

# Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Fall 2014

## CENTERING PRAYER: A CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

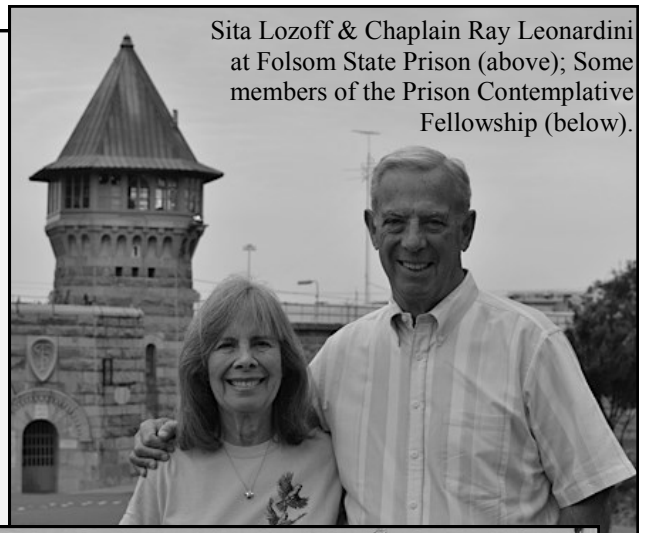
**A note from Sita Lozoff:** In August 2014, I visited a Centering Prayer group that meets regularly at Folsom State Prison in California. That group is led by Ray Leonardini, who has served as volunteer chaplain since 2007. Ray is also the Director of the Prison Contemplative Fellowship, an association of current and former prison inmates, chaplains, and volunteers, who practice Centering Prayer and are committed to reaching out to prisoners and their families on their travels along the spiritual path.

In the article below, Ray gives a clear introduction to the practice of Centering Prayer (also called Contemplative Prayer). I want to make two points before you read his words.

- 1) Although this is a practice from the Christian tradition, it is useful to people of any faith. Choose your sacred word based on what inspires you, which might be Allah or Buddha or a non-religious word like Peace.
- 2) I know that many of you never get to pray or meditate in a quiet place. Please make sure you see the note on page 4 about what "silence" means when you live in a noisy place.

Dearhearts, I hope you will give this practice a try. I was touched by the depth of the practice shared in the Folsom Centering Prayer group, and the peace those men have found in their lives. I wish that kind of peace for each of you.

*With my deepest love, Sita*



Sita Lozoff & Chaplain Ray Leonardini at Folsom State Prison (above); Some members of the Prison Contemplative Fellowship (below).



## Finding God Within

*Excerpted from Finding God Within: Contemplative Prayer for Prisoners, by Ray Leonardini*

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Most people understand "prayer" to be asking God for various favors – health, safety, forgiveness, wisdom. For many of us the only real question is: why doesn't God answer my prayers? So frequently many of us simply stop praying and hope for the best.

Contemplative prayer is an entirely different approach to prayer. This type of prayer is based in God speaking to us, and all the techniques of this prayer focus on learning to listen to God's original language – silence! This is the type of prayer practiced in monasteries around the world.

Listening to God turns out to be an extremely rewarding personal adventure. We come to find out that God wants to communicate all sorts of things to us that we otherwise would not know.

**Centering Prayer ... creates some sort of quiet oasis in the midst of the noise and intensity of living in prison.**

**—Ray Leonardini**

At the core, God wants to develop a friendship with us, the friendship of a wise and loving Mentor. This is an entirely new relationship with God for most people. This relationship can be both deeply rewarding and personally challenging.

As the relationship deepens, we begin to unearth parts of ourselves otherwise unknown or avoided – particularly those parts of ourselves we would prefer not to know – our deepest fears, resentments, anger, jealousy, and the like. We also see more clearly our happiness and joy.

