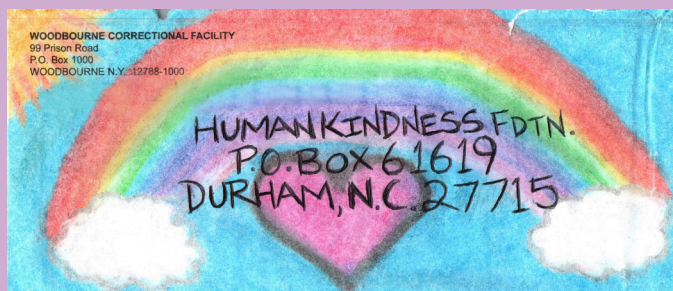




Family

Fall
2024

There are two versions of my life—one in which my sister went to prison and one in which she didn't. I have no idea what the second version would have looked like. That's not the journey my family took. When one person gets locked up, their loved ones' lives change. The expensive phone calls and canteen items (if you can afford them), the long trips to prisons (if you can afford them), seeing your loved one in the most soulless setting possible— all can disconnect even the most connected families.

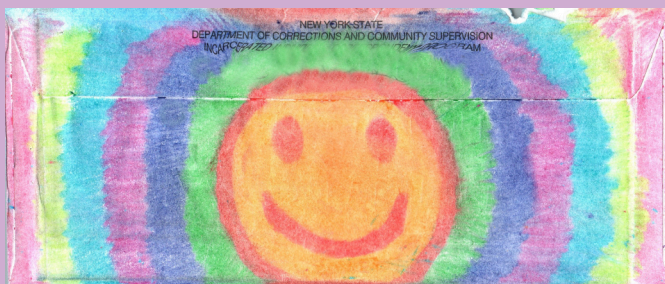


Some broken connections are never mended. That's what happened in my family. Some connections stay strong. That's what happened in Bessie Elmore's family, and this newsletter features an article about her story. Her family isn't better than mine, or yours if you currently don't feel connected to your family. Her path was different. We can't spend too much time on what might have been. Instead, we have to see our path clearly, with all its beauty and pain. That's how we're able to heal and move forward, perhaps mending previous connections or making new ones that are healthy and lasting.

My family's experience raising my niece while my sister was incarcerated inspired one of our new projects—a book of creative mindfulness activities that incarcerated parents and their loved ones can do together. It can be hard to know where to start the conversation with your family when you're locked up. What should you discuss when emotions are so high and life is so hard? Should you talk about your daily lives when there is so little time together? Can you even relate to each other? We hope these activities help provide a starting point for conversations and connections.

In this newsletter, you will find an activity to do with a loved one—maybe a child or a caregiver, a sibling, parent, or friend. There's a copy for you and a copy for you to send to someone else. The activity is simple—just share how you're feeling that day. When we're on the outside, most of the time we spend with our families revolves around the small stuff—what should we get at the grocery store, who's going to watch the kids, what happened at work or school, what about the crazy thing that lady did on the bus? The details of everyday life are where we build the trust, love, presence, and connection needed to work through the big stuff and the hard stuff.

These activities are a work in progress. It will take several years to finish this project. We'd love your help along the way. If you have any creative ways you've stayed in touch with your loved ones during incarceration, please share them with us. If you use the activity with a loved one, let us know how it goes. We treasure your thoughts, feedback, and wisdom. Always remember, family can take a lot of different forms. We're blessed beyond measure to call you family and we're grateful to be on this journey together. Love, Erin



HOW DO YOU FEEL TODAY?



happy



silly



mad



worried



sad



scared



excited



proud

Sit down in a quiet place every day this week. I'll do this too. Close your eyes, cross your arms, and place both hands over your heart. Take a deep breath in and a deep breath out and try to feel your heartbeat. Take a few more deep breaths as you quiet your heart. Now open your eyes and tell me: how do you feel today and why? You might feel happy or sad, tired or excited, lonely or silly, worried or bored, disappointed or proud. Or maybe something else. Write how you feel everyday this week.

MONDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

TUESDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

WEDNESDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

THURSDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

FRIDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

SATURDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

SUNDAY Today I'm feeling:

Because:

When you're done, close your eyes again and give yourself a hug. Feelings come and feelings go. You might feel sad, happy, nervous, lonely, bored, and excited, all in one day today! Tomorrow, you'll have a lot more feelings, some different, some the same. But never forget that everyday I love you and I always will. Give yourself one more hug. That one's from me!

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Interview with Bessie Elmore

Bessie Elmore is a force of nature. A tireless advocate for the rights of justice-involved and justice-impacted people, she is the Executive Director of Straight Talk Transitional House and Straight Talk Support Group in Durham, North Carolina. The Elmore family are beloved members of our community. Her son William was on our board and is author of the book *Prison From the Inside Out*. We're so happy to be able to share a bit of Bessie's story and wisdom with you.



"Yet because this widow troubleth me, I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me." Luke 18:5

Bessie Elmore is a persistent woman. It's not surprising that one of the two scripture verses that inspired her most while her son William was incarcerated for 24 years was a parable of perseverance. In the first verse, a widow goes before an unjust king and asks him to avenge her adversaries. Not wanting to be bothered by her, he sends her away. She comes back the next day. He sends her away. "This goes on for a while," Bessie explained. "And then he finally says—and I'm paraphrasing here—you know what lady? I don't regard you or your God, but I'm going to give you what you want if you stop bothering me." In this widow, Bessie found a model for how she would relate to the North Carolina Department of

Corrections as she worked to turn her son into a person in the eyes of those charged with running a purposefully impersonal system. "I like to test theories and I'm going to see if this works," she offered. "I would show up in offices. It connected me to people who could help me help him. I called every day—I can be a very persistent person. I wasn't going to let him die in prison."

