



Voices of People Incarcerated in Iowa
Winter 2024-2025



Art by Sofields

Today

by James Williams

There is no day better than today, because today is all I have, Yesterday is gone, and tomorrow is merely a plus in this Life's math... My eyes do see, but the vision is only an illusion, My Mind is distorted, and Understanding is lost to confusion... For Real is something that everyone claims, but its Values are compromised, Because Life Truths have been tainted, and its realities are lies... Believe the unbelievable is the Hope for a Peace of Mind, I even tried it a time or two, searching for a hint or subtle sign... Only to stare openly at nothing, looking for that something to feel, And dying slowly on the inside, watching the fake destroy the Real... Or maybe Real was always fake, misrepresented by foolish intent, For reality is the biggest illusion, and its deceptions are all hell-bent... I lost everything that's anything in the midst of this wicked storm, I guess this struggle was the struggle ordained mine even before I was born... Therefore this journey is one that my Life had to not only engulf, but endure, I only hate that I inherited this disease that has everything except a cure... I lost everything, but how can I lose when I'm actually lost, Maybe I found my Life's reality conformed in that broken thought... Tomorrow can't give me insight on now, for tomorrow may never come, The present is my only Gift, even though it's all rain and no sun... Within my Heart lies a Great Strength, and it I truly lacked to utilize, So just to make my today Better than my yesterday in itself is my Grand Prize... I admit I wonder about tomorrow with today's Happiness being outweighed by the sad, But what is Hope besides a want of something Better than the Nothingness that I had... Yes, I am a Better Me, but the Best is yet to begin, For my yesterday saw a loser, but my today Guarantees my Win... My eyes are with a clear view, and I'm holding firm to the bird in hand, Instead of dropping my head I hold it high, and firmly here I stand... I've been told Life is only Lived by the Living, and I vow to do just that, I stood in my Weakness far too long fighting for the Spirit that I lacked... That Passion to Do and Be Better was overwhelmed by a Strong feeling of letdown, Can a King be a King if he knows not how to wear his Crown? I traveled down many roads and somewhere in the journey I lost my way, But there's sunshine after the storm, and I've been rescued by my Today!

The following piece is written by an incarcerated individual regarding the Long Term Restrictive Housing Program at the Iowa State Penitentiary. The program is forced upon incarcerated individuals deemed to have behavioral issues by prison staff. Often, those in the program are locked up for 23 hours a day with little to no contact with family and friends on the outside. The program was originally designed to last three years, but many people remain indefinitely with no clear path forward:

Des Moines (Iowa Department of Corrections headquarters) is so-called approving this program to go on and I know of five people who have come back and been restarted or set back within the last 6 months alone. However more people are going into the program. There are not any one-on-ones with the counselors, there are no support groups, and their excuse is that there isn't enough staff. This is not acceptable. The crazy thing about it is the indirect systematic encouragement of prisoner-involved dilemma. The program exists because if we are on the stage, then we can't see what's going on. This needs to be brought up immediately. People have been to SSIP (suicide and mental health watch) multiple times, mentally deteriorating and breaking, and as long as people are taking up the bed space, they (at the top) get paid, so it doesn't matter. The state of this prison is very bad and the community needs to know, especially ones who have loved ones being painted as problematic. People have been in this program for over 8 years, and if this is a program to help, isn't it hard to believe everyone is failing? At what point do you say we are being failed? I am moving through the months with no reports, but I am mentally drained because when I speak I'm being told I'm correct, "but...." There is no "but" in the "justice" system, is there? When do you rise up? If standing for justice puts my health at risk, at least the truth will be heard because there are way too many who are afraid of retaliation with the price of oppression. As Les Brown says, "If you fail to plan, you plan to fail."

Why do prisons get a light shed on the injustices when a prisoner dies? People send letters to their people every day, they call home, file grievances, and speak up daily, but nothing is done until someone dies.

This should be a reality to the tax payers who fund these institutions, who have so much faith in the system and

who are being lied to just to be blindsided. Prison reform is a cliché, not a reality.

Rehabilitation is a loosely used word that's really loaded and really saying, "Give us money to misuse while you think we actually care about these pawns, these 'criminals.'" A crime is only a crime once it's noticed. Until then, it's only some act being done. No one becomes a criminal until they are caught for the act they've been committing all along. I say this to say just because something is being done in the dark doesn't mean there isn't a problem. It only means the problem is being done by the one who has more influence on the masses. How can justice be served by injustice? You can't say "That's how prison is," then say, "It's here to help." What's right is right, what's wrong is wrong, no matter who says or does it.

