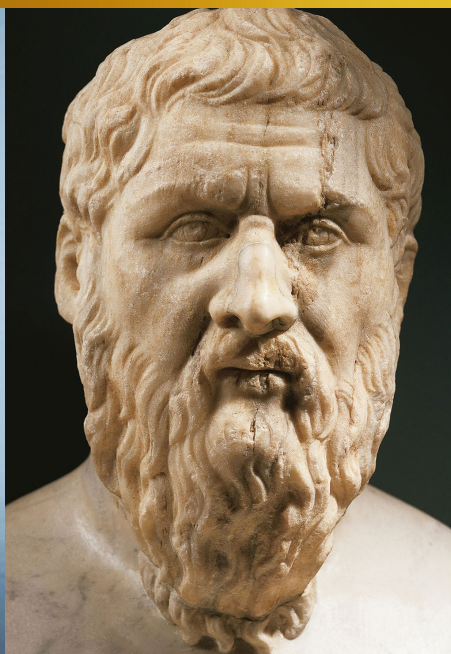
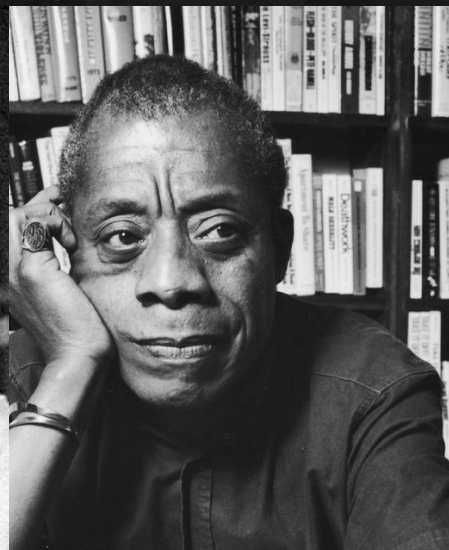


ODYSSEY BEYOND BARS ORACLE



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WHY WE WRITE

Well, at first this question had me questioning myself. I didn't think or couldn't wrap my mind around a question so simple. But still, to be honest, I really didn't know. The more I thought about the question, though, the more I came up with the same answer: that it is a great form to express yourself without leaving nothing behind. I write to express myself. I write so I can show my emotions, my beliefs, and my inner thoughts. I want the reader to understand what I'm trying to picture through words. I write so I can escape from the reality of the pain I'm going through. I write so I can express the happiness I feel because sometimes speaking isn't enough. I write to show the love and appreciation I have for my fiancée and family. I write because I want to educate other generations about what I was feeling while we were living on this great, mysterious earth. This is why I write, and one day I will write one of the greatest stories ever in my lifetime. That is my story. Thank you. **(Chavez)**

"The Humanities of Survival"

Writing for me is survival. I write to survive the parts of my mind where I begin to lose myself. Growing up in a dysfunctional household, without either one of my parents, I was often subjected to abuse, which led me to see the world from a cynical perspective. I became a shell of myself—afraid to speak and quick to please, in fear of physical consequences. I remember hiding in the closet, piling clothes on top of me while listening to an old Walkman, amazed at the creative and courageous way 2Pac Shakur expressed himself. I wrote my own writings as poems, never touching on my own situation, yet experiencing peace through my imagination. At times, I find it easier to be abstract than to connect my writing to my situation directly. To scribble parts and



pieces of my past together on paper is like mixing oil and water. I experience sort of a defensive emotional disconnection from my writing, as if my mind is saying, "No, this is your safe place!" Yet I am empowered when I'm able to write on the surface, to escape my own reality. In writing of conceptual situations or things, I can be intelligent, strong, independent, and courageous. To never write a word is to sit in a hollow box, breathing but ceasing to exist. The more I write, the more difficult it becomes. I used to be able to be organic with words and flow through my poetry almost naturally. Now I stumble on technicalities and fall short on grammar styles and political correctness.

Still, I write to survive. To survive my forever changing perspective, my constantly growing vocabulary, and there are always thoughts that need to be adjusted, edited, and corrected often. In an effort of self-preservation, I write to avenge the foes of my past, to exist in history, if not in the present. When I write I can live beyond survival, not a prisoner of society, religion, law, or politics. I possess the true free will to roam my imagination and the world around me. Writing to survive is why I write. **(Randy)**



Part 1

Well, my reason for writing all comes down to music. It all goes back to when I was about six. Kiss was the first band I got into. At that age, you could imagine I was blown away by their image—the make-up, the fire, the songs. So from that day on, I wanted to be a musician.



I look back as far as elementary school; writing wasn't something I enjoyed doing. I have this problem with expanding my mind to create a story on a topic that the teacher had given us. I tried really hard and wanted to write a great paper—not only for a good grade, but for my own sense of comfort. Well, let's just say, I got a passing grade in English, but it wasn't for any papers I'd written. This went on for many of my school years. I figured, "Well, guess I need to do well in math."

But back then, I knew nothing about making music. I was just a little rocker. Then when I was about 10, I got my first drum set for Christmas. That was the coolest gift I ever got. I got together with a few friends from school and we jammed to our favorite metal bands every day after school. I never actually took drum lessons in school. I thought it was boring, just learning on the snare drum. So, I played every time I could and taught myself.

Part 2

The whole time, my stepdad always told me I'd never make a career out of it and that I sucked. That always made me feel like crap. Though in reality, I wasn't bad. But around 19, I listened to him and quit playing. It was the worst mistake I ever made.

