



Creativity & Healing

Winter
2024



"I believe the world will be saved by beauty," wrote the Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky. It would be easy to dismiss this idea—we need a lot more than beauty to solve the world's many problems, right? But what if we reframe it to say *our* world can be saved by beauty?

In Jewish belief, each life is a universe. When we help or hurt a life, we help or hurt the world. One of the best ways we can help ourselves is to recognize our own beauty and our ability to create beauty. This can be hard to do! We can start by working to better understand ourselves and our life experiences.

Writing, artwork, and other forms of creative expression are great tools for understanding yourself better. You don't need to write award-winning poetry or paint a masterpiece to benefit from putting pen to paper. While a blank page can feel scary, it's also an invitation, a listening ear, and a container to hold your feelings and help you start to understand them better.

In this newsletter, you'll find two wonderful examples of people experiencing incarceration who are using writing and artwork to process their feelings, work towards healing, and build creative community. Self-expression isn't always pretty. It often requires looking at the hurt parts of ourselves and reckoning with the pain, fear, and sadness we feel. Yet taking this time to look within ourselves and reflect on what we see is an act of self-love. It is a way of telling ourselves that we matter, our stories matter, we are worthy of seeing ourselves and being seen by others. This is part of how we grow, heal, and become whole. There's nothing more beautiful than that.

Draw Your Soul Free: A Memoir and Manifesto

About the author: From writer, artist and yogi ANYAKARA comes a collection of poetry, prose, and art that tells the story of her journey to personal freedom while serving "A County Year" at Ingham County Jail in Michigan. "Draw Your Soul Free" is a letter of love to anyone who feels imprisoned. Excerpts are published here; the full version will be available on Edovo in early 2025.

Handcuffed. STRIP SEARCHED. Made to squat and cough naked. Locked in a cell alone. 24 hour observation. NOTHING BUT ME, MY MIND & harsh fluorescent lighting. Therapist asks if I need anything. "PEN & PAPER." Let my mind be free. The journey begins with nothing but BLANK PAPER, a pint-sized bendy blue pen, and a Soul that YEARNs to go HOME.

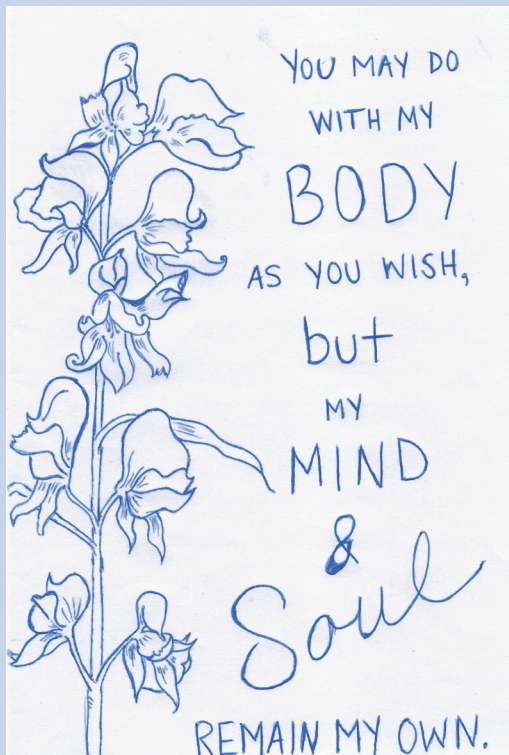
I was told there are only 2 truths in jail: #1 There is NOTHING to do but eat and sleep. #2 The only thing you learn in jail is how to be a better CRIMINAL. BUT...what if that isn't EVERYTHING after all? In truth there is always a choice: will I be...the victim of my circumstances ~or~ the warrior of my making? The decision is waiting & it is mine alone.

I choose to be a WARRIOR FOR PEACE and live by the truths of radical tenderness, unconditional friendliness, and fierce compassion. You may do with my body as you wish, but my mind and soul remain my own. I have learned that it is one thing to say this and something completely different to live it. So when faced with the reality of life behind bars, the question became HOW?

Every day I pick up my pen and put it to paper. I write. I draw. I scribble...Many days I'm not even sure why—I feel heavy and just want to sleep, but I do it because I know it is good for me, like brushing my teeth and moving my body are.

"I'm NOT an artist." "I can't!" "I don't know what to do..." Held captive by the critic who lives in my mind PANIC thrums through my body and the page remains blank until...The world is full of beauty, if only I can be brave enough to see it—and if I cannot see it, then be courageous enough to make it myself. My desire for freedom becomes greater than my fear of failure & I began.

