



Holy Days 2017



Sitting Still; Still Sitting

There is a stillness at the center of who we are. ... If it intrigues us enough, we practice Stillness a little bit every day. We begin the classic, most honorable pursuit of human beings: learning to sit still and shut up.

—Bo Lozoff, in
Just Another Spiritual Book

Sitting still can go by many names: meditation, contemplation, prayer, and more.

In this newsletter, we feature a practice called Centering Prayer. Our dear friend Chaplain Ray Leonardini meets regularly with a group in Folsom Prison that includes people of several faiths. They come together to practice sitting still using the method of Centering Prayer.

The instructions for Centering Prayer are simple and for many, the results are profound. That's the combination Bo Lozoff referred to in his book title *Deep and Simple*. Bo was not interested in making things complicated. He wanted "deep and simple."

Several times over the many years I worked with Bo, I heard him tell the story of talking to his friend Ted, a truck driver with very little formal education. Ted asked Bo what the Prison-Ashram Project was all about, and Bo began talking about Eastern mystical concepts and the many scriptures he had read with long Hindu names and terms that were unfamiliar to Ted. Ted said, "Bo, if you can't explain it to me simply, it's either B***S*** or you don't understand it yourself." Bo appreciated Ted's wisdom and turned his attention to expressing the big truths simply. He came to agree fully with Ted: truth doesn't need big fancy words, college degrees, or expensive weekend seminars about the latest complicated trend. In Bo's book *Just Another Spiritual Book* he says that spiritual practice pretty much boils down to: sit still and shut up.

And as most of you reading this know, Bo spent his life talking and singing about those deep and simple truths. He visited hundreds of prisons all over the U.S. plus Canada, Europe, Sri Lanka, and India. He wrote 5 books for adults and 2 for children, all about the spiritual journey. Simple, yes. And deep enough to devote your life to.

This newsletter is being printed just before the 5-year anniversary of Bo's death, and it's likely to reach you two or three weeks after that November 29 anniversary. Some people wondered if Human Kindness Foundation would continue after Bo passed on, since this was his life's work and his passion, and the project centers around distributing his style of teaching ancient truths. I'm grateful to report that HKF is going strong; not just continuing, but thriving. Sita Lozoff, Bo's wife and co-founder of HKF, is as passionate as Bo about this project. We're already working on something for our Spring newsletter that will give you a deeper glimpse into Sita's journey. Many of you know Sita already because you've gotten a note from her. She spends her days (and sometimes evenings) reading your letters and making sure our books keep going to the people who want them. She doesn't use as many words as Bo did, but her heart is in this work just as much as his was, and I hope you can feel her loving presence in everything that leaves this office. It's there, even if you don't see her name in your package. Sit still and see if you can feel it.

Still sitting with you, Catherine

The Transformative Power of Centering Prayer

By Chaplain Ray Leonardini

Three years ago, we featured Chaplain Ray Leonardini's book **Finding God Within: Contemplative Prayer for Prisoners** in HKF's newsletter. Since then, nearly a thousand people in more than 465 prisons have requested the book, which is available in English or Spanish. (See page 3 for how to request it.) Here we share a few of Chaplain Ray's thoughts about Centering Prayer, some comments from people who participate in the Folsom Contemplative Fellowship, and instructions you can use any time you're ready to try the practice.

Centering Prayer's popularity in prisons may be because of its attunement to the experience of suffering. For reasons known only to God, suffering and anguish are fertile ground for fostering a personal, even intimate relationship with the God of Silence, the God who meets us in contemplative prayer. This is the God who has loved us from the beginning and wants nothing more than our wholeness and happiness.

Through the simple methods of Centering Prayer, holding still in meditation, we are opened to insights and realizations outside of prayer time. As one man put it:

"Because of my Centering Prayer practice, I can understand now that I was not as bad a kid as they said. I was just a deeply lonely kid who couldn't find a way to get the affection and esteem I needed. So much of my ideas about fitting into my group came out of my desperate need to be seen and accepted. It never worked, but I couldn't think of any alternatives." Paul Deitering, Folsom Prison.

Centering Prayer is a non-denominational prayer practice that gets us in touch with our actual *experience* of God. The men in the Folsom Prison Contemplative Fellowship chose Centering Prayer because it was the easiest to learn and teach and because no one would be excluded because of their religion.

