

Captured
Words

Free
Thoughts

Writings From America's Prisons

Winter 2020

Volume 16

CAPTURED WORDS/FREE THOUGHTS

Volume 16, Winter 2020

—Writing and Art from America's Prisons—

Captured Words/Free Thoughts offers testimony from America's prisons and prison-impacted communities. This issue includes poems, stories, letters, essays, and art made by men and women incarcerated in California, Colorado, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, Texas, and Wisconsin. To expand the scope of our project, we also include works made by folks on the free side of the prison walls whose lives have been impacted by crime, violence, and the prison-industrial complex.

Volume 16 was compiled and edited by Stephen John Hartnett and Arditia Dervishi-Anderson at the University of Colorado Denver. Layout, design, and this volume's gorgeous photography were all handled by Andrei Howell. Our new correspondence editor is Dr. Benjamin Boyce, who has made the miraculous voyage through Michigan prisons and on to success as a teacher, scholar, and activist.

MISSION STATEMENT

We believe that reducing crime and reclaiming our neighborhoods depends in part on enabling a generation of abandoned Americans to experience different modes of citizenship, self-reflection, and personal expression. Captured Words/Free Thoughts therefore aspires to empower its contributors, to enlighten its readers, and to shift societal perception so that prisoners are viewed as talented, valuable members of society, not persons to be feared. We believe in the humanity, creativity, and indomitable spirit of each and every one of our collaborators, meaning our magazine is a celebration of the power of turning tragedy into art, of using our communication skills to work collectively for social justice.

CONTRIBUTORS & SUBSCRIBERS

If you would like to contribute work to forthcoming issues of this magazine, please send your poems, stories, testimonials, or art to Stephen John Hartnett, Professor, Department of Communication, CU Denver, 1201 Larimer St., Room 3016, Denver, CO 80204; stephen.hartnett@ucdenver.edu; 303.315.1914.

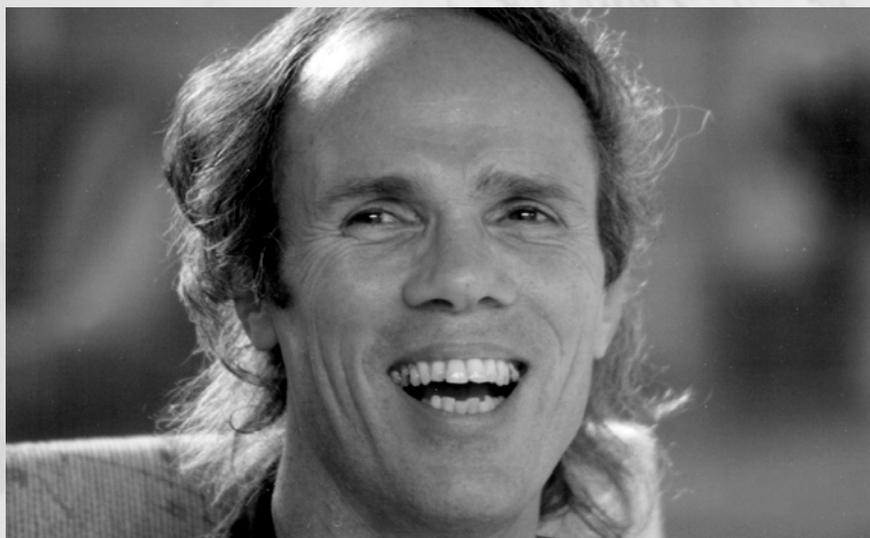
BACK ISSUES & ACCESS

For those of you who would like to use Captured Words/Free Thoughts in your classes or for other purposes, you can access volumes 7 through 16 by logging on to the Acedemia.edu webpage of Stephen Hartnett (<http://ucdenver.academia.edu/Stephen-Hartnett>).

THANKS

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- Thanks to Dr. Mia Fischer and Dances for Solidarity-Denver, a prison-pen-pal project connecting folks all across the country through various forms of artistic expression, for sharing works submitted to them. You can reach DFS at PO BOX 300562, Denver, CO 80218; dancesforsolidaritydenver@gmail.com; Instagram: @denverdfs
- For generous financial assistance, thanks to the Max and Anna Levinson Foundation (<https://www.levinsonfoundation.org>), where they bring a joyous energy to working for social justice.

Dedicated to Our Dear Friend, Dr. Buzz Alexander



Volume 16 of *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* is dedicated in loving memory to our dear friend, mentor, inspiration, and activist hero, Dr. Buzz Alexander, who passed away this September, at the age of 80. Buzz was the Founder and long-time Director of the Prison Creative Arts Project (<https://lsa.umich.edu/pcap>), a program that runs workshops in prisons and high schools around Michigan, and that hosts the Annual Exhibition of Art by Michigan Prisoners. An award-winning teacher and renowned scholar, Buzz dedicated his life to the belief that education is empowering, that listening is an art form, and that everyone has stories to tell. We send our love to Buzz's wife and collaborator, Janie Paul, and to everyone whose life was enriched by Buzz's commitment to social justice.

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Reverie

By Jordan Carr

I touch things that are lovely
In an inane reverie
Hoping their galactic beauty
Might rub off on me

Opposite Ends by Ronnie Randon

From opposite ends of the Earth we came
You from Money
Me from Shame

What you see as beauty
I have no name
You say love, I say it's a game

You use a crystal glass
I lap water from my hand
You eat from a table
I rummage in garbage cans

You felt hopeless one summer night
Took pills to end your life
I on the other hand
Have lived this way forever
Yet never considered taking my life

From opposite ends of the Earth we came
You from Money
Me from Shame

He's Gone Now By Douglas Craig

Forgiveness
Too late

So much to say
Now just to a cloud

The hurt that was caused
The hurt that was done

The scars will always be there
Never to be forgotten

He was my best friend
My family

In a better place now, I hope is he
A huge sadness he left in me

So much we did together
Such a better person I am

Until my dying day
Till we meet again
He's gone now

America in My Eyes By Eryk Smith

I'm talking about walking into an apartment building. The lights in the hall dim. The carpet dank with dirt and piss. The smell of boiled shrimp mixed with peanut oil and frying chicken. Pork tamales being sold by the daughter of an old lady named Maria.

The coke in my nose is Russian, the meth in my pocket is Mexican. My clientele is White and as American as apple pie. My Lexus parked in front is Japanese, but the weed in my console is European.

America, land where everything has a price, it's all for sale.

Moral's Meadow

By Joey Dellert

Morality is the reality of doing what is right
Doing so whether you are seen or out of sight
I believe it is a compass to our soul
It gives us responsibility and shows us our role

Would you provide help to a stranger in need?
Or be a hero, running into danger with bravery and speed?
Are we loving our neighbors even if and when we disagree?

I plead that you and I take a look at our principles
Do they persuade us to do what is right?
Or does it separate individuals due to age and sex
Or if their skin is brown, black, or white?

The beautiful thing about morals and life
Is that both can transform into meaningful light
That grows souls like flowers in a meadow
Where the good that we do resembles those petals

Morality is the fork in a backcountry road
Which way are you going to choose?
The direction you know, just go with the flow?

