

ODYSSEY BEYOND BARS

ORACLE ANTHOLOGY

FIVE YEARS OF STUDENT WRITING, 2019 - 2024



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This anthology includes only a few samples of the hundreds of eloquent essays, poems, and stories created inside Oakhill, Racine, Columbia, and Green Bay Correctional Institutions in Odyssey Beyond Bars composition classes from 2019-2024.

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www.odyssey.wisc.edu/beyondbars

WHY I WRITE

WHY I WRITE

BY DOMINEE, FALL 2019

I write to give a voice to the voiceless: the outcast, dispossessed, and oppressed everywhere and of every stripe—racial, ethnic, and political minorities; gender and sexual minorities; and yes, to those men, women, and children who, like myself, are currently incarcerated. I write because I truly believe in the power of the right word or the perfectly crafted phrase to change the world.



I want to be the agent of that change.

I want to be the agent of that change and writing gives me an opportunity to do so, to have my words “heard” before a person’s ears can be clogged by what their eyes may see—there is no color, neither brown skin nor the putrid green of prison khakis, accompanying a byline.

I write when I need to work through what are sometimes for me complex moral and/or ethical issues, such as violence vs nonviolence; crime and punishment; mass incarceration and criminal justice reform; abortion, immigration, LGBTQ rights, etc.—basically all of the social justice issues of our day. Writing helps me discover not just WHAT I believe but, equally important, WHY, and to integrate those beliefs into my continually evolving identity.

I write to stay in touch with family and friends. I’m able to say things through letters that I would feel extremely awkward and uncomfortable saying over the phone or, God forbid, face-to-face. Because of the amount of time, effort, and actual thought that goes into writing letters, I feel that they are a more personal and intimate form of communication. For someone to invest all of that into something for me says more about my importance to them than almost anything else can. I’ve never asked, but I hope that those who I write see my letters in a similar light.

I write to keep from reacting in a negative and unquestionably harmful fashion when I am in the grip of some strong emotion—usually intense anger or rage or deep sadness or depression. I seldom experience such intensely “negative” emotions these days, but there were numerous occasions early in my incarceration when the only thing standing between me and a trip to segregation was a sharpened piece of graphite. I find it extremely comforting to know that were I to suffer such an emotional state again, my “guardian angel” is only an arm’s reach away.

Now, while everything I’ve said is true, at the end of the day my ultimate reason for writing is pretty simple—

I write because I am a writer...sometimes.

WHY I WRITE

BY KARSHARA, SPRING 2022

As a child, I would create a land of make-believe. The stories my uncle would tell me of Africa shaped my imagination. After hearing about great and long-lost African civilizations, I would picture the golden grass where lions crouched as they stalked unsuspecting zebras grazing. I would think of the strong ebony warriors who wore fierce frowns, standing tall and dignified, brandishing deadly spears to defend their families against any who

dared to challenge them. I could clearly see the colorful beads and beautiful colored clothes that adorned the women as they went about their daily chores. I was surrounded by stories of my ancestors that expanded my imagination. These stories gave me a sense of freedom that I could not understand, yet I have always felt connected to. As a small child, learning and discovering the world around me, it felt easy to create these thoughts. It was something that I rarely had to think about. The stories and places that I thought of seemed to wait for me.

The unique power of children that we lose as adults is our imagination. A gift that is slowly washed away with the tide. Our innocence is lost. Our imagination becomes reality. Those early stories from my uncle gave me a foundation of freedom to imagine new worlds.

The world that I built as a child began to erode. My joyful thoughts, the faces of people, and the imagined faraway lands would sleep. Yet every so often the ideals and the stories would whisper to my thoughts as if fighting for space in my mind. For an adolescent teen living in a community that was immersed in drugs, gangs, and violence, the world of make-believe did not have a place. The streets had called and I answered. I had no time to daydream, to imagine or let my mind roam. I shut that part of my childhood off. It was a battle that I neither won nor lost, just continuously struggled. For a long time, I heard nothing. When the stories did push through the darkness that I created, it was during a time when I needed saving. Like many



before me, I was a young Black man in prison, lost. I was confused, scared, and determined to survive. I was in a loud and gloomy place filled with decades of pain. Every space was occupied by anger, hate, resentment, and quiet fear. Every day felt like it would be the day that the prison would explode. That was how I lived.

The stories returned, not because I wanted them to, but because I needed them. It was Thanksgiving, a time when all of my family would get together. This was a time when I was able to talk to everyone and escape the smell of anger. What I did not know was that I would be plunged into a lake of pain that I never could have expected. When I called home, the feeling of excitement and anticipation that I was used to was not there. I could feel the sadness before the words were spoken, "your brother's gone." There was no preamble, no "hello," just he's gone.

I stopped breathing. My vision was blurred, I couldn't see and I couldn't understand why. With the phone still cradled in my shaking hand, I hung up because then it would not be happening. My world would not be crumbling around me. A friend helped me stand, held me, and walked me back to my cell. I sat there numb and confused.

I was alone once again, a child left with my own thoughts and imagination. When the stories returned, this time I did not fight it. I did nothing but let the world of my imagination soothe me. Weeks later, chained to my own grief, I began to write. I lay in the dark unable to sleep. Classical music played while words danced around my mind. I sat up and turned on the light, took out a pen and paper and the words came out. That was my first poem.

For so long I'd been holding my breath and never knew. Now I could breathe. I wrote daily for the next couple of years. In the beginning, I wrote every chance I got. I did not want to lose a single word that came to me. I wrote on scraps of paper. I wrote while at work. I even wrote at the "chow hall" on napkins. Writing became my obsession and it became my medicine.

Most of what I wrote was to my brother. My poems were not meant for anyone to see. They were conversations that I longed to have. I told him how much I missed him. I cried and told him how sorry I was for leaving him alone. I put all my pain and regret into a few lines and slowly, very slowly, the gaping wound was starting to heal.

As I continued to write, I began to evolve into the man that I am today. I read the writings of Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, and Sonia Sanchez. Their words nourished me back to life, a new life that gave me a better vision and allowed me to have the confidence to embrace the gift of imagination.

