

ODYSSEY ORACLE

AUTUMN REFLECTIONS



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MOMENTS OF COURAGE



This year I stood on business and gained the courage to change my life around. For most people change is scary, but for me it was necessary. One day I just was tired—tired of living the same unhealthy lifestyle. I decided at this point I would wake up early every morning and work out. I am determined to build muscle and focus on my health.

I then completely changed my diet and am currently on a raw plant-based diet. People call me crazy, and I often hear, “How did you go from eating meat your whole life, to one day making this major change? I could never.” I always simply reply, “You have to want it enough.” Just as Bill Banfield stated, “plan your work and work your plan.” You have to set goals for yourself and imagine the bigger picture. The plan is the first step; executing is the second step.
(Dontaeva Acklin)



When thinking about a moment of courage in my life, one specific time comes to mind. December 18, 2015 was my first probation officer visit after pleading guilty to manufacture/delivery of heroin. Looking back on

the day, it seems all so clear to me that the men that later took me into custody were, very clearly, law enforcement and I wasn’t aware. Telling the story makes me relive the day, what occurred leading up to that, and subsequently after. “Carissa?” is what I remember hearing, looking up, and seeing my agent. We walked to the back, him leading, to a room directly in front of us. Initially I said to myself, “Wow, he must be the supervisor because he has the biggest office here.” That, of course, was before I entered fully into the room. At first eye glance I noticed an industrial-sized copy machine and a large printer, so I knew the room was big to fit those devices in there. What



I didn’t know was that on the other side of the room, behind the wall that I couldn’t see, were two agents from the United States Marshall Service. The two men that had walked in the building directly past me without even looking at me were here for me.

United States of America vs Carissa Marie Andrews was what the top of the paper read. I instantly collapsed to my knees and shrieked in disbelief. I was handed the paper and told I was being indicted by the federal government. I cried and cried until I was told that it was time to go. At that moment I realized that my whole life was in their hands. Instantly I thought about my mother, so I called her. I remember the agents telling me they would get in contact with my mom, but because this wasn’t my first time in trouble, I knew better. Quickly, I called my mom and told her I was getting indicted. She asked basic questions like, where I was going to be transported, who she could talk to, etc.

Getting to the federal courthouse and having a lawyer tell me, “Shut up. Do not say ANYTHING in this room. Shut the F up” as he is looking around and discreetly making me aware of potential listening devices in the room was one of the most traumatizing moments. I felt like I was in a movie. Trauma can make you do the most absurd things, like fake a pregnancy thinking that I wouldn’t be

taken to jail because of that. Luckily, I didn't waste anyone's time because they said my fake baby wasn't far enough along for me to need a checkup. After a couple of hours sitting in the room, it was my turn to go in front of the judge. I was released on my own recognizance and walked outside in the main lobby to use the phone and call my mother. The wind was so strong and powerful that day that when the call connected, that's all I could hear. Never did I imagine that my mother was already in route to me, with every document she could think of to give her belongings away to guarantee my release, if needed. Thankfully, as I stated, I was already out on the federal government's version of a signature bond. Eventually I was sentenced to a year in FBOP custody.

This was a pivotal part of my life. Something that was sent to break me did the exact opposite. The judge sentenced me to prison because he still believed there was hope for me, but I needed a wake-up call. The best thing he could do for me, he did. I didn't appreciate it, but looking back I was immediately grateful. I chose this situation as my moment of courage because it was one of the hardest moments in my life, and I still prevailed. Nothing worth having comes easily, and I truly believe that. I wasn't going to be the person I am destined to be without going to prison. My thoughts, behaviors, surroundings, and environments changed. I promised myself I would never go back to a life not worthy of me. Seeing my mother cry, knowing I was going to prison, my sister jumping on me and burying her head in my shoulder on the day I was released, etc.: all of those things were building blocks of the new life I wanted and the person I was growing to become.

I put the work in, I sacrificed, I lost, and, most importantly, I persevered. Courage isn't something that comes easily. It's often in the darkest moments we find courage out of nowhere. My moment of courage is exactly what I needed to reassure myself that I am in fact on my path to being the woman I strive to be. I am a part of the three percent of inmates that do not reoffend and do not return to federal grounds. **(Carissa Andrews)**



I was at a friend's backyard BBQ. We were probably pounding PBRs and waiting for the coals to get just right. A friend of a friend had her dog at the party—a little lap dog. There were other dogs at the party and the dogs seemed to be coexisting as happily as the people. The sun was shining and the worst thing that could happen is someone might have a hangover, tomorrow. The neighbor's backyard ran along the perimeter of the yard where the BBQ was taking place; the yards were separated by a low and failing fence. I'm not sure if I could hear a screen door opening in the distance or if there was any other warning of what was to come, as this was so long ago and seemed to happen in an instant. The neighbors had let their large dog out into the yard; it circled their yard a few times and then leapt over the fence into my friend's yard.

Perhaps the larger dog thought the smaller dog was a toy—we look for justification when something goes wrong. The neighbor's dog quickly snatched up a smaller dog in its jaws and began to whip it back and forth. Cries from the neighbor, whimpering and snarling, screams and weeping all clash to create a horrible soundscape. As soon as the dog had clamped onto the other dog's neck, I sprung out of my lawn chair and bolted towards the dogs. I pried the aggressive dog's mouth open and tried to extract the little dog as gently as possible. The little one looked like a toy someone might throw away—matted with blood and saliva. I hand off the little dog to its owner with the hope that the vet can work a miracle. I consider my reaction to be heroic because it was a moment where my body and soul aligned for a good purpose in the face of danger.

The little dog died. I wish that wasn't so. It's easy to expect to be rewarded for your courage; to think that a higher power should have saved the little dog. I'll just end with something my mother would say: "Courage is like a muscle. The more you use it the stronger it gets." **(Lucas Benford)**





Hungover, as I'm dropping off my sister at the mall, a stampede of people pour out every door. I lower down the car window and ask someone, "Why is everyone running?" They reply, "They're shooting." Wait what? My sister, I just dropped her off. I jump out the car, head into the mall. Immediately myself and a stranger get low. We both duck as we hear another pop as we walk past the food court. I notice the booth where my sister worked is emptied. My heart is beating so fast. Where is my sister? I see there is a blood-soaked paper towel. I'm looking around and see there's only about 20 people in the entire mall including the police presence. I'm looking in the stores around her booth, then "Jasmine!" I scream, cry, and hug my sister. She made it through and so did I. **(Jasmine Benson)**



Being a mother is hard. It has its daily trials and tribulations. Usually, I can get up and get my day and my children's day started with no problem. But most days it is hard. A moment of courage for me was when I finally found the strength to ask for help.

It is extremely hard for me to ask anyone for anything. Before meeting my partner, all I had was myself. I moved out at a younger age and was forced to grow up quickly as I became pregnant at 19 years old.

Fast forward to when I was 21 years old. At this time in my life, I had been battling with a job that sucked, poor eating habits, overweight, breaking open my son's piggy bank to buy cigarettes, and a bad drinking habit. One morning, I found myself dizzy, barricaded in my room, which was filled with cigarette smoke and a can of watermelon flavored four loco almost empty. I called my dad crying that I didn't know how much longer I could continue with my life and I wanted him to know that I wanted him to take care of my son for me. Within 25 minutes he was at my door, came in with his spare key, and hugged me. It was the longest hug I've ever had from my father. I knew then that all I had to do was ask for help. He helped me in so many ways.

Present day, I am excelling as a mother of three. I'm back in school, have a phenomenal job, and a bright future ahead. **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**



To double back on the last question, it took me courage to remove myself from a situation that could've killed me and taken me away from my daughter: overcoming postpartum depression, becoming a new mom and a new adult at 18 with zero guidance. I wasn't close with my mom so to navigate it all with no help I personally believe took me real courage. Some women twice my age let these things overcome them. I chose to overcome it, and I'm still actively working towards better. **(Mia Cannon)**



I never thought the decision to stop using marijuana would be a challenge that needed courage until my failure of multiple attempts. The first time I tried to stop only lasted a few months. I believe my relapse was due to still loving the pleasures it brought me. I believe many addicts deal with this issue. We realize something is not good for us, but it becomes difficult to fully let go because of the attachment the pleasures have on us. Marijuana was very popular with all my peers. I couldn't escape it. It was everywhere I turned.

Music is one of my life's joys. The art of creating a song or putting together rhymes brings happiness to my bones. When I learned the effects weed had in my creating process, it was amazing. It became part of my creative process tool. I felt I needed it to be more creative. Fearful of losing the talent I thought I had due to my decision to leave weed behind became one I did not wish to entertain. I strongly had to reach down inside to make a decision on what was more important.

I would love to take credit in this courage or strength that it took for me to quit, but it was truly my faith that did it. I still don't believe I could have done it alone. Now being over three years without even an inhale of it, I'm grateful to say I've had no urges and also my love for creating music is still with me. **(Vernell Cauley)**



My children became my motivation to lace up my running shoes and get back at it. While I constantly strive to inspire them,

today they inspire me. My children have become my motivation to be the best version of myself. As my daughters will soon be entering their teen years, I want to be the best example that I can for them. My two sons are starting to develop into little men and have a lot to learn about life.

I have worked hard over the years to instill good values into my children. I have always been their cheerleaders for anything that they want to accomplish. I have to say, it is quite refreshing to have the tables turned. My children have changed my world. From the moment they were placed into my arms as newborns until this very moment, they are constantly teaching me things about myself and about life. Push through the darkest times. They have shown me such tremendous courage and strength. They have taught me that it's okay to have a bad day, and you don't have to pretend to be happy. They also have taught me to be strong and to fight through those bad days because better days are on their way. They have taught me to be strong. My children are my strength, my motivation, and my inspiration. They give me the courage to face any challenge.

My children are the reason why I will never give up. They fill me up with hope and strength. As a mother, my children are the ones who help me find the strength to tackle anything that comes my way. As a mama I'm not perfect. I make mistakes. I forget things. I lose my cool. And some days I go a little crazy. But it's okay because in the end, no one could ever love my children the way I do. My greatest wish is that my kids always know how much I love them and that they walk through the rest of their life knowing I'll always be there for them anyway I can. **(Andrea Evans)**





I had to be strong and courageous when I had to bury both my parents—my mother in 1999 and father in 2014. Planning a funeral was not what I ever expected. My mother passed away from cirrhosis of the liver at the age of 43. She was an alcoholic battling depression. My father passed away from lung cancer.



Fast forward February 12th, 2021, I received a phone call at work that my baby brother had been shot and died. My heart dropped to my stomach and felt as if I was dreaming. This can't be real. No, he's just hurt, and he will be okay. No. No he wasn't. My brother was shot point blank in the head and passed instantly (the Medical Examiner told me). I have never felt so much pain in my soul, not only for me, but also for my niece (my brother's daughter). She was almost 10 years old when he passed away. She was my brother's everything. I couldn't eat or sleep. Planning a funeral for my last closest relative was gut wrenching.

I can't believe that they are all gone. I'm the last of kin. The strength of God keeps me pushing through life without them. My comfort is knowing that they are all together in heaven. **(Aleesha Flowers)**



A moment of courage for me in today's life is getting up everyday and putting effort into doing my studies or even just going to class. Sometimes you don't always feel smart. And some classes are a bit intimidating. Everyday I tell myself that I can do it! Even though I am struggling, I choose to go to class and seek help from the many resources to choose from. **(Andreya Gavins)**



My biggest moment of courage was when I lost my twins unexpectedly. I didn't know why God had done this to me or what was to come next. I was in an extremely dark place and it felt like there was nothing I could do and everything was my fault. I stopped working my job because working from home while living with multiple people as well as taking care of an infant was not working for me. So I quit my job and started my baking business full time in honor of my kids. No matter what anyone had to say, I kept pushing myself to do more and more things I never thought of. I owe it all to my children. Without them, I don't think I would have fought as hard to become the best version of myself for them and myself. **(Shanigel Goodwan)**





As a young girl working and going to school to help her sick grandmother, I had to make a hard choice that really wasn't so hard because one, I hated school, and two, I would do anything for my grandmother

without a doubt. Seeing someone you love so much struggle just to get out of bed in the morning and having a hard time just walking to the door takes a toll on your mental health. As times got harder, I found myself working more and going to school less. I worked in the mall so I still got to see my friends from school, which was a bittersweet moment as they asked, "Girly, why you never come to school?" I would just make a joke like, "I don't care about school, I'm getting money lol." In reality, I had no choice.

I eventually stopped going to school all together when I was 17 years old. I thought nothing of it, and I would get up and go to work every day. People (family) would make fun of me because I didn't graduate. Fast forward two years later, I searched up on Google how I could get my GED and a place named Omega popped up. I filled out a quick questionnaire, they called me back, I went to orientation, and I was like "no way I can do this." I didn't return for six months.

I finally had enough courage to go back. I went and had a talk with Oscar, and he told me, "If you don't do it now, you probably will never do it." After work, no matter how tired I was from standing on my feet all day, I went to MATC to take my tests, and I passed them all on my first try.

Fast forward three years later, my grandmother is no longer with us, but I know I am making her proud. I am in my first year of college plus in the Odyssey Program. I'm still surprised that I took the steps to actually enroll, show up, and complete assignments, but I know it all will pay off in the long run. I have a bigger vision for my life than working a job and barely making it in life. **(Mikaylah Harris)**



In 2014, a month before I started my senior year, I attempted suicide one Wednesday afternoon. I remember calling off work the entire week just feeling tired and consumed with the idea of having to be perfect. I

spent the entire Wednesday cleaning my room and writing poems to release some of my inner thoughts. I believed swallowing a full bottle of pills would help and take away my pain. I remember being taken to the emergency room and being forced to drink charcoal over the course of three days. After four days of nonstop running fluids, needles, black charcoal, and 24-hour supervision, I was sent to a children's mental hospital.

I spent a week inside the hospital, and throughout that week I was given wonderful tools to help with my day-to-day feelings. But I can't lie, I was so embarrassed and unsure about going back home. I feel like I let my family down, but I also feel like I ruined who I try to portray myself to be. Moving forward I had to relearn how to navigate through life alone. I had so much distant support that I became even more "sad." I couldn't understand at that time in my life that I had to become my own strength because everyone else was battling their own battles.

