

Visions from the Pen

**Memories
Incarceration
Metamorphosis**

**Education Justice Project Students
Danville Correctional Center
Illinois**

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Author Dedications

Michael Brawn

To my mother, whose unconditional love and support inspires me to make the most of the situation I find myself in today. And in memory of my father, whose passion for education guided him from his impoverished childhood in the Bronx to an academic scholarship to Yale--his story can inspire us all.

LeRoy Brown

For Mother who put up with countless situations my chemical romances put her through. To siblings Charles and Earnestine who were lucky enough never to formulate visions from the pen. To queen Yolanda, and Dyllion, our prince and heir to my throne. My separation from you, son, causes moisture from your soul. My soul is yours.

LeVerne Clayton

I am dedicating this to Marvin Wren, Kenneth and Joella Clayton, Sarah Whaley, my son Charles, and my remaining immediate family for their LOVE and support during this mental and physical journey of lost liberty and mobility. My humanity remains intact because of their undying love and support.

Willie Fullilove

I dedicate this to my beloved mother Theresa Kane, my sisters, brothers, nephews, and my dearest best friend A.E. Merten. I, especially, dedicate this to those who are misunderstood and in need of empathy, understanding, love, compassion, and reciprocation.

daniel e. graves

Always first, Yahwah Qadosh Yisrael, for everything I am begins with the breath You have given me. Mommy, my role model and a beautiful Black queen, from you I receive my strength. My greatest fear is that one of my errors has caused you pain. I love you, I thank you, and I cherish you.

Carlton "CG" Gray III

To my mom Gloria (my guiding light) and my dad Carlton "Big" Gray. To my moms Tootsie and Virginia, Valencia (for not giving up), to my sister Diamond, April-Marie, Phoenix. To Ms. Stine (Blood of my Blood) and my mom Betty and brother Lee, my greatest motivation to fight and stand righteous.

Tyrone F. Muhammad

Incarceration would be unbearable without a loving family. Aunt Eugenia Reese, Uncle Leroy and Lee Anna Dotson--you are my everything. Thank you Robert Whitfield for being a father to me. I love you! And to my spiritual father Munir Muhammad of C.R.O.E.; I look forward to helping you in the mission of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

Otilio E. Rosas

For Emily Mae, Sara Beth, Gabriela Ann: Every feeling of hope, love, and strength—you have inspired. You are the greatest gift of my life. Live your lives with kindness, compassion. “You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who cannot pay you back.” (John Bunyan) I love you, Your Dad.

Andra D. Slater

Tears for the Young is for all the youngins who've endured the toxic social mix of poverty and violence. For: Eric, Terrell and Mark; all childhood friends who I've lost to gun violence. To my Mother, Sheila, who kept me grounded despite my indiscretions in life. I love you.

David Todd

I dedicate this to my mother, Reunell Tillman, the most important person of my life. Your unconditional love is a Godsend. I also dedicate this to the children who were born into this world unable to enjoy the goodness of life because of the mistakes made by past generations. Progress is being made.

Earl Walker

Dedicated to Ora Lee Daniels, Elizabeth Daniels, and Gerz Lynn Jones – Mothers whom I made cry.

Andre Williams

All work that I do is dedicated to my mother Mary Jane who taught me not only to pray for others but to be a beacon to anyone that may need positive support, especially the younger generation. Thank you.

L.C. Williams Sr.

Dedicated to Derrick L.C. Edwards: My lovely son, my friend and my hero who showed what it takes to become a successful and great person. He touched his dad, brothers, sister and many others with all of his warm qualities. For that reason, my son, you will always live. Love! Rest in Peace! (Gone too soon! 24 years old.)

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(Haneef) Jeffrey Lurry
Spring 2010

Foreword

This is an extraordinary collection of pieces—raw, honest, and unsentimental. Some of the contributions will surprise you; others will bring tears to your eyes. If you detect a measure of urgency in these contents, it's because the authors are writing from a point of desperation. They want you, the reader, to heed their words and learn from their collective experiences. They're reaching out from prison in the hopes that those of us on the outside won't follow in their footsteps. America needs to turn back the tide that brings so many young men and women to prison. To the extent that smarter decision-making, a more critical outlook on life, and love for one another and self can accomplish this, then this collection serves an important purpose.

The authors are men I am honored to know. They are students in the Education Justice Project at Danville Correctional Center, a university program sponsored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The poets and writers whose work fills these pages were part of an editing workshop conducted by instructor Karen Hewitt. Together they solicited contributions, edited them, compiled and designed the finished volume, and then marketed it. What you hold in your hand is the product of their collective skills. With them, I thank you for picking it up and for reading these lines.

I urge you to go further into this book and open yourself up to the many emotions exposed inside—regret, rage, frustration, longing, and much more. Mind you, there's also some humor and wit on these pages. You will smile occasionally as you read *Visions from the Pen*. However, mostly you will lose yourself in a world that is unflinchingly real about the emotional and social costs of incarceration and the various behaviors and attitudes that lead to prison—substance abuse, street life, poor education, and various forms of narcissism and insecurity. The combination of lack of personal awareness and structural and historical factors that contribute to mass incarceration are a dangerous mix. That is where this book comes in. The lessons inside have been hard won and deserve our serious attention and our respect.

Finally, in addition to the acknowledgments presented elsewhere, I want to thank the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation for support to produce this book and the many private and institutional donors to the work of the Education Justice Project.

Please read this book and pass it on to others who might be reached through visions from the pen.

Rebecca Ginsburg
Director, Education Justice Project

Memories and Regrets

A Letter to My Little Brothers and Sisters

Willie Fullilove

Dear Future (that's you),

Where do I begin? I want to share some of my story with you with hopes that you will become greater than what I've become. Be more than me.

Two months after my fifteenth birthday, I was arrested and charged with three counts of First Degree Murder, one count of First Degree Attempted Murder, and one count of Aggravated Battery with a Firearm. I was charged as an adult for those crimes. I was also charged as a juvenile with two counts of Delivery of a Controlled Substance and two counts of Possession of a Controlled Substance. Yeah, I was in some serious trouble.

Can you imagine how scared I was? I was terrified. I constantly asked myself, "How did I wind up in a situation like this?" The answer is I made some really stupid choices that changed my life. I wanted to keep up with everybody else so I joined a gang and sold drugs to buy jewelry, clothes, and cars. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. *No idea!*

I should have listened to my mother and everyone else who told me to stay in school because life in a gang and selling drugs would land me in jail or dead. I did not pay attention; I thought they were jealous, hating on me, and didn't know what they were talking about. But they were only telling me the truth because they cared about me. I am so sorry for not listening. I apologize to my mother for not listening to her when she was only trying to save me from making the worst mistake of my life. It is not her fault that I am here, only mine. I did not listen and I am dealing with some tough consequences for being hard-headed.

