



CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

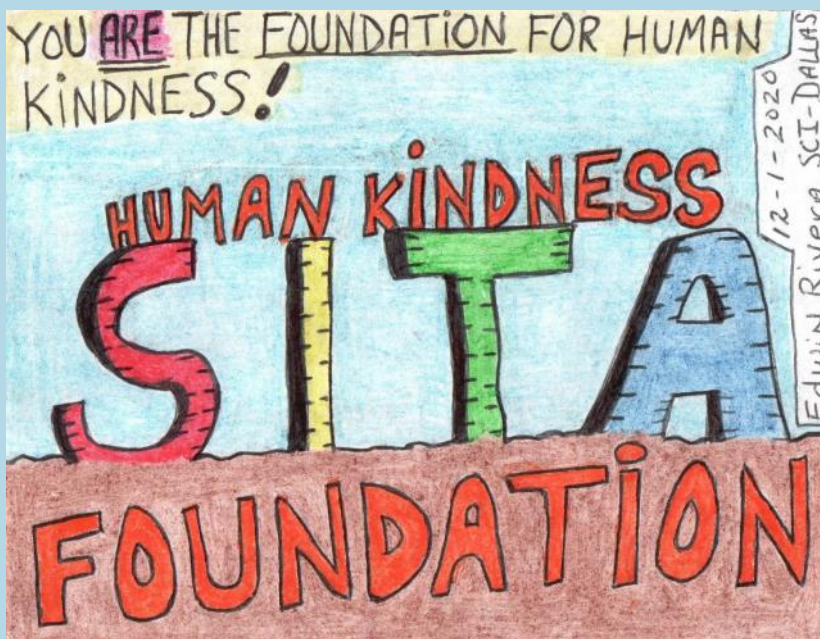
Winter
2023

For the past half century, Sita Lozoff has taught us what it means to live a faith-full and faith-filled life. Every day, she wakes up excited to answer mail from people experiencing incarceration all over the country. She catches the kites sent our way from people asking for help in hard times. She answers these calls with an urgency most reserve only for family. "We have to get these books in the mail today," she'll tell us with unwavering intensity—always thinking of the person on the other end, waiting to be heard. Sita has heard y'all for 50 years. It's the joy of her life to keep on listening. That's why when we decided to feature a long interview with Sita for our 50th anniversary, we thought there was no one better to interview her than the folks she loves best.

Thanks to everyone doing time who sent wonderful and insightful questions about the past 50 years. We love the community we have built together. In the words of a resident of the Texas death row Ellis Unit, "We're all here." Despite the many forms of separation—bars, years, distance, even death—we have found a way to nurture presence across distance. We know this connection is possible because you have taught us. We're all here, together. Thank you for the many years we've walked this road together. Here's to the journey ahead!

How has your life changed in the past 50 years knowing you have helped thousands of inmates change their lives? *Andrey, Taylorsville, NC*

My dear friend, I truly believe that I've gotten deeper, more loving, and more compassionate. That's the gift I'm receiving from this work and it's what I'm hoping will continue to evolve during my next 50 years!!! Just this morning I heard an old Bob Dylan song again that has always touched me—"Chimes of Freedom." Near the end of this very long and touching song he sings, "... and for each unharmed gentle soul misplaced inside a jail..." Andrey, dearest, that is truly the way I feel about each of you I've had the privilege to meet through this work. As these past 50 years have gone by, I feel the truth of that Dylan verse more and more, and I still cry when I hear those words as I did this morning.



What is your greatest enjoyment from doing/being in HKF and is that what keeps you motivated to this day?

Zach, Bunker Hill, IN

Or as another prison friend has asked me, "What floats your boat?" I know this may be hard to believe, but when I wake up in the morning, I can hardly wait to begin reading letters from my dear friends inside. I'm going to be 80 next year, and this feeling is actually deepening rather than diminishing. I feel so blessed.

What made you want to start this foundation and send hope to those who are incarcerated? *Zulmarie, Cape May, NJ*

Zulmarie, dear, we didn't think that deeply about it or that we were actually "starting a foundation." We just knew that we felt a strong connection to people inside after

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS: ASK SITA

visiting our brother-in-law in prison in 1973, and we followed that intuition when Ram Dass asked us to help respond to letters from people inside who wrote after he sent copies of his popular book, *Be Here Now*, to prison libraries throughout the country.

