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Stephanie Ballas April 10, 2023

Catharsis and Incarceration: How Writing, Music, and Comedy Foster the Healing Process

by

Stephanie Ballas

Cynthia Willett

Adviser

Philosophy, Politics & Law Studies

Cynthia Willett

Adviser

Edward L. Queen II

Committee Member

Chad Córdova

Committee Member

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Stephanie Ballas

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Abstract

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By Stephanie Ballas

How do incarcerated people use writing, music, and comedy to promote self-healing? To answer this question, I compared and contrasted research on what has proven to contribute to the healing process with the lived experience of three formerly incarcerated people: Michael, Emily, and Micah. I examined how my participants coped with trauma and grief during their incarceration, and assessed which type of catharsis their anecdotes fell into (homeopathic, allopathic, collective, or transcendent) based upon the theories of catharsis in Cynthia Willett's book, *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth*. Throughout my thesis, I integrated interviews with my participants and drew from philosophical, psychological, sociological, and music theory focused texts to examine how catharsis operates in some of the most marginalized communities in the United States.

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Table of Contents

Catharsis and Incarceration: How Writing, Music, and Comedy Foster the Healing Process

The Orléans-Saran Penitentiary Center located south of Paris in Saran, France, is home to the members of a very peculiar group: the Goncourt des détenus (the "inmate's court"), a government-sponsored project that supports incarcerated men and women as they bestow literary prizes upon French novels and novellas. The Goncourt des detenus is "unprecedented in size and reach, with about 500 people detained in 31 prisons" (Breeden) and supported by the French government and communities across the country. Over three months, the members of the Goncourt Project carefully deliberated over their nominations, narrowing down their selection from fifteen finalists. The award was presented to Swiss author Sarah Jollien-Fardel's debut novella *Sa Préférée* (His Favorite), a poignant tale of female emancipation, domestic violence, and overcoming physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Breeden). One incarcerated man, in justifying his support for *Sa Préférée,* explained that it 'showed the importance of "confronting the demons from your past."'(Breeden).

In discussing and debating over their preferred selections, the incarcerated people at The Orleans-Saran Penitentiary Center are forced to confront their own experiences in a public setting, an unsettling and uncomfortable experience; this process is so averse to human nature and the Orleans-Saran Penitentiary Center culture that some members of the Goncourt des detenus joined the group with no intentions to speak during discussions at all (although the debates were often so engaging, they rarely succeeded). Despite the varying levels of comfort in fostering

debates, the group members found an escape and an independence in the power they were given. By allowing the Goncourt Project the ability and freedom to judge literary works and pour their time and energy into a rewarding project that fosters cultural enrichment, incarcerated French men and women were able to begin their own journey in coming to terms with the trauma they have endured and exploring literature as a craft in their own right:

> “The hardest thing, when you arrive in prison, is that everything is obliterated,” (an incarcerated person) said. A familiar network of family, friends and colleagues falls apart, he said; he once considered suicide. After three and a half years as a prison librarian, he now is taking long-distance university classes and dreams of becoming a writer. “These workshops are fundamental,” he said. “It changes everything.”(Breeden)

The Goncourt project is especially unique because it garnered so much national support. Why is the Goncourt Project so widely accepted? It seems that bringing literature to incarcerated people, sponsoring author visits and Q&As, and supplying books is seen as a nobler pursuit and a higher form of enrichment. The project has been so successful that several incarcerated people at Orleans now aspire to write literature themselves one day.

> “Wherever culture, language, and words advance, violence recedes,” said Éric Dupond-Moretti, France’s justice minister, in an interview about the new prize.

“Time in prison has to be a time of punishment, but also of transformation.”(Breeden)

The Goncourt des detenus is an active demonstration of the healing relationship between art and incarcerated people. By combatting harsh conditions, familial separation, prison violence, and unlivable conditions with music, writing, and comedy, the resilience of the human condition is proved over and over. This thesis is about how and why people at the margins of society turn to the arts to heal deep wounds.

TYPES OF CATHARSIS: ALLOPATHIC, HOMEOPATHIC, AND COLLECTIVE

Three main forms of catharsis will be discussed, as outlined in *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* by Cynthia and Julie Willett. The first is homeopathic catharsis; like homeopathic medicine, homeopathic catharsis exposes subjects to small amounts of harmful material so that the body (or mind) is able to build up immunity over time. A fitting example is seen in the African-American population of the southern United States, who used homeopathic humor, often in the form of racial epithets, amongst themselves to build up a “tougher skin” against oppressive Jim Crow laws, casual racism, and discrimination (Willett et al.). Conversely, allopathic catharsis attacks issues by opposing them with their antithesis; if one’s vice, for example, is hubris, the cathartic remedy is shame (Willet et al.). A third type of catharsis completes the healing trinity: collective catharsis, a psychological and biosocial process that centers around transforming negative emotions into positive ones, occurs in a group setting, and challenges social norms. (Willett et al.)

A particularly relevant observational case study involving two Australian women's prisons examined the grieving process and traumatic events that many incarcerated women endure:

> The process of grief that occurs when women go to prison is related to this sense of loss and separation from loved ones. Incarcerated women speak frequently of their worries about adequate care of their children (foster care or at home); many lament their loss of economic independence and inability to support those who had depended on them on the outside… The majority of the female inmate population have a history of physical and/or sexual abuse that contributes to problems of self-esteem and which can lead to varied forms of grief, anger, and depression… (Gibbons).

The native Aboriginal population inhabiting the Australian women's prisons harbor an additional collective and cultural grief:

> These (Aboriginal) women must also contend with postcolonial cultural issues, which have caused grief and anguish for close to two centuries. The injustices in their pasts make for a deep sense of cultural loss. When incarcerated, their separation from family and community is particularly traumatic. (Gibbons).

Many of these traumatized women turn toward creative expression. Previous studies have found that facilities that were more sensitive to the individual problems or moods of incarcerated women (and had established a lower degree of control and discipline) further demonstrate the "positive role that artistic work plays in the alleviation

and/or transformation of personal feelings." (Gibbons). The study also highlighted the value of individual instructors of the arts, whether they teach carpentry, painting, pottery, or metal work, in contributing to the catharsis of incarcerated women (Gibbons). The transformation of negative emotions to positive ones and the consequent alleviation of stress shares characteristics with collective catharsis and allopathic catharsis; allopathically, creative expression is in opposition to the environmental stress and lack of freedom affecting the women—art is the antithesis of incarceration.

One of the most interesting elements of the artistic catharsis of these women has proven to be the nonverbal aspect of visual art; often women who have suffered physical or emotional trauma are better able to express their voices through a nonverbal medium, transforming their pain into a form of creative expression that allows them to process their trauma and minimize feelings of helplessness (Gibbons). Interestingly, the skills that these women acquire through art mediums like pottery or welding challenge social norms (a feature of collective catharsis) and the stigmatizing victimization of incarcerated women (Gibbons).

After losing these themselves in creative endeavors, the reality check of returning to the present, though jarring, could be cathartic in a pseudo-homeopathic way; the more times they zone out and return to the present, the less and less they are affected by their reality, and they are able to accept their new life. It could allow them to move past the shock of incarceration, and begin their new life on the inside. The "disease" that they become immune to is their loss of freedom, and in achieving creative freedom in a flow state and transcending the confines of their prison cells, then abruptly returning to incarcerated life, these women unknowingly grow a thicker skin and learn to adjust to

their new environment. This is different from homeopathic catharsis because here it is the occasional break from their confines that gives these women strength, not an occasional lack of freedom that gives strength to withstand that lack of freedom. Perhaps there exists a fourth type of catharsis in prison—a transcendence from confinement.

* * * * *

Projects like the Goncourt des detenus and the Australian women's prison programs highlight the importance of art and expression in catharsis. My goal in this paper is to explore the nature of homeopathic, allopathic, and collective catharsis, as well as other strengthening or healing processes in incarcerated people by examining how people who have experienced system-induced trauma use comedy, writing, and music to find solace and heal themselves through self-expression.

My argument will develop in several steps; Chapter 1 will focus on catharsis and writing, heavily relying on James W. Pennebaker's book *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Expressing Emotions*, as well as letter-writing and the nature of confession in the prison context. How does writing and expressing oneself impact the health of incarcerated people? What is the value of writing letters to loved ones, diary entries, or working on a memoir while incarcerated?

In Chapter 2, I will examine the relationship between music and catharsis within the prison system. How do incarcerated people use music in ways we might not expect? What are the healing properties of music, and why do we listen to sad music when we

are sad? I will examine the “art of the prison concert”, as well as the psychological, healing effects of music.

In Chapter 3, I will examine the complex relationship between comedy and catharsis, relying on *Uproarious: How Feminists and Other Subversive Comics Speak Truth* by Cynthia and Julie Willett. *Uproarious* is central to my examination of comedy, incarceration, and the potential healing effects:

> “This book is about how humor from below can serve as a source of empowerment, a strategy for outrage and truth telling, a counter to fear, a source of joy and friendship, a cathartic treatment against unmerited shame, and even a means of empathetic connection and alliance. In so doing, we challenge the philosophical foundation of humor as a simple device for debasement or for detaching ourselves from messy situations and their emotions. Instead, we offer a humor that connects body and soul, and that connects us with each other. This humor of connection is what self-described neurodivergent comic Hannah Gadsby claims when she strives to “break comedy in order to rebuild it.”[5]” - (Willett et al.)

I am interested in the work of Jeff Ross, an American comic and actor. His special *Jeff Ross Roasts Criminals: Live at Brazos County Jail* challenges social norms, but also uses comedy to heal wounds. How do incarcerated people use comedy to adjust to their new reality? Are there dangers in using comedy as catharsis? How could comedy serve to heal deep-rooted trauma in some of the most marginalized populations in the world? What is the relationship between empathy and comedy?

This project is both personal and self-referential. As I write and work on this project, I imagine and hope that it will prove to be a cathartic experience in itself as I heal from the trauma of my father's incarceration during my freshman year at Emory University (2019 - 2020). As I write, I hope not only to provide myself with the tools necessary for processing and healing from trauma in a healthy, affirming way, but I also hope to help others, including my family and the interviewed participants in my thesis, to do the same. As Dr. Pennebaker puts eloquently in his book, inhibition is unhealthy: it requires an exhausting amount of physiological work toward the active inhibitions of thoughts, feelings and emotions, and it serves as a "cumulative stressor on the body; increasing the probability of illness and other stress-related physical and psychological problems."(Pennebaker, 9) By not thinking about a traumatic event, we can never understand it; if we can't understand how trauma has affected us, it will haunt our dreams, thoughts, and even change the way we think (Pennebaker, 9).

