

RESPONSE

Why Not?
Matthew Feeney

CHOICES

You're locked in a cage, packed tighter than sardines in a tin can and feeling lost and hopeless.

You're here. Life is out there. To get to the other side of the fence, all you really have to do is punch your prison timecard and, unless you are serving a life or indeterminate sentence, you will eventually get out.

I understand. It is easier to lie in your bunk and sleep away your time with your eyes wide-shut than to participate in programming that could have a positive impact. Doing nothing is easily justified, but I would like to suggest a different approach to doing time. Everyone is given 24 hours every day, even while incarcerated. And every day we get the chance to make a choice about what to do with those hours. Remember, even if you made a bad choice last week, month, year, or decade, tomorrow you get another set of 24 hours with which you can make a different choice. Why not?

JUST START

Reading a book is a simple start. Whether it be a Vince Flynn adventure novel read purely for fun, or a book on Buddhist meditation or even a college accounting textbook, the act of reading helps develop and sharpen your cognitive abilities, reasoning skills and empathy. It also improves your vocabulary and introduces you to exciting new worlds. And you never know where it might take you.

I always enjoyed reading, even as a kid. In prison I soon realized "Intake & Orientation" meant remaining locked in my cell 22 hours a day, so I asked my mom to order me some books.

Walking back from property¹ with this big stack of new books caught the watchful eye of a Lieutenant I had never seen before. He casually commented on my being a reader and then, just like that, invited me to apply for the unposted chaplain assistant position in the spiritual library. I interviewed, got the job, and loved it. When I was eventually transferred to my next prison, that initial job experience in the spiritual library helped me get a job in the new prison's regular library, where I worked very happily

for three years. All because an officer I did not know happened to see a new guy walking down the hall with a stack of books!

TAKE A CLASS

Get out there and take an educational class, any class. Just do it. It will not only make the time fly by, but you will also gain valuable experience and credits that can help you stay out once you get out. My DOC facility offered some amazingly positive programming run by outside volunteers, including a Restorative Justice Council, the *Redeeming Time* Project² that worked on teaching clients to perform Shakespeare, *Alternatives to Violence* Program³ and the Minnesota Prison Writing Workshop⁴ (MPWW). Not only did these programs offer a unique opportunity to spend time out of our cells, they enriched and advanced the lives of the participants.

THE POWER OF THE PEN

Attending that first MPWW writing class back in 2015 literally changed my life. It was because of that one class that I discovered that I not only enjoyed writing, but I was actually pretty decent at it. I started spending more time writing different types of things, even poetry, and was eventually assigned an amazing MPWW writing mentor who provided me with much needed feedback and encouragement.

I was finally encouraged to submit the first and only story I had ever written to the real world for publication. Someone had provided me a hand-written list containing three addresses for submitting writings, so I thought, “Why not? I have nothing to lose but the cost of postage”.

The first publication, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*⁵ rejected my piece entirely because they don’t accept fiction (oops, my bad!). But the second, *The Beat Within*,⁶ actually published my story. I was now officially a “published author”. That was so cool. But then I got blown away when, a few weeks later I was notified my submission to PEN America⁷ had actually won 2nd place in fiction, which included a substantial cash prize. I was hooked.

Since my first nervous submissions in 2017, I have now had more than 300 individual works published around the world. Ironically, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*, the place that had rejected my first fiction story, published my entire 3,000-word essay entitled “MSOP’s COVID response

was a Disaster”, which was subsequently cited in the Mitchell-Hamline Law School SOLPRC newsletter and quoted in the *Minnesota Star Tribune* newspaper. Last year, *Spotlight on Recovery*⁸ published my “Open Letter to Governor Walz” in full-color, and the Governor’s office actually responded by reaching out to me with a phone call. In the last month, JSTOR⁹ accepted my essay about prison education to their archive and I have been asked to write for Prison Legal News¹⁰ (PLN). Instead of writing fiction, I am learning I can write about real issues experienced by real people, and the outside world is reading and caring enough to respond.

Lest you think publication in outside magazines and periodicals is easy, please realize that as of 4/15/2025, I have submitted 6,456 works to 588 unique publications.¹¹ That’s a lot of stamps.

