

Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Holy Days 2016

WHAT IS A PRISON MONK?



In our most recent newsletter, we printed a letter from someone who was facing “many life sentences” and wondering if he could ever find meaning in his life. Catherine encouraged him to “become a prison monk.” Soon after that we were asked, “what is a prison monk?” We’d like to explore that idea, which is so important to HKF’s work, with all of you.

Bo writes about this mystery in his beautiful book, *Lineage & Other Stories*. The character named Monk tells Hector, “It’s all right here you know. We just gotta learn how to use the time.”

In 1973, Bo and Sita Lozoff started encouraging people to use their prison time to do spiritual practices that can lead toward the most radical freedom. In this issue of “A Little Good News,” we share some examples of people who accepted the challenge, and some of the ways they did it.

Maybe you’ll relate to Randy, who has been clean and sober for more than 20 years (pg 6). Or maybe this step of your journey is closer to 18-year-old Lamar, who was moved to tears reading *Lineage* while he was in the hole for a recent fight (pg 7).

We’ve known prison monks who are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Buddhist and Hindu. If you want to be a prison monk, you can do it.

We reached out to Father Richard Rohr, who has been a dear friend and an inspiration to Human Kindness Foundation. Father Rohr is a

Franciscan friar ordained to the priesthood in the Roman Catholic Church in 1970. He is an internationally known speaker and author. His message for all of us appears below.

Happy Holy Days from all of us at Human Kindness Foundation, with great respect for your efforts to practice love and kindness wherever you spend your days.

What is a prison monk? Thoughts from Father Richard Rohr

I guess I have a little right to speak to this subject, since I am both a Franciscan Friar (sort of like a monk!) and I was the jail chaplain here in Albuquerque for over 14 years. There, the residents taught me far more than I ever taught them.

Believe it or not, the idea of a “prison monk” is not that unusual at all. I quickly think of St. Paul, St. Francis of Assisi, San Juan de la Cruz, and St. Ignatius Loyola, who all had major enlightenment and conversion experiences while they were in jail--not to speak of the many male and female martyrs who languished in prisons throughout

all of religious history. Yet it did not defeat them but transformed them and made them a model and hope for all the rest of us.

If the monk is known for solitude, discipline, and even celibacy, then the incarcerated person is a monk in the making! Just as the monks and friars set aside times for prayer throughout the day, the incarcerated man or woman has plenty of time to grow "in the one thing necessary" (Luke 10:42), which is our constant inner dialogue with the All Merciful One.

And if love of neighbor is half of the "one great commandment" to love both God and neighbor (Mark 12:31, Matthew 22:39-40), the prison monk is in a unique position to give simple kindness and respect to the many inmates who long for a human smile and a caring spirit—often without even knowing it.

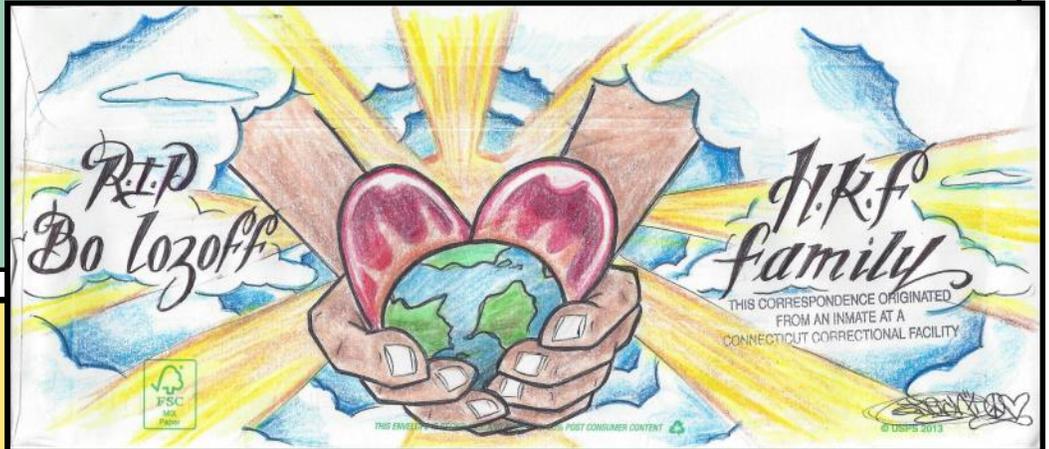
Be a prison monk, dear friends, and give back to our suffering world!

