LOVE IN A F*CKED UP WORLD – PODCAST, EPISODE 30
"LOVE AND RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS PRISON WALLS, PART TWO"

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 part of our series, Love and Relationships Across Prison Walls.

In the first episode, we heard from friends and comrades inside and outside prisons about the way that prison strains and distorts our relationships, how to strengthen and repair relationships that are being stressed, how to deal with the unequal power dynamics that are inherent in relationships between people inside and outside prisons, and how to adjust to the new relationship dynamics that emerge when someone comes out of prison.

Today's episode focuses on building and maintaining new relationships between people inside and outside. In this episode, you'll be hearing from many of the same voices you heard from in part one. Etta from Let's Get Free and _Daughters_ Magazine.

Etta: I have been collaborating with people in prison for over 25 years.

Dean: Anastasia.

Anastasia: My name is Anastasia Franco, and I'm the National Prisoner Correspondence Coordinator for Critical Resistance.

Dean: Amber.

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

Dean: And her friends S and M.

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

M: I'm M, and Amber and I have been chatting for maybe close to a year.

Dean: Eric.

Eric: My name is Eric King. I am an ex-political prisoner. I did 10 years in federal prison for a solidarity act with the Ferguson Uprising in 2014.

Dean: And last but not least, the inspiration for this series, Corey.

Corey: I love people. I love humanity. That's what got me out of prison.

Dean: I was inspired to make this series after Corey, who'd been in prison for almost 30 years when he first read my book, _Love In A F*cked Up World_, reached out to me asking why I hadn't included something on how imprisonment impacts relationships. You can hear my full interview with Corey on patreon.com/deanspade, and it's also linked in the show notes.

We're also about to post more of the interview with Amber on our Patreon, which is a conversation between her and two other trans women who are her close friends and supporters on the outside. I really recommend listening to that. It's not behind a paywall.

I really hope these episodes encourage people to start building relationships with people in prison if they haven't already, and strengthen their relationships with people inside if they have.

Listen to the end of the episode for a list of groups you can connect with to start writing to people in prison right now. At the end of this episode, I'll also share information about how anyone inside or outside can request a free copy of _Love In A F*cked Up World_ for people inside prison, and how you can find a PDF of the transcript of these episodes to send people inside.

One more thing, the videos on YouTube for these two episodes are kind of like mini documentaries, and we're encouraging people to use them at community events. Screen them and get people together to write letters after. This can be a great way to build community around abolition and liberation on your campus or in your local community. Video links are in the show notes along with other related resources.

Now for today's episode, Love and Relationships Across Prison Walls Part 2.

Etta: 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? You... There's no way to do that with integrity if you're not connected with the people who are in prison. Just that simple. Like, you know, and how do you build relationships? It takes time.

Anastasia: For me, relationship questions are, you know me, I'm an abolitionist, so this is where abolition becomes a daily practice for me, not just a future demand. When we're involved in a relationship with our people inside and talking with them, we get to have shared analysis. And then there's times for humor, you know?

We are humans, and we want to have that good back and forth.

Dean: We were talking about before we started recording, I just have to name, was coming up because we have a mutual friend in a Pennsylvania prison, and you can't visit this person because you're already on someone else's list, and you can only be on one person's list in the prison, and we were joking around that it's like this forced monogamy.

But it really is this, like, scarcity model that really is hard for people in prison, 'cause someone like you who's doing this work over the decades may have many friends in each facility, and there's not enough people who wanna drive to these remote places and visit, which I'm hoping this podcast will help recruit some more, but it's very painful to me to see intentional destruction of people's relationships.

Etta: You know, I've been visiting this prison for almost 25 years now, and for most of that time, I was on one person's visiting list at this one women's prison. And she got out of prison, which was awesome, but I was like, "I'll get on somebody else's list."

