

We would love to hear from you!

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the Sou' Wester

A grassroots newsletter on criminal justice & prisoner reintegration

Spring-Summer
2026 Edition

The Sou'Wester name is a reference
to Montreal's Southwest, where
Communitas began its work in 1999

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CSC, Librarians and post-secondary education.

In February of this year, Correctional Services Canada announced it would be cutting employment for library technicians as part of its plan to reduce the workforce across Canada by 400 positions. Also included in the cuts was access to post-secondary education, especially in Quebec.

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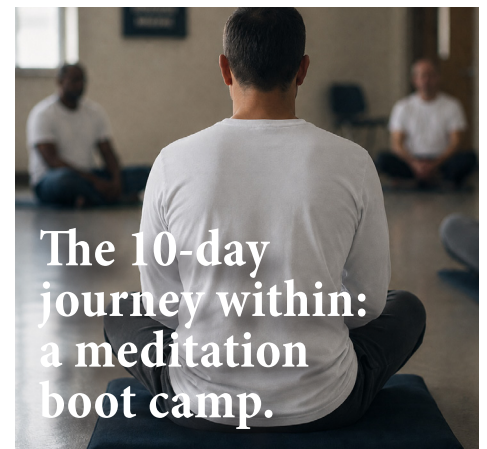


Congratulations Marie!

Longtime prisoners' rights advocate Marie Beemans has been granted the 2026 Joe Mell Award by Maison Crossroads. She received the award from Crossroads president Merris Centomo and Executive Directo Michel Gagnon.

The Joe Mell Award is presented to an individual or an organization who has demonstrated outstanding support for individuals who have become involved with the criminal justice system and who facilitate their social reintegration.

Congratulations!



The 10-day journey within: a meditation boot camp.

The concept of meditating more than thirty minutes was totally foreign to me. A while ago, I had heard how one could sign up for this Vipassana get-away and spend ten whole days to make a deep dive within oneself. Through the years, in the back of my mind, this idea lingered there, quietly, as something I might attempt... if time ever allowed.

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CSC, Librarians and post-secondary education

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However, after a groundswell of protest from across the country the librarian posts were saved. Unfortunately, the cuts still apply for post-secondary education which affected two Institutions in Quebec: Cowansville and Joliette.

CEGEP Marie-Victorin had been offering courses for inmates for 52 years and those have now come to an end despite the protests. CSC is simply saying that it is studying options for moving ahead.

In this issue of the Sou'Wester, we print only a few of the many reactions from inmates at Cowansville Institution that were sent to us.

From Theo

I think that removing CEGEP/post-secondary education would eliminate an occasion for people to have structured, productive activities that would be beneficial to our rehabilitation. First of all, there are not enough jobs for the number of inmates incarcerated here in the Cowansville Institution. Moreover, we lack the opportunity to have positive, organized activities to accommodate everyone. CEGEP provided a significant number of openings (44 to be exact) for inmates and gave them a constructive way to spend their time. As I've experienced myself, positive habit formation is an important part of re-integrating society, as most offenders lack some basic skill or another needed to navigate obstacles in the community. CEGEP plays an invaluable role in this. Not only can you practice these skills in a structured setting, but it creates a transitional environment for offenders to "rehearse" living pro-socially. These includes skills as well as social situations: navigating teacher relationships, submitting to the curriculum, and navigating interactions with peers in group projects while meeting deadlines.

All these present social situations that, as inmates, we might not have had the opportunity to experience.

I am writing an open letter to express the importance CEGEP has had in my incarceration in helping me better myself. I do not think the action to defund the CEGEP is one that coincides with CSC's mission statements. I think it might even be damaging to the Parole Board's effectiveness in judging us. When I signed up for the CEGEP program, I was motivated to try to structure my time better. Apart from CEGEP, there are very few productive activities. I struggle to find activities that would meet my need to socialize and are not counterproductive to my Correctional Plan. Prison is isolating by nature, and sometimes I struggle to fit in. I spent the next 8 months going to school and sticking to the schedule, which helped me distance myself from people around me who did nothing productive in their free time. Other than organizing meals, my classmates are the only other ones that I had regular contact with. It started off with homework with some, but with others it grew to actually checking up on one another, cooking and watching movies, and

...“I am writing an open letter to express the importance CEGEP has had in my incarceration in helping me better myself. I do not think the action to defund the CEGEP is one that coincides with CSC's mission statements.”

spending more time together, etc.... The CEGEP program had helped me find an in-group that was positive.

Lastly, I think that closing the CEGEP would hurt the Parole Board's ability to properly judge inmates. After all, the parole board doesn't live here among us. All they have to go by is our parole officer, cx and program officers in most cases. CEGEP provides a whole variety of feelers for the parole board to judge us with. There is, for starters, the report that is written by the administrators on our attendance and progress in our education.

It also is a program in which inmates can accomplish presentable metrics to the parole board about what they have done here. “How can I show you I'm doing better if there's nothing good for me to do...?” This might be especially damaging to lifers and long offenders, that often time use these metrics to prove their worth in cascading down and going in front of the board.