I hadn't picked up a set of drumsticks since then, but when I got here, I played. Wow, I still feel the power behind playing. I would love to be able to put down lyrics to music. I would love to rewrite my dream and show him up. **(Christopher)**

As far back as I can remember, I've lived this adventurous life—some good, some bad. A lot of people have asked me, "Why don't you write a book, or keep a journal? You have so much to share." I never really gave it two thoughts; but at this point, it's time to put those thoughts and ideas on paper.

I always wondered how big-time authors sat down and wrote five-hundred-page books. "Must be a gift," that's how I always thought of writing. I believe we are all writers; it just takes that special or right moment to figure out what it is we're good at writing about. It could be as simple as a kid writing a love letter to another person, putting a lot of thought and emotion in it. Or someone writing a best seller at the age of 55. I didn't know until now what my gift of writing was. I kinda look at writing like an old polaroid picture. We all have amazing memories, but in time we will forget certain things. A picture will tell you so much. I write to remember the events of my life. I write to help, and hopefully to save people's lives. I write because the thoughts in my head are running through it like the yellow lines on a highway.



All these years I thought I was a horrible writer; I'd never look at what I was doing at work. On a professional level, I can make an email look like an Executive Director or a CEO of a company wrote it. I never thought I'd develop a passion for it; it's one step at a time. I hope to become a great writer, and I won't settle for "just OK." This will be a big accomplishment, and I can then check it off the bucket list.

Do I think I'll write a best seller? Probably not. Will I write a positive memo on a website of a company I'm the founder of? Yes. Will I write words of wisdom, motivational quotes, or a short story about a person who overcame addiction and decided to put pen to paper? Yes. I have so much to share, and a big world to share it in. Twenty years from now, when I am sipping a cup of coffee at my lake house, I want to take a deep breath, smile, and think: that's why I write. **(Jamie)**

We endlessly pack our proverbial grey-matter-universe-suitcase, continually accumulating life experiences. I need to effectively learn ways to articulate this expansive unbridled imagination.

From various personal life experiences around the world, and from my "gated community" lifestyle choice I made decades ago, I have had time to filter through these encounters. Now I have much to place on paper and view from a renewed perspective. These thoughts from life need to be shared with others, beyond the sparkling miles of razor wire.



This writer can intimately touch and change lives for the good, versus the tragedies I inflicted on others, directly and indirectly. What influences will come from my past I can convey orally, and through the warmth to the old-fashioned pen and paper.

Emotion comes to thought and is vital to why this ole dude writes.

Raw emotion is the glue which reinforces my heartfelt communication with humanity.

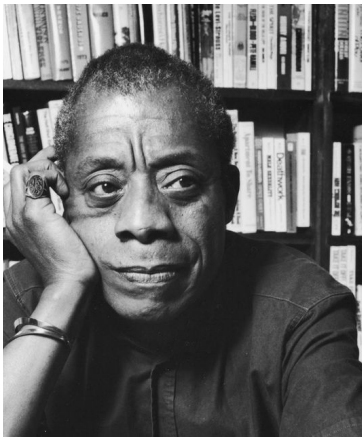
Persons outside of our fishbowl community might think we may not deserve to share beyond the perimeter of these self-contained restrictive communities. Because of "prison style" modern technology — an antiquated seven-inch tablet — transparency is brought in, which allows us to convey ourselves to our local and global communities.

My eyes are open to a yet larger world of communication with others in my thirty contact (person) digital world limit, which progressively allows me to blossom in various expanding degrees.

Persons are amazed as to what I'm able to convey from within our heavily censored community through writing. Personally, I now have a newfound confidence in self that hadn't truly been recognized or embraced. I love sharing my deep personal life and relationship with Jesus Christ, and I recently learned I paint beautiful word portraits in this area of personal interest.

Expanding this writer's horizon to see a bigger panoramic view truly excites me. To better articulate what is enthusiastically bouncing around within is profound. What a gift we have within. One must recognize it, cultivate it, experience it, and live it. **(Randal)**

Growing up in an environment where attitudes and beliefs are things like “men don’t cry” and “have no feelings” are taught, you grow up bottling a lot in. Now knowing how unhealthy that is for a person, I feel like it’s time to break this cycle. Writing for me personally is my way to vent, a way to share and teach through my life experiences to people with no ill intentions or motives. Writing for me is stepping outside of the box and breaking down barriers for those with the same zip code as mine. My way of crying, it’s me lying on that green couch in that psychiatrist’s office, letting it all out without the expensive fee. It’s me desperately searching for the better me. I’m hoping and praying that I’m onto something, and that in due time the words will jump off the paper and hit me, making me finally realize where the root of a majority of my problems lie.



James Baldwin stated in his passage titled “The Creative Process” that “We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself the truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilized in the prison of his undiscovered self.”

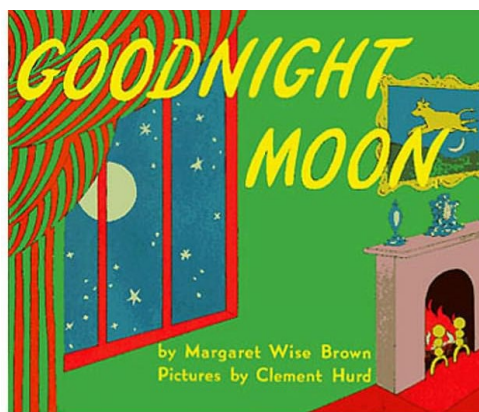
And my release date is nearing. **(Malik)**

When someone asks me why I write, a lot of answers come to mind, almost too many to respond. I want to flip the question around and ask this person, “More importantly, why don’t I write?” Writing has played such a big role in my life, ever since I was just a little boy. It may not have been me necessarily “doing” the writing, but I would read hundreds of other people’s stories. *Goodnight Moon*, *Hungry, Hungry Caterpillar*, the *Magic Treehouse* novels; they all started turning the gears in my brain at an early age

so that, later in life, I myself would put words onto paper for others to read.

