

FIVE

SILENTLY CRYING OUT LOUD

Chris

I dedicate this to my brother, T-Lo, who's always encouraging me to just be me and to give life my best effort. Thank you for always being my rock. And to all of my sweet children who continue to love me, even when discouraged from doing so. You are my strength. I love you.

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“For the LORD heareth the poor, and despiseth not his prisoners”
(KJV Psalms 69:33)

Hello, my name is Chris. I’d like to walk you through a journey on what many of us experience while incarcerated. This is not my first time in prison or even my first prison. Of course, hopefully it will be my last.

I am writing this because I feel we have been let down by the very people we’ve placed our trust in. We come to prison hoping we will get “rehabilitation.” We set goals and beg staff to help us achieve them. We don’t understand why we have to beg for help. We thought that was the actual reason we came here. An example from my personal experience is this: while talking to two case workers about taking some classes that have been on my case plan for years, they told me to get signed up. I crossed my arms, blinked my eyes and nodded my head, like on *I Dream of Jeannie*. I asked, “Did it work?” One case worker laughed and said, “I’m serious.” I said, “So am I. I don’t have access to a computer to sign myself up— you do. If it were up to me, I’d have taken those classes years ago.”

The expectation to do the absolute impossible is so overwhelming. The majority of us are working toward change. It’s a terribly slow process. I personally don’t feel it would be so slow if we received the help and encouragement we were promised upon being sent to prison. I have written a series of letters that discuss some of our thoughts and feelings to the people who affect or are affected by the prison system. These letters range from the prisoners all the way up to the President of the United States. They are not directed toward any one prison, but all prisons in America.

While we live inside the prison, we are not allowed to speak of what we want or need. We are the silent voices crying out loud. I have been given an opportunity to write about my experiences. I have chosen to try to speak for inmates in general. As I mentioned earlier, I am not focusing on one prison, but all prisons, for women and for men. I am not addressing every single

issue. I have chosen to be direct and to the point, as I know no other way.

I hope these letters will empower other prisoners to speak what needs to be spoken rather than continue to say what is expected of us when the public is involved. The truth needs to be told. I will not apologize if I offend you. What I will do is ask you to look inside yourself and ask, “*Why* am I offended?” Is it because this issue is so close to home? If so, ask yourself, “What can I do, starting right now, to make a change?”

Since so many people are being incarcerated, as seemingly the “only option,” eventually it will be your Grandmammy in prison. Will she be treated fairly? There are inmates that will not agree with what I’ve said or my approach. That is okay with me. However, I encourage those same inmates to ask themselves what they would like to be different, then express it. This, of course, is to only encourage people to express themselves in an intelligent manner. Rioting will not bring positive results nationwide. I ask that you open your hearts and truly listen. Then, become the change.

When we come to prison we are already emotionally broken. We know we need a psychological, spiritual, and emotional overhaul. We steel ourselves for doing just that. We expect to look deep inside ourselves to fix the parts of us we don’t like. We know these will be painful. However, we also expect to receive support while going through this grief process, just as the un-incarcerated would and should receive. What we don’t expect is to be shamed and degraded while we are grieving. We don’t expect to be told we are beneath the scum that cockroaches call scum. We come with open hearts, minds, and souls looking for rehabilitation and leave, if we’re allowed to leave, feeling like we have been in psychological and spiritual warfare.

Sincerely, from my heart of hearts,

Chris

Dear President of the United States of America,

We see commercials where animals are sad because their owners have left them unattended in a cage. There are two of us in a room smaller than our bathrooms at home. In fact, two of us are in a one-person cell. Are you saying that because we broke the laws of man that we're to be treated less than household pets?

Society expects "rehabilitation," yet when we enter these walls, we are dehumanized, which is in fact the exact opposite of rehabilitation. We grieve what happened to people in Nazi concentration camps, yet choose to incarcerate moms, dads, grandparents, charge children as adults, where they are denied nutrition, sunshine, space, human contact, exercise, basic employment, even the education they're promised. When do we/you start facing the reality of what mass incarceration is doing to our great United States of America? When do we stop playing "prison reform" and do an entire prison overhaul? A suggestion would be to ask actual prisoners, current and prior, what prisons need and don't need. Then take their advice. Keep it simple. You are the voice of an entire country. Will you be a voice for us?

