



# Dear Daniel

## Your Letters from Prison are Making MAPS Better

Rudy Maldonado

*I received the letter and book. Hope became a more realistic thing for me rather than something I seek and can never grasp due to all the setbacks of life.*

Daniel\*

**Rudy Maldonado** reached his position through persistent volunteering, combined with an open-minded approach to offering MAPS support in any way he saw possible. Before initially volunteering at MAPS, Rudy was a wrestling coach for children and adults. His interest in psychedelic integration formed his direction with MAPS as he brings a mentality of honesty and determination to the team. Psychedelic Science 2017 gave Rudy an opportunity to dive into the field of his passion, which was the jumping point of his career. He fulfills his dream to travel and meet new faces through supporting outreach events and psychedelic groups around the world.

**On occasion, the MAPS mailbox** will receive letters from people who are currently incarcerated throughout the United States. These letters come from people with infinitely diverse backgrounds, and they typically have two common requests: an audience who will listen, and a desire for educational resources around psychedelic research. We've been receiving these letters long before I began working at MAPS, but I quickly jumped at the opportunity to reply back as a representative of our non-profit organization. My mentor, Jenni Vierra, introduced me to the process of responding to letters: encouraging me to listen with an open heart, be caring in my response, and to include a MAPS-published book and/or *Bulletin* with each letter so they have more access to information.

My first letter was introduced to me in June 2018 from Daniel, who suffers from PTSD and found himself "in a very tough situation." Admittedly, his attempts to do self work and meditation were challenging while in a federal state prison. He offered to donate to MAPS as a means to receive up-to-date psychedelic research information to help address his PTSD; however, morally, we could not accept his money. We gave him a copy of *LSD: My Problem Child* by Albert Hofmann, gratis, which he replied shortly after, "I received the letter and book. Hope became a more realistic thing for me rather than something I seek but can never grasp due to all the setbacks of life."

One report from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that three-quarters of prisoners released in 2005 were arrested for a new crime within five years. More than half had been arrested by the end of the first year. In a cover story for the American Psychological Association, Kirsten Weir writes, "Yet while correctional systems are getting better at assessing inmates, there's still a gap between knowing what offenders need to be successful, and making sure they get it." In her article, *Life on the Outside*, Weir speaks on the efforts being made by psychologists to increase and improve services that can help incarcerated people face the challenges awaiting them outside of prison walls upon their (potential) release (Weir, 2015).

Everyone, regardless of their background, deserves the right to an honest education. It has been my personal mission to look for clues that may be helpful in selecting just the right MAPS-published literature to gift to my pen pals. If their goal is to learn about the healing potential of psychedelic substances, then I'll provide books like *The Healing Journey* by Claudio Narajo or *LSD Psychotherapy* by Stanislav Grof, M.D., Ph.D. Sometimes I'll receive letters about the struggles of navigating life and loss, so *Honor*

*Thy Daughter* by Marilyn Howell is a great option. For those who are not familiar with the interpersonal relationships behind prison bars, oftentimes the books are redistributed to another person who may also benefit from them. I can only hope that their interest in learning is infectious.

*“Somehow I believe that someone, Rudy or the MAPS Team, is really listening and totally understanding what I’m saying.”*

In 2009, I was convicted of a violent felony. Though I was innocent, I accepted a plea bargain. Proving my innocence as a Latino male against the word of the son of a high-ranking firefighter in affluent Silicon Valley felt impossible so I accepted my 10 month sentence over the potential four year prison sentence. In the time between my arrest and conviction, I was a 19-year-old community college student that had concurrently begun my exploration with psilocybin mushrooms. Though I was terrified and confused, my psychedelic ventures began to encourage me to prepare for the impending uncomfortable and challenging experience within the carceral system.

*“Reciprocal education initiatives where supporters, letter writers, volunteers, and survivors have a safe space to educate MAPS on topics that are relevant to them are imperative to our ability to provide honest education.”*

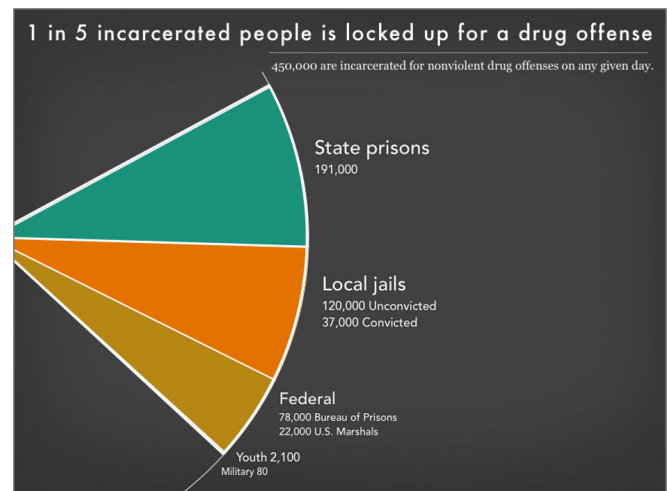
The letters between Daniel and I have continued for three years now, and in that span of time, I’ve sent over 30 responses to other people who are incarcerated. Daniel does not know this yet, but his letters created a spark within me to explore new avenues of consistently and mindfully providing educational materials like books and bulletins to others in the carceral system. In terms of making sure people are getting what they need to combat recidivism, I encourage our audience to listen to their voices with compassion. Throughout my experience of writing to each person, I have received an overwhelming number of responses with a similar desire to give back to all communities once they are released. I’ve heard examples of joining hospice care, fishing trips for kids with special needs and Veterans, and even potentially joining the MDMA Therapy Training Program!

If equipping these people with books and *Bulletins* could be a catalyst for change, then let’s continue expanding our collective reach to work beside marginalized and invisibilized com-

munities. Reciprocal education initiatives where supporters, letter writers, volunteers, and survivors have a safe space to educate MAPS on topics that are relevant to them are imperative to our ability to provide honest education. We want to hear about new information, new opportunities, to implement programs in conjunction with our major policy reform initiatives for safe psychedelic access.

As the influential María Sabina, Bia Labate, Stanislav Grof, Paul Stamets, Rick Doblin, and the Shulgins have taught us, psychedelics can offer alternative perspectives and opportunities for introspective work which can later act as a toolbox when facing challenging experiences, addressing traumatic events, and experiencing times when large or difficult life decisions must be made. Even now, I can still feel myself in a cold cement barrack writing my thank you letters using a half-length pencil and laying down on the top bunk of a three-inch beat-up mattress pad. Exchanging letters with incarcerated individuals is an emotional roller coaster at times, but it’s one of the most rewarding opportunities I choose to do.

Thank you for writing to MAPS, thank you for your courage and vulnerability, and thank you for listening.



\*Names have been changed to protect the identity of those in correspondence from prison.

If you or you have a loved one are incarcerated and would like to receive the MAPS *Bulletin* or MAPS-published books, please contact me at [rudy@maps.org](mailto:rudy@maps.org). We will provide *Bulletins* and books when we have the supply.

## References

Weir, Kirsten. (2015, December). “Life on the Outside.” American Psychological Association. *Monitor on Psychology*, 46(11), 66. <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2015/12/cover-outside>

Sawyer, Wendy and Peter Wagner. (2020, March 24). Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2020. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prison-policy.org/reports/pie2020.html#dataheader>.