Why spend all that time, energy and postage in sending my writings out? Why not? I am doing something constructive with my time, honing a new passion, and working on usable skills that I hope might become a future vocation. Sometimes I even earn a few bucks. I just got asked to write for the Prison Legal News (PLN). I have found my voice. I am not only writing about grave injustices and flaws in the criminal justice system, but publication allows me to shout about these issues from the mountaintops!

EXERCISE YOUR GREY CELLS

Back at the beginning my brain was still hungry for more and I started exploring my educational options. I discovered the DOC facility I was living at offered many exceptional opportunities, including in-person college classes, online degrees, and even specialized classes that provided certification for C-Tech computer network cabling that could lead to a well-paying job immediately upon release. I signed up for them all. Taking accredited college courses taught in-person by real professors was an amazing experience and compared to the usual zoom-zooms and wam-wams, the \$10.00 course fee was the best investment I ever made in myself.

MAKE WHAT IS MISSING

Of course, not every facility is as supportive of its clients’ futures. The facility I am at now had a written policy that actually prohibited staff from helping to facilitate any educational opportunities beyond a GED. Deeply

convinced of the importance of continuing these educational opportunities, I asked questions, wrote kites¹² and applied my newly honed writing skills to file an official grievance on this issue. Lo and behold, two months later, the facility actually changed – it is policy! Later that summer I became their very first client to be approved to take an accredited college class through Rio Salado¹³ College.

The assessor for my Special Release Board (SRB) suggested that working on my financial awareness would be a protective factor that would increase the chances of my release. Nervous because I was a writer who loves words, I took his advice and stretched outside of my comfort zone by making my first new college correspondence class Financial & Tax Management for Small Businesses.

As luck would have it, I received my textbook and course work the week before our facility went on a COVID-19 lock-down where we were restricted to our rooms 23 ½ hours a day. I got four weeks of homework done in four days and stayed ahead even after the facility lifted the lockdown. This wordsmith's numbers must have added up because somehow I passed with an A.

By the end of that year, two other clients had signed up for college classes. John Paul M. said "I was incarcerated in the middle of my first semester of Technical college - now twenty years later I finally have the opportunity to take another class!" Today, there are nearly half-a-dozen people taking higher educational classes at our facility.

EXPLORATION AND DISCOVERY

I've been taking a Buddhist Correspondence¹⁴ course via U.S. mail for the last few years because I enjoy learning completely new worldviews and concepts. I requested the address for every Buddhist organization in Minnesota and sent all 27 a postcard seeking volunteers willing to volunteer to lead a Buddhist spiritual group at our facility. One of them actually responded by contacting our facility and she has been leading monthly Buddhist Meditation meetings for the last two years.

I read in the Minnesota Star Tribune newspaper about a new "Prison to Law Pipeline"¹⁵ program. Maureen Onyelobi is the first imprisoned person in the country to get admitted to an accredited law school where she is pursuing a bona fide law degree to become a licensed attorney. She is a great

example of someone shaping their own future, making the most of our time behind bars, and not being deterred simply because something has not been done before. Unfortunately, my facility did not qualify for that program, so I kept looking for other options.

MASTER'S OF HUMANITIES

After reading that recidivism rates drop to 0% for those who earn a Master's degree while incarcerated (Stevens & Ward, 1997), I realized that education may literally be the key to my release. It took several years to find the right program, but as of January 2025, I am two classes away from earning my Master's in Humanities from California State University's special HUX program¹⁶ designed for incarcerated people.

Through my voluminous graduate readings, I learned about the historical roots of incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex. I was shocked that California spends more on prisons than it does on higher education (Goldbery & Evans, 1998) and I was inspired by the shared experiences of people like Malcolm X, Angela Davis, Abu-Jamal, Leonard Peltier and Nelson Mandela. I discovered there is no hierarchy of oppression and I can articulate the differences between abolition and reformation.

Several of my graduate school papers on these topics have been published by the American Prison Writing Archive¹⁷ at Johns Hopkins University.

Mandela astutely noted, "Prison is designed to break one's spirit and destroy one's resolve. To do this, the authorities attempt to exploit every weakness, demolish every initiative, negate all signs of individuality – all with the idea of stamping out that spark that makes each of us human, each of us are who we are".