I am not sure if you are familiar with Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs describes five separate stages of human needs that motivate our human behaviors. Maslow theorizes that humans must focus on their basic needs, survival needs, until they are met. Until our survival needs are met,

we as human beings cannot begin to... Well, anything else.

As a child, I was passed from one foster family to another. I also



lived with my real father for 3-4 years after which I was adopted at age 9. At age 11 I was placed back in foster care. I was sent back to my adopted mom's home at 13. I moved out on my own at age 14, and I have been on my own ever since.

I was finally free from rape and daily beatings. I was also never again locked in a closet, left unfed, and no one tried to drown me in the bathtub, or burn my face with scalding hot water. I was even allowed to sleep lying down. These examples don't even begin to speak to the horrors I lived or the tapes that replay in my head every single day. At no time in my life have I ever been able to move to the "love and belonging" stage of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Other than my children and brother, I don't understand the concept of love. It is foreign because I've not experienced it. Yet I grew up in a system that was supposed to do more for me than my parents.

While in prison, I have personally begged for therapeutic treatment specific to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). I was told that my "mental health safety" is not in policy. Not having PTSD therapy in prisons is akin to telling a war veteran he must remember the war daily but will not be given therapy.

When rehabilitation doesn't raise us above the bottom two levels either, how are we expected to know how to self-actualize, which is what rehabilitation is intended to be directed towards? If you/we could reform the system of rehabilitation to let us at least know we are loved and belong to the human race, it would be a step in the right direction. Such as teaching all inmates that even though we have made mistakes, we are not a mistake. We are all still worthy of love, kindness, patience, and acceptance, not shame, abandonment, and dehumanization.

I think, therefore I am. We think, therefore we are. While in our writing class, preparing our publications, we were given a free writing exercise. We were to take a landscape and describe it as an experience. We were only given a few minutes to do so. This is the experience I wrote. It is also an example of what our first thoughts are like and why many of us become prisoners, especially within ourselves. It is my hope that you can finally see us as the real

human beings that we are. Humans that deserve compassion, the same as you.

“When I was a child still living in Louisiana, we had fields on 3 sides of our home and woods as our back yard. In the middle of the woods was a trail that walked us to a creek that ran into the Gulf of Mexico. Although the woods could be scary because of the wild animals, such as tree snakes, that we couldn’t see, the woods were my safest place of my childhood. My brother and I would run to the woods to hide from our dad if we had the opportunity to know he was coming. We would hide behind or in trees or sometimes run all the way to the creek and hide in bushes there. Even though my heart would be racing from anxiety, I always knew I was safer in the woods. As an adult, I can see how I could picture my emotions separately hiding behind different trees. Hiding from me and themselves, at times running all the way to the creek. To the deepest, safest place within me.”

Thank you for listening.

“And he changeth the times and the seasons: he removeth kings, and setteth up kings: he giveth wisdom unto the wise, and knowledge to them that know understanding: He revealeth the deep and secret things: he knoweth what is in the darkness, and the light dwelleth with him.” (KJV, Daniel 2:21-22)

Directors:

I asked a few of the ladies what they’d like to say to you. Most of them spoke about gender equality in prisons. In general, men’s prisons have more to keep them busy, such as recreation and leisure activities such as pool tables, leather shops, play stations, weight rooms, basketball courts, and baseball fields. They are also given opportunities to learn skilled trades that will help them to find work as firefighters, carpenters, electricians, and much more. Women in prison are given access to yarn, needle and thread,

beading, and drawing materials. Our jobs consist of cooking, cleaning, sewing and very basic lawn care.

We, as women, would appreciate being given the same opportunities for success as men. Honestly, we already know how to take care of “home necessities.” We would like to know we are worthy of more than being barefoot and pregnant. This is not a job skill, but a lifetime expectation for us. It’s not that we are ungrateful for what we have. We are grateful. However, we would like equal opportunity. Also, in regards to equality, men are generally given less time for the same crimes. In Intensive Treatments Units, men’s programs are 6-9 months and women’s are 12-16 months. What can we do to help with overcrowding of women’s prisons? We would like to receive some consideration as well. Reform equals change.

