

Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Spring 2014

JOHN C'S STORY: "FIND SOMEBODY TO HELP"



"We must find some spiritual basis for living, else we die."

—Bill W., Co-Founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, referring to himself and other alcoholics

Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 Step programs offer a profound spiritual path to recovery. Bill W., co-founder of A.A., said he "gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself," until he had a mystical vision. "Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe." It is not necessary to experience such a vision yourself. Bill

and others have left instructions that anyone can use along the path to recovery.

In January, 2014, Sita Lozoff visited with and interviewed John C. at the HKF headquarters in Durham, NC. Because John talks about his recovery through A.A., he is respecting Tradition 11 (always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films) by not using his full name or identifiable photo here.

John's early life was similar to a lot of you reading this newsletter: drugs and alcohol at a very young age (in John's case, starting in 3rd grade), and then crime to pay for his addictions, and then prison. Whether you are addicted or not, we hope you will reflect on the principles that John lives by. We believe that the spiritual path is about recovery from self-centered living, which Bo Lozoff called "The Great Recovery." And we believe that is for everyone.

Sita: You've told us about many years of alcoholism, drug abuse, recovery programs that didn't work, jail and prison time. Did you have an experience of "hitting bottom"?

John: On September 9, 1996, I was arrested and charged with five counts of being a habitual felon. Which means that the state was through with me forever, five times. I stayed in jail for about a year, waiting to go to court. I wound up being offered a ten year plea bargain. It felt like that would be the end of my life, if I had to serve ten years in prison. I was 30. Ten years in prison seemed unfathomable.

I thought, there's no way I'm taking that plea, we'll go to trial. But they had a lot of evidence. I was caught passed out in the stolen car, with the stolen credit cards, with the drugs

in my pocket. A *lot* of evidence. At the time I was busted, I had become a hopeless, homeless, barefoot, shirtless, derelict, crackhead, alcoholic looking for something to steal.

That year in jail I was belligerent and obstinate and would argue with the guards and fight. I was out of my mind, I didn't care about anything, looking at all this time. I spent most of that year in and out of solitary confinement.

There was a recovery book, the "Big Book," that I would read the stories in. I was able to stay sober. The last day I used or drank was 9-9-96, that's my sobriety date. If I was in regular population, I probably would have run across drugs, so looking back, it was a blessing that I was in solitary. I didn't have the ability to say "no." I was going to die if left

on the streets. The only option for me to stay alive was for me to be incarcerated. I hated it at the time, but now I know my Higher Power was doing for me what I couldn't do for myself.

After that year, I finally took the plea bargain and went to prison. For that year in jail I had been eating junk food and gained a lot of weight. When I saw myself in a real mirror, I said "who's the fat guy?" I didn't recognize myself in a real mirror – jail mirrors are really small and warped. I wanted to eat healthier, so I started studying nutrition. I didn't want anything to do with religious books at that time, but I wrote to HKF and other religious organizations hoping for information about being a vegetarian. Some of the information was about me changing my attitudes and behaviors, being grateful for the food I was served.

I saw instructions on meditation, so I gave that a try. I was studying, while I was in prison, working on the education I had missed out on while I was partying. I was taking calculus by correspondence, and I would run up on problems that I couldn't figure out even though I tried with all my might. But when I would sit and meditate, sometimes the answers would pop into my head. I thought that was really cool. There was something to meditation, so I kept doing it.

I started looking at the bigger picture, listening to what Bo was saying. It worked really well with A.A., especially with the 11th Step, which tells us to use meditation. I started focusing on making changes now, while I was in prison, instead of just planning what I would do when I got out. Because if I got out without making changes, I was doomed to repeat my old pattern, like I did every other time I was in prison. **That was the key – to have a spiritual transformation or awakening while in prison, so that I would get out a different person, and have a chance to stay out.** So I started working the 12 Steps. I went to every meeting I could. I started meditating. The guided meditations would often end with a prayer, so I learned to pray for others, to radiate love out to others, to not be bitter toward the food service staff, but try to think of them with loving kindness.

