

Cellblocks To Mountaintops Podcast

Episode 4:

LOVE, LOSS & ART

Transcript

Disclaimer: About 8 minutes into this episode there is a description of suicidal thoughts. Listener discretion advised.

Cheryl McKinley: I always loved the idea of pen pals. I had one in high school. She lived in Greece and then I eventually went and saw her.

Host: That's Cheryl McKinley in 2003. She was 25 and living in the Denver suburbs when her best friend started writing to someone in prison as part of a class project. Cheryl was intrigued.

Cheryl McKinley: I had no personal experience with anybody being in jail, in trouble, in prison in my life, you know. I didn't even get detentions.

Host: But she thought writing to an incarcerated person sounded like a good and kind thing to do.

Cheryl McKinley: So, I decided to just start browsing and seeing what's out there. And then I ran across Sterling's ad.

Host: Letters are everything inside. Several websites like Wire of Hope charge hefty fees for inmates to set up profiles and solicit pen pals or legal help. Some sites, like Hot Prison Pals, have clear intentions, but many exist just to fill the very real need to connect to someone on the outside world.

Sterling Cunio: It's exciting. You get some news from the world; you get to feel thought about.

Host: And that's all Sterling was hoping for. When a friend set up an account for him on a site called Prison Pen Pals during a long stint in the hole.

Sterling Cunio: And changed my life. Actually.

Host: Cheryl and Sterling connected right away.

Sterling Cunio: She was smart, and a good writer, and was offering some encouraging words.

Host: They started writing to each other regularly. Neither were looking for anything more than a correspondence or a connection.

Cheryl McKinley: I had stereotypes about what I thought someone would be like to be with somebody in prison. That it was women who were broken somehow, or had some mental problems there, or I guess desperate.

Host: Cheryl was clear with Sterling that she just wanted a friendship

Sterling Cunio: and that held for a very long time.

Cheryl McKinley: And over a period of about maybe six months or so, we started to realize that we were really connecting. That's when things kind of took a little bit of a turn.

Sterling Cunio: Writing is very intimate. You get to share at deeper levels than you might normally do. So, the deeper I got, and the more open I became, the safer I felt, the more connected I felt. And it just grew out of that.

Cheryl McKinley: Once the phone calls started, it was expensive. A 30-minute phone call was about \$25. So, we really tried to limit that to one phone call a week.

Host: Eventually, they decided they wanted to see each other in real life face to face. So, she drove from Denver up to Salem, Oregon.

Sterling Cunio: I was in the visiting room waiting for her. She came out from Colorado.

Cheryl McKinley: The first time I walked in, and I saw him, I was so nervous.

Sterling Cunio: She came in and I remember thinking she was so beautiful.

Cheryl McKinley: First, I was like, oh, he's so tall. And then it took me a while to settle down and actually be present.

Sterling Cunio: Sat down and started talking. And the rest is history.

Host: The relationship changed Sterling's experience in prison.

Sterling Cunio: When I was in prison and in the hole, I felt disconnected, isolated, and desensitized. And it wasn't until I had a genuine connection with another person that I started to think about how my behaviors really impacted other people. I'd have to make decisions and think about how I would impact her.

Cheryl McKinley: Up until then, I'd met some pretty amazing people, but nobody like him.

Host: Genuinely caring about people can offer opportunities for growth, self-reflection, and self-acceptance in a way that nothing else can. Up until now, Sterling had started to change by virtue of getting older and exploring new ideas, developing his mind. But now, for the first time since Mama died, he felt love for another person, and someone loved him and seemed to understand who he really was and who he could become.

From Narrative Alchemy, Sonic Union and PRX. I'm Phill Stockton and this is Cellblocks to Mountaintops. In this episode, building connections from behind bars.

That's after the break.

Host: Around the same time, Sterling and Cheryl were getting to know each other. He received another unexpected letter. It was from the nephew of the man he'd shot and killed.

Sterling Cunio: And he asked me, you know, why did you kill my uncle?

Host: This was now about a decade after his crime. Sterling wasn't sure if he'd be legally able to respond, but he wanted to try.

Sterling Cunio: I'll start writing something in and I'll crumble it up today. Start trying to write something again. Crumble it up a thought away. Up to that point, I've told multiple lies to multiple people embellishing this, this image or whatever, but I wasn't. I wasn't gonna tell him any bullshit. And I sit down to writing him back, and I couldn't answer the question.

Host: Sterling had spent more than a decade distancing himself from what he had done, from the enormity of the pain he'd caused, and that worked well when he was talking to people who only knew him superficially. But he couldn't do that here.

