



Let Your Light Shine

Fall
2025

"If you let your little light shine...no one can extinguish that," were Sunny Jacobs' final words at an event exploring the meaning of freedom at a historic jail in Dublin, Ireland on Easter Monday, 2017. A small grey-haired woman in a purple coat and black turtleneck with her purse slung over her shoulder as if she might have to make a hasty retreat, she stood in a cavernous room surrounded by jail cells as she led the audience in singing "This Little Light of Mine."

Sunny learned a lot about finding light in darkness during her 17 years in prison. During five years on death row in solitary confinement followed by 12 more years of incarceration before her case was overturned, she nurtured a passion for justice and joy, no matter the circumstances. For decades after her release in 1992 until the time of her death on June 3, 2025, Sunny was a tireless advocate for human rights and the abolition of the death penalty. A powerful storyteller who knew how to use her experiences to activate others, she traveled the world in her wheelchair, speaking to any group who asked. Her talks were not just about the death penalty, she explained, but also "about human nature, human rights, and most importantly, about the resilience of the human spirit."



Sunny believed that we are the only ones truly capable of snuffing out our inner light. As long as we live, there is a part of us that is ours alone and only we can choose how to nurture it. Do we choose to nurture anger, fear, and resentment or do we choose to nurture joy, strength, and peace? These choices affect how we walk in the world and how we relate to others and ourselves.

What we feed grows. Even in solitary confinement on death row, Sunny fed her light a steady stream of meditation, prayer, and yoga. She fed the life around her, saving crumbs to share with the ants who visited her cell and then delighting in watching them move. She grew tomatoes with the stray seeds that found their way onto her tray. When only crumbs remained, she found a way to turn them into community.

Sunny was no saint. She was perfectly imperfect, as we all are. Her extraordinary life, filled with great highs and lows, is a powerful example of how positive practices can help us survive hard times in healthy ways. Before Sunny was incarcerated, she gardened, cared for animals, did yoga, and meditated. During incarceration, she did the same and even taught these practices to others. Once she was released, these practices helped her find stability and community as she struggled to navigate life after prison.

These practices offered a release from fear, anger, sadness, and blame. Such feelings need a way out of our hearts and minds, if only for a little while. The work of release requires maintenance. It's not a one and done experience. If we don't do this work, the big, difficult, painful feelings will take up all our space, leaving little room for joy, compassion, and connection. Sunny's life shows us how one woman who lost more than anyone should ever lose was able to do her daily work to be a free and full person, inside of prison and out.



A series of events one February morning in 1976 changed Sunny's life and that of many others, leaving a path of devastation across multiple families. That morning, Sunny was sleeping in the backseat of a beat-up green Camaro with her ten-month-old daughter, Christina, and nine-year-old son Eric. Her partner Jesse and their friend Walter were in the front seat of the car, which was parked at a rest stop off I-95 near Fort Lauderdale. On a routine stop, Florida State Trooper Phillip Black went to investigate the car. His friend, Canadian police officer Donald Irwin, was visiting Black and was along for the ride.

The exact details of what happened next remain under debate a half-century later. What is clear is that one of the adults in the green Camaro shot and killed the

officers. Walter drove off and later, Sunny, Jesse, and Walter were all arrested for the officers' murder. Walter took a plea of second-degree murder and testified against Sunny and Jesse. Both were convicted of first-degree murder. Jesse was sentenced to death. A jury sentenced Sunny to life in prison but Judge M. Daniel Futch, a former Florida State Trooper known as "Maximum Dan" who kept a miniature replica of an electric chair on his desk, changed her sentence to death. At 27 years old, Sunny went from being a nursing mother to a woman facing execution.