And it changed them, in my perception. It may have just been my perception but nevertheless it was a real change. I started getting along better. I wanted to do whatever I could while in, to make sure I didn't have to come back to prison again.

Sita: Does the word transformation resonate with you?

John: Absolutely. My whole attitude and outlook on life changed. That's a promise of the 9th Step. I'm not perfect, I'm not completely altruistic all the time, but I do grasp the concept and I do try to help others. To look back at how I was then and how I am now, you could call it born again or a new creature – I'm not the same person.

Sita: Was your transformation gradual?

John: Yes, it was gradual. I always wanted to do better, to be better, but I couldn't as long as I was drinking. And I couldn't just stop drinking. I had to get into some spiritual practices to make a lasting change. I find that the more I get away from meditation and prayer and altruistic deeds, the more I become restless, irritable and discontent.

Sita: And those feelings would be your warning signs that you might be headed back to that hopeless state?

John: Yeah, if I stray too far off the spiritual beam the consequences are sure. I know where it's going. I become more pessimistic, grumpy, agitated and self-centered. "Poor me," and then it's "pour me a drink." There are a lot of warning signs. But I get to wake up in the morning and ask God to help me stay sober today. Guide my thoughts and actions. And as I go through the day I continue to pause when I feel agitated or doubtful. I ask for the

right thought or action and always try to do the next right thing. And when I don't get my way, I work on acceptance.

In the practice of meditation, I got used to noticing an itch and deciding not to scratch the itch. That plays out to the bigger picture, like not lashing out when someone angers me. In the same way, it can help me resist if someone offers me a drink. I help other guys in recovery. I'm involved in religious services. There's a lot to the maintenance of my spiritual



condition. A lot of it is finding people to help.

Sita: Tell us about finding people to help.

John: I get to volunteer in prisons, and take men out on community passes. I have been asked several times to take men from prison to speak to church youth groups. Middle Schoolers ask really deep questions and are really into it. My goal is similar to what I do in an A.A. meeting: tell what I was like, what happened, and what I'm like now. You never know, you just hope it could help one person.

Sita: Is that related to one of the 12 Steps?

John: This is carrying the message to other people who may be suffering and practicing recovery principles in all our affairs, which is the 12th Step.

The pastor from a church where we spoke sent me an email a week later, and said she was blown away by the response from the kids that were in attendance. She had no idea that there was a family in the congregation who were hiding that the father couldn't stay sober. He had to do some jail time, and the kids were really ashamed of it and wouldn't talk about it. Our stories helped them overcome similar demons and talk to their pastor. Then, when I sent my mother a copy of the email, she got to experience some joy. That's part of making amends to her. I work on what's called "living amends" to my mother, by being present in her life. Remembering her birthday. Talking to her on the phone. Letting her know about the good things I'm doing in my life now.

There are promises in A.A., which aren't as well known as the 12 Steps. One is "no matter how far down the scale we have gone, we'll see how our experience can benefit others." And another promise says "we will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it." With all the pain I put my mother through, and all the stealing, and the drugs I sold that caused harm to others, how can I not regret that? I would take away that pain and harm if I could. But I find that I don't have to regret it when I see how my experience can benefit others.

"Kindness is a great mystery. It heals so many old wounds and hurts we can't possibly count them all."

—Bo Lozoff, *Just Another Spiritual Book*

Sita: It sounds like you feel a difference between remorse and regret.

John: I think so, because I do feel remorse about putting my mother through that pain, and I'm very sorry I harmed other people. If I could change it, I would. But I would not be of use without my painful past. **"Our deep dark past will become our greatest asset"** — that's another one of the promises. My past, which seemed so tragic, has value now. It can avoid misery and death for others. That's pretty powerful.

