

REFLECT:

Convicts' letters to their younger selves

trentbellphotography

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In early 2013, commercial photographer Trent Bell was shocked by the news that a friend - an educated professional, a husband, and a father of four children - had been sentenced to thirty-six years in prison. Over the proceeding months, Bell found himself haunted by not only his friend's bad decisions and loss of freedom, but also moments in his own life when things could have easily taken a bad turn.

"There were times when my son would look up and smile at me," recalls Bell, "and the finality of my friend's situation would rush into my head and I would hear a cold thin voice say: '...there, but for the grace of God, go I...'"

Bell, who is known for his architectural photography in publications such as the Conde Nast Traveler, Design New England, and The New York Times, soon conceived of a photo project that would merge large-scale portraits of inmates in the Maine prison system with handwritten letters the convicts composed as though writing to their younger selves.

"Our bad choices can contain untold loss, remorse, and regret," says Bell, "but the positive value of these bad choices might be immeasurable if we can face them, admit to them, learn from them and find the strength to share."



robert
67 years old
in for: murder
time in: 27 years
time left: 9 years

Dear Bob,

In the first few months after graduation in '64 you allowed three job opportunities to slip through your fingers. Any of them had the potential to be a career, most notably a career in the Canadian R.C.M.P. equivalent to the F.B.I. here in the USA.

It took you coming to prison and having time to reflect on your past to make you realize just how good you had it as an only child living in the country on a 150 acre farm. You were not smart enough to appreciate all the good things you had in life till it was too late. You lived for tomorrow not for today. As you started hanging with the wrong crowd, namely a cousin 7 years older. He'd take me along with his friends on overnight Salmon fishing trips.

Liquor was always present and wanting to feel like you fit in your drinking began. You looked up to your cousin like a big Brother, which turned out to be a poor choice on my behalf. I rarely spent time with anyone who didn't drink. It took another 10 years for your life to start spiraling out of control. Driving 18 wheelers and the bright lights of Montreal and other cities dazzled you. Booze, drugs and all night parties made trucking and home life a living hell. You sabotaged 2 marriages and as a result I'm here doing 55 years. After 17 years in here I now know when choosing friends whether it be family or others be careful of those choices. Do we have similar goals in life with them? We let drinking and drugs shatter our dreams and our potential future.

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bubber jack
41 years old
in for: trafficking drugs
time in: 8 months
time left: 3 years 4 months

To Bubber Jack

I'm writing to you to inform you that I've seen the future and I know what it holds in store for you. I want to warn you that times will be tuff if you don't change. I see that you like fast money, fine Trucks, Bikes, woman and Drugs. Though you are a worker at the end of the day you will find your self committing crimes like selling Drugs and not just working cause just worken isn't enough. when your using High end Drugs. Much more will be expected of you from

These so called friends you've picked up along the way. How ever impressing them wont be worth it because in the end when its you sitting in a cold cell. They'll be long gone. you'll be looking back saying How could I have changed and missed out on the prison experience rather than the lives of you children, parents even the great life you could have lived. Get to work Jack, get clean and avoid the madness because you are good enough to live your dreams and not just have them in your sleep



brandon
26 years old
in for: attempted murder &
elevated aggravated assault
time in: 4 years
time left: 13 years

Brandon,

It hurts to be sitting here writing you this letter. Our journey has been tough, it has been filled with pain, tears, and heart ache; I made a lot of mistakes. I write this letter now in order to caution you of what may lay on the road ahead if you don't open your eyes, and also to tell you what has become important in life as a result of where I have been. The year is 2013, and you have been in prison for four years now. The specifics of how and why aren't what's important right now, there is a bigger picture. You got here because of ignorance, because of a mind set, and because you were trying to be someone you are not. Just know that people will always try and test you, and no matter what you think, only a real man can walk away. Anyone can fight, the weakest people can fight. Anyone can act or react with violence, but a **REAL MAN** can turn the other cheek and walk away. Things are going to happen that will make you bitter with those closest to you;

you have to be the bigger person and confront your problems, talk them out. Express yourself. Don't run away from your problems. No matter what happens your family loves you unconditionally. They will be there when you need them most and you least expect it. They will always pick you up when you fall. Love them and help them at every opportunity, they deserve it. Don't be afraid to love, and when you do, love completely. Being young is no excuse, if you love someone show and prove it. Do the right thing now so you won't look back and wish you had done better, or done more. Watch the company you keep, your true friends deserve the world. Dedicate yourself to things that are worthwhile. Do something positive each day. Always have courage, "with courage you will dare to take risks, have the strength to be compassionate, and the wisdom to be humble. Courage is the foundation of integrity." (Keshavan Nair). No matter what, always love yourself.

