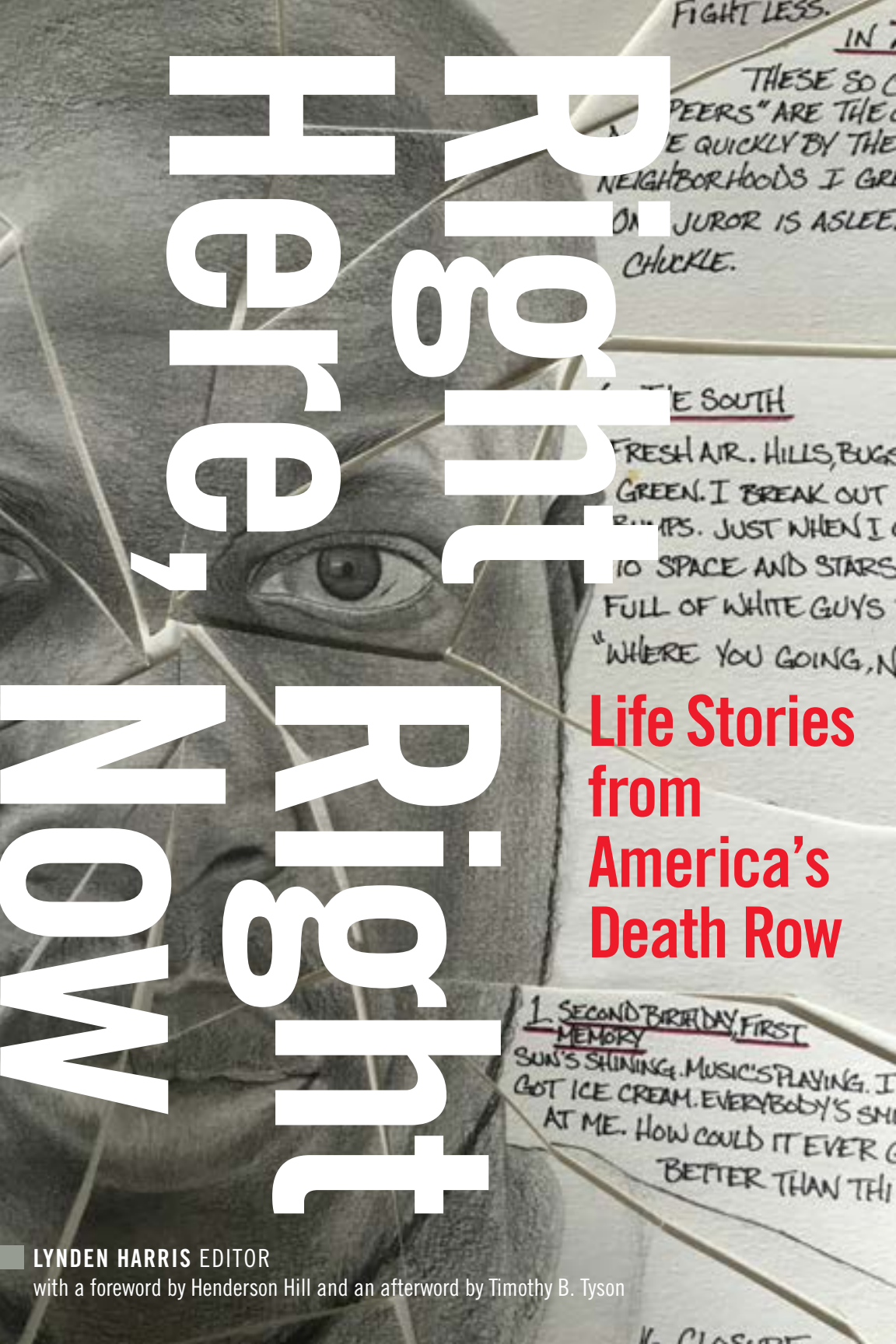

Here, Right Now

Life Stories from America's Death Row

LYNDEN HARRIS EDITOR

with a foreword by Henderson Hill and an afterword by Timothy B. Tyson

Right Here, Right Now

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Edited by **Lynden Harris**

WITH A FOREWORD BY **HENDERSON HILL**
& AN AFTERWORD BY **TIMOTHY B. TYSON**

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS DURHAM AND LONDON 2021

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper ∞
Designed by Aimee C. Harrison
Typeset in Portrait Text and Trade Gothic LT Std by
Westchester Publishing Services

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Names: Harris, Lynden, [date] editor. | Hill, Henderson, writer of foreword. | Tyson, Timothy B., writer of afterword.
Title: Right here, right now : life stories from America's death row / edited by Lynden Harris ; with a foreword by Henderson Hill and an afterword by Timothy B. Tyson.
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2021.
Identifiers: LCCN 2020040893 (print)
LCCN 2020040894 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478011972 (hardcover)
ISBN 9781478014119 (paperback)
ISBN 9781478021421 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Death row inmates—United States—Biography. | Marginality, Social—United States—Psychological aspects.
Classification: LCC HV8699.U5 R54 2021 (print) | LCC HV8699.U5 (ebook) | DDC 365/.6092273—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020040893
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020040894

Cover art: Cerron Hooks, *Consider the Source*, from Hidden Voices' *Serving Life* exhibit.

