

A Measure of Joy

Samara Gaev and Jarvis Jay Masters

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Samara Gaev, founder and artistic director of Truthworker Theatre Company, is a Brooklyn-based activist, educator, director, performer, doula, and single mama. Living and working at the intersections of social change, trauma-informed community engagement, and performance, she examines and challenges constructions of power, privilege, the prison industrial complex, and systems of oppression that enable cycles of violence.

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Jarvis Jay Masters is a widely published writer and the author of *That Bird Has My Wings: The Autobiography of an Innocent Man on Death Row* and *Finding Freedom*. His poem “Recipe for Prison Pruno” won the PEN Award in 1992. In collaboration with Truthworker Theatre Company, Masters’s work and life story have been adapted and performed in a variety of venues, including the National Cathedral and the Kennedy Center.

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A Measure of Joy excerpts and weaves together verbatim dialogue, transcribed and adapted from communications spanning over six months in the height of COVID-19 between Truthworker Theatre Company founder/director Samara Gaev, and Jarvis Jay Masters, an innocent man on death row. Jarvis, who has been incarcerated since the age of nineteen in San Quentin Prison, spent over twenty consecutive years in solitary confinement, and has been living on death row for over thirty. Through their decade-long collaboration, a powerful triangulation of healing has emerged between a dozen young visionaries directly impacted by mass incarceration, a survivor of a violent crime whose perpetrator is spending multiple lifetimes in prison, and a death row inmate whose capacity for liberation within the walls of confinement is astounding. Each continues to grow closer to themselves, their healing, their purpose, and compassion as they collectively strive to interrupt and transform the criminalizing and violent systems that permeate our communities.

I open my palms to the sky,
surrendering to my human hopelessness,
that it doesn't despair me.
For life needs no more,
no more despair, I pray.
To turn a situation as bad as mine
into an opportunity
to be of some benefit.
To transcend my present circumstances
To transform everything around me into something almost radiant.
—Jarvis Jay Masters, *Finding Freedom*

JARVIS

I have COVID, Samara.
It's bad. Real bad.
There's no way around it.
Only choice I have is to let it move through me.
It's not trying to make you sick, it's trying to take you out.
This one, this is the killer one, Samara.
You need a respirator, a ventilator.
You need something to keep you alive cause you're gonna go.
It's been bad, real bad.

My neighbor died yesterday.
I had all these friends, man.
Everyone I know who got sick, they're in an outside hospital—in a coma,
on ventilators—
It's bad, man.
There's a lot of mistrust going on around here and it displays itself with
the noise.
And I don't even think people know how scared they are.
And I don't know how to say to them, you know,
“We all have a reason to worry about what's going on
Because we don't know what's going on.”
But I do know, this is not the time to withhold us from our families.
We need to be in touch
And they're cutting the lines.
Phones hanging on the wall
For us to just look at—

Cut off from our loved ones
We need to check on our families.
People are dying.
I had no choice but to hunger strike.
I went 60 meals without eating.
And you know, when I did that, all the symptoms of COVID came back.
It was painful,
But it was necessary.

Samara, I was really really sick. I've never been so sick. I'm still sick.
This particular virus—it attacks your vital organs.
I thought we'd just get sick, and then it'd be over.
But this is the kind of sick where you can drown in your own lungs and
die.
That shit ain't no joke. No joke at all. It's criminal. It's truly criminal.
It's a genocide in here.
San Quentin.
Death Row.

You know, most people in prison—
We have high blood pressure, we're diabetics, we were born with
asthma . . .
Our medical histories are flawed from the beginning—from the first days
of life—
It's systemic.

SAMARA
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It's the architecture of this country.

