

Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Spring 2009

TRANSFORMATION: MELVIN'S STORY

In November, 1987, 20-year-old Melvin Rose had never been in trouble with the law. By the end of December, he was in jail awaiting trial for the murder of his cousin and his cousin's girlfriend. For two decades, Melvin has worked to become a very different person than he was on the night he committed murder. Melvin is in a prison in Hillsborough, NC that allows community passes, so he was able to come to HKF, where Josh Lozoff interviewed him this February.

So tell me about what kind of guy you were when you went in.

Looking back after years of analyzing it, I was pretty angry. I was hurt by a lot of things. Things I brought on myself. I made things worse for myself by holding everything in, not talking about it.

You say, "holding everything in." What was your life like?

Well growing up, I had a lot of anger. If you embarrassed me, I'd get angry. Fear turned to anger, but I didn't want anybody to know that I was angry because people were telling me, "The way you're expressing this anger is not good."

To say what led to my crime, I don't know. When I first come in, really it was unbelievable. I thought the whole thing was happening to somebody else. At that time I couldn't pinpoint anything, any one reason that would cause me to take two people's lives that I loved.

Tell me a little about your crime and what led up to it.

Well, it was my cousin Danny and his girlfriend Jill.

How old were you?

Twenty. I was married. My wife was nineteen. We lived in an apartment, and Danny and Jill were our friends. I worked with Danny; we rode to work together. We drank together on weekends. This night was nothing different, really. As usual I drank to oblivion, because I thought I had all these problems. Pressures of the world on my shoulders, you know. And the short version is something happened. I don't know if it

was anger or what, I don't know... Something happened to turn me around to where I committed these acts. I shot two people in cold blood, and I don't know. There's witnesses say that we were arguing over the job, other witnesses say they put something in my drink. I don't know. But the way I see it is, I just had all this stuff built up, it was there, that rage just boiling there and I had taken all I could take. I was full.

Do you remember doing it?

It was like watching an old, bad movie, where you see things coming out of the dark. I remember parts of it, I remember enough to know I'm responsible.

When were you sober and aware enough to realize what you had done?

The next morning in jail. Danny's parents came to see me, and there was a lot of crying. They were saying, "We want you to get help."

The parents of your victim were compassionate, saying they wanted you to get help?

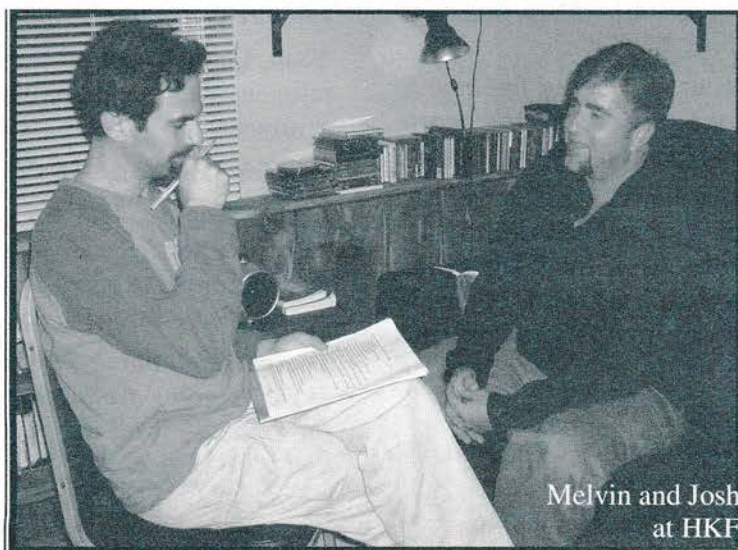
Yeah. That was right away. After the courts got involved and the shock wore off, they became aware that their son was gone, and my uncle became bitter. Of course, it affected everybody.

Did you go to trial or did you plead?

I went to trial. Actually I went to trial twice.

You pled not guilty?

For reason of insanity. That's what I was advised to do. I actually won two appeals. So the third time I went, I took a plea bargain



Melvin and Josh
at HKF

'cause I didn't want everybody to have to go through all that again.

It sounds like you pled "not guilty by reason of insanity," partly because you had people who believed so strongly in you; That you felt you'd be letting people down if you took responsibility for your crime.