What was Bo's master plan? *James, Walla Walla, WA*

Actually Bo and I never really had a master plan. The project started slowly, letter by letter, so it grew organically without a strong idea of what it could or should look like. Looking back on these 50 years and what this project looks like now with a half million copies of *We're All Doing Time* in prisons throughout this country and many thousands of our other books, I sometimes wonder if we could have gotten this far if we had had a "master plan" ourselves—God had a "master plan" for us, and we just had to follow it as humbly as we were able.

What is your religion? *Priscilla James, Raleigh, NC*

I've been asked this question a lot of times, so I'm very happy to talk about it here and now. I basically grew up without religion, so I believe that when I started to open the door to belief in God, which Ram Dass' *Be Here Now* helped me to do, it was easy for me to be open to whatever moved me in all religions. Ram Dass became my teacher, and in 1976, I asked him if he would give me a new name, and he gave me the name Sita, from the Hindu holy book, the *Ramayana*. I pretty much take things from every religion, dear friend, and ultimately, I believe what the Dalai Lama has so famously said, "My religion is kindness."



What was the largest obstacle you and Bo had to overcome to get HKF off the ground in prison ministry? *Timothy, Weatherford, TX*

Back when we started, prisons were more closed-minded about interfaith spirituality than they are now, which made for some difficulty getting our books to people inside who requested them. I'm happy to say that mindsets have evolved and it's now easier to reach people in prisons across the country.

Do you have any regrets about the path your life has taken? *Lawrence, Mineral Point, MO*

Absolutely not, Lawrence, dear! I mostly feel gratitude for being blessed and trusted by people in prisons to continue to do this work. Writing to my prison friends has become the deepest and happiest part of my life. My only regret, and perhaps it's more of a sadness than a regret, is that we never had the means to offer a pen pal project. I know from the many letters I read how much loneliness there is inside.

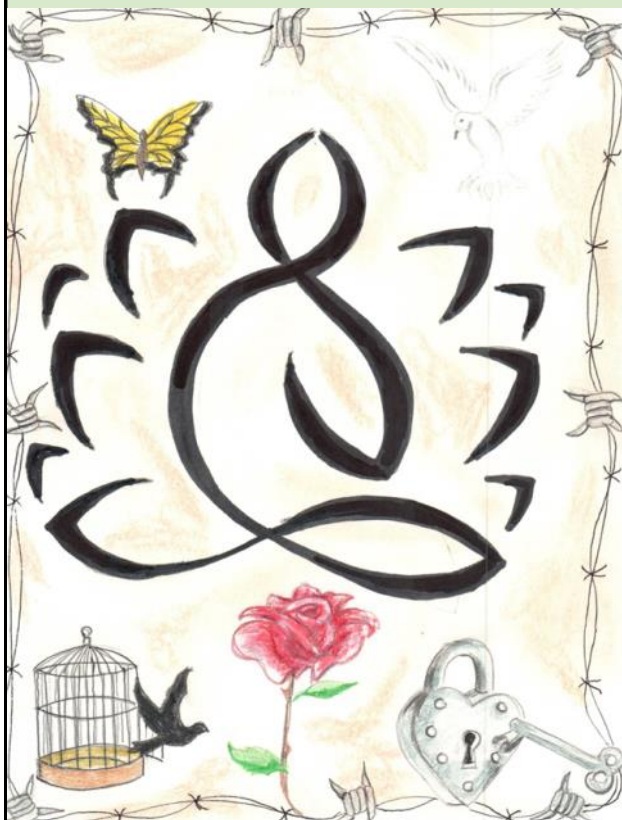
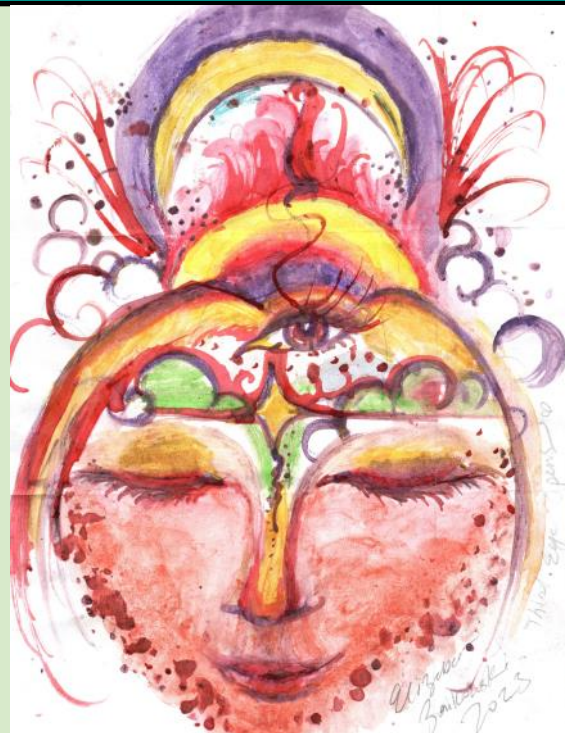
CELEBRATING 50 YEARS: ASK SITA

