



Meditation & Repentance

The word “repentance” sounds so judgey, doesn’t it? It’s not a word I ever remember using at Human Kindness Foundation or in my personal life, at least not since my years growing up in a Southern Baptist church.

But in this sermon, Nadia Bolz-Weber talks about repentance in a way that is new for me. Repentance as a continuing act —that sounds like daily spiritual practice! Repentance as an act of changing your mind, heart, and direction—I need that!

Nadia Bolz-Weber is not much like my image of a Lutheran minister. After growing up in a fundamentalist Christian family, by age 17 she began covering herself in tattoos and seeing herself as “society’s outsider.” She worked as a stand-up comic, and became addicted to alcohol and drugs before getting sober in 1991. In 2008, Reverend Bolz-Weber was ordained as a Lutheran pastor and founded the House for All Sinners and Saints, a radically-inclusive church in Denver, CO. She has written several books, including best-seller *Accidental Saints: Finding God In All The Wrong People*.

Sita and I have not had the honor of meeting her, but “Pastor Nadia” feels like part of the Human Kindness Foundation family because of her devotion to sharing powerful spiritual truth with people that society often treats like outsiders. We are grateful that she gave her permission for us to share this excerpt with you. —Catherine

From Reverend Nadia Bolz-Weber

So, my own pandemic fatigue got bad back in October.

Being stuck in my little one bedroom apartment for months started to feel like having to do time in a cell with a member of an enemy gang, except that the enemy was me—specifically—my own brain. I couldn’t stop my scurrying thoughts of doom and I couldn’t stop wondering when I would ever see my family and friends again, and I couldn’t stop wondering if maybe our entire civilization is collapsing, and is that little headache I have COVID? My psyche did not know how to handle the rising death toll. I began to turn on myself and turn on others because if I can’t control anything at least I can find someone to blame and if I can’t assign blame at least I can correct someone on Twitter. ...

It was then that my best friend suggested I try meditating, which felt like an act of aggression against me. I’ve never given meditation much of a go before because every time I tried it, all I could do is persevere over how bad I was at meditating and that kind of self-loathing didn’t seem like it was helping me spiritually so I thought “thanks but no thanks.”

But I was desperate. So I downloaded a meditation app and just did the thing even though I’m like, really bad at sitting perfectly still and clearing my thoughts. And look, I know I’m 51 and a so-called spiritual leader so maybe this shouldn’t have been such a surprise to me, but—it’s not that bad. I mean,





it's actually kind of great, once I was able to let go of thinking I had to be "good" at it.

See, what I learned from the teachers I listened to is that, the gift of meditation isn't in being able to maintain a still mind (although

at me because I said something stupid and then I'd hear "The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe this good news." And again I'd return. This is the beauty of our faith, that repentance gets to be a continual action.

This is the beauty of our faith, not that we once were bad but now we're good, but that Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling us out of our trances. Again and again. The trance of thinking that we will be happy when everything is as we think it should be. ... Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling us out of the empty promises of our personal and cultural trances and into what is most true and most real—this present moment, where the kingdom of God is at hand. ...

And part of the good news we are called to repent and believe is that **there is no upper limit to the times we can return to God by changing our minds or changing our hearts or changing our direction.** It is not like the three tries you have to remember your password before the system locks you out.

The gates of repentance are always open.

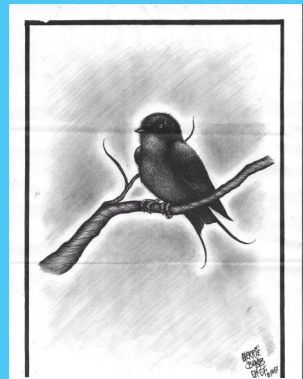
And there is no distance we must travel to get to the doors of the kingdom.

The kingdom our Lord ushered in is as close to us as our own breath... arriving with this breath and this breath. ...

Repent and believe the good news.

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that's great), the gift of meditation is in the messing it up—it's in being carried away in thinking and then realizing you are thinking and then returning to the meditation.

Meditation's magic is in the returning. Not in the never having left.

Theologically speaking, there's a word for that. It's repentance. ...

