Advice for Derek Chauvin on Sentencing Day

Now that the legal system has found you guilty and you join me as a convicted murderer, I thought it would be appropriate for me to give you some advice on how to navigate the prison system, and how you can find peace and contribute to society.

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Dying in the Samurai Way

By Bob R. Williams Jr. | Bob R. Williams Jr. writes from Death Row at San Quentin State Prison, Calif.

I came across a passage in a book called "Hagakure: The Book of the Samurai," that states, "Meditation on inevitable death should be performed daily. Every day when one's mind and body are at peace, one should meditate on being ripped apart by arrows, rifles, spears, and swords, being carried away by surging waves, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand foot cliffs, dying of disease or by a great wave, being thrown into the midst of a great fire, being struck by lightning, being shaken to death by a great earthquake, falling from thousand foot cliffs, dying of disease or committing seppuku at the death of one's master. And every day without fail, one should consider himself as dead."

This was a passage that would not leave me. It was like a nagging song that gets stuck in one's head. So I did what it said — I meditated on it to see where it would take me.

My sense of smell increased. My vision became alluring. Colors got brighter. Sounds were more beautiful. My hearing intensified. I did just that.

I don't mean grabbing a sheet and hanging myself or shutting off my feelings and becoming some soulless, emotionless zombie. No.

Living as a dead man, realizing that I die a thousand times a day, did something most amazing to me. My mind became clear and focused. My hearing intensified. My sense of smell increased. My vision became alluring. Colors got brighter. Sounds were more beautiful. My hearing intensified. I did just that.

I was suddenly freed from prison and transported to an awesome world that I didn't know existed. The constant noise of restless convicts became the exquisite music of nature. Once dull, drab, muted colors became airy, bright and melodious and the fragrances smelled amazing.

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Number of Women with Diabetes Jumps in Virginia Prison

The number of women with diabetes at Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women doubled to about 70 during the pandemic.

Vaccine Concerns

More than 47% of Americans have received at least one vaccination as of mid-May 2021, but inside New Jersey State Prison (NJSIP), the effort to inoculate everyone has hit a snag as prisoners and staff refuse to get their shots.

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We Need More Re-entry Support

PJP writer JoyBelle Phelan shares her experience after prison: "You are suddenly transferred to community corrections or released on parole, often with little to no warning or advanced preparation because that is seen as creating a security risk. The most urgent needs are housing, employment, transportation, clothing and food, all basic necessities required to establish a stable life.

First, you need to establish your identity, which means you need to figure out where to get your birth certificate and a social security card. You have no money, so you need a job, which means you have to prepare a resume and learn how to use public transportation. You have to be presentable, which means you need clothes, hygiene products, and a haircut. Walking into a grocery store and having to decide which brand of laundry soap or peanut butter to buy can feel like a monumental decision, and you end up walking back out with nothing because it's just too hard."
When we first conceived of Prison Journalism Project in 2018, we were focused purely on journalism education. After all, our director team included professors of journalism and writing from Pennsylvania, Illinois and California. Our first goal was to train writers inside the walls to use the tools of journalism in order to join the wider public conversation about justice issues.

T
hen the pandemic hit. We figured we could play a role in disseminating information about COVID-19’s impact in prisons, and we asked you for reports about your experiences. You answered our call and then some! Fast forward 15 months, and our publication has mushroomed into a full digital magazine that publishes journalism, opinion, personal essays, poetry and art daily. More than 350 writers in 33 states, Canada and the U.K. have submitted more than 900 stories. We are becoming a bona fide newsroom. We now have a goal of building a national network of prison correspondents.

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Ultimately, we selected stories that demonstrated the biggest trends in this year’s submissions. You’ll find coverage of the pandemic, essays and poetry on mental health and relationships, and commentary on current events. We’ve curated this digest to include work from first-time and regular contributors from all corners of the country.

In keeping with our educational mission, we’ve included a brief note with each selection to explain what drew us to the piece. And on page 6, you’ll find a fully annotated, reported article. Since we are at heart a journalistic organization, we especially wanted to show you how journalism can be done behind the walls. We hope this first installment inspires you. Please keep writing for us—or submit to us for the first time!