I get to talk to groups of families and tell them that there's

hope, that prison actually saved my life. For me, prison wasn't the end. It was the beginning of a new life, more meaningful and deep and real.

Sita: Bo frequently challenged people to take things deeper. If they were going to church, or A.A., or a meditation group, he might ask if they were just coasting with those groups, or really getting the depth of what is available. I see that you

I was sitting right where you are, and I was screwed. You don't have to believe it will work for you, but can you believe it worked for me?

have profound depth in A.A. as your spiritual community. Did you spend some years going to A.A. without getting much from it? If so, what turned that around?

John: I had to humble myself just enough to realize that I had to follow others' suggestions for recovery instead of continuing to be my own doctor. My sick mind can't fix my sick mind. I had to dive into the program and just do the simple steps with the help of a sponsor or other people in the program. I had previously just gone to the meetings thinking I was benefiting from listening and talking. However, that's like reading and discussing the menu at a restaurant and never getting any food. I wondered why I wasn't getting full.

Sita: Will you talk about how service heals in your life?

John: I'm blessed that I get to serve on several nonprofit boards, including one for a juvenile recovery home and one for a prison ministry at my church. I go to an A.A. meeting at a prison every week. I go back inside and talk to the guys about how I was waiting to make changes when I got out. Hopefully, they're able to hear that and start making changes while they're inside.

And I continue to try to alleviate the pain I caused. I do that by making amends. I didn't want to harm people when I was doing it, but addiction drove me, and I did cause harm. I'm lucky that I didn't do worse than I did. I'm lucky that I got caught and stopped.

Sita: If you have a really bad day now, what do you do?

John: Go find somebody to help. I also go to a meeting every night. And I can just sit quietly in meditation.

There's an instruction in A.A. that says "continue to watch for selfishness, dishonesty, resentment and fear. When they crop up" — not *if*, but *when* — "ask at once that God remove it, then tell someone about it, and then resolutely turn to someone you can help." I have a network of people to call. For someone inside, they can walk over to the next bunk or cell. There are tons of people to talk to and tons of ways to help.

Sita: And in your experience, that's the solution?

John: All the time. Selfishness, dishonesty, resentment and fear evaporate when I turn my focus to somebody I can help.

They just go away.

Sita: You started your job while you were still inside.

John: It came time for me to get a job on work release, and it was a good job. I've been there ten years. I've been recruited by other companies, but my boss wants me to stay there.

I've bought a home, my bills are paid. My life is manageable now. But I'm not cured. What I have is a daily reprieve, contingent on the maintenance of my spiritual condition. I have to do things every day in order to maintain the transformation.

Sita: HKF's three core principles are service, daily spiritual practice, and simple living. It's clear from what you've told us that service is a huge part of your life, and you have a daily practice of prayer and meditation. Do you also have a connection to simple living?

John: In A.A., we have a slogan: "keep it simple." My life is active, but simple. I get up in the morning, pray, go to work, exercise, go to a meeting, go home, pray, go to bed...repeat. My goal is to stay sober today. When I say stay sober, it is much more than just not drinking alcohol and not using drugs. It means continuing to practice a simple spiritual program of action. I used to get caught up in big dreams of the future and make plans for extravagance. Well, the root of my problem is selfishness and self-centeredness, so I find that the practice of looking for the next right simple action has given me more than my wildest dreams. Letting go of my

big plans and looking for the open doors of opportunity that appear has brought me better results of joy and happiness and serenity than I imagined.

All these practices were counter-intuitive when I started. I had to have instructions. They felt weird, and they felt stupid, and I didn't believe that there was a God that would help me. If I knew how to recover, I would have done it, and I wouldn't need a program. But I kept getting myself in the same trouble. With a few small right actions on my part, I was able to follow some counter-intuitive suggestions, and I found recovery. I didn't have to believe it was going to help. I can belligerently and skeptically follow the suggestions and watch the change. Little steps. Meditation, prayer. By the grace of God, one day at a time, I keep finding ways to use my past to help.