> "Confronting a trauma helps people to understand and ultimately assimilate the event. By talking or writing about previously inhibited experiences, individuals translate the event into language. Once it is language-based, people can better understand the experience and ultimately put it behind them." (Pennebaker, 10)

Putting the past behind you is always easier said than done. While it has been years since I have been in that space and position, the scars from the uncertainty and fear of my father's incarceration and the circumstances surrounding the event still remain. I want to grow and learn from my experiences, instead of feeling shame or embarrassment. I want to tackle the inhibition I feel toward talking about my experience;

I am pursuing a change in how I process my past, and this project is a culmination of that.

Throughout this project, I will be integrating the stories and lived experiences of formerly and currently incarcerated people (while protecting their identities and names). In doing so, I will hopefully contribute to each respective interviewee's cathartic process by inviting them to open up and share how music, writing, comedy, and other art forms have impacted their lives and helped them work through and understand trauma. I will be telling the stories of three formerly incarcerated people and personal friends of mine that graciously allowed me to interview them: Michael, a fifty-year old father formerly incarcerated in a maximum security prison in Pennsylvania where he led Bible studies and started his own ministry; Emily, a woman who used her time in county jail and prison in Texas to form friendships and improve her artistic skill set while eight months pregnant; and Micah, a man who is still serving and coming to terms with a 35 year sentence while on parole in Atlanta, Georgia.

In my conclusion, I will reflect upon which forms of healing align with allopathic, homeopathic, and collective catharsis, and additional strengthening or healing processes in incarcerated people.

Chapter 1: Writing and Incarceration

INHIBITION AND THE HEALING PROCESS

Inhibition is a learned skill; from an early age, we are taught to mediate our tempers, control crying outbursts and tantrums, watch our mouths, and hold our bladders. Psychologists have identified two distinct types of inhibition to explain human behavior: active and passive (Pennebaker, 12). Active inhibition requires attention and effort—we must be mindful of our actions and control our behavior. Consciously rejecting urges can prove to be exhausting, but as one continues to deny pleasures or impulses, active inhibition transforms into passive inhibition. Passive inhibition does not require attention or effort; rather, it is the culmination of habits.

In examining the idea of active and passive inhibition to account for trauma responses, we see that inhibition, while necessary for survival and self-discipline, has the potential to negatively impact our health. In a study conducted by Dr. James W. Pennebaker, psychologist and author of *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Emotions*, 200 people were asked to complete in-depth questionnaires about their childhood trauma, how open they have been to talking about what had happened to them, and their health history (Pennebaker, 19). The study found that people with the most health problems had at least one traumatic event that occurred during their childhood that they had never told anyone about: “Of the 200 respondents, the 65 people with an undisclosed childhood trauma were more likely to have been diagnosed with virtually every major and minor health problem that we asked about… Oddly, it made no

difference what the particular trauma had been. The only distinguishing feature was that the trauma had not been talked about to others." (Pennebaker, 19).

Some traumatic events are easier to discuss and disclose than others, but how does disclosure function in the prison context?

> Prisons are challenging settings for trauma-informed care. Prisons are designed to house perpetrators, not victims. Inmates arrive shackled and are crammed into overcrowded housing units; lights are on all night, loud speakers blare without warning and privacy is severely limited. Security staff is focused on maintaining order and must assume each inmate is potentially violent. The correctional environment is full of unavoidable triggers, such as pat downs and strip searches, frequent discipline from authority figures, and restricted movement. (Owens, Wells, Pollock, Muscat & Torres, 2008). This is likely to increase trauma-related behaviors and symptoms that can be difficult for prison staff to manage (Covington, 2008). (Miller et al.)

Controlling one's inhibitions in prison is key to survival, and so is managing trauma and the triggers one is bound to face while incarcerated. For female incarcerees, sexual violence is the most commonly reported type of traumatic experience, and it often prevents them from benefiting from trauma-informed care (Miller et al.). This could be due to a number of factors, including limited coping skills, trauma-induced disconnection or disorientation, and an inability to control dissociative symptoms in the presence of triggers (Miller et al.). Emily, one of the formerly incarcerated people I interviewed, has a firsthand perspective:

Emily: I would say with women, every woman I met in prison or county jail will have been through some type of horrible something, some type of abuse. So we would have some people that *should* have had mental treatment, or different types of care. They may be cool, but they could still hurt you! You gotta be careful—we had some crazy girls in there, big girls, that had beat the shit out of people. I guess you had to be careful, make jokes only with people you talked to on a regular basis, and stay away from touchy topics like family and kids and shit.

Male prisoners face a different set of challenges: “the most commonly reported trauma is witnessing someone being killed or seriously injured (Sarchiapone, Carlia, Cuomoa, Marchettia & Roy, 2008), followed by physical assault (Johnson et al., 2006), and childhood sexual abuse (Weeks & Widom, 1998).” (Miller et al.). The exponentially higher rate of sexual assault and lethal violence in prison compared to the general population promotes high levels of arousal and externalizing trauma responses (like outward-directed aggression), creating a hostile environment that often serves as an additional barrier to trauma-informed care (Miller et al.).

Did your grief-counseling background allow you to better understand your own mental state, and the grieving process and trauma responses of those around you while incarcerated?

Michael: I would say it helped me understand the different phases of grief, and the phases are not necessarily in order, there's just different parts to grief, and anger is a *huge* one in jail. And I went through that a lot—everybody did. Any spark could set

somebody off because, again, that's involved with grief. That *anger*. And there's a lot of anger. There's an anger at the system, the injustices of the world, your situation, why you're in that situation, the other person that put you in there… Yeah, it helped knowing if you don't deal with it at the extreme, and frequently, it could lead to suicide.

Prisons are filled with hurt, angry people, which is why effective tools that promote catharsis are so vital. The unique environment created in prisons is, as you can imagine, not conducive to healthy trauma coping. Many incarcerated people are hesitant to disclose or report trauma to clinical staff because they either do not consider it out of the ordinary, or they are afraid of further punishment (Miller et al.). Social codes and a culture of mistrust are often major barriers to the treatment of trauma in prisons, but they also serve as inhibition reinforcements. The complex relationship between incarcerated people and prison staff is an additional factor that contributes to the environment of mistrust; because of these circumstances, perhaps writing, or similar solitary activities could be more beneficial than participating in group therapy with clinical staff.

INCARCERATION AND CONFESSION: THE PLIGHT OF THE MODERN DAY INCARCEREE

The peculiar situation of the modern-day incarceree is exacerbated by the conflicting human need to confess, and the disastrous effects of informant testimony on one's case. When an incarcerated person confesses their crimes to a fellow incarcerated person, it could be used against them as "secondary testimony" (Jenkins et

al.). Several problems complicate the validity of a jailhouse informant's testimony, the first (and probably the most obvious) being that jailhouse informants are frequently incentivized to provide prosecutors with confessions, tainting their trustworthiness (Jenkins et al.)

Despite evidence that demonstrates how detrimental secondary testimony can be to evidence presented in a criminal trial, it is still used in our criminal justice system today. Perhaps this is because we can sympathize with the human need to confess to each other, and it is easier to imagine a guilty person confessing his or her crime to their cellmate than imagining a person lying under oath for their own benefit. Most people can relate to the weight of crushing guilt weighing them down, and the almost euphoric release of confession.

On a biological level, confession allows for greater congruence in our brain-wave activity. Dr. Pennebaker writes that the images, emotions, and thoughts associated with a trauma experience are intricately stored in our brains, but inhibition or lack of confession complicates the way we process it. The left side of our brains, for most people, governs speech, language, and conscious thought, and the right side of our brain tends to store negative emotions (Pennebaker, 53). When we abstain from confession, the brain-wave activity between the left and right sides of our brains is at a very low level because the left and right hemispheres of the brain are attempting to process trauma independently; one side stores disturbing images and thoughts, while the other side houses the negative emotions associated with traumatic experiences (Pennebaker, 54). Through verbal or written confession, we are able to process

emotional and linguistic types of information together, resulting in “greater congruence in brain-wave activity between the left and right hemispheres.” (Pennebaker, 54).

In prison or jail, phone conversations are monitored, letters are reviewed, and visits are under strict supervision; additionally, many incarcerated people don’t want to spend the precious hour or hour and a half (or less) they get with their families once a week talking about emotional turmoil. They would rather update each other on their lives, laugh, discuss legal issues, or talk about the future. Therapy is not at the forefront of their minds, and neither is burdening their family with more stress, but, unfortunately, clinical staff that serve to help incarcerated people work through and process trauma can never be fully trusted:

> Reporting of trauma is influenced by the culture of mistrust in prison environments. Confidentiality does not fully extend to clinical staff working in prisons. Limits on confidentiality include knowledge of escape plans, contraband or knowledge of the introduction of contraband, and knowledge of intent to commit a crime, in addition to the limits that apply to all clients (Bartol & Bartol, 2008). Inmates may not trust clinical staff with disclosure of their trauma histories (Grella & Greenwell, 2007). They may also consider any disclosure of trauma that was perpetrated by intimate partners or family members as “ratting them out” to the authorities, a violation of social codes both in and outside of prison. (Miller et al.)

To whom can an emotionally vulnerable, burdened person turn to while in prison, especially when their trauma could implicate them? Often, the only people left to

confess to or confide in in prison are each other. Incarcerated people are stuck in a peculiar liminal space between wanting to talk to other people, and fearing the implications of confession. There is also a social desire to maintain the appearance of indifference or toughness among peers in prison or jail, limiting any meaningful or transformative confession or connection between incarcerated people:

Micah: As far as confiding in personal stuff, when you are there, you can have friends, but you don't divulge too much, ‘cause you have to put on a certain facade while you’re there. You gotta be this tough person, you can't be letting your emotions out, you can’t be, “oh he in the room crying!” At one point, I was in prison with some of the worst people in Georgia, so I had to, you know, be the part. And that's probably something else that's gonna be with me a while, as far as being able to truly open up to people. Even since I've been out, to have a girlfriend, and having moments of being cold, and not wanting to communicate and talk about certain stuff. And I'm working through it.