Every writer is a storyteller. That is the common bond that is shared among us. What differs is our journey to get there. In the beginning, it was unclear, but now I understand that I write because it helps to free the thoughts and ideals that have always lived within me. This ability to create, to allow myself to live in a world that I created, was something that I had to rediscover. I write because it helps deal with the pain that sometimes lingers. I write because it allows me to share a part of myself. Today I write so that I can see the stories of my ancestors. Writing is my medicine and the legacy that I hope to leave behind. That is why I write.

WHY I WRITE

BY ANTHONY, SPRING 2022

I lost my voice for a long time. I'm not sure what caused it. Could've been from swallowing tears that burned my throat. Maybe from images that froze my eyes and body. Keeping me trapped on the inside. Somewhere, at some time, I lost it.

My heartbeat changed. Started pounding in my head and ears, causing my blood to flow differently. Hot or cold depending on any moment. Knowing it wasn't normal, I still couldn't voice anything.

Holding my breath went unnoticed. A little longer each time around people, places, and in private. Slowly suffocating while smiling at others like

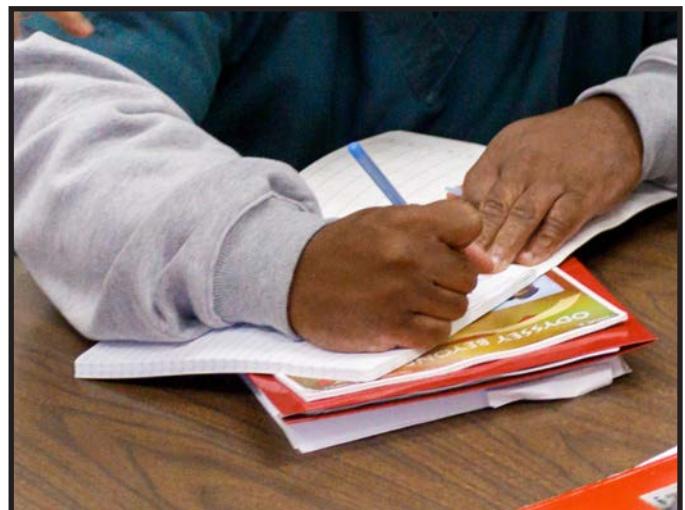
everything was and is okay. With no real words ever spoken, a fake smile said a thousand words. A counterfeit voice with no feeling people easily accepted.

I was isolated, alone, and smiling in a room full of people when I started writing. Mornings and nights, day after day, I'd write in a journal for just 15 minutes. Usually about someone I was grieving from. Then, everything started to change.

It didn't happen fast. In fact, without realizing it, my voice started healing or being rediscovered unintentionally. Why I write? It's simple. I write for me! I write to find me. I write to know me. I write to speak to myself so I can talk to you. Writing is my voice. It helps me feel and connect.

When I write, my blood flows evenly through the sentences or maybe it's through the ink of any pen. My heart beats in my chest as I can control the rhythm after every word and period. I can breathe. I can jog or sprint through each paragraph as I reread and/or correct the things I want to say. Feeling a calmness once completed and satisfaction takes over.

Writing is a world I can scream, swear, and whisper in. I can be anywhere and anything I want. I can wield unlimited power that's priceless, choosing to create or destroy. Continue to deny or uncover truths buried from within, on my time. This is where my voice was born and rules! I FEEL, this is why I write!



LIFE OF AN OBJECT

GRANDMA'S ANGEL BY RYAN, FALL 2023

When I was around nine years old, anytime I'd go over to my grandma's house I'd bring over a bin of toys to play with. One week it might be the green plastic toy soldiers along with my dinosaur, the fearsome charcoal-colored T-Rex with orange stripes along its torso, or another week it might be superheroes like Green Lantern, or Batman. One essential toy I would always play with was the Angel. The color of the Angel resembled Breyers vanilla ice cream, standing 16 inches high, with its wings spread open, holding the hilt of a sword adorned in small rubies, its blade plunged into the dirt. It sat on my grandma's shelf along with her cherished owl figurines, placed slightly in front of them, like a sentry standing guard to keep them unharmed. I'd spend countless hours using this same Angel as a guardian for my toys.

In the midst of playing with my T-Rex and the toy soldiers, I'd visualize recreating the Jurassic Park movies. The T-Rex would chase after the soldiers, flipping over their vehicles until I'd run over to the shelf with the Angel, grab it, and pretend that it was there to be the guardian of the other toys. My grandma saw how happy I was, so she let me be; she didn't yell at me, but would always emphasize being careful as the Angel was very fragile. Now, I didn't really understand how this Angel that I was in such awe of could be fragile. The Angel symbolized a ferocious protector in my eyes, and nothing could break it.

As I grew into my teenage years I came to see that my childish brain didn't quite comprehend the word fragile, yet it didn't matter to my grandma. She trusted me with something that was dear to her because she treasured my happiness as a kid more. When this realization dawned on me, I told



my grandma how much it meant to have someone holding my happiness above all else while I was growing up. She would say, "I know you struggled with the rules your step-dad enforced at home. You're my little angel, and I wanted you to have a place where you could be a kid and have sanctuary from the family drama." This undying love that she had for me as a kid was the same love she shared for our family.

The night before her passing, she had the family gather around, and she sat up in her adjustable nursing bed (stationed in the makeshift hospice room we created) so that she could give us some requests: we shall not blame God for her time being cut short, but celebrate! God had blessed her with 58 glorious years on this earth, in the comfort of a family who loved her. We shouldn't allow our grudges within the family to cause division; instead, forgive and be there for one another. She told us that if she could forgive our grandpa for the problems they had prior to being divorced then there was no reason we too couldn't forgive one another. When I awoke the next morning I knew that all of us being together was my grandma's last memory. And also that would be our last memory of our time with her.

