

PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

COVID-19 Care Kits: Mutual Aid for Prisoners in Saskatchewan and Alberta *Nancy Van Styvendale*

Since the summer of 2011, I have partnered with the Aboriginal Cultural Coordinator at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre to coordinate the *Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing* program.¹ Through this participant-centered, volunteer-run initiative, we have offered creative writing classes to over two hundred people incarcerated at both men's and women's penal institutions in Saskatchewan and Alberta, including the Saskatoon Correctional Centre, Pine Grove Correctional Centre (a women's jail in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan), and Edmonton Institution (as of 2019). As a university professor (first in English, now in Indigenous Studies) and a white settler scholar of Indigenous prison literature and community-engaged learning, I am privileged to do this work. I acknowledge the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their lands and communities through the penal system and the ways in which I have benefitted – materially and otherwise – from this dispossession. I recognize the attendant obligation I have to stand in solidarity with Indigenous prisoners and the relational responsibility to work in concert with and amplify the voices of people inside these institutions of settler colonial oppression.

Inspired Minds is a community of Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, writers, and thinkers, but we prioritize and ground ourselves in Indigenous literatures and ways of knowing, doing, and being. The vast majority of participants in the group are Indigenous.² The program invites participants to engage in critical discussions and creative expressions related to the issues they deem most relevant, including the harms of the penal system, the right to education for prisoners,³ and the necessity of adequate access to Indigenous cultural and spiritual supports inside carceral institutions. We take an explicitly “nothing about us without us” approach, which means that the participants in the program drive its direction. We also take an explicitly relational approach, informed by the Cree and Métis law of *wâhkôhtowin* – the natural law that recognizes the relatedness of all beings, human and more-than-human, and calls us to maintain good relations in accordance with that law (Skidmore, 2009; Cardinal & Hildebrandt, 2000).

In March 2020, with the onset of COVID-19 in Canada, jails and prisons across the country closed their doors to visitors and volunteers,

as well as cultural supports, including Elders and Indigenous liaisons. As of this writing in late-June, prisoners are still not able to have in-person visits (even no-contact visits) with family and friends, which means that they have had even more limited access to necessary supports than usual. Many have been on 22 to 23-hour lockdowns. Programs, like *Inspired Minds*, have been temporarily suspended. While rationalized as necessary to prevent the spread of the virus, these measures should be understood for how they further entrench and illuminate the carceral logics of containment and punishment that define the prison system – not only in the time of COVID-19, but always. As institutions that fracture relationality on every possible level, prisons contravene the law of *wâhkôhtowin*.

In response to the COVID-19 crisis, prisoner justice advocates and penal abolitionists called for the early release of prisoners wherever possible (Philpot & Pate, 2020), recognizing how the pandemic has exacerbated the chances of imprisonment as a death sentence. Certainly, physical distancing and other public health measures cannot be adequately implemented in carceral institutions where people live in extremely close quarters and have limited access to hygiene products. Some people were released as a result of these calls to action; for example, in Saskatchewan and Manitoba, the provincial prisoner population is down by 33% (Ling, 2020). Many more people have remained inside, cut off from family, friends, and other supports, left alone in inherently unhealthy conditions to contend with the threat of the virus.

As a complement to decarceration and in an effort to extend care to those inside, Inspired Minds started a GoFundMe page entitled “Support Prisoners Across the Prairies During COVID-19” to crowd-fund care packages for program participants. The fundraiser was inspired by the wealth of mutual aid endeavours that arose across Turtle Island to assist prisoners in the early days of the pandemic.⁴ Such actions function as a small way of reducing the harms of incarceration, while highlighting the always-perilous conditions in which prisoners live. We began with a modest goal of \$250, which quickly increased to \$500, \$1,000, \$2,500 – and ultimately closed with \$4,204, allowing us to provide care packages to over 1,200 people at four prairie institutions – Saskatoon, Pine Grove, and Prince Albert correctional centres in Saskatchewan, along with Edmonton Institution in Alberta. We were able to get approval to distribute the care packages at these institutions because of pre-existing relationships built over years with supporters of our program on the inside. A few weeks into the fundraiser, two Indigenous artists at the Saskatoon Correctional Centre, Jason Smith and Jordan Waskewitch,