From Mr. D

Many people would consider being in prison for even one day atrocious. After spending more than ten years incarcerated, however, I have learned that prison can also become a place of transformation—if the right opportunities exist. For me, that opportunity came through the social science courses offered through Marie-Victorin CEGEP at the Cowansville Institution.

These courses did more than fill my time; they fundamentally changed how I think, how I understand myself, and how I choose to live my life. When I first entered prison, I saw it only through the traditional lens of punishment. Like many others, I believed that a prison sentence meant wasted years and limited possibilities. Education challenged that belief. Through CEGEP courses in psychology and philosophy, I began to reflect critically on my life, my choices, and the kind of person I wanted to become. Instead of simply serving time, I began using my time to grow intellectually and personally. My experience is not unique. But I am a living example of how education can transform the meaning of incarceration.

Rather than reinforcing the idea that prison only punishes, education allows individuals to reframe their circumstances and take responsibility for their future. Through philosophy in particular, I learned that meaning is not determined solely by external circumstances but by how we consciously respond to them.

For someone serving a long sentence, hopelessness can easily take over. Many individuals lose motivation and begin to believe that their lives no longer have value. Education directly challenges that mentality. It gives incarcerated people a sense of purpose, discipline, and direction. It reminds us that time—even time spent in prison—can still be meaningful and productive. The programs offered through CEGEP Marie-Victorin have provided that opportunity. They allowed me to ask difficult questions about my life and to begin building a different future. Without these programs, many incarcerated individuals would lose one of the most powerful tools for personal transformation that exists within the prison system. If the goal of incarceration is not only punishment but also rehabilitation and public safety, then education must remain part of the solution. When incarcerated people develop discipline, knowledge, and self-awareness, they are far more likely to become constructive members of society. Removing access to higher education risks eliminating one of the few programs that actively promotes responsibility, personal growth, and long-term change.

From Cyril

This letter isn't addressed to anyone specific. By writing, I am not looking to change the course of a decision bigger than me, but rather to use the freedom of speech that Canada grants me to describe the positive impact that CEGEP has had on me as an incarcerated man, and the negative impact that its absence will have on all other inmates, present and future. I also know that the inmates currently studying won't be able to do anything as productive if they must spend the rest of their time inside deprived of something more than bare-minimum education. Another inmate who remains anonymous confided to me that if he could no longer attend CEGEP, he would be the "embarrassment" of his family. Education allowed him to change a bad situation into an opportunity for self-improvement, and to make his children proud of their dad despite the circumstances. As for my

case, I can assure you that the letter you're reading would not exist if it weren't for CEGEP.

Given the small size of the classes, teachers have the occasion to teach in a more personal manner and to adapt to individual needs more easily than if they were facing a fifty-student classroom. Since my first ever class here, I am far less affected by self-esteem challenges I was facing at the beginning. The teachers and the staff of the CEGEP instilled in me that I had value, despite my crime against society. My self-harm behavior, which I struggle with since my early adolescence, has

"Education provided me with the ability to read, write and do mathematics."

diminished in frequency—a result that would have been more difficult to achieve with psychotherapy alone. Convinced of being unsalvageable and entirely evil, I inflicted wounds onto myself to live with the monster I saw whenever I looked into a mirror. The psychology classes opened the possibility of a diagnosis that I identified with. Rather than the conviction of being a waste of oxygen, I then took the necessary steps that led to being in the process of being diagnosed today. Having a better understanding of myself, I also learned to love learning.

From Anon

CEGEP is good for our growth and integration, especially during this time and circumstance. It gives us an opportunity to open our minds to new knowledge and understanding, which feeds and stimulates our brains and gives us confidence and guidance on how we navigate and make choices in life. With CEGEP, people are able to receive education about experiences they've never understood in life, which may play a role in how they are able to make positive change because of the new information they've learned that

will lead them into the career they aspire to be in.

A lot of us use this time away to either finish up on our high school or equip ourselves with education and certifications that will prepare us for the employment workforce so we can actually do something worth doing when we are outside, instead of coming back inside and doing nothing but wasting time and missing out on life. Information provided through education gives one the ability to think and see things better, and if you know better, then you tend to make better decisions.

Education has provided me with the ability to read, write, and do mathematics. Education also provided me with life skills like people skills, woodworking, small engine repair, knowledge about science and chemical safety, and etc. While here, I'm interested in CEGEP and education because it's something productive to do with my time, and new information could be enlightening and fulfilling to one's path. Unfortunately, now I can't. Without CEGEP, you limit your desire to complete your educational journey and lessen your options. You also prevent them from exploring their abilities, expanding their horizons, and seeing what they're capable of. Completing and continuing educations should be a part of reintegration because this equips people with tools and skills that they've never had before coming inside, and when they're leaving, they should leave with a skilled trade so that they can gain employment, so that they stay busy and can support themselves without resorting to risky activities that can get them caught up. For all these reasons, I'm against the CEGEP being removed from Cowansville.



Remembering Margaret

It was with great sadness that Communitas learned in early May that our beloved Margaret had passed away.

Margaret and her husband Hugh were two of the early members of Montreal Southwest Community Ministries/ MSCM (as Communitas was formerly named), which was founded by Peter

Huish in 1999.

