search for understanding. Like during the primitive stage of his incarceration, Terrell could not fathom what it like for his son that his father was in prison. As time went on he began to feel a distance grow between them, thinking his son wanted to have nothing to do with him, or that his son didn't love him anymore. After some time, Terrell realized that what he was thinking was entirely ungrounded. That fact was, his son loved him so much that he couldn't stand to see his dad behind bars. This article explores the pain and suffering from both sides: the incarcerated father as well as the son growing up without him. This particular trauma leaves both parties searching for understanding, in one way or another. As a father myself, I found reading this article not only touching, but it brought to voice what so often is silent, which is a father's love. This is yet another representative example of how writing from prison can benefit others, through the preserving of relationships. And because relationships are a two-way thing, it's also a perfect example of how the writers themselves profit from their own writings. The reason I believe this to be a strong paper is because it doesn't just reach the reader, but the one person who matters most to the writer: his son. Writing from the heart leaves such an impression that it can be (and is) a strength in itself. Reading this letter finally made me rethink the direction of my

research question. In doing so, I'm more focused on what my writing will accomplish within myself.

Now that I've explored a fraction of what crafting a writer's life in prison teaches, specifically to those of us who have never claimed to be a writer, I'm mind-blown. Never would I have imagined that great writers didn't have all the answers before writing a paper. This research has given me a better understanding of the benefits of writing and how it enriches the lives of others as well as the life of the author. Yet, the most insightful areas examined were of collaborative learning, greater truths being distracted by smaller truths, and the ability to translate one area of strength into another. Each of these practices was effectively designed to shape writers and non-writers into great writers. So although you may not have an affinity for writing, there's no need to feel inadequate any longer. For those that have time, take that time to practice what's been highlighted today. See if your writing doesn't change the lives of others, as well as yourself. Let your voices be heard.

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What Should One Do to Grow as a Writer in Prison? By: **Matthew Lawrence**

Everyone in prison has a story to tell: the best way to get that story out is by writing. Well maybe you're not the best writer. Then ask yourself, what should I do to grow as a writer in prison? To grow as a writer in prison you will need to be determined, you must seek out every educational opportunity available, and you will also need to find a way to overcome every obstacle you face. No matter how challenging, you must never give up. The more you learn and the more you write, the more you will grow as a writer.

Educational opportunities in prison are very limited. For many who try to get into educational programs have no opportunities, just because the prison they are in offers nothing. I experienced this firsthand for ten years, once at a facility that does have educational opportunities, then you must wait to be placed in a class. This is not just Illinois; this is a nationwide issue. Those in Minnesota go through the same challenges, trying to get to school or getting to a facility that even offers classes. (Celigiuri 234-239). Prisons also keep the classes very small, so once you're in a college program you need to stay there. Prison officials can and will transfer you out of a program for any reason: then you will have to try and get somewhere that actually has programs. This really hits home for me. I was enrolled in the Eastern Illinois University Bachelor's Degree program at Danville C.C. and transferred to Graham C.C, a facility that offered no higher education. They only offer ABE (Adult Basic Education) and GED, leading me to apply to Lewis University at Sheridan C.C. The reason many prisons got no higher education is the lack of funding, due to the suspension of Pell grants. The Pell Grants were providing funding for higher education programs in the past (Bakr 127). Now that Pell grants have been reinstated it is an opening doors of new opportunity. Luckily the Pell grant has assisted in the opening of the Lewis University program at Sheridan C.C. This allows me and my cohort (and two other cohorts) the opportunity to grow as writers.

Once you're in school, that's a start. Now you must actually get into writing classes. To be in class where you learn proper essay format,

grammar, and punctuation means so much. You can take a lot of classes and do a lot of writing, but if you're not focused on the writing itself you'll never grow. By having my first college English class after twenty-five college courses, I found out how much this could have helped me long ago. The more we write and focus on the writing, the more we will grow. We should never stop growing as a writer. I believe this is the best explanation for the question, "Will writing ever get easier? No. Writing will never get easier. The better you get the higher your expectations will be" (Prendergast). This is the same concept as the farther along you get in your education the higher the expectations will be. You must keep focused on schooling and take all the classes you can to help you grow as a writer, especially taking writing classes, so when you have the opportunity do not pass it up.

Once you found your educational avenue and landed in a writing class, the next step is figuring out what to write about. Writing about your own prison experience, should be a easy start. We all got a story to tell. A great example of this comes from, Derek Trumbo Sr. He had no idea what he should write about. Then he remembered a 2009 Kentucky prison riot he experienced; Trumbo would write about the riot and get published. Remember, if we are not the ones writing to tell our own stories about prison, it gives the people at the top the opportunity to tell our stories the way they choose (Trumbo Sr, 201-204). This sounds like a really good reason to grow as a writer.

I would rather write and tell my story than let some law makers or prison officials tell the story. Letting them tell the story only parts of the story will get out, and you may never hear the whole story. Let them tell it and that's when the emphasis of one success story will hide the reality that there are may be many more opportunities. This happened when "Good Morning America" covered Bernard McKinley. His success hid the reality that many more prisons are trying to change their lives, and there is a lack of opportunity to do that in the Illinois Department of Corrections (Simmons). Writing about prison is an opportunity to grow as a writer because there is so much to write about. There are also a lot of people who would really like to hear our stories about prison.



They are interested in the good and the bad.

Now, that you're still reading this it shows you are determined. That is exactly what it takes to grow as a writer in prison. One must be determined to overcome any and all obstacles. Some obstacles will occur, while others are put in place to deter or discourage us. Lockdowns are a thing we can do nothing about. So, when a lockdown happens, we must look at the syllabus and keep moving forward, maybe make the day up, maybe not. You must use the extra time to get caught up on your assignments or start your next paper. Sometimes you just have an officer that doesn't open your door. There could be a mix-up on the movement sheet, and they will not let you go to school. So, then you must send word if you can with a peer and hope school building officials call for you. You also got the issue of a call pass. No one looks in the system to see what you got going on, they just schedule you whenever they want you. Some call passes are mandatory so you must go, so you have to find out what you missed in class. Another observation that is faced is having access to the proper supplies you need in class. Most of the time you can get supplies. However, there is going to be time it will not be so easy; I have experienced this before.

