

Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Christmas 2013

40TH ANNIVERSARY!

*On September 21, 2013, we celebrated the 40th anniversary of **The Prison-Ashram Project**, Human Kindness Foundation's project encouraging prisoners to live lives of spiritual practice and kindness. The group in attendance included current and former inmates, prison staff, families of inmates, and many others. Approximately 80 people gathered in Durham, sharing hugs, music, memories, and a great deal of warmth for each other and for all of you. We're sharing some photos from the events, in hopes that you can feel the love and goodwill expressed at the celebration.*

We heard from many groups and individuals who joined our meditation from afar: on death row in California, in a North Carolina prison meditation class, at a recovery center, and in many other places. Thank you to all who sent your love and prayers.

The article below was written by Bo Lozoff 15 years ago, at the time of the 25th anniversary of the Prison-Ashram Project. Along with the anniversary article, we're sharing two letters that Bo wrote in 1998, as well as a Christmas article of his from 1980. Even though Bo died a year ago, we continue to share his writings, because they are as inspiring now as they were when he wrote them.

We hope you'll join us as we continue the work of the Prison-Ashram Project. When you do spiritual practices... when you are kind to the difficult person in front of you... when you pray for all beings to find Peace... you are joining the work. May we all find our way.

*Our deepest love to all of you,
Your Human Kindness Foundation family*

1998 Article by Bo Lozoff

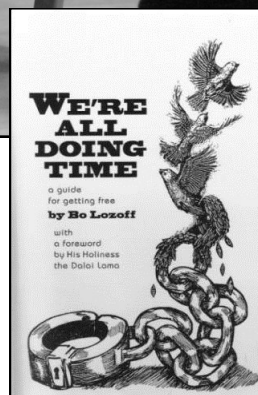
Dear Family,

Twenty-five years ago, a spiritual teacher named Ram Dass and I got together and talked about helping prisoners to use their time for spiritual growth. It was a quiet chat, no solemn pronouncements or bolts of lightning, no press releases or fund-raising campaigns. We just sat together on the lawn of the ashram where Sita and I were living with our two-year-old son, Josh, and mulled it over: "Wouldn't it be nice to do *something* to help?"

(Continued on pg. 2)



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A visitor to the HKF office shows his tattoo, inspired by the cover of the book he credits with saving his life. The stained glass window in the background, made by Sita and friends, was inspired by the same design.

At the time, Ram Dass was sending copies of his book, *Be Here Now*, into prison libraries, and was beginning to receive mail from prisoners. My sister's husband was in prison, and visiting him had motivated me to do something positive in such a negative environment. So we both had a soft spot in

postage alone.

And of course Sita and I are older, hopefully wiser in many ways; maybe our ideas and advice have become more practical over the years. But in the largest sense, what we started out to do—offer spiritual friendship to prisoners and others—remains exactly the same.

It's STILL Not About "Coping"

Right from the beginning, our work has been about helping people to make The Big Change—deep, genuine spiritual transformation. We truly believe that we are all capable of becoming sages and even saints. Most people seem willing to settle for a little less suffering, or some psychological adjustments which allow a little more happiness. To us, this is like settling for a piece of granite when the world's largest perfect diamond is up for grabs.

This is the main difference between a spiritual path and a strategy for personal happiness: one is about the self, and the other is about moving beyond that very self. This bigger journey is not about being comfortable or nice or safe. It's not about living in a supportive environment. We may need some special support for a while, but when real transformation happens, we are able to go anywhere, be among any kinds of people, and not be thrown off from our peace and goodwill.

The great Indian saint Ramakrishna likened our journey to the life of an oak tree: in the beginning, it may need a lot of care and tenderness, it may even need a little fence around it to keep it from being trampled on, but when it grows into its full stature, with its roots deep into the earth, the tree can provide shade for countless travelers and it needs nothing in return. That's who we all can be.