She was a gentle, indefatigable force in our organization, a member of the Steering Committee for many years, a constant member of our weekly visits to the various Institutions (Cowansville/Federal Training “Centre and B-16 minimum”— as it was then called) and a regular presence at our Open Door weekly meetings and our yearly celebrations in summer and at Christmas. Margaret was one of the few Open Door presenters who had their very own week when she ran the Canada Day Quiz every year in July.

Margaret and Hugh first came to Communitas through “Le Mouvement vers l’Esprit Communautaire” (MEC) when they introduced us to Community Building Workshops (CBW) in Montreal. A direct result of that introduction was the holding in 2006 of the first CBW in a Canadian prison when it was convened in Cowansville Institution – with 16 participants (8 inmates and 8 volunteers from the community). This was such a

successful event that Communitas went on to hold other CBWs in other prisons and in the Community – many of them led by Margaret.

Ever compassionate and caring, Margaret was greatly loved by the many men she encountered on the inside. During the time when she was no longer able to attend Chapel activities we were frequently asked about her, her health and whether there was any chance of her returning. She cared deeply about the men we met and followed over the years and this was reciprocated long after these men left incarceration and returned to society.

Communitas mourns the passing of Margaret and offers our condolences to her children and their families.

May she rest in Peace



The 10-day journey within: a meditation boot camp.

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A few weeks ago, I came to a fork in the road of life, and time – oddly rare and generous – presented itself. I decided to take the leap and sign up, not knowing exactly what I was getting into. With retrospect, none of us – nearly one hundred strangers arriving that day – had the faintest idea what we were about to endure.

Just a few minutes off Highway 50, tucked into a tranquil pocket of forest, stands a former residential school now repurposed into a live-in meditation center. You are greeted by smiling faces and led through an array of steps for intake. There is no mysticism in its presentation: no statues of idols, no frescoes of saints, no incense, and no gift shop with trinkets and t-shirts.

Instead, visitors are met with simplicity – clean dormitories, efficient organization, and an immediate surrender of the outside world. Phones, books, notebooks, even pens are relinquished upon arrival. Distractions, we are told, will only stand in the way of where we are going.

Men and women are separated early on. I found myself seated at a table with seven others – this would be where I ate for the duration of the stay. We exchanged polite introductions with a few tentative smiles – these would be our final words for the next ten days. Once the course starts, one must respect the principle of “Noble Silence”: no speaking, no gestures, no eye contact. Communications with your fellow meditators, in any form, is suspended.

That very evening, the work begins. Vipassana (which means seeing things as they truly are) is a technique over 2,500 years old that originated in India. It was

said that Buddha himself taught his disciples this path, which ultimately could lead to enlightenment. For the duration of these ten days, we are asked to willfully accept the teachings in order to give them a fair trial – and only then judge whether we accept them. Sounds reasonable, right? Well, here we go!

For the benefit of our readers who might want to try it themselves, I will leave a veil on the nature of these techniques. What makes this path unique is that each person has to experience the effects themselves to truly feel the benefit of these teachings. Unlike other religions or ceremonies, one is not asked to make a leap of faith or accept dogmas before reaping benefits.

Experience replaces faith: what you see and feel will pave your own path.

Like the repetitive drills in *The Karate Kid*—the now-famous “wax on, wax off”—the technique reveals itself gradually. We are given teachings at night to be practiced throughout the next day. And only at the end of that day do we get a recap of what we’ve accomplished and how it fits into the teachings of the next day.

And like *The Karate Kid*, we worked very, very hard: we’d meditate for over eleven hours a day! Our monkey minds make this quite the daunting task: my brain wasn’t used to living without distractions and even less to thinking in such a focused and linear way. Nor was I used to sitting still for hours: my body sending me signals of aches and discomfort.

Progress is subtle, almost imperceptible at first. But over time, the mind begins to shift. What once felt unbearable becomes manageable. What seemed chaotic grows quieter, more ordered.

Even discomfort takes on a new role—not as an obstacle, but as part of the process.

Between practice sessions, one could

take a stroll in the woods and appreciate nature. Meals are delicious. Needs are met, if modestly. Some chose to leave before completing the course — at my table, seven men became four — but most remain, pressing forward in silence. Notably, the entire experience is offered free of charge. We, as monks, live in humility off the generosity of others.

So what, ultimately, is gained from ten days of silence, discipline, and inward scrutiny? That answer is deliberately withheld.

Because the essence of the experience resists explanation. It cannot be handed down, summarized, or neatly packaged. It must be lived.

But if a hint can be offered, it is this: whatever inner truth emerges at the end of those ten days, it belongs neither to the body nor to the mind.

By Nicolas

For more information, please visit:

<https://suttama.dhamma.org/>

Or write:

Vipassana Foundation
810 Côte Azélie,
Notre-Dame-de-Bonsecours,
Montebello, Québec, J0V 1L0



For the latest news and activities at Communitas, between editions of the Sou’Wester, visit our Facebook page at:

<https://www.facebook.com/communitasmontreal/>

Trapped in the Past

Snap quiz. Dear Readers, name the Commissioner's Directive which creates the state's obligation to rehabilitate federal prisoners and prepare them for social reintegration.