JARVIS
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It's racism.
Our parents were heroin addicts.
We grew up in poverty.
It's designed that way.
You'd have to look real hard to find somebody in here
Who's a completely healthy individual—

I went to the shower this morning and on my way I was looking at peo-
ple's cells,

And I noticed they still had those red X's.
They used tape and those X's for the people who tested positive for COVID.
And it was like one cell, two cells, and then skip a cell,
Then three cells in a row . . .
Then skip one cell, then four cells in a row . . .
And, for some reason, I was thinking that it was the opposite, you know?
That all the cells that had red tape crossed out on the door,
Were the ones that didn't have it.
I didn't think it would be that many people who caught it, you know?
It was sort of biblical.

My neighbor died yesterday.
Right there in front of me, from the same virus I got.
I knew he wasn't gonna make it. I told him. I knew.
I think he would've been alive if they caught it two weeks ago.
Before they ran outta ventilators.
But he was on death row—and they let him die.
A diabetic on death row.
COVID knew exactly who he was.

All I know is that I have to find my center.
I have to know that all the possibilities are there
And that I'm going to settle with those possibilities.
You know, it's not about avoiding them, it's about looking at them for
what they are.
Then doing the work to figure out what's going on inside.
Inside of me.
I meditate because I need to realign my space.
And, right now, it's keeping me safe.

I'm thinking of you and your daughter.
I hope you're holding her close.
Keeping *her* safe.
That baby girl I love.
She was born in the height of all this.
Masks. Quarantine. Social distancing. Sirens.
But she has you. That's all she needs, Samara. Her mama's love.
You know how lucky she is? To have her mama's love?

SAMARA

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I'm the lucky one. This love is infinite. Potent. Just she and I from day one.

Never would've imagined it this way, but here we are.

Born at home under quarantine while COVID raged my city, this country, the globe.

I'm nursing her as I write this.

Sometimes she slows and deepens her tiny breath with such intention it seems—

She's teaching me, reminding me to ground.

Slow down. Breathe. Find my center. Be grateful.

Do the work of figuring out what's going on inside.

Inside of me.

Like it's you—checking me through her meditative breath—

When I have the audacity to wrestle with “isolation.”

To cling to my attachments to what I thought it was supposed to look like.

I think of my grandmother's war stories from Auschwitz, younger than I am now.

She knew survival. Loss. Adaptation. Trauma. Genocide.

I remember tracing the numbers on her arm as a little girl, reckoning with violence. Hatred. Murder. Forgiveness.

Trying to grasp it all as I traced her tattoo with my fingers.

I think about the days she didn't die by the weight of a trembling finger on the trigger, Pressed against her temple.

I labored in the wake of Breonna Taylor's murder.

Passed through the places in me where trauma still lives from the violence I survived

To give birth to my daughter—her sacred brown body scripted with prayer.

I think about the day I didn't die by the weight of a trembling finger on the trigger, Pressed against my temple.

I wonder what she might have memorized as she moved through me.

She keeps shifting her attention between my breast and this photo of you and me.

The one the guard took through the bars, where our hands are clasped
together
Around a string of prayer beads.
You led me through a meditation that day right there in the middle of
visitation.
Mothers and sons, husbands and wives, children on laps, lawyers—
In a row of cages bound together by a system that still believes in
execution.
*I think about the days you didn't die by the weight of a trembling finger on the
trigger,
Pressed against your temple.*
We closed our eyes and meditated.
Disintegrated barbed wire with our breath.

You told me that was the first time you guided anyone but yourself
through a sit.
Survived 23 years in solitary with your practice.
39 in prison.
My time on this earth.
With all the privileges in the world.
How dare I feel alone.
How dare I ever think I know anything about isolation.
Your phone lines have been cut since COVID came.
Visits halted.

I'm breathing with you, Jarvis.
Like you taught me.
Deep, slow breaths.
Breathing health into your lungs.
My daughter keeps reaching for your face.

JARVIS

You know, I reached my hand to the ceiling today.

I've been in here forty years and I've never tried this, I never understood it.
I just knew the ceiling was real short, real small.
But when I actually just reached my hand up and allowed myself to really
lock that in,
That image of myself—a snapshot of me—a moment frozen in time in my
mind—

It scared the hell out of me.
Because I realized that I'm nothing.
I'm not far from being in a coffin, you know.
Buried alive.
Something I've never felt before,
Something that I've never realized,
Something that I've never paid that much attention to—how low the
ceiling is—
God, it scared the fuck out of me.