I’ve always considered myself very lucky to have a teacher as a mother. Not many people have somebody who’s so anal about using the correct punctuation, spelling, formats, etc. in their lives at an early age. Whenever I would write up a rough draft of something or an essay for her to look over, I’d get it back an hour later with so many red marks and edits that I would think to myself, “Am I really this dumb?” But what I didn’t think at the time was that she was helping me prepare for the real world and my future, considering how writing plays such a huge role. My parents have always told me that education will set you free. As I sit here in the Department of Corrections, I can honestly say that they were right; education will either make you or break you for the rest of your life. I obviously never thought I’d be sitting here in state greens for four years at the young age of 24—I mean, come on, these are my golden years! I should have graduated college now, degrees hanging on my wall and student loans up to my neck! I guess I could consider this a different way of schooling, a school of hard knocks maybe. What I learn about myself in here will set the bar for me upon my release next year. One thing I have realized is how important writing is to me through ALL of my education, regardless of what classes I take or which career path I follow—not only for the next five years or so, but for the rest of my life.

I write for many reasons, all of which are important to me. It’s therapeutic, and I can get my thoughts and ideas out of my head and onto a piece of paper.



Whether it’s writing a letter to an old friend I haven’t heard from in a while, or even just journaling to myself about how the past week went, it helps me say things that I may not be so good at doing verbally and express my feelings. I write because I personally think it makes me a better person. **(Blake)**

There happens to be a war raging out of control upon American soil while its citizens are oblivious to the nature of its existence. Coveted individual freedoms have been stripped, innocent lives destroyed, and countless peaceful and non-dangerous souls are taken prisoner or executed. The amount of pain, suffering, and death derived from the COVID-19 pandemic pales in comparison to the war of devastating and horrific nightmares produced on an annual basis. This ongoing war with no end in sight is between our own borders and has played a key role in the emergence of the BLM movement by preying on innocent humans not because of their actions and morals, but because of where they live and the color of their skin. Unbeknownst to an alarming majority of American society, the war on drugs has decimated families, cities, and soon a country with no idea of its demonic existence.



more educated advocates put pen to paper, the masses would develop an understanding that drugs are primarily a health issue, not just a judicial one. More intellectual individuals knowledgeable on this important subject speaking the truth would speed up the process of dismantling unjust laws that have been out of touch with reality for far too long. Justice and equality are necessary aspects that will contribute towards a future for mankind that is sprawling with hope and enlightenment.

My passion for putting pen to paper, or finger to keyboard, helps to educate the blinded masses on the hypocritical and unjust drug laws that are destroying our country. One of the most innovative and advanced societies in the history of mankind still finds itself consumed by immoral and backwards beliefs rooted in prejudice, racism, and idiocy. Far too often, history repeats itself, evident in the unsuccessful attempt of the prohibition of alcohol in the 20th century compared with the 21st century teeming with countless substances deemed illegal, producing more violence, crime, and hardship than if they were decriminalized or legalized.

Creating felons and locking up citizens with extreme levels of potential within the confines of a prison filled with murderers, rapists, thieves, and child molesters for simple possession of an illegal substance with more medicinal properties than certain legal ones is a crime in itself. The internet, social media, and many other technological advances developed in recent history are the catalyst of a new age of knowledge where people

A stigma handed down over generations, along with essentially no education on the war on drugs, has led far too many capable minds to believe that deciding to make a drug illegal will magically solve every problem that arises in a society populated with over 328 million citizens with easy access to mind-altering substances, legal or not. Without decriminalization, legalization, education, and regulation, keeping drugs illegal only supports the black market, gangs, and dangerous criminals. If



of all backgrounds and ages can share their experiences, ideas, and most importantly facts in a fast and productive manner never seen before. Written and true facts not distributed by the corporate and monopolized media have found their way to energized millennials passionate with fixing the problems previous generations have created without much empathy for the future.

Why I write is so this monumental movement spreads faster in the right direction and reaches as many eyes and ears as possible. Writing and distributing the truth creates hope, and the hope of a more just and fair country starts with informing, learning, and writing. Generation after generation will look back at our time captured in literature and know that humans reached a pivotal moment in history where our voices and hearts could truly make change happen and therefore a better world. What a time to be a part of, but, more importantly, what a time to be alive to write. (Jon)

“You can’t see the forest through the trees.” This is an old adage for sure, and one that seems to so totally provide a frame of reference for the answering of this question, for myself at least. Why I write wasn’t ever something that was clear to me. Honestly, it wasn’t something that I ever