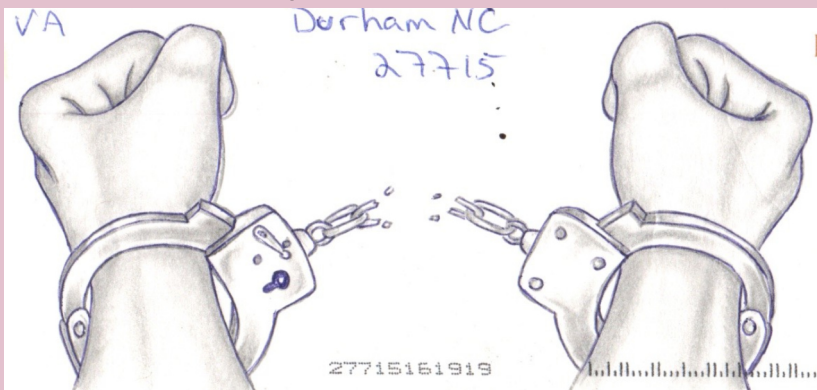
When Sunny was sentenced, there was no death row facility for women in Florida so they put her in solitary confinement at a maximum security women's prison. She was the only woman on death row in Florida at the time. No one was allowed to speak to her—not the inmates or the guards. She was left alone in a tiny cell with nothing but a law book and a Bible.

"When I was first sentenced to death and put in solitary confinement, I was angry and confused and frightened and disillusioned," Sunny recounted. "For the first few weeks I paced the six steps in my cell from the solid metal door to the toilet." Even though she didn't know if she believed in God anymore, she picked up the Bible every day to see if there was anything there that could help. She always found something that spoke to her.

It would have been very easy for Sunny to continue pacing her cell for years, trapped not only by the walls that surrounded her but also by her inner rage, fear, shame, frustration, and sadness. After a while, however, Sunny came to realize that while the walls held her body, they didn't control her spirit.

"There came a time when I decided I was sick of living with an angry person," she recounted. "It was in that very place when I felt the most hopeless that I realized I still had a choice. While I still was living and breathing, I was in charge of my life. I might not be in charge of my circumstances but my life still belonged to me and I could choose what I wanted to do with it and how I would live it. In my little world, I could decide. And so I decided I didn't have to live the rest of my life, be it long or be it short, in fear and misery and anger. Instead, I could use the time that I had there to work on my spiritual self."

Each day is filled with choices. How will I see the world? How do I understand my circumstances? Each choice we make is an act of power. Sometimes the mere act of staying





alive is enormous. Just lifting your head off the pillow and recognizing there's a reason to get out of bed can be an act of heroism. During one of the hardest times imaginable, Sunny realized she had tools and practices she could use to survive. These tools helped her release her fear and anger, if only for a moment, so she did not lose herself in pain.

"I took back my life," she recounts, "and began doing yoga, meditation, push-ups, sit-ups, and running in place. I decided to believe in God—in Hope rather than hopelessness—and I turned my cell into a Sanctuary."

Sunny's medicine was yoga and meditation. Perhaps that's yours, or maybe your medicine is lifting weights, going for a walk, making music, writing poetry, or cooking a meal. We all have our own medicine that we use to release ourselves from the binds of fear, anger, and resentment that can control our lives and keep us away from our light. There are no quick

fixes or magic pills. Instead, this is the work of a lifetime.

"Through yoga, meditation and prayer," she explained, "I realized I was a spirit here, in a body, on my journey. So if I am a spirit here on my journey then so must be the guards and the judge and the police and the prosecutor and those who had testified against me. I began to see them in a different way. I simply saw them as individuals, each on his or her journey. I never stopped pursuing my case in the courts. I wasn't living in denial about my sentence of death, but while I was still alive, I could choose the quality of life. If any day could be my last day, it would be a shame to have spoiled it worrying or being angry."

Not only was Sunny able to put her terrible situation in a productive perspective, but she was also funny about it—at least once she was out of prison and telling the tale. "For the first time in my life, I had servants," she recounted with a childlike giggle, describing her changed perspective on the guards. "They cooked for me, they brought me my food, they did my dishes, they did my laundry, I didn't have to work. I had no bills to pay. So I decided it was a good opportunity."