Growing up I always had someone to hold my hand whenever I had to go through something rough, so during my depression season I had to find the courage to be my own hero. I was at that age that I became rebellious against my mom so I ended up homeless, but I was also figuring out my sexuality,

which at times left me trapped with my own thoughts and feelings. I feel like I was forced to accept my reality at the time, which made me appreciate the journey of one's life. It was beautiful to me that I was still able to smile. It was exciting to me that I was still learning who I was and who I wanted to become. I found the courage to open my mouth and share my thoughts and experiences. If it wasn't for my suicide attempt, I don't think I would've found the courage to be my true self. **(Synquar Harston)**





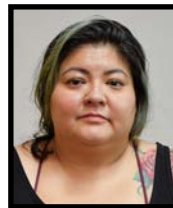
My moment of courage that I'll write about is a long one. It's just the time and period that I'm in right now, going through and trying to finish Odyssey. My outside personal life has just been hectic! Sometimes I don't know whether I'm coming or going, but I refuse to give up. I was so excited about this opportunity when it arose. I was crying, screaming, yelling, and jumping up and down. I'm sure everybody in the grocery store probably thought I lost a really dear relative or best friend the way I was crying... but instead of letting everything around me get me down and letting things get the best of me, I've still been getting up on Tuesdays and making it to tutoring for help. I've also made classes every Wednesday night, and I participate with my fellow classmates. I had a teacher tell me two weeks ago that it's the most they've seen me smile since they've known me, and they've known me for years! That really also gave me the push that I needed to keep going because that day I was so sad. I don't understand how I was smiling, but I was doing it and I didn't know it before she said it. I'm happy she let me know, and that just let me know that I need to keep pushing and keep fighting no matter how I feel or what's going on in my life.

I'm so proud that I made it into Odyssey. My moment of courage will soon end with a great gift, and I'm very excited about that. **(Cierra Jackson)**



One of my moments of courage was in my country when I was looking for new opportunities in my life. Due to the lack of opportunities in my country, I decided to apply with a job agency to come to the USA.

After many attempts, I did it. It was time to pack up, time to leave my country, my family, and a 20-year relationship behind. It was hard but it was necessary. Given this situation, I get depressed easily, but every day I encourage myself to keep going, don't give up because behind are people that believe in me, that trust in me, in my capacity, my strength to achieve success in this life and conquer my goals. **(Blanca Laine)**



My vivid concrete moment was when I finally left my abusive relationship of 12 years. It literally took years and months for me to have the courage to leave the unhealthy. **(Rosanna Lopez)**



I knew I was in the midst of another come to Jesus moment when my left hand was to the point of contracture from continuously gripping a stem pipe from my latest bender. I had been running on no sleep, and

clicking these cheap lighters from the corner store had left my thumbs raw and aching. The repetitive motions that my addiction required had taken quite a toll on my fragile hands. Between channeling my inner MacGyver as I scavenged drawers for office supplies to manipulate into elongated scraping devices and occasionally peering down at my resin-caked fingertips, I finally understood where the term "junkie" came from.

Sometimes I found it unbearable to even catch my reflection in the mirror. It was too much, too painful. A lot was there in my eyes, and all the things I had done in the depths of my addiction were always behind my stare. I wanted to write that afternoon, but I couldn't hold a pen. This drug had taken away everything in my life, and in that moment, I had lost my ability to write, too.

There were a cluster of moments when I felt like

God was pulling me in closer during my chapter of drug dependence, just as a father would lovingly nudge his own child towards a different direction. Seeing my hand crippled like that of the elderly residents I had cared for as a nurse's aide a mere two years prior taunted me and, looking back, was one of the curious occasions where I was being hugged by the Lord. Even though the urge to continue using proved to stretch onward that year, a part of me did listen that day.

I've always loved a blank page. There is nothing more gripping than staring down at college-ruled paper. It's intimidating and inspiring, it sets my heart on fire, and I believe it is where my destiny lives. Anne Frank once said, "I can shake off everything if I write; my sorrows disappear, my courage is reborn." I can't communicate a more eloquent picture of how the pen heals. I am an addict. I find meaning in life through writing.

At 32 years old, I embarked on a life of recovery. This is the most courageous thing I have ever chosen for myself. I always knew I was meant to do something monumental. There seemed to be a muted calling in the background of my days, following me ever so gently. Drugs never tempted me until I felt a void. I think it is pertinent to mention this so-called void. The interlacing of childhood trauma, mental health strife and the cocktail that was born within my being made me susceptible to trying the drug that stole four years from my adult life. This is how I believe substances can become suddenly appealing to us. Addiction is not cut and dry, and saying goodbye is a particular decision one can make. I lived my years in active addiction with an attitude of a gypsy or a wildflower—any lovely, quaint identity to hide behind. But I was not free in any sense. I was enslaved.

So, to commit to recovery has felt like a push-pull. It can feel like a mourning process when you choose to recover from a drug addiction. After all, you are saying goodbye to an entity who was a lover, seeing you at your worst and most vulnerable moments. It is a finale to a friendship with memories and sometimes I have felt angst about leaving this substance behind. Ultimately though,

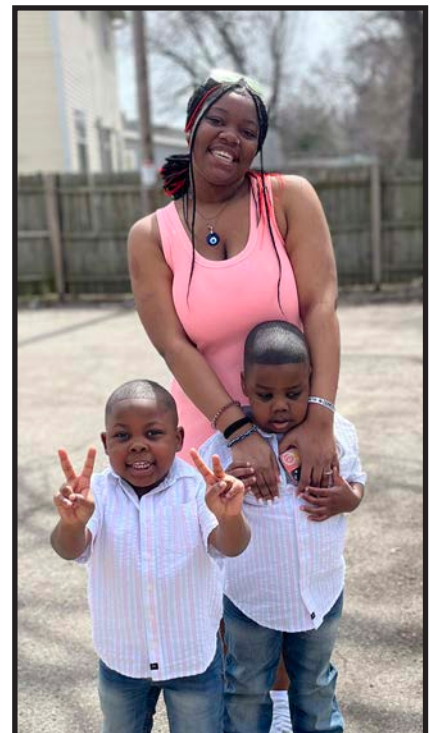
this drug cannot come where I am going. I am seeking so much more for myself. A monarch must sit in a chrysalis before it can emerge in its final transformation as a butterfly. **(Giana Mason)**



I believe I show courage every day by raising three beautiful kids on my own. I feel I show the most courage by raising a son who is autistic and nonverbal. It is hard to get up every day and do it by myself, but I do. I have to deal with a bunch of doctors' appointments, educational appointments, and also his sporadic behaviors. Some of that would include biting, scratching, and tantrums. It is hard to know what he wants because he can't tell me. I have to guess most times, or he will find a way to get it himself. Dealing with this all day is mentally and emotionally exhausting.

When I first noticed something was wrong, I reached out and the doctors told me it was just a delay. I went and got a second opinion, and that's when I found out he had autism. At that point I really didn't know what that was, so I reached out to a friend, and they explained what it was. That was three years ago. So much has changed because of the continued advocacy that I show for my son. I find myself being the most courageous in how I advocate for my son. In many spaces with professionals such as teachers and doctors, you are expected to minimize your voice because they are the professionals. However, I learned that my son depends on me to have the courage to advocate for him and his needs for survival.

(Tanisha Milligan)





I had a motorcycle accident in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso in 2009, on my way home after work, around 5 pm. I broke both my right tibia and fibula in that crash, and I also had a piece of metal that pierced my tibia causing immense bleeding at the time. I still have the scars and still suffer from the effects of these injuries to this day.



After around thirty minutes of waiting, I was transported to the emergency room by an ambulance alerted by those who witnessed the accident. Once I was at the hospital, the doctor first worked to stop the bleeding, then sent me into a process of examination and tests including X-rays and scanners to detect any other trauma that could be hidden at the time.

I entered the hospital around 5:30 pm, and I was already discharged the next day by 11:00 am, free to go home and continue the treatment until my next checkup scheduled for the following month. They made sure I was out of danger, then they put me in a cast from my hips to my toes. Even today, I am still wondering why they did not wait for the wounds to heal before covering the whole leg with a bulky cast.

I then went home helped by brothers and friends, since the cast immobilized me. The next day I woke up to see that my fancy cast had turned from white to red; the bleeding started again. Convinced that I could not keep that cast with unhealed and bleeding wounds, my family and I decided to use the services of a traditional practitioner who used to live around 45 kilometers away from my place of residence. After a phone call, he decided to receive us the same day because of the gravity of my state.

The journey to his place of residence was difficult for me because of the shakes due to an unpaved road, but the hardest part was yet to come. I was acquainted with the process because I assisted a friend who was in the same position as me.

Once we arrived at his residence, the practitioner first checked me up to ensure that he could handle my case and decided to cut off my cast. He then cleaned up my leg and used his own product made of roots and barks to completely stop the bleeding.

The next step was to press my leg to get out the remaining blood in the hole caused by the piece of metal, then align both bones back to their original places and tighten it up with a traditional garotte. In this last procedure, they usually have the patient held down by a couple young men. The reason is that the practitioner did not use anesthesia or any type of painkillers. As the pain goes up, he could be hit or interrupted by the patient. But in my case, I refused to be held by anyone. I was psychologically prepared, and holding me down would have made things worse. I prayed to God to receive the strength and the courage needed to face this matter.

The whole procedure was atrocious. I felt the pain deep in my heart as if someone was cutting my heart off my chest; the pain was indescribable. However, I was somehow able to contain myself long enough for him to do what needed to be done. I had eight sessions in total with the traditional practitioner, each session every other week. I was able to stand and walk just before the last session and continue to do so today. This is by far the most painful experience I have ever gone through, and I think it was courageous for me to endure the pain without being helped.

(Souleymane Nikiema)



I was in the hospital, and it was 2 am. I was 16 years old standing over my mom not knowing I was going to watch her take her last breath. She died right in front of me. Even going through this, I still went to school.

I remember people walking up to me and saying, "Why are you here?" I would always say "because my mom wants me here." I'm still not over it. I understand when your dad said that he misses her more [about his wife]. I did what my mother wanted me to do, and that was to finish school. So that is what I did. **(Terance Nix)**



A moment of courage for me is when I was struggling with depression after a failed relationship and long, dragging divorce process. I felt as if I had lost everything. I don't get to have my kids as much as I wanted.

I had to start everything from scratch, like finding a job, multiple jobs. I felt defeated in life until one day I decided to want to improve myself. One day, I went to Barnes and Noble and came across this book called "Fresh Start" by Joel Osteen, and it's the best book I've ever read. I never read or liked to read a book until after that. My eyes started to open up, and I began to love myself; that's where everything changed. I continued to keep wanting to learn more and wanting to live my full potential of what God has given me.

I then started to listen to audio books since I'm not a reading person. I began to listen to motivational speakers and authors such as Jim Rohn, Dale Carnegie, Napoleon Hill, and many more. After listening to those, I began to gain some knowledge and started to understand life better. It encourages me to want to have a better life. I wished I had come across these when I was young. But life has a way of teaching us. If it weren't for my struggles, I wouldn't have been where I am today. With my pain and struggle, it leads me to find my passion, which is coaching volleyball. I never thought or dreamt that I would ever be a coach, but here I am. It's beyond my dream and what I imagine. I thank God for his Grace and Blessing. **(Sally Phelps)**



One moment of courage in my life I would have to say is coming to class every Wednesday to finish school. It does become scary at times with the fear of something stopping me from attending class, such as



worrying about getting pulled over on the way to class because of the color of my skin or the women in my personal relationships dealing with child support and other factors. I have a lot of barriers when it comes to doing things to better my life. I just want to make my mom and my kids proud and show them that you can do anything you put your mind to, no matter if you have the support system. **(Isiah Pickett)**



I would say a moment of courage in my life honestly would be deciding to go back to school. After dropping out of college the first time, I always told myself I wasn't going back because I didn't see a point. As I

have gotten older and more mature, I've realized how important having an education is.

I struggled in school when I was younger because of my attention span, which is a big reason I was scared to try school again. So far, I am glad I took a chance on myself. I am not the same little boy I was, and I can say I am very proud and glad I made this choice. I never thought I would be so excited for school because I hated school growing up. I truly believe this is one of those leaps of faith I needed to take in this journey we call life.

(Rodney Poe Jr.)



While growing up on the southside of Chicago in the Ida B. Wells Chicago Housing Authority Projects,

I lived with many families who struggled through poverty and dysfunction. Our community was run and controlled by some of the largest gang leaders. Jeff Fort (EL Rukns) and Black Gangster disciples (Larry Hoover) members were recruited through the threat of death, and members of opposition gangs were murdered, from children to adults.

Our community was infested with drugs, crime, pimping and prostitution, and much more.

It was difficult to survive there. It had become a world of its own. The people who lived there became trapped there. It wasn't a good feeling growing up to be stuck in that cave and not be able to get out, every day trying to figure it out.

Some of us didn't make it. They died there. Some of us are still trapped there because their mentality has them stuck. Those of us that have survived there still live with the trauma.

My courage comes from my believing in God and coming to the realization that wasn't the way for anyone to live. I made up my mind to get my daughter, who was my only child at that time, and relocate to Madison, Wisconsin. That took courage—to leave everything and everybody. I couldn't have done it without God.

(Kimberly Rodgers)



The courage to stand on my own two feet, as I slip on my socks and boots, as to say I'm going to combat with myself. I have to know what it means to be courageous, to have the power, the will, and the way of knowledge so that I can understand.



October 16th, 2007: I'm sitting in my room, just looking at the four corners of an off-white painted wall only to notice that I'm boxed in. But I'm in tears, about to face my fears head on. I just been told that I was about to become a mom. Not knowing how to grasp the moment, I became overwhelmed. As the tears started to roll faster down my face, I could feel the snot form within my nostrils. I could just scream as the emotion

of one selfish night and inner peace destroyed my dreams to never have kids.

As the door slammed only to bring me back to reality, I quickly wiped my face and blew my nose into my brand-new tapered blazer. As I swallowed my spit, my fear, my pain, my sorrow, and my confidence all at once, I looked up only to see my mother's face. It was calm and easy, and I seemed to gain my strength in that moment of timeless courage. As I became numb, I had a glimpse of what life was to become. As the challenges within every breath I took, I knew that this lonely life was about to prepare me for the greatest love that ever existed. It would prepare me to love someone other than myself, but I questioned every bit of it. I kept telling myself that it takes courage, love, and wisdom to raise a child, and to hold onto your smile, while struggling with your inner self. Who was I to become? A doctor, a nurse, a teacher, a preacher, a counselor, a protector, a friend, a confidante, or even a master of my own pieces of life puzzles? No, I was becoming a mother, a woman of strength who was frightened to show any type of emotion towards the shame I caused around me.

February 17th, 2008, 1:21 am: The storm had started to form, and although I was in active labor, I was not dilated. I needed more pain medication. As the doctors rushed into the room, I could hear them in a distance talking while I screamed in anguish. "Take

her to the anesthesia room and get her prepared for an epidural,” I heard the doctor say. The room seemed to be spinning as I called upon my mom. I was dizzy just on the thought of becoming a mom, but I was eager to take on this battle of bringing life into this world not knowing if the baby was a boy or girl. I could feel the tension of my body pull forward as I leaned against the bed rails only to notice that I had started to push. I pushed and pushed and pushed to no prevail.

