

LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD PODCAST
EP26 LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS PRISON WALLS (PART 1)

Dean: I'm Dean Spade. Welcome back to "Love in a F*cked Up World", where we talk about how to build and sustain strong connections with each other, because our resistance movements are made of our relationships and are only as strong as they are.

Today's episode is very special. When my book Love in a F*cked Up World was first coming out, the Marguerite Casey Foundation offered to buy \$10,000 worth of the book and let me give them away however I wanted.

I have been involved in the prison abolition movement for decades, so of course what I wanted to do was collaborate with Books to Prisoners projects to get these books to people inside prisons for free. As a result, I've had many wonderful conversations with people in prison, reflecting on how the ideas in the book relate to dynamics they experience in their relationships.

One of those conversations has been with Corey, who I met through my friend Garrett, a co-founder of the prison education and organizing group Study and Struggle. Corey, who'd been in prison for almost 30 years when he first read the book, thought it was a mistake that I had not included anything specific in the text about how imprisonment impacts relationships.

Reflecting on my decades of relating with people across prison walls and supporting people being released, I agreed this is a topic that needs a lot more attention. I decided to use the podcast as a place to explore the specific relational dynamics that come up when we're relating with each other across prison walls.

I interviewed several friends, many of whom I've known and worked with in the prison abolition movement for years, about the ways that prison strains or distorts our relationships, how to strengthen and repair relationships that are being stressed in these ways, how to deal with the unequal power dynamics that are inherent to relationships between people inside and people outside prisons, and how to adjust to the new relationship dynamics that emerge as someone comes out of prison.

We had so much material that this is going to be more than one episode, and this is just the first one.

One final thing before we start. Corey was just released from prison, and I got to interview him for the podcast, but the interview was too recent for us to be able to include him in this episode. However, you can hear the whole interview with Corey at patreon.com/deanspade, and there's no paywall. Corey is brilliant. He has amazing, insightful

things to say about feminism and relationships. I highly recommend the interview.

And please check out the show notes for additional resources on how to get involved in directly supporting people in prison, and ways to contact some of the people featured in this episode.

Now for today's episode, "Love and Relationships Across Prison Walls, Part One".

The first person you'll hear from is my friend Etta. Etta works with Let's Get Free in Pittsburgh and has been doing all kinds of grassroots mutual aid work directly supporting people in prison for over 25 years.

Etta: I don't think there is a word in English that can capture, encapsulate, express the amount of missing that happens, like the magnitude of missing that plays out every day in the United States across the prison walls. It's enormous, vast, endless. There's so much helplessness, like to know that your loved one is in pain, has a medical condition, is not getting care at all.

You know, there's of course advocacy and organizing and all of that stuff, but at the very root of just the knowing... You know, there's the, the frequent saying of "the family and the friends do the time", and it's really true. You're in there. You're in your head, you're in there.

Dean: Etta has seen firsthand the importance of relationship building for our movements and for our people inside.

Etta: I believe that relationships are the antidote to, to everything actually. Um, and, you know, you think about what makes mutual aid different than charity and what is solidarity, and for me, the answer is relationships. If you care about, you know, toppling the prison industrial complex, you ain't gonna do it if you don't have any friends. You know, there's no way to do that with integrity if you're not connected with the people who are in prison.

Dean: But prison makes it so hard to build and maintain relationships.

Anastasia: I would say that across prison walls, relationships don't really fail because people don't care enough, 'cause we care, both inside and outside. They fail because the system is designed to make care risky, distorted, and expensive.

My name is Anastasia Franco, and I'm the National Prisoner Correspondence Coordinator for Critical Resistance. My main goal is to stay in contact with our people inside and get our people's voices outside into the real world where we can actually help make change

happen.

Prisons don't just isolate people physically. They actively interfere with how relationships work. So communication can be delayed or distorted or censored. Time gets warped. Misunderstandings can sometimes sit unresolved for months. And people inside are constantly calculating risk in ways that people outside don't have to.

So even something as simple as how someone signs a letter or the language they use to express closeness can be misread when it's taken out of lived context because that's so different than the context that we have out here.

Endjah: I was just talking to somebody yesterday who still, in late January, has not received Christmas cards that they know for a fact that their immediate family has sent them.

And so they, they wrote to the prison and were like, "Hey, can you send me my mail log so that I can find out what happened to these cards, because I never got them?" And then they got some BS answer back that was like, "Well, you need to send us cash slips because we have to make copies, and then you have to pay for those copies, and you have to tell us what dates."

But then how is she supposed to know what dates the mail got here? Because she never got the mail, you know?

Dean: Yeah.

Endjah: And so, it's like that is also a thing where people are just not getting their mail from the prison, but it's like you don't know if you just haven't heard from that person in forever, or if maybe your loved one actually thinks you've heard from them and you're not responding.

Dean: That is so heartbreaking. It's... I mean, every single thing about prison is intentional torture.

Endjah: Mm-hmm.

Dean: But the mail and the phone is its whole own thing.

Endjah: Mm-hmm.

Dean: This is my friend Endjah. Endjah is a Black queer writer and organizer who's been incarcerated since 2020. We've been friends since 2008. We were coworkers at a job when we first met, and then we became neighbors when their queer people of color household moved into the same building I lived in.

At one time, we had the cutest life meditating in the morning at my house, commuting to our job together, grocery shopping together. We put on some very cute parties together. Right now, we get to talk about three or four times per month, and we exchange messages through a for-profit messaging app in between calls.