Sincerely,
YOU

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Ken, (The Younger)

LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE TO US, OUR SONS,
OUR CAREER, ~~OUR~~ FUTURE - DESTROYED! ALL OF
OUR LIFE, YOU NEVER TOOK A BIT OF ADVICE
(WARNINGS) FROM ANYONE THAT HAD A
GOOD LOOK AT WHERE WE WERE
HEADING (WHICH WAS DOWN MANY A
WRONG PATH.) FROM WHERE I
SIT, IN MSP, AT THE AGE OF
(50) I KNOW, WE DIDN'T THINK
WE'D SEE (30) - SO MANY DISASTROUS
MISTAKES... DRUGS, RELATIONSHIPS,
ALCOHOL, SEX, "LOVE-GUY1762",
ON LINE DATING SITES, CYBER SEX,
AND PHONE SEX, YAHOO CHAT ROOMS
- ALL ADDICTIONS THAT HAVE
RUINED OUR LIFE!

SO MANY PEOPLE
YOU WANT A LONG
THE WAY - DURING
BACK TO 1982
MOM + DAD,
SISTERS,
BROTHER,
SONS,
WIFE/EX
WIFE, STEP
DAUGHTER,
MORE THAN A
HANDFUL OF
LONG TERM
FRIENDS/
PARTNERS, EX
MOTHER IN LAW
... ON AND ON AND ON...
CREDIT CARDS, BILLS
(FROM MOM +
DAD),

MON 6.17.13

A WASTED COLLEGE EDUCATION, HOW MANY JOBS
HAVE YOU HAD? HOW MANY OF THOSE JOBS
(+ RELATIONSHIPS FOR THAT MATTER) LASTED
(5) YEARS OR MORE? NONE! NOT
A ONE! REMEMBER YOU GOT
DODGE TAM CHARGER? WHAT A MESS
THAT WAS! 1991 CHAPTER 7
BANKRUPTCY? YOU (BRIEF) MARRIAGE?
MAN... NOW, AS A CONVICTED
SEX OFFENDER, WE'LL NEVER
TEACH AGAIN - YOU WORKED SO HARD
FOR SO MANY YEARS - GONE!
OUR AUTISTIC SONS? YOU'LL
NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN!
REMEMBER HOW HARD
YOU WORKED TO
RESCUE THEM
FROM THEIR
MOM? AND
THEN SHE
DIED? 1 1/2
YEARS IN
FAMILY
COURT,
ONLY TO
LOSE
THEM (4/30)
YEARS LATER
YOU KILLED
YOUR FUTURE
(LIFE) KEN!
DO YOURSELF A
FAVOR, LISTEN TO
THOSE WHO LOVE YOU
GET THEIR WISDOM +
UNDERSTANDING. THEY
WANT TO SAVE YOU,
FROM YOURSELF!



ken
50 years old
time in: 8 years
time left: 1 years

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james "jamie"
42 years old
in for: robbery
time in: 2 years
time left: 8 years

Jamie,

There so much that has gone on in my life. so many mistake have been made. Jail, drugs, stealing and lying to those who trusted me. The only good think that has ever happen was the day my daughters were born. Even with them we made bad decisions. why couldn't we have done the right things in life. Dropping out of school, thinking we knew it all was a real big mistake. people who said they were friend were only influences. we allowed them to get into our head.

Jamie, Jamie,
Jamie, we knew better when we done wrong but done it anyway. we can't blame no one but ourself. I sit here in this jail cell and say, Jamie, how could we have been so stupid to commit another crime after

getting such a break 2 month prior. I just shake my head. we are better than this. Being incarcerated is not a place people should want to be. Jamie you need to get yourself together. There is still so much life to live. I stand in

front of my mirror and drift off to the days when we played little league baseball. we had so much fun, or when we cuddled our kids. we chose a path that in life was wrong. 20yrs all but 10 is a very long time but we will get through it. Doing what we have done in

life is not what

I would want to see any one go

through. Life

is far from over Jamie.

The mistakes we made

in the past are the mistakes

we will learn from.

I say this now and I say it

tomorrow, "Don't do what I did."

I did."



pork chop
44 years old
in for: murder
time in: 23 years
time left: 4.5 years

DEAR WES, I'm reaching out to you today
and I pray that the words of my heart
are encouraging enough to keep you from
making bad choices that could change
your life forever. Spending your life
in prison is no fun at all. You
lose your freedom and people in time
forget where you are. It becomes a
lonely world in a very short time.
There is so much more to life than
drugs and alcohol and the life of
crime doesn't pay. Wes, I have
seen and done it all and 20 plus
years later I'm still in prison
paying for bad choices I made in life.
Don't be like I was. You can be
better than me and avoid
the prison systems. You
have the opportunity
to succeed in
life if you follow
your parents
advice. I was
a runaway
and rebelled
against
everything
I was told
to do.
Tough love
is what it's
all about and
when we think
we can do things
on our own that's
when we fail.
You don't want
to grow up
behind
prison
walls



