

HELPING PRISONERS ON DEATH ROW  
LIVE CONNECTED & FRUITFUL LIVES

# COMPASSION

WRITTEN BY DEATH ROW PRISONERS & ASSISTED BY LIFE WITHOUT PAROLE PRISONERS

VOL. 28 | ISSUE 133 | BI-MONTHLY  
JULY 2023



## IN THIS ISSUE:

- EDITORIAL: BREAKING CHAINS
- LETTER FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR: THE ART OF WRITING
- LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
- VICTIMS VOICE: UNBEARABLE SADNESS & ANGER
- IDENTITY...
- LITTLE BIRDIE: DAY OR NIGHT, I'LL FLY TOO
- MOURNING SONG
- CAN'T DO A LIFE SENTENCE IN A DAY
- NOT WHAT MANY PROCLAIM
- ENLIGHTENMENT
- AND MORE...

Publishing compassionate and introspective articles written by death row and life without parole prisoners.

[www.compassionondeathrow.org](http://www.compassionondeathrow.org)

P.O. Box 623 | Perrysburg, OH 43552

## UNTITLED

In the deepest corners of my heart lurks a darkness that utterly destroys the man-spirit within me.

It looms as dusk threatens to overtake the light of the spirit-conscience known as "day" or "happiness" if you must. My skin crawls as I attempt to escape myself, silently screaming, being heard only by the echoes of darkness.

Teardrops of blood, the avenging angel arises upon pillars of glass, suffering, piercing my bleak, shattered heart made of lava rock and stoned memories, reaching out to broken dreams never to come true. I've never had such surreal nightmares, grasped a moment...a second...holding onto what was, what could have been, only to find emptiness shunned without love.

Suffocating claws grip the throat of truth in a tango-dance of death. All believe their creators' call: Yahweh, Yeshua, Allah, Buddha, breath, heartbeat. All are destined to see the silver cord of life cut before the dawn of tragedy.

I cry out but not one wave of vastness replies in gentleness. Yes, my conscience, the man-spirit, screams to crawl out of my skin, to shatter the pillars of the avenging angel, to destroy the hands of Father Time; for darkness becomes my closest companion and discreet lover. Without her, my eternity upon eternity is left void.

Death, where is thy sting? There is no life left within me, only bones of the old, the contrariness of what was before the dawn. The crucifixion of the man-flesh lies at the feet of the avenging angel ready for judgement. I'm ready to give up my soul and spirit...



Samuel Capers  
California Death Row  
San Quentin, CA

## LWOP



## A WILL OF STRENGTH

Being born a thorn  
from within  
I'm torn  
long fight  
I'm worn  
but forward I must  
in me I trust

emancipation my lust  
thus  
with every breath I  
breathe  
I really believe  
that I'm a force  
that will succeed.



Melvin Speight  
SCI Greene  
Waynesburg, PA

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor are welcomed from all prisoners (this includes non-death row prisoners) and the outside community.

In submitting letters, we ask that compassionate and introspective guidelines apply to your communications.

Limit size to 400 words or less. Letters may be edited for clarity and space considerations.

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TEL: 419-350-6655  
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www.compassionondeathrow.org

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All stories are subject to editing for grammar, sentence structure, and clarity.

# EDITORIAL: BREAKING CHAINS

“Is this not the kind of fasting I (God) have chosen?...  
Is it not to share your food with the hungry?...”

Isaiah 58:6-7 (NIV)

Once, during a year-long stint in solitary confinement, I got into an altercation with guards. To punish me, they withheld my food trays for 8 days. I was so hungry I wanted to die!

When I got my food back, I realized being a little hungry didn't scare me anymore; also, if someone asked me for food, I was more willing to share than before because I knew I could do without and I cannot stand to see another person go hungry.

After encountering Isaiah 58, I view my experience as a sort of forced fast that broke my desperate attachment to food and made me more compassionate to the hungry – God had used my hunger punishment to develop my character.

I see now that I have many such attachments that stop me from sharing my God-given resources (money, time, energy, talents, etc.) because to share means I have to sacrifice something. By noticing what resources I'm attached to, I now decide how to use targeted fasting to loosen my grip: if I am unwilling to share my money, for instance, then I'm too attached to it, so I deliberately “fast” from money by giving it away or not allowing myself to spend it on myself for a week. By doing without, it expands my capacity for compassion toward the less fortunate. To this day, God uses fasting to break my fleshly attachments – to better love my neighbor. Amen



George Wilkerson  
Editor  
North Carolina Death Row  
Raleigh, NC

## LWOP LETTER FROM THE ASSISTANT EDITOR

### INTROSPECT: THE ART OF WRITING

As a young man serving life, I had a hard time finding myself. In the beginning, I followed the crowd, even though I knew they were leading me down the wrong path.