**I feel the Spirit of God moving me to be aware of feelings of hurt, joy, sadness, pleasure. I want to get deeper, because the deeper I go, the more I have the opportunity to change.** —Harold Lawley

**Currently in Folsom Prison, Harold has served 12 years of a 145 year sentence.**

Prisoners who practice Contemplative Prayer can attest to the deep personal changes that come upon them. They find themselves at peace at deep levels, less angry, more capable of avoiding violent responses, more willing to find positive alternatives to frustrating

circumstances, and able to address life-long patterns of resentments and grief.

Contemplative Prayer does not assume a particular religious faith, nor a particular prayer or Bible background. The only requirement is a willingness to explore the inner path to a relationship with God.

For some of us we find that in Contemplative Prayer God attends to our uniqueness and communicates a certain friendship to us. We find a new confidence in ourselves. In our quiet moments we can see the arc of our life. We may be able to grasp the reality that we often do what we don't want to do, and don't do what we truly want to do. Yet we seem to be able to cut ourselves some slack.

Centering Prayer is a simple method with easy to follow steps. This simple method leads us gently into resting in God. The practice of Centering Prayer puts us in touch with our truest self, the self underneath so much of our false notions we carry around with us. We learn that we are not so bad at the core after all, maybe there is goodness in us that comes naturally. Centering Prayer gives us back to ourselves.

#### **How Do I Do That:**

In Centering Prayer our goal is to let go of all thoughts and just be in Silence, deep within us – not only not saying anything, but not intentionally thinking about anything. When we close our eyes, it is natural for all kinds of thoughts and feelings to fill our minds. We expect this, we let them come and let them go.

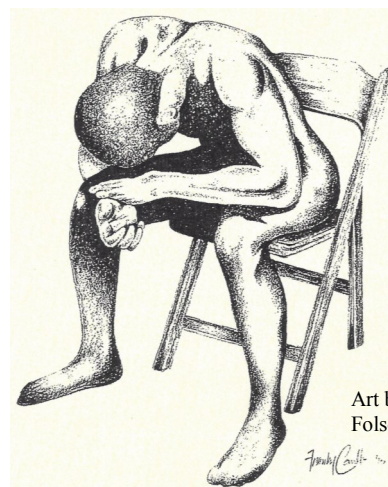
#### **Here Is The Secret:**

Before we begin doing the prayer, we choose a word, a simple word of one or two syllables. This becomes our "sacred word," sacred in its meaning to us. Words like peace, love, joy, trust, and listen are good. Some prefer God, Jesus, or

any word that helps us to let go of our thoughts. Then when thoughts begin to come we just repeat our sacred word silently a few times and let the thoughts go by. This word is the only word we use in the practice. It serves as the symbol of our willingness, our consent, to move into our truest self.

Consent is at the heart and soul of Centering Prayer. Our use of the sacred word is a short-cut, an almost mechanical reminder, that our intention is to hold still in Silence. We know that this holding still allows God's presence and action to take over.

In other words, we detach from our usual internal dialogue, with all its judgments, story-lines, hidden hurts and prejudices, and let God's Silence do the talking. Using our sacred word we simply and gently move into an entirely different space in our on-going relationship with God.



Art by Franky Carrillo,  
Folsom State Prison, CA

#### **Instructions:**

- 1. Set aside a time for your practice, 20 minutes is the goal but do what is feasible, twice a day if possible. Times prior to count or chow work well.**
  - 2. Sit comfortably on a chair, bunk, or on the floor with your back against the wall. Whatever position you use, keep the back straight. For many, it is easier to sit without moving if your back is supported.**
  - 3. Close your eyes and begin to settle down into that deepest center of your being. Take a few deep, slow breaths to help you relax and stay loose. Silently introduce the sacred word as the symbol of your intention to consent and surrender to the Presence within you.**
  - 4. As thoughts and feelings rush in, silently and gently repeat your sacred word until they go by. Thoughts are normal, don't try to stop them. But when they come use your sacred word to release them. At the beginning of your practice you may use your sacred word often. As you get more comfortable with this type of prayer, you may not need the sacred word as frequently.**
- If you find yourself drifting into sleep, bring your attention back with your sacred word. At times your sacred word will simply drop away.**

Although Centering Prayer gets easier with time, the main fruits of the practice occur in our daily lives, not during our prayer periods.