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UNIVERSITY
PRESS

This book is dedicated to you, the readers and changemakers, by those living on America's Death Row:

"We're all strong men here, but to not have your suffering recognized is the greatest indignity to the human spirit. Thank you for breathing life into our weary, wounded souls."

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Foreword

HENDERSON HILL

More than 2.3 million Americans are incarcerated across the nation for crimes great and small. How is it that a nation that trumpets its traditions of freedom and liberty vies for the international title of the largest carceral state? How is it that a disproportionate number of those prisoners are descendants of enslaved peoples and other people of color, the vast majority poor, and too many mentally ill?

Right Here, Right Now allows us to read the stories and hear the voices of men society has determined to be disposable, persons whose humanity is officially denied, prisoners who await the capricious call of the lottery-like summons to the execution chamber. There is a spiritual jubilee in the reading of *Right Here, Right Now*. Yes, reader, prepare to be liberated: freed from the fiction that these deplorables, condemned to death, are monsters, so very different from you and me that the only right response is to exterminate them. The stories compiled, and the voices amplified, in effect restore the 2,500 men and women on death row to the human family. Anonymous no more, monstrous ciphers never again. Read the vignette "Downpour" (chapter 5) and never look at an umbrella or experience a heavy rain without being reminded of moments of traumatic insecurity, or perhaps being moved by a warm remembrance of the nurture and protection of a loving caregiver.

Bryan Stevenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, and visionary instituter of the Legacy

Museum: From Enslavement to Mass Incarceration and the National Memorial for Peace and Justice, has explained how it is that he could grow so close to and love each and every one of his clients, all of whom could be described as deeply impaired and broken, many under sentence of death. In *Just Mercy* Stevenson writes, "You can't effectively fight abusive power, poverty, inequality, illness, oppression, or injustice and not be broken by it. We are all broken by something. We have all hurt someone and have been hurt. We all share the condition of brokenness even if our brokenness is not equivalent. . . . [O]ur shared brokenness connected us."

For decades, I have been privileged to be part of a community of lawyers, advocates, investigators, volunteers, and experts who have come to know and love the men and women our courts have condemned to death. I am stronger, wiser, and more empathetic because of the intimacies shared in isolated cells, tear-stained letters, and hostile courtrooms. The great gift that *Right Here, Right Now* delivers to readers is a soul-stirring compilation of stories and shared intimacies that can be life changing. Will it be the brief "U-Turn" (chapter 15), or "Car Ride" (chapter 9), or perhaps "Better Off Dead" (chapter 22) that quickens in you the realization that these broken folks were hurt by lived experiences, some close to our own, some unimaginable. Who and what are the individuals, the institutions, the teachings, and the safe places that gave you and me opportunities to repair from similar insults? The natural follow-up: what if one or more of those safety valves had been available to the then child-victim, now death row inmate?

Right Here, Right Now compels readers to examine their own experiences and make connections to innocence, damage, resilience, and hope. For me, I was transported back more than a decade, to a quiet and lonely jail cell. To a long embrace, followed by tears. First a welling at the corners and then the ducts giving way to the torrent. I was fifty, native of the Bronx, a Harvard-trained death penalty lawyer holding on to a trembling, bantamweight high school dropout. In my mind's eye I was embracing my younger brother or any one of the legions of African American young men, from my neighborhoods in the Bronx, Washington, DC, or Durham, North Carolina, who but for one social safety net provision or another might have been in that cell with me. This young man, whom I will call Ronald, shuffled between the Badlands of North Philadelphia and bucolic eastern North Carolina, was now drawing his first breaths

as one condemned to die in prison—serving multiple life-without-parole sentences. A jury had just spared him from the death penalty. There was no celebration. Relief, yes. Earlier bravado declaring that death by needle was better than life in a box had yielded to urgings about the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for growth and development that could not be curbed by prison bars. Still, Ronald sat waiting to be shackled and carted off to what we both imagined to be something of an abyss. He was hurting, fearful, wracked with guilt and remorse for the unspeakable damage he had wrought. The explosion of violence, just a week after he turned eighteen, came when the young man was feeling isolated and emotionally abandoned, even as he spent his life shuttled between family members in the North Carolina countryside. Three years later, he braced to step into the abyss, a lifetime of incarceration. Tragically, his nightmare resulted in all-too-real devastation for the community, leaving five bodies lifeless, felled by a gun that he held. As we separated, the painful truth that he would have to make this journey by himself was dawning on him; for almost two years, he had been supported by a committed defense team of skilled and caring lawyers, sensitive and empathetic investigators and mitigation specialists, brilliant expert witnesses. He would now be alone, the decompression cruel. After two years of devastating review of forensic files, extraordinary bonding, intimate sharing, we realized that when I left the cell, we would likely not see each other ever again. The cell door closed, I walked away, I cried, and I moved on. Next.

