FROM BO: Hello dear friends. I know a lot of you have been waiting to hear from me since the completion of my year of silence on September 21st. First of all, I want to thank you for your priceless blessings and prayers throughout that year and even now. It is truly humbling to be the recipient of so much goodwill.

Our relationship has always been based on the truth of our spiritual journey, and I am not about to change that now. The truth is, I had a very rough time coming out of retreat and silence, and I trust in that rough time 100% as being what God feels is best for me and for you. I am not yet able to write or lecture like I used to -- right now it would seem like superficial platitudes and vanity. I prayed (and you prayed for me) to touch very deep spiritual truths during my silence and to become a deeper seeker and teacher as a result. I have faith that is happening, it is just not completely at the beak and call of our human timetable.

I am back in part-time retreat, helping out around here, but not lecturing and writing until I have more of a sense from God that it is His will for me to lecture and write again. I love you all very much and am profoundly grateful for our friendship. I promise you I am being true to that friendship by taking as much time and effort as it may take to be a deeper friend, as God is calling me to be.

I've spoken and written so many words in the past thirty years! They've been good words, inspired words, helpful words -- like the article we are reprinting in this newsletter, below. My 385 days of silence were for the purpose of bringing me to a deeper well of living water, for your sake as well as mine. It's just not quite over yet, and I hope you can continue to support my quest, understanding that your brother Bo is actively seeking and practicing just like he encourages you to do. There is no greater gift we can give our friends or the world, than to do our sincerest practice and keep offering to share the results with others. I promise you I am going for broke. That's my commitment to you. All my love, Bo

Dear Family,

A young woman spoke with me recently about her struggles with irritability, negativity and anger. She has several recurring health problems which affect her ability to eat and digest, or even to get a good night's sleep. Sometimes she has headaches or stomachaches that last throughout the day. On top of all that, she is in her first year of marriage and living in a new place, far away from her birth family and all her old friends. She is usually sweet-tempered and positive, but last week, in her words, "I really 'lost it' when I got home from work each day. I put up with everything all day long, but then coming home and realizing I still had to make dinner and do all my household stuff, plus relate to my husband and his problems -- and he had a bad stiff neck last week so I was expected to help care for him as well -- well, I just didn't have enough in me. I took it out on him even though I promised myself I wouldn't. I just couldn't help it; I went past my boiling point."

This led to an interesting discussion about the difference between psychological work and spiritual work. Many of our psychological needs or problems are exactly the same as our spiritual needs or problems, so the work is the same. But every now and then, the psychological level of our experience can be very different from the spiritual level, and so the work may be entirely opposite. We must bear in mind that the goal of psychological work is to have a healthy and happy life, while the goal of spiritual work is to know God. Psychological work is about the individual in relationship to others. Spiritual work is about transcending that individual self in union with God. God-realized people are not merely psychologically healthy human beings. As His Holiness the Dalai Lama once said to an interviewer, "Sir, you seem to suggest that the Buddha was just a nice man. That is not the case."

If we see the young woman's situation psychologically, we might say, "Now dear, you need to make time for you. Take a bubblebath, treat yourself to a massage or a weekend at a spa, tell your husband to take care of his own stiff neck." We might say, "Don't feel guilty for popping off at your husband; after all, you were having a hard week. A person can only handle so much."

The spiritual problem with that popular advice is that it reinforces several false and limiting beliefs, just when we have a golden opportunity to move past them. The first false belief is that negative states of mind are caused by forces outside our control -- illness, rotten
night’s) sleeps, bad drivers, sick children or spouses. If people and circumstances can cause us to “lose it,” then we are doomed to be slaves all our lives to the shifting moods and actions of others. Victor Frankl, a psychiatrist who survived a Nazi death camp, said the best truth of human nature he had learned was this: There is one thing that no oppressor can take away from us—our choice of how to respond.

We have free will. Even if we are tortured, starved, raped. There is a deep “soul power” in us that can rise above, move beyond, see God in the larger picture, and respond with dignity and courage in the face of anything that the world can hit us with. This “rising above” is not the same as fighting our emotions. My young woman friend said she had tried to fight against her anger and negativity. It’s easy to understand why that approach fails. If we hold a false belief that a bad night’s sleep, or bad day, or bad week, “makes us cranky,” then whom are we fighting, other than our own beliefs? Fighting ourselves is a no-win situation. With effort and self-honesty, we can examine and discard the false beliefs instead. Our spiritual work is to surrender to God within every circumstance, and draw on God’s power to see us through it.