—Father Richard Rohr

I've never had an apology, but I forgave those involved in my conviction long before I left prison.

I didn't forgive them so they can sleep well at night.

I did it so I can. —Anthony Ray Hinton, quoted in *The Guardian*. Anthony spent 28 years on Alabama's death row. With help from Bryan Stephenson and the Equal Justice Initiative, Anthony proved his innocence and was released in 2015.



A Former Prison Monk Celebrates 10 Years of Freedom

John Collins was in and out of prison many times before he got serious about making a change. Near the beginning of a 10-year sentence as a habitual felon, John started using *We're All Doing Time* and a 12-Step program to become a prison monk. He went from (in his words) a "hopeless, homeless, barefoot, shirtless addict-alcoholic looking for something to steal" to a well-loved, respected member of his community looking for some way to help. John explains that the key was "to have a spiritual transformation or awakening while in prison, so that I would get out a different person, and have a chance to stay out."



In 2011, Human Kindness Foundation asked John to be on our Board of Directors, and he has been an enthusiastic, helpful member since then. He also serves on other Boards and as a volunteer for several organizations. Meditation and service are daily priorities for John, like they were in prison.

In August of 2016, John celebrated the 10th anniversary of his release from prison. HKF Board Member Chris Canfield (in the green shirt) is shown thanking John for his inspiration and service. (You can read a letter from Chris on page 7.) Sita Lozoff gives John a hug as she presents him with a gift of framed art. The art was given to HKF by Yao Chen, a resident of California State Prison.

Sita Corresponds with a Prison Monk

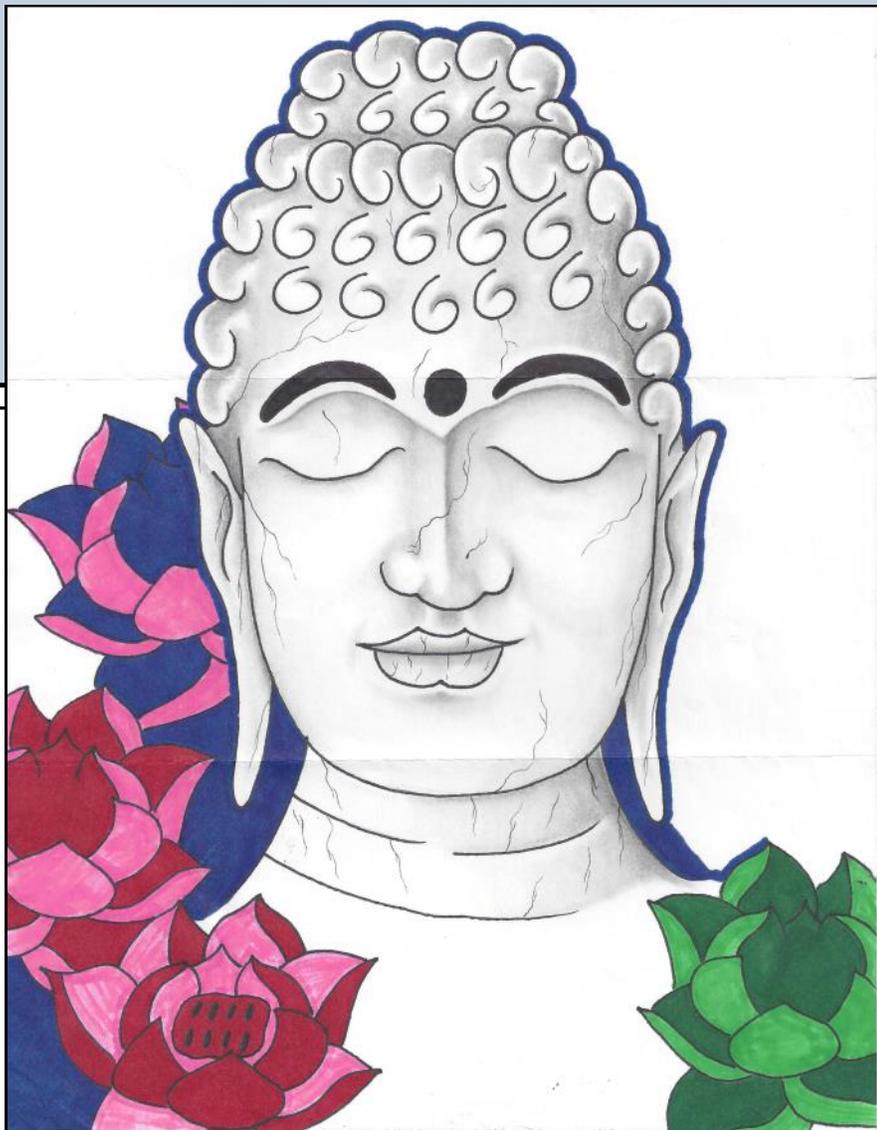
Over the last 2 years, I've been in correspondence with a man who was sentenced to death for a crime he committed in 1986. In the 30 years he has been incarcerated, JT has developed a peacefulness that is noticeable to people around him. Thirty years in a very restrictive environment, with no chance he'll be released, might have led to resentment and despair, and JT has certainly been through very difficult times. He has also become a man with a contagious humor, and I've found him to be light-hearted and compassionate.

