



No irredeemable people | An interview with Sita Lozoff

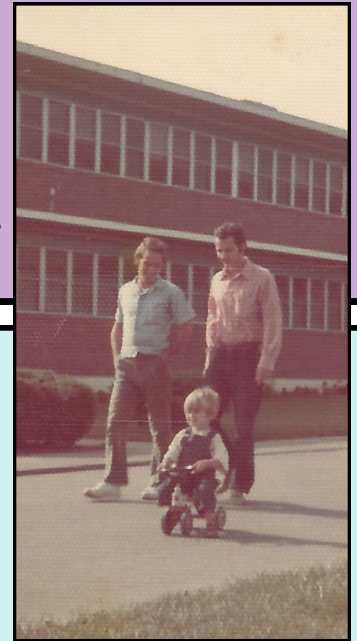
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To many of you getting this newsletter, Sita Lozoff needs no introduction. She has probably read your letter and maybe written you a note. Certainly she has held you in her heart with love as she put together a package for you or showed a volunteer how to get your address right. You may have read Bo's descriptions of their life together and how they began the Prison-Ashram Project not long after they began their marriage. Still, you have not read a lot about Sita's journey in Sita's own words. In December 2017, an online magazine called The MOON featured the following interview with Sita,

and they have graciously given permission for us to reprint it here.

Sita is the Spiritual Director of Human Kindness Foundation and she is hands-on involved in every aspect of answering the letters that arrive from prisons and jails all over the US. She hopes to continue in both roles for many years to come. The rest of us here at HKF hope she will, too.



1973: Bo and Josh Lozoff visiting Bo's brother-in-law at a minimum security prison. Sita took the photo.

The MOON: How did you and Bo meet?

Sita: I was a student at the University of Miami in 1965. Bo was recovering from a head-on car collision that almost took his life. He'd fallen asleep at the wheel and driven head-on into a Mack truck. He attributed his survival to the fact that he was a healthy body-builder; nevertheless, it took him years to recover and he had lifelong back pain as a result of that accident.

His family was from Miami, so he was living there while he recuperated. On this particular day, he was driving by and saw me. The rest, as they say, is history. (Laughs.) He was 19 and I was 21 when we met, more than 50 years ago! We married a year later.

The MOON: How did you come to devote your life to the work of redeeming convicts?

Sita: In 1973, Ram Dass was sending his famous spiritual book, *Be Here Now*, into prison libraries all over the country. That same year, our brother-in-law was sentenced to the minimum security farm at the federal prison in Terre Haute, Indiana for smuggling marijuana from Jamaica. When Bo and I visited him in prison, we realized that he was leading an ascetic life rather similar to the one we were living at an ashram in North Carolina. We encouraged him to use his sentence as an opportunity for spiritual growth, and we gave him a copy of *Be Here Now*.

Bo and I had been so inspired after reading *Be Here Now* that we invited Ram Dass to speak at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. That was in December 1973. Ram Dass told us he was getting letters from men in prison who had read the book and that he was overwhelmed by the prospect of responding to them all. After visiting our brother-in-law, Bo said that he felt drawn to serving inmates, so Ram Dass said, "Why don't you take these letters?"



God is an abyss. Jump! —Kazantzakis

That's how the Prison-Ashram Project was born—as a project of Ram Dass's foundation. By 1987, we'd grown so large that we formed our own foundation, Human Kindness Foundation, and focused solely on responding to letters from inmates, teaching yoga and meditation in prisons, writing spiritual books and sending them to inmates, and preparing inmates for leading a life of service—whether they ever got out of prison or not.

We'd come to North Carolina when we were a young family—our son was a year old—and were looking for the place we felt called to settle and begin our life's work. Bo had written a letter to Dr. J.B. Rhine, who'd coined the phrase ESP for “extra-sensory perception” and whose research foundation was located in Durham. Bo was interested in ESP so when Dr. Rhine wrote back suggesting we join his community here, we moved to Durham.