With appreciation,
Kate, Yuki, Shaheen, Teresa, Brooke and the whole PJP Team

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

WHO: First-time and experienced writers who are incarcerated, formerly incarcerated, family members, corrections officers, prison educators and others involved in the criminal justice system or affected by the experience of prison or jail.

WHAT: Submissions under 1200 words. No more than ONE STORY OR THREE POEMS per submission. Please submit only your best work.

All included facts must be gathered firsthand by you, not based on speculation or information that you’ve obtained through hearsay. We cannot accept stories about individual cases or that are accusatory about a specific person, group or institution. We do not publish academic research papers or work not intended for a general audience. Any data that is mentioned must say where you got it from. We reserve the right to exclude portions of your work that don’t conform to this policy.

By submitting, you grant us and our partners permission to publish an edited condensed version of it on our site on a non-exclusive basis. You own your work and can publish it elsewhere. We cannot re-edit a story once it is published, but if you would like your story taken down for any reason, please submit a request. If an error was inserted in the editing process, notify us with an explanation of the correction, and we will fix the story.

Submissions should include following:

• A header with your name, prison number, contact information, date, word count and suggested headline. Your UIN is only used for verification and to send you information.
• A 2-5 sentence bio to publish with your piece including your institution. If you are already published, you are welcome to mention other work. We recommend mentioning your sentence because it makes you more transparent, and it will enhance your credibility as a journalist, but it is not required. (If you do not submit a bio, we will create a simple one that says where you are incarcerated.)
• If you prefer a first name or pen name as your byline, include a request with a reason that can be published as part of your bio (e.g., fear of retribution already established as a writer under the pen name).
• A photo to go with your bio. If that’s not possible, we will use a graphic of your initials or the PJP logo.

WHERE: To accept stories on a rolling basis. You will receive an acknowledgement letter after we publish your submission with a copy of your story as it appears online and a packet that could include updated submissions info, training material or a selection of articles from other PJP writers. We have a large backlog of submissions, but we consider each one carefully. Please allow 8 weeks.
From Father and Son to Strangers

BY COREY MINATANI  |  Cory Minatani writes from Washington State Penitentiary, Wash.

Many years ago, I fell from grace. I left behind my eight-year-old son. The family called him many nicknames. He was affectionately deemed “Mr. No-No” due to everyone telling him not to touch or mess with things. Then he graduated to the nickname of “Little Bubba.” When I went to prison, that’s what I called him.

When he contacted me in 2017, he was a young man in high school. After seeing a picture of him, I didn’t recognize him. He was a stranger to me. From his point of view, I was a stranger to my son as well.

The first email through the prison messaging system was his to initi- ate. I was unsure if I was legally allowed to contact any of my children. But he reached out to me, telling me that he indeed had permission to contact me, and he wrote of his goal to be valedictorian at his school.

Valedictorian? Very good, I thought. He continued, saying that he was not into drugs or alcohol. Very, very good, I thought.

He then explained that he had a girlfriend. A girlfriend! I was a very late bloomer, so to read that my son had a girlfriend in high school showed me that he was maturing as he should. So, this was all good news.

Even though we had been separated for about five years, he still felt he knew me enough to tell me these things upon our first reconnection. I will forever appreciate the gesture.

Reading his recent email to me, I remembered him in kindergarten. On his first day, my son drew the wheel of his teacher, and I was called into the school with my then-wife. The teacher said he was in trouble because he said he was too smart for this particular class. I’m not proud of my state- ment to the teacher, but I hugged my son after seeing the classroom.

The teacher returned with something to the effect that she saw where my son got his attitude. My son was what I would deem highly confi- dent, others might describe him as cocky.

I am proud of his progress since then. He wrote that he had great anxiety about homework not being done correctly. Maybe it’s a sense of perfectionism. Later, in other emails, he demonstrated his mastery over computers and hinted at a career in engineering.