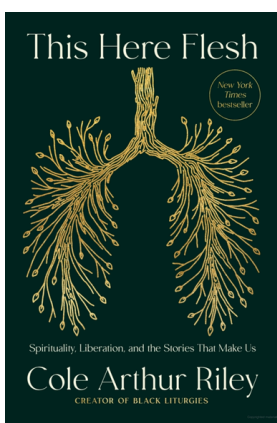
You must study and practice. In writing I believe that studying and practice go together. You read some material you like, then you write about it. The more you practice writing the more you will pay attention to your writing. Proper grammar and punctuation is what really held me back for a long time. Finally, I read some things that helped me out, like "Grammar is designed to make people's lives easier. It is very important to under how to use proper grammar. To do this you must first know who your prospective readers and what those readers expect. As a writer always remember grammar is there help you out" (Daley pp 130-145). You need to study and practice writing. Finding books on creative writing and reading them over and over will show you different writing techniques you can use to help yourself grow as a writer. One thing is for sure, you can never study or practice too much. The more I study the more I learn. That only increases my determination to continue to grow as a writer.

The last big deal I think we all need to learn about is revision: you can revise over and over till you get that paper exactly how you want it. Revision is something I never put a lot of time into until taking my first college English class. In that class I learned the power of revision. Revising your paper helps you fix all your errors. For myself this really helps because when I am going to write I take time to think of what I want to say, and then I just write it all out really fast, knowing I am going to go back and revise the paper. Following these three steps will really help you out, "Step 1: assessing content; who is your audience? What's your purpose? What's your arguments? Who/or what supports your claims? Step 2: organization; are sentences or paragraphs where you would like them? Move them around to see how it sounds. Step 3: expression; make sure it's your voice you're getting out there" (Jackson pp 152-162). Remember, you can always revise over and over. Also ask someone else to read your paper, it is always good to get another opinion, just remember it's your paper so don't let their opinion change your voice.

Since you are truly determined, then I believe following these steps should help you grow as a writer. These steps got me to where I am today. This is only the beginning because I will continue to grow. I believe those who are determined to grow as a writer will never stop growing. The more we study, the more we will learn. The more we learn, the more techniques we will have to put into practice. Putting everything into practice will help you grow. The higher the expectations are, the more determined you will be to never stop growing as a writer. Your opportunities are endless.

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BOOK REVIEW by Latasha Kennedy

This Here Flesh by Cole Arthur Riley



This Here Flesh is a book that should be on all educators' lists, especially if they teach in a diverse community. Riley had me looking around the room wondering as if someone had been recording me and my thoughts secretly throughout my life. I think if not every page, every other page had a, "Tell 'em sis," or a "How did she put that feeling into words?" For example, Riley writes, "My spirituality has always been given to contemplation even before anyone articulated for me exactly what 'the contemplative,' was. I was not raised in an overly religious home. My spiritual formation now comes to me in memories-not creeds and doctrine, but the air we breathe, stories, myth, and a kind of attentiveness" (preface pg.viii). She took the words right out of my mouth. I did not grow up in a religious home and my morality is built upon memories and old sayings my grandma used to keep us in check. Although we didn't know what all the sayings meant at the time, as an adult they come to mind whenever a situation arises. This is just the beginning of how Riley's upbringing is similar to mine when it comes to her thoughts and how she viewed the world and people in it.

Riley is speaking a number of truths that so many people are afraid to say, maybe even afraid to admit due to some unforeseen illegitimacy of the world and or religion. I can't help but write about how in chapter one, which she calls, "Dignity," she had a hard time seeing God as a lover and protector of all beings. Riley writes, "It is not wholly unusual for individuals or cultures to imagine God as being like them in some ways. Perhaps this is because we lack an imagination for a being who loves us and doesn't resemble us" (5). It is scary to realize that the same God who loves you also loves the people that wrong you, but it also reassures you that you are loved. For example, this quote of Riley brought to mind my incarceration and how I got there due to a man I was dealing with. I couldn't understand how God could love him after being a part of my incarceration. However, in that thought it was revealed to me that I was the one who was at fault for my incarceration, not him. With that, why would God not love him and me with the same love? It kind of helped me know that God's love for me was real and true. Throughout reading *This Here Flesh*, I examine my thoughts and reflect on how my upbringing is compared to Riley's, putting my grandma in the places where her father was. I couldn't help but understand her insecurities of her peers thinking she was weird for hanging in the fields with her friend Boo eating chocolate and imagining, wanting to be in another world where what we look like or where we come from isn't at the forefront of who we are or what we are to become.

Riley gave words to feelings I would have never tried to describe, bringing up long gone emotions I buried deep down inside related to contemplation and wonder. Riley states, "more than the grand beauties of our lives, wonder is about having the presence to pay attention to the commonplace" (32). This allows me to look at the small things in my life, like when my grandma use to say, "Alright Tisha," (that's what she called me), "the same sh*t that make you laugh makes you cry." This is just like Riley asking, what is wonderful to you? Is the simplicity of watching a child in awe at God's creation of a dandelion wonder? Or does it take you climbing Mt. Everest to create wonder?

Riley's way of racial reconciliation opens the door for other races to see each other through God's eyes first, not to see one another based off physical appearance or for what we have attained financially, culturally, and religiously, but through wonder or simplicity. We learn to reconcile through the act of love and what we know love to be.

Poetry and Art Corner

Poetry and Art Corner



“Inteligencer, Provoacatur, Visionary”
by **Elton Williams**

A Call to Beauty by **Nathaniel White**

A gentle breeze blew as I sat under the shade of the pavilion. Evening sun washed over my body, I basked in the warmth of its essence. Gazing out in the direction of the front gate, I watched intently as normal, average people with family pets got into their SUVs, cars, and trucks, leaving their homes which positioned themselves literally right across the street from the prison. It mesmerized me, the fact of it all. “Home is right there!” continued to play in my head. I become lost in the beauty of the vision, imagining those very people going to destinations unknown, though likely a familiar journey to them.

The last in-person visits began exiting the visiting room building, escorted by the red-headed officer with glasses leading them to the very gates which held my amazement. There were seven to nine women in total. Watching with the interest only a boy who had grown into a man after 22 years in prison could see, the details of the moment pierced my soul. Shapes, curves, and the walks of the disappointed women who desired to bring their lovers, sons, brothers, and friends home with them etched into the canvas of my heart. Then my own thoughts of home, love and being free came to me...

Green waves swayed, moving back and forth from the wind-blown trees. It all started to blur as vision and sound collided, becoming just sound. Eyes closed, the rustling motion became music to me...Shhhhh became melodic. Shhhhh became a mantra. Shhhhh became a call to life.

Prison is an environment where time is plentiful, yet you’ve lost it. You don’t want more of it, if anything, less. Sounds like an oxymoron, right? Yet whatever amount of time each individual needs to serve, they have “time.” More often than not, a prisoner’s day is filled with nothing to do, leaving us to our own devices: dominoes, chess, cards, or daydreaming. Being in our thoughts becomes a major pastime, like the picture I painted above. I had a lot of freetime where I wasn’t working, going to school, nor given meaningful opportunities to prepare myself for my release. Most prisoners have been subjected to live like this, especially those like me who have been incarcerated decades upon decades.

