



Reflections on Fatherhood

PRISON UNIVERSITY PROJECT

August 2015

Dear Friends,

I'm pleased to share this collection of reflections on the topic of fatherhood, written by students in this semester's Creative Writing class, taught by Oriane Delfosse and Andrew Maynard.

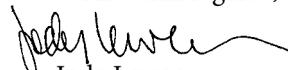
Reading these essays alongside Nigel Poor's beautiful photos from our June graduation, I am struck not only by how persistently the theme of education runs through them, but by how prominently the theme of fatherhood features in the photos. For better or for worse, parenting is a form of teaching; at its best, education is a deeply relational experience that teaches us not just how to think, but how to trust, how to depend, and how to take healthy risks.

The College Program at San Quentin is a community of students, teachers and staff who care for and are committed to each other. This dedication energizes, inspires, and encourages everyone involved. Being part of a larger, supportive learning community is what overrides fear, renews hope, and fosters excellence.

None of this would be possible without all of you. The dedication of the friends and supporters of the Prison University Project not only sustains the material existence of the College Program, it fuels our determination, and constantly broadens the scope of our dreams.

We are deeply grateful for your support.

With warm regards,


Jody Lewen



Born Again

Emile DeWeaver

Fatherhood is rebirth. My angel was born, and her birth baptized me. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them, I couldn't see through any eyes but hers. I couldn't feel with any heart but hers.

Fatherhood is fraternity. On October 19, 1998, I looked at my father and saw a man who'd failed me. On October 20, 1999, my daughter entered the world squalling for a father who was in prison, and the common ground of fatherhood made my dad and me brothers. As she grew, the hard edges of my father's failures softened because I saw a reflection of my father's love for me in my love for my daughter. I'm serving a life sentence. I've failed my child – not in every way but in enough ways – and my failure mirrors my dad's pain. It binds us in brotherhood.

Fatherhood is hope. However my life ends, the future will be bright because she's in it.

...Because we
never knew one
another, I feel
like I have
never fully
gotten to know
myself...

I AM

Le'Mar "Maverick" Harrison

"Being a "Father" from prison has always felt like an oxymoron, a contradiction, a falsehood or lie I've been living. How can I truly teach, nurture, or shape my son's life into something more if I'm not physically there? I thought this to be true until yesterday.

I called my house and my son picked up the phone. He said, "Mom told me you think I'm not interested in the things you do?" This threw me for a loop. All I could say was, "Do you?" "Of course I do," he retorted. "You're able to act, make music, go to college, and try to help people out here. All while locked in there. To top it off, you never forget my birthday and you make Mama happy. You're my inspiration and motivate me everyday."

My soul smiled that day. Through the words of this 11 year old boy I realized I'm not the worst things I've said, or best things I've done. But one thing I am is a father to my son.

Cover photo, **Jerome Boone** and his son at the Prison University Project graduation celebration in June.

Photo on second page, left to right: Creative Writing students **Bonarü Richardson, Antwan Williams, Kevin Valvardi, Emile DeWeaver, Juan Haines, and Tommy Winfrey.**

Baby-Boy

A. Kevin Valvardi

I'm finding it impossible to recall a particular moment with my father that stood out, due to the sheer number of moments and occasions that were special or memorable for one reason or another.

There were the numerous fishing excursions we went on together; crabbing in the waters of the mid-Atlantic; the many times he supported my endeavors regardless whether I succeeded or failed. There were the many times he lifted me up when I was down, picked me up when I'd fallen, or held me when I needed to be held. There were also the times he encouraged me or my efforts when I strived to accomplish something new or to improve at something I was involved in. I would be remiss not to mention all the times we fought when I was growing up and going through the turbulence of my teenage years. Yet, throughout those times, he never stopped loving me and wanting the very best for me in my life.

Even after all of the horrible crimes I committed and things I've done in my life to let him and my family down and disappoint them, he has been there for me unceasingly and without fail, and continued to love me unconditionally, despite his own pain.