Right you are, keeners, trick question—forget the CDs. CSC's duty is no flimsy offspring of penological policy but the will of Parliament, the law of the land, firmly anchored in statute and only then explored further in the Service's welter of national directives.

A binding responsibility in this regard is discovered already at the sentencing stage, where the Criminal Code's guidelines establish the desire “to assist in rehabilitating offenders” as one of the available rationales for the court's sentencing decisions. (s.718(d)) The Corrections and Conditional Release Act takes it from there. Section 3 proclaims that the correctional system's purpose is “to contribute to the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society by (b) assisting the rehabilitation of offenders and their reintegration into the community as law-abiding citizens through the provision of programs in penitentiaries and in the community.” Section 5 has a more directive flavour, advising CSC that it is responsible for “(b) the provision of programs that contribute to the rehabilitation of offenders and to their successful reintegration into the community; [and] (c) the preparation of inmates for release....”

CCRA s.4(c.2) brings the duty into sharper focus with its declaration that “the Service ensures the effective delivery of programs to offenders, including correctional, educational, vocational training and volunteer programs, with a view to improving access to alternatives to custody in a penitentiary and to promoting rehabilitation...”

One detects, particularly in s.4, Parliament's premise that it is through the provision of correctional, educational, vocational, and volunteer programs that the

ends of rehabilitation and reintegration will be achieved—why else force CSC to direct its publicly funded limited resources to the listed activities; while conversely, denial of those programs is understood to auger longer periods of incarceration and higher levels of recidivism.

Indeed, what agency or group, professional or volunteer, with an interest in the salutary work of social reintegration would deny that offenders' post-release success or failure is tied to the capabilities they are permitted to develop to follow the beat of free society: find housing and employment, meet their financial obligations, secure treatment for their physical and mental health needs, create ties with ordinary citizens, follow developments

CSC's policy and practice thwarts self-directed learning and general acquisition of knowledge of the world, including every citizen's right to consult the news media, Parliamentary debates, and compilations of the laws that govern us.

in public affairs, share the interests and concerns of their friends and family—in other words, participate meaningfully in the life of the broader community.

The statutory provisions set out above suggest Canada has understood and acquits that responsibility. The reality is quite different, for the entire project is critically undermined by the system's shortcomings in two interlinked areas: prisoners' access to adequate educational opportunities and vocational training; and access to computers and the internet.

Longtime readers of Mostly Legal will remember our focus in 2021 on the dance that goes on as CSC pursues its war of attrition on the shrinking population of personal use computers limping along on life support. Today we shall take another look, but through a wider lens, borrowing freely where needed from court materials filed in John Howard Society of Canada and Ghasan Salah vs Attorney General of Canada, a case we shall return to presently.

The late 1980s through the mid-1990s was the Golden Age, a magical time when prisoners were allowed to purchase and keep personal computers in their cells. Guidelines governing prisoner-owned computers were adopted in May 1996, and the amended CD of 1997 continued to tolerate personal computers, peripherals, and software, with the crucial proviso that they must not allow communications or access to computer networks.

Disaster struck in 2002 with CSC's shift from in-cell personal use to a new model based on computers situated in common areas, typically the institution's library. This came about when, in the wake of myriad incidents of unauthorized and criminal practices, a comprehensive external Threat and Risk Assessment sought the removal of all existing personal computers, video games, and other electronic equipment.

In response, Commissioner McClung agreed to prohibit the entry of additional personal use equipment, but also chose to tolerate what was already present in cells until the end of their life cycle. Upgrading was outlawed, dooming cell computers to a

slow, lingering death, and after 2023, repairing the grandfathered machines was prohibited as well, hastening the extinction of the species.

Any hope of success under the new regime depended on computers being put at prisoners' disposal in common areas. This did not happen in adequate numbers, and the pressures grew worse as the distance increased from the golden years when additional personal computers were entering. As 2005 waned, the Advisory Committee on Inmate Access to Computers recommended that CSC both once again permit purchase of personal computers for use in cells, and increase computer access in common areas for prisoners who would not be purchasing their own equipment. CSC declined both suggestions.

The Correctional Investigator's 2011-2012 Annual Report noted the number of aging personal use computers had fallen from 800 in 2002 to 115. The report condemned the growing disparity between free soci-

ety's pervasive dependency on computer literacy and use, and the prison population's never-growing, ever-fading access. It warned that "without digital skills, tools and knowledge, there can be little expectation for long term success upon release." The 2015-2016 report found the system could point to no more than one library computer per 63 prisoners, with none at all in a few institutions, and a single library computer in four others. The over 4,100 prisoners in the Prairies Region were serviced by one computer for every 114 prisoners. Such equipment as existed was typically obsolete or unreliable and operated on outdated software.