When I look up from the page hours have passed and things have shifted. Nothing has been "fixed," no answers have been given, and yet—things feel lighter, I feel calmer, and I'm not on the edge anymore. And I'm reminded that it's not really what gets made that is important but what happens inside of me while I am in the process of making.



Art provides us a medium to communicate what lies beyond words. It is not meant to be perfect, or even beautiful, really. But the strangest thing happens when we get rid of the stranglehold of perfection holding you back from even beginning and simply allow what lives in you to flow out onto the paper. What remains at the end is, paradoxically, beautiful and perfect because in its existence you see the presence of your soul and there can be no more beautiful sight in the world than that.

Chaos swirling. Tension rising. Conflict brewing. Letting it swirl around me. Tossing and turning about but not letting it pull me in. Keeping my attention on my pen as it flows across the page. My breath following the movement in and out. The stillness of my soul finding peace.

I am just EXHAUSTED of this world. TIRED OF FIGURING OUT how to face each new day. I just want to lay down and cry until the tears carry me off to DEATH. I am tired. So very, very tired. Give the pain that lives inside to the page and let my mind breathe

easier. There is more to this world than I can see—so let me close my eyes and listen with my heart so I may hear the truth of my soul.

Behold my soul: She is a fierce and wild thing. She sings and she rages, she births and holds death. She is MIGHTY and fragile. Her strength lies in her heart. She rises from the ashes of her past. Magnificent in her glory. She always was but could never be seen. Behold her radiance and bask in her love. She is me—let me never forget again...

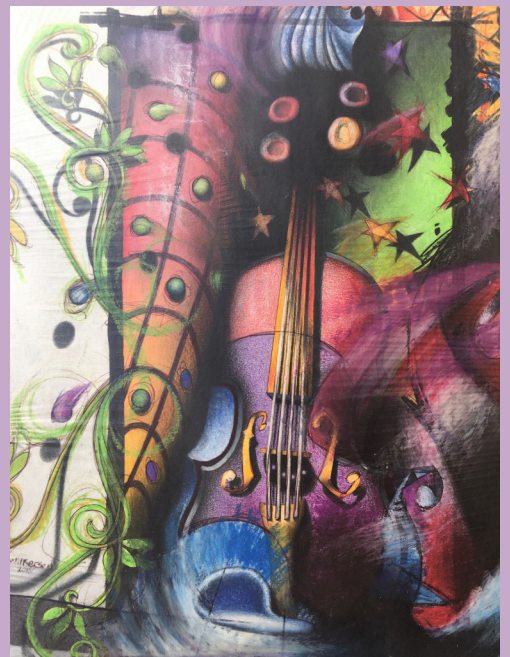
I am simply human, fallible, flawed, and scared. What I've learned is that it is possible to hear the voice of my soul, feel the presence of peace and know freedom even when locked away from the world. There is power to be found in a voice once silenced... so you must hang on.

Now the only question that remains is: What is the story your soul is calling you to tell?

Healing and Transformation Through Creativity

About the authors: *George T. Wilkerson is an award-winning poet, writer, and artist on death row in Raleigh, NC. He is the author of Interface and Bone Orchard: Reflections on Life under Sentence of Death and editor of the national Compassion newsletter. Kat Bodrie is a poet and editor in Winston-Salem, NC. She is the book editor for BleakHouse Publishing. Kat and George are co-authors of Digging Deep: Prompts for Self-Discovery, Healing, and Transformation—available on Edovo in early 2025—and two as-yet-unpublished poetry manuscripts. They are also co-editors of bramble online, an online literary magazine. You can read more of their writings at katbodrie.com.*

For both of us, creativity—and writing, specifically—is a means to heal, a balm for many wounds. For instance, George used to see his dad as “monstrous” for the way he’d lash out at George and his brothers as they grew up. Bruises and broken bones healed naturally, but psychological injuries festered in the form of resentment, confusion, shame, and contempt. Since George couldn’t talk about his emotions, he shoved them down and put a lid on them.