We would like to see some incentives for doing well. Although we are given “good time” toward release, the good time we’ve earned can be taken away. How can something already earned be taken away? An idea was suggested: “If we go one year without any write-ups at all, could that earn us extra good time?” Or maybe the women could be allowed places such as Honor Farms where we can work outdoors and learn skills. We understand you are very busy, but would it be possible to have one day a year where you and staff speak to the inmates? We could use open communication and exchange thoughts, fears, expectations, promote new ideas, and brainstorm. Respectfully, if you have maybe six prisons in your jurisdiction, that’s only six days per year.

I personally have two ideas that I feel would help all prisons across the United States. The first is: prisoners should be allowed to teach what they have learned to other prisoners. We learn best by teaching what we have learned to others. Also, it would teach accountability, responsibility, address attitude and behavior, show leadership and equality. This would address budget cuts as inmates only make \$.05-\$1.50 an hour or volunteer points. The second idea being: all prisons should have a large garden in summer and greenhouses in winter. This would allow prisons to

produce healthy foods, cut costs from buying wilted, rotten, stale foods, and create in-house employment. This would teach prisoners they can be self-sufficient, creative, caring, nurturing, consistent, and responsible— regardless of gender. With both of these ideas, prisoners could see self-improvement, take pride in what they're accomplishing, give back to their communities, and know the feeling of achieving success due to their own personal efforts.

We would like to ask you to visit the prisons you direct. Could you show up unannounced? Do you know how things are addressed when prison staff knows you're not around? When we had a suicide attempt, two of us ran up and down the hallways, pushing every button connecting us to the control room, looking for just one officer or a response from control. It was a very long time before we spotted an officer and we never received a response from control. When you come, Director, there are staff members in every walkway. When you are here, they smile at and talk to us. When you are not here, they scream at times and make comments like, "Why should I be nice?" We want to say we deserve to be treated with kindness, but we also know if we say this, the result is a write-up for being disrespectful.

We wonder, do you approve of inmates being screamed at while attempting basic exercises such as going to eat a meal? I am sure your nerves would be on edge if the managers of the restaurant you and your family were eating in proceeded to scream at you like a drill sergeant or worse because you laughed at the table.

Do you believe your staff should "lead by example?" Would you hold staff accountable if you saw negative behaviors? Or would you duck your head and walk away? What can you do to be the change?

Thank you for listening.

"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit" (Galatians 5:25).

Wardens:

So many Wardens come and go. Unfortunately, before you go, most of you didn't have the courage to stand up to the corruption. You either brushed it under the rug so your staff wouldn't look bad or you fed into it.

Our prison systems really need truly courageous people in charge. If you know your staff is violating basic human rights along with policy and procedure, it's actually within your ability to stop them. If every Warden is supposed to bring change, why is our prison system still the same? You want us to change. Well, we have the same expectation of you. Be the positive change you want to see. It is within your power to make a difference. Please! Make a difference. "But the Lord said unto Samuel, Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature; because I have refused him: for the Lord seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart" (KJV 1 Samuel 16:7).

Parole Boards:

When we come in front of you, we usually have a mental plan as to what we'd like to present. Sometimes we write it out using note cards. When we get in front of you, it seems as if our speaking apparatuses detach themselves from our thinking apparatuses. We draw a complete blank, not remembering our own achievements or classes we have taken. When we look at our carefully-written note cards, it becomes hard to focus, no longer able to see words, only a jumbled conglomeration of, "Man, I'm nervous. I want to say the right things, but I can't think straight!" in our minds. It is almost terrifying. Especially the second or third time. We hope you'll know we've worked so hard. Then when given our chance, we manage to say nothing we wanted to convey.

We are asking you to give us a second to catch our breath as we walk in the room and take it all in. Then, smile and say hello to us. One gentleman who has been on my last two parole board

panels has been very curt each time. It's like he's upset with me before I have even spoken. This type of atmosphere has made it very difficult to speak when addressed. I go into "freeze mode" and my answers become half sentences and jumbled, giving the impression that I'm uneducated and unintelligent. Neither of which are true.

Can and will you please take into consideration that our emotions are scrambled when we walk into your room, knowing you are going to judge us in a mere five minutes? We would really appreciate this. Also, we ask you to come visit the prisons we live in. Watch us while we are in the midst of social interactions. Watch us teaching and helping each other or while we laugh or cry together. See us for us.