Now, I know the word repentance has gotten a bad wrap, as if it is the priggish cry of a pearl-clutching moral elite demanding the immediate lifestyle changes of people more interesting than themselves.

But repentance or *metanoia* in Greek is far more than cleaning up your act. Repentance means changing your mind and changing your direction and changing your heart. And the cool thing is that in Greek it implies a continual action, not something that happens just once and then you're good.

So this week as I practiced meditating and I found my thoughts crowding back into my mind just as soon as I cleared it like freshly raked leaves on a windy day, I'd hear Jesus saying "the kingdom of God has come near, Repent and believe the good news" [Mark 1:15] and I would come back to stillness and my breath. And then I'd start wondering if I have all the ingredients to make that soup I am planning for dinner and if that one person is mad

Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling
Calling for you and for me
See on the portals, He's waiting and watching
Watching for you and for me

Come home, come home
Ye who are weary, come home
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling
Calling, "Oh, sinner, come home"

Christian hymn, written by Will L Thompson in 1880 and still sung in many churches

Please join us on Wednesday evenings

Beloved Family,

Please join us on Wednesday evenings, between 7:00 and 8:00 pm, for time "together-apart." During this time, we invite you to meditate, pray, or do other spiritual practices in community with your Human Kindness Foundation family. We have heard from people all over the US—and a few from other parts of the world—who are participating in this time dedicated to compassion for all who are suffering. You can join us using any spiritual practice that you dedicate to compassion. The instructions below, written by our friends at Prison Phoenix Trust in England, are offered for Wednesday evenings or any time.

"See" you on Wednesdays, dear friends! Love and blessings, Sita



The Breath: Profound & Simple • A Meditation by Prison Phoenix Trust

We all know how to breathe. It's the first thing we do when we enter the world and the last thing we do when we leave it. Breathing keeps us alive. Breath is life.

But there's more. How we feel affects the way we breathe. Think for a moment about how your breathing changes if you get a sudden shock or feel anxious or scared. The beauty of the breath--the real gift--is that the reverse is also true. As yoga students will already know, you can change the way you feel by changing how you breathe. It is as simple as that.

The first thing to do is get to know your breath. When you wake in the morning, as you move through your day, watching TV, going to work, or exercising in the gym, notice how your mood and emotions change. Pay attention to your breath. Notice where it is. Does it feel shallow and fast, high in the chest, or maybe slow and deep in the lungs? Are you breathing through your nose or through your mouth? Get to know your breath just as it is.

Let us start by practicing breathing consciously.

We'll practice sitting down (though you can do this later standing or lying down). Sit on the edge of a chair, your bed or on the floor. Breathe in and out, through your nose if you can. Your eyes can be closed or open with your gaze lowered.

Sit with your back straight and your arms and shoulders relaxed. Let your hands rest on your knees or in your lap.

Notice your natural breathing. You may be able to feel the coolness of your breath as you breathe in and a warmer breath as you breathe out. Just notice the in breath and the out breath. Do this for couple of minutes.

Now place one hand gently on your belly. Imagine you're are breathing into your hand. Notice the rise and fall of your breath, feeling the breath under your hand.

Now start to lengthen your breath: count to three as you breathe in, and to four as you breathe out. Keep the breath down low in your belly if you can.

As you count, pay attention to each out-breath. Notice as it fades away. There is no need to hold your breath or strain.

After a few minutes, let the counting go. Return to normal breathing.

Take a few moments to notice how you feel compared to when you started.

Practice this for a few minutes every day. Remember you can do this whenever you like. All you need is your breath and your attention.

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Beloved friends and spiritual family,

We have heard from many of you about the hardships of this time and how they are so much harder for people who are incarcerated. We read each letter with attention and love. As we listen to you in that way, we wish we could change your circumstances and remove your suffering.

The great spiritual truths are true in every circumstance. If we didn't know that, we couldn't be Human Kindness Foundation. Still, we understand that what you are going through is terribly hard. **We hear you.**



From a small-view perspective, it makes no sense to believe that you can be at peace and even joyful in terrible circumstances. But in the big view, we hear Jesus talking about *Peace that passes understanding*. Jesus acknowledged that it makes no sense!