And then, and this is, like, years later, I'm like, oh, I shouldn't just be on one person's list. But because I didn't set that sort of boundary or, like, that expectation at the beginning, like, "Hey, I'm only gonna be on your list for six months, and then I'm gonna see someone", it feels really, really hard, and I actually wanted to tell her on Saturday that I wanted to visit somebody else, and I couldn't do it. I couldn't even bring it up. I felt like I just couldn't do it.

Dean: The level of pressure on these relationships, it's like, you know, we know that for relationships on the outside, if I'm totally dependent on you because of illness or disability or because we're co-parenting or because of anything where you're the only one for me, that's gonna be hard on our relationship, and prison sets that up so hard for people.

Etta: Also, it's like, you know, there's the hashtag: "We keep us safe." It's like the "we" part of that is, like, the relationships, and if it's just, like, the one, it will just melt down. And, it's just like the key, it's like that network.

Dean: What you're saying is reminding me of this time in my 20s when I was living alone and somebody who a lot of people in my trans community had been supporting who was locked up came out, and she came and stayed with me.

And I, you know, had a full-time job and a million community responsibilities, and she really needed someone to be with her kind of all the time at first, you know?

Etta: Mm-hmm.

Dean: Like, she had to do everything. She had to set up... She had no ID. She had no connection to the food stamp system, so that, like, how to do transportation.

And she hadn't actually been in terribly long. It wasn't like decades, but it doesn't matter, you know what I mean? It's so traumatizing. It was so hard, and I just was like, "Oh my God, I'm doing such a bad job. I'm so ill-prepared for this." Our community didn't have any better ideas than her sleeping on my couch, 'cause that's also the level of scarcity in our community, and there weren't enough people around her, and it just, like, it just always reminds me of how vital it is to try to create a more robust, populated support system.

Anastasia: For trans and queer people, I would definitely say, you know, keeping these relationships, pen pals, and talking to people inside is our way of refusing to be disappeared and censored and silenced. Um, when people are behind walls, they're not with their family, they're not with their community. So by keeping that connection open and that constant back and forth is a way of refusing that disappearance of them.

Amber: There's automatically just, like, giant fractions of the population who I will never develop any type of real relationship with because I'm a pagan, trans woman, nerd, autistic, unathletic. Like, it's just, like, crossing off, like, all of these people that I would otherwise make a friendship with and, like, that is rough.

I might occasionally get a letter and I'll respond to that letter and then I get no response to my response to that letter. Like it's, it's really rough.

S: When, like, writing a first letter to someone who's in prison, I think it's kind of important to be clear what your intention is. And for myself, like, I know at this point, partially because, you know, you and I talk so often and, like, I don't have capacity to have deep relationships with anyone else in prison.

Because having relationships with anyone that are real and long-term is a lot of time and energy. And so if I'm going to go to a letter-writing night, I will write a birthday card to someone. I will write a card of solidarity. I will write something saying like, "Hey, we're thinking about you out here." But I will not write something that's like, "Hey, what's up?

How is your day going?" Because I can't follow up with that. I can't follow through. And so I think that to me, my, my maybe caveat to your rant is to say I actually think it's super important that people write people who are far away, especially when those people need mail in order to show them support or maybe they're on hunger strike or something like that and they just need some kind of like, you know, something to kinda lift their spirits.

But I think that if you're not able to actually follow through with someone, writing a thing that's saying like, "Tell me about who you are" is, it just feels rude, you know?

Amber: I'm not counting the letter where it's like, "Hi, I'm at the letter-writing event and this afternoon I sat under a tree and watched some people play Frisbee and that made me feel, feel really good. I'm hoping that where you are you're able to get some sunshine and fresh air and feel good. In solidarity," person's name. I'm, I'm not counting that letter with the rant I'm making, 'cause like that's the letter that I've gotten from 1,000 letter-writing events over the years. Like, I'm, I'm not counting those.

