

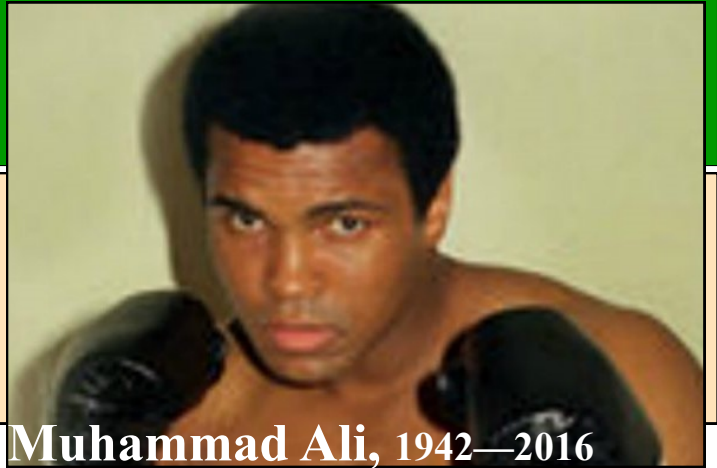
Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Fall 2016

“THE GREATEST” A MAN OF FAITH AND SERVICE

Truly great people in history never wanted to be great for themselves. All they wanted was the chance to do good for others and be close to God. —Muhammad Ali, in his introduction to *The Soul of a Butterfly*



Muhammad Ali, 1942—2016

Allahu Akhbar--God is Greater

Never have I been so proud or inspired to be an American Muslim as I was on the day of Muhammad Ali's funeral. As Sherman Jackson said that day: "Ali put to rest the question of whether you could be American *and* Muslim." And not just that: Ali showed us how beautiful, powerful, and inspiring an American Muslim could be.

Ali used everything in his life – his struggle and his success – to teach us what it means to be human. After losing a tough fight, he reminded us that everyone suffers – and that what matters is how we handle our losses. Newly diagnosed with Parkinson's, he said: "God gave me this disease to remind me that I am not the greatest – He is." He was even determined to offer his death as a teaching, so he thoughtfully planned his own funeral in the final years of his life. And what a teaching it was! On that day when people of all faiths celebrated him, when the old and the young, the famous and the unknown, remembered him with tears and passion, he showed the world what true religion actually looks like: indiscriminatory, all-embracing, unified by the power of love. As Ambassador Shabazz, the daughter of Malcolm X, said that day: Ali reminded us that to love God means to love *all* of his children – not just some of them.

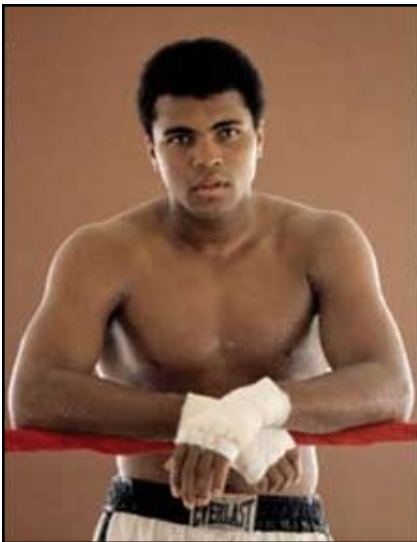
I expected his widow, Lonnie Ali, to be reeling from her tremendous loss, but instead she stood at the mic and spoke with a force and eloquence that belied her grief. She recalled how Ali's bike was stolen when he was a kid, and a white cop introduced him to boxing as a way to channel his anger. His life story, she said, teaches us that when a cop and an inner city kid talk, miracles can happen.

Allahu Akhbar, I thought to myself as I listened to these words that Americans so urgently need to hear. Often translated as "God is great," this phrase actually means "God is greater." Greater than our triumphs or failures, our faith or doubt, our skin color, or the various religions we practice. May God have mercy on Muhammad Ali, and reward him abundantly for all the good he did in this world.

Fi aman Allah (may God protect you)

Karima Bremer

Karima lives near the Human Kindness Foundation office in North Carolina. She graciously agreed to share these thoughts with us as we reflected on the inspiring life of Muhammad Ali. Karima converted to Islam five years ago.



