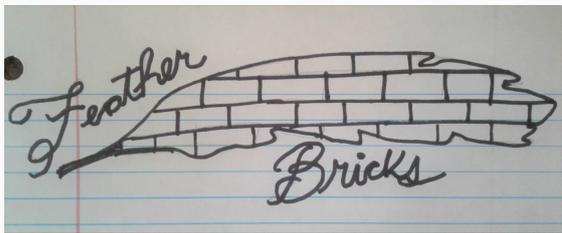


# Feather Bricks

The Official Newsletter of North Park Theological Seminary's  
School of Restorative Arts



Logo by Steven Ramirez

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## *Letter from the Editors*

Dear Students, Writers, Thinkers,

It has been a few months, but a really good read (like the second edition of this newsletter) is worth the...(fill in your own word here...or...hold on...just a sec')...wait! This brings me to our theme, inspired in part by the thoughtful reflection papers I received from students in our North Park creative writing class last summer commenting on the waiting dance for ideas we do as writers (also known as procrastination) that Julia Cameron presents in her book *The Right to Write*. Curious? Read (and, of course, write) On! --Professor Melissa

Welcome to the October/November edition of *Feather Bricks*. Did we keep you waiting? As I reflect on this edition's theme, "waiting," I can't help but think about a conversation I had with a good friend last school year. I was sharing with her how I felt like a bit of a procrastinator because I always waited until the last minute to do my writing assignments, and how I even sometimes envied some of the other students in my classes for their ability to tackle their writing projects early and to get them done well before our deadlines. She told me that she didn't necessarily see my writing approach as procrastination. Instead she said that she saw it as just me liking to wait until I was the most informed and knowledgeable before deciding to write. Needless to say, I ran with that explanation 😊.

I know some of you may see her response as just a clever way of justifying procrastination. Perhaps it was; I don't know. My reason for sharing this story with you, however, is to make the point that sometimes we have the tendency to treat waiting as if it is a negative thing. Either we see it as a cause for boredom or anxiety, or we see it as a potential waste/loss of time and control. But there are some advantages to waiting. Now, I'm not encouraging anyone to wait until the last minute to complete a writing assignment. After all, I'm a very special case. In fact, some may even argue I'm a nut case. What works for me may be disastrous for someone else. I am encouraging you to think about ways that waiting has benefitted you in your life and build on it.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *Feather Bricks*. I won't keep you waiting any longer, -- Howard Keller

# *Letter to the Editors*



Damen Price  
September 11, 2020

To Feather Bricks Editors,

Hello to all readers, producers, students, faculty, and donators. If I do not mention specific names, please do not feel less important because you've all added to the circle that has blessed me. The circle is a symbol for "Life." The sharing of your time, space, and knowledge has sustained me during my duress. Thank you—Thank you, even if you did not know it.

Some people know me as Da Da (pronounced Day Day), others as Price. Within anyone I tried to remain the same: sincere, sharing what I have and know, being encouraging, and not misleading due to my emotions.

I've been incarcerated for 25 years and 8 months. I've been depressed, distraught, hopeless and vexed in my spirit. I've been angry, self-pitied and defeated. I know what it feels like to be underneath the rock at rock-bottom. Before I willingly let go of the little piece of rope beneath the last knot, I prayed: "God, if it's your will that I die in prison, show me. If it's your will that I get out, show me. Show me what to do and how I must do it. Show me this time next year so I will know that it is you." That was October 9, 2009. I did not pray again. The following year, in 2010, I was in the cell with a guy who took me to the gates of anger for 6 months. I left that cell to one with a young brother about 32 years old, who worked in the library, named Emanuel Wade. We both understood the significance of his name, but the meaning did not register to me until years later. Within 4 months, Emanuel taught me how to do legal work—my legal work—how to read, understand, argue, and write it. I did my first petition with pen and paper because he really, really rebuilt my self-esteem and confidence. After sending the petition in, the county clerk returned my copy dated 10/9/10. I gasped because I remembered my prayer and the date (Oct 9th is also the date of the offense I am incarcerated on); I praised God and never stopped praying.

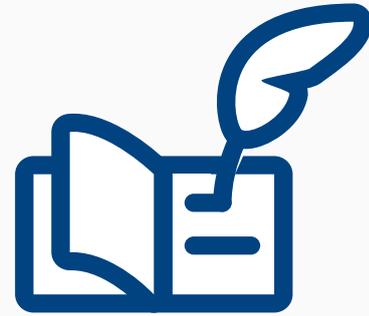
My sentence of life/30 years has been vacated, and while writing this I am in F-house being processed back to the county jail for re-sentencing. I'm praying for a "time considered served." When I look back, our Creator God was always with me, even when I didn't know. There are a lot of things that I did not see in prison. He protected my eyes, ears, mouth, and mind, body, and spirit. Prison still is dangerous. Even though I didn't see God at the time, markers of His presence were there: the people I was around, the jobs I had, the young legal teacher Emanuel Wade. Emanuel = God with us. It clicked when I was sharing this testimony with someone else. During our frustrations, or others', it is the sharing of our time, space, and knowledge; the comforting of someone else during their time of need is love, even when we are unaware of their state. Thank you all for comforting in your own way. I continue to pray for you all.

Sincerely, Damen Price

P.S. Thanks for picking my title "Feather Bricks." My burden is lifted. Prayer is Powerful—I thank our Creator God.

# INTERVIEW *with*

## PROFESSOR TIM BARNETT



Q: The theme for this newsletter is "waiting," based in part on writer Julia Cameron's idea from her book *The Writer's Life* that procrastination means "waiting for that mysterious and wonderful moment when we are not only going to be able to write, we are going to be able to write perfectly." Cameron goes on to claim that "the minute we become willing to write imperfectly, we become able to write." What do you think about Cameron's idea of "waiting" as it relates to procrastination and the writing process?

**A: She is right. There is a very strong myth about writers—that you either are one or you are not—and if you are a “writer,” then inspiration somehow comes to you and the experience of putting that inspiration into words is magical. That’s BS. Maybe there are writers out there who operate like that, but, for everyone I know, it is simply hard work that takes practice, experimentation, a willingness to produce a lot of bad stuff to get to the better stuff, and the ability to trust others to give you feedback. I am sympathetic, though, to procrastination, because I procrastinate with writing as much as anyone and am feeling the weight of that “waiting” right now since I am currently away from teaching and focusing on writing and research for the next few months. I’m lucky, I know, to have that time, but it is stressful too because writing is stressful. I never learn more than when I am trying to write something.**

Q: How do you see the idea of "waiting" apply to your work in the classroom in general and/or specifically during your tenure teaching at Stateville and in the "University Without Walls" program?

**A: I’m not sure my classroom practices are different at Stateville than anywhere else. I always try to get students to see how difficult writing, serious writing, really is, without discouraging them from taking it on. What’s interesting about Stateville is that so many students have written books or stories or are in the process of writing major pieces. There are many writers here who are using the time they have “waiting” to write. I am not used to teaching so many students who are committed to writing the way many of the students at Stateville are, and that has been an interesting challenge. What I think I might do best as a teacher is respond to students’ texts, and this is important for writers who are struggling to fill a page as well as writers who have written 300-page novels. Feedback is important for writers who feel like they have gotten as far as they can in a piece but know there is more to do. Having someone respond who cares about the work and has experience responding to texts can help writers who are unsure what to do next.**

One of the most powerful experiences writers can have is to receive significant feedback that gets them writing again because while procrastination happens before we even start a piece, we also often wait when we are in the middle of something. That is one of the reasons I am so excited about the writing center at Stateville. Communities of writers and readers are what is needed to help writers move past any prolonged waiting they might be inclined to do—whether they are experienced writers or not. Writing should be a part of our daily lives, like reading is for many, instead of something special that only special people do, and writing centers are built on that philosophy.

**Q:** Do you have a favorite quote, saying, joke, or adage you'd like to share with newsletter readers that is somehow related to the idea of "waiting"?

**A:** One of my professors when I was a graduate student, Beverly Moss, told me when I was writing a dissertation, and very stressed about it, that a "perfect dissertation" is the enemy of a "done dissertation," and I have remembered that whenever I have written anything that was stressful (which is just about everything I've written!). I took that to mean that I couldn't keep waiting until I had everything just right on the page or in a chapter before moving on. I had to keep going, accept that things would never be just right—even when I was done—and not be bound to the notion of perfectionism that keeps so many writers stuck, waiting for that moment of inspiration needed to make the text finally "perfect" before showing it to anyone or publishing it. We can't wait.

# INTERVIEW *with*

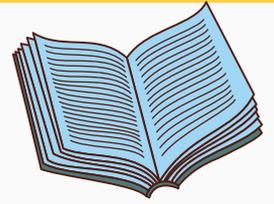
## PROFESSOR TIM BARNETT

Things in the world are too urgent (now and always) to wait until things are just right because that really means we just won't write. Things are never "just right" and never will be, and our voices matter even if, and maybe especially because, they are imperfect and partial.

**Q:** What else would you like to share with our Stateville students in the context of these times?

**A:** Just that I hope all of you know that there are many people who care and who are working to make Stateville and other prisons safer right now during this horrible time, as well as working to imagine a world where prisons aren't needed. Also, help each other as much as you can, use this time to read and to create your own masterpiece if you are able, forget about waiting and just write—for yourself, for your family, for your teachers, for the world, for history. Read each other's work with a generous spirit. Write together—one person can start a story or analysis or poem and others can follow up on it and see where it goes. When possible, find ways to continue to think and grow. Write to help others do that as well. Changes are coming; I don't know what kind of changes, but they are coming, and we need your input about where to go next.

# *Pontificating on Procrastination:*



## **Responses to Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write***

### *1. Response by Ryan Miller*

I don't know how it is possible, but I feel like I am constantly writing and procrastinating at the same time! I'm always working, but I never accomplish anything. I have a lot of ideas that I never seem to actually see through to completion. I will work on something tirelessly until I punch myself out; then, I will procrastinate and avoid that song, paper, idea, etc. I don't know why I do this, but it drives me crazy and I often feel very overwhelmed and exhausted. I think I suffer from ADHD and it causes me to bounce around to a lot of different thoughts, and it's extremely hard for me to focus on one thing for an extended period of time. As I write this, I am actually procrastinating from writing my clemency! I started to work on it. I got all of the stuff out. Picked up the pen, and somehow ended up writing this instead... (It's hard being me ☺). I do believe Julia Cameron is right about procrastination when she says it's "an investment in fantasy" and that "we are waiting for that moment when we are not only going to be able to write, we are going to be able to write perfectly." This is something I struggle with immensely. I'm never satisfied with anything I write. I feel like writing is all I have to offer the world and it needs to be perfect. Every time I begin a project, I think it's brilliant, but by the end, it disgusts me and I want to throw it away. I exist in a perpetual state of ambivalent emotions: love/hate towards my writing. I've diagnosed myself with what I call "Little Brother Syndrome." I will pick on my art mercilessly, but if someone else does, then I will defend it to the death!

