

HUMAN KINDNESS FOUNDATION

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BE STILL AND KNOW THAT YOU AM GOD

This is condensed from tapes of Bo Lozoff at the Unity Center in Arden, N. C., on April 1st, 1990. Copies of the tapes are not available.

It's interesting to notice the line in the Bible, "Be Still and know that I am God." There are so many other words that would seem more appropriate from our usual attitudes about religion: "Be *holy* and know that I am God," "Be *good* and know that I am God," "Be *giving* and know that I am God," "Be *righteous* and know that I am God," "Be *truthful* and know that I am God." Why "Be Still?" What's the big deal about being Still? That's wasting time, isn't it? How does that help us or help the world?

BE STILL AND KNOW THAT I AM GOD. There's no way philosophically, psychologically or culturally to resolve why the word "Still" is used there. If you want to find out what it's like to get wet, you've got to go in the water.

There is a Stillness at the center of who we are. When we try to remember or contact that Stillness, it's useful to find a quiet place, or take the phone off the hook, or wake up before everybody else, or go to sleep later. It's useful to learn how to sit perfectly straight, how to sit in such a way that you can put the body in park and turn the key off, so there's no attending to the body. That's why I sit this way. The body is balanced. There's nothing to tense up or or fall over if I were to lose awareness of my body. It's like setting a vase on the floor. [see sitting postures on page 32 of *We're All Doing Time*.]

So when we practice, when we're trying to get in touch with the Stillness, it makes sense to find a quiet place, but ultimately it won't matter whether we're running the Boston marathon or in a crowded cellblock or sitting in a cave. There's that Stillness always, because the Stillness is the infinite space, the Big Emptiness, in which everything else exists -- the noise, people, confusion, all of it.

So if it intrigues us enough, we practice Stillness a little bit every day, with no help; no group support; no external aids. Like Jesus said, "praying in a closet." We sit down. We figure out what to do with our bodies. And we begin turning inward to find the key to this Mystery that bugs us. We begin the classic, most honorable, age-old pursuit of human beings: learning to sit still and shut up.

Isn't that great? It's nothing that any of us idiots can't understand; no matter what capacity we have of grasping anything theological or philosophical. "How do you find God?" "Sit still and shut up." "Oh, I can dig that. I can't even read and I can dig that. Thanks." We just sit still and shut up.

When we discover our Stillness, it begins to awaken in us the spiritual power that we've always heard and read about. But first we have to quiet the mind and open the heart. To do that, we have to reduce the amount of noise that we carry around with us in the form of identities and fears and desires and greed and ambition, and self-reproach, the constant self-monitoring: "Oh, can I get some of that, can I avoid this, was I friendly enough, did I do it right, did I say it wrong, am I sitting in his seat . . ." All of that. The cessation of that noise *is* the Stillness. It's really very simple -- this isn't some problematic thing that we're searching for that maybe we won't be able to find.

What I have to share with you, beyond all the words, is a taste of Stillness. Your own Stillness. It's not mine that you're going to catch, it's your own. And if you catch even a smidgen of it, it may entice you inward to catch a little more and a little more and a little more. We're all in the process of garbage removal. That's it. It's not *acquiring* anything, just removing obstacles to our Stillness.

Earlier I looked over the shelves in your church bookstore. There's a lot of good stuff there and a lot of garbage. And that's so nice, because it gives you the responsibility of discerning which is which for yourself. I'm not going to lie to you and say, "Oh, I honor and affirm everything that's taught in those books." There's a lot of garbage on those shelves. The reason it's garbage is, though it means well, it springs from an essential lack of faith in what you already are. It's like there's this feeling in you that says "I'm not a godly person," so a lot of those books and teachers tell you how to affirm "I am a Godly person," or how to overpower negative thoughts with positive ones. But shouting that you're good, to cover up a whisper that you're not, is not the same as uncovering that whisper, seeing that it's delusion, and discarding it completely.

Both "I am incomplete, I am not Godly" and "I *am* complete, I *am* Godly" are just noise of the mind. That approach stems from the basic fear that if there is *no* affirming, *no* self-monitoring, *no* ego, *no* making sure, *no* caution; if we surrender into the Spontaneous Genius of being alive, that it won't be enough. That's a lack of faith, no matter how constructive or attractive its packaging. We just have to remove the garbage which covers our Godliness. We don't have to create it, strengthen it, or supervise it.