Yeah. Everybody was saying, "We don't believe you did this -- it was because of this, because of that." You don't want to disappoint anybody, saying that you really are a monster, you know. You think if they really knew what was on the inside of you, they'd run and hide. My parents, you know, they didn't think I was guilty at all. Especially my Daddy, he was like "Don't plead guilty." And I'm like, "Daddy, it had to be me." And of course people blamed my wife, everybody. They wanted to blame anybody 'cause, you know, to the world I was a nice guy, and that could never happen.

Do you remember how it felt to know you were going to be inside for decades?

I didn't really feel it then, because I had what a lot of guys didn't have, I had family, I had true friends. You find out your true friends when you come to prison. And it's divine intervention that I didn't get with the wrong crowd [in prison], cause that's what I always sought growing up, the "bad" kids.

How do you think it was that you ended up not falling into that crowd in prison?

I had people early on telling me, "Look, you got a violent crime, you can't be getting in trouble and you can't get into fights, cause people will say you're not changing." I relied heavily on prayer and reading the Bible. And of course, working is what I knew, so I sought out maintenance jobs -- jobs where I can work with my hands, and learn things. I took a heating/air class, and then I took anger management and stuff. But this was so new to me. I thought God would just solve everything, he would heal me without me doing anything. And I found out it takes work on my part, and it takes time to recognize you've got a problem, then you gotta find out how to do something about it.

So from the beginning you went in looking for how to become a better person. Tell me more about the people you met who were helpful, rather than falling in with the wrong crowd.

I always remember this one ol' guy, we called him Papa Grant. He was in for murder also. I just found his stories interesting, so I listened. But he would also try to get me to learn from his mistakes. He always figured he was gonna die in prison -- which he did -- and he didn't want that for me. He was just always there.

Do you relate to the term transformation? Do you feel like you had one, or multiple, transformations?

Yes. I've had multiple. (pause) Yeah I've had multiple.

What do you consider the beginning of that process?

Well, I don't really remember specifics. There would be times when everything just got too much, and I would cry out, to God as I knew him. Before I went in, I always thought I had to be perfect to talk to God. That I'd already had to have stopped smoking, swearing, everything. The more I matured and the more I read scripture and other books, and listened to people that I felt had their stuff together, I realized I can come to God just as I am.

I don't know exactly when I figured out that I was on a journey. I think it was when other people started saying, "You're gonna get out one day, what you gonna do with your life?" Or, even, "What are you dealing with right now?" It reminded me I'm a spiritual person. I believe what I believe. I can't always explain it. And now I feel peace. I have the peace finally, that no matter where I'm at, I'm all right. You know, whatever happens tomorrow, it's gonna take care of itself. Not that I'm at a pinnacle where I can't fall off to the side. It's just that I am where I am right now. I find my hope in Jesus Christ.

Do you feel like that peace evolved naturally, or was it a lot of decisions, hard work and choices?

Oh, definitely a lot of hard decisions. But then I realized that I had a Comforter who was with me all the time. I attribute a lot to AA, the people in the program. I look at a journey in steps. I'm not all the way there. I'm still going, I'm still trying to stay on that path, and some days I do better than other days, but I say this all the time, "practice," which I learned from hearing some of Bo's tapes. I got bad habits, and they didn't pop up overnight. So now I'm just trying to replace them with good habits. And the good habits, if you practice 'em, will be there.

So what are some of your spiritual practices?

Prayer, scripture, fellowshiping with people, not only that think like I do, but Muslims, Hindus... Anybody that will give me a few minutes...

Did our books and other materials influence you or were you already kind of...

Yeah, I think it helped me see a difference between being religious and being spiritual. At this point, I want to be spiritual.

What do you see as the difference?

I think religion, man has a lot to do with. It's how man perceives how you're supposed to act. And the rewards you get for being good. Spirituality I see as more of what's inside. It's not so much that there's a set way to worship.

You've said that a big shift in your relationship with anger is going from blaming other people or situations for "making" you angry to feeling like it's totally yours, and it's a choice.

That's right, it's my responsibility. My actions are my responsibility. If I start yelling, well you didn't make me

do that. That's the way I have chosen to react. Being responsible for what I do has made a big change, cause I don't have anybody else to blame. I can't blame my parents. I can't blame my friends. There's nobody to blame. I can't blame God anymore. It's just me. I am responsible. And I always have been, I just hadn't admitted it. I was looking for everybody else to blame.