### *2. "Do All Writers Procrastinate & Why?"*

*by Jamie Thomasson*

It is to be believed that all writers procrastinate in one form or another. Some writers do it while dreading deadlines. Having all that stress placed upon them causes writers to stall, creating in itself a form of writer's block. Some writers procrastinate simply because they get lazy and decide to push their writing off to the side. I can honestly say I believe the main reason why writers procrastinate is out of fear, a fear of letting down their audience. This form of procrastination has always been the main reason why I in the past as a writer have procrastinated. I was in fear of letting down my audience, the ones taking the time out to read or listen to what it was I had written, whether it was a story, blog, letter, article, or even a poem or a song to be performed in front of a live audience on stage. Talk about fear. Nothing scares a song writer and musician more than having to perform a song that they wrote in front of a live audience. Procrastination is not only part of a writer's life, but it is also a major part of life in general. Everyone has procrastinated at one point or another in their life, and I believe it is a huge part of what makes us human. To any writer claiming they never procrastinate, I ask that they be true to themselves and realize we all procrastinate in one form or another. Until we can be completely honest with ourselves, we may never learn why it is that we as writers procrastinate.

# *Pontificating on Procrastination:*

## *Responses to Julia Cameron's *The Right to Write**

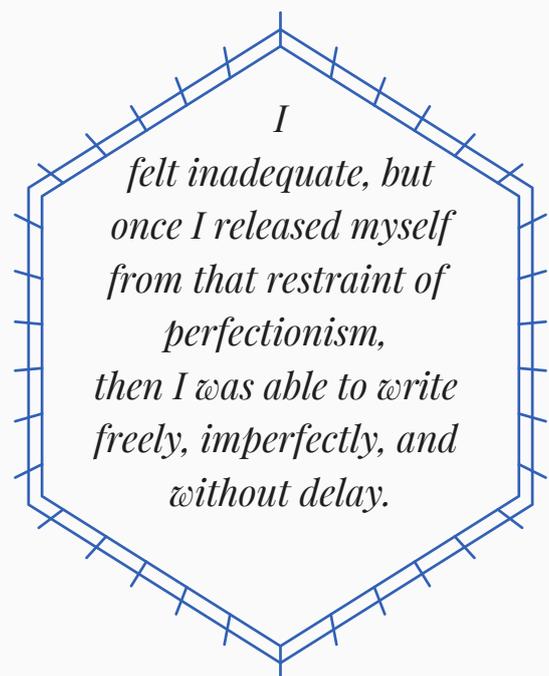
3. by Ignacio "Nacho" Alvarez

I clearly see Julia Cameron's point of view on procrastination, though I do not necessarily agree with it in its entirety, especially when she declares that "it is the act of writing that calls ideas forward, not the ideas that call forward writing" (82). I believe that there must first be a platform or an idea. Without a platform from which to begin, how can we possibly put anything down on paper? How can there possibly be a fire without there first being a spark?

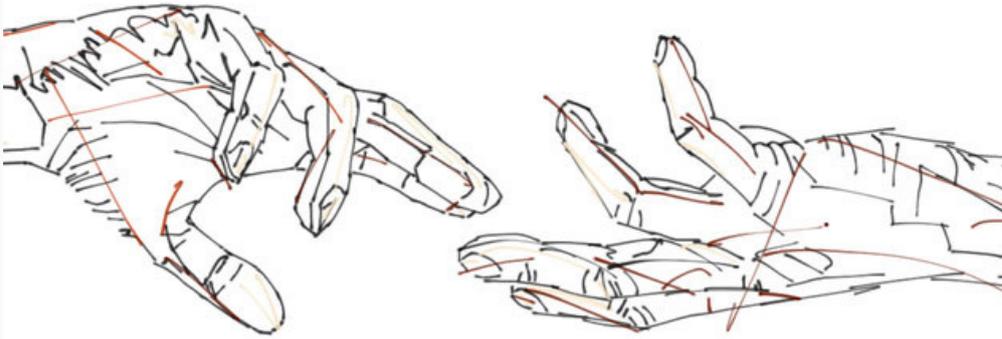
For me, one idea, or even one word, sparks a whirlwind of thoughts. As long as I have that one word or idea, then, and only then, can I begin writing. At this juncture I've been given the keys that unlock not only the front door to a mansion, but to all the rooms within it. I might not necessarily know what lies ahead, but I know it's good. Therefore, I begin to explore without reservation...

Now, I will agree with Cameron on the idea of perfectionism as a roadblock to writing, and thus a path towards procrastination. I think she hit it right on the head when she declared that "the minute we become willing to write imperfectly, we become able to write" (Cameron 83). I can personally attest to this reality, as I myself have been governed by perfectionism. If I could not write 'the perfect paper,' which is an urban legend, then I would hesitate to write at all. I felt inadequate, but once I released myself from that restraint of perfectionism, then I was able to write freely, imperfectly, and without delay.

Why did I fall into this vast pitfall along with a myriad of others? Because we were taught, by well-meaning teachers, that in order for a paper to pass the litmus test for writing academica, it must have all its "I"s dotted and its "T"s crossed. In other words, we were sold and embraced the notion that non-existent perfect papers were the only papers acceptable, but the reality was further from the truth. Why? Because like I stated before, there is no such thing as a perfect and immaculate paper. To continually believe this lie will only leave us in a state of deliberate and intentional postponement in writing.



# *Devotional* by Howard Keller



## **Scripture: Isaiah 30:18:**

“Therefore, the Lord longs to be gracious to you, And therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him.”

I love this text because it reminds me of both how relational God is and how valuable we are to Him. The Hebrew word for wait is **gavah**—a verb meaning to wait for, to look for, and to hope for. All my life, I have been taught that we are the ones to wait on God. There are numerous Scriptures that call us to wait on God, to have patience, and to be long suffering. But here, in this passage, God is the one waiting for us, **hoping** in us.

This text is so very encouraging to me, especially when I think about the state of our world today. With all of the sickness, poverty, violence, divisiveness, and unrest that’s going on, it’s hard to see humanity ever coming together and being able to solve our problems and having healthy, thriving, kingdom communities. Simply put, it’s hard to trust our abilities as broken people to do the peacemaking we’ve been called to do. But if the God of justice—a God that can do any and all things—can wait on us—that is, have hope for us—to live out our call, then who am I to think otherwise? Despite all of the ugliness in the world, God is still trusting us to help build his kingdom. He’s waiting on us.

## **Prayer:**

Thank you for seeing something in us to allow us to participate in the building of your kingdom. And thank you for your mercy and for waiting so patiently for us to get our stuff together, and not giving up on us in the meantime. I know that you are a God of justice and compassion. I ask that you open up our eyes and our hearts so that we may see and know what it is that we must do to help heal some of the brokenness in our world and truly reflect your image.

Amen.

# Rhymes & Reasons

## "CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT" BY WILLIAM T. JONES

Kicks, punches, stab,  
When the police showed up  
Who really threw the first jab?

Children of the night, why are you  
Stealing food from stores, stealing cars, and  
Robbing bars.  
Oh! My little child, that  
will not get you far.

Children of the night,  
Why do you roam the streets and fight?  
I know most of you are black and poor,  
And think America has shut her door.

Children of the night, there is a way  
you can make everything right.  
You can grow to be a man and stand  
your ground; go to school - through  
education no one can push you around.

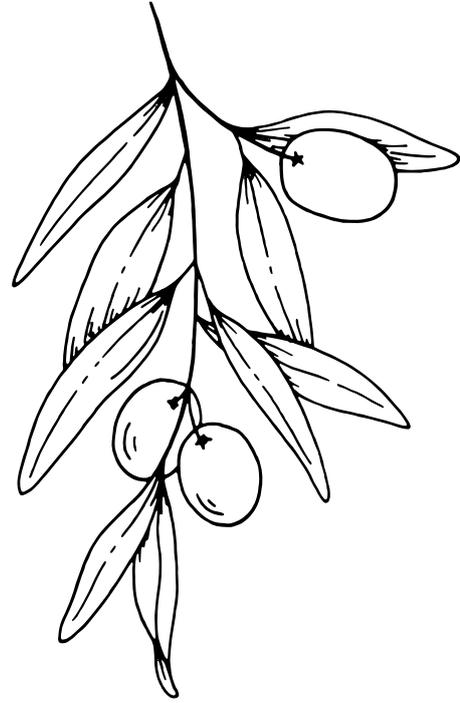
So go to school each and every day,  
Listen to what your teachers have to say.  
I know it won't be easy and to most  
It will be hard, but how do you think  
Dr. Martin Luther King, W.E.B. Dubois,  
And Fredrick Douglass got their start.

Children of the night take this  
information from a person who know,  
for this voice is coming from a former inmate of death row.



# Rhymes & Reasons

## “IT’S HARD BUT IT’S FAIR!” BY ANTONIO BALDERAS

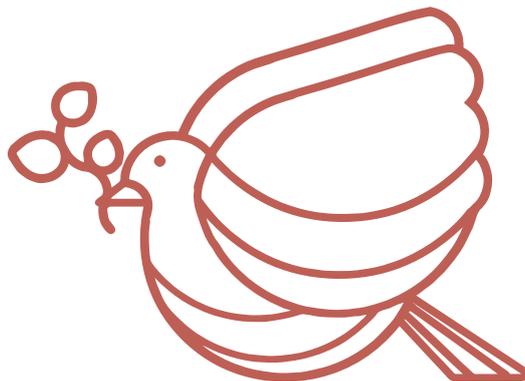


TWIGHLIGHT awakens me as people begin to stare.  
The saying goes, “Life’s hard, yet somehow, it’s also fair.”  
I find myself running in the middle of a Wisconsin street  
as smoke fills the air

As the bombs continue to burst through the smoke-filled air!!!  
It’s a horrible scene: all around, screams revealing the faces of,  
Dead of dying.