Do you feel the mistakes we have made make us a mistake? Do you make mistakes? Big ones? Are you forgivable? Aren't we? Are you capable of change? When you say or feel you have changed, don't you hope those you trust will believe in you? That's what we hope each time we place our trust in you. We truly hope you will be encouraging even when the general consensus is that you believe it's your duty to discourage us. Just like you, we hope to be forgiven and allowed to move forward. We are all still mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, aunts, uncles, role models, business owners, neighbors, loved ones, lovable ones, and loving ones.

Can you please look at us as the human beings we are? We are not just statistics on a page. Can you believe this with us?

Thank you for listening.

"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (KJV, Romans 3:22)

"He that despiseth his neighbour sinneth: but he that hath mercy on the poor, happy is he" (KJV, Proverbs 14:21).

Dearest Case Workers:

When we first met you we were excited. You spoke in a way about our future relationship together that we felt hopeful. We felt we had goals to achieve and that we were on the same page. Later we learned we weren't even in the same book.

While inside these walls, we are assigned to you to help us achieve success. We don't get to choose you. However, we try the best we can to make things work. We use open communication, honesty, and respect. All of which we do expect in return, yet rarely receive.

We are told to drop a request, which you choose to ignore. We drop another one a week or two later for you to respond with, "Stop harassing me." We realize you want us out of sight, out of mind. Which brings up the simple question, "If you didn't want to work with us, why did you become a case worker at an institution?" If your client is supposed to be on an enhanced plan or has special needs, why are you waiting to get them the extra help they're begging for? You teach us to "ask for help." Then when we do, you shame us. You drill into our minds that we are supposed to hold ourselves and our fellow peers accountable. Which we do because we are changing. Then we watch you as you make excuses for shaming and ignoring us. You watch as another staff member degrades us and say nothing. You acknowledge another case worker or your supervisor has violated policy, which has a grave effect on an individual or individuals, and you do nothing about it because you don't want to make waves. Making waves is what creates change!

The sad part is we want to look up to you. We hope and pray that you can show us a better way. The hard reality is most of you expect us to do as you say, not as you do. If you want to see change, be the change you want to see.

Here we are. Can you see us? We need you. Where are you? We are right here like children waiting to be fed. Will you feed and nourish us? Or will you continue to keep us locked in our closets while starving us of psychological and emotional nutrition?

Are you afraid of “them?” They are only people too. Nothing changes if nothing changes. Start somewhere. Stand up. Do what’s right, not what’s easy.

“For with God nothing shall be impossible” (KJV, Luke 1:37).

“Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and he shall strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the Lord” (KJV, Psalms 27:14)

Case Worker Managers or Supervisors:

You should be held to a higher standard in which you act responsibly and uphold policy and procedures. Lead by example. Just because you have the power to lose our paperwork, delete important information from the computer, lie to the Parole Board because you don’t like an individual, or make someone’s life miserable, doesn’t mean you should.

Where are your morals? You’ve been given a great opportunity to make a difference. Why are you abusing it?

When loved ones die or we lose custody of our kids, we hurt. Hearing things like, “Oh, so that’s over now,” is painful, and frankly callous. Can you show some compassion? We look to our case workers to help us achieve our goals. Our case workers look to you to learn new and positive ways to help us. A perfect place to start would be showing compassion – for us and them. Thank you for becoming a part of the change and for listening.

“Therefore be ye also ready; for in such an hour as ye think not, the Son of Man cometh” (KJV, Matthew 24:44).

Medical Departments:

We come to see you to receive proper medical care. We hope to receive it with a smile or even a positive greeting. We truly just hope you will listen and aid us in a cure. What we receive is

usually nowhere close to what we hope for. As women, this is at times very offensive.

Just this week, a woman came back from medical. She has a terrible rash on her face. Medical told her it's menopause and sent her away.

If you were to look in my medical file, you would see another example. I went to medical asking to get my eyes checked for glasses. I was told if I let them give me a pap smear, they would check my eyes. I refused and had to sign a "refusal" and set up another appointment to get my eyes checked.