At this point, what's your relationship with your original crime? There's so many different feelings among the guys inside about how they're supposed to feel years later – guys who feel like they need to get past feelings of remorse and guilt. Other people who feel like they should always live with that, to keep from doing it again. What's your take on that? Do you feel remorse or shame?

For a long time I didn't think I could feel anything but remorse and guilt. And it's not something I'm ever gonna move past. It's always gonna be in my life, but I don't see myself as a monster anymore.

It sounds like you're comfortable with that being a permanent part of you, without letting it overwhelm you in an unhealthy way.

I remember the story from Bo's book, *Lineage*. That guy had run over the girl I think, and then he went to be a monk and lived in a cave. In a way he wanted to get rid of the guilt and the shame. And the monk told him, "This will always be with you. Learn to live with it." That right there, was a defining transformation for me. I remember being like, okay, I'm just gonna live with this. I don't have to try to get rid of it. Just live with it and be the best person I can be. That to me would honor Danny's and Jill's memories better than anything. To be the best person I can be [starts to choke up]. And if I can help anybody. Because it's not the way they show it on TV. It's not like that. It's something you live with the rest of your life. And knowing you are responsible for taking another human being's life – their children and grandchildren, their future generations. You took all that away.

So you just made parole?

Pretty much. They've set a date [January 2010]. When I stopped fighting it all, and just somehow I knew, it was

gonna be okay either way...

If they just changed their minds and decided you're not getting out, do you feel like that would be a huge challenge to where you're at right now spiritually?

Yeah, but that's where the practice comes in. You just know, there's no faking it at a time like that. Do you really believe what you're saying? I know that's why it's based on faith, cause logically it sounds so far-fetched – the hope there's something that has created me, that has nurtured me, and that has watched over me all my life. There's a power greater than me. And you see that in people – kindness, love, that's where it's at.

If you get out next January, how long will you have been inside?

That'll be just short of 23 years. Just a few days.

Are you scared?

Not yet. [Laughs].

What are your plans?

Well, I have a belief in my heart, that no matter what, if I keep doing the right thing, it'll be okay. I mean, I'm not saying that everything is going to be easy. But if I keep doing the right thing, it's going to be okay. If I do what I can today,

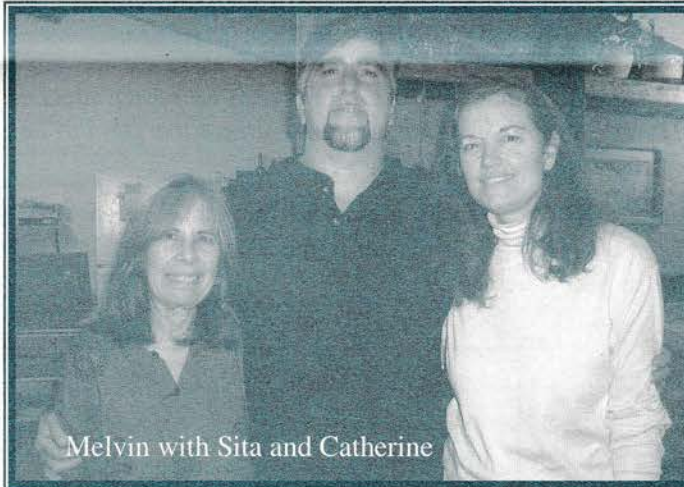
I think that tomorrow will take care of itself. If I'm focused on tomorrow, I'm gonna miss something today. And that is a practice that I work on everyday: just stay in the day. It irritates some people, they're like, "You gotta plan for something." And yeah, realistically, yeah, but I'm not going too far out there. If I'm doing what I'm supposed to do today, I believe with all my heart, tomorrow will take care of itself.

Any last thoughts on the subject of transformation?

In a way, I say I'm blessed to have had the time to look at my spiritual life, because I certainly wasn't able to find it on the outside. I'm starting to realize that it's not about me. It's about seeing if I can be of service, if I can be a help, and I really mean this. In some ways you could say it's penance, but I don't see it that way. It's something I want to do, not something I have to do. Everyone needs help sometimes. You can be in a prison without bars.

It's almost as if "We're All Doing Time..."

[Laughs all around.]



Melvin with Sita and Catherine



E A S T E R E Y E S

The following is an excerpt from a sermon given in Jerusalem in the '70s by Anglican priest Father Murray Rogers, one of Bo & Sita's beloved elders.