Sita: But there has to be faith to get started?

John: The faith that's needed is that it may have worked for someone else.

Sita: Perfect.

John: And that's why I go into prisons. To say "I was sitting right where you are, and I was screwed. You don't have to believe it will work for you, but can you believe it worked for me?" We need the people who are in prison right now to have this transformation, so they can help people in the future. That's what HKF is all about, in my opinion. Transformation.

As meditation deepens, compulsions, cravings and fits of emotion begin to lose their power to dictate our behavior. We see clearly that choices are possible; we can say yes or we can say no. It is profoundly liberating. —Eknath Easwaran

An 11th Step Practice: Meditation

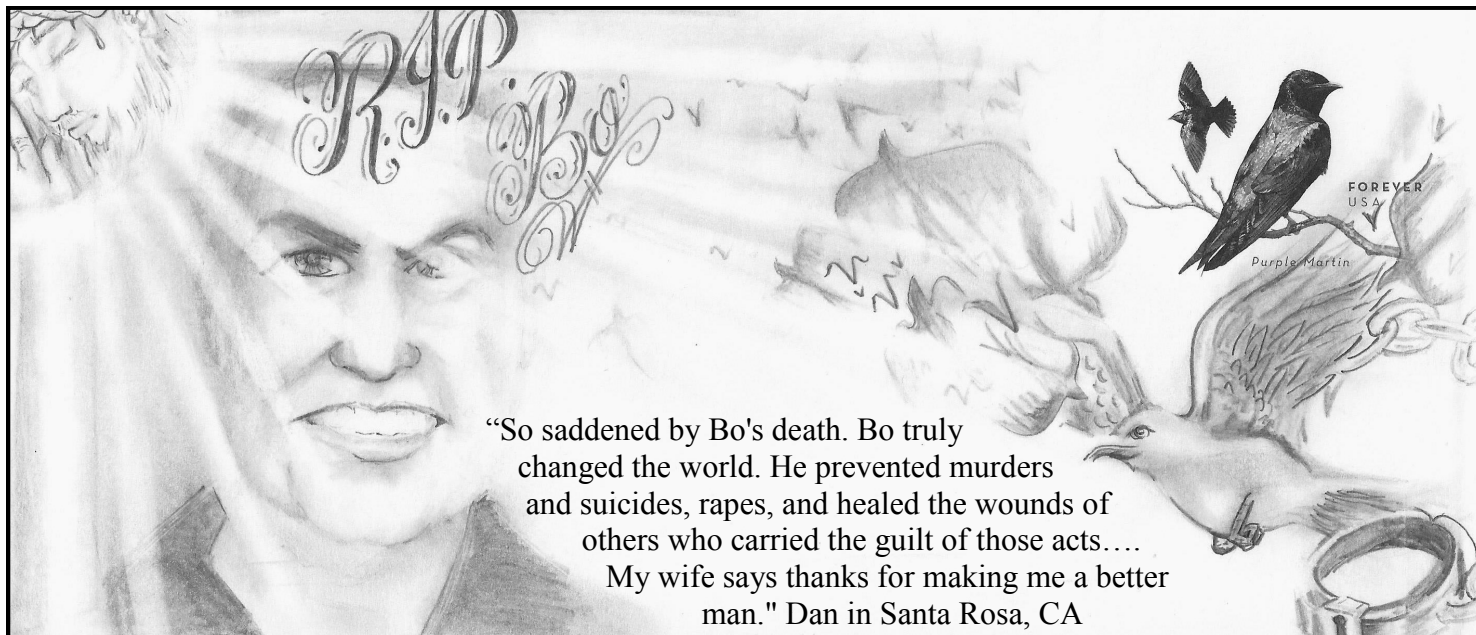
Step Eleven says: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood God, praying only for knowledge of God's will for us, and the power to carry that out." In this country, many of us are more familiar with prayer than with meditation, and some people working the 12 Steps ignore the word "meditation," as if it is simply another word for "prayer." But the Step says "prayer AND meditation."