I have not seen Ronald since our goodbyes in the jail cell almost fifteen years ago. Reading the stories in *Right Here, Right Now*, a dozen or more of them so resonate with young Ronald's life, they could have been written by my former client. I have spoken with Ronald by phone, and we have corresponded by mail over the years; he speaks and writes like a graduate student. He so impressed as well-read, curious, sensitive, and socially engaged. Having avoided a death sentence, he was able not to hear the parting words North Carolina judges repeat by rote to the condemned: "May God have mercy on your soul." *Right Here, Right Now* brings forward the voices of prisoners who received that judicial benediction, even as they struggle to maintain connection to society and sustain the flicker of humanity that incarceration and its daily insults attempt to extinguish.

Right Here, Right Now makes an especially timely and important contribution to the current national discourse on criminal justice reform

and the death penalty. Support for the death penalty has reached record lows, and skepticism about the penalty, a relic of the nation's history of slavery and racialized violence, is finding renewed purchase among religious and political conservatives. The national organization Conservatives Concerned about the Death Penalty supported the Republican-led campaign to repeal the death penalty in Nebraska and is engaged in similar efforts in fourteen states, most recently Ohio. *Right Here, Right Now*, while addressing none of the policy arguments that color the current debate—exonerations, serious mental illness, race disparities, costs—attacks the very premise of the penalty: that certain persons are disposable, that they have no humanity the law is obligated to respect. In the last decade, state supreme courts in Connecticut, Washington, and Delaware have invalidated the death penalty as violative of state constitutional protections. In deepest red Kansas, the state supreme court has invited briefing on the question of whether protection of "life and liberty" under Section 1 of the state constitution renders the death penalty unconstitutional. The stories shared in *Right Here, Right Now* poignantly illustrate the myriad ways that society failed to protect and nurture the life and liberty interests of the "hidden voices" while they were children, vulnerable and impressionable—innocents in the fullest sense of the word. The same or similar stories, easily available from the condemned on Kansas's death row, when considered alongside the caprice with which these hidden voices have been selected for extermination, make plain that the court should find the penalty unconstitutional under Kansas law.

American exceptionalism has been under attack for a decade, and the Trump administration, instead of resisting that trend, seemed committed to ceding global leadership to China, Russia, or Europe. Retention of the death penalty separates America from all of Europe and much of Western civilization. In Africa, where American influence on matters political, economic, and cultural still remains strong, countries closely watch American developments in civil and human rights. Last summer I served on the faculty of the Makwanyane Institute, in Cape Town, South Africa, convening sixteen fellows from seven sub-Saharan African countries for advanced training on death penalty litigation and advocacy. The fellows, very appreciative of the efforts of the American faculty, uniformly advised that the most significant help

Americans can provide to opponents of the death penalty on the continent is to abolish the death penalty in the United States. We are getting closer (there were twenty-two executions in 2019, continuing the drop to record-breaking low levels over the past five years), but in the meantime, governments continue to kill their most impaired, vulnerable, and marginalized prisoners. Even as I prepared this foreword, I received two heartbreaking email messages from fellows. One announced, "Six men have been executed this morning in Somaliland. The first executions since 2016." The second, from a Nigerian fellow, reported, "My client has been convicted of murder charge. He's been sentenced to death by hanging. A sad day for me." People of goodwill the world over should be saddened by this news.

Interestingly, the nations represented at the Makwanyane Institute look at the death penalty through an entirely different cultural lens from that which condemned the hidden voices amplified in *Right Here, Right Now*. Without the history of chattel slavery, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow, the death penalty on the continent runs counter to cultural norms native to Africans. Absent is the level of dehumanizing of the prisoner that is a signature of the American prison. African courts and justice institutions are significantly underfunded and generally have shallow footings in procedural and substantive due process. That said, African justice systems, and their laws and practices, are not so entwined in an ideology as pervasive and as toxic as the white supremacy narrative that underlies the American death penalty. The Makwanyane Institute takes its name from the landmark 1995 decision of the Constitutional Court of South Africa that invalidated the death penalty under the interim constitution. If and when the United States joins the enlightened position of South Africa, Europe, and most democracies, abolition in Africa will surely follow in short order.