I step back into the shadows, afraid for my life,

I tearfully ask myself when will all this violence stop and come to an end,  
This is AMERICA not the middle east.  
Why, can’t we all Just love one another,  
In the name of God and for world PEACE.



# Rhymes & Reasons

## VIRTUAL CONCERT BY LYDIA VANDER STELT

### Praise Break:

Waiting can lead us to a space of either frustration that things aren't going how we thought, or to a space of trust in a God who is in control. It can also lead us to sit in the tension of the both/and - both the frustration and the trust. It is from that space that I wrote this song. I feel like I am asking God to move the biggest mountains and part the deepest seas in my prayers. Then I remember that God has moved mountains. And God *has* parted seas. And God *can* and *will* do the same for us as it says in Mark 11:23-24: "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

I believe with my whole heart that God will move the mountains of my prayers. I can guarantee it will not be in my own timing, but if He did it before, He'll do it again. I'll wait and be still in the meantime.



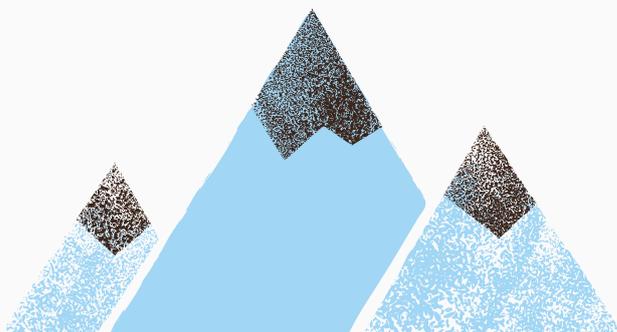
### Song Title: Mountains and Seas

Seemingly immovable  
The mountains of my prayers  
Seemingly impartable  
The seas of my despair

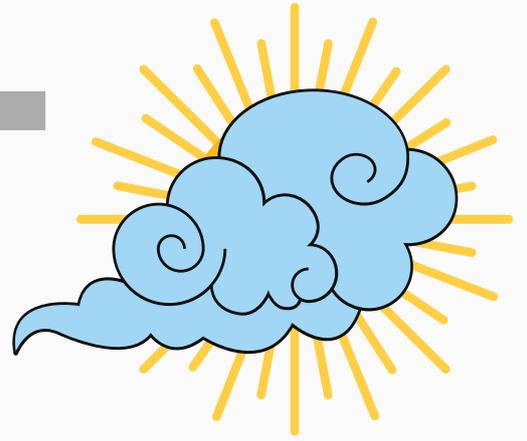
Yet you are strong and faithful  
You are always there  
Kind and true, impassible  
Our hearts are in your care

If I can't see you, help me feel you  
If I can't feel you, help me hear your voice  
If I can't hear your voice then open up my eyes  
to see your beauty and grace

For you are good and you are able  
Always with us in our time of need  
So help me trust in you, Oh Lord my God  
The mover of the mountains and seas  
You're the mover of the mountains and seas



# *Rhymes & Reasons*



**"REVELATION"  
BY KENNETH KEY**

LIKE A PHOENIX RISING  
COME WITNESS THIS HOLY TRANSFORMATION  
AS THIS TES-SHU-VAH BECOMES  
MANIFESTATION

AND HIS MOST POWERFUL REVELATION  
HIS MOST POWERFUL STATEMENT  
OF SINNERS  
NOW SAVED AND SHARING VARIOUS  
REVELATIONS ABOUT HIS  
SALVATION  
AND ABOUT PRISONERS CHOSEN TO  
RAISE HIS NEW FOUNDATION  
BY PRISONERS WHO WERE ONCE SINNERS  
NOW ENTRUSTED IN SPREADING THE  
MESSAGE  
OF HIS SALVATION  
OF  
HIS GRACE, AND LOVE, NOW  
THAT'S A POWERFUL DECLARATION  
OF HOW WE BECAME BLESSED AS  
STUDENTS  
IN THIS NORTH PARK LIBERATION  
IN HOPE OF ONE DAY SHARING HIS  
STORY WITH AN ENTIRE NATION  
OF SALVATION  
THAT'S A REVELATION.

# “In the Waiting Room”

Written in 1976, this poem addresses the chase for identity and individuality within a diverse society from the view of a 7-year old girl during World War I.

**BY ELIZABETH BISHOP (1911-1979)**

In Worcester, Massachusetts,  
I went with Aunt Consuelo  
to keep her dentist's appointment  
and sat and waited for her  
in the dentist's waiting room.  
It was winter. It got dark  
early. The waiting room  
was full of grown-up people,  
arctics and overcoats,  
lamps and magazines.  
My aunt was inside  
what seemed like a long time  
and while I waited I read  
the National Geographic  
(I could read) and carefully  
studied the photographs:  
the inside of a volcano,  
black, and full of ashes;  
then it was spilling over  
in rivulets of fire.  
Osa and Martin Johnson  
dressed in riding breeches,  
laced boots, and pith helmets.  
A dead man slung on a pole  
--"Long Pig," the caption said.  
Babies with pointed heads  
wound round and round with string;  
black women with necks  
wound round and round with wire  
like the necks of light bulbs.  
I read it right straight through.  
I was too shy to stop.  
And then I looked at the cover:  
the yellow margins, the date.  
Suddenly, from inside,  
came an oh! of pain  
--Aunt Consuelo's voice--  
not very loud or long.

I wasn't at all surprised;  
even then I knew she was  
a foolish, timid woman.  
I might have been embarrassed,  
but wasn't. What took me  
completely by surprise  
was that it was me:  
my voice, in my mouth.  
Without thinking at all  
I was my foolish aunt,  
I--we--were falling, falling,  
our eyes glued to the cover  
of the National Geographic,  
February, 1918.

I said to myself: three days  
and you'll be seven years old.  
I was saying it to stop  
the sensation of falling off  
the round, turning world.  
into cold, blue-black space.  
But I felt: you are an I,  
you are an Elizabeth,  
you are one of them.  
Why should you be one, too?  
I scarcely dared to look  
to see what it was I was.  
I gave a sidelong glance  
--I couldn't look any higher--  
at shadowy gray knees,  
trousers and skirts and boots  
and different pairs of hands  
lying under the lamps.  
I knew that nothing stranger  
had ever happened, that nothing  
stranger could ever happen.



Why should I be my aunt,  
or me, or anyone?  
What similarities--  
boots, hands, the family voice  
I felt in my throat, or even  
the National Geographic  
and those awful pointed heads--  
held us all together  
or made us all just one?  
How--I didn't know any  
word for it--how "unlikely". . .  
How had I come to be here,  
like them, and overhear  
a cry of pain that could have  
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright  
and too hot. It was sliding  
beneath a big black wave,  
another, and another.  
Then I was back in it.  
The War was on. Outside,  
in Worcester, Massachusetts,  
were night and slush and cold,  
and it was still the fifth  
of February, 1918.



# WA Corner

## "How to Explicate a Poem" by Belinda Banh



"Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words." -Robert Frost

Before you can fully understand a poem, you must explicate it. Before you can explicate a poem, you must understand that every poem is an onion. There are layers upon layers of meaning, emotion, visuals, and on and on that the poet condenses into a few intentional words onto a page. Everything about a poem matters: organization, word choice, visual formatting, spacing and rhythm. The interplay that happens in between the lines of a poem is the "big" reveal in the poet's magic trick. It is within the execution that makes a poem art; there is nothing literal about it.

Robert Frost's quote captures the process of a poet and his poem. The process is what we are interested in, as the poem is merely the product. How did the poet convey this meaning, feeling, and image to their reader? We want to look at the "how" and "why" of the poet's intentions by utilizing the "what"- the poem. To explicate a poem means to analyze and develop it in detail. Furthermore, it means that as explicators, you must break the poem apart into smaller pieces just so that you can put it back together, in order to understand it from a different, non-literal perspective.

In the following paragraph, I will briefly explicate the first stanza of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room." Note that I pay close attention to word choice and its underlying images, metaphors, and feelings that it might provoke. I go in the order of what I notice; try to explicate this poem on your own to see if you have similar or different observations and interpretations! :

*It was winter. It got dark early.* Line 6 sets up this gray, dreary, wet, and cold scene as the backdrop of this poem. The sentences are short and abrupt, which captures the time and daylight that quickly passes. It also shows that the speaker of this poem takes in the world as it is, the way a child would. At this point, we also know that they are inside of a dentist's waiting room (line 5). Although the speaker and her Aunt Consuelo are inside, away from the dark winter outside, there is a different sense of coldness in the waiting room. Artificial lighting, a very sterile space, with the anticipation of having your name called to be seen by the dentist. *...arctics and overcoats, lamps and magazines* from lines 9 and 10 provide a parallel visual of "object-and-object, object-and-object" that may represent this parallel coldness going on outside and inside the waiting room, presented in the previous paragraph. Arctics and overcoats sound cold and mature; whereas lamps and magazines sound warm, and may provoke an image of a child reading a magazine past their bedtime under the sheets with their lamp. This analysis may also be applied to line 6 with the youthful interpretation of the weather outside, and the grown-up people in the waiting room in line 8. There is a contrast of cold-and-hot, child-and-grown-up, and outside-and-inside.

*Feather Bricks* welcomes readers to send in their explications of other stanzas of this poem in for possible publication in our Dec/Jan issue. We also welcome any tips you have learned about explicating, understanding, appreciating, and writing poetry.

# WA Corner

A Writing Center in Prison:

## The Value of Collaborative Learning

by Benny Rios

(republished with permission from *WLN: Writing Lab Newsletter, a Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*)

When you think of prison, what comes to mind? People locked in cages, lost of hope for rehabilitation? Illiterate people without potential to learn? It might be rare for one's first impression to be that prison is a place of spiritual growth, transformation, and learning, but that has been the case for me. Whether or not formal education opportunities have been available where I am incarcerated, we have always had a learning community here.

Informal learning in prison is driven by collaborative learning. After reading several articles for my tutoring writing class as an incarcerated student training to be a writing advisor, I realized that what Andrea Lunsford, Kenneth Bruffee, and John Trimbur refer to is the kind of collaborative learning that has always taken place in this prison environment. Theories of collaborative learning developed by these authors, though, consider university settings. Since prison is not considered a place for learning, data that shows what collaborative learning looks like in a prison setting is limited. By identifying the barriers that hinder collaborative learning, finding creative ways to work around those barriers, and gathering data on what works in prisons, tutors and teachers both incarcerated and free can make collaborative learning in prisons more effective.