Emily: I would say there's a range of people that want to come off hard, like I don't need shit from nobody, so some people don’t even let you understand anything that they're actually going through, and then some people are comfortable to let you know and talk about the shit that they did. Especially, I was young and pregnant, like 19, 20, so a lot of older women felt sorry for me in jail, so I feel like a lot of people were kind to me—I had five close friends that I would talk to all the time… but those were like sleepover moments, you know? Like you're just sitting there eating snacks, playing games, or just chillin’, just a bunch of girls and you're just talking about shit, and those are times where it doesn't feel so bad, like, it's okay I’m not alone in this.”

Prison or jail is full of people that obsess over your identity and the traumatic events that brought you here—as Michael put it in his interview, “(incarcerated people) *need* to know why you're in there” to preserve their own safety, and to know how to treat you. When navigating such a tense social environment, confiding your emotional state to others is not always an option.

Incarcerated people are forced to relive their trauma every time they are asked what they’re in for, oftentimes losing agency over their stories as word of mouth spreads. But, through channeling their energy into giving advice, devising legal strategies, and preparing cases, many incarcerated people are able to find solace in helping others; interestingly, the cases that they are building require the open discussion of traumatic events, producing a complex pseudo- group therapy aimed at a specific goal: to help everyone fight their case to the best of their ability.

Michael: Well, in my case, I confided in the first person I met. I told him what happened and that's—they wanna know why you’re in, so it's not like you can keep this stuff to yourself. And my case was pretty solid—and I think it got around quickly: “hey this guy shouldn't be in here”—so I didn't have a problem. I'd talk to anybody about my case, because I would tell them what happened, and I didn’t have anything to be afraid of… When you get to jail, they *need* to know why you're in there. It's a tough situation, because if I did something I was ashamed of, or could put me in, you know, that I was guilty of, you can’t tell everybody the straight truth. You just can't do it, or you're gonna end up paying a price… You always wanna know about people’s cases because you wanna try and be helpful and they want advice, and they come and ask for advice—

okay, what do I do in my case on this? Everybody was helping everybody when it came to cases. It was like a giant legal forum. But, I mean, you took that seriously, that was an important part of being in jail was being helpful when it came to cases, being a person who had guidance or knowledge in the law. There was one guy, he was very depressed about his situation because there was no question he was guilty, he wasn't trying to say he wasn't guilty, and you just do your best to keep their head up. ‘Cause you don’t want people going around looking depressed. It's bad for the block, and it's dangerous for that person.

These “legal forums” are instances of collective catharsis: people deemed social outcasts confide in each other by outlining their (often intertwined) traumatic experiences and legal strategies, while enforcing a productive, enthusiastic optimism *and* helping their fellow incarcerees in a group setting. In discussing the events that transpired, people are able to reconstruct a narrative that allows them to process trauma in new, productive ways. Unknowingly, in receiving legal advice from another person on how to fight their case, both people are being healed; the confessor is releasing inhibitions concerning a devastating trauma, while the listener gains satisfaction in knowing he or she can be *useful* to others.

WHY DOES WRITING HELP?

Writing is unique because it promotes self-understanding, and if we can achieve this, we have a clear pathway toward fixing our lives. Writing fosters this skill more effectively than speaking does, and better than, as Pennebaker will argue, any other art

form. When we are unable to complete tasks, resolve issues, or find meaning in traumatic events, we tend to search for a resolution or explanation elsewhere.

When we write down our thoughts and feelings about an event, we are forced to slow down the pace with which we relive emotions and memories associated with traumas. We must structure and acknowledge our thoughts, and this promotes the resolution and recognition of emotions related to unexplained events. By confronting the same traumas repeatedly through writing, people are able to see events from different perspectives: “Over time, individuals who are writing about a specific event tend to become more and more detached. They are able to stand back and consider the complex causes of the event and their own mixed emotions. Perhaps by addressing the trauma multiple times, people’s emotional responses become less extreme. In other words, repeatedly confronting an upsetting experience allows for a less emotionally laden assessment of its meaning and impact.” (Pennebaker, 95).

When we translate information into words, we change how we understand and process that information. When people are unable to link emotional experiences with language, the effects are typically psychologically unhealthy; this is often seen in individuals suffering from posttraumatic-stress disorder or multiple personalities (Pennebaker, 96). It makes sense that one of the most effective treatments for PTSD and multiple personalities is talk therapy, which requires the patient to talk through traumatic experiences, bridging the gap between powerful emotions and language (Pennebaker, 97). Events become organized, emotions are acknowledged, and experiences are simplified when we talk openly about trauma. When we can summarize

information by writing or talking about it, the result is a transformation from overwhelming, consuming trauma to manageable, isolated events.

While writing to organize events is especially helpful, talking about it is an effective, practical way to navigate the system, and we see that this effect is achieved through conversations about cases and legal strategies:

Did explaining your story and narrowing it down with lawyers or to family or to other incarcerated people help you better understand it?

Michael: It really did, because I would read what the attorney would give to me, which were case precedents, and, I mean, these were thick papers, so I got a very good understanding of the case that they were building against me, the case that I had to defend myself, and what would be the probable outcome. The more we talked about it, even with other inmates, the more you could strategize and process what was going on, what was happening, and what was gonna be the next step in the legal process. We were all very, very up to date on that because we were all concerned about our own situation, and helping others would help ourselves as well. *Why*? Well, because you learn more about the law. And the more you talk with other people, the more knowledge you have. If you go into jail, you wanna be an asset, and for me it was knowledge. People came to me because I had knowledge of the scriptures, and they saw me as an older guy that was wise, and that's an asset—and these are younger guys, in my situation, and some of them looked up to me as a father. And that helped me, as far as being safe, too, ‘cause I wasn't a threat to anybody. I was the old guy—the old, smart, wise guy.

Micah: I just thought differently, and I owned up, and I knew what I did. So the processing part of it, I knew I screwed up, but trying to navigate the legal system was trying because of the errors that were made. I was trying to get my case overturned on a technicality, and I was looking for a loophole, but I came to the reality and I owned up to the fact that, hey, I committed this wrong. I had to own up to what I did. Once that happened, I ended up getting parole. 'Cause I have a 35 year sentence and my maximum release date is 2044. And I wasn't looking to get out, you know what I mean? After I manned up, or took ownership of my errors, you know, stuff worked out and I got out.

Confronting trauma, whether spoken aloud to others or written down privately, changes the way it is represented in our minds. We all have access to therapy with just a pen and paper, or just a listening ear. Disclosive writing, however, seems to possess additional cathartic benefits that go beyond spoken word.

One of Pennebaker's initial studies that put him on the track to linking cathartic writing specifically with health benefits examined the psychological benefits of emotional venting among college students at Southern Methodist University (Pennebaker, 31). The students participating in the study wrote about their traumas or superficial topics, but the group that wrote about traumatic events were split into three groups: the first wrote exclusively about their emotions surrounding the trauma, the second wrote exclusively about the facts surrounding the trauma, and the third group wrote about the facts *and* emotions concerning the traumatic event (Pennebaker, 31). The students wrote alone and anonymously for 15 minutes for four consecutive days, and completed

questionnaires after the study to assess the long-term effects of writing; six months later, the health center provided information about the students' frequency of visits. "After the experiment… the average person who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings went fewer than 0.5 times (to the health center) —a 50% drop in the monthly visitation rate. People who wrote just about their emotions surrounding a trauma, just about the facts of a trauma, or about superficial topics averaged visiting the health center almost 1.5 times per person." (Pennebaker, 34).

Writing exclusively about the emotions related to a trauma does not yield psychological benefits—in order to induce cathartic relief, you must write about your trauma *and* your emotions in order to understand yourself better and come to a resolution. Resolution and self-understanding are absolutely key to achieving positive mental and physical health benefits through cathartic writing.

A study conducted in 2021 led by Antonietta Curci, Lidia De Leonardis, and Tiziana Luciano at the University of Bari Aldo Moro relied on Pennebaker's work to investigate the benefits of disclosive writing in 93 incarcerated Italian men. The study was modeled off of Pennebaker's classic writing paradigm: one group writes about their deepest thoughts and feelings related to a traumatic experience, a second group writes about trivial topics, and a third group serves as a control group and does not write at all. In the writing condition groups, participants wrote for 20 minutes a day for three consecutive days (Antonietta et al., 76).

Researchers assessed the effects of written disclosure by analyzing the incarcerated men's mental health across the writing sessions and the change in tone of their writing, with the expectation that as as negative emotions in writing disclosures

decreased, the usage of positive words and cognitive terms will increase (Antonietta et al., 78). After transcribing the handwriting of the men, researchers evaluated the “effects of writing on short-term indices of mental health, anxiety, depression, and negative affectivity” and analyzed the effects on the participant’s likelihood to engage in depressive rumination (the act of dwelling on negative feelings) (Antonietta et al., 84). They found that writing itself led to significant improvements in mental health, anxiety, depression, and negative affect, and writing was associated with a decrease in depressive rumination (Antonietta et al., 84).

Researchers observed how the mens’ linguistic elaboration followed the temporal sequence of the writing sessions, and that “disclosure is associated with a significant decrease in the person’s tendency to engage in maladaptive rumination”, *and* that writing promoted a decrease in isolation and an increase in social integration, even if the written disclosure was anonymous (Antonietta et al., 86).

The implementation of Pennebaker’s writing paradigm in prisons seems to be well-received so far. The participants in Antonietta’s study rated the writing sessions as highly valuable and meaningful (Antonietta et al., 86). “…Disclosure itself appears to be a beneficial procedure that is easy to implement, inexpensive, and satisfying for people experiencing loneliness and a pervasive sense of exclusion from caring relationships. In the prison context, emotional expression appears to follow peculiar rules and trajectories, independent of the emotional valence of the disclosed experience.” (Antonietta et al., 87)

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While the benefits of disclosive writing are not commonly practiced in prisons, letter writing, a more social form of writing, is definitely widespread. Incarcerated people send out thousands of letters in order to maintain strained relationships and achieve social connection with children, friends, family members, and spouses. I have to wonder if the effects of writing letters to loved ones are comparable with Pennebaker's writing paradigm; it seems as though writing letters is primarily oriented toward social connection, while written disclosure is a private experience aimed at self-understanding and resolution. A 2021 study examining how incarcerated women view themselves as mothers highlighted the importance of maintaining contact through letters and telephone communication: "Our results confirm the importance of mother-child contact through telephone and letter writing. The effects of these forms of nonphysical contact do not negate the importance of physical interactions, but rather suggest that seemingly minimal interactions can be valuable in helping mothers retain salient maternal identities…Given the difficulty and expense many families face in visiting, letter writing and telephone calls may become the easiest way for women to engage in mothering." (Stringer et al.).