The second false belief is in our own limitations—“I can only handle so much!” The great teachings say that we never get more than we can handle. Do you believe that or not? If so, then act like it. What happens when water goes past its boiling point? It cannot handle the heat anymore in its heavy form, so it becomes steam instead. It doesn’t cease to exist, it merely shifts its nature into a lighter, less limited form.

When we get to our boiling point, we can do the same thing. In a single breath, we can remind ourselves that God knows exactly how much we can take, and furthermore, it is no one other than God who is presenting us with these difficult challenges now. Many of us pray to be strong, to be wise, to be in tune with God’s will. Well, our trials and adversities are not accidents or curses, they are in fact the answers to our very own prayers. God gives us the opportunity to act human in a very small sense of the word, or to act human in the most divine sense. When the young woman enters her home after a hard day and sees the work that lies ahead of her, she can breathe in God’s presence, and smile at those trials instead of run from them. God is messing with her head, that’s all. She can cheerfully do whatever she needs to do, and see that it is not beyond her at all. She is beyond it. Nothing bad happens. She does her housework and then has a much-needed rest.

When she is able to do this, then the psychological level of her life rests within the spiritual, rather than vice-versa. This is a very important step of spiritual awakening: First God, then the self. Most of us settle for “First the self, then God.” We adopt the latest psychological beliefs about our limitations, boundaries, traumas, hormonal swings, moods, needs and so forth. Then, within that context, we cultivate a very conditional spiritual life. When the two conflict, when we reach our boiling point, we tend to throw away our lofty spiritual ideals until the crisis is over.

We must reverse this process, so that when we reach a boiling point we drop the psychological self entirely and remember God. Then the young woman walks into her home dead tired, sees the work in front of her, and says—not to her husband, but to God—“You’ve really got it in for me today, don’t you, Lord? Well, you know what I want, so I guess you also know what I need.” She takes a few deep breaths, and then watches herself cook dinner, clean house, do dishes, care for her husband; and she finds she is bigger, deeper, kinder and stronger than she may have thought. We are not small.

This same young woman said to me, “But when I was a young teenager, I never let anyone know I was angry. I did everything asked of me. I let people take advantage of my kindness. And it did not make me wiser or freer. I was a mess. I was codependent. I became bulimic. I didn’t take care of myself. It was horrible. How is this any different from that?”

It is very different, because her teenage behavior had nothing to do with knowing God. Her life was being lived on a psychological level, and not a healthy one: “First other small selves, then my small self.” And of course, since others are never satisfied, she never got around to taking care of herself. But when we shift to “First God, then the self,” God takes care of us. We realize that we are not small and needy, we are servants of the One Great Force, and we clean house for God, take care of God’s stiff neck, cook dinner with gratitude from God’s own pantry. And we know that God eventually gives us time to rest, to heal, to play, and to have fun. Like every dollar bill says, “In God We Trust.” It is that trust that helps us endure a hard week at the office or the Nazi death camps, a rejection from the parole board or a year in solitary.

The psychological/emotional dimension of life is the child, while the spiritual is the parent. Look around and see what a mess the world has become from the child dominating the parent. Each of us has the opportunity and ability to turn that around in our own lives and, hopefully, in the lives of our children. Like anything else worthwhile, it takes effort. Right there and then, in the moment you reach a boiling point, turn inward toward God rather than lashing out at the world around you. Consistently let go of false beliefs until they no longer trigger your moods. God knows, God cares, God sets you up in all sorts of dilemmas for your own good. Just remember this, and try to act accordingly.
PRACTICE: ABANDONING BLAME

Following Bo's article, this practice can be a very powerful tool for letting go of false beliefs about who or what controls our moods. We recommend you try this pledge for at least one month, and repeat it aloud at the beginning of each day. If possible, let a few friends know about your practice so that they can help remind you if you seem to be slipping.

I pledge to stop blaming others for my negative states of mind.
I pledge to stop blaming circumstances for my negative states of mind.

Throughout the period of your practice, notice any irritability, anger, depression, bitterness that may arise in you, and look honestly at what you claim to be the source of it, which is usually someone else or something happening around you or to you. Remember the pledge, and discard your false belief that such-and-such is bumming you out. Such-and-such does not have the power to bum you out. Take 100% responsibility for your negativity. If you continue to be sad or mad after letting others off the hook, that's okay, at least you know that it belongs to you, not to them. It's okay to have a down day. Just know that it is your own personal thing, not anyone else's (and strongly resist the temptation to make any important or dramatic decisions on that sort of day).

