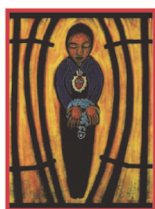


Wisdom from the Cells

Volume I



Jesuit Restorative Justice Initiative



Map of California's Correctional and Rehabilitation Institutions



www.cdcr.ca.gov/map
(Published 2/11/2014)

INMATE PLACEMENT (SECURITY LEVEL)

Except as provided in section 3375.2, each inmate shall be assigned to a facility with a security level, which corresponds to the following placement score ranges:

- (1) An inmate with a placement score of 0 through 18 shall be placed in a Level I facility.**
- (2) An inmate with a placement score of 19 through 35 shall be placed in a Level II facility.**
- (3) An inmate with a placement score of 36 through 59 shall be placed in a Level III facility.**
- (4) An inmate with a placement score of 60 and above shall be placed in a Level IV facility.**

Placement Scores are determined by a thorough review of an inmate's case factors to include: age, crime committed and if violence was used, prior incarcerations, gang involvement, etc. Each year an annual review is performed by a Counselor to determine if an inmate meets the criteria to have his/her placement score reduced. An inmate has the opportunity to reduce their score if they have been programming and have not received any disciplinary actions. In contrast an inmate's score and subsequent housing level can be increased due to receiving disciplinary actions.

© 2013 State of California

INTRODUCTION TO WISDOM FROM THE CELLS, VOLUME 1

Have you ever heard of the word MONK? **Monks were men who made the decision to totally get jumped into the lifestyle of God.** They found that the drugs and violence of the medieval village had such a negative influence on them that the only way they could keep straight was to move out of their neighborhoods, where they were messing up.

So they walked to the desert. They formed a brotherhood called community, beginning with their main head, Anthony. This guy was so *firme* that he went to live in a cave for awhile to really get into who he is and what God wants from him. **Similar to what happens to us when we find ourselves locked up.** This place of incarceration becomes our cave. We have to look inside, which is never easy, but always worthwhile.

When Anthony left the cave he was ready for a different lifestyle. His self-examination, his deepening of his life with God and his desire to do something positive for this world led him to begin the first **MONASTERY.**

A monastery is a collection of cells. This is where we get the word cell: where the monks who dedicated their lives to God would gather and pray in community and work for their daily bread.

The first community of modern day incarcerated monks was started in Corcoran State Prison in 2009. On a level 4 yard, young men who formerly had been at Barry J. Nidorf Juvenile Hall met and decided that they also wanted to do something with their lives, like the monks who live in other kind of monasteries on the outs.

They began to come together to pray and to **write. And write some more.**

In the Middle Ages, almost the only ones who were educated were the monks. They wrote and kept alive the intellectual life of society. The very ones who were living so radically and far away from the corrupt lifestyle were the very ones who were so wise and could see the big picture by being in their cells and have time to **honestly see what life is about.**

We have great books from long ago from monks who reflected on their lives and have written their wisdom from the cells. Today, we have those who are also living in cells in prisons and in juvenile halls, who have learned to look at their lives and write down their reflections and insights.

We have collected the writings of modern day incarcerated monks and formed them into a modern day wisdom book.

The writings found in this book are from monks from countless cells in nine State Prisons we have visited. They are just like the monks who had monastic communities in many desert locations.

We hope you will discover how these monks have so much to teach us, whether we are in cells or still battling lifestyles that leave us wondering what life is **TRULY** about. We do not always have to agree with them, but we can at least listen to what they have learned in their cells.

We encourage anyone in the cells to contribute with your own WISDOM to the book Wisdom from the Cells, Volume 2.

HECTOR'S MONASTIC EXPERIENCE

Gospel Contemplation and Spiritual Exercises and Monastic Life

Gospel Contemplation

Narrator:

Hector is 36 years old, and he is a lifer. He's had a long history of being high up in prison politics. But one day, Hector had enough. He was tired of hurting and killing others because of skin color or politics. A hit was put on his best friend from childhood. Hector was ordered to kill him or he would be killed. Hector said to himself "ya *'stuv'*" and opted out of this lifestyle. Hector's been telling the Chaplain about how opting out of prison politics meant opting for a new life, a life of prayer. The Chaplain is humbled at how Hector is becoming a Spiritual Master just like a Monk. Feeling inadequate to explain to Hector the discipline of Spiritual Exercises, the Chaplain invites an Abbot, the leader of a monastic community. Let's enter into their conversation.

Hector:

I'm glad the Chaplain gave me the chance to meet you. He tells me that you are an Abbot and you do Spiritual Exercises every day. He tells me you use your imagination to get to know Jesus and get in touch with the presence of God.

Abbot:

I think there is a lot we have in common. I think you and I have powerful experiences of God. My experience of God helped me to leave everything behind. Before I became a monk, I was a business man. For a while, I thought that making lots of money would make me happy, but it only made me feel empty as I became ruthless in the business world.

Hector:

Life before Jesus was crazy. Everyone respected me only because I was a lifer and because of the work that I put in. Nothing scared me. I wasn't afraid of anything. When it finally hit me that I was going to spend the rest of my life here, I put in work to get more respect. But the stuff I did, I regret. I'm sorry for how I messed up other people's lives.

Abbot:

I've been in the monastery for forty years. All I can say is that the only thing that seems real to me is God. Jesus leads me to God. When I feel closer to Jesus, life begins to make sense. The Chaplain told me that you feel the presence of God when you contemplate the stories of Jesus' life.

Hector:

When I contemplate on the Gospel, I use my imagination to enter into the different scenes of Jesus' life. I imagine the place and look around it; I imagine all the sounds and noises and smells; and by doing this Jesus becomes present to me. After disciplining myself to do this a few times every day, I start seeing things differently. I start to get rid of things that get in the way for more room deep inside.

Deep inside, I have found this space where I meet this Presence. This Presence lets me relate to life in a totally different way. This space is so deep and so mysterious, but also has a face. The face of this mystery is friendship with Jesus. Let me tell you one of my experiences.

When I entered the Gospel scene of the adulterous woman, I put myself next to her on the ground and saw how nervous she was shaking with fear. All her life, different guys would take advantage of her. Jesus was a man that didn't want others to take advantage of her. Jesus protected her. While Jesus was protecting her, I asked him if he could protect me and heal my hurts. I felt connected to the adulterous woman. Jesus loved her and me unconditionally. Jesus knew her past, and he knew mine too. I felt like I was going to be stoned by people who wanted to see me as nothing more than a criminal. Jesus looked at the woman and saw more than a prostitute. Jesus looked at me and saw more than a criminal. Jesus just wanted me to know that he loved me.

Abbot:

I live in a secluded area far away from the city. There are large mountains and clear blue skies. It's a beautiful landscape with a sense of peace. It seems a lot easier for me to feel God's presence out there than it does in here. I haven't met many persons on the outside who talk about prayer like you do. You, Hector, have found something special in this prison.

Spiritual Exercises and Monastic Life

Hector:

The Chaplain told me that you live your day like I live mine.

Abbot:

Like I said earlier, we have a lot in common. All the monks get up at 5:00 a.m. and sit in silence praying for one hour. After a short break, we get together to pray Matins.

After Matins, we eat breakfast in silence to help us reflect back on what happened to us during prayer. We spend the rest of the morning dedicated to work. Each of us in the monastery has a specific task. In our work, we are called to find God.

In the afternoon, the monks gather together again to pray the Psalms. Our day revolves around prayer, what we call the Liturgy of the Hours. I could feel God close to me in the morning, when I work in the kitchen or when I gather wood for the fire. I feel a Presence throughout my day.

How do you spend your day?

Hector:

I wake up everyday at 4:00 a.m. This is the only time that I find quiet enough to pray. I contemplate for one hour and then I write for one hour in my journal. I get a workout in my cell for an hour and a half. I get to eat breakfast while I watch some TV in the morning.

Then in the afternoon, I write letters and do some writing for various publications. I get to watch some T.V. during lunch. At 2:00 p.m., I focus on reading. Right now, I am reading ten books. The book that moves me the most is *The Interior Castle* by Teresa of Avila

At dinner, I get to catch up with some of the homies. Then I get to watch some news to end my day and prepare for the next. I prepare for tomorrow by taking a look at the Gospel readings for the next day. Before lights out, I reflect and write about the strongest feelings I have during the day. Abbot, I am not the only one who does this in prison. I got to know a few people here really well and shared with them what I do. They started contemplating on Jesus' life using their imagination. We try to stay connected by doing our Spiritual Exercises at the same time.

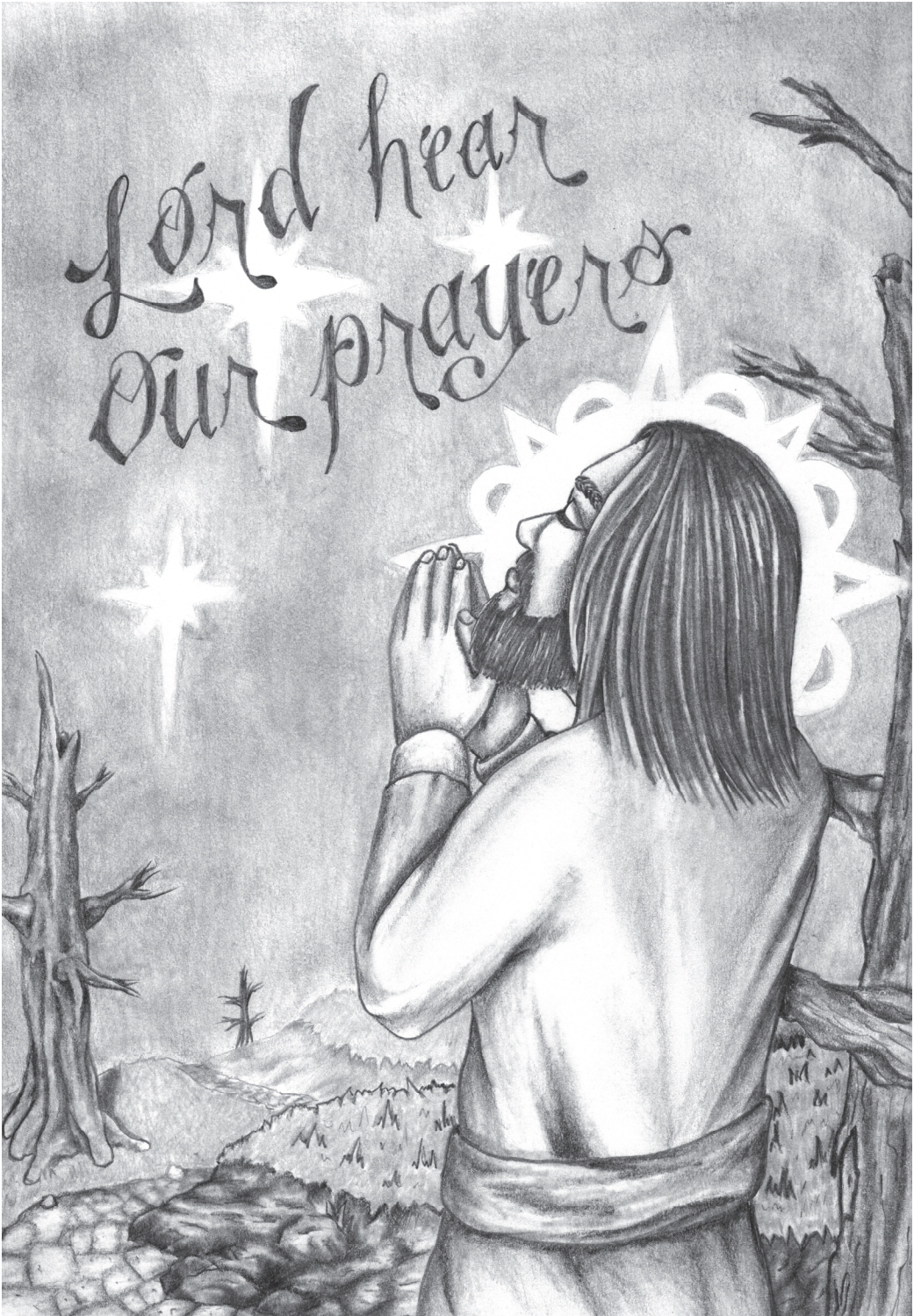
Abbot:

I imagine, Hector, that you are the leader of a monastic community like me. I teach other monks how to pray. You teach other prisoners how to pray. We have a lot to learn from each other.