In 2018 the system's failure appeared to penetrate the government's consciousness and conscience: the Commissioner received CSC's first-ever ministerial mandate letter, which called for enhanced community support, and access to education and programming through access to technology, including the internet. If that bolt from Olympus had an effect it was neither immediate nor far-reaching, for in 2019-2020 the Correctional Investigator's special inquiry into educational programming and vocational training described CSC as "steadfast and impervious to expanding or updating inmate access to technology or information behind bars." As for those reassuring legislative provisions we have canvassed, the report observed that the computer resources in CSC libraries were "so far behind the community standard that it seriously puts into question its legal obligation to prepare and assist offenders for release."

In 2021 the Senate Standing Committee on Human Rights took a stab at it, urging CSC to "provide internet access for secondary and post-secondary programming," and in 2022, a second Public Safety Minister renewed the instruction to get it done.

Admittedly, there have been pilot projects—there reportedly is one now at Bath Institution. In 2020, CSC launched a digital education pilot project which has allowed some prisoners in some institutions limited digital education material. Another amendment in 2023 created a cautious prospect of pursuing formal education or a work assignment on a CSC computer when approved by the IT Security Direc-

tor. If all of this sounds woefully haphazard and inadequate, it is.

The low-tech drag on rehabilitation and reintegration finds its complement on the educational and vocational front. The governing CD identifies Adult Basic Education (i.e. grades 1 to 12) as the priority, while allowing but not requiring CSC to provide or authorize further opportunities "as needed." Access to high school courses is consequently spotty and undependable. Vocational training is offered on a restricted basis to those who meet a number of eligibility requirements, most notably, that they are close to their release eligibility date on a sentence no longer than four years. The credentials earned thereby are but entry-level certificates which generally do not qualify the released prisoner for immediate employment.

As for post-secondary education, prisoners must locate an available institution outside the Service and pay their own way. Yet even with permission on paper to pursue academic and professional ambitions, prisoners are stymied by CSC's miserly library resources and technological stagnation. With no or limited computer access, prisoners are unable to do research and complete written assignments. More important still, as the Correctional Investigator observed in 2019-2020, few Canadian college and university courses still were being offered through paper-based correspondence courses, and six years on, society has convincingly moved online, leaving federal prisoners trapped in the past.

CSC's policy and practice thwarts self-directed learning and general acquisition of knowledge of the world, including every citizen's right to consult the news media, Parliamentary debates, and compilations of the laws that govern us. Attempts to research, draft, and file legal challenges also are nipped in the bud, especially as legal materials must be identified and ordered with the assistance of a prison librarian.

And let's not kid ourselves. If security concerns real and imagined were not handcuffing access to needed technology, CSC's tepid commitment to education and training would still earn a failing grade. As if proof were lacking, witness the scandalous betrayal of its mission earlier this year when it cut all thirty-one

librarian positions, a move described in an open public letter to the Minister as "a sweeping and regressive dismantling of rehabilitative infrastructure." The Quebec Regional office, for its part, blessed with a college stubbornly willing to maintain provision of in-person post-secondary courses, has been quietly scaling these back since 2010; and as of June 30 2026, the sole surviving CEGEP Marie-Victorin courses will be shut down, deserting students at Cowansville and Joliette in mid-program. In April 2024, CSC's perverse sabotage of prisoners' futures moved the John Howard Society and prisoner Salah to take bold action on constitutional grounds. A date for the hearing of their application in Ontario's Superior Court has yet to be set. The Orders sought are what you would imagine: access to post-secondary and other formal education, including self-directed study; and access to computers and internet, including in-cell, for educational, vocational, cultural, rehabilitative, reintegrative, and legal purposes, with adaptive technologies to accommodate disability. As the prospect of supervision of its operations by the Superior Court closes in, one is permitted to hope CSC will finally find enthusiasm for its core mission.

Steve

May 2026

Editor's Note: Since the present article was drafted, Canadians' loud and emotional pushback against the elimination of penitentiary librarian positions appears to have been heard. On June 11, two weeks away from the implementation date, CSC Commissioner Talal Dakalbab scrapped the planned cuts, stating that "access to reading materials, information, and learning supports plays an important role in offender rehabilitation, including literacy development, education, and personal growth. This will continue."

Community Building Workshop

March 13 – 15, 2026

The week that COVID shut down Montreal in 2020, Communitas had planned to hold a Community Building Workshop (CBW), the first in about four years. Now, six years after that cancellation, we finally held our first CBW in a decade.

Community Building Workshops are a process-driven practice developed by American psychiatrist Scott Peck, described in his 1987 book *The Different Drum*. If we are to prevent humanity from

destroying itself, it is urgent that we rebuild community at the local, national, and international levels. Peck's Community Building process enables participants to build deep trust and authentic connection. What in normal circumstances might take years instead takes days.

Our workshop facilitators were Louise, Michele and Gilles from the MEC, *the Mouvement vers l'Esprit Communautaire* (Foundation for Community Encouragement), guiding us to build authentic communication, unusual safety, and extraordinary respect. By encouraging silence and speaking only when deeply moved to speak, we end up sharing at an unexpectedly deep level. The surface chatter of

daily life is replaced by a level of sharing that many people have rarely, if ever, experienced.

Nine of us gathered at the Joe Mell House in Verdun from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. As expected, the weekend started off slowly as participants learned the process, and by Sunday we felt the trust and safety of true community, both in the sharing and in long periods of silence.