Your life will change tremendously if you sincerely work with this vow for a while. Stop yourself in mid-sentence if need be, but stop blaming anyone or anything for whatever may be going on inside of you. You will be amazed by how much peace and power are gained by abandoning all blame.

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Dear Bo,

OK. Now I read the advice you gave to the guy who was thinking about committing suicide in your book We're All Doing Time. You have a very interesting point of view on life and death.

But I'm afraid it gave me no desire to live. Neither did the book. I will be taking my own life soon. After court I guess. I just can't live in prison again. I have a 6 year old who's kept me hanging on. I sure hate to lose her but I'll miss her whole life anyway. So what's the point of living? She's all I ever had now. I'll lose her. I'm a coward. I'm not ready to deal with that pain. I already can never see her again because Child Protective Services will take her away from her mom. I was convicted of kidnapping.

I guess what I would like from you is something that will help me come to terms with my guilt, and help me ease into the... well... abyss, I guess.

J

Dear J,

I'm sorry to hear you're down so far that death looks like it's way up there as a goal to reach. We'll all die soon enough, little brother. We get a little closer every day. I'm 55, and I can sure feel it in these tired old bones. Dead man walking. So I'm just trying to walk as well as I possibly can down this long last mile. And enjoy the hell out of it, even with the aching old bones and a zillion old injuries that make me feel stiff like a robot.

You have the same situation. You don't know how long your last mile is—maybe a day, maybe 20 years, maybe longer, maybe not. Maybe in prison, maybe on the streets. Maybe with your daughter, maybe without her. One thing is for sure: if you kill yourself, you will definitely never see her again or be any useful part of her life at all.

And besides, your case isn't even over yet. I hope when you wrote me you were just freaking out and are feeling a little more reasonable now, J. You know, you talk a lot about loving your daughter, but is it really love or selfishness that you were describing? All you wrote about was your hurt if you lose her, your pain over not seeing her. There's an old saying: "Love acts for the sake of the beloved." If you were acting for your daughter's sake instead of your own hurt feelings, would you add the suicide of her father to all her other troubles and challenges in life? Do you know how much that can screw a kid up?

J, if you're willing to die, then why not be willing to let selfishness die first, and see what's left? Dedicate your thoughts, your prayers, your energy to your wife and daughter. Be ingenious about ways you can still help them or be part of their lives, encourage them, etc., even if you do get locked up again. Be there for them like no one ever did for you. Stop worrying solely about J's ass and J's feelings and J's pain. Start praying, "God, I don't care what happens to me, but how can I help them? How can I be an important part of her life, Lord? Please give me guidance, let me see your mercy in action."

And of course, you really have to mean it—"I don't care what happens to me." If you're willing to die, well, hell, why care what happens to you, then? Believe me, little brother, unselfishness is the key to all the glories of Heaven, and selfishness is the key to all the tortures of hell. Committing suicide would be the most selfish act of your life, and one you can never ever change. I hope you're frightened by that, J. So frightened that you decide you need to try the other path—unselselfishness. Trust me on this. I wouldn't lie to you.

Love Bo

Dear Bo,

Hello, my friend. I am in need of advice. I know you've dealt with convicts for many years and I know you give good advice. This prison I'm in is not really an upstanding place where guys live under "convict code/law": there are some dangerous men here, but not a hole lot though: most tough guys are kept under lock and key or transferred out to other state prisons.

Well, this prison has me classified as one of the dangerous convicts and got me living on life/death row. Mostly every guy is a lifer, except 6 guys who are death row inmates. There are two "max. custody" blocks, each can hold 16 men.

Okay my trouble is there are two death row inmates who want to kill me, one on D-block, a guy I've never met, and the death row inmate on my block. These guys are blood-thirsty killers. Both have killed right here in prison. I don't know why the D-block guy wants to kill me. He won't tell why, just says it's personal and he will kill me some day. And the guy loves to kill white men.

Now this other killer wants to kill me because he don't like the way I do my time and because he is tired of me living in the cell next to his. I'm in LF-1 and he's in LF-2 cell! Both guys have officers who will let doors open "by accident." The killer next to me says when I get to level 4 and get dayroom time (exercise), he will arrange for me and him to have dayroom together so he can kill me.

See deathrow inmates and max. custody are not allowed to yard or dayroom together, but cops do bend rules a lot, and I'm not too well-liked by a lot of officers who can open our door together and declare it as an accident, and want to see me get killed!