August 28th was the 20th anniversary of my grandma passing away. Over the years (around her anniversary) I often catch myself reminiscing about her and wondering, had she seen the Angel's fragility as a metaphor for my own troubled family situation? My grandma understood better than anyone the difficulties I experienced with having a new father figure in my life and feeling alone.

As the Angel was ferociously protective of my other toys, my grandma was of her grandchildren. When I was ten, on one of those brisk fall nights that I spent at her house, two of the neighborhood kids decided that it'd be funny to push me down, steal my brand-new jean jacket, and run away. When I walked home and into the kitchen, she immediately noticed the jacket missing. After my recounting of the story, she grabbed a hammer from the toolbox and walked briskly to their house. While she was squeezing the life out of the hammer in anger, she started pounding on the door until someone answered. The kids stood there motionless; it was as if they had just laid eyes on Michael Myers from Halloween. My grandma stared down at them like she was the Angel reincarnate, standing guard, protecting her fragile little Angel. Although she is no longer here physically, leaving me the Angel became her way

of saying that I'm not alone and that she'd always be there looking over me, just as she had on that cold fall night. Now it is my turn to watch over the Angel, with the same love and care she exhibited towards me. The roles have been reversed; I used to be her little angel, and now she has become mine.

THE INTENSITY OF A STARE **BY WILLIAM, FALL 2023**

There she was, sitting there in her blue jean dress with press-on nails freshly painted bright pink, a Rusty Wallace charm on her necklace, long, shiny, beautiful hair, and the most intense, fiery green eyes. The same ones that I see in the mirror every morning. She had her hands folded in her lap, like a lady, borderline eerily staring at me from way across the room. She didn't blink once, while she contemplated a myth and a complete stranger to her, in this moment of uncertainty.

I entered a huge prison visitation room full of other strangers mingling amongst themselves. Some had tears in their eyes, some had little hearts of love floating all around them. Some had grumpy faces, others were all smiles. The room was filled with a diversity of aromas; some were flowery,

some were fruity, some were pleasant, some were not. Everyone was wearing their Sunday best, satisfyingly ingrained into their own small worlds, enjoying their time with their loved ones, oblivious to everything else that was going on in the solar system circling all around them.

It was crowded, as well as a bit noisy, and there was a lot going on all at once, but while I scanned the room looking for her, I immediately felt her electrical, penetrating stare. I could immediately tell that she knew who she was theoretically looking at, but sadly, there was no recognition of prior bonding written on her beautiful face.



All that I saw was a blank expression, with these green eyes that seemed to glow with their intensity. Once our eyes locked, all of the other activities and people in the room seemed to disappear. Then, there we were, one painfully a complete stranger, and the other not, melded into an eye lock embrace, unlike anything that I had ever experienced before. It was so magnetic, so intense, and all-encompassing, that I couldn't even see her cute little nose, nor her mouth, nor anything else, just the portal into her curious soul pulling me towards her. At this point, I chose to match hers with my own expressionless stare, simply because that's what this moment seemed to call for. Then there I was, walking through this sea of people, with the most important person in the world staring right back at me. All of the other activities in the room seemed to go into slow motion like the rest of the world was suddenly muted. I couldn't hear the pizza sizzling in the microwave, nor hear the bursting out of carbonation from the opening up of soda bottles, nor any of the other countless sounds that had to be going on all around me. I couldn't hear anything, at least not until the magnetism of her eyes released me, once I fully entered the space that would become our own little world for the next three hours. Which surprisingly covered a multitude of emotions and profound topics of conversation that I could not have even fathomed possible.

This little lady, my daughter, was eight years old at the time. She hadn't seen her father since she was four, and at that moment, I was an enigma, an unrecognizable ghost from her past whom she couldn't recall a single thing about. After how close we once were when she was little, this cut me so deep, deeper than words could ever describe. Up until I went to prison, she was my Pumpkin, my wrestling, hide-and-seek, swimming, bouncing on the trampoline, going to Chuck E.

Cheese, absolute best friend in the whole world. We went everywhere together, doing a million fun things, exploring the world, and loving each other so much through life's toughest struggles. Up until this point, I had held onto those precious memories with my all, for the years since I had last seen her, absolutely dreaming of the day that I would be reunited with Daddy's Angel.

Now, here we were, and I was a complete stranger to her, and all of the memories that I had held onto so tightly were gone from her little mind, like all of that beauty and love was never created between the two of us.

She'll be 29 years old tomorrow and, to this day, I hold onto those memories of time spent with the most precious little girl in the entire world with the firmest grip. However, the scar that was created from recognizing that my absence from her life stole those memories from her is the "object" that I hold onto. It's what drives me past the point of exhaustion, to come home as the best version that I can possibly be of myself, all in the hopes of giving her precious memories that SHE can hold onto after I'm gone. Albeit, not to prison next time, but to Heaven.



MY EDUCATION

MY EDUCATION

ANONYMOUS, SPRING 2023

I was driving back to my house after my high school graduation ceremony, still wearing my dark navy cap and gown. The windows of my pale blue Chevy Celebrity were wide open while cruising along the rural highway on a perfect late May afternoon. The glorious sun shining bright, glinting, and reflecting its rays off the metal of my Class of '95 golden tassel.

The feeling of euphoria I had during that ten-minute ride has been seldom repeated in my life. I had done it. I graduated from high school with honors, the top 20% of my class, and received \$500 from the faculty as the winner of the staff scholarship contest. The hard part was over, I foolishly told myself. I won't have to deal with all the awkwardness, stress, angst, and boredom of my small town anymore. I got accepted into my state's flagship university. I'm going to college. It's going to be great!