As silence fell, I pushed one more time, just to hear the room yell. I took a sigh of relief as they all screamed “it’s a girl!” As the tears started to roll against my cold, swollen face; against it pressed a towel. I looked up at my baby girl as she came into the world without a tender cry. I could see her little head circle the room as she was handed off to be placed upon my breast. I could see my mom rush over to cut my umbilical cord, as she glanced upon me with a smile and said the sweetest words you would ever hear. “It’s your turn to do everything right as of now, congratulations my love.”

Now I don’t know if child birth is courageous, but to go through 73 hours of labor I would hope to think that people would look at me as courageous. My baby was my courage. **(Marcy Tibbs)**



My stepdad was diagnosed with cancer a little over a year ago. From that day forward, every day was a battle for my family. The last couple days of his life were really hard. I still remember feeling like I was hit with a bullet, not only for the loss of him but because of my mother. I knew I had to be strong for her.

Fast forward to the day he passed. After we got the news, I knew it would be time to go over and see him. I’ve worked in healthcare so I’ve been around death, but your own family hits different. I didn’t want to go in the room, but I knew I had to for my mom. I had to be courageous. Seeing his lifeless body is something I’ll never forget. I touched his hand and it was cold, like a seashell, eyes half open, like the moon. I miss him a lot. I miss him for my mom. Rest peacefully, Pops. **(Amanda Von Behren)**



Returning to school has been a very courageous moment for me. I’ve tried several times, and things held me back like lack of babysitters, having to work to take care of my kids, being lazy and thinking I just can’t do it! Some days are harder than others, especially when you’re sick and you want to so bad but you don’t have the strength. I’m glad I have a different mind set where I can self-motivate myself and encourage myself that with the completion of this first class I can achieve more and take more classes until I get the degree I yearn for. It will bring more opportunities for myself and my family. I will stick to the plan I have and pass this class and show I have the ability to accomplish things that frighten me. **(Endia Walls)**



Enjoying a beautiful afternoon in the park turned into a moment of courage for me and my new bride. Upon leaving the park we noticed a man struggling to assist another guy who appeared to be handicapped into a car. My wife suggested I help; however, as I was approaching the guys, I knew the guy who was getting the help. I also had trouble with trying to lift the guy into the car. This fellow appeared to be falling asleep and having trouble with standing. I started yelling his name, and he would start gasping for air. Knowing his past background, I assumed he was experiencing a heroin overdose. My wife mentioned she had Narcan in our car. I told her to go get the Narcan and call 911. She handed me the Narcan as she explained the current situation. She informed the 911 dispatcher that it is probably a heroin overdose. The dispatcher instructed us to administer the Narcan. I stood over the man, inserted nostril of the Narcan into the tip of his nose while pressing the chamber. The man instantly started swinging his arms at me and backing away from me. He now appeared alert. The police and fire department were on the scene. My wife and I told the officer what we had seen and done, and then we left. **(Ron Watson)**

ENCOUNTERING PREJUDICE

prejudice: *an unfair feeling of dislike for a person or group because of race, sex, religion, etc.; a preconceived, irrational judgment or opinion (pre-judging)*

Odyssey students wrote about a time they experienced, witnessed, or practiced prejudice.

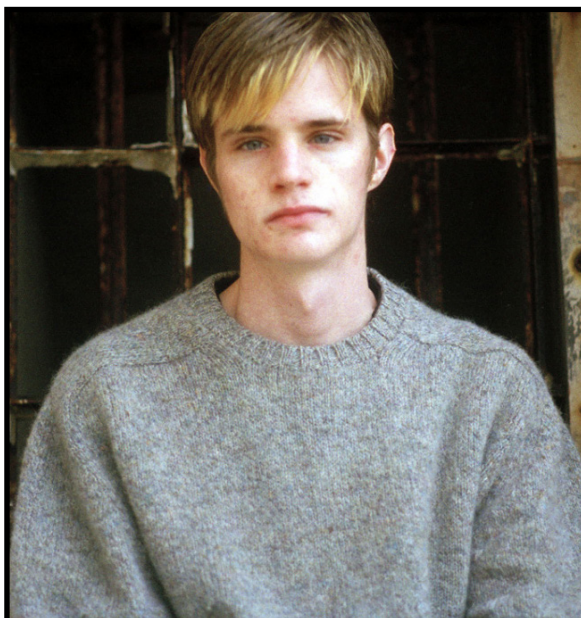
In high school our drama department put on a production of “The Laramie Project,” a play that explores the ramifications of the hate crime murder of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming. I had a small part in the production but was excited to put on a production with a more political flavor—a production that was rooted in reality and offered lessons on acceptance and community. We felt with this production, more than others, that we were part of a larger conversation about inclusivity and that our play had more than the power to entertain.

We received word that The Westboro Baptist Church would be protesting our production. This “church” is a cult of personality that promotes hate through its deeply anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and public appearances. This “church” is an affront to all that is good and all those that earnestly seek to live a moral life through the words of the Bible. Consider how this group blamed 911 on the very existence of queer people, and that’s just the tip of the iceberg of insanity that this group promotes. These irrational and hateful people would be coming to protest our play, and this was scary despite the support of our overwhelming liberal and inclusive community.

When we put on this production I was not “out.” I was questioning my sexuality and wasn’t rushing to be one thing or another as I didn’t even consider myself to be a very sexual being and probably

felt—in some dark corner of my mind—that I was unlovable. Seeing these protesters of our humble high school play made real some of the hate that I had only seen on the news or felt with tightened breath as a slur was hurled out a car window. Imagine a little girl with a sour expression holding a sign that says “God Hates Fags.” It hurt me to see a child taught to hate in the service of God, and it hurt to be the object of that hate.

I’ve known for a long time that there are people and organizations in the world that actively work to suppress and disenfranchise me because of the color of my skin, sexuality, spiritual beliefs, etc. It’s a painful thought to imagine that someone wishes you harm simply for being you. Prejudice can feel like a cold you can’t seem to shake—one that steals your energy and makes your breath tight. It’s the searching we have to do in other people’s eyes to know that their hearts are not hardened against us. It’s constantly wondering what the world could look like if we weren’t always cutting each other down.



What I can do is work to examine my thinking for prejudice; not letting hate take hold and color my thinking when encountering someone different than me. I remember that our first reactions are not always our best reactions and that others are best approached with an open heart and clear mind. I so badly want to live in a world with less hate...misery... intolerance...all the woes that we’d rather box up. I have to do what I can so that no children are made to hold signs that profess hate. **(Lucas Benford)**

I have experienced prejudice, especially when it comes to my name, which happens to be Marcy. I have heard people say, “What is a black girl doing with a white girl name?” I have walked with pride and grace because of my name.

I have strived to do what I know best because of my name, so why shame me because of my name? What the hell is a white girl name anyways? A name is just a name; it has no race or age until it is put to a face. My name was given to me by a woman of excellence and wisdom, a woman who taught me to hold my head up high and never look low upon anyone. When I hear someone say my name belongs to a white girl, it makes me mad and puts me in the state of disbelief of the bold ignorance they display.

The name Marcy is from Latin origin meaning “Mars, God of War.” I shouldn’t have to go to war to protect my name, my race, my age, or the fact that I’m a female. Even when people hear me speak or listen to my voicemail, they immediately assume that I am of a different race, and when they see me, they are surprised to see that I am of African American descent. They might think only white girls are proper when they speak, but I am somebody and properness doesn’t have a color. Learning starts at home. I always question my grandma about my name and why she didn’t name me something different, and she always has the same response: “Embrace your name, it is who you are and what you will become.” There are a few moments in my life where I have felt people were judgmental when it came to my name.

My name is Marcy, and I’m ok with that.
(Marcy Tibbs)

This question reminds me of the time I met my mentor. I was at the Boys & Girl’s Club on the south side of Madison. Then it was called the South Side Madison Neighborhood Center. I loved that place. Me dealing with the culture shock of moving from Milwaukee, it felt familiar to me.

***“Prejudice is a burden
that confuses the
past, threatens
the future, and
renders the present
inaccessible.”
—Maya Angelou***



It was early afternoon when I noticed this lady that I just knew was lost. I say to my friend, “Look, she looks lost.” I even asked her, “Are you lost?” She said no and named the program assistant she was there to see. It happened to be one of our favorite peeps that worked at the “center”; that is what we used to call it. He happened to be holding a teen club meeting, and he asked me to attend. I did. I met with this lady I’d assumed was lost. She not only was funny, smart, and an athlete at the time, but so was I. Andrea was cool, open, and warm.

There was something safe about her and so I asked, “Hey, you want to be my mentor?” She was like, “Yeah, sure.” I told how I prejudged her and felt so stupid, and she said no need to be sorry. We still talk and laugh about it to this day. **(Jasmine Benson)**

I didn’t mean to be prejudiced, but seeing a homeless black man come into my work when I was at the register and he didn’t buy anything, I assumed he stole. I asked my manager if he did. He didn’t. **(Rosanna Lopez)**

I was in high school, freshman year! How exciting, better yet, a feeling to experience. There I was to learn history, some of which reflected on me. As we learned, the kids would stare or ask indirect questions on the subject, subjecting or pointing eyes on me because I was the only black person in a class of white people. Some knew the history for real and some were still learning, and to them I was looked at as the example/the person.
(Fataeshia Clark)

There have not been many times in my life where I have experienced prejudice. But one that does come to mind is when I was in the grocery store. I was with my three children, and as we were walking down the aisles of Trader Joe's, there was one employee who was constantly in my sight. Each aisle we walked down, the employee just kept seeming to pop up there. Now, I tried to pay it no mind. But I knew what was happening. We were being watched, as if we were going to steal something.

As my children and I were heading to the check out, there again was that same employee standing by the checkout lanes "organizing the bags, magazines and other merchandise." As we got to the cashier, before I was even greeted the cashier said, "I do apologize, but our EBT card reader is down, and I just wanted to let you know." The utter disgust I felt came across my face as if I just witnessed someone throw up in front of me. The embarrassment and anger ran through my body and my facial expression could tell it all. I was infuriated. I composed myself and respectfully told the cashier that I do not receive EBT and I have cash. But I also told the cashier that I would like to speak to the manager and that I was not going to move out of the line until I do.



Once the manager approached, I then asked if all of the cashiers expressed to all of the customers in the store that their EBT reader was down, or was I the only one? The manager sincerely apologized for this as it was very insensitive for it to be said to me without pre-knowledge that I was going to even be using EBT. I will not ever set foot in that chain of grocery stores again. **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**

I experienced prejudice at a young age. My grandmother (my mother's mom) did not want her daughter to have "colored babies." When my mother married my father, a black man, her parents disowned her. I was told by my mother that my grandma was not a nice grandma and it's best we don't visit or see her.

Then one time when I was about five or six years old, my grandmother flew into Madison from Vegas to visit my aunt (my mom's sister) and newborn baby. My mother drove us over to the hotel my grandmother was staying at. I was not excited or even happy. All I remember from that visit is that it was very short, no hugs, no smiles. It felt very awkward at such a young age. I felt no love from my grandmother.

As an adult now I understand people are raised certain ways. Not having a relationship with your grandchildren because they have colored skin is so unrighteous. It is her loss, not mine. She missed out on a beautiful family. **(Aleesha Flowers)**

Being a minority in America and going to a predominantly white school from K-12 meant that there was plenty of room for me to be discriminated against. In high school, I got called plenty of prejudiced names by white people. The first time I was able to understand that I was different from my peers was when this white kid in school informed me that he thought my skin was brown like s**t. That's when I knew I was different and that some people simply won't like or respect you due to the color of your skin. **(Dontaeva Acklin)**

I experienced prejudice in my home due to my gender because being female was a synonym of weakness and incompetence in the society, even in my culture. I remember that my father used to blame my mother for bearing girls and not sons because for my father girls only are capable to do household activities and obey the men. My mother bore six girls and two sons. Every time my mother bore a girl, there was a scene of physical and mental violence. My father would say to my mom, "You are not even good for that," and he would promptly go away from home to drink and came back more violent against my mother. Being women represented to my father that they will no longer conserve his last name in terms of identity, authority, and honor. **(Blanca Laine)**

Being a server, I was prejudged at times because of the color of my skin and my long hair extensions. Once seeing my performance of being friendly and attentive, I get treated better with a change of attitude, eye contact, smiles, and a nice tip with gratitude. **(Andreya Gavins)**

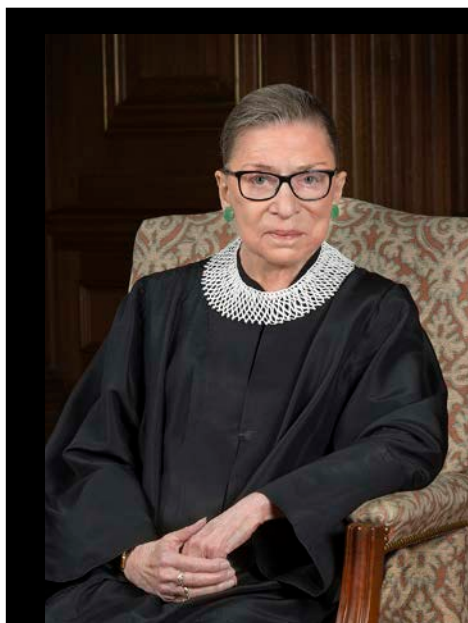
I was working at an elementary school as a special education assistant. It was my first week at this school. My boss was a white woman. The kids loved me, and the staff loved me. I was doing my job and doing it very well, probably better than the staff she had already. I remember having to go to a classroom and get a student because they were acting out. I got the student, and we were having a conversation on the bench about why she was having such a hard time in class, what was going on. The student proceeds to tell me what she and her family were going through. The principal overhears the conversation and says that they need to be talking to a social worker about that. The child then proceeds to say that

she didn't feel comfortable talking to her about that, that she would rather talk to me about it. The principal huffed and stormed off.

I eventually got the student connected with the school social worker and got the student what she and her family needed. I then asked the principal why she felt like that was acceptable. What she had said was that I didn't have a degree and I should've left that up to people with degrees. I also felt like she couldn't connect with this little brown girl like she wanted to, and she was intimidated. I later found out that she and the social worker had been trying to talk to her and her mom and they didn't feel comfortable because they were feeling like they were going to be judged.