As we sit in Centering Prayer, we watch how our mind works, how our mind continually replays all the things we have been taught to believe about who we are, what we've done, and why we're in prison. We try to listen to God, to receive the messages this God of our understanding is trying to communicate to us. It's like learning a new language, the language of Silence. This Silence is not the absence of noise. It's an internal stance of letting thoughts come and go without the engagement of our mind. The biggest mistake new learners of Centering Prayer make is thinking: "This seems like a great practice for some guys, but, honestly, I can't shut off my mind. I must not be right for this practice."



Centering Prayer does not stop thoughts. It's a practice of *not paying attention* to the thoughts. It's like watching TV and someone comes to your cell to talk. The conversation itself doesn't turn down the volume of the TV. Our *focus* on the conversation does. Our mind, like the TV, goes on chattering whether we pay attention to it or not.

Our Centering Prayer practice opens for us the ability to get glimpses of ourselves we've never seen before—ultimately to see ourselves in a new way. We now begin to let go of self-loathing. After a few weeks of practicing Centering Prayer, remarkable change starts to happen. Without knowing exactly how it happens, sitting for a time in Centering Prayer gives a sense of clearing out the negativity and poisons in our inner lives.

May you discover for yourself that this simple practice offers a way to a new sense of personal freedom and the deep knowledge of God.

A Follower of IFA, a Traditional African Religion

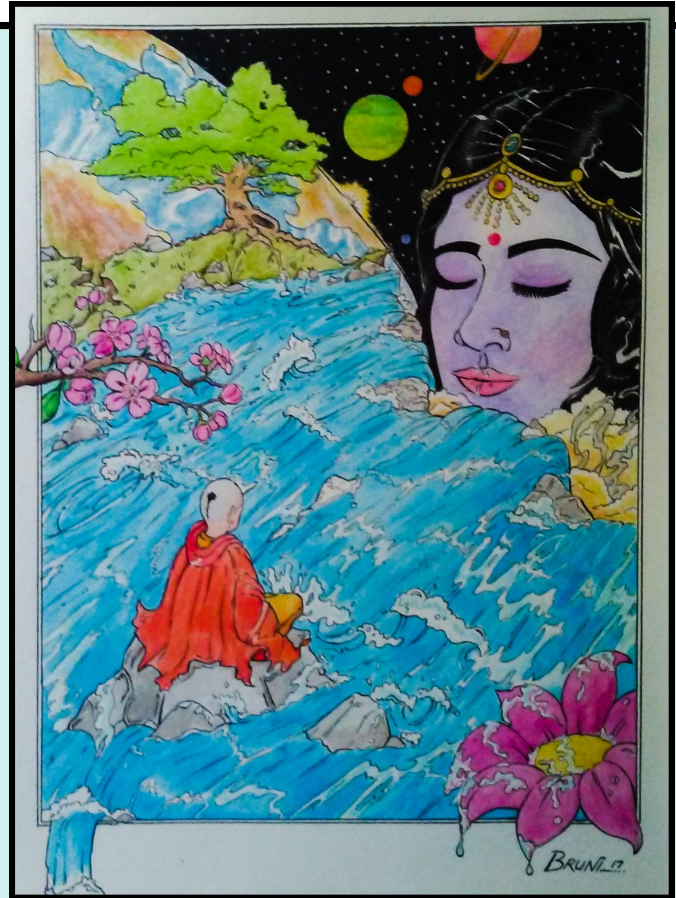
Through my own contemplative practice of Centering Prayer, I've discovered the Divine Spark within. The sacred teaching of IFA does direct us inward. ... By entering this space of silence, as I do with Centering Prayer, I find peace. ... These days, in my early morning moments, as I do Centering Prayer, I find the Divine in my 'shell' [inner safe haven] as I listen for what the Silence has for me.

