



# *I Like You Just The Way You Are* The Radical Kindness of Mister Rogers

## Wait, isn't Mister Rogers for children?

More than 90% of the newsletters we print get mailed into the harsh adult world of prisons and jails. Why are we talking about Mister Rogers? Stay with us, friends. I think you'll see why he means so much to us.

People are often surprised that Bo Lozoff and Fred Rogers were friends who greatly admired each other. This newsletter talks about that friendship and what the two men had in common. Before we get further into that story, I want to talk about how Human Kindness Foundation continues in that tradition.

Nearly six years after the death of Bo Lozoff, we still send out mostly Bo's words. He's the one who wrote the books! But it's Sita's heart that keeps this whole thing going. She loves you just the way you are. If you think that's not real, listen for a minute to someone who has been working in an office with her for about 18 years. Nobody could fake it for that long. Like a grandmother who sees the real you, Sita sees down deeper than any problem life has thrown at you or mess you've gotten yourself into. Way down deep, on the inside, there's the real you, shining with your divine spark. Sita knows who you really are, even if you're hiding it under a hard shell.

And so we continue. There are so many things we cannot do for you. There are so many broken things we can't fix. HKF is here to love you. And maybe to remind you how lovable you really are.

Mister Rogers seems to be feeding me these few months, like a grandfather whose love encourages me to keep on keeping on. Sita and I haven't been sure if his story will be nourishing to people who didn't grow up watching his show or meet him like we did. Will it feel like his style is just too far removed from your challenging reality? We hope you'll make an effort to see past the style and straight into the heart. You were loved by a gentle, kind man in a cardigan sweater who was easy to make fun of at the time. Now that we're all a bit older and more knocked around by life, his style feels more comforting than I could have imagined years ago. I hope you can feel that too.

—Catherine



**From Sita:** On April 20, 1999, Bo and I went to Pittsburgh to visit Mister Rogers at his studio. We talked about our work with all of you, dear friends—I know that he loved you and wished you well. We also talked about violence and TV, and, coincidentally, the shootings at Columbine were happening at the exact time we were having that meeting. In this photo I'm holding the trolley that he gave us that day, which is still here in our office. I'm so grateful that we had the opportunity to know this wonderful man and that he is once again being celebrated and recognized for his love of humanity.

*Sita*

*The release of a new documentary about Mister Rogers and the 50th anniversary of his TV show created a lot of media attention. An earlier documentary called "Mister Rogers & Me: A Deep & Simple Documentary" includes footage of Bo Lozoff talking about his friendship with Fred Rogers. Bo's book Deep & Simple was a favorite of Fred's. We invite you to consider with us the very deep and simple truths that Mister Rogers lived by.*

## A surprising friendship

We don't know how Mister Rogers heard about us, we only know that sometime in the 90s, someone in the HKF office noticed that a man named Fred Rogers who lived in Pittsburgh was buying a lot of our books. "I think that's *MISTER* Rogers." As soon as we heard him on a phone call, there was no mistaking that voice. The famous, neighborly Mister Rogers was reading Bo Lozoff's books and, we learned later, recommending them to many others. He even named Bo as one of his heroes.

Why would a man whose entire life was devoted to children's programming be interested in books written mostly for people behind bars? How did the soft-spoken Rogers and the tough-talking Lozoff become so deeply fond of each other?

Mister Rogers created his show for the youngest, most innocent viewers. Bo's favorite audience was people who were locked up in the toughest prisons. But these two men had some big things in common.

As it turns out, the only reason this friendship is surprising is our belief that children and people behind bars are so separate. Rogers and Lozoff said many of the same things. *Slow down. You matter. Keep it simple. Be kind. Each person in front of you is important and worthy of your full attention.* Turns out, people are people and the message is pretty much the same whether you're a preschooler watching TV or an adult reading a book in a cell.

## I like you just the way you are

Bo and Fred were both teachers. They encouraged their audiences to act in certain ways, to learn certain things, to keep growing the best parts of themselves. At the same time, they each had genuine affection for people exactly as they already were. In workshops in prisons, Bo challenged people, sometimes fiercely. But he already liked them. If they never changed, he still liked them. He didn't give up on the possibility that everyone can find more peace, get clean/sober, become a kinder and freer person, or even go all the way to the BIG freedom: Enlightenment. But progress and change were never a requirement for his love.