This has always made me feel like you don't always need a degree to do what the next person has a degree for. So ultimately this is the reason I want to go back to school to get my degree to become a social worker. **(Tanisha Milligan)**

I was in the fifth grade. I just started going to a new school, so I was the new girl. One of my classmates didn't like my long, new, beautiful, braided black hair, so she called it "alien hair." Her excuse was that up to now she had only gone to school with all white folks and was a little girl. **(Shanigel Goodwan)**



America is known as a country that welcomes people to its shores. All kinds of people. The image of the Statue of Liberty with Emma Lazarus' famous poem. She lifts her lamp and welcomes people to the golden shore where they will not experience prejudice because of the color of their skin or the religious faith that they follow.
—Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



The world needs much more love, no hate, no prejudice, no bigotry, and more unity, peace, and understanding. Period.
—Stevie Wonder

I believe there has always been some sort of prejudice, some not as noticeable or obvious as others. I recall back when I was in grade school being called “Chink,” “Chinese,” and “chinky eyes,” and being told, “Go back where you come from.” It’s crueler now due to social media.

The most controversial is when an American-American man by the name of George Floyd got arrested by a white police officer on May 25, 2020. A police officer restrained him to the ground

with the knee on his neck. He was in distress and complaining that he was having difficulty breathing. After several minutes, he lay motionless. His death was ruled a homicide. His death, through social media, became part of the worldwide protest supporting the movement “Black Lives Matter.”
(Sally Phelps)

I had freshly turned 21. I was downtown having drinks and bar hopping with a friend of mine. As we were waiting in line, my friend went around the corner to use the bathroom. As he was doing that, I was making conversation with people in line. A white male walks past me and says, “Shut the f**k up” while looking right at me. I politely told him to go about his business and that I wasn’t talking to him. He then says, “F**k you, n****” to me. Mind you, I hadn’t done anything to that man.

With everything I have been through growing up here in Madison and having other racial or prejudiced encounters, I couldn’t let that slide. I approached the man and hit him one time and knocked him out. That was my first time ever being in trouble with the police, and that was a felony. I was never offered first offenders, and now the system looks at me as an aggressive criminal. I had to spend four months in jail, three years on probation, and was labelled a felon. I can’t vote or leave the country, all for hitting a white man for calling me a racial slur. **(Rodney Poe Jr.)**

When I was younger there was a store in East Towne Mall called Debs. I don’t only have one memory. On several occasions I can remember being followed around the store for being young and black. I also used to love big Coach purses. I’m sure that didn’t help either. They would follow me and my friends from aisle to aisle because they assumed we were stealing. Little did they know I had my mom’s credit card. Joke’s on them!
(Amanda Von Behren)



FINDING PLATO'S CAVE TODAY

After reading Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" from The Republic, students found examples from their own life of times they have been trapped in caves that kept—or are still keeping—them from seeing the light or truth.



I believe there have been times where I have been in a "cave." For an example, practically going 22 years being told what to eat, then finally being able to understand that all food isn't good food. Another example of a time I was stuck in a cave was when I would listen to a particular type of music with low frequencies—allowing the frequency in the music to alter/distract my mind, instead of dealing with problems head on.

Lastly, I can honestly say another example of me feeling stuck in a cave is currently living paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet. It feels like I'm stuck in a cave, but it's also my perspective of life, and it's truly beautiful depending on the viewer.
(Dontaeva Acklin)



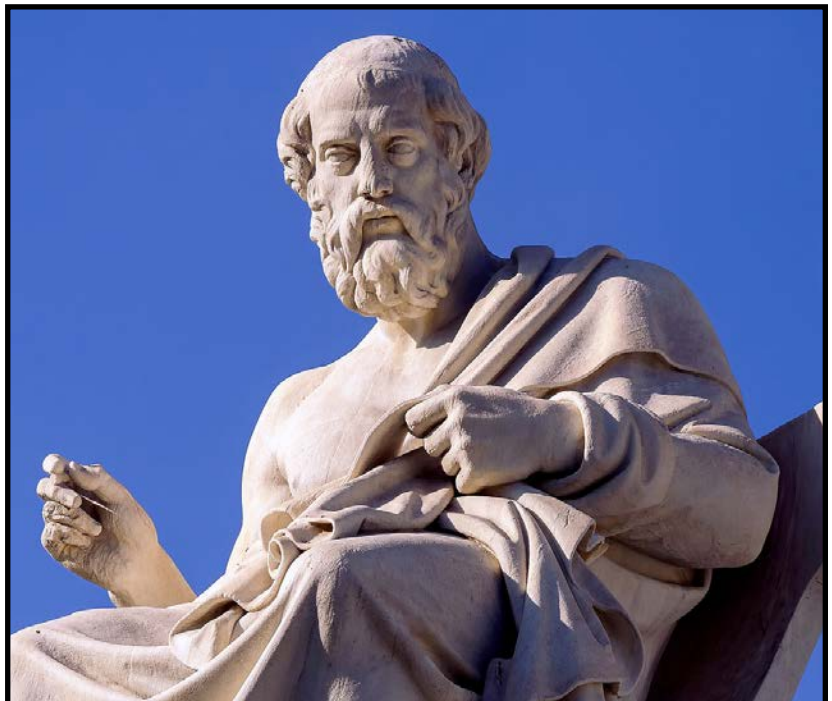
My cave is never feeling heard, or not feeling I belong as a woman, a black woman from an impoverished background, overweight, and gay. The struggle be real, and I am always worried if I'm ever seen as a person or one of those blacks, gays, fat, hood women that don't know how to act. I almost never feel accepted or truly understood.

Why do we as people have to put everyone or thing we encounter into categories? There is not one thing that defines a person, and each time people choose to define someone by their differences, or a group, it puts them into a darkening space or cave. There are too many times people have chosen to put me in a cave based off my differences.

My allegory is due to who I am. I never feel understood or heard. If I'm a woman who dates women, don't think you're a man. If I'm a black then all life matters and the guys get all the rights. If I'm gay I'm trying to compare my struggles to the civil rights movement. Lastly, if I talk about my impoverished background, I don't know what it is to work.
(Jasmine Benson)



I feel like at times I've been stuck in a cave of procrastination. I've known from a small age that I could reach any level of greatness if I applied myself. But did I always apply myself? No! No, I didn't. I think it was because I was comfortable in those moments. Looking back, I always gave myself mental pep talks about what I could do to reach that greatness, and I understand those things, I just chose to procrastinate because I was uncomfortable.
(Synquar Harston)





I do believe that everyone at some time in their life has been trapped in a “cave.” An example in my life would be that I have lived in poverty. Growing up I was raised on welfare and government assistance my whole life. I never saw this as being a bad thing, or that it would be looked down upon by others. This was the life that was given to me. I saw it as free lunch in school, going to see my doctor all the time and not having to pay, or using a green card to get free food. Now being an adult, I do see that these are resources in order to assist families that are low income. To this day, I am still trapped in that cave. But being in UW Odyssey Program, I am furthering my education so that I can get my family and myself out of poverty.

Another example of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave would be that I utilize television to experience the world that I cannot. One specific example would be my 600-lb life. I have sat and watched almost every episode of this show. Before I lost 96 pounds, I was 254 pounds. This was normal to me as everyone in my immediate family is overweight. It wasn’t until I was told by my primary care physician that I was morbidly obese and in need of insulin to continue living that I had to turn the television off and make the change. Seeing other humans living this unhealthy life was a way out for me to block the reality that I was too unhealthy. I was able to get

out of that cave. And I will not ever be returning.

There are many other caves in the world that I do see. One is the idea that everyone needs to look the same. Nowadays, everyone wants to look like everyone. There are some people that want to be unique and do not care what the world thinks. They are free to express themselves. One example is women feel as though they need to have extremely tiny waists, large breasts, and large butts. This is found all over social media and reality TV shows. But this is not a way that people should want to live. Learning to be happy with the body that you have is what the world should see. But they can’t because everything around you says otherwise. **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**



The reality of the mind is a trap

I grew up in poverty. I’ve seen what many have not. I believed in many but only a few things that I was taught. I became a rebel trying to figure out what my world would be instead of living for others around me. I came to a fault where everything around me dissolved like quicksand. I’ve seen riches from people who were poorer than dirt. The terms living beyond your means impact differently when you’re actually living beyond your means. I’ve watched drugs of all kinds deteriorate brilliant minds, so I never had the courage to try them. I’ve seen the prominence of many women lead them into shame, so I wanted to be different. I’ve heard the loudest of voices crack and shatter into pieces, so I decided to find my own.

I’ve been a rebel to the Allegory Story for so long that my knowledge of being true to myself has its dense moments. My actions and beliefs are being reconsidered and even questioned within my own mind. But that’s not an excuse for me to quit. It gives me the power and acceptance of things seen and unseen, heard and unheard. It gives me strength to stand for what I know to be factual within myself. I will not trap my mind with others’ beliefs. I will find my own. **(Marcy Tibbs)**



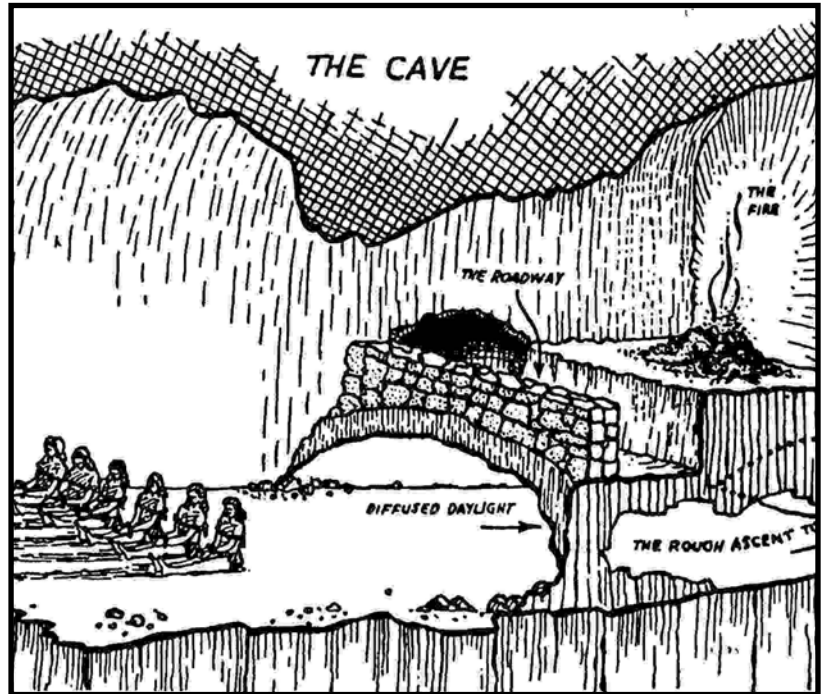


One experience of a small dark cave I remember so vividly. When I was about eight years old, my baby brother and I were placed in a foster home with a white couple with two children of their own. The house was big and beautiful, nothing I had ever seen before. I started a new school and was very scared and nervous. The outfit I wore was ugly and hot: an itchy wool skirt with thick tights and jelly shoes. My hair was uncombed and kinky. Other children were laughing at me and teasing me about my hair. The foster parents obviously didn't know how to handle or care for my hair. I remember the parents being very mean. It felt like my brother and I were a burden for them. They would not let my brother or me play with their children or any other children at that. I was too young to understand what I do now. We could not play at the park, only in the backyard. No TV. Only books and puzzles. I didn't eat much. I didn't have an appetite. I did not feel comfortable or happy in this home.

One night I did not eat all my dinner. I was yelled at and told to go to my room and that I will have it for breakfast! Breakfast came, and I still did not eat it all. It will be dinner. This is what I had to endure. Some food I would have for days until it was gone. Finally, a couple months later my brother and I were taken out of this home and moved to my stepmother's home. It was a little better but we still had to endure abuse verbally and physically. As I look back as an adult, I have a story to tell. My truth. **(Aleesha Flowers)**



Probably a cave for me could be social media because we accept the information that we watch there, even when sometimes everything is not real. It can affect our emotions, feelings, behavior, and our intellectual capacity, but we keep assimilating everything is normal, nothing can be changed, and we keep saying, "It is what it is."



I've seen some of my friends stuck in one job position; they argue about the lack of opportunities in the company or somewhere else, but they don't do anything different to change their discontent. They believe it is better to stay in a place that they already know than to adventure to new challenges and experience failure.

Just days ago, there was a presidential election in my country [Ecuador], and many people didn't know which candidate would be the best option. It was a controversial election, and some people disagreed with others, but they didn't deeply investigate or get educated about each candidate or what they offer in their governing plans. People concluded that whoever wins, they have to keep working and just living their lives.

In my personal life I lived in a cave for many years, working as a servant with no time to visit my family, no time to go out and socialize, but it was normal for all women of my culture working in that kind of jobs because we couldn't access education easily and get better jobs. As time passed, there was more access to education; however, some women prefer to keep working as a servant. Others like me decided to get educated and get out of our ignorance and expand our knowledge.
(Blanca Laine)



I do sometimes look back on my own life. Caves that I never knew existed on earth are drugs, domestic abuse, poverty, lack of education, racism, pursuit of money: all those things were built around years in my own narrow world back then. Most of it was not knowledgeable. These were my monsters, my demons.

I'm not proud of my past but happy to know that I was able to climb out of the cave. My cave. I do observe other caves and notice some same, some worse. Famous quote: "The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek." **(Rosanna Lopez)**



My cave of my life would have to be when I was in [an abusive] domestic relationship. At that time, I struggled with being post-partum so I didn't have the mental strength to leave. I was a new stay-at-home

mom so I didn't have the money to leave either. I felt trapped in a cycle that I didn't see ending. I literally just didn't have the strength. So, I got sick of being buried in depression. I got a mall time job at a daycare so I could create a routine and get my daughter out as well, and that was my first step and breath of fresh air. From there I took an inch and ran a mile! **(Mia Cannon)**



I recall sitting in Physical Ed class in high school listening to the teacher inform us on how it was important for us to "Say no to drugs." We were

educated on not only all different kinds of drugs, but also the effects they have on the body and brains of humans. Heroin was listed as one of the deadliest, most addictive drugs of them all. While cocaine, crack and LSD were mentioned as also being highly addictive, marijuana was mentioned not to be addictive but to be a "gateway drug." Now if you have never heard the term gateway drug, allow me to define. It means it is a drug that when

used has the potential to lead you to some of those deadly drugs that I mentioned before. They say the best education is experience, and I've come to discover that not only is marijuana a gateway drug but it is also a deadly and highly addictive drug.