—Lee Haynes, Folsom Prison

A Buddhist Practicing Centering Prayer

The goal of Centering Prayer is to have nothing less than an intimate relationship with God. This intimacy emerges on its own from spending time in silence. As I sit in silence I'm able to let more and more 'things' come and go: words—insights—judgements—emotions—feelings—body sensations—from the past, present and future. I choose to let these things go and notice the gaps of silence between them. These gaps may be instantaneous, timeless or eternal. **My spirit is fed in ways there are no words for.** As I sit in silence more things come and go. The more I let go, the less that binds me, and I am free to witness life, even life in prison, as an incredible experience. The silence of Centering Prayer transforms my life without major effort. It's like it's God's specific plan for me so it's easy to learn. At times, the silence can seem boring. But for me it's a good thing and worth it. After years of practicing Centering Prayer, I have been able to access and experience what I know is at the core of every human being—an unconditional positive regard for life.

—Lawrence Hamilton, Folsom Prison



A View From Islam

Orthodox Islam has it that the Creator and the created are distinct from one another. The one place where we 'meet,' before the day of judgement, is in moments of 'tafakkur' or deep contemplation.

When I engage in tafakkur, it is a private moment, like a 'blending,' with the Creator. I am saying: 'Here I am.' No one is as gentle or forgiving as the Creator with whatever is evil or incomplete in me.

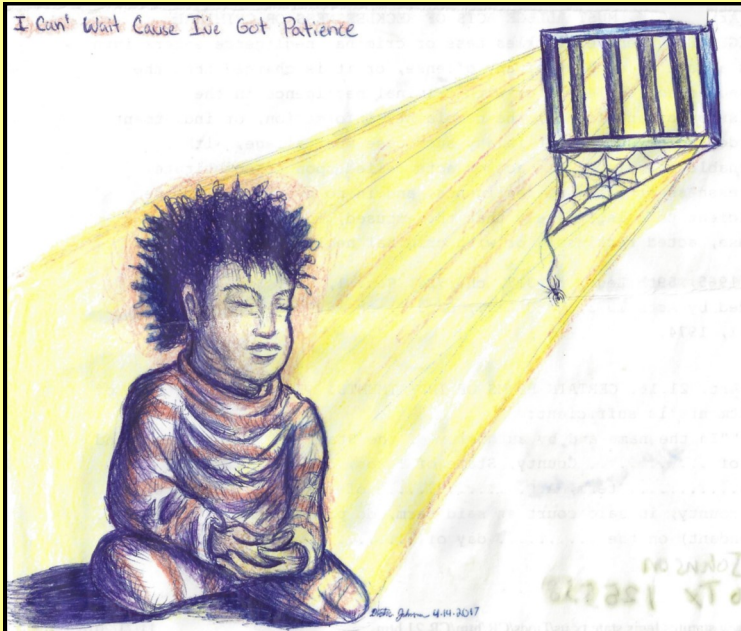
With 'Ilhaam,' or inspiration of the heart, the Creator inspires each human with an inherent sense of morality and dignity. Tafakkur opens us to greater Ilhaam. This greater awareness, openness of heart, is sought by people of all traditions. Ilhaam and tafakkur go hand in hand. Inspiration deepens the viewing with the Creator. It is for me very similar to the teachings of Centering Prayer. —Clayton West, Folsom Prison



Finding God Within: Contemplative Prayer for Prisoners is available free to people who are incarcerated. Write to:

Prison Contemplative Fellowship, P.O. Box 1086, Folsom, CA 95763-1086.

Anyone interested in going into prisons and jails to facilitate Centering Prayer groups can email Prison Contemplative Fellowship at: office@uspcf.org.



Practice: Centering Prayer

Instructions by Chaplain Ray Leonardini

Before starting Centering Prayer, choose a word that will remind you of your intention to detach from any thoughts that may arise during the prayer period. Your word can be a simple word of one or two syllables, or it can be your breath or it can be both. Words like peace, love, joy, trust, and listen are good. Some prefer breath, life, yes, mercy, God, Allah, Jesus, or any word that helps us to let go of our thoughts without creating new thoughts. We call it a sacred word, not a mantra, because it functions only as a reminder of our intention to detach from our thoughts.