Our thanks are extended to the participants, to the MEC facilitators, to the Joe Mell House, and to Jean Marc for providing two excellent lunches.



Time of a soul by Kye

Verse. As we sit for a time
Lest we think a thought
So surreal, so sublime
We yearn for a thing
not possibly bought

We wish for more
Yet hasten its passing
To which we're torn
Not fun for teasing
Set in stone
from flesh to bone
Immortal the soul
Rebirth's the goal
For what is at stake
Learn from mistakes

Rejoice the Eternal
The house always wins
Keep faith in your hope
It will help you cope
Only you can forgive your sins

Chorus. If I lived a day tomorrow
Could we live a day today?



Justice Without Accountability: Yusuf Faqiri in Montreal

On April 8, 2026, the SHIFT Centre for Social Transformation hosted a screening of the documentary *My Brother, Soleiman*, followed by a panel discussion with Yusuf Faqiri and Communitas members

Freeman and Doc. The film chronicles the 2016 death of Soleiman Faqiri, a 30-year-old engineering student living with schizophrenia, while in custody at an Ontario jail.

The Verdict vs. The Reality

In 2023, a coroner's inquest officially ruled Soleiman's death a homicide, finding that he died after being pepper-sprayed, hooded, and restrained face-down by correctional officers. Yet, the justice system has failed to hold individuals accountable: only two staff members were fired, and to date, no one has been prosecuted.

57 Recommendations Ignored

Yusuf highlighted a staggering lack of progress, noting that the government has implemented none of the 57 jury recommendations intended to prevent future tragedies. Critical demands include:

Hospital Transfers: Moving inmates in crisis to psychiatric facilities rather than jail.

Independent Oversight: Creating a provincial inspectorate for deaths in custody.

Banning Dangerous Restraints: Ending the use of spit hoods and prone restraint.

Health Equivalence: Ensuring prisoners receive the same quality of care as the public. A Call for Action

"A homicide without a prosecution is a failure of the rule of law," Yusuf noted. For Communitas, this case reinforces our mission: mental health belongs in the hands of medical professionals, not guards.

Watch: *My Brother, Soleiman* on CBC Gem.

Support: justiceforsoli.com

Join Us: www.communitasmontreal.org

By Freeman

A Woman of Inspiration

There are questions that stop you cold. How many mothers share Monique Lepine's reality—the mother of a mass murderer? The answer is thankfully small. A handful. Perhaps none who have walked her exact path of horror, judgment, and isolation. And yet, in that lonely, unimaginable space, she has done something nothing short of miraculous.

I have had the privilege of befriending this remarkable woman, Monique Lepine. The world knows her son's act of evil. But what the world too often forgets is that she is a victim—of her son, yes, but also of a media that fed on her silence, and of special interest groups that profited from her suffering. They wanted a villain. Instead, they found a woman who refused to break.

Why am I so impressed? So deeply inspired?

Because despite decades of judgment, critique, pain, loss, and suffering—despite having every reason to disappear into shame—she chose to hold her head high. Not with defiance, but with dig-

nity. She chose to write her own narrative. To declare, in word and deed: I am a person. I am a mother. I am a woman. I am a survivor.

With her faith in God as her anchor, Monique has faced the world with courage and class that leave me breathless. She has written books. She has done interviews. She has given her testimony—not as a defence, but as a gift. A raw, honest offering to a world that once condemned her. And in doing so, she has done something extraordinary: she has transformed her agony into inspiration.

She has inspired many people. I am one of them.

To know her is to understand that grace is not the absence of pain—it is choosing to rise

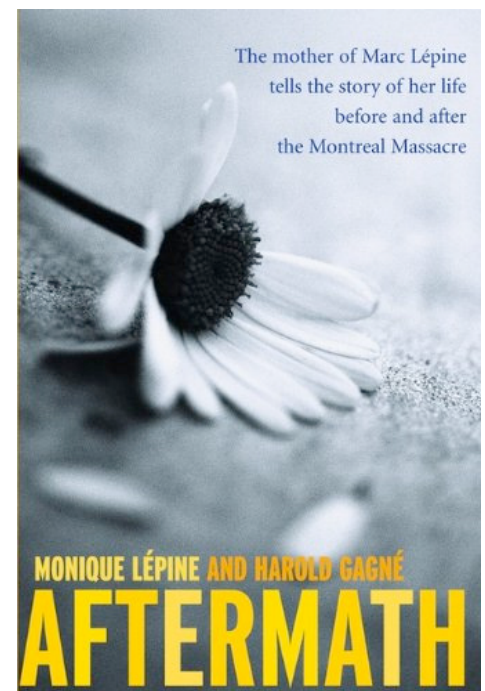
anyway. It is refusing to let one terrible chapter define your entire story. Monique Lepine taught me that victims can reclaim their voice, that mothers can still love without excusing horror, and that faith can hold you together when everything else falls apart.

She is not defined by her son's darkness. She is defined by her own light. And I am

privileged—truly privileged—to call her my friend.

By TJC

www.amazon.ca/Aftermath-Harold-Gagne/dp/0670069698



Letter to the Editor

Dear Sou'Wester

A word about what Tim Smart means to us at Cowansville and to me personally (Sou'Wester Interview - Winter 2026).