A Voice in the Wilderness

And that's the perspective which I hope the Prison-Ashram

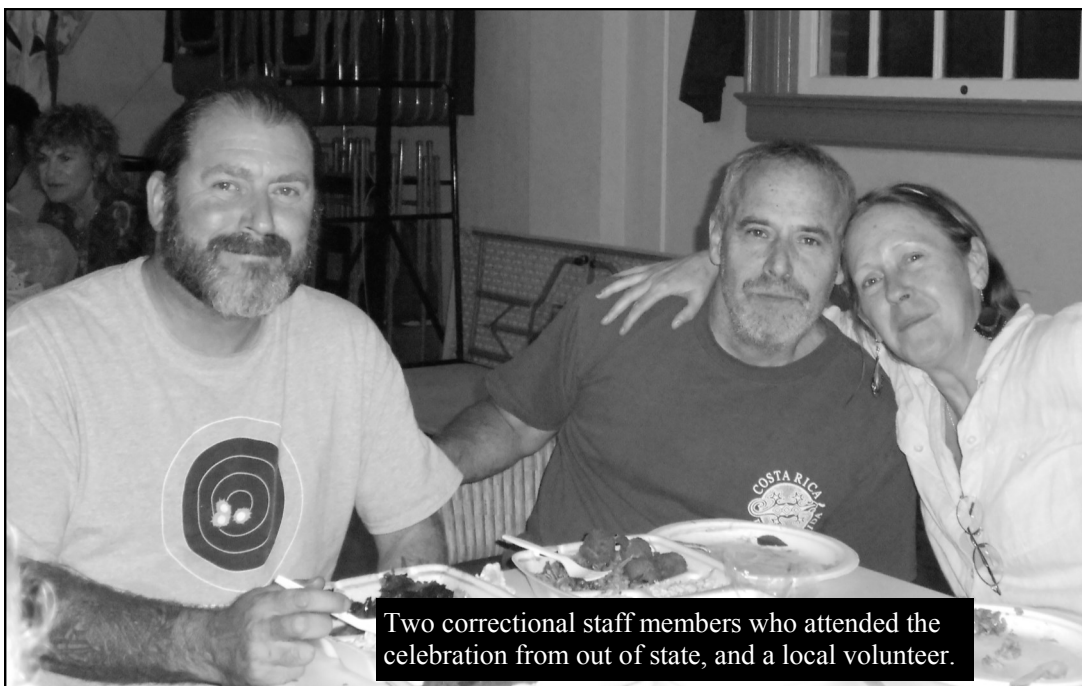


"I just wanted to convey my sincerest degree of appreciation.... The 'Human Kindness' that you all embody encourages me to take that to my fellow man/woman." Sincerely, Jeremiah, Hillsborough, NC

our hearts for the prison population, but we had no idea that brief conversation would turn into the Prison-Ashram Project.

Since then, the Prison-Ashram Project and Human Kindness Foundation have reached every corner of the globe, enjoying spiritual friendship with hundreds of thousands of prisoners and many others who struggle to live a decent and meaningful life. The depth of love, gratitude, trust and sincerest affection we have exchanged with our worldwide family is impossible to put into words. It has been a great Grace in our lives, a blessing we never could have imagined.

Our office has changed a lot over the years. At first, it was in our bedroom, and we didn't even have an electric typewriter. Ram Dass sent us a couple hundred dollars a month to run the whole project. Now, we spend about a hundred thousand dollars a year on printing and



Two correctional staff members who attended the celebration from out of state, and a local volunteer.



This is part of the group who gathered to meditate on September 21. We started our meditation with this prayer: *"We gather in gratitude for the love and friendship that has been shared for 40 years through the Prison-Ashram Project. So many people, in and out of prisons, have opened their hearts and shared their gifts, and we are grateful to them all. We are grateful to Bo Lozoff for the wisdom and compassion he shared, and for the special love he had for people who are incarcerated. In loving memory of Bo, we reaffirm our belief in the limitless transformation of all beings, bearing in mind that such transformation is possible at any moment, and is the very purpose of our life on Earth."*

Project and Human Kindness Foundation will always provide. In this age, we are constantly bombarded by messages to avoid pain, avoid struggle, take a pill to get rid of this, get divorced to get rid of that, put your own happiness above all other concerns—basically if it's too difficult or too painful, bail out. Take the easiest way.