### Centering Prayer Unravels the False Self

We learn that we have placed ourselves at the center of the universe, as if the world exists to meet our needs, and have asked God to kindly go along with our plans. Of course, this is exactly opposite to reality, and opposite to the

## Contemplative Prayer is “a wordless waiting in silence for the Presence of God as we understand God.”

—Ray Leonardini

true way that happiness can come to us. True happiness comes to us, not in a self-centered world, but in a world that has our experience of the Divine plan in the center.

From somewhere deep inside we begin to say: “maybe I’m more OK than I ever thought.” “Maybe God does love me, the real me.” As we rest deeper in God in contemplation, ever so subtly our self-image begins to change and shift. Feelings, memories, painful recollections – all the hidden material of a lifetime – start to naturally discharge into our awareness. Sometimes as a gentle stream, at other times a tidal wave. The

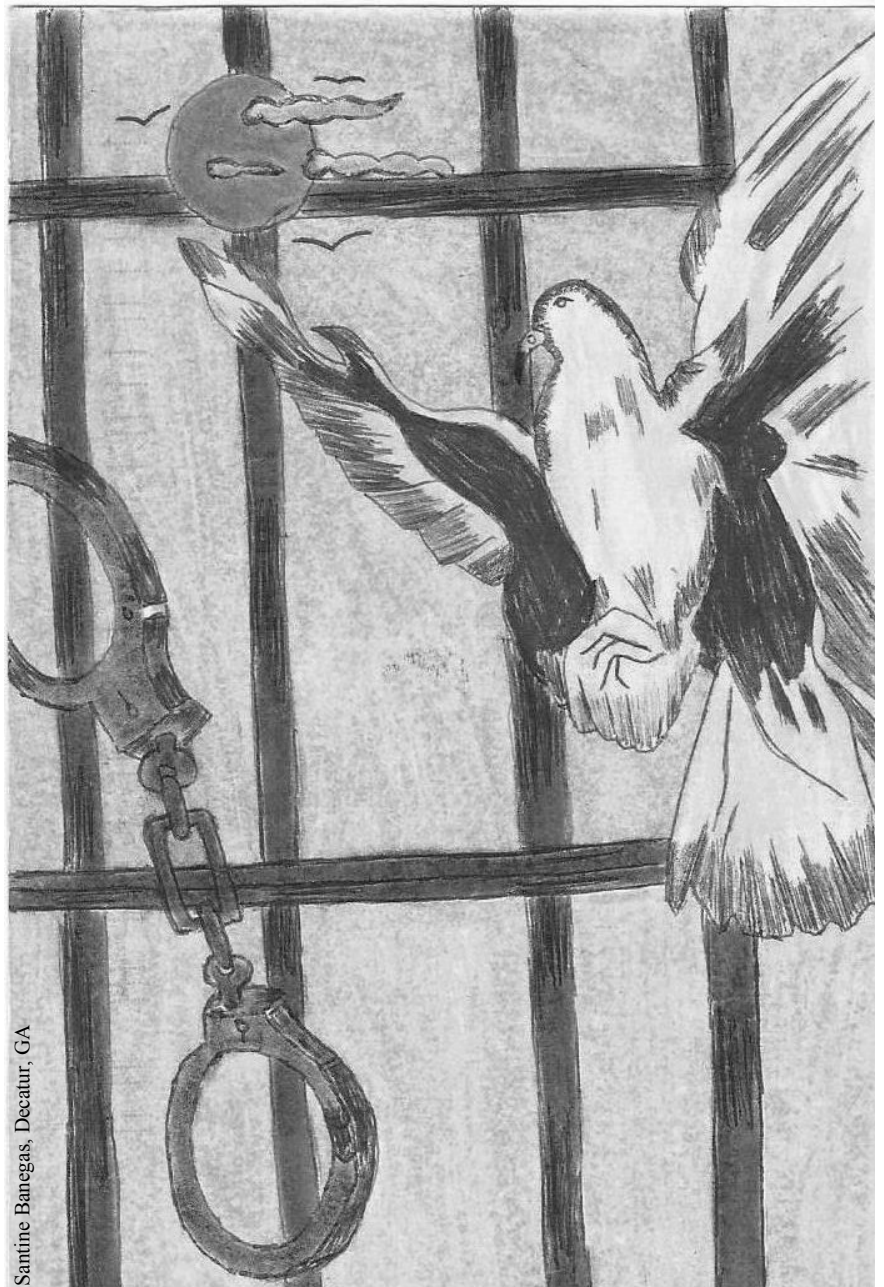
vast storeroom of our traumatized self is opening to Divine therapy: a gentle encounter that allows us to patiently mull over the experience of a life-time. There is a connection between experiencing traumatic events in our past and a sense of our own deep, at-the-core, goodness. “Made in the image of God” takes on new meaning for us in our gut as well as our mind. We discover we actually do have the humility and courage for the personal change we crave. We find we experience hope at deep levels, hope that allows us to continue our spiritual journey in earnest.



