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Freedom is a Good Book and a Sugar High

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**Re-Discovering
Reading**



FREEDOM IS A GOOD BOOK AND A SUGAR HIGH

BY MEREDITH DOENCH, PHD

CREATIVE WRITING

On the surface, my friend Tyler Davidson and I are an unlikely pair. I am a lecturer of writing at a university; he is a convicted murderer currently serving life without the possibility of parole. I am old enough to be his mother; his last birthday made him a legal adult. I teach courses on Prison Literature and Culture where I exhaust the perilous infractions of Social Justice and regularly ask myself and students, “What is freedom?”; Tyler lives that dark reality day in and day out.

Tyler was supposed to be my interview subject. I was writing a novel about a juvenile in an American prison who’d been sentenced as an adult. I thought that Tyler would be perfect for the gig because he had been sentenced for his participation in murders that occurred when he was between the ages of sixteen and seventeen. Drawn to his story, I followed the media coverage and found out that Tyler was also accessible; he’d been placed in a prison only thirty minutes from my home.

When I received Tyler’s response letter to my request for an interview, I had the strangest feeling that I’d made contact with a long-lost friend. Perhaps he was someone I’d known in some other life? A sibling separated from me at birth? Far-fetched, certainly, but that strong recognition of him never left me. I learned why when I read through Tyler’s handwritten letter in clear cursive script. Both Tyler and I are artists at heart: me a writer and occasional painter, he gifted in sketching and free form poetry. *I’m happy to help with your book,* he wrote. *Send me your questions and I will reply in a letter with my answers.* He concluded with a request, almost as though he’d used the space of the letter to build up to it: *I’d like to learn how to write better. Do you think you can help me?* I carried his first letter in my pocket for days reading through it when I had a few minutes to spare. I considered his request at length and understood that he was ultimately bartering with me, as trade is the form

of currency in prison. He had something I wanted and I had something he wanted—nothing in Tyler’s world of steel and metal bars is free. I thought: *perhaps we were meant to help each other.*

My correspondence with Tyler felt like I’d stumbled into a time warp—old school in every way. Despite the fact that Tyler was a teenager, and by that very definition should have lived on electronics, the internet, and social media, he hated anything that ran on a battery or had to be plugged in. A good thing, I guess, for someone who’s incarcerated and has very little access to such items. That meant, however, that every letter from him was handwritten and snail mailed. We did not talk through the prison phone system as Tyler couldn’t trust those old, wired lines of communication and he requested my own letters to him be handwritten—something I hadn’t done since I was a kid. *You have bad handwriting for a teacher,* he wrote and I laughed. I’ve heard that very sentiment from many students who have tried to decipher my scrawled script on the classroom write boards.

I had a plan to help Tyler: get him reading (anything at all) and then to write about what he was reading. My letters to him always began with a few questions I wanted answers to for a character in my book. A description of what I’d currently be reading followed, along with newspaper or magazine clippings regarding political events, legal/prison issues, or pop culture from the world outside his prison gates. His letters always answered my questions thoughtfully, adorned with lengthy descriptions of his surroundings and what he was doing with his long days. One letter mentioned the limits of his prison library, something I strongly suspected. Soon, along with my letters, I began sending Tyler essays to read. I also sent paperback books, used ones I found in second-hand stores or that someone had donated to me for Tyler. I sometimes ordered him brand new books from Amazon on holidays,

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those with their crisp pages and shiny covers and hard spines unbroken. I wasn't just sending Tyler novels and poems and stories, but whole worlds where he could escape his reality, even if it was only for a few hours. Ironically, the letters that he wrote to me forced him back into the world in which he lived. His pain-staking descriptions of what everything around him looked like, the behaviors of other inmates and guards, his worries and frustrations all brought with it the stark reminder that nothing in Tyler's reality was temporary.