My father wasn't there and maybe that was a reason I gave in to peer-pressure so easily. But this is not a good excuse for the choices I made. There is no excuse for being in prison.

Future: Do not look to the streets for love. Drugs don't care about you, neither does anybody who isn't encouraging you to stay in school or become a business owner someday.

I am sure my family feels like they are doing time as well. They miss me as much as I miss them. They often say, "We wish you were here with us." Being in prison can damage the family relationship to the point of destroying it. You miss out on graduations, weddings, and other precious moments when you are in here. My family members sometimes blame themselves for me being in here, especially

my mother. A family is supposed to have a close relationship but prison creates distance.

I am kind of smart. In prison I have earned a college Associate's degree. So just imagine what you could do out there with the potential you have. You can do whatever you want and be great at it. Opportunities are limitless outside of jail. In here, I deal with some horrible things that I don't even want to mention. I am dealing with it so that you won't have to. It really sucks in here.

Growing up, I did not want to be the "nerd" or the "lame" so I did what I should not have been doing. Look at me now. The joke is on me. The nerd is enjoying his/her family, paying for a house, traveling, and enjoying all that life has to offer. Be who you are instead of what's popular. My popularity landed me in prison.

I am not much older than you. I have been locked-up away from family and friends for nearly 11 years. *Prison sucks!* On a few occasions I've cried in here because it hurts. It hurts physically, mentally, and definitely emotionally. I cannot describe the hurt because it is difficult to do so, but I can tell you the hurt hits you in the pit of your stomach and the center of your heart. I pray you *never* have to experience this pain.

I will have done 17 years in prison by the time I am released. I write this to you because I want to be an example of what not to do. Do not throw your life away. Do not follow in my footsteps. Be a leader. You are special and you can be great.

I want you to read a poem I wrote for you. I hope it inspires you.

More than Me

I have learned to make wise decisions—to be more than mere
existence.

I want you to see things the same way.

I was a boy who made a terrible mistake only to become a man
in such a dreadful place.

I may be confined to a measured space, but my mind travels
across rough terrain and beautiful lakes.

You have the potential to become someone great,
but only outside these prison gates.

Remain outside. Do not end up like me and suffer the same fate.

Be who you truly are despite what others may think or say.

I believe in you and want to see you succeed.

I want you to believe that you can, that way you will.

You can become whatever you want to be because you are FREE.

I urge you to be excellent so you will be more than me.

Dear Mother

Tyrone F. Muhammad

Dear Mother,

I write you from the enclosure of a 9' x 12' washroom (prison cell) that I sleep in and share with the child of another Mother. I write in the hope that my expression of love, and remorse for my errant ways, resonates in the minds and hearts of younger brothers and sisters who might be guided by my words. If I am able to touch one young person with my words it will be my drop of water into the ocean of humanity.

Mother, I want you to know that these days your instructions to me when I was a young boy ring louder than ever before. I remember the time you said to me, "I am your only friend. No one will love and protect you the way that I will, and when you get in trouble you will come to see who's really in your corner." Mother, in my immaturity I thought you were being a bit over-protective of your eldest child. My lack of understanding of the dangers awaiting me at every ghetto corner caused me to believe you were just trying to stop me from having fun with my friends. Oh how I wished I had listened to your wise counsel. As you predicted, those friends I thought would be there for me during my hard trials of imprisonment are nowhere to be found. The way my friends have abandoned me, it is as if I never had any friends at all.

Mother, right now, while serving a 40-year prison sentence, your words to me are like a curse upon my mind. As an adult, I now perceive the truth of your desire to keep me out of harm's way. All you wanted for me—a black boy living in a hostile and violent ghetto—was to beat the odds of premature death or imprisonment by teaching me how to navigate in the war zone of Afghanistan Chicago. I must say, Momma, I beat death, despite living in a war zone. Unfortunately, I was unable to escape prison. Prison, though, is synonymous with being dead.

Mother, forgive me for dying on you. Now that I've destroyed 20 years of my life, my goal is to warn those kids out there about the horrors of prison. I will tell them that prison is an institution primarily built to destroy the young years of any boy or girl who believes it is possible to defy their parents and avoid becoming a victim of their own actions. I will tell them prisons aren't built for old people; once they get caught in the web of prison, escape is impossible.

Mother, I know you wonder in the sadness of your heart why we boys fall into such dreadful circumstances? You see, Mama, when we are young, our minds trick us into believing we can out-run time. We are unable to comprehend the fact that

things must ultimately come to an end—even our folly. As young boys, time seems to have no end. Our ignorant disrespect of time is our Achilles' heel. In serving prison time I now realize you were trying to protect me from the consequences of my inability to properly navigate the measure of time.

Mother, serving 14 of the 20 years I must serve of my sentence has allowed me to fully understand the importance of having a wonderful caring parent. My being inexperienced with the realities of life meant that I wouldn't adhere to the advice of a wise Mother. I'm sure other kids are experiencing the same problems I did. Now that I have children of my own, I can empathize with what you put up with in raising me. I guess it's normal for children to be so stubborn. But now that I am a man, I realize that is no excuse.

Mother, my stubbornness caused you and me excruciating pain. This type of pain heals over time but the pain of doing time away from you disturbs me the most. Mother, I want young people to know my isolation does not allow me to hold your hand for a simple walk in the park. If you get sick I am unable to provide you comfort. My separation from you keeps me shut off from the love a mother and son naturally share. Mother, the pain I feel in my chest for not being there for you is not fair. Is this pain only for the ghetto-fostered child, or can other children not raised in the ghetto relate to the hurt bursting through my soul?

Mother, I can't make up for the time the judge sentenced me to, but I can make my time with you in the future greater than any time in the past. And with the strength of your love and DNA running through my veins I will one day depart the kennel of incarceration. On that day my halo will wipe away all past pain. With my freedom, Mother, begins our new life. My Queen, I will never again disgrace the emerald crown of your heart.

Mother, please do not be ashamed of me any longer because I am on track to becoming the man you raised me to be. Time away from you has only increased my desire to love you harder than before. After serving 14 years out of your presence, Mother, no one and nothing will ever be able to separate our bond of affection again.

Mother, I love you!

Your Eldest Son,
Tyrone

Tear Drops of You

L.C. Williams, Sr.

When I think of Love, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Joy, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Peace, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Patience, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Kindness, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Goodness, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Faithfulness, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Mildness, there are tear drops of you!
When I think of Control, there are tear drops of you!

