

## THE LETTER SEASON 2, Episode 8: The Tether

**Amy Donaldson:** Warning this episode contains discussions of suicide. Please take care when listening.

[Music]

**Amy Donaldson:** When Chad Rasmussen's family helped the man who murdered his father win a special parole hearing, he wanted to be part of it. Because just like he has no memories of his dad, he couldn't really remember a time before his family forgave the killer. He accepted their forgiveness of Michael Moore the same way he accepted their stories about his dad. They were just truths he grew up with.

**Chad:** That was always just kind of the way that we were.

**Amy Donaldson:** He didn't avoid grief but it wasn't laced with bitterness.

**Chad:** Mine wasn't pain and anger necessarily towards Mike it was still just a pain and an anger that was from the void of not having my dad there.

**Amy Donaldson:** But for the first time he questioned it as he sat in that hearing that his family helped make possible.

**Chad:** and I did have a flood of emotion, I um, a whole mix of emotions mostly the pain that I had been going through and seeing for the first time this man that had caused that.

**Amy Donaldson:** He couldn't stop the tears. Instead of feeling like he was part of something special he began to wonder if his family's forgiveness even belonged to him.

**Chad:** I had experienced it in my life, but I didn't know if I was doing that and just following suit and just like following like a little duckling like my aunt's going through that.

**Amy Donaldson:** For the most part, he wrestled with this new conflict on his own. But after a late night outing with friends, he found his mom waiting up for him and he poured out his pain.

**DeAnn:** I would always wait up for my kids. And when he came in, Chad was especially talkative that night. And he started to cry. And he said, I just have this great feeling that I need to go down and see Mike Moore.

**Amy Donaldson:** Chad was about to leave the country for 2 years of missionary work. But he felt a deep conflict. How could he preach about forgiveness if he wasn't sure he even understood it?

**DeAnn:** Because how can I go out into the mission field and teach the teachings of Jesus, of forgiveness and love if I don't do that myself? And he said, Do you think there's any way that I can go meet with him before I leave?

**Amy Donaldson:** DeAnn agreed to make the arrangements. But while Chad wanted his own answers he didn't want to face his father's killer alone. He asked his siblings if they wanted to go with him. His sister Lisa said no, but his older brother Dave was torn.

**David:** I think my initial reaction was hesitation. It was not an idea I came up with, it was not something I would have thrown out as an option.

**Amy Donaldson:** Dave's struggle with whether to go with his brother to meet Michael Moore was complicated by how their dad's murder impacted them differently. While Chad's lack of memory about the murder made him a symbol of hope for his family Dave became an embodiment of loss. Everyone, even the murderer agonized over how Jordan's death tormented his oldest son. But what they didn't realize about Dave's grief was that it showed up as anger, defiance, resentment. Even he still calls it 'bratty' behavior.

**David:** I was kind of a punk. rude to my siblings. I don't remember. much other than some specific instances where I might have lashed out and you know, smacked or punched some of my siblings and I'm sure there's more to it than that, but that's my recollection, I was just kind of a little punk.

**Amy Donaldson:** Despite professional therapy as a pre-teen and as an adult Dave is still hard on himself.

**David:** I think I definitely could have handled it better.

**Amy Donaldson:** Dave wished he offered his siblings more kindness, that he had more memories of his father to share with them and that he hadn't taken his anger out on them. These regrets were at play when he agreed to go with Chad to the prison.

**David:** I just wanted to be a support for him. And I think maybe my intent was okay, I'll go but I'll be your co pilot. And if this is something you want to do, then you're going to kind of be the voice. And it was one of those moments as another brother, you're thinking, Gosh, I should be the one teaching him but he is a strong soul. That taught me something by going through that experience.

**Amy Donaldson:** With his brother Dave by his side, Chad looked forward to talking with Michael Moore.

**Chad:** I needed to hear what happened and why from his standpoint, because everybody makes decisions because of a thought that they had. And in their mind it made sense. And so I needed to understand the mind of the killer and what he went through and why he had to do it.

**Amy Donaldson:** So just after his 19th birthday in November of 1999, Chad and Dave made the same trek to the prison his mother made five years earlier. They even met in the same room.

**Chad:** My brother and I arrived first and then they brought Mike in. Now this is just the second time seeing this guy. And yeah, and physically when you see somebody that you have all these different floods of emotions and looking at someone too that has, you know, that murdered two people what type of person could do that and their state of mind and you know, are you thinking are they a monster?

**Amy Donaldson:** They sat in three chairs that faced each other. Chad took the lead, while Dave said very little. This was Chad's quest.

**Chad:** He shared with me all the details and The rumors and the fear that he was experiencing himself and even up until where he was standing and where my dad was standing when he

when he shot and killed him and then when the next innocent person arrives on the scene and how and why he, he chose to kill them as well.

**Amy Donaldson:** But when Michael shared how he'd come to feel remorse for what he'd done and how he'd tried to do good things with his life in prison. Something unexpected happened.

**Chad:** He talked about his time in prison, and his own personal change of heart and change of an understanding that what he had thought was right, really was wrong. And then a healing process that he started going through.

**Amy Donaldson:** Instead of feeling comforted it made Chad question the years of forgiveness.

**Chad:** And that's when my guard went back up against him, where I felt he was being persuasive, or trying to take advantage of us as a family because we were his pathway out. Without our support, he was looking at a lifetime in prison behind bars.

**Amy Donaldson:** Anger coursed through his body as he considered all his family had done to forgive Michael to support him to help him. Did he even deserve it?