For a free copy of *Finding God Within: Contemplative Prayer for Prisoners*, and instructions to help start a Centering Prayer group in your facility, write to: Prison Contemplative Fellowship, P.O. Box 1086, Folsom, CA 95763-1086.

**From *Finding God Within*:**  
**“As you know we are back on lockdown... I sat for about an hour this morning when my mind was all over the place. By the end, I wasn’t upset and I really was at peace... It was as if God was leading me to see how much I was letting the craziness of this place disrupt my peace of mind.”**

—Harold Lawley, Folsom Prison



Santine Banegas, Decatur, GA

Doug Laplante is a volunteer who helps lead a Centering Prayer group that meets inside Rockview Prison in Bellefonte, PA. Doug told us about two class members who were working together on a kitchen shift and had a 30-minute break. They decided to use their break to sit down and practice Centering Prayer together. The only space available to them was between the dumpsters, just outside the kitchen area. Both said they found a profound sense of silence right there in the middle of the garbage.

A former member of the Rockview group, Will, says he joined the Centering Prayer group as a way to help him earn parole, but he found it calming and peaceful so he continues the practice now that he is home. Will told us: "the prayers are silent, so nobody is judging you."

Doug says Centering can act as Divine Therapy, allowing stuff to come up as it can, generally in ways that are incredibly gentle. "This difficult stuff bubbles up and just goes away."

**Fruits of Centering Prayer don't occur during the 20 minutes of sitting; they occur over time. Other people will probably notice first. They will tell you that you have become a little more patient, a little more kind.**