I reflect over the stories in *Right Here, Right Now* and see two clear calls to action. First, to see and hear the voices of these long-hidden souls, recognize their humanity, and link arms with those individuals and organizations working to abolish the death penalty, the most inhumane of social policies. The question posed at the end of "You Can Be Anything" (chapter 24) is heartbreaking to the core. Yes, a searing *what if?* The second rallying cry I hear bursting forth from this compilation is more proactive: The impaired and broken prisoners, young and old alike, were once

vulnerable, needy, worthy of protection. We failed them. Will we fail the children who today find no safe places in their homes, their overcrowded and under-resourced schools; who are living with food and housing insecurity, with parents unable to afford adequate health care? These challenges face us, right here, right now. Will we rise to meet them?

Acknowledgments

To the more than one hundred story sharers, artists, and visionaries who helped develop the Hidden Voices project Serving Life: ReVisioning Justice and who continue to expand its reach today, I extend my profound gratitude and admiration. To the many universities, civic organizations, conferences, galleries, and faith communities that hosted readings of these monologues, installed the exhibits, took up collections, or provided meals and transportation for families, thank you for bringing forward these stories. Thanks also to all the individuals, organizations, and foundations who continue to fund Serving Life as it evolves, including A Blade of Grass; the Fund for Southern Communities; Humanities for the Public Good, UNC–Chapel Hill; the MAP Fund; the North Carolina Arts Council; the Paul Green Foundation; and the Triangle Community Foundation. The work could not exist without your kind support.

In particular, I want to thank those who offered artistic support and visionary direction at crucial moments in the project development: Peter Kuhns, Kathryn Hunter-Williams, Jennifer Thompson, Nancy Demorest, William Paul Thomas, Carlyn Wright-Eakes, Rachel Campbell, Frank Baumgartner, Douglas Campbell, Jon Powell, Vivienne Benesch and PlayMakers Repertory Company, Marc Callahan, Dana Reason, Madeleine Lambert, Richard Lonon, Ann Joyner, Allan Parnell, Michael Betts, Sita Lozoff, Catherine Dumas, Jenny Warburg, Graig Meyer, Jonathan and

Leah Wilson-Hartgrove, Cooper and Noah Harris, Allison Layague, the Center for Death Penalty Litigation, and the North Carolina Coalition for Alternatives to the Death Penalty.

I am indebted to Jayne Ifekwunigwe and stellar editor Gisela Fosado, who imagined this book after hearing a reading at Duke University's Rubenstein Arts Center. Your insights and perspective have been invaluable; all writers should be so fortunate.

Most of all, to Cerron, Chanton, Darrell, Doug, George, Gotti, H.L., Henry, Jas, Jason, Kenneth, KenTay, Leroy, Little Bison, Lump, Lyle, Mr. Blue, Paul, Rico, Rodney, Rome Alone, Stephen, Will, William, and the others: I never cease to be moved by your kind and generous sharing. Heart to heart is the only way to thrive.

To all the family members who so willingly shared their time and stories: your welcoming spirits have been a true blessing.

Finally, to every single person who helped create Serving Life in all its varied forms: your vast compassion, breathtaking talents, and tireless dedication will surely bring the dawn.

Introduction

To the reader, from a man living on death row:

> FACT: *Tough guys (like I'm supposed to be) are soft guys too, tenderhearted and caring. We love animals and children very much and cry sometimes when we see images of their suffering. I am not ashamed to say that I like to read* Mother Earth News *magazine. I especially like the last page of the publication, called "Earth Words." This page shows beautiful pictures of natural landscapes accompanied by a poem or some words of wisdom.*
>
> *One issue shows a hippopotamus with a portion of its head, eyes, and snout above the water in the Linyanti River at sunset. The accompanying poem is one of Maya Angelou's; it reads: "No sun outlasts its sunset, but will rise again and bring the dawn."*
>
> *I'm praying that you bring the dawn, God willing.*

What does it mean for each of us to bring the dawn? When I was a kid, we would sometimes go camping all alone. Just before sunset, we'd head off with nothing but a tent, sleeping bags, and ourselves. We'd tell ghost stories, stay up late, and if we got hungry, it was easy enough to hunt up something to eat. Easy because we were "camping" in our backyard.

Just before dawn, when the night was its darkest and chilliest, we'd generally abandon the tent for our own warm beds.

Many of those who live on death row didn't have backyards as children, and if they did, those backyards certainly weren't places to safely sleep.

And as for hunting up groceries, good luck with that. Too often, there simply weren't any. Even when there was food, it was often kept padlocked in a cabinet or refrigerator, since food was limited and the hunger of growing boys was not. Instead of pretending to camp out, one man recalled how he and his brother pretended to be locked up. Pretended to be incarcerated.

I think about my own children, how they built tepees and forts and treehouses. How they never once played "prison." How they didn't even know what prison was.