The timeless spiritual message is always a voice crying in the wilderness: *Life is about something more wonderful than you can imagine. You are Divine. You do not die. Don't be afraid. You are bigger than you can possibly imagine. This whole world is not what it appears to be. Wake up to your true nature. Wake up and rejoice.*

When we are in a miserable prison—either self-made, or one of bars and steel—or when we are steeped in our addictions or compulsions which we continue to engage in even though they may destroy our lives, those timeless spiritual messages may seem so remote from our daily reality, that they strike us as totally irrelevant.

But that's precisely the time it may be most important to remember: *Hang in there. Do the practices. Study hard. Pray for help. Be willing to change. Make an effort.*

As a prison friend once told me, sometimes we may be hanging on by a thread, but that thread may be enough to keep us from snapping. Life is always going to be loss and gain, pleasure and pain, pride and shame. Everyone has tough times. Life is pretty hard. Everyone struggles.

The great tragedy of our times is that the vast majority of people—especially our youth—seem to feel they are struggling for nothing. Imagine how hopeless and weary they become. The spiritual seeker struggles too, struggles constantly, but with faith that life is intelligent, not chaotic; merciful, not

cruel. May we be blessed to continue reminding you of that simple, ageless perspective for many more years to come.

—Bo (1998)



Beloved friends, I'm so grateful for the past 40 years and am looking forward to our continuing friendship. I love you all.

—Sita

—Letters written in 1998—

After all these years and the death of our dear Bo, our advice hasn't changed.

Dear Bo,
Have you lost your goddamned mind!? That candy-assed advice you gave "J" in your Christmas newsletter is Bullshit, man! I guess it may seem that I'm coming down on you, but this man is 2 cells away from the guy who beat his MOMMA to fucking death with a goddamn baseball bat! He saw his momma's eyes roll to the back of her head.

Bo, Fuck it. This guy needs to get a shank and take this motherfucker off the count! Nobody on earth could live after taking my momma like that. I can practice spiritual principles later! As soon as they put that dude in the ground!

Bo, I'm not a killer. I'm so passive I make myself sick. Sometimes I'm forced into a fight. But I swear to God, that man would die if he did my mother.

This must be the ultimate spiritual challenge for this Brother. I wish I could talk to the dude. Ah hell, what do I know? I still think you're full of shit. I'll tell you what though, "J" has more guts than I do. This is making me sick at my stomach, I'm fucking crying. Goddamn, but I'm mad! Man, I hope that nobody does that to my mom or dad. I'll kill em!

Later, D

Dear D,
I appreciate the honesty and friendship in your letter. Yeah, it's intense, isn't it? Maybe more intense than any other situation we can imagine. You said, "I can practice spiritual principles later!" which of course, is our natural response when horrible things happen. We want to react from our gut. We don't want to think about right and wrong or anything deeper than "take this motherfucker off the count!" as you put it.

That's very natural. But it's also "natural" for a baby to crawl off a cliff. Natural doesn't mean that it's good, or right. One of the worst things a human being can do is to kill another human being on purpose no matter who started it, what the circumstances were, whether there was any choice or not, etc. It's a tragic thing to do and has unpredictable consequences inside the mind and heart of the killer. It

doesn't matter how natural it is or how much the victim "deserved" it. Look at the current popularity of executions. People are cheering outside the prisons, just like you may think you'd like to cheer if our friend from the last newsletter took out his mama's killer.

But murders and executions shame us all. It is the supreme failure of human conduct, the supreme failure of trying to be decent human beings. Our friend had the horrible misfortune to see his mama killed right in front of his eyes. It is not any sort of loyalty or love to respond "naturally" and become a killer himself. That's not what any mama wants for her son. Please think about this.

Spiritual principles are the most important, powerful tools we can use to protect ourselves from living like brute animals. They are especially important and powerful when things are at their most horrible. Look how Jesus made that very clear. He didn't say, "Father forgive them," over a little disrespect. He said it after being unjustly arrested, convicted, tortured and nailed to a cross! Spiritual practice is not about being "nice." There are heavy mysteries and secrets locked up inside of us. Spiritual principles and practices are the only way to unlock that Divine Nature in our hearts.