I'm just remembering a really heartbreaking experience I had. I had a beloved friend who I communicated with in prison for, like, 15 years, and eventually he was released and is thriving, which was so beautiful. But when he was inside, he went through a period of crocheting, like amazing crocheting, and he sent me these really adorable animal hats for all the babies in my life.

Endjah: Oh my gosh.

Dean: And I took pictures of these babies wearing these hats and sent them to him, and the prison wouldn't let him have the pictures.

Endjah: Ugh.

Dean: Like, they all got sent back to me, and they also put, like, staples through the center of them. And it just was like, you know, I wanted him to experience the appreciation of seeing the babies wearing the hats, you know? I mean, it's like, it's just so rough, you know? Like, the ways that, you know, 25 or 50% of our communication and connection just get, somebody... They somehow stop it and...

Endjah: Yeah, because we can't leave voicemails and we can't text to be like, "Hey, this is my phone time," and because our phone times are different every single day. Like, I can't sign up for a 5:00 phone time every single day. When we get the opportunity to sign up for phone times rotates so that everybody at some point has a chance to get a later phone time, because most people wanna call their loved ones, like, when they're off work, when they're home from school, you know? So it rotates, which means that sometimes I might be able to get an 8:00 phone time, which is great because then I can call people in different time zones, right? But sometimes I might not be able to get a phone time past, you know, 10:00 AM. So because I can't call at consistent times, that means people can't anticipate when I'm trying to call.

So most people in here are just calling and calling and calling and calling, and, you know, will call 10 times before their people happen to have their phone nearby and the ringer's not on silent and, you know. It's just an intense kind of vulnerability that we don't have a lot of practice for. Like, nobody involved has a lot of practice for.

Etta: The prison system will make you doubt yourself. So when you don't get that letter or you don't get that book or you don't... Did they really send it? Were they lying to me? Did they keep their word?

You know, it's like when you write a letter, it's like you're expressing yourself, and then if they never get it, it's like, "What did I say?"

Endjah: While we're talking about all these kind of communication obstacles, one thing I really wanted to make sure we talked about is how intensely difficult it can be to read tones and interpret chemistry because it's like, we can't access the same kinds of physical cues. It's like, like right now we're on Zoom, and that's like a million times better than phone or in writing.

But even still, it's like we're not in the same space. Our time is intensely constrained. We're not having a private conversation. Like, there's like 18 different kinds of surveillance happening, and there's so much happening in the background right now. I don't know if folks can hear it, but there are, there's just like people yelling and like, like just staff having... you never know, here, with tone, the staff are always like, have like these angry tones, and you can't tell. Like, just now I thought she was yelling at somebody. She was just making an announcement, but her tone was so angry, you know? And so it's like you never know.

Dean: Yeah.

Endjah: Like, is something stressful happening in the background, or is it just like daily logistics, you know? Anyway, so...

Dean: I mean, our last two calls were ended by lockdowns, too.

Endjah: Yeah.

Dean: I mean, like, just that, you know...

Endjah: Yeah.

Dean: You only get six video calls a month. They are so precious for those of us who are trying to reach you and love you. That's a really big deal to have two out of six...

Endjah: Yes.

Dean: ...ended by lockdown.

Endjah: Yeah, yeah. Devastating, yeah. And just this week I had a phone call with someone who, we had been trying to connect... I mean, we had both been working so hard to connect for weeks, and we finally, finally got on the phone. We were on the phone for three minutes, and then they locked us down in the middle of the phone call because they were coming to take somebody to the hole.

Dean: After we spoke, Etta shared this audio recording of a conversation with her friend Donald Antonio Scott, who has served 18 years on a 107-year sentence in the federal system. He works as a peer support mental health specialist and has been teaching himself and others how to crochet.

Etta: You know, there's just no control over communication. And then on top of all of that, everything being recorded by the Department of Corrections. You know, it's like, people talk about the cop being in your head, like, in different circumstances. But in the, like inside/outside relationships, the cop's literally in your head, in your bed, up in your business, just, like, monitoring.

You know? It's like the kiss at the, in the visiting room where, like, they make you stand... In the federal prison, they have this box painted on the floor with feet. I mean, and this evolved over, like, two years, where first it was, like, COVID and there was, like, thick plexiglass. And then they like, allowed there to be brief contact, like, when you first enter the visiting room.

But then it's, like one kiss, and there's all these rules. Like, it has to be a closed mouth kiss, and these guards are literally standing around you, watching you, and then they check your mouth at the end of the kiss. It's just like, it's so fucking annoying.

Donald: Which is also another barrier, 'cause it's that fear of your family coming up here and, and have to deal with everything they have to deal with, with getting patted down, and getting frisked, and looking in your mouth, and doing all that. Like, your family members are treated as if they've committed a crime because they wanna come see their loved ones. And they're just treated like they next to nothing.

Etta: Remember that one visit that you got up to go to the bathroom or something, and you said hello to another person who was coming from the inside to a visit, and then they canceled our visit? I'm like, how many visits have been canceled? I'm just... I didn't understand that, and so we're going over it right now. Like, one, I tested positive for drugs.

Federal prison automated recording: This call is from the federal prison.

Etta: And they... I didn't even get in. And it's, like, a two-hour, two-hour drive.

Donald: Half of the time you're spending more time on the road than you are on a visit either way.