There are meditation instructions in *We're All Doing Time* (if you don't have a copy, you are welcome to write to us and request one). Here's a simple technique, which Sita has been using for decades. Remember, simple does not mean easy! Meditation practice often feels difficult. The key is to keep practicing.



- 1) Sit very straight. Either on cushions/blankets on the floor, or on a straight-backed chair, or on your bunk. You don't have to sit in full-lotus like an Indian yogi; the point is to have your back, head, neck and shoulders in a straight line — firm but relaxed. The easiest way to get your back to be straight is to raise your butt high enough off the floor that your knees can point down.
- 2) Focus on your breath. After getting the body still, bring all your attention to the tip of your nose, where your breath goes in and out. Keep the mind right there, feeling the movement of each breath in and out. Don't follow it in or out; just keep the attention in one spot, observing however the breath feels as it goes by. Your thoughts will wander, just keep bringing them back to the breath.

It's that simple. Start by doing this for five minutes each day. Gradually add more time to your practice, when you think you are ready. Now comes the most important part: KEEP PRACTICING!



Envelope art by Monet Beauchemin, Rancho Cucamonga, CA

Practice: The Serenity Prayer

Bo Lozoff on deep practice of the Serenity Prayer

—From “Going Deeper,” Fall, 2007 Human Kindness Foundation newsletter

There was a prisoner in Illinois a couple of months ago who was saying he doesn’t know what this spiritual practice stuff is about, he’s a Christian and all he needs is his religion. I said, “Tell me something that is especially meaningful to you about your religion, like what’s a really important piece of it.” He immediately said, “the Serenity Prayer.”

You know the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” I said, “So how has the Serenity Prayer changed who you are?” And he gave me this kind of blank look. He said, “Well it means a lot to me.” I said, “Talk is cheap, how has it changed you?” Because all spiritual practice is about, is taking something from religion and working with it in a way that changes us, really alters who we are. Not just changes our attitude, but actually our DNA. That’s the promise of every religion, we’re supposed to change, and spiritual practice really changes us in a very cellular way.

So I said to the fellow, “Here’s what I’m talking about: You’re the one who told me that the Serenity Prayer is really meaningful to you. Every morning of your life as soon as you wake up, before you go to the bathroom, before you get out of bed, the moment you realize you’re awake what you say to yourself is:

LORD TODAY, grant me more serenity than I had yesterday to accept the things about this world that I am not going to be able to change. TODAY GOD, PLEASE may I have a little more courage than I had yesterday to influence the things that You want me to influence, and not turn my back. OH PLEASE GOD, may I have more wisdom than I had yesterday, to know the difference between the two so I don’t waste your time and mine.”