Sterling Cunio: And it set me on a path to where I had to start taking an honest assessment of who I was and the things that I'd done. All of my growth, all of my internal work up to that point had been about me. But as I started to think about them, I started to think about all of the get-togethers that they missed. I mean, they was engaged to be married, that they was going to have a family. She was going to school to be a Christian counselor for at-risk youth. So, I started thinking, damn, who knows who she could have helped. I know plenty of people who had they had the right intervention at those age. I mean, had somebody came out there and got us and put us in a home and, you know, whether we like having to do homework and chores or not, as long as we fed and didn't get beat was in the house in the middle of the night, we would have been all right. Do you know? Because she of been that person for how many people? I've realized that for the vast majority of my life, I had brought pain or some type of difficulty to everybody's life that I had encountered. I had brought nothing good to the world like I was literally no good for the world. Is shattering because not only do I not like who I am, but who I am is terrible. And to feel that all the way through.

Host: He worked through some of this in his letters and phone calls with Cheryl.

Sterling Cunio: That was a connection to where I was willing to open up and face things that I didn't anywhere else.

Host: But he never let onto her just how depressed he had become.

Sterling Cunio: I was in a hole for a large period of that time, and as I'm going through that depression, nobody knows it. I was already isolated. My life had no value. I'm depressed. I felt evil. I'm going to hell anyway. I might as well just end it. I seen absolutely no point, really in even continuing to live. And that became my plan.

Host: Sterling told a nurse he was having problems sleeping. He was having intrusive thoughts, and he was prescribed psychotropic drugs. But he started holding onto them and preparing to say his goodbyes.

Sterling Cunio: I remember thinking that if I wrote people these letters and I told them, and I explained to them that I'd finally got the pain that I had caused so many others and that I was sorry, I felt like maybe they would believe me if it was my last act. I wrote the families of the victims. I'm never able to send anything to them, but I wrote them letters anyway, and at the time I only had maybe a few people in my life that was close enough to where I felt like I owe them an explanation.

Host: He wrote to a couple of friends, his Aunt Mary in Texas, and to a coach he had before Mama died. His last letter would be to Cheryl. But as he was writing, he had a realization. He imagined how much pain he would be causing her.

Sterling Cunio: If I couldn't take my own life because it would hurt those that cared and loved me, the few at the time, and I couldn't continue being the person that I was then. I had to become somebody that I could be proud to be, and I got it, I understood that even if I was guilty, even if I had done tremendous harm, I still had agency. I still had ability in this moment to do something different.

Host: And that meant he'd have to change how he was living, change who he was and his very core. Instead of bringing pain and destruction to those around him, he'd have to find a way to bring light.

Sterling Cunio: If life is inherently sacred, inherently precious, then that meant mine too.

Host: Sterling decided to officially renounce violence, to stop involving himself in anything that could cause conflict or pain. He told everyone he knew inside the prison and out, so that they would stop expecting him to be the person he'd been before. When Sterling first entered prison, he was deeply embedded in the dominant culture there, one of violence and crime. It was the culture he'd grown accustomed to in juvenile prison, on the streets and as a teenager, coming of age behind bars.

Sterling Cunio: When I first got there, I was a target, and so I fully leaned into the violence to establish that I wasn't no target. And that put me at a lot of odds with different people. I wanted to make it very clear that you could come fuck with me, but you better be real serious. I could play the game, right? Like I've always been a good learner, even of bad habits.

Host: Those habits included doing whatever he could to make a little money.

Sterling Cunio: My thing was like, get up, chase the dollar, and figure out ways to make that happen. And because I was good at that, people would always be wanting to cut me end like, hey, I got this, but I can't quite put all the pieces together. Can you figure this out? And I get in. It didn't matter whether it was drugs, phones, slippers, and transactions on the street. Like at one point the majority of my illegal activity was outside the prison, conducted through cell phones. So, there's this whole idea that incapacitation deters crime is bullshit.

Host: That was until 2008, when he was 31, when he decided to change the way, he was living. He renounced the culture of street crime and the violence that went along with it.

Sterling Cunio: It was like I was a new convert. I told people, I wrote letters, man, I read so many books about behavior change. And one of the common denominators was public declarations in all of these different schools of thought. One of the commonalities was how beneficial it is to make a commitment and make it public. Right? I break private commitments all the time. Shit that I tell myself I'm going to do that don't nobody else know about. Them things get broke regularly, right? So, it's like that public accountability thing. I remember I told my good friends Randall and Ben that I'm done. I'm done with any behaviors that are harmful, and I won't be able to eliminate them all. But I can get started right now. I'm not selling no more drugs. I'm not scamming, fighting. I'm not doing anything that's destructive. And they be like, that's cool, that's cool. I don't know what you up to. But we want in.

