



LETTING GO AND LETTING IN

Winter
2022

“What happened when you were able to let go of your anger?” Michael asked Jimmy during a mindfulness class at a local prison. “I had room for so many other things,” Jimmy responded. “Like joy. And rest. I was finally able to rest.”

There are lots of reasons we hold on to feelings like anger, fear, jealousy, or judgment. Psychologists talk about clean and dirty pain; Buddhists talk about pain and suffering. They’re basically the same thing. Clean pain is the hurt that happens to us. Dirty pain (or suffering) is everything we attach to this hurt. It’s how we hide, dwell, blame, avoid, grasp, or deny the original hurt that occurred. Dirty pain comes from our most wounded self. It has the power to strike out and wound innocent others, as well as ourselves. Unrecognized, unnamed, and untended, dirty pain just gets bigger and more toxic. Whatever kind of dirty pain you choose, it can consume you.

We carry things with us for a reason. The negative emotions of dirty pain and suffering can feel like they protect us from hurt. But it all takes up space and energy, keeping us from being the best versions of ourselves. We can choose how we spend our energy. There’s no real healing without looking beyond this dirty pain to see what’s underneath.

Revelation is scary. We get comfortable in the shadows trying to avoid our pain. Shining a light on who we are and what has happened to us can hurt. It makes sense to cover our eyes—or our hearts—from pain. Sometimes, we need someone else to turn the light on for us, to help us face what’s there.

Our brokenness can be our greatest source of connection to ourselves, others, and a loving holy spirit. First, we need to tear down the walls and put down the weapons we use to guard our wounds. We have to find a way to let the light into our lives or perhaps recognize that it’s been there all along.

What do you need to let go that is no longer serving you? What would you like to let into your life? Kindness is a good place to start. Be kind to your brokenness. Make friends with it. Recognize it as the roadmap to the deepest part of who you are. Let go of the stories you tell yourself about your pain that keep you away from yourself and others. In the words of Leonard Cohen, “Ring the bells that still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”



LETTING GO TAKES PRACTICE

***"You can't do this work one time. It's a practice to let go."
—student in a prison mindfulness class***

Take a moment to settle into yourself. Sit with your back straight and your feet planted firmly on the ground. Let your breath slow and deepen. Breathe in calm, breathe out peace. Offer gratitude for this precious moment.

Feel your feet as they touch the ground. Imagine your feet have strong roots. Let that strength and stability fill your body. Imagine looking at a tree that shares this strength. When there is a wind, this tree does not break. You share many of the qualities of this tree—you are also strong, solid, and nourished by others and the earth.

Imagine the leaves turning bright orange, red, and yellow. Look at these colors and feel the warmth of the sun in the leaves. See the sunset in the tree's last blaze. Now imagine a single leaf as it falls to the ground. Watch it turn in the wind and slowly come to **rest**. Your tree is letting go of what it no longer needs, changing to make room for what's to come. It's also time for you to let go what you no longer need. Time to let one thing go that gets in the way of your growth. Take a moment to think of something you want to let go.

As you breathe in, imagine what is rising up in your body. As you breathe out, imagine blowing out what you want to let go. Things we want to let go of often have deep roots. It takes time and effort to let go. Take several breaths in and out pulling up something you want to let go and pushing it out and away.

Set an intention to let go of something that's no longer serving you and lay it to rest.

In response to this practice, students in our mindfulness class at a local prison were assigned to create a ritual for letting go of something no longer serving them. What kind of ritual could you create to let go of something in your life?