This surprised me. When I was growing up, I was expected to get good grades. My mother, single and working three jobs to support us, didn’t give me a hard time. She simply said, “I expect no grades less than a ‘B.’” That was easy enough.

But we do not have an engineer in our family. My son would be the first, and in our Japanese family, this would be a very highly regarded profession. My son has a great uncle who holds a master’s degree in physics, but he did little with it and became a high school teacher.

I’m very proud of my son, but I still didn’t recognize him. How did

my son get the idea to become an engineer? Since we’re able to email, my son asked whether it would be possible to play a combat game called StarCraft via Wi-Fi, one of our favorite pastimes together. As a former infantryman, it is hard to relay the hu- mor and banter of being dominated in a military combat game by one’s eight-year-old son. It brought back a lot of memories, maybe my son is not so much of a stranger after all.

The beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was the last time I got an email from my son. He told me about getting a two-year scholarship to an engineering program at his top university choice. He then told me he had applied for other scholarships to pay for the rest of his education.

As a father, I’m very proud. But I often wonder — if I did not go to prison, would my son have advanced this far?

It sounds stupid to even think such things, but many people try to tell us imatres to look for the silver lining in the worst of conditions. I do not respond well to put answers to complex problems. And I know through emails that my son went through hell dealing with my incar- ceration and getting to where he is today.

At the time of this writing, I haven’t heard from my son in over a year. I hope and pray he is doing well. He says he has achieved his goal, our becoming strangers once again will be worth it somehow.

I get the feeling if the situation were different, we would be good friends, maybe we’d even try a father-son relationship again.

But until that time, I appreciate his “message in a bottle” updates on his status. So, I’m sending this “message in the bottle” back and hope it finds my son. We are still strangers.

Minatani’s essay brought me on an emotional rollercoaster, from despair when he had his son lose touch with gratification when they reconciled. The first question struck me. Would Minatani’s son have succeeded had he not been incarcerated? This poignant thought demonstrates the author’s impressive introspection. — PJP Intern Max Einstein

POETRY
VERSE FROM BEHIND THE WALL

Struggling with Demons

BY ARNOLD JOHN CORBINE JR.  |  Arnold John Corbine Jr. writes from Wisconsin Secure Program Facility, Wis.

Cold darkness
Desolate, complete isolation
Walls bleeding bland
Apocalyptic nightmares
Blank stares
Deadfalls, soaring cliffs
Toothy traps, venomous snakes
Flat-footed foxy demons
Eel-tongued sailors
Witch doctors and pharmacies
Roasting on electric cars
And pushing their wares

Don’t look
Don’t listen
Speak not —

Behold!
Light penetrates the fog
A simple call echoes
Through cavernous canyons

The veil lifts
Hope flares anew!
Demons shy away
To dark passages
Biding their time
To dark passages

I love the concrete detail in this poem, how it lets the smell and the mundane communicate such intense feelings of distance, tenderness and melancholy.

— PJP Director Kate McQueen

Talking to My Mom in Autumn

BY GEORGE T. WILKERSON  |  George T. Wilkerson writes from Death Row at Central Prison, N.C.

So many damm layers in between us.

"YOU HAVE A PREPARE CALL FROM: [George Wilkerson] AN INMATE AT CENTRAL PRISON...

a digital guard tells my mother, who must PRESS 5 to accept it. How can she ever accept my being on death row?

"Hello?" I probe the author. "Hi" says she’s delighted at the same time her monoste is just room temperature. Her cute Korean-tinted English catalogs fresh mundanities. How it now takes all days to rake away crunchy leaves, especially since my siblings are too busy to visit, to help; how fast her fast heart flutters when she texts a mundane, small thing; how she laments her creaky knees and dying vegetable garden.

Her voice lays wrinkled palms on my chest and the inside of me aches then opens, presses 5.

Illustration by Sharon Adarlo

A great burden was lifted from my shoulders, and every single moment became new and existing, so much work living for — worth dying for. The next moment of existence, now a lifetime away, no longer mattered. All that did matter was this one precious, everlasting moment in time, living each and every heartbeat for all that it is worth. Like it would be the very last, because it was and is the last.