Host: As part of that public declaration. He also decided to alter his appearance in a sign of his internal change. With the help of a friend, he grew dreadlocks. He'd always wanted them, but they would have cut them off any time he was sent to the hole. But Sterling had no intention of ever going back there.

Sterling Cunio: At first, I thought like, fuck, man, I'm going to be looked at as a sucker, a sellout. But then once I established new ways of being, that's when I started discovering, like, yo, there's a lot of other people that want to do this.

Host: But what next? What would he actually do now that he had completely abandoned his old lifestyle? That's after the break. To see our companion video series and find out more about the show. Go to our website at cellblockstoountaintops.com.

Host: About 4000 people die behind bars in America every year. Many prisons have developed hospice programs in recent decades, and an Oregon State Penitentiary, or OSP. That program is staffed by other inmates. They volunteer their time to make sure no one has to die alone. For a long time the idea didn't really appeal to Sterling.

Sterling Cunio: Too much of my life has been defined by death for me to go get close to people that I know going to die soon.

Host: But there was an activity for hospice volunteers one day. It was a screening of a film he wanted to see, so he put his name on the list, thinking he'd watch the film and take it off right after.

Sterling Cunio: And later that night, an officer woke me up and told me they needed me to sit vigil.

Host: Vigil means that a volunteer will sit bedside around the clock with a patient who was in their final hours.

Sterling Cunio: And I said, I don't. I'm not a hospice worker. He said like your name is on the list. And, and, you can't say, hey, we just did that so I could be in the room. Right?

Host: So, the officer led Sterling to the infirmary. It's a small room packed with 20 beds. Each of them was filled. The room had the smell of unwashed bodies, disinfectant, and human decay. Sterling was led to the bedside of an older Hispanic man who was shivering and writhing in pain, groaning. The man didn't speak English. Sterling didn't speak Spanish and had no training at this point, so he just did what he could. He later wrote.

Sterling Cunio: I simply held his clammy hand while wondering about his story. Who was he? What course through life led him here? Did he have family? What were his lessons and final thoughts? I wondered if he had time to resolve his regrets and make amends for his wrongs. In the absence of words, I became more sensitive to the power of presence and consciously tapped into feelings of compassion, hoping that energy would resonate with the stranger as he occasionally reached to the sky and spoke in Spanish. I wanted to snatch him up in a hug, close enough that my strength and vitality could hold him at least through the night.

Host: The next day, Sterling went about his business. He was training for a half marathon at the time, so he went out for a jog on the track, and while he was out there, he was struck by the privilege of his ability, his health.

Sterling Cunio: There was no way that I could be healthy enough to be outside training for a half marathon and not spend any time helping the sick.

Host: Later that day, the man passed away with another volunteer sitting vigil and Sterling decided to become a hospice volunteer. He went through 90 hours of training with nurses and others on how to support the dying in their final days.

Sterling Cunio: It ended up being simultaneously the most rewarding and the most difficult thing that I have done. I learned the strength and the power of tenderness, and I learned how unequivocally relationships are the most important thing. I know that sounds hallmark-ish and lollipop-ish, but I had no hallmark-ish and lollipop life. And I seen fuckers dying in horrible circumstances and without fail, the final moments are always spent thinking about the people in their life. The ones that had peaceful, loving relationships, they're thinking about how much they're going to miss their loved ones, people that had difficult relationships, they're thinking about the behaviors that they regretted, the things that they said to be. I seen people like spending their last days on earth trying to reconnect, tracked down, find people that they haven't spoke to in decades.

Host: It wasn't easy work. Inevitably got close to some of his patients before they died, but it completely transformed his view of himself.

Sterling Cunio: There was times where I got into conflicts with staff and violated rules to try to help track down or give information to families that were asking questions or at the request of the patient, even though it wasn't in the paperwork. There was a time before when I was a source of destruction and terror at the end of another's life. And to now be a source of comfort and love. That was when I felt like I was doing something redemptive. And that's what kept me doing the work even after it became difficult.