It's all kinds of things that, to inconvenience the people that's

traveling so far away, so they can turn around and say, "You know what? I'm not going up there to see him no more." And another thing is, is that when you have certain individuals that come up here, they'll turn them away because of their clothes.

And they try to go down and stay down the street at the hotel. And then when you get to that hotel, you're dealing with a lot of racism. You gotta deal with people coming past saying, "Get out of this town," and do this and do that.

Etta: Mm-hmm.

Donald: Which people are not really expecting to happen, but it happens on a regular basis.

It's a lot.

Amber: I'm Amber Kim. I'm a trans woman incarcerated in Washington State.

S.: I'm S. I live in Seattle, and I've been doing kind of organizing around prison stuff for many years, and met Amber in, I think, 2019, so about seven years ago.

Amber: That sounds about right.

Dean: Amber Kim is serving a life sentence. She spent over a decade in a men's prison and was finally transferred to a women's prison four years ago. In 2024, she was caught having consensual sexual contact with another prisoner and was beaten, hogtied, and transferred to a men's prison, where she has been in solitary confinement since.

S.: I'm just thinking about when I visited you since you've been in solitary, and just the way that visiting is so different when someone's in solitary. Like, you know, when I was visiting you at WCCW, we could hug at the beginning and end. But also just, like, I don't know, like, the energetic space between two people that's not separated by, like, three inches of plexiglass is so different. And I feel like there's a way that it sucks visiting you now. Like, I want to visit you, and I enjoy getting to see you, and it's just, like, hard to connect across that glass.

Amber: And then the speaker that cuts out does not help. And I mean, there's a whole bunch of very old sayings that for some reason we only ever say the first part of it, and most people actually don't even know the second part of it.

And the one for this is, "Seeing is believing, but touching is truth."

S.: Mm-hmm.

Amber: And you can see me. We can't touch. So there's some proof of being not just in community, but communing together that's lost.

Etta: Donald Antonio Scott, whose audio I sent to you, he was talking about that. Just, like, the imagining that happens between the walls. Like, in his situation, he's always imagining being a burden and, like, catching us in the middle of something and, you know, like, not wanting to interrupt. So he'd often, you know, get off the phone really fast. 'Cause he'd be like, "Hey, what's up? What are you doing?" I'd be like, "Oh, I'm just, you know, working on this email," or whatever. And he's like, "Oh, well, I'll let you go then." I was like, "No, I was just telling you, like, that's what I was doing right then."

Donald: I may feel like I'm calling too much, or I might be feeling like I'm calling...I'm a nuisance, so I'm not calling as much and I'm trying to, to stay away or, like... But I would call my daughter or my son before the phone call would go, I'd be like, "All right, well, I'll talk to you later. I was just calling to check in." But had I not got that advice from you where you told me that, if, if that what they saying, don't assume that's what they saying because they not talking on.

Because there's a lot going on and me making that assumption, or us as individuals in here, we feel like we being a burden or a nuisance. We, we don't know what to do, so we just like, "All right, I was just calling to, to check in, see how you doing," and that's not our actuality. We're supposed to be calling on, but...

Etta: Yeah, and I think just my perspective on that is, like, trying to understand what's going on for someone in prison. Like, in that scenario, you're imagining what's happening for us on the outside and feel like you're interrupting, so you don't wanna take up too much time.

But then on the counterpart to that, it's like this desperation to get every phone call 'cause you don't know if you're gonna get another phone call, and it might not even be a good time for you to pick up. But you feel like it's so precious to be able to get that phone call, and then you might not be in the mind space to have the conversation that needs to be happen at that specific time.

Donald: A lot of us in here don't really have a understanding of how to communicate. Because what we was on, we, how we would communicate, we was trying to buy you something or trying to give you something. A-- and that's how we communicated. So now that we have these concertina wires and, and, and, and walls between us and, and, and, and it's hard to...

We broken down to, uh, messages and, and writing letters and talking on the phone. We don't really understand how to communicate or how to convey exactly what it is that we feeling or that we going through. So that's a barrier in itself right there. And a lot of times, me, I'ma call, I'ma say something, but a lot of times others just don't have that, uh, that, that...

It's a fear of calling, not being able to say the right thing. I think that trips me up a lot of times as well. When I'm, like I said, talking to my kids or, or to my, uh... I'm, "Oh, I, I don't know what to say," or something. Just saying "I'm calling to check in." I'm, I'm trying to hang up.

Anastasia: It's important to know that prisons distort intimacy. Prison distorts what intimacy is. It distorts what consent is. And romance. I've seen relationships strain or break, not because there was harm or bad intent, because there was no way to clarify, repair, or slow things down in real time.

Etta: It's really hard to fight through the prison walls because it's like, yes, you have that 45 minutes if you're lucky enough to be able to get a video visit, but, like, my friend didn't have video visits, so we couldn't... we didn't have that option. And it's like we get a random 15-minute phone call that we can't plan. You're in the middle of something, you're having a feeling, we're having a feeling. You're trying to talk about it, then it cuts off, and then there's lockdown and lockdown. And oh my god, are they getting medical care? Oh, my god, are they getting beaten up? Oh my...

And then you get a phone call again, and you try to pick up from that two weeks ago. Feelings are different. I'm in a whole different place now. It's just, like, so many conversations are, like, never finished.