Does it get easier to love people you have never seen or heard from and people who don't like what you have to say, but who write in years later to say they are ready to grow? *Ronnie, Syracuse, NY*

Interesting question, dear Ronnie. I pretty much assume that if they're writing to me, they want to hear from me, and as we all know, there are different levels of being able to hear and feel as the years go by, even if it's the same message I've given before. I can hardly recall any "people who don't like what I say" because mostly I let people who write me know that I truly love and care about them.

With all you and Bo have been through, what is the most terrifying experience you have endured? *Frank, Tulia, TX*

What comes to mind, and it sounds like you're not just asking about experiences in prison, is the time that our dear son, Josh, was travelling through Guatemala while they were at war. He didn't check in with us when he said he would, and it was terrifying. It was about that time that I came upon this quote which is still very meaningful to me, "Trust in the absolute wisdom of each soul." Remembering that his soul was being guided in a way that was his own journey, no matter what was happening to him, was and continues to be extremely meaningful to me. I think of that quote often no matter who I'm communicating with. Try it yourself—it can be very powerful and liberating.



What thoughts do you focus on to feel peace and contentment when you feel yourself going down the rabbit hole of destructive thoughts? *Quinten, Suffield, CT*

I sincerely try to feel peace when I write letters. I believe that my state of mind comes across as presence, so truthfully, dear Quinten, I ask God to help me be loving and caring when I begin to read letters on a particular day. And that said, when I do find myself "going down the rabbit hole," I try to remember to pause and not respond from that space. What I have learned is that if I can be aware of that negative feeling pretty early, then it's considerably easier to change into a more heartfelt space.

What is your most euphoric revelation from HKF? *Joseph, Carlisle, IN*

I believe my most euphoric revelation is how much I'm personally benefitting by caring for you and others. It's what the Dalai Lama calls "wise selfishness." I'm sure you can feel the difference in your body when you're feeling compassion for someone rather than anger—well that's what I'm talking about, Joseph dear. This was truly a wonderful revelation!

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS: ASK SITA



Is there a fond, inspiring memory you have with Bo that you'd like to share? *Branden, Lovelock, NV*

Yes, dear one, my first thought when reading your question was the time at one of Bo's outdoor music concerts at a NC prison when hundreds of men sang happy birthday to me. I can still feel the joy I felt on that day, and it was many, many years ago! Thanks for the question—I'm feeling that joy right now!!

Did you ever feel like your work wasn't getting out the way you had hoped while helping others such as myself? *James, Fayette, PA*

Actually, no. My faith and trust in God have led me to believe that whatever way our work was getting out, it would be heard by the people inside and out who were meant to hear it. I particularly remember when Bo and I did a workshop on Texas death row at the Ellis Unit in Huntsville, TX. At the time there were a couple of hundred men on the row and there were only fifteen men at the workshop. I remember that when we asked the group where everyone was, someone answered, "We're all here!" That was the reminder that whoever was meant to be there with us at that time, was there. I've never forgotten that message! And, James

dear, I'm so glad you are one of the people meant to hear what we have to say.

After everything you've been through in your personal life, and while working with people in prison, what has been one of the most important lessons you feel is worthy to mention to us again? *Branden, Lovelock, NV*

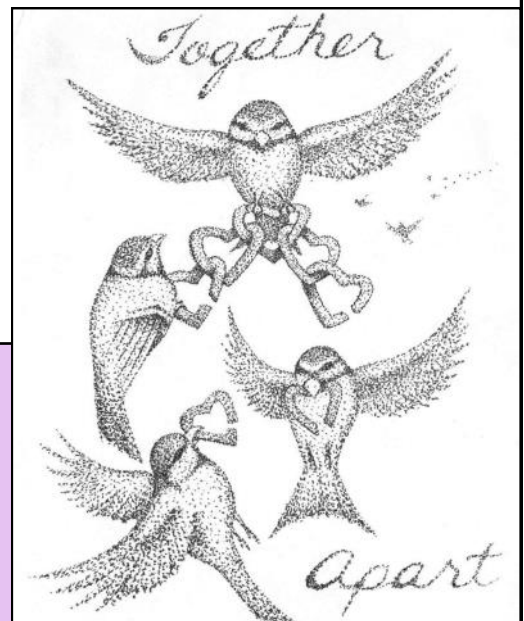
God is real, and you, my dear one, are one of God's beloveds. Please, please know the truth of this and remember it especially when times are tough. Sometimes, you might just need to take a leap of faith and trust that God loves you even when it doesn't feel like it. I've taken that leap myself on occasion and even though it sometimes takes courage, I've never been sorry or disappointed.