—Doug Laplante

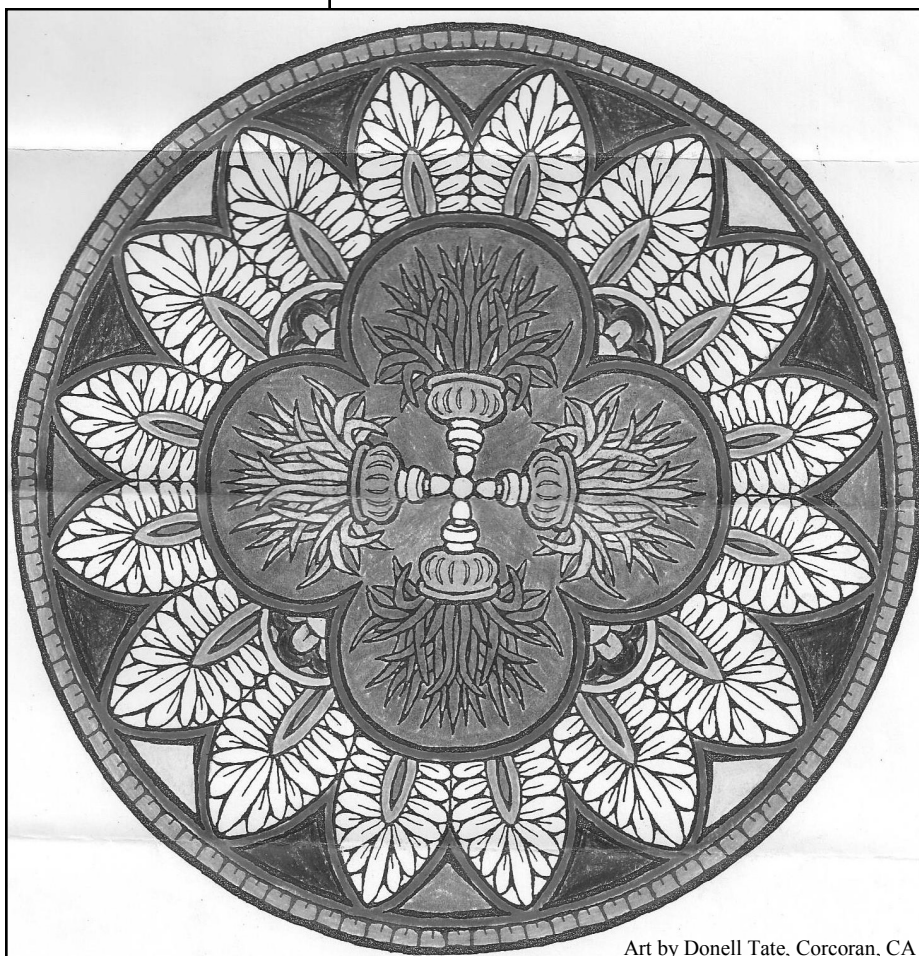
## Silence and the Absence of Noise

By Ray Leonardini

Those who develop a contemplative practice in prison learn early on that there is a difference between the absence of noise and Silence. There is no silence, in the usual meaning of the term, in prison.

If I know that the noise from the exercise yard will surely come into the chapel, no matter what, then I don't try to keep the noise out. I can't. I simply choose not to focus on it.

It's like watching TV and someone comes to our cell to talk. The conversation itself doesn't turn down the volume of the TV. Our focus on the conversation does. In the practice of Centering Prayer, our "sacred word" is used to re-focus our attention. Noise will still be happening all around us, and thoughts will still be happening inside us, but as we develop our practice over time, we are more able to simply be "present" to the deep interior stillness of our being. That is "Silence."