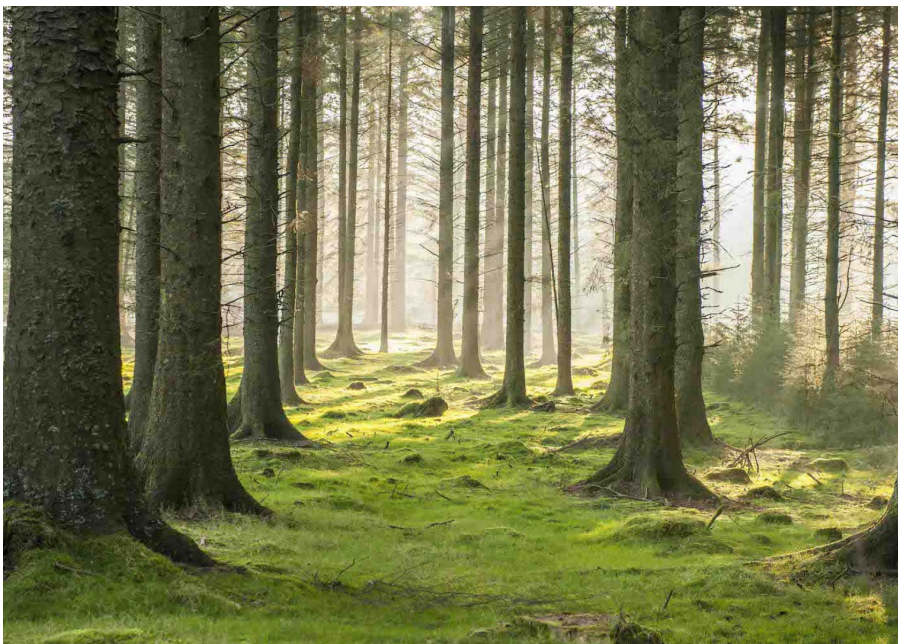
gave much thought, but once I did—think about it, I mean—I came to the realization that to truly understand it, I’d have to understand the bigger picture, that truly all-encompassing motivation. I’d have to see the forest, trees and all.

When I first started to think about why I write, it came to me that perhaps I needed to figure out why I wasn’t moved to write, and that via that deduction I could find out more readily, and more wholly, what it was that moved me to pen or type at all. This would turn out to not be true.

Baldwin speaks to artistic purpose in his essay “The Creative Process.” He speaks to the responsibility of the artist, the goals and motivations that one should possess who desires to create, but that doesn’t serve to answer for me this question that sits on the boundary of my thoughts—that is, until I start to look more closely at the trees.

“We know, in the case of the person, that whoever cannot tell himself truth about his past is trapped in it, is immobilize in the prison of his undiscovered self.” It is in the reading of that line that I come to recognize, at least in part, and certainly more so in heart, why it is that I find myself moved to create with words.

I do this to more wholly understand myself.



I do this, I write, in order to come to terms with what was, to unburden myself of what has been. In the releasing of those shackles, in the freedom of that bondage of the past, I come to see me more clearly. Baldwin is doing many things in his essay, not just outlining what he believes to be the purpose, responsibility, and motivations of the artist (be they writers, composers, painters, or otherwise), but also he is giving a blueprint to those of us who may come after him. He’s leaving for us, in his words, a mirror, so

that we may see that face of our own, so that we may see in us what he perhaps saw in himself, and in that reflection we may more fully come to understand, and come to terms with, who and what we are. For how can one lacking that actualization of self truly carry out the task that is that of the artist? And how can one, after having lived up to the responsibility that is embracing that aloneness, not come to know oneself more totally?

The undiscovered self, that face that I cannot see, that is why I write. I write in hopes that someday, at some point, this thing we call life makes just a little bit more sense. **(Neal)**

I write for the seventy-year-old man with a third-grade education that worked 14-16 hours a day to put his only daughter through college. I write for the dope dealer on the corner who wants a way out, but his pride tells him he is a Boss and has to “feed the hood,” so he continues the death dealing cycle again the next day. I write for the schizophrenic genius who would never be fully able to express to the world the greatness inside him. I write for the souls of my ancestors who jumped out of the slave ships in shark-infested waters, for they knew it would be better to die free than live in bondage.

I write for the slave who still taught their original language under the threat of death so that it would never be forgotten. I write for the young boy who is heavily medicated because he’s been labeled ADD/ADHD and emotionally disturbed, yet all he needs is an in-house father figure to teach him how to deal with his emotions.

I write to help end systemic racism.

I write to give a voice to those who died from senseless violence at the hands of those who claim to protect and serve. I write for the abused wife who desperately wants to leave her husband but can’t see a way out. I write for the addict and drunk who through sheer willpower find a way to get their fix and high yet can’t use the same will power to shake that monkey off their backs.

I write for the fourteen-year-old girl who had to give birth to a still-born child in a gas station bathroom because she had to hide her pregnancy from her alcoholic mother and child-molesting stepfather. I write for the misguided teen who thought they could be more likeable if they weren’t themselves but then took their own lives, tired of the constant bullying. I write for the Muslim who is harassed, shunned, and ridiculed by the scared and uneducated.

I write for the peace the world needs and is not getting. **(Ali)**



THE CREATIVE PROCESS

It was 79 degrees with a northwesterly wind. I sat in a visiting room in prison with no air conditioning, staring at my son and then wife, caught between disbelief and frustration. I was just told my grandfather has passed away, and I was breathless. My heart beat within my ears, my lungs moved slowly, and my vision blurred. I just got up and left them there going back to my cell. The process was a blur to me, yet I found myself writing a letter to a great man that was gone too soon. The letter was two and a half pages—no flowery words, no subtle nuances, just pure raw emotion. My pen shed the tears that couldn't fall from my eyes. My hands moved with the speed of lightning, yet they were so sweaty they soaked through the paper, yet I continued on. I prayed on that paper, I cried on that paper, my heart spoke Latin, Hebrew, Aramaic on that paper, yet the only constants were "why, love, emotion, and goodbye." To this day that letter sits in a frame in my mind, for it was too emotional to read. Yet I read it to his true love and she cried, for I never had or since spoken with the clarity of emotion, or fever, as I did in that moment. In that moment the noise in my head ceased, and the man who I will become spoke. **(Ali)**