My lovely son, as your dad I continue to cultivate these qualities of yours. There will always be tear drops falling from my eyes for you. Because even though you lost your lovely mother, my lovely wife, to a drunk driver when you were only thirteen, and then lost your dad in 2006 to the criminal justice system, you continued to cultivate these qualities in your life. And through all your adversities and hardships, you still managed to reach one of your main goals in life. You graduated from one of the Big Tens—Michigan State University! My Man! With honors!

Yes, there will always be tear drops of you! And as for that young misguided soul or souls who took my lovely son's physical life away, justice will prevail; I shall not rest.

So, until we come together again my son, your dad will continue to cultivate these qualities of yours, as tear drops of you fall from my eyes.

Rest! Rest! My Lovely Son!
Love always,
Your Dad!

My lovely son, Derrick, graduated in November 2008, from Michigan State University with Honors. But on October 18, 2009, while my son was visiting his lovely grandmother, my mother, in Calumet City, IL, he stopped at a gas station. As he was putting gas into his SUV, my lovely son was kidnapped, carjacked, murdered and thrown out of his vehicle on 130th Street.

May God bless our young generation! They need the older generation to hold their hands and walk side-by-side with them, showing them the right way to love each other, and not kill one another.

My Chemical Romance

LeRoy Brown

I first encountered this fluent lady through unusual circumstance.
Tender was I at six—maybe five—the very first time we met.
Being too young and inadequate around her, I didn't have a chance.
Because she was a close friend of Dad's, I didn't sense her threat.
It smacked somewhat incestuous, illicit, my immoral chemical romance.
But so impishly did I covet dad's paramour—his darling, wild Irish rose.
We could try anything together. I was ecstatic from our first dance.
Recklessly we took that journey along my road of woe.

Not long thereafter my mother decried my pilfered virginity.
She voided future overnight visits with Dad.
That decreased the amount of time spent between my dad and me.
Being naïve, I never perceived just why Mom got so mad over a simple,
condensed affair.
My crazy chemical romance.
The memory lingered a long time, and yes, again we danced.

Nearly a decade later, I rekindled my romance with Dad's dear old friend.
Voraciously we partook of one another. Intoxicating! Long lost lovers.
She sojourned for a spell so quite naturally I met her kin:
Uncle Willie P., 100-year-old Grand Dad, and her crazy brother Mad Dog, Johnny
Walker's twins—Red and Black, her aunt Bacardi and her sis Pina Colada.
Man, I'm telling you, her family is huge.
Yet every time I encountered them, with open arms they welcomed me.
Repeatedly, I found relief beneath her family tree. Their bloodline? Booze!

Weekdays, holidays and parties all presented ample chance,
For sordid rendezvous with several mistresses whose wares I tried.
I dallied with Valium, ludes like CIBAs and Trees—my mood they did enhance.
There was the hypnotic Mary Jane, the top contender for my bride.
The candidates continued uncountable—way more than at first it seemed,
Like Window Pane, Purple Micro Dot and Blotter; a day-tripper's dream.

Now I'm older, more sage, with plenty of vitality at my age.
My mistresses have moved on, seeking younger or duller prey.
Meanwhile I discern my future clearly from the confines of my cage.
Resolution has finally dawned on me after five thousand some-odd days.
Squandered are forty-plus years of my life, chasing a chemical romance.
Gone is my desire for her fire. Exiled, the craving to embrace her in dance.
I live life redeemed, a solemn persona realizing his one last chance.

Why Momma Cry

Earl Walker

ME:

I'm on bended knee with hands high, got my face up to the sky
And I'm screaming, "LORD please tell me Why Momma Cry"
Tired of the world with stupid reasons, daddy steady teasing
Ungh! All cuz of them my momma grieving
The LORD told me how he made women special
Gave them the means of being a life giving vessel
Weight of the world on her shoulder, people getting colder
Still, gentle enough to love and hold her
An inner strength to handle all rejection, her pain hid
And suppressed to teach a good lesson to her kids
Sensitivity increased to show love to the weak
Instinct to protect, and when to go and reap
It took GOD to explain, all the struggle and the strain
So I hope this little brain can maintain
Tell me LORD, so we can see eye to eye
Cuz I try, and yet I still wanna ask why
WHY MOMMA CRY

CHORUS:

(Repeat 4x)

I got an urge today, so I started to pray
And this what the LORD just had to say

GOD:

When daddy runs away to find his life
Momma gets the strength to keep the whole family tight
And with the same sensitivity for the weak
She makes sure that her little ones be prepared for the street

ME:

I interrupted and said, "Do my mom ever laugh?"

GOD:

He said, "One thing at a time son she's a delicate craft
Possessing beauty outdone by nothing
So next time you see her make her smile so she can feel like something
When it comes to a friend she's the best so realize
Momma's loyal from your birth till the time your life's denied"

ME:

LORD you hear me, I'm sorry I made her worry and weary
Now I see why she tried so hard to steer me
I wanna make it up but I'm still kinda shy
Show me the way as you continue to explain why
WHY MOMMA CRY

CHORUS

(Repeat 6x)

I got an urge today, so I started to pray
And this what the LORD just had to say

GOD:

"How do she survive the whole day?
By staying humble saying, LORD please help me when she do pray
And she doing my will, my way, don't act surprised
Because of me she saw straight through your lies
Serenity was equipped, accepting what can't be flipped
And the courage when to go and get a grip
Standing tall for her man through his ups and his downs
She's that life preserver for him when he think he might drown
Everyday faced with a new task, I gave her wisdom
Baby calling home mad, know what to give him
Had to make her rugged to deal with the public
Frustration, she got a way to get rid of it
It's similar to babies communication within the first two years
Nobody knows something wrong unless they shed tears
It's what makes her weak and feel delete
Your prayer's complete son so now you can see
WHY MOMMA CRY

CHORUS

(Repeat 4x)

I got an urge today, so I started to pray
And this what the LORD just had to say

Now You Are Beautiful

daniel e. graves

Your mannerisms were archaic. Your oversized housedresses covered with colored flowers were also antiquated, even then. You used to wear two different sets of dentures. One pair, for special occasions, had a single gold tooth, which seemed odd on an old lady, but hip to my young eyes; though I'm sure you felt it added to your sophistication. The other set of dentures, worn quite infrequently, scared me as they sat in that clear glass of water—that made you seem even older. That you didn't have a tooth in your mouth made you simply out of place in such a young household. And that toothless smile, I'm willing to bet I am not the only one who deemed it odd, ugly even.