I gave our friend that "candy-assed advice" because I know his real nature, and I want more than anything else to help him experience that for himself. Life has handed him an incredibly intense challenge, and I want him to meet that challenge in the best way instead of the worst way. The best way honors his mother and makes her death mean something wonderful to the world. Your way would only continue the pain and bloodshed in a world which has quite enough already. And remember, D: That guy wrote to me. I didn't seek him out. He doesn't want to kill the other guy. Something inside of him has a deep instinct to go a different way. Try to have a little faith in whatever forces are at work inside of him. He's the one it happened to.

You're a good man, D, and I'm glad you felt close enough to me to speak your

mind. This isn't an easy journey we're on together. But go back to my books and read them from a deeper place after all this, and try to understand that this stuff goes all the way, in every situation imaginable. No time out. The stakes are too high. The jackpot we're headed toward is better than your wildest dreams.

Love, Bo

Dear Bo,

Thank you for writing back. I'm sorry that guy lost his mother. And to be honest, if it was my mom, I'd kill her killer, thus becoming the killer! I don't even want to be able to respond any other way. However, I believe I was wrong in yelling at you. You made the point: "that guy wrote me." You're absolutely right. The fact that he has even CONSIDERED an alternative means he is so much more spiritually advanced than I can hope to become. I honor him, if I may.

I was angry. I wrote that letter before I even finished the entire newsletter. You saw honesty & friendship in that letter. I don't know what my motive for writing was, maybe trying to get a personal letter from you! I do operate that way. But my letter was spurred on by anger. We know anger is only fear.

God wants warriors not cowards. It's easy to be a coward. But it's hard to stand up for what's right. "... this stuff goes all the way, in every situation imaginable."

WOW! THAT'S A warrior!

I guess I'll close, Bo. I'm so proud and puffed up that you're where you're at spiritually! I'm even more glad that I'm part of it. I hope the universe doesn't get together and humble me. I hate it when that happens. Thanks again for writing to me. Thanks for your honesty and friendship.

Respectfully, D



Bo & Sita,

I was arrested back in 1995 because I raped and murdered a woman after a night of drinking and drugs. I had so much junk in my system that I have no

recollection of that night's events, but states' evidence proved what I did. Let me tell you, there were more than a few long nights spent trying to figure out how and why this happened. I wasn't a "bad" guy, I thought. I thought my self-pleasing, destructive lifestyle was just fine. Those long, soul-searching nights slowly made me realize that the only how and why in this formula was me myself. I put myself where I was, and all there was left to do was to deal with it and move on. I thought I'd turn to Buddhism for guidance. Your address was listed under Buddhism in a magazine I was reading, so I wrote you looking for the age-old teachings of the Zen masters. I was confused by the literature you sent me at first: "I thought these people were Buddhists. What's this We're All Doing Time stuff about?" But when I sat down and read it, I saw that this wasn't about religion, rites, and rules, but about centering ourselves in the big God all around and inside of us (if I misunderstood your books, I apologize). Now, what I don't understand is how I'm supposed to tune myself in to this peaceful God-ness when I can't shake my old thought patterns. I hate myself with such a despising loathing because of what I did, that I'm convinced it's all but impossible to ever get through it. Damn it man, I killed somebody! How am I supposed to be able to forget that? I realize that it's all a part of the past, the road I took to be where & who I am now, but it's a tough thought to just brush aside as if it were insignificant. And what about the thought that everything happens as God deems it? Was my murdering this woman all just part of the big picture? I find it very hard to believe that my meaning on this planet was to take the life of another person. That's some divine plan there. Perhaps part of my problem is just plain bitterness. I was only 25 when this happened, and now I'm sitting with all of the other Death Row inmates waiting to die. I can't seem to get past this and move on to finding peace. Am I wallowing in self-pity? I really, truly want to get over this hatred of self and put aside the pain and fear of my situation and my future, but I don't know how. Which is why I decided to bother you beautiful folks. I know you hear from others in worst predicaments than mine, but I thought I might give it a

shot in the hopes that you might be able to beat some sense into my head and tell me what I'm doing wrong. I'm truly fed up with all the inner B.S., but I can't let it go. I thank you for letting me throw all of this on you. I hope that you're able to help me snap out of it. May God bless you always. Your servant, K

Dear K,

It's good to know you. You may think, "Yeah, sure! What's good about it? I'm a convicted killer wallowing in self-pity and confusion." But who you are to me is a spiritual seeker, like myself: one more person in this noisy, violent world who is struggling to find a way into the heart of the Great Teachings. And it's always good to know one more.