JT is a Buddhist who credits his peace to his Buddhist practices including meditation and Buddhist chanting.

Although we have kept his identity private, we assure you he is a real person, and like Jarvis Masters on death row in San Quentin, California, we hope JT's life as a prison monk will be an inspiration to many others who are facing extreme life circumstances. You are not alone. Others have travelled through tragedy with grace and dignity.

JT has found peace and joy. You can, too.

—Sita Lozoff



I first met Bo and Sita when they came to speak on death row in the mid nineties. I came from a diverse religious background. My grandmother was Jewish, my Aunt was Catholic, and my mother was Protestant Christian. To me, the Jesus story was about Service, and I was always attracted to that.

When I was working in a shoe store, a customer invited me to a Buddhist Center. I fell in love with chanting, and I practiced at the Buddhist Center every morning for several years. But then I got very busy holding a family together, and I got into cocaine, stress, and more cocaine. I was living a dual life, hiding the drug use and hiding that I was bisexual, and I stopped practicing for two years. That's when I committed the crime that sent me here. It's pretty obvious in retrospect: when you live with secrets you make bad choices.

In 2006, I was given my execution date. The warden called me down to his office on a Friday. He threw the letter on the desk and casually says "there's your death notice." I looked up angrily and thought "that's the best way you can tell me?" But then I realized he was scared. I looked up and saw this man's troubles and was really feeling for him, and that diminished my anger. It was obvious that he didn't want to do this any more than I wanted to receive it. That was probably the biggest growth I had in an instant!

They stopped executions a week before I was supposed to go, and it actually took me years to accept that they weren't going to come and get me and execute me right away. I don't really think about whether the suffering I've caused can be purified in any way. I just feel that it's one of those things that shouldn't be spoken of. I do my spiritual work all the time. I think about my victim—in my mind she is linked to my daughter who was born after I got locked up. I try to live in service. In that way I try to honor my victim. I have to do better, and I can't be in the business of talking about whether I've made any spiritual progress.

I can't change the whole world but I can make the world a better place for the person next to me. —JT

A Former Prison Monk Responds:

Gabe was a prison monk for 9 of the 19 years he was incarcerated. In his responses to the following letters, he describes how he handled a big challenge and some of the steps he used to make changes in himself.

Dear HKF,

Unfortunately for me, our Governor has overturned the Parole Board's decision to grant me parole.

I am very hurt, sad and feeling like I can't go on. I found out today that after months of the review period, I'm not going home and still don't know if I ever will.

I was keeping your address close because I meant to contact you all upon release. This has been such a long and difficult process only to find out that the light at the end of the tunnel was a train. 15+ years. I thought it was over. Now I have to tell my family it's not. And then in another year I have to go back and try again.

I'm just so lost, lonely, and sad. The Governor looks at paper and sees the me of the past. All the terrible things I did and that were done to me ... but that's past.

Where is God? What can I do to truly feel that God is with me? How can I go on? It feels unbearably painful. I used to feel close to God, but somehow I lost that. Is it gone forever?

So dramatic huh? Yeah I feel that way.