Fast forward to four years later. While probably hungover, I'm going through my mail and I see a letter emblazoned with the colors and font of the university's logo. I open the letter and read that I have been withdrawn from the university, and my student status is no longer valid. This was not a surprise to me as I had been expecting this inevitable news to arrive. By that time, I was so far removed from the enthusiasm I had four years earlier about my education that I didn't even have the courage to go to the registrar's office to officially drop out. Unfortunately, this trend would continue throughout my adult life prior to incarceration and even afterward, as recently as 2020. I would enter the workforce full-time, get bored and disillusioned doing menial labor,



make a geographical move, decide to try college again, enroll, pay for tuition, attend classes, and then eventually abscond from my duties and responsibilities as a student and quit mid-semester. Looking back at this cycle of insanity regarding my attempts to complete my bachelor's degree is pretty hilarious, if not for being so damn sad and frustrating. I know substance use disorder was a major factor for my continued failures and squandered opportunities in completing my formal education, and my most recent attempt was compromised thanks to Covid-19. But my drinking and the global pandemic were only symptoms of deeper, unresolved issues that I believe (while working through and practicing the principles of recovery) are primarily rooted in fear and perfectionism.

I have struggled with the perfectionism of writing and have experienced those cliches of sweating blood and pulling teeth when trying to complete composition assignments. When it came to studying and preparing for exams that involved cringe-worthy blue book essays, I fared rather

well due to being skilled at memorization, recall, and spontaneity. But when the going got tough, especially with more involved research papers, I sat back and said, “I’ll take the zero.” This self-induced anxiety and stress about not being able to be “good enough” compounded other negative emotions like shame and anger, which we know are all primarily rooted in fear.

When I look back at my prior education, I can see how numerous positive influences and experiences have shaped me to be open and willing to resume my education now. It is amazing how opportunity can arise even in the most dire of circumstances, such as prison. This English 100 class through Odyssey Beyond Bars is a new chance. This ironic gift, to be able to use this time to make a commitment to my education, is worthy of a disciplined toil. I’m now willing to ask for help and can embrace the fact it’s okay to be awful and suck at writing. It’s a process. I look forward to getting up and writing something every day no matter if it’s trivial or absurd. A new freedom has already been granted to me, and now I look forward to the journey. I’m back in college again and greatness awaits.

MY EDUCATION BY ROBERT, FALL 2021

My education came in at least three stages: 1) The culturally definitive stage which established my attitudes, beliefs, and ideas as a black child – then man – growing up in the United States; 2) My militancy stage which gave rise to my working to address the problems that I was seeing on the streets, in prison, and around the country; 3) My academic stage where I turned my former militancy into academic pursuits that were more progressive in scope.

I grew up in the city of Pittsburgh. The city, at that time, was governed by the steel industry. It was rich, dirty, and one of the most racist cities in the country. Pittsburgh doesn’t have the blatant racism that one experienced in the South during the late 50s and through the 60s; rather, it was more of a subtle form of racism that one often finds in big cities back east.

My black education came about while I was growing up in the projects in Pittsburgh. Bonifay and Fisher Streets were the only two streets which made up St. Clair Village. It was a small enclave hidden behind the skirts of an all-white neighborhood called Mt. Oliver and located on Pittsburgh’s south side.

My family and I lived in the Village for 14 years. It was an all-black neighborhood that had little tolerance for white interlopers. For most people who lived there, segregation was fine. My parents thought otherwise, and the result was I became the only black student in an all-white Catholic school for eight years.

I was fortunate to have the influence of the Black Panther Party and FOI from the Nation of Islam (NOI), who were constant visitors to St. Clair. They taught me how to fight both with my hands and with my mind when it came to the issues that I had to deal with at school. In many respects, they became the only positive influences



that I had representing black manhood. Though I grew up in a two-parent home, my father was, and still is, an Oreo.

In the Black perspective, an Oreo is a black person who might have black or brown skin, but inside he, or she, is whiter than the white folks. I always believed that if my father would have had a choice as to what color he would have been born, he would have opted out for white.

I had a long education about poverty, hunger, and the cold when our electricity or gas would be turned off because the bills weren't paid. I learned how to make a cold hot dog straight from the pack seem like a steak, or how to make an uncooked potato edible out of necessity. I learned to think that day-old bread was the national standard.

To this day I will only eat peanut butter as a last resort because it was such a staple of my diet as a kid. Fortunately, the Panthers and NOI were there for that as well, and through them many of us kids from the projects got at least one hot meal a day—all we could eat, along with a healthy filling of black nationalism. The Panthers and NOI had different perspectives on the subject, but they have a similar message: black empowerment through education, strength, and unity.

Most of my education in those days was about race, and the fact that no matter how you sliced it, black folks and white folks were not the same. I saw this every day as I passed out of the shadow of St. Clair project housing into what we called the DMZ, across a viaduct, and finally to the entrance of the white neighborhood as I headed up to school.

They had real houses and garages for their cars, basketball hoops and yards to play in. St. Clair Village had none of that for their kids. Many of us, me included, played flag football on Fisher St., leaving numerous DNA samples from skinned elbows and knees. It toughened us up and made us a feared element in the city,

but we would have much rather had some grass to play on, even if only for a moment.

My oldest daughter visited St. Clair Village several years ago to visit where her father grew up. She was appalled by what she saw: rats the size of dogs walking boldly down the street, roaches marching along the walls of houses, rusted monkey bars, and a dented sliding board gracing the angled playground which was much like it was nearly 40 years earlier when I lived up the block. She could not understand how anyone could live in such a place, and I had to remind her that the only reason she had not lived in a similar place was because I made sure that her life – and the lives of her brothers and sisters – would be better. St. Clair Village was the crucible from which I was cast.

I mentioned the three stages of my education, though I've dwelt primarily with the foundation of my life, which was cultivated in St. Clair Village. The next stage, the militancy stage, was the aspect of my life that manifested itself after I got out of the Army. Where I was once introverted, the Army changed all of that by giving me the core strength to be more vocal and aggressive in defining and defending my ideas, as well as the ideas and rights of others.

The Army gave me a basic platform from which I was not afraid to share my message with the world.



It also gave me a different perspective, as a young black man, of the world because I was given the opportunity to travel and discover that the world was a lot bigger place than what existed in the United States.