Things a youth doesn't quite understand are foreign. You were foreign: your age, your actions, your long salt-and-pepper hair (heavy on the salt), your plumpness, and your watchful and all-knowing eyes—those old, dark, scary eyes. And when you touched me with those old wrinkly hands—soft hands—I held back, due to your unfamiliar oldness. But as a youngster, I couldn't imagine why there was a need for us to hide from your eyesight when you called our names.

When I was a teen you no longer scared me, but I still felt you were odd and didn't fit in with my times, like the way you would put bread into a glass of milk and eat it with a spoon. Or, how you would call me into your room and ask, "Do you have any change, dah-ling?" Who, but you, spoke that way? It was strange to me, so strange, the way you would sit in that big old chair watching the same shows everyday, on that oversized floor-model TV. I wanted to say, "Get a life, old lady," but you were old, so old, as you had been my whole life.

You startled me with your invitations to drink that brown liquor. You would say to me (and I'm sure you said it to others): "Come 'ere honey, come 'ere dah-ling, do you want a taste, come on get you ah sip," because—like always—you didn't want to drink alone. Your getaway was a sip now and then, a getaway to other places unseen from that drab room. Your getaway was to a different place with a sip here and there and you simply wanted us to come along. The reason for the sighs the adults forced between their clenched teeth whenever you called out hello, and why the kids didn't want your money or candy was because to accept anything meant crossing your threshold and, and, and we simply wanted you to go away. Someplace else.

Now that I am an adult, a grown man who understands loss, you are missed. I was stupid to think that since I always knew you as an old lady you would continue to live forever as such. I ignored your loneliness. I allowed your

beauty to go unnoticed; what a fool I was not to recognize it. Great-grandma Tensy, now I see you in myself. Your deep dark brown all-knowing eyes stare back at me whenever I look into a mirror. Your kindness I possess; your gentleness I own; your love for family I embody. Your chubby jaws are on my face; those slightly raised cheek bones are there too; and that creamy mocha skin covers me, as it did you. The well-defined pores on grandma's face, on my mom's face, on my sons' and daughters' faces, on my granddaughter's face, are here on my own face too. Yes, this skin came from that Native-American blood you passed on to us all; on you it looked too aged to appreciate. Now, on me, I appreciate it.

The beauty I see now in myself, in my sons, in my daughters, and in my granddaughter, I also see in my memories of you before cancer stole you from us. You, who existed before I had breath in my body—I am now enjoying each new breath thanks to you. The Black queen, the Black goddess who once held my mother when she was a baby wrapped in a cloth diaper held together with a big ugly, steel safety pin only mothers and grandmothers knew the combination to. You with your classy style—lightly perfumed, subtle earrings, and fashionable earth-tone clothes (none of what my mom calls “nigga colors”). I see you, more hip than any other grandmother of four, holding the youngest, my mom. All the while being cautious to not get any baby spit-up on your outfit, or allow my mother to lay against you long enough to wrinkle your silk outfit. In your day, silk on Black woman was something special. Boy, mom used to say you were a sight to see—simply glamorous.

When I conjure you, I imagine 1929 when you had your first and only child. I see a gorgeous woman, and your having a child did nothing to tarnish that: you still were hip, you still walked with elegance, you still carried yourself respectfully, owning your own style.

As I stand here, looking in the mirror in this cold dark cell, I now feel your loneliness. As the seconds turn to minutes, minutes to hours, and watery eyes to damp cheeks, I now recognize your pain. Wanting to talk, yet having no one to talk to. Wanting a hug when those you care for have forgotten about you. And needing to love and be loved because it's simply natural for us to do so, but there is no one willing to freely give, or take, this natural resource. Your knowing and beautiful eyes are mine. Your face is what I see in this reflection and your pain is what I feel in my tears—my soul.

Now I know I missed out on wonderful moments—I'm ooh so sorry dah-ling. But with age comes wisdom, and now I know never to pass up a sip.

Carelessness

David Todd

The warehouse was dry, hot and smoggy and smelled of burnt latex. The facemask Dimmy wore held back the fumes but not the nauseating smell. Most nights during his drive home, he endured agonizing headaches caused by the smell.

Today was the same as every other day—pack boxes and load crates onto trucks. There is nothing wrong with routine, but when routine is being carried out with resentment, time is more of an ailment than an encouragement. This was Dimmy's situation. The only thing inspiring about today was that he was going to see his ex-girlfriend, Carol. He eagerly waited for the next thirty minutes to pass when his shift would end.

Ms. Dove, his supervisor, walked in front of his forklift just as he was picking up another crate to load on the truck. He watched her from the corner of his eye hoping she would continue walking because when she walked through the warehouse usually it was to assign overtime. He just wasn't up for overtime today; he desperately needed to see Carol.

Ms. Dove walked up close and said loudly so she could be heard over the noise of the loud machinery, "How are you, Mr. Heavensway?"

Dimmy replied with a nod.

"Well, I came out here to inform you that the company is giving you a pay raise of twenty-five cents. I could have sent you a letter, but I feel good news should always be told in person," Ms. Dove smiled.

Dimmy responded with an apathetic smirk. He felt he should be promoted to an executive position; the company could use his ideas and management skills. There was no need to celebrate twenty-five cents, but the raise could not have come at a better time considering his wife was due to give birth to their child in three months.

"I know it's not that much," Ms. Dove continued, "but it will add some extra money toward your savings for your newborn."

"Thank you." Dimmy responded. He parked the forklift, somberly walked to the locker room while looking at his paycheck, and thought with regret about his decision to quit school. He had been failing in two of his classes, which was grounds for his scholarship to be revoked, and an excuse to end his college endeavor. He assumed he could make it without a degree.

In hindsight, he realized that was the most catastrophic decision of his life. From that point on, making bad decisions became habitual. Starting his career was more difficult than he anticipated. Actually, he didn't start a career; he settled for a job as a forklift operator, a job he abhorred. He was unqualified for a position in public administration due to lack of accreditation. The competitive condition of

the job market was fierce. His college transcript was no comparison to applicants with degrees, internship experience and connections. To be hired for a high paying job, a degree was required, and getting a low paying job was just as difficult because he needed work experience. Other than going to school, he had wasted his time playing video games, partying, and lounging around his mother's house. Dimmy's problem was he had an overwhelming amount of ambition, but no work ethic. He would rather be forced to work hard, instead of taking responsibility himself to work hard toward his goals.

A piece of advice from his mother came to mind: "Dimmy," she had said while making dinner, "I encourage you to go to school because education will provide you with the information and knowledge you need to make informed decisions and be and do anything you want to do in the world. You need your degree to get a good job."

Most of the time the advice his mother gave him went in one ear and out the other. He felt she was too old to know what she was talking about, and was being overly protective and just wanted to be in his business. Thank God for memories, because not only could he reflect on how right she was, but also how wrong he was.