### What Collaborative Learning is and is Not

This term "collaborative learning" covers a range of techniques. John Trimbur describes it as "practices such as reader response, peer critiques, small writing groups, joint writing projects, and peer tutoring in writing centers and classrooms" (87). Trimbur also points out that collaborative learning consists of shifting responsibility from the teacher to the group (87). Collaborative learning is not about individualism, nor is it meant to be hierarchy-based. Instead, the students assume leadership as they actively participate in their own learning (Trimbur 87). It is important to be mindful that students should not just be thrown together without any guidance. Otherwise, students could suffer from negative effects (Bruffee 334).

### Personal Experiences with Collaborative Learning

The variation of collaboration that has been most productive for me is when my peers and I have spontaneous, informal discussions about our writing assignments. Currently, I'm earning a Master's Degree in Christian Ministry and Restorative Arts. It is a four-year program that prepares students in violence prevention, conflict resolution, and ministerial work. Since this path trains us to work with people, working together collaboratively is crucial. In prison, spontaneous discussion is the most common way to collaborate. These gatherings occur as we walk in lines going from one place to another and in places such as the dining room, yard, commissary waiting room, and in various bullpens within the institution. When students come together in these situations, I act as a Writing Advisor and guide in the conversations that take place. Students often state their concerns about their papers, and I suggest how they might deal with those concerns. Together, we bounce ideas off one another; however, whenever other Writing Advisors are present, then the role of the guide alternates in a conversational way which allows everyone in the group to learn from one another. Bruffee explains it best when he speaks of "normal discourse" as conversation that takes place within a community of knowledgeable peers (329). It is through these conversations with my peers that I compose my papers. Talking helps me with my reflective thinking, broadening my internalized conversations that guide my writing as I "re-externalize" my internalized conversations in the papers that I produce (Bruffee 328).

### How and When does Collaborative Learning Work?

Lunsford, in her advocating for collaboration in the form of Burkean Parlor Centers, points out that this center is collaboration aligned with diversity, and it goes against the grain of American education (7). One barrier she identifies is dealing with an institution that can be hostile towards collaboration if its stakeholders feel threatened in terms of authority. In prison, however, we deal with a different kind of authority, an authority that has absolute control over what goes on and puts security as its highest priority. There is no way to decentralize the authority of the prison administration;

as a result, we are confronted with barriers that include 1) limited mobility for students; 2) no internet access; 3) limited access to the education building; 4) little communication with peers, tutors, and teachers; 5) no opportunities to work formally in small groups or hold conferences aside from our weekly classes and study hall; 6) possibility of lockdowns; 7) stresses caused by the prison environment. All of these factors limit collaborative learning.

I do want to mention how we can overcome some of these barriers. As conversation plays a major role in successful collaboration, conversation works especially well in prison because when we return to our cells, we reflect on and re-contextualize these conversations in our writing (Bruffee 327-328). One way to address limited mobility is to try to get permission from administration to allow students who reside in the same cell house opportunity for small group sessions on the first floor of the cell house or in the bullpen for an hour a day. Outside of attending programs, prisoners are kept separate in different cell houses, and they are also separated in the cell houses as well on different galleries, narrow walkways that allow prisoners to walk to and from their cells. The thing about being in the same cell house is that it is easier for officers to let us out of our cells to meet in the bullpen for tutoring with minimal security concern. Another thing we could do is utilize letter writing to offer reader response and peer critiques to fellow peers within the same cell house with the help of inmate porters, workers that do custodial work in the cell house. John Trimbur states, "Peer feedback is no doubt the most common form of collaborative learning used in teaching writing" (98). Through these letters we can offer constructive peer feedback and partake in collaborative learning. Maintaining a collaborative learning environment in prison is not something new, but what can be new is to begin gathering information for research purposes about what works in prison in terms of learning collaboratively. Lunsford points out that a collaborative environment calls for monitoring and evaluation of the group process; in doing so, each person involved should build on a theory of collaboration (6). Currently, tutoring conferences take place once a week for almost three hours during study hall. Writing Advisors usually consist of the inside students and, at times, Writing Advisors who come as guests from North Park's Writing Center (Chicago Campus).

The data that we collect is mostly from formal conferences that last up to half an hour depending on how many people need tutoring. However, some of the inside Writing Advisors record informal conferences that take place during the week.

Most importantly, it would be wise to gather data for future research purposes, especially on the informal collaborative discussions that take place. Monitoring data collected in a prison context would shed light on what areas we can strengthen or eliminate. The data collected in this prison is given to our writing center director Melissa Pavlik so that it can be stored electronically. Writing centers in universities often document nearly everything they do, so to create a writing center in a prison context that effectively encourages collaborative learning and peer tutoring, it is necessary to gather data and find ways to share what this data shows both within and beyond our university and prison communities. Our writing center here at Stateville is relatively new; it's a satellite center of North Park University's Writing Center. However, one of the major differences is that we do not have a writing lab with computers. We do not have access to our center five days a week where students can drop-in during school hours. For the most part, the writing center at Stateville is facilitated by peer tutors, which decentralizes the authority from the teacher to the students.

#### Conclusion

Universities have a long history with writing centers, whereas the history of writing centers in prisons is a new concept. One thing that connects us, though, is collaborative learning. We may face different challenges with collaborative learning, but our approaches to confront these challenges can be similar. I hope to challenge free teachers, students, and advocates to think about innovative ways to develop effective strategies that help make collaborative learning flourish in a prison environment.

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# WA Corner

## Sometimes Less is More When Advising Writers

By Ro'derick Zavala



Many incarcerated men have not been involved in the academic arena for years. Prior to the development of the MACM/RA degree program that has been launched by North Park Theological Seminary, men, such as myself, have not attended school in over 27 years. Basic skills such as thesis development, essay structure, and proper grammar and syntax are all but foreign concepts to most men in prison who have not been afforded the traditional route to college academia. North Park's Writing Center has developed a program that is training incarcerated "A" students in the field of certified writing advisors. As one of those "A" students, I am proud to say that working as a North Park Writing Advisor means that I have a chance to change the writing culture at Stateville. There are men in prison that have never experienced what it is like to have on-site help from someone trained to listen to their ideas and give them proper instruction on how to organize and structure those ideas into a working writing process. Utilizing the skills I have learned from the writing tutors training program such as "praise," "explanation of the prompt," and "listening," I can guarantee to produce a majority of confident, able, and enthusiastic writers.

In order to produce confidence in a writer, I must first determine which of my actions evoke self-assuredness in the writer's own abilities. Most of the men I tutor tell me that they don't write because they either believe they are not good enough at it, or they just don't trust their ability to bring across their ideas in an intellectual manner. The right amount of praise can not only build the tutee's confidence, it can actually assist at stripping away the very doubt that cripples the hesitant writer. Elaine P. Maimon makes a brilliant point for writing advisors in her article "Cultivating the Prose Garden." She states, "Most work that comes to our initial attention is not bad but humble, rough, incomplete. We should shift our focus away from 'what this is not' to 'what you can make this become'" (734). Focusing on what the work can become allows a writing advisor to approach the work from the standpoint of praise, which the tutor may use to encourage confidence in the writer.

Thinking in terms of nurturing a writer's growth takes writing advisors out of the mindset of "correct" or "incorrect" and shifts the writing advisor's motives toward building up what the work already is. "Praise" is an important tool I have utilized to build up the belief in success needed to usher the writers I've tutored toward confident self-assured writing. I first understood how important praise was for building confidence when I experienced it myself from my first year writing partner. I attended a North Park pre-college course called "Urban Studies." There were other men, like myself, who had no real structure or organizational skills as it pertained to writing. Professor Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom set her inside students up with outside students who worked at the North Park University Writing Center. Letters, along with essay assignments, were exchanged on a weekly basis. I was partnered with the outside writing advisor Emma. Before helping me with my errors, Emma first wrote to me, "I really enjoyed reading your paper; it is evident that you put a lot of thought into your argument." Those words she chose immediately created trust between her and myself. I was now over any fears I had of my work not being good enough, and I was willing to listen to her suggestions for helping me make it better.

Emma understood that no matter how much work still needed to be done, I had actually put a lot of work into my argument. In the article "Learning to Praise," Donald A. Daiker uses a quote from Mina Shaughnessy: "Since writing is an act of confidence, it is not surprising that the scholarly tradition emphasizes responding with encouragement" (105). I have used Emma's line in several of my conferences. Every time I utter those words with direct eye contact, I am elated to see the confidence grow within the eyes of the person I am advising. If the writing isn't good, I politely let the tutee know that they should read it out loud to check for flow. I never praise disingenuously because I understand firsthand how powerful my words can be while I am sitting in the position of a trained writing advisor. When I was being tutored by Emma, I was always mindful to pay attention to the praise I was given. No one wants to feel patronized or lied to. Trust was built between Emma and I because she gave me correction where I was wrong. Those corrections gave me confidence that her comments about the areas I did well in were genuine. There are possible dangers provoked by handing out disingenuous praise.

*The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* warns that “empty praise can mislead writers about how much work they have ahead of them (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 63). If a writer believes that they are more prepared for the work ahead of them than they really are, based upon disingenuous praise, then the writer will become resentful, in failure, toward the tutor and maybe even toward the writing process itself. To discourage a writer away from the process of writing goes against the goals of writing center tutors. Knowing that the writer’s trust and confidence with writing is at stake makes genuine praise all the more important as a tool for writing advisors. People have a tendency to trust training. Men line up to bring me their papers so that I may look them over, simply because they know that I have been trained as a writing advisor. I constantly hear statements from my classmates such as “I know you can help me; this is what you all do in your writing class.” I appreciate the trust given to me by those I tutor, and I work hard to instill confidence in them in return.