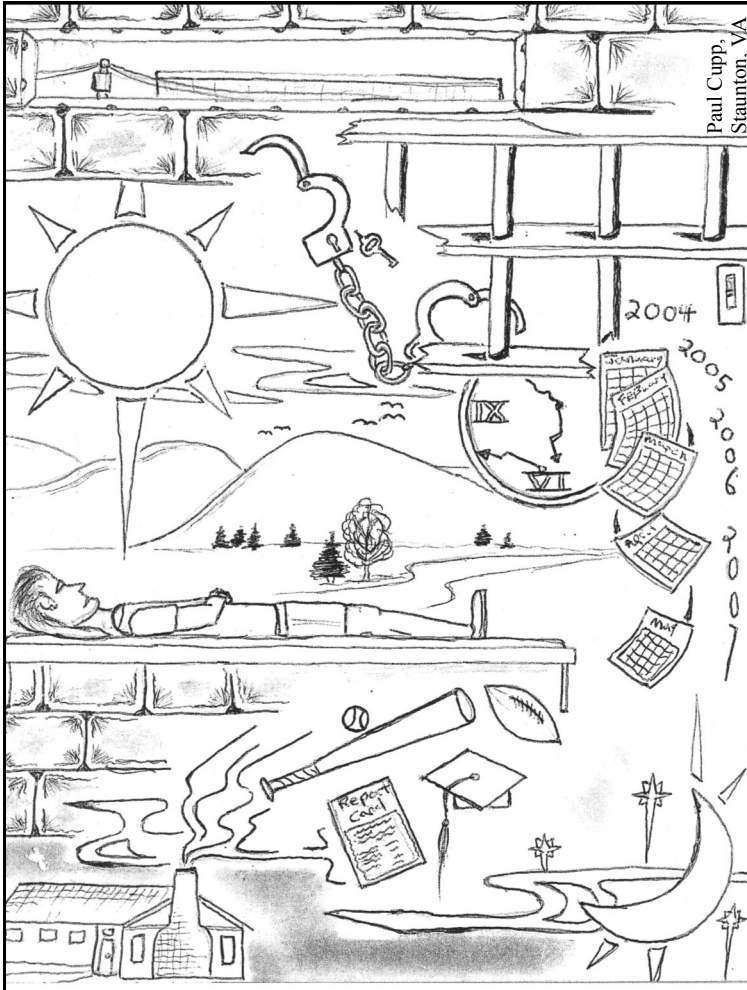
It takes about 30 seconds to do a prayer like that the moment you wake up. The Hassids, the mystical sect of Judaism that started in the Middle Ages with the Baal Shem Tov—the Hassids prayed this fervently every prayer, every day. Every prayer was just rip-your-shirt-open, “Oh God, please!” And you know what? They changed, because they meant it.

So imagine if every day this fellow—who says for decades that the Serenity Prayer is his favorite—imagine if every day, even the tiniest bit, he *actually* gained more serenity to accept the things he couldn’t change about his prison and his life sentence. And he gained more courage to influence the people and events that God does want him to try to influence, as a responsible person. And every day he has the tiniest bit more wisdom, more insight of being able to see where he needs such serenity and where he needs such courage. 365 of those changes later he’s going to be different.

I find mostly what I want to say is, go for it! The link between religion and spiritual practice is, are you going for it?

—Bo

Letters



Dear Bo,
I don't know if you still exist on this plane, but I thought I'd take the chance to write.

I am 13 years into a life without parole sentence. I am trying to find peace and am reading again your book, *We're All Doing Time* and trying to practice. I carry around a lot of guilt, shame and anger and can't seem to let it go.

Love. I don't know if it truly exists. I've tried to feel it but can't seem to find it. I read the Bible and am in a program for addicts. I've tried to follow the advice but seem to be getting nowhere.

I know I've caused a lot of pain in the lives of many people that I can never repair. 12 Step programs, Steps 8 & 9 ask for a list of those we harmed and a willingness to make amends to those people except when to do so would injure them or others. How do you know who will be hurt? The guilt/shame

love. Don't waste your energy longing for the things you don't have. Embrace your life, choose to be a prison monk instead of a sad, hopeless convict. When real LOVE happens in your heart, you'll realize that it's better than anything you thought you wanted. Spiritual practice and helping others is the path toward that Big Love. You ask how to make amends to your victims. In your situation, you need to make amends by being of service to others, not directly to your victims. Every day, set your intention to help someone. Like the crochet donations, look for any way you can be of service. That can include praying for people, smiling at some-

one is quite great. I have taken up crochet and donated some things I've made to a hospital, an orphanage, tornado victims etc—all through a church. I will continue until I can't. Still, the guilt, shame, anger, fear etc all remain. Can you help?

Love, C.

Dear C.,
I'm sorry to have to tell you that Bo died a little over a year ago. I'm sending you the announcement we sent out at that time.