Spiritual life is always about becoming a Divine Nobody; no identities, no expectations, no goals, just a free-flowing expression of God's will, being magically created fresh in the image of God in every moment. A lot of the books try to help you become a good *somebody*. That's nice, but it's not the same as freedom.

It's Spontaneous Genius that we're after. I mean, let's face it, who can walk on water? Nobody can walk on water, right? That's how He did it. There was nobody there but God. There was Spontaneous Genius, and it came time to walk on water and so, walking on water occurred. Who can heal the sick and raise the dead? Nobody. Right! That's who did it! There wasn't "somebody" there, thinking "I think it would be a good idea now to raise Lazarus." There was just this Be-ing -- that's a verb, not a noun, this human be-ing. The noise of our desires and fears is all that prevents us from being such fearless expressions of Godliness.

I saw a list of about forty rules the other day. It was in a peacemaking newsletter. Things that we're always supposed to have in our awareness, like, if you have a difference of opinion with somebody, don't make them wrong, and remember to listen, and all of the things that you say yes, that's the way that human beings should relate. But my God, there's no faith that that *is* how we relate when we get quiet. When we open up to our Stillness and surrender, We don't need to develop a *more* active mind -- "Uh, let's see, wait. Gee, I really disagree with her, but I don't want to make her wrong, so I'm going to" We're not trained horses! Life is an entirely different situation -- and a lot more fun -- than the peacemaking newsletter supposes.

Will you talk a little about your prison work?

Well, I have been *doing* the prison work for the last 45 minutes. Because all I do in prisons is what I'm doing on myself. This is what I do. Prison can turn out to be an interesting place to open up into the Stillness, because a lot of the social ties and obligations, a lot of the opportunities for fulfilling desires, a lot of the financial responsibilities, etc., that tend to distract us, or at least tend to be our excuses for not taking any time to become still,

aren't available to people in prison.

People in prison have already had the family ties and social ties and objects of desire ripped away from them. If you're in prison, it doesn't matter whether you chose to get in, or whether it's even fair, whether you were framed, whether you're innocent or guilty. Wherever you are, we're saying you can use that place to get free.

There's a tremendous pull on the part of prisoners to discover that freedom in themselves. And I don't really care so much about sin and guilt, I'm talking about awakening. In the process of awakening, we experience the pain and the fruit of all of the seeds that we planted. And so I help prepare people for that. In meditation, somebody who's killed somebody is probably going to go through periods of tremendous guilt or shame from having taken a life or from having lived a really bad life, a selfish life, etc. These are the layers of noise which cover over our Stillness, so they're bound to be experienced along the way. I teach people how to sit still through anything. So an overpowering memory, emotion, guilt, can rip through you like a tornado and you have developed the Stillness of body and the Stillness of speech.

The Buddha mentioned the Threefold Silence: Silence of body, Silence of speech and Silence of mind. Silence of mind takes a while, but we can achieve Silence of body (sitting down) and Silence of speech (shutting up) fairly quickly. I help prisoners develop those two silences so that when the really painful noise of the mind rips through like a freight train, they don't break down, get up, or scream out. As Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "Pain is pain and it has to be endured. There is no such thing as overcoming pain." So they keep breathing and feel the pain fully. They see themselves clearly, feel the pain they've caused, and let it help them grow. Guilt can be useful if it's used constructively. Guilt can help make us more compassionate.

To me, the thing that matters is the Stillness. That's the pot of gold at the end. I'm not a psychologist, I'm not in the business of trying to help people analyze these things. I'm just telling them that these are probably layers that are going to be reached as they dive into their Stillness; I'm just helping prepare them for the shock. So we teach them how to sit still. We introduce them to reflective thought. We send them books, etc., all toward the end of finding their own inner guidance.

In talking earlier about uncovering those layers through meditation practice and things like that, into the Stillness, wouldn't you say that psychological and psychiatric work tends to uncover layers as well, and tends to do it many times more quickly? Is that not the path, also?