**Chad:** Maybe our weakness or our vulnerability was his pathway and is a manipulating murderer, that he could trick us into siding with him so that he could be free.

**Amy Donaldson:** Maybe the man who stole his father was stealing from his family again.

**Chad:** And that's when I started reflecting on everything that I had heard the previous you know, my lifetime of my family and their healing process and I started thinking to myself, they've all been fooled. We're all falling for this guy's trick, and I didn't want to fall for that trick.

**Amy Donaldson:** Just as Chad was struggling with this question, it appeared everyone was preparing for Michael Moore's release from prison.

**Amy Donaldson:** But then Michael would do something that made them all question. Had they misjudged him? Had they all made a terrible mistake extending mercy to Michael Moore?

From KSL Podcasts, I'm Amy Donaldson. And this is the final chapter of The Letter, Season 2: Ripple Effect. Episode 8: The Tether

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**Amy Donaldson:** A year before his meeting with Chad and Dave. Michael Moore wasn't just hopeful that he would get a parole date. He was determined. And he felt an urgency to win his freedom as soon as possible.

To that end he began writing the Rasmussens and Carla Booth about six weeks before that special hearing in February of 1999. In a six-page letter to Jordan Rasmussen's widow DeAnn on Christmas day he outlined what he'd accomplished in prison, said he had a job offer, and a chance to continue to pursue a masters degree. With all that the Rasmussens had done for him, he thought he had a real chance to make his dreams a reality, but he told DeAnn, his dreams

could not wait.

He wrote to her quote "I want to argue my heart out for a six month date. This is my one chance at making a success at the rest of my life. I need your help. I must somehow convince the board that a release date years down the road is not in anyone's best interest. If they are going to parole me at all, it should be when I have the greatest chance at succeeding, which is six months from now, not years from now when my opportunities for success have evaporated."

Michael had an impressive army of advocates in his corner, and a long list of accomplishments. But parole board chairman Mike Sibbett says the support from the families of his victims is what really made this case stand out.

**Mike Sibbett:** It's rare. I mean, I can count, probably a handful of cases.

**Amy Donaldson:** And so when you start getting these letters, you notice them?

**Mike Sibbett:** Oh, absolutely. I mean, whenever we get correspondence from particularly victims this is what he's done, this is how we've been able to get to the forgiveness stage that's impactful.

**Amy Donaldson:** But there were some significant holdouts, including Buddy Booth's father Glen Booth. He'd written to the board opposing parole parole back in 1995.

**Mike Sibbett:** And Mr. Booth's father was emphatic that he did not want Mr. Moore out. There was no forgiveness there.

**Amy Donaldson:** But by the time of Michael's special attention parole hearing in 1999, Glen Booth had died in a car crash.

**Mike Sibbett:** So because he had died I can't speak for the other board members but I assumed that he never forgave Mr. Moore and never supported him being released from prison.

**Amy Donaldson:** Michael Moore acknowledged that Glen Booth never forgave him, and he even read parts of letters Buddy's father had written to the board in the past.

**Michael Moore:** He said my son didn't deserve to die. He wasn't given any special consideration. He was deprived of his association with his children and the right to live out his natural life. My son was only 24 years old when he was killed. Sir, I live with being the cause of that. I live with this. This describes what Michael Moore was. I've made every effort to deal with that.

**Amy Donaldson:** Michael claimed that volunteers from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints were the ones who helped him accept the brutal reality of what he'd done. While in prison, Michael left Catholicism and became a vocal practitioner of the LDS faith. But Buddy's father who said he was a religious leader himself thought Michael's conversion was just one more manipulation.

**Michale Moore:** He said in 95 He said I'm a high priest in the LDS church and I'm offended that Moore would use his religious conversion to put himself in a better light. The Catholic Church does not condone killing and neither does the Mormon church.

**Amy Donaldson:** But Michael insisted, his faith journey is part of what changed him. He was not the cold blooded, calculating killer prosecutor TJ Tsakalos said he was years ago.

**Michael Moore:** Mr. Sibbett that's not what it's about. These two LDS families had faith in me when nobody, including me did. And ever since they came into my life, I've realized I've had two choices. I could remain the cold ruthless murderer Mr Tsakalos described to you. Or I could try to do the impossible. I could try to address this damage.

**Amy Donaldson:** Michael admitted that Buddy's siblings also rebuffed his attempts to reconcile. And Buddy's younger sister Tammy Pipes wrote a letter to the parole board opposing his release. But while he acknowledged those who didn't forgive him and those who doubted he'd changed there was an air of pride or maybe indignation in his plea for parole.

**Michael Moore:** What I have done in here I have done in the face of utter hopelessness, negativism, much skepticism on the part of staff and I did it at a time in corrections when the administration didn't support a prisoner's efforts. I haven't been what they wanted me to be. I have broken new ground. I've done what no other inmate has tried. And it's been hard. And it's required a lot of dedication. By asking you for parole I don't minimize the murders. Denying me parole certainly has a ring of justice. And Mr. Booth said to you, I'm asking you to keep my son's killer in prison for life. But Mr. Sibbett that doesn't solve anything. I think the healing path I've chosen is important. I think it's important for every inmate in here. It doesn't earn me a parole and it was never intended to.

**Amy Donaldson:** Michael kept careful track of those who had forgiven him. He had a tally in his head.

**Michael Moore:** But out of 16 people who lives directly shattered, it made a real difference to 11. I haven't been able to heal with all 16. But 11 lives are better today. Not because I rotted in prison to serve justice. But because I took ownership of what Mr. Tsakalos said and have addressed to people I hurt.