Yes, C., love does exist. You can have love in your life, although you might not ever have romantic

one in a friendly way if they seem lonely, saying a kind word. It can mean sharing something you have with a new inmate, or with someone who is down on his luck. Sometimes it can even mean NOT speaking, such as when unkind words come to mind. Get creative, and be of service. Some people call this "living amends," and many people who have been successful in using 12 Step programs know that it can take the place of direct amends. It could cause further pain for your victims to hear from you, so unless a victim contacts you, make living amends instead of direct amends.

You also ask about how to deal with the pain of your remorse. I'm sending you the book *Lineage*. In that book, there's a story called "The Saddest Buddha." Read that story, reflect on it, and read it again. If you take it deeply and personally, I believe it will help.

Brother, our books are filled with tools for deepening your spiritual practice. The spiritual life is not easy, and it sometimes can have very painful steps. But it leads to Peace and Love. I can't prove that to you. If you're willing, prove it to yourself. We think you're worth the effort.

Love & blessings from all of us at HKF, Catherine

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for the books you sent. Your advice about becoming a "prison monk" is an idea I am seriously considering but have one thought that interferes with it. How does one correlate meditation/yoga etc with Christianity? I cannot feel I am abandoning Jesus Christ.
Peace, C.

Dear C.,

I'm glad you are considering becoming a prison monk. You are not abandoning Jesus Christ. The Christian monks who live in monasteries spend many hours each day in spiritual practice. Some of them do not use the word "meditation," but they spend time sitting in silence, prayer, and contemplation.

You can be a Christian prison monk by following Jesus. Jesus acted as a humble servant, washing the feet of his disciples, eating

**If my life were a picture,
It would be painted mostly in blue.
But now I can paint brighter days
Mostly because of you.**

From a poem by Anthony Montez, dedicated to Bo

with people who were considered outcasts, and even *touching* a leper. Those were astonishing acts in Jesus's time, which showed that He was different, and that being of service was extremely important. Jesus also spent time in prayer and contemplation, including 40 days alone in the desert. Take a look at our simple meditation instructions, brother. *[In this newsletter, see page 4.]* If there is anything in that technique that feels wrong to you, then of course don't do it. However, if it simply feels unfamiliar and challenging, start the practice with a prayer each time. You could use something like: "Jesus, I am your follower, and I dedicate this practice to being a better Christian. Please guide me and protect me and show me your will for my life." I believe a meditation practice like that will lead you to a closer walk with Jesus. Peace & blessings,
Catherine



Dear HKF,
Hello, I hope that you're okay—I just needed to talk to someone. I hope that you don't mind. Well, today isn't so good. I have been depressed. I am really very tired of all of this. If you don't mind, I will tell you how I got where I am. Three years ago, my wife committed suicide. There was absolutely nothing I could do to stop her. When I realized she had the pistol, she blew her brains out right in front of me. I keep blaming myself because I couldn't stop her. God knows if I could, I would have. I really loved her and still do. She got on pills. I look back now and I see all of the signs of suicide that I should have seen then. I keep telling myself that maybe if I would have loved her more or treated her better maybe she would still be here. I had a wonderful job and made a good living, so she could stay home and take care of our kids. Everything we did, we did as a family. I know that I probably should have tried harder. Now I'm locked up for manslaughter. The sheriff said that women don't kill themselves, that if I hadn't tried to stop her, the gun might not have gone off. The autopsy said it was suicide but the sheriff said he didn't believe that, so they found me guilty in court. I have been locked up for

three years now, and have about a year and a half to go if they don't overturn it. I keep praying that the truth will soon come out.

She left a big hole in my life and my heart that I don't think will ever be healed. I had a good name and reputation until now. All I am now is a convict. I keep thinking that no one is ever going to love me again because of this. Sometimes it gets really hard to hang on and have hope. I don't get to see my kids, they don't ever write to me. Their grandmother won't let them talk to me. She blames me for what her daughter did. I know that she hurts too, but nobody seems to notice or care that I'm also the victim here. I feel like I am worthless and no good because of this. My wife killed me that day—I just haven't stopped breathing yet—that's the way I feel.