*"I collected leaves to represent the things I needed to let go of. Anger is the biggest thing so it's the biggest leaf. Then, I collected leaves to represent all the blessings I have in my life. I have a lot of blessings."
-Jimmy*

*"I've been struggling with grief. I didn't want to do this ritual, but my friend made me. And what came to me were the words, "My dad is my guardian angel." I can't bring him back, but I can still talk to him. I don't know how he'll answer, but he will."
-Chris*

*"I need to let go of anger. I need to unlearn the things I learned as a kid. I look at the transformation of Saul to Paul. God never gave up on Saul. He's not going to give up on me. That gives me the opportunity to accept people. It's not for me to judge anyone on how they should be. I'm wasting more energy harboring anger than I am overcoming it."
-Michael*

The Wound is Where the Light Enters You

Trust your wound
To a skilled healer

You can't see
The ugliness of your own wounds

Flies hover over them:
Your thoughts

Your wound
is your heart's state
Unilluminated

The healer
This sage
Puts a bandage on your wound

The pain
Is gone

You think you healed all by yourself
But know this

The healing
was from the light

The wound
Is where the light
enters you

-Rumi

The poem "The Wound is Where the Light Enters You" appears in the book *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition* by Omid Safi.

Omid teaches courses on spirituality and justice traditions through www.illuminatedcourses.com and leads spiritually oriented tours to Turkey and Morocco that are open to everyone.

Many thanks to our artists.

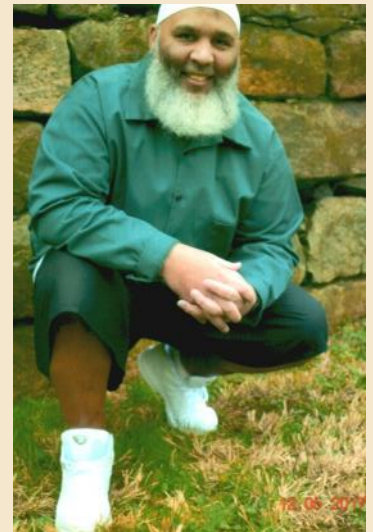
Page 1 & 2: Jimmy Jones, Hillsborough, NC;
Page 3: Roger Tad Price; Page 5: Diana Rogers, Athens, GA; Joe Swainston, Gatesville, TX; Page 6: Alan Piwowar, Jesup, GA; Page 7: Daniel Tarango, Huntsville, TX; Page 8: unknown



This drawing by Roger Tad Price is on five envelopes that line up together with beautiful precision.

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM ALIM

Michael Jerome Braxton, also known as Alim, is a rapper, author and Muslim spiritual leader to fellow residents at North Carolina's Central Prison. Known as Rome Alone in the rap world, he has the distinction of being the only rapper in the world to release music from Death Row. He is a contributing playwright for the play "Serving Life" and contributing author to Crimson Letters: Voices from Death Row. You can find him on Facebook, Youtube and Instagram @rromealone and on Sound Cloud at soundcloud.com/rromealone-music.



How has spirituality affected your experience in prison, and what spiritual practices help you the most?

Spirituality has made it easier to cope [in prison]. Submitting my will to the will of Allah settles my heart from fear and anxiety and grief. I trust in Allah and know that nothing can harm me except what He wills, and His Mercy is greater than His Wrath. Being around people who believe as you believe and are striving ultimately for what you are striving for is joyful and spreads love in the heart. The Prophet said you are not a believer until you love for your brother what you love for yourself, and the Qur'an encourages us to compete with one another in doing good deeds and race for the forgiveness of Allah.

Many spiritual practices help me such as the salat or five daily prayers which I often compare to the stakes of a tent that keep me grounded in my faith and constant in my duty to Allah. Prophet Muhammad compared the five daily prayers to washing or bathing in a river five times a day so that nothing unclean remains. Salat cleanses the heart and soul from impurities, evil thoughts, mistakes, and minor faults. It is like polishing gold or silver and keeps it free from dross.

Another practice that helps me is the Prophet's guidance on dealing with anger. He prescribed saying, "I seek refuge in Allah from the accursed Satan" at the first stroke of anger because the devil perches on the heart of the angry person. Anger can intoxicate our ability to reason, so the Prophet advises staying silent when angry so we don't hurt anyone by our speech. Next we are advised to sit down if standing and lay down if sitting. These postures not only induce calmness, they decrease the risk of causing harm to others.