We are told many times, "Do more kegels and drink more water" as a cure for our ailments. After my experience I ask this, "If I have to receive a pap to get my eyes checked, if I blink, does that mean my kegels are working?" This may seem like an inappropriate joke, but to us it is our medical care reality. For women who have been raped, molested, or sexually abused, these behaviors and attitudes towards us retrigger our traumas, leaving us feeling re-violated.

Here are a few other examples of what prisoners have been told when trying to receive medical care:

- She has high cholesterol? She's told to change her diet and buy salmon off commissary.
- She has a liver condition? She's taken off pain meds, told to buy "Pain-Off" on commissary. Pain Off comes with a warning that it destroys the liver.
- She feels like she's having a heart attack? She's told to drink a Pepsi.
- She has shooting pains in her hands and feet? She's told she has carpal tunnel.
- She feels balanced with her medication? You change it.
- She's anemic? Her levels of iron and hemoglobin are staying low? You doubled her iron and overdosed her on it. Because of this, you are taking

you off her iron completely. Although she's been anemic over ten years, she's not anemic anymore.

- She has neuropathy? It's called diabetic nerve pain and she isn't given medication for pain. She is told to try new diabetic shoes, though she already has new ones on.
- She has an abscessed tooth? She's told the dentist doesn't have time to see her. She still has a bump in her mouth with infection and has yet to be seen by a dentist.
- She's in labor? She stays in labor, all day, without being taken to a hospital. She is eventually told to, "stop pushing," as she gives birth to a child in her cell.
- 6 week post-natal follow-up? She wasn't seen for her follow-up after having her baby in prison.
- Umbilical hernia? Medical have given her a wrap to wear, but won't give her the medical care to have it taken care of.
- Visible tumor-like pus pockets inside her cheeks? The dental department tells her they won't test it, examine it, or help her to heal it.

These are just small examples that could go on. What will it take to remove the absurdity from our medical care so that we can just receive the medical care we need?

Dental Departments:

When I am not incarcerated and I go to the dentist, there is usually a simple process. I set up the appointment. I go to the appointment. I sit in the dental chair. The dentist looks in my mouth. While my mouth is becoming numb, he sees another patient. He comes back to the room and either fills or pulls the tooth needing fixed. He gives me instructions, tells me to have a nice day and I leave.

During incarceration, a dentist sees us at our appointment and tell us we will be placed on a waiting list and then we wait three to six months to fix the hurting tooth/teeth. Usually when we are seen the second time it's because another tooth is ailing us. We are looked at again and replaced on the waiting list. To repeat the cycle in three to six months. In three years, I have personally had three teeth fixed, when I need many more fixed.

While incarcerated, we are denied proper nutrition, so our teeth are getting worse faster than we can get them fixed. Should we run the health risks of having bad teeth? You know as well as we do that the constant draining of infection into our bodies is deadly. What can you do to help us?

Thank you.

Business Owners:

For those of you who do give people an opportunity after they leave prison: thank you. It is because of you that we have been able to support our families. We have been given a certain amount of trust and responsibility by you when others have treated us as though we have leprosy. We have been very fortunate to be treated as normal human beings by you. For this, we are truly appreciative and grateful. We sincerely thank you.

For those of you who have chosen to believe felons aren't worthy of being hired, you have probably robbed yourself of an opportunity to have one of the most intelligent individuals available work for you.

So many people inside prison walls are self-motivated, innovative, creative, self-sufficient, confident, easygoing, family-oriented, hardworking, fun-loving people.

If you have chosen to not give us a chance, thank you. Your selfishness has given us an opportunity to work for someone with a heart. Have a nice day.

Public Defenders:

You have been appointed to us to help us. Most of the time, we don't see you until we are already on our way into the courtroom. You don't ask what really happened. You have no desire to know us as people. We are supposed to be able to look to you with home in our eyes and hearts. Our families anxiously wait for a positive outcome. Usually, we have to call home and tell them the great news: "I've been appointed a public pretender so my defense will be basically nonexistent." It sucks! We need you to step up to the plate and knock it out of the ballpark. We don't need any more foul balls. We know you're busy, but our lives are in your hands. Will you please decide that our needs are more important than what the prosecutors want? They're not on our team, but you're supposed to be.