People tell me that I will find someone to love again, but it's hard to believe that it will happen. If I do find somebody to be friends with, she will probably be scared away if she finds out that I was in prison for this. I don't know you but yet I'm pouring my feelings out to a stranger. Thanks for listening. I guess I will go for now. Sorry for the bother.
D.

Dear D.,

My name is Gabe, and I'm a volunteer at HKF. You're not bothering us with all the struggles you're going through, so please don't feel that way—really. We're glad you're able to share with us.

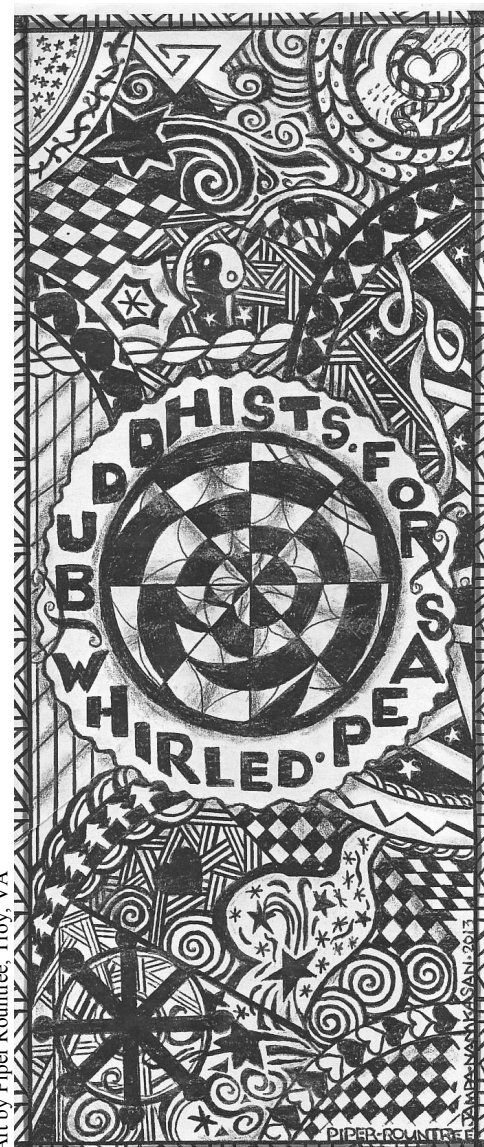
First, let me say, I'm guilty of killing someone, and I was in prison for 19 years. After a few years of being out of prison, I found someone able to love me despite the terrible thing I did. And for all the years in prison, I worried about the same thing you are. I was wrong!

But you've got enough going on in your life right now, and I hope you're able to do something with this time instead of only worrying about the future. Bo's books are for all of us—not just the guilty ones. Regardless of how you got where you are, you'll find that Bo's books and teachings are the key to help you get to somewhere else. I encourage you to work with them, if you're not

already. Make them a part of your life and DO THE PRACTICES. You'll do a lot better facing things with a quiet mind and open heart.

I also had a former girlfriend kill herself, and though you won't ever forget it, it does get easier in time. I can now say her name without crying. Sure there are things we would change, but we did what we knew at the time. For your kids, your family and yourself, I hope you can work on accepting that! You said it yourself in your letter: you did all that you could do. What else is there, D? You're in our prayers and in our hearts, and we all know you will get through this and even grow and be stronger, if that's what you want.

Your friend, Gabe



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*I live in a pod with
72 other inmates and more
than a few say I've changed.
I'm not so "angry" and "on edge."
I now pray and meditate daily,
and I just feel a load has been lifted
off my shoulders. I feel more at
peace, with a sense of calmness over
me that I can't ever recall
feeling before.*

—Blaine, Fresno, CA