



# Spiritual Writings Class

ELMWOOD JAIL

Winter/Spring **2023**

---

## WE ARE EXCITED TO SHARE WITH YOU

some of the writings from men at Elmwood Correctional Facility, who participated in a Chaplain's Writing Group. We are honored to have the privilege of hearing their stories, and sharing them with you. All the pieces in this booklet are written by men who gave us permission to publish them. We have used their first initial only in order to protect their privacy.

Writing is one way to help reflect, and process difficult memories, regrets and hopes. We hope that writing will be a tool that is effective for us all in pursuing healing and in moving forward.

We could not do this without support. Thank you to the team of volunteers from St. Mark's who faithfully attended, including Peter, Lena, and Diane. Thank you to St. Mark's for all your support, and for praying for each group member as we met. Thank you to Santa Clara County Jail Programs Division, especially RO Reilly Johnson, for his help coordinating this group. Thank you to the Episcopal Impact Fund for a grant towards making this group a reality.

We celebrate this group of men and their writing, and look forward to opportunities to continue this work.

Chaplain Liz Milner  
Executive Director, CIC Ministries  
[www.cicministries.org](http://www.cicministries.org)

---

Cover art by M Ramirez



## I Am From...

*We first got to know each other by writing poems that describe where we have come from in life, and where we are going.*

---

I am from hard-working parents that were rarely there.

I am from a cultural Indian family, and being bullied because of it.

I am from six people living in a roach-infested garage.

I am from long runs through orchards that eventually got torn down.

I am from doing everything in secrecy and getting beat when I got caught.

I am from Sundays at the Sikh Temple.

I am from samosas and curry.

I am from a criminal career that I wish I never started.

### But that's not the end of my story...

I am to my son because I want to be there for him.

I am to sobriety.

I am to a career.

I am to manifesting positive thoughts.

I am to freedom and success.

I am to peace and harmony.

~ G

I am from a home where it smells like burnt tortillas.

I am from where the feds kicked in the door, from where the Jack boys tied us up and said don't move bangers blazing in sight.

I am from a happy home where there was endless love and joy but screams and screams and laughter run amuck.

I am from a plantation of limes that allowed my grandparents to grow and thrive from vast vegetation of trees and sun, that smell of manure and livestock from burnt oil of my grandpa's truck.

I am from the trap where gun and crack smoke roams like fog.

I am from we behave with honor and respect to stand as a man.

I am from Church on Sunday and what you do on this earth will dictate your next life.

I am from warm sopas and coffee in the mornings and menudo when we're hungover and oysters on the grill.

#### **But that's not the end of the story...**

I am to relationships that I can't control with love of multiple women who I care for the same.

I am to be free soon to change my ways and not return to never see these faces again.

I am to stay sober and be the best Dad I can be.

I am to never break a promise to God and my girls.

I am to be open and approachable, to be able to love endlessly.

And to be able to love with all my heart.

I am to leave world on my feet and not on my knees.

And leave my stamp here and something to show and change it in my own way.

~ J

I am from a place called the Middle.

I am from instability and broken promises.

I am from alcoholic insanity, that's never one place for long.

I am from redwood, pine trees and rolling hills that gave me a place to go when things got out of control.

I am from the Bay Area.

I am from the alcohol stashed in the garage and from coming home after everyone is passed out.

I am from pretending everything is OK during the holidays.

I am from turkey and honey baked ham.

I am from summers in Lake Shasta.

#### **But that is not the end of my story...**

I am to being honest with my father.

I am to continuing to put the work into myself.

I am to putting 100% into my recovery.

I am to believing in a higher power.

I am to everyone staying sober and coming together more often.

I am to helping heal our planet and for less anger.

I am to being grateful for today.

~ C

I am from a room with hard working parents.

I am from an empty room, a state of shock.

I am from my mom who would sell churros, sodas, and candy.

I am from a big united family with lots of inspiration to keep going in life.

I am from rosaries my family had together.

I am from tacos de asada and tacos from taco bell.

I am from shock to see my sister fall.

I am from hurt, to never see my sister the same.

#### **But that's not the end of my story...**

I am to be a father to my 4 children.

I am to reflect in order to change my ways.

I am to remain sober.

I am to openly communicating and trust.

I am to being drug free and harm free.

I am to staying on the right path and being a great father and son.

~ E

I am from a door that is always unlocked.  
 I am from a fridge full of food and bike rides in the dark.  
 I am from what happens at home stays at home.  
 I am from marijuana that will make us a lot of money.  
 I am from a household full of love and hate.  
 I am from family comes first.  
 I am from brownies and ice cream.  
 I am from chillin' with my friends.  
 I am from where selling drugs and hurting people is okay.

But that's not the end of my story...

I am to get to know myself.  
 I am to continue going to RCP.  
 I am to what you put in, you get out.  
 I am to good health and long-lived fulfilled lives for all the people in and out  
 of my life and freedom and peace of mind.  
 I am to be aware.  
 I am to live in today.  
 I am to my better days.

~ C



## Letter to Younger Self

*We explored more about where we had come from by writing  
 a letter to ourselves at a younger age.*

Dear A,

I understand that it's still 1988 and you're still 10 years old. Believe it or not, I am you and I'm writing you today because I care about you and just wanted to share a few things about what I've learned and about how you may have a better outcome. Maybe by doing that, I am trying to establish a connection with you, my "inner child," and in doing so employ a greater breadth of understanding relative to the current problems in my life and for certain to come up going forward.

~ A

Dear T,

I know it's 1997 and you're only 15 years old. You're going through some tough times right now and believe it or not I'm you at the age of 40 years old. I'm writing to you because I care and I want to share some things. I know that you're feeling alone and vulnerable. I know you feel like you don't belong and there's no one who loves you, but that's not true. I want you to know that you were given life to be a good person that will find love and will also have your little one. I care for you and I want you to not give up; there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Right now I'm also learning to be a better person and not go down that wrong path. Well that's about it for now, hoping we both get a second chance to start over fresh.