I love you all at HKF, D

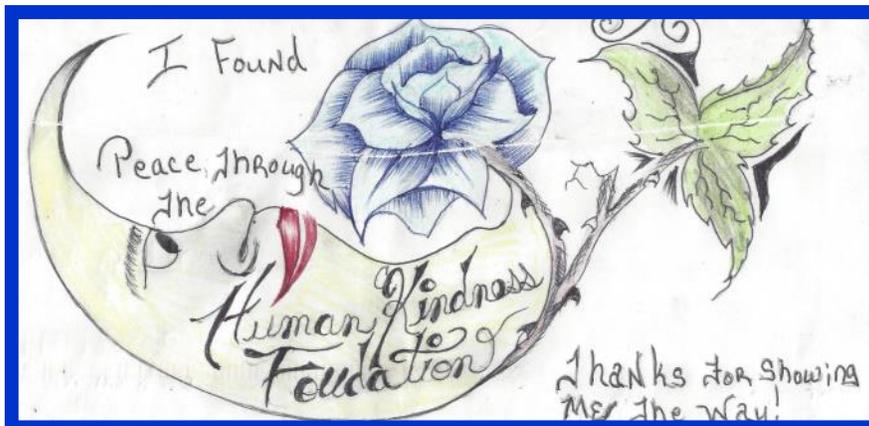
D,

Just wanted to let you know we got your letter and so sorry to hear about your parole. Not much to say about that except that it sucks. And as much as it does suck, you still have to continue with life.

I'm an HKF volunteer who did 19 years in prison. I've been out for over six years. I was granted parole the first time I ever went up, which in the state I was in, never happens. But, after a few weeks of waiting and hoping, it came back denied. I wasn't eligible for parole for another 3 years after that. I was feeling just what you're feeling—who wouldn't? As painful as it was, I never blamed GOD, I never asked why, and I never thought of it as the end. It's not, brother, and you will get through this.

For me, I understood that this comes with the path I took and the damage I did. I mean if you're going to feel like GOD let you down every

time something goes wrong, I would definitely do some deeper work on this subject. I don't believe this is a test, or punishment, or a lesson, it just is part of what you have to deal with for past actions. I face it in some way or another almost daily out here!!!



Yes it bites, and it's hard to move

past, but you've still got a lot of fight in you and as Bo says, WE CAN DO HARD. Get mad and cry and all that, and then pick yourself up and keep stumbling toward the light.

Keep holding on friend, Gabe



Dear HKF,

I have a long road ahead of me until I physically get out of prison. My sentence is 19 years to life. I want to hear from someone who has faced what I'm going through and has persevered through this hell. If I have an addiction to drugs and if it keeps getting me in trouble, how can I overcome this problem? Mind you, the same problem that led me to prison. I've tried self-help, Jesus, friends, rehab, you name it. And this addiction has robbed me of a lot. I know there's help if I really need it. But I want to feel good and that is usually when I'm high. Please give me some advice. I think highly (no pun intended) of you all at HKF.

Love, B

Hi B,

Easy answer to your question bro, STOP DOING IT!!!!!! Now the work to making that happen ain't easy, but you're not helpless to do something about it. You may have failed to quit over and over again, but in the long run, that is part of the process of not failing. This is what gets us to the point where we're willing to do WHATEVER it takes to change. That's where I was when I first read Bo's books. Now over 16 years later and here I am!!!!!!! All I did was what Bo

said. I worked with his books, I did the practices, I did whatever I thought would help me change my life and worked at not doing the things I learned were harmful to me. I made a lot of guesses, I failed a lot, I lost friends, now over 16 years later, and here I am!!!

I learned from Bo that ALL this stuff we're going through is part of our journey. All this stuff, brother, is not something in the way of it, it is it! It's not like once you finally stop using

drugs your journey begins. You're right in the middle of your journey at this moment.

I tried a lot of things, like you, without much luck. I woke up one morning and looked around at all the other dudes locked up with me, and it hit me that I wasn't as different from everyone else as I had believed I was. I somehow saw

that if I didn't make some changes I was going to end up the same way. I wanted something more than chasing dope every day and spending my life in and out of max. I was miserable when I was high and miserable when I wasn't. I didn't know how to go about changing my life, I wasn't sure you really could, but in my gut I knew there had to be something more than this. I found what I needed to take the next step in WE'RE ALL DOING TIME.