Anastasia: I can say what's worked for me in strengthening relationships under these conditions. So for me, it's slowing down interpretation. If you're getting a letter, if you're getting a GTL text or however, however that communication is going, slowing down and looking at it not with your perception or your shades, but kind of, like, maybe looking at it from a different perception.

Dean: Anastasia's advice here about slowing down interpretation really struck me, and I wanted to talk about it with Endjah, who has taught me a lot about checking in with people and clearing up fears and misunderstandings.

I just talked to this really brilliant person, Anastasia, yesterday who spent a long time inside and now does all this organizing work outside. And one thing she said was that, like, she practices...she used some kind of word sort of like 'generosity of interpretation' and pausing before interpreting.

Endjah: Hmm. I love that.

Dean: Reserving judgment kind of, especially with how slow communications are. If you find yourself sort of taking offense or feeling left out or shut out or, you know, just like...and I think that is a beautiful principle. It's quite hard to do, you know. 'Cause it's so easy to have a reaction.

Endjah: It's been really, really, really worth it, hugely worth it to me to, like, just take time to check in. And be like, whenever I feel like even possibly I've missed the mark or missed cues, and I've had the same thing happen with me and my loved ones on the outside. If they feel like they have, like, misread a situation or, like, miscommunicated somehow or, like, missed a moment somehow or... Those check-ins have been, like, such powerful tools, I think.

I have found that, like, even if the other person wasn't bothered at all and actually, like, doesn't even know what they're talking about. And like, you know, like, or, like, remembers the moment but wasn't bothered at all in that moment, that, like, it's just a way to demonstrate how much you care about maintaining a healthy bond. And that those conversations can lead to, like, new insights about one another that actually, like, help you grow together. And also that it can be just, like, a really powerful tool for helping to release anxiety. That, you know, if I'm spinning about something I said or worried that a tone came across in a message that could've been misread or misunderstood or, you know.

That just taking time to be like, "Hey, can we revisit this?" And, like, make sure that everybody's on the same page can do so, so much to relieve that anxiety. And any way to relieve anxiety is, like, you know, great all the time for anybody. But especially for folks on the inside, like, there's so much stress all the time in here, so, like, any way you can just let go a teeny little fraction of it is huge. It's a huge deal.

Dean: Yeah. You know, yeah, we've had some really beautiful interactions of that kind, honestly investigating and really wanting to hear what the other person says. And it just is so trust building, and I actually think it's really rare culturally. And then it's maybe even more rare when we're under stress. And everybody who's inside or has a loved one inside is really under a lot of stress. So I think the relationships can become really tight.

That has happened to me in other relationships with people inside, like where it felt easy to make a misunderstanding. And these relationships, I think, feel more fragile because there's so many things in the way. Like, it's so much easier to...like if, if people on the outside are, feel busy and avoidant and they just don't write

back, or they just don't schedule a call. Or someone on the inside is feeling like quite anxious and easily triggered to, like, "they don't care" --

Endjah: Right.

Dean: -- and I'm just gonna protect myself and shut down. You know, I can just imagine all of the kind of extra dynamics to just the reactive modes that are in all relationships.

Anastasia: I think one of the important things that we have to recognize is that relationships across prison walls are shaped by unequal risk and power.

What I mean by this is misunderstandings cost people inside much, much more than they do outside. Simple things as different meanings and language. Often, people outside have the ability to disengage, and people inside don't know what happened.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Anastasia: Depending on what a person inside may say, or what a person outside may say to the person inside, can actually carry, um, real consequences. When we look at power dynamics, mutuality doesn't require equality, but it requires honesty about power, and we need to understand that.

Dean: I think it's also just, it's a power dynamic, you know. And it's like, it produces essentially like, anxious attachment reactions, I think, oftentimes for people inside. Like, that's what I've seen happen for people.

They meet a new friend on the outside through a pen pal program, or they are newly inside, and they're communicating with their friends outside. And there's suddenly, like, this incredible unevenness that, you know, one person's super isolated, really relying on the people outside for companionship, but also maybe for some material things.

And the people on the outside have a zillion things going on, and they have a million ways to communicate really quickly, and they can get their needs met really fast through texting or something with other people, but not with this person who's got this time lag. And I just have seen a lot of people on the inside just be put through it.

Like, who of us has the resources to stand that relationship imbalance? Like, I think, you know, sometimes people work with it very beautifully and carefully, but it's just a lot to ask of relationships. Like, no wonder there's conflict. People feel angry that the person on the outside didn't do what they said they were gonna do or didn't do it fast.

It could put you in a state, you know?

S.: There's just such an intense power dynamic, right, of being like, you can call me, but I can't call you. And when you call me, I can pick up or not pick up, and you just have to keep trying to call. There's, like, this inherent power dynamic just there, right? And also the inherent power dynamic of being like, at this point, it's like, I have control of a bunch of your finances.

Amber: You and I are at, like, the tail end of intimacy short of marriage for a relationship across prison walls. So, like, you have my power of attorney. If I'm randomly dying and in the hospital, you're the one who decides if I'm donating a kidney or not. Like, all of these things, like finances you already mentioned.

And I feel like we've gotten here largely because you're open to a lot of things, and I'm very careful about not imposing. And I feel like that's also a part of, like, the dynamic that makes our friendship work on like many levels. You know, me being respectful of your time by not calling 50 times to try and get ahold of you is, we schedule a time, that's when I call. I try for like a half hour to 45 minutes, and then I set it aside until you tell me to try again.