**Amy Donaldson:** He asked Mr. Sibbett to see him as the Rasmussens, as Carla and Norma, as the prison volunteers saw him not as he was in 1982 but as the 42-year-old man who now sat before him in 1999.

**Michael Moore:** All I can do is show you that I am no longer that person and ask for your mercy.

**Amy Donaldson:** Chairman Sibbett said Michael Moore had a lot going for him in favor of parole, but there were some persistent questions that were never fully answered. And a psychological report prepared for that special parole hearing raised a deeply troubling possibility that Michael Moore was exactly what prosecutor TJ Tsakalos said he was a chameleon.

**Mike Sibbett:** And the report suggested, that there was complexity to Mr. Moore, and even openly questioned whether he was a true chameleon that could adapt to his surroundings for the maximum benefit, and for his ultimate goal, and that it was an extreme case that had patience. And there was a caution red flag saying, if in fact, he is a chameleon which I suspect, it's not good.

**Amy Donaldson:** That was unusual?

**Mike Sibbett:** Very unusual. Yeah.

**Amy Donaldson:** Yeah. They would usually just say these are the mental health issues, or these are the problems and this is what we see they're dealing with this one was, this guy is maybe more complicated than normal.

**Mike Sibbett:** Yes.

**Amy Donaldson:** Do you deal with very many, so to speak chameleons in prison?

**Mike Sibbett:** I think we deal with a lot of them. And you know, after you've done thousands of cases, you'd like to think you can read between the lines and kind of see the true colors. But that's a more of an art. There's no science to that. And it's very difficult to get to that level. That's why the parole board's main responsibility is risk to society, not innocence or guilt.

**Amy Donaldson:** Beyond that, the reality is, most inmates will be released from prison so public safety isn't the only thing the board cares about the members also try to give people a reason to change.

**Mike Sibbett:** You can't have justice if you don't have mercy and forgiveness. Justice was never designed to be 100% punitive. You have to balance it. And that's part of our laws. And it's part of our civilized society.

**Amy Donaldson:** And in Michael's case, one concerning psychological report had to be weighed against all the other good things he had done and all the relationships he had forged with his time in prison.

**Mike Sibbett:** We had all these letters of support, a stellar criminal justice leader, former prosecutor, heavy in law enforcement supporting his release, victims families writing letters of support. So we weighed all of that and finally came to the conclusion all right, we'll give Mr. Moore a parole date.

**Amy Donaldson:** That parole date was March 9th, 2004. The decision meant Michael, who once faced the death penalty, would spend 22 years behind bars for killing Jordan Rasmussen and Buddy Booth.

**Mike Sibbett:** In all of my decisions, it was probably the shortest date for that type of a crime that we had ever issued.

**Amy Donaldson:** It seemed like a victory. But Michael wasn't celebrating. He'd hung all his hopes on that six-month timeline but he'd have to wait 5 more years to pursue his dreams. Even former prosecutor John T. Nielsen, who had helped him secure the parole hearing, felt the decision was too harsh.

**John T:** Yeah, I was a little disappointed. I thought maybe what we had done to facilitate the strong support for his release would have been enough for the board.

**Amy Donaldson:** John T knew Michael would be struggling with the timeline so he reached out to offer him encouragement.

**John T:** I remember telling Mike, look, this is a big deal, man. You're gonna just keep your nose clean, you're gonna be out of here and you can start your life.

**Amy Donaldson:** The best thing he could do was to continue all the good habits he'd built in his life behind bars.

**Amy Donaldson:** And judging from the letters he wrote to the Rasmussens, he did. He excelled in his role at Correctional Industries, he remained on the dean's list for his college studies, and he continued to talk about his spiritual journey.

He also expressed an interest in apologizing directly to the children of Jordan Rasmussen.

In a letter dated October 17, 1999 Michael wrote to Jordan's widow DeAnn quote "I would very much like to meet with David, Lisa and Chad to apologize in person in much the same way as you allowed me to do. As I have never heard back from them, I am most curious to know how they view your path of forgiveness. I am open to your counsel."

And Michael got that chance just a month later when Chad Rasmussen showed up with his older brother.

The meeting started well, but it had taken a dark turn though Michael may not have been aware of it because Chad kept his thoughts to himself.

While Michael talked about all he'd accomplished in prison, Chad couldn't help feeling like his family had been played for fools, that they were being used and manipulated so that Michael could win his freedom. And it worked. Michael already had a parole date.

**Chad:** And I remember I got really angry inside but in that anger and in that resistance to him is when I felt another impression.

**Amy Donaldson:** As he searched Michael's face, his words, his demeanor for clues about what the truth was it hit him maybe that wasn't what mattered.

**Amy Donaldson:** it doesn't matter on his level of sincerity. He might be just trying to play you guys but accept it and heal.

**Michale Moore:** It's not for him it's for you and that's when I just let it go and said okay, I need to heal for me and not let this pain continue to control me.

**Amy Donaldson:** Maybe he didn't need to decide if Michael Moore deserved forgiveness. Maybe he didn't even need to know what was fact and what was fiction.

**Chad:** You can never know the true intent of someone's heart. But I decided to at least trust him too, because that helped me healing just continuing to understand his situation. And that allowed me to be okay and to soften in that experience and go on to truly accept it and I didn't think that he necessarily was a harm to society, that if he even if even if he was playing a game and he got released, I didn't think that he was a threat to go out and re commit a crime and murder.

