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A.R.E. Prison Program Prisoner Correspondence Guidelines

Thank you for choosing to be a correspondent to a prison inmate who is currently receiving books from us and who has requested this service. In the days ahead, you will become a friend, a mentor, and a trusted person in whom your correspondent can confide and ask questions about the Edgar Cayce readings (and about life in general) as he or she moves along on a spiritual journey.

We're glad you want to participate in this unique service project and are confident that your effort and the work of other A.R.E. correspondents will provide rehabilitation and healing among the participating inmates.

We realize that most people beginning correspondence with a stranger would appreciate personal information about their correspondent. However, in this case, the only information we have is that this person wants to learn more about concepts in the readings and that he or she desires to correspond with someone of like mind.

Part of the growth of this work will be the development of a trust that will allow the inmate to tell you about himself or herself as he or she feels comfortable. This is a real opportunity to build a bridge between two worlds. For some prisoners, your letters will be their first contact with another caring individual since their imprisonment and perhaps their entire life.

Your letters are important. We all like to receive a personal reply when we have a problem or a question. Such a reply has an even more powerful impact on one who is incarcerated and cut off from the "outside" world.

PURPOSE OF THE PRISON CORRESPONDENCE PROGRAM

This program was designed to give people in prison the opportunity to discuss with an A.R.E. member or friend their experiences, questions, and growth related to the Edgar Cayce readings, and particularly the *A Search for God* material. It is not always easy to find others of like mind with whom to discuss spiritual matters, especially while in prison. We know the importance of support and sharing with others during this time. Think carefully about the following guidelines before deciding if this is something you are led to do.

IMPORTANT:

There may come a time in your writing friendship when you are tempted to disregard or "bend" these guidelines. PLEASE DON'T. If you do, you could jeopardize our prison outreach program in your particular inmate's prison, or even our entire program. We work very hard to obtain permission to send books and correspondence behind bars, and, therefore, must abide by certain stated rules.

REMEMBER:

1. You are not a "pen pal;" you are a spokesperson for the Prison Program. Picture yourself in our office, writing your letters. In other words, although you are a friend, you are not a "buddy." You are a professional resource of the Edgar Cayce material.
2. Be yourself. An inmate is, first of all, a human being who desires to be treated with dignity, which you can offer with your honesty. Write about topics you feel comfortable discussing.
3. Use an impersonal, yet friendly, tone in writing. Try neither to be overly friendly nor rejecting. The middle path of detached caring is ideal. Be firm, but kind. Continue to bring your conversation back to the readings and more spiritual matters.
4. Maintain your privacy. You will most likely discover that your correspondent is full of questions about you, your work, your family, and so on. Answer as directly as you feel led to, remembering that many inmates have no family or other correspondents, having come from disruptive social situations in which they may never have experienced the warmth and sharing of a family. Naturally, they are curious. However, only share what you are comfortable sharing. Never feel "put on the spot" or obligated to answer questions you deem inappropriate or unnecessary.
5. It is important to reiterate during the course of your letter writing that you are a friend, a sounding board, a mentor, and a helper—nothing more. You are not seeking a romantic involvement. Many people in prison have never known someone of the opposite sex who wished to be "just friends." (If you are happily married or partnered, or single and not interested in a relationship with an inmate, let your correspondent know fairly soon and repeat this fact as often as needed. If the letter leans toward a romantic discussion, feel free to tell your correspondent that you are uncomfortable with the tone of the letter. State firmly that you are a writing friend and nothing more.)
6. Try to refer to the Cayce material whenever you can, either directly or by inference. Draw on the philosophy in the readings to answer questions and to reassure your correspondent on his or her spiritual quest. If you wish to research puzzling questions your correspondent brings up, feel free to do this. It's a wonderful way to enrich your own knowledge of the readings while sharing your research with someone else.
7. Refrain from asking why your correspondent is in prison. He or she will most likely volunteer this information as they get to know and trust you.
8. You may need to practice patience with your correspondent. He or she may initially suspect that there is some "angle" involved in your writing. (Remember, they live in an environment of constant fear, distrust, and ulterior motives.) Many prisoners are not accustomed to unconditional caring from another person and may think that you "want" something from them.
9. In the words of one long-time A.R.E. Regional Representative who worked extensively with prisoners: "Not surprisingly, most inmates want to

get out. You may be asked for letters to authorities that recommend the ‘good character’ of an inmate, or you may be asked to break or bend the prison rules. It is essential, however, to be firm and to be neutral—neither ‘for’ nor ‘against’ the authorities or the inmates. One should not break faith with either by breaking the regulations. Prisoners will respect fairness. ‘No,’ said with love, is not misunderstood.”