S.: But we also talked about like how, you know, like part of that power dynamic, though, forces you to a bit like hyper-track what I'm sensitive to in a way that means that it's like I don't have to do quite the same thing with you. Because, I mean, structurally, I feel like it's, feels f*cked up to say this, but like structurally you need me, you know? And --

Amber: Yeah.

S.: - so there's this huge power dynamic there that's like, I think forces you to, I think, be in a more deferential position. And I also think that we're pretty open about that in our friendship. And I honestly, I do think this is part of why our friendship has worked, is because you're really careful.

I can have a lot of avoidance, and I can have a lot of kind of like, I don't know, trust can be hard for me. And so I think the fact that it feels very clear that you're, like, very careful to not be imposing on me is helpful for me, and I think it's a burden that, like, you shouldn't have.

Amber: I mean, it's also on the flip side, because of the power dynamic, I am forced to be in a submissive, surrendering position to you, and I've had to deal with some of my own shit around that, because that was the power dynamic imposed on me by my parents as a child.

S.: I mean, say more about that, 'cause we never talked about that, and I feel like I'm so, that's something so deep there.

Amber: Well, it's one of those things where it's like I have learned to be extremely independent. Like, there's a level of independence I have forced myself to develop from my childhood damage through to being subject to the DOC's (Dep't of Corrections) bullshit and violence.

And it's really hard for me to be like, I am in no way independent when it comes to my finances, when it comes to my career as a writer, when it comes to just needing some information to be pulled off of Google and sent to me. I have zero independence on all of these different things, right? Like, I literally can't just look up somebody and send them a letter. I have to ask someone to look up somebody and send me the address so I can send them a letter. I'm put in this, like, infantilizing position of submission that I really don't like.

S.: And we've talked a lot about the ways that prison is infantilizing, right? And I think especially thinking about you being in solitary right now and just thinking about the kind of conversations that we had before you were in solitary, and the kind of conversations that we have now. You basically are like, you're kind of zoomed back into being, like, a preteen, you know?

You're like, "Oh, I'm just, I'm just, like, playing Pokemon and, like, you know, studying my Japanese book." Whereas before you were in solitary, you were like, "Oh, I'm going to class. I'm, have these friendships with people. I'm at my job." Like, prison infantilizes you, and then solitary really infantilizes you, right?

Which I think also heightens that power dynamic even more because then it's like that dependency on people on the outside gets even more outsized, right?

Amber: Yeah. Yeah. Because literally, this phone call is the first time I've spoken today. Like, we got on this phone call and you told me that you went and you did your saxophone and you hung out with your friends and you've done this and you've done that.

And I woke up today, I did some very light yoga because I am still recovering from surgery, so gotta be careful. I cleaned my cell, and then I waited for 12 hours to make this phone call.

S.: We talked some about, like, how solitary is kind of like being on an airplane, except obviously worse.

Amber: Yeah.

S.: The same way of, like, when you're on an airplane, you're, like, kind of just killing time, and that in solitary, I feel like when we've talked before, you've kind of, like, made that analogy, and it felt really helpful to me to understand the kind of like...to be able to relate that to my experience.

Amber: Yeah. I mean, I... If, like, if you substitute a crying baby for a 40-year-old man throwing a hissy fit and screaming profanity, yeah, it fits.

Dean: I also spoke with Eric King. Eric spent 10 years in federal prison for an attempted firebombing that was an act of solidarity with the anti-police uprising in Ferguson in 2014. I have admired Eric and followed his case for years, and when I saw pictures of the day he was released in 2023, I was so moved that he was wearing a Protect Trans Kids T-shirt.

In an interview with Unicorn Riot, he was asked about it, and he said, "I got to walk out of prison wearing clothes that represent who I am, so that felt really great." I was eager to interview Eric for this episode because he maintained a lot of collaborative relationships with other activists while inside, as well as his connection to his wife and kids.

Eric: It gives you, like, this impotent kind of feeling to where you're never enough. Like, I got my wife out here paying bills, taking care of the kids, taking care of me, getting books, getting magazines, getting them to school, and I am teaching a yoga class for \$12 a month. I am making one phone call a day, tops.

It creates this imbalance, and that's kind of where the 'you're not enough' comes from. I can listen and I can provide all that, but that doesn't feel like you're doing enough when all the tangible stuff is coming from outside inside.

It's hard.

Dean: I recently was talking to a class of students inside a men's prison, and we were talking about some of my more recent work about relationships and stuff, and this one guy was saying how he feels like actually he has a lot of emotional depth from his experiences of isolation, solitude, and study in prison. He feels like his loved ones on the outside are living these hectic lives trying to survive, and that he could have this kind of, like, wisdom that he can share and support them in their emotional processes that they have, like, less space for in a certain way. It was a really interesting perspective, 'cause I've also heard people say the reverse, that they feel that while they're inside, they have to be really shut down 'cause of the level of violence.

So I think, you know, there's lots of things happening for different people, but I really thought it was beautiful, his experience of feeling like a wise elder. He'd also been in since a teenager, and he was in his mid-40s, and so he was, like, sharing this role he had in his family and friend circle that, I found it very beautiful.

Eric: What they were saying, or at least what, how I'm interpreting it, that's real also because, like, especially when you're locked down, I did seven and a half years in a box just in segregation. And so that does teach you, like, how to work within yourself, and then you can pass that on. 'Cause in the free world, you are just smothered with information coming from every angle, and I forgot that.