I had spent over 15 years exploring the world’s great religions and spiritual traditions, and in giving up life, in living as a dead man, it all came together in this strange yet profound contradic- tion. I yearned for the serene release that death brings even though I was already dead, and yet so alive. I yearned now for life with a newly found passion for living as a humble spiritual entity in this vast, wonderful and magical universe sur- rounded by peace in perfect harmony with it all... as a dead man.

The lesson is that I learned that I am trying to pass along to others who are locked away, to those im- prisoned by the mind’s restraintss and surrounded by the chaos that such incarceration fosters and breeds, is to simply let go.

Embrace each and every dying moment. And, in that death, find life. If you can find that behind these violent walls, then it can be found anywhere you turn in this life and the next. You will see an honorable dead a thousand times a day, mindful of all things, smiling at everyone and everything, even smiling at death.

This story from Death Row was such a powerful read and made me really stop to consider how we perceive someone who is doing the death row? As incarceration breeds, is to simply let go.

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Illustration by Sharon Adarlo
The number of women with diabetes here at Fluvan-
na Correctional Center for Women doubled to about
70 during the pandemic. My health and exercise regi-
ment was especially bad for women who were not financially
able to make purchases from the commissary and had
to eat what they were given.

After all this unhealthy food, we don’t do very much.
This prison has exercise videos, owned by the recreation
department, but they have not played them.

Even though we have no choice in our meals, the
doctor tells us, “You are overweight. You need to drink
water and lose weight.” It is a blow to women’s self-es-
tee to have what you already know to be true said to
your face repeatedly.

This pandemic has taken its toll on each of us. Some
of us have gained what I jokingly call, “The Quarantine
Fifteen.” Others were fortunate and did not. But
the most unfortunate are those who are now diabetics as
a result of unhealthy diets.

More than 47% of Americans have received at least
one vaccination as of mid-May 2021, but inside New
Jersey State Prison (NJSP), the effort to inoculate
everyone has hit a snag as prisoners and staff refuse to get
their shots.

Back in January when I elected to receive my initial
dose of the Moderna vaccine along with four other pris-
oners from my housing unit, I figured more would be
scheduled as the vaccine became available.

“How many guys signed up for the shots?” I asked
one of the nurses at the South Compound Visit Hall.
She told me that about 500 prisoners had registered
at that point, less than a third of the overall population,
according to the New Jersey Department of Corrections’
website. She added that about 300 staff members had too.

“Hey, it’s a good start,” she said, giving me a thumbs
up before she moved on.

But was it? The estimate she gave was lower than the
45 percent of incarcerated persons willing to take the
vaccine, as reported by the Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention in a late 2020 survey of more than 5,000
people in three prisons and 13 jails in four states.

One of the officers I spoke to said he wasn’t getting
the vaccine because he was skeptical that there was an
actual pandemic. According to him, there are approxi-
mately 7,000 officers in the New Jersey Department of
Corrections and only four had died.

He added that he was healthy and trusted his own
immune system. “I know my own body,” he said.

At NJSP, the vaccination rate declined even more as
rumors circulated about vaccine side effects. First, there
was talk that “no one ever got sick after the shots.” Then
the gossip morphed into “someone” being hospitalized before
the rumors escalated to the “many” who had died
because of them. After that, many who had signed up
initially refused to take the vaccine.

Of course, none of the rumors were true. Some
guys experienced mild symptoms. One person lost
consiousness for a few moments. But that was due to his
phobia with syringes rather than any adverse reactions
from the vaccine.

The rumor mill, however, churned at warp speed.
Many have found solace in food, eating out of de-
pression or boredom. Perhaps this would not be so dis-
concerting if we were served healthier foods or if the com-
missary sold them. But we are given too much starch,
processed meat and soy and poorly cooked vegetables
with no vitamin supplements.