Easter—I know it is a historical event: something that happened once, on a particular day, in a particular place. That event was an undreamt-of marvel to that small group of the followers of Jesus who thought they'd lost their Master forever. But now, it is the Event of all events—the Feast of feasts: it is the celebration that makes human life not bearable but wonderful!

How badly we need to let Easter be as all embracing as it is. It touches everything and everybody; there's not a joy and there's not a tragedy that is not transformed by the Reality of Easter. There's not a situation, however full of oppression and horribleness, that is not turned into living hope by God's act of Resurrection.

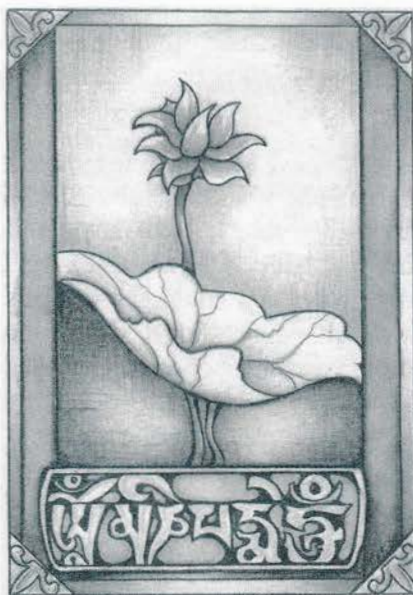
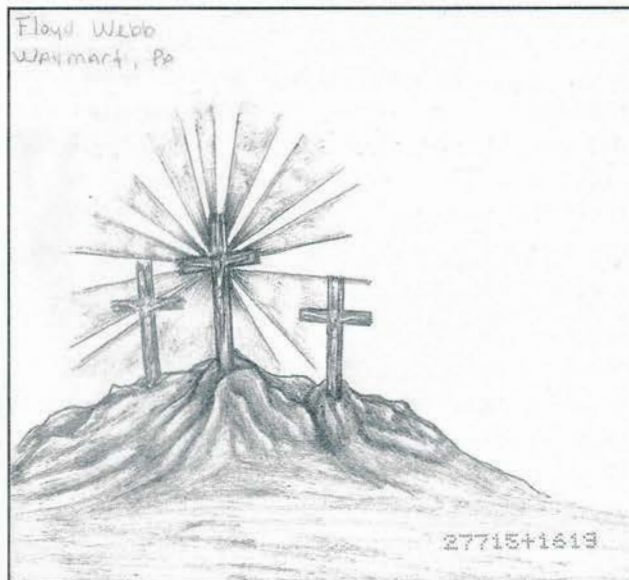
It isn't lovely theological ideas or Christian dogma. It is rather a great chorus of worship—the marvel of it! Drink it in! Would your wildest dreams have been able to equal such a stupendous surprise? Open your eyes and mouth and ears and hands and heart—drink it in if you can. Have you ever tried drinking the ocean?!

God is offering us "Easter Eyes," and if we accept, everything we see is extraordinarily transformed.

Easter Eyes cover everything—they include everything. To have them is an altogether special way of seeing and perceiving; of looking at ourselves and other people, at the people we love and the people who are appallingly difficult to love. It is an altogether special way of seeing events and happenings and situations. Very many of these happenings remain terribly painful and tragic—Easter Eyes don't help us to escape any pain. Easter Eyes are all about telling us that every bad Friday (or Monday to Sunday for that matter) has an Easter attached for those who begin to believe. Easter Eyes are an extraordinary and wonderful gift we are offered—almost too good to be true. Friends, please don't be so crazy as to refuse such a marvelous present.

Remember that Easter came after the murder of the cross, and in the face of whatever may happen to you, dare to live with all the Life that God gives and will always give to you. Easter is the wonderful gift of God to you, given each day, of Life and Love and Joy, for which each one of you were born.

I'm deeply thankful for Easter; aren't you?