*“To all the monks in these prison monasteries:
thank you for showing us during these retreats
who God is.”*

- Fr. Michael Kennedy, S.J.

Lord hear
our prayers



Please! Somebody help me, somebody hear me. All I need is another chance. Am I not human? Am I not worth saving? Or will I forever pay the consequences of immaturity, blindness, and the errors of my youth?

Please! Hear my screams of mercy. These feelings are eating me alive—I am a son, a father, a brother, a cousin, an uncle, and I am a human worth saving. What must I do to wake from this nightmare that fills the emptiness in my soul? Has this become my destiny? A mere cry for forgiveness, for compassion, for a helping hand to console, to let me live a life that has been lost before it has begun?

I am told that it starts with me, but I ask, *How can I lift myself up when I have been cast into darkness without end, where my emotions, my mind, and mere presence are considered filth—the worst of scum?*

I refuse to believe that I am a lost cause, a waste of breath. Is there someone out there that feels the same way I do? Or am I asking the unimaginable? Have I used my last grain of faith? Can someone hear the terrible silence of my soul? Minutes, days, years go by and I still find myself helpless without any peace of mind. For the millionth time, can somebody help me? Hear me? Am I not worth a second chance? Or, at least, a second *glance*?

-Miguel

*

I remember the day God showed me the way. I remember how good it felt being in His presence, taking my hand and telling me, *It's your turn to lead*. I remember back in juvenile hall where I first felt the presence of Jesus. Growing up in a religious home I was forced to go to church on Sundays and attend catechism classes. I remember having doubts about God and someone in catechism class asking, *How would we know if Jesus was real?* They told us you will feel an *indescribable* feeling.

I remember this indescribable feeling that day in Sylmar well. I was coming back from court with bad news, sad and heartbroken. There was bad news about my grandfather too. I remember feeling Jesus' presence and falling to my knees in tears with the most joy I have ever felt in my life. I remember questioning Jesus and asking him, *Why am I so happy if everything is going so bad?* He didn't answer then, but I remember his presence and wanting to do whatever it takes to feel it again. I accepted Jesus into my life without any doubt that He is my savior. Today I'm reminded that you, *Jesus*, have never left my side.

-Michael

I sit here today a *changed man*. I truly and sincerely gave up my previous lifestyle. I have finally come to understand the only way I will ever seek love and joy and an everlasting life will be to first seek God, our only savior. I now only praise and serve God. I know God is happy with the choice I've made. I know God is working in my life. I ask God to enter my heart.

Here in prison I give thanks to the Lord for my life and my intense desire to live. For another day to laugh, cry and love when it is hard. Lord, grant me peace, grant me grace, so that I may know how to forgive, dream and to say, *I'm sorry*.

I repent for all my sins. I know deep inside my heart that I have lived a path of unrighteousness. I have lied, stolen, beaten people up and even murdered. I am so sorry for all my unlawful actions. I promise to God—one day at a time—that I will change my ways completely.

-José

*

In many ways the board game, *Monopoly*, and gang life are very similar. Some similarities that they share include:

In *Monopoly* you have to choose what game piece you want to be. In gang life you have to decide who or what you want to become. In *Monopoly* you start off with nothing. In gang life you start off *as* nobody.

In *Monopoly* you start off building your fortune, while in gang life you start by building your reputation. In *Monopoly* you move forward by recruiting property. In gang life you recruit homies. Then in *Monopoly* you start taking over businesses. In gang life you take over neighborhoods.

Every time you go around the board in *Monopoly* you get rewarded. In gang life every time you go around the city you're gaining fame. In *Monopoly* you can have all the money in one moment, but in the next you can lose it all. Every time you roll the dice you never know what number it's gonna be and where you're gonna have to land. In gang life it's the same way—every time you make a choice you never know where it's gonna lead.

In *Monopoly* you try your hardest to avoid getting sent to jail. But the next roll of dice can get you there. In gang life it's the same way. Throughout your life as a gang member you try your hardest to avoid jail. But then there's that *one wrong decision* that can be the one to get you there—the place you never wanted to go.

In *Monopoly* there's a visiting center. Same in gang life. There is a visiting center in jail where your loved ones can come and spend some time with you.

In *Monopoly* you avoid your opponent's property because otherwise you have to pay the price which becomes higher and higher. In gang life it's similar—you avoid your enemy's territory because otherwise you have to pay the consequences, which vary from beatings to even death.

Finally, in *Monopoly*, even if you lose and have nothing left—no money, no property, nothing at all—then you're out of the game. But the game isn't over. In gang life? When you get locked up for life or killed because of gang violence then that's where your ends meet except for everyone else.

After you're dead, the world keeps spinning and eventually everyone moves on without you, even your family, friends, and mom. Time doesn't stop for nobody, no matter who you were.

-Jonathan

*

I remember back to 1979 when I was 17 and in juvenile hall. I was in on a 2nd degree burglary charge. I got arraigned to adult court. My mom—along with the judge, the prosecutor and my lawyer—was there on sentencing day.

The judge asked the prosecutor what he recommended. He told the judge he wanted me to do 13 years 4 months. I remember my mom's reaction and can see the tears—of a broken heart—roll down her loving face as if it were yesterday. The judge ended up giving me 10 years, and my mom lovingly gave me a hug and kiss goodbye.

To this day she still blames herself for what happened. I always tell her, *You are a great mother*, and that it was not her fault but mine. Her heart is still broken and I can see how hard she tries to fight off tears when she visits. Every time I look within myself I realize the hurt and pain I've caused my family. I know I've let them down. The remorse I feel makes me numb and tired. I look to God for comfort and believe he's the only reason I still hold on to hope. If I'd known back then—as a kid starting out on the streets—what I know now, I would sure do things differently. I have many regrets in life—none are bigger than the trail of tears and broken hearts I've left behind.

-Jonathan

*

Another year gone like water under a bridge but there is nowhere to go. I remain on the bridge and ask myself: *What life would I have had if I were running with the current?* Everyday in this cell—every morning I wakeup—I ask this question.

Then came the day I decided to look back over the past three years of my life. I realized that I was not stuck on a bridge. I was in a *canoe*, floating with all those years, running with the water.

I know I have done a lot. I have gained my G.E.D. and High School Diploma. I have changed my life and placed my faith in the Lord. I learned to *know myself* and the things I love. I learned to know that my family is my blood. **Not** the gang that brought me into a cage like an animal.

I have realized that there ain't homies in the streets. Your true "homies" are at "home" where we belong. Not in a cell.

Life is a trip and we must not stand on a bridge and allow all those years to pass us by. No matter where you are, you must *flow* with the river. Swim if you have to but *never stop* at a bridge to see your life be wasted. I have 17 years to go and my canoe seems pretty healthy.

-Ezequiel

*

Today I was overwhelmed with the amount of tragedy that has struck my *familia*. It hurts to see how emotionally damaged my mother and sister have become and how my niece is oblivious to all that has occurred in my 23 years. My mom watched me kill a man. She was no more than two feet away when I pulled the trigger six times and shot a man at point blank range! Now she is paranoid and thinks that everyone is trying to kill her and our *familia*. It's crazy. I have already endured so much, and it seems that more trouble still awaits me.

My little sister had a beautiful baby girl in the midst of all this. I'm sad because now she looks so unhappy. Instead of doing something about feeling that way, she has become content with her situation. It seems she has come to share the same mindset as the masses. I have begun to identify life's different patterns and the results of those patterns. It's a huge sadness. People seem to reach a certain, low-level of education, which is socially acceptable, and then stagnate. I'm so emotionally messed up. I have had some crazy stuff happen to me, but **I can't play the victim. I can't accept mediocrity. I need to change my life.**

-Anthony

*

What pain have I caused my mother? I remember when she would come to visit and I'd see the pity in her eyes. She'd cry because she said she'd never see her only son as a free man. I have become nothing and I've done nothing with my life. My *bad choices* have landed me in prison for life. I will always remember what it feels like to bring shame to my mother, because all I wanted to do was get high and not care about anyone but myself.

-Johnny

My name is José. We've never met and the fact that *I don't even know your name* only serves to highlight how senseless this all was. On the evening of November 16, 2001, I was driving the car that took your son and brother from you. It is my intention that this letter makes its way into the hands of Henry's parents and sister; to tell you how sorry I am for the events of that night.

I know my apologies must be worthless next to your loss, but I've never forgotten your faces nor the words Henry's sister spoke in the courtroom on my sentencing day. Each time I see my mother's tears—tears she sheds for me being here—I think of you all. My actions led to the loss of a son and a brother who was so obviously loved by you all. When I get to see my daughter who will never know what it is like to have her dad tuck her in or pick her up from school, I can only think of your own loss of a son and a brother. I don't intend to compare my losses to yours, I just want to convey the fact that I have spent much of this time behind bars reflecting on what I've done and think of all of the lives your son and brother might have touched but no longer can, and I am sincerely sorry for causing that.

I am writing you because I also want you to know that I am *not the same person* who allowed your son's life to be taken that night. I pray for him, I pray for all of you, and all those whose lives I've tragically affected. I've spent these years trying to understand how this all happened. To have my life defined by this one day does not fit with who I am at all.

I have been trying to use these past 12 years in prison to give back to those who will one day get out. I've been educating myself and trying to use my education to help others as a tutor. I'll never make up for what I've done but I am doing what I can to positively affect the lives of those who may return home from prison one day.

I would like to apologize for taking the life of your son and brother, Henry. I want to let you know how sorry I am for my part in this and that I will never forget what I have done. **I take responsibility for my actions that evening.** I replay what happened over and over again in my head wishing I'd have done something, anything, differently, but I'm powerless to change it. I can never take back what I have done, but I am attempting to do the good that I can. The person who made the poor choices I made is gone, and the person I am now would never do what that past person did. I regret that this change came too late.

Sincerely,

José

*

I didn't really feel the impact of my incarceration until the day I got sentenced. For a minute, I could feel the agony and pain I had caused my mother. Tears ran down her eyes as the judge gave the verdict. Next to me my crime partner was deeply shattered over the substantial amount of time handed to us. How could this be? *How old will I be when this nightmare is finally over?*

Suddenly, clips of events ran through my mind. I thought about everything I had ever sacrificed for the homies, the blood shed for the neighborhood, and the type of lifestyle I was living. Was it all worth it? Was it worth losing my youth *over a street* filled with rage?

Sadly, I now bear the burden of being separated from my loved ones. As I gazed across the courtroom, a feeling of betrayal overwhelmed me due to the fact that *not even one* of my homies were seated in the audience behind me. Where was the solidarity? Where were all of my friends that said they had my back no matter what? I thought that *mi vida loca* carried benefits, but I guess I was too blind to see that before.

So there I was, a juvenile charged as an adult, heading back to Sylmar Juvenile Hall as a HRO (High-Risk Offender). Upon my return, I shared the bad news with the rest of the juvenile delinquents housed in a unit at Sylmar labeled “W.” This unit was meant to house juveniles that were being tried as adults who may be sent to State Prison if found guilty.

During my stay in the halls, fights were a norm to me because I had lots of rival gang members. I had a reputation to uphold and no one was going to take that away from me. Due to my violent behavior I had the opportunity of also familiarizing myself with Unit “X.”