~ T

Dear C,

I know it's still 1993 and you are only eight years old and are a bit lost and confused about a lot of things right now like where you're going to live and who is going to take care of you and your brother. I am here to tell you that things are going to get better, everything is going to work out in the end. I know this because I'm you 27 years in the future. I'm not going to lie to you and tell you that everything is going to be great for the next 27 years. There are going to be a lot of ups and downs, more downs than ups I'm afraid, but it's all the hardships that you're going to get through that are going to make you the man you are today. We still have a long road ahead of us and a lot of work to do but that doesn't frighten us anymore.

~ C

---

Dear C,

How's it going buddy? You're probably wondering who I am; funny thing about that is I'm you. I guess we can just start with I'm proud of you and I love you. You're a good kid with so much to offer. I know you don't hear that much. I know right now you think you've got it all figured out. It breaks my heart because I know you're not going to listen to anyone, but if you don't mind, I would like just 5-10 minutes of your time.

C, you don't have to end your dreams here just because you're too focused on what's going on with the family and you want to make sure to be there when they need you. Well, I wish that was true, but Dad never allowed you to be a kid. You're always wearing the weight of the b\*\*\* he brought upon. I laugh because Dad will learn a lot from you and in the future. He will have another child and she will stand a better chance, which coincidentally is something you wanted. You always put everybody first and forget about yourself. This will become a problem in your future and eventually you will be forced to put yourself first because you are now in a place where you can't be there for anyone until you learn to be there for yourself. I love you and you will have an amazing life ahead of you.

Love, Your older self

PS. I have so much to say to you. This is just the beginning.

~ C

Dear N,

I know you've just been in an accident that will change the rest of your life completely, but this is yourself two years later sitting in a classroom in jail in a spiritual writing class, and I want you to know that everything is going to be OK and you still have a chance. I know that you thought you would never be able to forgive yourself, but life has an interesting way of showing the brightest light in the darkest times. Don't get me wrong, it's not going to be easy, but that's the beauty of it. You can't experience true joy without overcoming pain and heartaches.

~ N

---

Dear J,

I know it's 2002 and you're only 14 years old, but I am 34 and I'm writing to you because I care and love you and want to share some things and thoughts with you. I know that you're coming to the age where you will be deciding the turning point of your life and what direction you will be headed towards. I know that you feel hopeful and fearful about your life and want to explore all of your capabilities. I want you to know that you are more than able to be whatever you put your focus on, that you hold ultimate control of your destiny. I care for you a lot and want the best for your future. Right now I'm in jail telling you this is just a stepping stone on your path of eternal righteousness. Well, that's about it kid. Just keep your head up at all times, f\*\*\* everybody and just do you.

Love you till the end; be the best you.

~ J





## Letter to A Lost One

*We continued to explore the past as we wrote letters to people no longer in our lives.*

Dear Father,

I miss you so very much. Not only did my father die, my best friend died as well. You were my go-to guy, whenever I needed comfort, a good laugh, and wisdom. I miss those good times we had. You also had my back for everything. It's been hard for me ever since you passed. I know you know because I know you're up in the heavens looking down on me. But there there are times I forget you're up there. That's why I did some of the things I did, for I get caught up in the moment, the moment of crimes and alcohol.

I just want to say I miss you. I'm better now, even though I'm in jail, I have found myself walking in faith. I have learned to let go and let God, but you already know this by now. Soon father, I'll be with you.

~ M

Dear D,

It's me. You've been gone from this earth one year to the day now; but I'm still in love with you and very much miss you. I wanted to write to you to tell you a few things that are on my mind and heart. I wanted to thank you for every moment we had and endured no matter what atmosphere it was in. I'm angry about how you just left me and the rest of our families the way you did. I'm sad about how much we all miss

you, all the people you've touched. I wish that you would have given us more time with you. I forgive you for everything and anything. Forgive me for showing up too late and not being there when you needed me the most.

I love you! I need to let you go. I'm walking away.

~ Your loving husband, M

Dear Grandpa

I love and I miss you more than you could imagine. The last time we spoke I was around 13 years old and I randomly popped up knocking on your door. I remember that day well. I was visiting my mom and I told her I was going to make amends with you and I wanted her to come. She refused, and when I saw you I got a better understanding why.

When I sat down at your kitchen table and I asked you why you kicked us out, you told me you never would do that and my mom chose to leave for two years. I hated you and I thought you kicked us out and you're saying my mom lied to me, and it was because of her that I ended up moving away, and we would start our journey through a rough childhood full of feeling helpless, and forced to grow up faster than any child should. I was only 13 when I found out the truth, but when I got back to my mom and told her what you said she denied it and said you were full of s\*\*\*. It wasn't until you died and I was around 25 years old that my mother was confronted by her brother, and she finally admitted it was her fault. So there I was for around 12 years I didn't like you, I didn't think of you. I simply forgot about you. I'm sorry. I love you grandpa and I now know you really loved me.

~ Love, C

Dear Mom and Dad,

I hope this letter gets to you. I will try my best to express how I said thank you for raising me well. What have I learned from you? I learned how to live as a human being, and how to be a compassionate, kind human. But now, I have to live without you. At the age of 57, I still live the way you molded and cultivated me 57 years ago. So I'm still learning, but please forgive me some of the mistakes I have made. I wanted to thank you for being my parents. And I want to thank you for giving me a lesson of life. I thank you for keeping me safe during wartime and I thank you for the sacrifice of your time and love that you gave to me.