Regular contact with their children through phone calls and letter writing seemed to foster the favorable mothering attitudes for the women participating in the study, and this makes sense. Maintaining constant contact with children is especially important while incarcerated, and it has been proven that mothers who nurture close familial relationships are less likely to go back to prison and less likely to violate their parole (Stringer et al.).

Do you write letters? How does it feel to write letters? Do you send them out or do you keep any for yourself?

Michael: When I would write a letter, and I wrote and received many letters, I would always keep a copy for myself. Which I'm glad I did, ‘cause I can go back and read them, and a very important part of my life has been documented and saved. And a lot of details I forget, so it would be fun to go back and read those letters. But, these letters were important to me and I used them as a ministry to help people, and encourage people while they were trying to do the same for me.

Emily: I wrote *a lot a lot a lot*. I’ve written so many fuckin’ jail letters! When I was incarcerated, I wrote letters every day, sometimes I wouldn't send it out until I wrote eight pages. I’d write a page a day, it was pretty much like a small journal. I would send everything away, I'd always send everything out… I wrote letters everyday, I drew a lot, it was like I would just sit there and I *always* wrote to my husband at the time, and I'd write to my mom and my sister… You have so much time! (*laughs*) And every envelope was designed and drawn on, the max it could be that the post office would still let it get out, ‘cause sometimes if you draw on ‘em too much they will reject the letters, so that was a massive portion of my time, writing letters and drawings.

Micah: Yeah, so early on, I used to write and communicate with my mom and my sisters, then utilizing the tablet, sending emails, and I did write, I used to do poetry, for me, and I started writing books… It did bring a bit of connection. A lot of my letters used to be kinda angry too, at one point. Before all the cell phones flooded into the system,

we used to have pen pals, and there were times where I was writing to females, trying to have a whole relationship through trying to write a letter. You know, and that would be one of the things, after you write a letter, now you waiting on a response. So you know, mail call comes, and they call out names. And you know, and they don't call your name, that's some of the saddest, ‘cause you feel abandoned. You know, and there's guys in there that never get mail or visits, and you want that little piece of the outside ‘cause you're so far removed and isolated from what we call the “free world”, and it's rough. You want that letter to come in as validation, there’s somebody that loves me. They took the time to sit down and write me a letter or send me a card.

* * * * *

Disclosive writing in the prison context is a deeply private experience, due in part to the nature of the environment, and for this reason we can (at least partially) rule out collective catharsis. Homeopathic catharsis doesn’t seem to quite fit the mold either; disclosive writing is an intense, confronting experience, not at all analogous to the gradual exposure to negative stimuli that characterizes this form of catharsis. Allopathic catharsis, opposing trauma with its antithesis, is the most fitting here. Pennebaker’s writing paradigm confronts inhibition with private, unrestricted freedom of expression to produce a healing effect. Disclosive writing forces you to go into depth, translate into language, and formulate a narrative about a subject or topic you may be actively avoiding. The opposition of inhibition with expression is a valuable tool that should be implemented in prisons because of its ease of access, low cost, positive feedback from participants, and beneficial mental and physical effects. Implementing disclosive writing

sessions for 20 minutes over four consecutive days every six months for incarcerated people could be transformative in reducing recidivism rates and changing the way prisons operate in the United States.

Writing letters can fit into the collective catharsis category in some instances: as we can see in Micah's testimony, writing letters requires the writer to wait for a response—it's a social event. We also see Micah's letters to his mother and sisters go from angry to accepting, transforming his negative emotions into acceptance. In Michael's case, letter writing is part of his ministry to other incarcerated people and to recipients of his letters on the outside; they are a way to uplift others while documenting his own pain and emotions, subverting social expectations of hopelessness or impurity in the prison context. Does a challenge of social norms exist in this context? In Emily's letters, she flirts with rebellion by drawing on her envelopes as much as she can without the prison or jail rejecting the letters; it's this subtle act of defiance and pure self-expression that challenges the powers-that-be through art and letter-writing. The letters Emily sends out reflect her personality and her individuality, which is exactly what prisons and jails often try to subdue.

Chapter 2: Music and Incarceration

THE POWER OF MUSIC

Emily: Wherever you go to prison, you're not allowed to listen to music because it's considered a trigger. They say if you listen to the music you listen to when you're doing drugs, you're gonna wanna do drugs again. So no music *ever*. Except for when we had morning meetings—so the whole day was meetings then school or work, and we would sing these chants at the morning meetings. They had us sing marching chants—you weren't allowed to dance because that was considered sexual, so you had to just march in place and sing shit about recovery. One was like "went to the judge, told me what he said, you need [name of prison], I need [name of prison]"—that was called motivation. So then we would do positive affirmations, and somebody would do a performance and sing a song, but you could only sing songs approved by counselors, so there was a book of songs we could sing. So that shit *sucked* because we never got to hear music.

I remember once we got in a lot of trouble, because we were put on a, it's called G.I., where you just go around and clean with a rag, and they were like: just clean. You're not allowed to sing, you're not allowed to do anything else for however long until they tell you to stop. My friend that had come from county, she *loves* Sublime, and I love Sublime, so she started singing it under her breath, a little Sublime song. I was like oh shit, I know the lyrics! So I started singing it too, so we were in the shower singing, and then the *other* girls that know the song start hearing it, and they start singing it—so we're all singing and dancing to Sublime and we're *happy* and we're cleaning, just

singing Sublime having a fuckin' blast! *(laughs)* The guards come in, oh they were fuckin' furious, 'cause we were having a good time. And so we got put on a 48 hour no-talk, which means no talking from *anybody*, nothing but sign language or writing notes. Everybody was having a blast and it was really fun for 30 minutes, and then they came in and put us on 48 hour no-talk. It's like, danger! They're having fun! *(laughs)*

The regulation of emotion seems to be a recurring theme in Michael, Emily, and Micah's stories, whether it be regulating your own emotions in prison, or attempts by authority to regulate the emotions, and often the self-expression, of incarcerated people. Emily's story highlights the extremely important social aspect of music, which includes groove: "the pleasurable urge to move to a rhythm" (Stupacher et al.). Groove is dependent upon "a fine-tuned interplay between predictability arising from repetitive rhythmic patterns, and surprise arising from rhythmic deviations" (Stupacher et al.). This mix of predictability and surprise is what makes us want to sway or dance to music, and what made the women in Emily's tank feel the urge to move their bodies when singing Sublime together, despite the strict "no dancing" rule.

> When people come together to listen to or make music, the level of rhythmic complexity that hits an individual's sweet spot for an optimal groove experience depends on their biology and cultural background. In his interviews with musicians, Charles Keil noted that "each person has a unique feel for time and that bringing different or discrepant personalities together generates different kinds of groove" (Keil, 1995, p.8). Keil calls the intentional deviations in timing that result from the constant relating and negotiating between players

participatory discrepancies and hypothesizes that they are necessary to make music involving and socially meaningful (Keil, 1987, 1995).(Stupacher et al.)

Music is so much more than sound waves and catchy melodies—it has the power to connect people and create socially meaningful moments. Every woman singing Sublime in the tank provided her own perspective and unique cultural and biological background to the showers that contributed to the overall experience and unique groove that was created that day; that particular groove, those particular emotions, and the music created briefly among those women will likely never be experienced again. For a brief 30 minutes, they were able to enjoy themselves, let go of their inhibitions, and contribute to the atmosphere in the showers by doing nothing more than singing and enjoying themselves. The G.I. cleaning that turned into an enjoyable social event, albeit brief, provided an escape from reality, a theme we keep seeing in Emily's and Micah's stories specifically. It is especially interesting that the women's prison forbade music and dancing and classified it as sexual misconduct, considering the healing benefits of dancing: "Dance is also an intrinsically social activity that encourages social bonding (Tarr et al., 2014, 2015; Launay et al., 2016). Indeed, compared to synchronizing movements in silence or with a metronome, music can increase social closeness with another person." (Stupacher et al.). Often, prisons use social isolation as a tool to maintain order:

Emily: We were not allowed to touch each other, you can't braid somebody's hair, you can't touch them on the shoulder, if somebody is crying they can't hug you… Really interesting how they tried to separate you, and make you super accountable—you could

get written up for sexual activity if somebody was braiding your hair. Very different between the two (county jail and prison). So I had one very good friend from county, the only person I could create a bond with there. A lot of women were miserable because nobody could have any love, or care for each other.

Healing in prison is difficult, if not impossible. The odds are stacked against you, and oftentimes people will turn to music as a tool to escape reality, but also to socially bond and form connections, and thus to heal. Losing yourself in music is perhaps easier to do in what Micah describes as a “sensory deprivation situation”, where the impact of art and media is perhaps amplified.

Micah: Music is definitely powerful ‘cause prison in itself is a sensory deprivation situation—majority of the prisons in Georgia are miles away from big cities in the middle of nowhere. For me, it was certain smells I didn't smell, ‘cause when you isolated, you get to smelling the same thing everyday, everything starts smelling the same, so when I got out, it was a difference to be able to smell and hear different stuff. So in prison that's an escape—the music is an escape, so you have your favorite song you used to listen to when you was younger, or you have your moments of nostalgia, so you can be able to leave the prison and think about the good times, so certain songs that relate to good times in your life, so when I'm in here, I’m depressed, I'm locked up, I’m not with my family, I can put this song on that's gonna remind me of my dad, or mom, or sisters and stuff when I was happier. So yeah, music is definitely important in there. But it’s twofold—it can be helpful, but can also be continuing to cause harm for somebody that needs a mindset shift but they don't have the tools, they can't read, he has a problem

expressing himself, but all he got is music now, so now he coming out with the *same* mindset he had coming in, maybe even worse.