Successful “ability” with academic writing comes from knowing exactly what you are supposed to do. Most writers aren’t able to do well with their assignments because they don’t actually understand what is required of them. Donald Murray has a brilliant paragraph in his book *The Craft of Revision* about this. He states, “Bad writing is often the direct product of a misunderstood assignment” (Murray 55). Knowing what is expected of the writer is key for producing sufficient work. Most of the conferences I conduct are settled by just helping the writer understand the prompt. Once the tutee understands the prompt, they are able to build their research around it. Knowing what the professor is asking for helps the student stay within the guidelines of the assignment. *The Oxford Guide for Tutors* has a section about “scaffolding” that deals with this very subject. In “analyzing the assignment and context,” I use the tip where it suggests to “make sure the writers gather specific information about what the instructor or audience is looking for” (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 80). This will not only help the writer identify key requirements for the assignments, it will also reduce any anxieties that prohibit the writer’s ability to think about their product in order to communicate it properly. As I go through the prompt, using the tutee to “explain” to me what they’re getting out of it, I start to talk less and listen more as the tutee speaks. This tactic begins to build the tutee’s enthusiasm to explain, in their own terms, how the prompt can relate to their ideas.

“Listening” is the most important tool I have been exposed to as a writing advisor. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* claims that “just as probably everyone likes praise, it is likely that most people want to be heard” (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 63). An ear is a valuable tool for encouraging enthusiasm among hesitant writers. Allowing someone to vent out their idea gives them a sense of control over what they are attempting to write about. Listening creates an atmosphere of “what do you think about this?” I structure my sessions around what the writer needs and not some ritualistic routine that may prove unhelpful, as the personalities of the writers change. A good example of routine over adaptability is a conference my writing center director Melissa Pavlik shared with us that she had with a student. She stated, “One time a student came into the conference 10-15 minutes late. I had all my little notes ready, so I just jumped right in and started going down my list. Then I noticed that halfway through, the student had just checked out. They weren’t even listening to me anymore. I don’t know what happened.” Because Melissa was so adamant about her routine, she was trying to force the student to conform to her list. She forgot to use conversation to build the relationship. If she had convincingly asked the tutee, “Why are you late?” the tutee maybe would have become more comfortable, probably already feeling anxiety for not being on time. This is what the *Oxford Guide* calls “Tutoring is interpersonal.” The guide quotes Efrayim Clair’s emphasis on “shifting focus from ‘tutoring writing’ to ‘tutoring people’” (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 55). Melissa took away the tutee’s sense of control within the session. In doing so, she changed the atmosphere to “Listen to me, and do what I think you need to do.” The tutee’s needs always need to come first. As writing advisors, we must remain flexible as the sessions change. To be fair to Melissa, she is also a professor, and it may be difficult at times to change hats from professor to writing advisor at the blink of an eye. When I listen, I encourage the tutee to become enthusiastic about writing. By listening to the tutee talk about the assignment or briefly about themselves, I help the tutee feel more in control of the session because their voice becomes most dominant.



When I listen to a person thoroughly, they begin to realize that they have already written the paper in their minds, they just need someone to hear them out. Donald Murray uses test readers. He says that he “prefers readers that make him eager to get back to writing” (Murray 35). This is fine when someone has already written their paper. I’m speaking more along the lines of a “pre-write test audience.” Listening and periodically commenting at critical moments can kindle the flame of eagerness that leads to enthusiasm. Developing an enthusiastic writer is tantamount to creating a confident one.

On the flip side, “some people” are just superbly cynical about receiving help with their writing. I use the term “some people” so that I may keep to the “Stateville Writing Advisors Code of Ethics and Rules.” Number three states: “I will keep all personal information about my conferee confidential.” On top of that, it might not be the smartest idea to mention a person by name after you have referred to them as “superbly cynical.” With his type of personality, no matter what tactic I use, they’ll always find a way to be negative about the process. If I praise their writing, they’ll assume that I’m pacifying them. If I walk them through what the instructor wants, they’ll refer to the instructor as pushy or a task master. If I listen with patience, they’ll accuse me of not wanting to help them. These people are a pain in my ass! I did pick up one thing from Melissa called “negative politeness.” *The Oxford Guide* has a binary quote from Thompson et al and Carino and Enders that reads “Students’ reports of their ‘comfort’ in conferences has been shown to be important to their conference situation, and returning for future conferences has been shown to correlate with students’ confidence as writers” (Fitzgerald and lanetta 423). One of my main goals as a writing advisor is to build the tutee’s confidence as a writer. My job isn’t to change them or make them a better person. So I make sure to smile, I gracefully continue through the motions, I bypass all of their negative energy, I help where I can, then I send them on their way. It may not be the proper writing advisor etiquette, but what do you expect from me in this situation? This is prison! I can’t help everyone.

My own mindset about writing and my ability to write well were cultivated by a North Park writing advisor. She is the reason why I joined this WA program in the first place. Through her praise, her careful instruction of the prompts, and her ability to unbiasedly listen to my point of view, I have become a confident, able, and enthusiastic writer myself. I have helped those around me in some of these same exact ways. Through the use of praise, I make sure that I point out my tutee’s strengths in order to build their confidence in their writing. With a mind focused on careful explanation of the prompt, I walk the tutee through each sentence, line by line. I make sure to point out key words and phrases that they should focus on for the research in order to strengthen their ability to anticipate what the professor is asking for. In an effort to unbiasedly listen, I set aside my own personal judgments about “correct” and “incorrect” thought processes. In doing so, I don’t limit my understanding, and I am able to take in the writer’s point of view, allowing the tutee to shine in the conference and become enthusiastic about their own writing process.

As of now, there are men in Stateville who are benefitting from the skills I have acquired as a writing advisor. Those that I have tutored are approaching their assignments, boldly confident in their abilities to produce good work. Their enthusiasm to write inspires me to help as many men as I can, and this approach also inspires others to do the same. The culture around us only changes when we get involved. We can either keep what we have learned to ourselves, or we can unselfishly share it with others.

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## *The Amplifier* with Alex Negron



"The Amplifier" column is all about celebrating and stressing the importance of **voice** when it comes to writing. In this column, you will read Alex's response to DeCedrick Walkers' response to the "Black Lives Matter" prompt Alex wrote for our North Park Summer creative writing class; also, you will read David "Nazeeh" Bailey's response to Ced's BLM response. [Here's Alex's prompt:](#)

**"Black Lives Matter invited you to make a speech at an injustice rally at Millennium Park. What would your speech consist of? Would you be nervous to speak in front of the large crowd? Why? Would the knowledge you share be firsthand knowledge or through the experiences of others? Would it provide solutions to address the injustices the city faces? What would your opening statement (or whole speech) be? You only have 5 minutes at the microphone, so keep your text under 850 words."**

### Presentation Response by De'Cedrick Walker

(1006 words)

If I were invited to a Black Lives Matter injustice rally to make a speech, my speech would consist of the tone deafness of the talking points that non-blacks use to show their public support for black lives. Like, for example, the prompt that I'm responding to that has the word combination of "injustice rally." Now, one may think my intent sounds a big paradoxical and antagonistic towards all the great people who are personally and professionally invested in the improvement of black lives. But if you afford me a little bit of your patience to allow me to explain, you will understand my position.

First, let's say a man buys his daughter a pet hamster. And like any daughter, she simply wants to hug, feed, and play with the hamster because it's fun. The father, however, sees how beneficial the pet is, but he believes that if it were allowed the run of the house, it would leave droppings all over the furniture in every room of the house. So, instead of allowing the pet to have the run of the house and being upfront with his daughter about what he truly thought of the hamster, he convinced his daughter that the hamster would be "safer" if it were placed in a cage. Because she has no reason to distrust him, she happily obliges. After all, daddy knows best.

After a couple of months of pulling the hamster from the cage to play with it and placing it back in the cage after it serves its purpose, the daughter noticed that her pet had gained some weight and it seemed sluggish. She communicated the observation to her father. After he investigated, he decided to remedy the hamster's weight and sluggish issues by placing a wheel into the cage so the hamster could exercise. The hamster took to the wheel non-stop for what seemed like hours. Finally, it stopped running. In the following weeks and months, the hamster wasn't as enthusiastic about the new toy as it was before, but it managed to recognize the benefit of exercising. Running on the wheel may have caused the hamster to remember what it felt like to be free, but that hamster certainly knew that it was not and most likely would never be. None of what I just described sounds unreasonable because it is a typical understanding of how humans normally interact with the non-humans we intend to domesticate. But, I wonder, would it still be reasonable if we learned how non-humans felt about interacting and being domesticated by humans? (Continued on next page...)

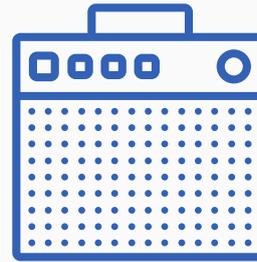
# The Amplifier

Presentation Response by De'Cedrick Walker  
(continued...)

African Americans are the hamster in this example. The father is the system of white supremacy in all its thoughts and intents. The daughter—all peoples confined within the system's parameters—is the unsuspecting recipient of the system's outward mechanisms. The hamster's wheel—an outward mechanism—is the right to peacefully protest. Like the wheel that the hamster ran on for hours, African Americans have been speaking at (running on) injustice rallies since we began applying the provision to peacefully protest. The peaceful protest mechanism has become all that black folks could utilize whenever an incident like a white cop killing an unarmed black person occurs. It's one thing when the father, who decided why the cage should be instituted, what size the cage should be with respect to the range and scope of its boundaries, and the quality of the social institutions or "hamster wheels," acts on an idea of arbitrary control.

But it is another thing when the unsuspecting recipient (daughter) extrapolates the hamster's wheel out of the controlled environment and places it into another environment to help another out-of-shape hamster exercise. The intellectual construction of this prompt functions like a hamster's wheel in that it creates the opportunity for those who have been abused by injustices to reiterate those injustices to the people who have been through similar experiences. Now, while such an event may not appear problematic, it most certainly presents a banal-like atmosphere because the recipient passes on to another the very thing she saw her father do.

Furthermore, as a result, the hamster's wheel will be what proceeding generations will utilize as the way to respond to an injustice that only results in an experience of literally and figuratively running in circles. Her intent may not have been malicious, but since the daughter did not take into account what the hamster's life was like before her father put it in a cage, it never occurred to her that the hamster's issues of gaining weight and looking sluggish were because it was taken out of its natural element and contained in an unnatural one.



The African American experience in America, from the point of being bought as slaves until now, has been lived within the framework of injustices. Like the hamster, we were taken against our will and placed in a cage (low-income communities) and given wheels to exhaust ourselves whenever we became heavy with the grief of unrest when one of our unarmed men or women were killed by a cop. But there was a time before we were stolen, marketed, and bought. Back then, we were Kings, Queens, Princesses, and Princes. We ran and leapt with unbridled joy and constant laughter within the boundaries of a vast and rich continent. There was neither injustice to protest over nor any injustice to rally about. In fact, there would be no injustices to protest over if the seat of power in America were to remove the containment cages and let us have a run of the place. Of course, there would be no droppings because, unlike hamsters, we are actually human. So let's not try to see what someone would say at an injustice rally. Rather, ask us what will we do when the cages are removed and when we are offered, not allowed, the run of the place. Because you would be talking to our inner freedom. You would be talking to what we were designed to be, which is free.