Why are you a public defender if you don't actually want to defend? If you want to play "Let's Make a Deal," put on a costume and compete on the television show. Otherwise, will you *please* defend us!

"Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (KJV 11:14).

"Ye have shamed the counsel of the poor, because the Lord is his refuge" (KJV 14:6)

Department of Family Services:

Your mission statement includes preserving families. Why is it that when your department becomes involved families are ripped apart? Have you lost sight of what family means?

Being part of a family includes accepting each other's faults and working through them together. Instead you teach our children that we as parents are not acceptable and they should respond to this by turning their back on everyone they ever loved. No longer allowing them to even talk with grandparents! Then you

proceed to teach them they are not accepted for the smallest infractions. You act as though the children in your care are either a grade or a behavior. When did they stop being little human beings?

We, as parents, may not have been perfect. However, no matter how “off” our families may have seemed to you, our children always knew we loved them and know we still love them. You leave them feeling empty and alone.

How are you going to handle your own children when they become adults who make mistakes? Will you place your own grandchildren into foster care? If you wouldn't do this to your own family, why do you keep doing this to ours?

“If a man thinketh himself to be something, when he is nothing, he deceiveth himself” (KJV, Galatians 6)

“And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (KJV, Matthew 10:28).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted” (KJV, Matthew, 4:3-4).

Those with Family in Prison,

We thank you for your love, support, kindness, and tough love. We thank you for not leaving us alone in our darkest hours. If you have left us alone, we always pray you'll come back around. We want you to know we want a good life, too. We don't want to keep coming back to prison. We really don't like it here.

The thing is, we don't understand the demons that tell us we are unworthy, unlovable, and unacceptable. Many of them come from childhood traumas that were not our choices, but had led to us make irresponsible, impulsive decisions. We don't want to hurt inside and in turn hurt you inside. We don't understand

what is going on in our lives any more than you do. We just hope that when we can finally see the light, you are still there.

We all know we have hurt those we love. We are sorry and hope that soon you can and will forgive us. Even if not for us, but for yourselves. Especially for yourselves.

Many times we don't know how to tell you how much we love you. We don't know the words to express how much we miss you when we're not with you. Most times, we don't know how to love ourselves, so we feel unworthy of your love.

So many of us focus on doing better in prison so that you, our family members, may finally one day accept us for who we are. We usually never realize we are worthwhile and need to do it for ourselves in order to succeed.

Please try to remember that just as you are hurting through this experience, so are we. You need us and we need you. If we can all stop pointing fingers at each other, embrace, share compassion, and work as a team, we will all come out of this better people. We do need to live, laugh, and love through our hard times, too.

We love and miss you. You love and miss us. Therefore, we already have a common ground in which to start over. Can we start with forgiveness, acceptance, honesty, love, and mutual respect? We know it's hard because you are upset with us. We are upset with us, too!

Can we start over today, right now? We know it's not our first 'do over.' Maybe it won't be the last. Can we give it our best efforts?

We would like to start with: I love you. I am sorry that I have hurt you. I have no excuses. I was wrong. You did not deserve to feel the pain I caused you. Please look into your heart for forgiveness for me. I would appreciate a chance to begin again. Thank you for listening.

Fellow Prisoners,

This is a letter to prisoners of all types. I'd like to remind you that you are not a prisoner. You are a human being who lives within prison walls. You are not defined by the place you live, but by your truest self. The person you are when no one is looking and/or when everyone is looking. If they are not close to the same, you now know where to start your internal work: the mirror.

If you have never been to prison, but are on your way, know this: you will be "fresh fish/meat." Everyone will be paying attention to you. Are you trustworthy? Are you a thief? Can you hold your own? Do you know when – or *how* – to turn the other cheek? Are you a drama queen or old school? Can you make up your own mind or do you want someone else to make up your mind for you? Do you want to keep being too cool for school? Or do you want to graduate from school? On and on.

The question is, "What will you make of your prison experience?" When you leave, will you still be dragging your feet or holding your head high? Guess what? The choice is yours alone. Good luck.

Have you been in prison a while? What have you done to achieve success? Do you know that success doesn't involve business, drugs, friends, money, or status? It is achieving what you had hoped for and reaching a favorable result. Is that what you have used your time to do? If not, now is always a great time to start. We all lead by example. What example are you leading by?