In 2013, Hidden Voices was invited by a psychologist, the programs director at a prison, to develop a project for a group of residents living on death row. At that time, the death penalty was lawful in thirty-five states, down one from the previous year after Connecticut abolished its death sentence. More than three thousand people were incarcerated on America's Death Row. And that number didn't even count America's Junior Death Row: the children we sentenced to life without parole, meaning the children we sentenced to grow up and die in prison.

At Hidden Voices, we describe ourselves as "a radically inclusive, participatory, and co-creative collective committed to creating just, compassionate, and sustainable relationships." Building these relationships is the only way to create the just and compassionate world we all wish to inhabit. So I suggested that instead of developing a project *for* the men, we follow our usual process and develop a project *with* the men. At Hidden Voices, our core values are simple: *All lives have meaning. All stories matter*. The programs director agreed. We were in. But little did we imagine what we were in *for*.

When we walked into that first meeting in 2013, we brought nothing but paper, pencils, and our Hidden Voices process. At the close of our second meeting, we left with a list of intended outcomes, a rich visioning of what we might create to achieve those outcomes, and a list of whom to invite to our table: both to speak and to listen.

By unanimous agreement, the most critical intention read like this: "We intend for our stories to break the stereotype of who lives on death row. We want the public to know we are not monsters." And so we set forth with a destination clearly in mind but absolutely no idea how the journey would unfold.

During the following years, we collaborated with those original men, and then others around the country, to create Serving Life: ReVisioning

Justice. The project evolved to include a wealth of material: collections of stories, interviews, performances on death row, cycles of monologues, public readings, two interactive exhibits, and the play *Count: Stories from America's Death Row*. We worked hands-on with groups of men and one-on-one, laughed and wept together on phone calls, exchanged letters, spoke with family members, and invited others living on death row around the country to share their most intimate stories, words, and prayers. The stories in this collection are drawn from those interactions.

The men who played "prison," and who now live there, generally preferred to share stories of the "good times," in no small part because those stories stood in relief against the background chaos: the time they went to an amusement park; the time they got a pair of brand-new shoes; the time they went fishing at the creek and Grandma slipped and lost her wig in the water. Heck, who doesn't enjoy a good laugh? But we also invited them to share the other stories, the ones that required more effort. Those stories—of meals that consisted solely of ketchup crackers, of a parent waking the children in the middle of the night and forcing them to choose which one would receive that night's beating, of learning to tie their shoes and smoke weed at the same age—those were shared more slowly and at greater cost. Often they were introduced with the halting words, "I've never told anyone this before."

More than once, the speaker wept.

In those moments, the other guys sat quietly. Patiently. There was no attempt to console, no attempt to stem the rising waters, no patting someone's back. This was prison, after all. The men offered something far more powerful and healing: the profound respect of allowing another person the space to feel what they were feeling, without any need to have that other person stop feeling so that the rest of us might feel *better*. In that windowless place, there was so much unspoken, of tenderness and grief. Of shared, unshed tears for the children they once were, for the men they had become.

One prisoner commented that he never realized the traumatic things that happened in his life were tragic until he became an adult. "It was just stuff that happened, understand?"

Well, sure. Who notices the water in which we swim, the air we breathe? We don't question the beliefs that drive us, because we don't recognize them as beliefs. We just see them as "what is." You can't question what

you don't see. As children, those men were just trying to keep their heads above water.

No other society has imprisoned as many of its own as we do here in the United States. What we hide in the dark obscurity of prisons and jails are real people, shredded by mental illness, violence, abuse, and poverty. As one young man told me, "Poverty and prison go together like Kool-Aid and sugar. Without sugar, you got no Kool-Aid. Without poverty, you got no prison."

Scholars from around the world have referred to our current state of incarceration as "American apartheid." In her February 6, 2009, Children's Defense Fund Child Watch column, Marian Wright Edelman writes, "Incarceration is becoming the new American apartheid and poor children of color are the fodder. . . . Child poverty and neglect, racial disparities in systems that serve children, and the pipeline to prison are not acts of God. They are America's immoral political and economic choices that can and must be changed."

Perhaps we would benefit from our own Truth and Reconciliation process. Who need to tell the truth? Who need to listen? Surely we all do. We need to tell the truth about who it is we incarcerate. We need to tell the truth about why we think it's OK. Too often, what we accept as truth is simply some form of *It must be because it is*. Stay within that circular world, and those statements hold up. You can't see the river till you climb onto the banks. But clamber up, and suddenly the river is defined. It stands out against a larger landscape of possibility.

After a public reading of these monologues, an audience member said, "I always assumed those men must belong on death row because that's where they were." Simple, isn't it? We can't see what we don't know. The muddy waters of those other lived realities are opaque to us.

In one of our prison sessions, a resident stated bluntly that childhood was overrated; he didn't remember "anything positive under all that dirt." Another man gently insisted they shouldn't blame childhood circumstances for their choices. As young teens they had chosen to start selling drugs. No one had forced them. But is that true?