Luckily, when I locked in my cell, I wrote about my frustrations. Sometimes, I wrote a poem, sometimes a story, sometimes a letter. It didn't matter what form I used; I found a way to channel adversity through art.

Over time, I learned to rely on my writing more than on the people around me. I made mistakes but writing gave me the chance to understand where I went wrong and how I could correct myself. As I matured, I watched my old friends grow more immature because they did not take the time to evaluate themselves.

Writing not only changed my perspective on life, it allowed me to follow my dreams. As a writer, I have accomplished more than many people who are not in prison.

Darrell Sharpe wrote to ask where he could find my work. Most of my publishing history is in online magazines, websites, or so old that they are hard to find. However, there are two books on Amazon that may inspire you and others to keep up the hard work of writing in prison.

Try “Cage” and “Ambitious,” both written by Vance Phillips. I highly recommend them.



Phillip Vance Smith II  
Assistant Editor  
Nash Correctional Institution  
Nashville, NC

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

## BEFORE I GO

I took my last breath last night –  
there was no struggle, I didn't fight.

I just closed my eyes and let it flow,  
the peace, the calm before a snow.

My body's numb, I'm sinking down.  
I will not wear no funeral gown.

My life flashed before my eyes,  
bad choices led to my demise.

I couldn't hold the guilt

yet it was mine to keep.

The evil we do, that's what we reap.

An eye for an eye makes us both half-blind –  
let's look together, see what else we can find.

Down...Down...Down we go –  
where do we stop? How should I know?

And when the cold envelopes me with its death kiss,  
when I'm gone, it won't be me you'll miss.

Take my fortune,  
don't forget my cloak –

I'll leave you everything  
but there's one problem:

I'm broke!



Shari Eggum  
Crain Unit  
Gatesville, TX

## DEATH OF INNOCENCE

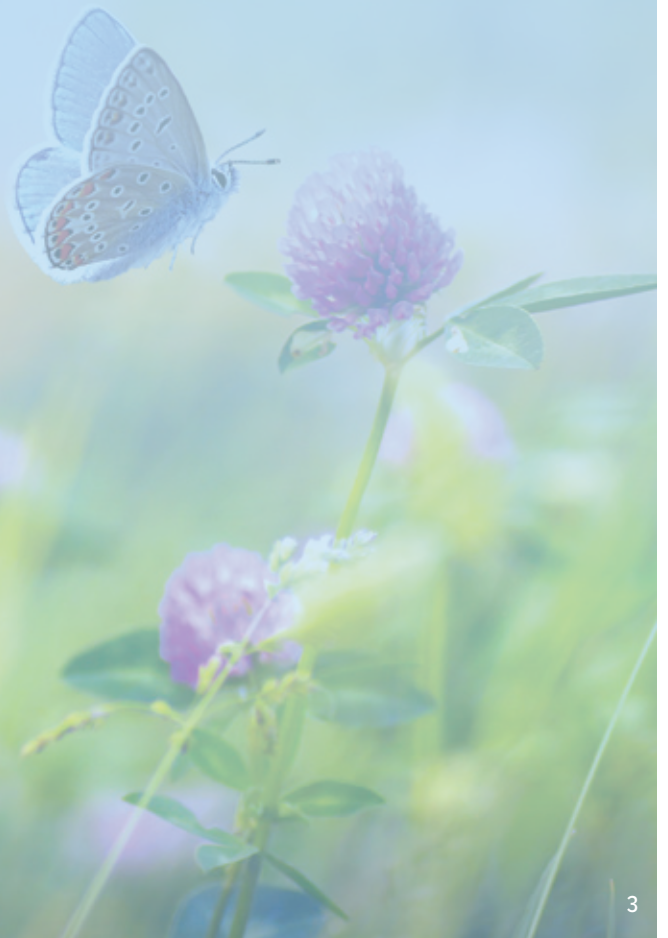
In the beginning it was a shining time,  
that the mind's eye saw through a golden glow:

It was innocence before the age of reason,  
at the dawn of memory. But sin is a cruel green  
thing that grows like a weed in everyone's garden.

And all too soon come sudden clear images  
where memory becomes linear and precious,  
but that irretrievable kind of innocence dies in us.



