



The educational experiences of men in prison

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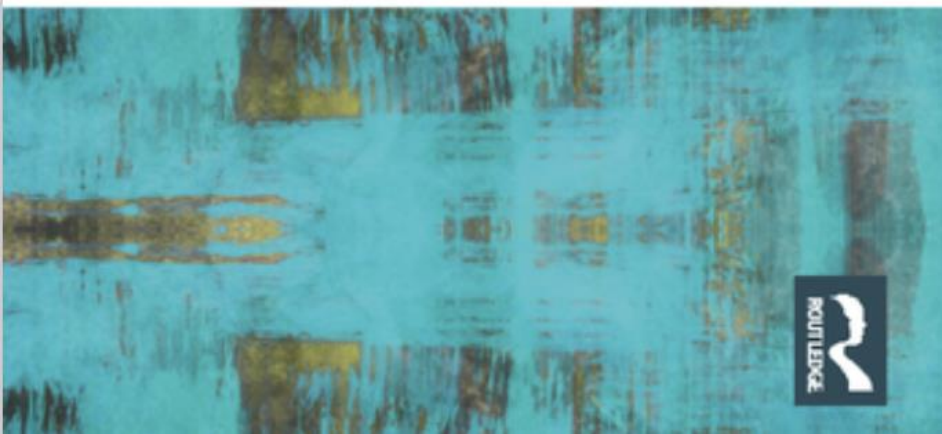


Routledge Frontiers of Criminal Justice

UNDERSTANDING THE EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF IMPRISONED MEN

(RE)EDUCATION

Helen Nichols



Overview

- Education in Prison: A very brief context
- The Research
- Pains and Coping with Time Inside
- Shaping and Reshaping Identity
- Education and Relationships
- Education and Desistance
- Concluding Thoughts

Education in Prison:

A very brief context

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of people entering prison were assessed as having literacy skills expected of an 11 year old—more than four times higher than in the general adult population (15%)

The proven one year reoffending rate is 34% for prisoner learners, compared to 43% for people who don't engage in any form of learning.

Declines in number of people taking part in education in prison in recent years

Approx. 2000 prisoners in higher education - opportunities are limited for those serving long sentences. Prisoner participation in higher education has been estimated to cut reoffending by 20-40%