The five o'clock rush-hour traffic was moving at a turtle's pace. Dimmy thought about the good times he and Carol had shared. "Why was he going over to her apartment when he had a wife at home?" he asked himself every time he went to her apartment. Yet, despite his intense feelings of guilt, he managed to place the blame on his wife—she was not giving him attention, and her pregnancy made her temperamental and intolerable. It grew to the point that he no longer wanted to sleep in the same bed with her. As always, he took the easy way out when conflict arose.

Carol was Dimmy's first love. Ever since she returned to town they had been sporadically seeing each other. She became his source of pleasure and peace.

Carol had dropped out of high school her junior year, and broke up with Dimmy because he went away to college. She felt she didn't have time to be waiting on him; she had ambitions of her own to pursue. She went to California to become a model/actress, but it was not the easy road portrayed on television. Her ignorance resulted in her being underpaid and cheated because she had no knowledge of what a check, bank account, or contract was. Things went further out of control when she got caught up in a scandal with a video director and then no one wanted to do business with her. Now back in her hometown she lived off her ten minutes of fame.

"Hey Baby!" Carol exclaimed as she jumped into Dimmy's arms when the elevator doors opened.

"What's up Ms. Lady?" Dimmy said, giving her a kiss.

Carol's apartment was always preposterously dirty. A hurricane would have made it look better. There were dirty dishes in the sink, pots and pans on the stove, cigarette butts, ashes, ash trays, and half-filled cans and bottles on the

counter, leftover pizza on the coffee table, potato chip bags and more cigarette butts on the dining table, and her entire wardrobe covered the sofa and recliner.

Dimmy knew he had no business messing around with Carol. He was married, and his mother had warned him about girls like her: "A girl who can't keep her space clean is a girl who is nasty and unstable. If she can't take care of herself, she surely can't take care of a family."

"Do you ever clean up?" Dimmy sarcastically asked, as he pushed aside some clothes to sit on the sofa.

"Don't start with me Dimmy." Carol said as she took a seat on his lap. "I got enough stress as it is."

"I'm just sayin', you got to keep your space clean. I want to come here and relax. I don't want to be climbing through dirty clothes and leftover food."

"When you get your divorce, I'll start cleaning up." Carol retorted.

"When you stop messing around with that ol' boy with the Range Rover, I'll think about getting a divorce."

"I'm a grown woman and can do what I want. You are the one who is tied up, and scared to drop your wife."

"Don't start with me."

"Every time I say something about her, you get defensive. If you love her like that, you need to be at home with her and not here with me."

Dimmy kissed her.

Carol had to get in the last word. "Don't talk about my apartment, and I won't talk about your wife."

The instant the big hand on the clock landed on six, Nia rushed off to the employee's lounge, quickly changed out of her work uniform, gathered her things and left. She was ecstatic to finally be able to touch her boo, Rank, again. They hadn't seen each other for over two weeks.

Instead of communicating when they needed some time away from each other, they argued in order to be separated. Their arguments were always about Nia not leaving her husband, and Rank having sex with all the girls in the city. She called him a man whore.

Nia was exhausted from working a twelve-hour shift. The headlights of a Mercedes Benz flickered from the parking lot. A smile spread across her face, but she was surprised Rank was on time. Usually he'd show up late, making her wait in the donut shop until he arrived. Her spirits lifted as she got closer to the car, and his smile was bright as the headlights. The door locks popped as she reached the car.

"What's going on Ms. Glamour Girl?" Rank greeted her.

"Happy to see you." Nia coyly smiled and gave him a juicy kiss.

Rank occasionally picked Nia up from work when he had nothing else to do, or wanted sex, but overall, he was a decent person to be around. Nia loved her some Rank. She loved his nonchalant, but in control, witty personality.

She had first met Rank at a gas station. As she was purchasing her items, Rank approached her and offered to take her out. She declined—at the time, her faith in her marriage was strong. Later, when they encountered each other again at the mall, Nia assumed Rank was a drug dealer, judging from his expensive truck and attire, but it turned out he owned two beauty salons. Rank carried her bags and escorted her around with entertaining dialogue. After taking her to lunch, he convinced her to accompany him to a jewelry store. She was taken aback, and won over, when he purchased an eight hundred dollar diamond encrusted ankle bracelet for her.

As a young girl, Nia was deprived of attention by her parents. Her father was serving a sixty-year prison sentence, leaving her without paternal affection. And her mother's obsession with work and pursuit of her degree left Nia competing to get any attention. She grew up prematurely self-sufficient, cooking her own meals, doing her own laundry, ironing her own clothes, doing her own hair, and going to school on her own accord.

When Nia's husband came into her life he filled an emotional void. He bought her things, he took her out, he listened to her, and not a day that went by without them being together. Over time, however, his attention and emotional support gradually declined until he no longer paid attention to her. This provoked Nia into seeing Rank regularly. Apart from the attention Rank gave her, she became enthralled with the challenge of getting Rank to commit to her exclusively.

"So what are your plans for tonight?" Rank asked while reaching over to rub Nia's belly.

"Whatever you want to do," Nia smiled, placing her hand on Rank's. "Just make sure you stop by a 7-Eleven so I can pick up some ice cream."

"So, how long are you going to stay with me?" Rank started the car.

The doctor's office was quiet and smelled of citrus. Dimmy sat in his chair fidgeting with his fingernails, and glaring at the floor, thinking about the overtime he was missing because of this appointment. Nia looked in baby magazine, page shopping—she was imagining the clothes she would dress her baby in.

Dimmy and Nia had been together for four years, and married for two. For the past year they had grown distant from each other, so both of them hoped the baby would bring them back together. They still had sex with each other, but there was no lovemaking. Neither of them knew how they had lost so much passion and affection for each other, nor did they know how to talk about the problems in their marriage. This baby was their last hope.

"Damn, this doctor is taking all day." Dimmy muttered. "I got things to do."

"What's more important than knowing the health of your baby?" Nia retorted. "It shouldn't matter how long it takes. Sometimes you say the stupidest things."

"What's so stupid about doing overtime? Especially so I can take care of

my baby. I bet if you needed some money to buy something, you'd be pushing me out of the door."

"Don't give me that overtime B.S.. I know you're trying to chase them nasty girls."

"You're crazy. What nasty girls?"

"I don't want to argue with you here Dimmy."

"I'm not trying to argue. I said the doctor was taking all day, and you went off questioning my love for our baby."

"Nia Heavensway!" The secretary called out. "The doctor will see you now."

When they entered, the doctor was sitting behind his desk looking at some charts.

"How are you, Mrs. Heavensway? And this is the baby's father?" said the doctor as he walked around the desk to shake Dimmy's hand. "I'm Richard Fullilove. It's good you have come today."