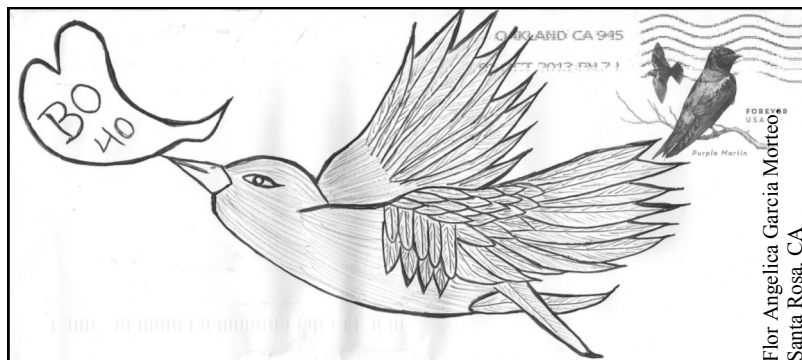
It sounds like you're going to be there for a while. Well, it looks like we are, too. So we can be friends along this slow, confusing, often painful process of awakening. You can take heart in the fact that not only you and us, but also thousands of other seekers in an infinite variety of situations, are doing the same stuff, looking for the same answers. You're never alone in this, regardless of what it may look like as you gaze around the death row unit. You are not without friends. Try to really take that in -- past the mind, into your heart. Sit with it for a few minutes and realize what I am telling you: You are not alone. You are not unloved. Ever.

I am extremely glad you are "truly fed up with all the inner b.s." because that's the best thing you have going for you. Like a friend of mine said once, "When the storm is over, pray that things don't get back to normal." Don't be satisfied with anything less than truth.

This process isn't just about reading and thinking, K. The age-old recipes are there for everyone to see: study, practice, and service. You didn't mention practice at all in your letter. And like many other prisoners, you probably assume you have no

opportunity to do any type of service. As you discover how to balance your life between study, practice and service, that's when the missing pieces you yearn for will begin to fall into place. You can't just do it in the mind.

You also insult both yourself and me when you talk as though inner peace were a matter of "just brushing aside" your terrible crime. What genuine spiritual teacher or teaching has ever said to do that? Who ever said it was just "insignificant"? That's your complete misunderstanding of inner peace or enlightenment. We've sent you several books which you say you've enjoyed, but I don't think you're working deeply enough with them. For example, my story "Saddest Buddha," in *Lineage*, is exactly about your situation, and it certainly doesn't imply that the harm we have caused others is trivial or "God's will" in a way that gets us off the hook. Work with it. Learn how to sit still and open to your pain and confusion at the deepest



levels, and let them be exactly what they are. It takes a lot of courage, patience, and practice. The ultimate key you're seeking is always the toughest one to grasp: cherish others more than yourself. We have to stop being so self-centered and begin to feel compassion in every direction all the time to anyone whom life puts in our path. That's your redemption for the rape and murder, K. That's the redemption for everything we have ever done. It takes a while. It may take our whole lives. But I truly don't see anything else worth doing, whether we're murderers or judges, rich or poor, in prison or out. Study, serve, and practice. The whole world is wherever we are.

Love, Bo



HAVE A ~~MERRY~~ ~~HAPPY~~ MEANINGFUL CHRISTMAS

—Written by Bo, Christmas 1980—

People assume that Christmas is the worst time of year for prisoners; how can you be “merry” or have Christmas “cheer” when you’re locked up away from your loved ones? And yet, if we could let go of the whole notion of Christmas as some sort of “fun” time, if we could just drop the heavy association between Christmas and “happiness,” perhaps you can have a very profound Christmas instead, even behind bars; especially behind bars. And you needn’t be a Christian to have a meaningful Christmas; Jesus himself wasn’t Christian. Let’s forget about religions for a moment and consider instead the teachings of this powerful spiritual master.