Or do we take the road less known
Ultimately, the path where you grow?

The Monster

By Dan Leiter (aka Orange)

The taker of lives, a killer
The Monster, and always inside me it lives
Its roots are abandonment, the sickness of depression
And the feelings of sorrow it often gives

At first dance it was the “good life”
False images seen through faded eyes
But then a loss of freedom, real life, real love
And now all feeling slowly dies

I was brought up right
That poison was not allowed to be around
But it was glamorized and glorified by many
It nearly left me six feet underground

I got up just to get down
Always moving, flying around
Making, using, and then distributing
The Monster inside me from town to town

Now here I sit, sentence sealed
My fate playing out inside my casket
Smiling, laughing and joking around
Simmering as I try not to blow a gasket

This vicious monster
I hope you have never met
It brings chaos, destruction, loneliness, and death
Its name is addiction—I call mine Meth

SPECIAL SECTION FROM L.A.'S JUVENILE HALL

Juvenile Hall

By Shelley Ring Diamond

I walk the yard at L.A.'s Central Juvenile Hall. On my way to the classroom where I teach, I pick up writing paper, a roster, and snacks (Flamin' Hot Cheetos are a favorite). The gleaming towers of USC's medical school and hospital are visible just beyond the compound's fences. I'm always struck by the contrast of opportunity and care that vista represents.

I pass through multiple gates, which open with a loud snap and then bang metallicly shut. These sounds define juvie. Boys and girls cross the yard stand in orderly lines and under guard. I've been teaching a while, so I'll get a shout out from a student or two: "Shelley D!"

I say "Yo" back to my girls, these bright, joyfully unruly, funny, potty-mouthed 14-to-18-year-olds. Some are mothers. They've committed crimes—some stupid, some serious—but now they show up for class to write, and most importantly, to be listened to.

For more than a year, I've been a teacher for InsideOUT Writers, a nonprofit that uses creative writing to empower youth and reduce recidivism. My purpose is to guide my teens to a written expression of feeling, imagination, and life experience. I ask them to read their writing out loud to me and their peers so they can not only be heard but also respected for what they have to say. My classroom reverberates with finger snaps and applause.

I enter my unit and set up the desks. I never know exactly how many girls will show. The roster tells me one thing, but if you've been fighting or were written up, you're barred from class. Today, I've got a party of six. Once my group sits, I can hand them pens. Pens are treated as weapons, carefully distributed and collected, but I never feel unsafe. There's a guard in the room with me who can be motherly or tough, depending on the behavior and the mood in the room.

Today's lesson is meant to take the girls away—to expose them to a new environment and have them imagine being there. I'd fallen in love with the great outdoors when I was 12, on a family kayaking trip to Maine, and I can still conjure up the sounds and softness of tall grasses in the breeze, water lapping. Now I want to share this experience with my girls. To create the lesson plan, I'd spent a week as an artist in residence for the Angeles National Forest. Each day I snapped pics of mountain vistas, dusty lizards, and ponderosa pines. Upon descending the San Gabriel Mountains, I'd deliver these photos to the grim halls of juvie, where we would meditate on what it's like out in the wilderness.

Class begins as I pass around the iPad of photos. "Girls, take your time to look at these pictures. These mountains are about an hour away. How do you feel about these pictures? Does this landscape inspire you? Imagine being there. Explore. Fly outside the walls! Write!"

Silence. They hold their pens aloft, expressions neutral. Cute lizards, splendid vistas—Mother Nature holds no sway here. Soon a verbal chorus erupts. “What the hell am I doing up there?” one student asks. “Snakes? Thirst?”

“This is not gonna happen,” another girl replies.

Trauma shadows these girls’ lives, and gaining their trust is difficult. Trust isn’t part of your nature when your mom doesn’t show up for a visit, or won’t pick up when you call. When you take your baby to a park you think is safe only to have bullets start flying.

Clearly, I’ve got to pivot, and my own imagination needs a booster shot now. How am I going to make this more interesting for them?

“OK, you’re stuck on a mountain top and you have to get down,” I say instead. “What are you going to do?” My dubious flock grants the pictures one more look. I sit and watch them start to write. When they’re done, they take turns reading, and I realize with relief that the lesson has landed. In fact, they’ve written with as much depth, thought, and humor as I could have asked for.

One 17-year-old lays it down like the slam poet she is: “Stuck on a mountain, I’m trynna get down. The whole scenario reminds me of where I am now. Stuck on a trip with no way down. . . . Is this my mountain forever, or will I find my way down?”

A 16-year-old mother is reflective. “When I see your pictures, it makes me wanna go and spend time with my son, take a run with my boy. Go and walk and look at the beautiful trees. This place makes me relax.”

One writer has drawn a wide road leading to shelter and safety. “I want to feel the trail road,” she reads. “I want to see the animals searching for more, and shout out any worries that come my way.” She names her piece “Freedom.”

With thanks to Shelley for her teaching and writing, we are proud to share some of the pieces written by the young women in her InsideOUT workshop. Some of these pieces are stand-alones, while some are written in response to the prompt discussed in Shelley’s essay.

Lyric

By Darnell (Age 16)

I cannot believe I'm in jail
I sit here and think about my life and why I chose to do wrong
I chose to make the mistakes that I've made
I chose to boost and do the wrong things
For what reason? I'm still trying to find out

I come from a good family
My mom has never exposed me to struggle
I've never had to want for anything and yet, somehow, somehow
I decided to steal when I could just ask
I wanted to be grown so bad, and now I see where that's gotten me
I wanted to say I got it by myself so bad
But now I've seen that some people
Would have loved to trade places with me

I've always been good in school, yet allowed myself to fall off
I should be grateful for all that my family has accomplished
To give me the life that I have
Now I feel as though I need to do my own thing
I'm smarter than most, it blows me away
I should have always, always stayed true to myself

Freedom

By Y. (Age 15)

Mountains feel like home
I want to roam around and explore
I want to feel the trail road
I want to see the animals searching for more
I want to smell the living nature all around me
I want to feel the tree bark under my finger tips
I just want to be in the open
And shout out any worries that come my way

Greek Myth and Me By Dulce Diaz (Age 18)

I don't know why, but I'm thinking of that Greek story about the guy who was trapped and used wax and feathers to build wings for himself. The other guy told him not to fly too close to the sun, but he didn't listen. As he got close to the sun, the wax holding his feathers melted, and he fell in the middle of the ocean, where there was nobody to save him.

That's how I feel

I didn't listen to nobody who gave me advice, so I fell

I don't even know how I cope, I'm getting hopeless

Like the guy in the story, I just want to be free

If I Was In the Woods By A. (Age 16)

When I see your pictures
It makes me wanna go and spend time with my son
I wanna take a run with my boy

I wanna go and walk and look at the beautiful trees, the views and other things
I would sit down and smoke and just enjoy the day

This place makes me relax

Thoughts on the Wilderness By K. (Age 14)

I'm not walking 2,000 miles - that's out!

