



MY WALK AROUND THE SUN; JOT writers on making their own choices  
Writing from Bezazian, Hall, King, and Mabel Manning Branch Libraries; Albany Park Community Center; Christian Community Health Center; Herzl Elementary School; Instituto del Progreso Latino; Project Hope; San Lucas Church; Southwest Youth Collaborative and St. Leonard's House  
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## ***Journal of Ordinary Thought*** **My Walk Around the Sun** **Summer 2009**

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Photography by David Marques

Introduction by Alice Kim, [Director of The Public Square, a program of the Illinois Humanities Council.](#)

### INTRODUCTION

“What’s the hardest choice you’ve ever had to make?” I asked him.

“To forgive,” he said, without skipping a beat.

Forgiveness was on Ronnie Kitchen’s mind after he was released from twenty-one years behind bars, wrongly convicted. A poignant response, especially coming from someone who had known freedom for only four days when I asked him this question.

“The world is unforgiving, society is unforgiving,” he said. “But I need to forgive to move on. Through the twenty-one years I’ve been locked down, a lot of people turned their backs on me. Even some family thought I was guilty, and to them I didn’t exist anymore. So I walked out the door at 26th and California with a forgiving list.”

I don’t often think about forgiveness. I’ve been an activist since college, and for over a decade, I focused my efforts working with death row prisoners and their family members to forge a grassroots movement to end capital punishment in the United States. Seeking truth and justice have been important to me and forgiveness has at times seemed far removed from these endeavors. So Ronnie’s response to my question gave me pause. His newfound freedom gave him a sense of clarity.

I met Ronnie in 1998. Before Anthony Porter was released, making national headlines when college students investigating his case for their journalism class discovered his innocence. Before Governor Ryan declared a moratorium on executions. Before the governor emptied death row and pardoned four fellow prisoners as one of his last acts before leaving office.

Before all this – Ronnie and the other men on death row reached out to activists, asking us to be their voice on the outside. Even as they faced death, they dared to hope and to struggle. Discovering that

at least ten of them, all of whom were African American, had been tortured by white Chicago police officers at Area 2 and Area 2 headquarters on the south side, they called themselves the “Death Row 10” and began to organize. From their cells, they wrote letter after letter with the aim of bringing attention to their plight.

Ronnie was one of the first death row prisoners I ever visited. I remember the inhospitable visiting room at Pontiac Correctional Facility where many of Illinois’ death row prisoners were housed – the smell of the Styrofoam cups we drank water out of; the clanking of the chains used to secure the prisoners’ wrists to the tables, their ankles to the chairs they sat in; and the penetrating stares of the white officers who were there to keep watch over us.

Death row was sterile, mechanical, un-human. But Ronnie and his comrades behind bars managed to seek life from this daunting place. Because of their own determination, five of the Death Row 10 have been exonerated. More than that, their actions and their courage have helped to shape and make history.

“For twenty-one years, somebody’s been telling me when to take a bath, when to eat, when to go outside,” Ronnie told news reporters the day he was released. “It’s definitely good to be out.”

I have known Ronnie for just over half the time he has been in prison. And I still find it hard to imagine what it was like for him—spending most of his adult life incarcerated—thirteen of those years on death row.

I find it just as hard to imagine what it must be like for him now, suddenly finding himself on the outside facing freedom as well as the inevitable uncertainty that freedom brings. When a friend asked Ronnie, what was the most surprising thing about being out, he said, “Being out.”

“It’s a whole new world for me,” he said.

As he faces the unknown, I think about the choices that Ronnie will be making now, including the everyday choices—choices we often take for granted: how we choose to spend our waking hours. And I have a new appreciation for our own agency.

In this issue of the *Journal of Ordinary Thought*, you will read about the challenges individuals face that make them unique, as well as the ones we all have in common. You’ll read about the choices these writers have made at different points in their lives and how their choices have shaped their experiences and our world. Inspired by Langston Hughes, Erin Moore’s poem, “Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?” describes a sorrow that can sometimes overwhelm us. “I Would Choose Marvin Gaye” by Marion Jones celebrates the power of Marvin’s music and words in a world where cynicism is deep and prevalent. “Choosing Normalcy” by Adam Taylor acknowledges the value of those “normal” moments we can often overlook.

For Ronnie, each day is a new adventure. My hope is that his story—and the stories in these pages—will inspire the audacity to struggle for a better world as we embrace each and every day.

*Alice Kim*

## **HOOP DREAMS**

**Devery Atkins**

Hoop dreams, oh how I've failed the test.  
The choice I made threw hoop dreams out the window.  
Now I just have dreams of hoop dreams.  
Upon this road most traveled, I see my  
Future unraveled. If only I could have made  
The right choice. Become a right voice.  
But it was my choice. Now I'm divorced.  
What's been haunting me for twenty-four years—  
my addictions.  
Now I have this vision—it's recovery and no more  
Time in prison. Today I have a choice.  
And that's to become a positive voice.

## **I WOULD CHOOSE MARVIN GAYE**

**Marian Jones**

I would choose Marvin Gaye  
Over the news any day  
Brought by so-called pundits  
Who are in business  
To have masses  
Swing and sway  
To tainted messages  
Geared for us to hear  
And be paralyzed by fear  
While Marvin  
Perhaps a prophet  
Asked us long ago  
To "Save the Children"  
Marvin with notes fine as silk  
And sometimes sweet as mothers' milk

Suggested we reflect about  
"What's Going On"  
Marvin said  
"We've got to find a way  
To bring some loving here today"  
Imagine if the press  
Rather than always ready to depress  
Seeing some unending mess  
Brought us news  
Not just blues  
Sounds of good things  
That are happening in the world  
And ended every broadcast with  
"We've got to find a way  
to bring some loving here today"