The last time I saw my father, he hugged me, cried, and said, "It's okay, Baby-Boy."

Papa

Ivan Skrblinski (Juan Moreno Haines)

When duty called Papa to sea,
Nine months seemed forever.
To ease the days – to draw him close,
A darkened closet served adventure.

There I'd sail, flashlight beaming,
In search of something new.

Through cigar boxes, stuffed with stuff,
Like exotic coins and ribbons and photos
From escapades around the world,

Luring me closer
To him.

Most of all

It was skinny arms slipping
Into pressed uniforms,
Feeling and smelling of starch
With sleeves hung to knees,

There I'd look into Papa's mirror,
And salute my hero.

The months would pass
Or linger by,
Until the day I'd run to him
And grab his waist,

All before mother got
Her kiss.

The last time I saw my father, he hugged me, cried, and said, "It's okay, Baby-Boy."



My Father's Name

Syyen Hong

I never knew my father, Tuth Hong. The only thing I know is that I have his last name, Hong. This is not a common Cambodian name so I go around telling people that my father is Chinese born in Cambodia without even having the facts. Why? Because I never knew my father, Tuth Hong.

I was born in a Khmer Rouge labor camp where people were forced to toil day in and day out. “Khmer Rouge” means “Red Cambodian” in French. They were a ruthless rebel army that took over Cambodia for four years. My parents got married at a young age and in 1975 my older sister, Sy, was born. I was born in 1978 in the heartbeat of the Khmer Rouge Regime. My mother told stories of how terrifying it was to live during this time, food was scarce and there were no roaches or crickets in Cambodia. Tuth Hong was a proud man who had a temper. When he and my mother got into an argument, he would beat her and then my sister. I’m not sure if this is what took place because I don’t even have my facts straight. This is just something my mother said but I will never know the facts. Why? Because I never knew my father, Tuth Hong.

Phoeun You

As I reflect back on my childhood, I begin to see how alike my father and I are. We were disconnected mentally and emotionally. He showed me how to be strong and never cry. But when it came to father and son bonding – he just didn’t know how. He was strict and always pushed me to do the right things. But when I did the right things, I was never rewarded. Instead I was often disciplined for doing wrong. I know he did his best for me but that was all he knew. Perhaps it was the same way his father treated him. He’s a great provider but fell short in providing for me emotionally. I know he loves me but perhaps didn’t know how to express it. As a result, I grew up feeling that I was robbed of having a loving father. Because we never knew one another, I feel like I have never fully gotten to know myself.

What he taught me was to never give too much of myself to anyone. And I did just that. As a result, I continued that same cycle in how I communicate and relate to others. The truth is that although I thought he didn’t teach me much, he did. He taught me what not to do.

*Above: graduate **Phoeun You** and his family, including fellow classmate **Syyen Hong**, who is also his cousin.*

Antwan Williams

Once I told my daughter something that might change her life/
“Always hide your tears baby don’t let them see you cry”/
Looking back I realize those were tools to keep her hardened/
Not knowing I planted seeds soon to grow into concrete gardens/
Who am I but her teacher, a form of broken leader/
I’m her image of what love is, so mines must go much deeper/
If she thinks I don’t cry, I don’t hurt then she gone find/
Someone she think can understand what she going through and in no time/
What she think is right, is all wrong/
And she’ll still feel, all alone/
And that child insides still broken and who she is today is all grown/
If I’m the first man she loved, then the love gotta be right/
So now she knows that tears, will help her grow through life/

Long Live the King

Micheal “Yahya” Cooke

April 4, 1968 was the only time in my life I remember seeing my father cry. He sat at the kitchen table huddled over an old Philco radio with my Uncle James listening to a staticky news brief being broadcast. His old 30-30 Winchester rifle sat propped-up against the Frigidaire as my father held his large round head in his callused palms. My uncle kept muttering to himself, “Those bastards. They finally kilt him!”

“Daddy, are you okay?” I asked my father. He seemed to look at me without really seeing me. His proud mahogany face that shone like polished ebony when he smiled, was wet and etched with a grief that radiated from the depth of his soul.