The third stage of my education was the more proactive academic side of me. When I became a writer and chose, as my weapon of choice, a typewriter and pen, I found out that words can be much more powerful weapons when used properly than a pistol, knife, or sword. The proper use of words has created and destroyed empires. I found that they can also document injustices in such a way that one cannot help but to notice and, perhaps, bring about change.

Note: After graduating from Odyssey Beyond Bars, Robert returned home and steadfastly continued his education. He graduated with a Bachelor's degree from Metro State University as an Outstanding Student award recipient and went on to complete his master's degree in May 2024.



FIVE-MINUTE STORY

BOXED IN

BY DAKOTAH, FALL 2019

All my life people have tried to put me in a box.



Four years ago, I was in an intake process. A young white woman with peach skin and long black curly hair was asking me, "Are you White Non-Hispanic, Black Non-Hispanic, Vietnamese/Hmong, Asian or Pacific Islander? Please pick one." I paused, then responded White Non-Hispanic. For those of you who cannot see me, I am light tan with curly black hair. She just stared at me without inputting my response. I stared back, then asked if there was some kind of issue. "Well, um, what do you want me to put?" she said. It was evident that she wasn't taking me seriously. I said look, you asked me to identify myself with only one option, I did that, obviously I am a makeup of more than just one. But if I had said Hispanic or Black, you would

have gone on without question or thought. Why, if I am an equal makeup of more than one, is my choice not believable or acceptable to you?

She wasn't ready for what I was laying on her. It was 10:00 AM, and I think she just wanted to make it to lunch. I just wanted to not be pre-identified, not forced to place a part of me over a different part of me. I'm mixed, just mixed, and I like being mixed.

All my life people have tried to put me in a box.

My driver's license used to say that I was a white male. I have since changed it. At the time I owned a nicer car and had recently moved to a nice neighborhood. I was pulled over nine times within the first month that I lived there by nine different white clean-cut, short-haired male officers. I was told every time my description did not match the owner of the vehicle, and I looked suspicious riding around in such a nice car in this neighborhood. All I got was, sorry for the inconvenience, have a nice day, and a warning to update my info to match more of "my description."

All my life people have tried to put me in a box.

In a more recent situation, I was applying for college again, and there they were. The boxes I check can sway the amount of potential grants and loans I could be eligible for down the road. But no matter what I check, it will not define all of who I am.

All my life people have been trying to put me in a box.

Society has tried to BOX me in. It demands that I check one and only one box. Being that I fall under a series of these boxes, I have mixed feelings about just choosing one. In society, we continue to put people in boxes by - Race - Gender - Sexual or Gender Identification - Political Stance - Religion. Such few boxes cannot define who we fully are.

All my life I have been trying to avoid being identified by a box.

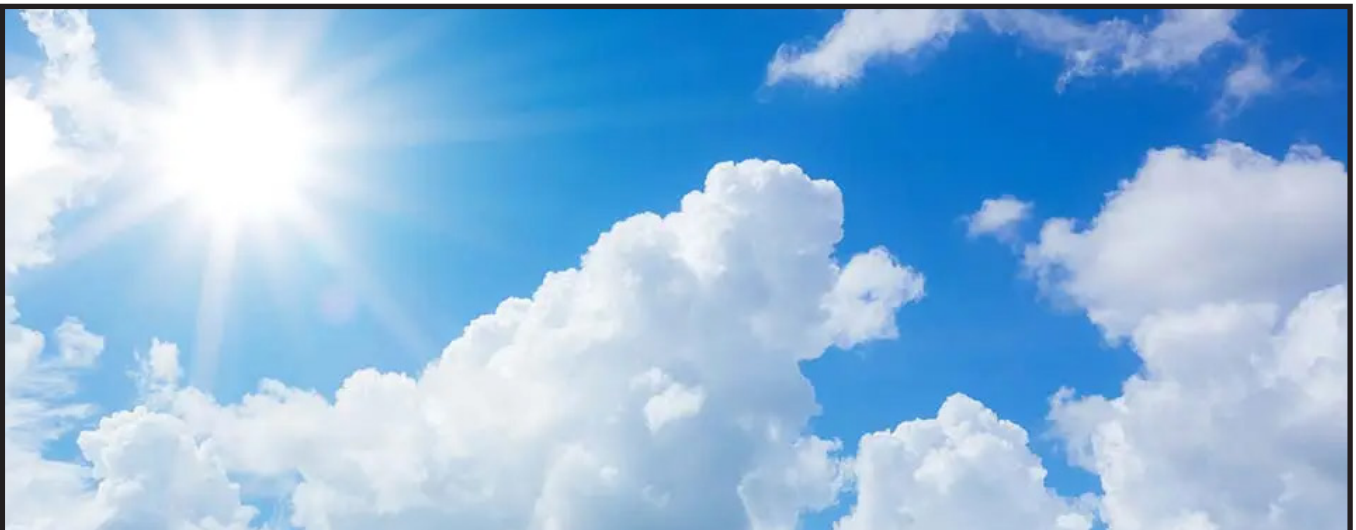
I am now part of a new box. Are you a felon, Yes or No, if yes please explain. There are consequences if I don't check it, and there are consequences if I do check it. This is what it's like to be boxed in.

A close-up photograph of a document titled "SECURITY" in bold blue letters. Below the title, there are several lines of text with checkboxes. The first line is "HAVE YOU EVER BEEN CONVICTED..." with a checkbox labeled "YES" and another labeled "NO". The second line is "DID THE CONVICTION(S) (OR GUIDANCE) IN EACH CONVICTION (AND GUIDANCE) an applicant, but it may affect your..." with a checkbox labeled "YES" and another labeled "NO". To the right of these lines, there are columns for "No. of Times..." and "No. of..." with checkboxes. The document is slightly tilted and the text is somewhat blurry.