If I had to imagine being in the forest, I would cry and pray to God that a snake doesn't bite

If I was on a mountain stranded, I would try to find my way to a road and get a ride
I'll just walk down

I would eat some snakes and drink my spit!

Shemyah McKenzie (Age 15)

Being in here has really been making me think about my dad. It's hard but I tough it out because I know that he's watching me, along with my brother, who's also gotten killed. It's kind of weird, because I never know—I could be next.

I know I'm a girl, and it's maybe a little different, but it's still hard, because they were the only people on his side I knew about and had a relationship with. The rest of his side, I really didn't talk to so much.

The things that keep me going and happy is thinking about my little sisters and my other brothers, who I'm sure miss me—I miss them so much. Especially my older brother, as he is my best friend and I can't wait to get home to see his champagne party pictures.

Mountain Tops

By P. (Age 17)

Stuck on a mountain, I'm trynna get down
I've been here before, but not really forest-bound
The whole scenario reminds me where I am now
Stuck on a trip with no way out
It's snakes all around me, they rattle all day
No physical freedom, only my mind gets away
A struggle to survive, trynna live for today
Will I stay on the trail, or again will I stray?
The road remains bumpy, trees confuse my route
Now I'm going in circles battling with doubts
Is this my mountain forever
Or will I find my way down?

End of special section

Death's Time Frames

By Jordan Carr

Past

Yesterday re-lived every morning
Watching his life soak my hands
Two bullets eternally screaming
Entering his chest and stealing my man
My life given back, and his, for mine
Sacrificed
His life forfeited my lawful crime
Innocence crucified
Some may ask
"Did he say he loved you
That one last time?"
Now to me falls the task
His eyes blinked death's sign
Only because dying stole his tongue
Yesterday I awoke to today's nightmare
My lover simply dared
To love and, with me
His life share
Death's sign his eyes blinked
And this became my lover's creed:
 Born to live and live for love
 Born to die and die for love

Present

Joy in the brightest morning
And peace in the moonlit evening
Grace for you and love for me
Haunting in my every breath
These for me are daily death

Future

If you exist, false God above
Can minutes from now be my time
To leave this land and see my love?

 Oh I exist, my little child
 And let me ask the one you love
 If today's the day to be reconciled

Ask him, I plead, ask him and beg
Tell him I'm sorry and I love him so much
And remind him he loves me as he once said

Dear mortal, why do you think
That I must remind him of things he said?
Did his love resolve in a seven year blink?

You're eternal, I get it
But from my perspective
He's only dead due to my bullshit

O dear child...
My dear child...

No, let me talk for awhile
For this you'll never comprehend
You see, us humans are forgetful
Please try to understand
I cared only for dimes and nothing about nickels
I want my drugs and I loved my man
Well I guess this is a lie
I only loved my drugs
Because he died for my high
I was trapped, I made a choice, I lied
The night my baby died

I allowed my folly to taint our bed
And now he's gone
God damn it! He's dead
So yes, it was my personal flood
Of highs and bullshit and choices
Ending in his payment of blood
Can't seem to quiet the accusing voices
I still wear the wedding band
And I'm ready to make my payment
Cause I just want to be held
Once again by my husband

I know I died
Not a year and a month later
And I know he cried
And I saw his nightly pain
But, God, I chose life for him then
One day, I'll hold him again
But in the interim please tell him...

And that's when God told me
Those words I'll hold forever
That embrace my nightmares
I'll use his words to sever
I'll find joy with the sun
And peace with the moon
Grace for all acts done
And love for me and you
And when darkness does creep
I'll echo his words
Let them cut my demons deep
For this he said to me

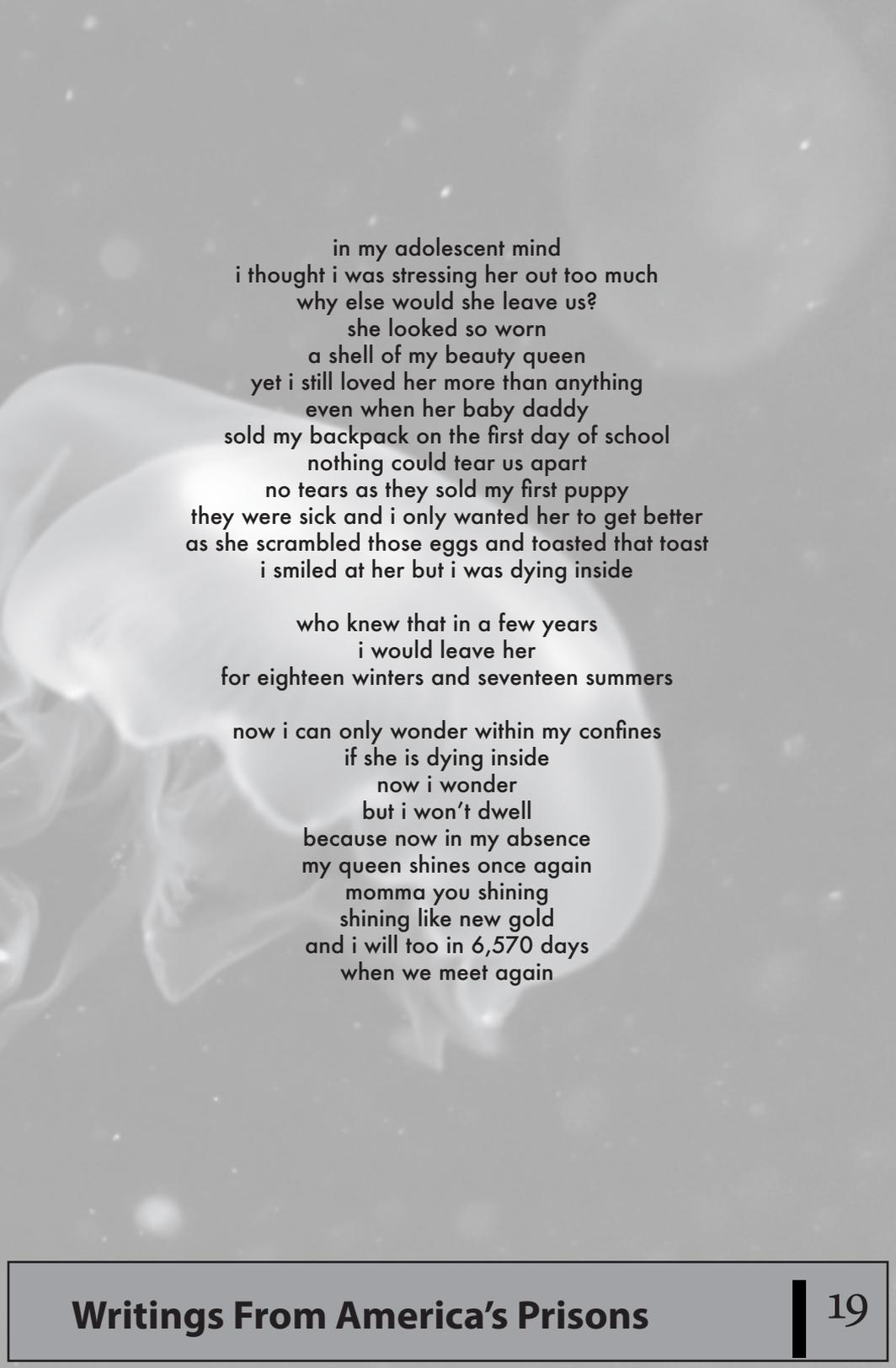
Just know, my love
That all days between now and then
I will never forget
And always you love
But for now, you have a debt
To live and fight and hope
Just recall my creed
And daily water my planted seed