I'm talking about the one where it's like, "Hi, I'm person, and please write me back." And then I'll answer that letter and then I might get a response and I might not, but like 90% of the time I don't get a third letter. And it's like, okay, this person wasn't honest about their capacity or life happened or whatever, and it's kind of a crapshoot.

Anastasia: I think naming limits early is extremely important. If you were to start writing to somebody inside, you know, it's okay if you only write to them once a month, but let them know, "Hey, I can only write once a month." And then recognize that the time it takes you to write a letter and mail it, if you're still using mail, it may take an additional three weeks or more for them to actually get that.

So those things are important because of how that slows down. And I think for both sides is the understanding to allow pauses. Inside you don't have a choice. The pauses are gonna happen. But to do that without assuming abandonment. But I think naming those limits early are the most important thing. If I can only write to you twice a year, then say it.

No one inside is gonna say, "Well, you're only gonna write to me twice a year, then don't write to me at all." That's not gonna happen. They're gonna be happy to hear from you twice a year, and they're gonna talk to you twice a year. That's the thing of standing in solidarity with our people inside. "Hey, I'm here. I hear you. What's going on inside there? You know, what can I do to help? Is there something that you particularly need? I'm here. I'm here. I see you." I think that's the thing: I'm here. I'm here for you.

Dean: A lot of people are really flaky about it, and this has been a struggle for me for years. I have so many people in prison contact me, especially trans prisoners, for decades, and I can't be personal pen pals with every, with the hundreds of people or else, you know, 'cause I have all this other work I have to do on the outside as well.

And so I'm always trying to find people pen pals, and I'll, like, post something on social media or whatever and get, like, 10 people to be pen pals. And, like, you know, three months later, the person will write to me and be like, "They all didn't write me," or, "They all stopped." And I think it's, like, the power dynamic, maybe some people aren't aware of it or maybe some people are overwhelmed by it, and then they freeze up.

So I wonder, too, about, like, being friends with lots of people on the outside who are also connecting people on the inside and kind of creating accountability by being like, "This is a part of our lives."

Etta: People on the outside have so much guilt. I mean, we are not in the day of snail mail anymore, but I'm a snail mailer. I'm an OG snail mailer. I was a mail artist, like, I love the mail. I also love long distance relationships too, which I feel like prison relationships are kind of long distance, and I'm pretty good at it. A lot of people aren't good at it, and they feel so guilty. Like, I just, like, a lot of my friends not in prison just feel so guilty about, "I never wrote you back," and da, da, da.

And I feel like my friends who are active pen pals also have a lot of guilt, and they're always feeling like they're not enough. But yeah, the flakiness is totally a problem, and we're, I'm always underscoring with any connection, whether it's letter-writing or video visits, like, try to be aware of what your capacity is.

And I know that's really hard, but, like, say, you know, are you writing a solidarity card or do you wanna be a pen pal? Don't say, "Write back soon" if you're not gonna even get the mail, if that mail's going to the Let's Get Free PO box and you're not sure you're gonna get that letter.

Dean: Ghosting is really, really normal out here, and I think it's gotten more so, and so I think people don't, don't get it.

I mean, I just, I just say I'm talking to one friend, uh, in prison recently on the phone, you know, maybe once a week, and they're sitting in an area that I know you've seen where there's video visits on either side. You know, they're, like, in this cordoned area. And they're telling me that so often other people in the prison say, like, a person doesn't show up or they're like, the person's in the video visit with them, but they're, like, on their phone the whole time.

Like, people complaining about their family members just being really checked out for the video visits that they scheduled, the family member scheduled, you know? Which is, like, the heartbreak I have around... I mean, I get it, it's, this is the norm out here. But it's like, it's really fucking heartbreaking 'cause this person has so little opportunity to connect, you know?

Etta: Yeah, keep your word. Keep your word, community.

S: There's also a way that I think sometimes, especially in, like, politicized letter-writing spaces, that people kind of, like, write to people in prison as a political act in a way that I think, uh, kind of makes the real relationship secondary. I came to having relationships with people in prison because of being an abolitionist, you know, and being like, "Oh, I feel politically like I should have a relationship with people in prison."