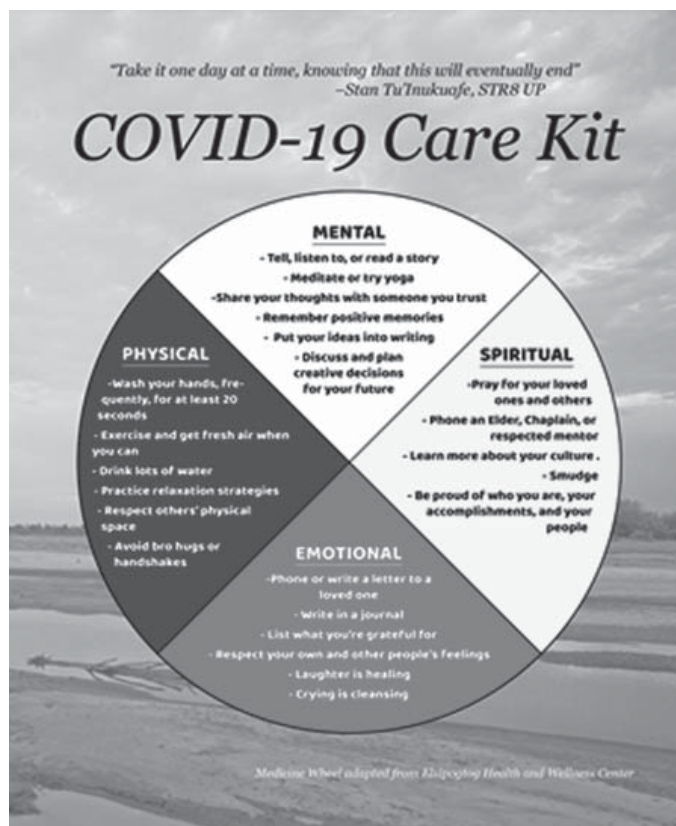
came up with the idea to raise additional funds by beading a number of “COVID-19 Survivor” lanyards (see below), which we sent to randomly selected donors as a token of gratitude and reciprocity.



**“COVID Survivor”
Lanyards by Jason Smith and Jordan Waskewitch**

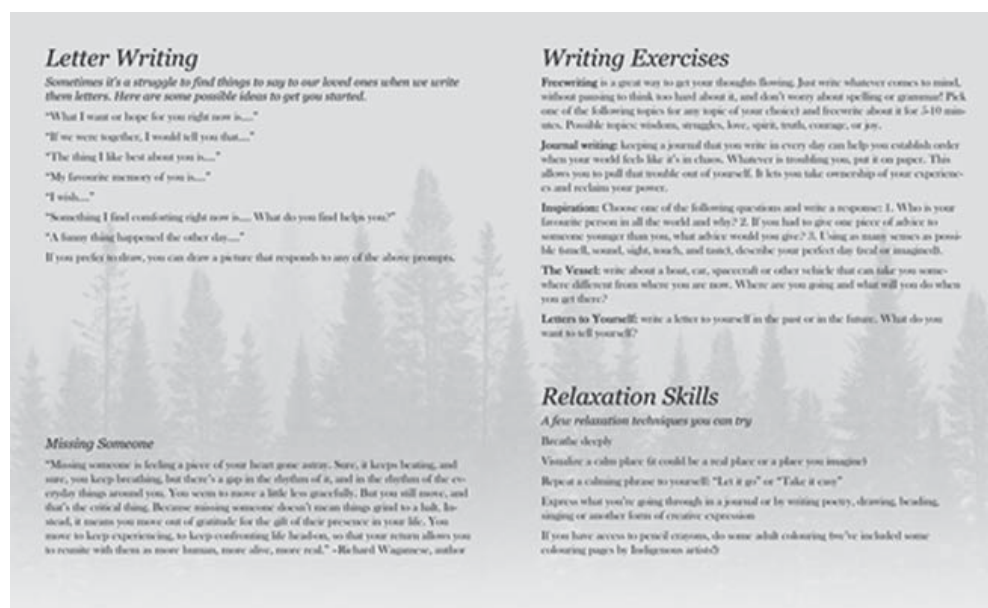
Each “COVID-19 Care Kit”, as we called them, included a large bar of soap, two blank writing booklets, a pencil, a letter of support, and a self-care pamphlet collectively designed by members of both *Inspired Minds* and *STR8 UP*, a Saskatchewan-based organization for people wanting to leave street gangs. Soap is most basic of necessities during the pandemic, but I have heard that it is often of low quality and in short supply inside. Writing materials are important too. With increased access to pencils and paper (usually limited to a few sheets at a time), people in prison can write letters and thus maintain some measure of communication with family and friends while visits are suspended. They can also continue, or begin, their own creative writing practice as a means of self-care during a certainly stressful time.