Mister Rogers is famous for saying "I like you just the way you are." Human Kindness Foundation is here to continue what Bo and Fred lived. We may challenge you to dig deep, even deep enough to forgive people who have hurt you very badly. We might push you to work hard on spiritual practices, finding ways to meditate in noisy, chaotic places. We ask you to be kind to ALL the people around you, even the most annoying or dangerous ones. Still, through all of that, we love you just the way you are. We see the divine spark in you. It's already there, and it's beautiful.

## Radical kindness

It's right there in our name: Human Kindness Foundation. Kindness matters to us, and we believe it always matters. Mister Rogers' kindness toward children matters. The

kindness you show to somebody you see today matters. Yes, the world has lots of conflict, injustice and suffering of all kinds. To some people, it seems that kindness is irrelevant in this angry world. But we believe that the angrier and more divided people get, the more important it is to practice kindness.

What do we mean by "**radical**" kindness? That's the hardcore part. The word "radical" means "at the root." Kindness as the very root of our life, the part that everything else grows from, is radical kindness. Everything, every moment, can be based in kindness.



With practice, it can become a habit that flavors everything you do. Walking down a hall can be done aggressively or kindly. Standing in line for canteen can be a time for hostility or kindness. Haven't you ever felt anger oozing off someone as they impatiently fumed in a line? And the opposite: the good-natured person who may not say anything but makes the line more bearable? If kindness is your root, you will find yourself wanting to make that line a little better for the people who are stuck there with you.

## Kindness is strong

Francois Clemmons is an African-American man who Mister Rogers recruited to play "Officer Clemmons," the policeman on the show. Clemmons started in that role in August 1968, just a few months after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He was the first African-American with a recurring role on a children's TV show in the U.S. To make a stronger statement, during one episode Rogers invited Officer Clemmons to join him in cooling off his feet in a small pool. This was at a time when public pools were being vandalized if black and white swimmers were allowed in the same pool, and many communities shut down their public pools completely in order to avoid integrating them. The camera moves in close to show the two men's feet sharing that little pool, and then they share a towel to dry their feet. In 1968, that took courage. It required caring enough about other people to take a risk for them.

## Thank you, Mister Rogers

Fred Rogers died in 2003. He left a generous bequest to Human Kindness Foundation. Of course donations are always helpful—that's how we keep printing newsletters and sending out free books. This gift was also deeply encouraging beyond the practical help. There's something special about knowing that Mister Rogers "liked us just the way we are." We think it's because he liked you. We believe that the message he said at the end of each of his TV shows is for you: **"You've made this day a special day, by just your being you. There's no person in the whole world exactly like you; and I like you just the way you are."**

### A Mister Rogers moment of mindful compassion

In the summer of 2001, a little girl came to stay with my family for a few weeks while her mother was struggling with some big challenges. Just a few days after T arrived, having flown across the country by herself to stay with people she barely knew, she was with us at an event at HKF. The group gathered around a speakerphone to hear Mister Rogers speak to us. The adults waited quietly as he started into the call he had planned. But T was seven years old and she knew that voice! She moved forward to the speakerphone and began to talk with him. In just moments, setting aside the planned phone call, Mister Rogers was singing “It’s a Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” to a little girl. He didn’t know that she was 2,000 miles from home or that she and her mother were going through a rough time. He didn’t seem to remember that about 20 adults were listening. A child asked for his attention, and he offered it wholeheartedly. Here it is 17 years later and my heart still warms when I think of the simple kindness he gave her.