You got the internet, you got social media, you got Reddit, you got TikTok, everything. It doesn't stop. And capitalism crushes people, um, constantly worried about everything on earth. When I'm in that SHU, Special Housing Unit, segregation, I'm worried about, how can I keep myself whole? How can I develop my brain to survive? How can I learn to treat people kindly? How can I learn to love myself and others? And you don't really get that in the free world, that space. I mean, that is something that you learn in prison, and it is, it's a hard lesson to learn, but you can. And I think that is important to, to bring to people outside, and I hope that it's helped my family.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Eric: It's helped me.

Endjah: I feel like really diversifying the way that we intentionally seek varied pathways for support in both directions, like I think is so, so, so important. Carceral structures are intensely infantilizing. It's like they really, really do everything to like strip away your agency, right?

And it's like, I could never even begin to calculate like the ways that every single day its captives are like subjugated and stripped of agency at every possible turn. The level of creativity is like, is really mind-boggling. So any practices that like mitigate or like counter that daily violence are like so crucial and valuable. And I feel like really thinking creatively across the walls about like how we can offer one another really varied pathways to support.

So like advice giving and like perspective giving. One thing that's been really amazing for me is people offering me playlists for music. And me being able to offer people back like, "Here's what I'm listening to, and here's why, and here's how it's awesome." For me as a captive, like receiving each of these types of gifts really restores and repairs my dignity and sense of self.

And then on the flip side, like being asked to offer any of these

types of support restores and repairs my agency, which is like one of the most precious things that anyone can offer someone who is reminded a billion times a day that they're property. You know?

Like agency, it's like so critical in all of our lives anywhere, no matter where you're living. But like, it is like the most precious thing, you know, to someone who's locked up. We can be acculturated to think that asking for support is burdensome, but in this dynamic, it's actually the opposite. It's like the hugest gift because it's so affirming and such a huge reminder of someone's humanity and connection.

I mean, another thing that we practice that has been hugely, hugely, hugely important for me is like really explicitly expressed affection. The impact of going without loving physical touch for so long is, to me, like one of the most violent parts of being a captive. Sorry, I think I'm too emotional, and so my words... I lost my words. I don't know if you wanna talk maybe about-

Dean: Yeah, I'll say a few words about it. Yeah. We've brought this explicit practice into our relationship that didn't exist when we were friends on the outside, obviously, where we like talk openly about giving affection. And I intentionally sit and think of you and think of, you know, holding your head in my lap or having a certain kind of hug or being together at the beach, and I tell you that in a message, and you tell me that in a message, and it's like we're caring for each other's bodies even though we can't be together.

And it's true that we've known each other on the outside for a long time, and I have a zillion memories of being around your body and riding in the car with you and being near a fireplace with you and being at a beach with you and you know. But I think that people can do this even with friendships where you haven't gotten to be with somebody physically before. Because I just think it's like very animal that we're able to connect across distance psychically to each other's physical beings in some way. And knowing that you're not getting the physical touch that you need in there and that I just love you, including like love your body so much and, you know- know so much about... I don't know, it's just, like, so easy for me to feel a sparkle in your eye even though I can't actually see it with the way they set up the Zoom. Or to remember what just the shape of you is like, what the gravity of you is like in a room with me or, you know, on a couch or wherever we are.

Endjah: And one thing that's so awesome about this practice that we're, that we have is that I can return to it. Like, if I am really, really feeling like I need affection in a certain way, I can, like, go back and look at old messages that you've wrote. And so you might have created that moment for us, you know, months ago, but I can go back and look at it and experience it again now. And I believe

energetically if I'm experiencing it again now, that part of you is also experiencing it again in this moment.

And so these moments that we create get to kind of have infinite possibilities, you know? The same way a moment that we might have shared when I was on the outside, we can both, you know, have memories of and go back to, right?

Dean: One of the things some people have talked about in these interviews is the significance of, like, when people are transitioning out of prison, having those relationships. And I wondered if you'd talk about that either from your own experience of transitioning out of prison, or people you're supporting since you've been out to transition out. Like, just what's needed and, and what works.

Anastasia: What works is patience. We definitely have to start those relationships while people are still inside because it makes it easier and builds that bond of trust.

Um, they're going to need support. They're going to need sometimes financial support. They're going to need not necessarily therapy, but solidarity and standing in support, mutual aid, helping. You know, "What can I get you? Can I give you a ride to this place?" Talking to someone about finding a job. Stay in solidarity and support them so they don't fall through the cracks.

That's the scariest thing for trans and queer people for me, is them falling through the cracks.

Eric: People forget about the post-prison. They forget that, like, it doesn't just stop when the doors open, that that love changes and it needs to develop too, and it's hard.

Etta: It's really traumatic, I think, re-entering society again. I work with people who have spent decades of their lives in prison, and that's who I mostly know who've come home, like 30, 40, and even 50 years home from prison. And it's like they've said things like, "I feel like I've been dropped from another planet." Like, the social cues mean different things, totally different things. There's physical anxiety. There's, like, getting lost easily, not knowing your way around. Just very overwhelming. So many decisions.

Eric: It's supposed to be like the Fourth of July, like the best day of your life. And I'm finally getting to touch my kids again. I'm finally getting to touch my wife. Right? It's literally been five and a half years, we haven't touched a fingertip.