I was 13 years old when I took my first hit of marijuana. I remember that day like it was yesterday. A friend of mine at the time told me he got his hands on a whole ounce of weed (a very popular name we called it). I ran excitedly to my big brother to let him in on the news and also added for sure we were going to cut school to get high. Now I don't know if he stole it, bought it, or what. All I knew, just like one of my favorite hip hop songs written by Talib Kwali (a famous hip hop artist) titled "Just to get high," I was all in ditching class "Just to get High." Weed was really popular in my community by my family and also the entertainment industry. If I wasn't witnessing my cousins, uncles, or aunts smoking it, I'd see it in the movies or even hear it in popular songs. One that comes to mind is "I Got Five on It" written by Luniz. So the chance of me being inspired to one day give it a try was bound to happen. My brother and I sat in my friend's now-cloudy room smoking away. Instantly I was hooked. I loved the calmness it set in my body and the joy of laughter it would bring over the silliest jokes. We literally watched reruns of a well-known comedy show "Def Comedy Jam" for hours on in.



It wasn't until I got to the age of 34 that I realized I was highly addicted. Weed had now become not only a normal use of mine but also a lifestyle. After 20-odd years of using it, I was considered a professional. I was educated on all the different strains that existed and also becoming a dealer. I mean, I would smoke as soon as I woke up in the morning and smoke until I went to bed at night. It got to the point I couldn't eat without it or even sleep without it. Come to think about it, there was nothing I didn't do without it. You want to watch a movie? Need weed! You want to play basketball? Need weed! Hey, you want to go out on a date? I got weed!

I took some thought to my behaviors and noticed all of my life experiences and its enjoyment was based on my usage of this drug. It affected every decision of my life. I can honestly say all of my troubles with the judicial system were captured with weed in my system. By the way, I'm not justifying any of my mistakes in life; however, I am simply stating facts of my experiences. It wasn't until I attempted to stop that I found it to become difficult. My mood changed and I became more aggressive and also lost plenty of sleep at night. That awareness led me to know the "gateway drug" we call weed is just as addictive as any other drug on the market. Now while the physical effects may differ, it doesn't take away from it being addictive. I also stated it's deadly because when you're high at times you are never in your right sound mind. It can alter your decisions in life and can be life threatening, like murder etc. **(Vernell Cauley)**



Loving someone so much that we lose who we are. I learned much about love. Pure love is painless. Addictive love is incredibly painful. If your heart is crying from pain, then you were using love like a drug to numb

an emotional pain in you. When your relationship ended, the love coming from the other person was taken away and, like any addict, you are desperate for a fix. Like a heroin addict detoxing from heroin, you are emotionally detoxing from love. I allowed myself to be physically and emotionally abused, bullied.

This was incredibly painful and very difficult. In many societies, there's this idea that loving someone more than you love yourself is what love is all about. But here's the thing: that's not love, it's codependency. When you love someone else more than you love yourself, you lose the ability to set boundaries. You prioritize the desires of others over your own needs, even if it damages you. You allow others to harm you because what they want is more important than what you want. What's worse than that, though, is the message you send. By loving someone more than you love yourself, you send the message that that's okay. That's the way it should be. It's natural and right that their priorities override yours. So, if you ever do set a boundary, then you're taking something away from them that rightly belongs to them. **(Andrea Evans)**





As a young girl looking for love in all the wrong places never having/ seeing a

healthy relationship, I found myself in love with an older man that truly meant me no good. I will say it wasn't all bad; we had some good times and some bad times, and some horrible times at the end of the relationship. I have an amazing son who I live for. Having him changed my life for the better.



I will never be the girl I was when I let someone put their hands on me or cheating on me or taking from me or letting someone make me so depressed that I at times wanted to hurt myself. Being in a domestic violence relationship was the second hardest cave I've ever been in. Without my son I feel I would still be in that situation. My son gives me the courage to do better and gives me something to live for. **(Mikaylah Harris)**



Being a single mother of two boys, I sometimes feel like I'm trapped in a cave. I feel like this because, first of all, I had children at a young age. It was an age where I wasn't ready for the responsibilities or of

an immature partner who wasn't ready himself, an age where I was still in school and had family trials. I wasn't ready! It was hard attending school or even hanging with friends to live out my own childhood.

Going to school was hard at this particular moment because my mom moved me to Oregon where I was then in an environment I wasn't used to. It was an environment where most were white and racist and where I myself felt singled out. Having that feeling, I stopped going to certain classes and started hanging with the wrong crowd, which happened to be of my kind. **(Fataeshia Clark)**



The Trap:
An Allegory
Story

My mother
passed away

when I was 26 years old and she was my entire life. She was my backbone, my go-to person for any and everything. I moved out on my own when I was 21 but found myself back home within a matter of months because home was safe. I know my mother provided the stability I craved, and I didn't want to be an adult,

so I had her to depend on. When she passed away, I had no help, so I had to fend for myself. But what she instilled in me got me through a lot of difficult times. So if she was still here I would probably still use her as a crutch.

In other words, even though my mother was all I knew for help, when she was taken away I had no choice but to be the woman she raised me to be and be there for myself and children. Let me tell you, the light at the end of the tunnel was worth everything she instilled in me. **(Endia Walls)**





I kind of feel like I've been in a cave my whole life. I met my kid's father when I was fifteen years old. I spent many years with him, most happy, some not. I never really imagined living a life without him. I became

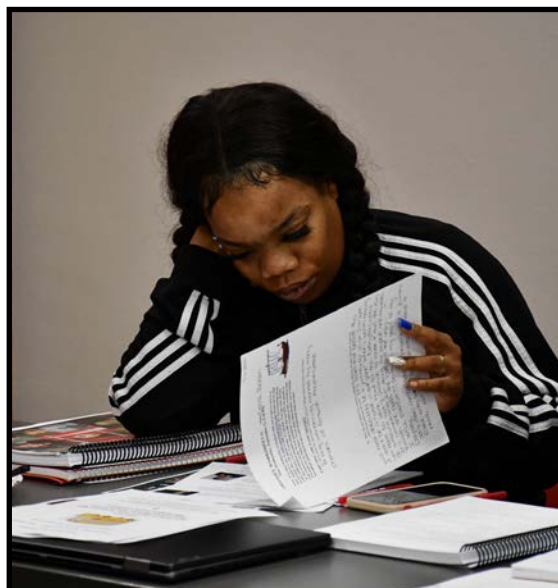
very dependent on him over the years, especially after adding more members to the family. After years, we started to grow apart, and I never really was okay feeling like I wouldn't survive without him. It eventually got to the point where we both knew that it was over. We both stuck around because we both only really knew each other after being broken up for three years. We learn every day that we can still be great parents and still love others. **(Amanda Von Behren)**



For this question I'm going to write about my own experiences in caves and also caves I've observed around me in life today.

I'll start with my own experiences being trapped inside of some caves of life. The first example I'll start with is how when you have lack of education that can represent being stuck in a cave. Before I started my school journey I didn't know much about financial literacy. This caused me to make bad choices when it came to paying bills on time and just doing things that would affect my credit in a healthy way.

If I had known then what I know now, things would be so much different for me, but in a good way. It's never too late to make a change, and again I'm excited to be a part of Odyssey. I'm going to use this experience to do a total 360 in my life to make sure my kids don't make the same mistakes as I did growing up.



I say mistakes but really in reality it was just choices I made with the amount of knowledge I had at the time. I'm going to make sure my kids have better options and better understanding of what credit is and what it can do for them.

On the other hand, I've experienced people in caves around me also. For example, my mom was 13 when she had her first child of five girls, of which I'm the baby. But she also was addicted to crack cocaine, which led her to abandon us and leave us with my elderly grandma to raise us all on her own. This caused us to grow up very poor because the love she had for her daughter she never went and got custody of us, so my mom was able to keep things like checks and food stamps. It made it hard for my grandma to provide for all of us on her one fixed income.

Before being presented this lesson, I had blamed my mom for a lot of the things and choices she made in life, and I even blamed her for how it impacted me as I grew up and now into my adult life. The Allegory of The Cave story really makes me look at things differently.

Now that I know what I know, I feel if my mom was able to, she would have made a change and made better choices for her kids. I sometimes wondered how when my mom would take my grandma's car and rent it out for drugs or sell all our food stamps knowing that my grandma didn't get any to feed us,

I couldn't understand how and why my grandma always forgave her. Now that I know what I know, I would have probably forgiven her too. It's all she knew and it was her comfort zone.

I'm glad I got this lesson because it even makes me look at people who are racist different. At first I felt they all were ignorant and just didn't want to make a change, but when you look at how they were raised and the fact that that's all they knew as right, it makes you look at things a bit differently. Again, I'm very grateful to have had this lesson. **(Cierra Jackson)**



Living in the Depths of OCD

I was diagnosed with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder when I was a sophomore in high school. I was fifteen and could barely function.

While other teenage girls in my class were blossoming into their newfound confidence, I was hiding in the bathroom stall with my bagged lunch. My severe social anxiety had left me floundering, and there was nothing more crushing than having to carry around my puppy dog eyes across the cafeteria. So, I did what I had learned from my childhood, and that was how to become invisible.

OCD is an anxiety disorder, and it made my brain feel hijacked. As a little girl, I innately moved differently. I was slow and composed. I recall my teacher writing on my first-grade report card "Dillydallies." My memory is porous and keen, like an elephant. I see in detail and retain information most would think could only be beneficial.

Sadly, OCD is not a friend. I thought it was my ally for so long until July 23, 2011. This mental agony had exacerbated to the point of a bus ride over to my mother's house where I filled a mason jar up with tap water. My motions were cool and my feelings were numb as I rustled through her nightstand for sleeping pills. OCD had convinced me that life was no longer worth living simply because my brain was too dark of a place to dwell in. Every decision I made, I could not trust. I was exhausted. I was hurting. There was a tyrant taking hold of my head, and he was so unrelenting. I saw in black and white, in his distorted view. What I wanted would never matter, and over time, my sense of self began to disintegrate. When you have this disorder, you carry a lot of "what ifs." You worry and you wonder. You worry about what you might have done wrong in your past, and you wonder about what you may encounter down the road. It takes from your present and it pokes fun at your past. It wants you to keep an eye on tomorrow because it wants to keep you down.

For me, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder is a cave of shame-based thinking that can provoke shame-based actions. If there is one thing I have learned in my journey with OCD, it's this: OCD isn't as smart

as it thinks it is. I heard a Hallelujah chorus when I asked for help and learned about the different clinical techniques used to treat this mental illness. I believe that knowledge is power, and once I understood that this is a product of my genetics, I was able to further forgive myself. Coming out of such a non-sensical circus (Hell, I was washing my purses and deep cleaning my blinds) made me feel angry and flustered. I had been obeying this voice in my head since I was a child like it was God, only to come out on the other side deeply traumatized and tired.

But, I have a story, and a part of that story is OCD. I want to advocate and de-stigmatize and educate for what this disorder is and what this disorder is not. It is quite painful and sometimes hard to pinpoint. It was the darkness I thought I had to endure, and it is the silver lining to my story. **(Giana Mason)**



During my 36 years on earth, I have been in several caves. I have experienced a lack of education or limited resources to finish school. I haven't been able to finish school because of the financial part of going to school. I'm not always able to keep a job because I feel like I get racially profiled or they look for a typical reason to fire me. That discourages me from working because I try my best to come to work, be on time, and do my job to the best of my abilities, but I still end up being fired.

Another cave would be jail systems and law enforcement. This ties in with the racism which is still happening in today's society. I always fear being around police no matter if I'm the victim in the situation. I still fear being wrongly accused of being the aggressor based off my skin tone, my tone of voice, and my hair style. **(Isiah Pickett)**





I feel like I have been in a cave for the majority of my life, or at least once I started experiencing adulthood. One of the many examples I can think of is when I got my real taste of life for the first time and ever since, I have been in a deep dark hole. I was 21 years old, and I had just gotten my very first apartment. Things went left for me very fast. I was very immature and loved to party, so let's just say I messed that opportunity up, not realizing how important it was for me to take care of business.

Ever since then, it was always a struggle for me to get my own place and it was very discouraging. Being denied left and right made me want to give up. It took seven years later for someone to actually give me another chance. Being a single father to two kids moving from house to house was very hard for me to process mentally, and I know it wasn't easy for my babies. My siblings and my parents always told me to never stop trying no matter how discouraging it may be. Seven years later I can finally give my babies a place of their own and not have to worry. It's just me and them and I wouldn't have it any other way, even though I know this is just the beginning. I was in a very dark place throughout those seven years. **(Rodney Poe Jr.)**



As I look back on my own life, I feel that I can relate in so many ways, such as poverty, pursuit of money, lack of education. I grew up in a poverty household where my parents are from a refugee camp as immigrants to the United States with a lack of education. We were living in a bondage. Our parents teach us from what they know, and they were taught from their parents and parents' generation, etc. As I get older, thinking to myself, I want to break this generational curse. I want to have a better life and to be able to help my parents, but I only know what they taught me. I was content with the life that I had lived, a very sheltered life. I feel my life was in bondage and I was living in fear.



I believe in our world today, many of us may still be living in a cave because of fear. But until we overcome that, we will live in our illusion of what we believe is the reality of life. But there is more to life than being stuck where we are. **(Sally Phelps)**



The biggest cave I was in to myself is growing up in Wisconsin and never traveling. There is so much more to the world than what I see at home or even in my own community. People can become so small-minded.

Just because you live in a nice neighborhood doesn't mean you can't be "broke." Going from a predominantly white school to a much bigger, diverse, less funded school meant many more of the students were missing out on sports and learning. The only way to become something is not letting the failures of other people around me make my decision for me and not allowing myself to fully live. I have seen family members not being able to do something and saying if she can't do it, how can I? **(Shanigel Goodwan)**



I was in a relationship with a man who I thought loved me because he used to beat me. I was in my early 20s when I met this man who just moved to Wisconsin from Mississippi. This man had a girlfriend

that he had had for ten years. I thought that I was just on top of the world because this older man was pursuing me. This man would come pick me up in her car and would buy me anything and everything I wanted. So, of course, I thought that was love. Of course, I thought that I was better than this woman. But I never knew her story.

Months into the relationship after the woman left him and moved back home, I moved in with him. I thought I finally got the man I thought I wanted to myself. Everything was great until I found out a couple of weeks after my birthday that I was pregnant. I was having this man's baby, something that no other woman was able to do. Then it started the constant beating because he thought I

was cheating, or I was outside with my friends. If I spoke to his coworkers when they came over, after they left, he would beat me because he felt like I was cheating. I was isolated from my friends and family. I had to stay in his house all day while he was at work or outside with other women.

I remember the day I said I was done. I was seven months pregnant, and I didn't do something that he had told me to do so he started to hit me. I was screaming, and the neighbor came to the door. I opened it and ran out the door and down the stairs. I remember going outside and looking to see if he was behind me. He was looking at me out the window. I saw a big stick just lying on the ground, and I busted his back window. He saw that and ran out. By that time, I was across the street at my best friend's grandparents' house and called for someone to come get me.