The "path" is simply to keep discarding false identities of who and what we are. If any tool helps you to remove layers covering your Stillness, then use the tool. It may be hard to discard identities if our minds are still screwed up about what our parents did to us, or screwed up about having been raped, or about having this happen or that happen. So, if somebody tries to meditate and is unable to let it go that way, maybe therapy is a good idea as a temporary fix. Get this wrinkle ironed out. Then go back and let go of that abused child identity. "I am not that child who was abused. That's just a memory now. It's just clinging, and I can let it go, now that I've clarified what happened and how it affected me."

For some people, meditation does it all, and for some it's necessary for some kind of therapy. Journal writing, I think, is another good method. For me, speaking shows me where I'm at. I hear what's important to me come out, and it's always fresh. When I write, it's the same thing. I never know what I'm going to write about for a newsletter, I just write what's in my heart, and that's like therapy for me. So, I think it's a personal decision as to whether anything is a useful tool or not.

At a point when psychotherapy or anything else becomes a crutch, an external authority or dependency, then honor it for what it's given you, and move on. For example -- and I'll probably get in trouble for saying this -- AA does a wonderful job of beginning to help somebody through a period of dependency on alcohol. But the vast majority of AA members latch on to that identity for a lifetime. Yet spiritual work is about gradually giving up *all* identities. Can you picture, "Hi, I'm Jesus and I'm an alcoholic?" "Hi, I'm God and I'm an alcoholic."

Or a codependent.

Sure. Or "I have PTSD," or "I'm a rape victim" or anything else. To whatever degree support groups and therapy help us to work through delusion and get back to self-reliance, they're enormously helpful, especially at a time of great pain or confusion. But let's not substitute one set of delusions and reliances for another. Many support groups merely serve as group hiding places with an attitude like, "This is who we are, and nobody who hasn't been..." -- fill in the blank -- an alcoholic, a junkie, a convict, rape victim, abused as a child, etc. -- "nobody who hasn't been blah blah can understand what we've been through." Or, "I've been raped, and you haven't, and you'll never be able to understand what I feel. Don't you dare say you understand my pain." Again, substitute "a convict" or anything else for "raped."

There's a thing called empathy. Empathy is not

just a word, empathy is a very profound experience. We can take someone else's pain into our hearts and feel it without having to experience the same exact source of the pain. If we're looking to divide our world, it's always easy. "You're Russian and I'm American, you don't understand my cultural experience." We can just divide it in any way. "I had a big car wreck and had this surgery and that surgery, this fear and that pain, and you can't understand..." But it's silly.

The aim of any spiritual work is to unite, not to separate, and support groups or therapy need to unite too, not just with people who've been through the same experience and not just to strengthen the ego, but to open up past the pain and be a healthy citizen of the world who sees that everybody is family, all places are home, and all experiences arise from the same Stillness.

What about things that control your life that you don't know? I was poor, so unknown to myself I made a commitment somewhere that I would never be poor. And for better than thirty years, money controlled me, instead of I controlling money. Someone pointed this out to me, and now my whole life has changed.

Until we are fully aware like the Buddha or the Christ, there are things in all of our lives that control us, simply because we're not aware of them.

A warrior king stopped on his way to a battle, and stopped to see the Buddha, and said, "I have very little time. I'm on my way to war and I might die, and I just want to know, can you sum up in one word what all your teachings are about?" And the Buddha said, "Awareness." Or, as Jesus put it, "Know the truth and the truth shall set you free." Awareness and truth are the same. In this process of becoming still, little by little we let go of limitations, we let go of the things that control us. And we feel proportionately freer. It's unbelievable, the freedom that comes from not being controlled by so many things. Just walking around, it's like this extraordinary ordinary state. It's not that we've *got* anything, it's just being unfettered by thousands of little chains of desires and fears.

I feel a flow of power and fearlessness in my daily, trivial life that I never dreamed was possible to feel. Just being not so reactive to my likes and dislikes, being less demanding on how reality should work, being able to walk in a room and not have social fears of whether you'll like me or not, as well as the bigger things like not seeing illness and death as my enemies, etc. All of that noise, those desires and fears, not controlling what I do or say anymore. The power underneath is now just free to flow through me, and it's like, it just feels so good to be simply *alive*.