We all have the same God, we just serve him differently. Rivers, lakes, ponds, streams, oceans all have different names but they all contain water. So do religions have different names and yet they all contain truth. Truth expressed in different ways and forms and times. Doesn't matter whether you're a Muslim, a Christian or a Jew. When you believe in God, you should believe all people are part of one family. For if you love God, you can't love only some of his children. —Muhammad Ali, in his autobiography *The Soul of A Butterfly*

Muhammad Ali has become an American icon. A hero and an exemplar of courage and strength. But what has become almost a footnote in his legacy is the very thing that catapulted him to international acclaim: He was a Muslim!

It was his faith that propelled him to greatness, his religious conviction that compelled him to face imprisonment for refusing to fight in the Vietnam War at the height of his boxing career. It was the religion of Islam that gave him the courage to renounce what he called a slave name and proclaim before the world that he was Muhammad Ali!

Without his religion there would be no legacy. He would have simply been Cassius Clay, not "The Greatest of All Time." —M.J. Braxton (Muhammad Alim), resident of North Carolina's death row



Islam has changed my life in every way. It pulled me up and kept me clean as a human being. Islam taught me that living a clean life physically, mentally, and spiritually elevates a person's mind, enabling him to see the world in a new light. Some people

hold on to hatred, revenge, and prejudice. But there comes a time in every person's life when he has no choice but to forgive or he will be consumed by bitterness. We live in a material world that places too much value on possessions. Although I've been fortunate financially, my true wealth is within. There was a time when I placed great value on the heavyweight crown, but that was before I had the religious convictions that I have today. One of the greatest lessons Islam taught me is how to recognize what is truly valuable in life.

—Muhammad Ali, *The Soul of A Butterfly*



"As he once put it, Muhammad Ali was America. Brash, defiant, pioneering, joyful, never tired, always game to test the odds. He was our most basic freedoms – religion, speech, spirit. ...

Ali was a radical even in a radical's time; a loud, proud, unabashedly black voice in a Jim Crow world. ...

There were times he swung a bit wildly, wounding the wrong opponent, as he was the first to admit. But through all his triumphs and failures, Ali seemed to achieve the sort of enlightenment, an inner peace, that we're all striving toward.

In the '60s, when other young men his age were leaving the country to avoid the war or jail, he was asked why he didn't join them. He got angry. He said he'd never leave – his people are here, the millions 'struggling for freedom, and justice, and equality... I can do a lot to help, in jail or not.'" —President Barack Obama



*"I am Muhammad Ali, a free name – it means **beloved of God**."*

—Muhammad Ali, talking about his name change in 1964

At Human Kindness Foundation, like so many other places in the world these days, we are frequently thrown into sorrow and dismay when we hear the news. How could we celebrate and honor the life of Muhammad Ali without also acknowledging the ongoing violence and marginalization experienced by the two groups he most represents, African Americans and Muslims? It's not possible.

And yet, what can we say? How does a person—or an organization—keep going in the face of such unacceptable realities? How do we offer any help or comfort to those of our readers who are living these realities every day? And, we ask ourselves, what can we do to make things better?

For help, we turned to a member of HKF's board of directors (below). We also reached out to Karima Bremer (page 1) and Muhammad Alim (page 2) for this newsletter. We hope that *everyone* connected to HKF will feel invited to join hearts in this troubled world and stand up for each other as brothers and sisters. We believe that Muhammad Ali would want that, too.

—Editors



The Kindness of Lament by the Rev. Joe Hensley

Rector, St. George's Episcopal Church, Fredericksburg, VA and member of the Human Kindness Foundation Board of Directors

"What do we do now?" In the wake of tragedies that shake the core of our communities and nations, this question shakes our souls. After the violence this year in Orlando, Baton Rouge, St. Paul, Dallas, France, Syria, and so many other places, there have been calls for prayer and cries of mourning for those lost. At the same time, almost immediately after a tragedy, fingers are pointed and leaders repeat *ad nauseum* that we need to come together and solve the problems. Of course we want and need to respond, even when the tragedies may be far away from us. Rushing to solutions, though, may mean missing the deeper need for healing. What do we do now? We first need time to be sad and space to be angry. We need time and space to lament.