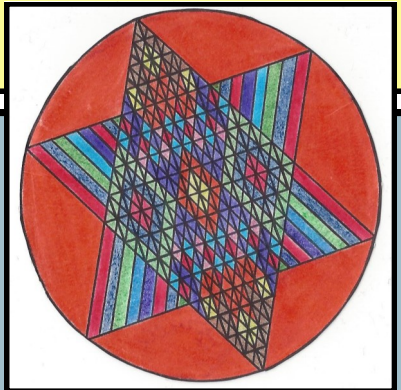
1. Set aside a time for your practice, 20 minutes is the goal but do what is feasible, twice a day if possible. Times prior to count or chow work well.

2. Sit comfortably on a chair, bunk, or on the floor with your back against the wall. Whatever position you use, keep your back straight. For many, it is easier to sit without moving if your back is supported.

3. Close your eyes and take a few deep, slow breaths. 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. 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. At times, your sacred word will simply drop away.



When you don't know what
else to do, focus on love.
—Louise Hay

Louise Hay's book, *You Can Heal Your Life*, spent 13 weeks on the New York Times bestseller list. More than 50 million copies have been sold. Louise was a supporter and friend to Human Kindness Foundation since 1988, when she invited Bo and Sita to Los Angeles to speak. In August 2017, at age 90, Louise died peacefully in her sleep. Louise designated in her will that HKF will receive a bequest to help continue the compassionate, transformative work of the Prison-Ashram Project. Thank you for your generosity, Louise dear.

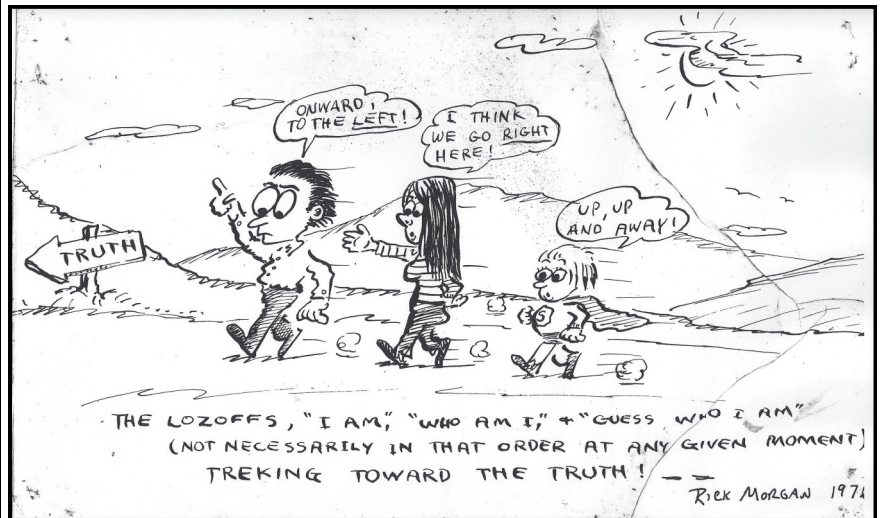
Many thanks to the artists: pg1: Jason Bruni, Graceville, FL; pg3: Jason Bruni (upper), Amanda Lynn Smith, Fort Worth, TX (lower); pg4: Datra Johnson, Amarillo, TX (upper); Jose Villereal, Huntsville, TX (lower); pg5: cartoons by Rick Morgan, Raleigh, NC; pg6: Stephanie Guillory, Fort Worth, TX; pg7: Jessica Harrington, Hanford, CA; pg8: Angela Madison, Virginia Beach, VA.

You might not recognize his name, but we bet you've seen the art of Rick Morgan.



Rick drew the cartoons that help *We're All Doing Time* discuss big truths in a profound yet light-hearted way. Rick died in October, 2017. Thank you for your

generosity, Rick. Your talent and humor will continue to touch people.



"Texas prison inmates donated more than \$53,000 through their commissary funds to be used for Hurricane Harvey relief, according to a prison system spokesman.... During the month of September, 6,600 inmates donated \$53,863, which will be sent to the American Red Cross fund benefiting victims of Hurricane Harvey. The average donation was \$8."

San Antonio Express-News,
October 14, 2017

Thank you to everyone who helps out in the world. Together we can make a difference.



If you've been on our mailing list for a long time, you might remember the little boy who was in our group photos in the early 2000s. Eli is Catherine's son and Sita's godson. He is now an adult, living far from the HKF headquarters. Eli grew up helping around the HKF office and spending lots of time with visitors and volunteers. He sends his love to all of you.

