

Writing by Participants in The New York State Literary Center's 2019 Community Engagement Seminar

What Is It Like Behind These Doors?

I wonder who can truly comprehend
looking
but not seeing,
hearing
but unable to listen.
The blankness of these walls is like snow
blurring the lines between sanity and reality.
What reality do you see?
Do you see
the life of a convict,
the life of a man, or
or the life of a caged animal?
In here there is no difference.
We sit.
We think of life outside?
We miss our children,
hoping and waiting to see their smiles,
to see their faces.
Do we really know the pain they feel?
Without knowing the truth behind their eyes,
they try to hide the lies of where daddy or mommy had to go.

Anonymous

Incarcerated.
Incarceration
echoes
oppression
and is a school for criminals.

Look into the eyes of any inmate, and there is a story to be told, but we keep a code of silence, an unknowing of how to even express all of it. We need more programs to help us express ourselves instead of staying silent behind a mask.

We need something to be able to make ourselves and our family members proud, and we need to build a stable foundation for the rest of our lives.

Incarceration should echo rehabilitation and growth, learning from our mistakes, learning trades, getting an education. We need transformation from an old to a new and better you. Instead the echoes are bad networking, sadness, anger and depression. We need to learn how to become better fathers and mothers, siblings, workers. We need to learn how to become functioning members of society.

A. A.

I want teachers to know important our children's education is to those of us who are incarcerated. Please keep in mind the well-being of each and every child. Each child's mind is important.

Just because a child acts out does not mean that child needs to be labeled "problem." What if that child were your son or daughter?

I am an incarcerated parent, and my children's attitude did 180 after I was gone. How can we know what is really going on in a child's life?

Please get to know each child. Please show each child you care. Please be a friend when child needs a friend most.

A. G.

Notes, Questions, And Me

“He wished to add his own voice to the nation’s ‘blood-written history’ as clouds of ‘wrathful thunder and lightning’ hovered over the land. Then he gave voice to his life’s work. He would, as long as ‘heaven’ gave him the ability to speak and write, fight for abolition and the beginning of black equality with ‘my voice, my pen, or my vote.’”

David W. Blight. “What America Owes Frederick Douglass.” *The New York Times*, November 5, 2018.

I think so much news is false.

The middle class gets smaller, and the lower class gets poorer.

History seems to repeat itself. This is what knowing tells us.

Is it dangerous to be educated and to go against the grain?

I believe we are slowly but surely becoming aware of the world through our own eyes.

To me, chess is like the game of life.

“Herein lies the tragedy of the age: not that men are poor—all men know something of poverty; not that men are wicked—who is good? Not that men are ignorant—what is truth? Nay, but that men know so little of men.”

W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks*. 1903.

I don’t know where I belong, but I know I want to be successful. The sound of travel, the sound of relaxation, the voice of truth, the debate that goes on in my mind, a voice that keeps me confident and sane, sits unheard in my brain.

My time here is getting shorter, and I have to start thinking about the future. I have learned that there is really no such thing as good friends. Being locked is one of the closest things to death, out of sight out of mind. You learn to kind of look at everybody with contempt. You no longer look at relationships the same way. I live and learn.

J. H.

Why I Should Be Accepted Into College

My life? I have gone through a lot of struggles that caused me to be on my own at an age younger than most people. I grew up as a bi-racial child which brought with it identity issues that I had to overcome. I felt as though I did not belong in any group.

The problems began when my mother’s boyfriend, our baby sitter, was angry with my mother and burned me with scalding water. I received third degree burns. My mom never forgave herself and became over protective, which caused me not to grow up like regular kids. In addition, when I was eleven my father died. My mom started dating one of his friends and that caused a fallout between us. I started to get kicked out of my home. I was not allowed to eat there or stay there, so I started to live on the streets. I was homeless from the time I was fourteen until I was eighteen. At eighteen I got an apartment and started to pay my own bills.

All of the time I was on my own I had a special interest in history and travelling. I studied a lot of history and did a lot of research for facts. I have such a big fascination with the world outside of the United States. I keep up with world news and how it affects things around us.

I went to Monroe Community College and did not graduate due to my instability. I lost my job because my contract ended. I was encouraged by a teacher to attend MCC and to pursue my passion of studying the world around me. I hoped the degree would open the door to job, which required me to travel.

I am sincerely trying to find out who I am. I do know that I still like to travel, and I still love history. I realize that an education is important because I know you cannot get far without one. I want an education to open doors that I am unable to open myself. I believe that I have truly learned from my mistakes. I wish I had taken college more seriously. Given the opportunity to attend I know I want to succeed because I want to succeed now, and I want to go above and beyond. I want a college education to elevate my life. I want to help others who want to succeed also.

Thank you for reading this and giving me the opportunity to tell you about myself and why a college education means so much to me.

J. H.

We Need Help

I learned that having a parent in jail or prison affects children for life. It was from a study on the effects of incarceration on children. The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Nationally the number of kids who have had a parent in jail or prison at some point in their childhood is around 5.1 million and this is a conservative estimate (Anna E. Casey Foundation, 2016). I know children are never the same with a parent in jail. I know this because it affects my children. I wish I could take back what I did, but I can't and my kids suffer from it.

We need help. I am writing this for every inmate who wants to be with his/her children and family. We need this type of program. Our kids need this type of program.

W. H.

I have a boy and a girl, one and two years old. My dreams for you, my children, are to believe in yourselves, to defeat the odds, to always strive and to prosper.

I want you to think hard and sharper than I ever did and could.

I want you to make yourselves and me proud with your healthy spirits.

Your Father

K. H.

At the end of my life what will live last past my existence? What can my kids hold on to? It was never designed for me to be great, whatever great even is. One thing I do know is I have to have a purpose if not then my whole life is just idle time recreation. I would rather set life changing trends in order to give people like me a leg up in life. The way I learned prison is not a place I want to be was by going to prison. I never knew how much it hurt to be shot or stabbed until it happened. We don't have to learn like that.

I sit in jail and daily it feels like authority figures try to break me down and oppress me and people like me. If only they knew what I have been through, they would know this is not child's play.

I am taking back control because for so long I was out of control. Every move I make from now on will no longer live in my insanity. I want to live with a purpose.

M.T.

What is my purpose? I ask myself all the time. I did not think I was worthy to have one. I always dreamt of having one and finding it, but the troubles I have had in my life started to show me otherwise. What's the point? I have always hated those feelings and thoughts, but after a while they just became natural. After so many years of being hurt, lost, let down, beaten, abused, and looked down upon I put my feet down and I am making life changes. I am starting to find myself. I have forgiven, but I will never forget. This has made me the man I am today. I am stronger now and more determined to find my purpose and to find the beauty in life itself.

C.Y.