For five years in solitary confinement, waiting to die, Sunny did her spiritual work. When her first appeal came up, her sentence changed from death to life in prison. She moved to a different facility. There, she could receive art supplies, so she painted pictures for her children and her partner Jesse, who was still on death row.

Her parents were raising her two children, who came to see Sunny four times a year. After her death sentence was commuted and her parents were no longer worried their daughter would be executed, they decided to take a vacation to Las Vegas. On the way, their plane crashed outside of New Orleans. They both died in the crash.

"That was the worst day of my life," Sunny remembered. "I became an orphan and my children became orphans again." Sunny's children were placed in foster care. After about a year, her daughter's caregivers decided it was too stressful to bring her to visit her mother so Sunny was no longer able to see her. She also lost touch with her son who was a teenager at the time. All she could do, she said, was "pray and send them my energy."

Fifteen years into her sentence, Sunny's partner Jesse died in a brutal botched execution. After Jesse's death, a team of lawyers and friends continued to appeal for Sunny's release. Finally in October 1992, the court granted Sunny a new trial after discovering the prosecutors withheld evidence in her first case. She accepted a plea deal and was released on time served. After 17 years, Sunny had to face a world and a life

totally different than the one she left behind. "When I went to prison, I was 27 years old. I was a mother, a wife, and a daughter. When I came out, I was a widow, an orphan, and a grandmother." She missed her children's childhoods and her parents' last years on earth.

When she was released, Sunny had no money, no home, and no job. She had to rebuild her life in so many ways. She had to build a relationship with her children—who were now adults—and a life without her partner. She had to learn to walk through this world without being crushed by the weight of the tragedies she experienced. Slowly, she found her people—rekindling her relationship with her children and grandchildren and finding community in fellow yoga and meditation practitioners.



Later, at a talk in Ireland advocating for an end to the death penalty, she met her person—Peter Pringle. Peter had been wrongly convicted and sentenced to death in Ireland for a crime he didn't commit. He served 15 years before he was released. "Together," she shared, "we became part of each other's healing."

They built a simple life together in rural western Ireland, caring for animals and growing much of their own food. Their house close to the sea was filled with the smells only an animal lover's old house could have—of good memories and not-so-good memories, of goats and cats, and of whatever food Sunny was cooking that day. Every week, Peter would take Sunny, in her wheelchair, to teach yoga in the nearby city of Galway. They would feed and milk the goats; Sunny would make cheese that seemed to find its way into every meal she cooked. As far as possible from a six-foot cell, her life was now filled with "nothing but nature, the animals, blue skies, the sea, and the wind."

It wasn't enough, however, to live in peace in the Irish countryside with her partner. She wanted others with similar experiences to also have a healing place. So she and Peter started The Sunny Center in rural Ireland, where first they welcomed exonerees and later anyone struggling with injustice, to experience the healing quality of nature, peace, and community.

When those seeking refuge from life's injustices came to visit, Sunny and Peter would take them up into the mountains to reconnect with the earth again. "Always, an animal became their companion," she remembered. "Sometimes a dog or a cat. Sometimes a chicken or a goat. And this is so healing." Sunny and Peter welcomed people to their home and shared their stories for years, even in the face of Peter's failing health and Sunny's mobility difficulties. After Peter's death on New Year's Day, 2023, Sunny continued giving talks advocating for human rights, even traveling to France several months before her death in June 2025.

Fire followed Sunny throughout her life. She died in a house fire along with her caretaker, Kevin Kelly. Her partner died in the electric chair. Her parents died in a plane crash. Two men—Philip Black and Donald Irwin—died in gunfire, devastating their families' lives. Sunny's life was surrounded by more tragedy than most of us could imagine.