But that doesn't build a relationship. That's actually, like, fucking weird.

Eric: When I advocate for people to be pen pals too, I try to really stress that, like, you're writing a person. You're not writing someone who's dead. You're not writing an obituary. You're not writing a number or an image, an object.

You're writing a person with feelings and hopes and dreams and loves and passions. And if you embrace that person in that way, you can develop real close relationships, and they can be mutually beneficial. My wife wrote me my second month in prison, and we've been together ever since because she treated me like Eric, not political prisoner Eric, and that played a big factor in, like, my ability to trust, love, and develop our relationship.

Etta: It takes, you know, being vulnerable, and it takes following, you know, not everybody. Just like not everybody outside of prison you're not gonna wanna be friends with, you're not gonna be wanting to be friends with everybody who's in prison. So, you know, trusting your instincts. You know, what is it to be a good friend?

And also, just not to romanticize people like you're gonna be best friends with somebody that you write with. It's just getting to know people.

Dean: I've had long-term friendships with people in prison, some of whom are very different from me, some of whom I'm like, "Oh, we're totally vibing. We both love to read this or that, or we both care about these politics," and some of whom are like, where I'm like, "Let's find out what we have in common," you know what I mean?

And it wasn't the obvious things. In the same way I might with a family member or somebody, where I'm just like, I'm just committed to staying in touch. Or with an elder sometimes, like you, where I'm like, "Oh, we, uh, a lot of my typical topics are not gonna be grabs for you. Well, what is?" You know? And, like, I think there's just, like, something about practicing that kind of integrity in relationships that's really different than a fast, quick, like, I'm gonna find the hottest person in this room and... you know what I mean? Kind of like, it's, like, a little more, like, no, it might be a little bit of, like, poking around. Like, wow, we've got a lot of difference in our lives. Where's the overlap? Where are the shared interests, passions? Like, do you wanna hear about my nature walks? Do you wanna tell me more about your artwork? Do you wanna talk about your childhood or your faith?

Eric: Please don't go into it fetishizing this person. Like, I stress this all the time. I even said to you, like, four times already on the record, just going over. Humanize this person. Like, they have got a unique experience. They were born somewhere. They were raised a certain way. They have their own views. And if you go into it with an open heart, willing to learn, and willing to embrace this person where they are at, not where you want them to be. Like, don't write some person in prison and expect them to be goddamn George Jackson. Like, be okay that they're Joe Smith, and see where Joe's at.

And I really recommend writing letters that have questions. If you wanna start a pen pal relationship, start with getting to know each other. Like, you don't have to tell me every single fucking thing that you did the entire day of your life. Like, I don't need to know that, what dog you saw and what color his collar was. But you can tell me about what you felt, like, what you experienced, what you saw, what you read, and then that way we can go back and forth. We can have a conversation about it, as opposed to you talking to me.

My best friend right now, or closest friend, is Josh Davidson, who I did the books with. And our friendship started from him writing me, and he would ask questions. And then when I responded, he would respond. So it's an actual conversation as opposed to, "I like dogs." "Well, great. I like dogs, too. Who's your favorite dog?"

M: I was just thinking about our conversation, our last conversation, Amber, where you were kind of, like, talking about the daily, the regular and normalized brutality of prison that you experience.

And I was like, most people on the outside, we don't wanna know about it. We don't wanna hear about it. We wanna pretend like prison is, like, something that happens on TV rather than just a few miles, like, from us. Um, and that there are real people that are experiencing this brutality and, like, not letting the structure of the prison prevent us from knowing each other, caring about each other, connecting to each other.

And, like, just how much I've, like, benefited and learned from knowing you and, like, you know, random things I was working on with my show you had done research about already.