Stephen LaValle  
Sullivan Correctional Facility  
Fallsburg, NY



# VICTIMS VOICE UNBEARABLE SADNESS & ANGER



I am a wife, mother, and sister. I am currently in grad school working on a Master's in clinical mental health counseling. My sister was murdered on November 27, 2018, and I, along with our family, became a part of the group no one wants to be in, serving a life sentence, with no hope for appeal, as homicide survivors. I have been a caregiver most of my life and done grief support (not professionally) and being on the flip side of survivor's guilt is a difficult path to walk down.

My sister's murderer was arraigned on March 6<sup>th</sup> of 2020, a trial was set for April 12<sup>th</sup> of 2021. Our mother died on March 18, 2021, three weeks before her daughter's trial was to start and I hold my sister's murderer accountable for her death as well.

Sammy was a mother of four, a social worker, and our baby sister. The grief, at times, is

unbearable. Her children were her life and she deserved to see them grow and blossom. As I work through my own grief, it helps immeasurably to share it with others who are walking through the same trauma survivors of homicide endure.

I believe in the vision of SOMS, having been a part of the online support group for the past two years and a volunteer board member since January 2020. Some days, Siblings of Murdered Siblings has been that saving grace in a day or week of unbearable sadness and anger. It is an honor and privilege to help grow this group and organization, so that others who are suffering like I am, and my family is, have a resource to help them through the horror of the murder of their loved one.

Michele Schottelkorb

For more information visit:  
[www.siblingsofmurderedsiblings.org](http://www.siblingsofmurderedsiblings.org)

## IDENTITY...

People are very interested in identity, and we're all defined by something. But too many times, we find our identity in the wrong things. What we allow to define us has a great impact on every part of our lives, so it's important we find the "right" identity. It is usually early in the conversation when what we do for a living or what training we have is brought up. And if I don't tell you, there's a good chance you'll ask, "What do you do?"



Our identity tells others who we are or want to be, what we're about, what we stand for, what to expect from us. It could speak to what's happened to us, where we've been. Some identify by skin color ("I'm Black" or "I'm White"), others by religion or nation, still others by sexuality ("I'm straight" or "I'm gay"). People define themselves in many ways – you could be a banker, businessman, baker, nurse, electrician. A Cancer survivor, athlete, student, artist, republican. A democrat, Catholic, Baptist, etc. We could be many of these things at once. To say they define you, that you identify by/with them, is to say your life is organized by and around them.

But what if you identify as an addict? An inmate? A victim? Or what if you say you're a white supremacist? Think of the messages those send to others...and to yourself. I hear too many talking more about their old life and how they've

experienced hurt, focusing on it, letting it define them. "Well, because of my past abuse, this is how I am." "I can't do this or that because of how I was raised."

To identify by pain, we can allow our pain to become excuses; oftentimes crutches. But if you're trying, working to better yourself, you can overcome the past! I'm speaking generally – some traumas are lifelong struggles. But otherwise, why in the world would you choose to identify with your old life? How you identify yourself now affects how you think and speak.

Instead of focusing on the new you, do you start reliving those bad times, maybe even brag about it? "I used to drink more and chase women more than anybody in the country!" "They treated me so bad; they did this and that to me..." Do you get lost in these past gory details? If so, before you know it, you're either missing those "good old

Continues on next page

# IDENTITY...

Continued from previous page

days” or you’re feeling sorry for yourself... That is what holding onto your old identity can do. What if instead, we said, “I had a rotten childhood/ marriage/whatever...but I won’t allow that negative experience to define me any longer?”

Imagine being a prisoner and your captors handcuff and shackle you, making it impossible to move quickly let alone run away. Those restraints are terrible but you have to endure them. Then one day you don’t have to wear them anymore. You’re free but you can’t adjust to the image of your life without them. In conversation, you tell others, “These chains are just who I am.” It’s confusing because you’re physically free but mentally and emotionally, you’re still wearing shackles! If I

define myself by my chains, it helps me justify my brokenness; it helps me justify my failings – those things I know don’t belong in my life but I refuse to let go of.