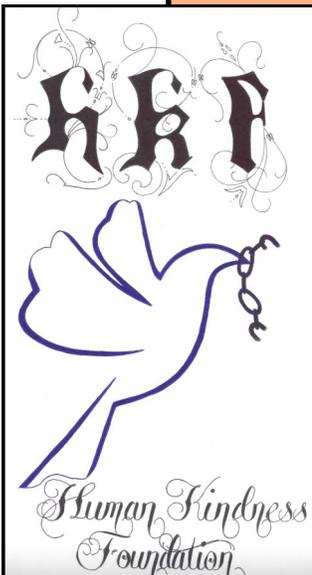
Many times over the years I saw Bo give that same kind of focused attention to people who came to his workshops in prisons or to speak with him at the HKF headquarters. His mindfulness practice gave him the ability to focus on the moment, and his commitment was to be of service to the person he was with in that moment.

—Catherine

[I’m happy to report that both T and her mother are doing well now.]



**Anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God**



A story told by Tom Junod in Esquire magazine describes a teenaged boy with severe cerebral palsy. Not only was he physically limited by his condition, he was emotionally scarred by abuse he had suffered as a younger child. Junod tells about the time Mister Rogers met this boy:

“Mister Rogers ... said, ‘I would like you to do something for me. Would you do something for me?’ On his computer, the boy answered yes, of course, he would do *anything* for Mister Rogers, so then Mister Rogers said, ‘I would like you to pray for me. Will you pray for me?’ And now the boy didn't know how to respond. ... although at first he didn't know if he could do it, he said he would, he said he'd try, and ever since then he keeps Mister Rogers in his prayers and doesn't talk about wanting to die anymore, because he figures Mister Rogers is close to God, and if Mister Rogers likes him, that must mean God likes him, too.

... when Mister Rogers first told me the story, I complimented him on being so smart—for knowing that asking the boy for his prayers would make the boy feel better about himself—and Mister Rogers responded by looking at me at first with puzzlement and then with surprise. ‘Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for *him*; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God.’” —Tom Junod, *Esquire.com*, April 6, 2017



### A Concert full of love

Sita, Catherine, and several volunteers from HKF recently attended a concert that was performed inside a minimum security prison. The professional musicians invited everyone to join in, taking turns at the mic or with some of the instruments. There was tremendous talent in the audience, and the room seemed to overflow with love and joy. At the very end, the whole group—professional musicians, incarcerated musicians, volunteers, HKF staff, facility staff—joined in to sing the chorus of “What the world needs now is love, sweet love. No, not just for some, but for everyone.” The group agreed to sing it as a blessing for others who are incarcerated, sending that great energy out especially to people in higher-security facilities.

### Practice:

If you’re feeling worn down and your tank is empty, take a moment to receive the love we’re sending your way. That love is not just from this 2-person staff here at HKF. It’s from about 75 people who attended the concert that evening. It’s from the many volunteers who show up at HKF to help keep the books and newsletters coming your way. It’s from hundreds of people who send money so HKF can pay for postage, printing, and other necessary expenses. Stop for a moment and take it in.

There are people who care. You are loved. Let that sink in.

When you have taken that in, send some love out from your heart toward everyone.

Give love when you are able. Receive love when you need it. (And we’re pretty sure everyone needs it.)

Cynthia Trenshaw, an author and poet who serves as a massage therapist to people living on the streets, says:

**“There is only one Commandment: that we are to love. There is only one Gospel: that we are loved.”**



This is the talented trio of musicians who volunteered their time on a Friday evening. Aaron Turner (in front) is also a member of the HKF Board of Directors. Ben Palmer (middle) has been volunteering with HKF for many years and performed in Bo Lozoff’s band starting in the 80s. Reggie Jeffreys (left) has

performed as a volunteer in several facilities.



**Many thanks to the artists:** Pg 1: artist unknown; pg 2: Stephen Land, Joplin, MO; pg 3: Michael Sloan, Grafton, OH (upper), Brian Kowal, Ludlow, MA (middle), Anthony Perales, Bismarck, ND (lower); pg 4: Zena Dunford, Santee, CA; pg 5: Lee Brinkley, Big Stone Gap, VA (upper), Pamela Sherrell, Topeka, KS (lower); pg 6: Mark Howard, Chatanooga, TN (upper), Robert Smith, Blythe, CA (lower); pg 7: Josephine Almodovar, Marysville, OH; pg 8: Stephen Stoeltje, Beaumont, TX.