“Come mere, boy,” my father said to me, taking me in his arms and turning me around and bear hugging up against his barrel chest. He rested his chin on the top of my head and I felt him tremble as his hot tears splattered on the back of my head and rolled down my neck. I was at a loss, faced with my father’s sorrow, so I just stood there and let him hug me to absorb his pain... The announcer repeated, Dr. Martin Luther King is dead.”



Father or Daddy?

Mesro Coles-El

When I was five, almost six, I heard the word “melancholy” on television, and began using it with impunity. Everything was melancholy. How was your day at school? Melancholy. How is that new mix tape? Melancholy. How is your dinner? Melancholy.

“That’s a pretty big word for such a little dude,” my father said. My Dad is all six foot two, two-hundred-fifty pounds of Brolic stoicism and odd jokes. “What’s it mean?” He leaned forward to listen.

I shrugged my shoulders, preparing to duck.

“How do you spell it?” He asked.

“M-E-L-O-N,” I floundered, “C-O-L-L-I-E.”

“Use it in a sentence,” he ordered.

“I went to the State Fair and had a melancholy time,” I said, encouraged because I did not get smacked.

But that was when I did get smacked. Hard.

“Don’t ever use a word you can’t spell, don’t know the meaning of, or can’t use in the right context!” He roared. “Learn about it!”

I spent the next few weeks trying to discover the meaning of the word ‘melancholy’ and soon found the dictionary, a book full of the meanings of words. When I showed my father, he was proud, and that was something I kept with me always.

The difference between a father and a Dad is that any male can be a father by simply being a sperm donor; a Dad or Daddy is a man who does his best to raise the result of that donation. A Dad has to be responsible, and do the best he can to make sure his child or children can benefit from his experience. A Dad does not even have to be the child’s or children’s biological father; he just has to care enough to raise a child.

A Father is a Real Man

Donald Ray Houston

When I think of the word father, I think of someone who’s loving and caring. For instance he encourages his kids to always set goals in life, starting off with the small goals and building up to bigger goals. A father will even take the time out of their busy schedule to help out by giving constructive advice on things concerning school, or relationships. They will motivate their kids to stay out of trouble and to value their future.

A father is one who provides for their children; he does not deflect from the responsibility of helping out with buying clothes, shoes, pampers, etc. Instead he hangs in there doing his part of the obligation. The word father does not come easy and just because an adult male helps to create a baby doesn’t make him a father. Instead he has to have maturity and values.

My perception of a father is one who’s also a teacher; he teaches the kids things that will help them prepare for real life experiences, for instance he teaches them independence by instructing his kids to start cleaning up the yard at a young age. In addition he may show them how to fix on a car.

My soul smiled
that day.

Sanctuary

J. S. Long

There once was an old man who spent some time with a little boy. This old man taught the little boy many things, such as the art of river fishing, lake fishing, how to pick one's self up after getting knocked down. They stayed up late on Saturday nights, watching Creature Feature, until the boy fell asleep. Then the old man would pick him up and put him to bed. Sometimes the boy would fake sleep, just to feel the comfort and warmth, to feel sanctuary.

The little boy would often just watch the old man, as he worked on his poor man's castle, laying stone, plumbing, cutting firewood, planting and caring for lawn and flowers. It seemed there was nothing the old man couldn't do. And he showed the little boy the most important thing any father figure could show. He showed this little boy that he was the most precious thing on this earth. He also showed by living that the very essence of life is to play.

It is a shame that I remember so much after I am fifty and Grandpa has been dead for over forty years. But I would not trade those memories for nothing in the world. That old man was the most precious thing on this earth.

Lost Chances

Tommy Winfrey

Stumbling and bumiling drunk
door ajar, memories of him
never afar.
Pain rooted deep within my soul
thoughts of a boy with
but one goal.
Fleeing the neglect.
Fleeing the abuse.
Fleeing the absence as a father.
I ran so fast.
I ran so far.
I forgot I was a boy,
and struggled to be a man.
Blame on my tongue at every turn.
Until I could see my distorted
visions of him.
Came without understanding.
That the pain of absence was hereditary.
At least I had a dad, unlike him.
Now all is forgiven.
But these words have went unspoken
because he left this world before
I could utter them.

