

**To: Spring 2020 Restorative Justice Group #27**

**Title: *Dear Men in Prison***

**Dear men I've met in prison, all the ones I hope to meet, and the ones I'll never get to meet,**

As a volunteer in the Restorative Justice program, I am often asked why I love that program. I reply that it is the most meaningful thing I do, and that it is a privilege to get to know men I would never meet on the outside. Men who are smart, funny, articulate, creative, and—to me the most important trait—compassionate. The hardest thing for me about the pandemic is that I don't get to know and interact with you.

Some of the most moving times for me in Restorative Justice are when men laugh. Not sarcastically, not at someone's expense, but honestly, connecting with a light-hearted side of themselves that, unfortunately, seldom surfaces. I am so inspired by men who have, in the midst of their incarceration, maintained or reclaimed their sense of humor, even after enduring horrible things.

Don't ever think that no one on the outside cares about you. We do, and we wish we could do more for you. The one very small thing I do is something I learned from another RJ volunteer. On clear nights, I go outside and gaze at the stars. I think of the individual men in green I've met, and the vast number I'll never meet. I grieve for you. I pray for you. But I also give thanks for the connections and role models I've seen among you. So many times I've witnessed kind, open-hearted exchanges between inmates, and between inmates and volunteers. I hope and pray you will find like-minded souls, men like you who are finding freedom inside the walls by leading positive, purposeful lives.

And now I'd like to tell you about Peter Murphy, whose poem I've included here. He was born in Wales and grew up in New York City, where he operated heavy equipment, drove a taxi, and managed a nightclub. He's written eleven books and chapbooks of poetry and prose and has won countless awards. He is a hugely successful writer who has lead hundreds of workshops for writers and teachers, both in the US and abroad.

But this is what I want you to know about him. He said that I could include this; it's a quote from an email he sent me when I asked him if I could send you his poem 'Doing Time.'

*"I am lucky in that I was never caught for any of the illegal things I had done, drugs, stealing a car or two while under the influence. I couldn't drive, but I was very clever using a coat hanger to break in. My greatest beast was alcohol. I barely made it out of high school and flunked out of three colleges. I am lucky."*

In other words, he has a lot in common with you and knows it's but a fluke of chance that allowed him to escape incarceration.

Enjoy the poem and never, ever give up hope.

~ Ms. Whitman, Restorative Justice volunteer

## Doing Time

By Peter E. Murphy

Each week my supervisor rejected my lesson plans because my goals and objectives were the same. When I asked him to explain the difference, he changed the subject. When I asked why the syllabus makes no sense, he said, You're not being paid to think, you're being paid to deliver a curriculum. When I asked how to teach teenagers who can't read to read, he put a hand on my shoulder, and with the other pointed toward the horizon, which happened to be the men's room at the end of the corridor, and said, Take them where they are. When I turned to ask what that meant, he was gone. I figured he was off to help another teacher or meet a parent, but when I saw him first in line at the lunch counter, I knew I was wrong again. I also knew I wasn't meant to teach anything important to the dark-skinned students that sat in front of me. Like them, I was meant to fail. And because I was teaching *stupid kids*, I figured I must be stupid too. Even if I wanted to, I'd never be promoted to supervisor like him. So, I thought, Screw it, and I read my kids a poem about nature, and they said, Man, that's dumb. So I read them a poem about love, and they said, Man, that's stupid. So I read them a poem about sports, and they said, Man, that's nice. So I read them a poem about death, and they said, Man, that's deep. Then I read them a poem that said something about their lives they didn't know they knew, and they

said, Let me hold that, pulling it from my hands, reading it over and over, until they said, Why ain't nobody ever told us this shit before? And I said, You've got to be careful. If they know how much you really know, instead of more schools, they'll build more prisons to teach you a lesson.