



Turning the Page



*Voices from
The Francisco Homes*

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Voices from The Francisco Homes

compiled by Diane Lefer
Artist-in-Residence
Los Angeles, 2013

*Make some muscle
in your head, but
use the muscle
in yr heart.*

—Amiri Baraka

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Turning the Page

*Dedicated to everyone who is coming home,
their families and friends
the people they've hurt*

*and to all still waiting
for freedom
for healing*

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AS YOU TURN THESE PAGES...

The Francisco Homes are five neatly kept and well maintained houses in South LA, each with a yard, each offering the first step back to freedom for a total of about 60 formerly incarcerated men. These houses are the only transitional housing specifically intended for men who received life sentences but after decades behind bars were released on parole after the board of prison terms and the governor were convinced they had turned their lives around and posed no threat.

Transitional housing is a stepping-stone. One man told me, "If you go to prison at 15 and come out at 50, in some ways, you're still 15." That means there's a lot to learn – and decades of technology to catch up on. Still, the men are anxious to move on once they've regained their footing. They look forward to living, at last, as adults.

For the time being, they attend house meetings and classes as well as regular meetings with their parole officers. They pay a low monthly rent, share household chores, grocery shopping and cooking. One man told me how much he loves going to the grocery store because he smiles and greets everyone – neighbors and strangers – in the aisles and at checkout, and these simple human interactions fill him with joy.

In July and August 2013, it was my privilege to offer a series of writing workshops for residents.

Everyone was invited at any level of experience, from men who'd been published to men who didn't think they could write at all. We usually began with some conversation on a topic that might spark ideas. We looked at published poems, essays, and stories. Sometimes we incorporated drawing or improvisation to open up creativity in different ways.

When I first showed up, I had some preconceived ideas. First, I expected the South LA neighborhood to be rough. And yes, it can be. But men sit on porches, talking quietly; children play; people work in their gardens; the ice cream truck passes playing "Turkey in the Straw." One Francisco Home resident said, with evident delight, "I live on a tree-lined block!"

I figured that just to get out on parole, these men had probably spent many years keeping their heads down and their mouths shut and so I wanted them to have the chance to express themselves freely.

I admit I had an agenda: I thought no one knows as much about California prisons as prisoners and the formerly incarcerated do, but while voters and politicians make policy and law, no one really hears from these life-experience experts. However, I underestimated how cautious some of the men would be, reluctant to use their names or allow their work to be made public. The men are still under supervision and some worried about repercussions. Some didn't want to share their thoughts about the prison system because they are skeptical that what they write can make a difference. That leaves me to appoint myself Complainer-in-Chief.

(Please see pages 122-128.)

I found most of the men don't like talking about prison or being called "lifers." With good reason: They are men. They are human beings. The label diminishes them. But I will use it because my other preconception – or let's call it "hope" – was that their writing could change public perceptions. With California under court order to release prisoners, some advocates have recommended granting parole to more lifers. The media promptly stirred up fear of these scary, violent men. In fact, of all released prisoners, lifers are the least likely to reoffend. While the overall recidivism rate in California hovers around a shocking 65%, studies show that for lifers, the rate is miniscule – less than 1%. People who've never been convicted of a crime are more likely to commit violence than a lifer on parole.

But what struck me most was that the workshop writers rarely wanted to spend time or energy on complaints. They wanted to stay positive, to think about what they can give their communities today and tomorrow rather than look back at what they took yesterday. They wanted to write with wonder and gratitude of the new world they had entered.

In "On Reverence," a recent essay in *Numéro Cinq Magazine*, author Richard Farrell mourns the loss of the sense of awe in contemporary life. In the obliviousness of our daily pursuits, he writes, we fail to see the sacred patterns in the landscape we walk every day. "[W]e seem perpetually distracted. We cash in our humanity, and turn our backs to the sacred moments with such a blithe indifference that at times it feels as if life were one giant video game." He confesses, "As often as not, I am

oblivious to awe, wandering around in an over-saturated haze of consumerist fervor, kinetic schedules and endless detachment."

I think of Farrell's words every time I visit The Francisco Homes where the men live and breathe reverence. In their writing, they express gratitude along with their perplexity at people living free who don't appreciate their relationships or the gifts they've been granted. Every week I was reminded by them of the pleasure to be found in looking at flowers or the sky, watching a mother cat with her kittens, riding a bike, being free. Sacred moments.

The nonprofit Francisco Homes are "faith-inspired" and the executive director, Sister Teresa, is a Catholic nun, but residents need not be Catholic or have any religious affiliation at all. In their years of incarceration, however, the men had to discover inner resources and new values to live by and for many men that meant a new or renewed relationship to God. After years of being separated from loved ones, suffering from guilt and remorse while confined in a dehumanizing environment of arbitrary decisions, collective punishment, irrational rules, and sporadic violence, many found the Supreme Being was the one companion who was always there and could always be trusted.

The men I met went through profound change while in prison. What is apparent when spending time with them today is their decency.

This is not to overlook or minimize the harm my new friends did earlier in their lives. Their victims must not be forgotten, their pain and grief denied. But while well-funded victims rights organizations lobby successfully for longer sentences and fewer

chances for parole, there are other victims whose voices also need to be heard. The first ever survey of California victims and survivors of violent crime found that the majority believed we incarcerate too many people, not too few. By a two-to-one margin, they favored probation and community supervision over prisons and jails. By a three-to-one margin they favored investments in mental health and drug treatment over incarceration.

Aren't victims and survivors best honored and served when we devote resources to preventing violence instead of spending \$10 billion/year on punishing perpetrators after the fact, when the worst that can happen has already been done?

But going beyond the results of that recent survey, perhaps the biggest surprise for me was this: The general public turns out to be way ahead of the tough-on-crime politicians and policy makers.

Again and again, the men told me their stories: A man is put outside the prison gates, disoriented, with no place to go. He stops a stranger to ask directions. Offered a cell phone so he can make a call, he has no idea how to use it. He explains he has just been released from San Quentin after 29 years and instead of recoiling in fear, the stranger — usually a woman! — gives him money which he tries to refuse, takes him to the bus terminal and buys him a ticket, or drives him to a center where he can get help. Even a friendly greeting, the simplest of gestures, fills a newly freed man with gratitude.

I am grateful to The Francisco Homes executive director Sister Teresa Groth; director of case management Julia Harmon Chavez; Ralph Mendoza of

HealthRight 360 who brought other recently released writers to join us; JoAnn Morgan, senior librarian at the Exposition Park/Mary McLeod Bethune Regional Library, for hosting our book signing; and the Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs for supporting the program.

Most of all, I thank the men of The Francisco Homes writing workshop for opening the doors and letting me in. I expected them to teach me about prison. Instead they taught me what it means to live without expectations but still, always, with hope. They reminded me – and I hope they will remind you – to appreciate the beauty in everyday life.

It was a privilege to play a very small role in this new phase of their journeys, to offer them a chance to be heard and for them to once more hear the sweet words, *Welcome home*.

– Diane Lefer

Now, in their own words...



Aaron Nava is a good person. He helps people and enjoys life. He knows God is not finished with him and gave him his life back. He knows everything is within his reach. He writes, "When I first got out, I had to learn to walk again. Too many obstacles – curbs, cars, lights, ladies, children, and noise, noise, and more noise."

A Sheet of Flame

A sheet of flame she was
Fire like a red woodpecker.
Barefoot and bent, thigh and leg.
Movement, rustle, a receding body
The pale girl, the old woman
Dancing and being watched by fire
Besides showing the way home
Through the sky and across the ocean.
She quenched her fire in the ocean
And dried with the seaweed.
The old lady did neither, her fire gone.
I want the fire and I'll wait for the seaweed.

AARON NAVA

Imagining: In My Crib

I lay in my crib. I see the light shine through the curtains. I dare not move. I hear them talking. I know it's about me. How can I cope? I'm in prison; I've these little wooden bars all around me. I'd like to ride back and forth and move in my crib, but I dare not to.

The wind blows gently through the curtains, carrying sounds that I do not know. I hear them talking. I know it's about me. I dare not move.

I'm going to sleep. Not a real sleep. It's a sleep where I can play and be happy. They can't hear me or see me. My friends know where I'm at. I dare not move.

It's them, I can move.

AARON NAVA

He Played Like Nothing Was Wrong

Furry and small he was
A European dog for sure.

Snow, rain, wind, and heat.
He always came out.

Food was always good.
He never complained.

Bones from the butcher, my friend,
always made him wag his tail.

He was my Rusty. My pet.
He loved to be brushed and hugged.

When we moved, he moved with us.
His offspring stayed behind.

He loved the open space and run of
the neighborhood. He was arrested once.

We all got older, even him.

We played the night before. The next
morning, my brother was crying. I knew.

But why didn't he tell me?

AARON NAVA

What Was Important

When I came out of prison, I had \$200.00 in my pocket – not a lot of money, but money was not important at that time. What was important was freedom – not like a slave. Freedom that exist like a caged animal or pet.

I had the freedom to run until I could not have run anymore. I had the freedom to think in society again. I had the freedom to work – for free, money, or trade.

I could breathe pollution, flowers, perfume, cologne, food, trash, and even baked goods.

I had the freedom to buy cheap stuff at the 99 cent store or a retail store like WalMart. I don't ever recall a Walmart store before prison – nice shoes – nice clothes.

I had the freedom to buy my own clothes. I could touch, smell, and try them on! That's freedom in one sense. I could even pay with my own money – like I did when I was a young boy buying ice cream from the Good Humor man and loving it.

AARON NAVA

What Do You Know about Time?

I loved flowers and plants as a child.
Now, I see most cannot see my flowers
and plants.

I loved my little friends in school.
Now, friends rarely find anyone.

I worked for small wages.
Now, work has paid big wages.

I loved to learn things.
Now, I learn and love later.

I see people differently now
but people really never change.

I rode with time and
jumped off at 55 years.

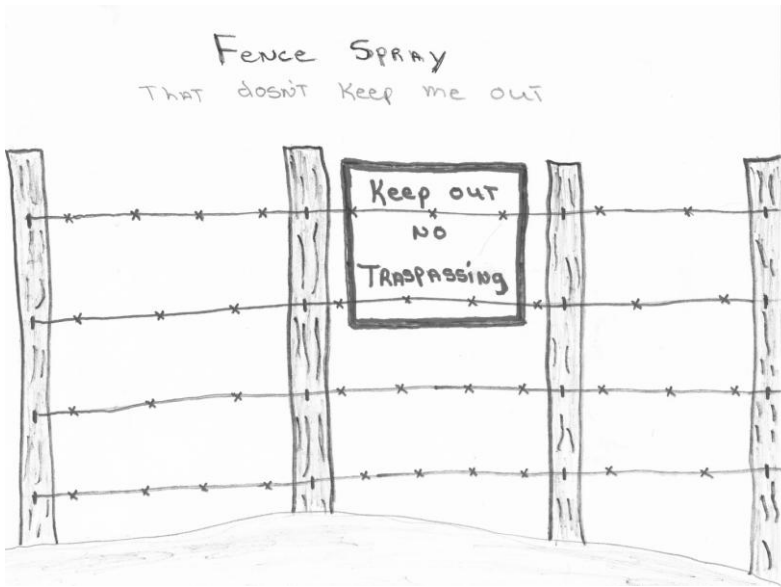
I see life and time as one.
Now, I make my time my life.

Most do not know about time.
I see it, and them,
As I go on my way.

ADVERTISING FOR CHANGE

I invited the men to think of a problem they see in the world around them, invent a magical consumer product that would solve it, and draw an advertisement for their invention.

Dave E. invented a spray that gets rid of fences.