Many thanks to our artists: page 2: Charlie Kingsley (top), George Mills (bottom); page 3: Charlie Kingsley; page 5: Frank Spencer (top), Trinity Bossler (bottom); page 6: Robert Joseph Swainston; page 7: Raymond Joiner (top), James Carr (bottom); page 8: Banegas Santine.

Her life was also extraordinary. A movie and play were made about her. Famous actors like Susan Sarandon and Brooke Shields played her on film and stage. At times, she even played herself. She wrote a memoir. She travelled the world sharing her story and advocating for human rights and an end to the death penalty.

Sunny had a Big Life. She had a Big Light. We deserve to recognize the great big light that shines within us all. Sunny did. May we not be afraid of our light or feel like it does not burn as bright as others. May we not fear or resent the light of others or think that by snuffing out someone else's light, ours will burn brighter.

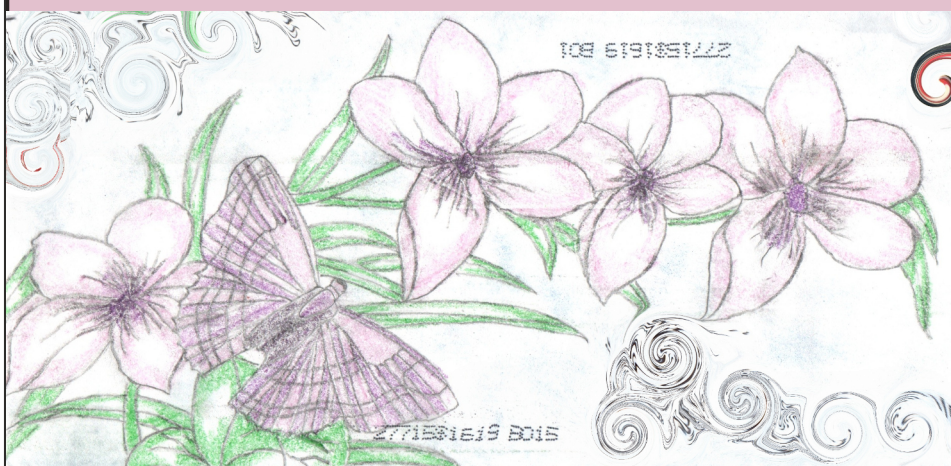


Sometimes, the fire inside of us can be all consuming. We have to learn to channel our energy into something that builds instead of destroys. This is the most important lesson Sunny can teach us. During hard times, she used her survival skills like yoga, prayer, and meditation to work through and release the big, tough feelings that could have consumed her. She wrote the pamphlet "Survival Yoga"—currently on tablets on Edovo in 1200 prisons and jails across the country—to share the tools that helped her survive with others in similar situations as her.

"At first it was for my children," she explained about why she created a regular spiritual practice in prison. "I wanted to make myself the best person I could be, by not becoming bitter or fearful, so that when I got out, I would have something left to give to my children. But then, as the years passed, I started doing it for myself, so that no matter what happened, at least there would be a me."

While many of us struggle with the idea of forgiveness and letting go, particularly when pain feels like a part of how we honor loss, Sunny's practices of release offer a roadmap towards survival and even healing. She did her work so that her bitterness and fear would not become all she was; she did her work to not lose herself in pain. Creating our own practices of release allows us a space to not feel like the hard feelings—whether they are fear, guilt, grief, shame, anger, sadness or some combination of them all—are all we are and all we'll ever be. Her example shows us we can do the work needed to survive with our light intact.

May we remember the strength, energy, humor, love, gratitude and power that lives within us all and makes up our own beautiful light. Let us remember our light always burns brightest when we share it with others. –Peace to all, Erin

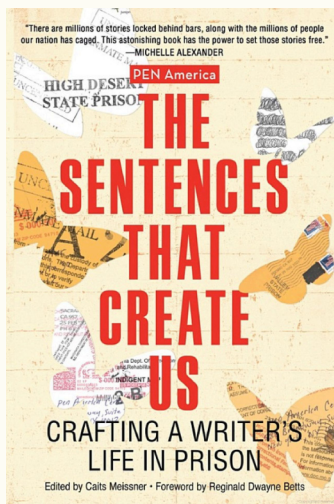


"The longer I live the more deeply I learn that love—whether we call it friendship or family or romance—is the work of mirroring and magnifying each other's light."