**Amy Donaldson:** As he followed these feelings, he thought, Why shouldn't Michael Moore get a second chance?

**Chad:** I don't think he was a cold blooded serial killer that was gonna go out and do this again to

other victims. And so in our Justice Justice system, that's what there's a debt to society that needs to be paid. And I felt that Justice had been met. And so I was okay with that.

**Amy Donaldson:** As Chad's struggle dissipated, he felt something else. Hope.

**Chad:** and I wanted to encourage his own continued healing and path of recovery as well, because we had ours, which is healing from this loss and this void, and he had his which is he made a terrible decision. But to solve that shouldn't be lifetime behind bars in this confined space like that is that is cruel to do that, to somebody that is no longer a threat to society.

**Amy Donaldson:** As the meeting came to a close, Chad decided he didn't need to judge Michael. Forgiving Michael was going to help him heal and maybe there was something better in the future for all of them.

**Chad:** We stood up and embraced and had a true heart to heart just, just a hug and a healing and, and a connection of, of hope and encouragement just as, as friends would.

**Amy Donaldson:** Dave followed his little brother's example and embraced Michael as they all said goodbye. Unlike his brother, Dave hadn't been struggling with whether or not he should forgive Michael. But being in that meeting ended up changing his understanding of what it means to forgive someone.

**Dr. Matt:** I had the example of my aunts and my grandparents. But it was not until my younger brother really taught me. And going with him to the prison. Through that experience, I think that it kind of came to fruition. It was real, it's one thing to just kind of say you forgive somebody, but not until you can be in the same room with them and put your arm around them and truly forgive.

**Amy Donaldson:** And the meeting had an impact on Michael Moore. He told his clergy about it and in January of 2000 DeAnn got a letter from Michael along with something else, an unexpected gift he had tucked into the envelope.

**DeAnn:** It was about the time that Chad left to go on his mission. And I went to the mail, opened the mailbox, and here's this money from Mike Moore. And I'm sure I was overcome with emotion. And I sat down and wrote him a letter and thanked him, because of the time having eight children, and now a blended family. At the time, we had three missionaries.

**Amy Donaldson:** Oh, wow.

**Amy Donaldson:** I'll jump in to say that members who serve missions have always been asked to pay at least some portion of the cost. Having three missionaries likely cost them more than \$1,200 a month.

**DeAnn:** But anyway, the money was greatly needed and appreciated. And I told him that I wasn't going to just use the money frivolously that I was going to put it towards Chad's mission. So Mike could receive the blessings of helping to support one of Jordan's children on his mission.

**Amy Donaldson:** It seemed as though Michael Moore's story was one of remarkable transformation in every sense. He was doing good deeds for those he had hurt, he was a model of repentance and reformation for other prisoners, and he was a dedicated student of the LDS



faith. But it's hard not to notice that all of these things were also helpful in his quest to be released from prison. But for the people who believed in him, who advocated on his behalf his transformation wasn't just a triumph for him. It was a victory for them too for the ideas that inspired them. He became proof of what's possible evidence of how forgiveness can change so much.

And for those in the prison system, like John T, Michael was a rare prison success story proof that the system could do more than punish.

**John T:** It was, it was something I had really hoped that the criminal justice system could do. And that is to rehabilitate somebody. Make them become a productive individual and not someone who was angry and resentful, and cause trouble in prison. And I began to realize that maybe rehabilitation really happens. And some people, maybe it does occur, and maybe they can be completely reformed and become a productive citizen once they're released.

**Amy Donaldson:** Every letter Michael Moore wrote seemed to confirm that while he hated being in prison, he was grateful for how it created change in him. In a one-page letter to DeAnn dated Nov. 20, 1999, Michael thanked her for supporting Chad and Dave's visit. He wrote, quote, "It was a brave thing for them to do. I felt their forgiveness, but Chad really misses his dad. That's my fault. Facing what I did to you and your family never gets any easier. Chad's tears weigh still on my heart. I hope it was a positive thing for them."

Chad said the meeting was critical for him finding his own forgiveness and it also felt like Michael's financial contributions to his missionary work were creating a different kind of bond between them.

**Chad:** I did feel very strongly that he was sincere, and you know, as I then ventured out to Hong Kong, he was making donations to my own mission fund. And, you know, prisoners don't make that much money. But he was contributing what, what he could and paid for a significant portion of my mission to be able to go out and share that message to others. And it was a very kind and kind of a completing part of the story.

**Amy Donaldson:** It felt like something cosmic was happening or maybe actual closure.

**Chad:** It felt like a completeness of kind of this healing cycle and circle. And it gave hope and excitement. And we then looked forward to a time where he would be released.

**Amy Donaldson:** It all seemed inevitable at this point, as though it were pre-ordained. The stars were aligning for Michael Moore to live a great life as a free man. But this story will not end the way anyone expected. We'll find out why after the break.

[Music]

**Amy Donaldson:** John T Neilsen was still in bed on a Saturday morning, April 15, 2000 when he got a phone call.

**John T:** At six o'clock in the morning, my phone rings. And I'm used to those early morning calls when I was in police work, because I get them all the time on shootings. And it was Mike Sibbett.

**Amy Donaldson:** That's the chairman of the board of pardons who'd signed off on giving

Michael a parole date.

And he said to me, he said, John, I don't know why these are his exact words, because I remember it. I don't know why people do the things they do. But let me tell you what happened. He said, We found Michael hanging, he'd hung himself in his jail cell. And he's dead. And I just wanted to let you know. That was, that was a heartbreaker. I couldn't believe it. I was just sick.