Has your last 50 years truly meant Together/Apart to you? *Jeremy, Carlisle, IN*

Ah, lovely question—Yes, Yes, Yes!! The Together/Apart practice began a few years ago. One of my very dearest friends, who lives on death row, told me that she—she's transgender and Buddhist—was doing a practice on Wednesday evenings with a couple of the Muslim brothers on the row. She said that basically they were sending light and love to the suffering beings in the world. I asked her if I could join them at my home, and she enthusiastically said yes. It felt so meaningful that we started inviting people reading our newsletters to join us. I'm guessing we have hundreds, and possibly thousands, of people inside and out who are doing it with us! We didn't have the words Together/Apart in the early days, Jeremy dear, but in retrospect, I believe that this connection is what the last 50 years have always been about, and I love the expression!!

Together-Apart

My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be more convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays! Love, Sita



SHARING KINDNESS

We got an amazing response from our request in the last newsletter for poetry and questions for Sita. In this newsletter, we're sharing a poem we received about our beautiful board member, André Smith, who has been teaching Buddhism and anger management in prisons for close to 20 years. Additionally, we're sharing a 50 Days of Kindness reflection sent in by a reader, all the way from Guam. Thank you so much for sharing your creativity and wisdom.

My Name is André

—by G

Hello, Welcome.
His voice was soft, almost melodic
One could imagine such a voice
lulling a person in a warm cocoon
But he was here, in this land of the brutal
to promote peace.
My name is André.
Welcome to Mindful Meditation.
For twelve weeks we met
Twenty four convicts of various crimes
Coming together to develop compassion.
Undaunted by this ominous task

André came each Friday
bearing a smile, that voice of silk,
and compassion for the unlovable.
I've heard that into each life
will come a brief encounter
A person known for only a short time
but their impact is so profound
you are left forever changed.
André never tried to proselytize
Yet his "stealth Buddhism"
imparted kindness, tolerance, hope
replacing mistrust, bigotry, and anguish.
I shall never forget him.



Art by Edward

“Today I asked God for wisdom and
to fill my mind with good thoughts.”

Edward, 2023

Reflection

Take a moment. You know you're doing time. You see yourself between a rock and a brick wall. You can barely see sunlight. All you see is concrete and steel. Imagine this picture. You "free as a bird."

Questions

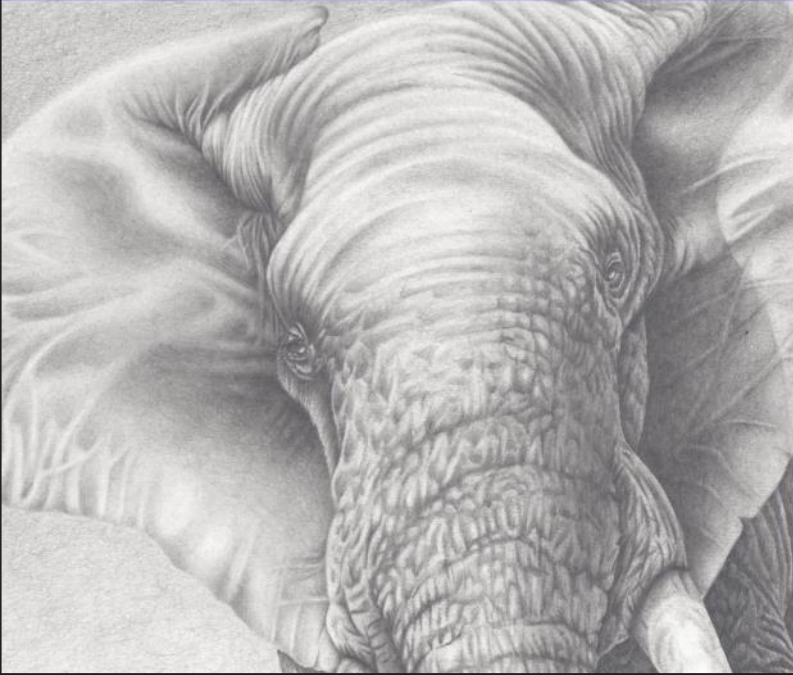
How do you manage to strive each day being deprived of your liberty?
Is there hope? If yes, what keeps it alive?
Where do you go from there, despite the many challenges you're faced with (behind these walls)?