Jesus was not one of the nice, respectable people in his society. He was an outcast; a gaunt, intense figure who refused to water down his teachings to be more acceptable to the middle class. Against all proper social customs, he cast his lot time and again with prisoners, lepers, prostitutes and beggars, and reminded his followers to *love* these other “outcasts” if they wished to love him. Jesus’ followers had to leave the comfort of their homes and the security of their jobs in order to follow him. He showed them by his own example that comfort and security have nothing at all to do with dignity or self-respect; that worldly pleasures mean nothing if one’s life is empty of spirit, and that even prison, torture or death can be bearable if the living spirit is present. He showed and taught us new meanings of words such as humility, longsuffering, forgiveness and love.

It would seem that Christmas can be the *most* tolerable time to be in prison rather than the least, if you but tune in to its essence. In your deepest Heart, where do you think you would most likely find Jesus spending Christmastime: with you sitting quietly, humbly alone in a cell; or with a “nice” family madly ripping open all their K-Mart presents under an aluminum tree decorated with blinking plastic lights and phony candy canes? Where can you picture Jesus?

Century after century, most of us continue to miss the point of deep spiritual teachings such as Jesus’. We water down the intensity, the go-for-broke devotion of the masters in order to keep our lives orderly and comfortable. We depict Jesus in our movies as handsome, clean, and Aryan rather than a swarthy, smelly and sweaty desert-dweller. And the same things we do to his looks, we do to his teachings. How else could we have insurance companies, when he told us not to worry about tomorrow? How else could television evangelists live in millionaire palaces when Jesus told people to

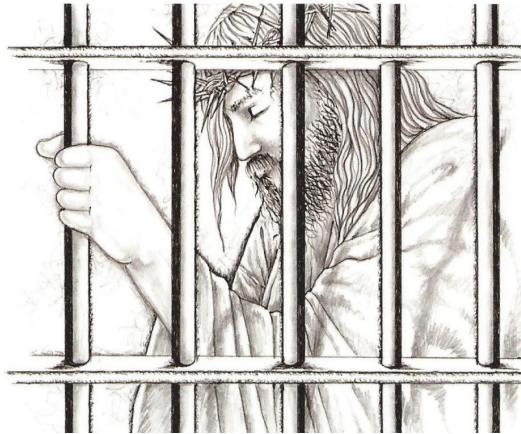
give up their wealth and share it with the poor?

But if all that is *missing* the point, then what *is* closer to the point of Jesus’ teachings? Why *didn’t* Jesus simply emerge as a respectable, scholarly rabbi of his day, changing the course of biblical history in more conventional ways? With

all his wisdom and power, why did he endure such hardships and suffering, including imprisonment, humiliation, torture, and death on the cross? Jesus showed us that there is great power in our suffering. He showed us, really, that living without spirit is a greater form of suffering than physical pain or deprivation. And he indicated a mystical dimension of experience *behind* our suffering that we can share with him if we but surrender our pride, desires, and fears.

All around you this Christmas season, people will treat you as a “poor, lonely prisoner.” If you can find strength to resist that powerful temptation of acting the part, acting out all the self-pity and bitterness and loneliness that is expected of you, then perhaps you might have a true Christmas surprise gift. Sitting alone in your cell, feeling your own self-dignity and allowing your mind to be quiet and humble, you may well find an unexpected friend sitting by your side or in your heart. You may well have the very most beautiful Christmas in your life, touched by the master who understands your imprisonment; who understands and loves you so much...and we do too.

Drawing of Jesus by Spider Stoner, Norfolk, MA.
Angel by Herbert Taylor, Philadelphia, PA.