At that point in my life, I found myself stuck. I was having this man's baby, his first child, and thinking that this was love because this was all I knew. When I knew I was finally done, I was seven months pregnant with my daughter. I was trying to work things out. I was ready to go home, and I was tired. The man asked me for some money and I told him no. We started to argue, and I left and walked home. I was down the street from my mother's house, and he rode past me. He then came back and tried to hit me with his car. I moved out of the way and ran the rest of the way to the house and called the police. He was taken to jail. At that point I was done. I had to do better for the child that I was bringing in this world. (**Tanisha Milligan**)





I used to smoke cigarettes, and I smoked for fourteen years. My favorite brands were Benson & Edge, Peter Stuyvesant, and Craven A. I was smoking ten to twenty cigarettes a day on average.

I was already smoking several cigarettes a day when I started my first job as a Trade Marketing Representative (T.M.R) with a company named “British American Tobacco” (B.A.T) in 2003. B.A.T was a company of distribution of several brands of cigarettes such as Peter Stuyvesant, Craven A, Benson & Edge, Dunhill, King Size, etc.

No need to say that my work and workplace were a steppingstone to more dependence, more addiction to cigarettes. Now I had access to free cigarettes and a reason to smoke proudly as a T.M.R., I was trapped inside that vicious circle of smoking like the prisoners in the cave depicted by Socrates in Plato’s allegory.

I used to smoke everywhere: in the car, in the living room, even in the bedroom. Very soon I realized the wrong that I was doing not only to myself but also most importantly to my relatives and close friends such as my girlfriend, who is now my wife. Every place I smoked in, the nicotine would stick to the walls, clothes, and everything else and stay for days so that we’d continue to breathe the poison days after I smoked in the area. My body, my clothes, my car, my room smelled bad because of smoking. I realized the bad consequences smoking had on people I loved as well as myself, yet I couldn’t separate myself from the slow killer despite the advice and reprimands of my parents. I, however, knew that I must quit smoking, I just did not know how to.

The deliverance finally came in an unexpected way in 2006, after many attempts to stop and prayers. In fact, I had a business trip to the South-West region of Burkina Faso one day, and a friend asked me to drop off his uncle at a village located on the way. I did not hesitate to help. It was cold outside, so I had my car windows closed. Because of the

respect I had for his uncle, even though I did not know him, I refrained from smoking for five hours. Once we arrived at his destination, I put down the windows and finally lit a cigarette. To my surprise my friend’s uncle told me that he was also a smoker and he refrained from smoking because he did not want to upset me. The old man then lit his cigarette; it was a strong tobacco without filter of the brand Gauloise.

The Gauloise smell was so strong that I threw away my Peter Stuyvesant. Since that moment until today, I have never lit a cigarette again, and I have no more desire to smoke. I was tempted by friends and coworkers many times after I quit, but miraculously, I no longer succumbed to the temptation. I was saved, I felt healthier, and I had a better life. **(Souleymane Nikiema)**



Emotional and mental issues is what I lived through for years, and it made me feel I was stuck in a cave. Not being able to identify that I was experiencing some mental health issues kept me running in circles

where I kept ending up in the same situation. Hospitalization after hospitalization, but never addressing my underlying problems. Incarceration after incarceration, but never addressing my underlying problems.

Effects from my issues gave me a feeling of shame, guilt, and embarrassment. As a result, I isolated myself from people who love and care for me--my family and others. Funny thing, my family was there waiting for me to come out of isolation. I never knew how real family love can be so unconditional.

Once I finally got to a place where I really wanted help, then I asked for help. Instantly, there was the light that I needed. There was the opening of the cave that kept me a prisoner for so long. Being out of the cave and in the light of knowledge has been a blessing to my soul and has opened the doors to advancement in every part of my life.

(Ron Watson)

cAVE

Oh, say can you see?
 We sit Indian-style on the bedrock
 watching the munitions of independence cast
 on the flag of peace stretched taut.

Gauds' chosen people witness as
 white phosphorus lights up the sky and
 rains down on brown bodies. Hungry smiles;
 lips and teeth biting into the flesh of strange
 fruits - under ripe and bitter-sweet.

Remembering postcards from lynchings
 happy picnickers: mothers and children, too.
 Entranced by the dance of black bodies swaying in
 the wind.
 White teeth gnaw on roasted doves while carrion
 birds circle.

We write snippets of blues in class:
 I'm so tired of being sad.
 Yes, I'm so tired of being sad.
 I'm gonna call up my mamma and ask that I never
 been had.

A former lover relates to me
 when they were in the womb
 the umbilical cord wrapped tight
 around their neck and almost took them

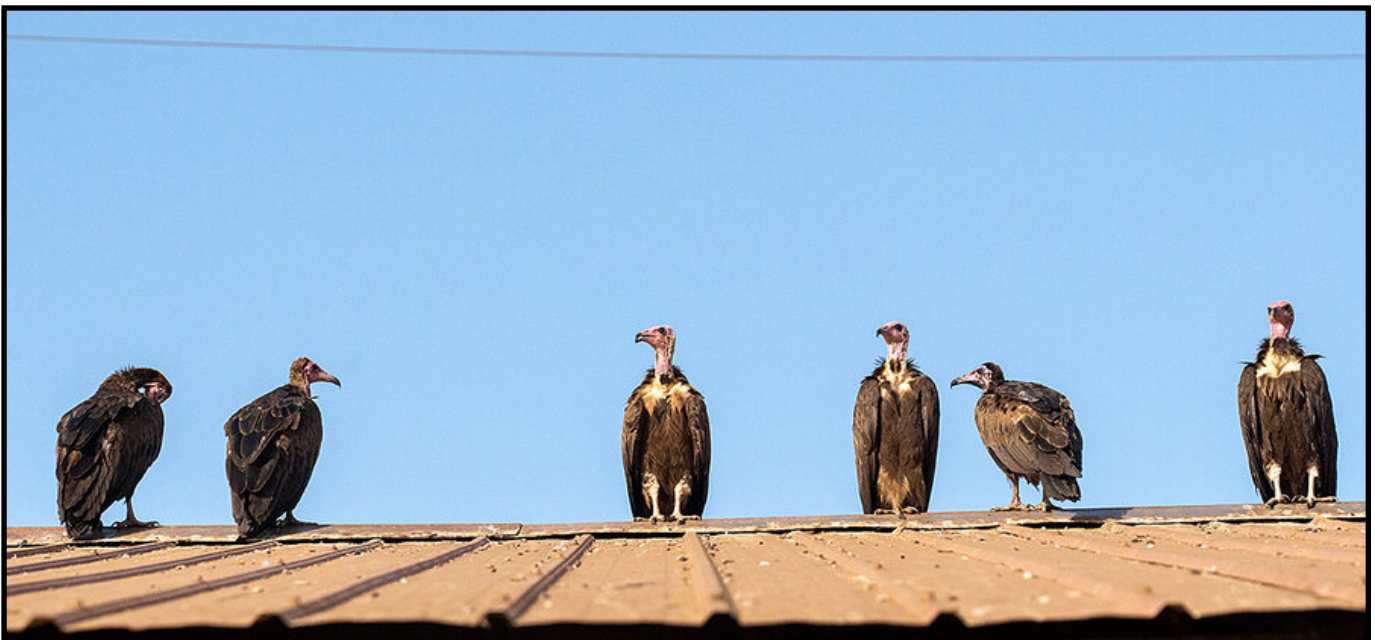
back to black.

On the news, I see those whose
 forefolk had thrown off the chains of oppression
 again and again chant, "Death to all Arabs."
 Deaf to all reason.
 Glittering rockets exploding behind their eyes.

Yes, we are the Victims! Where the "V"
 is the fang of a serpent -
 deceit pumping into veins -
 the coils of fascism leave truth gasping.
 Foaming at the mouth...possessed with our own
 Superiority.

I pick up a little Spanish because most
 confuse me for a Latino.
 No, soy como Obama. Soy halffrican.
 See, "ave" means bird in Spanish.
 Doves of freedom. Owls of wisdom.
 Vultures of death.

Dove, find me a home in the stars.
 A place not drowned in blue.
 A place without any bars
 to separate me and you.
 Sí, ave! Sí, ave!
 Do you hear her gentle coo?
 If so, it's time to rise up out the cave
 And do all that you can do. **(Lucas Benford)**



CHANNELING FREDERICK DOUGLASS

After reading Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Odyssey students were given an editorial from the Southern Quarterly Review of 1852 claiming that slavery was God's plan, that slaves basked in the sun and were happy, and that only whites could understand the conception of liberty. Students responded using the fiery voice and oratorical style of Frederick Douglass, including alliteration, rhetorical questions, exclamations, irony, and other techniques. Here are brief excerpts from longer letters they wrote in the voice of Douglass.

Dear Editor,



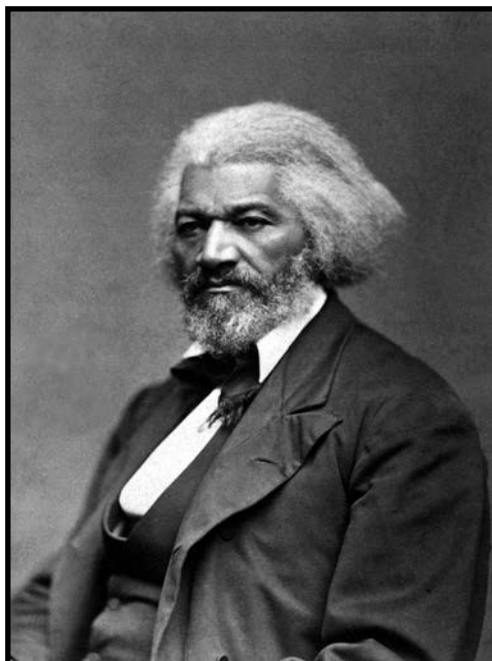
How does one say that another does not dream of liberty, when freedom has never been something the slave can acquire without being beaten to death? Our backs are made too familiar with the bloody lash of a whip, coming from master, simply from having a dream or a thought of freedom. If slaves didn't dream of freedom, then why would we risk our lives for a dream to read, write, go to school, and live life just as happily as the little white children? I watched one of my masters take my little brother by the throat, throw him on the ground, and take the heel of his boot, stomping my brother's head until blood gushed from his ears and nose.

"Slavery to which God has destined him," you write. Those words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentences that lay slumbering. Slavery is one of the most painful situations, and to understand it, one must experience this tragedy. **(Dontaeva Acklin)**

Who but God could claim to know the contents of the hearts and minds of man? This is the question that I pose to the readers of *The Southern Quarterly Review*. Too many myths abound concerning the cheerful slave, content to toil all his days with a smile on his face and a song in his heart, but know

the truth of the matter is that the negro's smile is the grim grin of the reaper and the song in his heart is a dirge for his family stolen from him; an elegy to his manhood; a lament for all possible futures under the tyranny of slavery.

Go amongst the slaves, alone, and with the pure innocence of curiosity. Tell the slave that you are curious about his experience and reassure him that you are not an agent of his master. Perhaps, bring with you a bit of food to be shared, as I was often starving, and ask him to relate his experience honestly, as if he was addressing St. Peter himself. You will find that some slaves will dissemble, fearing for their lives and safety, and will assure you of their master's perfect benevolence and magnanimity. However, you will find those handful of brave or innocent souls that will relate the



truth of the matter. Their testaments will be filled with tales of abuse, injustice, malnourishment, torture, murder, and deepest woe. If disbelief or willful ignorance still blinds one to the fact of the matter, there is another place surfeit with misery where the devil presides—the slave market.

Go to any place where slaves are kept, sold, or bred and bear witness to the multitudes of miseries that play across the countenances of those kept in bondage.

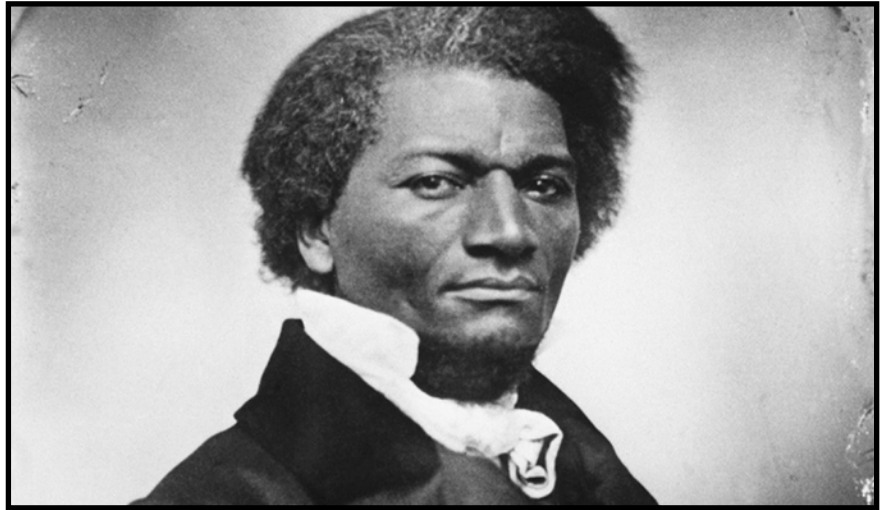


Witness the mother, with tears in her eyes, see her child snatched away from her and sold far far away - likely to

never be seen again. Witness the horror in the eyes of a young girl as an unscrupulous man eyes her with obscene intent in his heart, intending to make a “fancy girl” out of this pure soul. Witness the deplorable conditions that the slave is kept in: no warm clothing to bear the cold nights, a bed made of dirt, and a rumbling stomach is their only lullaby. Now, imagine your beloved wife or husband—daughter or son—kept in such wretched conditions, the future and the past robbed from them—only a present of endless strife. A bitter destiny. A perfect kind of misery. You may ask yourself what God would permit such treatment of his children and may deduce that only a devil could conceive of such hells.

We know from the Bible that all men are created in the likeness of God. All men are equally endowed with the grace of the creator; and to harm one man is to harm both thyself and God as we are all reflections of His grace. This is the genesis of our Christian morality and the bedrock of our faith. To dismiss this truth is to turn away from God and content oneself with a wicked morality conjured from ill-conceived arguments—underpinned by pride and greed. Turn to our great forefathers and their Declaration, wherein they proclaimed for our nation a land where all men are created equal. This is the word of God made manifest through the fathers of our great nation. This is the unalienable right of all men and the promise to the children of our great land.