Prior to that we were basically hippies—traveling the country, looking for a home after we were married in 1966. Bo's brother Mike worked in northern Georgia, organizing women who worked for Levi Strauss, which had a factory there. It was mostly a company town that exploited its workers. Mike invited Bo to join him with his work, which is how we came to be in San Francisco for the Summer of Love in 1967. We went to ask Jefferson Airplane, who had just done a commercial for Levi Strauss, to consider supporting our work and to make an anti-Levi commercial in solidarity with the women who were organizing in Georgia.

That didn't quite work out, however. [Laughs.] Nevertheless, it got us to San Francisco in 1967, where we be-

Sita and Bo in an early HKF office, around 1985.



came very taken with the whole peace and love movement. We brought it back to Atlanta, Georgia, opening the first head shop in the South. Hippies were not very welcome or treated very well in the South, which prompted us to become a little more political and a little more spiritual.

The MOON: Will you tell us a bit about your spiritual journey?

Sita: Bo and I were both born Jewish, but I was essentially raised without religion because my parents felt betrayed—as did many Jews—that God could have allowed Hitler and the Holocaust. But during the Summer of Love, Bo and I both had the profound experience that there is more to life than material reality; that there is Consciousness underlying all that we typically perceive as real.

So that was the context in which we read Ram Dass's *Be Here Now*. Ram Dass, we felt, put our own experiences into words. He became our first spiritual teacher.

I just want to say that, at this point in my life, fifty years after beginning the Eastern practices Ram Dass introduced to us, I feel as connected to Christianity as I do to Eastern religions. I love Christ. I believe in the resurrection. I love St. Francis. I just finished reading Kazantzakis' *St. Francis*, which I'd recommend to anyone, of any faith. It is deeply moving; I've read it three or four times now. Kazantzakis says, “God is an abyss. Jump!” I love that. To me it's a reminder to have the courage to take that leap of faith when appropriate.

The MOON: What draws you to Christianity at this point in your life?

Sita: When my guru, the Indian saint, Neem Karoli Baba, was asked how Christ meditated, with tears rolling down his face he replied: “He lost himself in love.” When I was leading a workshop at San Quentin a couple of years ago, and an in-

Sita and Bruce share a moment of appreciating their 19 years of friendship.



mate there asked me what I thought was Bo's favorite saying of Christ's, I could easily reply, "Love one another as I have loved you." I experience Christ as love, and I think that about sums up the heart of our work and my life's calling which is to share that divine love with people who feel unlovable.

The MOON: Please tell us more about your prison experiences.

Sita: The first time I ever went into a prison—accompanying Bo at one of his workshops—I felt as comfortable as if I was in my own living room. I'm a middle-class Jewish girl from Philadelphia who has now been in hundreds of prisons, and I've always felt safe and comfortable. The only way I can account for this is through reincarnation. I have no other explanation for why I instantly felt at home. Bo and I surmised that we may have shared a cell together in one of our past lives. Why else would we both be so moved by prison work that it became our life's calling, almost immediately?

The Human Kindness Foundation has printed and distributed almost half a million copies of Bo's main book, *We're All Doing Time*. Because of the way books are shared in prisons, I feel confident that at least a million inmates have read the book. I know from the letters we receive and the work we've done inside prisons that there are people inside who want to change, and a great many who succeed. I don't know whether these inmates will continue to meditate when they get out, or go to church, or continue with some kind of spiritual practice, but I would say that most of the people who have been touched by our work are going to stop hurting people. If they can do that, after all of the abuse and pain they have experienced in their lives, that is tremendous progress for one lifetime. You cannot even imagine the suffering of some of the stories I've heard. But people want to change. They want to feel good. That comes from changing your heart and learning to be kind.

The MOON: I'm always blown away by the accounts you share in your newsletter, "A Little Good News," of Bo calling upon inmates to "be love in action," despite

what it might cost them personally in the violent environment they're living in.