Now all guards and inmates know I've become a Buddhist and taken vows to not indulge in anymore violence and not to kill! And now I'm confused because when I get to level 4, I'll have to do something.

I do not want to hurt or kill this guy. All I want is peace. But I have a history from other prisons as a damn good fighter in both boxing and martial arts (tae chi and tae-kwon-do), and as a guy who won't back down or eat on someone. But I swore to not fight again, 'cause the last time I fought, it was a death fight with another martial artist.

I've killed three people in this lifetime: 1 in a drunk-driving accident, 1 out of anger, and 1 in a death fight; it was me or him, and he lost. After the last one, I swore to never use martial arts fighting again and burned my belt and silk robe. But I can't really fight without using the arts. I do not want to hurt or kill this guy! But what do I do. Bo? The guy has told me if I don't kill him, he will kill me. I'm not ready to die, and I don't want to kill him! And I'm in a prison that has a
Dear Bo,
I am forever in your debt because of the simple insight I have received from your books and of course I'm meditating, meditating, meditating and am trying to be a blessing instead of a burden to all I meet.

You will never know the full impact I have had on me. One day I'll go into detail. You'll even laugh as I do when I tell you about a letter I wrote to you about 5 or 6 years ago telling you how evil I was and your response.

Nor would you believe the trials I've had to endure, the addictions (physically and mentally) I've had to kick and the hell I'm still going through. And through it all I've put your practices to the work and "WOW" I've come out shining like the sun and I still continue to shine because thanks to you all I've finally got it in my thick head that its all necessary.

We have to go through hell to get into heaven. I've learned to be fearless, I couldn't care less what life has up ahead because as long as I have enough faith to get through "RIGHT NOW" then the future continues to drift by into the past and I remain untouched. And believe me I've been through some rough stuff and its been unbearable at times but that's why we practice so that we hold up under pressure.

Peace,

Dear T,
Sorry to hear you're in such a bind. I can't wave a magic wand and make it not a bind, but maybe I can help you to just try to see the whole situation as clearly as possible. When you are able to see clearly, usually the solution is right there in front of you, even if it is a bitter pill to swallow. But it's there.

My first word of advice is to accept and embrace this conflict you are being given as a legitimate, important teaching on your spiritual journey. On one level of reality, there is this terrible thing going on, as if it is by chance. It involves these guys who want to kill you, an administration that doesn't care, guards who will turn the other way, etc. That may all be true, and it sucks. At the same time, though, there is your spiritual journey going on, where nothing is ever random or chaotic, where every event and person carries a teaching for your own good, and where you never have to go through these things alone.

Many Christian hymns have phrases like "a nearer walk with Thee," or "with your hand in mine, Lord," or "my constant companion." These are reminders of that other level, where God knows, God cares, and God is with you if you are with God. Many Christian martyrs met their deaths by torture or execution, and yet were in bliss at the time because they really, truly were in the presence of God.

Your chief problem — and I think the center of this teaching God is sending you — is that you are in an in-between sort of place, neither here nor there. You have vowed not to harm others anymore, and yet you also don't feel ready to meet your death at the hands of others. Something has to give. If not fighting is the most important principle, then have faith that God will decide whether you live or die. Gandhi walked right up to the guy who was hired to kill him and said, "Here I am. Do what you need to do." He would easily choose dying over fighting. The guy fell at his feet crying, by the way.

I have no wish to harm others or to fight, but I have a hunch that I would still defend myself as best I can, because I am not where Gandhi was. But I would defend myself — as you can do also — making every possible effort not to lose myself in anger, and not to kill my opponent. If you are so good at martial arts, then it is not very difficult for you to incapacitate your opponent rather than kill him. Break his leg, blind him, break his jaw. Why would you need to kill him? My son, Josh, is a black belt in Aikido. When a crazed homeless man tried to steal the winter coat of a poor child Josh was taking care of, Josh apologized to the homeless guy for not being able to allow him to take the coat. He said in several ways, "I'm sorry, and I don't want to hurt you, but please understand that I can't allow you to take this child's only coat. So it's your choice — you can give it back, or I will be forced to take it from you, and I really don't want to do that." That encounter did not result in a fight, and the kid got his coat back.

So does your problem stem from these guys on death row, or the guards, or the prison, or from your own inner confusion and spiritual pride? The cons and guards and prison are just doing their normal prison stuff, aren't they? You can never fully control others around you. You are in your own bind. Either decide that not fighting is worth dying for, and rely on God to be with you every step of the way, or else consider that maybe your vow not to fight was a little prideful or unhumble, because you are not Gandhi, you do not have his fearlessness about living or dying. Gandhi did not matter at all to Gandhi. But T seems to matter very much to T. Acknowledge the truth of where you are in your journey, and then act in accordance with that truth.