Remember to keep it simple. Don't sweat the small shit. Treat others the way you expect to be treated. If you don't, remember karma will be a bitch. What you send out is what you receive.

Do you need to go back to your thinking when you were brand new and had goals? Please tell me your goal is NOT to stay stuck in the bullshit. Nothing changes if nothing changes. Namely you. Good luck.

If you are a lifer in prison, I know there are no magic words to change your predicament. However, I know that you change

lives by sharing your experiences and the wisdom you have gained. I know every day is monotonous. Some “Same Shit Different Day” (SSDD) or “Different Shit Same Day” (DSSD). I can only hope that you will not give up on yourself. Even inside prison walls, you are worthy of a good life. You are a worthy human being. Please make the best of your time, because you deserve to know you are valued. Lifers are the glue that holds prisons together. Without you we wouldn’t have many people to guide us in the right direction. You might be in prison for life, but you can stick it to the man by not allowing them to take YOUR life away. Good luck to you.

If you have done your time and are on your way out, good luck. But before you go, hold onto those who have helped you in your prison journey. Without the people you see when you look up right now, you would not have survived. Don’t get the “short and shitties” and forget where you came from before you even leave. None of us want to come back. We don’t want the outside to be our home away from home. But it happens to most of us, and when (if) it does, don’t you want to be welcomed back with open arms instead of being remembered as the asshole who burned all of her bridges before she left? In having a conscience awareness of this, you will also treat your loved ones better when they receive you home with open arms.

Also, remember that you have spent time changing you. Those outside of prison are still the same. They don’t know what you have done for you. Hold on to what you know about you. Show them by doing. Lip service is just lip service. And remember: if you fail, fail forward. It’s not how many times you fall it is how many times you pick yourself up, dust off your parts, and put one foot in front of the other. Just keep on keepin’ on.

One other thing, all the promises you have made to stay in touch, maybe you will for a while, maybe you won’t. Just know that the majority of us know that eventually life gets busy with family, work search, jobs, classes, parole stipulations, relationships, and so on. If you don’t plan on writing, don’t say you will. If you plan on it and too much time has passed— buy a

flippin' postcard for fifty cents. Just write, "Hey, thinking of you," the end. If you don't write, there's no reason to make up excuses as to why not. Keep it simple. But, don't ever feel guilty for succeeding in life. One foot forward. And again, good luck.

If you are a parole violator and have come back, remember that today is just the first day of the rest of your life. What will you do with it?

Maybe I don't know you, but I feel you. And I know you feel me too. Just be real with yourself. You can do exactly what you put your heart and mind to.

Good luck to each of you. Hold your head high. God knows you've had enough hardship in life. Be good to you. You/I/we deserve it! Don't give up five minutes before the miracle.

Sincerely,
Chris

"For the Lord hath called thee as a woman forsaken and grieved in spirit, and a wife of youth, when thou wast refused, saith thy God. For a small moment have I forsaken thee; but with great mercies will I gather thee. In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord thy Redeemer" (KJV, Isaiah 54:6-8)

"But I say unto you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you" (KJV Matthew 5:44)

"But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved" (KJV Matthew 24:13)

"But many that are first shall be last; and the last first" (Mark 10:31)

"He that is void of wisdom despiseth his neighbour: but a man of understanding holdeth his peace" (KJV Proverbs, 11:12)

Dear University of Wyoming Writing Class:

I truly want to thank you. You came into our home not knowing what it would be like to work with women in prison. Nervous or not, you greeted us with smiles. This may seem like such a small gesture to you. For us, the sun was shining inside concrete walls.

During our time together, you were all so open-minded, with no judgment at all. Each of you listened to our stories while we laughed, cried, debated, rambled, and even bickered. Through it all, you allowed us to have a voice. As you know, my title is “Silently Crying out Loud.” In your presence, we were able to speak openly and we feel we have been heard.

Because of the opportunity that was given to us, we will be heard time and time again. Many of us will use this experience as a stepping stone to be heard again. Your efforts have become so empowering to the women here.

Thank you for an amazing opportunity. I look forward to reading your writings as well. I wish you all the best of luck in your professional endeavors.