Gradually we break those ties that bind us, and we're freer than we were before, like you are now from that poverty thing. Gee, that's great; now you're free to be poor. [laughter] But it *is* great, to be free to be poor. Because now, you can take or leave wealth. You no longer require it. That's great.

Yeah, but when I came to this realization, the first thought was how many more . . . ?

Thousands. Thousands. But you don't have to uncover them in one particular way, you don't have to bring them into rational awareness, and you don't have to resolve them one at a time. You can have a moment of meditation in which a thousand of them come up at once, and you see them without grabbing or flinching, and they all just leave. And you get up from that single meditation, and you're like thirty pounds lighter and freer of past burdens. So, it happens. And then there might be one that you're working with for 35 years.

Reember, the peace which surpasses understanding does surpass understanding. The New Age culture seems to say that if you think good thoughts and if you free yourself through therapy or whatever else from these things that are controlling you, and if you get yourself balanced between inner and outer, you'll be at peace. I want to remind you, the transcendent is *transcendent*. It isn't a matter of *any* formula. What can be understood is not the Stillness, and the Stillness cannot be understood. So once again, the trick is to do whatever therapy or self-examination or wholesome lifestyles we need to do, just enough to then move beyond them.

Some teachers and even doctors say that all illness is just dis-ease, and even AIDS or cancer can be cured if we love ourselves unconditionally.

I would be cautious about those teachings. On one hand, our minds and Spirits are certainly

stronger than any bodily illness, and anything *can* be healed. But that doesn't mean illness is wrong, or that *everything* is supposed to be healed. If something is wrong about dying at age thirty from AIDS, then tell me, what's the "right" age to die? Is it 80? Go ask a 79-year-old! And what's the "right" cause of death? Heart attack? Train wreck?

It's the most natural thing in the world to want to feel good and stay healthy and live a long life, and we should use any reasonable powers of mind and body to do so. That's where some of those teachings come in handy. But don't get drawn into the notion that illness implies failure on your part, or that death is a tragedy. Illness and death come to us all, at many different ages and in many different ways, *and* for many different purposes. Haven't you seen illness and death bring enormous amounts of love, patience, humility and forgiveness into our lives and the lives of our families and friends? Illness & death are not the enemy.

In terms of strategies, being seriously ill seems like a powerful time to quiet down and look into our Stillness. If it happens to be true that we caused our illness by stress or a lack of love for ourselves, we'll see the truth of that as we quiet our minds, and we can do whatever we need to do about it. That seems more helpful than *busying* our minds with a million affirmations and positive mind-games which may or may not be on target.

I just keep getting back to the one Stillness as the source of our very best guidance. I know that Stillness personally. And I know it in a way that I know that you have that Stillness too. I know that it's not just mine -- it's laughable to think that it could be. When you're in the Stillness, there's only one of it. So, I say look, I found the Stillness, not my Stillness, I found *The* Stillness. The Stillness is in you, too. Be Still, and know that You Am God.



NEWS

Update: Texas Book-Banning

Not much to report in this slow-moving drama, except that we have indeed filed suit now against the Texas Department of Corrections for banning Bo's book *Lineage and Other Stories*. TDC has now received about 400 letters of protest, but refuses to budge.

If you haven't read *Lineage and Other Stories*, it's free to prisoners (or staff) and \$7 to non-prisoners. A new edition, *Lineage and Other Tales of Wisdom*, published by Threshold Books, is also now available through your local bookstore. It's the same exact book, just a commercial edition.

Bo's & Sita's Summer Travels

Bo & Sita Lozoff will be out of the office most of July and August. Their schedule includes prison workshops and public talks in Alabama, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona, although exact dates and places are not yet available. If possible, we'll send a card of their final schedule to all of you who live in the areas they'll be visiting.

LETTERS

Dear Bo & Sita,

Thought you'd be pleased to hear of a minor miracle we pulled off here at the Adult Diagnostic & Treatment Center (Jersey's prison unit for sex offenders). I had just gotten this computer, and was learning by leaps and bounds and loving it, when a month later an edict came down from the Commissioner of Corrections banning all PC's in the prisons. After five years of therapy, I know how to deal with my anger now. So I used my computer to write to everyone I know, and asked them to write to every official who might have some influence on getting this ruling rescinded before the March deadline.