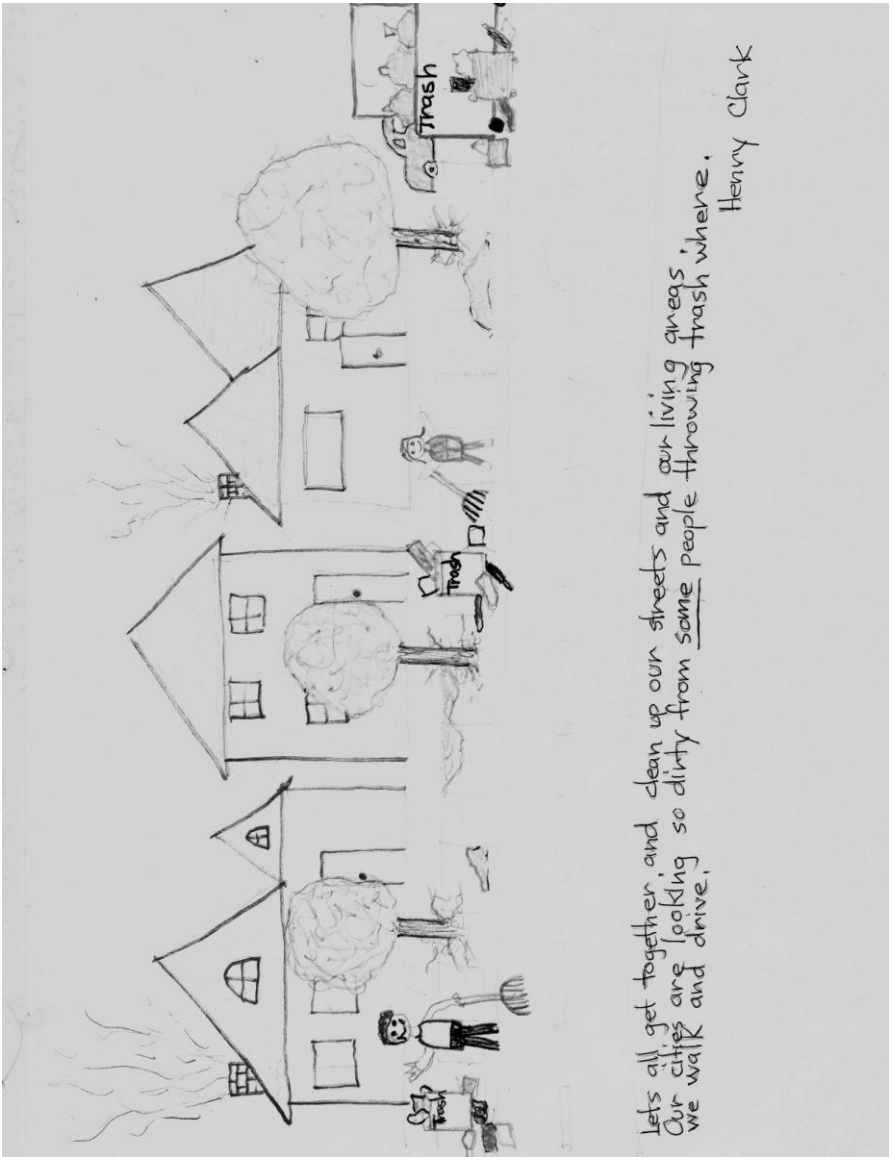


So there are no fences to keep me out
So there are no fences across a river,
a field, a road. So I can go
where people want to keep me out.

So there are no fences
with barbed wire,
electricity running through.
Fences that surround places I want to go.
Fences of all kinds, small and large.

Fence spray made by the people who are
Fenced out for the people who need no
Fences that keep them fenced in.

Henry Clark took a realistic approach. His drawing could serve as a public service announcement.

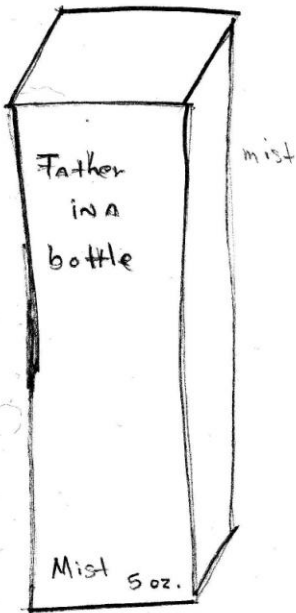


Let's all get together and clean up our streets and our living areas.
Our cities are looking so dirty from some people throwing trash where.

Henry Clark

Father in a Bottle

a new consumer product
invented by Aaron Nava



Spray the person with this
when you want a father, and
instantly, he is there for you
for guidance, support, and
most of all love.

We all need a father because
he is not a mother and has
different ideas, advice, and love
than a mother.

Don't miss out! You can now
have a father for only \$10.99,
plus tax.

The reason I invented this spray is because while I was in prison, I noticed a lot of young men in prison who did not have fathers in their lives.

I could see how our young men ended up in prison. For most, they looked for respect and acknowledgement and were willing to commit crimes to obtain it.

Most were good kids, at one time, and good guys in prison too, but that need to feel equal to other men was still there. I'm sure this happens to young women too.

My two nieces were babies when I went to prison. Their father did not do his part in raising them, but they know him and love him. Their eyes lit up every time I spoke about him or they spoke of him. It matters. It really means a lot to all of them.

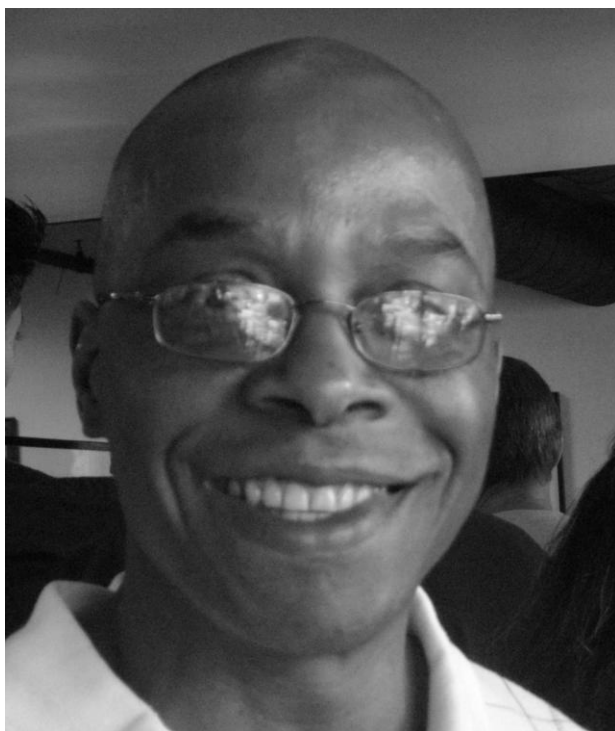
—Aaron Nava

After Aaron invented Father in a Bottle, T.U. offered his description of a good male role model:

A real father figure should be a person who you could console in. A person who is honest, dependable. Where his word has value, where you don't question it! A best friend that you can count on. Someone you would be proud of, to brag about.

Someone who is there for you to come to with your problems or just to hang out with. A person who will be honest with you, to tell you the truth either way.

Someone who would set a good example for you early in life. A person with strong morals and values who would lead you in the correct highway where you would be proud to follow his footsteps through life.



Amory Everett is a spiritual person who likes writing poetry and being around people. "I don't have much of a choice," he says, "'cause people come at me with their situations. I'm always expressing the connection we have with each other and when you send that out, people sense it and feel it, and respond with positivity to it."

AMORY EVERETTE

Love Poems

I

Greetings Sweetness, I was sitting outside
listening to the rain and began fantasizing
about you.

Rain always reminds me of when my eyes first
gazed within yours, it was then I knew you were
one in which another would do anything to spend
their life with, and that we would be.

Not many have touched my life with the ability to
behold the core of my being, and never before has
one done so completely – until you.

When you are near I can think of nothing other
than you; and in truth, all that is of me, has found
comfort in embracing the essence of you.

You have become the center of my universe, and
my heart has chosen a path leading directly
towards you.

Then I remembered a time I wondered what it
would be like never to see you again and I felt like
one blind . . .

I felt like one blind desperately holding your image
within my mind, that your reflection never fades
away.

Have you ever wondered how it must feel to touch
a perfect emotion.

I wonder, for I think of you and my doing so has grasped an emotion within me - I have not before felt something so wonderful, so pure, perfect!

Thus, it is my wish to touch every perfect aspect of you.

II

Sweetness, you have wondered how I see you, how you exist within my world, and since it is a request you have of me it has given me much pleasure to give it thought.

That which I deem you to be is total within the embrace of all I've known enchantment to be.

You have captivated my world with a touch which has had me envisioning you since the moment I gazed in your eyes.

Because of you, I find myself wanting, and that which I feel has me wanting to never be free of the essence I behold flowing within you.

From our beginning you have allowed yourself to be, and embraced my being as well, thus, beheld the beginning of our flowing together.

You are special in a way I have not known another to be . . . you embrace me, thus, in your way, flow within the depths of this manly being.

What I would have of you Beautiful, is for you to have of me, take of me as desire beckons and behold that which is of me.

Already we feel one another, and we cannot deny its joy, or its purity – the purity of a wonder life deemed we enjoy together.

When I embraced you I found myself falling within a world unknown, but I could only smile, for I enjoy basking in the warmth of your world.

All that I see in you affects me in a way that, every moment I am relaxed within myself I reflect upon you, and I am content.

Do you not know I exist for you, that my quest has become to make your world the center of mine.

Do with me what you will, flow with that which you feel.

Be You Willing

III

My Darling, I am not one who beholds another and through time grow to love them – I love from the very beginning, and time only unfolds how such a love will be shared.

This fact became my reality the moment you entered my life, for when I first saw you, love was awakened, and it dispelled those obstacles which existed to keep us apart.

The instant my eyes beheld you for the first time was not in truth the first time you were revealed to me, because it was you who appeared long ago when I first encountered beauty.

Eternity fashioned my soul with wings that I may
fly to warm myself by the fire which burns in my
heart, and through my heart bears such a fire
I am not the flame – you are.

Truly God has taken our prayers and placed us
before one another as a means of fulfilling them,
for the path which compels me leads my steps
unto the threshold of something heaven has
made special. . .just being a part of you.

My Darling, love is an aspect of eternity, thus,
that which moments with you inspires me to feel
has always been and will always be.

IV

I have tried to be at peace with my heart, but
when you are not near my heart won't be still.

As I sat on the bank gazing into the stream of
contentment, your image was being reflected in
my mind.

It has been my thoughts of you which awakens
joy and laughter in the caverns of my soul, for
memories of all your eyes revealed to me are
like whispers that alters time into music.

Your smile alone has filled a part of me which no
other has searched deep enough to find, and seized
a rainbow to symbolize the breath we have
given unto beauty.

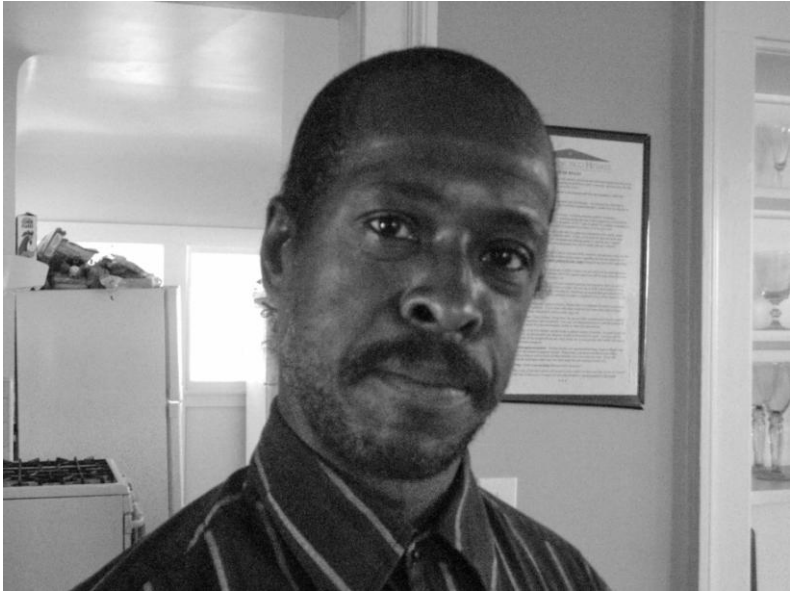
Think not that my love can be troubled by
quivers of worldly circumstance, because my loving
you is fashioned by eternity.

Love is the joining of our hearts, and only together will we encounter our greater desires.

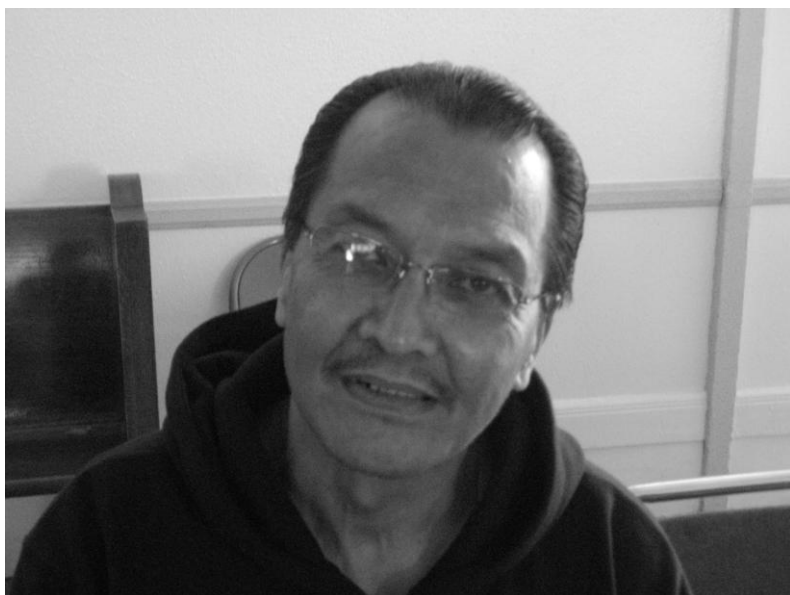
In my world you are love made visible by the essence of evermore, and my heart bears no desire to ever entreat another unto me.