Am I living in a place like this?
How can I survive in a place like this?
Why did I do this? I'm asking myself why did I do this?
Reach my hand up, touch the ceiling.

You know me.
Imagine me, who I am, living with the ceiling this short.
40 years, Samara. 40 years.
How is this possible?
How is it possible that I can write a book, 2 books?
How is it possible that my sanity's been maintained?
My whole sanity's been maintained in something like this.
God, I wish I didn't touch that ceiling.
I won't ever reach my hand up like that again.
It's too scary.

An innocent man
A man who did nothing wrong.
On death row.
Almost buried alive.

And you know what?
I can sit down.
I can meditate.
I can write.
I can write books.
With this, with this over my head.
That's fucked up. It truly is.

And I'm sorry I had to tell you all this.
It doesn't sound like I'm a well prepared Buddhist.

I know I'm supposed to have all this experience, you know?
But tonight, when I stood up and put my hand on that ceiling,
It seemed like all the Buddhist in me
—All the time I spent in a cell—doubled, tripled.

I mean. I feel like I had to duck to get in the cell.
You know how you bend over so you don't hit your head on something?
I did that twice now 'cause I didn't know if I would bump my head on the
damn ceiling. Now, of course not. That's not gonna happen.
But to realize that you're living in a cell this small . . .
It makes you wonder if you have to bend over to get in or to get out.

But times that by 40 years.
And then times that by an innocent man
In prison,
Times that by death row,
And then times that by the people who love me,
Who care about me,
Who know I'm innocent,
That they have lived this life with me on death row.

I can't say I hate being here, though.
Because I've learned so much, you know?
Oh, you can hate knowing that I'm here for no reason.
No reason.

My life.
The years in my life, in my thirties are all gone.
In my forties are all gone.
Now in my fifties, a few months away before they're all gone.
I can't get that back, Samara.
I know that. I really do.
And if I ever get out of here, I will not reach to bring them back.
They're gone. They're gone.
And for no reason. No reason at all.
This is my life.

Every year of your life, I've been in a cell.
But they felt like a hundred years when I touched that ceiling tonight.
I don't know how I can take my mind off that.
And I just hope that whoever reads this will understand my fear

And won't think of me as being flawed,
Without purpose of realizing who I am, where I am.
It hurts.

So, whatever I leave people,
I guess I'm leaving them with the understanding that I'm just—
I'm just like everyone else.
Confused. Hurt. Scared.
But not scared of no violence.
I'm scared because so many people anticipate me living without feeling
these fears. Sometimes I'm just living the fear
So they can benefit from knowing that if I did it, they can do it.
I feel like I'm being trapped by that
While I'm holding so many people together.

And whatever I do, will become a part of my legacy.
You think about that on death row.
What am I gonna leave?
What am I gonna write that will stick?
That will make a difference
Whether I'm alive or dead?
It feels like everything I do
Will have a history to it, you know?

But you know what I realized?
I realized that, other than being here,
I'm happy being me.
I'm truly happy to be me.
And so many people don't feel that way about themselves.
I love being me,
Which allows me to wake up feeling blessed.
To have my heart, my spirit—
To have my fears, to have my joys,
And to understand that I can really look at myself with a measure of joy.
You know?
A measure of love.
It sustains me.
It holds me up and makes me feel so lucky.

So anyway, I just wanna say I love you
And I love that baby girl.

Hopefully, before she's three or four, I'll get a chance to meet her and hold her.

I can't wait to hold her.

Send me pictures.

And I hope your mom's doing alright.

I love talking to her.

More than you.

I'm kidding—

But I'm not.

She's special.

I love her too.

Kiss your baby girl for me.

Goodnight.



Samara and Jarvis at San Quentin Prison.