CREATIVE CORNER

MY FIRST TIME ANONYMOUS

my first time I met you I was flushed with emotions
my first time I met you I was nervous, anxious
 my mind was racing like a fire
my first time I met you I was excited to hear your first cries
my first time I met you, with a sense of pride I held you
 high in the sky
my first time I met you, for a few quick seconds I hear
 nothing I see nothing but your brown eyes
 so small and shiny like marbles
my first time I met you, I felt love like I never felt love before
my first time I met you, I could float and soar, touch shoulders
 with clouds, shake hands with God
 for allowing me to create something
 so godly. So perfect. Grade A
 So perfect a day
my first time I met you, I bathed you, I swaddled you
 like a little burrito
my first time I met you, I fed you, burped you,
 and now you sleep ever so peaceful
my first time I met you, it was such a beautiful, wonderful day
 our first time we met



POEM ON STRENGTH

BY DANNY

My family is my strength. I carry them tattooed on my skin,
Pain running deep, I reside in a hell within
Years of sorrow and pain hidden well.
The story of mine I hesitate to tell
Screaming heard at night on the prison tier
As I screamed inside something fierce
No one knew, only those I loved could assume.

Lil' bro yet the bigger bro
To my sisters that love for them they have no clue
A mother who's been there since day one
I wasn't the perfect angel, a prodigal son
An absent father, so for my children I tried to do better
Sent cards and expressed my love in letters
And still I ache within
If it weren't for those I love, the end of this time, where to re-begin

I'm stuck on pause
No rewind, just playing forward for a better cause
The past heartaches can't be erased, nor should they be
Dressed in armor
The strength I get from family



A POEM & ITS AUDIENCE

ANONYMOUS

A poem without an audience
is still a poem.
But magic ... Energy has misstepped and found itself—lost.

Sound has unbundled
and string vibration has turned to flat space.
Air has become a vacuous vacuumous vacuum fluctuation.

Blackholes have lost their holes,
supernovas have become stupidnovas,
and novaless novas.

Electricity is sparkless.
Breath is breathless.

The pen is a shell with no fire,
a bullet with no powder,
a dull sword, a wingless arrow.

The poem a heart with only one beat,
for even the author becomes
an audience member when serving it up
for an audience.

COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES

COMMENCEMENT SPEECH BY RYAN, FALL 2019

I think we can all agree on one thing: it's especially in situations like this momentous event, where everybody is anxiously waiting to get on with the business of celebrating, that our preference to keep things short and sweet is paramount.

So, in keeping with that spirit, I'll just say, "Congratulations! You did it! And you can do it! Now, go get 'em!"

(Cheering and applause)

[Speaker steps away from the podium and is nearly off of the stage when confronted by an irate MC, shaking his head and pointing to his watch. The incredulous speaker defensively raises hands, shrugs shoulders, and gestures to the applauding audience. MC physically turns the speaker towards the podium, then says something into the speaker's ear. MC confidently walks off stage. Speaker stands motionless, contemplating the situation for a moment, then determinedly walks back and retakes the podium.]

Well, as it seems to be necessary, I've been reminded that I'm obligated contractually to deliver a speech, not a sound byte. And while everyone's speech cannot ever be expected to be the same, it's neither a tweet, text, Instagram, Facebook blurb, blog, or what-have-you on your device, as many of you have already reached for.

Can you imagine if you could see all the data flying through the air, mixed in with all that other stuff? It's a good thing that we're only able to see very dimly in the EM spectrum. I'm pretty sure we'd go bat-snot bonkers if we had to see it all.

I mean, we're already at a disadvantage here. Our own inborn bioelectrical rhythms follow a very



set, persuasive beat, easily frazzled or confused with just the limited information that we can process. Pop quiz: how many study sessions have you needed to hack your sub-optimal sleep cycles, and downtime? This is nothing new. Over the ages, we've instinctively followed and gradually learned to exploit it to our advantage and even for entertainment—sonic weapons, Tasers, color theory, even the latest Top 40 hits. Go ahead, turn on your radio, browse your personal playlists, and you might find it interesting that most songs clock-in anywhere from two to four minutes. TV and cinema? Any scene follows this careful economy. Commercials? Any successful campaign recognizes our tolerance is even shorter when they're trying to sell us some crap we don't even need.

So, in our world, which is increasingly saturated with media content all competing for your time and money, what do you pay attention to? And how well can you even focus when your attention span is constantly set on tilt? How does anyone surf a tsunami? And, more importantly, for creative communication types such as yourselves, how on earth will you possibly be heard among the roaring flood of media content?

Well, one way of course is to claim your calling as one of this generation's luminary creative talents. To be that attention-grabbing star in the night sky, brilliant and unapologetic in your vision. No doubt, there's a good chance that one or two of you are sitting here right now.

For the rest of us, we can appreciate the fact that every star can be found within a constellation. They are surrounded by a supporting cast of additional voices and talents, structuring the story, connecting the dots, and all helping to effectively deliver the message.

Collaboration, by adding our voice, time, and individual abilities to those others who are set on accomplishing the very same things we believe in, it's how change-making moments get rolling. It's how friendships are made, marriages formed, businesses established, and nations rise. From down here on Earth, the stars that we're able to see could very well be suns, much like our own—be they giants, dwarves, or maybe even binary, two suns spinning around each other. Or, they might even be another far-off galaxy. The more distant they are, the more voices are needed to shine as bright.

The ancient sea-farers navigated dangerous oceans and vast stretches of open seas by fixing their sight on that distant star. So, whatever you happen to be looking at, don't lose sight of it. Don't let anyone discount your vision.

And lastly, don't worry about missing out on your chance to be a changemaker. Because in our modern capitalistic society, even if you're not into politics, your voice counts. Sure, there'll be times when you wonder, really, how valued is your vote? Rest assured, every dollar's worth, every purchase, where was it made? By whom? Under what conditions? What potential consequences should out-trump any cost/benefit ratio? From the clothes tumbling around inside your dryer, the shoes you shuffle, the food you put on your table, to the car you drive – recklessly or responsibly – into our near future, how far, how many generations can you see down the road?

Yes, dear friends and contenders, brothers and sisters, always be mindful. Our voice, our money, our votes always count.

We are all stars here.



**TREE OF MEANING
BY ERIC, SPRING 2022**

It's been said the tree whose roots twine around buried rocks grows tallest and strongest. It's this same stony ground that proves too harsh for most seeds.