Deep is my longing to hold you close to me, for to drink of your sweetness will light a fire in my dreams forever.

Know that we are necessary . . . do continue to allow the petals of us to unfold.



Bernard Houston writes, "On December 3, 2012 after what seemed like eternity, I was finally paroled. I appeared before California Board of Parole Hearings seven (7) times appealing for parole. I was turned down the first four (4) times, granted parole the last three (3) times finding the Governor reversing the first two (2) parole grants, yet declining governor's review the last time. As I walked through the prison gates, it seemed like I had died and gone to heaven."



Cesar Flores is working on a full-length memoir that will be published in the Philippines.



Clement Eric "Meke" Brown is a laidback guy who likes to look at beautiful things, like sunsets, and to look out his window, admiring all the lights. He writes, "When I first got out I had a hard time believing it. My eyes filled with tears as the Sasca van pulled out of Corcoran parking lot. I immediately said a silent prayer thanking God for the position I was in and vowed NEVER to take my FREEDOM and FAMILY for granted ever again. I smiled after that and have not stopped smiling since."

COLLABORATIVE STORIES

Everyone was invited to think of a place he knew well and to make a list of ten things he would see, hear, smell, touch, or taste there.

Then we worked in pairs. Each pair came up with the names of two characters and created a dialogue between them by passing a sheet of paper back and forth. Once ten lines of dialogue were complete, the writers referred back to their lists to fill in some descriptive detail and also worked together to add action and gesture.

Here, in the pages that follow, are some of the results.

a collaboration between
HENRY CLARK and GERARD ROMAN

Money, Money, Money...

"I need that money," Jerry yelled toward where Hank was seated, seemingly in a trance listening to the music that was blaring on the stereo system while Jerry's wife, Maria was busy in the kitchen preparing dinner for the family. Their two daughters, Elvira and Cynthia were in a world of their own, noisily playing Batman on the video game console.

Yes, I can take care of the dog, and the other animals, Hank was thinking to himself. By the school, my family and I can view the train coming, making rumbling noises as it shook our home to its very core. My parents were saving money also, in the hopes of moving to a quieter setting.

Hank's train of thought was once again interrupted by Jerry's voice saying, "Maybe I'll have to sell some of my electronic equipment to come up with this money," as he passed a hand over the spotless dustcover on his turntable, a Tecnics, supposedly among the best as turntables went. He also owned a collection of music that would make any disc jockey smile.

Yes, thought Hank, it would be sad not being able to listen to music every day. I sure hope we can find a way to help Jerry pay his bills. The music would always soothe and help me to relax at home, and in my car.

"You know, Hank," Jerry would say, "maybe we could invite our friends over for a fundraiser of

sorts." Jerry's dog Benji, was now adding to the din as he snored on the living room floor. Laughter was making its bid from one of the open windows facing the front of the house. It would be dusk soon and...

"That might be a good way to come up with some money quickly. We might want to consider having a car wash as well. I could set up my car to play music to attract business," Hank added eagerly.

Jerry pondered the thought for a few seconds then replied, "Let's put the subject of money aside for now and have dinner Hank, OK? Maria is just about done in the kitchen." Indeed the aroma emanating from the kitchen was overwhelming everyone's olfactory senses, almost making them salivate. Even Benji wanted in on this feast.

"I have some other ideas on how we can generate some money that will bring music to our ears, Jerry. My mother's kitchen also gives me ideas on how to solve our money problems," interjected Hank.

At that precise moment, Maria was heard in the kitchen calling out to Jerry that dinner was now being served in the main dining area.

"OK, everybody," Jerry resounded. "Let's eat."

The entire family came together and ate. We listened to music and chatted about financial issues, and about ways to help one another. The future looked promising.

a collaboration between
AARON NAVA and T.U.

The Hot Blonde

"What happened last night after I left?" asked Cliff.

The dog started barking and running through the trees.

"Your best friend left with that hot blonde everyone was after," said Tom. He remembered how there was silence as they walked out the door.

"Did you notice what kind of car they were driving?"

"Yes. A red Corvette."

"Did he score or what?" Cliff asked. "I heard she was one of the biggest teases out there. Is that true?" He added, "Did you see that short dress she was wearing?"

"I think he did score," said Tom. "I dated her in high school and she was really nice. After her first marriage went bad, so did she. Now she is really one mixed-up lady."

"I knew something in her past was affecting her attitude, but I heard she just plays everybody to get her way."

It was hard to hear what Cliff said because of a loud plane overhead, but Tom agreed, "You are probably right."

"I will have to catch up with Larry, my best friend," Cliff said, "and find out the real deal. He's always been honest with me."

"Well, all we can do is think the best, I guess."

"You're exactly right," said Cliff, "but I still want to know."

"I'll pass," Tom said. "I've other things to do with my life."

a collaboration between
SIDNEY DUBERRY and DIANE LEFER

Beware of People with Strange Hats On

"Why are you acting like you don't know me?" said Judy.

On the beach, everyone was dancing to the music except her and Robert.

"I just met you two weeks ago," he said.

"But I thought we really hit it off."

She was wearing a funny-looking hat with a blinking light. He thought she was a clown.

"I have to know a person because I get nervous," he said. "I need to know what your motivation is. I get nervous talking to strangers, but I'm polite." He looked up at the jet roaring overhead instead of looking at her face. Or her hat.

"You sure didn't act nervous last time," she said.

"Well, my looks can be deceiving. I was just being polite."

Over by the grill, someone laughed.

"Well, if you were just being polite..."

He looked away at people on the bike path.

"So you give it up then," he said. "Then it's all a fake, the way I look at it." He could smell the chicken cooking. He'd rather be over there getting something to eat.

"Why do you make it so hard to be friends?" she said.

He was afraid he'd soon hear the sound of his own crying. He wanted to say, *If you open up, people have a tendency to walk all over.* "In other words," he said, "I'm reserved."

He turned away and watched the ocean waves.

a collaboration between
HENRY CLARK and MIKE M.

Leaving Home Again

"Jerry," his father said, "I've been sitting here worried that you are going back to Afghanistan. You already did enough for this country; think about your future with your family."

Jerry was looking out his father's living room window remembering his childhood, playing in that front yard. "Dad, a part of me doesn't want to go, but I think about my friends out there fighting without me, they're like family to me."

"Yes! I do understand. I have friends that were in the military. I myself will fight for friendship because it's very important. So son, I do respect your opinion on what you want."

Jerry turned around to face his dad and said, "Also, since Brittney left me, I don't feel like I belong here anymore."

"Jerry, you are still young and there are so many young women around. I wish you all the luck. Meanwhile, when you get there just remember your experience you learned and I'll be thinking of you a lot. When I'm relaxing, I'll be seeing you in every way I can."

"Dad, you don't need to talk that way. Last thing I need to know is that you are worried about me. Maybe, it's you that needs to go out and start meeting other women. Mom has been gone for almost four years."

"Son, you're right! Sometimes I am like your mom. You and I will spend lots of time together when you come back. First things first, you go take care of business over there. I will be telling my friends about how proud I am of you defending our country."

"Well, Dad, you always taught me to do my best, and be the best. With what I experienced, I'm surprised I'm still alive."

"Well, together we'll do it and make it in this world. I'll see you when you get back, good luck in everything you do."

"I promise," Jerry said, "if all goes well, this will be my last tour."

Jerry started for the door.

a collaboration between
J.R. and SIDNEY DUBERRY

What a Day for Poor Bob

"Why did you walk by like you don't know me?" says the heavy-set angry lady who looked like she woke up on the wrong side of the bed and had an attitude like the whole world owed her something.

"I was doing something", says Bob, the very thin man who by this time, it was obvious the two were acquainted but, Bob, knowing how Jean is in the morning was trying to avoid her.

"Next time you walk by I'm going to pop you, if you act like you don't know me," says Jean who was obviously trying to pick a fight with someone in the parole office and she had her sights on Bob, the only poor guy that would acknowledge her.

"What's wrong with you," Bob replies. "It seems like every time we come to the parole office you pick a fight with me and threaten me for no reason."

"Shut up," Jean says, "or I'll beat the crap out of you," as she stomps out of the parole office, much to poor Bob's relief.

a collaboration between
KENNETH R. MARTIN AND DAVE E.

Boys of Summer

"You don't have to apologize." The two boys are on their skateboards on the way to the park. It's a hot day of 90 degrees, with the flowers in full bloom.

"Fine." Eric didn't even know what to say or apologize for. Johnny must be having heat stroke from the hot summer day, or dizzy for all the jumps and circles of his skateboard.

"Fine, is that all you have to say?" Johnny became a little agitated with Eric's simple but nonchalant answer.

"Is that all, Johnny, I have to say? I guess yes. Why don't you jump the rail of that walkway and ride your board? Hey look, Johnny. See those other kids riding? Let's go over there."

"You know what? It was petty anyway." Johnny jumped over the rail as Eric suggested, and had a skateboard competition with the other kids.

"Johnny, hey, we're the best. Those guys can't mess with us. We will ride circles around anybody, Johnny. Johnny, let's get something to drink, I have two dollars."

"O.K., I have two dollars also. You get the drinks and I'll get us some sandwiches." The two boys left the other kids victorious and went to Subway's for something to eat and drink.

"Look out, Johnny! That car isn't stopping. Be careful, Johnny."

Johnny and his best friend Eric yelled out loud together at the car and saw Subway in sight.

"Man, Eric, that was a close call. I don't know why the DMV allows people like that to get drivers licenses."

The boys picked up their skateboards to cross the street to Subway.

"Johnny, get the sandwiches. Let's eat. I have to be home at 5:00. Mom will be mad if I'm late."

"Johnny, you're a great friend. What a nice day."

a collaboration between
AARON NAVA and T. U.

Checking Up on Karen

Karen asked, "Why have you been calling my sister?"

Clark said, "To find out more about your past."

"Why do you call my sister to find out about my past?"

"Because I thought you might take it the wrong way."

"What do you want to know?"

"How many boyfriends you had in your past."

"Grow up."

"That's why I asked your sister."

"You need to date my sister and not me."

"No, but I'm crazy about you, but just curious."

"Why don't you take a break with our relationship, because you seem too possessive at the moment."

"That's why I asked your sister, because you would blow it all out of proportion."

"I don't like sneaky, and you are sneaky."

"I just wanted a truthful answer."

"So, I'm a liar."

"No, that's not true, but that's how you're taking it."

"O.K., 100 boyfriends, 200 lovers, 300 one-night stands."



Dave E. writes, "When I first got out, I was in awe of people living, moving, full of life. Awakening of Freedom. I was full of emotion and excitement. Not knowing where this ride was going to drop me, but knowing it would be away from a prison I spent life inside. Wow! Excitement of the unknown, fear of known. Knowing I left prison today. Excited, and fearing."

DAVE E.

Arrival

On March 1st, I was released from Soledad State Prison and was placed on a bus to Los Angeles, after 37 years of incarceration. I was picked up by a guy named Chris from Francisco Home. I was greeted with a warm smile from a man I did not know and taken to get a warm cup of coffee and sightseeing. The next morning he took me for the opportunity to dive into a wondrous swimming pool.

My arrival at Francisco Home was an awesome and welcoming experience for me. I was greeted by many others who had already walked this path and knew of my overwhelming experience and emotions.

One of the most memorable parts of my experience was the opportunity to speak with Sister Teresa on a phone. I had heard so much about her and Francisco Home but it was a reality at the point I was able to speak with her and the things she said alleviated much of the anxiety of such a huge change in my life.

The experience of freedom cannot be described in words and the transition is so much easier with the environment of Francisco Home.

DAVE E.

Hounds and Boys

A dog named Dash and a boy named Dave, a puppy, brown and white. A boy, small and pale. Together they knew companionship. They ran, they barked, they laughed, they played, they grew together.

Dog and boy will always be. The day on the road the dog lost endless days of life. The boy knowing life's memories of a dog named Dash. R.I.P.

Leaving Prison Today

Leaving Prison Today, I left a person behind
'cause I didn't want to take him along
from a place where he belonged
as all did full of wrongs.

Leaving Prison Today, I carried myself along
to a place that holds no wrongs, so I could
be myself away from the person I left behind,
not taking him along.

DAVE E.

Driftwood

Driftwood piled high on the ocean's sand
The river emptied into the ocean's mouth
Seaweed floated around, the waves pungent
to the smell
The sky's rim as sundown came over the
ocean's blue.
Shells in the sand shimmered as the ocean's
sounds quieted, as the night fell.
Seeming itself a sheet of flame from the fire
as she moved, the little pale
Girl who had bundles of driftwood to take
home.