Sita and Bo visiting His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet in India, 1994.

Sita: Years ago, in the mid-90s, the Dalai Lama invited us to Dharamsala to talk about our prison work. Bo had received a letter from a young man in a dorm situation asking whether he should risk his life to prevent another inmate from being raped. Bo didn't feel comfortable taking on the responsibility for this young man's decision, and so he subsequently wrote to three spiritual leaders, including the Dalai Lama, who was the only one who wrote him back. His Holiness invited us to India for a conversation.

That was my first trip to India, although I've since been three more times. The Dalai Lama never definitively answered that question for us, although His

Holiness does feel deeply that happiness comes from being kind and helpful to others. A very recent book of his, *The Book of Joy*, consists of conversations between himself and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. They say over and over again that kindness is the key to any religion.

The MOON: What is it about your own spiritual path that made you want to recommend it to others?

Sita: What has worked for me are three core principles for a happy and fulfilled life. The first is simple living: taking only what you need; not being caught up in the drama of never-ending wants and "must haves." The second is a commitment to some kind of spiritual practice—whether that be prayer, meditation, yoga, reading spiritual books, whatever inspires you. And the third is a commitment to service—finding some way that you can help ease the suffering of this world. I personally have found that this formula works, which is why I'm comfortable recommending it to others.

The MOON: Even though this service to others has put you in contact with people whose suffering you share because you care for them, or who are in horrible circumstances you're not able to change?

Sita: Particularly in the beginning, it was difficult not to become caught up in the others' suffering. Ram Dass

recommended a practice that has been helpful. That is, to consider the snow on the mountaintops, representing the perfection of God's creation, and the blood at our feet, representing the intense suffering in the world. He said that our job was to maintain connection with both. If I stay too much in the perfection, I'm in danger of being unsympathetic, and yet if I stay too much in the blood at my feet, I have nothing to offer the inmate who has written us for spiritual help. So it's a practice to maintain the balance, to keep our eyes on both. In fact, it's been my main spiritual practice for 40-something years. It's a pretty amazing practice.

It's true there are times that I've read a letter so painful and horrific that I've had to put it down for a while. I cried over a letter just this morning. Yet, I do know that there is also perfection in this world, which is one of the reasons I'm so immersed in *The Book of Joy* right now, because these two men—the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu—have truly been through hell; yet they are telling us that you can find and live in joy even though the world is filled with so much suffering. I'm working on being that same kind of example.

The MOON: When I read "A Little Good News" I'm also impressed how you and your staff are able to comfort and encourage inmates without taking one ounce of responsibility from them for the crimes they've committed. How do you walk that line?

Sita: I try to practice and teach what the Buddha called "The Two Bright Guardians"—*Hri* and *Onappa*. *Hri* means taking responsibility and feeling remorse for the harm one has done in this world, and reconnecting with our goodness and decency. *Onappa* means making a commitment to not doing any more harm. This is something we talk a lot about with inmates.

One of our volunteers who responds to inmates' letters is a man who served 19 years for murder and who has been out of prison for almost eight years now. He clearly lives and practices *Hri* and *Onappa* himself, and he writes to inmates in a way that I never would be able to because he's been in their situation. He knows how they can make the transition from doing harm to being of service because he's done it. He reminds them that "we're all doing time," whether we're behind bars or not. We all have the same

task here on Earth: to grow spiritually; although admittedly some of us are doing harder time than others. The way he communicates with inmates is unique. When he tells

inmates that they can make the change—because he has—it has power and credibility!

The MOON: Will you talk a bit about the spiritual work of forgiveness and reconciliation?