Eric: What people, I think, often forget is that we have a lot to offer from inside. 'Cause it does, I think, feel like a charity thing. Like, "I'm gonna do this for you," as opposed to leaving your heart open.

Like, what can I learn? What can I gain? And some people, like the, you'll see, like, the Victory Gardens, stuff like that in Virginia, that's their whole approach. Like, what can we gain from you? And when you do that, it allows you to learn from each other, and that's, like, what the movement's built on, too.

You have your experiences. I have mine. We can combine them and develop and grow, and that's the same foundations for love and respect. Like- You can take a lot from what I'm doing inside. You can see like, "Oh, that's really interesting. I never thought about that," or, "Oh, wow, that's wildly sweet of you." Like, my wife, we were able to do projects while I was inside.

Anastasia: Also, it helps build inside leadership and allows our inside leaders to shape what we would consider outside strategy for, like, Critical Resistance or Flying Over Walls. Getting the words out from the people inside on what we should be doing, what they actually need, is extremely important. Political education flows in both directions.

Etta: Sarita's the co-editor of Daughters, the founder of _Daughters_ Magazine, and, like, I wasn't on her visit at first, but, like, she was visiting somebody else in our group visit, and just this connection of us seeing each other from across the room, doing a little crosstalk, like, made a connection that allowed us to create _Daughters_ together.

Daughters is like, it's a magazine that was started in, was it 2000, I think? We had no idea what we were doing when we made _Daughters_. We had no idea it was gonna be so popular, and it's a magazine started by Sarita Miller. She wanted to do a newsletter because, you know, all of the letters in prison, most prisons, you don't get any mail anymore directly from... like, if I was to send you a letter to prison, you don't get that letter. It goes to a mail processing center that's scanned, and then it's printed out in the prison. So when Sarita had the idea for a newsletter, we were like, "Let's make it a magazine so you guys can actually get it, the physical copy of it."

It started out, it was like 30 pages, and now it's like 60 pages. We have about 50 different voices in each issue. Sarita, who's incarcerated in one of the women's prisons in Pennsylvania, she, like, puts a whole bunch of articles together, picks out the theme, gathers it, sends it to us. We transcribe it. We augment with other articles, and then everybody else who's in, you know, all the other 22 prisons in Pennsylvania, they'll also send submissions too.

So it's like, I kinda think of it as, like, social media a little bit for the people in prison because they get to hear other voices, you know, see pictures of people that they've lost touch with because, like, a lot of our community's long-timers, like, people with life sentences and long time. So that feels really special.

Yeah, and the magazine, we just had no idea what a hit it would be.

Dean: I was so honored when you asked me to submit a short article about the romance myth before _Love In A F*cked Up World_ came out, because, yeah, it's so meaningful to me. You know, my- I spent my life in conversation with people inside prisons as well, and coming out and seeing the stresses on those relationships of all kinds, including love and romance, and also friendship relationship, and also collaboration relationships.

So, it was really meaningful to me, and then very meaningful to me when we collaborated to distribute _Love In A F*cked Up World_ through you all. I'm really grateful, and it's been really cool to see people reading it and, and responding to it.

Eric, I'm curious if you wanna talk a little bit about what, any observations about collaborating with people across the wall on projects. Like, what have you learned helps? What are common mistakes we make when we're writing something together, when we're, yeah, whatever it is we're doing?

Eric: I love inside/outside projects. Everything that brought me joy, except for my family, came from that stuff. _Rattling the Cages_, the book me and Josh put out, that was an inside/outside project. I mentioned Victory Gardens up in Charlottesville, like, that's inside/outside. They reach out to prisoners, and the prisoners tell them what plants they wanna grow. And then that group plants the seeds, and they grow the garden in that person's honor. Like, that's beautiful.

Dean: So cool.

Eric: And there's also the small local groups where people connect with someone inside, and like, they'll find ways to get their kids Christmas gifts or birthday gifts, and that's dope.