David O. Smith is down-to-earth and joyful and loves everyone. He writes, "When I first got out, I found a sense of peace that took me by a storm. I searched for tears within myself because I wanted to cry all the joy and release every bit of happiness I longed to experience. An amazement opened my eyes to a long awaited freedom that embraced me like a warm breeze. I am free. I am calm and freedom never stops loving me."

DAVID O. SMITH

I'm Filthy Rich

From my mouth
I'll shout, I'm filthy rich;
But not by drilling oil
from a well inch by inch.

Or finding some diamonds
in a dangerous mine;
No large inheritance passed
down through a family line.

No lottery number
picked from my head;
Not even an insurance policy
for someone being dead.

No two to one odds
on some Derby horse race;
Or playing blackjack
flipping over the winning ace.

I'm filthy rich
so I'll shout it once again;
Only, because I have a
rich personality and kind
spirit that dwells within.

My presence is filled with worth
and my currency of love is carefree;
So the amount of my wealth is
why everyone enjoys my company.

I'll shout, I'm filthy rich
in my own special way;
No pocket full of money or
credit cards for my display.

I don't need expensive jewelry
or wear the finest clothes;
Live in a big mansion and
drive a big body Rolls.

I'm filthy rich
because it is so plain to see;
I have a multimillionaire character
that makes me wealthy.

So whenever the dollar bills
depart from my fingertips;
I am constantly reminded
by spirit why I'm filthy rich.

DAVID O. SMITH

*No Place To Be
Somebody*

I have always tried to figure out
what my purpose in life could be;
But trapped by my fears
and immaturity I failed to see.

Locked inside my mind
was the answer to my destiny;
But, without the correct resources
led me to a path of misery.

Lost in the depths of my mind
patience for time ran out;
And consumed by the jaws
of my confusion came about.

Controlling my desires for attention
and without approval led me;
To a wasteful life
in the state penitentiary.

Powerless as my failure captured
my anger and missed opportunities;
But now I see this vision
of God's gift surface from me.

Why now? Why me?
this is no place to be somebody.
As I sit behind steel gates,
the rhapsody of time can't wait.
For the moment, another chance
to be somebody.

With thoughts and ideas
no one cares about me;
My purpose and destination
they refuse to see.

To them I am only property
of the penitentiary.
So I continue my journey
through the sand of an hour glass;
With a vision and imagination
as my time slowly pass.

Before being free,
this is no place to be somebody.
I am determined to hold on tight,
as my days turn into nights.

People slowly cut my rope
with a knife,
but I climb beyond the cut rope
for my life.
I know I will someday be free;
But for now,
this is no place to be somebody.

I Don't Belong

I used to wonder
again and again,
will I ever
fit in.

Lonely and confused –
I felt so abused,
of not having any friends,
I wanted so badly
to fit in.

So this lonely feeling would
surface from deep in my heart;
And that is where my
tears would depart.

As my tears fell from my
eyes with a feeling of shame;
The thought of not having no one
to play with caused me to blame.

Confusing and crazy thoughts
would rush to my head;
And sometimes I would wish
that I was dead.

Wanting to be a part
of something so bad;
As I watched the neighborhood
kids play around and laugh.

None of the neighborhood
kids came to play with me;
So I remained all alone
with my toys for company.

I could not understand why
I had no one to play with me;
And why was my childhood
filled with so much misery.

So day after day
I sit all alone, feeling low;
Continue to play
with my GI JOE.

Wishing he
could talk to me;
But, quiet Joe
remained to be.

Then my mom would call out and
say to me, "Baby what's wrong?"
And looking at mom
with tears in my eyes
I would say, I don't belong.

So I would continue
to play all alone;
And mom would bring me
an ice cream cone.

And looking out the window
at the neighborhood kids play,
I would stare;
Lick after lick of my ice cream.
I wanted to share.

Not having friends to play
with me was so wrong;
And still to this day it feels
as though I don't belong.

EXTRAORDINARY VISITORS

One evening, I asked the group what fictional character or person from history they'd like to meet.

Kenneth R. Martin immediately named Harriet Tubman and he wrote out these reasons:

Ex-slave Harriet Tubman is a very courageous woman. She assisted hundreds of slaves to escape the physical, atrocious, savage bondage of chattel slavery.

Her spirit appeared to be driven by God the Almighty. Traveling thousands of miles to the North, out of slavery only to return risking capture, lashings and being hung to death. She possessed the spirit of God.

Assisting the slaves in escaping was a blessing rather than a job. It was her obligation.

I asked him to portray her while other workshop participants asked questions as though we were at a press conference.

Gerard Roman then took the role of a visiting Martian.

Exclusive news reports follow.

Headline News: Oddest couple
reported by Mike M.

On August 12, 2013, I had the privilege to be in a news conference with a Martian (scary looking but very friendly) and Harriet Tubman, a crusader for her time.

Harriet shared her opinion about what motivated her to do what she had done to change the world. However, she did share her displeasure at the outcome of freedom but almost was amazed by society's progress overall.

The Martian was more upbeat and really showed a sense of humor that is out of this world. He did share about how Earth people are rude when riding a bus but overall he gave us a thumbs up, thanks to Mickey Mouse.

Breaking News filed by Aaron Nava:

A Martian landed today in LA. Surprisingly, the Martian appeared to be as human as earthlings.

The Martian stated that he did not intend to land here. His original destination was Venus. I guess it's a planet of Martian women. I can see why.

He stated that his blood is green and not red. That's the only difference between Martians and earthlings. He spoke perfect English and wore clothes as we do. Martians also have a God.

Los Angeles honored by Visitors from Beyond
by Gerard Roman

Dateline: Monday, August 12, 2013.

Today the city of Los Angeles was visited by two very unique individuals our city will not soon forget. Harriet Tubman, the famed Abolitionist from yesteryear, made a rare guest appearance on the Maury Povich Show. Ms. Tubman was responsible for assisting hundreds of slaves achieve freedom by means of the Underground Railroad.

Ms. Tubman is still passionate about her beliefs of freedom and of the rights of women. Ms. Tubman also expressed her approval of the present day concerns of racial equality. Ms. Tubman will return to her native Maryland on the 21st of September, 2013.

Across town at the Los Angeles Science Center, a Martian was the guest of honor at the Space Shuttle Endeavour Exhibit. Mr. Greenblood, (Martian's name) plainly stated that he came to Earth purely by accident. His intended port-of-call was Venus, but was disoriented by Earth's strong magnetic field. Mr. Greenblood was impressed with the volume of water on Earth, but gave riding on the bus two thumbs down. Mr. Greenblood will remain on Earth until repairs can be made to his interplanetary teleporter 5. When asked how long will these repairs take, Mr. Greenblood simply answered, "Nano, Nano."

Francisco Castillo is a very exciting individual who appreciates each and every challenge and opportunity that he is faced with, knowing that each and every opportunity will lead to more challenges. He writes, "When I first got out, I knew the first thing I needed to do is get my birth certificate so I can get my identification. This I knew would help me find a job. I know having a job is very important to pay for my meals, pay my rent, and buy those things I need to get me through another day. Today I have found work, I do have my identification, and now I am looking towards my driver's license. These are just a few of the obstacles and challenges I was faced with."



Frank Rivera is an elderly man who loves his big family. He has eight daughters and a son and many grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. He is going to be a great-great-great-grandfather very soon. He writes, "Getting released from prison was a bad experience for me. First, I was told by prison staff that my release paperwork could not be found. It was lost. Finally, when my release paperwork was found, I had to be processed out of prison by 10:00 AM and driven to the bus station in a half-hour to catch the last bus out of San Luis Obispo or I would have to wait another day in prison to be released. Thus, the thought of waiting another "day" in prison was unthinkable at the time although I had just finished serving 29 years. Anyway, everything turned out fine; I was released on time. Nonetheless, I would never want to go through that experience again!"



George Lucas is a unique person who loves humanity. He is very forgiving to others and is growing spiritually. He has something to give that is worthy. He writes, "My first day free was like coming to a new world. A new world where all things are possible, with many blessings. Thanks to Yahweh for giving me another chance at life, and for His work through Sister Teresa and Francisco Homes and her connection with HealthRight 360 Walden House."



Gerard Roman is a proud father of a daughter, Cynthia, and a son, Gerard Jr. He proudly served in the U.S. Army for 12-1/2 years. He loves to text his daughter daily, and loves to jog. He enjoys watching movies and playing chess. He also loves to feed the birds. At 63, Gerard still thinks he can obtain gainful employment. He has a great attitude and a good sense of humor. He writes, "When I first got out, I was taken to the bus stop not too far from R&R and I was very eager to get going. Once outside the gate, I breathed a sigh of relief. Yeah! I'm finally free. Some time later, the bus was approaching another prison and I panicked, thinking we were all going back to prison. Then it dawned on me that the bus was merely picking people up. "

Welcome Back

On the morning I was to parole, I found myself really anxious to get going and get off the prison grounds. Instead I was to undergo one last torture before the gates were flung open. Every minute was an eternity waiting around to be taken down to the bus stop.

At times my mind was going places I'd rather not be – they changed their minds, we're not going home, etc., etc., etc.

Then finally, H-hour arrived. I never felt so happy to board a bus in my life as I was that morning. Mere words cannot describe the joy I felt as we went through the gate.

Once we were on our way, a passenger who had boarded the bus sometime before we did, gave us all a warm greeting and asked if we wanted to call anyone and handed us his cell phone. I tried the only number I had, that being for the Office of Restorative Justice, but was not able to make a connection.

About an hour into the bus ride, we turned off the highway and headed straight for this prison. I don't remember which prison it was, but I felt a terror like never before because in my panic, I kept saying to myself, they're taking us back to prison, oh no! I breathed a sigh of relief when I realized we were just picking up other parolees.

I stopped being nervous when we got off that bus and found ourselves at the train station. Freedom

finally soaked in.

That train ride turned into another bus ride that eventually brought us to Los Angeles. At the bus depot a perfect stranger approached me and said, "You look like you need to call someone," and handed me his cell phone. Once again I tried calling the Office of Restorative Justice, and again no luck.

It was getting late so I decided to walk from the bus depot (Greyhound bus terminal) to the Office of Restorative Justice. I didn't expect to find anyone there but I didn't feel like spending the night at the bus terminal either. So I grabbed my bag and after asking directions on how to get to Santa Fe Avenue, I began my long walk.

I didn't see very many people walking the route I was on but I did run into a young man who beamed when he saw me and asked me if I had just gotten out. When I answered yes, he said all right, welcome home.

I must have walked for a good couple of hours, or it seemed that long when I finally reached my destination.

I came to the door, pushed the doorbell not expecting an answer, and when I did get an answer I felt so relieved to have contacted someone who would be able to set things straight in the person of Sister Mary Sean. We talked for a while in her office and it was determined that the office was indeed unoccupied at the times I had called and that Sister Mary had returned to finish up on some paperwork she had started earlier in the day. It was truly a Godsend that she had returned to the

office shortly before I arrived.

Sister Mary basically gave me an orientation of the program in her office and afterwards she drove us to Subway's where we shared a sandwich and after we ate, she drove me to the 45th Street House where I still reside to this day. Thank you, Jesus!

GERARD ROMAN

Fantasy Airport, a short story

Little Kiddoe awakens to another warm, sunny Saturday morning in the South Bronx. After a quick breakfast of Cheerios and milk, it's time for little Kiddoe to leave for his spot across the street that only a kid of seven could imagine being an airport, about to pilot TWA flight 134, to Fantasy Land, USA.

After little Kiddoe completes his pre-flight checks, he radios the control tower requesting permission to taxi down the runway and prepare for take-off. Permission is granted and little Kiddoe puts on the "fasten seatbelts" sign. (The seats were about 4 or 5 milk crates that little Kiddoe was able to obtain right there on the slopes of the highway located just across the street from where he lived.)

Alone, but yet not alone, little Kiddoe began to taxi toward the runway. Little Kiddoe has had a passion for airplanes ever since he could remember and flying them gave little Kiddoe a sense of power that was just too pleasurable not to enjoy every Saturday and Sunday morning while it was still summer.

Up, up and away, the fantasy was real enough now. Real enough to envision the glittering across the vast blue of water before this very experienced, 7-year-old pilot. Some Saturdays he would even fly with a co-pilot, his Cousin Miguel, who at five also enjoyed flying. An hour into the flight and suddenly storm clouds began to gather. Little Kiddoe did his best flying during adverse weather conditions. The thunder and lightning just added

to the thrill of the moment. The old crate was able once again to weather the storm and little Kiddoe added yet another perfect landing to his repertoire.

My, who would think that flying would make anyone so hungry? Time to go home and see what mom has cooking for lunch. Until next Saturday....