"A Direct Response to Ced's BLM Presentation"

by David "Nazeeh" Bailey

My initial response to Ced's "Black Lives Matter" presentation was quite lengthy. I fully acknowledge his attempts at utilizing his fluffy Lil' Friend "the hamster" as his metaphor, and I can clearly see the picture he has drawn.

We (humanity) were created in God's "image and likeness," and had the duty of vice-gerents of the earth. So, this would include bringing under our control and dominion all other living creatures on the earth as part of God's ultimate design and purpose. And providing an exercise wheel after observing the weight was definitely an act of kindness shown.

As the cage served as a human necessity even for the fluffy guy's safety as well, it was used to ensure that the hamster could be located and have the run of the house. Primates would have served as a better example (than the hamster), seeing that they are more related to humans in a variety of ways, like their family structure, communication, tool-making skills, and even making or having wars between clans, since you'll find they are territorial. They even cannibalize their enemies, eating their flesh.

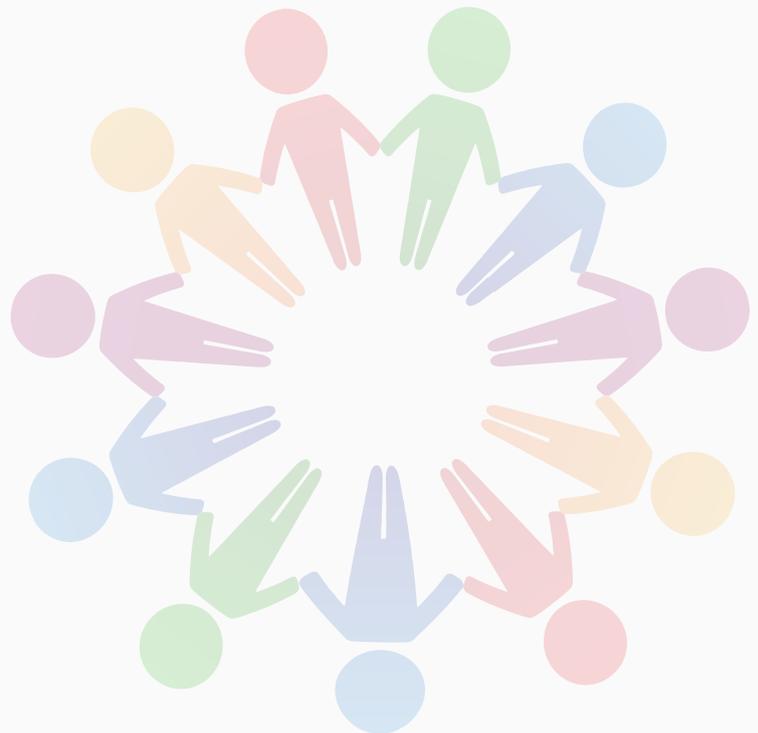
In addition, we would be dismissive if we didn't fully acknowledge and recognize that the systemic racism we are fighting against is categorically multi-faceted and, therefore, would absolutely consist of a combination of injustices. Right? Here goes, the fluffy hamster's wheel, the system itself with all of its variables, different facets as a whole that keep us trapped within a racist system and most of the time out as well.

We're being unable to eradicate the mistreatment, dehumanization, degradation, marginalization, and genocide against people of color, as well as the entire societal infrastructure. Now, we would be unfair to ourselves if we did not recognize that we as human beings do to our fellow man/woman what other living creatures do not do to the same extent as we do, such as degrading, devaluing, or setting up a caste system of annihilation.

*The Amplifier*"Closing Response to Ced's BLM Presentation"

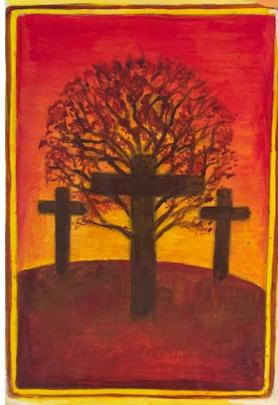
by Alex Negron

What I love about De'Cedrick's response to the "Black Lives Matter" prompt was that he was able to flip the prompt on its head to make it his own. He was able to lead his audience on a journey that so many pet hamsters find themselves on and compare it to the complex and polarizing issue of White Supremacy. This sort of flipping a subject on its head reminds me of Paul's epistle to the Galatians in 4:22-31. De'Cedrick's response is a perfect reminder that prompts are fluid guides, not rigid and restrictive. It also reminds us that being able to take complex subjects and expounding on them with simple images keeps your audience engaged. It leaves the reader wanting to know more about the subject. This text left me wondering: when will they finally ask the hamster what does he/she/they want? Great job, De'Cedrick; your voice in this response gave me the sense that you were present with me.

Write Your Response Here:

## *Grafted In*

**This column highlights elements of integration and synthesis within our community.  
The idea for this column and image credit goes to C.D. Everett**



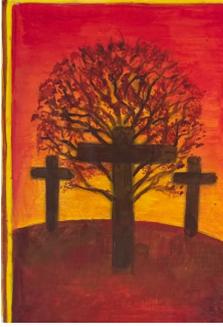
“New Beginnings: A Dual-Campus Writing Center” by WA Darby Agovino

North Park University’s Writing Center is a dual-campus center: one campus in Chicago is over 15 years old and employs mostly undergraduate tutors, while the other, in the maximum-security prison Stateville Correctional Center in Crest Hill, Illinois, is three semesters old and run by a diverse group of male MA in Christian Ministry candidates in North Park Seminary’s School of Restorative Arts. Neither could exist without the other, as both centers are united by a coordinated effort to provide students in the community with mentorship and writing support. My time as an outside Writing Advisor (WA) for this dual-campus writing center, especially during COVID-19, showed me the value of access to information, identity expression, and ability to amplify one’s voice, as well as the privilege that has allowed me to take those things for granted.

Our Chicago center would be a different place without our sister center in Stateville. Stateville students relentlessly push our Chicago center to be better. They remind us not to take for granted the resources we have access to and drive us to push the boundaries of writing center work to use our power to support the oppressed, whether that is through supporting social justice reform, acceptance of code-meshing, or publishing of our dual-center experience.

For the past year and a half, I have been involved with our center’s Letter Partners Program, which has given me the opportunity to read Stateville students’ writing as well as send feedback and my writing into Stateville and receive feedback from students. I have also worked as a mentor for two semesters to two Stateville WAs in training while they were enrolled in a tutor training class taught at the prison by our center director. While mentorship for outside WAs in training is done via face to face conferencing (this semester through the online platform MS Teams), inside Stateville, mentorship is done through written feedback exchanges.

Correspondence with my first mentee allowed me to rediscover the art of letter writing. My mentee and I exchanged papers from our courses and gave honest, constructive feedback. The act of physically writing letters to and receiving letters from my mentee made me feel more connected to him, not to mention that his letters were often extremely long, detailed, and sincere. I connected with my mentee in a way that I had been failing to connect with my fellow students in Chicago.



## *Grafted In*

“New Beginnings: A Dual-Campus Writing Center” by WA Darby Agovino (cont...)

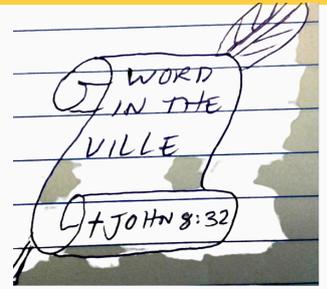
I continued to correspond with Stateville students, and in the Spring of 2020, I became a mentor to a second mentee. We corresponded about commenting on student’s papers and how to create the proper tone when giving feedback. But after North Park’s spring break last March, all communication with students in Stateville ceased, as Chicago and Stateville went into quarantine modes. This was a scary time. We learned of rising cases within the prison and death of two highly valued students. One was my mentee. I learned of this loss over email and struggled to comprehend that I would never receive another letter from him.

Despite the lockdown that continued at Stateville, our center was able to run Creative Writing and Grammar Correspondence courses this past summer. Through these courses, I reconnected with my first mentee over a haiku about cleaning poop off the walls (part of his job in the prison). I received letters about student struggles during lockdown, grammar handouts, and creative writing every week. I wrote feedback and sent in my own poems.

Last summer, I had felt that we were not doing enough. I wanted to march into the prison and demand that my colleagues and my friends be treated with the humanity I knew they deserved, but I was devaluing the power that we gave to Stateville students by providing an ear to listen and a microphone to amplify their voices. So, we created our first School of Restorative Arts Newsletter titled *Feather Bricks* with the theme “Growing” that is completely made up of writing from Stateville students and was disseminated widely within the prison and is also linked on our writing center’s website.

I designed the layout of *Feather Bricks*. I spent hours over the summer choosing fonts and images. What I valued most about this job was the connection it gave me to a larger purpose that students have been articulating for a year and a half: listen to and amplify the voices of the voiceless. My correspondence with Stateville students has shown me the importance of connection in a learning environment that demonstrates the power writing has to bring people together. The significance of this moment, as the world faces a pandemic and an uprising against systemic racism, makes these experiences even more relevant: when you lend your voice to the voiceless, your purpose is magnified.

## Word In the 'Ville



- **“WRITING CONTEST** Announcement from Alex Negron:

North Park’s writing center is holding its 2nd annual inside/out writing contest! Last year, North Park students from Chicago and Stateville campuses participated in a writing contest that promoted the importance of championing the community of writing both inside and out. This year, to further our mission to cultivate a culture of writing at Stateville, we would like to extend a special invitation to pre-GED, GED, and Northeastern UWW students to participate in this writing contest. Contestants from the inside will have their submissions judged by Writing Advisors from the outside, and submissions from outside WAs will be judged by WAs from the inside.

**Submission deadline is November 15th** and writing can be sent in homework packets in care of "Professor Melissa" with the label "Writing Contest." Winners will be published in *Feather Bricks* Dec/Jan edition. This year’s optional theme is “Cross-talking, Code-meshing & Community”:

Cross-talking: conversations that happen between cultural groups within a larger community in speech or in writing. Example: NP Chicago campus students discussing a sermon delivered by Pastor Jeff and written by SRA student Pastor Alex.