Host: Most inmates' educational, vocational and self-improvement programs require a clean disciplinary record for at least 18 months prior to joining. So Sterling was not able to participate for his first decade in the penitentiary until about 2014 when the door opened. OSP is located in Salem, the state capital, and it's less than an hour from Portland and Eugene, so it has more volunteers, therefore more programs than most Oregon prisons. Lauren Kessler was one of them. She teaches writing at the University of Washington and is an award-winning author. She came to OSP about 20 years into Sterling sentence. At first, her writing group was limited to people serving life sentences or lifers. Usually, an older demographic tends to be more settled and often more cooperative. And Sterling was one of them.

Lauren Kessler: Sterling was, I believe, the only person in the group who identified as a writer. He was just a sponge for editing. He wanted many, many versions of editing, and I was happy to do that.

Host: She worked with them to tell true stories about their own lives. They'd read their stories out loud, and with time they became more vulnerable with their writing and with each other. It was about the craft. But that's not all it was about.

Lauren Kessler: When you can slow down a moment in your own life or a moment that you have observed. That in itself is therapeutic. What really happened here? How did I actually feel about this? Why did I react this way? I mean, I know I said this, and when I type it and hear me say that you're the writer, now, I can examine it and I can say, boy, I guess I was angry there. Where did that come from? And then you put in the backstory of where that came from. So, you're sort of giving yourself therapy as you are writing. And then to be able as part of that therapy, you're visible and you have a voice.

Host: Lauren got their permission to start publishing their stories in the local paper in a column called Life Inside.

Lauren Kessler: I think every three weeks we would use a small piece that I edited and selected, and it would be about some moment of life inside.

Sterling Cunio: She had just come in and teach us about writing. She came in and taught us about the power and the craft of storytelling. And then the craft helped me establish pathways and platforms for my voice to be heard.

(Reading) *Over a dying man stands another who has committed murder. The dying man speaks of his kids and of seeing angels.*

Lauren Kessler: The first piece of writing that Sterling and I work together on was about Sterling's work as a volunteer in prison hospice. Being next to a man named Gus who was dying and watching that death.

Sterling Cunio:

(Reading) *There will be no help for the dying man as the cancer concerns him.*

Lauren Kessler: He was able to tell the story in a crisp way. It was gritty. I mean, the death itself, the disease and what it did to the man was gritty.

Sterling Cunio:

(Reading) *He needed to be turned to relieve the pressure on his bedsores, which had gotten so bad that the bones were visible through his rotting flesh. Cleaning him up, turning him gently, wiping ointment on his open wounds.*

Lauren Kessler: But the impact of the story had to do with empathy. And when you think of someone who has taken the life of somebody else, you think, well, they had no empathy. Yet empathy is everything in that story. It is about death, and it's about hospice, but it's about the connecting to people and seeing them for who they are. And it was extraordinary.

Sterling Cunio:

(Reading) *Gus had helped me to become a source of love in the exact spot. I was once a source of pain after so many years of isolation and apathy.*

Lauren Kessler: It showed that Sterling was an entirely different person than he was at 16 when he committed the crime that he did.

Host: Like Lauren, I was drawn to this work in part because of the nature of the stories in a prison, the naked, raw humanity. But my medium, my love, has always been theater. I

worked at a number of other prisons before, but I'd never taught in a maximum-security facility or worked with lifers. So, when I arrived at OSP, it was a whole different level for me, and it proved to be the best, most intense and productive experience I'd ever had.

Typically, I'll go in, get a group of inmates together, and then try to create a piece of theater from scratch in their own words. But you never know how it'll work. It depends so much on the group itself, the dynamics, how the facility is run, how nervous or open the guys are. A lot of the guys at OSP weren't quite - convinced. I always start with a lot of improvisation. It breaks down barriers, even in a prison, and it allows the actors to take it in any direction they want. It's their choice. It takes vulnerability, allowing yourself to be present in a real and meaningful way. And for guys inside, that can be a difficult process. They're peeling back layers of armor they've been forging since childhood. Many of the men have never had a safe space to be vulnerable for years, or maybe ever. But that wasn't Sterling. He was open and excited and having fun from day one.

Sterling Cunio: Phil came in open, laid back, relaxed and having fun. Creative. We were running through little prompts and doing little silly stuff and I was with it, all the theater games and warm-ups and in the imaginations.

Host: Sterling said the exercises also helped him learn to be a better listener, even outside the theater group.

Sterling Cunio: There was a theater technique - blocking. Blocking is, if me and you were on stage and we're improv-ing, you don't block or resist or counter whatever I say. You just roll with it so that we can keep the scene evolving. So, I say, hey, look at all them purple chickens over there. You don't say, I don't see no purple chickens, right? You'd be like, oh, those ones over there? What do you think they're doing? That concept I applied in my relationship with Cheryl. I applied in my communications with people. Like, I didn't want to block people's ideas. You let them ideas flow. And in a personal relationship as it flows out that communication leads to greater clarity and greater understandings.