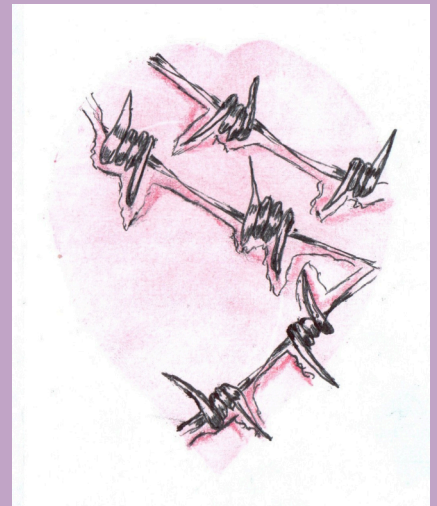


But something beautiful happened when he started writing about his dad, who passed away during George’s trial in 2006. At first, those toxic emotions spewed out like thick black smoke. But then, he started to feel lighter, cleaner, and could see beyond his own pain to his dad’s good qualities. George also realized that his dad had been in the grip of schizophrenia and was grappling with his own traumas — all while trying to raise four rambunctious boys. Creative writing helped George empathize with his dad, forgive him, and see him as human again.

Creativity has had a cleansing, transformative effect for Kat too. In high school during the late 90s, she began journaling to crystallize and release feelings, thoughts, and opinions, and to process situations she

was going through. Her first journal—a blue, multi-subject notebook—became a place she could just be herself. She recorded quotations she liked, brainstormed for her fantasy novel, and even decorated the cover with dragons she'd printed from the Internet and colored in with colored pencil.

Part of Kat's self-expression involved writing poetry, which helped her process difficult emotions. When one of her friends committed suicide in 2019, she printed his farewell letter, put it on a clipboard, and used a Sharpie to mark out phrases and sentences. She rewrote the story he'd been telling himself. He wasn't actually alone; he wasn't actually a failure. The erasure poem Kat created became the first poem in a collection she wrote to process her grief.



Something else that's been healing for us, in addition to individual creativity, is our creative collaboration. When we met in 2021, we realized we weren't average penpals. We exchanged poetry and gave one another constructive feedback. We saw each other as equals, which was especially healing for George, who lives on death row. In the process of exchanging nearly every poem we'd ever written, we developed a lot of admiration and respect for each other.

After a few months, we decided to start writing a book together. It was risky: writing a book is a years-long undertaking with many cycles of rewriting and revising. Writing a book with someone else is even more difficult because it involves putting aside ego to work toward a shared vision, and counting on the other person to deliver.

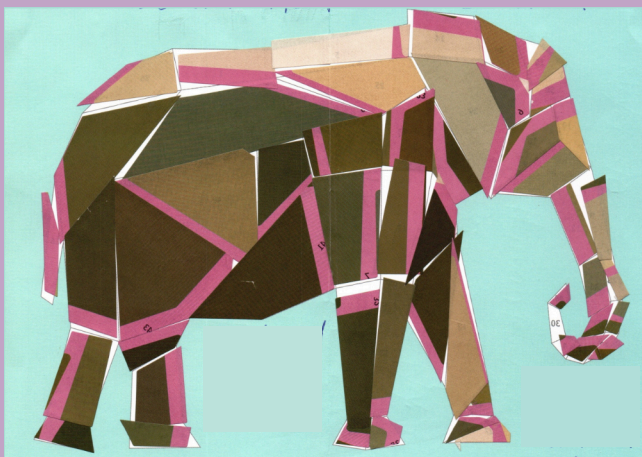
Our shared vision was to help others heal and learn more about themselves through writing, just as we had. To fulfill this vision, we wanted to use our interests in psychology, therapy, and emotional intelligence to develop a series of writing prompts. Topics would range from anger, guilt, and joy to reputation, forming relationships, home, and reframing stories we tell ourselves.

During the process of working on our book, we had our share of ups and downs. We had health emergencies, slow mail service, interruptions from other obligations, and more. Since George was in prison, the computer work was up to Kat.

After three years, we finally accomplished our goal. Prisoners with tablet access can find our prompts on the Human Kindness Foundation's page on Edovo starting in early 2025.

Just look for *Digging Deep: Prompts for Self-Discovery, Healing, and Transformation*. Those with access to Edovo can use these prompts as a guide to starting a creative practice in prison. But you don't need our book to start this process. You just need a pen, paper, and a desire to understand yourself better.

We understand the masks and walls you have to put up to protect yourself in prison. But you matter, your healing and wellbeing are important, and you are worthy of every good thing in life. So join us in experiencing the healing and transformative power of writing.