Nathan Byerly, Boise ID

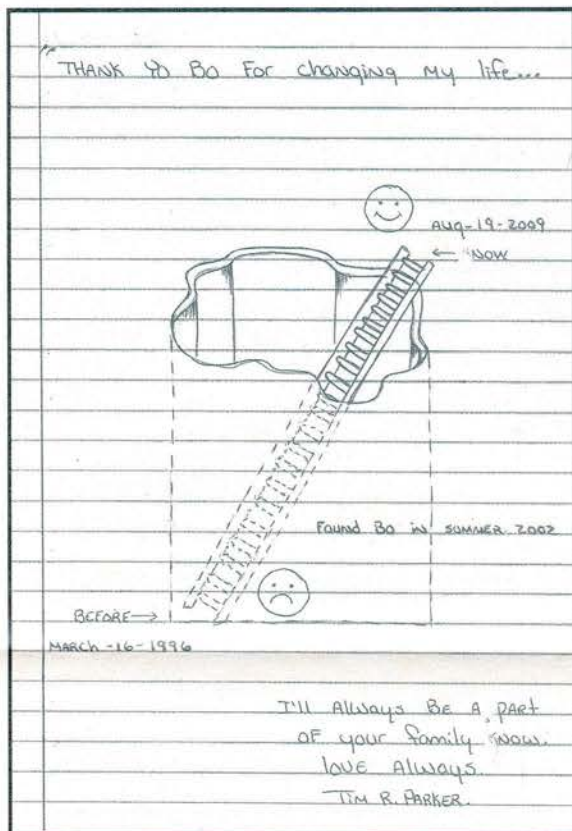
Poem by Daud Alvarez, Malone, NY

The world calls me a loser.
I say that I am gentle and beautiful.
The night calls me bad, but I have stars burning like blue fireflies.
The hate mongers poison my earth,
and still my flowers bloom and release their gifts.
The dream keepers have locked my ancestor's songs in history,
and I still sing.

The snow hurls its white fury at my landscape,
and all things lie beneath the white cold.
The suffocation is deep and heavy.
My seeds with hope shall become a resurrection.
There will be Spring

LETTERS

Bo Lozoff is on sabbatical, which means a time away from normal work for rest and rejuvenation, and to focus on his music. We thought we'd share some of the letters and artwork that come addressed to him. Our hope is that these letters will inspire and remind us all that true transformation is possible — even under the harshest conditions — and is in fact happening all the time, all around us. Though he's not in the office to answer mail, Bo asked us to pass along all his love and blessings. He appreciates your prayers and he holds you in his heart.



Dear Bo & Sita,
Sam was again denied parole, but remains the same kind and loving man he was when I first met him 15 years ago. I was recently asked how Sam is able to maintain his peace and good humor after being denied parole 8 times. I thought I knew the answer, but relayed the question to Sam. His reply was "Bo Lozoff and We're All Doing Time." He continues to live everyday by those teachings. HKF will always have a special place in my heart. We're All Doing Time brought Sam and I together, and has helped sustain us through all these years.

Namaste,
Linda, Charlotte, NC

Dear Bo,
 I have gone from a mean, selfish, close-minded jerk, to a humble, happy, loving soul, and I owe it all to your teaching. I am amazed that after so many years of evil, I have found love. Thank you so much. You truly saved my life.
Chris, Tracy, CA

I have come to accept that I will probably be here the rest of my life and there is so many people to help here. Jesus would be jealous. **Jonathan, Represa, CA**

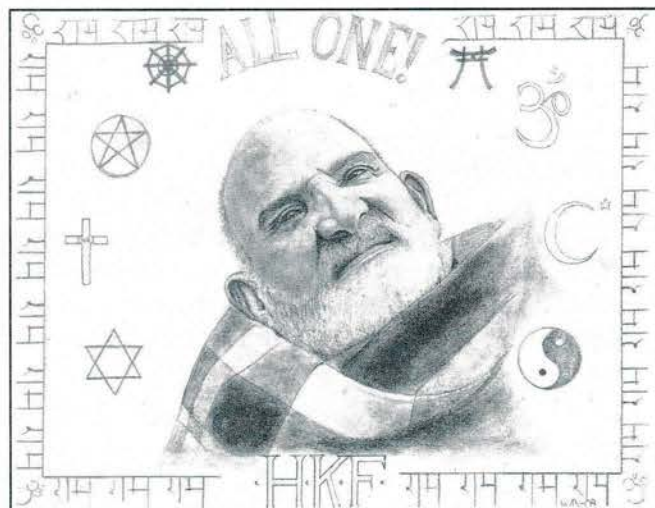
A month ago I discovered *We're All Doing Time*. I've just finished my 3rd reading. Mr. Lozoff's book has lit a spark and set me down a path that I cannot help but follow. I'm a 52 year-old career criminal doing Life, and after all these years, this book has helped me find a way to forgive myself. I hunger for more.