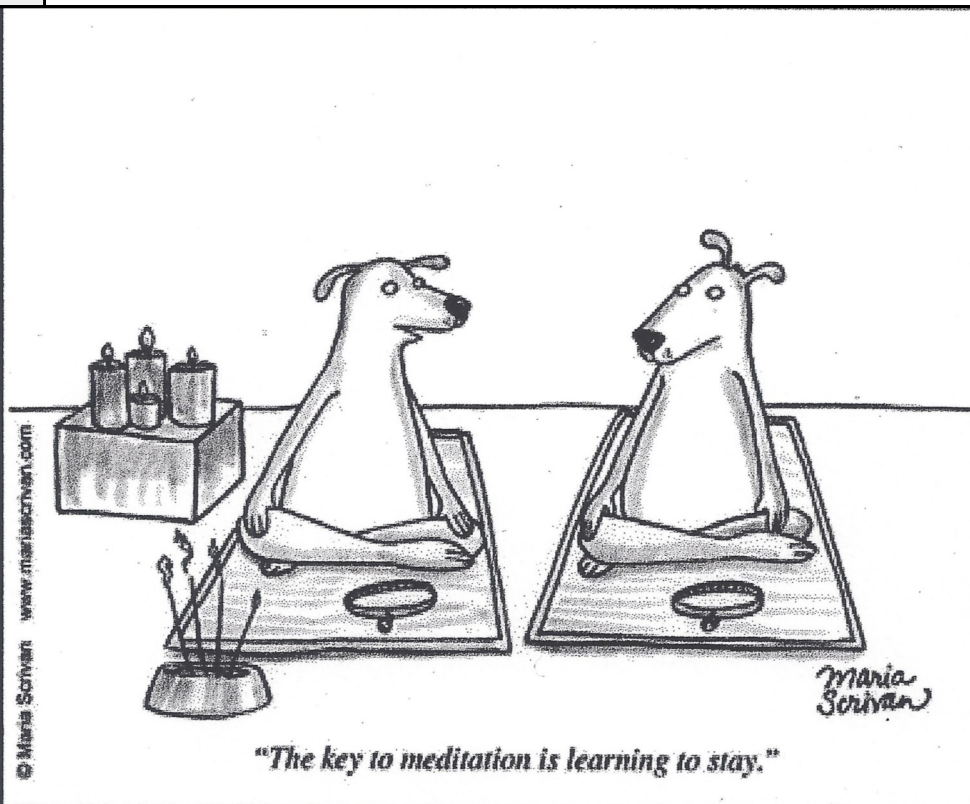
Art by Donell Tate, Corcoran, CA



**“The principle method of Centering Prayer, really, is to sit down. Now that isn’t too hard for most people.”**

**—Father Thomas Keating**

Father Thomas Keating is on the Advisory Board for Human Kindness Foundation. He has been a friend and an inspiration to Bo and Sita Lozoff since they met him in 1982. His talks and writings have brought the ancient practice of Christian contemplative prayer to a wide modern audience, and many consider him to be the founder of the Centering Prayer movement.



## A Light

*Thoughts from a mother, speaking about her son who is in the Centering Prayer circle in Folsom Prison:*

At each visit, too numerous now to count, I would search for glimpses of the quiet and introspective person he was, but prison life had shoved it way back down inside. Most often I would see a haunted look in his face, a slump to his shoulders, a lack of animation, a dullness in his eyes, and a beaten-down demeanor. An overall general disconnect. All I could do was silently pray to God for something to bring him back to himself, for a light at the end of the tunnel.

Then, in the summer of 2012, I noticed a dramatic change. I got an excited phone call from him telling me about a class he had begun to attend at the prison. It dealt with Centering Prayer. This was what he needed, and an answer to my prayers.

In the last 2 years, his demeanor has changed markedly. He has things to say now, excitedly, and he reaches out to other inmates in the Visiting Room, something he never did. He is developing insight and compassion, two valuable things the prison system can take from you. He is still quiet and introspective, but he walks lighter now; some of the weight of prison life is gone. And *wonderful laughter* has returned.

Because of his involvement in the Contemplative Prayer program at Folsom Prison, his world has gotten larger and is no longer so confining. He has found a source of freedom, right here in the midst of a well-controlled prison.

And that light at the end of the tunnel is now the light I see in his eyes!

Robin Gilmore, March 2014

## Letters

Hey HKF,  
I hope this finds you all well and happy. I am familiar with Bo's books--I read them in county jail. I have recently been sentenced to 42 years for two murders and various crimes. When I committed my crime, I was on a few different drugs. I don't turn 18 until June. I take responsibility for my actions, but I know I am not a bad person. Bad things happen to good people who make bad choices. But I still have trouble accepting the length of my sentence. My first release date has me getting out when I'm 51. I know I still have a long life after, but I don't feel the person I am deserves such a long sentence. I meditate and do yoga every day before I go to breakfast, and I feel so good for the few hours after that. I walk on the clouds and want to be nice to these kids. I feel more at ease and spontaneous every day. Someone in here said prison is for outcasts, the people who can't fit in society. Everyone laughed and agreed, but I felt it deep. I feel like an outcast here. Most of the kids here say they're going to commit more crimes. That sickens me—I want to help people. But we see the world how we see ourselves, and these kids think I'm trying to scam them or I'm a weirdo. I wish I could help them feel less separate from their humanity. I just wanted to get that off my chest.  
Thank you and God bless you, S.

Dear S.,  
Hi, my name is Gabe and I'm a volunteer at HKF. I received a 45 year sentence and

spent 19 years in prison for a murder I committed when I was 19. I've been out now for around four years. Bo's books made their way into my life about 10 years into my time. They helped me to find what I needed to make a better life for myself. I didn't just read them until I felt a part of Bo and all his teachings, I lived them. I practiced them. I still do and that's what it takes.