Many thanks to our artists: page 1: Michael Sloan; page 2: Michelle Corona (top), Anyakara (bottom); page 3: George Wilkerson (top), James Blanton (bottom); page 4: Tommy Pickren (top), Ronnie Robertson (bottom); page 5: Robert Joseph Swainston; page 6: Jason Bruni; page 7: William Downes (bottom); page 8: Michael Turner.

Sita's News & Notes

Awakening Loving- Kindness



Pema
Chödrön

New Book: *Awakening Loving-Kindness* by Pema Chödrön

Beloveds, thanks to the generosity of the Pema Chödrön Foundation, we're now able to offer you a new book, *Awakening-Loving Kindness*. This little jewel of a book proves big wisdom can come in small packages. It's a wonderful resource for starting a meditation practice or maintaining an ongoing one. Here's just one example of her "big wisdom." "Mindfulness is loving all the details of our lives, and awareness is the natural thing that happens: life begins to open up and you realize that you're always standing at the center of the world...you're always standing in the middle of sacred space..."

New on Edovo

Early next year, we'll have new content on Edovo, including videos of our 50th anniversary celebration. These videos will include a performance of the collaborative poem "Dancing in a Sky of Kindness," which features the writing of many readers of this newsletter, and a play called Together-Apart, made from letters we've received over the past 50 years. We will also post a recent talk we gave at Zen Peacemakers International highlighting the Together-Apart practice, all three 2024 newsletters, and the new works from Anyakara, George Wilkerson and Kat Bodrie mentioned earlier in the newsletter.

Update on Jarvis Jay Masters

My dear friends, so many of you have read Jarvis Jay Masters' beautiful and touching book, *Finding Freedom*, that I wanted to share an update about our dear Jarvis with you. After 42 years of incarceration at San Quentin State Prison — 33 of those years for a crime he did not commit — Jarvis Jay Masters has now been transferred to Sierra Conservation Center in Jamestown, CA. Jarvis was among the last of over 630 men to be moved out of San Quentin's East Block, as part of California Governor Gavin Newsom's plan to physically dismantle the nation's largest death row. All death sentences currently remain in place. If you don't already have a copy of *Finding Freedom* and would like one, please let us know.

Together-Apart

My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays!
Love, Sita



Letters

Dear HKF,

As I approach ten "long" years of incarceration, I feel such joy and thankfulness to God for being blessed with one of your newsletters during the very first month of this unexpected "detour" my life took. I vividly recall the first 24 hours in an intake cell at a county jail — the metal door bolted shut had an unwelcoming message for the occupants: "WELCOME TO HELL!" It certainly felt like it!

Yet there where the shell of my former self lay broken, sprouted a small spring of hope. It received critical nourishment from the words in "A Little Good News" and other HKF publications. I know I probably could have gotten back on my feet after a long, confused struggle to remember the inner spark of myself (which dwells in each and every one of us!), but I was fed a diet my soul so desperately needed. Those initial spoons of "baby food" were delivered to my cell, passed through many hands (including officers!) from Human Kindness Foundation! I was truly blessed to receive such sustenance!

I am no longer that frail small sprout unsure of what lies ahead. Thank you for caring for me when I most needed it! I am now vibrant and full of LIFE, and all of its incredible opportunities. The years left remaining to "serve" are almost irrelevant. Life is, and will be, regardless of physical restraints.

Love is: seeing the green life burst up through cracks in blacktop on the other side of the concertina wire-topped fence. Paved over, the vegetation that has lied underneath for years has no choice but to reach up for the opportunity of life! I have never felt so free.

My family has a difficult time trying to understand this seemingly impossible paradox. Just last month, a visiting priest motioned for me to approach. He had a confused look on his face when he said, "You look so happy!" My reply was just as straightforward, "Yes father, I am!" To all of those recently incarcerated, no matter how difficult your present circumstances are, you are not alone, and within you too resides a precious seed of life that will thrive on hope!! All my best to everyone at HKF this holiday season! Thank you for your continued gift! -P



Dear HKF,

Thank you. I just read your Fall 2024 newsletter, and I'd like to try to explain to you how it made me feel. By the age of 20, I'd been to county jails a few times, and this time I was sitting in the hole of my county jail waiting to go to state prison for a 3-9 year sentence. I was full of bitterness because I knew I was full of potential, but here I was, 20 years old with 5 years already spent in institutions. I was just feeling lost, with such a strong desire/need to do something with myself but not knowing what or how.