Henry Clark knows he could be a very good person in life. Many people love him – his family, friends, and especially himself. He writes, "When I first got out of prison, I tried to remember a lot of the things I learned. I said to myself I'm going to try and be honest. I remember telling many people in the self-help groups and the board hearings how I changed. So now I have to live up to all of my words and thoughts. Especially for myself. I see so much ahead in my future. I just need to motivate my mind and ideas and not worry what others think. When I was a kid I was very shy. That's why I got in a lot of trouble. I forced myself in groups to open up and communicate more. As the years went by, I got more positive thoughts and information."

HENRY CLARK

All Those Beautiful Animals

When I was a kid I'd always look forward to the weekend. Me and my brother would get up early Saturday morning. We had a dog, pigeons and chickens. I would always just care about nothing else but those animals. My brother and I would make big cages for these animals.

We would play with them and at times we'd show them to our friends. Sometimes we would just sit proud in our big backyard and sit on the grass and watch. On rainy days, I would look out our window wishing we were out there but our mother would not let us go outside. I remember wishing that rain would stop because I thought it was too cold for the animals.

When we did get that chance to go out we would make the cages better so the animals could stay warm. I no longer live in that house but I sure remember all the good times I had there. I still tell many stories about those animals and all the good times my brother and I had.

I hope someday I have kids that could do similar things, and tell their stories. I also have many other memories of riding bikes, walking down the railroad tracks and spending lots of time with my brothers.

My brother Ruben still has lots of animals. Now he raises snakes for a hobby.

He and his family love animals, all sorts of them. They also take in animals that have been hurt very

badly. He has a cat that is missing an eye and the other eye is getting bad. My brother also has a little dog he took in. It has a bad leg and he's real careful who handles it.

I sure like that my brother and his family care about these animals. I love animals but I can't take in every one I see that's hurt.

HENRY CLARK

Since I Was Freed

I've been doing a lot of personal things, physically and mentally. I am so happy to be out, and I don't care what my odds are of making it. My family has done so much for me, just like they did while I was incarcerated. I also thank many others for their help of guidance and helping financially.

Out here I ride the bus a lot to get to my appointments, etc. A lot of people on and off the bus don't talk to each other very much. I enjoy watching people, looking at all the tall buildings, and places that I have not seen in thirty-plus years.

I paid respects to my parents and other family members at the cemetery. I also made amends, and thanked many people for their help.

I'm still taking it one day at a time out here because there is a lot to learn. The new generation of people I'm trying to learn from are very different from mine. I'm learning new things from the help of my nieces and nephew. I'm still living at the Francisco House which I hope will be for six months. For the last few years the staff here and in the past have helped me so much.

I also ran into good friends out here from prison in the '80's. It was good to see many ex-lifers out here and I hope others have faith in getting out.

In conclusion, I again thank the people of my past, and present, for all their help. I also thank God and all the people I don't know about. Thank you all so much.

HENRY CLARK

Fathers and Families

I. Make believe from Dad & Son

Dad,

I'm getting older now and I think I'm ready to move out, and get my own place. So remember a while back we talked about you helping me out financially. Will you, Dad, help me out? I got a little bit saved already.

Oh, son, I have some bad news, I been lying to you all along. I don't have money in the bank, and never had.

II. When I was twelve

I know I should forget it, but...When my Dad passed away when I was twelve I really loved him so much. As I got older I learned he died from drinking so much. I feel he let me and the family down. Sometimes I hated him for it because at my age we all need role models. So, as time went on I became older, and realize we all had problems in life. So myself when some day I have children I will try my best to be there for them as a role model.

III. When I got out of prison

I had two hundred dollars, but I also started a savings account with my brother in 2000. Most of all I am free. I remember all the help I received from other inmates, teachers, my bosses at work. And most of all my family I love for all they did for

me through good and hard times.

When my family picked me up I was so proud of them. I remember the three of them were children when I got arrested. The next day they took me shopping for clothes, gave me money, and we went out for dinner, and talked non-stop.

HENRY CLARK

Fire, a story

The light skin girl's body was lit up from the fire place. I admired her so much; she'd walk around barefoot playing with every movement. She always keeps the firewood coming to keep the house warm. She knew the man was watching her, but wouldn't make eyes with him. The old woman continued to dance and shine with the fire going. Meanwhile, the old man decided to see the young women together. He remembered the old woman looking like them one day. He decided to go to the mountainside to burn wood and let the women watch his body shine from the light of the fire. He'd hope the women would see him as a young man that he used to be. The man just continues to show the women what they were showing him the day before.

J.R. is interested in restorative justice and nonviolent communication and would like to complete training as a mediator. He writes, "Since I've only been out for a minute, as we say, these 13 days have been nerve-wracking, confusing, overwhelming and even enjoyable but I know I have a very long road ahead of me. I know once I get readjusted it's gonna be a lot of fun."

J.R.

Thinking Back

Thinking back to when I was a little guy, I don't have very many memories at all. Either I've suppressed them, or the alcohol or drug use at that early age has fogged my mind.

The bits and pieces of the memories I have are of stressed-out home life, worried about the cops coming to take the ole man to jail because he was always in and out of jail most of my life, stressed that our life wasn't the same as the other little kids I went to school with because we were poor and didn't have much. Worried that we would have to move because when the ole man went to jail money was tight and making rent was hard.

Remembering when I or my little brother got something new, we felt like the richest little guys in the world. I know that I'm no different than the other poor kids and a lot of other brothers I left behind in prison, but the good memories are very, very, very far and few between.

This is what I think about when I think about being young. I know now this is why I did turn to the drugs and alcohol at a very young age, not the only reason, but it's one of the main reasons.

J.R.

Inspired by an Expedition

Bonobo males, deadly predators wake the troops
at dawn

Wild beehives, local villagers, flying squirrels,
the thrill of the chase

Six-day trip, five boatmen, a village destroyed

Mid-morning world's longest rivers in the jungle

Congo River, hitching ride darkness drops

Like a giant snake, fish eagles perch

Caught in the river, our boatmen lost in the jungle.

J.R.

Mass Transit

"How often does the bus run?" I ask as I step to the bus stop.

A crazy lady sitting there, going through a bag of trash, looks like she hasn't showered since the last good rain, looks up and laughs, then mumbles some words that he can't quite make out.

I take a breath and think, "The world has really changed since I last walked the streets."

I look around for the next person to ask when it hits me that there is a bus route map right there next to the stop. I feel like a big dummy but no one knows what a dumb question that was except the crazy woman but I'm pretty sure she won't tell anyone as I see the next bus coming.

Empathy

Empathy can mean a lot of things to a lot of different people. I never had a good understanding of it until about my second year of non-violent communication groups.

To be perfectly honest, I don't think I would have gotten out of prison if it wasn't for "n.v.c.", but that's another story.

When I did learn empathy and how to use it, it changed my life. To use empathy in daily life while still in prison, the guys started to notice I would intently listen. No judgments, no criticisms. It's a rare thing to be able to connect with someone when they are sharing personal, sometimes hard, life stories.

Why I was able to get this empathy stuff so well is still a mystery to me but in my culture I believe that everything happens for a reason, which is why I know I am exactly where I'm supposed to be, but that's another story altogether.

One reason why I know I have an understanding of empathy is when the guys would share their stories and I would say, "It sounds like that's really painful for you, to be in prison and go through so much in your family and have to be in prison" or – "It sounds like that brings you a lot of joy." You see, one thing I did learn about empathy is I can't know how anyone is feeling, but to really listen to someone and know that I can only guess what their feeling is, and then ask, "Are you feeling glad? – happy? – joyful? or sad? – irritated? – mad? –

confused? – and then the person says, YEAH!

"How did you do that?" I've been asked more than once or twice on a number of different times.

I owe it all to non-violent communication and wanting to change, of course, but that's only one of many tools n.v.c. has given me to use in my daily life out here with real people in the real world.

Thanks to non-violent communication, rose city prison project.

Far away

sheet of flame
fringes of shells
she was barefoot

receding surf
a piece of driftwood
the fire blazed high

little pale girl
the old woman
her eyes, watched

morning hours
far into the hills
sweat house fire

sundown
the other side
uphill

forgotten
meaning to come
sick all the time
far away, far away



Kenneth R. Martin is very passionate about life, especially because today he knows how to live gratefully. He wants to talk to youth. "Who better to talk to them but me?" he says. His life is just beginning. "It's like a new birth. I have to learn to crawl before I walk. One foot in front of the other." He writes about being released: "I felt overwhelmed. However, there was a sense of peace and serenity that covered my entire being. My first experience is when I was walking down the street, going shopping at Ross. My thoughts were, Thank God I'm finally home. I never thought that this day would come. But once I realized that it was a possibility, I took control of my destination. And the outcome was what I had been praying for. All praise and thanks goes to God."

KENNETH R. MARTIN

I Wonder

When I was four years old, if my parents weren't addicted to drugs would I have made the decisions that I made? I remember the vision as if it was yesterday: Witnessing my parents in their addiction leaving my brother and I and sister unsupervised.

I took the opportunity, as any four-year-old would do, and explored the world outside of the confines of our home, if one can call it a home. My explorations led me to watching the local street gang to which I would inevitably become a part.

I would watch these gang members and would want so much to be a part of them. So years later I manifested my thoughts into a reality, six years later to be exact. I was a member of a gang at a very early age. I hung out at ten, and was jumped in at eleven. After witnessing my father beat my mother for so many years, I finally had a place to retreat to that wasn't going to beat me because my mother didn't have the money to feed the drug habit of my own father. I had a place to retreat to where I would not have any restrictions; I was lawless, hopeless, and inconsiderate of the rest of humanity.

As I look at the little boy, I recognize that there was a whole lot of anger, fear, and resentments that he was faced with. And who, at that age would understand the emotions, feelings, and vulnerabilities? Not me, things were scrambled in my head like a two-thousand-piece puzzle, difficult to put together. Time-consuming, and one would require patience beyond what I had back then.

Five years later to six years later, that same little boy who was misguided committed the most horrible act that can be committed against another (murder 2nd). I was the same four-year-old, scared, intimidated little boy that didn't know how to talk about what he was feeling let alone identify those feelings and emotions. So they were kept bottled up and eventually they exploded. I was 16 years old. Scared to death in a world that was cold and unforgiving. I had not the slightest idea what I was to embark on for the next twenty-four years.

So here I am sitting in writing group, free as a person can aspire to be. I have nothing to complain about.

KENNETH R. MARTIN

Prayer in the Dark

Like a flame to a wick
The fire burned, lighting the dark
Cold night satisfying the companions of the
abyss.
Utilizing the lighting the companions filled
baskets of branches
To keep the cold night warm.
The face of one of the companions was
nearly frost-bitten.
He prayed for the receding of the night.
Prayed for the walk on the warm and cool
beach,
Home is where his thoughts are. He
imagined the aroma of incense
Burning on his Queen Mother's Terrace.



Kesauć Musheer Hill says poetry is his outlet, his way of expressing himself without violence. He writes, "When I first got out, the first thing I noticed, besides the fits of anxiety, was how smoothly so many years of barbed wires, gun towers, and concrete walls melted away. I refused to look back, content with the feel of its washing away and the warmth of freedom's sunlight."

KESAUĆ MUSHEER HILL

Still Good In Me

My father beat my mother into induced
labor, having fistfights with grown men
always trying to save her.

Hopes of being a kid again was somethin
to savor; never knew I'd see the Pen but
a few years later.

A child made man in a manmade trail then
called by the world a lyfe taker. Youth
prison knife taker.

Surrounded by concrete like the monkey god,
man. Plus lyfe began to look odd and futile,
lords and tribal wars was a world of caos
at its core. A little nigga gang bangin at
the door and scrappin niggas up as a chore.

At first step hunted, trained by 43 hundred
preying on the faces like look hunted.

My habitat like Iron Woods, body tatted
a pup running with wolves, but I was searchin
for a part of me still good.

Graffiti on the wall say NO WARNING SHOTS
and the will to survive now is all I got, not
to mention, I've been prayin alot.

The rage got my emotions in a knot, got a
burner in the place of a glock, like a best
friend shot. On a prison yard smokin Pot
listening to Pac.

Hard lessons at knife point I'm forced to
learn, war mongers doing SHU terms, while
politicians treat the subject like a germ.

Meanwhile, breath is my only concern warrin
with kind that killed Pern.

This must be a glimpse of how hell be, knowin
only GOD can help me, the devils tryin to
melt me but that's not lyfe I was dealt see,
I knew that there was still GOOD in me to
see the MAN I could be, should be, would be.

Thats when the reality of it all took me.
They wanted me repentive thats why they
call it the PENITENTIARY and its been that
way for centuries, while the homies aint
been keepin it Gee and the madness was
makin me lonely.

Tired of the situation ownin me, I needed
FREEDOM like a twisted soul down on its
knees, the reality of Mothers please Or how
a mother grieves for all of the things that
I've seen.