We're in a room full of creators. While we don't know all of each other's stories, it's fair to assume we're rooted in the ground with more than our fair share of stones. I also know that some of us have lost much, and too many, to the stony ground of our pasts; often unfairly.

I don't think anyone really knows what causes one man to persevere and thrive, and another to wither, but there's something all of us in this room have in common: We're all creators, compelled

to bear fruit and contribute. What creating and what that contribution means is unique to each person. One might 'feel' with such intensity that the pressure forces an outlet. Another's inner life may be inhabited by people and places having so much vitality that they demand to be manifested in ink. Some of us seek to better understand, others demand to be heard. Other times, creation is an act of alchemy - a uniting and mixing of ideas in the crucible of the creator, synthesizing something new. Creation can also be an act of resistance - creating novel skillful attacks on injustice or ignorance. In a sense, every creator is a revolutionary; creating because what exists isn't enough, or because what already is isn't acceptable.

We're not our past; our past is the soil from which we grow. The fact that we're still moving, striving to create better and be heard further, proves this. We're not our crimes; or our sentences; we change and grow defying expectations. We're not our incarceration, our creative eye sees far beyond walls and fences. Most of all, we're not merely what anyone says we are, we're not any one thing; creators by definition defy stereotypes and categories.

All this may seem overly dramatic for a Writing 100 class in prison ... It's not. At the command of a creator, anything; an ordinary object, a memory, or something that doesn't yet even exist; can become imbued with depth—like a square becoming a cube. That's what this is really about; the creator conjures awe from mundane reality - he is the creator of meaning in the World.

It's been said that storms make oaks take deeper root and that a tree can stretch as far into the air as it's rooted in the deep. There's every reason to believe that the storms we've already weathered are beyond what most men of soft rich soil would understand. Show them these are not murky waters; that any darkness they perceive is depth. This is your ground. Stand on it.

ODYSSEY BEYOND—NOT BEHIND—BARS **ANONYMOUS, SPRING 2024**

In preparing this commencement address I was intrigued with the name of the program that facilitates this educational opportunity offered by the University of Wisconsin: Odyssey Beyond Bars.

An 'Odyssey' is defined as "an extended adventurous wandering; or an intellectual or spiritual quest." The word itself arose out of the Homeric epic recounting the wanderings of Odysseus after the fall of Troy.

The name of the program I believe was intentional in its selection. The name is not, as I have heard many say, 'Odyssey Behind Bars', but rather, "Odyssey Beyond Bars."

This means that the educational adventure and quest upon which we graduates set out on several months ago does not culminate here today. There are those who worked hard, others who hardly worked, but the common denominator among us all is that we worked. Its zenith, if you will, is not envisioned or anticipated to experience its realization in this place, but beyond it. In other words, the adventure is just getting started.

You have begun the process, the work, the labor of moving, of transitioning from the margins to the mainstream. That's an Odyssey! That's an



adventure. The brave of heart, the courageous are called upon for such a time as this and you have chosen to prepare yourselves to answer that call.

We are all familiar with, and for far too long, the margins and with being marginalized. Born out of wedlock, in broken homes, with dysfunctional families: The Margins. Less than quality educations, in neighborhoods riddled with crime, mischief, and mayhem. Empty lots and boarded up windows: The Margins. Socially, economically, and racially ostracized: The Margins. Absent and incarcerated fathers, and strung out and hurting mothers: The Margins.

And unfortunately because the bar and the expectations were set so low we grew comfortable with being marginalized. But those of you who remain out of a class of 12 have decided and declared by your presence here today that you're tired of being marginalized and you desire something more and better for your lives. You seek to be a part of the mainstream.

You have experienced over the last several weeks nothing more than a glimpse of your potential. The biggest conflagrations, or fires, are often the result of nothing more than a spark. You must ask yourselves, "What's been ignited in me?" Ask the person sitting next to you or across from you, "What's been ignited in you?"

Our teachers, facilitators, volunteers, and sponsors have responded to the Odyssey Behind Bars by providing opportunity. And educators do what they do best, equip and prepare. And if concrete and steel rebar, fences and chains are inadequate to stop or stifle an 'Odyssey Behind Bars' despite the numbers of difficulties we have faced down on a weekly basis, it is no less inadequate in stopping it beyond the bars.

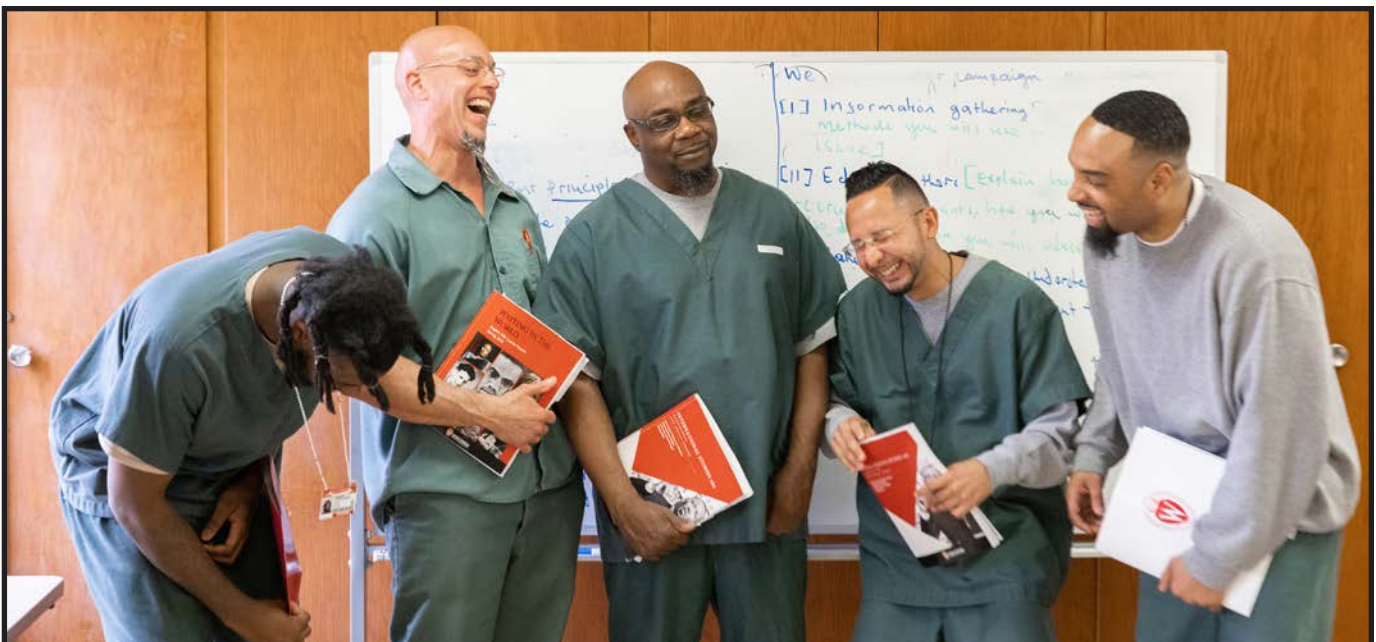
The idea that lies lurking beneath the surface of this program "Odyssey Beyond Bars" is the belief that the realizations of your greatest potential are to be realized beyond the bars.