We also listen to wise people like His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet and Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa. *The Book Of Joy* is a discussion between these two sages—one Christian and one Buddhist—about how to find joy in this painful world. Each of them has survived decades of exile and the crushing violence of oppression. And yet, they are two of the most joyful people on the planet! Their peace *passes understanding*. They offer some hints to help us experience that peace too.

We're truly sorry, beloveds, but we're not able to bring *The Book of Joy* to you. We've chosen some powerful quotes from the book to share with you on these pages. We hope they'll be as meaningful to you as they are to us.

Love, Sita & Catherine

**Wherever you have friends
that's your country, and
wherever you receive love, that's your home.**

**Even ten or thirty minutes of meditating on compassion, on kindness for others, and you will see its effects all day.
That's the way to maintain a calm and joyous mind.**

The Dead Sea in the Middle East receives fresh water, but it has no outlet, so it doesn't pass the water out. It receives beautiful water from the rivers, and the water goes dank. I mean, it just goes bad. And that's why it is the Dead Sea. It receives and does not give. In the end generosity is the best way of becoming more, more, and more joyful.





Discovering more joy does not save us from the inevitability of hardship and heartbreak. In fact, we may cry more easily, but we will laugh more easily too. Perhaps we are just more alive. Yet, as we discover more joy, we can face suffering in a way that ennobles rather than embitters. We have hardship without becoming hard. We have heartbreak without being broken.

money. You can be the richest person on Earth, but if you care only about yourself, I can bet my bottom dollar you will not be happy and joyful. But when you are caring, compassionate, more concerned about the welfare of others than about your own, wonderfully, wonderfully, you suddenly feel a warm glow in your heart, because you have, in fact, wiped the tears from the eyes of another.

If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.



Letters

Dear HKF,

I know my situation is not nearly as desperate as so many other people who write to you. I've read their letters in your newsletters and books, and my heart goes out to them. Still, I wonder if you could share any guidance on disappointment? I was involved in a car accident, and I'm facing a lot of disappointments since. I'm 35 years old and I'm looking at the possibility of a 15+ year sentence. I have a low bond, but my family refuses to be the signers on the bond. They say I haven't followed through in the past, although I've never been in a situation like this before, so I'm left confused.

The possible sentence and relying on a court appointed attorney has been a heavy head trip of disappointing outcomes. I remain grateful that I'm healthy and *We're All Doing Time* preaches that whether in a prison or a palace over the next 15 years, I'll experience the full range of human emotions, but it still stings, you know.

Thanks for any clues you might offer towards pointing me to the truth. I sincerely appreciate your time and consideration.

Peace & love,
C

Dear C,

One thing that Bo always did with letters from sincere seekers like yourself, was to be loving, yet honest. He

never assumed that folks wanted a sugar-coated answer to their questions. So I'll try to channel my best Bo and answer your letter.

You said you wanted guidance on disappointment, and at first I was not sure if you were disappointed in yourself or someone else. Then you stated "I was involved in a car accident" and the rest of that paragraph was about you: "I'm facing disappointment, I'm facing 15 years, my family won't help" etc. But you didn't elaborate on the accident. Apparently, if you are facing 15 years, someone was killed. How did

you handle that? What kind of disappointment has that person's death caused his/her family?

You also tell us that your family says you did not "follow through" in the past. Is there any truth to that? C, you need to be deeply honest with yourself before real freedom can come your way.

You can use your cell as an ashram for the next 15 years, but if you're not honest, it will be a waste of your time. If you truly want what you say you want, it is going to require taking a compassionate and honest assessment of your life—all of it—before, up to, and after the accident. Can you see any areas where you may be responsible for

things? For your family's reluctance to put up the bond money?

C, we say all this with the utmost love, because we believe you wrote to us sincerely wanting the truth. So we

come from a place of compassion. When you care about someone, you don't tell them what they want to hear, you tell them what they need to hear. We want you FREE! Spiritually free.

You are young, and although 15 years seems like an eternity, if you get that sentence you will get out when you are younger than I am now. And my life is by no means over!