Prison literature, however, became our main discussion board filled with our comments and observations snailing back and forth to each other. We started with the obvious: Stephen King's "Hope Springs Eternal: Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption" and on to *The Green Mile*. *I'm reading every word*, Tyler wrote me, *and I love it*. We moved on to memoirs from those who were incarcerated and those that had been exonerated. Our letters examined character development, images, themes, and all the great elements of literature English teachers love to talk about. It turned out Tyler was a critic of sorts, who loved to tell me what the writer should have done. I was the type of reader who just enjoyed the book's ride. Tyler, I found, favored the Classics while I loved a good mystery or true crime narrative. All the while, Tyler's sentences and writing skills improved as well as my understanding of what it meant to be incarcerated at any age. Both of us whole-heartedly agreed that freedom was a good book no matter where you found yourself reading.

The turning point in our literary adventure was a worn copy of a book I'd been using in one of my courses: *Prison Writing in Twentieth Century America* edited by Bruce Franklin. Of all the books we'd read and discussed, this was the one that seemed to touch Tyler most. In this collection, he read the words written by inmates long gone: Jack London, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Jack Henry Abbott, Etheridge Knight, and Malcolm Braly. *Don't forget that the women have something to say, too*, I encouraged him, and so we discussed Assata Shakur, Patricia McConnell, and Kim Wozencraft. He read every single word of that prison writing collection, something I hadn't even done, only scanning to see which selections would work best for my classes. Tyler's letters were suddenly filled with the excitement of learning and reading the voices of those who had served time just like him. *Did you know that Agnes Smedley went to prison for birth control pamphlets? Pamphlets—not even the real deal! Or, I always wondered what happened to men who refused to go to war like Robert Lowell*. Then, finally, what I'd been hoping for happened. He wrote me, tentatively: *I realized something I never thought of before. Maybe I could be a prison writer, too*.

I smiled for days. I smiled so big my face hurt.

When I arrived in the visitation room of the prison eight months after our initial letter exchange, I expected a barrier between me and Tyler, a glass wall where we would talk to each other on old, tear-coated prison telephones. Instead, I found myself standing toe-to-toe with six and a half feet of Tyler, an inmate who'd somehow become my friend through a flurry of written words and well-worn texts. And I was gasping for a full breath.

A life-long asthmatic, I always carry my rescue inhaler, or as I like to call it, my puffer. It's always in my pocket, bag, or somewhere very close to me. While I don't suffer from many asthma attacks, the puffer has become my security blanket. I panic without it; my breath which might have been full and flowing moments before suddenly becomes jagged and shallow without that plastic tube of security. If you've ever suffered an asthma attack, you understand the terror a lack of oxygen brings with it. It's like drowning inside a roaring ocean with no water. Sand quickly fills every bronchial tube from the inside out until there is only the pinhole of a wheeze, that desperate wail for air. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been without my puffer. That all changed when I entered the prison gates.

There are a number of guards and security checks one must go through in order to get to the visitation area of a prison, and if one doesn't clear them all, the visitation is cancelled. You are escorted off the property. There are no excuses or negotiations. Rules are rules. Period. And that includes the rule of no medication in the visitation area.

If I wanted to meet Tyler, I'd have to take my puffer back to my car and enter the prison without it. I tried to reason with the older guard with an enormous belly. "I need this," I said. "It's a medical condition."

The guard puffed out his wide chest complete with a shiny name badge. "Then you need to leave."

"What if I go into a full blown asthma attack?"

He shrugged. "We have a nurse."

His answer only elevated my anxiety levels. I'd seen prison nurses and medical care delivered on late night episodes of *Locked Up Ram*, and I hoped to never personally experience it. I looked around at the other guards for some support who were all suddenly interested in the toes of their scuffed black shoes.

"I don't have all day," he barked at me. "Give up the inhaler or leave."

I held the plastic tube of medication, turning over that weight of safety in the palm of my hand.

“MOVE!”