The most creative I have ever been was when I was a youtuber. After being inspired by countless other content creators sharing their beliefs and experiences with the world, I dove in myself and became hooked. In that moment of my life I was still partying excessively, but this outlet was the real me clinging on by only a thread. You're going to encounter obstacles when you share your soul to hundreds of thousands of people from across the world, but these obstacles only made me stronger as I learned extensively about the creative process and how complicated it is. I was sharing my beliefs, my life to complete strangers and, in the end, compiled friends from all over the globe. For every one person who didn't like my content, there were 100 people telling me how much they loved it. Why did I stop creating and start selling? Why? **(Jon)**

I guess one of my great creative moments was when I used to paint. When I was in Oshkosh Correctional, I took a



painting class. We learned the fundamentals of painting. So, I learned different techniques to paint things, which I think looked great. Well, the last project for my class was something we came up with, and I decided to paint my ancestors in battle against white people. In my painting, I wanted to express the pain and fears my people were going through while they fought with enemies with weapons they had never seen. But I also wanted to show how my people were brave and great warriors. Inside I felt proud and strong when I was doing my painting. When I was done, I felt like I did a great job showing a great battle and had lots of pride in my painting. Also, the other Native American brothers liked what I did and were excited to show my work to others. That felt the most heartfelt. **(Chavez)**

Damn, look at my brothers all tattooed up and my skin all naked. Man, f** that, I'm going to call our bro and get some ink to show my pride. Damn, my heart is pumping as I listen to that needle machine. Not going to lie, I'm kinda scared. But I'm ready to put some drawings on me so others can see what I like, what I have pride in. Plus, girls love tattoos. Wow, I'm sitting in the chair, and I decide to put my dad's last name. Now I'm here, and it's about to be real. Well, it's time, here he comes. He asks me, "You ready?" I said "Yes, let's get this over with!" He puts the needle to my skin. Damn that ain't bad. Now, I see what I had in my head, what I wanted. He tells me, "Bro, I'm all done," and I look at my Dad's name. I felt pride, honor, and great to have his last name as my first tattoo. As I came home, I showed my new tattoo to my father. He looked at it, then looked at me and said, "Son, you're in big trouble, but thank you." As he's telling me this he's crying. Then I start crying because that felt great and honorable. **(Chavez)**



I remember being about 15, playing drums with some friends, and we recorded our first bit of music. It was of course on cassette. That part, though, was only the guitarist and me. We practiced and practiced over and over, and finally we got it. Wow, did it feel amazing, putting something on tape. It was only instrumental, but we had it. I listened to that tape a lot. My friends loved it also. I wonder, where did that tape go?

(Christopher)

In 2010, I was working in California, and we had a big turn-over rate within the company. I realized it was because the guys weren't understanding their job and responsibilities and were getting yelled at all the time. So in my free time, I developed a new employee handbook for new employees. I went and took photos of every tool and piece of equipment an employee should know. Then I wrote a description under each photo, describing what it does and why. At the very end of the employee manual, I had all the experienced guys, along with management, write a short paragraph to give some positive advice. At that point I was new to the company, but the energy I was feeling from all the people around me was amazing. A lot of top management staff couldn't believe what I did on my own time and accomplished. It helped a lot of new employees. **(Jamie)**

All I really remember is standing in the kitchen of a house in the middle of nowhere, at a time and place I can't really remember. The kitchen is like

the thousand others I've been in over the course of my life—cracked faux tiling and the same brown cupboards that come out of factories everywhere, connecting every middle-class home ever.

What I do remember vividly was the ring of people, and the expectant look on their faces as the instrumental started and my head began to nod to the music. They were like me, kind of. Young, college kids, with too much alcohol in their system and not enough blood, somehow entranced by me, the token black guy, about to do his token black guy routine.

But this is what I signed up for. This is why I enrolled in college in the first place, so that this music that I wrote, this skill that I was CONVINCED I possessed, could be refined and capitalized on.

To this day, I couldn't tell you what song was playing, I couldn't even tell you what finally came out of my mouth as I began to freestyle over the track, but I remember feeling like what I created there, in that moment, was something special. I remember looking into those faces, the girls and the guys, recognizing how wholly I'd ensnared their attention and knowing that this was something I wanted to do for the rest of my life, would do for the rest of my life, and I'd be damn good at it.

But of course, that COULD have just been the alcohol talking. **(Neal)**





Summer night with the gas light on, so I gotta stop for gas. Damn, under the influence—I should have listened to my big brother and followed the rules gassing up early in the morning while most still sleep. I’m by myself on the north side of Milwaukee, where it’s always the people closest to you that bring harm to you. I get out and leave the door up in the air and run in to get my gas, can’t show no fear! Make it out, cool, pumping gas, cool, checking my phone to see who’s calling, and guess who pulls into the gas station? You got it, your neighborhood robbers, and I’m naked. What do I do? Any sign of weakness or fear and I might not make it home that night. They pull in the pump across from me so I put my hand in my jacket pocket like I’m ready. Yup, totally pump faking! It worked, though! Thank God. They nodded back and pulled off. Whew. **(Malik)**

There’s a lot of things that come to mind when I think of a time I was creative, but the one that sticks out the most was during my freshman year in high school. My buddies and I found an area by one of their neighborhoods that was surrounded by woods, and we decided to turn it into a fort/cabin/getaway that we named “Toke-Town” for obvious reasons.