Poetry and Art Corner



Luxuries by **Shawn Block**

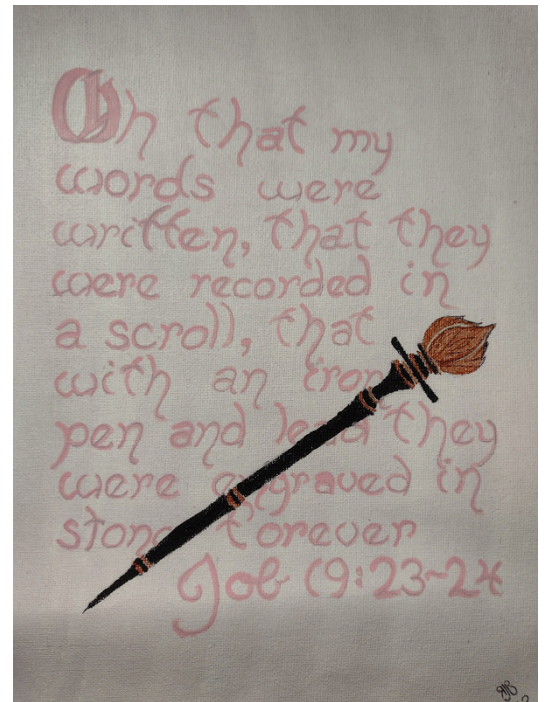
The corner in my new, small room contains a window. It only opens slightly with great effort but it's just enough space to let in the earthy smells that I've missed so much. This is the first window I've had in years: the first view of something other than concrete in ages. Staring out at the rows of corn, growing taller than I ever remember it growing at home, I'm transported back to a life that was filled with windows.

Outside looking in to the kitchen, watching as my mother danced. The sounds of the old house pouring out - wood straining against wood in squeaks and groans as she floated to a song in her head. I dare not disturb her peace.

In school, fixated on a thunderstorm calmed by the chaos on the other side of the glass. Hoping the power stays knocked out.

Through the rearview mirror, my hatchback window covered in grime except for a large finger drawn shape of a heart. My dirty car and I were both loved by a girl I didn't deserve.

And now the corn, and the sunshine, and a gentle wind that whistles through the cracked opening. These are the luxuries brought in by my portal to the past, this rectangular absence of wall.



Art by **Rita Jo Brookmyer**

THEY CAN'T LOCK AWAY OUR TALENT!



"Ida B. Wells"
by **Jose Salcedo**

"Checkmate: I am Something"

by: **Anthony J. Harrison**

Part 1

Should I assume someone hears me
When I pray,
I pray "Please God please don't let
them throw me away"
Yet everyday I get closer and closer
to the end,
It seems my prayer is futile,
but I don't want to die,
my whole existence is dependent
on survival,
is it delusional to want to keep living
and never die
I DON'T WANT TO DIE
Am I delusional
I'm never going to die
Am I delusional
I DON'T WANT TO DIE
Why do I deserve to die
Am I delusional

Part 2

BOOM!
The big bang happens
and now I'm here,
damn...
you mean I came from nothing,
and now I'm something,
That's amazing,
To be alive,
Well. Fuck...
if this happened once
why can't it happen again? :: pause ::
Let me say it like this...
I was nothing,
then came to be something,
and now
I am headed back to nothing. :: pause ::
So,
when I am back to nothing
why can't I come back to be something? :: pause ::
That leads me to believe in
reincarnation,
If reincarnation is true then
as it is
Now I got time,
I want to play a hypothetical game of
chess,
my opponent, Death,
"Checkmate," says Death
Damn,

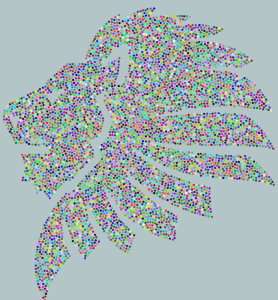
I look around and see it's got me cornered
with no where to escape,
you know,
Death is always one step ahead,
and for some just one wrong step away,
Man,
but I hate to lose,
I got so much time to think about this,
Yet...
I'd rather not think about death,
it's grim and depressing,
but it's a real problem that needs a real solution,
where do I even begin?
I know some say life is worth living but is it
worth fighting death?
Should I try to find a cure for death?
Is that too much to ask? Who's with me?...
But What About Donald Trump?
Damn, why are you so distracted with Trump?
Trump!
I'M GOING TO DIE, WE'RE GOING TO DIE,
we got to fight death!
"Checkmate," Says Death
Shit...you're right, I'm trapped :: pause ::
running circles while going in circles,
So, death, what do you want me to do?
"Join Me" says Death
wait wait wait, hold on, if you mean for
me to die right now then that's not going
to happen, I got too much to live for,
I got a family that I love, friends, homework,
and I want to see if Trump...
Hear me out,
you won the game,
I'm a believer, I'll follow you until the end
of time, there is plenty of proof that proves
your way is the only way, that there is no choice
but to embrace your presence, .. :: pause ::
you know what, scratch all that out,
I'm not giving up so easily,
Because I hate to lose, so fuck you
I'll always be something, whether I'm bones,
ashes, or atoms, I came from nothing and
now I'm something, so how about this...let's play
another game and if I lose then another and another
we'll keep going in circles until I wake up and say
"CHECKMATE"
Because I'm headed to noting and am going to be
something.



with
DeCedrick Walker

-“Don’t
touch the
bars”.

Here's A Thought



What Religion Couldn't Do College Has By DeCedrick Walker

One of the main objectives of imprisonment is to keep an individual psychologically tethered to the image of being condemned. Part of the strategy to achieve that objective is to make sure there are always physical and social barriers restricting the prisoners from accessing the ability to move freely from one place to another inside the institution. An ex-cellmate of mine once said, “I don’t think these cell bars are here to keep us in as much as they’re here to make us think we’re animals.” In addition to cell bars, steel doors, cement walls, and razor-wired fences are other restrictive images that come to my mind.

Other impediments like a prisoner’s social awareness of the unwritten rules of hyper-masculinity and/or a given prison’s policy which prioritizes rehabilitative opportunities to non-violent offenders inhibits persons with lengthy sentences for violent crime convictions from reimagining the self, outside a cage forgiven or as a productive member of society. Some prisons take policy a step further in that they restrict opportunities from some based on crimes that fail to meet appropriate actions of aggression, thereby insinuating acceptances in animality differences.