I turned and shoved the glass doors out to the parking lot hard. I cursed that guard all the way back to my car. I couldn't remember the last time someone had yelled at me. I'm a professor, after all. I work in a place where rules are questioned and ideas are golden—*no* is not a word that is frequently used in higher education. Instead, we explore options. We look for opportunities. We try a different method and create alternatives. I hadn't come up against a world of such black and white rules since high school and I hated it. I felt like a young girl who'd been chastised and I wanted to go home. I wanted to shake that fat guard and scream in his face: *I'm not the one who committed a crime. I've done nothing wrong!*

The bottom line was I'd come to meet my new friend; I'd come to learn more about Tyler's world. He waited for me inside, and I knew he didn't have many visitors. I also knew that in order for him to have a visitation, he had to go through a strip search twice—on the way in and the way out. If he was willing to go through that to meet me, I at least owed him my presence. Asthma attack or not. I placed my puffer in the console of my car and locked it up tight.

My breath hitched without the safety of my puffer, but I made that walk back to the prison entrance and through all of those checks. I even managed a smile for the guard who clearly enjoyed his power way too much.

So, there I was, puffer-less, standing before Tyler as we each sized up the other.

Breathe in, I told myself. *Breathe out.*

Finally, I offered my hand. I wanted to touch Tyler. It felt important somehow, that physical touch between two people who have never met face-to-face. When his bear-sized hand wrapped around mine, skin to skin, his eyes softened and a smile spread across his face.

“I'm so happy to meet you in person,” he said.

And I finally took a deep breath.

Tyler and I sat knee to knee with only a short table between us—I shifted all around, nervous and unsettled inside my hard seat. I couldn't figure out what to do with my legs. Cross them at the ankle? At the knee? And what about my arms? I was suddenly ultra-aware of the space my body occupied. I felt naked without the usual distractions I surround myself with in social situations, and I longed for my cell phone, laptop, music, or even the murmur of a television commentator. Anything to take this laser-like focus off of each other. I finally settled on crossing my legs in a big 4 and crossing my

arms in my lap, a position of protection.

Tyler, though, sat before me on a plastic molded chair with his legs spread comfortably and his ginormous hands easily folded inside his lap. He was freshly shaven and his short hair was brushed back from his face with some sort of gel, hair so carefully combed I could see the grooves from each comb tooth. His prison blues had *Davidson* ironed to the right breast pocket and his heavy work boots looked brand new. I was struck by his open and calm nature, particularly given that at the time he was a nineteen-year-old facing life in prison with no chance of parole.

“Would you like something to eat?” I asked, nodding to the array of vending machines. “Coffee? Or my favorite, Mountain Dew?”

“Coffee, please.” I had to lean forward to hear him. “Black.”

I felt his eyes on me as I weaved between the other visitation tables in the room. Most of the other chair sets were filled with male inmates and their loved ones, some visiting with children, some visiting with the elderly. When the vending machines took a few moments to spit out our beverages, I felt grateful for the brief time to gather my thoughts, to steady the shake of my hands. Clearly, the extra dose I'd taken of my anti-anxiety medication wasn't working. That cold bottle of Mountain Dew never felt so good inside my sweaty hands.

Tyler watched my knees anxiously bounce as he sipped his coffee. Just as observant in person as he was in his letters, he said, “It must be weird to be here for the first time.”

I nodded toward two wall-sized hanging fabrics, one with a mega-huge American flag and the other with a bizarre rendition of a large, circular staircase with flowers around the white, wooden posts. “What are those tapestries for?”

Tyler smiled in a way that said he found them humorous. “Family and visitor photographs. They don't want the prison to appear in pictures the way it really is, so we get these crazy photograph backdrops.”

When an inmate and a woman stood before the staircase for a photo, they looked like a prom couple. Tyler laughed with me. “It always reminds me of wearing one of those t-shirts with a tux coat and the rose iron-on. I mean, why bother?”

Suddenly the prison's pathetic attempt to hide reality was related back to a book we'd both read and Tyler and I were off and running, riffing off one another with observations and truths and images and metaphors from

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the readings we'd shared. Soon all the inmates, visitors, and guards around us disappeared and together we left that dingy visitation room and transported to another world in a way that only books and characters can offer. Both Tyler and I are drawn to the redemptive qualities of literature, the Andy Dufresnes of fiction, the Sister Helen Prejeans of memoir, and all those forgotten voices in prison poetry that echo from somewhere deep inside a cell. There is a forgiveness inside these kinds of work where second chances are given and new life is granted with the panache of glorious images and tear-producing symbols. Who wouldn't want to stay inside those worlds so far from the one in which we both sat for our visit?