~ K

Dear K,

It's me. You've been gone for 9 years and everybody still misses you. I just want to get a few things off my chest. I want to thank you for all the fun times we had and all of the love that your family has showed us since you've passed. Your death has brought all of us closer than we could ever imagine. I'm sure I'm speaking for all of us when I say this, but I want to tell you how sorry I am for not answering that phone call that night. I never will understand what you are doing on the freeway at 2:00 AM, but I can't help but think if just one of us answered one of those phone calls, you would still be here today. We've celebrated all of your birthdays with your family, going to places you loved, and doing the things you love to do. One person that always stood out on those trips was J. We lost him to an overdose last year and buried him in the shirt he always wore with your face on it. I guess in a way I'm writing to both of you, and I just want to tell you guys I love you, and thank you for watching out for me, and helping me get a second chance.

~ N

Dear G,

You are my older brother by 9 years. You were always my idol. You have been gone 12 years now and I am still having a problem with so many things. I'm so mad you chose to kill yourself without reaching out to me. I'm also sorry I didn't see the pain you were in. We weren't close growing up because of the age gap but as the years went by and I got into my twenties we became very close. I've always been proud of you from being a football star in high school, to devoting 30 years to the Santa Clara Sheriffs Dept. We always enjoyed having fun and a few drinks together. I didn't notice when they retired you how the drinking was escalating. Maybe I didn't want to see, after how mom drank herself to death. It doesn't say it on your death certificate, but we know that you sat down that night with that bottle to end your pain. I thought you were a coward, but that was the pain, hurt and loneliness. I miss you brother.

~ Love, L



## Defining Memory

*We spent a few sessions reflecting on memories that stand out to us, that seem to define the direction of our lives in some way.*

There was a school shooting at C School. The gunman shot my sister's friend and other kids. She was only older than me by one year. At the time my sister was devastated. So was I. With all the mass shooting going around lately, it's just bringing me back to that moment of my life. The heartaches, pain and suffering of taking one's loved one is so sad. I remember the chaotic scene, police everywhere, ambulance trying to save my peers, parents trying to get to their kids. I felt like it was a movie scene, like it wasn't real. I wish it didn't ever happen. It changed me by making me feel like school was not a safe haven no more. I don't understand why someone would take another life without ever thinking so easily. Signing off with a prayer for all the innocent lives lost or taken.

~ T

One moment that stands out for me is when I was 17 years old my girlfriend and I were dealing with her being pregnant with my little girl. The nine months were I think the best time in my life. For one reason, we were sober and clean from drugs! I will say this that at first it was not easy because she did not want to be clean! We got through it and my little girl was born and I was able to deliver my own kid because she came before the doctor showed up in the delivery room. This was the best and happiest day of my life!

~ F

One memory that stands out to me: I was about 26 years old, and I was living in a room that I used to share with my girlfriend. She had been moved out of the room we shared for about 6 months when I made the worst decision in my life that will forever change me. I never expected the choices I made would have such an effect on me and my life. I was so lost, in pain and careless that I turned to drugs thinking they would make me feel better. I remember thinking that I had control and that I could stop at any time. I quickly started to feel out of control. I wish that I had been strong enough to not turn to drugs. It changed my life by taking almost everything away from me. I know that I can't change what I've done but I'm working on myself every day.

~ C

I was 17 years old and my mind had been made-up for some time. From an early age I knew I wanted to join the Marine Corps. At 17 ½ my father emancipated me so I could join. Looking back, I wish I would have waited.

I joined and in just four weeks, I was headed to boot camp. I cried my first night from being so scared. This was 1974 and the Vietnam War was still going. After eight weeks of boot camp and six weeks of sniper school I received my orders that I was being deployed to Vietnam. Just after my 18th birthday I landed in Da Nang.

The first thing to hit me was the smells. The fear in civilians' eyes touched me to the core. What a beautiful country that was being destroyed by war. I prefer not to go into any more detail because I can't. I returned home after two deployments, one year. My thoughts of life and the living are and will be forever changed. I came back a different person.

~ L

I will always love you, and I will always remember how we used to live. I thought the world would understand, but they don't. Many sleepless nights that we are wandering on lonely streets of San Jose. Cold, hungry, and lonely misery soul. Searching for a warm place to rest, we keep walking on the street that have no shadow of humankind. There are many people drive by, look at us that we are not even exist. I wonder, does society care or concern the environment we live in. Life is so sad and unethical but we got to keep walking on the empty road. I guess some of us have feelings and some don't, but I know at the end of the road that God save our soul and give us a real reason. I will always love you and I will always remember you.

~ K

One memory that stands out to me, I was about 18 years old, I was living in Texas with my dad. He had found a pipe which I used to smoke my weed. His upbringing, his culture, being Spanish, frowned upon marijuana. The evening of the incident I failed to come home and opted to stay at my cousins' and aunt's house, which turned into two days. When I returned on the third day, my father had rekeyed the door, so I was forced to wait. When he finally returned, he reamed my ass (metaphorically). After the reaming, I gathered my things and left for good.

The evening of my high school graduation, you opted to stay home, sit on the couch, drink a few beers, and watch TV by yourself. I phoned mom the following day and she was livid! She apologized to me, saying that she was trying to surprise me by being at my graduation. She said, by the time she had gathered the funds, she could not get a flight in time.

Dad, you never asked, I purchased a one-way airline ticket to San Jose. The night of my flight was a terrible thunderstorm. I felt so abandoned, hurt, and low. I was angry that you always sided up with your drunk and abusive brother. He would always arrive home, drunk, and on a rampage. Dad that late evening, I wished that a lightning bolt would hit the plane, shatter it into pieces and end it for me forever.