Lo and behold, as our "networks" on the streets sprung into action, an avalanche of letters poured in from all over the country. And at the 11th hour, just like in the movies, word came that the Governor himself had directed the Commissioner to rescind the ban! Totally awesome, eh dude?

We here have become so accustomed to being thought of, written about, and openly called the "scum of the scum", that we sometimes forget that we do have many, many people who care deeply about us, and are willing to take a stand for us regardless of the political climate. Further, we sometimes forget to care enough about ourselves to fight for our own welfare. Our population is passive in the extreme, as you might expect. This time, however, we stood up to the D.O.C. "Steamroller" and said "No!" - but we did it legally, respectfully, and in unison, without harming anyone except maybe the Commissioner's ego.

So miracles go on happening. Getting the D.O.C. to back down is almost as incredible as being able to

buy a chunk of the Berlin Wall at Bloomingdale's. Almost. Just wanted to share our Good News.

With love, B

Dear Bo & Sita,

I'm writing to you because you have helped me to grow so much in the last few months. I've gotten into a way of life now which I'm liking myself better than I used to.

I have come to a bridge in my journey and I'm very upset behind my actions and thoughts. I got into a beef with some real "flako" here over a transaction we made and I have welled up some serious thoughts on damaging this person. I've been trying so hard to ventilate my angers in other ways and it seems that I really have no other choice but to get this person. He has said some real crazy shit and that he was going to stick me with some steel! I normally pay no mind to threats because that's anger talking. But when someone tells me they're going to stick me I get pissed. This person has a reputation of such actions. I guess this is a major hurdle in my quest and I'm sorry if this is a burden on you, but you are a good friend in my eyes and you're truly honest in yourself!

I guess I must handle this confrontation when it arises but I will do my best not to be the aggressor. I guess "shit happens"! Please keep being that strong influence you are to me and others in this troubled world of ours!

Love ya, C

Dear C,

Yes, for sure "shit happens," but also we cause 90% of it ourselves, so it's a good idea to look honestly at

how it all happened if we don't want the same shit to happen again and again in our lives. If there are lessons to be learned, let's learn them. For example, what would you do differently from the start -- like whatever kind of "transaction" it was, or whether you should get involved with a "flako" in the first place, etc. I'm not saying you should be hard on yourself for things you've already done, I'm just saying you should always learn from an honest look at your part of what went down.

The second thing is, I hope you can find a way to stay away from the guy and watch your back without having to resort to "preventive elimination" on your own. If you just stay watchful, there's at least a chance it'll blow over. If you go after him, there's no chance at all; you definitely have more shit in your life.

I know you have a good heart and want to stay as cool as you can, so I send my very best hopes you can find a way to do that, brother.

I'm pulling for you, Bo

Dear Bo,

Soon I will be finishing my sentence in the Illinois Dept of Corrections. I want to take this time to write and share some of my more enlightening experiences.

The past year, since I have taken the initiative to rise up out of my "poor me" trip, has been the most fruitful year of my life. By gaining spiritual insight I have come to a new understanding of myself and the universe. I have risen from a defeated state of alcohol and drug addiction to a surrendered state as one of God's kids. Most of all I have finally been able to see past my own king-baby-

ego and effectively touched other peoples' lives in a positive way.

On a more material plane, I have acquired over 70 hours of college credit, keeping an A average. I have also joined a fellowship that I used to only pay lip service to. This has all come about by getting out of myself and what I perceived to be monumental problems. Come to find out my "problems" were gifts that helped me to achieve the spiritual, mental and emotional state I have been given today.

I am now making tentative plans to finish college once I'm released. I eventually hope to be working with people as a profession. I have proved a successful convict, if only to myself, by using "time" to my benefit. The possibilities are endless. Being a kid in the 60's, I missed the involvement and positive activity that was going on. I plan to take advantage of the 90's, which I hope is a renewed period of peace, love and positive growth on a world-wide scale.

I know I can't save anybody and I wouldn't want that kind of responsibility. But I do know that if someone is really tired of having their face shoved in the muck of Maya, they can save themselves. I can be there to help them do that. Just as you & Sita & your crew were there for me.