Don't let death be the reason the community stands for those who are being mistreated in the hands of a crooked system.



Art by Sofields

Urgent Request for Assistance Regarding Inmate Treatment and Rights Violations

by a mother of an incarcerated individual in Iowa

I am writing to express my deep concern regarding the treatment of my son at the Iowa State Penitentiary. Over the years, he has endured multiple instances of retaliation, resulting in significant physical harm, including two black eyes, a dislocated shoulder from an incident involving a tactical team, and repeated physical and mental abuse by correctional staff.

Specifically, my son has been denied basic necessities, such as toilet paper and has faced punitive measures for actions as trivial as praying in a unknown language. Additionally, he has been subjected to solitary confinement for the majority of his time in custody, which is detrimental to his mental health. It is my understanding that he is not supposed to be held in such conditions, particularly given his documented mental health issues.

Moreover, my son has faced obstacles regarding his visitation rights. During a recent visit, staff members incorrectly stated that he could not see his son due to familial status, despite our clarification that his son is approved for visitation. After this, we were told he was not on the approved list, even though he has been since birth. This kind of miscommunication appears to be a recurring issue designed to provoke and undermine him.

I am also concerned about the handling of his legal correspondence. His legal mail is being opened outside his presence, which raises serious questions about his rights and the integrity of the legal process. Furthermore, his grievances are reportedly being delayed until deadlines pass, only to be attributed to his supposed inaction.

Given these troubling circumstances, I am urgently requesting an evaluation of my son's treatment and the conditions of his confinement. He has expressed a desire to participate in programs that would aid his rehabilitation, yet these opportunities are seemingly withheld from him. Additionally, I believe it is imperative to communicate with the Bureau of Prisons to review his time served, as it appears

he may be eligible for parole.

I have reached out to various offices within the Iowa Department of Corrections, including the Ombudsman, but have not received adequate responses. I would appreciate any attention to this matter and any guidance on the next steps to address these serious issues.

To My Real Self

by Dre'Sean Barber

With Wisdom, darkness awaits, heat escapes through the abrasions left on my body by life's journey, which causes me pain, I'm left with a frozen heart, from the ice being pumped through my veins, sensation-less extremities, oxygen taken away by life's standards, If I'm on a gurney, then it's way too late, I needed you, you were my E.K.G., you left me with no rhythm, you left me to D.I.E., if he can't



Art by Sofields

hold his pain, then i'ma hold it for my brother, I'm standing in the storm, waiting on the sunny weather, I know it's getting warm, my heart's melting, I'm being flooded by emotions, inside this pressure cooker, contemplating every mistake, going to war with my Creed, wondering is time faith, or faith is in time, or could it be both combined? I'm searching for signs, trying to keep hope alive in a hopeless dwelling, governed by laws of servitude, fixed my body to limitation, acceptance of the price to live, my mind became limitless, I find knowledge of love, from the hate I gave myself, through my unjust deeds, now I'm constantly saying possibly, if I treat women and men right, even if they keep me down, cause they have the authority to, I can't keep looking at them as oppositions and opportunist, I gotta be optimistic and use intuition, not interjection, just intersecting, maybe I'll give you just a little light, for you to know, you not in complete darkness, you get what you give, pleasure and pain is what they call it, you knew the price and you still bought it.



Art by Sofields

Fish and Newspapers

by Gene Campbell

Today's fish is wrapped in yesterday's newspapers!!! Just take a minute to let this sink in.

Today's fish is wrapped in yesterday's newspapers because yesterday's news doesn't matter anymore.

Everyday GOD creates a brand new day for us to travel though and restore positive energy and change lives for the better. We get another chance to right a wrong and show men and women what a straight path could look like. In the mist of GOD creating a new day for us yesterday was destroyed and will never come back. This is a sign to all of man kind to leave what's in the past in the past. Yesterday no longer matters. Each day we are blessed with a clean slate and only today matters.

If we live within the fish and newspaper concept then we must learn to forgive others, and most of all, forgive ourselves and move forward.

Do you know why the windshield is larger than the back window in your vehicle? The front window is larger so you can see everything that's in front of you, which is YOUR FUTURE.

The back window is smaller because the things that are behind you don't really matter anymore but you need to see out of that window at times so you can make sure whatever is behind you stays behind you, which is your YOUR PAST. You notice the things in your back window tends to get smaller and smaller as you move forward.

So if GOD created us a new day, then why would we bring yesterdays issues into a new an pure day. If you saw a man or woman pulling a car around with them everywhere they went each and everyday what would you say? EXACTLY!!!