Truth lives in the heart of God as the heart of God lives in truth. The heart of God beats in our chest and batters down any barriers should you let it. Let it strike down all falsehoods and unite us in spiritual prosperity. Your brother in the eyes of God. **(Lucas Benford)**



I, as a negro, former slave, find your words and article beyond offensively misleading. How can you as a free white man possibly have any inclination of what it is to be a slave? Or any idea what it is like to

be me, a former slave? I ask you, what is Christian slavery? Do you believe that to be an honest way of living, to own a person? What of the person who is torn away from their homeland? What of the person who is shipped to the foreign lands to work in inhumane conditions? If as a woman you are raped, beaten, and have children torn from your bosom, sold to never be seen again—I ask again, is that Christian slavery? You are beaten as a man, castrated, and demoralized in front of your wife and children. Wife, sister, mother raped, beaten in front of you—as a man, I ask you, is that Christian slavery?

I only have a few memories of my mother because I was forced to live away from her. Then she was sold away and died when I was really young. As a young slave I was cold, hungry, and yearned for my mother. I witnessed the harsh treatment of other slaves until it was my turn to endure the same abuse. Again, I ask, is that “Christian slavery”?

Lastly, as I write this, I am a fugitive because I choose freedom. I was and never felt happy to be treated as or to live as a slave. Might I suggest you attempt to live as a “Christian slave” and see if you are content and do not think of freedom? **(Jasmine Benson)**



Have slaves not the right to liberty as a white man? Have you ever been withheld from learning to read and write simple words? Alas! I think not. It is repellent to describe slavery as being destined by God himself, when He is who gave life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to all men.

You alone cannot say that a slave “basks in the sunshine and is happy,” for you have never been in the coarse, uncomfortable shoes slaves walked in every day. In your delusion of revulsion, you and other white people have convinced yourself into believing that Christianity gave you the right, no, the privilege to perpetuate those horrendous thoughts upon others. I am sure you had the pleasure of seeing your mother and father your entire life. I, undoubtedly, only have mere memories of my mother in the dark at night when she would sneak away to soothe me to sleep. And you dare to say that this was happiness?

A slave is overworked, unpaid, beaten, and treated as a tool to make the white man’s life better. As I was a slave in this demonic world, I fought and taught myself how to read and write so that I can help other slaves see what it truly means to fight oppression. **(Danika Bethel Johnson)**



The negro left alone to himself would not only dream of liberty but will also develop the necessary skill to reach heights that no man can fathom. In the Bible it states, “Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.” God has not set for any man to be in bondage. There is no such thing as Christian slavery. This concept was created from the minds of darkened hearts set to destroy the nature of not only the negro but mankind itself.

I have traveled through unimaginable troubles as a slave. I was born to a

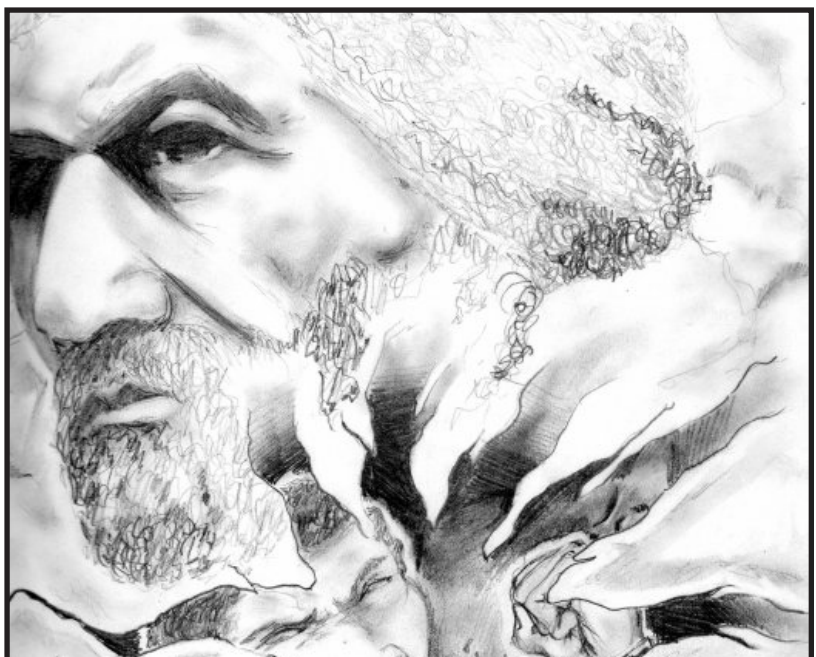
mother that could not raise me and a father I never knew. This is my Truth! As a child my thoughts and feelings were never to be recognized. Any word of speaking about them resulted with brutal beatings. This is my Truth! A pure being of existence with a broken spirit caused by heavy workloads and whippings with no means of escape. This is my Truth! The dream of liberty always sustained my reality of now boldly standing as a free man happy and in the position I was destined to be.

(Vernell Cauley)



Does not every slave have a dream of liberty and freedom? The negro may have been left in the hands of the cruelest, most brutal slaveholders but not left without his dreams. I have been lashed, left bloody and broken. I watched my brothers and sisters suffer the same brutal punishments. What is natural to the white man is pure ignorance of justice and freedom! Slaveholders bask in the joy of our pains, befriending us with liquor for a short good time to only make us feel inhuman, only to remind us of a life of unutterable anguish at the cost of our happiness and freedom.

God has no place for Christian slavery! God is pure and sees no color or blood differently. Freedom is the brightest omniscience for ALL existence.



My God would not accept such unjust laws and principles because my skin is black! No slave is happy to be starved for not minding the fields or washing the horses. No slave is happy to sleep on wood boards and sticks. No slave is happy to walk miles to work. Slavery has never been a beam of sun, only shadows of dark, deep, depression. My fellow slaves are destined to be free, free from torturous slavery, free to live a life dreamed.

(Aleesha Flowers)



I bear no regard to give mankind the assumption that I am for slavery. It shall be known that I am a true leader and there will be change for us to demolish slavery. For slavery nor freedom wilt not be the end,

the true destiny from God is to live with him for eternity. Then, ever-lasting peace. Godspeed,
(Andreya Gavins)



You define America as the land of freedom. In my people's America, we are shamed, seen and treated as inferior to white people because of our skin color. We are forced to work from dusk to dawn

and get nothing in return. When we are tired, we get whipped until our backs turn invisible from blood covering our open wounds. Our women are being raped by their masters, and our cries for help and escape are disguised by songs.

As being someone born into white skin, you will never be able to understand half of the pain and agony my people have endured over the decades. We never asked to come to this country. We were stolen from our land and forced to work for disgusting people like you. Slaves have no enjoyment in this life. My people have risked their life and even killed themselves because they would rather be free in heaven with a

God that loves all his children than be bonded to a life where they are stripped of their identity and family, silenced, forced into back breaking labor and sex, and beaten and hunted for fun. Is it even a life worth living? **(Mikaylah Harris)**



Do I not dream of liberty? You white men were privileged to tell your age in your childhood, privileged to have the natural affection of your mother.

Do I not dream of liberty? That liberty was stolen from my people when your people put my brethren in chains, kidnapped them from their country, and exposed them to sale like beasts in the market.

Do I not dream of liberty? I was forced to separate from my mother when I was an infant, when I was treated as mere chattel and whipping was my punishment to disobey master's errands.

You must get rid of the notion once and for all that there are superior or inferior races. I am free to say, in your place, I should throw your argument into the fire. **(Blanca Laine)**





How do you know the negro himself does not dream of liberty?! You are not a slave! Yes, I can grasp what is naturally mine and not the white man's. Yes, it is a cruel task to disturb me in the enjoyment of my life.

What if the white people were slaves? What if you did not know when you were born or who your mother is, or if you were made to watch your aunt get whipped, would that be a "brightest sunbeam?"

I risked my life to be free, something you never, ever in your white privileged life would ever know!
(Rosanna Lopez)



The Declaration of Independence states that "All men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In your editorial, you suggest, "The

negro, left to himself, does not dream of liberty." But I believe left to himself, that is the very thing he does: dream of liberty. Left to himself, he falls asleep wishing on a star called liberty. Left to himself, he is alone to think and what enriches his mind are thoughts of liberty. You claim, "He cannot indeed grasp a conception which belongs so naturally to the white man." Are the very slaves that grasp the crop for their master's plantation incapable of grasping the conception of their own freedom?

You warn, "It is a cruel task to disturb him in the enjoyment of that life-slavery-to which God has destined him." The only enjoyment I have witnessed has been in the crazed eyes of masters as they have whipped their slaves endlessly. Furthermore, you gather, "He basks in the sunshine and is happy." A moment in the life of a slave does not see such a thing as that. "Christian slavery, free from interference, is the brightest sunbeam which Omniscience has destined for his existence." This is an audacious statement and contains great error as a theory regarding God's design. You see, according to designer of life, a crop needs not only

bright sunbeams to thrive but rain from the glorious heavens must fall and intertwine. This interference of thunder amongst that sunshine is necessary for abundance, so the soil can loosen and enrich. Prosperity is something that can only be relished in when one has been truly oppressed. Now I have people with warmer hearts to tend to, liberty to fight for, and happiness to pursue.
(Giana Mason)





Have you lost your mind? Did you really think that slaves enjoyed getting whipped and having to take care of your family, not being able to be there for theirs, being taken away from the woman who gave them

birth?

Where in your mind did you get the idea that we were happy? How would you like it if the shoe was on the other foot, and you had to work all day and get beaten for little to nothing? This can relate to Plato's allegory of the cave because they were also letting people think everything was all right and it was not. In both instances they tried to play the slaves because they could not read and write. They tried to play the people in the cave because all they knew was the cave.

The only people basking in the sun were white people and the abusers. **(Tanisha Milligan)**



As a former slave, I believe I have the right to reply to your assertion published in *The Southern Quarterly Review* newspaper. A quest for freedom is a long process that starts with a burning desire for liberty.

Contrary to what you think, I always and secretly dreamed of freedom for years, every time with more conviction and more motivation to attempt the perilous adventure. I recall the time, together with my fellow slaves John and Henry Harris, Sandy Jenkins, and Handy Caldwell, we nourished the idea of getting away; we dreamed it over and over. We then met regularly to think and work out a plan to reach our goal. Escaping from slavery is not a simple affair; it requires the right information, knowledge, courage, and dexterity. Succeeding in freeing myself from slavery is a pure illustration that slaves, like any other human beings, dream and sometimes make it come true. Fear is what makes a slave stay a slave and slaveholders masters.

Many slaveholders use Christianity to justify their cruelty upon the defenseless slaves. During my



years in slavery, among the different masters I had, the religious ones were by far the most brutal, the most barbaric, and the most diabolical. **(Souleymane Nikiema)**



I dream of liberty, life, and freedom. All of these things I do on my own. The God you speak of is made up in your favor. I am not made to work for you and you are not made to work for me. God did not make me

to be a slave nor did he make you to be a master. Why is it all right for my family and people to be treated less than cattle? Christian slavery is only for you to enjoy, not for me. Why am I not respected as a human? Why am I not respected as an equal? This is not what God wanted for me.

The sunbeam you speak of is the darkness of my life. I get no sunlight from slavery. Any slave that speaks of his or her master in a good light is forced to out of fear. Growing up and seeing what I have seen and survived is a testimony to why slavery should be abolished. **(Terance Nix)**



Thank you for the opportunity to write on your opinion about slavery. I do object! First, you say people of color do not get what the white man automatically understands about freedom. As a former slave, I

believe in freedom. I fight for my freedom and for others who are in my situation or worse. I fight like

a soldier. I am ambitious to learn how to read and write because it will help me navigate through free life by gaining knowledge.

You say, do not try to interrupt slavery. You think that is what God has planned for slaves to be happy. How is watching my people being tortured considered as enjoyment? Overall, I believe we all have the right to freedom. **(Sally Phelps)**



Why do you think slaves enjoy being enslaved? Is it because you think of it as “Christian slavery,” which means they are “free from interference,” or is it because you believe that the concept of being free or having liberty is secret to the “white man” or the “legalized kidnappers”?

Everybody has their own definition of happiness and sunshine; for me, it is making my mother and children proud. It helps me to know that they will never have to depend or look to anyone for anything. It would be cruel for the legalized kidnappers to disturb me of that enjoyment of my life. For I am not a dangerous man, but a man that is careful with his choice of words! **(Isiah Pickett)**



What makes me or my people so different when it comes to having the same freedom as a white man? If it is my skin color, then you are completely delusional and wrong for your so-called opinion. You have no right to play God. He did not choose this destiny for me; you white people did. God would want us to love one another, but instead, you folks have been abusing your authority because of the resources that have been given to you from day one. Meanwhile, my people and myself are stripped and deprived of any said knowledge, resources, and opportunities.

If the shoe was on the other foot, then maybe you would understand, but as far as I understand, you are not able to comprehend that, nor would you be able to last a single day in our shoes. So ask yourself, who really cannot grasp a conception? If you have been through or even had a taste of what my

people and I have been through, being separated from our families, beaten, deprived of any freedom or knowledge, you would probably kill yourself. Keep that in mind before you ever even think about bringing God into this and believing slavery is all right. God did not make slavery; the whites did.

(Rodney Poe Jr.)



I truly disagree with you, Editor. Even though slavery was the law of the land, no human on earth wants to be a slave, even if they do not know anything else, especially for those of us who have never seen anything but slavery. No person on this earth would have wanted to experience not seeing their mother no more than twice in their life.

I totally disagree that slaves were happy being slaves. If so, why would slaves try so hard to escape and run away? Why would slaves be so resistant? Why would people find it to be morally unacceptable, and why would people abolish the trade in human beings and help fight for freedom? Slaves truly wanted to control their own lives. They wanted to learn how to read and write like everyone else. They wanted their independence, they wanted their families, and they did not want to see their families shipped away and never seen again. They are human and have feelings and emotions like any other human beings. God loves everyone; we are all God's children. **(Kimberly Rodgers)**



I am writing to express my deep concern and disappointment regarding the recent published *Southern Quarterly Review*. The moment I read the first line I knew I had to respond because even before I could dream, I dreamed of freedom and liberty, so I will not let you take that away from me with your ignorance.

You think that I enjoyed slavery? That I for once agreed to accept or even chose the cruelty of mankind? God has not destined this to be the reality for negros, and in that moment where you are to be judged after life, you will feel the wrath of this war within your heart of hatred.

How can you call it Christian slavery? This is absurd, for how does any Christian treat the negro mankind with such hate? How dare you use Christianity in vain? How dare you think that we as people are free from inheritance?

When we were created, our destiny was taken by white men and women. God did not destine this existence for people of any race. For that you are wrong: you are a slave within your own mind. For this, one day justice shall prevail upon all mankind, and I shall see to that. **(Marcy Tibbs)**



Does my skin color make my dreams different than yours? I want to be free! I dream of living a life like yours. Do you not know your parents? Have you not any special memories with them? What about birthdays as a child? I do not even know when I was born. The month, the day, the year are all a mystery to me. I am not even sure of my current age.