Her gang bangin little boy out
there running the streets,
she gots the whole church praying
for me.

But there was a rage in me, the need for
caging me, wish it was strange to me,
thats the GOOD there with me.

I knew I could be repentive but I had
Blood spilt enemies who hated the thought
of forgiving me, with a thirst for a rep
dreams of killing me.

Still the efficaciousness of prayer was
healing me.

A little boy living lyfe a grown man
being guided by a strong hand, UNDERSTAND?

While raised by the best of societies rejects
honor now a reflex to see how deep my
thoughts get, like knowing how cold the
dark gets but I hadn't touched my heart yet.

If success is standing on my own TWO I
got that, after falling short, man, I'm right
back, a tortured soul that wouldn't crack.

I killed for it, bled for it and TEARED
for it, man, I've served 26 years for it.

But I haven't been brought this far to
blow it; There's something in me, man, I
know it.

I see it now despite the HOOD in me, I'm
my Mothers child so there's GOOD in me,
a service to GOD and Family with dignity
as it should be.

Like Lost Angels and them Palm trees
I'll lift my head and be FREE.

KESAUĆ MUSHEER HILL

People Are Cold

I've been through the cold and
Pouring rains, so much shit
I don't know who to blame.
My life has been crazy; Mama
Look what they've done to your
Baby!

I come from that part of L.A.
Where the people are snow;
Where the urban streets are
Cold, no matter how tough you
Are or who you know, you're
Still subject to lose your
Soul.

My mama sacrificed joy and
Life, sold her body to make sure
That we were dressed right, and
Had a place to sleep at night;
There was no man in the home
So she taught her oldest boy how
To fight.

By the time I was twelve I
Had to earn my way; bring in
What I could to be sure the
Bills were paid. My mama
Wept when they robbed our place,
So that's when I chose my trade;
Officially a man that day.

I've been through the cold and
The pouring rain; so much shit.
I don't know who to blame.
My life has been crazy, mother
Look what they've done to your
Baby.

Running the streets with my hands
In everything, while at church my
Little sister sang, would grow
Fangs to protect my siblings from
The pain that I knew the ghetto
would bring, moving with a nine
milli and a sack of cocaine; the
money was all the same.

On the frontline of an urban
War, not really understanding
What I was fighting for, but
Still putting brothers in the floor.
Hating our lives for being poor,
Just not caring anymore.
Discontented striking at the core
Be Cool? What the fuck for?!

Didn't know how many more days
That I'd see; I was only fifteen
And had grown men shooting at me.
Ducking so much never knew where
I would pop up. They got Buttons
Then Len Dogg, Tick went down
And I didn't even have time to grieve.

I've been through the cold and
The pouring rains; so much shit
I don't know who to blame.

My life has been crazy; Mama
Look what they've done to your
Baby.

Even though by law I was
Still a child, I was cast out
Into the wild. 15 to life in prison?
Never again will I smile. Before
I see them bricks again it'll
Be a while. Man, the last time
I saw my mother was during trial.

My life has been rough but I'm
Still here. This shit hasn't beat
Me yet, despite these twenty
Years, I have nothing but God
To fear, and I've learned that
Life ain't always clear; maybe
Now I can shed that tear...

I've been through cold and
The pouring rains; But I'm still
Here all the same; breathing
To tell you my name; My whole
Life has been crazy; Mama look
What they've done to your baby.



Lefty is a kind and gentle person who likes to help others and is a good listener and has experienced life in a positive way, and looks for the good in people. He believes we all have the choice to do good. He believes that in being around people that are positive, we motivate ourselves to do better. He writes, "When I got on the bus by myself and no guard followed me, I felt Free again."

Hardened from War

My stepfather was Polish. He went to Siberia concentration camp for 4 years under Stalin, got out and went to Africa to get retrained with the English army, went to Italy to help the U.S. get the Germans out of Italy. Then came to the U.S. with my mother and me. My mother was sick with goiter glands and could not raise me. So they sent me to foster homes until I was 9 years old. My stepdad did not want to take care of me. He was hardened from the war, and had no patience for me.

He was a hard worker and worked for the Illinois railroad for 25 years. Could fix anything but was not a father. You couldn't talk to him about anything. He was cold and it showed because of what he went through in the war. In the end before he died at 88, he became more willing to listen, but still not giving or showing any love for me. I understand what he went through in his life and that's how he was till the end. He was a good provider but showed no feelings. I grew up in foster homes, 3 of them, but I don't hate him. He was never a family man, never took me to a baseball game or any sports events, very dull life. Work, sleep, eat and some money. That was what he enjoyed doing. Not Americanized.

I had to get away so I've been on my own since I was 17.

LEFTY

Sticks

I was in east dorm for 15 years and there was a litter of cats, but there was an orange cat that I named Sticks. He would jump in my lap and I would pet him. He trusted me and I fed him tuna and cat food, when we could get it. I would walk around the yard and he would follow me and walk with me. I left him in good hands with other inmates that would treat him well.

Deserted Island, fiction

I have imagined being on a deserted island, but found out that I was not alone. On the distant shore I saw a flickering in the waves and walked close to the shore to see, I believe, a mermaid. But it's only an illusion.

I am thirsty and cold. But for a split moment, I was not alone.

Mike M. has been out for about two months and views life challenges today as opportunities for growth. He writes, "That makes living a privilege. After all the things I have done, to still have people believe in me is an honor. It's what inspires me to give back."

MIKE M.

Truly Humble

It is truly humbling to be in the position I am today. To be supported by groups, programs, and families that want the best for me is a blessing.

I have been out for about two months. I am now entering another stage in my transition that exposes me to life's demands and pressures.

What stands out to me is that I notice that my coping skills have improved. I remember how I would overreact to the simplest challenges which now I am able to deal with without even a hiccup.

I also am humbled to have more choices in life and actually have a say as to the direction I want to take in life. Of course selfish desires are constantly pulling at me now that more gratifying materials are attainable, but discipline and regrets remind me what I truly need to do, which is to be responsible and do the right thing.

I often think about people that helped me to be in the position I am in today because alone I truly would not have come to deserve what I have now. All I had to do was trust and listen to people. The uniqueness of my situation is that I was released at the earliest possible date because of the changes I made in my life.

I often think about the people I have hurt. I always pray for their healing and that they are blessed 10x more than I am blessed. For me to be able to enjoy life while there are still people who might be

suffering from the pain I have caused proves to me how merciful God truly is.

And you know what? I still don't have to be perfect.

MIKE M.

Words Put Together

His mission seems to be in flame,
fire within him hurting with regrets and shame.

His thoughts scatter in fringes.
Though connected together, his motion is off
the hinges.

Looking ahead he sees many problems ahead.
Like shells on the beach and driftwood, a blaze
that's going dead.

Everyone seems to be happy, all night dancing
While he is back under the sky rim thinking

His journey seems to start all the way across
the ocean.
He feels he needs to pray until almost sundown
just to bring them home.

He went up the hill to get a better view
Then he knew
from his manner, he needs to believe,
because life doesn't stop to deceive.

MIKE M.

Nick, a short story

Nick wondered why people die. He became afraid and confused. The question he would always wonder about was, *What happens after people die?*

He went to his brother to ask him but his brother couldn't really explain to Nick the way he would understand. Nick's fears really troubled him. He did not want to die.

He did not have a place to hide to feel safe. The only place he felt safe was on his mother's lap which was in another country.

One thing Nick enjoyed doing was playing sports, so he played basketball all the time.

Since he couldn't get the satisfying or comforting answer about *What happens when people die* from his brothers and sisters, Nick chose to stop talking about it and ignore it.

Not knowing what to do, Nick turned to what he knows best, that was head to the playground to play basketball with his friends, so he would not think about dying anymore.

MIKE M.

Lost in the Jungle, a short story

Six days into this journey Michael is starting to feel a little hungry. Especially when he tries to sleep at night he feels lifeless, that any deadly predators can have him for dinner.

He doesn't even pay attention to his habitat. It's been days since he last saw the group out traveling he came with.

In his bag he has a piece of pineapple left that's his source of liquid which is starting to dry up.

He stares at all the huge trees; their branches are like young women partying through the day.

At times it seems like they do it to mock him. He knows he needs to find a waterway.

This travel he realized wasn't a good idea. All he encountered was bizarre beings. He thinks that this must be like being in the heart of the Congo. With giant snakes and river twist.

He finally found a river and caught a catfish for dinner. As he prepared his dinner with the fish cooked in oil and rice, "Michael," he hears his mom's voice.

He then ran to the house from the backyard.



Sidney Duberry studies people. He stays quiet in the room and just listens. Once he trusts people, he has a lot to say and speaks from the heart. "When I first got out, I cried. All my family was dead and gone. I'm the only one." He is 72 years old and wants to work. He hates not working.

SIDNEY DUBERRY was hospitalized at age 14 after he was hit in the head with a baseball bat. Over the years, his difficulties with reading and writing have been attributed to that injury. He quit school as a teenager when he was called on to read aloud and didn't want the class to see he couldn't. But his willingness to try and try and keep trying brought him to the writing workshop. It wasn't easy for him, but he wrote a little. He read aloud a little. But his life-story comes through best when he speaks. This account is compiled from tape-recorded statements during workshop sessions and from transcripts.

My name is Sidney Duberry and the date is the 15th. Where do I start? My life has been turned upside-down. I was a kid always happy-go-lucky. Never smoked, never drank, never used drugs, and always tried to be kind. But my world come crashing down the day my mother was taken from me. I must have been about seven years old and I'll never forget her. She was murdered, raped, thrown in Lake Michigan. The fishes ate her up. They closed the casket and some gentleman came to the funeral and said he was sorry, big disaster at the funeral. They rushed me out of there. And I never seen her face no more.

My father disappeared. I didn't see him until years later. So I didn't have a very good upbringing as a kid. I was shuttled round, passed around, shipped out, moved out, run away.

When I was a little kid, I was kind of scared but I had a dog. His name was Rusty. I have a picture of

him. Today that's all I got left of him and he was my protector. I loved him so much and when he died, I found myself crying a lot about him. He was the one true friend I had that would never turn on me and never leave me. He slept at the foot of my bed and I would go out for walks with him.

I was even scared to go in the basement. But I wasn't scared when I walk with Rusty 'cause he would bolt down them stairs so fast. He didn't know what was down there and I didn't know and he start barking and running at anything that moved, clean away from me.

I haven't had a dog since then. I don't know when I'll get a dog but I do want one and I hope when I do get one he's like Rusty.

So my time was really hard as a kid. I know other people got stories in life they talk about but mine is different because I come from a time back in the late 40's and 50's when you didn't do things that you do now. You just didn't do 'em. There's no way I coulda done the things back in the 40's and 50's that they do today 'cause there woulda been two things: I'da been hung or I'da been killed. In that order.

I've been on downfall for so many years, I don't know how to get up half the time.

Maybe it's my reading and writing. It's all "You can do this! You can do that!" and I always try but no, I can't. If I could, do you think I'd be in this position? I spent probably 40 years behind bars. I went to every classroom that I thought I could go into to get the help but to no avail and never broke the barrier. I get headaches trying to figure out

words and throw a sentence together. People are always telling me, "Oh, you can do it." But you're not in my position. You're not in my mind. It's something up there, I don't know what. You think I like to be like this? Well, I don't. I don't like being this way, but I am. And I know that I've tried and always asked the Lord for help and He gives me help, just enough to keep me going. I thank Him for that.

I'm 72 years old and I'll say it again: Where do I start? I try to do what's right in my life because my life is inches coming to an end. What day I don't know. I try to do what's right as I said but somewhere along the line I keep slipping up and I feel bad.

I went to Stateville for stealing a car and then camp after that. I come out here and messed up out here in California. When I got out here, I wanted to do what's right and I ended up doing something stupid. When I run out of money. That was my downfall. I lost sight of who I were as a human being because a mother do not raise a child to go out there and take stuff and kill people.

I took that young man's life and now he's part of mine for the rest of my life.

He's a part of my collective. It's like my mother, and that's not what I wanted to do. I think of her. I think of him, her, all a part of me. I do this for him because I know he tells me to do what's right. People look at me and say, Why would you say that? Because it's true. I took this young man's life. I can't, I don't sleep well at night. It's not enough sorry, enough remorse in this galaxy that can undo what I did to that man's mother. I got to carry him

around me all the time, all the time.

Every time something come up for me to do something wrong, who steps in front of me? He does. *Don't do it. Don't do it.* I see him. I hear his voice, strange as it seem. I see his mother, the pain I caused her.

I'm tired. I'm tired. I lost too much. A human being's life was taken because of my hands, my life. I can't undo that. I can't. I'm truly, truly sorry. He was a victim to all this and his mother, dear mother, I wish I could see her in the face and let her know how I feel of what I've done. He's in me every day. It's a virus that's never going to go away from me. You can't cure it. It's no cure for it.