When our discussion turned to an element of freedom, I told him about the ways we discuss freedom in my class. I told him that I could always rely on a student to start the conversation with some variation on the philosophical belief that no one is free unless everyone is. Freedom—that lofty ideal we struggle to define all semester and rarely come to an agreement on what that esoteric concept means.

Tyler's brow furrowed. "Freedom doesn't need to be so difficult."

"What do you mean?"

Tyler shrugged. "Remember that letter you sent me a while back that explained your usual work day? I've thought a lot about that, about how incredibly free you are. I thought about how I'd do just about anything to have that day be my usual."

I couldn't help but laugh: my job as a version of freedom? Don't get me wrong—I love my job. I love to write and teach. I love interacting with students throughout my day on campus and in office hours, even if I do have to sometimes negotiate uncomfortable conversations about failed work or too many missed classes. My days were generally filled with smiling people who held doors for each other across campus and called out, "have a good day!" when they left my classroom. I always teach four classes and grade the work of nearly 85 students a semester. As all teachers know, it can be a drudgery and getting through those stacks of essays is a thankless job in many cases. There are times when I've also envisioned my career as something that held me down, taking away my time from the dream career I'd rather have as a full-time writer, and locking me into a location I might not have otherwise chosen for myself.

"Think about it," Tyler said. "You choose whether you will go to work or not. You choose what you will say to a room full of students. You choose the texts and the paper topics. Even outside of your work, you hold so much freedom. I wish I had the option to spend as

many hours in a stocked library as you do."

I listened as Tyler detailed my daily habits as acts of freedom: I had the ability to take a long shower at three in the morning and the choice of what I would wear every day. I decided whether I would go outside on a given day or not, and I chose what I would eat and drink.

"You even have the freedom of choosing a dentist who won't immediately pull your tooth because it hurts," he said. "You don't get it. Freedom is more than an idea—it something you are offered every second."

I never thought about all the options I had in my life before, not in this sort of a way. A shower in the middle of the night as an act of freedom? Holding class as a version of freedom? *Really?* And I hated going to the dentist no matter what the procedure. Freedom, Tyler seemed to be saying, was all about options and acknowledging the choices I'd been given. Was the answer to the question I'd so long considered really all about the lens I'd been choosing to view my life through?

Before I knew it, the guards were calling for the end of the two-hour visit. Tyler was taken away for his strip search and I was funneled out through a series of checks before I could leave the prison grounds.

While I waited for the final check, a woman about my age stood in front of me in line. She had a beehive of a weave stacked on top of her head with thick strands of bright pink wound throughout it. "What's your man in for?" she asked. "Drugs?"

"He's not my man," I said and purposely ignored her question about Tyler's crimes. "He's just a friend."

She shrugged. "It's all a racket, you know. Crime does pay, just not for us."

Tyler's crimes. That was the one part of his life I wasn't completely comfortable discussing with anyone. I wasn't really sure what I believed—the story that came out in court or the media's interpretations of his actions. Tyler was ultimately found guilty of taking part in three murders and attempting a fourth. There were other charges as well, but the wash of it, the real rub, was cold-blooded murder that was planned well in advance. There was no evidence, however, that Tyler killed anyone. His full participation as the driver of the vehicle, though, and his presence during the planning phase with the murderer deemed him equally responsible in the eyes of American law. Tyler's judge gave him no breaks—he would spend the remainder of his days in prison without the chance of parole.