Sita’s Christmas Tradition

Most years, Sita takes a retreat day to celebrate Christmas. Sometimes alone and sometimes with one or two others, she starts the day in silence. She makes a spiritual practice of watching a six-hour video about the life of Jesus, taking breaks to do walking meditation between segments of the video. After the video, she enjoys a simple meal of home-made soup, and that’s when she and her fellow spiritual seekers speak for the first time that day. “I feel humbled,” Sita says, “as if I spent the day at the foot of the Cross. Others who do the retreat with me seem to feel humbled, too, and our conversation is quiet.” Sita looks forward to enjoying this tradition again this year, with two people who recently began volunteering with HKF.

FINDING FREEDOM: WRITINGS FROM DEATH ROW

Finding Freedom

Writings From Death Row

JARVIS JAY MASTERS

Now available free to prisoners:

We are happy to announce that a **Buddhist book** that HKF has sent out in the past, *Finding Freedom: Writings From Death Row*, is again available free to prisoners. You may request a copy by writing to:

Finding Freedom
Human Kindness Foundation
PO Box 61619
Durham, NC 27715

We will be getting thousands of letters, so please:

- * Keep requests brief
- * If you expect to be moved or released in the next 2 months, please wait until you are at your new address
- * Clearly print your name and full address, including i.d. # and dorm/cell # if you have one

Excerpt from *Finding Freedom*:

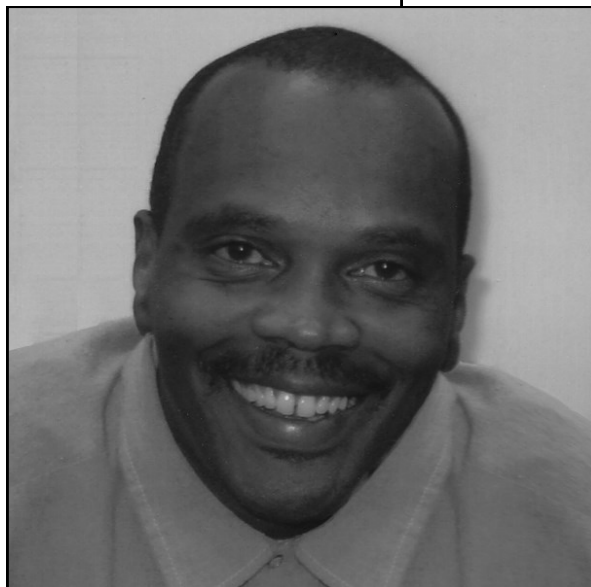
"I don't fear death most of the time, but what I do fear all the time is how I'm going to die. It has been decreed that I be put in a chamber that will gas the breath out of me, while people watch, write, and sketch me strapped in a chair, fighting for my life. It will be society's statement that something inhuman has been executed. When I think about the fact that society, a nation, has sentenced me to death, all I can do is turn inside myself, to the place in my heart that wants so desperately to feel human, still connected to this world, as if I have a purpose. But then the next day, a prisoner will ask me to write a letter for him because he doesn't know how to write, and I'll say sure, grateful to him for giving me another reason to be at peace."

Message from the author:

This edition of *Finding Freedom*, published by Human Kindness Foundation for free distribution to prisoners, is much the same as the version published by my friends at Padma Publishing in 1997, which is still in print. I have made only a few minor changes in the text to allow for wide distribution in American prisons.

The people at Human Kindness Foundation, who publish the late Bo Lozoff's classic book *We're All Doing Time*, have been my friends and supporters for many years. I was honored to have written a foreword to Bo's 1999 book *Deep & Simple*. I am pleased to say we have worked together on the text and artwork of this new edition of *Finding Freedom*. Fifteen years have passed since its original publication. Yet in that time more and more young men and women are locked behind prison walls, away from their community, family, and dreams. And despite significant breakthroughs in my legal case, I am still here in San Quentin. We are all still finding freedom.

—Jarvis Jay Masters, San Quentin Prison, California, July 2013



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We wish you
"the very most beautiful Christmas
in your life,
touched by the master
who understands your imprisonment;
who understands and loves you
so much... and we do, too."



Dove drawn by Aaron Goode, Laurinburg, NC • Angels by Herbert Taylor, Philadelphia, PA • Quote by Bo Lozoff (see page 6)