Beyond bars, because life cannot be stopped. It insists on happening. Odyssey is an ongoing project, the quest. The adventure, both intellectual and spiritual, never stops.

Beyond bars, because you desire to be responsive to those creative forces that beckon you to the Odyssey that awaits you.

Beyond bars, because you've come to realize that it is in the mainstream that the adventure, the quest, and participation in it is to be experienced.

Beyond bars, because you understand and embrace the truth that you are not defined or confined by the failures of your past.



LETTERS FROM OBB FACULTY



JENNIFER FANDEL
E100 INSTRUCTOR
COLUMBIA CORRECTIONAL

Seeing one's work in print is a transformative experience for our students inside the Wisconsin prison system. For men who are identified by their DOC number, having the ability to develop and share one's voice—in class discussions, personal essays, commencement addresses, five-minute stories, and, ultimately, the Oracle—is akin to being seen as a fully realized human being, recognized for their potential rather than their crime.

After the community of the classroom disperses for the day and students go into the isolation and chaos of their housing units, the Oracle is a tangible reminder that their caring and supportive learning community still exists. Their words, and those of their fellow students, rise off the page. They live and breathe.

We define ourselves through stories—the stories that we tell others, as well as the stories that we tell ourselves. Through the process of writing and revising, we learn we have the power to not only give voice to our joys and our pains and share our voice with the world, but we can at any time write and rewrite the stories of our lives.



DR. DANA OSWALD
E100 INSTRUCTOR
RACINE CORRECTIONAL

Teaching my students at RCI has been one of the most rewarding parts of my career as a teacher in higher education. I believe all people are deserving of a high-quality education, and I am thrilled to be part of sharing education with many students for whom such an education was previously inaccessible for a variety of reasons. Every semester, I am newly delighted by the insights of my students, and their curiosity, passion, and work ethic. They are willing to put everything they have into their writing, and they come to class with questions, vulnerability, and interest. Each semester, they form the kind of community of trust that is necessary for collaborative writing processes to work effectively. Not only do they learn to speak and be heard, but they learn to listen and advise. It's been an honor to work with these talented, interesting, hard-working students, and to watch them develop their skills as writers, and as a community of thinkers. I'm so excited for them to share their work with you, and for you all to experience the gift of their perspectives and stories and insights.



DR. BEN SHANNON
E100 INSTRUCTOR
OAKHILL CORRECTIONAL

As an instructor for Odyssey Beyond Bars, I have witnessed its transformative impact firsthand. Many of our students begin the semester saying things like, “I didn’t enjoy writing in high school,” or “I would never consider myself a writer.” But by the end of the course, they gain a deeper appreciation for the power of writing and a stronger belief in their ability as writers and scholars. As one of my students put it, “Because of Odyssey, I want to not just pursue college, but work to attain my bachelor’s degree. How cool is that!” This transformation is made possible by the vibrant learning environment created in every OBB classroom. Throughout the semester, we focus on building competence, confidence, and community. Each week we introduce students to different forms of writing and a diverse array of authors and encourage them to use this knowledge to find their own voices. Our Oracle publication amplifies these voices and reinforces the fact that every student is indeed a writer. Throughout the semester, when students share their writing and receive constructive feedback from classmates, tutors, and instructors, they build a foundation of trust and a network of support that extends beyond the classroom. The result is a learning community that energizes and empowers individuals in a prison environment that all too often feels isolating and immobilizing. Simply put, Odyssey Beyond Bars fundamentally improves the lives of its students, and I am so proud to be a part of this program.



DR. KEVIN MULLEN
E100 INSTRUCTOR
OAKHILL CORRECTIONAL

As a graduate student at UW-Madison, I taught English 100 (Introduction to College Writing) on campus at least half a dozen times, but there is something inherently powerful in this particular English 100 classroom at Oakhill. As the semester progresses, and students work through writing assignments that ask them to reflect on both texts (by writers like George Orwell, Plato, Alice Walker, James Baldwin, Joan Didion, and many others) and their own experiences, they begin to develop a stronger sense of confidence in the unique power of their individual voices. This process is amplified through the sharing of their writing in the Odyssey Oracle, and students get to know each other in a deeper, more intimate way as they read each other’s thoughts and ideas. This circulation of writing allows the classroom community to become more tightly knitted together, which encourages each student to take more risks with their writing and share experiences that they might not otherwise. By the final class, where each student tells a “Five-Minute Story” in front of an audience of peers, instructors, tutors, librarians, academic advisors, and other Odyssey staff, they have learned to trust their classmates and their own writing abilities, and the celebration of finishing their first college class is one that we all share in. Every semester, it is a truly extraordinary and inspirational event.