Above: Sita, Eli, and Catherine during a recent visit.
Left: Eli and Bo building a warehouse in 2008. That warehouse currently holds about 50,000 of Bo's books.

Letters

Dear HKF,

I've been reading the letters in the back of *We're All Doing Time*. Those exchanges Bo had with the cons back in the seventies and eighties feel like Bo is challenging me from beyond the grave. I'm doing time in Montana, but I'm from Jacksonville, Florida. I get depressed and angry being caged so far from home. I'm utilizing some of the practices in your literature and really enjoying positive results. I have peace. I have to work at it every day, but it's the small practices you guys teach that are the vehicle for that peace. I really like taking life at a slower pace, being mindful and aware. Meditation is still hard on me. I try to do it a little each day though, and I still have good results, but it's hard to find the right time to meditate in an open bay dorm. There's always some curious fellow convict or even a guard that walks by and asks the same question, "What are you doing, meditation?" Needless to say I usually drop the ball on quieting my mind at that point.

I have, however, found a cheap alternative in walking. I pace up and down a hallway here and do pull ups in between. I am usually alone and people come through occasionally but since my walking doesn't seem unusual to them, I can actually get some alone time. They just cruise by without interrupting most of the time.

I still deal with a great deal of fear. I am pretty paranoid often and use a "tough guy" image as armor. I don't think I am going to be able to change that image, although I do want to face my fears and insecurities. Got any tips?

All my love, B

Hi B, I just wanted to thank you for your letter and send a few words of encouragement. I did 19 years in prison and have been out over 7 years, so I know the struggles you're facing. As challenging as it is, it sounds like you're doing the work, and a lot of your fears are just part of growing. I'm sure life will help you deal with them when it's time. People respect and admire a person who is genuine—work on being that in all you say and do and the tough guy thing will find its own place.

I love your walking meditation and the way you are finding what works in your circumstances. Yes, you have to be flexible. When I was in a dorm, I use to stay up or wake up before most others to get

the quietest, most relaxed time. I still never could get around a guard with a flashlight, but I did it anyway. You're on a good path, man, and I respect the work you're doing. Keep at it, friend. You're making a good life for yourself. Spend some time with the words of ol' Bo. He has a way of saying just what we need to hear!

Your friend, Gabe



Dear HKF,

I am a 26 year old male. Due to the most unfortunate or the highest blessing, I find myself in a prison for burglary, criminal trespass, sexual assault and simple assault. These crimes or the one in particular—the sexual assault—is absolutely not true. I am simply here because the mother of my daughter wanted me out of the picture. As you can imagine, I have much anger within me. What that woman did to me is/was a horrible thing. I've read Bo Lozoff's *We're All Doing Time* and *Just Another Spiritual Book*, and I'm reading the Bible. Although I am reading these things, I find

myself hating her and being angry. I also find myself worrying. I've gone from being a contributing member of society to a menace—all according to this spiteful woman who placed me here.

The question I have for you is how can I use this experience and do good? How do I move on from this? How can I live? I've considered suicide, but I am afraid of leaving behind those that love me; my children, friends, family. Please direct me to whatever you think is best.

With so much love and peace, J

Dear J,

Thank you for writing to us. Right after I read your letter, while I was reflecting on how to answer you, I was in a grocery store and saw an old friend (I'll call him R). R did more than 20 years in North Carolina prisons for a nonviolent crime. He has been out for several years. He's one of the many people we know who not only survived such a difficult thing, but came through it with dignity and compassion. It's sure not an easy path, but it is possible, so please don't give up.

One sentence in your letter stands out to me as evidence that you're already on the right track to get through this. You ask "How can I use this experience and do good?" The answer to "how?" is long, and you can find details in our books. For the moment, let me reassure you that IT IS POSSIBLE. How do I know? Because of friends like R who have done it.

Another friend, M, is still in prison. M says that he reaches out to younger men, acting as an older brother or friend, helping them get through their early years of incarceration. He says that some of them hardly knew any men when they were growing up, so his example as an older male who is strong, calm, and kind means a lot to some of them. Maybe it helps them believe that they can choose that kind of path for themselves.