## Letters

Dear Gabe,

I'm in prison for beating my wife with a bat. I read in the newsletter that you did 19 years, and I'm doing 3 to 10. My question for you is how did you forgive yourself for your crime? I've been in now for 9 years and I have not been able to forgive myself, and I'm losing faith in God because of

it. I look all around me and see people that did a hell of a lot worse than I did, and they all look to be happy. How can that be? If they can forgive themselves, why can't I?

I just feel like shit for what I did to my wife and family, and I'm not asking for their forgiveness. I need to find a way to forgive myself. I don't blame no one but myself for being here—this is where I belong. I am asking you, Gabe, because you have been on this side of the wall and your input will mean a lot to me. I thank you for your time. Please tell Sita and all of you at HKF that I love you all.

G

Dear G,

I got your letter and wanted to write you a little something back. Thank you for your real and honest letter.

I think the only way I've been able to carry on through these years is by finding what I did through Bo's books and teachings. Before that I think I was just holding on by a thread. I think I still hate myself for what I have done in my life, just not as much and I try to do the good I can, so I don't feel like such a shit. There's a lot of hard times and inner work that come with feeling any kind of peace and contentment. I wanted something more and I think I owed all the people I've hurt to do something better with my life. With Bo's help, I found what I needed.

Blessings and I hope you find what you need.

Your friend, Gabe



From M. in Pennsylvania:

Dear Sita & Human Kindness people,



I want to personally thank you all for believing that everyone needs love, even a sex offender like me.

Having a sex crime has made my time harder than other crimes. I've been beaten and worse by both inmates and staff alike, but it has given me a unique opportunity to work through karma I've acquired through my lifetime.

The thing is, I wouldn't have been aware of this opportunity if I had never read *We're All Doing Time*. Bo changed my perspective on life, and his spirit will live on in all those he has touched, including me. You must have been a powerful team!

Thank you all.



From A. in Texas:

Dear Sita & friends,

There is not a day that goes by that you all are not partially responsible for the great changes in my life, especially the profound peace that has enveloped my heart and soul.

When I get your newsletters, I read them and always use to run to the toilet area for privacy and cry with the utmost joy—reading every story several times. But now there has been another great change. Something profound happened when I

received the last newsletter.

I was reading the beautiful stories and all of a sudden some of my friends in my dorm came over and asked if I was okay. I said yes, why? Their response was that I was crying in the middle of the day room. I was shocked!

I want to say thank you for this. I feel like I have transformed. I'm not the stereotypical man that society tells us we have to be, but a real man. A real husband, a real dad, who actually has real feelings!

Thank you and keep up the incredibly good work.



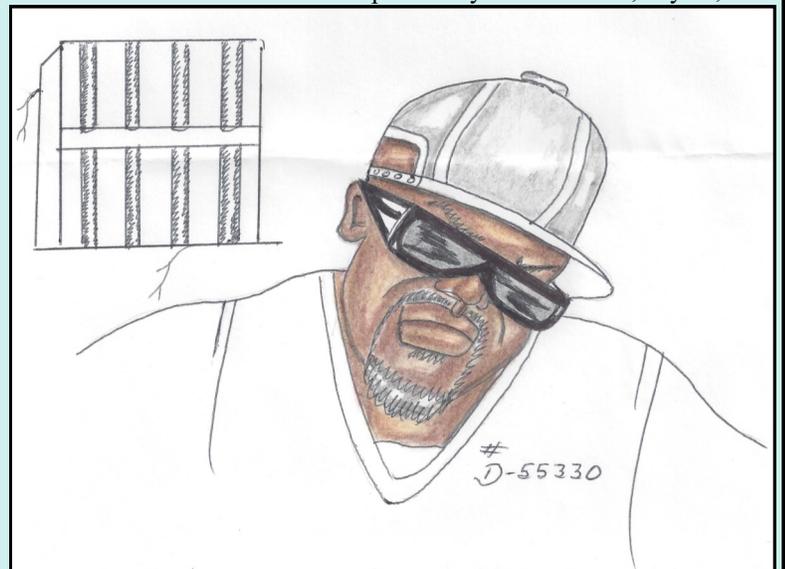
From our email inbox:

I am emailing you to request a book for my husband. I requested a copy of *We're All Doing Time* a while back and he was thrilled when he received it. Last week he was transferred to a different facility and all of his belongings were thrown away. He was more upset about losing that book than he was about anything else he lost including his shoes, cell phone and wallet which he had when he was arrested. If you could send him another copy of *We're All Doing Time* he would be ecstatic.