Thus, the choice or opportunity to psychologically move from our worst moments -- in an attempt to seek to make amends by reimagining ourselves as productive members of society -- is non-existent among the cultural and institutional expectations of the prison environment. For some, even becoming a productive member of the prison population is difficult to be achieved.

For a time, religious observances assisted those of us convicted of violence in developing a singular but distant hope of someday standing before a merciful God who would forgive and see us beyond the scope of our specific condemnation. Seeing that many who were directly and indirectly victimized by our crimes are legally barred from even refusing to forgive, appealing to an idea of authority not bound by a slanted social order seems most preferable. Rethinking the rules of a hyper-masculine culture through the lens of spiritual tenets like seeing ourselves forgiven or loving our neighbors as ourselves helped many of us transform how we thought and behaved but only to the tune of exercising self-control. Due to the aforementioned restrictions, we could only monitor our transformation by what we no longer do—not much movement toward actualizing who we reimagine ourselves to be. There are only so many religious roles a prisoner could see himself becoming.

Sadly, many observed tenets — well-meaning and all — are unable to influence how prison policy developers distribute programming. Self-reimagination through religious tenets is considered unsustainable because self-control in the prison context is interrupted in a sense that a dog will only move as far as a leash will allow. Critics who argue for indefinite incapacitation believe that it is the restrictions of prison, not religious tenets, that sustains a prisoner’s “self” control.

Here's A Thought

In addition, tenets are often ineffective as factors to consider because they are internalized beliefs or blessings that are unobservable in real time; they lack the ability to be documented because people are not always aware at the moment they transform, but they are transformed when they realized they applied a principle. Even more so, a confession of self-transformation isn't widely accepted as legitimate. People usually want to make determinations of someone's transformation for themselves.

Moreover, loving a neighbor as yourself isn't exclusive to religious practices. So long as God's blessings stay in the unseen realm of intentional unacknowledgement by the powers that be, observances as legit or sustainable paths for moving from our worst moments will fail to be included into prison policy development. No one would be able to count ripples without throwing a rock into a pond first.

That said, since the advent of higher educational programming becoming available to violent offenders at places like Stateville Correctional Center, self-control being only interpreted as a leash has been replaced with the self-control needed to develop skills and gifts that help people move from abstract notions of spiritual blessings into concrete examples of who we reimagined ourselves to be. The common practice of prisons classifying us only as violent offenders, and some in the violent offender realm as not masculine enough, has been countered by programming developed by credible and independent colleges that now classify us as scholars, theologians, adjunct professors, writers, poets, mitigation specialists, artists, and music producers.

A caveat with higher educational programming among those with lengthy sentences is, if there are not legitimate opportunities for release, the newly actualized classifications have the potential of falling into the same disreputed perception religious tenets have. That being, critics will claim our actualizations are the result of prison restrictions and not collegiate programming tailored toward how we specifically imagined ourselves.

Mascu-len's Love by DeCedrick Walker

As the sun embodies heat and project its flickering flames,
I stare for a second. Daring the bright light which
Ricochet off the moon to irritate retinas
I stare then I look away. Aghast or embarrassed
or just plain incapable of seeing the sun as I see love
Or is it the other way around? Do I see love
as I see the sun, squinting? See love, then she shrugs indifferently.
Offended and defensively I said in defense of me
My propensity is to avoid where love is shared.
She just stared blankfaced like she looking passed me
My mind asked me had she given up, apart is where
we're ending up. I'm sensing us now not together
in spirit a glimmer of separation brisking
by my line of sight wondering if I'm eyeing right

Her posture was that of a woman who seen lies, finally she spoke
She said "N-word! You too obsessed with yours inwards!
You only see scenes of you, we only see things through you!
My whole life consist of orbits around you or centers on you!
And I'm tired."

Blind-Spotted Love by Michael Mlynarczyk

Note: This essay was written to fulfill a requirement in a Fall 2024 literature course taught at Loyola University Chicago by Professor Ovidiu Brici.

In DeCedrick Walker's poem "Masculine's Love," most of the lines are spent focusing on the difficulty that the male speaker faces when expressing love and how it impacts a relationship with a female. In the poem, Walker uses the sense of vision in both a literal and metaphorical way to express the difficulty of loving as a male expected to keep his emotions inside.

One of the major themes brought up in all parts of the poem is celestial bodies. There are several metaphorical comparisons to interstellar space ideas in the entire poem such as stars, orbits, and planets, each with their own characteristics. The references to these objects could even be in reference to which objects the male and female in this relationship are and the dynamic between them. The female in the relationship is the star, a star being the provider of all energy, light, and the very reason a relationship exists. In this context, the light given off by the star can be the love the female gives in the relationship. However, the speaker has a hard time even looking at the star, perhaps due to an inability to match the light, and hence has a hard time visualizing love itself. This comparison between light and love is reflected from the very start in the lines "incapable of seeing the sun as I see love," and at some points the speaker even "stares for a second," suggesting that an attempt was made and that he wants to look, but is incapable of it. The speaker in this sense is a planet, one that is cold, barren, and gives little to no light in the relationship, or in other words love. With no way to match the light given off by its host star, the planet comes off as cold while simultaneously being blinded by all the love, all while being unable to grasp it itself. Finally there is the idea of orbiting. Typically, planets find themselves orbiting stars, but in this poem it seems to be the star having to do the orbiting as noted when the female says "My whole life consist of orbits around you," suggesting that she thinks it's her who is doing all the sacrificing in the relationship. The star orbiting another celestial body can be a metaphor for the female constantly having to revolve her attention on the male and working on his terms while receiving little back. However, this idea mostly goes against the observed nature of stars and planets, which could be another metaphor for why there's an imbalance in the relationship as seen in the female's distressed nature and the male's feeling of "sensing us now not together." Perhaps in an ideal world, the male speaker could have also been a star who provides his own light, and hence love, to the other, and the two stars can act as a binary star system that are constantly in orbit around each other, both doing as much in the relationship as the other.