We got your letter and though you've got your work cut out for you, you're already on a good path. In your letter you said you're not a bad person and that you just made some bad choices. S., we know that, but I want to remind you that that goes for most of those dudes in there with you. Most people in prison are good people who just made some messed up choices. I seemed to grow a lot when I finally realized just how much I was like all those guys in there with me. Maybe in some ways that made me want to change even more, but it also opened my heart up to see things from their view, that most of them are just as lost and wanting something better as I was. Some people just got some screwed up ways of showing it or are better at hiding it.

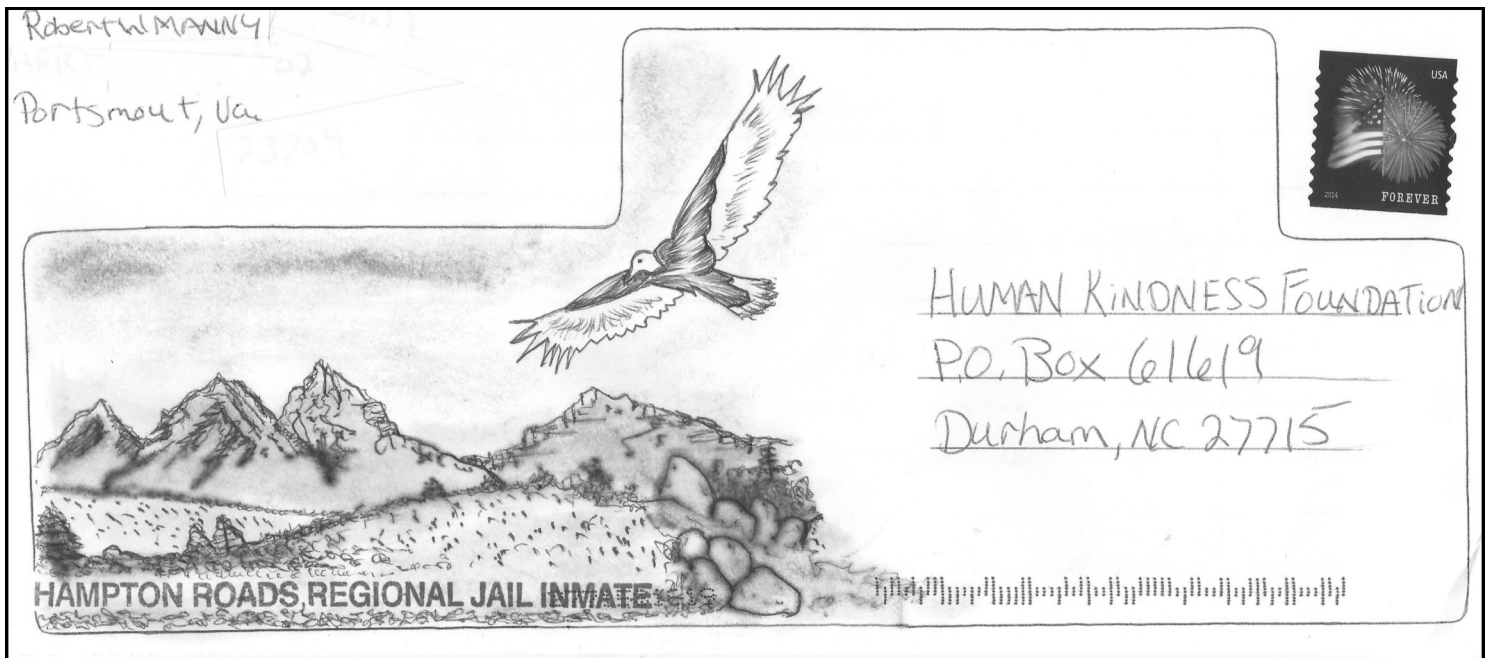
I don't know anything about your charge and it doesn't matter to me one way or another, but some kind of way you had something to do with taking someone's life. Two murders, right? Well as someone who has been in your shoes and still walks in them, I don't quite get you saying in your letter that you don't feel you deserve all the time you got. I'm sorry

man, but you do! I don't mean that to sound mean, but how could you not? I'm lucky to be given another chance out here and you will be too. I was lucky I didn't get more time and you are too. You also said you take responsibility, but as someone who knows what that means, I think you need to dig a little deeper. Responsibility to me means knowing that you've hurt others in a way that can't be fixed, while still doing anything you can to fix it. It means living your life in some kind of way that shows you want to do something about the pain you caused—to give something back. It means going deeper than most of those guys in there with you. It means totally accepting everything that comes with your actions. No excuses.