Sita: For the last three years, our executive director, Catherine Dumas, and I have been meeting monthly with about a dozen men on death row. When Arkansas executed four men recently, these men living on death row came in and sat down with us, angry and fearful, but by the end of our meeting we were sending love and forgiveness to the executioners and to all the people who were



Sita and her grandson Joey.

suffering as a result of the executions. So this is profound, powerful, and healing work. There's nothing I'd rather be doing. These men have found that forgiveness has the power to change their own hearts. They forgive because they realize how much better it is—for them! It's what the Dalai Lama calls "wise selfishness." As a result of their ability to forgive, all of their relationships have been transformed. Their relationships with their families, with other inmates, with the guards. Forgiveness has become a key to their own happiness.

But it's hard work. There are 150 people on the death row that we visit and about a dozen who are willing to do this work with us. It takes a lot of courage to take a course of action that is counter to the conventional wisdom—especially in a prison environment where people are constantly being assessed for any potential weakness. But as Kazantzakis says, "God is an abyss. Jump!" and they courageously are choosing to take that "leap of faith."

These men have found that holding onto anger and bitterness is toxic. We all know that. What does anger and bitterness feel like in our bodies? It's horrible. And what does love feel like, bodily? It's heaven. So it takes a bit of courage to try, but the rewards are worth it. That's why these guys keep coming back to our group. And although there hasn't been an execution in this state in more than 10 years, one of the men in our group, who's a Buddhist, was scheduled to be executed very soon when executions stopped in that state. He told the group that when the warden came to him with his execution date, he felt compas-

sion for the warden! Imagine that! Like the other men in the group, he has found peace and happiness even though he's not likely to ever see the outside world again.

There was a situation in my own personal life where I can honestly say that walking through that door of active forgiveness gave me the opportunity to grow in ways that have impacted my own spiritual journey, as well as the people I come in contact with. Forgiveness doesn't mean excusing behavior or letting someone get away with something. My guru used to say, "Do what you will with people, but don't put anyone out of your heart." So we can forgive and still stand up to people when necessary.

The MOON: I'm trying to understand the specifics of this practice that has helped you and the death-row group to understand the benefits of forgiveness.

Sita: God gives us all the lessons we need to work out; we don't have to go looking for them. So for the men on death row, there may be a guard who is giving them a rough time, and maybe alone in their cell they picture this guard and send him kind thoughts. Or perhaps they have lost their temper with another inmate. They might bring the experience to our group meeting, and the whole group will then discuss how the situation might have been handled differently—so that they each leave with an expanded repertoire of options for dealing with the situations that present themselves. They are willing to examine themselves and their behavior and sincerely work at being better people going forward.

Mindfulness practice can give each of us a second or two before reacting so that we can respond more skillfully. [Check out the "Two Seconds" practice on the following page.] God brings them—brings all of us—opportunities to examine ourselves. To me the answer always has to do with love; how do we bring more love and kindness to every situation we encounter in our lives?

The MOON: That brings me to a personal question. Over the years, Bo has always been the more visible member of your team. Since his passing, you've stepped up to take on some of that role. Will you tell us a bit about being the invisible partner? Do you feel that was part of your traditional role as a woman, or just your personal style and comfort zone?

Sita: I think our division of labor was completely appropriate. Since Bo's passing I've felt even more strongly,

"Thank God he wrote the books and did the work he did," because I'm just not able to articulate these spiritual truths as powerfully as he did. Sometimes it makes me cry because I want so much to be able to help someone, but I just feel at a loss to communicate in a way that will make a difference. Thank God I can send them one of Bo's books. At the same time, I feel that as a result of my nearly 50 years of spiritual work I have become an elder. I'm comfortable in that role, which I carry into my prison work as well. I have something to offer inmates, and it has to do with presence. I sincerely feel deep love and affection for my dear friends inside, and I believe that they can feel it.

The MOON: Do you "hear" from Bo regularly even though he is not here physically? Do you feel as if you're still in partnership?