A common, I guess, would-be misconception is that everyone has a project they wanna work on. Like, sometimes people have ideas that are wild that you cannot do, and sometimes we don't have ideas. Like, there was people that would write me all the time, they're like, "Hey, what project do you wanna do?" I don't know. I wanna read a book. Like, can I get one book one time in my life?

And so, like, coming with creativity, coming with tangible ideas, coming with actual stuff you can do, like, that's a big thing. Someone like Oso Blanco, God, I love that dude all my, with all my heart. They will often have projects that are not doable. Like, they will often have ideas that are broad 'cause they want to embrace the world, but people also have to pay their bills. So you can't always do everything someone wants, and that can be hurtful, too, and that can make people feel rejected, and that goes back to setting a boundary. They're like, "Goddamn, this is a good idea. I don't have it."

I used to want to start a, uh, a moving political prisoner museum, and it'd have, like, historic artifacts like George Jackson's letters and Tom Manning's... who cares? And people had to tell me, like, "That's cool, but maybe we can think about something else and think about something more doable."

And that's good. It's good to know that, like, just because something can't be done, there's still love there to get it done, but also it's good to know that every idea you have isn't a good idea. That makes you feel human, or it did for me. I loved it. I loved it when people would tell me, like, "Eric, you need to reconsider."

But I also loved it when people followed through. When I asked someone, "Hey, do you wanna do this?" and they said, "Yeah," and then they did it. That felt so good, and I have like 30 examples of this to where I tried to do something and people were like, "Okay," and we did it. And I still feel that joy from it, that pride, because people trusted me, they respected me, and then they followed through.

I'm sure you've experienced this, too. The level of connection and joy that can exist when someone actually does what they say they're gonna do is unreal.

Dean: Yeah. I'm also thinking about a lot of times in my life when I've had long relationships with people who've been inside a super long time and they haven't really used, like, the internet or phones or things, and they don't have a realistic idea about some of it, and it can be hard to try to describe, like, why something isn't, doesn't quite work that way or isn't as easy as it sounds from what they've perceived on TV or in the media about the internet or, like...

The other thing I'm thinking about, too, with the follow-through is, like, a lot of people have been disappointed and betrayed and abandoned so much, especially if they've been in for a while, that I really want people who are on the outside to be really, like, loving. If someone's having a strong reaction, just stay with them.

Just be like, "I hear you." Like, if they write you a letter and they're really angry because you said no to something or you said something didn't seem possible to you or whatever and it's like, just don't fall out all the way. Just stay. 'Cause it's just like, people deserve room to have feelings, and part of it is that something about the technology of the prison doesn't give people any room.

And, like, one thing we can do with these relationships is, like, give each other more grace and more space to be like, "Yeah, you can get really mad at me and I'm, I still love you. And, like, I'm still gonna be consistent."

Eric: Oof. Thank God you're doing this series. My goodness, that's powerful. And that's so real, dude.

Like, it's okay for people to be mad. Like, it's okay for people to have strong reactions. If they're abusing you relentlessly, that might be different. But if someone's disappointed or upset, like, love them enough to work through it. Love them and care about them enough as a human to feel their hurt, understand it, and then help you both move forward.

Dean: I've known a lot of people who are writing with someone inside and the person wants them to help start a business. And they're like, "I know I don't want to help start a business, I can't do this right now." And they're scared to say, "I can't do this," 'cause this person doesn't have an option to do it without some outside help.

But that moment of saying like, "I can't do this with you, but I wanna do these other things. I wanna keep writing about the books we're reading. I wanna like share art." Like, whatever it is that you actually wanna do is how you make a real relationship. But instead they just disappear. You know, or they do stuff they don't really wanna do, and then it's unsustainable and eventually they disappear.

Corey: Exactly. None of us wanna be alone, and that's where the problem comes in at. Is it all right for me to be manipulative to make sure that you stay? And then the next question is, why do you have to be manipulative? Because I don't think you can handle my truth.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Corey: And there's a big risk.