Another major theme that the poem draws attention to is the difficulty men have expressing their own love in a relationship. It has already been ruled out that the male in the relationship is trying to love back, at least to himself it is apparent, so then there must be some cause that is stopping him from fully committing to it. Similarly to how it is not necessarily a planet's fault that it was born a planet incapable of giving back and not a star, it is not necessarily the male's fault for being cold when he was born into a community that expects him to bottle his emotions. Many people don't expect a male to show any distressing emotion such as crying, yet they are still susceptible to falling into periods of depression but unable to express themselves. In fact, studies such as the one referenced in an article on male depression cite that "twice as many women are diagnosed with major depressive disorder compared to men, yet men are four times as likely to die by suicide...", and this reason stems from how "these disparities may be influenced by adherence to traditional masculine norms (e.g., self reliance and stoicism) which discourage the expression of typical depressive symptoms" (O' Gorman 1). The act of being stoic implies dealing with hardship without showing emotion, yet this is in direct contradiction to how relationships should involve feelings; after all the sole reason they exist comes down to feelings. Despite not being expected to have a role in expressing emotions, many men still want to have fulfilling relationships which often require a mastery of communicating feelings and emotion, a skill that is not common in most men. One could even say that the "masculine lens" is simply not trained to see such things. In fact, men are encouraged to do the opposite of communicating feelings and emotion, yet are also expected to

have equal weight in the relationship as the female nowadays, causing an impossible-to-solve paradox of being expected to hide their emotions and at the same time expected to express emotions. This could be where the poem's title "Masculen's Love" comes from and how such a paradox is only visible to the male lens because of the fact they must both be stoic and also loving. They are forced to struggle solving the contradiction of love after previously being taught not to be emotional.

Examples of this can be seen in the poem at the start when the speaker contemplates whether they "dare" the bright light of love as though it were forbidden to be seen by him. In the case the speaker does dare "staring," they end up "looking away," only after looking for a brief moment. Later on in the poem they are left questioning their feelings, whether they are "Aghast or embarrassed or plain incapable of seeing" because of how confusing it is to share love in a world that taught them not to share any emotion, let alone a complicated emotion like love. Despite "Masculen's Love" being a poem about male love, it still has the perspective of the female partner, and this involvement of a second person makes communication, and in turn, failure of communication, important themes to the poem. The poem can be read in one way: a male thinking to themselves and keeping to themselves until the female confronts them about it, or it can be read as a dialogue between the male and female. This dialogue aspect can be seen in lines such as "See love" halfway into the poem after the male speaker finishes talking about his feelings towards love, which also sounds a lot like the question "Do you see, my love?" but worded differently, love being used as a way to address the female. The presence of dialogue is confirmed by the female responding to his question with a gesture of "she shrugs indifferently." All of this sounds like the male is trying to explain why he seems distant in the relationship to the female, yet the female either does not understand or isn't very convinced, complementing the earlier point of how men are expected to be above emotion, causing the female to be confused by his emotional display and perhaps even disregard his emotional feelings. More dialogue is noticeable where the speaker rhythmically says "Offended and defensively I said in defense of me" which likely means he noticed her gesture, is aware of it, actively took offense to it, and proceeds to defend himself explaining why he is the way he is: "My propensity is to avoid where love is shared," which is a direct confession about how his natural tendency is to avoid love and all emotion, even when shared, but all she does in response is "stare blankfaced," not fully understanding where the "propensity" of not sharing feelings comes from. The same way that the male lens has trouble visualizing how to balance his emotions, the female lens seems to have trouble visualizing why the male can't just be more open about his feelings. This comes from how "men are assigned a role in which emotion management is considered secondary, because it is associated primarily with women" (Martínez-Morato 2). This is something that is plainly obvious to the male; he has often been told to just suppress emotions, thus making him very aware of the contradiction to loving but also being stoic, but it could entirely be possible that the female perspective doesn't quite see this since she didn't have to live like this, thus preventing her to be able to visualize the difficulty the male perspective has on love. The female partner's final lines that claim that the male is constantly "too obsessed with your inwards" means she thinks the male is cold and unresponsive to her love, which is likely true based off his reaction to seeing love in the first half of the poem and his failure of reciprocating it, but what she doesn't see is where his struggle comes from. In a way, both the male and female have a blind spot in the way they try to see the other's love but fall short until both learn to see through the other's eyes.

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Hope for 2025 by Benny Rios Donjuan



For the twenty-third year in a row, I'll be up on New Year's Eve watching the giant ball drop in Times Square on my 15-inch Clear Tunes TV. I watch it for two reasons: First, it reminds me of my deceased big brother Meme. When he was incarcerated, he watched the giant ball drop from his prison cell at least 16 times until he returned home. The second reason is because it symbolizes the end of another year in prison and the hope that a new year brings. It's a bittersweet moment because it's saddening to think about being apart from loved ones, yet there's joy in venturing into the unknown of a new year that offers a renewed hope for freedom.

On December 19, 2024, our friend and brother Jamal "Kap" Bakr had a parole hearing. He was recently resentenced under the newest juvenile/young adult sentencing guidelines, which made him eligible for parole. He was visibly nervous as he anticipated his parole hearing. He also didn't hesitate to heavily lean on his support system for the encouragement that he needed. Even though he has accomplished so much in the past decade, has undeniably transformed his life, and holds himself accountable for his actions, his confidence was low. I believe many of us can relate to that sentiment since the system continually denies our new plans for mercy, justice, and freedom with deliberate indifference.

The day before Jamal had his hearing, the brothers at Illinois River gathered around him in the dayroom before we locked up, and we prayed over him for his release. Not only did Jamal go into his hearing with overwhelming outside community support and all his accomplishments, but he went in with faith as well. When we face this system, it certainly requires faith in something higher and supernatural; in Jamal's case, he did so with faith in Jesus Christ. The moment was powerful and it was a blessing to witness the solidarity of our community.

On the day of Jamal's hearing, our wing went out for lunch, and on the way out, everyone noticed him sitting in a little room in front of a laptop as he virtually had his parole board hearing. As we sat in the chow hall, we noticed Jamal walking in with a line from another wing. When he walked in, he threw his fists in the air, demonstrating the joy from his newfound victory. When he did that, all of the brothers from A-Wing erupted in cheer, clapping, and well wishes. The lieutenants and officers in the chow hall were dumbfounded because that type of joy is never expressed in the chow hall. In fact, silence is demanded of us when we sit in that chow hall, but nothing was going to stop us from sharing Jamal's joy and victory with him. The moment we erupted in cheer, Jamal's face instantly filled with tears of joy. Those are the tears I hope to experience one day soon when I'm released from prison. I'm sure many of us share this sentiment. To see our brother on his way home, even though he still had at last nine years left on his sentence, gives me hope. All of our circumstances are different, but we continue to pray, fight, and plea for our freedom. Not too long ago, two other brothers, Eric Watkins and Jacob Miles, both had their sentences commuted to parole eligibility. Soon they'll be home too. That's just more reason to be hopeful going into 2025.