Several times you said that you were going to take advantage of a holiday or a four-day weekend, all to never see you. You failed to show up. As you said to me after one of your failed visits, "I have a new life now with my new wife." So did I Dad, I have two beautiful, grown-up daughters. They are such a joy to be around. They're optimistic and enjoy my company. I'm a big part of their lives, as you should have been in mine.

Dad, G has recently passed. He said I need to let that chip on my shoulder go. Well, Dad, I'm letting it go, I've moved on. Time and my kids have allowed me to heal. I'll always love you and miss you. I forgive you for not being there for me and my siblings.

~ Take care, Dad, Your son, E

Alone, all alone,

Story of my life.

I found the one who will make it alright,

May we all find him now. Creator.

Truth is, never been alone.

Never will be, no one ever forgotten

Walk with God.

~ T



I remember hating  
 I remember angry  
 I remember ugly  
 I remember differently  
 I remember unaccepting  
 I remember aching  
 I remember why people laughed at me I remember feeling like ENDING EVERYTHING  
 EVERY DAY I remembered all of these things NEVER ENDING  
 UNTIL, one day, I was reminded that it's OK to be me because only I can control me  
 and it's OK be differently as long as I love me

I am trying for Love  
 I am trying for me  
 I am trying to FIND me  
 I am trying unconsciously  
 I am trying to DO BETTER  
 I am trying to accept  
 I am trying to appreciate  
 Every day I am trying to be FREELY just me  
 Like an eagle flying through the clouds so easily  
 ACCEPTING myself like my family accepts me  
 DEEP DEEP down I am fighting just to be the one and only thing I can be  
 which will always be THE BEST ME  
 I just want to be the happiest me

~ E

I remember in 2008 I lost my best friend. Let me tell you a little about my best friend.  
 He was older than me. He always worked, chilled out in his house, drank some beer,  
 or sat in his truck here and there listening to music. We never hung out at all in the  
 streets. Nor did we go to the same school. He had his own crowd he hung out with  
 from time to time. I hung out with my crowd. We were two totally different people,  
 but he did teach me a lot growing up. How to be on time. How to work on cars. How  
 to build houses. How to respect women. How to be on top of my game. He always  
 warned me about the way I was living. He used to tell me, one day, you're going  
 to make a mistake and you're going to face incarceration. And sure enough I was

slipping into darkness, and I found myself in a situation that led me and a 14-year-  
 old boy to jail for a very long time in California Youth Authority. My best friend  
 always came to see me and sent me money. I remember the day I got out, he threw a  
 big BBQ party for me. I was 18 now, and my best friend was not in good health. His  
 diabetes got the best of him. I found myself years later taking care of him, helping  
 him with his doctor's appointments. He was getting worse. His memory was going.  
 His body was falling apart. Then the day came I will never forget when my father  
 passed away and I remember that day so clear. He had me leave to go get him a  
 hamburger but when I came back he was gone. I miss you Dad. For a long time I felt  
 alone. But I know I'm not. You're up there watching over me.

~ M

One memory that stands out to me. I was about 11 years old, and I was living at  
 my mom's and stepdad's in Mountain View. Had moved around a lot prior to that.  
 Was happy to have finally settled down. I remember one day while going to school,  
 I discovered two lock boxes in the office. I stole the contents of those lock boxes.  
 I left school, and waited across the street like every day for my stepdad to pick me  
 up. When he got there and I jumped in the truck, he almost immediately knew  
 something was off. He waited till we got to the house to ask me what was wrong.  
 All I remember was feeling like this was going to get me in the worst trouble I've ever  
 been in. But when I showed him what I stole, he looked at me and instead of getting  
 all upset he just asked me a simple question. He asked, "Is this what you want to do  
 with your life?" And I looked back at him and said "Yes I think it is."

Just as I made that choice, his phone rang and it was my principal, telling my father  
 that the school was missing something and they thought that I might have something  
 to do with it. My dad then did something I would have never thought he would do.  
 He shuffled through some papers on the seat as to making the sound like he was  
 going through my bag, and told my school that I had nothing on me.

I always wondered what life would have been like if my dad would have imposed the  
 trouble I should have received, if I would be a different person if all my choices in life  
 would have differed.

~ M

I still cringe when I think about that night. I thought I'd feel vindicated or victorious or satisfied but I felt sick and sad and wished I could make the moment go away. I think I was about 34 or 35. My dad's mom had just passed away from cancer. We were at my parents' dining room table drinking. Alcohol was a pestilent mist that wreaked havoc on most of my family's lives. It had caused the rift between my dad and I, but at the same time was the devious bridge that now spanned the very expanse it had created.

Another facet to the context of the story is that my girlfriend was six months pregnant at the time. Our relationship was extremely strained by a myriad of issues. The ones I can identify now include my alcohol and drug use, my emotional swings possibly due to stress, also not being ready to be a parent, PTSD from childhood trauma. I also have always had this fear of missing out and I thought this baby was going to make me "miss out". I can say looking back at that night that I was on the edge of two emotional thresholds. I was like prey hopelessly caught between the pincers of my doom. All it took to set off that melee was that one comment from my dad...

He said something to me that indicated he was privy to information that only myself or my baby's mom had shared. I remember how hurt and betrayed I felt when the comment hit me. I had been suspicious that my mom, dad, and baby's mom were conspiring behind my back for months at this point. This was proof of their forsaking ways. I stood and said, "What the f\*\*\* dad? You've been talking to my baby's mom?" "Of course we have! Every day!" he challenged then shifted in his chair, squaring up with me, but remaining seated. Looking down his nose at me with a hostile squint, and with an air of belligerence, he whispered, "Now, sit down before I put you down!" Outwardly, I think I kept my game face on as I backed up a step using my foot to sweep my chair aside. My body language must've goaded a response because he stood up. Internally, the maniacal revel in my head had begun. The war drums, cadence pulsating fuel throughout my veins, stoking the flames of conflagration. I was alight with the rage of indignation.