Sita: I'll read to you something Ram Dass wrote about losing someone very close to you: "You will start to feel in your heart, if you can listen very carefully, a very deep and profound, loving connection that is very living. It's not just a memory, but a living truth that will nurture you." I actually have chills just reading that to you. I feel as if I have a living and present connection to Bo. I can't say I've had mystical experiences or visions about him, but I'm sitting here looking at his picture and I feel that he is with me. He's at my side, and we're continuing to help others. We still get hundreds of letters from people inside who are hoping that someone will read and respond to their cry for help. I feel so fortunate that I get to open those letters and respond with love.



Practice by Jarvis Jay Masters

Dear Friends,

As a result of our sending Jarvis Masters' wonderful book, *Finding Freedom*, into prisons when requested, many of you have asked us for an update about him. Jarvis is still living on San Quentin's death row—this is his 28th year—and we ask for your prayers for our dear friend. I'm including here a practice he gave us when I visited him at San Quentin a few years ago. I still use it myself, and I strongly recommend it to all of you. —Sita

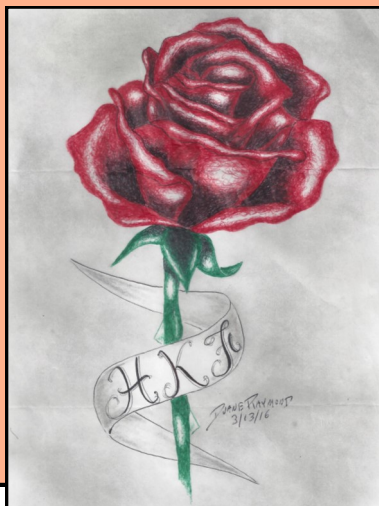
Two Seconds, by Jarvis Jay Masters

If we can learn to give ourselves two seconds to pause, just give two seconds to everything we know, whether it's before causing harm to others, or before putting ourselves into situations where we find ourselves asking, "not again... what have I gotten myself into?" When the job is nagging at you or the parole officer is on your back, or something even greater, the risk of being killed or killing

someone... a death sen-

tence.... All of these experi-

ences are just two seconds away from determining the outcome of your life. Give yourself those two seconds to put yourself in check... knowing not to do harm to yourself or to others. That ability to hear and think about what it is that makes us go down one road and not the other in those two seconds. To ask: "what if?" "Nah, my family, my kids, where again will I be? Where has their father gone this time?" Two seconds can bring the peace we have been longing for, or the situations that we may regret for the rest of our lives. Allow those two seconds to keep us true to our hearts, the heart that can give all of our lives a chance.



Long-time volunteers retire from Human Kindness Foundation

Pam Clarke moved to North Carolina in 2004 and soon became HKF's volunteer bookkeeper, keeping our financial records accurate and up-to-date. A few years later she began serving on HKF's Board of Directors. Brian O'Grady began

volunteering with HKF in 2008, teaching yoga and faithfully showing up on Wednesdays to load up large sacks of mail and take them to the post office.

Pam and Brian are both retiring from their volunteer positions. Their hard work and loving generosity will be missed tremendously. Each has contributed enormous numbers of hours to the nuts-and-bolts work required to keep Human Kindness Foundation operating. Paying the electric bill, filing our tax forms, or hauling sacks of books, Pam and Brian have shown their compassion in practical ways for many years.

Thank you, dear friends.