After spending numerous visits in the camera room and the hole, I started to become a major problem. Little did I know they had a trick up their sleeve for me. As soon as I turned 18-years-old I was transferred to L.A. County Jail. It was my time to play with the big boys.

The whole environment was something that took time to get used to. The rules of conduct were standards that had to be followed—as a Hispanic, we’re prohibited from fighting each other. If we do break the rules, then our consequence is a 13-second regulation. All of the rules are meant to be utilized as guidelines to what we can and cannot do.

Sadly, my behavior continued to worsen in the county jail. Even though I was fully aware of the solidarity from my fake homies, I had to survive, and that meant by any means necessary. After visiting the hole a few more times, I was then transferred to Super Max, where I would eventually catch the chain towards State Prison.

Months went by when I heard my name being called on the intercom one morning. This five-foot-five officer named Mora said, “Hey youngster, you’re up for transfer to Delano State Prison.”

On my way towards Delano, I started to reflect on everything people had told me about prison and for a 2-striker like me how it was going to be impossible to make it out.

Once I got to Delano, I was held in “B” Yard, which was a Reception Center where I would then wait to be transferred to a Level Four Prison. During my stay there, I had a divine experience in the cell. One night after reading the Bible I decided to pray

for a while. At the time I had nothing to read but the Bible. As I started to pray I felt this unspeakable joy consume my whole being. The feeling was like no other drug or pleasure I had ever experienced. *It felt as if God was there with me by my side.*

The next morning I felt someone hit me on the side of my thigh. I turned quickly thinking it was my celly. Strangely, he was sleeping at the time of this experience. At first I thought nothing of it and went back to sleep but as I started to daze off it happened again. *Smack, smack!* Right on the side of my thigh. At that moment, I laid still and tried to hear what God wanted to tell me. It felt as if he wanted me to kneel down and start praying, so I did just that. I got off my bunk and started to pray. Then it was as if He told me to ask Him for what I had asked him before hand.

Immediately, I started to think what I had asked him before. Luckily, I remembered. I asked that God would *give me the gift to write good gospel rap music*, and that He would make a way for me to go to a Prison where I could change my life.

Till this day I am amazed on how God answered my prayers. If there exists any power, *it is in prayer*. That morning I wrote two songs. It was as if I had been writing music for decades. God truly heard my prayer.

A month later, I was *mysteriously taken off* the Corcoran transfer list and placed on the Lancaster State Prison list. I kind of knew that God was working in my life and circumstances at that time.

When I finally arrived to CPS LAC, the committee decided to release me to a program called the Honor Yard Program on “A” facility in General Population. I had no idea of this program or what it was about. I was amazed at the amount of programs allotted to us. This program led to vocations such as plumbing, carpentry, and small engine repair. The jobs offered were P.I.A., main kitchen, and satellite kitchen jobs, which hold lots of benefits for an inmate. I couldn’t believe it. *How could it be after years of tension and violence that I would be given a chance to enjoy a yard like this?*

I had a choice to make at this time. I would either view my imprisonment as if I’m *enrolled* at a University in which I’m trying to achieve the highest education possible or I would continue my journey in prison politics. Of course I chose to become a different person. *Why wouldn’t I?*

After years of drama and nonsense, I finally realized that I was only *hurting myself and those who truly love me*. I decided to obtain my G.E.D. In order to educate yourself, one must have a **desire** and **discipline** to achieve these goals.

I studied intensely and on July of 2006, I was in a graduation celebrating my achievement as a G.E.D. graduate. Since then I’ve been involved in vocational programs such as Microsoft Word and Excel. I’m a Certified Peer Educator, the Treasurer for a group called Men for Honor, which teaches young men how to write creatively and business courses on bonds and stocks. I’m currently working on a Associate’s Degree in Business. Hopefully soon I’ll be able to go after the Bachelor of

Art's program that is also offered in this prison. I'm also part of the Men's Advisory Council in which I'm utilized as a vehicle of communication between staff and inmates. All of the people who thought I was a failure, all of the doubts that certain individuals had about me, **motivated me**. Now, I had the opportunity to prove them wrong.

My mother is now shedding tears. But this time? They are tears of *happiness* for what her son has accomplished. I'm just a regular guy who grew up in the *barrio*. I was brought up with a gang mentality, but I refused to be another failure. I refused to quit. I pray that my story is an encouragement to those who find themselves in the same position.

Change is definitely possible, but it has to come *from the inside*. Sometimes we have to take a stand and regardless of how people think of you, **we must be strong and do what's best for ourselves**. The gang life only brings hurt and betrayal. I tried drugs, drank alcohol, had plenty of women, and just about anything you can think of, but none seemed to fill the emptiness I felt in my heart until I met Jesus Christ. Now I'm free.

Everyone has an option. You can choose to be free or remain in bondage. The question is, *What will you choose?*

Sincerely,

-Daniel

*

Jesus, I remember a time when I felt overwhelmed and needed your love.

I called "home" twenty years ago and told my mother over the phone that I committed a murder and asked if she would call our church and ask if a priest would come and see me to give confession. That was a time when I felt overwhelmed and needed God's love. I felt alone and lost. Many people that day changed forever because of my actions, a true tragedy. That day I felt I lost a piece of my soul. I hurt all the people I love in this world and people I didn't even know deeply.

Does God love me? Will He ever love me? In 2003, my mother was in the hospital on her deathbed. My oldest son said, "You know grandma is waiting to talk with you. She's holding on." My son, Brian, said, "Hold on. I will call her three-way at the hospital." He made the call and, for a few minutes, I told her how much I loved and missed her. She asked how I was doing and told me that she loved me. Then she had to go. She died that evening. *A mother's unconditional love for her son*. That's what she left me.

One morning at 3:00 a.m.—no one awake, nor anyone doing count—someone touched my head and stroked it in a few times. I sat straight up, not scared, I only felt love. I truly believe my mother was saying goodbye, letting me know she was with God and that she loved me.

-Roger

Meth Made a Mess of My Life

In the beginning doing meth made me feel like I was able to do anything. It gave me energy and the ability to think quickly. I finally felt like I fit in with everyone else. I didn't hesitate to get involved with others socially. Then I found my thoughts starting to focus on things that really didn't matter. I started "tweaking" on little projects to pass the time. My relationships started to fall apart. It's crazy that I started doing meth to socialize with others and feel better about myself, thinking that others would like me. I soon found myself in isolation from others and spending all my time alone. *This was exactly what I was running from in the first place.*

Growing up I had always felt like *no one was there* for me. Yes there were adults around sometimes doing their own thing—drinking or getting high with pills—but no one ever took an interest in what I was doing. They would usually say, *Go outside and play*. I hated meth, but I did it anyway. I liked the rush it gave me, but I didn't want to stay up for 3 or 4 days. It kept me awake when I really wanted to sleep.

After several days of being awake and not sleeping, I started mumbling incoherently, making absolutely no sense at all. I hadn't eaten and was dehydrated. I thought I would find myself and be able to accomplish more by putting this *poison* in my body. But all it did was poison my mind and body.

I actually lost my "self." I lost my soul. I felt empty. It was a long struggle back and the only reason I was able to stop at that time was because I got arrested. It was *25 years ago*. I finally started feeling healthier and was able to focus on the things that really mattered—re-connecting with my loved ones, my kids and mother, brothers and sisters. I was able to re-connect spiritually with Jesus—the true source of my happiness.

I was one of the lucky ones. Many of my friends never made it back clean and sober. They slowly lost their lives. My 3 best friends in life are deceased because of meth, cocaine, and other drugs. I really miss them. I pleaded with my son and daughter to never try this drug, as it would steal their soul. Years later, they confided in me and said they tried it, but didn't like it. They never did it again. I'm so thankful that I still have 2 healthy kids and did not lose them to meth. If you have experienced the effects of this poison and cannot stop, *please, ask for help*. I have felt your pain.

-Stan

*

Why Be Angry?

I remember when I was young how I was always mad at the Lord. I despised him for allowing me all this pain. Life was unfair and I hated God for making it so. He didn't care about me and ignored my cries. That's exactly how I thought.

I was only a child with so much weight on my shoulders. I couldn't understand how God can stand and watch me crumble over and over again. I suffered many losses and great pain in my life. So of course I hated God for turning his back on me. *Why would a loving, compassionate Father allow his beaten son so much agony?* I was only a kid. I couldn't take on so much on my own.

The truth was, I was never alone. Those were thoughts of a child. As a MAN I now understand life is filled with struggles. All of us as men have our own trials and tribulations in life. I also realize that *suffering builds character*. We see the value in the simple gestures of life, like a hug, a "good morning," or a simple smile. They can change the course of someone's day. The Bible says pain brings us closer to God. I now thank God for bringing me closer to him.

I've been in prison a few years with many more to go. I know I felt enough pain and heartache to now *acknowledge the blessings*. I didn't make it this far on my own. The good Lord took every step with me.

-Wally

*

When I was 12, I started to change rapidly and dramatically not knowing it would affect me in the future. I started gangbanging, smoking all kinds of drugs, getting into shootouts, and messing around with all kinds of girls at age 15. I thought, *I am living the life!* But, really, I was selfish.

Sometimes, I wouldn't go home for days because I was too smoked out to be around family. I would hear about my *Jefita's* truck being seen driving slow through the *barrio*. I would wonder why she would do that until, one day, I came home around 2 in the morning. She would be crying, screaming, and, at the same time, asking me, *Where have you been? Why haven't you come home?* I wouldn't like her telling me nothing because all it would do is get me mad. I would leave again to the *calles* until one day in April when I was arrested and charged with attempted murder and sent to the compound.

In the holding tank I could only think, *Who is going to support my baby boy that I left in his momma's womb? What is my Jefita gonna think and do when she hears about what I'm being charged with?*

Seven months passed fighting my case and my son, Matthew, was born. It opened my eyes. I felt something in my *heart* and *soul* telling me to change. Being away from home got me even closer to my parents and Jesus Christ.

I know I'm here for a reason. I would have gotten killed or overdosed on drugs. I thank and pray to God everyday for *sparing my life* and giving me another chance to look at life differently. All that anger and confusion I had inside caught up to me and turned me to someone I never imagined. By changing, I hurt the ones that really loved and cared for me—not the "homies." I'm in here not knowing what the outcome is gonna be while they're out there doing their thing.

Being locked up, I realized that my family is the one suffering. I'm a father myself and I only get to see my son one hour *every other* month. I'm thankful. But it hurts that I'm doing some time, leaving my son to grow up without his father.

I know that God will be there for him and protect him. All I have is time to build a better and stronger relationship with God and my family.

-Israel

*

I'm 34 years-old. I grew up in East L.A. and joined a gang in 1990. I'm currently serving a 21-year-to-life sentence for murder. While in juvenile hall I spent most of my time in the *box*. While in the county jail, the *bole*. When I went to prison I picked up where I left off, spending most of my time in Administration Segregation (Ad-Seg). I was *validated* as an associate of a prison gang and then *re-validated* as a member, causing prison officials to place me in the Security Housing Unit (S.H.U.) for the remainder of my life sentence.

That's when I opened my eyes and *realized the lie* that had been my life. I guess it's true that it's never too late to change. One of my many regrets is not doing it sooner. If I only knew then what I know now. Even my mom feels somewhat relieved that the monster is no more. That—for whatever reason—her kid is trying to become someone she can be proud of. But most importantly that her *pedacito de corazón*, as she calls me, has become human, valuing life and the opportunity to become someone worth mentioning.

-Miguel

*

For the youth: I have been in your shoes, facing a future of uncertainty without care for my wellbeing or the suffering I put my family through. I was sitting there thinking that all would be all right; that I made the right choices for the right reasons and that my homeboys respected me and glorified my doings. *I was wrong*. I wasn't fooling anyone but myself.