Before he was fully up on his feet, I was put in motion, kinetic – like a bolt of lightning. I tackled him to the hardwood floor and was on top of him. He tried to recover and push me off, but I had him by the throat with both hands, and I pulled his shoulders off of the ground, pivoting at his torso as I kept it pinned with my whole body weight, and I slammed his whole upper body, shoulders, and head back down into the hardwood. His head hit hard. His eyes were squinted in pain, his mouth open. I don't know how long I held him by the throat, but at some point my mom was standing beside me, and I kind of came to and stood up. She was talking, but the beat drowned it out. It sounded like fireworks exploding in the sky or laying on the bottom of a pool. This toxic deluge of blood lust orchestrated by my beating

heart faltered for a second when I looked down at him. Feeble and defeated as he was, I felt nothing but guilt and disgust. Then I had an impulse flash of all the times he had stood over me. An aftershock of bellicosity made its resurgence, and I blurted out as I pointed menacingly at him, "Your sun is setting, and my moon has risen. And that's what you get for talking s\*\*\*." I stepped over him from my straddling position and moved towards the door. My mother shouted, then in perfect unison, we both said "get out."

This is not the first time I've been kicked out, and I knew what she was going to say. For about a year, I told the story with pride to friends. I thought my little sun-moon analogy was quite clever, and it wasn't until I saw my dad for the first time a year after my glorious victory that I felt the pestilence of guilt start to affect me. He looks so much older and weaker and my proud victory felt more like a geriatric massacre. I still cringe when I think about that night.

~ A

Dear me,

I remember that time I started taking drugs before ending up in here. For example, I was popping pills, smoking weed and drinking alcohol. But I think back at that time I feel very upset and confused and depressed because I was homeless at the time so I don't remember a lot that was going on before I got in here. I know it affected other people in many ways. For example, my grandpa was stressing wondering where I was, my sister was constantly getting angry, because I wouldn't stop taking the drugs. It also affected me too, because look at where I am now. I don't even know how much time I'm looking at. I'm at my worst right now.

A lot was going on for me at the time, such as I got kicked out of my grandfather's house at 18 so I was living on the streets for a long time. I ain't have money to buy food or clothes. I was constantly stressing every day until the drugs took over my body. I'm still working on forgiving myself.

I feel like I need more help instead of being locked up.

~ M



## Why Carry On

*We spent one week considering why, in the face of struggle and suffering, we carry on.*

---

My life is one big story of bouncing back and overcoming, dealing with loss, betrayal, death, and not really getting any headstarts. Definitely no handouts. I guess I would say tragic is a good word to describe the life of someone who's been in my shoes, but because of the things I've been through, because of the hardship and pain early on, it's made me the man I am today, and I'm OK with the man in the mirror. That wasn't always the case, but through all the trials and errors of my life, the lessons learned both good and bad, I've definitely become OK with me.

Early on, life was tough. I guess very early on, it had a chance, but that was soon dissolved with the death of my mother. I was in second grade when my mom unexpectedly passed away. I remember it like it was yesterday, and I just hope she's in a better place now, pain-free, and hopefully, even though I've made mistakes, I hope she's proud of the man I have become and sees the things I've had to endure along my journey.

However, losing mom wasn't my first loss — she was my second. When mom died, my dad was approaching year number four in what would be 27 years he would do in prison for murder. Was it really murder? Some say yes and by definition it was. But he did only what many men in his situation might do. When my mom was five months pregnant with me, she was raped by a man she worked with. He got in

trouble for the crime, but while he was out on bail, my dad took matters into his own hands and shot that man six times, so by the time I was 7 years old, I was facing life without either parent in my life.

I spent most of my youth going from one abusive family member to the next until I became too much to handle. Eventually, I was sent in sixth grade to a group home. Oddly enough that place was my favorite place, but it was short-lived. My mom's brother adopted me and brought me back to hell. I was basically his punching bag until the punching bag fought back, nearly taking his life and landing me in YA. I was there until I was 16 when I was finally shown some love. My best friend's mom took me in. She loved me as her own and my best friend got to turn into my brother. We did everything together. We excelled in sports, mainly baseball. His big brother was a major league catcher for the Reds and his best friend was a major leaguer for the Phillies. We were like their little brothers, whom they were determined to make better than them.

Although I had that amazing opportunity in my life, I was still dealing with life's actual facts and that was I didn't have my mom or dad. As a matter of fact, I had no clue who my dad was or where he was. A misguided or unguided young man I was finally found, and that was by drugs. They quickly became my best friend, but at that point, I was a stand out athlete both in football and baseball. I tried to do both and it lasted for a while, but I had to let them go because sports were really starting to present some pretty good opportunities. Eventually after back-to-back championships and setting the school's home run record for two years, I got a scholarship. I was there doing well until I got injured. I came home with crutches and a bottle of oxycontin, and being a motherless and fatherless kid, my options were limited and selling my script is the one I took.

Well, that wasn't the best choice for myself. A controlled buy was set up, and I sold 50 pills to an undercover cop landing me in prison for the first time, and the rest is history. I've been in and out ever since, losing friends and family along the way. Not always bad though. I've gotten to know myself, and I'm truly OK with me, so I guess at least I have that... A story based on loss and pain and an outcome that resembles drive, will, and determination. I've never given up on me, no matter how bad the odds, and for the pure fact that I am still here, still failing, yet still getting up and dusting myself off, and trying, is testimony to who I am, and what everything has molded me into, which is an example of resilience. Now I just have to be an example of change....