What's the most important thing you've let into your life, and what's the most important thing you've let go of? Faith in the Hereafter [is the best thing I've let into my life] because it gave me something to strive for beyond this life. It empowers me because despite the hardships of this life, I am in control of my fate in the next life through faith and good deeds. Kufr, which means not only disbelief but ingratitude, is definitely the most harmful thing I've let go of in life because it leads to ruin. Spiritually good deeds have to be accompanied by belief because absent faith there is no real reward. For instance, if you believe you can accomplish something and you work to accomplish it, the reward is sweet. But if you accomplish something that you never believed in, or aspired for, the reward isn't the same, and you will likely become ungrateful. Letting go of doubt and disbelief has made me grateful for the blessings I receive when striving for good.

If you could share one piece of wisdom with your younger self, what would it be? What's one piece of wisdom you would like to leave with our readers? The decisions you make today, determine your tomorrow. Prophet Muhammad said, "Fear Allah wherever you are, do good deeds after doing bad ones, the former will wipe out the latter, and behave decently towards people."

NEWS, NOTES, AND OFFERINGS

Friends, we still have copies of Pema Chodron's beautiful book, *When Things Fall Apart*. Write us if you'd like a copy and haven't received one yet. We are sorry, but this book is only available to people in prisons or jails.

New Offerings on Tablets

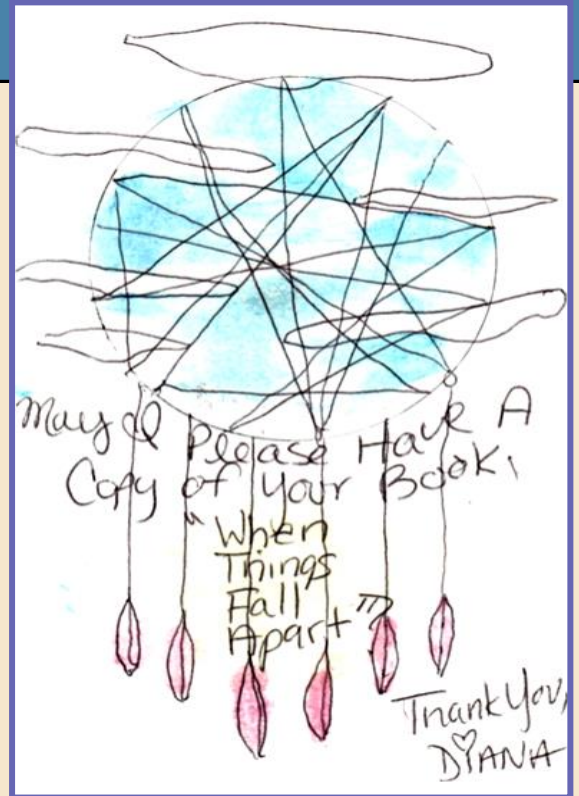
The books *Radical Love: Teachings from the Islamic Mystical Tradition*, *Memories of Muhammed: Why the Prophet Matters*, and the podcast "Sufi Heart," all by Dr. Omid Safi, are now available on Edovo. Many thanks to Professor Safi for sharing these beautiful works with our readers in prison. One of the poems from the edited collection, *Radical Love*, is featured in this newsletter.

Prison Contemplative Fellowship's documentary video *Holding Still*, 13 short films, a Course of Study on Centering Prayer, and the book *Finding God Within* are also available on Edovo.

We are working to expand our offerings to other apps and tablet providers so we can provide resources to as many people as possible. If you work in a jail or prison with tablets and can help get resources on tablets, please reach out to us at hkf@humankindness.org.