Sita is 76, and she wakes up every day with purpose, strength, love and dedication to people other than herself. I would ask you to perhaps say.... "I never saw my adult life beginning this way," and start today making choices that reflect a new way of being in this world. Make amends where you can, be honest about your life. No one is asking you to feel guilty, just rise up above your present way of thinking and see if you can see through someone else's eyes. That is compassion. You CAN live a purposeful life—in or out of prison. We see it all the time. But no one takes step one without truth! And you know the saying: the truth will set you free.

We know that you are going through a tough time right now, and that you may go through tough times ahead. But your life is not over, and you can still make something meaningful of it. Maybe this is your wake up call. Be gentle with yourself, but be as honest as you can be. We all make mistakes, but we don't have to be forever defined by them. How you move forward is up to you.

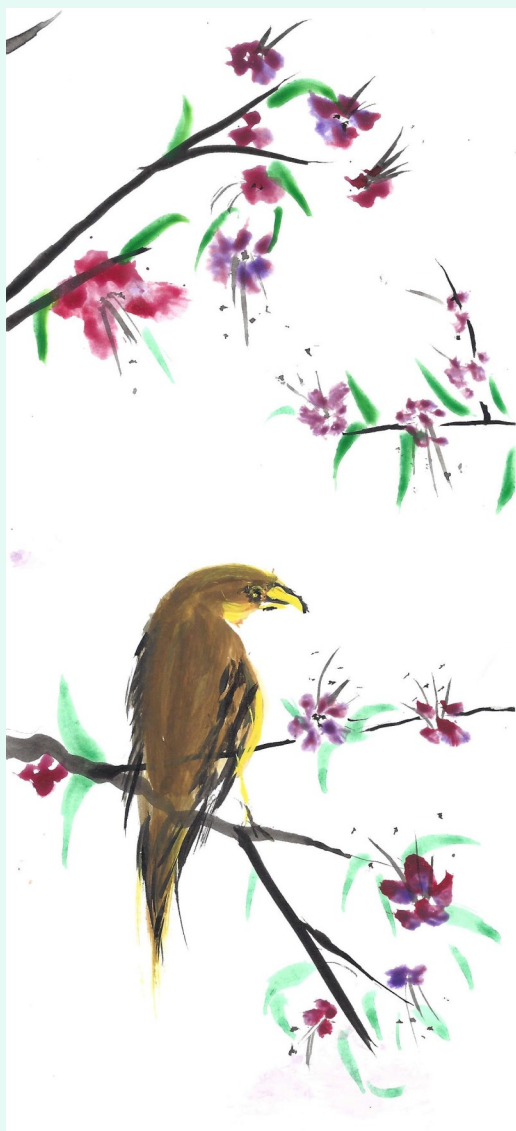
Love, Donna



[Ed note: the following is one part of a correspondence that has been going on for several years. We excerpt this part because we know that some others, especially if they got locked up very young, struggle with similar confusion.]

Dear Catherine,

I'm so glad you are well, especially during this pandemic. As for the relationship I told you about, I guess I was pushing a little too much and moving too fast by asking X to be my girlfriend without first getting to know her as a person and as a friend. Is that what you meant when you told me to listen with



respect and don't push? Am I reading you right? If I asked a female to be my girlfriend without first getting to know her and she turns me down, the question I have is do you think I can start over? Would it be ok to ask her again later on if she would be interested in being in a relationship with me?

Truly yours, your friend B

Dear B,

When I said listen with respect, that includes believing what a woman tells you. X has told you many times that she's not available or interested. You have to believe her and act accordingly. You will see movies and other stories that make it look like women don't mean what they say. Those stories are damaging to our whole culture. They contribute to confusion like yours.