Um, and it's not the best day. It's the scariest day. It hurts. Like, everything is confusing. Everything hurts. There's the joy, but then there's also the fear, like are they gonna take it away? What about my

trauma? Am I gonna push them away? Am I gonna be shitty? Are they gonna have to deal with me being mean, closed off?

Like, there was a while, like, me and my wife couldn't snuggle. Or there was a while, like, where my daughter would sit next to me and, like, she would casually touch my arm. "Don't fucking touch me, dude. Don't touch me." And you don't say that to them, but it's just like they can tell when you're like... Kids can tell that, and that internalizes in their body or head, "What's wrong with me?" Like, "Why don't they want to hug me?"

And that was really, really hard for me, and that took a level of patience, understanding, and hard work. Once again, it's not just me. They haven't had a grown man living in their house either. And so it's a two-way street once again to where it was hard because I had to readjust to the world, but also the world had to readjust to me, and it doesn't always want to.

Like, people develop their own routines, their own patterns, their own ways of viewing the world, and it might not involve picking up every dish that you want picked up. It might not involve, like, not eating candy in their room. These are things that you have to learn to bend on, and that's a real hard process to, to work through.

Or it was for me.

Dean: Yeah. There's so many dimensions to it. I've really seen people have so many different kinds of struggles. I'm just thinking about a friend who I picked up from prison, and we went to the grocery store, and it was so overwhelming for him. He'd been in for decades, and just the idea of choosing was so...

I mean, it was, it was just one moment. It continued to be hard for years in different ways, and beautiful. But how to imagine what is happening in his system being in this very different kind of building with all this food and being asked to choose some things that he likes when he hasn't gotten --

Eric: Yeah.

Dean: -- any choice in decades, you know?

Eric: That's real. I think people forget that, like, we have constant fight or flight going on in prison. Like, every single day is fight or... Is something bad happening? Is something bad gonna happen?

Dean: Yep.

Eric: Should I make something bad happen?

And then we get into the free world, like, what do you do with all that energy, all that adrenaline, all that conditioned fear or rage or anger?

I had a problem at the grocery store too, probably for about the first five or six months. Like, if someone bumped into my cart, no. No. And also the world's gotten really aggressive since Trump. Goddamn. I was not ready for that. People got significantly more aggro, and so she had to teach me that every single person that's shitty isn't gonna try to hurt you. And that's a hard lesson to learn too, because you're conditioned to think every single person that looks at me wrong has bad intentions for me.

Etta: One of the things that I've learned is that everybody has expectations, whether you're in prison or out of prison, and it's not gonna be, like, what anybody thinks. It's not gonna be, like, what anybody expects. And I actually didn't know I had expectations until after we were, like, in the post-prison experience.

And I'm like, "Oh, I actually expected us to get along really good." Like, "Oh, I actually thought this part was gonna be easy. Oh, I thought it was gonna be like this." And then I was like, "Oh, I had all these ideas of what it was gonna be like." And then it wasn't. It was really hard. And I think the expectations that everybody puts on that...

Because it's like when you're inside, what I've seen, you're planning everything for when you come home. It keeps you alive. It is a survival mechanism for you to plan what you're gonna do when you get home. So it's like your expectations are kind of like your survival. This is just my observation. And then you come out and it's, you, it's just like you, you can't prepare somebody for...

I've tried. You can't. From other people who've experienced it, you try to prepare them and tell them what to expect and it's, they c- you can't understand it till you're actually living it yourself. It's going from a very long distance to, like, if you're moving into the same house, which because of housing scarcity a lot of times you do, it's going into extreme opposites of like relationship experience. And it's just really, really hard. And, you know, just from my experience, a lot of those relationships don't last too long. There's like breakups and a lot of hurt feelings.

Dean: Like you said, it's like a long-distance relationship. How many people do you know who've moved to another country or a faraway city to live with a lover and quickly broken up? Where prison's not even involved. Because it's just a lot of pressure, that transition.

Etta: Right. You mentioned the weight and the pressure of just even like the video visits and like what a relationship and a friendship

can mean to someone in prison. And, and that dynamic comes out of prison, too. So like, for example, a couple that I know who knew each other before the prison got involved. They were long stretch, 17 years. Then the person came out, and then there's this weight of like, she was there for you the whole time. And also, like, you've been through so much.

So those two different dynamics make it hard to be honest and actually get mad at the other person. Like, how can you get mad at someone who was there for you for 17 years? How can you get mad at someone who was wrongly convicted and had 17 years of their life stole? It's like, so there's that.

And then there's, like, the pressure of, like, when it's a public experience, because a lot of our campaigns to get people out become public, so then that relationship has a relationship with the community, which causes other pressure on it.

So that's just really, really hard.

Eric: So my wife, she had two little girls when we met. They were two and four. And so I've basically been their dad their entire lives. When I wasn't allowed visits or phone calls, that was for, like, five years. And so I missed my kids grow up. I missed the ages of, like, six till 11, and that's a full life.

And they're completely different people then, and you're different then. So you have to take the time and patience to relearn them. And sometimes that can be really hard. It can be really hard to understand that this kid is still a kid, and they're not gonna do everything you want. They're not gonna rush to write you a letter every day or send you pictures or even want to talk to you.