**Amy Donaldson:** Michael Moore, who had changed John T's view of the criminal justice system who had made him believe that reformation was possible. Why in the world would Michael end his own life when the plan he had worked so hard for was finally in his grasp?

**John T:** I know he's dead and then I subsequently find out they suspected him of tapping into the state's mainframe.

**Amy Donaldson:** In order to understand what happened we have to go back a week to April 8th when someone accused Michael of hacking into the prison's computer system.

A newly hired computer auditor at the prison discovered a file on Michael's work computer that he thought contained a copy of his confidential incarceration data.

An investigation was launched immediately into whether or not Michael and other inmates had been able to access the state's prisoner information system.

But even before that investigation began, Michael was fired from his job and transferred to a maximum-security cell.

Five days later, on April 13th he was found dead.

It was about 9:25 a.m. when a sergeant discovered Michael hanging from a noose he'd made using his bed sheets.

This was not the first time Michael had been suspected of misusing the prison's computer system. Three years earlier, an inmate had accused him of illegally accessing the internet on a print shop computer. The accusation cost him his job, his access to school and even his ability to attend church services. Michael was eventually exonerated, but it took him nearly a year to get his job back. He told Chairman Sibbett, it was one of the most significant challenges he'd faced as an inmate.

And he used that situation to illustrate that the changes he'd made in his life were sincere. And how that psychological report asserting he might be a chameleon was wrong.

**Michael Moore:** Well, what kind of happened to me and 97 was Log Haven all over again. They took my job of 15 years, I lost my income. I was banned from family home evening, banned from the chapel, I was kicked out of college. So there was a lot of anger and animosity in me.

**Amy Donaldson:** And then, adding insult to injury, he said, prison officials put the man who made that false allegation in a cell near his. He felt the same kind of rage he'd felt all those years ago at Log Haven when he killed two men.

**Michael Moore:** But here they put the guy that caused me the trouble right next to me. What am I going to do? You see two things. One, I'm terrified that this guy is going to cause me some

more grief. The other thing is Mr. Sibbett, I want to go beat him up. We have long Haven all over again. I think what I should have done at Log Haven is probably gone down to the Holiday Police Department and turned in my gun and told the officers down there I'm going to, I'm going to be violent here and I need some help.

**Amy Donaldson:** But in this case in prison, Michael thought he did the right thing.

**Michael Moore:** I went down to see the sergeant and I said, I'm real concerned here. I'm going to go beat this guy up. I need some help. And he was going to move me. That's not the kind of help I wanted. But that was what I was going to get.

**Amy Donaldson:** Then Michael received a letter from Jordan Rasmussen's mother Blanche. She suggested that he learn from the forgiveness and grace he had received, and try to extend that to others.

**Michael Moore:** Then the letter from mother Rasmussen dated May 17 was awesome. And that's what happened.

**Amy Donaldson:** He took her advice and he said it saved him from making a terrible decision. But Michael had to fight for months even after being exonerated to regain what he'd lost. In some of his letters and at his last parole hearing, he intimated that corrections leadership might be targeting him, that it seemed they didn't want to see him succeed. Sibbett warned him that prison seemed to be an incubator for conspiracy theories.

**Michael Moore:** there seems to be some concern with the mental health status report that this would still show a certain sense of paranoia. I don't know if that's the case. This is a paranoid place to live here in prison.

**Amy Donaldson:** But the situation that happened on April 8, 2000 that led to his move to max, wasn't prompted by an inmate report. So most people took it more seriously, and it put his parole date in jeopardy. John T, felt like he was treated so harshly, it left him without hope.

**John T:** I mean, they treated him as though he was enemy number one. And I've always believed that some of the prison people, not all of them by far, but some of them were jealous of Mike because he was so bright. And he was sort of favored by some of the prison staff. And I wondered if that harsh, the way he was treated might have been part of that.

**Amy Donaldson:** Some people had such trouble believing that the prison's poster child for repentance and redemption could have taken his own life, they came up with other theories about what happened.

In a Salt Lake County Sheriff's report, investigators said that a couple of weeks after Michael's death, they got a call from the wife of an inmate named Jack Colona. He'd shared a cell with Michael before he was moved to maximum. She told the detective the two men were best friends and, quote, "Michael's death was not a suicide, staff members at the Utah State Prison had killed him." Investigators talked to other inmates, reviewed videos monitoring the section and Michael's cell, and they concluded there was no evidence of foul play or even institutional mishandling or neglect.

Corrections never revealed whether or not Michael had been involved in anything problematic. And, in fact, the audit corrections officials said they were conducting never resulted in any kind

of public findings.

John T. said he isn't one to buy into conspiracies, but he has a hard time believing the allegations were true and he can't help but wonder what if.

**John T:** I thought to myself, jeez, if I just known about it, I could have gone out there and insisted that there be an immediate investigation and see if he was guilty, fine. But if not, they need to clear him. Because it was just suspicion at the time there wasn't anything fundamental as to what he'd been doing. And to this day, I don't know that they ever found anything wrong that he had done.

**Amy Donaldson:** We made numerous records requests with the Department of Corrections, the Utah State Archives and the Board of Pardons. All said they don't have any records relating to an investigation, audit or the results of any criminal probe.

John T believes Michael took his own life because he lost all hope. He faced another investigation months of living under another cloud of suspicion. The investigation would have led to an indefinite parole delay, a ban from work in prison industries, an inability to continue his college studies and at least for a time the loss of his model prisoner status.

**John T:** He didn't leave a note or anything. I don't know why committed suicide that might have been that he just had he done everything he could. And now he thought, I'm done. I've got to start over my parole is revoked. What have I got to live for? And probably he just couldn't, couldn't handle it.