"I got to be here for my baby." Dimmy said, and reached over and took hold of Nia's hand. "I'm Dimmion Heavensway."

"Oh—you two are married?" Dr. Fullilove asked surprised. "Well good you both are here. It's important that both parents are involved in every aspect of a child's life. What I have to say today needs to be heard by both parents...together."

Nia looked at Dimmy, anxious for the doctor to tell them the baby's gender and about its health. At that moment, she did not see Dimmy as the man she was falling out of love with, but as the man she chose to be her child's father.

Dimmy was caught up in the moment. He imagined riding around in his car with his son sitting in the passenger seat. His son was going to be his junior.

It didn't matter to Nia whether the baby was a girl or boy, just as long as the baby was healthy. It felt good to finally know that she could genuinely and wholeheartedly love someone, and to be loved in return.

"I'm sorry to have to share with you," the doctor began, "some good news, as well as some bad news."

Upon hearing the words "bad news" their happy expressions turned to worry. Dimmy wondered if the baby had Downs Syndrome, or a defect caused by Nia's drinking and marijuana smoking, or could he have passed on a genetic flaw to his baby?

Nia wondered if the baby at risk of dying if she gave birth, or was there some problem with her?

Dr. Fullilove said, "First, the baby is a girl, but there is a problem. We did some tests, and the baby is H.I.V. positive."

"What did you say?" Dimmy asked angrily.

"Mr. and Mrs. Heavensway, your baby girl is H.I.V. positive."

"No!" Nia yelled at the top of her lungs.

Dimmy collapsed in his chair, and fell into a blank daze. He thought about

all the girls he had been with, and which one had given it to him. He didn't think about how many girls he may have infected.

Nia cried hysterically. She was sure Rank had infected her.

At first, Dimmy and Nia didn't consider that one of them may have infected the other. When the thought finally hit them, they turned to stare at one another.

"I knew you were messing around with one of them nasty girls!" Nia snapped.

"Don't put this on me!" Dimmy snapped back. "I know you was with one of them punk-ass dudes! My guy told me he seen you riding around in a Range Rover with some dude!"

"Don't argue." Dr. Fullilove interceded. "That will get us nowhere. At this point, it doesn't matter who is at fault. Our concern is to be clear on what got you to this point, so it will not be repeated. This is the result of being irresponsible and selfish—not considering who will be affected by your actions, not loving and respecting yourselves, and not honoring commitments. There is one way you can save this child and yourselves—love each other. Love each other, and this child will have a fulfilling and prosperous life. Love can take you to the skies and beyond. Now let's devise a plan to get things in a better prospective for the sake of the baby."

Dimmy slumped further in his chair. His heart beat rapidly, and he breathed heavily. The two things on his mind were Nia and the well-being of the baby. How could he face his wife and child after this? If only he could have said no to the big butts and pretty smiles, or at least been considerate enough to wear a condom. Nia aggravated and annoyed him at times, but she didn't deserve this.

Nia stormed out of the office and ran to a corner behind the building. She sat and cried and thought about all the times she and Rank had sex without using a condom. She had destroyed her future, her child's future, her husband's future, and who knows who else's. She should have known there was a possibility of Rank being infected. He had sex with every girl he laid eyes on, and there were times when he was downright nasty. How could she have been so stupid and naïve, she thought. Her mind was in a whirlwind.

She thought about her baby and Dimmy. There was an ache in her heart as she imagined the possible suffering her baby would endure from being infected. The only thing she could do at that moment was ball up in the corner as tight as she could, and cry her soul to the heavens.

Dimmy stooped down beside her, and tightly embraced her. "Baby, I'm sorry this happened to us. I'm here for you, and I'm going to love you like never before. One thing you can be sure of is that you have me. We are going to be strong for our child, and give her the best life a child can have." Tears streamed down his face.

THE END

**Incarceration of the
Mind, Body and Spirit**

Chains

Andre Williams

For years it has been said that a chain
Is only as strong as its weakest link.
But without that link there couldn't
Be a chain, wouldn't you think?

Some people are shackled in their minds,
To habits, influences, or bad choices.
But does that mean our society
Can't support one another through spoken voices?

Inner fetters that create distance between us and
Those we care about show unrestrained pride.
But when that chasm is produced by outside forces
Then the pain is even harder to deal with inside.

Our duty is to become a type of locksmith
That can open barriers with tact and grace,
Repairing the weak links that caused
Breeches of security within the household in the first place.

Yet no matter how strong we may feel
About serving justice or any other claims,
There is no comparison I can imagine that
Equals a parent in chains.

In My Own Words

Robert Matthew Reed

We plant seeds in fertile soil that fail to bring forth fruit

Because when no man is home to tend the garden,

The enemy destroys the root.

In this environment our childrens' consciences are formed

By what they see, and think, and feel.

Our children develop wounds that scar but never heal

As they embrace a reality that imprisons them in their skins,

Battling empty souls inflamed by sin.

Our women mourn the loss of a nation devoid of its men.

Our people see their lives as a burden they refuse to defend.

Therefore, the Lord reveals himself to whom He will,

In an attempt to protect our children from the death of an innocence

That cries from within.

World's Most Hated Creation

LeVerne Clayton

No one ever liked me; I guess you could call me a square.
I'm gloomy, grey, old and cold, and often filled with despair.
I've seen so many things that most never have to see,
Like a man filled with envy for he wishes to be free.
I hear them crying in the darkness; I feel them shake with fear.
I see them growing older, year after year.

No one ever liked me, but so many often return.
They seem to come to me in order to learn.
I smell the stench of their anger. Sometimes I see their lust.

It's true they don't like me, as they say,
But it's like it's me they trust.
Why else would they come to me so much?
One night I saw one swinging by the throat. He never returned.
I saw his soul descending as the locals took his body to burn.

No one ever liked me, but seldom am I left alone.
Yet for many, too many, I am their home away from home.
I wish I could talk to them the way they talk to me;
I wish that I could tell them all it takes to remain free!
But, I can't do that; my creator would not be happy with me.
But if I could say something, I'd say, "Loving thyself" is the key
To never hurting yourself or others again.

Yeah, "Loving thyself " is the message I'd tell,
And if you haven't figured me out by now—I am a prison cell!

Moisture From Your Soul

LeRoy Brown

Within me lies the king of the castle, a king among beasts.
My roar rang supreme within the boundary of my reign.
Yet moisture from your soul caused me pain.

The most royal of beasts, grey and black is my mane.
No pity for any prey hunted in my domain.
Even upon your bounty did I stake a claim.
Yet moisture from your soul caused me pain.