I wanted to believe Tyler was a forced accomplice and that he'd been threatened with death if he didn't

comply with the orders to help in the murders. I wanted to believe that he was somehow struck with a debilitating shock at the horror of it all and unable to ask anyone for help. I was desperate to believe in the possibility that Tyler hadn't committed any crime other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time and with the wrong person. But the truth that I absolutely could not get around was Tyler did something terribly wrong. Not just once, but four times. His hands that had shaken mine also held the shovel that dug the graves and buried those victims. His hands wrapped around the barrel of a shotgun and hid the arsenal of weaponry in his home, under the very bed he slept in every night. And he never *ever* said a word to anyone about what he'd taken part in until the detectives tracked him down and he realized there was no way out of the situation. Lives were forever altered because of Tyler's actions. Pain ricocheted out from the location of those murders in waves, bringing grief and sorrow to all it touched. I'd read Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* once as a graduate student and then again when I started corresponding with Tyler. At first, I'd read Capote's flimsy attempts to excuse the crimes of Perry Smith, one of the partners who had broken into the Kansas farmhouse in 1959 and brutally killed the Clutter family, as a symptom of a crush he had on the killer. I now understood Capote's grasping need to find a reason for Perry's behavior as something much more than just a crush. Capote saw the soul within Perry Smith, someone who was sensitive and even kind at times. He saw someone he completely resonated with, and to acknowledge the fact that this person also had it within him to kill brings on a terrible confliction. I felt it, too. I want to believe what Sister Helen Prejean proclaims, that we are all so much more than our worst acts. I want to believe that our pasts do not define our futures. But there are many times that I am not sure what I believe.

During one of my visits with Tyler, after we'd met a few times and had grown comfortable together, he was released into the visitation area and was not himself. He drank his black coffee quickly, his eyes scanning the area around us and over those who occupied it. He couldn't focus on our discussion of the book we'd both been reading, one that featured all the letters of Vincent Van Gogh to his brother, a book I knew Tyler loved.

"What's going on?" I asked, taking a swig of my Mountain Dew.

He shrugged. "Sorry. I don't really care about Van Gogh today."

"Are you okay?"

He finally looked up at me then and his slate-blue eyes met mine. "I'm not sure how to say this."

My breath rate quickened and by habit, I reached into my pocket for my inhaler that wasn't there. "Say whatever you need to."

Tyler looked at me as if he were deciding whether or not I could handle whatever he was thinking. Finally he said, "Today was the day. Three years ago today, the first victim was killed."

The anniversary! I hadn't even thought of it.

"It feels like a hundred years ago, you know? It feels like a different lifetime."

"So much has changed for you since then."

He nodded and we sat facing one another with the stupid little table between us for a long time. He didn't speak and I didn't, either. I needed him to take the lead. We'd rarely spoken of his crimes, but when we did, I felt a strong breath of cold air, like those ghosts surrounded us, and a creeping chill scattered up my spine.

Tyler sometimes wrote briefly about the murders in his letters, quick lines that let me know he was thinking about what happened and working through his own feelings about the victims. Sometimes Tyler would tell me on my visits, always speaking barely above a whisper, about what his lawyer had said or about a memory from that awful time period in his life. He spoke of drinking too much, of attempting to black out what was going on his life as if there was no way he could possibly face it sober. Once, when I was feeling particularly brave on a visit, I asked him if he was telling me everything. I asked him if there were parts of the story that he'd held back, even from himself. He looked at me then, with the saddest eyes I'd seen in a long time. He said, kindly, "I said everything I could remember in court. That's the story. That's what happened."

I suddenly felt ashamed, and I'm sure my face reddened with embarrassment. Did I have a right to demand the truth? Did I even *want* to know what happened? There are private moments in any event that happens in our lives, thoughts and feelings and actions that are ours alone to know and understand. It's our freedom to choose who and when we disclose those moments. Even in the best-loved tales, the most time-honored stories, the narrative does not unfold all at once, but with the grace of a flower slowly unfolding as it reveals more of itself to the reader. Understanding of a narrative grows deeper with each reading, and can change for us as we grow emotionally and physically. And sometimes there are parts of a story we are never meant to know or understand.

"I'm sorry you are in this situation, Tyler," I told him on that anniversary date. "It's an important day. A day to show respect above all else."

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Tears pricked his eyes and he blinked them away fast while frustration filled his voice. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I *can* do. I’m so sorry and I’ve said it a million times. A million times!”