I had been forewarned at Reception by Sean, the Buddhist practitioner there, that Tim Smart was an exceptional chaplain. Sean said something to the effect that when he first met Tim at a gathering of chaplains, he immediately gravitated toward him. I may have found that information daunting, expecting some charismatic religious type with a perma grin and an arm always prepared to shoulder you and lead you down the path.

Upon meeting Tim for the first time, that image quickly dispersed - well, the smile may be mostly ever-present, but it is not of the ilk of the Cheshire cat; it is one that generates out of a person truly glad to see you and to be doing what he is doing.

My Mom is in BC, near three institutions. I had planned to transfer there when I first arrived at Cowansville over three years ago. Various things have kept me here (including my PO's failure to put the transfer through). During the waiting, I began getting involved with what Cowansville had to offer, primarily through Tim: His Monday gathering; the amazing Book Club; the service of Yamaska Literacy, which morphed into CHIRP (Children of Inmates Reading Program), and other such things facilitated by Tim, such as the yearly meetings with Professor Jeff's McGill Law Class (Professor Jeff was interviewed in a previous Sou'Wester).

At one point, when two of Tim's Monday Gatherings were cancelled, I realized that I had been adapting to the absence of the Gathering. It wasn't so much a case of "you don't know what you got till it's gone" as it was realizing what I had because it was back again, re-filling our being. Walking back with Pascal, he said something to the same effect - that Monday Gatherings sustain him. I often wonder why there isn't a line outside the door on Monday evenings, if only to get the scraps that fall from the table. In letters to my mom, my aunt, and my

friend, Tim is often included in my writings simply because he is such an integral part of my existence here.

Hope ... can also be very destructive for many men in institutions such as incarceration given all the waiting, changes, and disappointments, one after another (Sacred Connections). I take note when the subject of hope is brought up. In Tim's Circle, it is a topic often broached. There is a Proverb: "Hope deferred makes the heart sick". Sometimes it seems easier if I could eliminate hope for that very reason. Yet I've found that hope gives a vitality, even if that hope will eventually be another disappointment. At that point is where grace can take over to get me through. But in the time preceding, that hope's vitality gets me to the moment where the baton can be passed, as the race progresses to another lap where the other gift of the spirit starts running (are not hope and grace gifts of the spirit?)

by Ray

Reflections on Five Decades of the "New Era": Life Sentences in Canada

I was deeply honoured to have been invited to participate in this year's Annual Proulx Roundtable at the McGill Faculty of Law. As a lifer, the opportunity to sit on this panel and contribute to such a critical dialogue was both poignant and personal. Navigating the reality of a sentence that has defined the last five decades is not merely an academic exercise; it is a reflection on a lived journey that has shaped my life and the lives of so many others.

The event, titled "Life Sentences - Fifty Years of a New Era (1976-2026)," served as a somber milestone marking exactly five decades since the introduction of the mandatory life sentence in Canada. Held in the historic Maxwell Cohen Moot Court Room, the roundtable brought together a diverse group of scholars, advocates, and those with direct experience to challenge the perceived inevitability of these laws. For me, sharing my story in this space was a powerful way

to move the conversation beyond abstract legal theory and toward a more human understanding of the "new era" of sentencing.

The panel featured a range of experts who provided critical context to the reality of these five decades:

Nyki Kish (Co-Executive Director of the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies) provided sociological insights into the specific impacts of life sentences within the Canadian context and the processes behind legislative change.

John W. Conroy, K.C. (Constitutional Lawyer) discussed the legal evolution of prison sentences, including his extensive work with the "faint hope clause" and the various constitutional challenges that have emerged since 1976.

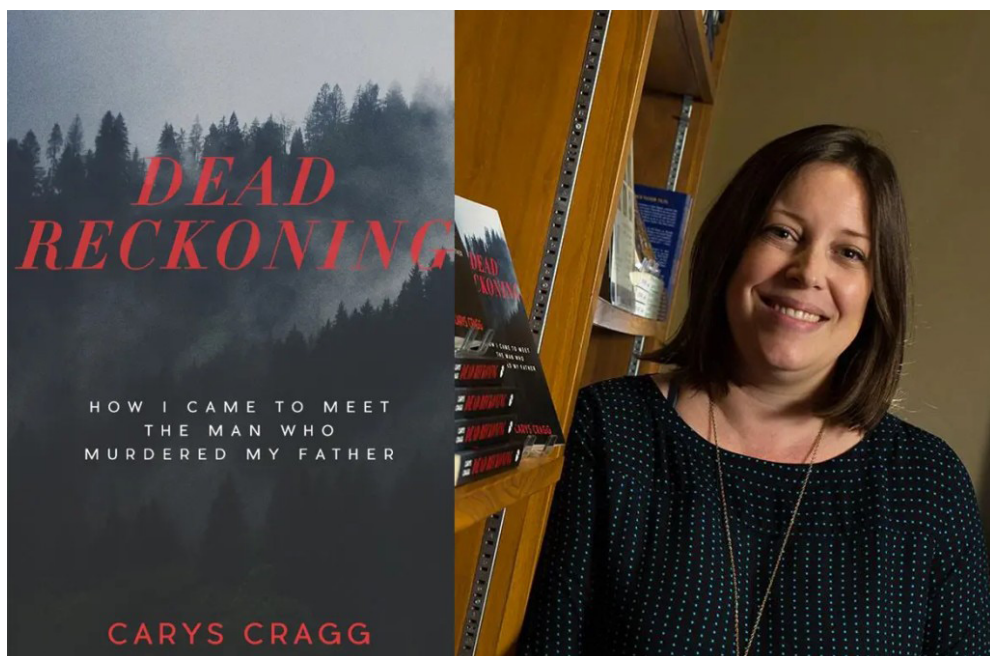
Nora Demnati (Montreal-based Prison Lawyer) spoke about her direct advocacy for federally incarcerated people, highlighting the increasing representation of racialized and Indigenous people serving life sentences.