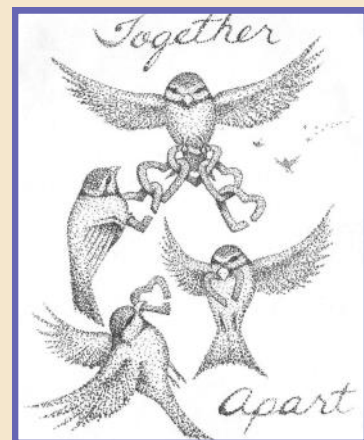
Prison Contemplative Fellowship

Prison Contemplative Fellowship, publisher of the book *Finding God Within*, and producer of the documentary video "Holding Still, Centering Prayer and the Spiritual Journey," now has DVDs of "Holding Still" as well as 13 short films featuring the men in the film and expanding on the many themes featured in the film. If you are interested in receiving a DVD, please write to them with your complete mailing address via email at outreach@uspcf.org or mail to P.O. Box 1086, Folsom, CA 95763.



Together-Apart

Please join us in prayer and meditation on Wednesday evenings from 7-8 as we send blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. (If this time doesn't work for you, any time on Wednesday is fine.) See you then! -Sita



LETTERS

Dear Prison Ashram Project,

I don't know who really to address this letter to and I know you get a lot of mail. I am in the end chapters of *We're All Doing Time* and the further I read, the more I feel like letting things off my chest. I'm tired of putting my hands on people, really tired. When I was 11, I was wrestling with a grown man; he was drunk. I let him hit me a few times and then I swung back until my mother (an alcoholic) finally stopped it. It was my first act of violence. My current charges are Domestic Violence: Habitual Offender and Strangulation. I don't recall how the whole thing got started, just bits and pieces, being way too drunk. This adds to my guilt and shame, and I really need some advice from someone on how I can let this go. Anyway, I know you get a lot of mail and this letter is just like another grain of sand on top of the mountain of letters you already have. If you have any advice for me or any other books you can recommend for how to let go, I'm here for the next 14 months. Thanks, D