Dean: Right. You might feel like you're gonna be left without support if you tell your truth and someone doesn't like it.

Corey: Yeah, but what if I could tell you my truth and you don't go nowhere? You help grow the person. Most people in prison are, like, in social distress. They're just looking for any type of relationships.

But if people walk away because we tell you our truth and it sounds very aggressive or very forward, all right, give us a little grace. Understand that where we're at. And people on the inside understand that, okay, you're asking the people to swallow a big pill. What if I could ask you anything I want, accept a yes or no, but you leaving is not on the table? That changes the whole dynamic. It's like, I could say the most absurdist thing and it's like, okay, we'll deal with it, but no one's leaving.

Dean: I mean, this is good advice for relationships on the outside too, you know?

Corey: No, but more so in here because if you leave, all right, if you're my only source of pleasure, whatever you wanna call it, and you leave, I'm in prison. It's not like I could go and choose. That's what makes me attach onto you more and it's like, "Wait a minute, this is too intense."

That's what I heard a lot of people say in the street. "I'm too intense." I'm like, yeah, 'cause I'm really trying to secure this now and I'm like, it's like there's a scarcity of it.

Dean: Yeah.

Corey: And that where the desperation comes in. But if I know it's like, okay to say this and you're not gonna go anywhere and we don't have to do this all right now, it takes everything down. And it's like, okay, I may not say the right thing to you all the time, but I know you're not gonna leave.

Dean: Yeah.

Corey: And it makes me wanna work harder to say it to you correctly.

Dean: I just really noticed that the disempowerment around saying no ruins relationships. Like, what you're describing so clearly, like just being able to make a request and you know it's fine to make it 'cause they're gonna say yes or no.

That kind of clear, open channel just does not exist in people's relationships of all kinds.

Eric: Something I say to a lot of people when I'm doing, like, talks about this stuff, is that you have to love and respect prisoners enough to say no to them. Or to say, "What you're doing doesn't make me comfortable," or, "I'm not gonna be able to go to this level or that extreme with you."

That's respect and love. That's what you would do to your friends in the free world. If your friend came up to you in the free world and said, "Type this book for me and I need it done in a week," you'd be like, "No. Get out my face." And you can say that to prisoners, 'cause we're people.

Like, boundaries are cool. Like, it's cool to know where you stand with somebody. But if someone, like you said, if someone is afraid to do that, then they might either ghost you or give you false hope.

Dean: One thing I've seen a lot is people become often very romantically attached to pen pals, whether or not that's the nature of the relationship, 'cause there's just so little love being given to them, you know. And I mostly communicate with queer and trans prisoners who often don't have any family members communicating with them. So it's like, that person who wrote to you, even if you've just known each other for a few weeks through that mail, may seem like your destiny lover. And then...

Etta: Yes.

Dean: ... That person hears that and freezes up and stops writing you instead of just being like, "Hey, that's not what it is for me," if it's not.

Etta: I try to really encourage people to, like, set that boundary at the beginning. Just because it happens pretty often. And sometimes, fall in love. I want you to. If that's what you want, like, go ahead.

Dean: Absolutely. People should. You could have a really great relationship under those conditions as well.

Etta: Yeah.

Dean: And I want people to be open to it. But I also, it, it's just, you know, there can be a really common... Like I just think, if someone gets a crush on you 'cause you're writing with them, don't abandon them. That's my message. Just, you know, be direct about what you're available for.

Corey: It's a simple thing. Like, "Listen, I like you. I'm just not into it. I don't feel that way about you. But we can do something else." Like, first is why are we even talking? Did I meet you through abolition work, or did I meet you as a pen pal? I mean, what is your reasons for being there? That's the first thing you have to identify. If you came there just to be a educator, alright. If someone pushed you to do anything more, you have a choice to say yes or no.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Corey: But the one thing I wouldn't do is walk away unless it becomes physically dangerous. It's like, okay, you said your piece, but I'm still here as a educator. I just don't feel that way about you. That's a normal thing that everybody has a right to say, whether you're a prisoner or a free person.