Thank you very much and I am truly grateful for the work you do.

*[editor's note: We're always happy to replace lost books, and happy to hear when the books are so well loved.]*

Self-portrait by Robert Smith, Blythe, CA



Sita & Human Kindness,

Thank you so much for the love and light that you shine. The encouragement that I get from you helps me so much. As my understanding of the self grows, my love for others, as well as myself has also blossomed. I have made friendships with people that I may have not gotten along with before. I'm learning tolerance and compassion. My anger and anxiety have lessened.

My release date is in four months, and I will be living out of my car. I'm currently in Texas. I got a year for a small amount of hash oil. I hope to get custody of my children one day, or at least visitation, but my parents, who have custody here in Texas, disapprove of me and usually don't let me visit.

I used to use heroin. I moved to Colorado and fractured my spine in two places. The doctors prescribed opiates which almost sent me back to heroin. With the back pain I still have, it's very hard for me to keep from using opiates and heroin.

My heart is torn. I love my children very much, but I'm not welcomed here by my father. I have a good job in Colorado, friends, and support to help me treat pain without opiates. My quality of life is much

better in Colorado. Here in Texas, I do have my awesome children, but I rarely get to see them, and it's very easy to get depressed and just give up and go to the heroin neighborhoods. I am torn on what to do. Every time I come back to Texas, I end up in prison. I'm really not even looking forward to my release. Any thoughts?

Thank you so much.  
I love you, E

Dear E,

We're glad to hear from you, and sorry you're in such a rough spot. Sita asked me to answer your letter, although you addressed it to her. She sends her love.

And wow, what a rough spot you describe. It doesn't sound like there's an easy quick answer to this one, dear.



We never give that kind of specific advice, since we can't know the full situation or what's best for you and your family.

What I can give you is a practice to use while you're making your decision. Stay with me – this will take a bit of explaining. Be sure to read the whole thing before you start.

Practice:

Choose 2 days to focus on this decision, where there isn't anything big or

unusual going on (just do the best you can—don't pick a day when you'll be getting a visit, for example).

Randomly pick one of the states to start with. I'll call that "State #1."

On day 1, wake up knowing that you're going to live in State #1. Spend the whole day feeling sure (or pretending that you feel sure) that you've made

a firm decision to live in State #1. During that day, write a long letter to your children explaining why you made the choice. (Don't SEND it, just WRITE it.) Tell them what efforts you're going to make to stay in touch with them. Tell them how living in State #1 will help you be a better father. Tell them you love them and that you made this decision for their best interests. Tell them why you believe it's in their best interest that you live in State #1. Go to sleep that night telling yourself you have fully made that decision to live in State #1.

On day 2, do the same thing, but with State #2. Really the same: look back at the practice and do all the same things for State #2 that you did for State #1. Only after you have completed both days, let yourself compare how the two days felt. Look back at the two letters you wrote to your children. Spend some time being as honest with yourself as possible. Sit quietly. Do whatever you do to help yourself be calm and centered.

Just like we can't tell you what decision to make, I

can't predict how you'll feel after this practice. It still may take some time to make your decision, or you may know immediately after the 2 days of the practice. I feel confident that you'll find it useful, though.

Whatever you decide, Sita and I hold you in our hearts and prayers. We wish you and your children much love, peace, and understanding.

Catherine



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“There’s something that I wrote in a newsletter long, long ago that Fred said he quoted in just about all his public talks. And that is ‘**The cause of all our personal problems and nearly all the problems of the planet can be summed up in a single sentence: Human**



**life is very deep and our dominant modern lifestyle is not.’**  
And Fred loved that.” —*Bo Lozoff, in “Mister Rogers & Me: A Deep & Simple Documentary,” a Wagner Bros. Film*