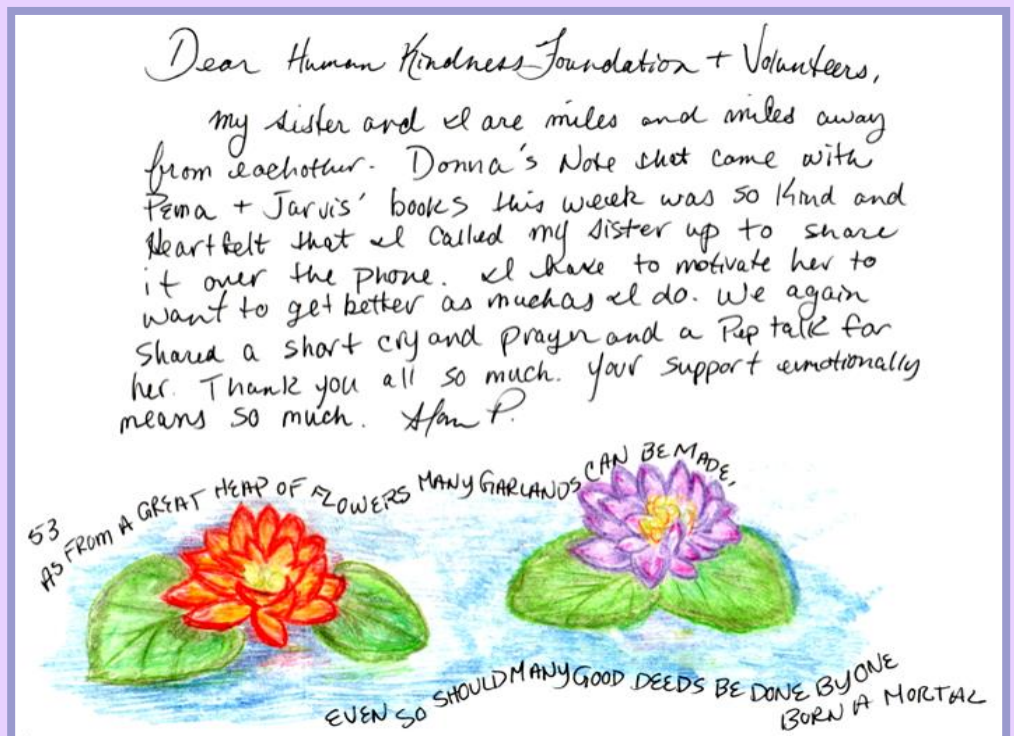
Dear D,

Thank you so much for your letter. It sounds like you are struggling with some pretty heavy stuff right now, but that is good, because it means you are looking at your life through a more watchful lens, so you can see how you got to this point and maybe do something to change that.

You had it hard growing up. Many of us do, including myself. But at some point we have to realize that the past is gone. It no longer exists, unless of course, we stay trapped in it in our own minds. You are coming to the important realization that you have a say in that matter now. That is an important turning point. Now you have to start finding your answers from within. As the words you are reading go in deeper and deeper, you will find your own Higher Guidance that is just for you, on how to really let go.

The first step is wanting change, and you are there. The next is moving away from those parts of you that are causing you pain, and towards the things that are healing. Your past has not worked, so letting go of it should make sense. Many of us had traumatic childhoods with parents that could not help themselves, much less us, so it's up to you to break the cycle, and that means letting go. You deserve it no matter what you've done.

Love, Donna



Dear HKF,

I am very thankful for the recent newsletter "A Little Good News." I struggle with controlling my anger every day-- sometimes toward the world-- and when it's hard and I get things such as your newsletter, it reminds me that there are good people in this world who care for the goodwill of everybody, and I feel good. I've had a hard life and it seems like I'm always incarcerated, but my mindset is changing for the better just a little more every day, so I'm finally feeling hope. I just want to let you know that I truly appreciate your help and kindness especially when I'm ready to give up. When I receive something like this in the mail, something that seems based on my inner struggles, it feels like a sign of hope. I thank you and god bless. -J



"Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul and sings the tune without the words and never stops at all." —Emily Dickinson

Dear HKF,

I'm serving 7 to 15 years, and so far the road has been rough. In this world today there are not many people who are kind. They are far and few, and it almost seems as though kindness is a thing of the past. We are human beings, and we all make mistakes and are worthy of forgiveness. I just feel that my punishment was very harsh for the crime, and I'm trying to cope with all the bs that comes with it. Do you have any words of encouragement? Please don't be shy. Thank you. -J

Dear J,

Thank you for your letter. I'm sorry that times are so hard right now! Please know you are loved by all of your family at Human Kindness Foundation.

Often, we look for things in others that we have a hard time finding in ourselves. I always find it harder to be kind to myself than to be kind to others, but I'm the only person whose actions and emotions I can control. That's a good place to start and a good practice to work on for you. What do you need to be kind to yourself? What kind of practices can help you see that you are worthy of love and kindness towards yourself?

We never know what other people are holding onto and how they are struggling. Everyone has at least one hard thing they are holding that if we knew about, we would treat them entirely differently. This idea helps me to be kind to others. There's a lot I don't know about others just like there's a lot they don't know about me.

Kindness doesn't have to be weakness in ourselves or towards others. Sometimes, the kindest thing we can do for others and for ourselves is to just let go. Let go of our expectations of who we should be or who others should be and accept ourselves for who we are. We are all beautiful in God's eyes; you are always surrounded by loving spirit, even if it can be hard to recognize. I hope the practices in these books help you feel the loving spirit that surrounds you and help you work on practicing kindness towards yourself because you are so deserving of it! Peace and blessings to you, Erin



humankindness.org

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**Let sorrowful longing dwell in your heart.
Never give up, never lose hope.
Allah says, "The broken ones are my beloved."
Crush your heart. Be broken.**

—Shaikh Abu Saeed Abil Kheir, aka Nobody, Son of Nobody