The notion of "choice" has such allure. It is seductive to imagine we are in control of our destinies. But when I asked my children how they might have gone about buying and selling drugs in middle school, they just laughed. The best they could come up with was a girl rumored to have smoked a joint.

My children wouldn't have "chosen" to sell drugs because (1) we didn't need the money and (2) they'd have had no idea where or how to begin. At thirteen, my children were surrounded by ice skates, baseball practice, and violins. The young man who made the comment about "choice" was surrounded by guns, drugs, and an immediate need for rent money. Are we seriously trying to convince ourselves that this boy had the same choices as my kids? That we have acted responsibly by sentencing children like him to execution or to life in prison without parole, meaning to grow up and die there?

The men were shocked to hear me say this. But my goodness, just look around. Who benefits from the conjoined notion of choice and personal responsibility? Obviously, it's those with the most benefits. The story we tell ourselves is we are personally responsible, because of the choices we made, for our abundant benefits, and you are personally responsible for your lack of them. This false narrative enables us to wash our hands of *our* responsibility to fix what is clearly broken. It allows us to ignore what and whom we leave in our wake.

At thirteen, I don't think anyone has much free choice. What we have are our given circumstances. In one conversation, the men compared notes as to the first time they saw someone killed. Think back—how old were you when you witnessed your first murder? The youngest was three. These children, now prisoners, were caught in a net that was not of their making.

When I listened to their stories, one thought arose over and over: it's a wonder any survive at all. That some survive with hearts intact is a damn miracle. Many have never, in all their years in prison, had a single rehabilitative or support program. Some were surprised to know there even were such things. Many men have lived twenty-three hours a day in a small, windowless cell, their food trays pushed through a slot in the door, with only one hour spent outside, and that in a cage. Most of the men have not had a contact visit in decades. They have not hugged their mothers in ten, twenty, thirty years. Have not touched their children, their grandchildren. These men reflect to us the communities of absence in which they were reared, which are our very own shadow communities.

Yet somehow their hearts have expanded beyond their often violent and despairing upbringings, beyond their current deprivations. They want so much to be of service. One man wrote that "sacrifice is not the ending of life but the devotion to it." These men envision a system

where they might serve as coordinators of rehabilitative programs, their focus not on freeing themselves but on freeing younger prisoners' minds through the truth of their own stories. They imagine these younger prisoners returning to their neighborhoods and families with a new restorative vision of justice. As one man wrote, "I pray, I hope to give back a bit of what I have taken from the world."

After listening to a public reading of the men's stories, audiences tend to sit silent, stunned.

"What do you feel?" I often ask.

One woman answered, "I just feel shame. For years, I've driven by the prison near where I work without once thinking about who is inside." She teared up. "It makes me wonder what else I've never thought to think about, who else I've overlooked."

Do the stories in this book humanize the men? Certainly. But my hope is that by reading these stories, we humanize ourselves. We need to trouble the waters of our complacency: a complacency that claims those of us gifted with childhoods free from witnessing murders, from the need to sell drugs for rent, from incarcerated parents, aren't indebted to those who were not so fortunate. We are. And we are called to recirculate our unearned good fortune in the form of tangible, hands-on, loving action.

Just like the woman driving by that prison every day, most of us have washed our hands of these men and their families long ago. Yet as I write this, it is Easter and Passover, the season of new life, new beginnings, the coming of a new day of liberation. I have heard that the true meaning of washing one's hands during the seder is not about pretending to some inner purity, but signifying that we are prepared to participate. Without hesitation, we are ready to do whatever is within our reach.

What is within your reach? *Who* is within your reach? We all know some small action we can take in the name of love and compassion and liberation from our own limiting and hidebound perspectives. One small action practiced over and over can free us all.

I leave you with this final story. One of my friends sent big news: two geese had taken up residence in the rec yard. Of all the possible places in the world, this pair had determined that the perfect spot to build a nest was inside a prison compound.

Before long, the men realized that the female had laid a clutch of eggs. "She rarely moved," my friend wrote, "except to adjust the nest and hiss

at anyone who got too close. Even the male stayed away, seeming content to walk the yard with the rest of us, a quizzical tilt to his head."

Can't you just imagine the gander as one of the guys, pacing the yard and keeping his distance from a short-tempered partner? No wonder. Nesting is no picnic. The eggs must be gently rotated beneath the mother so that the temperature remains constant and the membranes don't stick to the shells. The mother leaves only to drink and eat. Some of the men, concerned about the overwhelming heat swamping the area, made a little tub to hold water. They sat it where the mother could crane her head and drink without leaving the nest. Each day, when the men were allowed in the yard for their hour, the first thing they checked was whether the mother needed more water. Some carried out bits of bread for her to eat.