Many thanks to our artists: Edwin Rivera, Dallas, PA (pg 1); Barbara Peterson, Tucson, AZ (pg 2); Elizabeth Hotlwick, Santee, CA (pg 3 top); Gary Farlow, Ridgeville, SC (pg 3 bottom); Dale Schexnaider, Cottonport, LA (pg 4 top); Robert Joe Swainston, Beaumont, TX (pg 4 bottom); Edward Dela Pena, Guam (pg 5); Jimmy Stine, Cross City, FL (pg 6 top); Barton Eason, Quitman, TX (pg 6 bottom); Shanti Das (pg 7); Chris Bown, Doral, FL (pg 8).

PRACTICE

“All beings are created **to be enough
for the roads they travel.”**

P, 2021



Reflection

Imagine you are on a path in the middle of a journey. You are carrying everything you need with you. You are also carrying your fear, pain, and doubts. They can make it hard to find your strengths and skills. Look in your backpack and take out the stuff you don't need. Leave it on the path. Continue on your journey—lighter, stronger and more sure of the fact that you are everything you need to be. And more.

Questions

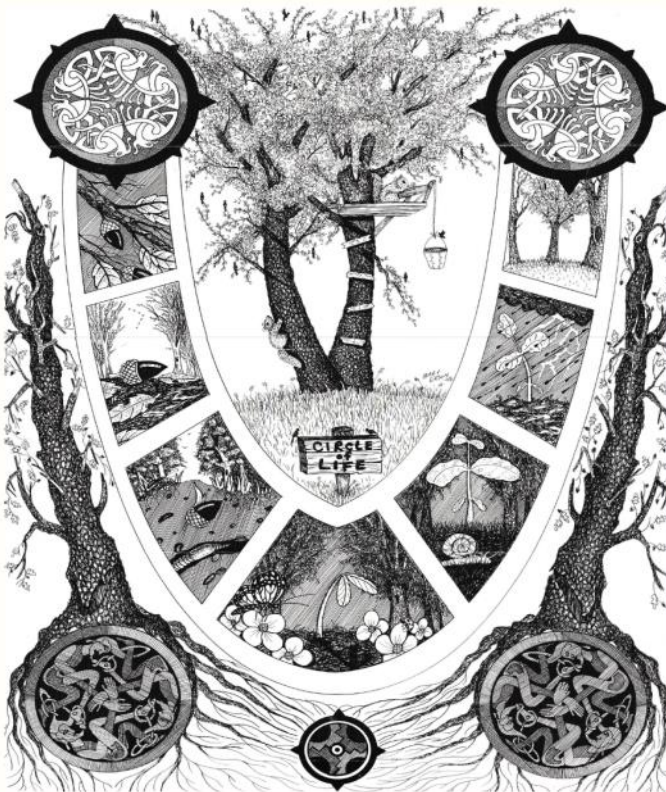
What have you been carrying around for too long?

When have you believed you weren't enough?

What do you need to hear to remind you that you are enough? Write yourself a pep talk and keep it with you when you need it.

**“What I once saw as the end,
now seems like it's **only the beginning.**”**

J.S., 2008



Reflection

Stand up and slowly stretch your arms up and then out to your sides. Focus on a single point before you. Pay attention to its details. Now slowly start to turn around. Notice what the world looks like as you turn. What stands out? When you find your way back to the place where you started, look at the same point. Does it look the same? What changed—the point or you?

Questions

What is something that felt like an ending that was really the beginning of something good?

What is one thing you would like to start? Why?

Reflect on a time you learned to see something in a different way.

What caused this change?

Please note HKF may anonymously publish letters you write to us in our newsletters or other publications. We may also publish artwork sent to us with attribution whenever possible. Please let us know if you do NOT want your work published. Thanks for filling our publications with your spirit and wisdom!