People say you should take it a day at a time. I take a half-step at a time. 'Cause tomorrow's not promised me, only now. I don't know what tomorrow's gonna bring but I hope to get to see it because it's a beautiful world out here. I enjoy every moment of it.

72 years old. I got a smile on now. For the first time, I see flowers, beautiful blue skies, birds, beautiful people but I know beyond the beautiful people there's some dark characters out there so I'm always on my guard. But I always have a sense of humor on my face. I'm looking at this thing, this thing recording my voice. I just hope tomorrow comes and I'll be around to see it.

Here I stand, I'm sad in my heart. My family's all gone. I walk the street and I see people happy, you know, enjoying life and I like to enjoy too but there's nobody there in my life that I can really care about. That I can hold onto and say I really

truly love you. I miss my family. I miss my mother, my son, and I messed up my life being behind bars all these years. I'm just heartbroken and I'm trying to do what's right, you know. I look at people and they have houses, wives, kids, cars, and things and they're happy.

But can't have a lot of negative around you. It eats you up. It tears up your heart and soul. You have to know when to let things go. You're alive. You're breathing. You could be pushin' daisies out there.

I know there's good people out there that care about me but I'm scared to open my heart because I lash out. There's grief come from my lashing out, so I try to refrain from that. That's what I don't do no more. Someone could get hurt so I stay in a shell. What do you call it? A cocoon. Keep everything bottled up inside.

I try to keep myself within my own self. I could say I'm very guarded about opening up, but here I sit with this strange-looking device in my hand talking about my life.

I have a friend that I met a couple days ago. She's gonna take me to my first Black Rodeo and I'm quite shocked she did offer me that but, see, there are good people out there and I put it on a pedestal, and I'm looking forward to this weekend. I don't know what to expect but I'm going to enjoy. 72 years, signing off for now. I hope I give you some insight into this individual. Now how do I turn this thing off?



"People busy with their lives, going nowhere fast!"
by SIDNEY DUBERRY

*To see Sidney's drawings in color, please go to
www.franciscovoices.weebly.com*

The Black Rodeo

It's me again, Sidney. I'm back over this recording device again, this strange machine in my hand. I don't know how to explain it but I do the best I can.

This past weekend, to my amaze, some beautiful people took me to my first rodeo in my life and I was overwhelmed. It was a Black Rodeo and I didn't know what to expect or how to act. It was two beautiful ladies and three little boys. They took me on a scenic route through the back roads and stuff. They had an hour and something to spare and so she showed me some beautiful lakes and where she worked at and I was just enjoying, watching the scenery and stuff. She showed me a cherry field where they pick cherries and it was all beautiful.

The community was so clean, you could eat off the streets. I never seen anything like this. I seen two cups and a piece of paper on the street, that's all. No police cars. No helicopters. Beautiful houses and it was a beautiful community and it was a beautiful day for me. I want to say I got emotional, it was just overwhelming to me to see this kind of community exists out here. No violence, no anger. I thought I was in another world.

It's fascinating how in this world you could go ten miles, twenty miles up the street and you see one of the most beautiful communities I ever laid my eyes on, but to live there you got to have money. Twenty miles and it's a whole different world.

When I was a kid, when I growed up...sometime when I think where I came from...I know the world

have changed, but when you look at things now from the past that I came from, people in this era here they have no concept of what I was going through as a kid. There was curfew. I couldn't be in the neighborhood at a certain time. You get caught on the street after ten o'clock, you get beat up or get arrested or get killed. Lots of places I couldn't go to, water fountains I couldn't drink out of, swimming pools I couldn't go into, lakes I couldn't swim in. I couldn't go in certain stores. It was just bad back then. I didn't know which way to turn as a kid but I had one thing. I had just a little bit of sense in my head but I had a lot of speed in my legs and I run like a rabbit if I had to. It sound funny but it's the truth – couldn't nobody, I don't think a man on this planet coulda caught me when I was in flight when I was in my teens.

Now it's mindboggling to see this other community. There's more people on this planet, more communities that I find out about that I didn't know existed for better or worse. So it was just a pleasant ride for me that day. I enjoyed the company of these two ladies and these three boys. I was their guardian and their caretaker that day. I was there to protect these kids and these two lovely ladies.

I was emotional that day but I didn't cry. I held it in.

And when we got to that Black Rodeo, I could not believe what I was looking at. All these beautiful people. Beautiful women, childrens, men, just having a beautiful time. Cows, sheeps. The kids were having fun. I was just in awe of everything out there.

It's fascinating how the world has changed, how they accepting other minorities and other races in this big beautiful world we living in. I went there with the intention of not knowing what I was going to see and when I got there was I shocked.

I seen black cowboys – something I had never seen in my entire life. They was riding horses and bulls. Riding every which way and not falling off. It just blew my mind watching that people riding cows and bulls and kids out there chasing around. It was so funny. There was a lot of black people there, some whites too, probably some Hispanics, everyone getting along. I was the only one didn't have a cowboy hat. It was a festival that everybody should try to go see and participate in once in their life.

She say, "You enjoying yourself?"

Enjoying. That's an understatement. I didn't know what to say. I just stood there in shock, looking.

When it was all over, I got in the car and then we started home and it was such a beautiful ride, a beautiful day. I don't know if God intended me to go on this journey but he sure put me in this position with two lovely ladies and some kids and it just made my day.

There are no words to say how I feel in my heart. I'm not the same fellow that got locked up years ago, angry young man want to hate and take things. That's just not me. I'm more at peace with myself. I don't know how I'm gonna fit into this world but I'm going to do the best I can because with my limited education, at 72 years old, I can't change that. I don't know how many golden years I

have left on this planet but I try to do the best I can and be positive to everybody I come in contact with. That's what life is about.

To see how this world is evolving is quite fascinating and now I'm not going to break any laws. I might not be the most educated person in the world but if you give me a chance – anybody deserve a chance in life to be a decent human being. I thank God for giving me this chance to be out free in this society again. I'm not going to let Him down and I'm definitely not going to let myself down. I just take one step, one baby step at a time.

Out there, there's a cute kid and I enjoy watching him. He's lonely and he wants somebody to talk to him. I wish I could have a son like that. I lost my son. Wish I could give him some kind of guidance. Guidance I didn't have as a kid growing up, not having a parent there, a father, a brother, a sister. It would mean the world to me to have that in my life. But I don't have it. All my family's gone. I miss them dearly. But I know I'm not alone. 'Cause God up there, He's watching over me for some reason or other. And I got peoples in my life that cares about me.

I probably have more to say but now it's just me and the machine and the sun pouring in my face and outside I'm looking at a mother cat and two little kittens cuddling one another. Cats wandering around looking at me wondering what's goin' on. It is beautiful. Life is great and I guess I just hope for another beautiful day tomorrow.

All I can say is thank God for letting me see the outside again.



T.U. is a sincere person who tries hard to make things right and help others, and appreciates life to the fullest.

fiction by T. U.

He Says He Loves Her

What I still don't understand is that my friend, who has been happily married, likes to play around. I said, "If you are happily married, why do you feel the need to play around?", trying to understand his perspective on the matter. He shared that he told his wife when they were married, just never get fat. Which she is 5'2" or 5'3" and about 175 or 180 lbs. So that is his excuse to have occasional flings. Of course he's on the heavy side now also.

He doesn't see it as cheating, just that his wife broke the contract. He says he loves her to death and never wants to leave her. It's hard to say. And I guess because he fools around he's becoming more suspicious. She is too. For example: when she doesn't answer the phone right away or not at all, or isn't home when he thinks she should be, he will joke around and say, "She's probably at the boyfriend's," but I think he's serious. Kind of a bitter/sweet relation and I hope they work things out and stay faithful to one another.

Also, I wonder how many others do the same thing.

T. U.

My Cat Squeeky

I adopted Squeeky's mother who had several litters and Squeeky was of the last. I couldn't keep the 8 kittens, so put them in a laundry basket and took them down to Thrifty's and in hours gave them all away except Squeeky, he was the smallest of the litter just meowing over and over and never stopped.

So that's how he got his name Squeeky. So I took him back home and kept him. He grew up to about a 40 pound cat. We moved from the apartment and took Squeeky with us in the car. Squeeky flipped out on the 5-mile car ride, and jumped out of the car and I didn't see him for 3 years. One of our old neighbors from where we lived at said they thought they saw him at our old apartment.

So I went down in early morning for 3 days and would call him and put out food in the alley close by, and on the 3rd day he came out but wouldn't let me touch him. Matter of fact, he would hiss at me and run away but would come back and eat the food. So it took about two weeks of putting food out every morning and to call him before he would let me pet him, but would get spooked and run off. He was only about 9 or 10 lbs., with sores all over him and seemed very different but he remembered me and finally let me pick him up.

I ended up moving back to the apartment next door where we moved from and I just kept putting

food on the porch every day and he would come and eat it and take off again.

About three months later Squeeky was staying in my room and lying on the bed and healthy again.

Barefoot

The young barefoot tourists sat on the terrace of the beach filled with the aroma of seaweed; waiting to experience their first early morning sunrise.

At their first glance of this awesome sunrise, they knew this well thought out trip was worth every effort!

They couldn't imagine being anywhere else in the world at this particular moment.

As they engulfed their surroundings of miles and miles of deserted white sand beaches and waves dancing on top of the clear ocean blue water with the flames of their personal sunrise sparkling in their youthful eyes, these young at heart, barefoot tourists, digging their toes in the virgin white sands, made a dedication to relive their special moment to the sunset of their lives.



UNLIKELY FRIENDS is a new documentary by Leslie Neale of Chance Films that follows the stories of survivors of violent crime who forgave the men who harmed them and ended up becoming friends with them. The film delivers a message that these relationships don't coddle criminals. Instead, meeting with a victim forces a perpetrator to recognize the consequences of his act, to develop empathy and remorse, and experience profound change.

We watched the film together on August 5th, and some of the men wrote responses.

J.R.

Unlikely Friends for me was a painful reminder of all the hurt I've caused to countless people. Something that I'm not too far from since I've only been out of prison for about 13 days after doing 25 years for killing a friend of mine.

In those 25 years I had the opportunity to do a lot of thinking to try to figure out where so many things in younger years went wrong. It can all be summed up, I guess, in a few short words. When I was able to figure out that doing the right thing, to honor the countless people I hurt, I found a sense of peace and doing the right thing became easy and I began to enjoy my life, and somehow I was freed.

MIKE M.

When I first got out I really couldn't believe it. I was thankful because at one point in my life it was something I believed that might not happen. I accepted the possibility of me spending the rest of my life in prison. All I could think about is how I will be able to spend time with my family. I felt guilty at the same time because from what has happened, my victim's family took a back seat from the happiness I was feeling. My focus went from always thinking what I had done to what possibilities I am faced with.

The best thing I could do is pray for them. I now honor my victim by making wise decisions and commit myself to give back. I made a pledge to

some kids to do something for them next summer so that they will have something to motivate them as they endure the school year. It gave me a sense of purpose and a good feeling because I now know I'm not just living for myself.

The film reminded me that the healing is not over. That it is important to continue seeking to grow and help someone else.

I need to self-check my attitude of, "I don't care – it's in the past, I can move on." What this process offers is a peace of mind and happiness because it is about appreciating life as it is. That life is a privilege that should be cherished. It reminded me that I did not get here by myself. An act of kindness is what really got me through my barriers.

KENNETH R. MARTIN

It takes a strong person to forgive a person whom has murdered their loved one. In a situation where a person would've murdered my loved one, what would I do? I know for sure that the word forgiveness would never be a part of my vocabulary. An eye for an eye, anger, hatred, and revenge would be more like it.

As I watched the documentary, feelings of shame, sorrow, regret, and even a percentage of self-anger developed within me for being the cause of my committing the worst act a human being can commit against another human being. I thought about the ripple effect of my decisions that day, June 6, 1990: the fact that I never took into account the feelings of Gary's family members, the community, my family, and the continued fears

that I so selfishly partook in.

I understand today that the way I allow myself to think will inevitably manifest in my actions. The way I perceived myself is how I was willing to introduce myself to the world.

For a long while I was ignorant of the fact that Gary had people who loved him. And it wasn't until my own mother passed away that I understood the almost unbearable pain and suffering my soul was in, that I began to think about Gary's mother and the rest of his family and friends. I began to ask questions, did he have any children, was he married, was he the breadwinner of his family? All of these questions brought me closer to understanding the impact of what I had done.

Like the mother in the film, I could not understand what had happened inside of me but something happened that compelled me to forgive myself because I believe in order for one to righteously be forgiven, one has to forgive him or herself for all of the wrongs he or she caused.

The film was very profound. It gave me a direct look at how crimes, how my crimes had an effect on family members.