The more bizarre and hardcore I became? The *emptier* I felt. The more sorrow and suffering I inflicted upon my Mom, kids and loved ones. I, too, have lived a hard life, raised in the streets and taught my ways by those I looked up to. Now I find myself all alone with no one to blame but myself. And where are those who I admired and looked up to? Most are in a cell next to me, wondering and asking themselves the same questions—*Was all this worth it? Was my life that useless? Can I be redeemed? Can I be helped or given another chance for a new beginning? When is this torture going to end?*

For the rest? They're *underground*, without glory or a significant trace of their existence. They are forgotten by the *so-called homeboys* but are still cherished and missed by those who matter.

Now I ask you, *Do you righteously believe that the lifestyle that you're on is meaningful?* Trust me. Don't wait any longer to make a change that you can make right now. I was young, too. No one was as hardcore, stubborn and feisty. I also believed that I was doing what was best for me. But every time I pictured my mom crying and asking herself where she went wrong, I snapped out of my delusions. Every time she visits me behind that glass I could see the pain in her smile. She tries to disguise her hurt with warm and kind words, but deep down? I know that she suffers and feels guilty for what I became.

The constant remorse I feel for ruining my family's lives as well as my own is immeasurable. At times I feel so ashamed and guilty that I lose my strength to move forward. But life as I know it now has made me realize that I probably do have a purpose in life, that all my tribulations aren't and weren't in vain. What hurts me the most is that it took me 17 years to *see the lie* of a life I was living to stay *true to* my so-called friends, who never write or visit because they are simply next to me, *only a wall away*.

If after all this you *still* aren't convinced that this lifestyle is all a lie, then you're more than welcome to move into this "luxurious hotel." Now whether or not you like it? Is another story...

-Orlando

*

My name is *Michael*.

Now it's been a long time since I've said my name *just to say it*. I'm so used to my "county name." It's like my first name has disappeared and the county has given me a new name—my PDI number or my last name. It has gotten to the point that when people ask my name, I say, *Thomas, just Thomas*. When the staff says my first name I *hate it*. At first I didn't know why, but now I do. It reminds me of freedom. I hate that it took this much to realize what I had.

-Michael

*

I was born into a gang and violent family. My mom was a teen mother caring for two. When she was 13 she became pregnant and had my oldest sister. Four and a half years later I was born. My father was in a gang. A year and a half after my birth, he left. My mother started to do the drugs that my father *left behind*. A few years later we were homeless. I remember sleeping in hotels and friends' houses. Sometimes we even slept in the car. My mother then started to change her life. That's when I was also started to

change mine. Shortly after we moved to Long Beach I started going out and stealing bikes. This eventually led to doing many drugs. My mother felt bad and tried to protect me. I didn't care. Things got worse. I never realized all the things my mother did for me. She did her best being a single mother. For not realizing this? I am now in the halls. It sucks that I can't just go to her house and hug her or call anytime and say *I love you!* I hate hearing my mom cry over the phone. Every time I call she says, *I need my baby boy home!* I try not to cry.

After I signed the *Book of Life* and started to build my relationship with God, I started feeling peace in my heart for the first time in a long time. I wasn't just *signing* a book; it was a promise to God, my family, and myself to do better. I learned that **it's never too late to change**. God will love and care for you no matter what. I now realize the beautiful gift he gave me—a life with obstacles so that I may share them with you.

My mother drove from Arizona to watch me sign it. When she grabbed my hands she started to cry. It hurt her to see me locked up, but in a way, she said, she now knows that I am safe. Before she left she hugged me and cried. She didn't want to leave her only son behind. I told her *I'm sorry* and that *I'll be home soon*. She walked out in tears.

- Michael

*

I remember a time when I thought all hope was lost. I thought my life was at its end. I had been going to court for over 32 months to fight a life sentence. Then a ray of light and hope came through. They offered me a deal for 23 years and 2 strikes.

It might not seem like much of a deal but compared to the other prisoners around me I still have a *release date*. It all happened 15 days before I turned 18-years-old. I looked at it as God giving me a second chance. I am taking full advantage of it. I decided to drop out of the game. At first I thought I would never do it. Truthfully, I was tired of watching my back, caring about what other people think and proving myself for people that are never there for you. Now? I can show people who I really am and stop acting.

-José

*

As I walked into the Pomona courtroom one day during the month of May, I had a sense of hope for a hung jury or a mistrial. I sat next to my lawyer and he asked, "How do you feel?" I replied, "I'm cool," even though I thought, *How do you think I feel, stupid?* The jury then came in and I prayed—something I hadn't done in a while. I told God that if he would get me out of this I'd try to get myself together for real this time. The judge started to talk and said something amusing, I guess, because they all started to laugh. The whole courtroom was laughing and a flash of anger came over me. I thought to myself, *The rest of my life is about to be determined and you're laughing right now?*

As the verdict was handed to the judge's assistant, a new feeling come over me. It was a sense of sickness, deep down in my stomach. The assistant then opened the envelope and looked at the first page with a look of disappointment. He started to read, "The court finds you guilty of premeditated attempted murder and all charges as follows," which I recall was attempted murder, the use of a gun, discharge of firearm with the intent to kill, gang allegations, and a couple more that I can't remember. As this was read I put my head down with that sick feeling in my stomach, like it was spinning in a washing machine. Now I understand where the term getting "washed" comes from.

While I sat in my chair with my head down, I thought, *Thanks for nothing, God.* I sat there arguing in my mind and then thought, *Put your head up. Don't let this faze you. Don't let them get credit on you.* I lifted my head high and listened to them read the same charges and allegations. When he ended, he said: "The court finds you guilty of all charges." I laughed out loud to show that they couldn't faze me.

When I walked into the hallway it hit me. I felt like I was going to pass out. The sheriff tried to talk to me but I was speechless. I knew it was a wrap.

-Michael

*

There is nothing better than being at home with your family, lady, friends and loved ones. There is nothing better than having *carne asada* at the park after dark. My intentions of getting respect, fame, and putting in work for my *barrio* got me nowhere, because *look at me now*—I'm posted chillin' in my room looking at 25-to-life.

Every day I think of ways to change my vocabulary and attitude, *pero a veces uno se acostumbra!* I pray for my friends on the outs and for the homies that are doing time in the pen, hoping that they don't get caught in any *desmadres*. They may have forgotten me but I haven't forgotten them. I should have known the difference between *being a man* and *being a knucklehead*. You know the difference. When you get time, you think about your mistakes.

There is no turning back. It hurts so bad telling my *jefita* that I might spend the rest of my life in the pen. She told me, *Stay home!* I wouldn't listen. I thought it was fun and games until they picked me up for the crime I committed. My freedom was taken just like that. Now life's changed and I'm lost in the system. I just want to let all of you, homies, out there know that losing your freedom and your family to the game isn't worth it. *Stay positive. Don't try to be someone you're not.* The real you is the person you knew long ago.

If you want to continue doing what you're doing, go ahead—you can be my *celly*. You're going to see what it is to be away from the hood and your family, waking up at 4 in the morning to get transported to court in the filthy county bus, taking 3 minute showers, being on lockdown 23-hours a day, and seeing your *jefita* cry when she comes

for visits. If that's what you want, *take my room* and I'll go home in an instant. If I got a second chance to be free I wouldn't do anything to mess that up. If you could see what I've seen and be where I've been, then you would know what I mean. You'll learn one day or another.

-Brandon

*

I go to meditation because it helps me get through my weeks in this stressful environment. I appreciate all the volunteers that come talk to us. They help us vent.

I was sentenced to 19 years and Father Mike has supported me ever since. I would like to thank you, Father Mike, and all the volunteers for being here with us and our families. It shows that you truly care about us.

-Joshua

*

Dear Mom,

I remember the first day you came to visit me. I remember the tears and pain in your eyes. I remember how happy you were to see me, your *baby boy*. I remember how surprised you were to hear that your youngest son was detained for a very violent crime.

Mom, I want you to know *I am sorry* for all the pain I have caused to your heart. I'm sorry for being a street-soldier, corrupted by violence.

Mom, I ask you for your forgiveness. There is not one day that passes where you don't cross my mind.

Mom, *I love you*. I hope that one day soon we can be together again. I love you so much, *Jefita*.

Love your baby boy,

-Joshua

*

I remember coming home from elementary school. My door was wide open and my house was ransacked. The back entrance was smashed. The safety and security of my home was cracked.

My sisters and I slept in the living room while I dreamt of burglars peering at us. I tried not to show that I was scared. Back then I was the man of the house.

A few years later, when I was about twelve, the same scene repeated itself. Nothing in my room got touched this time. I figured out why.

My birthday passed and dad *borrowed* all my money. But I guess that still was not enough. Dad didn't have a key, so he broke down the door, robbing my sisters to pay for his stuff.

I didn't even know this person anymore—the *monster* the drugs made him become. I thank him for the fact I'll never use drugs. Besides that, my grandpa has taken my father's place.

-José

*

The retreat went well. I'm learning more about myself and what I'm capable of doing. I really didn't understand the metaphor of spiritual exercises being like *burpies* until the retreat was over. I felt drained and tired. I finally got it!

-Johnny

*

My relationship with God is a work in progress. At times God has been there for me and at other times I have felt like He was mad or disappointed with me. Hopefully, though, God can make the impossible happen and help me beat my 10-year gang enhancement.

I use to think that God gave me a limited amount of luck. But when I lay back in my room and think of the past and what happened to my homeboys and I, I realize that God has given me *lots of chances*.

I guess God punished me because I never took my time to listen to life and words of wisdom. When I lost my freedom I thought God was mad at me for challenging Him, thinking I didn't need him. That same day, when I came to the compound, I saw Father Mike walking across the field, and something inside me told me, *God forgives you*.

-Jerson

Dear José,

I hope as I am writing this letter you find yourself in a good place. I am writing to let you know that *I am sorry* for what I did. I am asking for forgiveness, José. I am asking for *your* forgiveness. You don't know how sorry I am for my actions. I can't replace the tears and heartaches of your family with joy and laughter. I can't bring back their son, brother, cousin, nephew, and uncle. I can't bring back you.

Late at night I stay up thinking about everything we've been through—fights, girls, friends, parties. You remember the one time two *foo's* tried to jump and stab me. I told you to leave and you said, "Hell naw *foo*. You my boy. I got you." When one of them tried to stab me you pushed him away and he almost cut you.

Do you remember the time those *foo's* were looking for you and they found you and me at the park? They were asking for you and I stepped up. I was like, "Why? Wassup *foo*, that's my homie." They started calling you a bitch and all that. I was like, "Hell nah. F... yah *foo's*." Then you stepped up and said who you were and one of them pulled out a strap and lit us up. I remember running up to you and tackling you to the floor, almost getting shot for you, *foo*. Do you remember? I do.

I remember everything we went through, José. I am truly sorry for my actions. I never meant for what happened that late, cold night. I am just asking for your forgiveness. I would like to restore our friendship. Please help me through these hard times as I go to court. Please help me. *I have changed*, José. I no longer live as a Warrior of Darkness. Please have compassion on me. Let me again gain your trust to speak to you from my heart my brother. *Please, forgive me, brother.*

- Javier

*

It is true when they say God works in mysterious ways. At first I was not able to comprehend my time in prison. I thought that people like me do not belong here, but through many trials and tribulations God has opened my eyes and helped me to understand who I truly am.

In my loneliest times God has given me strength to move on. God has helped me to be patient and recognize the mistakes I have made. God has showed me how selfish, arrogant, and ungrateful I was. God has humbled me. Even though I still have problems I need to fix, I have been transformed. There is nobody else I can thank for this but God. I am overwhelmed with gratitude.