Shine
By Carl Ware

i remember the days when i
would awaken to the sounds of Sade
incense wafting through the air
a cigarette burning in the metal seashell ashtray
this is the only love i know

she would hum the melodies
as she cleaned our humble abode
looking into her face always made me wonder
why i had no freckles beautifully placed on my face
what would you like to eat baby?
being so caught up in her aura
i would always reply i don't care
truthfully i didn't
just having her around was all i cared about

before this morning's surprise visit
i hadn't seen her in a week or two
i can tell she hasn't been eating
the hollowing of her cheeks
means she's ten pounds lighter
this morning she's in her mode though
Sade's taking her to another world
when things were good and the sun never stopped shining
when she would lick her thumb to clean my face
draped in gold she reminded me of an Egyptian queen
she was the apple in every man's eye
only in mine she was everything, my world
as she took a pull from her Newport and greased the pan
i was reminded of the pain she was going through



in my adolescent mind
i thought i was stressing her out too much
why else would she leave us?
she looked so worn
a shell of my beauty queen
yet i still loved her more than anything
even when her baby daddy
sold my backpack on the first day of school
nothing could tear us apart
no tears as they sold my first puppy
they were sick and i only wanted her to get better
as she scrambled those eggs and toasted that toast
i smiled at her but i was dying inside

who knew that in a few years
i would leave her
for eighteen winters and seventeen summers

now i can only wonder within my confines
if she is dying inside
now i wonder
but i won't dwell
because now in my absence
my queen shines once again
momma you shining
shining like new gold
and i will too in 6,570 days
when we meet again

A Motivational Moment By Roderick Finley

New Year's Day is special
Because it's a symbol of a new beginning
But the reality is that every day is a new beginning
A new chance to create life
And to elevate into new ideas and goals

Each day of our lives
As soon as we open our eyes
We must keep steady, good energy
With a strong focus for a successful day

We do not judge each day by the harvest we reap
But by the seeds we plant
By growing
By seeing our fruitfulness

With each new day
Plant seeds of hope

Editor's Note: Roderick has been writing us letters, poems, and essays for over a decade. He is among our most-often published and longest-running correspondents. Thanks, Roderick, with love from the Rockies . . .

SPECIAL SECTION, FEATURING ESSAYS ON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION, FROM THE LANCASTER STATE PRISON, CALIFORNIA

These selections are shortened versions of work that first appeared in *Colloquy: A Journal of the Department of Communication Studies at Cal State LA* (Volume 13), with special thanks to Dr. Kamran Afary for sharing this work. This special section begins with a preface by Dr. Afary:

The Department of Communication Studies at Cal State Los Angeles started offering a BA degree program inside a maximum-security prison facility in fall 2016. There are currently more than 40 students in the program working on their degrees. Cal State LA is one of 67 post-secondary institutions to participate in the Second Chance Pell Program, and the only one that offers a Communication BA. This one-of-a-kind degree program is the result of several years of creative collaboration by many participants across the university dedicated to abolishing the dehumanizing environments created by mass incarceration and the prison-industrial complex. Faculty and administrators combined efforts to create a learning community inside prisons to both enlighten and empower, as a form of activism for engaged citizenship. We had to create a department infrastructure, train instructors, develop sustainable funding, design courses to meet the needs of prisoners, and develop collaboration between campus and prison students.

As faculty working in prisons, we found a new reality behind bars: We met incarcerated men who have lived “inside” for 10, 20, 30 or more years. Most of our students were sent to prison for life because of a crime they committed at a very early age, most during their teens. Here we found a welcoming, engaged, and deeply enthusiastic group of students who were eager to inquire, and to pose questions about communication theories and practices. Many of them had already taken college courses and were building on knowledge and skills they had already mastered. Several of our students were social justice activists working on some form of restorative justice project. Many had made their amends to victims long-ago and were focused on contributing and being of service to other prisoners and to the “outside” world.

The following selected writings are a testament to these students’ readiness to engage with what the discipline of communication studies has to offer and to contribute to a dialogue on social justice.

The selections included below were written in response to readings from Denise Solomon and Jennifer Theiss, *Interpersonal Communication: Putting Theory into Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2013)

The Ripple Effect of Communication Reshaping Prison Culture

By Allen Burnett

There are thirty-three prisons in the state of California, each divided into separate facilities that have their own cultures created by the prisoners who use their own social rules and speech codes.

Traditionally, violence has been the response to conflict in prison; these acts ultimately encourage more violence. A simple misinterpretation of a look or comment can result in an assault or worse. Prisoners combat a multitude of social issues, including stress, depression, and anxiety, yet there are few available mediums or channels to deal with these emotions in a productive manner. Conflicts are inevitable, as social rules are established to either prevent a person from becoming a victim or to promote victimization as a self-defense mechanism to ward off any future harm.

Professor Afary introduced me to Interpersonal Communication study this semester. It didn't take long for me to understand just how important this study is, especially in a prison setting. Focusing on Conflict Management—a particular component of Interpersonal Communication—would benefit the prison culture and aide tremendously in the rehabilitative process.

Conflict Strategy is defined as the overall plan for how people will communicate about their conflict. As I mentioned above, the primary way to end conflict in prison is violence. Developing a comprehensive conflict strategy would provide prisoners with an alternative to violence. Interpersonal Communication offers a “win-win” solution to conflict called Integrative Conflict Strategy, where each party ask important questions to determine what is mutually beneficial. This is an ideal strategy for cellmates. It has been my personal experience that men living together in a room the size of a Honda Civic will develop negative emotions about one another, including resentment, frustration, even jealousy. Prisoners need to have alone time (cell time). The problem is that prisoners try to avoid conflict and uncomfortable conversations that may lead to physical conflict. However, avoiding exacerbates negative feelings and leads to hostile episodes.

In contrast, Interpersonal Communication and Conflict Management offer opportunities to improve your personal relationships by providing guidelines that can help prisoners (and all people) to restructure their activities, identify values in the person in conflict, or find points of agreement. This study suggests as a solution to conflict that the focus should be on a specific behavior rather than the individual. This will prevent the person in conflict from feeling as if they are being attacked, thereby putting them on the defense.

I would like to see Interpersonal Communication offered to the population here on the Progressive Programming Facility (PPF). Interpersonal Communication Studies would help provide the population with new social rules that could help to quell violence, encourage self-help, and advance higher education, therefore reshaping the prison culture and prisoners' mindsets, ultimately leading to change in our communities as a whole. The majority of the men here are potentially returning home to their families and communities. This study would not only improve their/our social rules here at the prison, but we will then carry these tools with us when we are released, taking our newly acquired social rules into society.