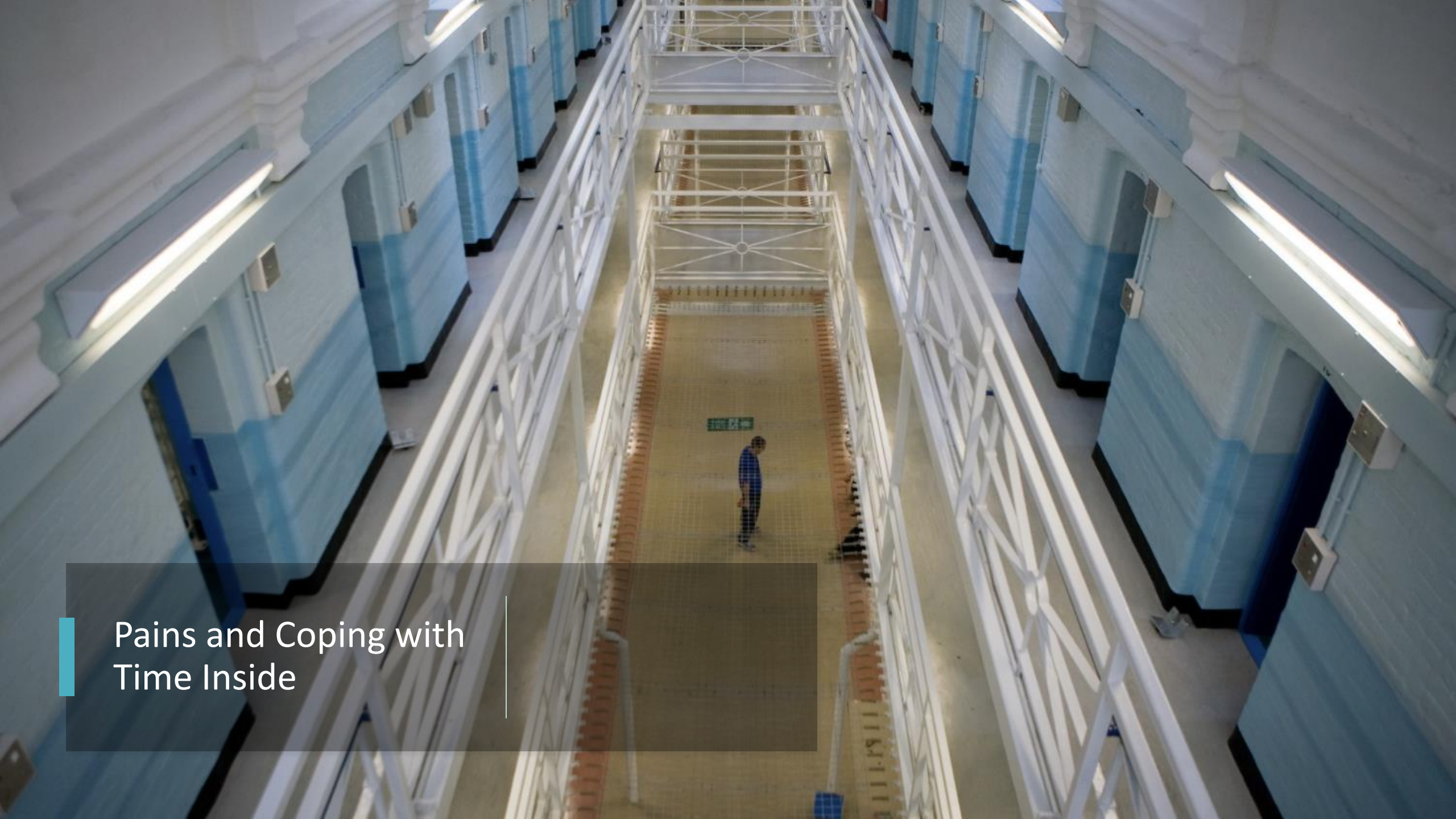
The Research

Understanding how imprisoned men interpret and make use of their educational experiences

- Interviews with serving prisoners
- Interviews with staff (officers, educators, governors)
- Interviews with former prisoners
- Analysis of letters written to the Prisoners Education Trust (PET)