-J

*

God, thank you for hearing our prayers and answering them. People do not know how scared I was waiting for the clerk to read the verdict. That was the first time in my

life that I feared for my life, including when people were shooting at me. I was scared because I knew what I would have lost: my family and my beautiful son. When I heard the clerk say “Not guilty.” I felt both joy and sadness, because this nightmare had finally come to an end. God was beside me and kept me strong during the 10 long months of waiting. Thank you, God.

-Israel

*

To become a Warrior of Light is a big event in one’s life. It means that you finally realize that it is time to change. It doesn’t mean that you just want to stop gang banging. It means that you want to change *physically* and *mentally* and become a better person. It means you want to step up in life and stop going down the same old road—the road that leads to nothing but pain, misery and jail time.

Becoming a Warrior of Light tells people you have learned from your mistakes, that you want to be forgiven and are ready to return to society. Being a Warrior of Light isn’t just something you do; it is *who you are*.

-Fernando

*

All I have known since the age of 12 are the halls and placement. At the age of 16, after a life of nothing but gang banging, extortion and drug use, I ended up in the compound—a place where juveniles are facing life in prison.

After a year and a half in the compound, I went to court and lost. I was looking at life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) but was lucky to receive 50 to life. *Can you call that lucky?*

I was given life as a minor—washed away like it was nothing. I was fighting a lot of emotions in my head. I wanted to say, *Forget this! It’s time to go all out*, but another part of me said, *No, haven’t you caused your family enough pain?* I knew the answer: *Yes, I have*.

A month and a half later I turned 18. I said goodbye to all the homies and headed up to Unit Z for 18-year-olds. I knew that since I was already sentenced I would be going straight to Chino. But who knew it would be only five days?

The night before I went to prison I sat there thinking, *Damn, this has been one of the only stable places I have ever lived*. After almost two years at Sylmar in the compound I’m finally leaving.

I was nervous the day I moved to Chino. I didn’t know what to expect. I only knew what my older homies and family had told me. As soon as I stepped into that prison I knew *I didn’t know a thing*. It was nothing like what I had been told. No one

ever tells you about reception. They always tell you the good things about prison but not the bad. But there is nothing good about being locked up. *You have to make it good.*

-Fernando

*

The last time I stood before a judge was the day I was sentenced. I stood shackled in my orange transportation jump suit. Behind me were my family, friends and loved ones. I remember Father Mike stepping up to the stand and talking on my behalf, my co-defendants and homies.

I remember the victim's father, *whose son I killed*, crying and not condemning us. He forgave us. It touched my heart, making me feel something I had never felt before. I remember standing before everyone, telling the victims family sorry for the pain I've caused them. I don't remember apologizing for taking his life though.

I remember the judge looking at us and saying, *I hereby sentence you to 50 years to life in a California state prison.* She said it without any remorse. I remember the ride back to juvenile hall. We drove through my neighborhood. Taking in the sights, I wondered if I would ever see it again. I remember thinking, *Yeab, it's all about my neighborhood and I would do it all again.* That's how I felt on the ride back.

I remember that night thinking and thinking, *No, I wouldn't do it again*—what was I thinking? I gave up my life for a couple of blocks. For some guys and girls who will barely write me and barely remember me. I wouldn't do it again.

I gave up everything: my family, daughter, friends and freedom. I am going to spend the rest of my life in prison for my neighborhood, my *barrio*, for my *camaradas*.

I remember thinking, *I messed up. I really have to change.* I remember that night. For the first time I prayed for forgiveness. Not just from the victim's family again, but from my own family too. I remember.

-Fernando

*

When you are locked up, especially in juvenile hall, a lot of guys always talk about the amount of girls they had in their beds. I found myself sharing my experiences and it turned into a conversation, degrading women. We talked bad about them and called them bad names. Then I realized that the way I should talk about a girl is the same way I should talk about my female relatives. *It doesn't matter who they are and what they've done—all women deserve respect.*

-Ezequiel

I remember the day that living without you caught up to me. As I sat lost in the darkness of my cell, you came. In that instant, when life seemed meaningless, God met me with great love. You left me *both* devastated and full of courage to go on, knowing that with you there are no bounds.

-Ernie

*

After years in prison I found myself in a cell ready to end it all. Then, a letter arrived from my mom. She told me about the reality of God in her life and how He was the only one who could liberate me *from the chains*.

I cried out to God and He answered me! The *worst* day became the *best* day of my life. Out there people need family gatherings, possessions to be happy and enjoy life. In here? One can learn how to have joy and peace with Christ in their hearts. A person's relationship with God will be his secret weapon to succeed. *With God we can be free!*

-Ernie

*

I am locked down in my cell... 255 years with the "L" is what the judge gave me... I'm only 17 years old and I got sentenced to life in prison. Even though I got sentenced to life, that doesn't mean I'm going to give up and lose faith. I know God has a plan for me, even though my life doesn't make sense right now at this moment. I know God is working behind the scenes on my behalf.

I know I'm going home someday. I know I'm going to get another chance in the future. And I'm going to take that chance and live it to the fullest. I'm going to enjoy every waking moment of my life. I'm not going to take life for granted. I'm never going to let a sunrise go by without appreciating it and being thankful for a new day. I'm never going to walk by a pot of food without tasting it, and I'm never going to walk by a flower without stopping by to smell it... You don't realize what you got until it's all gone, like my freedom. I didn't realize how precious life itself was until I lost my case...

My birthday is coming up soon. I'm about to be 18 years old. I should be heading upstate pretty soon. I plan on being an "Abbot," the leader for Jesus the Risen Prisoner Community like Isaac is up in Corcoran. I would like to dedicate my life to God, and wherever I go I will always pick up my cross and follow him, no matter what the circumstances are. As a Warrior of Light, I will walk through the valley of the shadow of death, but I will fear no evil. As the old saying goes, "only the strong survive."

-Eric

Thanks to the man up above I got my sentence reduced to 50-years-to-life. My heart burns with hope that some day the laws will change and I will go back home. I'm about to turn 19 and I should be out enjoying life with my loved ones, but my life of sin has brought me here.

It's a struggle everyday. I am trying to do good. Somehow I end up doing wrong. I hope and pray for better days. I know my destiny lies in the condition of my heart.

Lord, give me the strength to get back up when I fall. It's not how many times I fall but how many times I get back up that counts.

-Eric

*

Mom, I'm sorry for being a troubled kid. I hope you forgive me for my many mistakes in life. I feel pain every time I hear you over the phone. A mother and son should talk face to face, *not* over a jail phone. A mother and son should be able to talk for as long as they need to, not 10 minutes at a time. Mom, I love you with all my heart and I'm trying to change my ways. I miss you.

-Elias

*

There was so much unity and love within the twirling flame of the Easter candle. So many stories brought together. This Easter morning will forever be engraved on my heart.

-Edin

*

Hanging on the Cross, Jesus makes room in his heart for all of us. No matter what kind of pain and agony Jesus was going through, he set it aside to *save us* from our pain and agony.

I've prayed so much that Jesus would make room in my heart for those that are going through hard times. Sometimes I get stuck thinking that it's all about me—how I am feeling, what I am going through and how much I need some kind of remedy, a cure.

But it's not about me. It's about all of us being connected. When we are all connected we are never left alone. We have each other to fall back on and that's how God wants us to be— *together*—falling back on him.

-Edin

Is God really seeking me as a desirous bridegroom—a jealous lover? I believe that God really seeks me. And yes, God has sought me as a jealous lover. God is unrelenting and never gives up on his children. It is us that play *hard-to-get* or who are too caught up in our own little world to take notice of Him.

I have experienced God's love in my mom who has always been there for me. And in my grandmother whose smiles and love have brought me joy and whose prayers have kept me safe.

I know God's love for me in the kindness of strangers, inmates and guards. I can see God's love for me when I look out the window and see the mountains, trees and little animals. I didn't experience God's love in all these things before. I was blind to it and was lost in my own little world. But I now see and appreciate God's love in all good things.

-David

*

We give joy to God, the one who made all of this, by showing goodwill towards others—doing random acts of kindness, showing mercy to others, doing our best to live a good moral life and, more importantly, by having a forgiving heart. I believe that by practicing these principles everyday we give joy to God.

-David

*

Dear God,

From going to church on Sundays with my family I know that I'm not supposed to question you. Now today I'm full of questions that need to be answered! *Why God?* Why do I have to live in this cold cell? Why do I only get to see my parents once a week? Why do I have so much hate in my heart? Why did I bring so much pain and hurt to others?

God, why did I hurt my mother's heart and make her grow old in a nine-month period of court dates back-to-back? Why do I have to be handcuffed from 5:00 in the morning to 10:00 or 12:00 at night? Why did I choose to live this life of pain and hate?

God, there are certain days when I go to court and I feel like I don't care or have any feelings left. I start to wonder if you are listening to me or if I am alone in this world with no hope. *Am I just another kid being tried as an adult with no opportunity of a second chance?* I don't even think people believe in second chances the ways I see youngsters get washed up.

God, what is my purpose in life? Why is my life being gambled in the court system like some craps game? Why do they want to lock me up for the rest of my life? Come to think of it, they want to give me 80 years-to-life when I won't even live to see 80 years, let alone life.

So God, I ask, *Why?* I can only take so many more court dates and county bus rides.

-David

*

I think about all I've been through. I'm a third *termer* with three strikes and I don't have any more chances. If I get arrested again, it's 25-to-life. There's more out there for me than wasting my life in prison.

I know drugs can ruin a person's life and hurt the ones you love most. I've seen people come and go from prison. I've heard all there is to hear. It's the same story: gangs, violence, drugs.

It hit me hard that I was inside with my father and sons. It hurts knowing that I was in the same place as my father—walking the *same* tiers, doing the *same* time, heading down the *same* path to nowhere. It's the harvest of the seeds I'd sown—the outcome of being involved in gangs and drugs.

I'm tired of it. It's a rough and lonely life. I hope you never have to go through it.

I hope when I get out I'll be able to walk away from this hell and never look back.

-Danny

*

Before Jesus asked me to become vulnerable, I was going through political struggles with a gang I was a part of. This was a time when family, friends *and* enemies secretly prayed for me. Yet I continued to be stubborn and not see or feel the love. I got stabbed over 20 times and was dying. I *literally* was dying—punctured lung, two cut arteries and many stab wounds. I was bleeding to death.

When I asked the nurse if I was going to die, she said, *Mijo, I don't know.* I saw a bright golden cross—it blinded me for a minute—and prayed to God to help me, to *save* me, to give me the strength to push forward.

Today I am alive, healthy and strong. I'm not the same person. I am trying to change. To be an example for those around me—those whom I call my *carnales*.

-José

I am doing a life sentence in a SNY yard. It's ironic and humorous. Here's why: My whole life has been one struggle after another. I have had to deal with fear and shame ever since I can remember. All I ever learned was that I had to be hard to overcome personal hate and resentment.

The whole world was cruel. You had to be able to keep a secret. Pain, suffering, and embarrassment were kept hidden behind a mask. After a few years of degradation and humiliation you learn the value of personal achievement. **I refused to let my misfortunes turn me into the evil that was torturing me.**

There were times I hated myself. I grew up on the streets because I didn't want to go home. I was ten and shining shoes, passing out advertisements and had a paper route. I paid off my Dad so that he wouldn't do things to me. Sometimes it worked, not always though. I cursed God. Yeah, I was a Catholic, attended catechism and Catholic school. I received the Holy Communion and was confirmed. It never changed my suffering and shame.

I was eleven or twelve the last time I cried. I've been through at least twelve near deaths, including being shot twice in the head. I believe in God, but inside I feel I've always been sentenced to hell. The one thing I always feared was dying alone. Yet, here I am in a cell alone waiting for death. Guess what? The irony of this that I'm doing it in a SNY yard.