I think I spent the most time there, mainly because I liked adding things onto it: a fire pit with a grill cover or top, a bathroom with an opening and closing door, wooden tree stumps to sit on, and so much more. I’ve always liked being in the woods, and this was my “home” away from home, I guess you could say. When I was at this Toke-Town, I

could escape from all my problems—just kick back and hang out, listen to music and chop it up with my buddies, and not have to worry about our parents finding us. Even though there were times when we’d get poison ivy, mosquito bites everywhere, or make the mistake of venturing 15 minutes through the woods just to realize someone forgot a lighter, it was all something we remembered and enjoyed. I loved it there because I could express myself through building stuff and making that Toke-Town my own. **(Blake)**

Over a decade ago, I was asked to write about a prison experience. As a veteran, I was a member of the Veterans Group at “the Lake” — FLCI. As a member I was asked to be Santa Claus in the visiting room for visitor’s Christmas Eve Day and Christmas Day, which I did for nine years. It was an honor to represent my fellow veterans and the men behind the razor wire.

Being able to bring smiles to the men’s children, grandchildren, and families is a memory I will never forget. Handing out crayons, coloring books, and candy canes was awesome. Those precious families allowing this old dude to be in their cherished family Christmas photo is still priceless to me. Wow, this still carries emotions for me. Walking around the visiting room dressed like an authentic Santa and sitting with men’s families to interact with them brought joy, smiles, and memories for all of us.

What a memory that keeps on giving. Those experiences are writing/words in action. **(Randal)**



FINDING PLATO'S CAVE TODAY

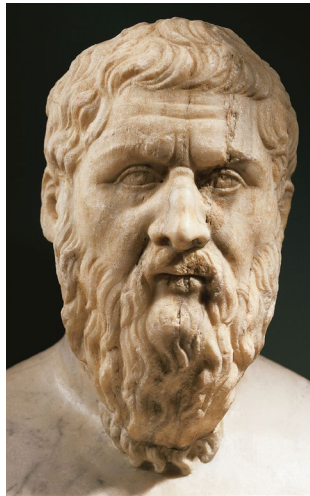
I think [Socrates and Glaucon] are talking about the people within the body of the government or religion. What keeps them in the cave is safety—they think they're safe in the world that they were taught. It's important to learn so you can see and escape from what you have been taught.

Yes, I lived in a world where I was TAUGHT that I'm from the Hood, and I would never succeed in anything legit. That selling drugs was our best form of seeing good money. I was TAUGHT that no one cared about us besides our brothers. That gangs were part of being a part of the higher power in our Hood. I lived in a cave where prison was a good thing, and where dead bodies were a part of life. **(Chavez)**

I believe the Allegory is about democracy. The people are the citizens, following blindly with only the information given in the dark by the shadows. [The citizens] need to come to the light of knowledge and take their rightful place. That is destined. And once you have experienced both the light and the dark, you now have a deep understanding of your rightful place in this world.

I observe caves on the regular. People are so used to gathering information without investigating the merits or intentions, leaving them in the darkness of their own minds. Like myself—I lived in a cave all my life, growing up believing what I saw and what I was told, when it was all an illusion—misconceptions of what life is really about. **(Randy)**

In my opinion, the prisoners that only see the shadows refers to the people in the world who only see what's in front of them. I think in today's time, social media, tv, and music are all things that keep us in the cave. Getting out of this cave and the [journey] to light symbolizes truth or better understanding. **(Malik)**



The prisoners are people like myself—those comfortable residing in obscurity, unwilling to step out of comfort zones in the status quo. Isolation becomes comfortable, residing in the darkness. The darkness allows one to not see all the “stuff” hidden, not being able to identify problem areas in our lives, which become personal barriers that keep us from advancing forward. We are unable to truly identify the true person we were created to be. Not much good comes from limiting one's self to reside in darkness. In order to flourish, one

needs to come into the light to become and remain vibrant. We need to allow ourselves to interact with others and socialize, as was intended.

When we remove whatever our chains in life are, we remove the restrictions and barriers that we have created because of fear and not desiring to be hurt again. The reasons for isolation and restricting one's self are endless. When we remove self-imposed restriction and come out from under our rock, where the darkness is, we come into the light where life can regenerate itself—there is where the growth can begin. We will desire to articulate ourselves to others, listen to others, and process what is shared. When we interact, we see things from a fresh perspective. Possibilities are now endless, and let the growth begin. We will gravitate to others as we see ones of wisdom and desire to learn what they have to share, building on the solid foundation we build. Once we have this proven foundation, we can build upwards and outwards. Building relationships is a gift to one's self and others that continues to invest forward without end.

At one time, I was a “Master Cave Builder,” with all the trappings of secluding myself in darkness and isolation . . . My cave was a continual wall all around me, with a heavily fortified gate at the entrance. Why did I unknowingly reside like this? Hurt, shame, insecurity—just to mention a few . . .

Then there came a time when I made the decision to examine the light, and I felt gravitated toward it. Little by little, I allowed myself to see the scars and bruises that were there but had been hidden in the dark. In the light, I also allowed myself to interact with others more . . .

I am so proud of allowing myself to come out of my cave, removing the barrier chains I allowed to be there. Now I live in the light and am proud of the direction I am going in and loving the relationships I have built. Also, I am grateful to those whom I have learned from along the way. Never stop moving forward and asking the tough questions. **(Randal)**

Solitary Confinement of the Mind

Breaking the chains of the forced solitary confinement of my own making was the hardest thing for me. I was self-confined, meaning I retreated into my mind when I was handed a 20-year sentence. To deal with the uber-traumatic experience of being taken away from my loved ones and thrust into a multi-tiered cage with some of the most heinous beings in human history was a cultural and emotional shock.