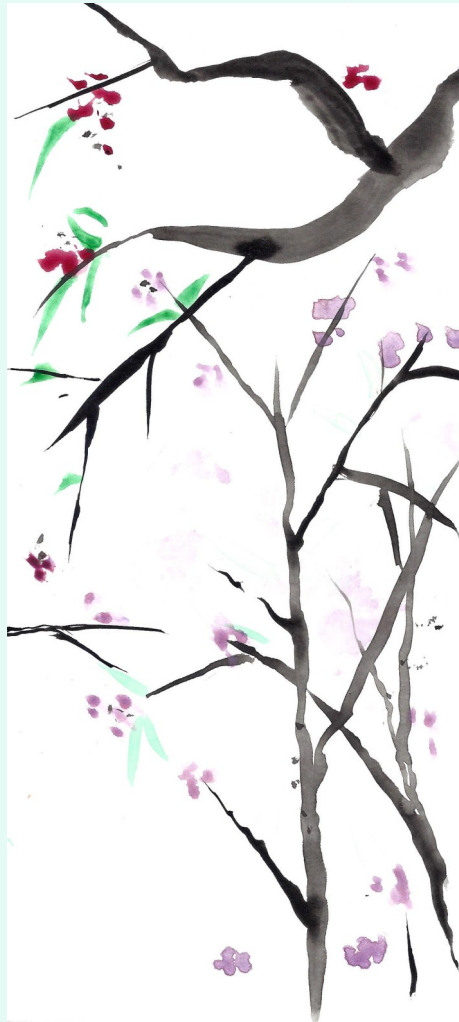
If you want a healthy relationship, you have to start with respect. If a woman says no, believe her. I suppose there are the RARE times when someone is not interested for awhile and later becomes interested, so you might have a friend who tells you it happened to him. But you cannot make it happen, and you are harming yourself if you focus on someone who has said no to you.

You have an extra need to be careful in this department, B. As a person who has been convicted of a sex offense, you have to be much more careful than other men. Please accept that you absolutely must hear "no" and understand that it simply means "no." If you don't take that in very deeply, you are going to repeat a cycle of crime and incarceration for many years. I don't want that to happen to you, friend. I recommend that you make a daily practice—add it to your meditation time—of repeating to yourself: "no means no, and I respect every woman's right to say no to me."

There is plenty of goodness in you, B. Turn your thoughts and practices to those parts of you, like you're doing by helping people get their G.E.D. Keep developing your spiritual self with daily practices. If God has a romantic partner

in the plan for you, that will happen at the right time. You cannot force it.

Peace and blessings, Catherine



Dearest Sita,

Hello again. I just wanted to thank you for printing my letter in your last newsletter! I was pleasantly surprised and very proud to be part of such a wonderful thing!

When I wrote to you last time, there were about ten of us sitting together-apart on Wednesday nights here in the prison. [See page 3 for how to join in on Wednesday evenings.] That number keeps growing and growing! Now there are about 25-30 (out of 200) in the prison and it's spreading! Recently, a good friend of mine was released from this

prison to a pre-release after ten years locked up here. Her first letter was unexpected, but brought me great joy. Most of her letter was about how many people there at the pre-release jumped on board to sit together-apart on Wednesday nights! All of them willing to accept everyone else with kindness, compassion, love and non-judgement. She was amazed, and so am I!

A couple of months ago, I wrote my Buddhist lama friend at the Billings, MT Dharma Center and told her what we are doing here. She emailed the entire Buddhist community in Billings, and now they all sit together-apart on Wednesday nights! In an itty-bitty town in another part of Montana, my friend, a preacher's wife, presented the idea to their whole congregation!

I feel so grateful to be connected with all of these people. This is becoming a Montana-wide sensation!

Love, K



Dear HKF,

My name is T. I am in prison in Texas. I have seen over the last two years, the most complete change in a man I have ever seen. He went from being extremely violent and remorseless to being kind and thoughtful.

When I finally got up the nerve to ask how that happened, all he said was to write you and ask for two books, read them with an open mind, and I would know.

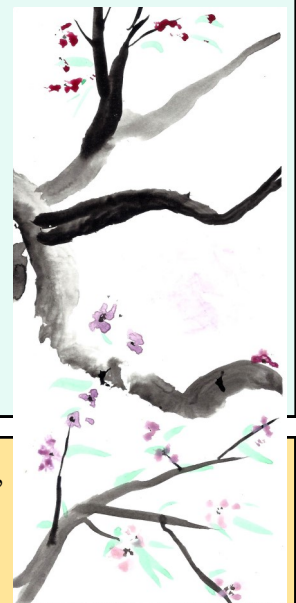
Please send me *We're All Doing Time* and *Just Another Spiritual Book*.