You got some work to do friend, but there is hope. I encourage you to spend some quality time with Bo and get to know him like I did and find that out for yourself. If you want something better you can make it happen. If I can, anyone can!

Good luck friend, I'm pulling for you. Gabe



Dear Gabe,

I received *Just Another Spiritual Book* and I just finished reading the chapter titled "Be Still and Know that You Am God." Definitely a good chapter, especially since it slapped me in the face and told me to "shut up and be still!" So, needless to say, I did, and now I'm sitting here writing this letter to you.

When I got these books, you had put a little personal note in with them. Nineteen years... wow... I was curious how did you make it nineteen years? What drove you to keep pushing on each day?

Instead of offering Muslims a retreat from society into the solitude of a monastery, Islam challenges believers to bring the monastic spirit of asceticism, service, and rigorous spiritual practice into community life. The prison monk—whether Muslim, Christian, or any other faith—brings that discipline and practice into their prison life.

In the letter below, Elrico describes his faith as the most important thing in his life.

I feel like I've been looking for the answers in all the wrong places, but I feel like I might have a little luck this time.

Thank you! David

Dear David,

About me, I saw where I was headed, if something didn't change—chasing dope, robbing, ending up stabbing someone or gettin' stabbed, all that kind of stuff. I just wanted something more. At that time I didn't know what it was or how to get there, but I just felt that "there had to be something more than this!" (I was right!) About that time *We're All Doing Time* showed up in my life, and from there I just did what Bo said. I didn't just read the books, I lived them.

Meditation for me is what put things in a different perspective. I can't explain it, and until you do it yourself it wouldn't make sense anyway—so practice! You're on a good path David. Keep working with Bo's books. It'll help.

Love, Gabe



In the time that I'd been on The Row my grandfather died, my only brother was murdered, and my favorite aunt died from complications of AIDS. It seemed as if I was losing more than my freedom. My family was beginning to fall to the grave, and I couldn't be there to help the survivors.

Naturally, anger and resentment entered my heart and mind. Still I didn't curse Allah. I continued to worship and strive to better myself. I submitted to the facts that Allah has control over everything and that my grandfather, brother and aunt didn't belong to me, they belong to Him.

I may never get my freedom. This prison may be my lot. But I have to keep living life, no matter the circumstances. I could have lost or abandoned faith, throwing away my Quran, prayer rug and kufi. I could have said I'm done with this way of life called Islam. I didn't though, and I'm not. I have been blessed to persevere, even though things may not go my way. Perhaps Allah has something better for me that I don't or can't see, or He is protecting me from something that is harmful to me. Nevertheless, I still have to live my life in Islam (Submission to the Will of Allah). Everything else is vain.

Now I'm finally becoming a real man. I now know that my ultimate objective in this life is to live and die as a righteous man, whenever and wherever that may be.