–James Baldwin

Sita's News and Notes

New Book: The Sentences That Create Us



We have been so blessed to receive writing from people in prisons and jails over the past 50 years. For all those writers out there, or those thinking about starting a writing practice, we now have a great offering for you. We're so happy to be able to share *The Sentences That Create Us: Crafting a Writer's Life in Prison*, by PEN America, edited by Caitis Meissner. This book features writing advice and exercises from over fifty contributors, many of whom also experienced incarceration.

Our friend John Ballard shared his thoughts on the book and some of his own writing as well. "This book is encouraging to every writer behind bars so our voices can be heard," John offered. "Let us continue to create what has not yet been seen or heard."

What's your story?

*Silence is more heard than a voice that is loud,
words that are whispers become quiet as kept,
scared to go deeper because answers have depth
Usually what is behind you is set up to remind you
The story of your actions is the book that defines you.*

-John Ballard

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



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Letters

Hey!

I just read Sanctuary from the beginning of Jarvis Masters' book *Finding Freedom*. It made me cry! I see the love in your face, Jarvis! I just want to let y'all know that I feel the love generated through the work of everyone involved in this light and love organization. I'm doing time one day at a time like everyone on planet earth. Thank all of you! Maybe God will use me in a special way to relay the message, and I too can be a positive in this seemingly negative society. I just want to say thanks and wish all of you a happy happy joy joy day today. RN

Friends at HKF, Namaste,

I want to share a bit of Dharma Koolness I discovered in a fantasy novel and then I want to write out a personal pledge I've committed to reciting every morning upon awakening for breakfast call.

"The Hero isn't the one with the biggest sword, but the one with the biggest heart, who believes doing the right thing is its own reward because it's the right thing to do. The hero believes the greatest reward is being able to go to sleep with a clear conscience by knowing he/she did their best for the betterment of all races, all beings and Mother Earth."

Personally, I believe the above bit of Koolness is a Truth that should be a personal philosophy for all human beings on this earth. This is my pledge: I pledge to do my best to be the Buddha's example of mindfulness and kindness, showing compassion, patience and understanding to all I encounter as the moments come and go, and with infinite kindness to the past, infinite service to the present, and infinite responsibility to the future never far away from the present moment.

Hope y'all have a very peachy happy peaceful day, RT

In all you do, maintain joyful mind, kind mind and great mind AKA Buddha Mind



Dear Sita,

Blessings to you from our Creator! Thank you for the copies of the two books you sent me, *We're All Doing Time* and *Deep and Simple*. I have let the other ladies in jail with me read them and it has given them peace to realize that the reality that we are all in is an illusion. We don't have to be held captive because freedom is inside of us. Funny enough, we've been trying to do yoga. A couple of us have been practicing Contemplative Prayer. As a result, we are more patient and kind to each other, noticing our surroundings are just props and we are all in this drama together. Each night I try to sit for at least 20 minutes in silence being still before God, and during it and after, I often feel I've accomplished nothing but the effects are evident daily. Thanks you again, EB



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Practice

Imagine your body as a strong oak tree. Your feet are its roots, your torso is its trunk, and your thoughts are branches touching the sky. Think of the strength and stability a tree must have to weather even the worst storms. Remember that you, like a mighty oak, are powerful. As a tree's power comes from its roots, your power comes from within.



Art by Banegas S.

“They claim that they have taken your power, but it’s not true. No one can take that power away unless you give it away.”

Sunny, 2022

Questions

Have you ever been surprised by your inner power? Why?

How have you used your power for good?

Reflect on the meaning of inner power. How is it different from other forms of power?