You don't have to say the words "I take responsibility"—you show it. I'm with you brother, I know you're going through a lot of s\*\*t and there is more on the way, but there is hope. I'm living proof of that. Whether you get out when you're 51 or earlier, like I did, or even never, you still can live a meaningful life. I encourage you to focus more on the life you're living now. Keep doing the practices you're doing and don't give up. You will blossom when it's time. Through Bo's books I learned that this isn't just something in the way of your path, this is your path. There's a lot of help in Bo's books, so use them. Hang in there.

With all the love and respect there is,  
Your friend, Gabe





Dear HKF,

My thoughts and prayers are with you. We're going to miss you, Bo--love you. First, let me say that I do not have any family or friends. I pled guilty to a charge that is absolutely untrue because my public defender insisted that was what I needed to do. He said I would do 5 years, but instead I'm doing 25 years for aggravated child molestation. I'm fighting tooth and nail to get this case back in the courts, because the public defender lied to me. There is a part of me that just wants to throw the towel in and give up fighting. Then there is a part of me that wants to just die because my family turned on me at the drop of a hat. I have four kids, but I have not heard from any one of them since July 2010, and I'm alone in this battle. I kick myself in the ass every day for taking the state's plea deal. I'll be 62 when I get out. I'm in need of a miracle. I really believe that I just need to hang myself. I'm so unhappy. I don't even know what to do anymore. There will never be a woman that would take me and start a life with me, a convicted sex offender, child molester, and I didn't even do the crime. What do I do now? I'm like an orphan that nobody wants. I'm hurting very badly inside, and I want to be free from all of this pain.

Love you always, L.

Dear L.,

I am so sorry about the suffering and the injustice you are experiencing. I am putting you on our prayer list, dear. I understand how you would feel you have no family, and you feel you can't deal with your situation. That is a normal human reaction, L., and we understand. We also know that it's not quite true. You DO have family, and you CAN deal with your life situation. Please let me explain. Your children are your family, even though they are not in touch with you. They are going to need to hear the truth someday, and they definitely need to hear that you love them enough to stay alive. We can't know what the future holds, but we do know that most children eventually look for their parents, even if they've been told awful things about that parent. When the day comes that one or more of your children contacts you, what do you want them to find? What if they found a strong, calm, wise man, doing his time with grace and dignity? What if they found someone who had let go of anger, even in a situation as unfair as they can possibly imagine? What if they found a man who holds his head up and helps other people, in spite of having been dealt an injustice that might cripple most men? L., if you are crippled by injustice, I wouldn't blame you. I would feel sorry

and sad and wish I could help in some way. But what good will that do you? On the other hand, if you dive into spiritual practice as if you are a monk whose life depends on it... well, that might do you a lot of good. Maybe it will get you what Jesus called the "Peace that passes understanding." Maybe it will get you to a depth of Love and Joy that makes no sense at all to your mind right now. It truly is possible for you to feel Love and Joy in prison. I'm not just making this up. We've read many letters from people who have experienced as much injustice as you have, and then made that leap. It is possible to experience good things, NO MATTER WHAT is happening around you.

Now, this doesn't mean stop working on your case, if there is a way to work on it. You can be at peace and still work on getting justice. It is our responsibility to do what we can to make things right in the world. The spiritual seeker works toward justice, and at the same time, finds Peace in his own heart while injustice is still happening.

We know it isn't easy to be a serious spiritual seeker in prison, L. But it's the only way we know to have Peace, and we think you are worth the effort.

Blessings from all of us at HKF, Catherine



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