Communication Theory Within and Without the Walls

By Dortell Williams

Many new and intriguing themes were offered in Interpersonal Communication, giving me more insight into the overall communication process. I will focus on listening and support strategies, with an emphasis on perspective taking.

Personally, I make earnest attempts to listen to the communicator. Yet I find myself hearing, more than practicing active listening. On occasions, I have listened to the communicator to an extent, but then found myself presupposing what they were going to say. Of course, this extracurricular mental activity distracted me from the communicator's message. Most of the time I was wrong in my supposition about what was going to be said. These personal bad habits diluted the message and negatively affected the communication process.

Active listening helps me focus, like blinders on a horse. This concentrated focus helps me note subtle cues expressed by the communicator, and helps me interpret and attach meaning to their overall message more accurately. For instance, non-verbal cues have helped me time an interjection, or ask for clarity without a mid-sentence interruption. Repeating, or as the text says, "paraphrasing" what the speaker just said, helps me understand better and assures the communicator that their message has the necessary clarity. Paraphrasing also helps me remember what was said, as well as evaluating the message.

All of these individual techniques, like single threads, weave themselves into support strategies that aid in the communication process. For example, the subtle, non-verbal cues mentioned earlier can also signal the need for an empathetic response from the listener. A sullen face, for example, may signal the need for a pat on the back, the grasp of their hand, or to simply lean in closer. Eye contact and nodding my head can signal to the listener that I care without verbalizing it. Certainly, I knew some of these concepts, but in the aggregate, as the "tools" weave themselves together, I am made more conscious, and understand their affects more intimately.

Touching is another effective way of validating the communicator's feelings. This component of the process is referred to in the text as "person-centeredness." Person-centeredness requires empathy, and there's no doubt that our apathetic world could use just a little more empathy.

For me, the most insight offered in the text was on perspectives. This chapter reminded me of, and put into context, the wonderful world of diversity we are now enjoying. In the past, I have interpreted someone else's message from my own myopic worldview, not taking into account nuances in perspective such as culture, age or gender. By broadening my perspective to include the worldviews and experiences of others, my understanding widens and the entire world becomes more relevant and relational to me. Through this wider lens of culture, age, and gender, misunderstandings are minimized, conflict is avoided, and problem-solving increases.

In the overcrowded world of confinement, where egoism and pride run men, interpersonal skills are the perfect panacea to conflict deescalation, violence diffusion, and calming, making the world—inside and out—a more peaceful and civil place to live. Interpersonal communication reminds me of how valuable collectivism and interdependence are as opposed to our culture of individualism. In fact, in my opinion, communication theory, and the study of communication as a major, makes the world a better place, both within and without the walls.

Editor's Note: And see Dortell's poems, "What Prison Feels Like" and "Priceless and Majestic Sight," published in *Captured Words/Free Thoughts* 15 (Summer 2018), p. 7 and 32.



No Longer a Conversation like Every Other

By Tin Nguyen

Perhaps it is difficult to believe that a 16-week course can have such an influence on an individual's life style that it changes the way he or she lives. In the beginning of this course, I felt arrogant about what a course in Interpersonal Communication could teach me. I have survived nearly two decades of incarceration, and that takes a well-versed individual in interpersonal communication. In hindsight, I recognize my ignorance Interpersonal Communication has taught me a wealth of information, techniques, and tools that I have at my disposal when the occasion arises. However, the three most important aspects of interpersonal communication are perception, listening, and interpersonal conflict.

I have found that in perception and interpersonal communication, understanding attribution biases has influenced my thinking, decisions, and actions when I engage in a conversation with a friend or family member. For instance, a friend and teammate of mine has not cleaned the dog crate for quite a while. In the past, I would assign this behavior as internal, for his laziness, which is a fundamental attribution error. However, I now would consider the external factors that cause his actions, including his long work hours and academic obligations. Another element of attribution biases that has influenced my thinking is the actor-observer effect, which is defined as "explaining one's own behavior in terms of external, rather than internal, causes" (107). When I fail an exam, I no longer place the blame on the instructor using ambiguous and vague questions, but evaluate if I had put enough time in on my study. These two elements have increased my understanding of perception and interpersonal communication.

The chapter on listening has altered my style of communication. I realize that throughout my life, I hear more than I listen. By recognizing the barriers to effective listening, my interpersonal communication has improved immensely. As I begin a conversation with a friend, I observe my internal and external environments for noise, noticing any obstacles that impede our conversation. During the conversation, I attempt to comprehend the feature of the message, and evaluate my thoughts and feelings to consider factors that might influence our conversation. I make an effort to be engaged in our conversation and be aware of all of the forms of non-listening, such as pseudo-listening, monopolizing, selective listening, defensive listening, ambushing, and literal listening. Becoming aware of the barriers to effective listening has made me a more effective interpersonal communicator who appreciates and values each conversation.

However, the chapter on interpersonal conflict had the most impact on my life. By understanding conflict strategies, I recognize the strategy I am using. If my strategy is distributive conflict (win-lose), which is always the case, I make every attempt to guide my conflict strategy to a more integrative conflict strategy where everybody can achieve a "win-win." Using these interpersonal conflict strategies, I can resolve my conflicts—this is especially significant in a prison environment.

In conclusion, I have found this course to be very resourceful. Beside the benefits that I have stated above, Interpersonal Communication has not only mended many of my relationship with family members and friends, but also, it has improved my relationship with those current relationships that I love and value. Interpersonal communication is no longer just a conversation like every other, but a more personal and positive attitude toward my interactions with the people I value. To be concise, interpersonal communication has taught me to be a better communicator and, thus, I am a better man.

What the Future Holds for Me

By Thomas Wheelock

When I came to prison I found myself wanting to change who I was and wanting to repair all of the damage from my past. It all seemed to stem from my school experiences. So I decided to teach myself and to develop my education in meaningful ways, yet I soon became complacent with my education. It was not until the daily prodding of my best friend, Charlie Praphatananda, that I finally gave in and enrolled in Community College. I was so terrified because I still felt that I was not smart enough for higher learning. My parents could not believe that I enrolled in College. I think that they just assumed that I would give up soon after I enrolled. I was fortunate to have a really great support group around me that kept me motivated and focused. As the semesters passed by, my self-confidence increased and I felt really proud about my grades.

My parents were so happy and proud of my accomplishments. I told them that I wanted one of my majors to be a math and science degree because those were my two worst subjects. My Dad would always talk to me about the benefits of school and he would say that it doesn't matter where you are at the moment; the only thing that matters is what you do in that moment. I began to get As and Bs in college and realized that maybe I really am smart enough for school. When the Cal State LA Communication Studies bachelor program became available to the prisoners on this yard, I had doubts that I could handle being a part of the program and take junior college classes. Once again, Charlie Praphatananda was there to prod me to go with him into the Bachelor program.

So while I am in the Communication Studies BA degree program, I am also finishing up my community college courses. I just wished that my Dad could have seen me graduate from college. He passed away last December from cancer. I was so devastated when he passed away, I wanted him to see me graduate. I wanted to prove to him that I was somebody; I wanted him to be proud of me. His passing is something that I am still trying to work through. I know that he was proud of me, I hope, at least he knew that I was trying to become a better person and student.