throwing your life away as I did. You have choices in
life and if you reach out to people that really love
and care about you I promise you won't be a
failure as I was. I made many bad choices and
always ask myself the questions what if. ① what
if I had of stayed in school. ② what if I had
of chose better friends? ③ what if I had of said no
to booze and drugs. ④ what if I had of listened to my
parents. Oh how I could have lived a better life
and avoided prison. You got that chance
being a young boy with your whole life ahead
of you. Ask yourself what is it you
want for your life? What makes you happy?
Whatever that happiness may be I
promise you it's much better than being
locked up in prison a world filled with
loneliness and darkness from being away from
family and loved ones. Wes I believe
in you so many people do you
just have to believe in
yourself. You can do
whatever you set
your heart to.
Don't follow
my footsteps
for I
promise
you
it's no
life you
want to
live. My
advice to
to you would
be to stay in
school and follow
your dreams
everything else will
take care of
itself.

Wesley
Thight
7-
10-
13

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william "wild bill"
40 years old
in for: burglary & theft
time in: 10 years
time left: 8 years

William,

Looking back on how my life has turned out I want to give a little insight about how my decisions have impacted myself and the people around me. When you turn sixteen years old your parents get a divorce and this forces you to take on an unfamiliar role as a parent as well as an older sibling. You quit school to work full time and you will do the honorable thing. You will help support your younger siblings by buying them food and providing them with clothes. Not only will you sacrifice your schooling but your free time as well. You will be there at sporting events and all

school activities. As the summer season come to a close and your job ends things will once again become very hard. The thought will run through your mind for an opportunity to come up with another way to get money. Please think twice before you turn to stealing from a guy who ripped off your brother. This is a fork in the road and I have chosen the wrong way. I choose to steal this guys stuff and get caught. I received six months in jail and from there had a hard time finding work after that. There is always another choice and you must find it. I have spent most of my life behind bars and you are worth much more than that.

paco
46 years old
in for: robbery & aggravated assault
time in: almost all adult life
time left: 7 years



A letter to the younger me -
Hello. This is the older, future you.
I want to reach out to you &
hopefully help save you from becoming
me - a veteran of the prison system
for over 20 years. If you pay attention
to me & consider my advice, you
just might avoid this particular
future, & maybe you will decide
to create something special with
your life. First things first,
accept the fact that you are
special. You were born that
way. Be yourself and you will
attract good people to you
when you try to be different,
in order to fit in, you
will lose more and
more of your
true identity.
Always re-
cognize that
you need
to be a
friend to
yourself
first.
Also know
that
your
family
loves

you and will always love you. Don't
over-analyze their love or compare
it with the love of other families. They
do the best they can with the tools
that they have. Love them back
without expectations and without condition,
and the bonds will remain
strong. Finally, no matter what
negative experiences you
suffer, they do not have to
define you. You have the
power of choice... always.
Be quick to smile, slow
to anger, and treat
all people with
the respect
they deserve. That
is how
you will
avoid be-
coming
me.

Robert
Payant

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Dear Peter

It's great to be able to talk to you, I'm 55 years old now, and living in prison for the past six years. Let

me tell you kid, it's no way to live. A lot of the things you're going to do are good, a few of them are really

stupid -

If you think something might be a bad idea,

believe it! Don't do it. If you think you feel the Lord in your life, believe it! You will receive many blessings,

many signs of what you should do. Keep your eyes open wide, and pay attention, do what is right, and you won't need to go to prison.

God loves you, live by His word.

Pete

pete
55 years old
time in: 6 years
time left: 4 years

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red
28 years old
in for: burglary
time in: 22 months
time left: 5 years 10 months

If i could write a letter to me
I would start by telling myself
that life isn't allways beautiful
Sometimes it will knock you down
but the struggles make you stronger
and the changes will make you
wise. Make sure you allways
respect your parents even if
you think you are in the
rite and allways tell them
how much you love them.
You can never tell them enough
and you never really know how
much time you have together.
Make sure you stay in school
even if you struggle
that diploma is more
important then you
think not just
to yourself but
also to your
children and
parents. When
you go to
that high
school get to-
gether and have
a few drinks
make sure
not to
get
into
any



vehicles because it dosen't turn
out good for anyone. Never try to
fit in to much because a lot of
times you will try to be someone
you are not and it will le to
many mistakes. When you meet
the love of your life, you will
know when you do. Make sure you
marry her and spend every
minute making her happy.
Never take time for granted
you never know when you
could lose it all. If it
was meant to be then every-
thing will work out just
don't give up. If you
were to take
anything from
this letter I
hope this is
it, Never
lose the
person you
really are
because
it may be to
late by the
time you find
yourself again
I hope
this letter
finds
you well.

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