Debra Parkes (Professor and Chair in Feminist Legal Studies at UBC) examined the carceral system through a critical lens,

focusing on gender and racial inequality and the rights claims of those subject to life sentences.

Throughout the session, we explored how the legal landscape has evolved and changed over the past 50 years; it was a very frank and illuminating evening.

By Freeman



Dead Reckoning: A Restorative Justice Journey

What can you learn from a murderer? And not just any murderer, but the killer of one's own father? Carys Cragg's memoir, *Dead Reckoning*, deals with her journey to unshackle herself from victimhood. She had questions, and the system wasn't providing the information that she wanted. So, she went on a quest.

Carys Cragg, the author, lived through the trauma of her father's death. But it does not end there:

- There is the trial, and the sentencing.
- The appeals and the reporting.
- There is life, sorrow, and grieving after the event.
- There are the whispers and the awkward moments, when people either don't know what to say or don't know how to say it.
- There are people telling you that it will pass — but of course it doesn't.
- The trauma is there. It is real.

That trauma is part of a Restorative Justice story that is worth telling, worth hearing, and worth grappling with some of its lessons.

First remember that the Restorative Justice journey is not just for the offender. It

is also for the victim — both their families, friends, and loved ones, and the community at large. Offences affect all of us.

The author wishes that when this extended community feels pain, they could share it. "Every time we miss Daddy, or want to be near him, or want to tell him something, we could push it. For the rest of our lives. And then that guy would know. Then he would know what he took away." Cruel and unusual? Perhaps, but then again, so is the taking of a teenager's loving father.

Carys Cragg explains, "The system doesn't seem to understand that children grow up and want to know things that their parents may not have been forthcoming about." People want and need a voice. They want their pain and their stories told. Not just in an adversarial and sterile environment, but in a sharing that can be catharsis and healing. She continues to explain, "No manual exists on how to contact the person who ruined your life. It seemed apt, because despite the uncertainty and the risk, I'd never have been one to take guidance. Rather, I liked to do things on my own."

CSC — Corrections Services Canada — does not like people who "do things on my own." They are a "by the book" organization. Perhaps too much so. They have left their humanity behind in a maze of bureaucratic fog. As a restorative justice facilitator explains, "You're familiar with the criminal justice system, as you've been through the trial, and so on. It's governed by retributive justice, where crime is a violation of

the state, defined by lawbreaking and guilt. Justice determines blame and administers pain in a contest between the offender and the state, directed by systemic rules."

He continues, "Here we operate by a different worldview: restorative justice. Where crime is a violation of people and relationships, the violation creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions that promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance."

This different worldview is critical for Restorative Justice. It is at the core of a more healing and nurturing experience — for all, not just the offender. People want and need answers; they want and need to tell their stories. And the current system, by and large, not only discourages that, but it punishes people for doing so. That is not only counterproductive; it is wrong.

Carys Cragg soon discovers that the offender "is a person." He too has wants and needs; fears and regrets; confusion and traumas — they may be different from her own, but they are there nonetheless. There is no getting people "back to 'normal' as though nothing happened. But I strongly disagree with these approaches." Normal is but a myth.

You see most murderers are not experts at it. There are often emotions and fear involved. And "Fear is a very complex emotion. With the addition of drugs and the mindset I was in, the seconds it took to commit this horrendous act was a vicious cocktail that should never have been consumed."

Restorative justice is "a model that focuses on identifying harms, empowering victims, and responding to both victims' and offenders' needs." Dr. Howard Zehr explains: "Crime is a violation of people and relationships. It creates obligations to make things right. Justice involves the victim, the offender, and the community in a search for solutions that promote repair, reconciliation, and reassurance."

It requires brave people to look into this abyss and see light and healing on the other side. Carys Cragg was such a person. We should learn from her bravery.

By Lino

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Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) at Communitas: Is it for you?

Communitas is proud to have introduced Circles of Support and Accountability (COSA) to Quebec in 2000 and have provided more than 50 circles since. COSA matches individuals with a history of sexual offending with a group of everyday community members who are committed to helping you navigate the challenges of life in the community and achieve a successful, crime-free life.

If you are interested in hearing more about the possibility of having your own circle, contact:

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