~ C

Before I was arrested, I was on a fast track to death. I was smoking, a lot of fentanyl and meth and eating as much Xanax as I could get my hands on. I was lying to almost everyone who cared about me, telling them what I was doing fine when I was far from fine. I knew I had warrants, but was so caught up in the life that I was unable to take care of them. To say my life was unmanageable would be a vast understatement. I had a close friend die in my living room, and was not able to save him. After coming to jail, it was almost a relief because I knew I was going to get clean and start the process of cleaning up the wreckage that I had caused. Life in Elmwood is not hard, it's actually very easy once you get off drugs. I have learned how much I cannot afford to do this anymore. My girlfriend is over it. My parents are getting older and sick of getting calls from jail. I worked really hard to get a place and a dog. I made a promise to myself that I would not lose those things, and only because of my family and girlfriend, I have not lost those things. It is by going down into the abyss that we recover the treasures of life.

~ E

---

I've learned that I was careless. The reason I'm in jail is because I was careless. I became careless through depression, being rebellious, fear. These are three things I've been able to identify while being incarcerated. It's unfortunate, because when I was a kid, that's when I developed these three things, which I think all kids experience, just in different ways.

See I wanted to be a bad ass when I was a kid. I wanted to go to prison. Not for life, but I wanted to experience it. I wanted to sell drugs. I wanted to hurt people. Everything I wanted to do, I did, and I ended up in prison. Then it started to become a revolving door, and I had to stop and think, is this all I want in life? And the answer was no. The answer is still no. And I refuse to believe the prisons and jails are the end of the road for me. I want more than that in life. To be honest, I feel ashamed for wanting prison to be a part of my life at all. But we can't change then, so I focus on now.

People blame drugs, their parents, friends, grandparents, the cops. Whatever the f\*\*\*. Right. But for me, I blame myself. For I am my own man and since a very young age, I've been my own man. And I chose this bulls\*\*\* because I thought it was cool. I thought it was OK. Until now. There is so much more to life...I only speak from experience and I just want to spread a message to people that I want to change.

~ E

Getting arrested was probably the best thing that could have happened to me. Not because this place is so amazing, but it showed me every aspect of my life and thought process that was so wrong. Being here at Elmwood showed me how to never end up back here again, it showed me how to be a real caring and loving partner. As much as I hate being here, I'm glad I'm here now rather than later down the road in life.

Being here showed me that I had it in me to be strong and to finish what I started. Being here showed me that it's never worth risking your freedom no matter how much money it can bring you. It also showed me how loving my father is, even if he doesn't express it to me. When I leave this place, I hope I can continue my sobriety and reach my goals of owning a house within three to four years. I want to show my significant other and family how much I love them and how much I'm grateful for them. I wouldn't trade them for the world. Being here has definitely been a journey but I'm glad that I was able to turn this time into tools I can use in my everyday life outside of here.

~ A

---

A situation that was hard for me was when I got in a car accident and I was dead for a couple days. Doctors didn't think I was going to make it so the reason why I carry on is because I am grateful for a second chance of life..

~ J

---

To my high roller:

Always there when I needed a shoulder.

For a woman raising a man.

You always tried as hard as you can.

As I get older I see a little bit of you in me each day.

But I'm proud I came out this way.

At times I'm lost for words and don't know what to say

I fear the day I call and you don't answer

All I can think is F\* CANCER!

Now it's my turn to roll the dice.

In this game we CALL LIFE.

~ J



## Forgiving

*We read and wrote about forgiving others and ourselves,  
seeking freedom to move forward.*

---

Dear M,

Before you can forgive anybody you have to learn how to forgive yourself. You have to mean it. You have to let everything out, all your little secrets that you have. You were once told to write everything down and burn it. But you weren't ready to forgive yourself because you were living a double life and continued to be a drunkard and a drug user (living in the flesh) while trying to be a man of God. The pain you carry is guilt. You weren't fooling anybody. You were fooling yourself. The church never looked at you different. But you couldn't accept their help. Your pride was always a problem.

I know you fell in love with the church. It broke you. Something happened to you that day when you started to cry, not knowing why. You have to let go, and let God. He's a forgiving God. Let go M, and we will be just fine.

Once we let go, we can start to forgive. But you have to forgive yourself first!

~ M

Dear Mom and Dad,

Regarding the situation and time when you sided with the ex to stop me from seeing my son. I despise you for that. How can you keep me from seeing my son. It hurt me so bad, I didn't talk to either of you for six years after that. I didn't call or contact you or my son after that. I've been holding these feelings of resentment and regret for a long time. And what these feelings have done to me has caused me to be in disrepair with the ones around me. If I let these feelings go maybe I can get you guys back in my life, also my son.

I am ready now to forgive you and let these go. I know I can't blame you. It was me on drugs and you were protecting him. I see that now. I look forward to having a family reunion with everyone when I'm clean and sober.

~ Signing off, T

---

Dear F,

I want to forgive myself for using drugs for the first time. From this first trip, it sent me down the path of destruction I call my life. When I started my trip into the system, I was 12 years old. I am now 40 and all I have to show for my life is nine prison terms, and almost 17 years of lost time. I've hurt the ones that love me and I missed my two girls growing up. I regret my choices, but I can only forgive myself for my selfish ways and work to be a better person and learn from my mistakes. I think I am on the correct path now. The only way to heal and move forward is to forgive.

~ F

---

What do you see when you look at me? A loving father, a brother and a son or a want-to-be a gangster with a gun?

I'm an angry man full of hate or am I starting over with a clean slate?  
Do I love to fight or do I fight to love?

~ R



Dear me,

There was a time you mistreated the people you loved. You mistreated your mother, that's the one person in your life who will sacrifice everything for you. I don't want to go into great detail about the past. I understand you were in a dark place at this time of your life. You know you can't change what's happened in the past or take back certain things you said. That is enough of a reminder for you.