Understanding the reason for my incarceration and in agreement with it, for a life was taken (even in the defense of my own), and punishment must be administered. And yet I found that my new dwelling place was not to my liking. I retreated into the chaos of my mind where emotions, thoughts, and beliefs converged with an earth-shattering force that threatened to rend me apart, yet it was still better than where my physical body was. People in prison talk about being “institutionalized.” It’s a statement that a person who is institutionalized is so accustomed to prison life that they’re like an automaton in prison.

Most people who put that mantle on are those who have been incarcerated a long time, i.e. 15 years or

more. I had 21 years to do and didn’t want to be institutionalized, so I retreated into my own mind, thinking it would be a safe place to shield me from becoming accustomed to the prison lifestyle.

I couldn’t blame them [for becoming institutionalized]. It’s the same thing every day, and the only thing that changes is the weather, and after a while that starts to seem the same as well. One tries to participate in groups and programs only to find out that they are mostly generic and the same, and the only difference is in the name. It could drive a man crazy. It took me to change my outlook and expand my thinking to get out of my own way. [I felt] anger at my plight, even when I believed that it saved my life, for the path I was on was only leading to an early death. I still couldn’t bask in the glorious rays of enlightenment until I let go of my simple way of thinking. For me, listening was my biggest problem. I didn’t want to listen to anyone who disagreed with me without giving me concrete proof of why I was wrong.

Then I sat down with a man who unfortunately will never see the streets again, and he gave me the best piece of advice I was ever given. He said, “Ali, what’s wrong with trying something new? Experience is your best teacher. If you don’t like it, no harm no foul, and what do you have in here but time? Your life is utterly yours no matter where your living arrangement is, and you can be free even if your body is confined.”

Those words lit a fire within me, helping to break the shackles I put on myself and opening the door of my solitary confinement cell. They urged me to experience any and every program or group available to me, with an open mind this time, and to interject and ask questions (something I never did before). The knowledge of self and the world outside these walls flooded my synapses. I learned and thirsted for more, and in the search for more I learned that I had a hidden talent. That talent helped calm the voices in my mind, which in turn helped me to better express myself. **(Ali)**



The “prisoners” are a person’s way of looking at something—one point of view. They are so blinded by the darkness or ignorance that they cannot see past the darkened shadow and into the light of a new life and possibilities.

Addiction . . . While using, I was seeing life completely differently. I was stuck, locked into a worldview I couldn’t escape. I was looking for a shot of hope, the bright light, something positive that would help me climb out of the dark cave. As crazy as it may sound, prison was that release from the cave. Now the light I’d been looking for I’ve found—my faith, education, and another shot at life. If put back into that life, I would be able to help the others (prisoners) suffering from addiction.

(Jamie)

The prisoners are people in society who have been so stuck in their ways, mainly because they are forced to only see one view of things. The chains keep them in the cave, as well as the thought that if one were to escape and try to free the others, one would be put to death. It’s important for them to get out, so they can see the light and the realities of the real world, so they have a clearer vision.

I was in a cave once for a very long time—the cave of addiction. The chains of drinking and drugs were holding me there, until I was able to break out and see the realities how good life can be without them. I wanted more. I wanted to stay free. **(Blake)**

The prisoners are the citizens or people. The darkness (aka, the shadows) or not learning keeps them down there. The light is the sun (aka, knowledge or wisdom), and they want to learn.

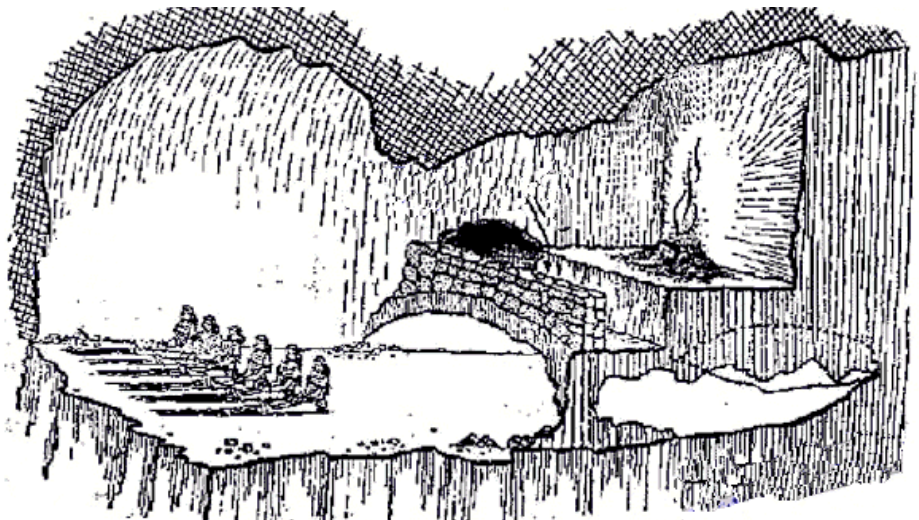
Meth was my cave. I didn’t learn or want to learn because I was too worried about doing more meth. There are all kinds of caves that people are in,

like sex addiction, drug addiction, and gambling. Even being stuck on themselves, caring only about themselves [is a kind of cave]. Sins are big causes. **(Christopher)**

Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave” can be applied to everyone’s lives in all times—throughout the past, present, and future of humankind. In just the last century, American society has been brought from the depths of the darkest caves into the just and fair light. Women’s rights, freedom of speech, many laws and a great amount of prejudice and racism has escaped the darkness by the determination of enlightened minds.