10. **Important:** You are not obligated to provide financial assistance or gifts (money, clothing, etc.). Should they ask, please tell your correspondent that you are not allowed to do this under the guidelines of the Prison Program and that this program focuses on their spiritual growth. (Each inmate correspondent will also receive a set of guidelines, reminding them of this point, but they may test you.)
11. When an inmate receives that first personal letter from you, he or she will write back to A.R.E.’s Prison Program at A.R.E. Headquarters and address the letter to you. Here’s what comes next:
 - o You write your response letter and mail it to us at A.R.E. Headquarters, Prison Program, 215 67th Street, Virginia Beach, VA, 23451-2061 or email it to prison@edgarcayce.org, along with the address information for your inmate.
 - o We will then mail or download your letter and send it via U.S. mail (the only mail they are allowed to receive.) Remember, most inmates do not have access to computers.
 - o They then respond to us and we mail their response to you. That maintains your privacy and keeps a neutrality and safety factor present in the correspondence. Your correspondent will be someone who lives in another state, usually at great distance from you.
 - o We at A.R.E. Headquarters remain the “clearinghouse” or go-between in any matters you feel you need to discuss. Let your correspondent know that you will be in touch with us if you have questions about anything you may be asked to do, to make sure it falls under the Prison Program’s Correspondence Guidelines. Feel free to defer to us.
12. If, at any time, you receive a letter you do not feel comfortable with or competent answering, please return it to us and we will get an answer to them. If an inmate seems more interested in engaging you personally than in matters of mind and spirit, redirect him or her back to the initial reason you volunteered to do this: (i.e., to be a friend to a fellow-seeker along the way.). Should an inmate develop a strong emotional attachment with which you feel uncomfortable, be honest with your feelings about the relationship, that is, verbalize your discomfort. Sample verbiage: “I’m uncomfortable with the turn our correspondence is taking. My role is to be your friend, nothing more. I need to know that you understand and accept this. Please don’t compromise our writing friendship.”
13. Frequency of correspondence will vary from inmate to inmate. Decide on the amount of time that you can give to this writing commitment and be consistent in that effort (that is, once a week, every two weeks, once a month, etc.) Verbalize this to your correspondent, and if you find yourself flooded with letters or if you feel inundated, remind your correspondent to please respect your time considerations: work, family, caregiving responsibilities, and so forth.
14. We do read all letters going through our office and keep a file of inmate correspondence. *LOGISTICS: Please date each letter in the upper right-hand corner. Type the inmate’s name and address in the top left-hand corner of your letter. Address the inmate by his or her first name. Please sign your letter with only your first name. Under your signature, type or write, “A.R.E. Prison Program Volunteer.”* We have found this to be a very simple, but effective, way of letting inmates know that a correspondent is part of a larger group responding to him or her in an objective capacity. We will note on the letters sent to you what books we have sent. That way, you can refer to this when you write. You might say: “You’ll be receiving a copy of *There Is a River*. This is the seminal biography of Edgar Cayce. Pay particular attention to the Philosophy Section beginning on page 321 that may answer some of your questions.” We may note that we will send a book with your letter, so you could say, “The enclosed book has some useful information on meditation (or dreams).” This also emphasizes that you are part of our organization. Feel free to make liberal use of the personal pronoun “we” as you write.
15. Compose your letter with a clear sense of caring professionalism. Men and women in prison are often not accustomed to the kind of spiritual love or caring that we call *agape*. In their own experiences, most of their relationships have been of a totally different nature. Therefore, it is very difficult for them to understand that your caring comes from a different point of reference than theirs. It is also very easy to slip into a relationship that moves outside the purpose of this project.
16. Maintain a focus on the inmate’s experience and on how the Cayce readings may address their needs. Your personal experience will help the learning process, however, too much information from you of a personal nature will lead to complications. Remember that we have books and articles that discuss many aspects of the readings, and upon your recommendation, we will be happy to send them to your correspondent. Please don’t feel you have to know everything about everything. You can always “plead the fifth” and punt to us!
17. Please find enclosed some sample letters that may be of use to you in answering difficult questions. These are not intended to be copied verbatim, but rather, to be used as guidelines.

A PERSONAL THANK YOU

Once again, thank you for your participation in A.R.E.’s Prison Program. Without your help, we would not be able to respond to the many inmates seeking help in changing their thoughts and improving their lives.

Remember that we are here for you.

CALL: 757-457-7120 (8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, Monday through Thursday.)
OR WRITE: A.R.E. Prison Program, 215 67th Street, Virginia Beach, VA, 23451-2061.
YOU CAN EMAIL US AT: prison@edgarcayce.org

VISITS WELCOME

You are always welcome to drop by the Prison Program office, located on the ground floor of the Wynne (Press) Building on campus when you are visiting A.R.E. Headquarters in Virginia Beach.

Those of us working daily with A.R.E.’s Prison Program have witnessed nearly 50 years of outreach using the timeless wisdom provided by the Edgar Cayce readings. Not only does this material help men and women behind bars to change and become more caring, responsible people, it is often a life-saving work for all of us in the “prisons” of our own making. Thanks once more for **YOUR** important role in our outreach mission.