**Amy Donaldson:** That same morning John T learned about Michael's death Jordan Rasmussen's widow DeAnn got the news. She was standing in her kitchen when the phone rang.

**DeAnn:** I remember when I got the news that he had taken his own life, I mean, some people might go, Oh, thank goodness, he got what he deserved. But really, it was devastating. When we heard that he had taken his life because we imagined in our life that when he got out of prison that he would be part of our life.

**Amy Donaldson:** DeAnn immediately worried about how she'd tell her children.

**Lisa:** I remember my mom told me that Mike had committed suicide.

**Amy Donaldson:** Lisa remembers a mix of feelings she wasn't sure she wanted to share with her mom.

**Lisa:** I felt a little bit of relief because he was going to be released when my oldest was going into kindergarten. And I was in kindergarten, when I found out my dad died. And so I felt sad that that he had taken his life. But I also did have that sense of relief. You always hear stories about how hard it is to get used to life outside of prison. And so I, in the back of my mind, I would think like, what if he doesn't adjust to his life outside of prison?

**Amy Donaldson:** Jordan's oldest, Dave remembers the phone call he remembers feeling sadness but the complexity of his reaction is best summed up by his wife Amy.

**David Rasmussen:** When Mike died, DeAnn called Dave and told him and he immediately

choked up and just said to his mom, this is not how this was supposed to end. He was supposed to be able to have some sort of life.

**Amy Donaldson:** The youngest Chad was on his mission and missionaries were given very few calls to family, usually on holidays so DeAnn had to wait nearly four weeks to tell him news she didn't want to put in a letter.

**DeAnn:** and I had to tell him on Mother's Day call about Mike and he just broke down and just cried. And it was, it was very sad. It still makes me sad to think that was his only way out.

**Amy Donaldson:** For all of the Rasmussens there was a cruelty to their heartbreak that they couldn't quite understand. After all they'd been through with Michael wading through grief and anger, finding empathy and forgiveness, reaching out to him, meeting him, exchanging letters, and advocating at the hearings they believed in him. They believed he was remorseful, reformed and ready to be released from prison. They never imagined this is the way it would all end.

But there were people who never believed Michael had changed. They believed he was just doing what he'd always done, lying and manipulating to get what he wanted. One of those was TJ Tsakalos the prosecutor who thought Michael deserved the death penalty for killing two men who thought Michael was and always had been a chameleon.

**TJ:** People can change. But it was just that I thought Michael was not a person that would turn around. I just felt he was a bad person. He was a bad guy. I didn't feel he had remorse. You know, he never broke down and cried and said Oh, my God, I did this and these poor people or what have, what have I done? It was just I got a story and I'm sticking to it. And I never saw him in the trial break down. You know, show remorse for what he'd done. I got no, no good feelings about Michael Moore. Seems like he never did change.

**Amy Donaldson:** So was Michael just a bad guy all along, like TJ said? The short answer I don't know. The long answer I don't think it's that simple. I've read the letters between the Rasmussens and Michael. I've read the police reports, court documents, made phone calls to people who knew Michael but didn't want to be on this podcast and I've listened to everything they had to say in his parole hearings. And to a large degree Michael Patrick Moore remains an enigma. I think there is good reason to believe he stole from Log Haven, mostly taking petty cash and misusing the company credit card. But I'm not sure he was the only one. But the murder investigation didn't find anyone else responsible for embezzling or thefts.

The animosity between the two owners was real. It's documented in a myriad of ways, including civil court battles that persisted until the late 90s. But there isn't any evidence of organized crime or any of the crimes Michael alleged. In his letters, Michael is at times a man struggling with the pain he inflicted on innocent people, who had a desire to take responsibility for his mistakes and other times, he was a man who saw himself as the victim of conspiracies he couldn't prove but also couldn't ever completely abandon.

The Rasmussens' forgiveness was the impetus for him reaching out to the Booths. But the rejection of Buddy's father and siblings stung. And Michael couldn't seem to get past it, even suggesting it was the work of 'Satan' that they refused to forgive him. In his later years, he blamed his violence on a dysfunctional childhood and said he was an alcoholic who used drugs in the months leading up to the murders. The reason sorting any of this out matters is that what he shared in those letters and hearings shaped not just his relationship with the Rasmussens

and Carla Booth but their view of him, of why he killed Jordan and Buddy and even how culpable he was. So was he a manipulator? A man trying to recover from childhood trauma? A narcissist? A chameleon? There is an argument for any perspective. But what if he was some mixture of these sincere and manipulative, remorseful and selfish does that mean he doesn't deserve forgiveness?

The question I was left with was did those who forgave him feel differently once they found out about those final allegations in prison or his decision to end his own life? Had they all misjudged him?

That's after the break.

[Music]

**JTN:** It was a miserable, rainy day.

**Amy Donaldson:** From the shelter of a canopy covering a row of chairs and flower arrangements, John T. Nielsen watched as several employees from the Utah State Prison climbed out of a corrections van and hurried through the rain to join him. The mourners gathered under gray skies at a small cemetery on April 18 at 11 a.m. for a brief graveside service for Michael Patrick Moore.

**JTN:** And there weren't very many of us there. I remember the casket. It was light blue, sitting there in the rain, with a few people standing around. And I was thinking to myself, here's a here's a young guy in his 40s who should have been productive and, and had a funeral with several 100 people there to honor him. And yet there we were about a half a dozen of us standing in the rain over this blue casket.