Lament is a word we do not use very much, as we have neglected its importance. Lament is not just being sad. In its roots, it means "to wail." Wailing carries all kinds of emotions that we need to express if we are to heal: confusion, sadness, frustration, even anger. When we lament, we give voice to those emotions and let them lead us, eventually, toward hope. We hear this so often in the prayers of the Hebrew Bible known as the "psalms." Psalm 22 begins with this famous lamentation: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" After many verses of despair, the poet eventually turns the corner toward hope in God's mercy: "You are my strength..." Blues music is another example of the hopeful

power of lament. Even as the singer wails about lost love or tough times, the cadence and melody of the music lifts the heart to face another day.

Too often though, the voices of lament are squelched in the aftermath of a tragedy. America, especially, tends more toward an attitude of fortitude. Rather than sing the blues at memorials and vigils, we sing patriotic and hopeful tunes to inspire us to stay strong and forge ahead. Even the song, "We Shall Overcome," which I love for its amazing capacity to bring people together in hope, does not mention sorrow. Protesters take to the streets, but anger and sadness often give way to confrontation instead of consolation. There are few spaces where it is okay to fall apart and wail. There are few people who will just listen



without trying to convince us that our crying is somehow out of place.

When we rush to action without taking the time to mourn and feel the pain of loss, we tamp down an essential part of the healing process. We are afraid of the emotions, maybe because they seem depressing. It is actually more depressing when we stuff away our sadness. Our society is in many ways depressed. We talk about meaningful change but just



cannot seem to make it happen. The way for individuals and society to heal from depression is to shine a light on the sadness, not push it away. Maybe the greatest kindness we can offer in these troubled times is to offer or welcome a cry of lament. Our first impulse may be to rush to “fix it,” but kindness is deeper than offering fast solutions. The kindness of lament is the space and permission to be human and to mourn without harm or judgment. Lament does not

seek to hurt another. Its purpose is healing of the soul. “What do we do now?” We fall apart, and then we pick up the pieces together. Lament is not a downward spiral of negativity. It moves downward at first and then turns toward hope.

How do we show each other this kindness? We first need to give ourselves permission to lament. This does not mean we have to cover our heads in ashes or make some public display, although it might take some outward form. For me, just the awareness of my own voice sighing within me connects me, in a physical way, to the sound of the world’s suffering. When someone else is expressing their pain, we can simply listen. We can say, “I know it hurts.” We can offer a cup of water, a tissue, a safe place to wail, even when it is hard to hear. We can resist the temptation to rush to solutions or tell people to be quiet. We can create safe places in the community where this wailing can happen uninterrupted. Even if someone else’s pain is not something we personally experience, we can lament in solidarity. The reality of pain and loss is common to us all.

Breathe deeply. Welcome the moaning and groaning. Lament is kindly reminding us that we are human. Hope will arrive too, but it might take its time. Our impatience for results may actually work against deeper solutions. The kindness of lament requires a willingness to wait and trust. Maybe this is the meaning behind Psalm 30:5: weeping needs to endure for a night, so that joy can come in the morning.



I understand that there are many paths to God, and I believe Islam is the correct path for me. Like the Dalai Lama, I respect people of different religious beliefs and agree that spirituality should be a central focus of our daily lives. Spirituality helps us achieve self-discipline, forgiveness, and love, which are so essential to a peaceful existence in living among others.
—Muhammad Ali,
The Soul of A Butterfly





This journey to obtain inner peace is a constant battle. Every day presents something new. We must really examine our lives and make the right choices. As a Muslim, I have to keep my armor with me daily. I'm not talking about a knife or razor. I'm talking about asking God for His protection and guidance.

—William Raheem Bowie, resident of North Carolina's death row

A moment with His Holiness the Dalai Lama of Tibet

Chad (the man in the blue shirt) first connected with Human Kindness Foundation in 2005, and stayed in touch through his incarceration and transition back home. Chad sent this photo, taken in June 2016, and this description of the moment he shook hands with His Holiness the Dalai Lama:



“For me it was like being baptized and the most intense religious experience. It was a very warm and hardy handshake. I just couldn't stop crying but it was a happy cry. I could just feel the compassion and positive energy.”

Many thanks to the artists: Pg 2: Stephen Land, Angleton, TX; Thomas Ford, Atlanta, GA; Jimmy Stine, Malone, FL; Pg 3: Stephen Land, Angleton, TX (both drawings); Pg 4: Jose Luis Garcia, Clearwater, FL; Evarardo Ibarra, Orange, CA; Hector Cupich-Quinones, Dallas, TX; Pg 5: Forrest Hawthorne, Angleton, TX; Pg 6: George Mills, Warsaw, VA; Pg 7: Thomas Parrotta, Moulton, AL; Jose Luis Garcia, Clearwater, FL.