At one point during the pandemic, we received
a bag of chips with every meal except for breakfast.
At another, we received entire loaves of bread — one,
sometimes two loaves per week. For breakfast, we were
served danishes high in sugar and carbohydrates. This
was especially bad for women who were not financially
able to make purchases from the commissary and had
to eat what they were given.

At NJSP, there has not been enough education about
the vaccine and vaccination process. In a recent pris-
ons’ representative meeting, medical staff talked about
the benefits of getting vaccinated. Yet, they were at odds
with the almost daily barrage of anti-vaccination com-
mments made by custody staff. In some cases, the medical
staff included members who had not taken the vaccine
and had openly shared their own aversion to the shots.

This is a great example of news correspondence from
prison that mixes on-scene reporting with additional
research for vital context. — PJP Executive Director Yukari Kane
**PODCAST**

**The Hidden Heroes Forgotten Inside**

I am a 48-year-old African American man with asthma confined in a California prison. Every day, while unrest is happening in prisons around the world, I wake up at 3 a.m. I get dressed. I wash up. I put a mask over my face. I put on gloves and I step out of my cell to go work in the main kitchen. Instead of sheltering in place, I go assist in preparing morning meals for 3,600 other incarcerated people during this pandemic.

Steve Brooks writes from FCI Big Spring, Texas.

**VERSE FROM BEHIND THE WALL**

Is Anyone Listening?  
**BY MESRO DHU RAFAA | Mesro Dhu Rafa’a writes from San Quentin State Prison, Calif.**

Social distancing.  
A deadly pathogen spreads like an infestation.  
Is anyone listening?  
Electric fences bickering.  
First prison security measure is always isolation.

Social distancing.  
Cordondes heard in the whispering of over 150,000 in our nation.  
Is anyone listening?

Nurses with cotton swabs not tickling.  
And iron bars locked 24 hours on the plantation.  
Social distancing.  
Is anyone listening?

Governors hedging with elections glistening.  
While the death toll rises, the ledgers are erasing.  
Social distancing.  
Is anyone listening?

This poem is a powerful, condensed document about what the pandemic experience was like for people behind the walls. — PJP Director Kate McQueen

We don’t have all the protective gear we need or receive hazard pay, but we contribute to the work.

We put our lives on the line to ensure the health and well-being of others.

Steve Brooks

We congratulate San Quentin News, the newspaper run by incarcerated journalists at San Quentin State Prison, which won five awards in the 2020 California News Publisher Association annual competition. The paper’s editor-in-chief Marcus Henderson, the president of the SPJ-PJP chapter, took second and fifth place for two articles in the Print Editorial Comment category.

**VISUAL STORYTELLING**

**Two Sketches of My Cell During Pandemic Lockdown**

**BY BRIAN HINDSON**  
Brian Hindson writes from FCI Big Spring, Texas.

**SKETCH 1:** The laundry line is hanging my and my cellie’s clothes. We both worked out about every day, so washing and hanging clothes was a necessity. At the time, we were only getting out to shower three times a week at random times. I’d work out first thing in the morning and then wash clothes before my cellie did the same. It would take three to four hours, but routines help keep a person sane during a crazy time.

**SKETCH 2:** What looks like a yellow raincoat are laundry bags filled with packages of potato chips. In the beginning, we saved a lot of the food provided to us. As time went on, we didn’t get as much, so we ate the chips. On the table are art supplies and miscellaneous food.

This was eye-opening for me as an outsider because it describes what essential service in prison entails, and why it deserves recognition. It also does that magic thing that good op-eds do: it centers a larger argument around concrete personal experience. — PJP Director Kate McQueen
A quiet morning playing football suddenly turned into something entirely different on November 7.

"We got a new president, thank God," I heard a Black man proclaim from his cell in San Quentin's South Block. 

"What happened?" asked another man a few cells down. 

"Joe Biden's the President," said the first voice. "It's finally official. They are calling it on TV right now."