Why is my destiny any different than yours? Because of my skin color? Does our heart not beat the same? I breathe the same air as you. I read and understand things I bet you cannot begin to understand. There is no sunshine in pain. There is no sunshine in getting beaten or being hungry. God created us equal and equal we should be. **(Amanda Von Behren)**



To say that slavery to a slave is an enjoyment of life is a far reach from you because you have never had to endure the pain and hurt of being a slave. To have to watch family members get punished for the little things and to not know if you were next is one of the worst feelings ever.

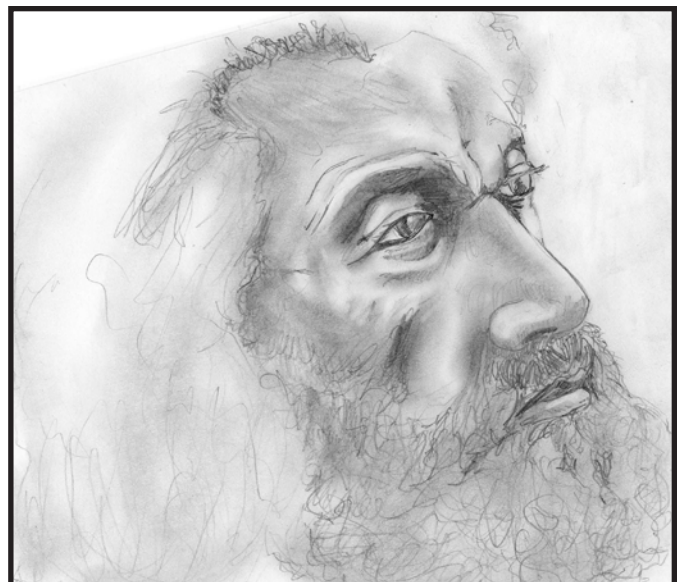
To only have known your parents and not know the love they had for you due to being sold or even killed is a more horrific feeling. The hurt and pain you hear in our voice from singing old negro songs is a testimony and thought that one day we will overcome these trials. Slavery is a thing you will

never have to experience. So, your assumption on what makes us negroes happy and want to be a part of this is outright ridiculous. Slavery was one of the worst things to mankind but I survived it. I taught myself to read and write and overcome my trials and, for that, I am a very noted man in history. **(Endia Walls)**



Ask yourself, how do I know what the negro wants out of life? Slaveowners have successfully deprived us of education, but you have not blinded us. We can see your happiness. We can see your advancement of knowledge and resources. We can see you live out your dreams that are far more than "looking in the sunshine." Is that only the white man's natural right?

What makes you think it would be a cruel task to "disturb him in his enjoyment of that life, slavery?" How do you know that God has destined the negro slavery? Where in the Bible does it say this? Christianity is a religion about God and God is good. There is nothing, and I mean nothing, good about slavery. When you wrote such a foolish description of the negro not being able to understand the concept of liberty, you did not add the part about the negroes not being allowed education to be able to understand concepts like liberty. Your article left me with the feelings of resentment, rage, and repulsion. **(Ron Watson)**



SHOWING OFF STYLE

Before writing as Frederick Douglass, students experimented with a variety of persuasive writing techniques and literary devices.

Alliteration:

The brave boys brought buckets after buckets of water to quell the flames. **(Lucas Benford)**

The cold, creaking, crusted wooden floor was old and dirty. **(Jasmine Benson)**

Harry hopped happily home. **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**

The mean master makes me mad. **(Mikaylah Harris)**

I wonder why white women were wicked to slaves. **(Blanca Laine)**

I enjoyed eating at Red Robin Restaurant. **(Kimberly Rodgers)**

Allusion:

You don't have to be William Shakespeare to write poetry.
(Andrea Evans)

All that remained was winter, so my sister began to cry, murmuring,
"Where late the sweet birds sang."
(Lucas Benford; allusion to a Shakespeare sonnet)

Analogy:

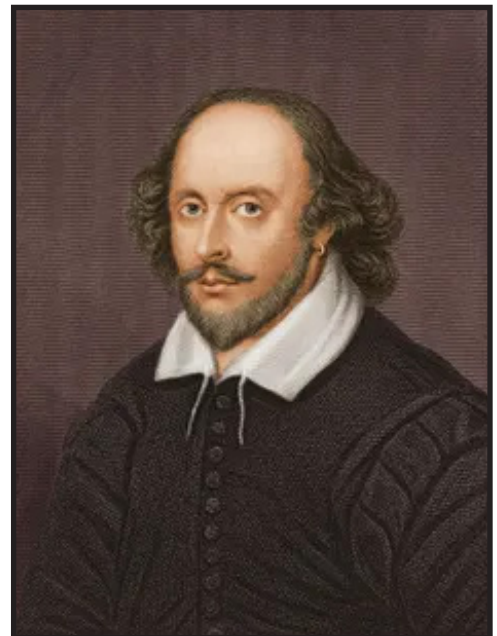
Sometimes going to work feels like getting my tooth pulled.
(Mia Cannon)

Finding a good man is like finding a needle in a haystack.
(Andrea Evans)

Assonance:

He eats many sweet treats. **(Isiah Pickett)**

The fast cash kept coming. **(Marcy Tibbs)**



Chiasmus:

You don't have to be great to get started but you have to get started to be great. **(Sally Phelps)**

Let's always dream big and may big always be our dream. **(Souleymane Nikiema)**

You take the drug, and the drug takes you. **(Giana Mason)**

Are you dying to live or living to die? **(Terance Nix)**

Exclamation:

My name is not Danica but Danika! **(Danika Bethel-Johnson)**

Go clean your room! **(Mia Cannon)**

I yelled, "I hate this!" **(Vernell Cauley)**

What a terrible accident it was! **(Andrea Evans)**

Do not touch! **(Andreya Gavins)**

Every Wednesday I come into class I'm full of excitement! **(Synquar Harston)**

How diverse and inclusive the Odyssey Project is, with everybody hungry for knowledge! **(Blanca Laine)**

I can't be late for school! **(Rosanna Lopez)**

I get so excited for Wednesday to come around every week! **(Tanisha Milligan)**

Damn it, I forgot my homework! **(Marcy Tibbs)**

Kids, go to bed NOW!!! **(Cierra Jackson)**

Figurative Language:

--Simile: I am like a hamster running on a wheel repeating the same cycle over and over again. **(Vernell Cauley)**

The guy runs like a cheetah. **(Ron Watson)**

--Metaphor: He was a hound for her love. **(Mekicia Davis)**

I was molasses, slow moving and prolonged. **(Giana Mason)**



Irony:

With thunderstorms, it's a beautiful day. **(Andrea Evans)**

My boss yelled at me, so I love my job. **(Tanisha Milligan)**

Oh, how sweet of you to forbid her from teaching me. **(Cierra Jackson)**

**Onomatopoeia:**

The chirping of the birds soothes my soul.
(Aleesha Flowers)

The balloon went POW! **(Kimberly Rodgers)**

Grrrrr! I am so mad. **(Mia Cannon)**

When I stepped on the egg, it squished.
(Rosanna Lopez)

My cat purrs loudly when she's excited.
(Marcy Tibbs)

Oxymoron:

My friend loves to keep secrets but has a loud whisper. **(Jasmine Benson)**

In a relationship with fussing, fighting, breaking up, making up, I called it "bad love."
(Vernell Cauley)

A damned saint, an honorable villain. **(Andrea Evans)**

The silence was so loud. **(Mekicia Davis)**

It's an open secret. **(Andreya Gavins)**

My younger brother is the smartest dumbest person I know—book smart but makes dumb decisions.
(Rodney Poe Jr.)

Parallelism:

To be alive, or to be dead? **(Dontaeva Acklin)**

To be all or to be nothing **(Synquar Harston)**

Repetition:

She was broken beyond measure, broken as if snapped in half. **(Mekicia Davis)**

Odyssey makes me more confident, more optimistic, and more knowledgeable.
(Blanca Laine)

As a black male I feel I'm always a target, always being watched, always being judged because of the color of my skin. **(Rodney Poe Jr.)**

The blue boat floated in the blue water underneath the blue sky. **(Ron Watson)**

To live free is to live every aspect, every moment, and every minute of life.
(Souleymane Nikiema)

Rhetorical Question:

What makes my life any less valuable than yours? **(Dontaeva Acklin)**

Who but thy maker should have allowance to keep a man? **(Lucas Benford)**

Have I not already stated I am tired? **(Mia Cannon)**

Will I not be free from this mental emotional abuse? **(Vernell Cauley)**

If I didn't know what I was doing, would I be here? **(Mekicia Davis)**

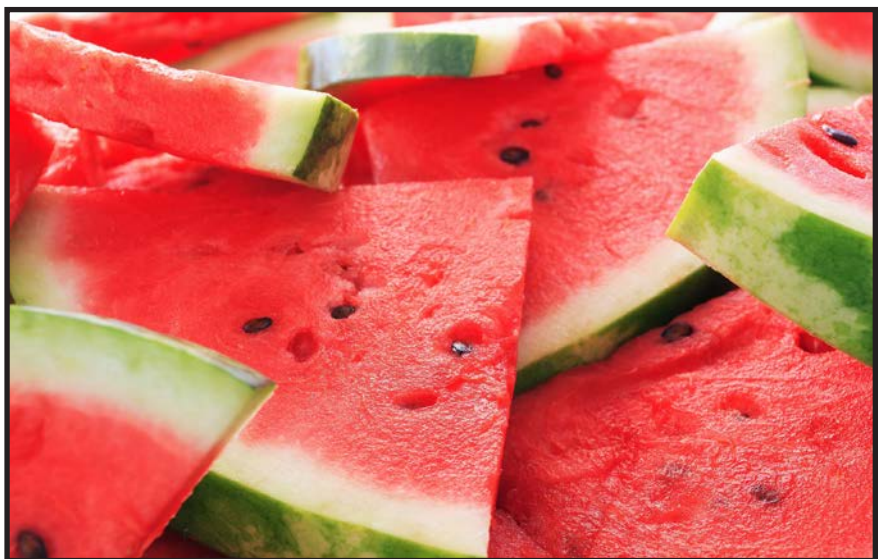
Would you rather be wealthy and happy in life or rich, miserable, and depressed?
(Rodney Poe Jr.)

Superlative:

This ultimate brownie recipe has chunks of the finest imported chocolate to make for the most decadent and tastiest dessert extravaganza. **(Lucas Benford)**

the hottest summer and coldest winter **(Aleesha Flowers)**

I purchased the biggest watermelon in the world. **(Kimberly Rodgers)**



CREATIVE CORNER



My Odyssey: A Sonnet
By Terance Nix '24

I was considered to be bad to the bone.
This time I made a promise to be great.
Might look weak, but I still stand strong.
At times you can see the pain in my face.
Not knowing the road that I have,
Always knowing I have to crawl before I walk.
My next goal completed will never be my last.
Most definitely my next goal's getting stalked.
It's going to be a long path on this Odyssey
I pray to God that I make it to the end.
I'm just trying to be who I got to be.
I hope to pass with flying colors in the wind.
If I put in my last, it was my best.
Took a left off failure right to success.



School Bus Driver
By Brandi Filsinger '06

To drive a school bus is a gratifying job.
Some kids may not like me,
Others can't wait to see me.
As I enter my bus in the still dark of the morn,
it enters my mind, oh what will the day bring?

As I exit the lot, the sun starts to come up,
and still all I can think is what will this day bring?
As I drive down the road going stop after stop,
more students get on with a good morning.
I have a few that tell me about their day.
Others in the back goof around and play.
Despite the screaming and all the other noise,
I like my job because I know
I may brighten a student's day.
Some students start their day with yelling at home.
I may be the first to smile at them and say,
"Good morning."

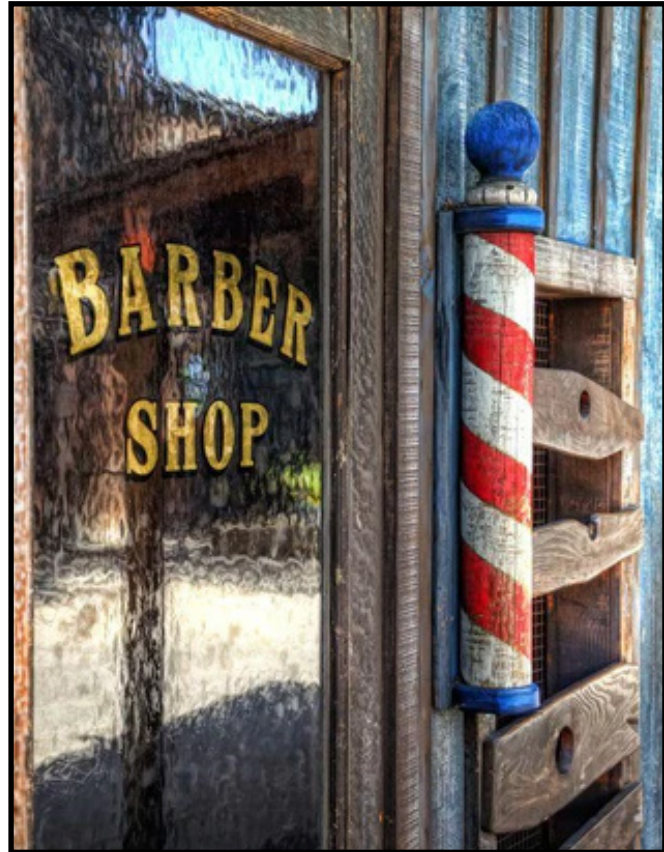




Silent Observer
By Derrick Washington '07

Being silent being observant
Doesn't necessarily make me malevolent
Being silent while unwillingly processing
The woes of a whole community
You have one choice one decision

Choose pain or choose apathy
Listening to all and being heard by none
Feeling like a character of Ralph Ellison
But this is the profession that has chosen me
More than a certificate to cut hair
More like a degree in psychology
You see every part every pain
Every palimpsest attempt at being new
You see every birthday every wedding
Every graduation day without a clue
But what I see truly
Is the magnificent beauty in humanity
Another way of saying the same thing
But saying it differently
I still remember those classic words
Emily Dickinson "I dwell in possibility"
Wait I hear Mahalia Jackson
Yes! I will tell them about the dream
About the technique I would use
To patch the seam
But it won't be an original
Just a pentimento
Or a fresco
A skillful chiaroscuro



Odyssey Poem
By Takeyla Benton '11

Like an unexpected poem I pieced together
from pieces of paper from different years
stained with different tears
and pasted with various hues of pain,
Odyssey is the beginning stanza
for the poem of our lives.

I've inherited inspiration from each individual,
made friends I like more than a little,
realized my dreams can come to life,
as long as I fight, cry a little,
lean on someone a little,
but continue to fight,
and never be afraid to write.