In Micah's story, we see that music allows us to use memories to turn to the past and transcend our situation, but the music must be conducive to healing, and thus transformative. The music we consume must transform us and produce a "mindset shift". Music becomes something precious and sacred in prison—something able to be given to and shared with others, like a piece of cake:

Emily: So in county, you can buy a Walkman radio, that's just like a radio receiver and a pair of headphones, that's like 25 dollars so you can listen to the radio. That's something you gift, a lot of people have gifted, whenever you're leaving like hey man, I'm gonna leave you my radio, you know, I got you, because it's your access to *news*, the outside world, and *all* the music you love and all that stuff, and feeling a little bit of freedom. So I would listen to music *everyday* and I would go out at rec and walk my pregnant ass around the little tiny square just listening to music.

It's this "little bit of freedom" that is especially interesting. Is it freeing because you have the agency to listen to what you want, or is it freeing because you can suddenly connect with the emotions of thousands of artists who feel a similar pain?

GRIEF AND MUSIC: TO LISTEN TO SAD MUSIC OR NOT TO LISTEN?

Micah: For me, I used to listen to the upbeat rap music when I wanted to workout, but when I was feeling some type of way, you know, in my emotions, I listen to

a lot of R&B, a lot of soul, a lot of old schools stuff to kinda take me away. So music was kinda an escape route. We had the big headphones on, and you could put those on and just zone out. While you listen to that, you could be *anywhere* else. Or, if we locked down in the room, we on lock-down, you better have your radio. Some headphones, or a good book, one of the two.

It is common for people undergoing a personal crisis or significant upheaval to turn to music to begin the healing process, especially in prison. One might expect grieving people to choose uplifting, happy music to oppose their mood—however, this is not always the case. In fact, many music listeners, like Micah, find comfort and solace in sad music:

> At least in the case of Western-enculturated listeners, it is widely reported that some of the most profound and beautiful musical experiences are associated with sad music (Gabrielsson & Lindström, 1993). In describing such an experience, the 19th-century literary critic (and amateur pianist) Oscar Wilde wrote: “After playing Chopin, I feel as if I had been weeping over sins that I had never committed, and mourning over tragedies that were not my own” (Wilde, 1890, p. 2). (Huron)

So why do we listen to sad music if it makes us more sad? What sort of catharsis is this, and what benefits does leaning into our sorrow have on our healing journey? David Huron of Ohio State University explores these questions and more in his 2011 study *Why is sad music pleasurable? A possible role for prolactin.* First, we will explore

the benefits of listening to sad music; next, we will examine how sounds induce sadness; finally, we will determine what sort of catharsis (homeopathic, allopathic, or collective) this behavior falls into.

> When experiencing sadness, one might suppose that people tend to become pessimistic; however, research suggests that we are at our most realistic when sad—a phenomenon called depressive realism (Alloy & Abrahamson, 1979). Compared with happiness, sadness encourages more detail-oriented thinking, less judgment bias, less reliance on stereotypes (Clore & Huntsinger, 2007), and greater memory accuracy (Storbeck & Clore, 2005). Listening to nominally sad music has been shown to induce depressive realism (Brown & Mankowski, 1993). That is, exposure to sad music encourages more accurate self-appraisals and more realistic assessments of the likelihood of certain outcomes. Nesse (1991) has suggested that the optimism that characterizes normal mental life encourages individuals to strive to achieve goals that might be attainable with effort; conversely, depressive realism provides a mental "grounding" or "reality check" when those same goals prove elusive. (Huron)

Grief provides us with mental clarity and depressive realism—imagine a relationship ending in a breakup, and suddenly being able to clearly see the flaws or red flags by removing your rose-colored glasses; in my experience, the post-break-up period is a time for self-reflection and "getting your life back together". Sad music, it appears, enhances depressive realism and recalibration. Sad music helps us to adapt to our situation and make necessary changes to begin thriving again, like the immune

system recovering from a bacterial infection. We learn from the situation, reassess our state of being, and try again. I was curious to see if anyone had experienced something akin to this while in prison.

Did you ever experience a moment of clarity while in prison, despite your emotional state?

Michael: While a lot of guys were there, well there was clarity because there were no drugs. Or very little. I mean there weren't *a lot* of drugs, and I think for a lot of guys it was, you know, a time in their life where they could think clearly without being distracted on the streets by drugs. So, yeah, there was definitely clarity for a lot of guys. Some guys didn't want the clarity, and they would entertain themselves with the TV and with games and everything, and other guys couldn't face it—there was a lot of suicides. In my experience in jail, my block, maximum security, was a safe place. It sounds funny, but the guys who were there—it was probably more dangerous for them to be in the streets back home than being in jail.

Despite the benefits of that stemming from grief, like depressive realism and enhanced recalibration, researchers are still conflicted on the evolutionary purpose of grief and sadness:

> On one hand, according to Archer (1999), grief is a maladaptation. Archer's argument is that it is biologically important to form close personal relationships and to experience emotions like love and trust. When one of these relationships is lost, whether due to death or another circumstance, grief is experienced as a

maladaptive side effect of the lost relationship; there is no useful purpose of grief. (Warrenburg et al.)

If grief has no purpose and no positive long or short-term effect on our well-being, it is useless for the cathartic process. Instead of “better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all” some researchers believe it is better to avoid these emotions altogether. This line of thought posits grief as the antithesis of health and thriving; grief is a side effect rather than a tool.

> On the other hand, some researchers argue that the function of grief is to solicit help, compassion, comfort, and prosocial responses from others in times of need (Huron, 2015, 2016; Urban, 1988; Vingerhoets & Cornelius, 2012). This theory of grief is driven by observations that when people are in a grieving state, they often exhibit conspicuous (overt), multimodal displays of emotion, including crying (visual), wailing (auditory), and pheromone release (olfactory; Frick, 1985; Gelstein et al., 2011; Mazo, 1994; Rosenblatt, Walsh, & Jackson, 1976; Urban, 1988; Vingerhoets & Cornelius, 2012). Observers easily understand that a person is grieving and therefore are able to respond to the grieving person with compassionate or prosocial behaviors. (Warrenburg, et al.)

Oftentimes, when people are in pain, they want to be seen and heard. In today’s age, this could mean posting images on social media of a lost loved one, or announcing a breakup, or even more vague and difficult to interpret social cries for help, like posting a picture of a black screen accompanied by the words “don’t text” (the goal, in this case,

is often to attract attention and make grief known). In today's technology culture, humans are able to express grief with little to no human connection whatsoever. How much comfort does receiving condolences in the form of Instagram comments truly provide? Is texting someone about grief and pain enough to ease our spirits, or are intimate "IRL" conversations, hugs, and comfort required? Today, we have been programmed to recognize grief in our peers visually and technologically; for example, if you are texting an acquaintance and they seem "off", you may recognize this in subtle changes in their texting style, response time, or even something as seemingly ridiculous as emoji usage. The possible effect of this phenomenon could be an easier method of communicating grief for those who are typically closed off, or, on the other side of the spectrum, the progressive degeneration of face-to-face human contact.

But how does music induce feelings of melancholy and grief? It appears that several prosodic clues exist in music to let us know that what we are listening to is sad: lower pitch, smaller interval sizes, a slower tempo, and darker timbres (Huron). A sad voice is associated with low arousal, so anything that suggests sleepiness, a relaxed state, and slow, lazy speech patterns tend to evoke sadness. Our empathetic mirror neurons allow us to take in this information and register it with emotions:

> …a number of researchers have suggested that mirror neurons provide a possible physiological path by which empathetic affective experiences might be generated (e.g., Gallese & Goldman, 1998; Iacoboni, 2008; Rizzolatti & Craighero, 2004). Similarly, neuroimaging research has shown that neural

activation of perceived affect resembles neural activation of the associated felt affect (e.g., Carr, Iacoboni, Dubeau, Mazziotta, & Lenzi, 2003). (Huron)

In keeping in line with the second view of the function of grief, that it is socially advantageous, evoking sadness through sad music is a form of homeopathic catharsis. The individual is purposefully making themselves vulnerable to sad emotions or grief triggers, and perhaps unknowingly building up an immunity to their own grief. After listening to sad music and inducing feelings of grief or melancholy, depressive realism allows us to clearly assess our situation and make necessary changes to our lifestyle or habits. Grief is a wake-up call for many, and through sad music, people are able to homeopathically heal, and transform their negative emotions and grief into positive, productive cathartic experiences.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS THE FUNCTION OF GRIEF?

During my interviews with Michael, Emily, and Micah, I asked each of them what they think the function of grief is. The responses I got were completely unique and subjective—the product of each person's cultural, religious, and lived experience. I invite you to ask yourself what you believe the function of grief is before proceeding.

What do you think the function of grief is?

Michael: "I believe without grief, you would be missing a huge part of what it means to be human. Grief is the human condition. It's the loss of something that is important to you, and every single person, human, is gonna go through that. And it's

vital. It's *vital*—our whole life depends on what we do with that grief, how do we handle it? How do we face it? And struggle through it? And there's only one way to deal with grief, or else it will make you bitter and depressed. Everything about jail is about grief. You've lost your freedom. You're looking at life in prison. That's an important question, and a great question, how do you deal with grief? And there's really only one way to deal with it, is to understand that the God who created you went through that process, and the last words Christ spoke were, “Why have you forsaken me?” And to understand that your God who created you went through that same emotion. Helps you deal with it. And that there is…There is… An afterlife. A judgment. A time when all things will be made *right*, and that grief will be turned to joy. And that's the best way to deal with grief, otherwise you become bitter, and depressed, and useless to other people.”

Emily: I would say it would be to not carry trauma or that pain around with you. For me, I really didn't understand or process anything that happened to me, especially quickly. It could be *months* all of a sudden before I started feeling bad about something, so you don’t even realize you’re stressing, ‘cause life moves so fast, it just keeps going and nobody has time to stop, to be depressed, or grieve, or be angry and cry or whetever, so you better keep going ‘cause you got shit to fuckin’ do! I would say it's really important to process the grief and understand that it *does* affect you, and you carry it with you, and it will show up at the worst possible times if you don't. And you don't even know why, you could be feeling *horrible* forever and not even know why ‘cause it's just like a process, and it could change a lot once you learn about it. Okay, yeah you know what, I’m fuckin’ sad, I’m gonna be sad! And allow yourself to feel those

feelings, and so I think that's what the most important thing is—to get that feeling *out* so you can move on with your life. Otherwise, you get trapped in the cycle of shit forming.

