

# Mend

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## On Caring

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# On Caring

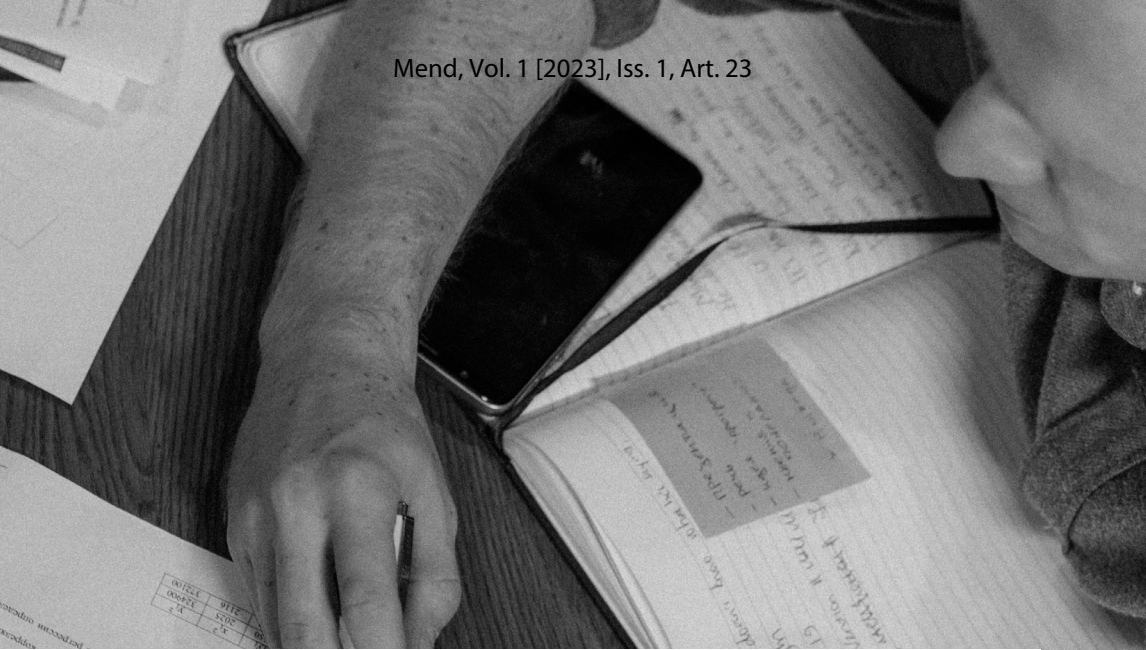
Ronald Short

**W**hy should I care about anything? When I was in Clinton Correctional, I had only one goal for eleven years: to end my life. I attempted it several times—obviously without success. I didn't care about anything or anyone. Why should I have? My family, friends, and society in general had abandoned me. I even hated myself, and I had intense feelings of guilt and shame. I was stuck in a cell with a life sentence and no hope of ever getting out.

My judge was a celebrity—he wrote the book *Carlito's Way*, which became a movie. The media filled the courtroom during my sentencing, and Judge Torres put on a show for them. He was trying to prove how “tough on crime” he was. He gave me the maximum time in spite of my clean record. Those eleven years in Clinton Correctional were the darkest, most depressing times of my life. I was heavily medicated, but the meds did nothing for me. Then I came to Auburn, and things changed.

My next-door neighbor for three years

at Auburn was Sam. In the beginning, Sam had coffee and I had a hot pot. Sam shared his coffee with me, and I shared hot water with him. Sam was black and I was white, but I never saw his color because of how I grew up. I lived in the melting pot called the Lower East Side of Manhattan. As a child in school, I was the only white kid—the rest were black or Puerto Rican. I naturally had friends and enemies based on the content of their character, not the color of their skin. Sam and I began to share other things along with the coffee and hot water. We wanted the same thing—to end our lives—and both of us had had a similar experience while attempting to do so. This shared openness brought us together and made me feel that Sam was a kindred spirit. We shared more as time went on. We had very long sentences with no family support, and we both came to the same conclusion: Life behind bars was not worth living. We spent our days exchanging ideas on how we would be successful on



Layout by Troy White. Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko from Pexels: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/gray-scale-photo-of-person-holding-paper-5686112/>.

our next suicide attempts.

Sam was going to school for his GED. When he failed the test, I thought that failure would end his efforts to get his GED. But Sam went back to school, took the test again, and passed! If our goals were the same—to end our lives—then why did he go back to school, study, and take the test a second time? I have ruminated long and hard about his perseverance; I had a catharsis because of our closeness. I realized that I did not want to see Sam die.

I realized there was a possibility of living in prison and having some kind of life worth living, but I still needed a *raison d'être*. When I heard about Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP), I immediately thought, *this is for me*. Sam saved my life by changing my goal in life. Now my goal is not to end my life, but to extend it—thanks, Sam. I still feel as if I owe Sam for saving my life, but he was transferred to another facility. So now I repay him by “paying things forward,” especially for new

and/or young inmates. I try hard to get them into CPEP or anything positive. I am currently tickled pink that two inmates—friends of mine—will take the entrance exam for CPEP this May. This is what success looks like for me.

Five years ago, I came up with this question: If you found yourself in hell, what would you do? Answer: You start work on an air conditioner! Well, you are in a man-made hell, so how do you start work on an AC? The answer is different for every one of us. For some, the answer is to transform their physical bodies by eating right and doing strenuous exercise. For others, the answer is to study their chosen religion, thereby improving their spiritual life. For still others, the answer is to further their education, earn a GED or a degree, and improve their intellectual abilities. They all have one goal in common: to magically transform the darkest, most depressing time of their lives into an adventure to proudly tell their grandchildren about.