You are a better man now. You've learned to be accountable for your actions. No more of that brush it off b\*\*\*, it's someone else's fault, if so-and-so didn't do this or that, then I wouldn't have done this or that. That's a copout and we don't live like that anymore. You have integrity and pride. You respect yourself. You are a man. A good man, and every good man knows that you have to take full responsibility for your actions.

After all these years, you've focused on the pain you've inflicted on others, but failed to realize the person you've hurt the most through your insanity is yourself. Today you have a great relationship with your mom. Today you have a good relationship with yourself. Today I appreciate life for what it is, no matter how bad. I still wake up and tell myself today is good. I love you Brother, keep your head up.

~ C

---

Dear Dad,

When you got sober, I never got a better dad. I have had a tough go at things without my dad. I've struggled because of feeling sad and mad. I'm in the fight for my life. I don't want to have this be a part of it. I forgive you. I love you with all my heart.

~ Your son, T

---

Dear pops,

S\*\*\*, I don't know where to start but you did some manic s\*\*\*. When I first met you I didn't know what to expect, but you hurt me inside and out. Like beat me, made me feel low as possible. I didn't feel the same way no more. You hurt me a lot, then gave me no help at all. For real, when I lived with you, you treated your step kid and the kids you grew up with more better than me. You didn't support me at all or uplift me. You didn't care at all. All you cared about is my money and that's why you keep me around. And when I went to jail and I was homeless on the street, I had no help from you at all. But after all this I forgive you, and hope to make it better day by day.

~ Love, K

I release my guilt for not being there.

I release my anger for not trying harder.

I receive forgiveness though sometimes it doesn't feel like it.

I receive a certain amount of peace from writing this down.

I always loved you unconditionally through your years of drinking, for being the best grandmother anyone could ever ask for with my children.

When you started getting ill from all the abuse you did to your body, I started out angry but soon turned to understanding your disease. I was happy I did see you a few times before God took you. I've tried for years to forgive myself for not being there when you left, though I know it wasn't possible. I now remember the good times. I miss you, Mom.

~ L

---

I release the bondage of self.

I receive the freedom of release.

I release the feeling of regret.

I receive the feeling of gratitude.

I release the hate and the anger.

I receive the love and the joy.

~ C

---

Dear N,

I'm sorry for not being there with you right now. Dada messed up and had to go away for a while. Your Auntie sent me pictures of you and it warmed my heart to see how happy you were in all of them. I'm sorry I wasn't there for your third birthday. When Dada comes home, I'm going to try and make it cool with your mom to a certain extent so I can be there for your fourth. I never planned for you to grow up in a broken home. I just ended up making some mistakes that pushed your mom and I away from each other. Just know that it is not her fault. From the bottom of my heart, I love you, my son. I think about you every day and hope that you don't forget who I am by the time we meet again. I love you, don't ever think otherwise

~ Love Dada, G



## Jail

*We explored what we have learned from being here in jail.*

---

Hey there buddy how are you?  
I hope this poem does find you,

I hope you're free from these walls and chains,  
Being in jail has nothing but negative consequences.

Upon your release I wish you well,  
I talked to your mom and your grandma as well,

I wish you the best, I know you can do it,  
Get into a program, work hard to complete it.

I want you to reach your hopes and dreams,  
All I hope is that there are no drugs in between,

I remember how happy you are when you're clean.  
For us to go back to drugs would be just insane,

Especially knowing where they can take us,  
Nothing but broken dreams, and total darkness, broken glass, broken hearted,

Always feeling hate, and feeling sorrow,  
Just getting clean will give you a better tomorrow.

What matters the most, is that we always are here for each other,  
We can help out others, which makes us Hope Dealers.

Stay in the Bible, I will do the same,  
If we can live in the darkness, then think what light the world has for us?

When you get out of jail and you stare out in the sky, I want you to tell me what you see,  
I know that the darkest nights produce the brightest stars, and you're the shining star  
my friend.

I want you to tell me how you're feeling,  
Always remember to count losses as blessings.

~ J

---

My life, before I was arrested, was a painful mess, all because of my not wanting to deal with my demons. Coming to jail helps me with the kick start to pull myself out of the gutter. I've learned to value myself, and to care about others. I have self-love now, and I'm still learning about how to process my feelings and the steps I need to take to become a productive person. When I leave here I am going to my first drug program. That way, I can continue my path of the positive me. I'm tired of not being with my dog and family. I've missed so much over the years. I refuse to give up anymore of my life to drugs or jail. I put together a nice plan for my return back to the free world.

~ F

---

Looking back on my 39 years on this planet, it's unfortunate to have to face the fact the majority of my adult life has been spent in some form of incarceration. Just recently, before my travels back to this dump, I was out living as a free man for nearly 2 years, the most amount of consecutive days I've spent as a free man. Before my journey into the illustrious career as a junkie, criminal and convict, I was an athlete, husband and father. The first time I was arrested, I was ashamed, I was nervous, I had no clue what was in store for me. Now, several arrests and two trips to prison later, I don't even sweat it when handcuffs are put to my wrists. My comfort behind bars should have never become a reality. For that very reason, this time I've dedicated myself to changing that reality. I'm applying myself in ways I never used to, and I'm gaining the skills and tools to make sure that all my time spent in jails and prisons around the state isn't my reality, but just a part of my past. And I'm planning to make my next 40 years, God willing, much more successful, productive, and happier than my first 40 years. I have no regrets and although my path to this realization was bumpy and not easy, I'm OK with it because I'm OK with me. And although I don't wish it on anybody, the story isn't anywhere near over.

~ C



## Dream

*Together, we read MLK's I have a dream speech  
and composed our own versions.*

---

I have a dream of success.

I think the hardest part of a dream that I have is keeping the dream alive. For myself, I dream that I can stay diligent, positive, and on track of my goals. I dream that I am free, and persistent. For my loved ones I dream that they find their own paths to success, and if they are having trouble, that I can help them on the way.