-Daniel

*

When I got locked up I was like, *Yeah, nobody can stop me from anything. I don't need nobody else but me, myself and the hood.* But when I went to court I got slapped on the face with 15 years. Once I got back to my unit I really didn't know how to react until I talked to Josie. I realized I was hopeless and lost. I really didn't know who I was at that moment. I didn't know if I should have been mad, sad, or happy... so I turned and said, "Well if my boyfriend is going through it, I'll handle it then."

Then I realized that I was depending on *someone else* to take the weight off me. But when they told me to talk to God. "What? You mean like talk to the sky? So I look crazy? Nah, I'm straight."

Then Josie said to let God inside. *He's there for you and He's willing to wait.* I asked, "Who is this person called God? He's never been there with me through all my hard times."

I really wanted to know, *Who was God?* I wanted to test to see if what they say was really true. I followed a prayer that Josie gave us. Then I felt all these emotions come through me. I felt light headed and all I wanted to do was cry, but I didn't know how, so I told Josie how I felt. She said it's good to cry and to tell God what you need help with. So once when I was in my room I cried then told God my problems—at court that they wanted to give me 15 years. I asked Him to guide me and give me strength. I worried that I was talking to the wall but I felt better.

A month went by and they told me that I didn't lose my fitness. I might get nine years of Y.A. "Wow, God is good, but still nine years? Wow!!!" What sucked was that my boyfriend already got sentenced and was doing his time, and I really didn't know what to think at that point. I prayed to God. I felt very lonely. I didn't have anyone to visit me.

Six months passed as they figured out what they were going to do. God was the only one there so I trusted Him. Then right before my birthday they told me that they're going to give me five years. I was so happy. I thanked God. Even if I didn't have that support that I wanted, He was there for me.

After a couple months I went to Y.A. I had my ups and downs, but I kept my faith. Now I'm doing well and might get paroled out by the end of next year. I wouldn't have made it without the help of Josie, Father Mike and Father G to go through those rough times. Now I have faith in God and I know that he loves me. To all, *God Bless you!*

-Crystal

*

All my life I have been searching for fortune and fame. All my life I have been considered the *bad guy*. Since then, my life has changed before my eyes. Today, I sit here in my cell thanking God for *forgiving me* for the sins I have committed: for disrespecting my mother, for robbing people, and for taking a soul out of God's creation.

As I ask for forgiveness, I can feel my cold blood start to warm. As I ask for forgiveness, my life is new to me. I now have a fresh start, like when a *snake sheds its skin*. It doesn't care about what is shed—that's old, *the past*. I now focus on what's to come. Whatever trials I may encounter through this struggle, they will eventually come to pass.

So as I ride this out with Jesus, I am *no longer riding shotgun with Satan*. I have no worries. As I walk through the valley of death, I shall fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and staff comfort me. I now fight for what is right, not caring what my case looks like, because in the end I will be sentenced to Paradise.

-Christian

*

When I look out my window I see freedom—something all of us in the compound dream to have one day, along with the ability to run around and play. Freedom for us is outside recreation that we sometimes don't receive. You don't know how much being outside means to us. It's where we can move around freely and enjoy the beautiful scenery, the wind, and the hot sunny weather. A place where we don't have to worry about doors and locks.

-Christian

It is very difficult for me to accept gestures of kindness and love from others. I don't feel worthy of anyone's love. I have been in prison my whole adult life. I feel I have nothing to offer anyone. When people like me, I often pull away from them. I have been on my own for so many years.

-José

*

I remember how the tears poured down your face as I wiped them off your cheeks. I told you *I was sorry* and *I love you*. You told me that you never thought I would be in here. I told you that we all make mistakes and that I am not perfect. Mom, hopefully I will be returned to you soon.

-Ruben

*

My tears falling, thinking of you,
wondering how you are still right beside me
caressing my pain with a simple kiss
telling me it's all okay and my pain just goes away.

My mother, my love for you is never-ending
as you feel it's all your fault
now I wish to take your pain away with a touch,
comforting you lovely mother.

Thank you for not giving up.

-Alex

*

To be a follower of Jesus means to see that change is needed in the world, and to then *embody* that change. It involves selflessness, servitude, strength of will, and moral consistency. It also requires humility, which is necessary to admit faults, learn new lessons, and continue to grow.

-Omar

*

I knew a guy named "Joe" who seemed to be living the good life but was not happy. Joe had lots of money to go to the canteen. Joe also had lots of friends. He loved to gamble and won a lot. Joe got many visits from his family and was always happy.

I remember one day I was talking with Joe and he said, “I don’t lie. I don’t cheat. I don’t curse. I treat people right, but something seems to be missing. I feel empty inside. I feel like I need something.” I remember telling Joe, “It’s Jesus you need. Jesus in your life.” Joe looked at me right in the eyes and it looked as though he was about to cry. Then Joe just walked away from me. Joe had everything, including too much pride.

-Johnny

*

Once a program came to this institution and we were all having a good time. One of the guys from the program kept asking, *Why are you in prison?* I didn’t answer him. But he kept asking. *What are you in for?* I finally told him. I have a murder case from when I was 17-years-old.

After I told him I didn't see him for the rest of the program. I thought he would recite some scripture about forgiveness, but he just seemed to be scared of me and stayed away from me.

I remember feeling terrible and felt no matter how much time goes by I will always be judged for my past. I know I will always be judged by man. I thank Jesus for dying on the Cross for my sins because I know that someone will forgive me. I am sorry for all Jesus had to go through for our sake. But I am thankful for all that Jesus has done for us. I am hopeful to become the person God has created me to be.

-José

*

I know what it feels like to be abandoned. I remember when I was in prison and my parents came to visit. My mom started getting mad at what I was saying. She got up and walked out of the visiting room. I remember she was only there about five minutes. I remember my dad got up right after her and they both left the visiting room. I remember feeling like they left me there to die. I felt hurt and hopeless. I felt abandoned.

-Johnny

*

When I put my hand against the bloody spike in Jesus’ feet, *What did I feel?* A sense of healing and peace. I felt new again. I felt what the Roman soldier felt: loved *unconditionally* by God. I know that when I sin that God loves me and he has a plan for me.

-Johnny

It was my father who introduced me to the idea of forgiveness. He was able to see the good in me and look past my faults. I remember how good it felt to be loved and forgiven despite all I had done to hurt him and others. He taught me how to love.

My father changed his own life so that I could do the same. With such a wonderful father, I remember feeling disgusted with myself when I was first incarcerated. But I also remember the euphoria of *freedom and liberation from my guilt* when I *took responsibility* for my own choices. This changed my whole life.

-Alex

*

Dear God,

Can you even hear me when I pray silently in the night? Or am I just carrying on an endless conversation with myself? Often I'll wonder why my anger always seems to rise when I'm mad at you. Is there a reason I'm not supposed to understand all the pain you have delivered me in my twenty years of life? I admit there have been times where I felt your hand at play, perhaps helping me. However, often there were times that you have chosen to hurt me. Moments when I needed you, yet *you abandoned me*. WAIT... it was then that you carried me, right? BULLSHIT!

I don't hate you. My problem? I don't understand you. Why would you put me in a catch 22 position at the age of seventeen, where I had to choose to either kill or be killed!? Why would you take away my Grandma right in the middle of my trial and then take away my biological father a month after my sentence as I was sitting in reception for prison?

I guess a better question is, why am I asking questions that will never be answered? I suppose I should be content in knowing that you have some grand plan that is beyond my comprehension. The irony is that I do believe that and **I am stronger today** because of all that I have been through. Is that your plan—*hurt me in order to help me*? It's almost like you designed life to be a huge contradiction. It is strange though, that somehow I feel that I'm in a better position in life because I did pull that trigger in the middle of that March night.

Why is it that the truth can sound so ugly at times? I thought it was supposed to set me free. Why is it that I wear this golden necklace with your son nailed to the cross around my neck? There's so much I don't understand, like how my frustration inevitably leads me to hope. I just want you to know that you're my only chance. Your forgiving me is my only way to reach redemption. I want it to be clear that I always try to do the right things and stand up for what I believe in. I'm sorry if I doubt you at times, but what's faith without doubt.

Sincerely,

-Anthony

Hey Mom,

I'm writing you this letter that you probably won't ever get. I just wanted to write you and let you know what is up with me. I've been all right. There's not much you can do in here as you know because *we're in the same place*.

Well Mom, as for my courts, they went pretty bad. As you probably know by now, I lost my trial. It was sad hearing the judge's words, "The jury finds the defendant Fernando guilty of all charges." Then having to stand up and get handcuffed in front of your family and hearing everyone all sad. It sucked.

But I also have an inner peace in me because it is finally over. I don't have to worry about my fate anymore. I know what's gonna happen now. And I'm all right with it. It really doesn't bother me that when I go to court February 9th to get sentenced, my name will be added to the Lifer's list. What does get to me? You guys, my family.

I don't know how you guys are going to take it. Just with losing my trial, the family took it pretty hard. My lil bros and lil sis probably took it the hardest. They really need me there and I can't be. Growing up I was their Mom and Dad because I was all they had. I raised them. And now I left them just like you and my Dad did. I did *the same thing* you guys did and now I'm in the same place.

My grandma also took it hard. After seeing her son—my dad—locked up, a part of her died. And then having to see her oldest grandson who she raised locked up too, something else in her also died. And that hurt me too. Grandma told my Dad and I heard he took it hard too. He actually thought I was gonna get out or take a deal. My boy, Guero, even took it hard after it all happened. I hit him up and my boy actually broke down and started crying. It was the first time I ever heard my boy like that.

The only person who didn't know what had happened to me was you. I wrote you a couple days after and I really hope you didn't take it too hard, Mom. I know it probably really hurt you reading my letter telling you I lost and all. I just really hope you didn't take it too hard because I know all you really have in life right now are just me and Miguel. I know the other kids don't want you in their lives but me and Miguel do. I never meant for this to happen, Mom. I never meant for you to lose me again, but this is what happens when we live the lifestyle we live.

I'm sorry for everything that has happened in our lives, Mom. I know our lives sucked, but this is the life God dealt us and we got to live it the best we can. But damn Mom I'm really sorry for all the pain I caused you.

Before you got locked up, you really supported and visited me here while I was fighting my case. But something came up and you got locked up again. I know you will be out in a couple of months but I know how it will be different now. I know this is really gonna affect you. And you're gonna finally grow up and see this life isn't for you anymore. You have to grow up and actually *be a Mom* because Miguel needs you. He really needs you. He has no one else in his life besides us.

The rest of your kids also need you to step up and show them you can be a Mom. So do that Mom. You know we have been through a lot of tough times and a lot of pain. **It's time to change that.** Please take this as an eye opener. It's time to change so no more of your kids end up like me, your eldest.

Like I said, I'm really sorry for this and I never meant for it to happen. But I'm also trying to change, I really want to. We'll see what happens with that. For right now, let's work on *now*.

So, Mom, I hope you take my advice to heart and you really do change. Just now, even when I get life, I will still get out one day. Don't forget that I love you to eternity, Mom, and I always will.

Your son,

Fernando

*

My name is Mario and I came to prison when I was 17 years old. It's been 20 years, and I still find myself here. It's easy to come to jail, but it isn't easy getting out.

I was like you guys, full of pride, and I never feared anybody. I didn't care if you were tall or small; who you were or where you came from. I grew up believing the cultural influence in the neighborhood—you know, the OG with the big mustache and all the tattoos.

I first went to jail when I was 10 years old. My friend and I were playing with a 12-gauge shotgun and it killed my friend, José, by accident. It took half of his shoulder off and half of his neck. There was blood everywhere. Me and my other friend, Pepe, didn't know what to do, so he called the ambulance. Next thing we know the cops told me to show them where my friend lived, so I did. Then I ended up in a small room with no windows and the cops said we needed to talk. The first words out of his mouth were, *Why did you guys kill José?* I honestly didn't know what to say. I kept telling him it was an accident but he didn't believe me, or my friend. He just kept showing me pictures of my friend José's dead body. I still see those pictures in my head today.