I myself have been lost in that undesirable cave many times, but I’ve also found my way into the light as well. Becoming a health-conscious individual has been one of my proudest journeys, finally finding the exit from a cave full of unhealthy and destructive behavior. Just recently, I have found the exit to the path of a life without incarceration, from living in the blindness and darkness of the cave within the world of committing crimes.

Everyone, including me, must still continue the endless path to enlightenment and a just life by always looking and searching for the exit from whichever cave they find themselves in. Once one exits the cave, one must go back to help and guide others who have not yet found the entryway to a better form of knowledge. **(Jon)**



ALUMNI CORNER

MY JOURNEY

BY RENÉ '08

I was born in Chicago, number eleven of fourteen children. At one point in my life, we had ten people in a three-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. It was lively, challenging, and sometimes disappointing, but never a dull moment. It was family, my family. I didn't have a choice in the matter.

We were poor. How poor were we? We were so poor that my uncle, who worked at the Campbell Soup Factory, would bring us cans of soup that couldn't be sold because of flaws (bends and dents). The cans didn't have labels but contained numbers, which identified the type of soup. We memorized the numbers because we had to. If you didn't know the numbers, you were stuck with the soup no one wanted, which in our house was the tomato soup.

Survival, that was my life. Not only did I have to survive on the south side of Chicago, in the ghetto, the low-end as we call it, but at home as well. Can you imagine fourteen children vying for attention? Fourteen children wanting to be loved? Fourteen children striving to be better than the next?

It wasn't all good but neither was it all bad. We were taught principles, morals, and Christianity. We were required to excel in school. You would think that such an upbringing would produce upstanding and productive individuals, and it did for ten of us. Unfortunately I was one of the four who didn't quite meet the challenge. I was persistent at taking the wrong path and making poor decisions. I had my oldest son at sixteen and was forced to attend a high school for pregnant girls. I married at seventeen and had my second son at eighteen. It was a blessing to have a husband who was also the father of my children (where I come from, that was a unique happening in itself), but unfortunately with that came physical abuse.

I could go on and on about the many ups and downs due to the poor decisions I made over those thirty years, but I want to talk about the good news! I made it out of that situation and relocated to Madison, WI. I got a job, an apartment, then a used car. I joined a church that made me feel at home, and then I heard about the UW Odyssey Project, one of the best decisions I have ever made.

Odyssey is for people just like me; those who wanted to do better but couldn't for whatever reason. Having made so many poor decisions in my life, I feel I'm somewhat of an expert in understanding how easy it is for people to mess up, to make mistakes, and choose the wrong paths.

Odyssey gives you the feeling like the little red engine we read about in elementary school, "I think I can! I think I can!" It releases the "Wow" factor as in "He did that? She did what? Really? They left Britain to do the same thing in America? I didn't know that." Then it begins, the desire to know more, the desire to understand, the drive and tenacity to do better and to critically think, analyze and understand what you are reading. And what's so fantastic about Odyssey, it's generational. I tell people that all the time. Not only does it change the lives of parents, it changes the lives of their children, which will change the lives of their children, etc. Odyssey is a "Mind Opening Experience"!

Before Odyssey, if someone had asked me to write a poem or told me that I would be analyzing Socrates, Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, and Frederick Douglass, I would have rolled my eyes up, down and sideways. But there I was, at my Odyssey graduation, earning six UW Madison credits and reading this poem I wrote about the value of lifelong learning:



My Journey

My journey started about nine months ago.
 How I would fare, I really didn't know.
 Reading, writing for sure there would be,
 But from six to nine PM, that I couldn't see.
 The professors were there for all to meet,
 Outlining History, Humanities, and Philosophy.
 I was scared but I didn't know why,
 Maybe it was the thirty years that had quickly gone by.
 Getting acclimated was a little rough at first,
 But soon thereafter to read books I would thirst.
 See, prior to Odyssey, I didn't read.
 All the info I got was from the TV.
 But things have changed, mainly the screen
 From the TV to the computer, I'm now a Google Queen.
 My journey, my journey, who would have thought
 Would be the beginning of me being taught,
 Being taught the importance of opening my mind,
 Instead of sitting around wasting my time.
 Thank you, Odyssey, for choosing me,
 I've found knowledge, my greatest discovery.



Rene Riffs on Plato

I believe the prisoners in Plato's "Allegory of the Cave" are us: people, human beings in general. It has nothing to do with race, economical or educational status; I consider those sub-caves. We have all been fettered (shackled and chained) from generation to generation. We have been taught how to think and what to think. The expansion of our mind has been limited to our surroundings. We have been made products of our environment by our communities, our neighborhoods, and our upbringing; we were all born in a cave.



The cave is like a one-sided coin: seeing only one side. If you are born rich, do you know what it is to be born poor? If you are born poor, do you know what it is to be born rich? The importance of getting out of the cave is to find out what's on the other side of the coin; such as Socrates' example of going from the darkness to the light. I believe every human being in this world is dealing with some form of darkness, whether by force or choice.

We need to walk towards love, passing by hate. We need to walk towards courage, passing by fear. We need to walk towards "I can," passing by those infamous words, "I can't."

René performs as a musician, motivational speaker, and dramatic reader (Sojourner Truth, Maya Angelou, and others) in church, at community events, on the radio, and for every Odyssey class.