Anticipation grew. And on the day the shells broke open and the baby goslings emerged, men who hadn't been outside in twenty years came to see the fuzzy hatchlings, "watching them stumble and bumble around their new surroundings."

Imagine the fresh-born puffballs blinking in the unfamiliar light, surrounded by men who hadn't been outside in decades doing the exact same thing. Amazement all around.

Eventually Animal Control took the birds away.

It was good they were taken, my friend explained. The environment was not conducive to healthy development. Men had spotted hawks, fox pups, even vultures nearby. Were the babies to fledge in that setting, my friend doubted any would survive. Still, the day Animal Control took the geese, my friend said he went outside "and the yard felt like the empty dirt lot it is. Only more so."

It's a gorgeous human quality, this capacity to love beyond boundaries. Animal, human, incarcerated, free. Who knows how or why this happens? It just does. One moment we're encased in our own thick, protective hides, and the next, a miracle occurs and some raw beauty cracks us open. Life catches us off guard, and the light that shines through is shocking. Pink and raw, we suddenly become less who we think we are and more who we truly are: present, tender, welcoming. It dawns on us that the notion of separation is just that: a notion. A ghost story invented by frightened children some dark night.

In those moments of clear seeing, we find ourselves awash in love, connection, community. Our vision of wholeness is restored. If justice

rolls like a river, it's surely a river of mercy that carries us all to a shared land where we are washed clean of past ghosts and can wake to a fresh, new day. Truth *is* reconciliation.

These stories will surely break your heart, and that is a fine place from which to view much of what we prefer to keep at arm's length. Handle these stories, these lives, with care. Let the words find a nesting place in your heart. And when the stories crack you open, be glad for the light.

About the Stories

The voices and stories in this volume represent a cross section of the United States, from California to Washington, DC, from Maine to Florida. In addition to the men from those states, we corresponded or spoke with men incarcerated on death rows in Alabama, Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Texas, Utah, and Virginia.

The events related in these stories took place during the past six decades. All the men were born between approximately 1960 and 1990. When we began the project, all had been living on death row for more than five years, and some had been incarcerated more than thirty. The youngest participant was in his twenties and the oldest close to sixty.

For reasons of privacy, protection, and security, personal and place names have been removed from the material. This is standard practice for every Hidden Voices project, whether that project focuses on sexual assault, immigration, military experiences, family violence, or any other pressing social issue. There can be very real repercussions for those who speak out, and we assure each participant that we will do our utmost to maintain their anonymity. In the context of this book, the incarcerated men whose voices reach beyond prison walls may experience tangible pushback. We have seen prison programs canceled, phone and recreation privileges suspended, and prisoners moved into solitary confinement

after speaking to reporters, posting on a blog, or accessing other means of public communication. For families, too, the stigma associated with death row is very real; we have known families forced to relocate once a loved one was convicted.

There is another reason to omit such identifiers. Specifics such as age, race, and geographic location can allow us as readers to more easily distance ourselves from these experiences. Absent a specific image of the speaker, we more easily and viscerally allow the deeper truth of the story to penetrate.

As mentioned in the introduction, the raw material for these stories came via several avenues. Sometimes the stories were embedded or referenced in longer written pieces. Other times the stories formed the basis for remembrances, poems, letters, essays, or interviews. Sometimes the stories were shared orally, in response to another man's written or spoken reflection. When we met in person with our collaborators, we took copious notes and later asked for clarifications and additional details by mail or during a subsequent workshop. Some men were marvelous writers; others saw themselves more as visual artists; still others cared nothing for writing but did care deeply about the project goals and were gifted storytellers. For some time, we also ran a story slam inside prison, and about forty men participated in those offerings. We recorded and transcribed telephone conversations with the men and their families, and from those conversations, we excerpted comments, details, and dialogue that illuminated important themes. Through the generosity of a well-respected prison magazine, we were able to send a broad national request for any stories, poems, and prayers that death row residents wished to share with a public audience. We received almost a hundred responses. This abundance of material allowed us to create the varied components of Serving Life: ReVisioning Justice.

There was great commonality in many of the men's experiences, and a few times, the stories were so similar that it was hard to distinguish one from the other. While we couldn't include but one such story in the collection, we also didn't want to exclude critical details essential to a reader's understanding, so in a few instances, we created a single composite story made richer by those inclusions.

Certainly, the most important thing to remember is simply that all the experiences and incidents shared in the collection are true and hap-

pened to real men living on America's Death Row. We are deeply grateful for the vulnerability and generosity these men evinced in sharing some very difficult experiences. It was not easy. It came at a cost. Most everyone on death row suffers from post-traumatic stress. At times, the price for sharing these memories was tangible: nightmares, depression, stress, withdrawal. The men persevered. They did so because they believed the benefit might outweigh the cost. They trusted us when we said there would be an audience who cared—about them, their lives, their families. Most crucially, they trusted that facing their own painful memories might prevent someone else ending up in their situation.