So it's kinda like a check engine light to let you know something is wrong? Yeah, ‘cause I would say, just for me alone, personally, I just grew up in a lot of trauma and I went through trauma for so long, that I'm just now being like hey, it’s okay to be sad when you’re sad. ‘Cause if you’re not, all of a sudden you’re gonna explode and be sad for two hours, and you don't even know why you’re crying, you know what I mean? ‘Cause you’re not allowing yourself those emotions, you're just like, “I'm always okay, I’m always okay”, and that's just not real. So, yeah, you need that *check* to just say hey, you're not okay.

Micah: So I can only, I relate it to, you know, somebody passing and you have that moment of grief, and it's *supposed* to be that moment of grief, but that moment is gone, I'm really gonna miss them, I'm grieving, but its like—you can't stay in that moment. Even with death, as hard as it is to accept, you gon’ die. I’mma die, you gon’ die, they haven't made a pill, that I know of, or maybe they made it and the elite haven't told us, but there’s no pill that’s gon’ stop us from dying. And it's scary when you think about it, but if somebody I loved passed, I can't stand that grief. The way my emotions work now, as a byproduct of prison, I just went to two different funeral ceremonies, and I wasn't emotionally bothered by either. Now, they weren't extremely close to me, but they were still family members. I've gotten very pessimistic over the years, and I'm just a realist, like I know I’mma die. And I've had talks with people that are dealing with grief, and I know I sound kinda cold and stuff, but essentially we're all gonna die! It's just a

part of life, and the only thing you can do is make your life worth something, the life that you live. So, say somebody born in 1977 and they died in 2034, that little dash in the middle of that—that's our life, so what are you gonna make your life? With the grief thing, I don't know. My grief mechanism is kinda screwed up, unfortunately. Maybe that wasn't the best question for me.

THE ART OF THE PRISON CONCERT

When thinking about music and the prison system, Johnny Cash's 1968 Folsom Prison performance and recordings quickly come to mind.

> The late 1960s and early 1970s were a time when musicians and their songs captured the soul and vision of street politics. For Cash, country music was an expression of love, and his performance a mix of raw cynicism and soulful empathy. His music was such a powerful force that one former inmate recalls Cash could have set off a riot the day he played at Folsom. Cash was welcomed with open arms from a relatively homogeneous white working-class prison population whose life struggles seemed similar to each other as well as to the Man in Black…But it is empathy tinged with biting humor, not the pathos of country music, that mediates divisive social identities, antagonistic ideologies, and territorial boundaries. (Willett et al.)

In Cash's prison performances, we see the intertwinement between groove and social atmospheres again, just like in Emily's tank collectively belting the lyrics to Sublime songs, but now we see this relationship between performer and audience:

> This type of involvement may be especially strong with syncopated rhythms, as performers—live or recorded—can invite listeners and dancers to participate in the relating and negotiating by filling in the gaps in the syncopated rhythmic structure (Witek, 2017). (Stupacher et al.)

Again, the unique groove created by the contribution of Cash and every single incarcerated person at Folsom culminated in this once-in-a-lifetime, rowdy, raucous social experience. Cash's performance especially stands out because he was breaking social norms by advocating for the socially outcast. He was putting them in a position that millions of people wanted to be in, and all for free. Cash reportedly stated that incarcerated people were his most enthusiastic audiences, and part of the reason he put on these shows was his belief that everyone deserves a chance at redemption. This sort of empathy seemed to be felt by his raucous audience, and made the performances all the more electric and validating. In *Uproarious*, Willett makes comparisons between Johnny Cash and Jeff Ross, a comedian who performs a stand-up set at Brazos County Jail in 2015 and makes frequent references to Cash, which we will dive into in the upcoming chapter:

> To be sure, Cash did a bit of stand-up back in the day, pretending to choke on prison drinking water and purposely using foul language to mock jailhouse rules, while pointing out the injustice of doing time for petty crimes like stealing eggs. If Cash's performances tapped into comedy, it was the music that defined much of

the era. In 2015, Ross borrowed much from Cash, and now comedy has found the political spotlight. (Willett et al.)

Music is clearly a powerful social tool, and it makes sense that the authority in Emily's prison worked so hard to stop the women from singing and dancing together; it's this authoritarian and dehumanizing attitude seen across the country that needs to be directly addressed in our prison systems if we want to implement real change. Music has the power to allow traumatized people to work through grief, to process emotions, and to socially connect in meaningful ways. Opportunities to sing together and create music together should be facilitated in prisons and jails as creative outlets and forms of self-expression; by limiting what the women could perform together, only allowing them to chant, and banning dancing altogether, the prison guards only helped to reinforce feelings of isolation and helplessness. In music, we see again a fourth type of catharsis: transcendent catharsis. Little bits of freedom give you strength to endure imprisonment and transcend the confines of your environment, even if just for a moment. It's this hopeful sort of healing that gives music so much potency in the prison context.

Chapter 3: Comedy and Incarceration

COMEDIC NARRATIVES IN PRISON: WHAT IS THE FUNNIEST THING THAT HAPPENED TO YOU WHILE INCARCERATED?

In this chapter, I will examine the relationship between comedy and incarceration centering around stories told by Michael, Emily, and Micah as a framework to understand the complexity of humor while incarcerated. I asked each person to tell me a story about their funniest memory while they were incarcerated; the resulting stories are hilariously humanizing, and set the tone for the empathetic type of humor I plan on examining.

Michael: “Crazy situation here—*not* according to protocol, there’s *no way*. So the power went out in the prison—all day long. And by about 10 o'clock at night, they decided to let *everybody* into the general assembly area, the common area, and they let everybody out of their cells—no power on. Okay, so there's no lights, and everybody’s in the common area—about fifty guys! Crazy. I mean, this is nuts. And then, Tiko, he was one of the biggest guys in the prison on our block—had a mouth on him, and he was *not* gonna lose. The tier above us, they were the general population, and they were in the hole. So you had our block which was twelve cells, two guys to a cell, and that was “B” block. Maximum security for homicides. And above us were the guys from the general population put in the hole, and they couldn't come out of their cells at all. So, anyway, there was a verbal fight between Tiko and this other guy in his cell. And they were going at it for at least forty minutes non-stop—you know, “you’re so ugly” kinda

thing—but much worse. *Much* worse. And the guy sitting next to me… he was a white guy. About fifty years old, my age, and he was doing a sports commentary, you know, almost like tennis going back and forth, and it was *hilarious* because he sounded *so professional,* like he was actually watching a sporting event *(laughs).* And when it was Tiko's turn, this guy would just comment on how well Tiko did, and then the rebuttal. *Oh my gosh*, that was probably, that was one of the funniest memories I've ever had—and I couldn't *believe* it, because it was *such* a dangerous situation. I mean, anybody could come up to you at any second and, you know, shank you or whatever. And we're just sitting at this table and he's doing commentary on two guys verbally sparring. Fond memories."

Emily: This is gonna be a *very* weird story—well it's sad and weird. I had been in county for seven months at this point. And so, my brother got shot while I was eight months pregnant. *Oh, I'm so sorry.* Thank you. I was able to get a furlough to go to his funeral, and before I went to county jail, I was probably like 127 pounds or something, a couple weeks pregnant when I went into county, but at this point I'm eight months pregnant, and none of my clothes fit. I'm south of Fort Worth, Texas, and I had to go all the way up to Wichita Falls, and I had to be back within 24 hours. I had 24 hours to get there, so I had to get out, get clothes, drive to Wichita Falls—by the time I got to Wichita Falls, I had missed my brother's funeral, and I just got to see my family and then turn around and go back, because we had to go look for clothes and everything. So moving on from that, I had a pair of black panties that I snuck back into the jail, because they didn't change me out, right? So they just let me go change my clothes, and I left on my

panties because it was like a piece of the “free world”, you know, that I got to keep and hide! So mind you, I'm just miserable at this point, and so I’ve got this pair of panites, and they let me change out of my own. I put on my suit, and *nobody* checked. And I would say, not even a couple days, like I only had ‘em for a *couple days* and they raided the place and come and shake down the whole thing and go through all of our shit. And I had hid them in a folder—anyways they found ‘em. And they had them on their little stick they're like holding ‘em up in the air like “WHOSE ARE THESE?!” (*laughter*) Oh, so that was rude ‘cause it was really cool just to have a piece of the outside world, just to know you have something, I don't know. I was really excited that I got away with it, but then they found it. I didn't get in trouble ‘cause *y’all* didn't do your job!

Micah: Okay, so it was an incident where I was getting ready to get into a fight, and you know, I'm older, I'm in my forties at the time, and as I was getting ready to fight, I actually stepped wrong and literally dislocated my foot. It's not funny, but I look at it like—I wasn't even really supposed to be engaged in that fighting, and here it is, you know, I’m older, I’m fighting somebody younger, I’m really supposed to handle the situation differently, and here it is, everybody all hyped up. They felt like, oh man Ball, ‘cause my nickname was Ball, he finna handle his business, and I took *two* steps and put too much pressure on my foot, and broke my foot almost, probably dislocated, and the fight was over before it even started. I was like no no no no, hold on hold on! That was funny, but it was painful at the same time. Yeah, I learned my lesson, no more fighting after that. Prison warps your sense of what's funny, what’s not funny, what’s supposed to be hurtful, what's not hurtful, because you’re put in a situation where you

have to turn off certain emotions and stuff so that you don't feel hurt and pain, you ain't in there crying every day, and to be honest, I'm still battling it in certain emotions. I know I'm supposed to cry about this, but I don't, then I cry about something I'm not supposed to cry about, and I don't even know why I'm crying. So long durations of incarceration *definitely* do mess with your mental and emotional state. And it can vary, and I think it depends on how strong a person's mind is to start off with. So if you already kinda weak-minded and you go in, you just gon' crumble like a bag of chips, or if you're strong minded, you go in and they still gon' affect you a certain type of way, and then here it is, you know, a couple years later I'm out and I'm still dealing with the byproduct of being in prison. I feel like it's probably gonna be with me for the rest of my life.