We were inspired by the Elsipogtog Health and Wellness Centre to design a medicine wheel graphic for the cover of the self-care pamphlet (see below). The medicine wheel is a commonly used signifier of Indigenous health and wellbeing that emphasizes the necessary balance of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of self.⁵ As Cree poet Louise Halfe (forthcoming) explains, “The mind, the heart, the gut, and desire co-exist and are directly related”. We drew on Elsipogtog’s COVID-specific teachings, yet adapted these for the carceral context. For example, instead of “Take a relaxing bath”, “Do an at home workout”, and “Eat a good meal & stay hydrated” in the physical quadrant of the wheel, we put “Practice relaxation strategies”, “Exercise and get fresh air when you can”, and “Drink lots of water”. Instead of “Be in nature” in the spiritual quadrant, we put “Be proud of who you are, your accomplishments, and your people”.



**Cover of the “COVID-19 Care Kit”
 by Inspired Minds and STR8 UP**

We divided the inside two pages of the pamphlet into three main sections: letter writing, writing exercises, and relaxation skills (see below). Based on past conversations with *Inspired Minds* participants about the difficulty of finding things to write home about given the monotony of carceral schedules, we wanted to include a number of letter writing prompts, such as “What I want or hope for you right now is....” and “My favourite memory of you is....” We also incorporated writing exercises similar to those used in an *Inspired Minds* class, including tips on freewriting and journal writing, as well as specific prompts designed to expand creative and critical thinking. Finally, we included a few basic relaxation techniques, some drawn from *STR8 UP’s Stories of Courage: A Healing Workbook* (2015), including visualization, breath work, and adult colouring. Based on past *Inspired Minds* participants’ interest in inspirational quotes, we filled the back page of the pamphlet with such quotes, crowdsourced on Facebook as a way of again involving the larger community in the project.



Interior of the “COVID-19 Care Kit” by Inspired Minds and STR8 UP

Ultimately, the COVID-19 Care Kit project has been one of practicing an ethics of care for those inside, beyond and in spite of state mechanisms

of division. At its core, the penal system in Canada is a settler colonial institution that removes Indigenous peoples from their lands and works to fracture nations, communities, and kin. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only highlighted, but exacerbated the lethal implications of these colonial mechanics. At the same time, the pandemic has created surprising opportunities for community care, opportunities to enact our relational responsibilities to each other, and to practice *wâhkôhtowin*. While it is but a small gesture of support, the COVID-19 Care Kit was animated by a desire to stand in solidarity with our relations inside – to (re)build or fortify those relationships and to let prisoners know they are not alone.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the *Inspired Minds* program, its many diverse constituents or the views of our partner organizations.
- ² The hyper-incarceration of Indigenous people in settler-colonial Canada is especially pronounced in the prairie provinces. At the Edmonton Institution, for example, 54% of the prison population is Indigenous, the highest rate in the country in federal prisons for men (Zinger, 2019).
- ³ See “A Doorway Out of Darkness: Education to Heal” (Inspired Minds, 2016).
- ⁴ See Amy Goodman’s interview with abolitionist organizers Mariame Kaba and Dean Spade (2020) for a discussion of mutual aid projects in New York and Seattle, such as the soap drive organized by Survived and Punished New York.
- ⁵ The medicine wheel is sometimes critiqued as a pan-Indigenous symbol that obscures not only the specific history of the medicine wheel, but also the diversity of Indigenous nations, each with their own cultural traditions and spiritual practices. However, many Indigenous mentors and organizations use the medicine wheel to teach culturally specific values within a shared framework of balance and interconnectedness. It is in this spirit that we employ it here.

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