Finally, it is common for people to ask, "Why death row?"

On one level, the answer is simple: that's where we were invited. But there exists a more essential reason: death row is a microcosm of the prison population in our over-incarcerated nation. Almost all residents are low wealth. They are disproportionately racial and ethnic minorities. Mental illness is rampant. Hundreds who were innocent have been convicted, yet even if these men are not "guilty," they're easily perceived as "not innocent enough."

As Bryan Stevenson reminds us in *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, "Proximity has taught me some basic and humbling truths, including this vital lesson: Each of us is more than the worst thing we've ever done."

Clearly, proximity is key. Proximity to our own failings, to our own innocences and guilts. But what does proximity even mean when we speak of these others, of men who have lived in solitary confinement for years, sometimes decades; men for whom visitors are a rarity and phone calls simply a memory? How do we find proximity to them?

As we collaborated with men living on death row or sentenced as children to die in prison, we conceived the notion of a community call and response between the public and these most hidden members of our society. This collection of stories is one piece of that call. The response, of course, is up to you. We welcome your own stories and correspondence and will share those with the men and their families.

Finally, this collection does not intend to offer a comprehensive overview or critique of our current system of incarceration. Our intent is more limited and personal. Over the past two decades, many excellent books have been written that address the historical roots and policies

that have led to our current criminal justice system and our present state of mass incarceration. Consider some of these excellent and compelling resources:

Are Prisons Obsolete? by Angela Y. Davis
Charged: The New Movement to Transform American Prosecution and End Mass Incarceration, by Emily Bazelon
Deadly Justice: A Statistical Portrait of the Death Penalty, by Frank R. Baumgartner, Marty Davidson, Kaneesha R. Johnson, Arvind Krishnamurthy, and Colin P. Wilson
End of Its Rope: How Killing the Death Penalty Can Revive Criminal Justice, by Brandon L. Garrett
Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration—and How to Achieve Real Reform, by John F. Pfaff
Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America, by James Forman Jr.
"The New Asylums" (PBS *Frontline* episode), by Miri Navasky and Karen O'Connor
The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness, by Michelle Alexander

What this book does offer are first-person stories from those most impacted by this system. As you read, you will notice some unmistakable themes: racism, segregation, housing insecurity, underfunded and inadequate educational opportunities, a lack of mental health support, substance abuse, violence, post-traumatic stress syndrome. If you pay attention, you will see these themes reappearing throughout the stories, as the young children grow into young men maturing inside our jails and prisons. This pattern, in which these adverse childhood factors lead to incarceration, has been called the "poverty-to-prison pipeline," the "cradle-to-prison pipeline," and the "school-to-prison pipeline." Whatever label we choose, our work must be to disrupt the pattern and heal the underlying causes.

We decided at the inception of this collection not to include scholarly reflections or commentary on the stories shared. We wanted to offer these voices the space and the respect they deserve; we wanted to offer readers the same. Each reader will find their own pathway into perspective, understanding, and connection. And for those readers eager

to engage in healing the harm caused on all sides by our criminal justice system and to restore kindness, compassion, and wholeness across our communities, we have ended the book with a list of solutions-oriented resources, from restorative practices to global alternatives to our current carceral settings.

Resources for Deeper Connection

As mentioned in "About the Stories," we offer this list of resources for those readers eager to engage in healing the harm and restoring—or perhaps initiating—kindness, compassion, and wholeness across our communities. These resources focus on transformation, both personal and systemic, because both are required if we are truly to envision new pathways toward healing. From their varied positions as scholars and lawyers and residents of death row, these women and men speak eloquently of a possible United States, one that has addressed its racist and classist history with insight and conscious action. As you read these titles, I hope one or two will engender that feeling of "Oh, this! This is what I need to hear."

Most fundamentally, these books remind us that what we have created, we can change. As a friend of mine often says, "It ain't that deep." In a very tangible way, she is right. The need is obvious. The time is now. So we do what needs to be done with courage, conviction, and gratitude for the opportunity to set right a mighty wrong.

Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice, by Howard Zehr
Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States, by Sister Helen Prejean
The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions, by Sister Helen Prejean
Finding Freedom: Writings from Death Row, by Jarvis Jay Masters

Incarceration Nations: A Journey to Justice in Prisons around the World, by Baz Dreisinger

Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption, by Bryan Stevenson

Living without Enemies: Being Present in the Midst of Violence, by Samuel Wells and Marcia A. Owen

The Redemption Project with Van Jones (https://www.cnn.com/shows/redemption-project-van-jones)

The Sun Does Shine: How I Found Life and Freedom on Death Row, by Anthony Ray Hinton with Lara Love Hadin

Until We Reckon: Violence, Mass Incarceration, and a Road to Repair, by Danielle Sered