**John T:** It was just a microcosm of this whole tragic incident. Not only the death of two innocent victims, but now the tragic death of someone who had tried to do everything possible to atone for what he had done.

**Amy Donaldson:** It just didn't seem possible that this was how Michael's story would end? How could it be when everything felt so meant to be?

**John T:** I just felt, you know, if you're everything that he had done and everything we had done, how come it came to this? I don't have an answer to that. You know, I happen to believe in justice, but I also believe in mercy. And I'm confident there's a merciful God who saw what was good and I hope that that the Lord has been merciful. I think he has.

**Amy Donaldson:** In that modest crowd with John T, stood two men who'd risked their reputations to vouch for Michael Moore Dick Clasby, his boss at Utah Correctional Industries; and Jack Ford, the spokesman for the Department of Corrections. One had decided he'd probably been duped but the other was like a lot of people who'd come to know and love Michael Moore convinced the computer hacking allegations were false. In the end, both decided it didn't matter now.

**Jack:** I think he changed in prison, sincerely changed.

**Amy Donaldson:** Jack Ford has worked with thousands of inmates in his years at corrections but he's only attended funeral.

**Jack:** I've never done that for anybody anybody other than Moore.

**Amy Donaldson:** But there was one man among the mourners who'd grieved Michael Moore and his lost potential for years Michael's father Edward Moore. He laid his son to rest next to the plot where he'd buried Michael's Mother, Roseann. Edward Moore wrote Michael's obituary himself. And it didn't sound like something written by a man who'd disowned his son. It sounded like a man who was full of love and pride but its brevity hinted at restraint. His words are read by an actor.

**Actor:** He spoke French, Spanish, German and Russian. He was a master of computers. Michael join your loving mother in the sweet place of peace and love. God loves you. Know that you will be missed by many who also love you. You were blessed with a rare intelligence and have helped many in teaching love and forgiveness.

**Amy Donaldson:** The mourners weren't just grieving Michael's death, they were grieving their own hopes for him. Most of them had invested years of time, energy and emotion in helping him. And it somehow made the allegations that swirled around him, the choice to end his own life, it felt like an indictment of their faith in him. They braved the rain and the shame to give him a few more minutes of their time, a few more beats of their hearts because they loved what he meant to them more than they loved him.

And maybe no mourner felt that conflict more deeply than Jordan's youngest sister Ann Marie. She hadn't been able to attend her brother's funeral because she was out of the country serving a mission. But she was the only member of her family who attended the funeral of the man who killed Jordan. And time has not diminished how passionately she feels about the injustice of his death and how he never got a second chance.

**Ann Marie:** going to Michael's funeral was so difficult. I probably felt some of the grief of Jordan again, because they are connected. But I was so sad that he was gone. This ending was not what we wanted. It was heartbreaking. It was absolutely heartbreaking.

**Amy Donaldson:** It was so difficult for her to let go of her belief in him, she became one of those who suspected there was more to the story maybe those conspiracies, which he'd shared with her in letters, weren't so crazy. Maybe all his fear wasn't so far-fetched. And if any part of that was true then it made more sense to believe these new allegations, his unexpected death was part of another conspiracy. And she wasn't the only one. Friends, volunteers and others who forgave him shared her suspicions that it was more complicated.

**AnnMarie:** It didn't make sense. Because the last letter I got from him was hopeful. That was his message in the prison to the inmates is, it was a message of hope, because it is such a hopeless place. There's no encouragement, and for him to bring that out to other inmates and for him to have hope, it didn't make sense that he would take his life.

**Amy Donaldson:** I brought all three of Jordan's sisters Leslie, Diane and Ann Marie into the studio. We discussed Michael's death.

**Diane:** I thought, Oh, no. What has he done?

**Amy Donaldson:** Diane remembers being shocked but she says she never questioned Michael's sincerity or suspected him of any wrongdoing in the prison.

**Diane:** When he took his life I personally felt sorry that we couldn't see it through, see him be able to get out and prove himself.

**Amy Donaldson:** Do you still feel like he was honest with you?

**Diane:** Yeah, yeah,

**Leslie:** absolutely. Unequivocally.

**Diane:** That's, yeah, I never went, Oh, maybe he was a liar. No, we can't deny that feeling that we had when we met with him.

**Amy Donaldson:** So what if found out he was lying? Does it matter to the story, if he ended up telling lies or turning back to doing something dishonest? Or would it change what there is to learn or what you take from this?

**Diane:** I wanna say no. Because I can't deny what I felt. I testify of that with all my heart. I can't doubt it. I would feel sorry for him again.

**Amy Donaldson:** In fact, they all told me they never even considered his apology to them was insincere or a manipulation until I asked them about it. And so, even if they have come to believe he may have gotten involved in new crimes or lied about the conspiracies that he couldn't ever quite abandon they are sure of one thing what they felt in that hearing and in their meeting with him that was real.

**AnnMarie:** We felt his sincerity. There is no way that he could face us because we just had such a feeling. You can just tell if someone is lying. We knew he was open. We knew he was truthful. And we knew how sorry he was.

**Amy Donaldson:** And even if he was lying, it didn't change how the meeting impacted their lives.

**Ann Marie:** And it wouldn't detract from what we got what we had gained from this, from this life changing experience,

**Amy Donaldson:** Diane says the experience transformed her.

**Diane:** I mean, it's been absolutely the most meaningful thing I've ever gone through.

**Amy Donaldson:** She carries it with her, and it helps through life's daily challenges and frustrations.

**Diane:** And it's, it's something you never want to detract from that. And so I try and you know, when the person pulls out in front of you, or when someone else does something, then yeah, I like I try to rely on that. I have forgiven this. Why can't I forgive this?