I switched channels to CBS from Fox's NCAA Pacific-12 opening day action. Yep, there was Norah O'Donnell and Gayle King sharing the news with the American public. Pennsylvania finally announced an insurmountable lead in voting numbers for the Biden-Harris ticket.

"Trump won, damn it all!" yelled a White guy from his cell. "I switched channels to CBS from Fox's NCAA Pacific-12 opening day action. Yep, there was Norah O'Donnell and Gayle King sharing the news with the American public. Pennsylvania finally announced an insurmountable lead in voting numbers for the Biden-Harris ticket."

"Trump don't matter what that crazy motherfucker wanna try and do," said the Black guy. "Yeah, said the neighbor. 'He's gonna get all the guns out and try to stand his ground in there. He got Russian spies ready to fight with him."

"It don't matter what that crazy motherfucker wanna try and do," said the Black man. "Come January, he's outta there. They'll go in and drag his ass out if they have to."

Minutes later, a different Black prisoner mused, "I'm sure gonna miss old' boy, though. Trump kept that shit entertaining — even if he was always wrong."

In accordance with the way it works right now inside San Quentin, it was a "down" day for us in South Block's Badger section. We were all locked in our cells for the day, each person housed in a cell by ourselves. Tomorrow, they'll open our doors for showers and yard, followed by another such down day. That's the current COVID-19 program here — one day on, one day off. Whenever the coronavirus counterbalance is levied, we usually count on a special cigarette and a visit with friends.

With no activity beyond the confines of our cells, guys frequently talk with their neighbors. They might even yell back and forth with friends on different tiers and many cells away.

Later that night after President-elect Biden's powerful first speech, and as the Clemson/Notre Dame game went into double overtime, I could hear lots of guys asking, "Hey, what time is Saturday Night Live? Does anybody know when it comes on?"

"Yeah, said the neighbor. 'He's gonna get all the guns out and try to stand his ground in there. He got Russian spies ready to fight with him."

"We all ride out the COVID-19 storm together inside these walls, things are beginning to look a bit brighter. Earlier in the week, California voters approved voting rights for parolees and former felons. We all hope to be one of those someday. Even more significantly, Prop 20 was voted on by a large margin; its passage would have revoked all such parole reform from previous years.

"That dude's more racist than I am," I heard a White guy tell his buddy during the commercial break. "But I love him. He's funny as fuck.

While we all ride out the COVID-19 storm together inside these walls, things are beginning to look a bit brighter. Earlier in the week, the state of California took a major step forward in voting rights for parolees and former felons. We are hopeful that we will be among the first to benefit from these new rights."

On the West Coast, California voters approved voting rights for parolees and former felons. We are all hopeful that we will be among the first to benefit from these new rights."

This SNL reference for the timepiece of the piece, this is a selection PJP editors might consider cutting to tighten the article if we felt limited space.

Because this Dave Chappelle anecdote doesn't fully tie in to the election theme of the piece, this is a selection PJP editors might consider cutting to tighten the article if we felt limited space. This section is interesting because it brings in relevant news for those who may not know about voting reform in California. When it comes to Prop 20, PJP editors might have asked for a bit more information about the endangered parole reforms, for those readers who are not in California following this legislation. It helps to keep in mind that PJP's audience is a national one: readers often need additional supporting context to fully appreciate your stories.

Learn More
If you'd like more information about how to add more journalism to your essay, write to us with your request and we'll send you a copy of our "Quick Guide to Journalism."

Write for Prison Journalism Project
Today most stories about prison are written with an outside perspective. Prison Journalism Project has an online publication for incarcerated writers and others who know the system from the inside to take the power of journalism into their own hands, to learn the craft of journalistic storytelling and to share their stories of life behind bars.

... learn more on www.prisonjournalismproject.org or contact PJP for our submission packet (see page 2).
We Need More Re-entry Support

Imagine for a moment living for years or decades in close proximity to other people in a cold, drab and sterile environment, surrounded by concrete and barbed wire. Whether there is a pandemic or not, social distancing is impossible.