We have to learn how to forgive and move forward. Remember things of the past is not to be dwelled on but used as a teaching moment in life SO WE DON'T GO THROUGH WHATEVER WE WENTTHROUGH AGAIN!!! LEAVE YESTERDAY WITH YESTERDAY AND FOCUS ON TODAY!!!

Where Are We Going With This?

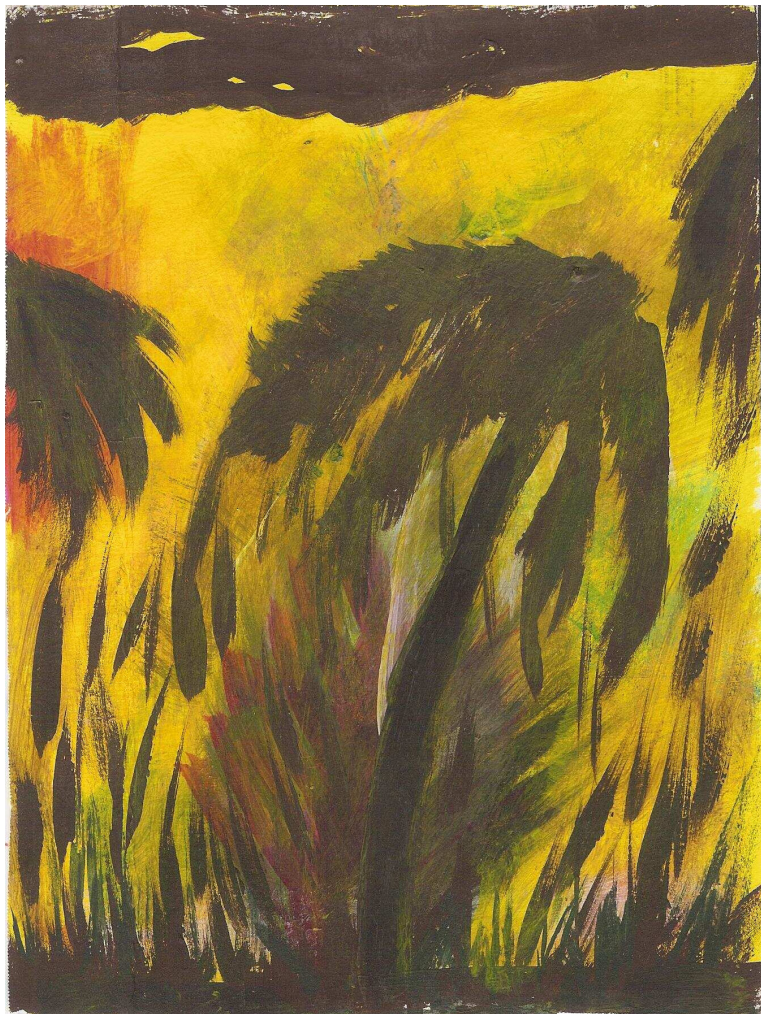
by Michael Kelly

Redundancy will inflict the most damage to any organization taking up a cause of any particular importance (cause defined as “a series of actions advancing a principle or tending toward a particular end)! With fervid apace, we gravitate to like-minded intellectuals who have acknowledged a past of COINTELPRO¹ and are unafraid to take up intellectual arms -- with interlocked arms - holding the freedom of oppression within our arms. We begin by having a coalescing of thought, composed through a mutual intimacy of action. Such action will be in the continued defense against a colonized, chattel capitalist society, who by force, has taken the physical possessions and freedoms of thousands of indigenous people while their communal families looked on in horror. However, any redundancy experienced or felt cannot be blamed on any outside agency. Although we recognize the powerful influence of an oppressive capitalist regime and its insufferable toll placed upon our mental and physical freedoms, we must detract ourselves from this atrocity in order to derive solutions; molding a united front that’s holistically free from the betrayal² of redundant activity or inactivity.

Are we the ones playing by redundant rules?

Sun Tzu’s military tactics in *The Art of War* changed how one general overcame the draconian principles of warfare. A Taoist and experienced military soldier, Tzu was fully aware of the long term effects of war. If we too are going to be free of state capitalist oppression, then we as a united front must be willing to overcome any draconian redundancies that we have followed up until this point! Why? Because, as Frantz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it, in relative opacity.”² If we are unwilling to do away with redundant activity or inactivity as intellectuals, then we become nonintellectuals who fail to ask, “Where do we go from here?” or “What direction should we take now?” Have not countless hours been spent drafting political proposals to release and end chattel slavery of prisons, to end racial inequality, mass incarceration, and the profiling of black and indigenous people?