Host: Sterling says that theater serves a distinct and important role inside a prison. On the outside, actors often have fun pretending to be other people, embodying someone with experience or a worldview very different than their own. But in prison, the opposite is often true.

Sterling Cunio: Theater just gave us an opportunity to be ourselves and a place to emote and tell our stories, right? Like our shit was based on real-life scenarios and semi-autobiographical for all of us.

Host: For our first major production, the group decided to create a piece on solitary confinement. Almost all of them had spent time in the hole and had very intense stories, so there was no end to the possibilities.

I wasn't sure if we would get pushback from OSP. A prison reform organization was conducting an investigation of the facility's use of solitary at that point and frankly, I thought the administration might not let us perform. We had our own internal challenges, too. Some scenes were difficult to work through and to process. But Sterling, more than anyone else in the group, rose up and took on a leadership role. He'd encouraged them to take risks, support them. He even get the ensemble to rehearse when I wasn't around.

Sterling Cunio: When I'm in the creative process, I can be a little intense. Not mean or disrespectful or nothing, but like, let's do it again. Let's do it again, man. What are you doing? We suppose to be at practice ten minutes ago where were you? you know.

Host: The show was called "The Bucket." Each of the nine cast members develop their own character, and story was monologues about the brutal reality of solitary confinement. Here's an excerpt from one of our performances:

Troy Ramsey: *One night, an inmate chose to end his life. He woke us all up with a loud in Chilling rendition of the Lord's Prayer.*

Key Davis: *My father who art in heaven Hallowed be thy name.*

Host: Sterling made sense of and shared the story of his own transformation. He traces evolution from an angry and disassociated teen.

Ben Pervish: *What about Jesus?*

Sterling Cunio (Warzone):

Jesus, man that cat ain't coming back to save anybody? And if he do, he'd better have on a bulletproof vest. Otherwise, he get nailed again. I hammer him myself.

Host: To depression and defeat.

Sterling Cunio (Warzone):

I'm tired of not seeing the sun. Something in my soul misses the moon. I'm already every place I'll ever be. My humanity is forever stained. Fuck this. I'm through. It's over I'm done.

Host: To renouncing violence and finding his voice.

Sterling Cunio (Warzone):

In these concrete tombs that most call cells, resistance is survival.

Host: We were lucky to have people from the outside come to our performances, including folks from the ACLU and other prominent social justice organizations.

Sterling Cunio: It was amazing. The room was packed. The chapel was packed. We had transformed the back of the chapel, and the whole prison was abuzz with it. And when it all came together and I seen the impact of the people, it was worth it. All of that insistence on running the lines a thousand times all of that does do it again. Let's do it again. You know, it reinforces all of that hard work. And that sense of accomplishment gives guys a sense of self-efficacy. Right? Like we made a play. Inside the prison, about the prison that gave voice to an invisible population. And had it talked about and acknowledged in the world beyond. Seeing that and seeing how that came from support, it came from dedication, imagination, creativity to see you can have that impact. After dedicating yourself to something that was good, that's powerful.

Host: Then one day I received a surprising email about "The Bucket" winning an award. After some research, I found out one of the members of our class had submitted the play. We were awarded first place in the drama category from the national Pen America Prison Writing Contest. Singer and songwriter Becca Stevens came across the script on the Pen

America website. Together with Mexican composer and Grammy winner Antonio Sanchez they put Sterling's words to music.

Thana Alexa, Bad Hombre Band:

(Singing) *In these concrete tombs that most call cells, resistance becomes survival.*

Host: That same year, the story Sterling wrote in Lauren's class "Going Forward with Gus", won him Second Place for an Essay in Pen America's annual Prison Writing contest.

And his relationship with Cheryl deepened, too. She moved to Salem to be closer to him, and they decided to get married. But it turned out that all of this, it was just the beginning.

Soon Sterling would find ways to transform the prison itself.

Sterling Cunio: The fact that people knew I wasn't afraid of violence, the fact that people knew I could carry it out when I started talking about doing things differently. The necessity of healing and the necessity of building peace and the power that we could have in solidarity versus always fightin' with each other. They was listening.

Host: That's on the next episode of Cell Blocks to Mountaintops.

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Host: To see our companion video series and find out more about the show, go to our website at cellblockstomountaintops.com.

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