LETTERS

Dear Friends,

I was recently incarcerated and in a very dark place spiritually. I was fortunate enough to be introduced to your books. *We're All Doing Time*, *Deep and Simple*, and *Just Another Spiritual Book* were the ones available at the facility I was in, and I must tell you, they saved me. At that time, I felt hopeless, desperately alone, and absolutely no connection to God. I suffered horrible trauma from an early age, and I learned to deal with that trauma by repressing my feelings and memories, and when I could no longer escape the pain of my thoughts and memories, I turned to substances to relieve the pain. Substance use led me to criminal activity, which of course, led me to prison.

Your books led me to a breakthrough in thinking, which opened my heart to the beauty of the spirit, and the love of God that I had been running from for many, many years. I was so angry, I was hurting, and I was alone. After reading one of the books, I began to open to the possibility that the painful lessons I had learned throughout my life were not in vain, and that my actions, thoughts, and feelings do matter, and they do make a difference, not just in my life, but in the lives of others as well. Most importantly, I learned that we're all in this together, so if you suffer, I suffer, and vice versa. I have always been very compassionate and giving, and felt like this was a negative trait, as I was always being taken advantage of. Now I know that even if others take advantage, or don't appreciate me, my actions are making a difference by making the world a little better.

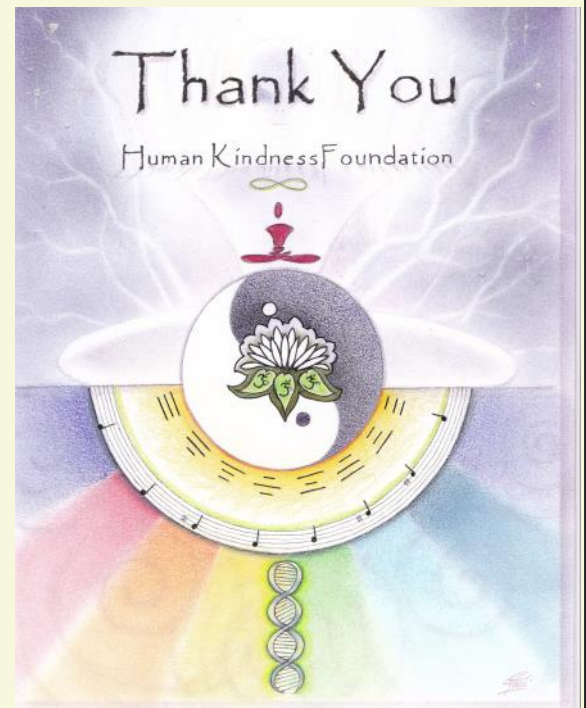
I realize in the grand scheme of things I am just another soul learning the hard lessons life teaches us. These books made such an impact, and you guys continue to do such a great service in a sometimes thankless world, I wanted to take a minute to let you know that you're making a difference and still changing lives. Thank you again for seeing us for who we are and not what we do. Much love to you all, Teresa

Dear HKF,

Peace and blessing to you brothers and sisters. The light you spread to us prisoners is cherished. I have less than two years left and I'm in the home stretch. I used to be depressed about getting out because I've lost everything I've owned, my family refuses contact with me, and my friends have all abandoned me. What do I have to go home to? But through prayer and meditation I've found myself—the person buried deep down in darkness. I now have hope, and with hope I look to the future. Thank you all for the help along the way. I couldn't have done it without you... I've been sharing what you've sent me with others, hopefully changing minds and hearts. I've found a special freedom inside myself and have realized I was in "prison" for years before actually coming to prison. I pray for you all and hope the good work continues. Namaste, DB

Sita dear, beloved sister,

Fifty years!! It seems like yesterday. The Prison-Ashram Project's loving kindness has been the foundation of helping me not lose sight of the things that matter most—how to be more human and how to live and become a better person—to be kinder to one another. HKF has helped me enjoy my spiritual journey and savor the process. One of the main messages to me over the past fifty years is that we take life too seriously. Let us all become lighter beings, put all our problems into a box, sit on the box and laugh at ourselves. However, sometimes we need discipline to do the things we know is right in our hearts, but that we don't feel like doing. We can continue to do the right things with integrity, and we will begin to live life the way a leaf in a stream drifts with the current. HKF has shown me that the quality of our lives is ultimately shaped by the quality of our choices and decisions. My heart swells on waves of love for you all. Michael





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***"For each unharmed
gentle soul
misplaced inside a
jail..." -Bob Dylan***

***"Trust in the
absolute wisdom of
each soul." -Unknown***