THEORIES OF COMEDY

In *Uproarious,* two prevailing approaches to humor in philosophy are outlined. The first is incongruity theory, which "focuses on the perception of puzzles occurring when mental patterns and expectations are violated." (Willett et al.). When, for example, a sweet-looking female comedian utters the most vile, sexual, anti-political correctness you've ever heard in your life, the humorous effect emerges from the surprise and unexpectedness. What you see and what you hear are completely incongruous, producing a mentally pleasing sensation, analogous to solving a puzzle (Willett et al.). In Micah's story, the audience and Micah himself, expect him to engage in a prison fight and "handle his business", but his dislocated ankle shocks the audience—the tension built up in the story and the release results in a brainy, humorous moment. Tension builds up, then expectations are violated—it's a formula for comedic success.

The second approach is described as “a new take on an ancient Stoicism (that) views humor as a means to rise above and thus transcend the absurdities of life.” (Willett et al.). This type of humor offers “a mental distance from turmoil” (Willett et al.), rather than a challenge to it. Michael’s story about two men making commentary on a prison fight shines a light on the absurdity of the situation—he is trapped in a room with fifty incarcerated men in the maximum security block, many of whom have a violent, homicidal history, in the pitch dark, and completely vulnerable. And yet, somehow, in nightmarish, surreal circumstances, the human spirit is able to turn to humor and laugh at the ridiculousness of life, finding a “momentary uplift in the face of the irresolvable absurd.” (Willett et al.).

> Simon Critchley cites an example of such an approach in *On Humor*, where he updates the Stoic philosophies of life via a late 1920s essay of Freud’s… Freud’s updated theory turns to a detached and controlled mode of humor where a visceral relief might be felt but is largely left unexamined. Critchley cites a passage from the essay where “Freud speaks of a criminal who, on the morning of his execution, is being led out to a gallows to be hanged, and who remarks, looking up at the sky… ‘Well, the week’s beginning nicely.’” As the British might say, with a stiff upper lip, this kind of humor invites us to do little more than “keep calm and carry on.” For such a head–brain approach, humor emanates from the mind, where it produces, as Critchley explains, the “modesty of the chuckle or the humble smirk,” or even just the simple “smile.” (Willett et al.)

This peculiar “gallows” humor perfectly describes Michael’s position. When left completely powerless (literally and figuratively), the men acknowledged the gravity of the situation, the danger they were in, and their inability to change the events transpiring, and decided to smile at their situation and laugh. So what is the point of this type of humor? In a way, it allows you to recognize your own impotence as a means of overcoming these feelings on a personal level; this form of humor requires a dramatic shift in perspective. Suddenly, you are able to see past fear, like a spectator watching a film about your own life. When we laugh at our situation, we transcend the first-person narrative, much like how writing about trauma repeatedly helps us gain new perspectives. In this story, there may be some additional elements at play. Gallows humor typically does not produce fits of laughter between two people, nor does it contain the element of ridicule we see directed toward Tiko. We do, however, see two people detaching from their situation in order to feel a sense of control.

Emily’s story is difficult to categorize. While it is humorous and incongruous that the male guards are appalled and furious they found black panties in a woman’s room (something that shouldn’t be appalling or infuriating), we also see a bit of “gallows” humor as well. The image of black panties on a stick being hoisted in the air like contraband is absolutely absurd. Emily is powerless in reclaiming her possession, and there is nothing left to do but smile at the ridiculousness of the situation in the face of grief, anger, and the possibility of punishment. At the same time, what happened to Emily involved other people, so a social element is at play here as well. I will be diving more deeply into this story in the upcoming sections.

HUMOR AS SOCIAL HEALING

While Pennebaker's work emphasizes the importance of writing because it helps us release our pent up inhibitions and translate experiences into words to reach a new understanding of events, Willett argues that comedic relief produces the same effects, and does even more (Willett et al.) While disclosive writing is a solitary activity, comedic catharsis requires a social setting, and has the capacity to take catharsis even further: "As social animals, our affective entwinement with others and our felt status are key to our health, suggesting greater benefits when cathartic processes go beyond solitary sense making." (Willett et al.). Certainly, this social element exists in the prison context:

Michael: There's different units in the prison, and one of them, they're like rapists? Sex offenders! So one of these sex offenders, who was gay, said to Joe, and Joe was a friend of mine, he was a running back at his high school and a trash truck driver, and he's a big guy—strong. Anyway, he was the head of the block for the work crew which I worked on. And he was walking through the hall, and a sex offender said to Joe, "Hey chocolate." It was pretty funny, and everyone was laughing about it, and a few days later—maybe it was the same day, I don't know, but he, I'm mopping the floor or something, Joe picks me up throws me over his shoulder and starts walking me across the rec room, and I said, "Hey chocolate, put me down!" Everybody was *dying* laughing *(laughs).* It was a risk, a definite risk… but it paid off—the whole block was dying laughing."

Here we see humor as a social mechanism bringing the block together, while simultaneously separating them from other units and communities. When Michael states that yelling “Hey chocolate, put me down” as an older white man to a younger black man was a “definite risk”, we see how humor can soften boundaries between social groups in the prison context, like race and age, but also provide a release for inhibitions and bring people closer together. Willett links humor with feminist author and poet Audre Lorde’s *eros,* a life force that Lorde describes as the personification of love often expressed through dance, art, day-to-day activities, and even laughter: “In contrast to the Stoic use of humor for a turtle-like defense and turn of the self inward, the laughter of a Lordian eros presses animal spirits outward, but now less as release than a force for connecting mind to body and self to other.” (Willett et al.) Instead of distancing the mind from the body, laughter makes us feel more connected to each other and the world around us; in the anecdote above, Michael felt more connected to his block through the “belly laughs” that they shared. This little moment uniting the block through an inside joke reinforces playfulness, breaks down social barriers, eases tension, and fosters an atmosphere of healing.

Similarly, in Micah’s story about the almost prison fight, the fight is completely dissipated when he breaks his ankle, showing how humor can quell crowds and ease emotions, like anger and fear. After laughing about the situation (albeit while in pain), Micah and the crowd egging him on were able to see with clarity that he should have never engaged in the fight in the first place, leading the entire group (or at least Micah) to a transformed understanding of the events.

Emily: A recurring funny moment that happened, so we were in a tank, about 16 something women, and only the male trustees were allowed to have jobs that went around the prison or that left their particular area or went outside the prison, so they would come and clean the showers in the women's tank. Every couple of months, a guard would come in there with a male inmate, and they would have a power washer. And we were supposed to sit there and not look, but girls would go *wild*. He didn't even have to be handsome or *nothing*, it was just the fact that some of us, you know, we haven't seen men or been around men or anything for months and months. So girls would go *wild,* they would be hollering, and they would be, depending on the guard, depending on who would get in trouble, this girl one time straight up flashed this guy and *oh my gosh* the guy just dropped the power washer 'cause he's an inmate too! So that would happen every couple months, it was like a piece of meat walking in!

In Emily's story, we see incarcerated women releasing their sexual inhibitions in a social context specific to the prison environment. This aligns more closely with incongruence theory—we would not expect women to act rowdy with their peers, yell profanities, and sexualize men. I have to wonder if the women are acting rowdy because they truly are excited to see a man in the women's showers, or if they are releasing steam to make each other laugh. It also seems to have become an engaging tradition, and entertainment is not an easy thing to find in prison. This raucous, masculine behavior is totally incongruous with traditional expectations of women, and perhaps the knowledge that their behavior is so unexpected makes the recurring situation even more entertaining and humorous. We can empathize with the rowdiness

of the women, but also with the complete shock of the incarcerated man dropping his power washer. Perhaps the woman who flashed him was taking back some of her bodily autonomy in an environment where this is prohibited, but she also imposed herself on a man trying to do his job, and got a laugh from the crowd out of it. Humor, while powerful, can also be dangerous. It can rally people behind a cause, target scapegoats, and dehumanize people. It is important to keep in mind that all three forms of catharsis discussed in this thesis, writing, music, and comedy, have the power to heal, and the power to do harm.

EMPATHY AND HUMOR: JEFF ROSS ROASTS CRIMINALS

In 2015, comedian Jeff Ross hosted a very special televised performance at Brazos County Jail in Bryan, Texas. In *Jeff Ross Roasts Criminals: Live at Brazos County Jail* the self-proclaimed "Roastmaster General" spends the day before his stand-up performance playing basketball with the incarcerated men, poking fun at the food, and forming connections with members of his audience in Cell Block 3B, maximum security. "If you can laugh at yourself," Ross narrates, "you're one step closer to freedom!" (*Jeff Ross*).

At first glance, it seems odd and even questionable that Ross would choose to perform a roast of incarcerated, marginalized men rather than do a classic stand-up set, but we quickly see that Ross' goal in the performance is to humanize the incarcerees at Brazos County Jail. A roast requires trust between the two parties: the roaster deals out insults in a playful manner, coming from a "place of love" as Jeff puts it, and the roastee is a good sport and chooses to laugh, rather than get angry. But a roast, like siblings

teasing each other, as Willett writes, mixes empathy with ridicule in a playful way, evoking feelings of fellowship:

> Roasts are typically inclusive and have a celebratory tone; to roast prisoners is thus already to elevate their stature to someone you laugh with, not simply at. By seeing prisoners as worthy of a roast, Ross honors those too often viewed by his audiences as exiles, anointing them as members of the larger community. The roast is a major device for creating community through the comedic use of a type of play-fighting that carefully balances ridicule with empathy. (Willett et al.)

Ross recognizes and acknowledges the differences between himself and the residents of Brazos County Jail, while still respecting them and making them feel included in the performance, rather than the objects of ridicule or entertainment. At one point, an incarcerated 19-year-old named E.T. gets on stage with Ross to perform “the walk”, as the audience calls it, and the crowd roars with laughter; the men are able to perform alongside Jeff, instead of being the butt of the joke (*Jeff Ross)*. They add to the humor and laughter of the event, rather than become subject to it. One of the first jokes Ross makes is in reference to Courtney Waller, a female guard at Brazos County. After she gives the incarcerated men “permission to laugh tonight”, Ross quips, “alright I’ll see you back at the hotel!” (*Jeff Ross).* This simple joke both separates Jeff from his audience and connects the two. No audience members have the ability to return to a hotel room with a female guard after the show. When the show ends, their lives in jail resume, and so does Jeff’s on the outside, but they share the same material for their comedy. It was necessary that Ross immersed himself in the world of the jail the day

before performing because he needed to connect with his audience and relate to their world in order to empathize with them.