...thinking beyond employability

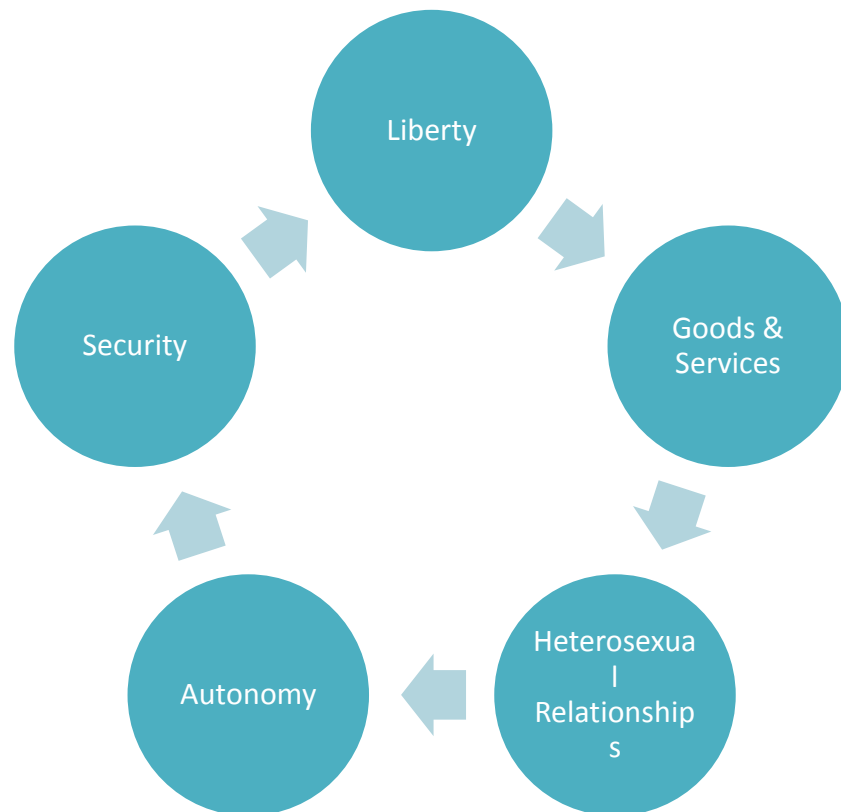




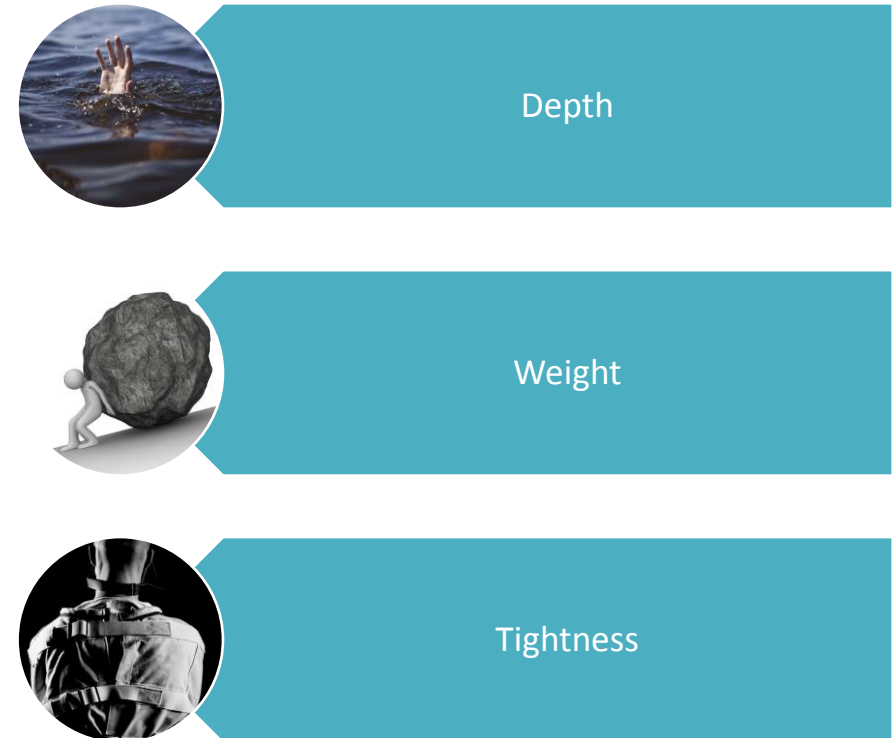
Pains and Coping with
Time Inside

The Pains of Imprisonment

Sykes (1958)



Crewe (2011)



Coping

[the receipt of arts materials] will mean that when I am depressed, I can turn to my painting, rather than locking myself away in the dark. . . I used to really enjoy drawing when I was a child, I used to draw pictures for my mum, god rest her soul, she past (sic) when I was 11yrs old, since then I have not had much spark about life...I am hoping that I can find the artist in my (sic) again...

Curtis' letter to PET

My art has kept me focused and helped to pass the time as well as given me a great sense of achievement.

Jeremy's letter to PET

We are not just forgotten in society, I used to get bored and confused. But I found solace in making things, I made a super harp for my friends who have stuck by me through this sentence.

Christopher's letter to PET



I have now spent over a year learning about and painting some beautiful paintings. By doing this I have managed to achieve things (paintings) that I never thought I would be able to do. My paintings have given me hope and pleasure in a very very grim environment. So much of prison life/sentences is punitive and about punishment that it is very hard to try and stay motivated. By doing painting I have brought beauty into a place where there is none.

(Alistair's letter to Prisoners' Education Trust)



Shaping and Reshaping Identity

Rethinking Identity

- In Norway prisoners are viewed as citizens with a right to education
- In England and Wales, the prisoner is seen as an **offender** whose **risk** of reoffending is the primary concern
- Costelloe and Warner (2014) suggest that seeing a person in prison as a 'criminal' or 'offender' leads prison education to become **too concerned with addressing behaviour**
- This negates learning that facilitates personal development in a broader sense and therefore narrows educational aims, curriculum, activities and methods
- Education can give some prisoners an opportunity to re-forge their identities resulting in a change in their self-perception



Authentic performance

For Mark, his ‘backstage’ was his cell where he was not required to perform to a prisoner or staff audience. Here, he was able to engage with the private elements of his self, part of which involved pursuing his interest in writing poetry. Mark was entirely conscious of the way he switched between his back and front stage identities. Revealing more about his ‘backstage’ identity, Mark spoke further about his poetry writing, which he described as being ‘*a piece*’ of him. This allowed him to protect the private parts of his identity that he had deemed unsuitable for audience-facing performances in prison. He was ‘*very glad*’ that he had good writing skills because it meant that he was able to ‘*write poetry every day which [he] found therapeutic*’. Speaking about his experience of education more broadly, Mark said that education had given him satisfaction and the ability to express himself with a better range of vocabulary.