Dean: It's honesty. Like you were saying at the beginning, the framework of honesty. It's actually really radical.

Corey: I can have a conversation about my feelings, my desires, fantasies, without, without projecting on the person I'm talking to.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Corey: And I notice that a lot of times that helps a lot. It's just, I just wanna be heard.

Dean: Mm-hmm.

Corey: But sometimes for a lot of prisoners, being heard means, well, you just do what I say, and that's not really healthy either. So again, I think, like, you can hear a person out without actually becoming their fantasy. But you could facilitate a place where they could at least get it out in the open.

Dean: Yeah. And people should be able to talk about their desires because it could be a match.

Eric: My wife wrote me my second month in prison, and we've been together ever since, because she treated me like Eric, not political prisoner Eric, and that played a big factor in, like, my ability to trust, love, and develop our relationship. And...

Dean: you weren't together before you went inside?

Eric: No.

Dean: Oh, that's cool, okay, that's, so that's, it's very specific...

Eric: Yeah.

Dean: ... That you actually became lovers...

Eric: Yeah.

Dean: ... Through the mail or through that connection.

Eric: Yeah. Our entire relationship was built on communication and trust and developing an ability to be honest and open with each other.

She was very clear that, and this is important I feel for people to remember, that her life matters, that I need to be willing to talk about the hard things in mine that I'm able to, and that she needs to be able to do the same, 'cause otherwise it's a one-way road, and that's not a friendship, that's a charity.

Dean: Is there anything else you wanna make sure we get in here, that you would want people listening to know?

Anastasia: Let's see. Um, I think one of the hardest and most hopeful things about relationships across prison walls is what they ask us to practice and how that becomes abolition for us now, not later. These relationships force us to figure out how to communicate without coercion, how to repair without punishment, and how to care without control.

None of it is clean or easy, but every time people inside and outside stay in relationship under these conditions, it reminds me, and I hope it signifies with your people that are listening, that the prisons haven't actually won. Because connection, imagination, and collective responsibility keep leaking through those cracks, and that's how we do it.

Etta: I don't know what I'd be doing with my life if I wasn't working with other people towards collective liberation. I just, like, don't know what that would look like. So part of that is having meaningful relationships, and you can't be friends with everybody. You just, there's just not enough time, and I want to! I really do. I have unfinished letters in my head. I just, I enjoy people. I enjoy getting to know people. I enjoy working on... My favorite thing to do is work on projects with people. You know, I love being in community, and I've... You know, it's just, I just happen to be in this one. Nothing was really planned.

You know, these relationships evolved, and then it's like, once you know people, you ain't gonna leave them behind, you know?

Dean: That felt like the perfect note to end this episode. I wanted to make this series because I know how life-changing and important these relationships are for people on both sides of the prison wall. Connecting with people inside prisons is an essential part of our liberation, and I hope people listening here will consider becoming pen pals.

Hopefully, this series, including the additional content from the interviews that we put on Patreon, provides support for people navigating the ways that the prison system tries to interfere with these connections. 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, Letters for Liberation, Abolitionist Mail Project, or Trans Pride Initiative. Links to these groups are included in the show notes.

Also, if you have a friend inside who wants a free copy of _Love in a F*cked Up World_, you can request a free copy to be sent to anyone in prison by filling out the request form on my website, deanspade.net, in the book section, and anyone inside can request a copy by writing to 1977 Books at 1468 Woodley Road, Montgomery, Alabama, 36106.

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 is easier and cheaper to print and mail than a typical transcript. You can find a link in the show notes or on my website, deanspade.net, under podcast.

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. Thanks to Corey for inspiring it, and thanks to 1977 Books.

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 don't buy from Amazon or Audible.

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, Alanna, and everyone else who helped with this 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.