Thank you for your time, T

Dear T,

Welcome to the HKF family! Your books are on the way.

Love, HKF



Many thanks to the artists: pg 1: Thomas Ford, Atlanta, GA; pg 2: Matthew McCullough, Chowchilla, CA (upper) & artist unknown (lower); pg 3: Mark Howard, Chattanooga, TN; pg 4: Steven Dean Parks, San Quentin, CA (upper) & Corey Ray, Lafayette, IN (lower); pg 5: Scot Wallace, Camp Hill, PA (upper) & Selena Fisher DeBor, Lebanon, PA (lower); pgs 6 & 7: Dave Arledge, Canon City, CO; pg 8: Stephen Stoeltje, Beaumont, TX.

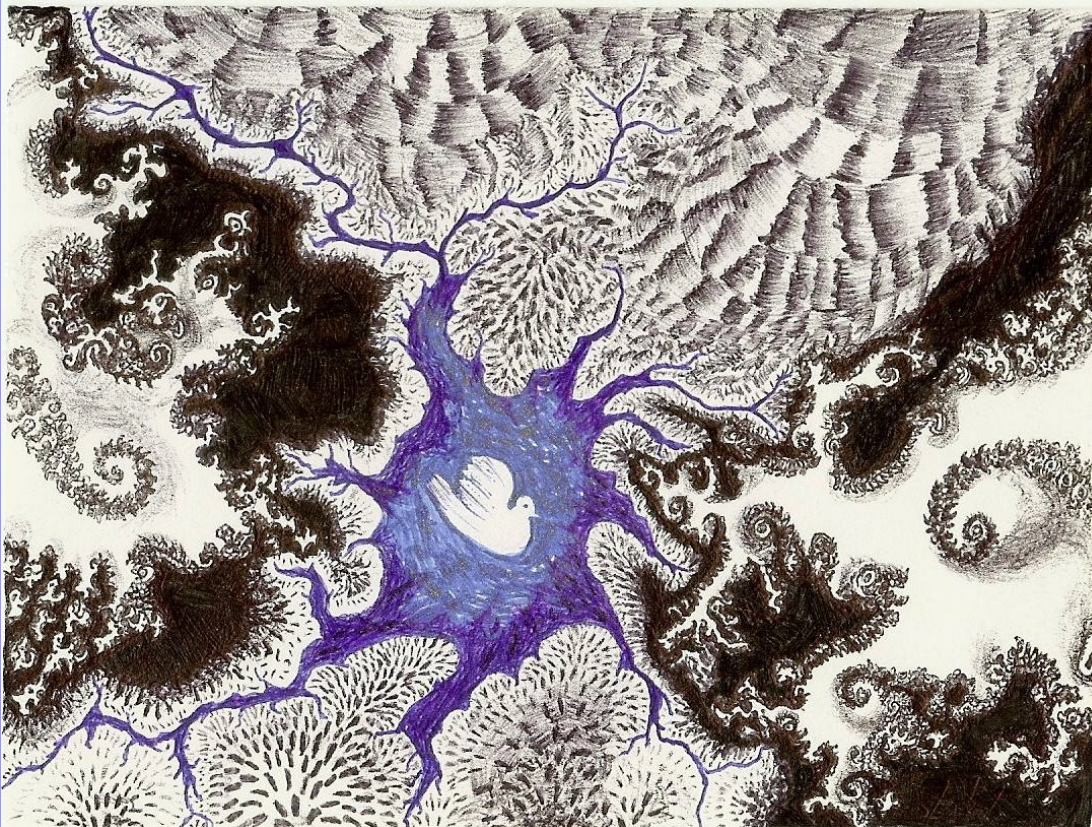


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The amount of Love and Respect I felt for Bo after reading the book without ever having met him... well, I suppose that's the very type of love and respect that is due every other soul on this earth that I have never met as well. And that's how I am focused on living my life now. Every day. Towards Every One.

—John St. Clair, High
Desert State Prison, NV

To request *We're All Doing Time*, write to HKF, PO Box 61619, Durham NC 27715. Allow 5 weeks for delivery. Free if you are incarcerated.