Tyler leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and wiped his face with his paw of a hand. His posture, so angular and rigid with anxiety, reminded me of who I was speaking with: a nineteen-year-old who’d faced tremendous tragedy in his young years. A nineteen-year-old who had been thrust into a very adult world much too fast. It was very easy for me to forget Tyler’s age because he spoke and acted like a man in his forties. His life experiences had aged him far beyond his years. It took moments like this to remind me that he really was the age of my students at the University, the same students who sometimes forgot their assignments and occasionally slept through alarm clocks or chose to party rather than study. Unlike my students, though, Tyler didn’t have the luxury of those sorts of age-relative life lessons.

“Maybe it’s enough to remember him,” I offered. “You can show respect by acknowledging that life and the part you played in what happened that day. Maybe later you can find a quiet time in your cell and talk to him in your mind. Say whatever you would say if he was standing right in front of you.”

“Do you really think he will hear me?”

I shrugged. “It can’t hurt to try, right?”

Tyler agreed and his posture finally softened. I got him more coffee and cheesy Doritos, but our conversation never returned to Van Gogh that day or any other book. Instead we talked about something else we both loved: junk food. Despite my physician’s firm insistence that I am no longer a nineteen year-old, I continue to eat like one. Tyler and I laughed that day about food that never expires and always tastes good, like Ho-Hos and those chocolate cupcakes with the squiggly white curls across their top. We pined over Twinkies and those marshmallow bunnies at Easter and the way salt still lines your lips long after you’ve eaten Pringles. We connected over rumors we’d heard about how fast food “meat” was really made and the supposed cleaning agents that fill the soda pop I love to drink. We joked about the freedom to have sugar highs and how neither one of us would be able to peel ourselves off the ceiling for the next few hours. But we did not speak of the truth surrounding us that day. There are some things in this life a person cannot free himself from, some realities you cannot escape no matter how many apologies are issued, no matter how much remorse is shown for your terrible deeds. These realities aren’t at all related to the land

of literature where forgiveness and redemption reign. In these stark cold realities, there isn’t a good book where one can get lost. There isn’t the escape hatch into another world of characters that can make the given situation better.

I never finished that novel I was working on about the youth who was incarcerated that led me to first write to Tyler. Its bare bones are saved in a file on one of my desktops somewhere. It turned out I wasn’t even willing to put a character through all the harsh realities I’d learned from Tyler’s experience.

Our friendship continues after two years, and we write regularly. I try to visit every few months, a feat that has been made more difficult since he was transferred to a distant prison. But our letters still snail between us, and nothing makes my day like finding an envelope in my mailbox with Tyler’s clear cursive writing addressed to me.

Tyler’s latest letter waited inside my mailbox for a few days until the snow and ice of winter gave way. I sliced open that cool, white envelope and unfolded Tyler’s words about how he’d been filling his days since he’d last written. He told me that he’d gotten new books from some of his family members this year for the holidays. For the first time since he’d come to prison, he had a small stack waiting for him to dive in, places where he could escape for a while. I pictured those books inside his foot locker, one escape hatch from reality stacked upon the other. *I forgot to tell you something*, he concluded the letter. *Did you know that on clear days I can stand in the yard and look over the fence? I can see the old prison they used for the set of the Shawshank movie.* I folded up Tyler’s letter and sat on my couch in the quiet for a long time. I held an image of Tyler standing in the prison yard at a tall six and a half feet looking out over the barb-wire fence. It made me smile to think of the winter sun on his face, the warmth across his shoulders, and the grass beneath his feet. It made me laugh to think about when he first read the story of Shawshank and how I told him I was certain Red and Andy were still living together on some remote Mexican beach drinking Margaritas with bright pink umbrellas and carving chess pieces out of seashells they collected along the shore. And then it brought tears to my eyes to think of that fantasy world of literature, that freedom, so very close to Tyler and yet so terribly far from his reach.

*Author’s note: I have changed the name of the inmate in this essay for his privacy.