Like, they've got lives, and their life doesn't stop because you are inside, as much as we think it does. So for me, and I'm still working on it today, it takes a level of patience and understanding and respect for them, that their life is important and I need to once again meet them where they're at.

You're a 12-year-old girl. You don't want to hear about me getting tortured. You don't want to hear about Jack over here and how he had a knife. You want to talk to me about your annoying friends and how you did a play. And that's beautiful. Like, that's your life, and you're willing to share it with me on that level.

But I think we put too many expectations on kids. I think we expect them to be adults. I think we expect them to have a level of care and understanding that their brains aren't capable of. I think we expect them to be a conduit of us, and they're not. They are little precious things, and the more we nurture that relationship, the more we give

them positive love, the more we show them affection, the more we show them that we care about them, the stronger that relationship can be.

Etta: This is an idea I have, I actually haven't... Any more of my friends come home from prison so we can practice, practice starting new. If it could be like we're meeting for the first time, even though we're not, 'cause we have this history. But, like, I'm gonna be a different person with you now, and you're gonna be a different person with me now. Our relationship is actually a new relationship.

Dean: A lot of people I've been connected to have had to adopt certain narratives about themselves to survive. Like narratives of, like, remorse or narratives as if they d- like, some kind of rehabilitation narrative was required in a bunch of programs they were in or whatever, and they didn't...

It's not true. That's a bunch of bullshit, right, like they had to say in order to get by, but sometimes for years and years and years. And then trying to find their authentic self when they've been forced to narrate this other self to get out, you know, or to get by and then to get out. I also have seen that struggle of, like, is this freedom?

How free am I, and could I tell the truth about my own experience of violence I've experienced in my life, or the conditions that actually led to my being locked up, or how I feel now? It's like a thaw almost, a deprogramming, you know, sometimes.

Eric: And that thawing out that you mentioned, that's serious. That's serious for all of us. Redeveloping your personality and seeing where you belong, that's not a linear journey either. Like, that's like a hurricane of emotions, and I've never heard it called a thawing out before. I've always called it, like, shaking off the dust.

Dean: Yeah.

Eric: Uh, just shaking off all the bullshit, trying to get back to who you are.

Dean: I wanted to end this episode by sharing part of a conversation Endjah and I had about what is working in our relationship. I feel so close to them right now, even though I haven't seen them in person in years, except for one short visit through plexiglass before their sentencing in 2023.

Should we talk a little about what has been working well for us in our relationship?

Endjah: Well, first of all, we definitely have this, like, really explicit concrete agreement, right? We have, like, this agreement that we have a default understanding that, you know, any lapses in

communication are not out of a lack of desire to be connected, right? They are about external constraints and not what either of us would choose.

Dean: Yeah. I think that's so important. It's almost like trying to create security in a relationship that, like, the state has tried to make insecure.

Endjah: Yeah.

Dean: It's like, how can I make sure you feel my love, devotion, and friendship no matter what? You know, and I think us having that background agreement and then also repeating it to each other.

Endjah: Mm-hmm.

Dean: It's like a ritual for dealing with the fact that there will be lockdowns and there will be, you know, whatever. There'll be times we don't reach each other and we're like, "What's going on?" How to still feel love across our connection no matter what's happening and still feel like we can rely on it. Like, it's part of our sense of security in the world for both of us to know that our friendship is there, and so how do we feel it even when there's obstacles?

I think that's, like, very aspirational of course. It's, it has to be practiced all the time, you know, 'cause we're all kind of also naturally insecure in this really terrifying world. But I do think it's meaningful to put that into the friendship-

Endjah: Yeah ...

Dean: and keep putting it in there.

Endjah: Yeah. Absolutely.

Dean: Thanks to everyone who spoke to me for this episode, and special thanks to Kelsey and Hope for the intense editing lift that this project required. Thank you to Corey for inspiring this episode.

One of our hopes for making this episode is that more people will become pen pals to prisoners. If you're interested in becoming a pen pal, find a chapter of Black and Pink near you, or check out other pen pal programs like Power Blossoms, Flying Over Walls, ARC Gender Justice, Abolitionist Mail Project, or Trans Pride Initiative. We'll list these in the show notes.

Also, if you have a friend inside who wants a free copy of *_Love in a Fucked Up World_*, they are still being distributed by 1977 Books. You can send a direct request to Stef, S-T-E-F, @1977books.com.

If you want to share this episode with friends inside, there are two ways. Some people have been able to download the podcast through prison tablet music and podcast platforms. For those who can't, we've made a special version of the transcript that we hope will be easier and cheaper to print and mail than a typical transcript. You can find the link in the show notes.

Thank you for joining me for the latest episode of "Love in a F*cked Up World". This podcast is based on my book of the same name, which is out now from Algonquin Press. I hope you'll pick it up from an independent bookstore in your community. Please do not buy it from Amazon or Audible. It is also free on the Anarchist Library website.

"Love in a F*cked Up World" is hosted by me, Dean Spade. It is produced and edited by Hope Dector. This special episode was also produced by Kelsey Kitske. Our creative director is Ciro Carrillo. Thank you to Eugene, Derekh, Lindsay, Morgan, Jessica, Raindrop, Nicole, and everyone else who helped with the podcast. Our theme music is "I've Been Wondering" by The Ballet.

We need each other now more than ever, and I hope this podcast offers tools and ideas that can help us to build and sustain strong relationships and strong movements. I hope you'll keep listening, subscribe, and share this episode with the people in your life.