

*This essay was inspired by a series of letters I wrote to Joseph L., a death-row prisoner. I have maintained the format of a letter to give the flavor of our conversations.*

May 1, 2017

Dear Joseph,

I appreciate your writing back to me under your current conditions. It's devastating to hear you've been dealing with such chronic stomach pain for the last four months in isolation. We lit a candle and placed it near your picture when we heard you were so sick. What you explained previously captures how horrible our prison system is: having to beg to get a colonoscopy; waiting for weeks to get it; being transported to the hospital in full body chains while having uncontrollable bowel movements. And after all that you finding out you couldn't even get the exam. I'm disgraced and want to apologize on behalf of America for your poor treatment. It breaks my heart knowing you suffered many complications on top of the normal pain.

Coincidentally, I've been dealt my own stomach problems. This year I've missed seven weeks of school and have been in the hospital with ulcerative colitis. The juxtaposition of our illnesses and treatments perplexes me. I was feeling sad for myself: I wasn't able to participate in my dance team's state championships; I missed social events with my friends; and I accumulated so much school work to make up, but your letter enlightened me. When you expressed faith and gratitude under dire circumstances, I felt I could stay hopeful.

Although we've only been writing to each other for two years, you have no idea of the impact you've had on my life. The honesty and spiritual strength that you nurture despite your

living conditions has been a powerful awakening for me. From a young age I've always been passionate about human rights. My mom educated me on global realities that I was not taught in school: human trafficking, extreme poverty, and institutional racism. As I developed a more conscientious world view, my own privileges and oppressions came to the forefront. I began to question how I contribute to injustices.

Through the sharing of your story, you've helped me clarify what I want to do with my life, and for that I thank you. Writing to you has encouraged me, as I begin college, to commit to furthering my education on restorative justice. Although I can't fully understand what you, along with thousands of others nationwide, experience in prison, my educational goal is to contribute to dismantling and reconstructing our prison system rather than merely "reforming" it. I hope that prison reconstruction includes your voice and all the voices of those behind bars. I am so thankful for you sharing your story with me. Know our family continues to keep you in our hearts and prayers. You are not alone.

With love,  
Priya

Addendum: On May 17, 2017, Joseph passed away due to his untreated, chronic stomach issues. It was truly an honor having gotten to know him, despite a barrier of distance. His picture stays on our family altar of the dead so we remember him every day. According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice statistics, Joseph was just one of 2,000 inmates on death row that year and he was one of 2.3 million people incarcerated in the U.S.