When I first went to Stateville in 2003, things looked bleak and hopeless until at least halfway into my 23 years of incarceration. Hardly anyone was getting any rhythm in court, let alone being granted clemency. Slowly but surely, we've been witnessing more blessings than ever before. We're seeing people go home despite the natural life and de facto life sentences they were sentenced to. However, the numbers are still low, so we have to harness the hope that we get from seeing people like Jamal go home. We have to believe what happened to them could happen to all of us serving long-term sentences.

As 2025 approaches, I go into it with hope and faith in God. I'm hopeful that Eric Watkins, Jacob Miles, and many more of us will be home in 2025. We gotta keep fighting in court, filing clemency petitions, and pushing for legislation that paves the way for freedom. Again, I must reiterate, we have to call on God alone to move the people who control this criminal justice system to act with mercy. Remember, there's something else we can do for our freedom: have our people push for the Earned Re-entry Bill (HB3373/SB2129) and the Day for Day Bill (HB5219) to get passed. For more info, have your people visit www.paroleillinois.org. We must enter 2025 with hope and faith, but we also have to put in the work. Our loved ones are waiting for us out there, so let's work together to get back to them. God bless you all and Happy New Year!

New Year, New Beginning, New Blessings

By: Alann Vega, DePaul Legislative Think Tank (Extension) at Illinois River C.C.

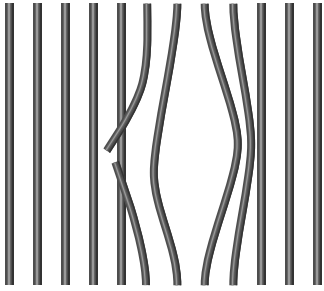


Photo of Jamal and Alann

Back when the former Illinois Department of Corrections (IDOC) Director Rob Jeffreys began his “Road to Success” initiative within the IDOC, I took the time to write a published article in *Stateville Speaks* questioning the administration’s willingness to embrace a new way of doing corrections—centered on rehabilitation and restoration. Today, Stateville C.C. has finally closed, and while many blamed the incarcerated population for its closure, the reality is Stateville C.C. closed itself in so many ways. Perhaps, had administrators really supported Mr. Jeffreys’ initiative, the facility would still be open. Nevertheless, Stateville’s closure affected the lives of many, whether incarcerated or not.

For example, prior to my departure from Stateville, my anxiety levels were high due to the uncertainty and change that was to come. To make matters worse, I didn’t think saying goodbye would be so painful for me. I had spent nearly two decades at Stateville C.C., and to be transferred out meant being separated from people who had become my family. It also meant having to start all over. Thankfully I was blessed to be surrounded by a great support system of peers and a dietary supervisor Ms. Smith who helped me settle myself, accept the change, and trust in my ability to forge a new path ahead.

I now find myself in Illinois River C.C., far away from my family—yet not alone as I am surrounded by some of my Stateville academic family who have now coined this place “River-ville.” From day one I encountered staff who treated us respectfully and fairly thus far. Yet, I would be naïve to think that everyone may have experienced the same. Surprisingly, Warden Chance Jones met with us the following day after our arrival at the education building, along with Ms. Myers and Mr. Durbin, an experience most of us had never had. Warden Jones was the former warden at Kewanee and his desire to create restorative and rehabilitating hubs like Kewanee at IRCC is evident. From the start, Warden Jones was straightforward and answered our questions honestly. And from my personal take, I can see the opportunities to share what most of us took the initiative to learn at Stateville C.C. Thus, while so many of the IDOC’s population in program deserts hunger to learn, our unmeasurable gifts, knowledge, wisdom, and skillsets as degree seekers and degree holders, once compacted in Stateville C.C., are now ready to feed the people. As one of our peers DeCedrick envisioned, Stateville’s closure is an opportunity to spread throughout the I.D.O.C. and become pioneers. Or, as Dr. Christina Rivers would say, “Each one of you is not only prepared to teach one, but to teach tens and hundreds.”

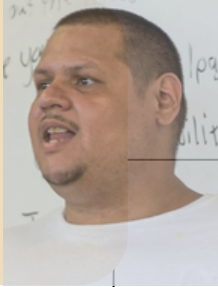
After all, we can never forget what we had at Stateville C.C.—once upon a time we didn’t have. It was thanks to Dr. Margaret “Mama B” Burroughs, Queen Mother, and Lori Wilbert, who encouraged us to convert our prison cells into workshops, and we did! As a result, we carved out the space for P-NAP, University Without Walls, DePaul’s Inside Out, North Park’s School of Restorative Arts, and Northwestern’s Prison Education Program, to be a success. Now it is on us to reflect on what our teachers instilled in us and refuse to allow the critics to say, “I told you so.”

In closing, I would like to congratulate Eric Watkins on being granted parole eligibility, Howard Keller and Aryules Bivens for their acceptance at Kewanee, and Jamal Bakr for his recent release after going in front of the youth offender parole board. All of this gives hope to those of us who have and continue to put in the hard work, day in and day out, so that one day our blessing will come as well. A personal thank you to the staff (you know who you are) and volunteers who supported and encouraged our transformation while at Stateville (I can hear you rooting from afar). Last but not least, let’s not forget to continue our support of the Earned Re-entry Bill SB2129/HB3373, the Day for Day Goodtime Bill HB5219, and the Restoration and Civic Empowerment Act SB3482 by participating in the letter campaign to our state legislators and asking our friends and loved ones to visit the Action Network Letter at www.paroleillinois.org.



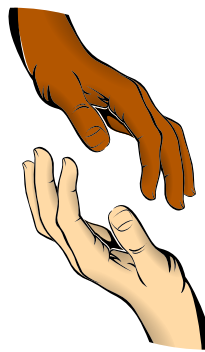
THE AMPLIFIER

with Alex Negrón



Ignacio is a dear companion of mine. As we celebrate the new year with new blessings and new places, we must never forget the old faces that have touched our lives. Nacho is one of those brothers for me. In my younger years, Nacho taught me how to speak hope into our hopeless situation. Through his kindness, acceptance, and lots (lots of lots) of patience, I was able to learn how to climb out of my depressive state. Nacho may have planted and others may have watered, but God gaveth the increase.

For 2025, let's look at these daunting tasks as a challenge to touch people's hearts. We might not be where we want to be, but God's purpose and will, has us right where we need to be at this moment. Let's look at our Diaspora as a blessing to speak hope in places in which that concept is bleak around us. Let's bring the message of love and inclusion to those who have been excluded. Let's be the blessings God intends for us to be in these new places, whether inside or out. Happy New Year, everyone 😊 !



"Write on!"