Thank you for your listening ears, honest feedback, writing techniques, loss of sleep to type our excerpts, and for treating us like women.

Sincerely,
Chris

Closing:

On the first day of class, we went around the room, each announcing why we joined the class. Each of the amazing women I came to work with had fabulous reasons why they joined. I joined because my case worker told me I had to! Thank you, case worker!

When she came to me about this writing class, she told me she felt that I needed to learn the memoir style of writing so I could use it to help others tell their story in the future. Of course, this

spoke to the side of me that believes in advocating for oneself and being a voice for those who can't speak. Neither of us had any idea that my writing would lead to speaking for the unheard voices of America's prisoners. What an honor! I am truly grateful. "For with God, nothing shall be impossible" (KJV, Luke 1:37).

The funny part is that I had no idea what to write about, or if I could even produce full sentences. I was terrified! What if I don't make sense, or don't say the right things? What if my piece is laughable when I'm finished? What if I'm retaliated against? "Ahhhh," my stomach said, "What if?" I can only imagine what the UW writing class thought. "Here's a lady in our writing workshop who didn't sign up because she actually wanted to take a creative writing class *and* doesn't feel she can write. Oh boy!"

As it turns out, I can write. However, I did not do it alone. My coauthors were very courageous, showed tremendous inner strength, and shared extraordinary wisdom. The ladies who guided us in class were so encouraging and inspiring. This is an experience I will never forget. Those of you who were part of the class, but could not be physically present, your presence was felt. All of us enjoyed your critiquing, feedback, and sense of humor. Thank you. I mostly need to give credit to my Higher Power, God. I was so terrified to write this piece. I just know this job was too big for my capabilities. Then I was led to some scripture that encouraged me to take a chance. I pray you, the reader, will also take a change when your opportunity knocks.

"Then said I, Ah, Lord God! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the Lord said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith the Lord" (KJV, Jeremiah 1:6-8)

You may not believe in God or any type of Higher Power. You don't need to in order to know that when your time comes, you will somehow know the right words or steps to take. Even if you are afraid, because something new can be terrifying, go ahead

and give yourself a chance. If you do believe in God or a Higher Power, remember God will give you the strength and courage to do the impossible.

I've had some real shitty things happen to me since I came to prison this time, none of which involved inmates. I initially wanted to write about that. My heart changed quickly to the letters. However, I was still concerned about future retaliation. So I asked God why He gave me a job I felt was too big for me. I tell you, I was truly terrified. This was my answer: "Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not" (KJV, Romans 12:14). "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised. (KJV, Luke 4:18)

So basically, God has said, "Chris, you can do this. Quit trying to over-think everything and just write what needs written. Don't be afraid of those who *think* they have the power. They are mere humans too. Don't be afraid, just get it done."

I am sharing this with you because in the past, I have thoroughly fucked my life up! Man, I have made so many flippin' mistakes. Some of the same ones numerous times. I'm 41; you'd think that I'd have it figured out by now. Truthfully, not even close. And yet, God has still given me an important mission to accomplish. Like I mentioned in the very beginning, God does not despise his prisoners. He actually uses us to make the world a better place.

I also could not have written any of these letters if it were not for the prisoners living in a correctional facility somewhere. It was your needs that encouraged me the most. I am sorry you're going through so many trials and tribulations. Just remember that diamonds need massive pressure to form. Each one transforms into something unique and special.

I ask everyone who reads this to remember that every person has a purpose. Not one person is useless. Together, we make a whole: "And whether one member suffers all the members

suffer with it; or one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it” (KJV, 1 Corinthians 12:26). All of us need to work together to create change. I hope I have opened some eyes and hearts. I also hope I have started a trend for people to speak and to listen.

I would like to close with these last thoughts. Our society needs to change its thinking or we are all going to continue to suffer unnecessary pain. This change can only happen within each individual. I implore every single person who has read this to look in your own hearts. Please, don't just ask yourself what you can do to create change: take a step into the unknown. Do it afraid, and create change. It starts within each and every one of us. Not “them,” *us*. I thank everyone for what you have done and will do. Remember to always pay it forward.

May God bless you in your future endeavors. Thank you for walking this journey with me. My name is Chris. What's yours? Speak it loud and proud.

God Bless,
Chris