Your very membership in my pride increased my perceived dominance.
But as I marked my turf, your acquiescence was cause to ponder:
Was I a member of "my" pride? Was it I who was by your side?
Because moisture from your soul caused me pain.

As a mirror reflects an image encoded by perception,
I brood over my reflection in this zoo I exchanged for our jungle.
My roar remains the same but is seldom heard. Not once by you.
Now the only stake I claim is a bunk in the 9 x 12 turf that I share, not reign.
Yet the memory of moisture from your soul causes me pain.

I have just to blacken out the world, my only recourse to see your face.
After more years than toes, your memory is fresh. Just as is your scent, your taste.
All that remains are memories. They are permanently etched in my brain.
Still, the memory of moisture from your soul causes me pain.

Dethroned, I sit alone.
In this zoo with my memories of you that cause moisture from your soul.

Visions from the Pen

LeRoy Brown

I woke up this morning with a vision
of my dreams. It's the first time in ages
that I've remembered anything so I had to write
it down. As I scanned my dismal crypt for a pen
I faintly heard what sounded like squealing tires.
Sounds like that stand out when you're not free.

In life is anyone or anything ever really free?
Not according to my line of vision.
Man works until mind or body tires
from grueling labor that abuses the body. It ages
prematurely, the human body, like a fat boy in the pen
who only exercises his mouth to eat and his fingers to write.

His greed won't allow him to call. It's cheaper to write
home for cash. Western Union is fast but not free,
so he gets more bang for his buck with a pen.
To watch him on chicken day is a vision
I'll remember for ages.
He's too young to have so many spare tires.

The daily routine of prison really tires
a man's soul. Escapism! Read! Meditate! Write!
Sometimes I enjoy music that has withstood the ages,
taking me back in time to when I was free.
Closing my eyes, the melodic notes become a vision,
a memory transporting me beyond the pen.

A picture is worth a thousand words, even more the pen.
The potential, options, stories, art—it only tires
when you do. It lives as long as your vision.
If it is a story, then sit down and write.
If an image in your mind, then set that free.
It could be the talk of ages.

Almost three decades alone in a crowd takes a toll. It ages
your essence, the psyche, the soul, this place called the pen.
I've worked hard on my body. I'm close to being free

from this systematic, mental onslaught that tires
the best of us. No one to call, no one to write,
I endure it all with just my vision.

Alone with my vision I've weathered ages,
painting vistas when I write. That's the power of my pen.
In my mind I'm spinning tires, speeding away to be free.

**Metamorphosis:
Education and Rebirth**

A Symbol of my Fist

Carlton “CG” Gray III

The symbol of the fist means a battle won in victory,
It's possible some of us need a reminder—always research your history.
Beyond Black Codes to psychological chains,
Self-denial and disbelief reinforce the adverse behaviors in our brains,
Which dictates our socially-induced bodies.
Rent-to-own was the movement,
Black Power a misunderstood philosophy,
The concept of freedom is rooted in our present ideology.
Moors, Berbers, Muslims, Seminoles and Panthers won victories in battles,
Hannibal, Boukman, Nat Turner and Biko fought against economic rape: renaming
continents, warehoused chattel.
Or maybe that's going back a little too far...
Reganomic policy left its generational Unipolar warrior scars.
Expressed through Clinton's vision:
Increased jobs evolved into a balanced budget and a boom population of prisons.
Casualties fueled by the war on drug...sales.
America learned from the Brits. Opium Wars 1839. Chinese society fails.
While the haze of cancerous smoke got us locked in a narcissistic hell.
There is no victory when from our own families we've already bailed...
Like a war vet traumatized from my long tour in jail.
And yet many claim there can be change and growth:
Better study the laws, Constitution and 13th Amendment: Options—slave, inmate,
offender, super-negro.
Methods may change. Ideas need to be manifested. We went from a g-thang, to a
g-strang, to a “Doing Me” thang
Now we family. Look how far we came.
What Bush has left Us,
Obama has to replenish and establish Just-Us,
Rooted in three-fifths—goons, beasts and American Gangsters,
Nourishing our youngsters, teaching them greed and to bleed lust.
When we step up and fight this war
I'll put both my fists up.

The Race

Otilio E. Rosas

Don't be so conscious of others' actions,
Jump outside and let your feet get wet.
You will derive your satisfaction
From living life without regret.

You're not a loser because you lost,
Adversity is something we will face.
Sometimes the setback is the cost
To feel the thrill that is The Race.

Haters and cynics stand idly by
Jealous critics—they're stuck in the mire.
They see you struggle and they wonder: Why?
But they don't have your inner fire.

So give no credence to the accuser,
Don't be disheartened that you fought and tried.
He shows his true colors when he calls you loser,
For the loser is the one who never vied.

Tears for the Young: A.R. 15 to Life

A.D. Slater

Violence exists where poverty is the root
A neglected harvest bears a reflection of bruised and impoverished fruit
As a result, poor choices are produced
Black and Brown tears fall from eyes of our youth
No one reaching out cancels out the small chance they won't shoot
Yearning to be heard is a painful cry when silenced
Suffering and trying in environments pervaded by violence
Learning to be heard is a task quite different
Current education like a current seeking to submerge
My advice? Keep swimming.
Staying afloat is the task
Sadly, transforming the code of the streets from the code of the class
Dropout rate? On an incline fast.
Street life make scholastics the past
"From Pencils to *Pistols*" shifting Spank the Philosopher's words
Lost souls to a darkness from a refusal to be heard
Crying out—why do you determine our fate,
By providing sophisticatedly-crafted pieces fresh out the crate?
Accessibility increased by plots to flood assault weapons into urban blocks
No conspiracy talk
Trace the lineage to violence in the hood—let's walk
80s Crack on Black Science Project
Bred 90s and Millennium Black on Black project violence
Code of Silence beefed up gang task force and sirens
Encouraging this culture of despair and now A.R.15s,
Enduring American Nightmares obscuring all hope for American Dreams
"Deadliest form of poverty is violence," Ghandi said
Caskets filled with young tears poured from rivers cried red
From Tonka to Terror toys,
Increased the level of young boys paranoid
Hyper-sensitive to blast
Hold fast!
Stop to think—don't kill that boy

Policy makers legislating gun laws on steroids
Deceived to construct “Tough on Crime”
Then brought *Truth*-in-Sentencing to justify the lies
Violent offenses trigger the mechanism
15 to Life in prison and the system makin’ you finish
Power structures—dreams ruptured
A.R. smoke morphs into bleak clouds that hover over the youngins
Silver lining mirages because the storm never goes
Blue skies—symbolic eyes piercing down into their souls
From the towers surveilling—disproportionately incarcerating
With no intention to make life for Black and Brown boys greater
A.R.s crush dreams and discourage learning
Stop shootin’ in order to keep Mothers from hurtin’
Peering into caskets screaming their babies didn’t deserve it
Let the Motherly adage resonate—“dead or in jail”
Resting in Peace or striving for peace with life in a cell
Either choice claims your life for an eternity
These words are a cry for the young,
A prayer for brighter days that’ll hopefully come
Hoping they don’t trace steps of fallen soldiers
Cycle of violence funneled into prison pipelines
Game over.
Drip drop—the sound of tears
That have trickled onto this page from a pen that has cried for years
Young brothers, this cry is for you.