One must ask permission to use the restroom, walk across a yard, open a door, be given medication or have access to feminine hygiene products. Meals are prepared for you and only available at specific times each day. If you miss that window, you go hungry. Unless your family has put money into your inmate banking account and you are able to purchase over-priced, sodium-filled processed products from the canteen such as instant noodles or canned meals. You send your laundry out to be cleaned on a strict schedule, and you rarely have to clean up after yourself because there are porters assigned to clean the bathrooms and other common areas. You are assigned to a job or a program with no consideration of your preferences or skill set. You make very few choices or decisions on your own.

But then you are suddenly transferred to community corrections or released on parole, often with little to no warning or advanced preparation because that is seen as creating a security risk. The most urgent needs are housing, employment, transportation, clothing and food, all basic necessities required to establish a stable life.

First, you need to establish your identity, which means you need to figure out where to get your birth certificate and a social security card. You have no money, so you need a job, which means you have to prepare a resume and learn how to use public transportation. You have to be presentable, which means you need clothes, hygiene products, and a haircut. Walking into a grocery store and having to decide which brand of laundry soap or peanut butter to buy can feel like a monumental decision, and you end up walking back out with nothing because it’s just too hard.

When you are out, you stop and wait for doors to open for you, because that is what you are used to. At night, you fall asleep with all the lights on because it never really gets dark inside prison. Quiet creeps you out because it’s unusual. It’s never quiet behind the walls.

I was released from prison just before Christmas 2020. I am still property of the Colorado Department of Corrections, residing in community corrections, a halfway house that is supposed to be a transition between prison and freedom.

In theory, I am supposed to be receiving help learning how to navigate the world after being incarcerated for the last four-and-a-half years. The reality is that, if I were not a detail-oriented and proactive woman with an education, networking skills, and a passion to improve myself, I would be struggling even more than I already do.

At the halfway house where I’m obligated to live, I owe $107 a day in rent. In addition to all the challenges mentioned, essential technologies like Zoom and Lyft were new to me.

COVID-19 restrictions just make everything harder. And while I’m learning how to re-enter society I’m still held accountable for the smallest of technicalities. Starting over from scratch at the age of 47 is a monumental decision, and you end up walking back out with nothing because it’s just too hard.

Everywhere I step, I have to watch for broken shards. Who knew that shattered people and shattered glass had so much in common? You can see right through them. They’re both jagged around the edges and likely to cut you if you’re not careful. Sometimes you see a rainbow in them, and they are broken in such a beautiful way that you want to keep them.

I saved someone today in the mental health hall. A girl was waiting to see the psychologist, to try to get medication so she could stay high until she was released. She was thin, oily hair and a face full of acne. She looked as if she weighed 80 pounds. She obviously had a drug problem. By the looks of her melted teeth, meth was her drug of choice. My heart broke for her. She was so young and didn’t know what is was like to be trade one addiction for another. I convinced her not to abuse the health system by getting pills she really didn’t need.

Too often, the prison system fails to take a holistic approach to the mental health needs of those incarcerated. Realistically, she needed a good therapist. She needed some unconditional love. She needed patience from someone who didn’t want anything from her. A couple good meals and some shampoo wouldn’t have hurt either.

I see women like her everywhere I go. Her brokenness is a disease running rampant in the hell I’m in. There is a sensuousness that surrounds us while we try to keep ourselves sane in a place where everything and everyone is so detached from humanity. Though the prison is rehabilitating me from my abuses, incarceration breaks me down and steals the last bit of my humanity. It prepares me for society by making me cut grass, paint sidewalks, wax floors, and cook for 1,710 people. Yeah, I’m really ready for the world.

They take my drugs and replace them with theirs. They tell me to face my fears and get over my trauma while creating new fears and traumas for me every day. Should I really thank the penal system for locking me away for nine years so that I could be a better person and successful citizen?

I fit in here perfectly, with my jagged edges and see-through soul. I am just as broken and unstable as my peers. Yeah, I’m really ready for the world.