This summer I will be graduating with four degrees and yes, one of those degrees is in math and science. Now I cannot wait for what the future holds for me. I want to continue my college education and I really hope that I will be able to get a master's degree after the bachelor program has ended. In going to college I discovered that I could succeed in whatever I try to do. I also learned that it is no big deal to ask for help when I really need it. College has changed my life immensely for the better.

Internalizing Communication Ethics

By Jeff Stein

It is with gratitude and enthusiasm that I reflect on this course, what I learned, how I applied it, and the immediate benefits of doing so. Whether one majors in theoretical physics or mass marketing, I recommend at least a course or two in communication studies. Having interpersonal communication skills has made me a better employee, scholar, friend, and family member. I am confident that I have not only the good intentions, but the valuable and much needed skills required to be someone's intellectual and emotional equal, a good lover, and a suitable mate. I owe a significant part of that to my study and application of the interpersonal communication skills. Today I understand my community and myself in a deeper way that allows me to appreciate the contexts we interact in. Interpersonal communication skills helped me to develop consequential aspects of my character that were largely underdeveloped . . . I have become a much better communication partner and can also recognize a good communication partner more easily.

Since communication is the foundation of any collaborative effort, it puzzles me that the study and development of quality communication skills is not as strongly encouraged as subjects such as math, science, or other "core" courses. For example, I was taught to solve math problems that take up the whole blackboard—yet somehow I went through life for decades with woefully inadequate interpersonal communication skills. I can only conclude that many of my personal and interpersonal difficulties such as substance abuse, deviant behavior, and poor relationship quality are directly linked to my lack of situational awareness and emotional intelligence. Although I was becoming a fully functioning, psychologically healthy person, I still lacked a few pieces to the puzzle, therefore the new skills I developed over the course of the semester filled some of those gaps in my personal make-up.

Since I meant well, but did not have the most ideal role models growing up, I would often start off great when it came to jobs, relationships with others, school, sports, or just about anything you can name. Yet because I "improvised" my way through life, I often compromised what few scruples I had. By internalizing interpersonal communication ethics, I am more careful now to communicate (and think) ethically rather than to say "The end justifies the means." Not only does this have me feeling much better inside, but I can see how careful attention to my motives and techniques as a communicator now promote the health and wellbeing of others. I am conscious to promote and attend to those values that need to be protected rather than cast aside! Additionally, I consider the impact of my communication with others and preserve relations with them instead of seeing them as a means to an end. Finally, I help others and myself to make informed decisions instead of stubbornly clinging to old, worn-out positions derived from pride and selfishness.

In Solomon and Theiss (2013) I found out that “emotional intelligence is revealed as a consequential aspect of people’s personality” (196). Now that I have wrapped my head around that concept, I have well-founded confidence in my abilities as a communication partner.

Another key concept that I quickly internalized is the “win-win” Conflict Strategy. Also called the Integrative Conflict Strategy, this approach to resolving conflict involves cooperating with a conflict partner to reach a mutually satisfying solution. When I was younger, I had no definitive conflict orientation. I was all over the place. Sometimes I would achieve a “win-win” with a conflict partner, but it was rarely a decided goal on my part. Often I would damage the relationship at least temporarily over a relatively trivial disagreement—and more than half the time I was the problem, not the other party.

Over time this led to resentment that manifested itself in many areas of my life that were unhealthy. In addition, I harmed others around me in various ways that they did not deserve: I lied when they deserved the truth, I was selfish when they needed me to be considerate of their feelings. But now, by making a conscious, informed decision to always find a win-win outcome, I will be a blessing to others who really need me to be at my best. What happens if there is no win-win outcome possible? Well then I reframe the situation; at the very least, for me, a win-win is a result where I do not harm anyone in any way and do not use substances or break laws. While my main objective at that moment may not be realized, I can see someone else happy while I continue to have a life worth living. So no matter what, a win-win is the result.

Debating Immigration

By Mark Warner

The topic of immigration
What does it mean?
The world's population flooding our borders
Many getting through unseen

Those with hopes and dreams
Wanting a new life
Sparking a heated debate
A nation in strife

You look at your neighbor
Only to see the enemy within
Should we build walls or tear them down
Where to begin?

The battle between right and wrong
People today take it to the extreme
Now they use social media
To take the topic of immigration mainstream

On the Paradox of Knowledge

By Robert M. Mosley IV

I am over 63 years of age and have been incarcerated for more than 20 years. I have been striving to complete a bachelor's degree since 1970. Along the way, one paradox keeps presenting itself. I have summarized it in the following poem:

Do You Know?

The more you know, the more you know you do not know
So many times, one has decried, from the wishful state of ignorance
That things observed
With nouns and verbs
Do not really make a difference
Contrary to that train of thought
Which leads to lengthy damnation
Is the truth of years of proof, brought in by a summation . . .
As you know, you grow
And
The more you know
The more you know you do NOT know

Community Performance Aesthetics By Levaunt Peterson

The black community performs in a social system that criminalizes and antagonizes men of color. In response to this painful and discriminatory social web, black men body bounce, arm swing, and head lean, magically expressing self-propelled black masculinity, courage, and grit. I'm talking about the "Pimp Walk."

The Pimp Walk is unique to the black community; it publishes fearlessness, vividly illustrates black culture, and creates black identity. Have you ever seen this pimp walk? His steps are delicate and dramatic, visually vibrating like a drum. Check it! Following the lead step, the body bounces, the feet plant, and the arms swing with an informal cadence, head leaning to the left. As Arnold says in *The Creative Spirit*, "[T]he impulse to perform is part of the way we survive" and "seek to transform ourselves or to emphasize a compelling characteristic, such as courage . . . that will carry us safely through danger" (p. 4).

Historically, the word "pimp" is one of many negative labels used to describe unique black male expression, although men from many ethnic groups may perform some version of the Pimp Walk as a masculine performance. Pimp walking physically shows human victory over inferiority complexes and social norms that require black men to creatively survive and strive in the face of racism and injustice. As the pimp walk is performed, the walker celebrates and educates. There is a procedure that follows this walk: the community honors the victor for his success and return, and the victor educates the community on how to avoid problems. He answers two key questions: what is he afraid of? And what are the mechanisms and knowledge he uses to be fearless?

Pimp walking, a magical Black force, is an exceptional ritual as old as humankind. Arnold writes that "through dramatic rituals we reinforce community values . . . that preserve a way of life" (p. 6). Dramatic steps, body bounces, arm swings, and head leans are aesthetic forms that invite the community to a celebration that provides lessons for both young and old on how to be undaunted while surviving an unjust social system. Does popular culture appreciate these self-commissioned performances?

Quotations from Stephanie Arnold, *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*, 5th edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010).

Shitty Tattoos

By Brandon Johnson

Shitty tattoos and sketchy situations
stressed about cops and Hep C
They've faded and left scars for all to see
Plans to get some re-done or covered-up
Laser some off for my Mom
So she can be seen on the beach with me

The Misfit Army

By Ryan Meyer

Who are we?

