REFLECT:
Convicts’ letters to their younger selves
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.”

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Dear Bob,

In the first few months after graduation in 69, you allowed various job opportunities to slip through your fingers. Any of you had the potential to be a career, most notably a career in the Canadian M.C. or equivalent to the F.B.I. here in the USA. I thought 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, if 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 overnite 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 spiral 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 time after 27 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 people. We let drinking and drugs shatter our dreams and our potential future.
bubber jack
41 years old
in for: trafficking drugs
time in: 8 months
time left: 3 years 4 months

To BubberJack
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 tough 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 working isn’t enough. When your using high-end drugs, much more will be expected of you from those so called friends you’ve picked up along the way; how ever impressing them won’t be worth it because in the end when it’s 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, Jacky get clean and avoid the madness because you are good enough to live your dreams and not just have them in your sleep.
Brandon, 
It hurts to be sitting here writing you this letter. Our journey has been tough, it has been filled with pain, tears, and heartache. 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 don’t matter just what’s important right now, there is a bigger picture. You got here because of ignorance, because of a mindset, 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 sit 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 lose 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 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.” (Unknown name). No matter what, always love yourself. 

Sincerely, 
YOU

Brandon 
26 years old 
in for: attempted murder & 
elevated aggravated assault 
time in: 4 years 
time left: 13 years
Ken, 50 years old
Time in: 8 years
Time left: 1 years
Jamie,

There so much that has gone on in my life. So many mistakes have been made - jail, drugs, starving and lying to those who trusted me. The only good thing 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, doing drugs, we knew it all was a real big mistake. People who said we were friends were only 'influence'. We allowed them to get into our heads.

Jamie, Jamie. Jamie, we knew better when we were young. But don't do it any more. We can't blame no one but ourselves. I'm here in this cell and say: 'Some 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 I played little league baseball. But we had so much fun, or when we cuddled our kids, we chose a path that in life was wrong. 20 years old. 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. I see anyone 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 say it tomorrow. Don't do what I did.'
Dear sir, 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 and a very short time. There is so much more to life than drugs and alcohol and the life of crime doesn’t pay. We have tried and done it all and so now years later I’m still asking for bad choices I made in life. Don’t be like me. You can be better than me and avoid the prison systems. You have the opportunity to succeed and realize if you follow your parents advice. I was a runaway and rebellious against everything I was told to do. Tough love is what I’m all about and when we think we can do things on our own. That’s when we fail. Don’t want to grow up behind bars and walls.

Throwing your life away as I did, you have chance in life and if you reach out to people that really care about you. I promise you won’t be a failure as I was. I made many bad choices and always ask myself the question what if? What if I had stayed in school? What if I had of made better choices? What if I had of said no to drugs and alcohol? What if I had of held to my parents. Oh and I could have lived a better life and avoided prison. You get that chance being a young boy with what life ahead of you. Are you yourself what is it you want for your life? What makes you happy? Whatever that happiness may be you promise you’re much better than being locked up in prison a world filled with sadness and darkness from being away from family and loved ones. Yes I believe that so many people do you just have to believe in yourself. You can do whatever you set your heart to. Just follow my footsteps. I promise you if its no like you want to live, my advice is to you would be to stay in school and follow your dreams. Everything else will take care of itself.

Best wishes,

[Signature]

7-9-13

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Pork Chop
44 years old
In for: murder
Time in: 23 years
Time left: 4.5 years
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 school activities. As the summer season comes 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 work in the road and I have chosen the wrong way. I choose to steal this guy’s stuff and get caught. I received six months in jail and since 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.
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 just another veteran of the prison system for over 30 years. If you pay attention to me & consider my advice, you just might avoid the 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 recognize 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 conditions, 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 becoming me.

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

It’s great to be able to talk to you, I’m 55 years old now, and having served 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

55 years old
time in: 6 years
time left: 4 years
If I could write a letter to me
I would start by telling myself
that life isn't always beautiful
sometimes it will knock you down
but the struggles make you stronger
and the changes will make you wise.
Make sure you always respect your parents even if
you think you are in the
rite and always 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 than 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 vehicle because it doesn'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 led 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.