I Need You To Be Okay

Otilio E. Rosas

I need you to be okay.
I need God to give you the foundation to a beautiful day.
I need the sun to hug you with its warm fingers, and to take away
That cold gift that loneliness provides.
I need you to be okay.

I need you to walk on the street with your head held high, knowing in your head
and feeling in your heart that you are
Capable of everything, with your inexorable will.
I need you to be okay.

I need a breeze to caress your face and cause you to close your eyes and dream.
I need that dream to be reality when you open your eyes.
I need you to be able to always live in a dream world.
I need you to be okay.

I need for your heart to never make contemptible pacts, so it will never have to feel
hate, disdain, ill-will, or resentment.
That only helps to kill your very heart. I need you to always have joy.
Life is but a moment.
I need you to be okay.

Raze-ing Test Scores

Michael Brawn

The year is 1999, and I am sitting with my nephew Kevin at Lee's Hoagie Shop in Newtown, PA, trying to explain to him that at the age of thirteen dropping out of school is not an option. Like many kids, Kevin didn't like school, and every day was a battle for his mother to get him to go. Now his absenteeism wasn't just a few days here and there—by February he had racked up close to ninety absences. As I sat there talking to him about the importance of education, something became pretty obvious to me from his responses: he didn't see any value in it. My words were falling on deaf ears. For every point I would bring up, he would counter it with some story about some person who had become successful while having never completed their education. My nephew was not to be dissuaded from his views, and when he turned seventeen he dropped out of school never to return. It is now 2010, Kevin is twenty-three years old, lives at home, works sporadically, and spends his entire life online. Unfortunately, Kevin's views on education are not unique. They are shared by far too many young people in this country, and they are views I have encountered more than a few times here, in prison.

I see on television and I read in the newspapers that in some of the country's largest cities, the dropout rate among high school students is close to or above 50%. There are reports about tying teacher's pay to student's scores on achievement tests, and politicians talk about schools and education during campaigns or budget negotiations. But what I don't see on television or read in the newspapers are any stories that explain to the Kevin's out there, or the young men I meet in here, the value of education.

Thinking a lot about this topic, I have come to the belief that as a society we have diluted the value of education to the point that it is now measured in terms of the student's ability to pass a series of standardized tests, beginning in elementary school. The federal government's education policy of "No Child Left Behind," and its new incentive-based program "Race to the Top," has turned up the pressure on teachers and schools to raise test scores. This system not only does a great disservice to our children, it also diminishes the role of teachers. Instead of developing and expand young minds, teachers are now expected to train students' minds. It seems to me that schools are more like training facilities, where the students are the trainees, and the teachers are the trainers who have a specific training goal in mind—to raise test scores.

This is a dangerous path our educational system is on, for it does not allow for the development of a child's innate capacities to emerge until much later in their scholastic journey. By the time most teenagers reach high school many of

their natural abilities have been stifled to the extent that it's not surprising many of them decide to dropout. The current system seems to be so centered on testing and test results, that the values of education are not being communicated to our children.

So what are the values of education? To me, education is nourishment, from which comes personal growth, social growth, and intellectual maturity, a nourishment that has no substitute. I haven't always viewed education in this way. I remember sitting in my eighth grade geometry class thinking to myself, "I am never going to use the stuff I am learning anywhere except in this class". My teacher, who must have possessed mind-reading skills, stopped writing on the board, turned to the class and told us that what we were learning went beyond being able to solve geometric equations. We were learning the steps needed to recognize, break down, and solve problems. She was honest by letting the class know that many of us probably wouldn't be solving a lot of geometric equations later on in life, although the problem solving steps she was teaching us could be applied to many different situations. I sit here writing this paper at the age of thirty-eight, realizing how correct my teacher was, for I have used those steps many times in my life to help me deal with different challenges and problems. Essentially, what I was being taught was a way to respond to various situations on an intellectual level, rather than on an emotional level, which is our natural instinct. Education is the only way to acquire these tools that allow us to think, rather than to react. Education provides us with the tools that we need to communicate. It provides us with options in life, options that many times are closed off due to the lack of education.

Unfortunately, I took all these values of education for granted, and it was not until I came to prison that I realized many of the things I am sharing with you now. I knew that in order to survive the daily quagmire of negativity that surrounds prison life, I was going to need to find something positive to feed my mind. Education has been that positive sustenance, and over the past four years I have gorged myself with all of the educational opportunities available to me. Education has shown itself to be an incredibly powerful liberating force. Even though I am bounded by the confines and constraints of prison life, my mind is liberated by the boundless freedom of education. It has become my own personal life preserver, helping to save me from this monotonous existence.

These are not the values that are being communicated to our children when it comes to education. Instead the message has been diluted, because we equate the values of education to tests and test scores.

So what can we do? I write this essay as a call to action, to encourage parents, teachers, community and religious leaders, and politicians to speak with one voice, in order to communicate to our children that education is a "Necessity of Life."¹ That education fuels personal growth, social growth and intellectual

maturity. Without education, communication is diminished. Without education options in life are limited. Without education freedoms are lost. I am writing this because I feel I failed my nephew so many years ago, and I don't want to see other children continue down a path that sees no value in education, a path that in many instances will lead to where I am writing these words from today—a **prison cell**.

Reference

1. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (Merchant Books, 1916), 5

*This is an extraordinary collection of pieces — raw, honest, and unsentimental. Some of the contributions will surprise you; others will bring tears to your eyes.**

Visions from the Pen

The lessons inside this volume have been hard won and deserve our serious attention and our respect.

If you detect a measure of urgency, it's because the authors are writing from a point of desperation. They're reaching out from prison in the hopes that those of us on the outside won't follow in their footsteps. They want you, the reader, to heed their words and learn from their collective experiences.

The poets and writers in this volume are students in the Education Justice Project at Danville Correctional Center, a university program sponsored by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

** from the Foreword by
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Visions from the Pen

Memories
Incarceration
Metamorphosis

Education Justice Project Students
Danville Correctional Center
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