We are the voice of the forgotten youth
We are the misunderstood and the abused
We are the shadow dwellers overcome by shame
We are the nobodies serving for fame
We are the psychos with sewn up lips
We are the ones to succumb in manic fits
We are the men to strike out with white-knuckled fists
We are the quick to anger, hold grudges, and stay pissed
We are the unknown best to be left alone

So sorry
For all the pain yet to be blamed

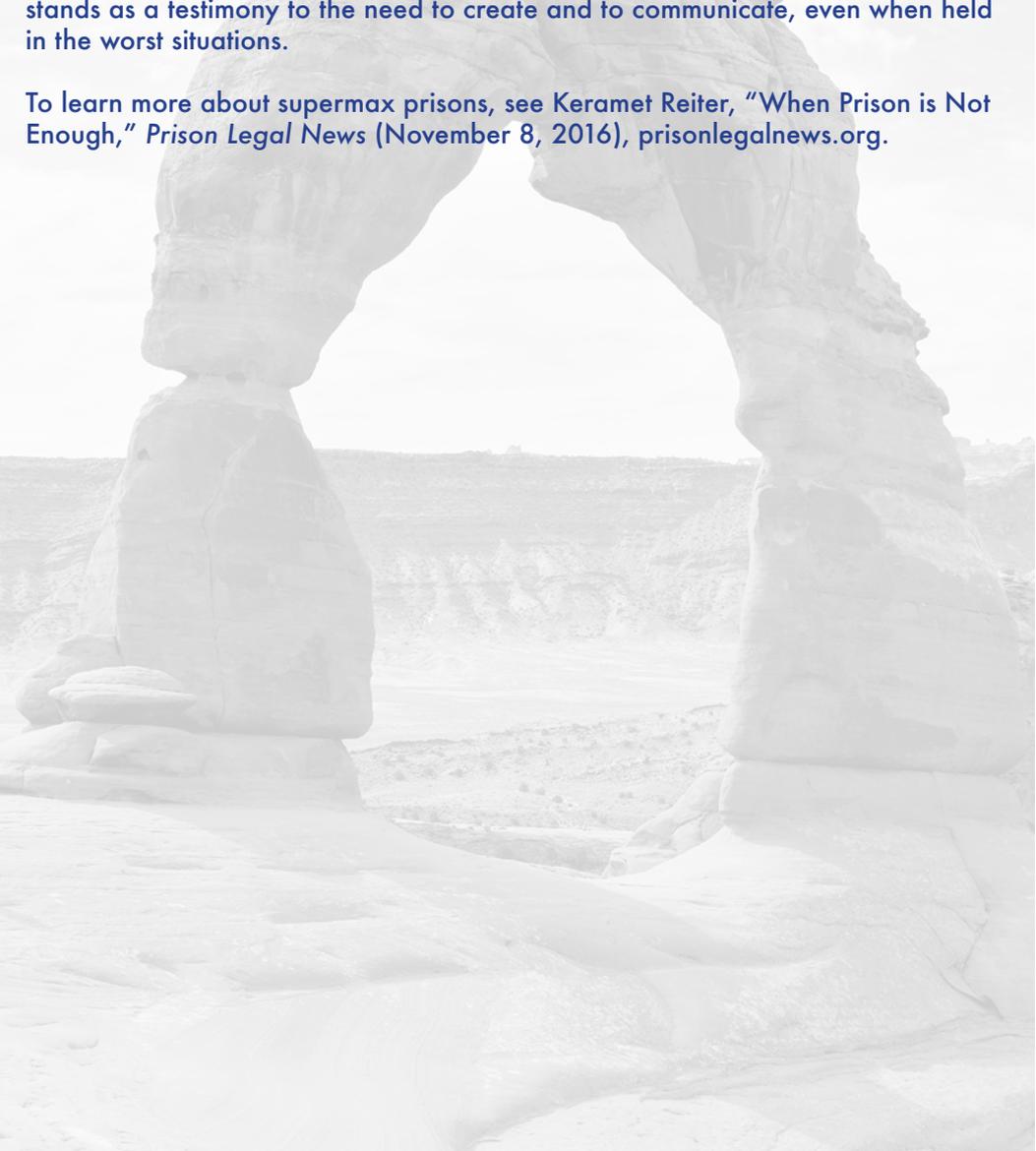
Who are we?

We are the kings refusing to be stepped on by peasants or fiends
We are the alpha and the omega
We are the revolution that was carved from stone
We are the future that has been foretold
We are the misfits that were scattered throughout god's army

“Owl,” drawing by Jorge Francisco “Frankie” Muñoz.

Editor’s Note: “Frankie” is serving time at the Pelican Bay “supermax,” a controversial facility that has drawn international criticism. Supermax facilities isolate each prisoner in individual cells, where they spend days on end, with no access to educational programming, group exercise, or other means of human contact, thus amounting to long-term solitary confinement. Psychologists around the world, and an increasing number of courts, have determined that this practice amounts to torture. Given this context, we are proud to print Frankie’s art, as it stands as a testimony to the need to create and to communicate, even when held in the worst situations.

To learn more about supermax prisons, see Keramet Reiter, “When Prison is Not Enough,” *Prison Legal News* (November 8, 2016), prisonlegalnews.org.





Birth

By Jordan Karr

I have a story to tell, as so many of us do
It's an age old question about fundamental truth

Is it the way I was born or a choice that I made?
Is being myself equivalent to not being afraid?

My orientation might just entice from you some scorn
But to deny who I am would make me a stillborn

Science and Lady Gaga both agree, it's in my DNA
It's the way I was crafted and molded from proverbial clay

I'm tired of crying alone in the tub behind my rainbow suds
Because you think your self-appointed jury and judge

Chanting about Adam and Eve and Sodom and Gomorrah
Preaching about how I fail in the eyes of God and Allah

Should I be a true hell-bound me or a robotic version of you?
I think I'd rather live with the Devil than be seen in heaven as taboo

In the end, isn't this argument pointless?
Let me say something to make all sides acquiesce

Humans are simply human, let's leave judgements to G-O-D
Love is love and that's what will set all of us free

Heaven or hell or reincarnation or purgatory
That's next life, so why spend this one acting discriminatory?

I have a story to tell as so many of us do
Agree or not, I'm just looking for love like you

Choice

I have a story to tell, as so many of us do
It's an age old question about fundamental truth

Is it the way I was born or a choice that I made?
Is being myself equivalent to not being afraid?

I was born in His perfect image and a choice I made
If I admit this is a sin, at least my soul is still saved

Maybe I'll be judged, but I'm just living my life
Before I one day settle down with my love, my wife

I'm not worried about my eternal well-being
Because my God is loving and wholly forgiving

Let me be young and ferocious and free
Because at least I am brave enough to be 100% me

In the end, isn't this argument pointless?
Let me say something to make all sides acquiesce

Humans are simply human, let's leave judgements to G-O-D
Love is love and that's what will set all of us free

Heaven or hell or reincarnation or purgatory
That's next life, so why spend this one acting discriminatory?