—Elrico Fowler, Raleigh, NC

Waking Up Awake: first moments of the day for a prison monk in England

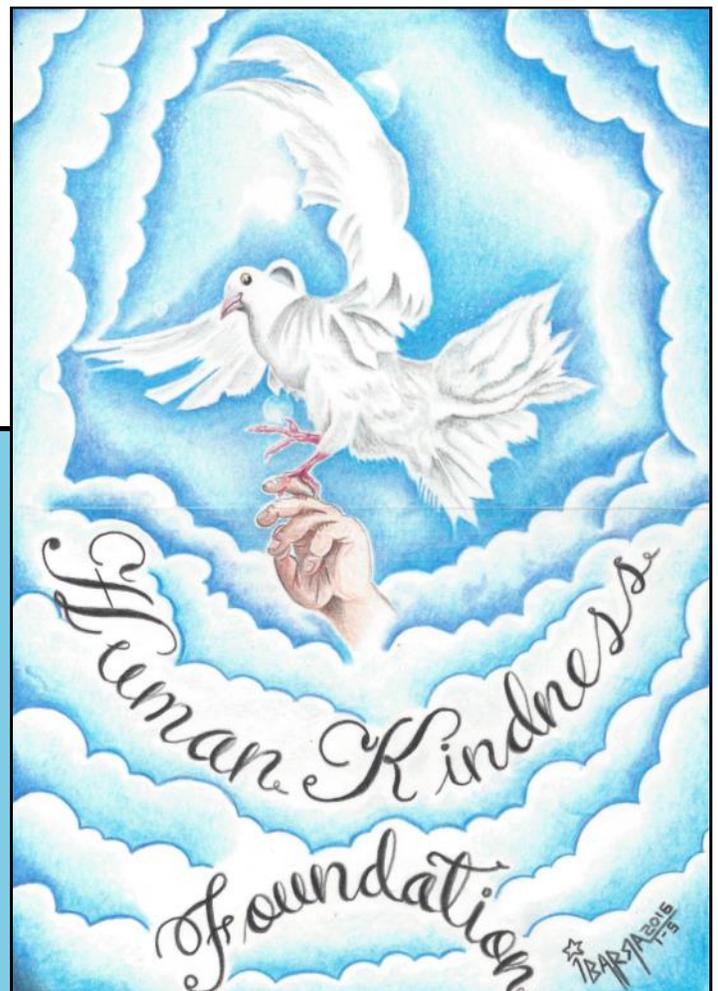
A man wakes up in his bed. Immediately on becoming conscious, he's paying attention to what is happening inside himself: he tastes the quiet and stillness inside himself that are there naturally from sleep. He's aware of his breathing: easy, relaxed, deep. He feels the weight of his heels, calves, bum, back, against the bed; the pillow beneath his head. His arm itches but he doesn't scratch. "What's it like to have a little itch and not scratch it?" he thinks. He sees how the itch passes after a few seconds. He's aware of becoming awake, and with attention grounded in his breathing, he sees the second thought: "Here I am, stuck in this depressing, bleak place for another day."

He keeps his attention focused inside himself and notices his breathing becoming shallow and faster as a result of the thought, and his stomach and shoulders beginning to tighten slightly. He chooses to take three slow, long, deep breaths. On each out-breath he reminds himself that every moment is precious, and also that he has some control over what goes on inside himself, over his life. During the third breath, he happens to remember someone going out of their way yesterday to help him get signed on to a course he wants to do. He also remembers his own kindness a few days back towards a fellow prisoner who was feeling low and out of sorts. He notices his lips forming a faint smile, his

breathing becoming more relaxed again. He sees that the tension in his shoulders and belly is almost gone. Something like curiosity about what else the day might bring has crept in. He reflects that in the space of less than a minute, he has gone from feeling hopeless and powerless to curious and engaged. He decides to do three things, just for this day: (1) keep watching his own mind as much as he can; (2) try to take all the ups and downs in his mind with a pinch of salt; and (3) offer kindness to at least two other people, and be open to receiving help for himself, wherever it might come from.

From Sam at the Prison Phoenix Trust.

Prison Phoenix Trust teaches yoga and meditation in prisons in the United Kingdom.



Former Prison Monk, Randy

It was said to me in my 20s, "you will be on death row by the time you are 30."

But one day in jail, someone shared a copy of *We're All Doing Time* with me. I began reading it, and it made sense. I learned! I made a change, and if my stupid, badass can do it anybody can. I have been out of prison around 20 years. I have my own business. I am free, bound only by the love I share everywhere I go. Ya know? It comes back to me 10 times over.

Your free spirit brother, Randy

Many thanks to the artists: pg 1: Evarardo Ibarra, Orange, CA; pg 2: Clemente Aused Jr., Uncasville, CT; pg 3: Curtis C., Eloy, AZ; pg 4: Tim Harris, Salem, VA (upper), Jason Knowles, Memphis, TN (lower); pg 5: Jason Bruni, Graceville, FL; pg 6: Evarardo Ibarra, Orange, CA; pg 7: Howard Ault, Raiford, FL (left), Steve Parra, Monroe, WA (right); pg 8: Wade Holman, Pampa, TX.

Letters

Greetings,

I hope everybody is doing well! I wanted to write for awhile but couldn't stand the idea of writing the same old stuff that everybody writes. Now I'm in the hole and I'm going through *Just Another Spiritual Book* and I would like some serious feedback.

Okay, so, this "new age" stuff, where is the line between that and pure spirituality? Because the bottom line is that I truly feel we should have power to heal sickness. When I smoke I integrate my conscious and subconscious mind together. Is this a crazy thought? How do we communicate with our subconscious minds? The power it holds is other-worldly, so to touch this "other" mind is abnormal or super-human.