So again here I go to jail for the murder of my friend. I go to a small cell with the windows painted white so I can't see out. I stay there for a week until my court date. The police figured it out now. They know it was an accident so they decided to let me go home.

I remember going back to the hood and nobody ever asked me what happened. They were more interested in how jail was. I could see it in their eyes. They now started to look up to me. I had earned some respect.

I didn't know it then but that's when I started to repress my feelings. I never learned how to express *when I was hurting*. I remember at the funeral I watched everybody crying, yet I never did. I thought if I cried I would be looked at as weak. So I never did. I remember as I continued my life of crime I never showed emotions or even cared whom I'd hurt. I was in and out of jail until the age of 17 when I committed my murder. It all happened so fast—all I knew was what happened was something I couldn't take back.

It took a lot of soul searching in order to deal with all the pain I caused. *I never cared* that my victim had a mother or father or family or friends who really cared about him the way I feel about my loved ones.

You know growing up in prison isn't something I'd wish on anybody. These places are full of people with hate in their hearts and they all think like you—you know, like *no one can touch me*. I know how it feels to think you are so tough that you don't fear anybody. I want to tell you prison is full of people like that. I know. I thought that for a lot of years.

Prison made me a *miserable man* because I had to grow up very fast. There was no time to be a kid and enjoy life. I went from carrying a gun to carrying a knife and in prison, no one is your friend. Someone is always trying to get over on you.

I know we hear the war stories of how it's cool in here with all the homies, drinking, partying, and sharing war stories. But to be honest with you? That gets old *very* fast. I know. I found myself alone in a hole, miserable with nothing. No friends. People stopped accepting my collect calls. Everybody else in life had moved on and I was still in prison. My girlfriend got kids so she isn't going to stick around for someone who is still doing the same old thing. They want to hear that you got your life together and that you're trying to come home. Your *own* family is now tired of you lying to them because you can't tell them the truth that you're still doing the same thing.

I remember always making excuses for everything. Nothing was ever my fault. I always blamed everybody else for my problems. Until one day **I finally started to accept responsibility for myself**. I took responsibility for my choices, for the decision I made in my life. They were not the right ones but I had to accept responsibility for them.

Then I started to look into myself to see why I was making so many bad decisions. And it all took me back to the murder of my friend, José. That's the moment when I started to repress my emotions. And I started to gain the gang mentality, thinking the cops were always trying to get me.

When I started to go back into my life and saw what got me where I am today, it also brought a lot of pain because I started to see and feel the pain I caused. My victim had a name—*Carlos*. He also had a beautiful family who loved him. I caused them a lifetime of pain. *I murdered their son*. I killed someone they loved and miss very much. I remember when I started to feel the pain. I couldn't stop the tears because I started to feel all my pain.

I know the words *I'm sorry* don't even come close to giving the my victim's family any kind of comfort. I feel so ashamed for the pain I caused. I know now there is nothing I can say or do to help heal the family. And I have to live with the decision for the rest of my life. Today I continue to look at myself and continue to better myself. It took the life of a human being in order for me to see and feel the pain I caused and I will regret that decision for the rest of my life. No one has the right to take someone else's life. If you want to see what I mean ask your mother *how she would feel if you had been the one who died*. So before you make a choice **think about the consequences**.

You guys are young right now with a lot of growing up to do. Don't try to grow too fast. Take it one day at a time. If you need help, **ask**. *Don't be me*. Believe me, someone will help you, but you got to ask. I know you think your parents don't understand, but if you talk to them, tell them what's on your mind. I'm only writing because I don't want any of you youngsters to end up like me. I'm 37 years old and still trying very hard to get out of prison.

So please take it from someone who has walked in your shoes. I'm not better than you; I'm just like you, only now *I make better choices and have a better understanding*. We all have those friends who made it. That's who you want to be like. I believe in you guys. I know you don't want to be in a cell for the rest of your life.

Well youngsters, I'm off for now, but I really hope you think about things. As tough as we are to do wrong *we should be tough enough to do right*. Not for family or anyone else, but *for yourself*. So until next time, God bless you guys.

Your friend,

-Mario

*

Ever wonder what it's like to have insomnia & be in solitary confinement?

I live in a cage—6 x 10 feet, 24 hours-per-day, seven-days a week. I have only seen daylight *twice* in 350 days. But for one hour each week an angel visits me and I am free. And yet? She must always leave and I must die a little more.

I lay awake at night and listen to the cold world. I hear the screams of the mentally ill, the drip of water from the ceiling, the scurry of a mouse. I try to escape into my mind and live within a memory, but I can never get far enough. My head hurts, my body hurts and doctors refuse to help me. I think of life and all that I've missed. I think of death, a sweet release from my torture.

But I am no coward. I only have two more years. I stare at my walls, the paint, falling off. Fifty years of lead-based paint fall on me daily. It's cold at night and it smells of rot. The night seems to never end. A lunatic is pounding on my walls. Is he crazy for trying with all his might to get out, or am I, for just lying here? *Only time will tell*.

Heal me Lord, for my soul is twisted with pain.

-Moses

“I can’t change you, but God will.” Those were the words of my *jefita* (mom) when she was frustrated not knowing what to do with me. My response to her always was, “Nobody can’t change me mom, I’m already lost.” Tears would come out from her eyes and she would tell me, “I’ll keep praying for you because I trust in God that one day you’ll change.”

I would walk out from the house and go to my hood. My parents came to the USA when I was 5-years-old. They left me and my lil sister in El Salvador. My older brother and my older sister were supposed to take care of us, but that never happened. The only thing they cared about was the money that my Mom would send them every two weeks to buy food or something we needed.

While I was growing up the only thing that kept me going was—and still is—my little sister because I know *she was suffering just like me*.

When I was 9, I started hanging out with the fools from my neighborhood. I was the youngest in the group. When I was 11 when I started liking all the gang stuff and I started rolling with them. I became one of them and they became my homeboys, my family.

When I was 14, my Mom brought my little sister and I to live with her in the U.S.A. I felt strange in a new country. But I was happy for being with my Mom. She had two jobs so there were days that I wouldn’t see her at all. My Dad was in the house more often than her.

Again, I started feeling lonely, sad, and disappointed. I used to walk on the streets by myself smoking *frajos*. I met a homie who claimed the same hood I claimed but it was weird because I was in a different country. For some reason I always thought I was gonna die when I was 15 so I wanted to live my life to the fullest. But I was just destroying myself. The only reason why I liked to be home was because of my little sister.

It was a Monday and I was going home to kick it with my homeboys and a car came towards me. They asked me for drugs. I ignored them and kept walking. I was gonna put my cell phone in my pocket but I heard gun shots. I fell to the ground and realized that I was hit. There I was—dying with 5 bullets in my body. I lost a lot of blood. I had a bullet stuck close to my spinal cord, and my heart stopped beating. *I died*. The doctors tried everything they could to bring me back but it wasn’t working until they opened the left side of my chest and started *massaging my heart* and, just like that, *it started beating again!* They kept on doing surgeries. I was stable but they didn’t know if I was going to make it.

My parents were there by my side, feeling the pain I was feeling. I could see it in their eyes. My Dad said, “Your little sister said that if you close your eyes, she will do the same.” Those words really touched me. It gave me hope and strength at the same time. My little sister was suffering because she didn’t want me to die. See, I wasn’t the only one who got hurt—my family got hurt, too.

The doctors didn't know if I was gonna walk. My Mom told me to have faith in God and to believe that He's with me. She used to pray everyday in the hospital for me. The two men that shot me were two undercover cops. They said I looked *suspect* and that I tried to shoot at them. I did have a gun on me, but I didn't use it against them. So not only did I get shot, but I had a case to fight after my recovery.

I went to juvy and was charged as an adult. The worst part of being locked up is that I missed my family, especially my little sister and my lady. I started praying everyday and got close to God. I talk to him everyday, day and night. At first I thought he didn't listen to me. I was facing 35 years plus two strikes and they only ended up giving me 21 months. Now I know that God *really listened to me*. He gave me another chance.

If you see me you would never think that I got shot, except for the scars. But those scars make my story real. I think about how much my family loves me and how much pain I caused them.

See, when you get hurt or locked up, **your family gets hurt and locked up with you too**. For them *locos* facing time, think about it homies. *Was it worth it?* I carry my *barrio* in my heart and I'll look out for my homeboys because I don't want them to end up like me. That's *loving* a homeboy. Sometimes we act like people want us to be. But inside *you know who you really are*. Think about it and don't give up.

-Omar

*

Losing Everything

First you lose your freedom. That's expected after committing a crime.

Then you lose your dignity when they take your personal property. That's expected after committing a crime.

Then you lose your humanity when they strip search you in front of a hundred other guys. That's expected after committing a crime.

Then you lose your identity and are given a number. That's expected after committing a crime.

The list goes on and on, like your old lady, your car, your job. That's expected after committing a crime.

Then? You *lose* your father. That's *not* expected after committing a crime.

It ain't over yet. Now? You *lose* your mother. That's *not* expected after committing a crime.

With that? You lose a piece of your heart. That's *not* expected after committing a crime.

Some things you can get back—your freedom, property, humanity and identity. But not your pops and moms and all other family members you lost. Now you only have the memories to cherish for the times you once had, never to make anymore, because of taking love and life for granted and committing a crime. So *think first* of what is expected of you before committing a crime.

I lost a lot.

-Orlando

A lifer since Dec. 1980

Happy is the person who finds wisdom and gains understanding. Proverbs 3:13

*

Really, which one are you?

Let's just say you, a homie, and I go out. By the end of the night, one of us will be dead. One will be telling, and the last one will more than likely be doing a life sentence when it's all over.

Now let me ask you a question, "Which one are you?" Before you answer, give it a minute or two... Yeah, I know you ain't the rat and obviously you ain't the dead one. So I guess you'll be the one doing the life sentence.

Well, guess what? I felt the same way as you do because of the beliefs instilled in me through the gang lifestyle. But after almost 32 years in prison, regret, and self-reflection, I have had a change of heart. When the older homies were schooling me, they forgot or left out the part about the long years of pain and suffering endured by everybody involved: you, your family and friends, and—most of all—the family and friends of your victim(s).

There will be many, many years of loneliness with only your pillow to stop the river of tears that will flow while reminiscing of the cherished past you once had. Rarely will you think of your future, because it only exists in your dreams, or the hope that lies within your heart, if you still have one left.

Prison has a tendency to take away much of who you could have been. The worst part about living in a cell is the overwhelming guilt—you can never hide from it. It's a part of you every day of your existence. So now as your older homie, I owe you this much: to tell you just to deal with life and its problems that involve school, girls or boys, your parents, brothers and sisters, instead of making the choices I did and living with the consequences.

I promise you this much—your views of the *barrio* will change drastically as time passes. You owe it to yourself and to your family to **think before you act** because *they do the time with you if you kill someone*.

If given the change or opportunity, back then, things would have been way different. I am your future and you are my past, unless you can choose wisely from this point forward.

God changed my heart.

-Orlando

Doing life for my choices...

*

A Reflection: *You Tried Your Best*

I just didn't wake up one morning and say, "You know what, I'm gonna be a criminal." Neither did I have the aspiration of becoming a permanent resident of the Department of Corrections. Whether society believes it or not, I became a byproduct (a secondary result) of a community, better known to me as a *barrio*, a ghetto of violence, of anger, of rage and of hatred—a place that was lacking in education and in the rearing of a child.

Here, you were taught a set of rules and principles that were distorted, to say the least, where you couldn't show signs of weakness such as crying, fear, telling. Your childhood friend became your homie. His problem is yours and yours, his. If an issue was raised, you learned how to deal with it quickly and, sometimes, fiercely without hesitation. You don't even think twice of the results or consequences of your actions, because, deep inside, you didn't want people to think bad about you.