Code-meshing: using a variety of mixed diction (languages or dialects) in a single utterance or text, as opposed to “code switching” where one would use a single language (such as Standard Academic English) in one context such as an essay and then “switch” to another one (such as Black English or Spanglish) in a different context such as in a home environment. Example: writing an exegesis paper for Professor Will and including quotes from the King James Bible (language #1), using seminary-student vocabulary to explain those quotes (language #2), then also including references and quotes from hip-hop songs to support your thesis (language #3).

**Submission Guidelines:** Submit one literary piece in any genre that includes but is not limited to: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and drama. Your entry cannot be more than 1,200 words for fiction/non-fiction, no more than 500 words for poetry or songs, and no more than 5 pages for drama.

- The Writing Center would like to give "Extra Mile Awards" to **Luigi Adamo** for submitting the first (and many) conference reports of fall semester and to **Vickie Reddy** for her unending devotion to the *Feather Bricks* layout, printing, and distribution process.

- Kudos to SRA students **David Denson** and **Steven Ramirez**, whose devotionals are being shared this fall the entire North Park community through Campus Ministries.

- Big thanks to **Chester "C.Mac" McKinney** for attending more writing center drop-in conferences than any other SRA student in Sept/Oct; we wish you success with your "Mobilizing for Justice" reflection papers!

- We continue to hold all who have been affected by loss this season in our thoughts and prayers, especially **Shaun Hubbard**, who we also welcome back to classes while looking forward to reading more of his work.

## *Creative Nonfiction*

“Ootu” by Luigi Adamo (continued from previous issue)

### **Part 2:**

Ootu was a small, lizardish human being, about the same size as an ordinary squirrel you’d see in backyards across America. I can see Ootu as clearly now in my mind’s eye as I ever did in my dreams. He had the bright green leathery skin of a baby iguana, and a long feathery tail he would whip side to side while he spoke.

Ootu’s face was much more like a human’s than a lizard’s, having a protruding Roman nose, a sharp jaw, and even a beard as well as eyebrows. He had a full head of thick, coarse black hair as dark as jet that had a blue shimmer to it in the light, and spiked straight up like nails. His eyes, though totally red with now whites in them, I found to have a real kindness to them. Ootu was clad in a shiny green coat of mail that covered his torso, his arms, and came to the mid-thigh like a long, overs-sized tucked T-shirt would. There was a strange gold symbol on the chest of the mail that as a child I never understood but have since discovered is an ancient Hebrew symbol from “The Test of Solomon.” He wore a leather-like belt with a scabbard that held a little scimitar that would burst into flame when drawn. His clawed, human-like hands had four fingers as well as an apposable thumb, and were quick as lightning. I remember how he used to make small items vanish or appear in those hands faster than my eyes could catch. When I would show surprise whenever he did so, he would tease that he hoped my mind was quicker than my eyes were. His legs and feet were always bare, and very lizard-like. As such, he would seem to have to lean on the base of his tail to stand upright.

As I write this, I know how it seems that Ootu sounds very frightening to behold, but I was never scared of him. In fact, I found myself much more calm and at peace in his presence than anywhere else. Then or since. I wish I could find that kind of peace again. I could really use it. Ootu and I had all kinds of conversations in these dreams. Though we communicated clearly and I would speak, Ootu actually never spoke out loud. His words would just appear within my mind without him ever opening up his mouth to make a sound. He would, however, open his mouth to flick his tongue snake-like from time to time. He told me he was a watcher, and when I asked him what he was watching, he replied simply, “You!” His reasons for doing so were not as simply answered.



## *Creative Nonfiction*

“Ootu” by Luigi Adamo (continued from previous issue)

### **Part 3:**

Ootu didn't reveal why he was watching “me” all at once, but over many encounters I was able to ferret it out of him. I'd pepper him with questions, and I could always tell when I had struck a nerve when he would reply with, “perhaps,” “time may tell” or “in time, you'll know.” If I persisted on that subject, he would rest my mind by broadcasting these amazing images into it, making me lose my chain of thought.

Despite Ootu's mind manipulations, I was able to learn quite a lot. Ootu was worried for me. He told me how he was a special kind of person because I was very authentic and would put myself in harm's way to defend another. “You're the type that would go marching into hell for the glimmer of a heavenly cause. That's exceedingly rare in this world,” he once told me. Ootu took to calling me “Albus Equis” which he explained meant “White Knight.” When I asked what a “White Knight” was, the image of a knight in shining armor atop a white horse charging to someone's aid with sword drawn was projected into my mind's eye. I even felt the sense of pride of protective action that such a knight would feel when charging to someone's aid, and I liked it. Ootu's concern for me was that here were plenty of faces and beings who enthusiastically work the will of Evil in this world, and he feared such things would find me, and twist me to be more like them. Cause me to become jaded and calloused. Ruining me as a force of protection or help.

It wasn't solely my own sake that Ootu's concern focused on. “There are going to be others. Others who are far more important than you will be, who will find themselves in terrible peril and will be needing your help,” he explained. If you are bent with malice, or twisted in motive, the universe won't have any help to offer when your lifeline and theirs cross.

My young, immature mind tried its best to understand the complex riddles Ootu seemed to communicate in whenever he tried to be purposely evasive, but often I couldn't follow. It never bothered me when I couldn't understand. I just enjoyed sitting in Ootu's company. A true sense of peace radiated from him like heat from a furnace. I miss that sense of peace, that sense of safety. I haven't felt it before nor since.

If we weren't conversing or basking in each other's presence, Ootu and I would play some pretty fantastic games. At least, he called them games, but looking back, they seem more like training exercise.

To be continued in our next issue...

# *Creative Nonfiction*

## "Confessions of a Channel Surfer" by Raymond Nesbit

I go through a range of emotions every day. Most of the time it's not due to social interactions with staff or other inmates. Neither is it the mail or phone calls. The majority of my emotional incongruities are from television. Perhaps this has happened to you as well. Whatever the show is: a movie, breaking news, a documentary, even a comedy, these programs can make you laugh, yell, cry, throw a fit, or even turn it off. For myself personally, I'm addicted to channel surfing. Like surfers of the beach wanting to catch the best waves, I like to catch a plethora of airwaves on different channels. These emotional incongruities reach a peak when several programs that I like come on at the same time, and I have to make a snap decision on what to watch. If it's a re-run, I'll catch it later. Other times, I flip back and forth between commercials. Breaking news stories usually take precedence. Religious programs have the highest priority, especially if the speaker answers a question I've pondered a long time without resolution.

Some say I'm a conspiracist, and I'll readily admit they are right. My conspiracy theory concerning TV is that it is a form of mind control. The Apostle Paul may have prophesized of TV in the last days using metaphorical language of "those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts (2 Tim: 3-6). Cable TV creeps over our walls and into our lives. The media and their advertisers send electronic signals that bombard us with information overload that can turn a truth into a lie (Fake News) if you hear it enough. When drive-thru movies first opened, subliminal messages were embedded in their commercials. The message was simple: "Buy more popcorn now!" Every drive-in noted an increase in popcorn sales as a result of the subliminal signal. The next step in subliminal programming was for the advertisers to broadcast similar messages to a nationwide television audience. Consequently, the multi-national corporations using this technique generated great profits. At that time, early TVs had 450 lines of resolution. These subliminal signals are broadcast only for a moment, whether they are beamed by satellite or recorded for playback later. I've only just scratched the surface of this topic. Suffice it to say, I'm aware of what the media is doing, and I still watch TV. I believe the majority of people who watch TV may not be aware of the extent of the "mind games" being played on them. The purpose of these overt and subliminal signals is to sway your opinion and alter reality. After those 1-3 seconds on the screen, those images are imprinted into your limbic or "unconscious brain" to act upon when the advertiser gives the signal.

The media upped the ante when broadcasting by using a military term called "shock and awe." CNN's "BREAKING NEWS" is a perfect example. Whenever this logo is flashed, CNN wants you to drop what you're doing or else you'll miss the message. Two things can occur from watching too much sensationalism: first, you become emotionally entangled because the story is so riveting. Like the first movie I saw was "Les Miserable." Allow me to paint a synopsis of the scene. The main character, having escaped jail for stealing a loaf of bread, is taken in by a priest. The escaped convict ends up stealing the priest's expensive silverware. The police catch him the same night, and the stolen booty and the bandit are brought back to the priest. The priest explains to the police that he gave the man these items. After the police begrudgingly leave, the convict cannot believe it! He had always been treated harshly by anyone and everyone in authority since his incarceration. Then, without warning or fanfare, the priest goes into absolution mode through the power of the Holy Spirit! This causes Jean Claude to fall to his knees and cry. This convict and thief experiences God's "Amazing Grace" that removes all the hatred from his soul that had been building up for years. This scene was so powerful that I cried uncontrollably. From that point on, I noticed how TV could elicit an emotional response.

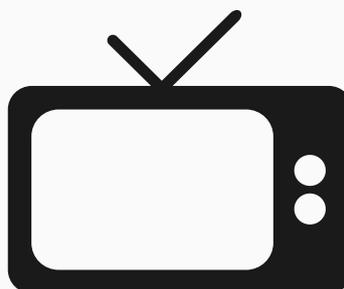
## "Confessions of a Channel Surfer" by Raymond Nesbit (continued...)

On the other hand, the second thing that can happen is too much sensationalism can dull one's moral senses. Again, let me flashback for you. As the FCC relaxed rules about what can be seen or heard on television, the number of rapes, murders, and crimes shown there has skyrocketed since the 1960's. Those who witness such violent events become desensitized because, unless it is a relative or an acquaintance lost, the pain and suffering viewed is compartmentalized and marginalized.

Personally, I've found that while books and newspapers can elicit emotional response, TV is more visually stimulating. As I sit here in prison due to the pandemic lockdown, I can't seem to turn off the TV. Whether it's movies, news, documentaries, or religious programs, I'm addicted to being bombarded with information both useless and profitable. Like the chemical dopamine the brain gives off when a person gets high on a drug, I get high off of processing info. Every now and then I may even talk audibly (but not loudly) with my TV. For one, it doesn't talk back 😊. But then again, a program can get my attention if it answers a question I've been seeking an answer to. Then, channel surfing can be profitable.