Peace & Growth, H

Dear Bo,

I love your newsletters and the responses to the letters of others. I've read hundreds of "spiritual" books but none with the level of sincerity and wisdom as your talks and letters.

I would like to know your views on the death penalty. In your view, is it ever justified? And what about people out on parole such as the following: (a) the guy who raped that young woman and chopped off her arms, then left her for dead (Larry something or other). She lived (if you call that living). (b) The guy (Rosen-thal, I think) who poured gasoline on his young son in a motel room and set the place ablaze (supposedly to get revenge on his ex-wife). The son lived and is horribly disfigured.

What kind of justice allows such people to go free while their victims suffer forever, and live in constant fear of their torturers? To me the death penalty seems too good for such perpetrators of evil (both of whom are Caucasian, by the way).

You are the one person I feel has the wisdom and experience to answer such questions. I would sincerely like to know your views.

Sincerely, E

Dear E,

You might expect in all these years that I'd have received a lot of letters like yours, but actually this is the first time those questions have been put to me so clearly.

First, as you might expect, I'm not in favor of the death penalty. It has nothing to do with race or fairness of application or even a moral absoluteness about killing. I think I could've assassinated Hitler with a clear mind and compassionate heart, filled with regret that such a horrible deed had to be performed. But there's the key: Actions we perform with clarity and compassion reduce the amount of suffering in the world. Actions we perform without clarity and compassion increase the suffering in the world. It's as simple as that.

You can look around and easily see that the death penalty inflames hatred, vengeance, and downright evil. I don't use the word "evil" lightly. Now that there are mobs of people cheering "Fry him! Fry Him!" outside prisons where fellow human beings are executed, it seems to me we've crossed over that line.

Executions are not bringing out the best in us, nor are they adding to our hope for a better future. And statistics have repeatedly shown the death penalty has absolutely no deterrent effect -- in fact, death penalty states tend to have higher murder rates than non-death penalty states. So the death penalty makes neither moral nor practical sense. It would behoove us to learn how to deal with our problems rather than lashing out with murderous rage.

Which brings up your next questions, about the people who commit cruel, vicious crimes, and then get back on the streets while their victims continue to suffer. This is part of the same issue. An immature culture is going to make mistakes in every direction, hurting everyone. Our criminal justice system has nothing to do with truth, only with winning or losing.

The truth is, Larry Singleton is probably just as twisted now as he was when he hacked off the girl's arms, and may be a real danger to

whatever community he's in. But we never called him "sick," we called him "guilty." We didn't remove him from society to help him work through those profound disturbances; we just sentenced him to prison for as long as the law allowed because we hate his guts. So when the time was up, we had to let him go.

But did anything at all get accomplished? The girl still has no arms; he still denies his depravity, and society still hates his guts. It never had to do with responsibility, with healing or renewal. It had to do with ugliness and blindness on both his part and ours. And the same holds true for Charles Rothenberg, who set fire to his son David.

Government has a responsibility to protect citizens from violent crime to the greatest degree possible without becoming a police-state. I share the public's outrage over the release of Singleton or Rothenberg, or a rapist or murderer or other violent felon who then commits the same kind of crime again. We're outraged that the government hasn't acted responsibly, and that's damn right. But the lack of responsibility begins long before parole; it begins with our unwillingness to be a mature, compassionate society, our unwillingness to look at crime as totality -- victim, criminal, the act itself, its lingering consequences -- and to strive toward the best total healing we can find.

Our irresponsibility continues all the way down the line -- as we ignore the wounds and vulnerability of the victim, often badgering and humiliating them during the trial; as we thoroughly crush any sane notion of justice under the weight of legal loopholes and strategies; and finally as we lock the offender up in a brutal system conceived in anger for the purpose of punishment. Our system manages to hurt everyone -- the abused victim, the banished offender, the amoral lawyers, the manipulated juries, the pressured judges, and the outraged, frightened public.

Once again, we can find no moral or practical benefit from the system we have created. Crime soars, violence increases, our prisons overflow, and instead of looking honestly at the heart of the problem, we elect politicians who shamelessly exploit our fears and anger by mouthing "tough on crime" posturing. But

things never get any better, because we're the ones making things worse.