Yes I am now in prison but in the distant future I would like to look back and gladly say that I took each and every single opportunity that came my way. I would also like to be able to look back and say I have no regrets about letting things go and that I threw myself into everything that I could. So once again, yes I have been in prison but I want that to be only a very minor part of who I am, not the be all and end all of who I am.

Jason's letter to PET



Education and Relationships

Exploring prisoners' narratives about education experiences allows us to understand relationships with...

School teachers

We would laugh when we got caned and would think to ourselves "you should see what my dad does at home, this is nothing!"

Interview with Liam

In his first year of secondary school, he was bullied for being clever, so he "decided to give it up to be the class clown"

Interview with Mark

Prison teachers

I was initially quite fearful and anxious about being in a classroom due to old memories of school and a lack of belief in my ability to succeed...

Justin's letter to PET

We see their human side in education. If you've got any compassion in your heart you've got to have a kind word sometimes...I tell the lads in here that I want the best for them.

Interview with Sophie, Teacher

Prison officers

If someone is wearing black and white, their role is discipline. If I'm in as a civilian I am an enabler for something. The relationship we have with prisoners is different and we often see a different person to those seen on the wings and we're often told that by officers.

Interview with Tim, Teacher

One of the nicer screws helped me to find an education course

Interview with Steven

Family

I believe education is "a gift", for which I am extremely gratefull (sic). My youngest son is studying for a Marketing degree at...University and during a recent phone call he reminded me that we should both graduate at the same time if I get my head down and study hard?! So you see education not only offers opportunities for the future but it also brings families together.

Gregory's letter to PET


Teachers and Officers

- Teachers in prison can project more openly caring approaches in the absence of authoritarian clothing and the requirement to lock prisoners in their cells
- Teachers have more opportunity to see prisoners as people
- Officers carry the burden of knowing the crimes that prisoners have committed making the ability to view and treat them in more neutral ways difficult for some
- Unlike teachers, officers are also present on the wings to witness the masculine masks that men wear, and this can make it challenging for them to understand how men performing in such ways might have the capacity to wear an entirely different mask that demonstrates vulnerability and sensitivity



Education and Desistance





What is Desistance?

Desistance is a branch of Criminology concerned with understanding why people who have been involved in criminal activity consciously decide to stop committing crime.

It stems from work which began in the 1930s (see Glueck and Glueck, 1937).

Desistance or desisting is defined as the point at which a person decides to quit their life of crime (Maruna, 2001).

It is the long-term abstinence from criminal behaviour among those for whom offending had become a pattern of behaviour (McNeill et al., 2012).

Maruna and Farrell (2004) make the distinction between short-term crime free “lulls” (primary desistance) and secondary desistance which involves a more permanent state of assuming a reformed ‘non-offender’ identity.

Education and Desistance

- Although education can be a significant factor in change and transformation, release from prison introduces a new set of challenges essential to the desistance narrative.
- For prisoners who do experience change in their identity and conception of self, the inevitability of stigmatisation leaves some negotiating the reality of living in two worlds
 - one's own and the world of 'the normals' (Goffman, 1963)
- One of the core issues in successful and continued desistance is the process of maintaining these dual identities through a constant process of negotiation and renegotiation of self.





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- Education alone does not necessarily lead to desistance from crime
 - Education combined with other factors including family support and self-reflection can lead to desistance processes
 - Education can help prisoners and former prisoners to create a new identity for themselves
 - While changes occur, there are aspects of identity from the past that remain constant and, in some cases, people are left to continuously negotiate between identities when they leave prison



Concluding Thoughts

The themes presented are important to employability, but they are also important in their own right

Education in prison can have considerable benefits in the immediate prison context, including:

Reduced pressure on prisoners to adopt and display hegemonic masculine traits in safe spaces;

Helping prisoners to cope through mental escape by focusing on a meaningful activity thus reducing the pains of imprisonment;

Allowing prisoners to re-create their identity and cease seeing themselves as a 'prisoner' or 'offender';

Enhancing relationships and encourage the building of future positive relationships with family and friends, building hope and positive connections.

Thank you for listening

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