T, I think when you pledged yourself to nonviolence, you bit off a little more than you could chew, and God is giving you this lesson now so you can set yourself on a truer path with more self-honesty. You should always regret the possibility of being forced into violence, no problem there. But especially in prison, you cannot always guarantee you can live without ever raising your fist. What would happen if you needed to defend someone else? Would you allow someone to be raped or beaten to death just so you do not have to fight?

The Buddha himself committed murder in a previous life. He was a very wise man, very compassionate, and he was told that a certain evil man was going to stick a ferry carrying five hundred people. The Buddha prayed and reflected over what to do. Should he kill the man to save five hundred people?
GOOD WORKS

The Soul Knows No Bars

"A rare gem of a book," says Kweisi Mfume, president of the NAACP.

"Conversations that knock your socks off," says Sister Helen Prejean, author of Dead Man Walking.

"Philosophy at its best," comments Cornel West, distinguished professor at Princeton.

What are they all talking about? A book composed by fourteen inmates and a professor, The Soul Knows No Bars: Inmates Reflect on Life, Death, and Hope. This book emerged from a two-year philosophy seminar taught at the maximum security Maryland Penitentiary. Participating inmates discussed their experiences of force and violence, race and sex, time and space as lived out in a cellblock. Most of all, they spoke of how to create freedom even in a prison world. As H.B. Johnson, Jr., a prize-winning playwright, says in the book, "There's a difference between leaving prison and getting out of prison." To get out of prison is to free yourself from the inner prisons - rage, fear, ignorance, self-hate - that keep you confined. You better get out of prison before your release, or "nine times out of ten your ass is coming back."

This unusual project has been featured in the Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and other national media. The Soul Knows No Bars, by Drew Leder and his co-authors, is now in paperback and can be purchased through bookstores or the publisher, Rowman and Littlefield. While supplies last, free copies are also available to prison educators and inmate groups who will use it for group study. (Supplies are limited, so books can't be sent just for individual use.)

To obtain a free book, explain how it will be used for educational purposes. Write to:

The Bridge Project
Center for Values and Service
Loyola College in Maryland
4501 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21210

Please say exactly how the book should be addressed so it will be sure to reach you.
NEWS, NOTES, AND OFFERINGS

KARMA BOOK STILL AVAILABLE TO PRISONERS

Larson Publications has funding to send out more free Karma books. The book What Is Karma? by Paul Brunton, is being offered free to prisoners in the US and Canada. The book is a positive view of karma: What karma is, how it works, its relation to forgiveness and freedom, and how to get it working for you. (Please check your regulations to make sure you can receive the book. Also, be sure to tell them about any special requirements, and include your ID#.) Write:

Larson Publications, Dept K
4936 Route 414
Burdett, NY 14818

UPDATE ON JERI BECKER

The main article of our last newsletter was an interview with Jeri Becker, a California lifer. Unfortunately, the governor of CA vetoed the parole board's recommendation to let Jeri out. Please keep Jeri in your prayers, and the governor as well.

UPDATE ON SHABARI MA

Our founder, Bo Lozoff, and another community member, Shabari Ma, have both completed a year of intense practice of being in silence. All of us here at Human Kindness Foundation are grateful to them for doing the practice. Shabari Ma has become a quieter person, something she was hoping for. After a year of silence, Shabari Ma says, "I realize I don't have a lot to say."

100-DAY NOBLE SILENCE PROGRAM

Free Dharma instructions (meditation, Buddhist spirituality) are available for anyone in or out of prison, and to institutions anywhere in the USA or Canada. This is NOT a Book, but rather instructions. For more information write:

[Note: This is a new address from previous newsletters.]

Dharma Instructions, NFPP
23611 NE SR 26
Melrose FL 32666

Artwork by Christopher Coyne, Ft. Worth Texas

a little good news

is a publication of Human Kindness Foundation, which is non-profit and tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code. Donations and bequests are welcomed and are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. All money goes directly to support HKF's work, helping us to continue producing and distributing free materials to prisoners and others, and sponsoring Bo Lozoff's free lectures and workshops and the other projects of the Foundation.

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Season's Greetings & Happy holy Days

HAPPY HOLY DAYS FROM ALL OF US AT HUMAN KINDNESS FOUNDATION