Creative Writing students **Syyen Hong, Kevin Valvardi, Mesro Coles-El, Phoen You, Maverick, Borey Ai, and Tommy Winfrey.**



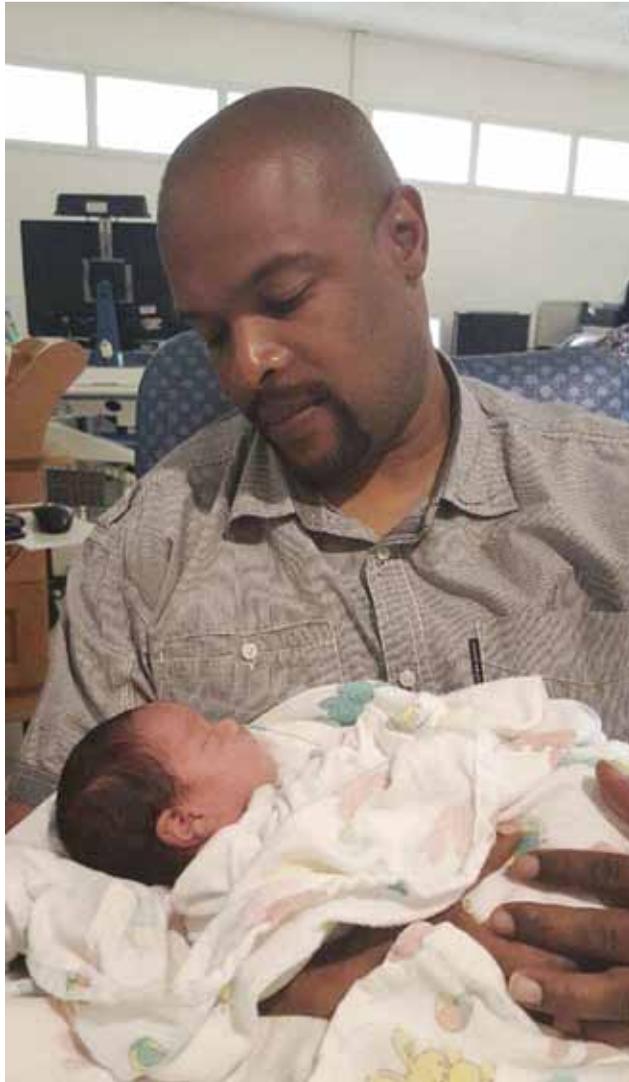


Forgive Me Father

Bonaru Richardson

On a very cold foggy night something similar to this one
As the hate was poured into children of pilgrims
Manifested deep within souls from four years old, to the ripe age of ten
Prepped, labeled, stamped and ready for shipping and handling
Not too sure demons never understood the real meaning
Unknown shadows in the night reveal liverish appetites
Chain smoke and alcohol enhanced the darkness of love
Where it chose to remain and grow into misdirected pain
The pain which taught that, "it hurts me more than it hurts you"
Generations of punishment passed down through abuse
Where and when and how to make it stop?
Stop blaming him, you, and others for the failures to understand
Poverty and a failed plan blinded the ideology of a real man
Suicidal tendency and fantasy erased humility
Destroyed everything and diminished the freedom and prosperity
Can a grown man stand up and cry again, lie again?
Betray a friend, cowering in the shower hollering
Forgiveness failed to reach the epitome of its existence
Perished with its recipient and hid in its appearance

2015 Graduates **Tony Manning, Keung Vanh, James Cavitt, Carl Sampson, Carlos Flores, Jerome Boone, Van Wilson, Sa Tran** (missing: **Jose Camacho and Phoeun You**)



Former student **James Houston** with his son **Semaj**, who was born on June 21, 2015 — Father's Day.