**Amy Donaldson:** And Michael's troubled ending doesn't change what forgiveness gave DeAnn Rasmussen Kilgore and in turn, what she was able to give her family.

**DeAnn:** It's just this liberating feeling. It's like, I'm not weighed down with these awful thoughts.



With this desire for something bad to happen to somebody that hurt us. It's just like, I'm good. Life's good. But it just kind of changed my whole my whole demeanor. Somebody hurts me, and I think I can be, I'm hurt. But I can forgive

**Amy Donaldson:** DeAnn says her family's connection with Michael is stronger than death.

**DeAnn:** He still is and will always be tethered to our life.

**Amy Donaldson:** Buddy's daughter Norma and her mom Carla say they don't regret forgiving Michael because they have avoided bitterness.

But Carla points out that it wasn't easy. She often felt caught between the Booths and her decision to forgive Buddy's killer.

**Carla:** It was hard. Yeah. Because they were mad at me for forgiving him.

**Amy Donaldson:** But Carla says Buddy would have understood.

**Carla:** I think he would have been fine with it. He knew for the children's sake I needed to, to move on. And I needed to be not so angry with him.

**Amy Donaldson:** All of them struggle with how Michael's story ended.

**Chad Rasumussen:** I remember I sobbed because of that sadness.

**Amy Donaldson:** Chad's tears though are not for himself but for a man he believes didn't understand there might have been even more grace for him if he hadn't lost hope.

**Chad Rasumussen:** It was almost like just such a letdown. It's like a man Mike, we were all here on your team and. I don't know what 20 years behind bars feels like and the the hopelessness that that is and so. I tried to understand what he felt but yeah, you just wish that that he wouldn't have lost any sight of that hope that that hope could have at least still been burning inside that he'd be able to get through that just like he had gotten through the other stuff

**Amy Donaldson:** None of them regret any of it. Not forgiving Michael Not their prayers for him, their letters supporting him, not their faith in him.

**Amy Donaldson:** But the truth is They never wanted a connection with Michael Moore. They would have preferred a life with the men Michael gunned down in a restaurant parking lot. But they now acknowledge that bond they feel to Michael isn't something they need to sever. In fact, Chad sees it as a gift.

**Chad:** That tether again is no longer a weight but it becomes something different. You're tied now differently in a yoke or a friendship where now you actually wish that you could use that rope and lift him.

**Amy Donaldson:** As Chad said, there was a tether connecting his family to Michael Moore that could not be broken. But what they didn't realize is that what they chose to do with forgiveness would also thread their lives with others who they didn't even know.

Years after the final chapter of Michael Moore's life seemed closed, a woman named Sy Snarr

entered a church looking for hope. In the decade after her son was murdered, she'd lost another son to cancer. She was mired in grief desperate to feel anything other than anger and a bottomless pit of sadness.

A friend told her she was speaking in the service. She wanted to tell a story about a family who'd forgiven a murderer. She called Sy to warn her because she was worried it would upset her. But Sy told her she was eager to hear the story. And sitting in those pews, listening to the story that you've just heard in this podcast, Sy felt something shift. She'd sought comfort in this chapel many times but she'd never heard something that gave her this much hope.

**Sy:** And it just hit me. I thought, I want to be like that. I want to feel that. I want to be able to forgive him.

**Amy Donaldson:** Season 1 of The Letter podcast exists because Sy Snarr chose to forgive. And she was inspired by the Rasmussens. One unlikely story led to another.

I invited Sy Snarr and Leslie Rasmussen Moore into a studio to talk about the connection between them. Leslie and Sy both say telling their stories in a podcast has not only opened up a connection with strangers, but with the next generation of their families who are hearing these stories of forgiveness including the tough parts told in full for the first time.

**Leslie:** It was just a beautiful thing, to invite them in now to invite them in and let them feel that the ripples of the ripples of forgiveness,

**Sy:** You never think that something so hideous, and painful and ugly, it is, can turn into this beautiful thing, which it can. And I know that probably sounds weird to some people, but it honestly can and it can bring people together. Oh, it's just so, such a wonderful thing to be able to really forgive somebody and let it go.

**Amy Donaldson:** Before this podcast, the Booths and Rasmussens had never talked not even during the trial. But after listening to each other's stories, the children of Buddy and Jordan expressed interest in meeting. So when I was meeting Carla, Norma and Dana at Buddy's grave, I invited David, Chad and Lisa. At the graveyard where both Buddy Booth and Michael Moore are buried, they gathered to put flowers on Buddy's grave.

Watching them greet one another with hugs and share details about their lives, about their dads I thought about how it was more than the tragedy that tethered them to each other. The Rasmussens' forgiveness created a connection that brought healing to Carla and her daughters. Her decision affected her children and their decision continues to impact the lives of those around them.

So like throwing a stone into the water, the Rasmussens and the Booths are sharing their stories with strangers with the hope that whatever beautiful thing that started with that first letter can continue to ripple out and maybe find whoever needs it next.

**Andrea Smardon:** We want to say thank you to the families of Jordan Rasmussen and Buddy Booth, and to everyone who shared their stories this season. If you're interested in hearing the conversation with Leslie Rasmussen Moore and Sy Snarr, check out our bonus content. This week, we come full circle as Leslie and Sy join Amy to talk about the connection between them and the different conversations about grief and forgiveness The Letter has made possible.

To get access to bonus content on Apple podcasts, just click on the button to subscribe to Lemonada Premium.

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**END**