I'm very much a realist, and that's why I question a criminal justice system which is more criminal than just, and a corrections system which not only fails to *actively* correct, but makes it almost *impossible* for correction to occur. Believe me, the thousands of prisoners I've known who've managed to turn their lives around in prison have battled uphill all the way. Not that there aren't good staff people around, because there are many. But they too have an uphill battle against a paranoid, violent system which rewards inertia instead of innovation, and submissiveness instead of rehabilitation.

People who defend the system, or who want to build even more prisons and sentence more people, are the idealists, not me. They're "negative idealists", because they have a punitive ideal which reality continues to disprove. It simply doesn't work. Hurting people who hurt us just perpetuates a lot of hurting.

I would say over 90% of prisoners would love to straighten their lives out if given a decent chance. Very few people are dead-set on doing wrong. The vast majority of prisoners hate their lives, they feel like worthless losers, and they begin to shine when someone comes along and shows them they can be of value.

That's why I'm so passionate about prisoners doing some kind of "good works" instead of just getting an education and job skills. As somebody named Susie Gomez once said, "It is an honor to be asked to help." It's an amazing experience to introduce a prisoner to that honor, and watch the profound changes

which take place!

I don't say to set everyone free. There may always be twisted people who need to be removed from society to protect the public. And sometimes somebody may even forfeit his right to ever again be trusted with his freedom -- perhaps like Singleton or Rothenberg, or David "Son of Sam" Berkowitz, or Charles Manson, or the crazy guy who swears that when he gets out he's going to kill the actress Theresa Saldana. Why should the public be guinea pigs?

But there are very few people like that, and we already have *more* than enough prisons to hold them. And even so, we can create optimum conditions for their redemption so that even if they're behind bars for the rest of their lives, they have an opportunity to become respected writers, inventors, thinkers, artists, or humanitarians, contributing to the world through their unique restrictions and the humility of their past.

But those are the few. The *many* are prisoners who would be better served through imaginative combinations of house arrest, community service, electronic monitoring, family counseling, restitution, drug & alcohol rehab and so forth. Prisons should be the last recourse. And prisons offer *no* solution to problems which are primarily social and medical, such as drug abuse. Our temporary insanity toward drugs and drug offenders exacts a terrible price on us all.

If we wish to live in a compassionate land, then we have to express compassion, even when we find it necessary to arrest someone, or restrict their freedom to harm others. We have to be able to look at both David Rothenberg *and* his father, the

mutilated girl *and* her attacker, and feel terrible for all of them, and take the most responsible steps to begin the profound healing on all sides. Lock him up, yes. But don't feed the victim's hatred, nor the offender's sinfulness. Life always begins right now, wherever we are.

You said about the girl whose arms were chopped off, "She lived (if you call that living)..." Whoa! Of *course* I call that living! Don't you? Some people are *born* without arms, some lose their arms in farm accidents or car wrecks. Should they just chalk it up and die? That girl can experience joy and sorrow, marriage, motherhood, thrill and wonder. If she turns inward because of her suffering, she can make profound spiritual discoveries and contributions, as can little David Rothenberg.

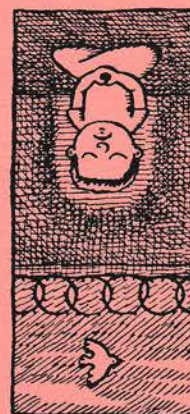
Life at last is a mystery, not just a struggle. We can't understand why such horrible things happen, but we can choose our response. In a hundred years, the attackers and the victims, the judges and juries and you and I will all be gone. The most relevant question will not be "What happened?", but rather, "What happened next? What did the girl and David Rothenberg choose to do with their lives? What kind of future did we help to create by our response?"

Our society seems to be moving backward into more infantile reactions to our crime & justice problems. It would be a good idea to begin changing our attitudes as individuals. As John the Baptist said, "Before kingdoms can change, men must change."

Thanks for writing, Bo

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A lot of books and teachers tell you how to affirm "I am a Godly person," or how to overpower negative thoughts with positive ones. But shouting that you're good, to cover up a whisper that you're not, is not the same as uncovering that whisper, seeing that it's delusion, and discarding it completely.

-- Bo Lozoff