As Tzu realized, in order to defeat the enemy, there must be a rethinking of redundant principles of activity and inactivity that has failed to produce the results sought and/



Art by Sofields

or desired.³ As a collective, we acknowledge and respect those who have laid past foundations, as these giants have erected pillars of grandeur! However, do we wish to continue the results of that action which has allowed the oppressive giant to return with force and has been designed to stamp out our activity? When we speak with them, do they hear? When we write to them, do they reply? When they fail to answer, what shall be our next step? It remains the hope of this writer, your fellow comrade and political prisoner since 2006, with intellectual arms, that I created the following 13 Steps of Action:

Step 1: Understand fully and grasp the issues of prison reform throughout the nation:

- Rejecting death and torture⁴
- Legislative reforms reducing excessive sentencing
- Using discretion to reduce extreme sentences
- Recognizing the rehabilitative potential of youth and young adults
- Depoliticizing parole decisions (see New York state)
- Correcting overly broad definitions of violent crime
- Scaling back collateral consequences

Step 2: Understand fully that the oppressive state will be unwilling to hear our grievances no matter how well thought out or written.

Step 3: Understand fully that their plan will be to exhaust and frustrate our efforts, and in doing so, they look to us to give up in our activity and cause us to be inactive.

Step 4: Understand fully that we will no longer win the battle on the steps of the enemy. The enemy has written laws to allow you to enter their threshold. They are prepared for this.

Step 5: Understand fully that in order to prevail, we must acquire the many seats that lay beyond the threshold through intellectual political warfare. If unwilling to chariot these, there can be no lasting success.

Step 6: Understand fully the principles that our enemy has in place. This will ensure our ability to prevail in the enemy's house (for example, applying the most recent Supreme Court opinion which ends gerrymandering). We now map out the area, choose our champions, and rally the people.

Step 7: Understand fully that your enemy does not fight where we fight. They rally their people through different avenues. Shall we not also traverse these roads of freedom?

Step 8: Understand fully that the enemy expects to see us in the normal places. They know where we will be and when we will be there, and they go about their business. Be intentional to not be where they expect us to be. We will not speak in the way they expect us to speak.

Step 9: Understand fully that we must find a new avenue of public support through media in which we no longer grieve our collective ideals as a tragedy, at the height of tragedy, or because of oppression as if we remain oppressed, but when it's quiet and unexpected, we voice our principles through intellectual reasoning. In this way, their people are unafraid,

and we too are not thriving off emotions. When the emotions are gone, we can see clearly the avenue in which to rest our chariots.

Step 10: Understand fully that the battle must one day end, and the battle ends with the teaching of the next generation the tactics and principles of the enemy so that when that day comes, they might not fall into the hands of the enemy and be held captive as slave and prisoner, held until all value is removed from them.

Step 11: Understand fully that no enemy has ever hated his own flesh willingly. Many of the enemy's kin suffer from political identity confusion and wish to stand with us. Seek those out and place them on the front lines so the people will get to know the true nature of our enemy.

Step 12: Understand fully that our enemies and their people have been taught to see us as a threat, and they have armed themselves; yet we wish to teach their people that we are not their enemy. We must make them our people or seek war with them.

Step 13: Understand fully that these steps are only the beginning, as a collective unit of incarcerated individuals, free women, free men, and free identity-chosen people who freely give of themselves daily, seeking to move in a forward direction, overcoming redundant activity and non-activity through continued progressive action, forsaking past teachings to meet the enemy where they expect, instead meeting them where they are not expected. Here lies the path to end the war of redundant activity.

• • •

1 Teishand A. Atner, Diane C. Fujino; Matef Harmachis *Black Power AfterLive: The Enduring Significance of the Black Panther Party* (2020), Book Section.

2 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (Nex York: Grove Press, 2004), 45.

3 Any statement made by the writer is not a direct quote taken from Sun Tzu's *Art of War*.

4 For more information contact: The Sentencing Project, 1705 DeSales St. NW 8th Floor, Washington D.C. 20036, 202-628-0871, sentencingproject.org (also on Facebook, X, and Instagram)



Art by Sofields



All content for this zine was created by people incarcerated in Iowa, unless otherwise specified. If you would like to reach out to any of the authors or would like to get involved with prison abolition efforts in Des Moines, contact the Des Moines Abolition Coalition at prisonabolitiondsm@gmail.com