Let me elaborate on how channel surfing can be rewarding in many ways. Surfing allows me to utilize the gift of knowledge (I Cor.12:8) that I asked the Lord for years ago. Many times I see Bible prophesy unfold. We've all seen on TV about the Corona virus, the demise of George Floyd and other people of color at the hands of the police, the protests, looting, and lockdowns. Watching these episodes sometimes causes intense visceral responses. My veins in my head may show, my heart palpitates, then beads of sweat, the clenching of the fist, the cracking of the knuckles and tensing of the body involuntarily. My God, what am I doing? How can I fight against this? It is hard to hear from God when you focus on the temporal and not the spiritual. Then I think of scriptures to temper my spirit like Heb. 1:1-3: "Why do you show me iniquity and cause me to see trouble?" Jesus foretold all these televised events in Matthew 24:7 nation against nation. Nation is the Greek word *ethos* which in English is ethnic. Christ not only alluded to racial tensions but pestilences (Covid-19) and famines (Amos 8:11). I've also seen paradigms from the Bible play out in the media. Like Gen 47: 20-22 when Joseph was in Egypt and due to a famine the government acquired most of the land. The financial crisis of 2008 is a perfect example, when the US government had to bail out Freddie Mac, the federal agencies where most home loans originate. Another way TV is profitable spiritually is when I watch Christian programs that teach not preach. They teach just like the Bible says we should learn, "line by line" (Isaiah 28:10). Finally, TV is profitable not only for financial news, but for hoping I'll see a news snippet that will help my case.

However, what drew me to writing? It is way to take my mind off the negativity I see from the news and media. My solution to channel surfing is to admit I have a problem. I haven't had a drink of alcohol nor smoked what is now purchased in some places legally in this country in 15 years, so TV became my vice. I'm even getting frustrated at the TV because many shows present too much soft porn or ungodly lifestyles (Rom 1:27). Then I recall what David said in Psalm 101:3 (NKJ): "I will set nothing wicked before my eyes. I will hate the work of those who fall away; It shall not cling to me." In Julia Cameron's book *The Writer's Life*, she says that "writing is a means of prayer (55); it connects us to the invisible world and is actually a "spiritual tool" (57). While I have an aversion to channeling (New Age), since I've set my pen to paper, I became so focused that I didn't channel surf the TV. Ok, maybe once.



## *Alphabet Inspiration with Elton Williams*

Choose one letter of the alphabet and express a thought wherein each word begins with that chosen letter. This is meant to be a fun exercise in vocabulary expression. The more profound the statement, the better. Submit your creations for "Q" through "U" to be printed in our next newsletter.

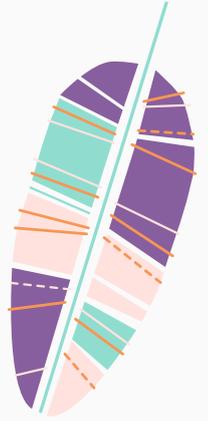
**B** Bouleversement. Bank's been burglarized by bile-born bishops; bailing battalions breaking boundaries, bending beliefs, bringing believers before Beelzebub's block. Being befuddled by Babel's backhanded balderdash, beholding Babylon's bacchanalian backdrop, blinded, believers behave boisterously: beast-led, bemused, bamboozled. But Biblican bondings bring balm, broadcasting blessings, benevolence, backup, balance. Blindly battle beastly bands, bespokenly battle-dressed, bekinghted, born betimes...betoken...bann...betrothal. --By Elton Williams



Professor Pavlik procrastinates prolifically: pondering punctuation (profoundly), petting portly pit-bull puppies, popping popcorn, perilously profiling professional peers, proofreading personal pieces, putting purple pens/pencils places, pigmenting papers, peeling pinkish peaches, proclaiming poetry (poorly), pestering parents, pouring pitchers, pinching pennies, predicting poverty, posting photos per pandemic pestilence, projecting pet-peeves, pouting, practicing, praying. --By Professor Melissa



## *Closing by Nancy Arnesen*



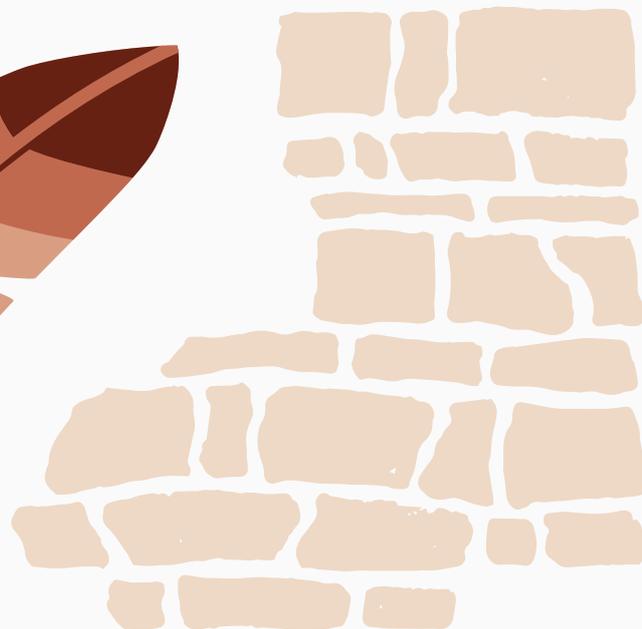
As an English professor, I believe in the transformative and liberating power of words, and so I read this second edition of *Feather Bricks* with great joy and gratitude. Many thanks to all who have worked on this project, and to all who have contributed their poetry, prose, and artwork. Your words and images are moving, thought-provoking, inspiring, and filled with possibility. As a whole, they speak profoundly of the extraordinary learning and faith community that you have all created together.

Writing in the 16th century, Sir Philip Sidney says that poetry is “a sword, not an embroidery needle.” By this, I think he means that poetry (and all creative expression) is more than simply decorative; it is an instrument of power, power which (like a sword) can be used for good or ill.

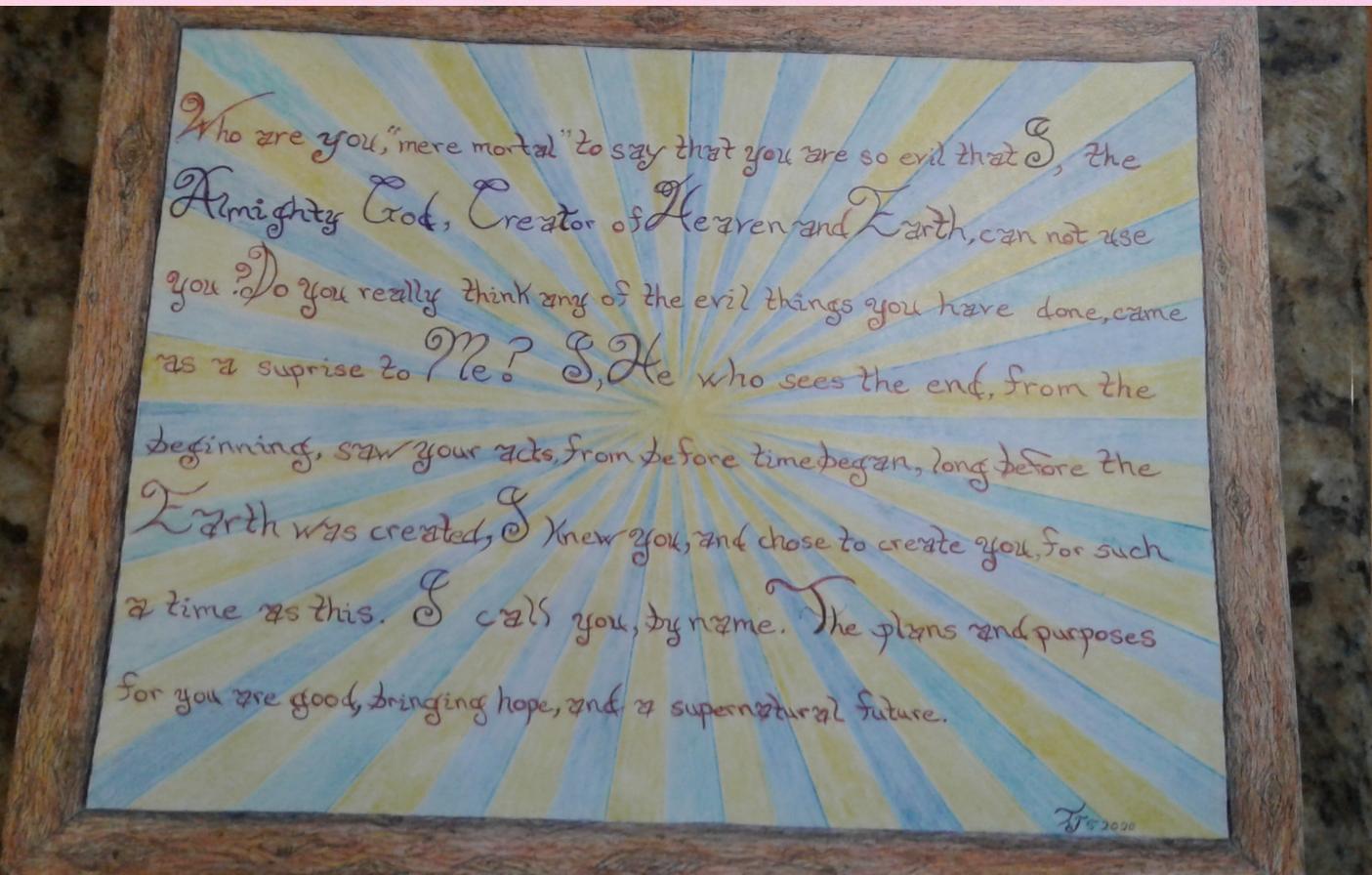
At the end of his response to De’Cedrick Walker’s Black Lives Matter presentation, Alex Negron writes: “your voice in this response gave me the sense that you were present with me” (22).

High praise indeed, and ultimately, this is the “good” that *Feather Bricks* points us toward: the sense that we can be present with one another through our words.

Nancy Arnesen  
Professor of English  
North Park University



## Notes



Who are you, "mere mortal" to say that you are so evil that I, the Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and Earth, can not use you? Do you really think any of the evil things you have done, came as a surprise to Me? I, He who sees the end, from the beginning, saw your acts, from before time began, long before the Earth was created, I knew you, and chose to create you, for such a time as this. I call you, by name. The plans and purposes for you are good, bringing hope, and a supernatural future.

T.B.G. 2020

by Ted B. Gray "Country"