Up on the stage, Ross is one of them, and yet he is completely different at the same time. We see this materialized when Ross bursts onstage wearing the same bright orange institutional clothing as his audience, complete with Brazos County Jail across the back, only to rip through it and don his classic blazer and hat combination. While elevated on the stage, Ross is seemingly able to connect more deeply with his audience, in contrast to his pre-show visits; in fact, he seems more comfortable up on stage than he was wandering about the rec room—we see clearly that we are on the comedian's turf now. Similar to Ross' Brazos County Jail t-shirt, most of the incarcerated men have put on a new identity—new nicknames are given (like E.T., "forty", and "Big Mama Jo"), new reputations are made, new relationships are formed, and new behaviors or addictions or hobbies or interests emerge in the prison context.

The viewers of *Jeff Ross Roasts Criminals: Live at Brazos County* on Comedy Central, YouTube, and streaming services are exposed to a new perspective of incarceration that they otherwise might never have experienced:

> In laughing with others who are laughing at themselves, we find ourselves unexpectedly unlocking streams of amity for those whom we may or may not be able to identify with. While straight satire and ridicule can subvert or reinforce lines of power, empathetic humor laced with playful mockery that forces all to expose their vulnerabilities may offer more than just a momentary escape from prison life. This humor has the potential to de-escalate tensions and reveal the

> humanity of mortal enemies, thus opening up across social divisions a horizontal field of fellow feeling. In this volatile field, comedy and raunchy roasts may begin to redress heavy histories of social tension. (Willett et al.)

This type of humor that fosters empathy must be distinguished from the Stoic, transcendent humor and incongruence theory of humor because empathetic humor is inherently an *agent of change.* It builds relationships and knocks down walls. The two men making commentary on Tiko's verbal altercation reflects a Stoic, transcendent form of humor because they had no choice but to laugh at their situation in the midst of fear; this is not to dismiss the value of gallows humor—as Willett writes, "transcendent humor as a type of escape and elevation could prove to be a healthy response when one is required to accept an unalterable situation." (Willett et al.) But it does not cross social boundaries and challenge the status quo quite like empathetic humor does:

> Rather than transcending an underbelly of affects, empathy combined with humor renders us more porous and relational. Through empathetic humor, bodily openness to affects and emotions streaming from others enhances the fluidity of identity, shifting lived social positions along with the cultural landscape. Instead of fostering an attitude of adaptation that rises above a fraught situation, such humor serves as a catalyst. If self-transcendent humor culminates in, as mid-twentieth-century sociologist C. Wright Mills warns, the "cheerful robot," empathetic humor breaks open the social circle of belonging, altering and widening the sphere of amity, and offering the potential for political realignments along with social and psychic change. (Willett et al.)

THE PRISON BUZZKILL: WHAT IS OFF LIMITS?

While conducting interviews, I noticed that certain topics are not joked about in prisons and jails: racism, families, and legal issues.

Have you ever experienced other "buzzkill" or "killjoy" moments when in prison?

Michael: Well, yeah, one time I'm playing cards with a bunch of other white guys around the table in the common area, and I said, I believe everybody has a little bit of racism in them. And I said yeah, I mean, I have a little bit in me, you know, I'm not proud of it, but I think if anybody's honest, they would, they would agree. Everybody's a little bit racist to some degree. So this *asshole* says to me, "Oh, MICHAEL IS RACIST." And I had a lot of black friends, and you don't wanna be known as a racist in jail, especially when you're the smallest guy on the block. So I had to explain what I meant, and after explaining, I was okay. But that was a scary moment, *talk about a killjoy*. Just playing cards and somebody blurts out Michael is racist! We'd laugh about all kinds of things, but when it came to talking about people's cases, that was a serious matter. That was off limits. You took that seriously. So, yeah, you could definitely empathize, because you were in their same shoes. But again, there's *no* humor when we're talking about the cases. Those were serious issues, you didn't joke around about that.

Emily: Well definitely, if you're gonna try making fun of people that aren't immediate friends of you, and sometimes your immediate friends… When I was in county, and then when I was in prison, which was considered a safe prison, minimum

security, most of the time people could be lighthearted, but people's kids, family, things like that were *always* dangerous. And people that don't have shit, like some people have visits every week, some people get letters every mail call, some people always have commissary, but some people I have never seen them get visit, a letter, a dime for commissary, and those people that don't have shit, they have a little bit less to lose already. So you had to be careful about that.

Micah: Yeah definitely don't talk about nobody family. You don't really talk about the amount of time somebody had, so, for instance, if I only have five years, and I'm in a dorm with dudes with life sentences, I wouldn't say hey, you got all that time you ain't *never* getting out, your family ain't *never* gon' see you no more. So yeah, unless somebody voluntarily wants to talk about their charges, you don't wanna say hey man what you locked up for? Nobody's doing that. I did this when I got certain roommates, and I would find out what they were locked up for, just not the particulars, just to know, hey is he a murderer, a rapist, a pedophile? So you get classified and you get outed. Like hey, this dude is an aggravated child molester, you know what I mean? Yeah, he gon' have it pretty rough.

Prison is full of traumatized people, many of whom need mental health care that they will never receive. It makes sense that there are topics that won't be brought up in empathetic roasting or playful ridicule. In a space where everyone is trying to figure out who you are and who they are dealing with, it seems that poking and prodding with humor is not the way to go about it, especially in such a tense social climate.

HOMEOPATHIC, ALLOPATHIC, OR COLLECTIVE HUMOR?

We have seen Stoic and incongruity theories of humor play out, but how do these isolated and unique events align with our original conception of catharsis? In Michael's case, the story about Tiko and the power outage, "gallows" humor seems reminiscent of an allopathic sort of humor. We see two men oppose fear and anxiety with laughter as they transcend the absurdity of their situation. By channeling the antithesis of fear, they are able to get through the night, release pent-up emotions, and perhaps even translate some of their anxiety or frustration into language via jabs at Tiko and the ridiculously mismanaged situation.

In Micah's case, there is certainly an incongruous moment of humor we see when he dislocates his foot. What is interesting is the social setting—in the midst of a rowdy crowd ready to see something entertaining (and what is more entertaining than a fight?), suddenly feelings of anger and tension dissipate when the fight is disrupted. A new perspective on the situation is realized. Does this instance challenge social norms? This is unclear, but I think this anecdote is most clearly an example of the power of comedy—it can alter the atmosphere in a split second, whether it be calming a crowd down and releasing tension, or creating an "other" and building up feelings of hatred or resentment.

This brings me to Emily's story, which I believe shares a few elements with collective catharsis. Emily challenges social norms by going against prison policy and sneaking something back into prison as scandalous as black underwear, but what's more is that everyone in the tank saw what she had accomplished, perhaps inspiring

some hope in other women that they, too could sneak a piece of the “free world” under the guards’ noses. The only missing element is a transformation of negative emotions to positive ones; we see a transformation of positive emotions (the joy in owning a piece of clothing from the outside) to negative ones (disappointment in its removal). The actual article of clothing carries emotional significance, perhaps reminding Emily of her brother and the funeral she couldn’t attend because of the prison’s lack of leniency, as well as a reminder of her loss of independence. Keeping her black underwear spits in the face of the institution that kept her from attending her brother’s funeral. I am again reminded of this fourth type of prison-specific catharsis that involves transcendence akin to a Stoic theory of humor. Bits and pieces of relief (like a joke or laughing hard) from a painful, overwhelming environment gradually strengthen mental fortitude. Emily’s black underwear, music, and comedy seem to fit this description as means of temporary escape that foster healing.

Conclusion

In this thesis, my goal was to examine how incarcerated people use writing, music, and comedy to promote self-healing. Throughout the thesis, I compared and contrasted research on what has proven to work as a healing agent with the lived experience of Michael, Emily, and Micah. I examined how my participants coped with trauma and grief during their incarceration, and assessed which category of catharsis their anecdotes fell into (homeopathic, allopathic, or collective, or transcendent). According to Pennebaker, simply talking about trauma helps us work through it, and I hope that through these interviews I was able to help others achieve a new understanding of themselves—know thyself to heal thyself. I also hope to help readers empathize with incarcerated people by telling their stories. Many (if not all) incarcerated people are hurting, traumatized, grief-stricken people, but the lack of mental health care and the restricted culture fostered in American prisons does very little to combat this.

In terms of my own healing, I am proud that I was able to dive back into this period of my life. Conducting these interviews was not easy, and I often found myself getting emotional. Listening to the trauma of people you care about is not easy, but it's sometimes necessary to understand their past and to help them work through it. Of course, we should never be afraid to refer someone to professional help if needed, but being a listening ear is a valuable skill.

Implementing programs in prisons that reflect Pennebaker’s writing paradigm is a necessary step toward reducing recidivism rates and promoting healing rather than punishment in these institutions. From the moment someone enters jail or prison, they

should be taught how to write disclosively in order to process their emotions. Writing shouldn't be a substitute for professional medical help, but, unfortunately, this may be all the help an incarcerated person receives. A simple, mandatory class that outlines how to follow Pennebaker's method, the benefits of writing, and the provision of pens and notebooks could be a start in making written catharsis accessible. The production of music and singing in a group should be encouraged, perhaps with music lessons and universal access to music, so that people can experience the positive effects of sad music while grieving. The implementation of empathetic comedy in prisons is difficult due to its abstract nature; in my opinion, transformative, healing comedy can only emerge in an atmosphere of love and acceptance. Perhaps after implementing cathartic writing and music in more prisons, empathetic comedy will naturally grow out of it. I found that every story my interviewees told me did not perfectly align with one particular mode of catharsis, but in general, disclosive writing shares elements of allopathic catharsis in the way it confronts trauma directly, while letter writing shares elements of collective catharsis. Music, especially listening to sad music, seems to align with homeopathic catharsis; the individual purposefully makes themselves vulnerable to sad emotions or triggers, and builds up an immunity to their own grief. Empathetic humor, finally, aligns most closely with collective catharsis. It transforms negative emotions to positive ones through empathy, it challenges social norms, and it occurs in a social setting.

I saw a fourth type of catharsis emerge, especially in music and comedy: transcendent catharsis, a process that occurs when bits of freedom allow for a temporary escape from reality. The temporary escape gives strength and fortitude to the

incarcerated person, and allows them to carry on, analogous in many ways to the "gallows" humor outlined in Chapter 3.

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