I've realized a few things. I feel the more I align myself, or live in harmony, or as it basically feels: shutting my mouth and opening my mind, things fall into place, opportunities present themselves with more clarity. Why do I feel weird for this? Why do I have these thoughts?

I will be excited for any experienced feedback on any of this.

Thank you for your time, M

Dear M,

We live in an addictive culture. Buy this, and you'll be happy. Take this, and you'll have no more pain. Achieve this, and you'll never want for anything. Follow this, and you'll be released from the cares of this world.

The term "New Age" encompasses so much that it is hard to know even between us what we are talking about. So let me try another tack. If something promises instant, "super-human"

powers and success, it probably comes from an addictive mindset. And addiction is a powerful ego trap on the path of spiritual growth.

In those practices that have lasted the test of time, there is recognition of the sneaky ways the ego tries to use addiction to keep control. That is why great teachers have always warned against attachment to any heightened states of mind. Yes, such states, whether they come from deep meditations or from psychedelics (such as pot), do happen. But

they are usually only glimpses of enlightenment at their best, and delusions of grandeur at their worst.

In the end we have to return to the here and now. To the bunkmate who won't shut up, the fan that won't stop squeaking, to our memories of all we have done wrong. If we long to light up or bliss out in a trance again to be okay with all that, we are in the ego addiction trap.

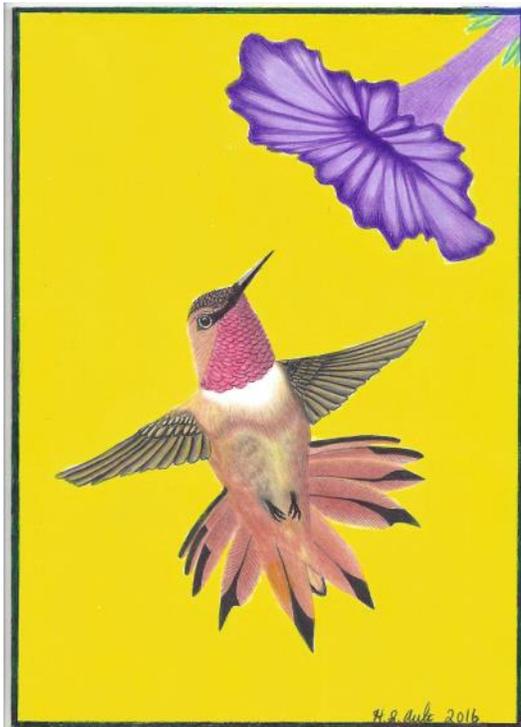
There is an oft-repeated Zen proverb: "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

There is absolutely nothing special about glimpses of enlightenment or even enlightenment itself. They are available to everyone. What is special is the commitment to dedicated practice, caring, humility, service, and detachment from any "special" states of mind along the way.

So I'd encourage you to trust that voice that says for

you to align yourself, to live in harmony, to more often close your mouth and open your mind. Then things will likely fall more into place and opportunities will likely present themselves with more clarity. Not because you have some magic power over the outside world. But because you have stilled your inner world enough to see what has been there all along.

Your HKF friend, Chris



Dear HKF,

I am 18 years old and I was sent to the hole for fighting. I was so mad at the world. After reading *Lineage & Other Stories*, my fav story was "Lineage." I felt a tight connection to the character Paco. Just a kid in an adult world with a heart not from this planet. I cried on my bunk one late nite when I read a short passage: "I see the road now, I'm coming home. Teach me to sit still, to love life. To move beyond you into the One. Where have I been hiding all this time?"

—Lamar

The Soul In A Body

is like an old Russian immigrant looking out his apartment's only window. Yes, yes, he says.

The landlord printed my name in block letters on the lobby directory decades ago.

All correspondence has been forwarded to this address.

But I am not from here. I am not from here at all.

Yehoshua November

From his 2016 book *Two Worlds Exist* published by Orison Books (orisonbooks.com)

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Go sit in your cell and your cell will teach you everything.

Abba Moses, a third-century "Desert Father." The Desert Fathers (and Mothers) were among the first Christian monastics.