Donald, Vacaville, CA

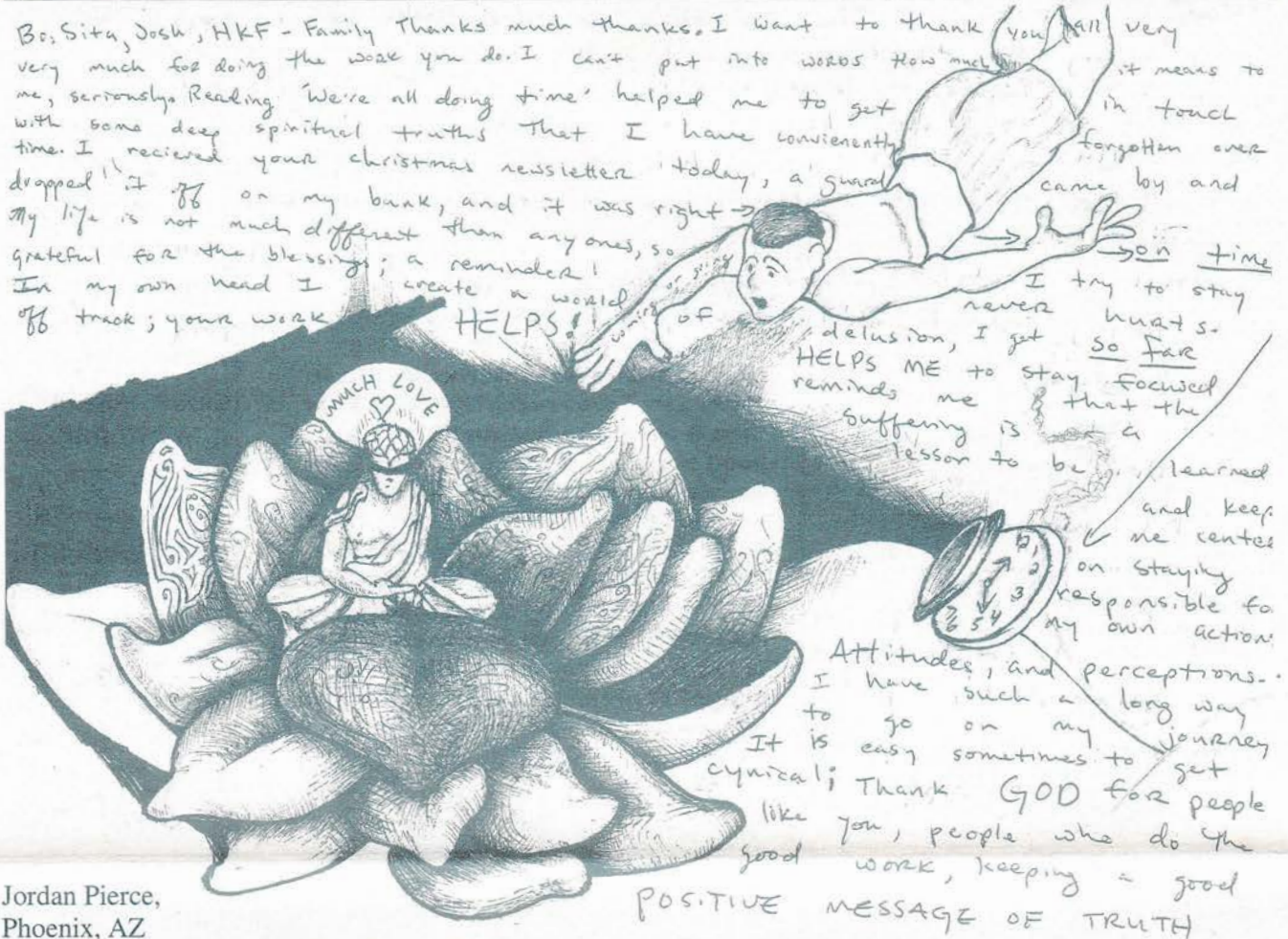
Dear Bo,
Know that you and your ministry has forever changed this man's life.

Brian, Greencastle, IN

Dear Mr. Lozoff,
I have never been one to think of myself as a spiritual person. That has truly changed now. I live in a pod with 72 other inmates and more than a few have come up to me asking why I have changed. I didn't know what they were talking about at first but they say I'm not so "angry" and "on edge." I now pray and meditate daily, and I just feel a load has been lifted off my shoulders. I feel more at peace, with a sense of calmness over me that I can't ever recall feeling before. Thank you so much.
Blaine, Fresno, CA



William Becker, Crescent City, CA



Jordan Pierce,
Phoenix, AZ

Dear Sita & HKF,

Hello! I hope as you are reading this letter it finds you all doing well and in the very best of health!