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Everywhere I step, I have to watch for broken shards. Who knew that shattered people and shattered glass had so much in common? You can see right through them. They’re both jagged around the edges and likely to cut you if you’re not careful. Sometimes you see a rainbow in them, and they are broken in such a beautiful way that you want to keep them.
Dear Family and Friends,
You may notice from the included picture that my dreadlocks are gone. Please do not be concerned about this drastic change. I am not seeking a new religion, nor have I lost a bet. Let me explain what happened.

Around 2006, my hair was fashioned into dreadlocks and I kept it that way since it has become an easy identifier or a kind of signature. If another person asked about me, it was quickly said, “The guy with the long dreads.” Everyone knew me. Unofficially, I had the longest hair in the entire institution. It’s almost funny now people have to take a second glance before they realize, “Ohh, you cut your dreads? I didn’t recognize you.”

The reason? Basically, it was time for a change. There are situations we’ve gone along with for so long that we are no longer truly aware of them. They represent a certain capricity, like staying in a job or other commitment not because we enjoy it, but simply because it is what it is and we accept it as it is. We become so comfortable in our own capricity that nothing else, no matter the awesome possibilities, seems to matter beyond this thing that is. Some may say that doing time in prison is not that hard, at least in the age of today’s correctional institutions. It certainly is not a physical or neurological activity that nothing else, no matter what, matters. My hair became that thing. Call it a safety blanket.

Inside, we’re told what we can or cannot do, where, how, and what for. For my past actions, yes, it is fitting that I am here and that will never ever be disputed by me. But it was time for a change, to prepare for the next phase of this life.

In His Love,
Jeff

What first struck me about this piece was the direct address to the reader. In addition, the simplicity and relatability of the concept is complimentary to the writing style. The message of agency we have over our realities is crucial to any reader. In His Love, Jeff

By M. Yayah Sandi | M. Yayah Sandi writes from East Jersey State Prison, N.J. He requested that his first name be withheld.

Prison laughter is rarely without a victim. This poem is short yet profound. There is truth in here, everyone will recognize about the problem with humor, even outside the prison context. But it helps illuminate how small, nonverbal gestures and communication can be weaponized in an environment that already is so punishing.

— PJP Executive Director Yekini Kone

Unshooting the Shots that I Shot

BY JESSIE MILO | Jessie Milo writes from Corcoran State Prison, Calif.

I have laughed when the law has failed you as it has been failing Blacks for years. Make suggestions that would improve the relationship between the police and the community.

I urge you to speak openly about how the system failed you as it has been failing Blacks for years. Make suggestions that would improve the relationship between the police and the community.

Finally, I hope you get a reasonable sentence. You see, since we are now on the same side, I have no choice but to root for you, as I hope you will be rooting for me and other prison inmates like yourself.

Sincerely,
M. Yayah Sandi

This story was relevant, timely and offered insight into a question that people outside had — what is going through Chauvin’s head and what will prison be like for him? The perspective was one that only someone inside could provide.
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The Meaning of a Haircut

BY JEFFREY SHOCKLEY | Jeffrey Shockley writes from State Correctional Institute Fayette, Pa.

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Unshooting the Shots that I Shot

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If life rewind through time
In reverse through my eyes...
Half un-gray as I un-age
From 18 years spent in a cage
Heart unbreaks as I learn
She will be with me.
Heart un-repaired, her healing
Her heart un-attacks
And tears roll up on cheeks
Fear un-felt, pain un-inflicted
Shots un-heard, safety un-stolen from community
I walk backwards to the car and reverse up the block
Turn left instead of right
And go on with Shelly to live a happy life

Youngsters un-emboldened, hood stories un-told
Gangs un-grow, youngsters grow up to build homes!
Six life sentences go back to the state
Instead of getting life
Life I create
Six kids with my baby!
Three million dollars go back to the state for my cage
Instead it is invested in parks for kids to play
I go to school and pay taxes
Life is great!

If only life were this simple. When I was young, I did the worst thing in my life. I shot two people. Thank God, they survived. My fiancé Shelly was with me; after the trial, we split. She passed away from a heart attack at 26.

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