THE SPIRIT-SPARK THAT MAKES US HUMAN

That brings us to the most difficult cases: people serving life without the possibility of parole (LWOP) or "indeterminate" sentence of civilly committed individuals. Why waste time improving yourself if you are never going to get a chance to see the light of freedom? Why educate yourself if you will never be able to apply for a job in the real world or have a chance to work for a company that might care about your credentials? Why prance around like a fool and bother memorizing lines from some long-dead bard

who did not even have the courtesy to speak normal English? Why study corporate accounting if you cannot run a company from prison? Why read a book about a place you may never be able to visit? Why do anything?

To that I say, what is the alternative? Your life is important and you can make a difference in the world, even if it is from behind bars. Just ask Onyelobi. According to the article, she is serving a life sentence in Shakopee, Minnesota. She did not give up. In fact, she had to work extra hard to earn her bachelor's and master's degrees while in prison before she could even apply to law school. She is my hero. She made a difference in my life without us ever meeting.

I am also serving an indeterminate (de facto life) sentence. After I completed the maximum prison sentence allowed under Minnesota state law, I was civilly committed to the notoriously draconian Minnesota Sex Offender Program (MSOP), where I have lived since January 2020. MSOP has been in the news and the courts over questions of whether it is constitutional to keep people locked up indefinitely to prevent future crimes they might commit. Ever see Minority Report? But here I am, stuck in a place that would give Dante nightmares and realizing there is a chance I may never get out. But now I know I am not alone and that many others have suffered far more than I have without giving up.

So that leaves us with a lot of WHY questions. Why do I care? Why do I get up in the morning? Why do I continue to educate myself? Why do I participate in treatment? Why do I take classes? Why do I write essays like this? Why do I do any of these things if there is no possibility I am ever getting out? The answer is simple. Why not?

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Property: The department where imprisoned people go to pick-up incoming packages.
- ² See www.redeeming-time.org
- ³ See www.AVPusa.com
- ⁴ See www.mnprisonwriting.org
- ⁵ *Journal of Prisoners on Prison*, 120 University Private – Room 13020, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6N5
- ⁶ The Beat Within, PO Box 34310, San Francisco, California, USA 94134
- ⁷ PEN America Prison Writing Program, 588 Broadway, Suite 303, New York, New York, USA 10012

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- ⁸ Spotlight on Recovery, Robin Graham Publishing Company, 10201 Flatlands Avenue #360111, Brooklyn, New York, USA 11236
- ⁹ JSTOR Second Chance, One Liberty Plaza, 5th Floor, New York, New York, USA 10006 and www.about.jstor.org/blog
- ¹⁰ Prison Legal News, PO Box 1151, Lake Worth Beach, Florida, USA 33460 and www.prisonlegalnews.org
- ¹¹ For a free copy of my current list of publisher addresses, write to Matthew Feeney, 1111 Highway 73, Moose Lake, Minnesota, USA 55767.
- ¹² Kites are forms used to communicate between imprisoned people and staff.
- ¹³ Rio Salado College, 2323 West 14th Street, Tempe, Arizona, USA 85281.
- ¹⁴ Phap Nguyen Buddhist Congregation, 1838 County Road 129, Pearland, Texas, USA 77581-6239.
- ¹⁵ See www.allsquarempls.com
- ¹⁶ Dr. Matt Luckett, HUX Program Director, California State University – DH, College of Continuing & Professional Education, 1000 E. Victoria Street, Carson, California, USA 90747.
- ¹⁷ American Prison Writing Archive, 3400 N. Charles St., Baltimore, MD 21218.

REFERENCES

- Goldbery, Eve & Linda Evans (1998) *The Prison Industrial Complex and the Global Economy*, Berkley: Agit Press.
- Stevens, Dennis J. & Charles S. Ward (1997) “College Education and Recidivism: Education Criminals is Meritorious”, *Journal of Correctional Education*, 48(3): 106-111.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matthew Feeney is currently imprisoned. For further information on the initiatives he is involved in, join the Facebook group “End MSOP” and check out national organizations fighting against civil commitment such as CURE-SORT.org, NARSOL, and aJustFuture.org. He can be reached at the following address:

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