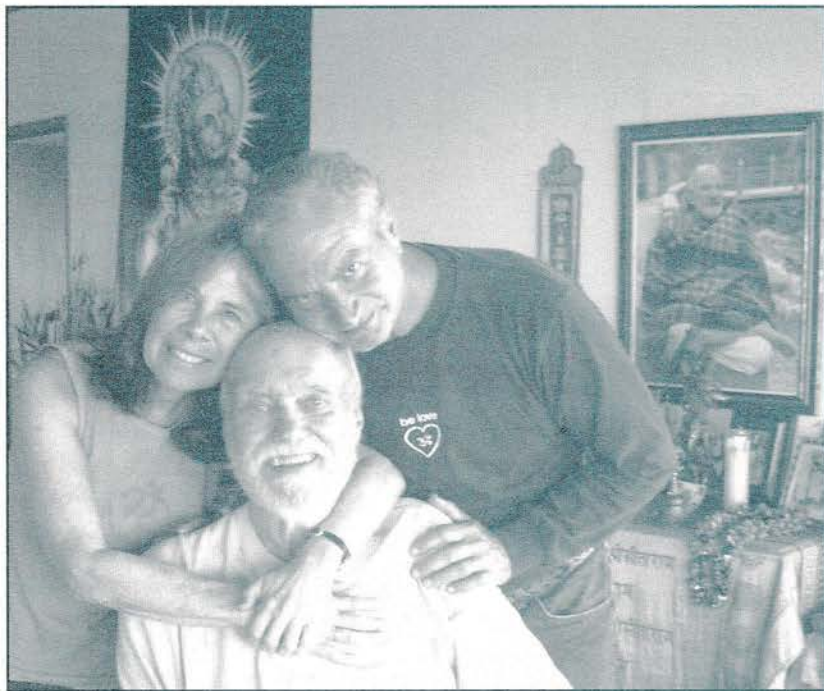
I received the book you sent to me about a month ago—*Father Arseny*, and after reading it, it has inspired me to try and be a even better person. And it also has shown me that no matter where I am I can do some good. And over the last couple years I've turned my whole life around. But now after reading *Father Arseny* I see its now time for me to start reaching out to my fellow prisoners and even trying to reach out to the guards!

See I'm currently in one of the worst supermaxes in the United States, but I'm living proof no matter where you are you can change. And its still kind of strange to me when a staff member says to me, Bobby you're doing really good! Even now the guards tell me, "Man I'm glad the old Bobby's gone," or "we really like the new Bobby." And even my family now tells me they see a major change and my friends. And it feels really good.

I never knew I had any good in me. My whole life I've been in and out of jails and prisons. I was a gang member my whole life, and I've left that life alone. I use to get into so much trouble—I mean lots. Now its been 5 years since I've been into any trouble at all. And it all started with the book, *We're All Doing Time*. Now of days I go to sleep feeling good and I wake up feeling good. I treat everyone with the up most respect and kindness, and it comes right back my way. I see now what life is about—its about treating people with kindness, respect and being compassionate. But most of all its about being in tune with your self and God. I got 50 more years to go till my out date. I'm 33 now, and I may never make it out from behind these walls, but I'm living my life fully and in peace!

Well, I'm going to end. I'll keep all of the HKF and Bo and Sita in my prayers and just so you all know, your books and all the newsletters help me out A LOT and I'm very thankful.

From your friend, Bobby



Sita recently spent two weeks visiting Bo on sabbatical. While together, they visited their old friend Ram Dass. Bo, Sita and Ram Dass created the Prison-Ashram Project together in 1973.

*Much love
from me and Bo,
Sita*



CHECK OUT OUR NEW WEBSITE !



If you have access to the Internet, please visit our newly-designed website at www.humankindness.org. A huge thanks to Brooke Hall, who volunteered her time and design talent to bring our site into the 21st century. Thanks Brooke! It looks great.

While you're at our website, you might want to check out the **HKF Store**. Purchases from our online store are an important source of support for the free books we distribute, and the other work of the foundation. We've added new t-shirt styles and colors, and have some great deals on wonderful products.



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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