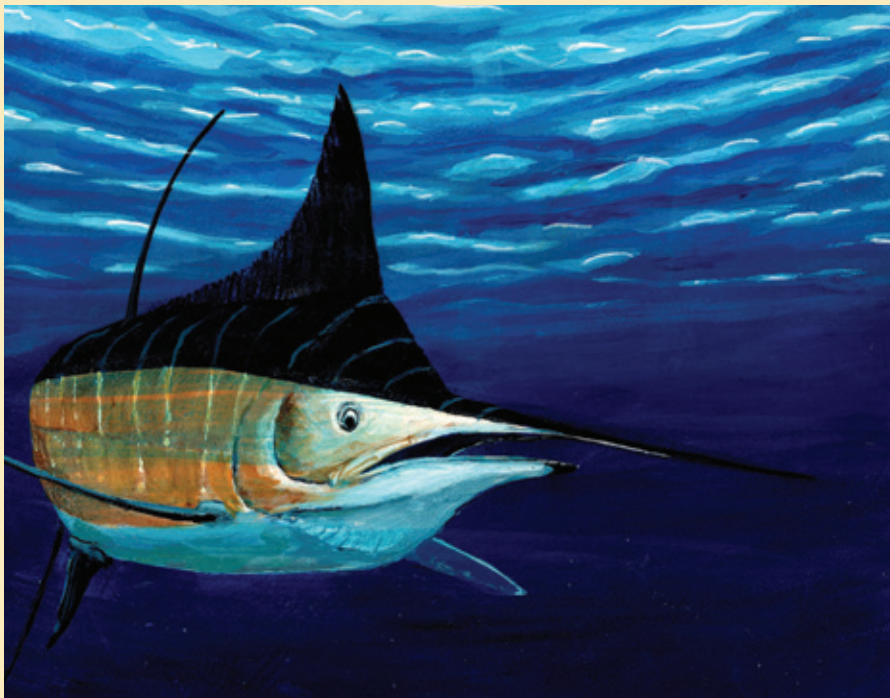
Living with an old identity will only weigh you down, frustrate and discourage you. Let go of the old and grab onto the new! Let the old die and you’ll find it so much easier to move forward.

Let today be the first day of your new – positive – productive identity.



John Robinson  
Kansas Death Row  
El Dorado, Kansas

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By John Sexton  
Florida Death Row  
Raidford, FL

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Call 419-874-1333 and ask for Compassion office to verify availability.

## LITTLE BIRDIE: DAY OR NIGHT, I’LL FLY TOO

Little birdie, little birdie  
in the sky so high and blue,  
why are you so cheery, singing in the tree?  
Are you here to visit me?  
Can’t you see I’m not happy?  
Just sad and blue, my heart is broken.  
Mother and Daddy are fighting again –  
I wish I was dead. I feel so alone,  
nobody cares, it seems...Is there anyone  
who does? Come, answer me!

Little birdie, little birdie,  
I wish you’d teach me how to fly,  
but I got no wings, just these small  
hands and feet.  
Come nearer to me...closer  
for your beauty and wonder comfort me.  
You must be very dear and special to God,  
that He gave you wings to fly with,  
soaring above the clouds,  
singing beautiful songs,  
how wonderful it must be!  
You’re a true marvel and joy to me!

Little birdie, little birdie,  
so dear to my heart.  
My tears don’t fall so much when  
you are near.  
We each have different paths  
but our purpose can be the same –  
cheering up others in their pain.  
I am grown up now; it’s a brand-new day.  
I know your secret, for my King came  
and gave me a brand-new heart,  
filled me with wonder,  
beauty and love. Now I too can soar  
above the clouds...Some day soon  
I’ll fly home beyond the sky.  
Day and night,  
I’ll be with my King and family...



Dennis Morgan Hicks  
Alabama Death Row  
Atmore, AL

# MOURNING SONG

I hear a song within my heart,  
a song I didn't start.

It gets louder as I look upon  
a word that's come and gone:

children committing crime,  
the poor without a dime,  
drug addiction commonplace,  
hatred among the human race.

This song I constantly hear  
is a dirge that brings a tear;  
a sorrow upon mankind,  
to which we all seem blind,  
bringing tears to the eye  
and from the soul a deep sigh,  
pondering how it may all end  
or how to make amends.

Where to begin such a task?  
Who am I to even ask?  
So, I put it forth to you-  
how do we save all that's True?



Kevin Marinelli  
Assistant Editor  
Pennsylvania Death Row  
Waynesburg, PA

## LWOP

# CAN'T DO A LIFE SENTENCE IN A DAY

One late August afternoon at the New Hanover County Courthouse, I sat alone in a holding cell awaiting the jury's verdict. As reality struck, I sprinted to the toilet convulsing with dry heaves.

While cleaning up in the sink, I regarded the ashen face staring back at me from the dull sheet of stainless-steel posing as a mirror. In the top right corner, someone had etched: Past regrets and future worries rob your present moment. Mockingly I thought, "Great Universe, what a wonderful time for such words of wisdom."

Just then, a bailiff opened the cell door telling me they called me to the courtroom. The judge gave me... "Life!"