Letters

Dear HKF,

I'm a 44 year old African American male. I'm facing a murder charge against my wife who I miss so much. I'm not sure of all that happened that night, but I do know that we got into a fight and whatever happened had to be my fault. I just can't remember all of the night—I was so mad. I'm in jail awaiting trial still, and I'll be sent to prison upon conviction.

I'm really truly scared. At times I sit and contemplate suicide. I do not have a plan so please don't worry about that so much. I feel that upon arrival in prison, my life will be taken by someone. I fear being raped too. In your book, I read what you had to say about kindness and how the convict code was made back in the fifties by a small amount of gangstas. That gave me the inspiration to write you. I agreed with that letter written by Bo—kindness is a way to break down hardness. But I also feel that my kindness is going to point toward weakness which could get me killed or made into someone's punk. I'm really scared. My feelings are to fight everyone I can and the others will leave me alone even if I lose.

I really need to know what to expect. Is my life truly coming to an end? I think at times I should hang myself instead of facing what is ahead. In some of your books I find some relief. I pick them up in a time of full depression to help calm my fears. Please respond and let me know what to expect. Please, please, please. Keep up the good work. Thank you for taking the time to read this. Sincerely, T

Dear T,

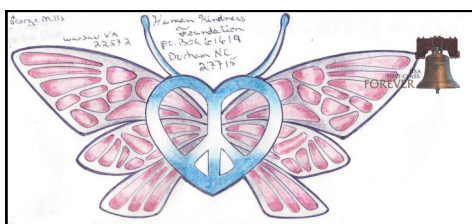
Glad you felt like you could write to us. My name is Gabe, and I'm a volunteer here at HKF. I've been here for five years now, but I also did 19 years in prison. I got locked up when I was 19 and I can't even tell you how scared I was at that time. I thought of suicide for years. I kept putting it off. I didn't want to die—just not face all the things I had to. I can't give you an easy response to your letter or tell you what to expect, but will say if a scared kid like me can get through this, you can too. This doesn't have to be the end—it can be a new beginning if you want something better. We owe it to the people we hurt, as well

as ourselves, so I hope you do want something better.

You've got Bo's books and teachings—that's more than I had at that time, so you're already a step ahead of where I was. Prison is going to be what you make it to be. Kindness doesn't mean not sticking up for yourself or others when you need to. I got a lot of help in Bo's responses in *We're All Doing Time*. I encourage you to spend more time with them. You'll find a lot of help in just a few of his words. Meditation practice will help you deal with all you have going on, so practice. And pray a lot—it works. Keep holding on, friend—I'm sure glad I did.

Your friend, Gabe

P.S. As I learned from Bo's books, courage doesn't mean not having fears. It's doing what you need to in spite of the fear. Take courage, brother, it's worth it!



Dear HKF,

I grew up being a very mean man. I just turned 48 and at least 20 of those years has been in prisons. As we speak, I am in lockdown and have been in my 8 x 12 cage for over 2 years.

Ok enough about me. This isn't about me—it's about my little brother Sammy. He is the only family I have, and he is about to lose his life for taking 4 other lives. He is on death row—this is going on his 20th year and that is about as long as you get to stay on death row in this state. He was only just 18 when he went to jail.

I'm the reason my baby brother is setting where he is. I want him to know how sorry I am for being the big brother that I showed myself to be. If only I could have known that I was leading, I would have walked a little straighter.

He is all that I got left in this old world and I won't ever get to see him again. I waited too late in life to change my life for him. I want to tell my little bro that I'm sorry for not being the big brother that I should have been, and I

love him and will see him when we make it to the other world. I'm sorry for teaching him that being a bad boy and making everyone fear you is a good way of life. It's not.

Thank you for all the books. I've read them a good number of times and they have given me lots of understanding. I will tell Bo what he had done for my soul and body if I meet him in the next life. Peace, B

Dear B,

Your letter is beautiful, and the change you've made in your heart is inspiring.

You and your brother are both in our prayers, B. I wish you both the deepest peace and healing. Always remember that God loves you and your brother.