I have a story to tell as so many of us do
Agree or not, I'm just looking for love like you

Straight

I have a story to tell, as so many of us do
It's an age old question about fundamental truth

Is it the way I was born or a choice that I made?
Is being myself equivalent to not being afraid?

Ma, this ain't me coming out of the closet—
I'm just tired of my brothers and sisters playing Russian roulette

First thing, since birth I knew I was straight
God's plan for me was to have a woman as a bedmate

Secondly, heterosexual supporting LGBTQ?
Stances like this are desperately overdue

Hold up, wait a minute...let's talk about the issue
It's humans supporting humans...damn, what a break

I was born a man loving women, but I'm opened minded
Because I can recognize we all bleed blood-red

In the end, isn't this argument pointless?
Let me say something to make all sides acquiesce

Humans are simply human, let's leave judgements to G-O-D
Love is love and that's what will set all of us free

Heaven or hell or reincarnation or purgatory
That's next life, so why spend this one acting discriminatory?

I have a story to tell, as so many of us do
Agree or not, I'm just looking for love like you

I Refuse to Break

By Brother Manuel Bey

My life done slightly changed
I went from purification
To living with this pain
Just seeing all those wires
Her brain done started to leak
They called it an aneurysm
I call it Devil's Peak
She reached the upper streets
But told heaven reach

The Angels cured my sista
And brought her home to me
They saved momma too
Her heart had started to weaken
She died in that house

These demons are chasing me
And pops had tried to escape
His pace had slowed
Now pops done left us too

And all I have is faith

They tried to cage my mind
But I refuse to shake
They want me to lose my culture
But I refuse to break
This life has many lessons
Which come in all degrees
No matter what's your preference
Just know we gots to leave

I love you Uncle Lee!
You taught me everything
I pray your hear these words
As you lay down to sleep

A Reflection

By Tammy Englerth

I looked into the mirror
And saw a reflection of you!
All the scars and pain you brought
Tears burning down my face, but nowhere to hide
I turned away but still felt your presence
Nightmares after nightmares, you still haunt me
A human punching bag, you took my soul
Gave me a lost spirit, gave me no hope
Almost took my life
Gave me no confidence
Living a nightmare every day
Grief, sadness, and pain
No one to understand
Hoping and praying
Everyday
My nightmares turned into dreams
Looking back into the mirror
In hopes of seeing a reflection I once knew
And the dreams you took

Candle

By Todd Reid

Put it there
In the window
By the door
So one could see it
Should they pass
Upon the road
From who was to –
Perhaps turn
Through the gate
(Winds at their back
Pushing in their face
Pushing back)
To find themselves
Home

Memorial

By Mia

My life was like a train gone off the tracks

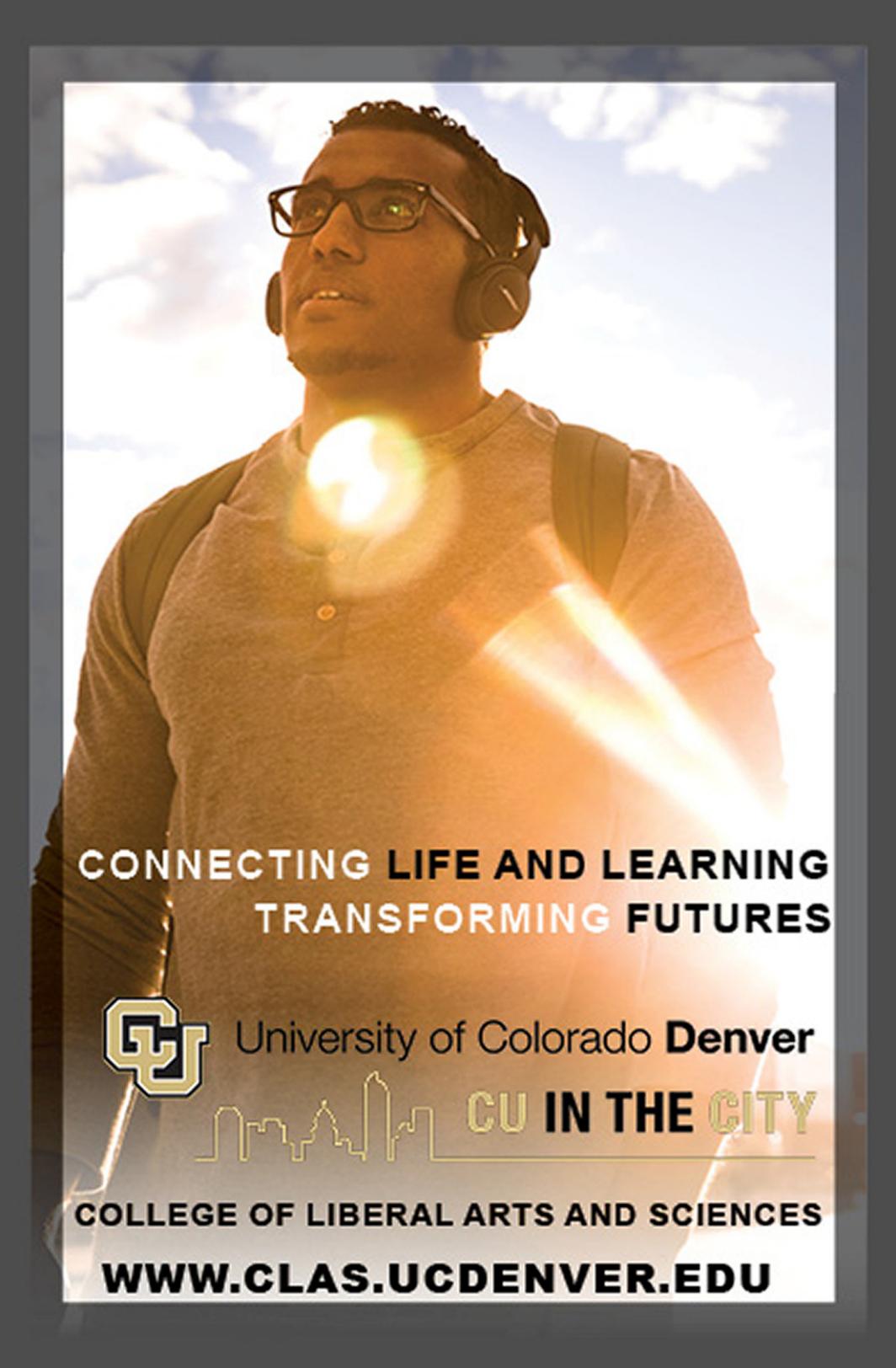
My mother cried, so I said "Mom I'll be back"

Stressed and worried about the life choices I made
She sometimes wonders if not getting that abortion was a mistake
I was a hard-ass living a wicked way
In deepest need and in touch with reality
The violence wouldn't stop
I had too much pride
Wondering how will I die?
By a bullet wound or knife in my side?

I have a loving mother
And can't stand to be the reason of her pain
So I want to let my mom know:

I love you
I'm sorry for all the heartaches
All the pain I caused you

Hopefully after you read this book
I will have made you proud



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