"A Little Good News" is a publication of Human Kindness Foundation, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Donations & bequests are welcomed and are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. With your help, we send over 20,000 free books annually to people who request them while they are incarcerated. You can request books by writing to HKF, PO Box 61619, Durham NC 27715. **www.humankindness.org**

Letters

The five months I spent in county were important because I finally realized the consequences of my actions would always lead me right back to where I was sitting. I was feeling completely and utterly alone not knowing what to do next. So I asked God for help.

I knew there were people out there—somewhere—who were striving to learn and practice the habits that will enable them to escape the negative cycle they were in—I'd just never met them. Just like people from Cuba know there is snow, but they never really know until they encounter it. They haven't had an experience with it yet so they don't really know. They don't know how cold the snow is, how it looks falling, how it tastes, how it smells, how it sounds falling—the sounds of life around it.

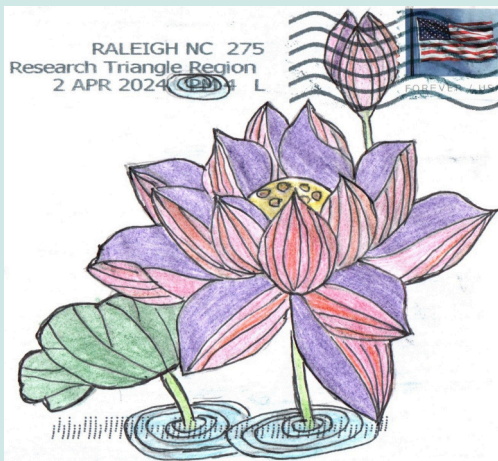
This is where I was and then I read your Fall 2024 newsletter. I felt like I had finally found a place, a people, where I belong! There were people asking the same questions as I am. People who felt like me. People who have been through it. They understand! I'm not sure I'm adequately describing how you've all made me feel—the feeling was sublime!

I just want to thank you for somehow making me feel like I've found a community, a place where I belong. For proving to me definitively that there is snow out there. Thank God & thank you brothers and sisters. -TB



Sita & Friends,

Wow! Thank you all! You recently sent me three inspiring books by Pema Chödrön. To be honest, I'd fallen out of practice with meditation & had been in denial because I thought I was doing good enough being mindful and knowing so much (me and my big fat head). I got in a fight and finally ended up in isolation for 30 days for "major disturbance." I felt everything was so unfair and I kept struggling against against against.



The books you sent align so well with my experiences now. Pema says being the worst Buddhist is the best way to grow and I felt exactly that. Stronger than ever just for not giving up. I realize how much fear I still battle. Fear I'm going to lose myself again, fear of being misunderstood, fear of being humiliated, fear of failure, fear of success and how fear affects everything I do.

Prisons may not be very scenic but they make amazing ashrams! When I meditated yesterday, a fly landed on me! I told myself the fly was my worst mistakes. It made my skin crawl but it was harmless. I became friends with the fly and he brings me peace as he lands on me repeatedly today. I love you all! Thank you!

-Meow

Please note HKF may anonymously publish letters you write to us in our newsletters or other publications. We may also publish artwork sent to us with attribution whenever possible. Please let us know if you do NOT want your work published. Thanks for filling our publications with your spirit and wisdom!

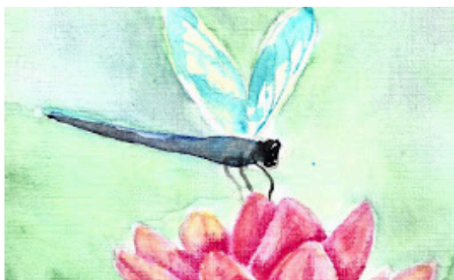


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Practice

Look all around you.
Don't stop until you find
something beautiful.
Take all the time you need.
This beauty might not be
something you see; it might be
a sound, a smell or a feeling.
Open yourself up to beauty as
a way of being, a way of believing.
Beauty always surrounds us.
It is up to us to see it, to believe it,
to be it.



Art by Michael T.

**"If I do what I can
today, I think that
tomorrow will take
care of itself.
If I'm focused on
tomorrow, I'm gonna
miss something
today."**

Melvin, 2009

Questions

When did you experience
beauty today?

Get a pencil and paper, close your
eyes, and let your hand freely
move the pencil. Draw
something that feels beautiful.
Open your eyes.
What do you see?