I know it is heartbreaking for you that you won't be able to see or talk to your brother before he dies. I'm so sorry about that.

You say you waited too late in life to change for him, but I'm not sure about that. You mention "the other world" where you will see your brother again. I can't know for sure what happens in that world, but maybe it will mean a lot to him that you did change. Maybe, while you are still in this world, you can use the change you've made in ways that help other little brothers. When you see a younger man in need, can you see the face of Sammy? There are plenty of "tough guys" in any prison, but can you see past that tough exterior, to the child of God that is right in front of you? Aren't you hoping that someone is doing that for Sammy right now?

B, sometimes the most helpful and inspiring leaders are people who have experienced great sadness and remorse. You are feeling remorse over not being a better brother, and sadness at losing Sammy. I believe you can use those very painful feelings, and do some good in this old world. You say Sammy is all you got left, and I hear how awful it is to have no family. I hope you will begin to open your heart to another kind of family. There are people who need you. There are people you can help. It won't take away your sadness about Sammy. But it might fill your heart with love.

If you get to that other world before I do, tell Bo we love him! Peace and blessings, Catherine

Communion and Community

If you look back at the first quote on page one, you'll see why writing about Muhammad Ali reminded us of what Bo Lozoff called "Communion and Community." The way Ali said it was: "do good for others and be close to God." This letter from May 2016 touches on how important the idea is to us.

Dear HKF family,

I'm facing many life sentences, my family is gone—I found out the other day that I'll never get to see my son again, and he's my only meaning in life. Wow! How do I live with this? How? Please help me to hold on. I'm so broken and hurt and lost, I don't know what to do. I tried to kill myself before, and I'm left with the scars to remind me of that night. Every day I see them I feel next time I'll make sure I do it right, and no one can really stop me.

I'm sorry if my letter is so upsetting, but I feel drawn to Human Kindness Foundation, so I'm sharing my real me, and the real me feels like scum. I want what you've got, Sita—to offer some kind of help to the people behind me. Love, J

Dear J,

I'm so sorry about your suffering, J. Losing contact with your son is so sad, for you and for him. I'm sure you already know we don't have any easy answers for you, or any way to take away that pain. What we can do is encourage you to be a spiritual warrior through this very difficult time of your life.

You say that your son is your only meaning in life, and I understand that feeling. Now you are faced with a very difficult challenge. Can you be strong enough to do your spiritual work for your son's sake, even if you may never see him again? What if he comes looking for his father 20 years from now? Will he find a man who has become strong, kind, peaceful and brave in spite of great suffering? Or will he discover that his father killed himself in despair? Do you think it will matter to him? I do, J. I think it will matter very much.

You are not scum. You are a human being, a beloved child of God. I don't know why this suffering is happening to you. I spent last weekend with my friends who lost both of their children in an accident. I don't know why that happened to them. I do know that the suffering is immense, and they have found the strength to carry on in meaningful ways. I believe you can do that, too.

You say that you want what Sita has, and that your reason to keep going is to offer help to the ones behind you. That's great, J! Sita has dedicated her life to 2 things: spiritual practice and service to others. You can do the same thing Sita has done: do some spiritual practice every day, and find ways to help other people. It's not an easy way, but it's the only way we know of to make sense of life.

Brother, we hope you'll stick around and do the hard work of becoming a spiritually deep man. The world needs you to do that. Your son needs you to do that. We're sending more books. Use them, and the ones you already have, and take it all the way. Really, ALL the way. Become a prison monk, and see what power you find in that life. We're pulling for you.

Peace and blessings, Catherine



Communion and

Community are not for later, they are your tickets out of Hell! If you decide to devote your inner life to Communion and your outer life to Community, that little suffering self doesn't have anywhere to exist! —Bo Lozoff, in Deep & Simple



For more about dedicating your life to these 2 simple principles, see "Communion and Community," pages 89-95 in *Deep & Simple*.

If you are incarcerated, you are invited to request a free copy of *Deep & Simple* by writing to HKF, PO Box 61619, Durham, NC 27715.

If you are able to purchase books, please help support HKF by purchasing *Deep & Simple* at the address above or: www.humankindness.org.

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*When you feel a
peaceful joy,
that's when you
are near truth.*

—Jalāl ad-Dīn
Muhammad Rūmī

Sita Lozoff and her
grandson, Joey Lozoff.