HENRY CLARK

For myself I believe everything I saw, and heard in the video. I, as a former lifer inmate, I was involved in programs just like "Unlikely Friends." I was in three groups at Avenal State Prison called "Victim Awareness." The victims' mothers would talk to us and tell us the pain we caused to them and their families. They would look right at us while they are

crying. I myself felt so bad for my victim, and his family.

I, later, after the group, felt so sorry for all the people I had hurt in my life. My victim and his family, my family, friends, the community, the tax payers, etc. Groups like those sure changed my ways of life, I thank God for that. I also thank all the people that played a part in my life in making parole.

Thank you.

GERARD ROMAN

This film brought to mind the importance of forgiveness from the victim's standpoint because it acts as the catalyst to begin the healing process for the victim and allows them to move forward.

While I was incarcerated, I was able to meet with several victims of violent crimes and yes, hearing their stories enabled me to fully understand the degree of pain that my own actions caused the victims in my personal case. I was able to fully define what empathy was by listening to their tragic stories. I sensed they were seeking to begin the healing process, to forgive and move on. My own healing process, I believe also began at that point.

I truly believe that these interactions between victims and perpetrators of violent crimes are beneficial to both sides and should be encouraged whenever possible. I consider myself fortunate to have participated in several of these interactions. I'm a better person today because of them.

Thank you.

Victims, who are we?

We are all victims in one form or another. All of us have suffered physical and emotional pain, and yet, we go on in life.

There must always be victims and non-victims. After all, our innate makeup calls for us to have feelings for people suffering.

All of the victims in the film seemed to feed off the offender's feelings in the crime. To them, it was a non-medicated way to feel better, feel love, feel pain, and feel, for the most part, a solution to their loss.

The fact that they thought, or were making, a positive change in someone's life was a spiritual thing that was good in God's eyes.

What I've learned is that one must change their life before they can change someone else's life.

The victims needed change before the crimes. It was, sadly, only the crime that brought out who they were. So with this change, it was okay in their hearts. That's the wonderful and not so wonderful thing about human beings.

WHERE WE'RE AT AND WHY

One of the workshop writers spent almost 40 years in prison for a crime that I learned – had it not been for the practice of indeterminate sentencing – would have warranted eight years behind bars. He cut me off when I showed how upset I was on his behalf. He didn't want to think about what was past. This was all he had to say about the many times he was denied parole: "I couldn't afford to get angry. If I wanted to stay healthy inside, I couldn't blame anyone but myself."

I read the transcript of another participant's final parole hearing. Though he was deeply remorseful over the crime for which he'd been convicted and sentenced, his parole was denied decade after decade until he gave in and parroted back – untruthfully – the words the D.A. and the board wanted to hear, taking responsibility for a crime of which he'd been *acquitted*.

How did the men in the writing workshop come to be locked up decade after decade? Well, to start with, most of them couldn't afford a decent lawyer. How did the incarceration rate in the United States come to be the highest in the world? What's wrong with the system and how might it change? The men in the workshop didn't seem interested in writing about any of that. One of the participants finally said, "We suffer so much from guilt and remorse and self-hate, nothing the State could do to us was as bad as what we did to ourselves."

Since they won't do it, I guess it's up to me to write about the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (that last word considered a joke by both prisoners and guards).

But I, too, hesitate. One evening, Aaron told me, "Before we went to prison, we lived in the world you live in and so we know how people in society think. But then we went to prison and we learned things about human nature that you will never know. We know both sides. You only know one."

So with some humility, this is what I know – or think I know.

Four names may help explain mass incarceration:

Willie Horton was a murderer serving life without the possibility of parole in a Massachusetts prison. He was, however, allowed a weekend furlough during which he killed again. In 1988, his terrible crime was highlighted over and over in television ads meant to discredit presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, Massachusetts governor at the time of the murder. All over the country, politicians and parole boards feared being blamed for the next Willie Horton. The solution: Don't take chances. Don't let *anyone* out.

Richard Allen Davis, known to have tortured and killed animals as a child, was in and out of prison for decades with a lengthy record that began with nonviolent crimes like burglary but escalated into a series of violent acts of robbery, kidnapping, and assault. He was released on parole again and again. In 1993, within months of his last release, he kidnapped and murdered 12-year-old Polly Klaas. Outrage and heartbreak over this murder led to the passage of California's tough Three Strikes law which mandated life in prison for repeat offenders. The law was intended to protect the public from

vicious and violent felons, however the state's prisons soon housed some inmates whose third offense was as minor as shoplifting a pair of socks or stealing a pizza. Only this year did it become possible for at least some Three Strikers to petition the courts for resentencing and release. (As of this writing, almost 900 nonviolent Three Strikers from LA County await their day in court.)

John DiIulio, Jr. is a political scientist whose theories in the early 90's transformed the way America treats juveniles in the criminal justice system. In his writing and his consultant's role with government, he warned of a generation of "super-predator" youth, incapable of remorse, empathy, or rehabilitation. Youthful offenders had previously been considered the most capable of positive change. Now they were to be tried as adults, considered more dangerous than adults, and usually given more severe sentences than adults. DiIulio has since recanted his views and admitted he was wrong but harsh policies remain in place.

Let's add Richard Nixon to the list, making it a Gang of Four. The war he declared on drugs in 1971 has put hundreds of thousands of Americans behind bars. While there's a much higher rate of drug use among middle and higher income whites than among people of color, African Americans are incarcerated for drug offenses at a rate 10 times greater than for whites. The War on Drugs has left communities that already suffer from discrimination and high rates of poverty with broken families and sharply reduced possibilities for education and employment. (And we're still locking men and

women up for minor drug offenses. When California voters approved an initiative in 2000 to divert drug offenders to rehab instead of sending them to prison, programs weren't funded. There are few free programs available so, for the most part, only people who can afford the high cost of in-patient addiction treatment avoid incarceration.)

I understand why the men in my workshop prefer positive thinking to anger but, as a member of the society to which the formerly incarcerated must return, I can ask how much public safety – or justice – Californians are getting for the ten billion dollars spent every year on our prisons.

I'm angry that prison websites list a wide array of educational, vocational, and therapeutic programs – most of which exist only on paper or on the computer screen. When California prisons had real educational and vocational programs, the recidivism rate was so low, we were a model for the nation. These days, it's pretty obvious why 65% of former prisoners are back inside within three years.

Programs are eliminated because of an attitude that to offer anything constructive is to coddle prisoners, by frequent lockdowns, the wardens' reluctance to assign corrections officers to escort men to classes, by class and meeting rooms converted to dorms due to overcrowding. Even programs that cost prisons nothing to run are hard to get into. I listened to one man who spent ten years on a waiting list to attend an AA meeting.

As one man in our group put it, "I had to rehabilitate myself." But not every prisoner will be able to discover those inner resources.

Forget about college courses – unless you can afford to pay for them yourself. You might even have to forget about high school: A lifer I know was repeatedly blocked from taking the G.E.D. exam as the prison officials found it just too inconvenient to arrange.

Even if you get a chance to take the G.E.D., it's hardly enough, a workshop participant told me. You can pass the exam, he explained, and still lack basic literacy and numeracy skills. "The men I knew inside need classes in reading, writing, and math," he said. With solid skills, you can continue your education once you're free. You've got what you need to find work. He had suggested classes in the basics repeatedly while incarcerated. No one listened.

I'm angry that the men think no one cares about corruption behind bars. There are some good guards, they say, but it's common knowledge which corrections officers smuggle and sell drugs and remain protected by superior officers who happen to be related by blood, marriage, or friendship.

It makes me angry that pre-release planning too often consists of giving a prisoner a piece of paper with phone numbers and addresses of social agencies. The list is entirely out-of-date or simply incorrect. Phones are disconnected. Letters returned, *Addressee unknown*.

The fortunate find a safe harbor in transitional housing or treatment facilities, but there aren't enough beds to go around while Los Angeles suffers from a severe lack of affordable housing. The organizations that serve the formerly

incarcerated recently acknowledged they need to collaborate with organizations serving the homeless: the two populations overlap.

"If you have no place to go," said a man, "you go back to the streets." And back to prison.

Men lose all their identification documents when they get locked up. They emerge with only prison ID that isn't accepted anywhere. Negotiating a way through the bureaucracy to get a birth certificate, California driver's license or photo ID, and Social Security card can be daunting. Nothing like being told that according to computer records you don't exist. It took one man in my workshop eight long months of persistent effort to get the documentation a person needs in order to seek employment. Why on earth can't our prisons assure that prisoners get their documents before release?

It makes me angry that our jails and prisons have become de facto mental hospitals – confining those who had psychiatric disturbances to begin with and those who've fallen apart under the dehumanizing conditions including long term solitary confinement – a practice recognized in the U.S. and around the world as torture. (As I write, California prisoners continue to risk retaliation, health consequences, and death on hunger strike to protest being kept in isolation for decades.)

And where were the mental health and social services that could have made a difference when some of the guys in our group were growing up in the extremely traumatic circumstances that marked them?

It angers me that we blame formerly incarcerated

people if they end up homeless and unemployed and fall back on bad ways. All of the men I met want to work. Two bills pending in California, AB 218 and AB 870, would "Ban the Box," that is, would remove the box on employment applications that ask if a person has been arrested or convicted of a felony. If passed, employers would still be able to conduct background checks, but would see a person's skills and qualifications *first*, only learning of prison time later in the process.

Many of the men in the workshop face an even greater obstacle. After decades behind bars, they've returned to the free world past the age of 50, 60, or 70 and, as one man told me, "My age is held against me more than my criminal record."

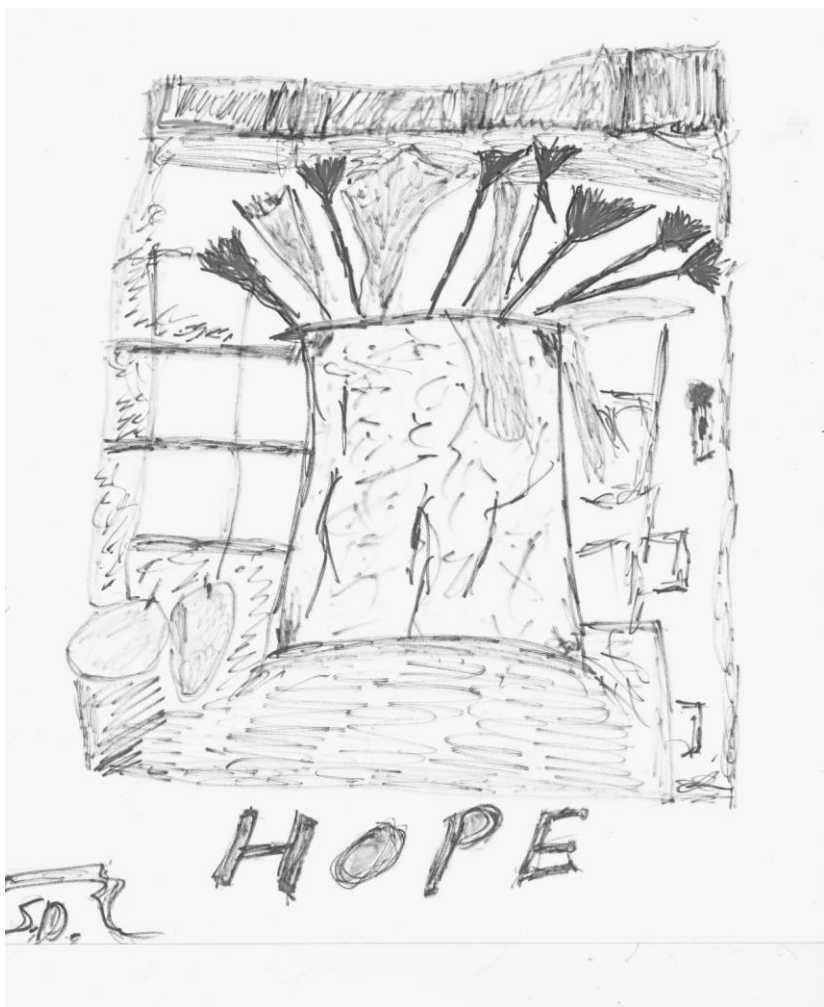
There are plenty of reasons to be dismayed with the system we've created, but I realize much of my anger comes from feeling powerless. It begins to dissipate as I share these thoughts which – partial and incorrect as Aaron has taught me they may be – are written with hope.

The men in the writing workshop have questioned where they've been and what they've done and they have changed direction. In August, U.S. Attorney General Eric Holder acknowledged we imprison too many people and keep them locked up for too long. He spoke out on the need for change in the way we administer criminal justice. Maybe the time is right to show that we in the general public – the free members of American society – have an equal capacity for change.

– Diane Lefer



Jumping over the Freedom Stick
at the Welcome Home ceremony
July 31st





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