And of course you're right about the people who love you. They need you. Even if you're not able to be in touch with your children right now, eventually they will wonder about you. Imagine the difference between looking for your father and finding that he gave up versus finding that he dug deep and became a man of peace and deep kindness. What a powerful gift you can be to your children.

For now, when worries about the future arise, do your best to set those aside. You have plenty to work on right here, right

now. Go back to your excellent question: "How can I use this experience and do good?" Look around you and see what good you can do. It might be as simple as nodding at someone you pass in the unit. It might be listening to someone who is lonely, or reading to someone who doesn't read English, or saying a silent prayer for someone who is having a terrible day.

One more thing, J, and this one is hard to talk about. Whatever happened between you and your daughter's mother, even if you didn't do anything that was against the law, look deeply into yourself and face anything you did that you regret. You don't have to tell anybody else about it, but if there's anything at all that you could have done better in that situation, admit it to yourself. Take responsibility in your heart for any unkindness you showed, and work to become a person who treats people better. This might take some time, and it is likely to be painful. We all make mistakes, and some of those mistakes contribute to terrible consequences. Facing our own part is important to healing.

I know you can make a good life for yourself. If you decide to keep working with our books, you are welcome to stay in touch. We'll do our best to help you use the practices that are such powerful tools for inner peace and freedom.

With deep respect, Catherine



Dear HKF,

After a good start for a couple of months, I seem to be falling short of the standards that I honestly thought I would be at. One of those areas is meditation. I am able to do the just sitting still thing for a little while, but I feel it is like trying to grab smoke and hold on to it while in the midst of a gale force wind. After reading the meditation chapter in *We're All Doing Time* over and over again, I can't seem to break through. Any help on this will be greatly appreciated.

Love, T



Dear T,

Your letter was passed to me in hopes I could help you in some ways. I can't say I have any instantly healing insights but perhaps just having your words and thoughts reflected back to you in this way will help you hear more clearly your own best guides.

I have decades of experience with the frustrations and benefits of meditation. They are linked. In fact, the frustrations are the very things that lead to the true benefits. Anyone who claims to have sat down the first time, entered into undistracted loving bliss for themselves and the world, and continued it for years after, is probably lying or deluded. Even the Buddha and Christ faced great demons in their meditations. I used to teach yoga and meditation regularly in a prison. Many left claiming the yoga was too strenuous for them, but I'm convinced most really left because they found the meditation part too vulnerable. We don't have a culture that promotes us being quiet with ourselves and others. Instead we have a culture that promotes addictions. Feel uneasy? Buy something. Take something. Have sex with someone. Get entertained. Work yourself to mindlessness. All so we don't have to actually just be with the discomfort. I fight the same impulses. Just tonight I sat in medi-

tation, most of which was listening to self-critical voices, fears about my self-image, and feeling how my body and energy changed with each passing thought. But I stayed with it. Just long enough to once again remind myself that I bring this to myself. And if patient with myself, these judgments and fears pass, and eventually my body settles. Maybe for only 20 seconds, but that makes the rest of the 20 minutes worth it. So sit with your distractions, your irritations, the noise in your unit. Let them all be part of the meditation. Investigate them intensely or just watch them with minimal interest. Do both. That is part of the training. It teaches you that these aren't uncontrollable impulses but actually things you choose to fuel or, hopefully, choose to let go of. In every minute. Of every day. Whether in meditation or just in life. And with each failure to live up to that goal, forgive yourself and start again. It is called meditation practice, not meditation perfection. Keep "trying to grab smoke and hold on to it while in the midst of gale force winds," T. If you can come up with that phrase, I'd say you are doing something right in your meditations.

With all the love and encouragement of us here at HKF, Christopher

HUMAN KINDNESS
FOUNDATION



www.humankindness.org
PO Box 61619
Durham, NC 27715

SPONSOR OF THE PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

Return Service Requested

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Durham, NC
Permit No. 205



Are not two sparrows
sold for a penny?
And one of them shall
not fall on the ground
without your Father.

Are not two
sparrows sold for
a penny? But not
a single sparrow
can fall to the
ground without
your Father
knowing it.

—Matthew 10:29

Beloved friends,
you are God's
precious,
precious child.

Sita