For my community I dream that people help each other the way I've been helped to achieve my own success. I dream for better drug education and not simply preaching abstinence from drugs. People in communities will always use drugs, but knowledge will keep them safe whether they choose to use, or not.

I have a dream for the world that we will end the rise of global warming that is destroying the earth. I dream that we can reverse global warming and the negative effects of it so our children have a safer place to live."

~ K

I sometimes dream of a place  
where peace and harmony occupies space,

But with destiny due for destruction,  
I must admit it's becoming hard to function.

I trust my heart and mind to truth, love and grace,  
I pray to God diligently, seeking out His face.

I put forth the foot into darkness, trusting that no matter what  
God's got a solid plot for its mark."

~ M

---

I have a dream that I am turning into a goal. I am working on getting my life in line and am working to stay sober. I am going to a program to help me pick the right path. I have so many wasted years with drugs, toxic people and jail cells. I do not want to keep up this wasteful cycle. My dreams include a nice home that my parents can spend their golden years in and a big backyard for my dog. Since I was 12 years old I have spent almost 18 years in and out of prisons. I want my dream life to take over the nightmare I've been living and send it away. I will always remember where I have come from. I just do not want the lifestyle anymore; I want the family life. This is my dream.

~ F



## Letter From My Death Bed

*Here we explored imagining ourselves at the end of our lives, writing back to us today.*

One of the first important decisions I made as an adult was to join the Marine Corps. Another would be the day I married my wife. I learned what true love really is. From this love we created three beautiful children. I have pursued many careers and have been fortunate to enjoy or learn from each one. I've lived through hard times when the family struggled to more fortunate times. I've been blessed to make some very good friends that, for the most part, I still have. I have lost many family members and friends. I miss them every day but feel blessed for having known and loved them. I currently have three children and nine extraordinary grandchildren. I've made many mistakes that for some I have paid for and still pay for today. I have forgiven myself and moved on to live a wonderful and blessed life. I only can hope for the same for my kids and grandkids. I am now looking forward to spending eternity at peace with God.

~ L

I have lived a good life with its ups and downs just like anyone, but overall it has been good. The relationships I have had throughout the years have been meaningful. I have realized that at the end of the day that is what is truly important. Not what you have, but who you have. If I could do it all over again, I would try and cultivate more relationships and have more friends. I would have worked harder when I was

younger so I could enjoy my later years and relax a bit more. I would tell my younger self to try new things more and always go through life with a smile. Don't be afraid to talk to strangers because you never know if that stranger is going to be your future best friend. Don't be afraid to take risks. Don't bet your life-savings on a dice roll but be calculated and not afraid to lose from time to time. Spend more time with your family — you only have them for a short time, so enjoy them while they're around and listen to the knowledge they have and are willing to share.

~ E

Dear Death,

Only you truly know how afraid of you I am and that is only because of what I haven't accomplished. I'm not afraid to die, per se, and although we've had our toe-to-toe battles a few times where I was lucky enough against all odds to have beat you, I know one day ultimately you'll get your win and that will be the day that our battles come to an end.

I guess this letter to you is a request. I know you have to respect me for the battles I've won thus far, but before we have that last dance, I have some personal battles I'd like to overcome. I'd like to kick my battles with addiction in the a\*\* and get some productive years in life and give back. I'd like some years with my kids where their pops wasn't high or in jail or prison. I'd like to have some happy years with a woman I love and to do some of the things I never got the chance to because I was too busy fighting cases, demons or you.

So out of respect, before we, me and you, have that last dance, the battle where you send me off to wherever it is I end up, please just give me a chance to right the wrongs of my life so I don't have to be afraid of leaving this life before ever truly living it. Until then, take it easy on the ones I love so I can have them around too. You've already taken so many of them from me. With all due respect I ask this and until next time just kick back and get some rest because you know I'm going to give you everything I got then too.

~ C

Thank you for a chance of life, thank you for the chance of opportunity,

Thank you for the obstacles you have thrown at me to help me realize how precious time really is to us.

Thank you for giving me the gift to see before losing all my vision.

Thank you for allowing me to experience the ability to love, to forgive, to overcome, peace, to lose, to win, to count losses as blessings, the ability to breathe, the ability to be the best. I can be.

Thank you for bringing children of my own in this world, thank you for showing me that life is about progression not perfection.

~ J

---

So I read a book that talked about “Your Dash” — When your time on this earth comes to an end, how would you like to be remembered? I would like to be remembered for not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways. Remember Me for all the love I shared to my family, my brothers, my sisters, my enemies and to my church. The decisions I’ve made were not always the best ones in life, but when I found you my God I was born again. My eyes were open and that’s when life began for me. You pottered a new creation. I want to be remembered as the new me, the me that does God’s work.

Yes I ran into some speed bumps along the way, but I managed to stay in my faith with you. The battles with myself at times got the best out of me, but I’m reminded every day here in jail of who I am. Even though I sit here in jail, I still continue God’s work. And I know that I will be remembered by some as a man of God, not the boy of sin. I know change is never too late. So M, thank you for forgiving yourself. Now we can move forward so when that day comes people will remember your dash as a good one.

God help me to accept your forgiveness and then enable me to live my life in such a way that I will be pleased by what people say at my memorial service about how I spent my “dash.”

~ M



To all who contributed to this collection,  
Thank you!



*Many thanks to:*



St. Mark's Episcopal Church | [saint-marks.com](http://saint-marks.com)

---



[cicministries.com](http://cicministries.com)

---



[episcopalimpact.org](http://episcopalimpact.org)

---

[gailjohnstondesign.com](http://gailjohnstondesign.com)

---

Santa Clara County Jail Programs Department

*We could not do this without you!*