Years later, my friend Jimmy asked, "You got a life sentence, why're you happy?"

Jimmy and I were working out on the yard at Central Prison in Raleigh, North Carolina. I ignored Jimmy to laugh and joke with Cool, another friend standing nearby.

"You got a LIFE SENTENCE." Jimmy repeated.

"Do I have to do it all right now?" I asked.

"What? What do you mean?"

"Jimmy, I can't do a life sentence in one day. If I did, I would have to die on that one day. I want to live,

Jimmy, which is the only thing I can do right now – live. The past is over, the future doesn't exist."

I paused to let him think about that, then I said, "So, if I don't have to do my whole life sentence RIGHT NOW, then shut up and spot me. It's my set."

Jimmy's infuriated face faded to embarrassment. I said, "Jimmy, don't let past regrets and future worries rob your present moment." To myself, I thought, Great Universe, what a wonderful time for such words of wisdom.

A life sentence did not cause me to walk away from life, rather it caused me to run towards living. Every day is filled with moments of great meaning. The judge sentenced me to life; he did not sentence me to a miserable life in prison.

When I understood the mirror's wisdom, my suffering was minimized. I still experience negative emotions but they are short moments. Being aware that my life is lived in this present moment reminds me that I am only in prison for this moment – not for the rest of my life.



Barry Mintz  
Nash Correctional Institution  
Nashville, NC



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*If you want to share someone else's work, please be sure you include the name of the author or its origin.*

# PRISONERS OF DEATH ROW YOUR ASSISTANCE WILL BE APPRECIATED

## 7 SUGGESTIONS AND GUIDELINES

1. Write about an experience that impacted you.
2. It doesn't have to be religious. Here are some themes: anger, apathy, beauty, betrayal, boredom, change, complacency, courage, fear, friendship, growing older, jealousy, pride, purpose, vices, and wisdom.
3. Use sensory details – the smell, who said what, its color, how cold it felt. Sensory details connect your experience to your readers.
4. There's no need to use big words when a simpler one suffices: leave your ego at the door with your case: this isn't the place for either one.
5. Look for ways to unify; help; and solve problems.
6. Be authentic. Be yourself. No one's perfect.
7. Try to limit it to 400 words or less, and if possible enclose a photo of yourself.

As there are numerous submissions it may take up to eight months for selected articles to be published.

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# NOT WHAT MANY PROCLAIM

It's implied that we're worthless  
because of where we reside  
some even claim we have no  
redemptive  
value living anywhere inside.

Others fail to see they are one  
decision away  
from possibly being in similar  
situations  
we face today

The more rocks thrown, the more  
their souls must buy  
glass houses are shattered at  
an all-time high

We're the bad guys,  
in every scenario  
people turn their backs  
while making assessments,  
most times  
without appropriate facts

I'm not implying none of us put  
ourselves in position to be blamed  
just that, not all of us are the  
monsters many proclaim



Anthony Cain  
California Death Row  
San Quentin, CA



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## LWOP

## ENLIGHTENMENT

**M**y name is Duawn Wesley McMillan. I am a practitioner of the Supreme Art and Science of Raja, a spiritual form of Yoga. I've been incarcerated in the North Carolina prison system for over 22 years, serving a LWOP sentence for a crime committed in my youth.

I have experienced the same ups and downs as you and through my struggles, I searched to find my way.

When I entered prison, I was naive and bitter. Living with the weight of a LWOP sentence caused me so much pain and suffering. I went through cycles of trying to prove myself, which led to solitary confinement. Because I had never served time before, I sought guidance from any and everyone. I tried multiple religions, but I still felt empty and the pain of prison life remained present.

An old saying rang true for me: "When the student is ready, a teacher will appear." Studying Raja Yoga taught me how my thoughts are manifestations of my mind and reflections of my intellect. When troubled, my thoughts can

be as turbulent as ocean waves. When my mind is at peace, it is a calm lake. How I perceive the conditions around me dictates my mood, not the conditions themselves. Finding this reality broke my cycle of trying to prove myself to people and it helped alleviate the stress caused by serving LWOP.

Sri Anandamayi once wrote that when one finds one's self, one has found God; and in finding God, one has found one's self.

While on the path of realizing ultimate truth, I have realized that my life in prison doesn't have to be bad. I can choose a better path.

In practicing Raja Yoga, I removed the negative perception that brought me pain and suffering. I do not like being in prison or serving LWOP but I have found peace, no matter where I am.



Duawn Wesley McMillan  
Nash Correctional Institution  
Nashville, NC