Touch By: **I. Alvarez (NACHO)**

To be "touched" is defined as "the state of being in contact or communication [with]." It is a state that most humans innately desire to be in and that most within carceral communities do not have due in part to their intentional de-humanization. The absence of touch is not normal; if anything it is a sinful distortion and health-hazard to mind, body, and spirit as we were meant to live and thrive within communal settings. The absence of connectivity, understanding, and empathy or touch will give rise to a very real & present danger; namely, loss of hope and distorted vision or perspective.

Depression, seizing the opportunity created by a lack of touch, becomes a persistent and nagging companion that beckons individuals within that vacuum to engage it. But, thankfully, resistance always shows up as an antidote to counteract that poisonous agent. Its objective is to pull individuals back from the brink of despair. It tells them: "Do not give in, do not give up, this absence will not last, it will soon pass, you must go through it and in the process learn from it!" Easier said than done is the usual retort that most, if not all, give back to resistance. They know that resistance is correct in its assessment, and begrudgingly acquiesce to its wisdom.



THE AMPLIFIER

with Alex Negrón

and Ignacio Alvarez

Please understand that I in no way look down upon any who are in a depressive state. If anything, I understand it and empathize with those going through it because I have dealt with it in the past. But, I also find myself fighting against it in the present. A lack of touch always puts individuals to the test, even the most mentally strong can't escape its grasp. And so I fight to stay afloat in the midst of an oppressive, punitive, and divested environment that refuses to connect & communicate with individuals in a meaningful way.

This geographic displacement has revealed to be that were I was, though not fit for human habitation, did have incubators that sought to touch the carceral community in a myriad of expressive ways. It sought to educate, empower, and restore a humanity that had been lost through false narratives. These incubators were oases of hope in the wasteland of one's carceral existence. Their objective was to touch, to reach, and bring to the surface the substantive depths of the marginalized, disenfranchised, and othered. But, they were not just there to communicate their thoughts, ideas, empathy and concerns. No, they were willing to be educated by us as well. Reciprocity was always a reality that the powers that be definitely frowned upon.

At the end of the day I by no means write this in order to lament the closing of a condemned space, but what I do is mourn the loss of touch that was found within that oppressive system. A touch that helped me become the man I am today. A touch that has equipped me with the transformative tools that are in dire need within these hidden pits. Now, more than ever, I find myself relying upon those tools to get me through. I navigate these spaces striving to be what others were for me – I seek to connect & communicate with a community that has been left to fend for themselves. It is definitely not an easy task because of the generational gaps that exist, but it isn't impossible either in the midst of such an obstacle. My availability, understanding, and non-judgmental approach is, I believe, the key to bridging the gap.

In closing, I'm appreciative of the touch or connectivity that was afforded to us through DePaul, Northwestern, North Park, and PNAP. I'm grateful for the investment they sought to place in us and one that we must now seek to return. I also extend my appreciation to the spiritual shepherds who saw us not as inmates, convicts, or individuals in custody, but as bearers of God's image. This vision of us helped them fulfill their God-orienting mandate of equipping & empowering us to be what the Eternal called us to be: prophetic voices of change. Thank you for touching us and allowing us to touch or connect & communicate with you...

Interview with Jamal Bakr by Alann Vega

AV: First and foremost, congratulations on your victory with the Youthful Offender Parole Board. Can you describe how you are feeling right now?

JB: It sounds cliché, but I am still in shock. My historical experience with the dysfunction of the system has left me feeling blessed because it worked for me. Yet, I worry for those that are coming after me. I had the sitting (now former) State's Attorney, my resentencing Judge, and a former Warden, speak at my institutional hearing, all asking for my immediate release. There were only nine members of the board present, but I still needed the majority, as if all 11 were there. I did win, by one vote (6-3).

AV: As you went through the process of preparing for the hearing with the board, what was the biggest challenge, and what kept you grounded?

JB: The biggest challenge was combatting the flat narrative from the past: one constructed around the worst decision I ever made. Telling my narrative, giving a redemptive arch to my story, was crucial. I would also like to point out the brokenness of the system, and how it forces us into a desperate situation leaving us to file any claims we can. A Youthful Offender Parole proceeding should consider those and various factors, like your level of accountability, the seriousness of the offense, your transformative efforts, and your behavioral history. Instead, some members only concentrate on what they consider negative aspects. Like, why you made innocence claims in the past, tickets you caught 20 years ago, and grievances or lawsuits you filed. So having resources to tip those imbalances in your favor are extremely important. From the very first day I stepped into jail, I refused to accept it as my reality. I admit, this initial rejection emanated from an unhealthy place. However, as my faith in God grew, my defiance evolved into a belief that God had something much greater planned for me. This faith was certainly NOT of the passive variety. It wasn't the kind of faith that causes you to rest on your prayers alone. I felt empowered to join in the fight, as a partner with God, for my freedom. This then led me to become relentless, ignoring anyone who told me that I was "doing too much," or that I was "getting in the way" of my blessing, because I didn't settle for the one accomplishment or one letter of support. I went hard all the way to the door because I believed that it is what God wanted from me. I didn't lay down and wait for a miracle! I remained defiant in faith and relentless because I had faith.

AV: What advice will you give to someone just entering into the system who's of the same age (18) when you entered?

JB: You already have allowed at least one set of circumstances in your life define who you are; don't allow this set of circumstances to define who you can become. Take control over who you are, be accountable, and set your own expectations.

AV: As you embark on your new beginning, what are some of the things you are taking with you from your experience?

JB: The biggest takeaways: I leave behind an excessively sentenced, punitively oppressed, and aging population. All these realities can be addressed through legislative and policy changes. I feel compelled to dedicate efforts towards bringing radical change on behalf of those who still face those realities. Will I see those changes come to fruition? I don't know. However, the most selfless thing a freedom fighter can do is keep fighting for justice even when they might not see the freedoms they fight for realized in their lifetimes.

AV: Are there any other criminal justice reform issues you look forward to advocating for?

JB: Yes, the comprehensive amending of the Youthful Offender Parole Law to include, among other things, retroactivity, the Earned Reentry Bill (SB 2129/HB 3373), Day for Day Goodtime (HB 5219), the R.A.C.E Act (SB 3482), the Elderly Release Bill, and addressing some discriminatory issues within the Violent Offense Against Youth law and registry.

AV: Any words for the community you led that you are now leaving behind?

JB: Firstly, I am not leaving anyone behind. Any person who knows me knows that they won't have to miss me for long. Though I won't step into a prison again, I am a change agent, so the next part of my mission begins. I will leave them a message: "Do not allow where you are to determine where you end up. Remain defiant in your faith and relentless in your pursuit of restoration. Always lead with love; for God, self, and others, and you will be good!"

AV: The theme of this *Feather Bricks* edition is New Year, New Blessings. What better way to start 2025 than with your freedom. What are some of the things you look forward to doing?