You're more worried about your reputation, never realizing all along—because of your naiveté—that they've trained you to be a gladiator or—even worse—bred you like a pitbull or Rottweiler, to always attack and never relent 'til death! Sad, but true.

A psychological injustice is taking place because you're being taught to detach yourself from human emotions.

Thirty-one years ago was the only time I saw my *barrio* collectively cry. It was because we laid a homie to rest due to gang violence. In those tears lies hope in the sense that maybe, maybe *mijo* or *mija* still had that seed of life left in them. With the right love and affection and especially determination, change is possible. Not all will be saved from the lies and promises of the *barrio*. Some will continue living the life until they wake up. When? *I honestly don't know*.

We all have our own limitations, but please **don't give up on us**. Only after wallowing in my own self-pity did I realize that family is what's more important than your so-called friends. Family loves us unconditionally, through thick and thin. Friends,

or, should I say, homies, love us only while we're there to be used. I am one who "was" lost to the *barrio* at the expense of another, an innocent victim. Only God can help me deal with the guilt and shame that riddles me, and the burden that is overwhelming at times. Forgive me, Father, for my sins. Forgive me, mother, for my ways.

Love your son,

-Orlando

Once lost to the gangs, but found by God...

*

I am thinking of the joy and peace in my heart these days. It's almost surreal feeling so blessed today. I look to the darkness of my past life to bring fourth the great transformation to who I am today.

To be active in a ministry of serving God and furthering His kingdom has become my purpose, hope and joy in life. It is not for recognition that we find ourselves serving Him by serving others. We do not seek a worldly reward; rather, to find the fulfillment in our souls in knowing that what we do in secret He will both *reward* and find *pleasing*. When He returns He will bring with Him His reward. I am thankful and humbled today for His salvation, forgiveness, mercy and purpose.

I am blessed to have been given my sight—for now I truly see and have life in abundance, which *supersedes* the limitations of flesh and blood. It is blessing upon blessing that we should be privileged to not only see His hand moving in our lives, but to also be able to see the work He's carrying out through us—he fruit He bears. And therein is our joy—to be living in His will.

-Oscar

*

I remember a time when Jesus gave me a second chance at life. I remember waking up one day (Pelican Bay SHU, 1998) and having an epiphany—*how did I get myself into all this mess?*

I felt alone and had a sense of being lost. Then, after much reflection, I told myself, *Robert, it's time for you to make a difference in your life*. From there I went to obtain my GED. That was my first accomplishment in prison. It felt good to earn something I worked so hard for.

Then came other opportunities that brought about the much-needed self-discovery. To my amazement these courses (self-help/self-development) provided a greater insight into my life and commitment toward parole. However, I must admit that at first I credited my accomplishments and self-betterment to my human capabilities. But ever since I embarked on my spiritual journey my whole perspective has changed. I now credit God and I thank him for shining his light upon me in my days of darkness. Today I'm building a strong foundation of faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

-Robert

I remember when I felt possessed...

I remember when my closest friend was killed last year and how I found out the day after my birthday. At first I felt nothing but sadness. Then I felt nothing at all—not bad, just emptiness where I knew he belonged in my heart. But he was no longer there.

Then I was possessed by a rage I had never encountered in my life. A rage that couldn't be stopped by any type of consoling or kind words. I remember the thoughts that ran through my mind.

I'm glad I was in here, because, in my state of fury, I probably would have acted on him for taking away the one person that I could confide in—the person that would *never* judge me and who was a kind-hearted friend till the end.

As they say, *time heals all wounds*. I hope, one day, this wound will heal. But to this day the topic of him is a gash filled with salt so I try not to talk about him. But I know I must to make sure he is *never* forgotten and is forever held close to my heart and everyone that knew him.

R.I.P.
BROB
1993-2010

-Robert

*

I feel so much love holding the presence of God in my arms. The sadness and loneliness limps away and I feel pure joy and happiness to be re-united with all my loved ones. I am grateful to be a part of your life and I cherish the memories we all have shared.

I forgive you for the times you never wrote, and were too busy to make a phone call. I finally understand that perhaps you weren't equipped to give me what I needed. I finally found this in Jesus and now I share it with you. I forgive your selfishness and want you to know I love you all more than you can realize and hope. You can see how much my heart has changed for the better.

-Stan

*

Healing from Emotional Pain of the Past

I've struggled with emotional pain for over 40 years. I can honestly share my thoughts and feelings today only because I've experienced a level of healing so deep, that the pain of the past doesn't have its grip on me any longer. I achieved this healing through the meditations of Father Mike's retreats.

Once he taught me the simple tool of reflection, doing the inner work that was necessary to overcome this pain, to go within myself to find, face and bring it out with me. To write about and openly share it with my fellow Christians, and then slowly let it go.

It no longer has the power over me. The shame I've carried for so long didn't belong to me. The abuse, neglect and rejection has been overpowered with happiness, joy, love, and forgiveness. These things are available to you, if you really want them.

The difference between now and back then is in the pain. I don't look for something like drugs or impulsive behavior such as anger to cover it up and pretend it's not there. I don't look for someone else to fix it, because *they can't*. Only Jesus is qualified as the true source of lasting healing. I use the tools of reflection many times during the day, sometimes walking the yard, during chow, mass, or just sitting in my cell or sharing with a friend. Don't wait 40 years like I did!

-Stan

*

I am thankful for re-connecting to God's presence in my life and in my heart. I thought God had abandoned me because everyone else had. It was a familiar emotion for me to experience the loneliness I felt. I could be around lots of people and still feel empty and lonely. I would ask God for comfort and at times I wouldn't feel it until I realized I wasn't opening up my heart for this experience!

Once I realized this, I found I could find comfort every time. I've learned to allow myself to feel vulnerable and let other people into my heart. I had to learn not to be so guarded and let the walls down. I built these walls because I was tired of feeling so much pain. Once the walls came down, I felt God's presence had been there all along. I allowed myself to openly share in fellowship with others. I found the essence of true love and compassion by opening my heart. I found Jesus.

-Stan

*

I first started using meth at age 12—the age of a child. I didn't understand what hit me. It started with that first “hit” and then the dope consumed my every thought. It was an instant rush, too fast for me to catch and I've been chasing it ever since.

I didn't have to be introduced to meth. I've grown into that “lifestyle.” My immediate family was already lost in the frenzy. What surprised me was the fact I saw the overwhelming control meth had on everyone, including *my own family*. But I still fell for the false galore. I wasn't subjected to peer pressure, or a need to fit in—I'd grown accustomed to being surrounded by crystal meth. I was naive and didn't understand how we could be engulfed by the severe pain from using.

My own precious mother was often clouded by the drug. She would neglect me *for days*, without feeding, speaking to me, or just reminding me that she loved me. Those were the everyday consequences of the drug. She was raising a child filled with hate because I couldn't understand that the drug was in control of all my thoughts.

We were shackled with barely enough slack on our chains to get the next high. I was only a child trying to figure out an escape and I had no one to run to for guidance. My heart was breaking and I knew no high was worth all this misery.

Meth distorts the mind, leaves the thoughts twisted, and makes you lose focus on what's important. The mind is a powerful thing to waste, so crystal meth has a "high" price to pay. I couldn't run from something that was everywhere.

Now I stand my ground and deny *all* temptations. It's a fight I got myself into, and I learned a long time ago, *never run from a fight*.

I have to train hard in this constant battle. To lose would mean my life. It took me a while to see that the drug weakens our mind causing everything else to fall apart.

Now that I see what the problem is, I can find a way to fight it. It takes patience, perseverance, self-discipline, and strength. I never thought I could overcome this battle. But in time we all develop the ability. We just have to use it. Crystal meth is a drug that infests the mind, body, and soul. It's a *self-induced* disease.

-Wally

*

I remember when I allowed drugs, sex, and other influences to control my life. I was a little boy in this giant world. My ears and eyes were unprotected.

Just going out to the neighborhood endangered who I would become. Like the aroma of perfume, the influences flow through the air. I could hear the music of rap bumping in the stereo of a car passing by. In the apartment I passed by they were playing the same jam. It taught me about sex, drugs, and stealing.

I got a little older and the influences of the world changed who I was. One day I heard God's Word and he revealed to me that I was set free by the man, Jesus, who died on the cross. Now, I'm protected by God's Holy Spirit. I'm free, living in victory, and these walls of this prison can't take that away.

-Alberto

*

I remember a time when I almost experienced death. It started as a good day, but the way it ended was not so good. I remember just walking the neighborhood almost all day like nothing—no worries, just chillin' with my homie. We ended up going to my cousin's pad to see what was up with him.

We kicked it most of the day, having laughs and all that stuff. After our little visit, me and the homie walked out my cousin's front gate. I was the first to step. Once I got to the corner, I stopped. I looked back to wait for the homie to catch up because he was talking to my cousin. And that's when the devil tried to creep in through the back door.

Once I saw my homie walk out the gate, I turned back around facing the street, the corner and block. *My barrio!*

That's when a dark colored car turned the corner. I had been in this situation before. *It was time to dance with the devil.* Not because I wanted to, but because it was just *that* time. A whole bunch of thoughts flashed through my mind—of me dying, or my homie losing his life. So I was just going to scream the hood and run for my life. But when I snapped back into reality, I just put my game face on. Yeah, you know that game face that we all got when we act like the sun is beaming down our face with that mad-dog look? Yeah, *well that face.* All I did was stand my ground. The rest happened quickly and out of nowhere.

I just remember hearing my homie say, “Trucha!” as he was walking up from behind. I was still way ahead of him though. That's when the car crept to a stop. And, quickly, the passenger jumped out. It's crazy because he looked just like us—young, bald, Mexican, gang-related, and just trying to make a name for himself.

Once we exchanged “one” word and a hand gesture, it was a wrap (If only you knew what those words mean, you'd probably laugh in surprise).

I saw sparks and heard gunshots. The crazy part? *They were meant for me! This guy was trying to kill me!* I can't blame him though because I was playing the same game he was! Only in this game, there's no cheat codes or re-starts.

Luckily, I quickly dropped and ran for cover. I heard bullets zoom so close by my head. I still get the chills with the thought of it 'til this day. After 5 quick shots—which felt like forever—that's when my homie ran up to check on me. At the same time, *he's returning fire!*

Nobody was injured that day. But that day I thought about life real good because I almost lost my life. And I was only 15 at the time. It's crazy how you can almost lose your life over *some letters* or just by what side of the *tracks* you live on.

This was the only time that I heard bullets fly so close to my head that it isn't even funny. And it wasn't the last. I've been shot at in front of liquor stores, parties, homies' houses and inside of cars. All this action that I went through was over what side of town I represented. It's crazy, but true.

I have always had God in my life. But now I can actually thank him for my being here, *alive!* And as I look around today, I don't see inmates! I see *survivors* because I know it's hard to live past the age of 18 when you grow up in a rough neighborhood.

-Joshua

Inner Life

Jesus's concern about our inner life is jarring because he talks as if there is a whole world inside us; the world where God lives and the world where the most important activity of our lives plays out its drama. That world consists of our dreams, our hopes and aspirations, our ambitions, our visions of ourselves, our relations with others, and our decisions as to how we treat others and use others. And most important of all, it is where God and our heavenly friends fit into our lives. That is an entirely different world from the world outside ourselves. It is the world that is most real to God even though we may not even be aware of its existence other than on those rare occasions when we may do a little soul-searching and for a short while become aware of things happening inside of us. The world inside us may be just as vast as the universe outside-our senses. It makes one think of the vastness of space. For centuries we have been exploring that outer universe. Now as we analyze the molecular and atomic and subatomic composition of matter, we are becoming aware of a whole new universe on the opposite side of tiny matter. The world inside our souls may be similar in its dimensions. It is a heaven where God dwells. "My Father and I will come and live within you," Jesus promised.

-José