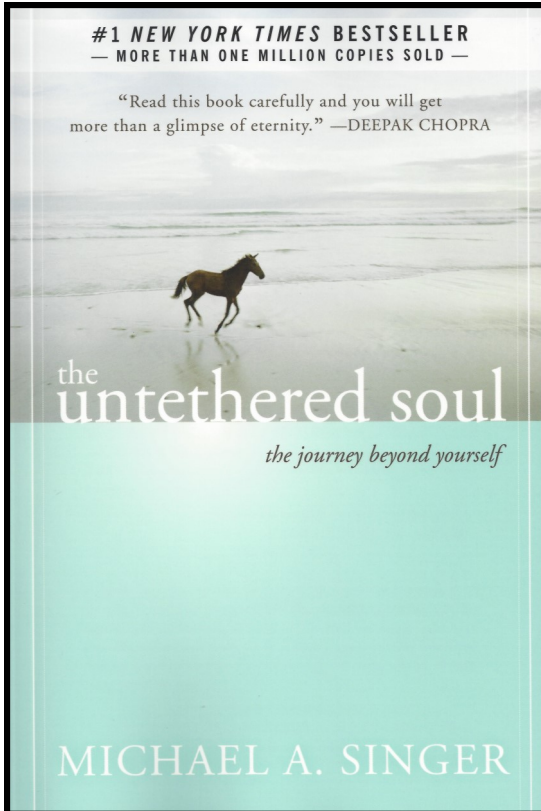


Now available free! *The Untethered Soul*

by Michael A. Singer

is now available free to people who are incarcerated.

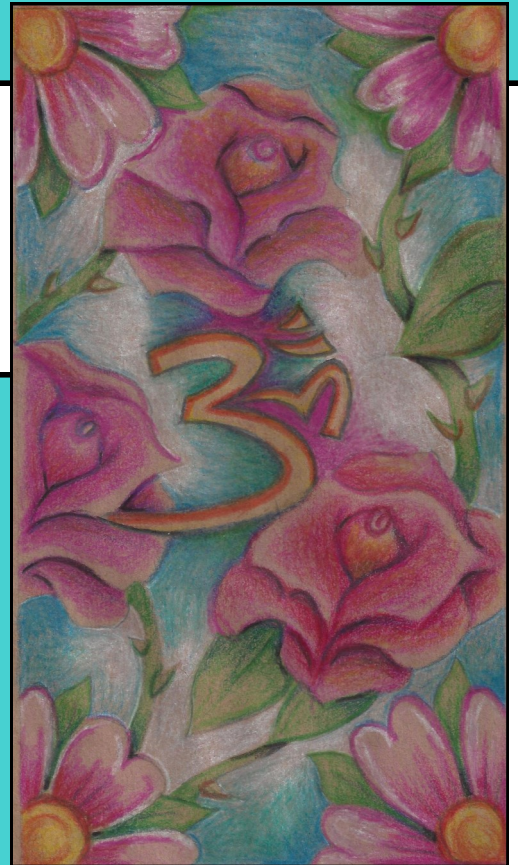
If you'd like this paperback book, please write to us with your name and full address including any numbers or location information your facility requires. It might take up to 4 weeks for your book to arrive, so if you're at a short-term address please wait to request the book at your next address. Send your request to: Human Kindness Foundation, PO Box 61619, Durham NC 27715.



"Instead of being encouraged to feel completely protected, loved, honored, and respected by the Divine Force, you've been taught that you're being judged. Because you've been taught that, you feel guilt and fear. But guilt and fear do not open your connection to the Divine; they only serve to close your heart. The reality is that God's way is love, and you can see this for yourself."
—Michael A. Singer

After receiving this book, Alvin T. says "It confirmed some things I had experienced in my recovery process. When you're given the truth, it's tremendous! I'm going to keep re-reading it."

"Life itself is your career, and your interaction with life is your most meaningful relationship. Everything else you're doing is just focusing on a tiny subset of life in the attempt to give life some meaning. What actually gives life meaning is the willingness to live it. It isn't any particular event; it's the willingness to experience life's events."
—Michael A. Singer



Many thanks to the artists: photos on pg 1 and pg 4 by Satsuki "Sunshine" Scoville, Durham, NC; pg 2: drawing by Mark E. Howard, Chattanooga, TN, photo by Morgan Siem, Raleigh, NC; pg 6: drawing by Duane Raymond, Delano, CA; pg 7: drawing by Michael Sloan, Grafton, OH; pg 8: acrylic painting by Bryan Sneed, Coleman, FL.



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*My
religion
is very
simple.
My
religion
is
kindness.*

—His Holiness
the Dalai Lama
of Tibet

Painting by
Bryan Sneed,
Coleman, FL