JB: : I am not worried about the small things, like what I am going to wear or eat. What I do look forward to is spending time with my family and holding them until they feel like they had enough. Then hang on a little longer! I want to enjoy the fullness of their love without the restrictions of prison separating us and give them that in return. Then I want to get involved; ya feel me?!

Writing Advisor Corner

The Art of Diplomacy in Writing Advising by Jalena Daney

Note: This essay was written for North Park University's WRIT2100 tutor training course in fall 2024, taught by Mia Santiago.

To be a writing advisor at North Park University means to embody diplomacy. Diplomacy involves handling sensitive situations with tact and care, and communicating solutions even when faced with rudeness. Students come to the writing center in a vulnerable state, seeking help. It is our responsibility to show them that the challenges they face are not as daunting as they might seem. Over the past four months, I've learned that understanding the finer details when advising people and practicing kindness are crucial tools. These tools ensure that my conferences run smoothly. Reflecting on my experiences, both as a former student seeking advice and now as an advisor, I see how these tools make a difference. When we approach our conferences with diplomacy, we cover more ground with people. This approach fosters a welcoming atmosphere in our center, making it a safe space for students and others to come in and feel supported. Most importantly, it ensures that we get things done effectively.

Encouraging Independence

As a student coming into the writing center, I initially had the wrong idea about the type of help advisors offered. I thought they were similar to a teacher's aide, reading my work all the way through, making editing marks, and pointing me directly to the right way to write. However, now that I am an advisor, I understand how this approach can be counterproductive for both the advisor and the student. While it is beneficial to read a paper thoroughly or be given the correct answers, the writing center is a privilege that will not always be available throughout a student's entire career. Students need to learn in a way that helps them become stronger, more independent writers. What advisors do is explained in a fellow writing advisor Luigi Adamo's paper on minimalist tutoring called "Minimalism: How Less is More." On the first page of his paper, Adamo quotes writing scholar Kenneth Bruffee, who states,

What peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit, or least of all proofread. What they do together is converse. They converse about the subject and about the assignment. They converse about, in an academic context, their own relationship and the relationships between student and teacher. Most of all, they converse about and pursuant to writing.

The most important takeaway from this excerpt is that advisors are peers to their fellow students. In each of my meetings with a student I conduct them as if we are just having a conversation. Doing so lifts the atmosphere of any prejudices and expectations. Sometimes people are not open to conversation, and that is okay. Instead, I lead the conference with my entire focus on hearing them out and helping them find their necessary tools, such as Purdue OWL. We also provide inclusive distributions for being able to reach the writing center virtually through the MS Teams app; this is another way how the center is centered around kindness because we think about everyone involved.

Fostering a Supportive Environment

The first thing that pops up when you go into the writing advising class on the Canvas Learning Management System dashboard is the quote by Elizabeth H. Bouquet: "Is the writing center primarily a space...? Or a temporality, an interaction between people over time, in which the nature of the interaction is determined not by site, but by method?" Essentially, I believe that Bouquet is pondering if the essence of the writing center lies in the space itself, doing the work for the students, which is the typical misinterpretation of a writing center, rather than practicing the space in the dynamic sense of evolving relationships and techniques that shape the learning experience over time. In one of the first weeks of writing advising class, we discussed *The Craft of Revision* chapter 3

Writing Advisor Corner

about a small quote by H. G. Wells: "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft" (Murray 34). Correcting all the work of people and not being open to conversations takes away from a student's personal growth. From my own experience, I believe the writing center flows well and is structured around the interaction between people in the writing center, rather than focused on the concept of the writing center as a space of work. Examples of this include starting from just greeting whoever you are partnered up to work with for a shift or being open-minded to the student coming to the writing center for support. But this atmosphere can also be manipulated due to the mishandling of a situation whether it be through miscommunication or just plain selfishness.

How to Do your Job (Tact / Care)

Whenever my mom tells me to do the dishes in a strict, demanding way, it causes me to not really want to start even more than when she initially ordered me to, but in the end, when my mom tells me to do something I do it, especially because she would whoop me if I did not follow her instructions. That is what we should keep in mind with the writing center: we are not the students' parents, we cannot force them to do their work. Instead, we should communicate with care and politeness, rather than ordering them around.

There is a theme throughout all the materials we have discussed in class and within our assignments, and that theme is a sense of politeness. Over the past four months, we have talked about how to make the writing center a place where everyone feels welcome, by bringing up multilingual writers, different ways people learn, self-reflections, and more, showing how we keep the writing center inclusive for everyone. When you keep everyone in mind, that is showing compassion and care, which is synonymous with politeness, but because politeness can be easily misconstrued, it is often taken advantage of.

Not too long ago, an assigned student signed up for a meeting at the last minute for their paper at 11:30 pm on Thursday, for a time slot of 10:00 am on the upcoming Friday. They then proceeded to only send me their paper at around 12 am. I tried to be understanding that sometimes things come up and I went along with the meeting instead of canceling. The next morning, understandably so, I did not have their paper finished with my feedback, and they showed up 30 minutes late. Upon their arrival, I informed them that our meeting might be shaky because I did not have the comments all together. The writer replied, "I guess that is okay since I did come a little bit late." In my opinion, they were being condescending and this was only the first hint of this rude behavior with the student. I say all this to show a real experience in which even when you are polite it can be used against you; that is where having a diplomatic mindset comes into play. I handled the situation by calling them out about their behavior and got the both of us back to the task at hand. Their actions surely improved after our little chat, and so did their grades.

Conclusions

In conclusion, being a writing advisor at North Park University is about embodying diplomacy in the way Daniele Vare defines it: "Diplomacy is the art of letting someone else have your way." This means handling sensitive situations with tact and care, and communicating solutions effectively, even in the face of rudeness. Over the past four months, I've learned that understanding the finer details and practicing kindness are crucial tools that ensure smooth and productive conferences. By fostering a welcoming atmosphere and encouraging independence, we help students become stronger, more confident writers. The essence of the writing center lies not in its physical space, but in the dynamic interactions and evolving relationships that shape the learning experience. Through diplomacy, we create a supportive environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to succeed.

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Call for Submissions! *Feather Bricks* aims to highlight and celebrate North Park School of Restorative Arts soon-to-be-graduates from cohorts at Illinois River and Logan C.C. in our next issue. Deadline: April 15.

Editors' Note: Outside readers can find an electronic version of this issue (and past issues) of *Feather Bricks* on North Park University Writing Center's website: <https://www.northpark.edu/academics/undergraduate-programs/academic-assistance/writing-center/>