She shares the knowledge gained from two decades of advocacy with members of the Straight Talk Support Group, which Bessie runs along with her daughter Cheryl. With members throughout the country and in Mexico and Canada, the group helps family members with loved ones experiencing incarceration find community and better advocate for their families.

"People don't understand the power they possess," Bessie shared. "When you empower people, you can move a mountain—once people are empowered with the right knowledge." Part of that power, for Bessie, is understanding the Department of Corrections system and being willing to push it, challenge it, and engage with it. "When I started the support group people started becoming empowered. It was beautiful. They would take notes and then call up the facility and call Raleigh. They would come back the next week and talk about what happened and were like oh, Ms Elmore. I said no, it's not Ms Elmore, it's you. You became empowered. Now it's your job to empower somebody else."

"Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," was the second bible verse—Hebrews 11.1—that guided Bessie's path as she struggled to navigate life as mother to an incarcerated son. When William was incarcerated in 1991, the path forward was difficult to see. Bessie left her business and life in Georgia and moved to North Carolina to be close to her son—with no car, no job, and no connections. "Getting from Durham to Central Prison—that was very stressful, and when I say stressful, I mean stressful. That was very difficult, but I managed."

When Bessie and Cheryl visited William, they came with talking points to discuss.

Many thanks to our artists: page 1: William Amidon; page 5: Robert Joseph Swainston; page 6: Gabe Shute; page 8: Brett Profit (butterfly), David Mandigo (cicada band), John Downey Jr (Sita).

Interview with Bessie Elmore

"I didn't want to visit and just be like, "how was your day?" You know, same old thing," Bessie offered. They also had a family book club. "William, Cheryl, and I would read the same books and then we would have a discussion and people would say man-what do y'all be talking about? He would share it and everybody would want the book."

Not only did Bessie and Cheryl set the stage for meaningful visits with William, they also prepared for life when he returned home. Before a family member comes home, Bessie suggests "it's important for the person in prison to first try to understand what the family is going through. Then turn it around, the family can try to have some compassion for the individual, no matter what the crime. Be open and honest with one another. Don't focus on the crime. Let's try to look beyond that."

"We all deserve to be forgiven and to forgive," she continued. "This means laying down something very heavy you've been carrying for a long time. It took me a while to forgive my ex-husband for not visiting his son. I carried that around and it was heavy. All of this unforgiveness inside you, it clouds your vision. It doesn't help your thinking. To really put it down is not easy. It takes time but it feels good when you do. It's a relief. Then you can move forward, see better, sleep better, eat better, everything. Then forgive yourself. A lot of guys in prison they're carrying-my mother didn't do this for me, my father, or my grandmother, my wife, my uncle, cousin, yada, yada, yada, yada- and they carry that around with them. Then they carry around the guilt about what they did. You got to let it go."

Now that her son is home, Bessie spends her life helping others get back on their feet when they get home from prison. It's not the path she thought her life would take, and she's grateful for that. "I wouldn't be the person I am today if not for this journey that William put me on," she explained. "I was a corporate America woman climbing the ladder. I love who I am, I love what I'm doing now. I love seeing guys transformed. I was given a gift back to me and back to his sister. I'm required to do something with that gift. I have joy. I'm living the best part of my life doing what I love to do. I love my life right now."

In many ways, William's return home represents a rebirth for her family. It's the next chapter, one the entire family struggled to build together. The Elmore family story is unique to them, as is every family's story. Bessie's reflections on her son, her family, and what matters most, however, can ring true for us all. "I love hearing William laugh-to see him and his sister together, the little jokes they have about me. Laughter is very important," she concluded. "But we're honest with one another and that's important too. I wasn't the best parent but I'm a better parent; you weren't the best child but you're a better adult, so those things matter. Focus on what matters."

If you would like more information about Straight Talk Support Group, visit www.straighttalksupportgroup.org/support-group. The virtual forum meets the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month at 7pm EST for families and friends to share common experiences and get connected to resources.

Together-Apart

My dear friends, please continue to sit with us on Wednesday evenings from 7 to 8pm (or any time on Wednesdays that might be convenient for you) as we send love, prayers, and blessings to the many suffering beings in the world. Use whatever practice is meaningful to you, beloveds. "See" you all on Wednesdays!
Love, Sita



Letters

Beloveds,

The letter response and art on this page were written and painted by our dear friend Gabe who passed a few years ago. Reading Gabe's letter reminds me of the many heartfelt and wise letters he wrote to people inside. I still sometimes talk to his beautiful soul, and I feel that he thinks of me as well. Be blessed, my dear friend, Gabe. I love you, Sita

Dear HKF - I have been in and out of prison for 30 years. I'm currently on my 6th term of incarceration with 8 years in. I was raised in a good Christian family, but I strayed away and never came back to it. When I caught this case in 2009, I was shot and left to die. I cried out to God while in the hospital, and he answered. He gave me back mobility because doctors said I would never walk again. Ever since then, I've dedicated my life to Christ.

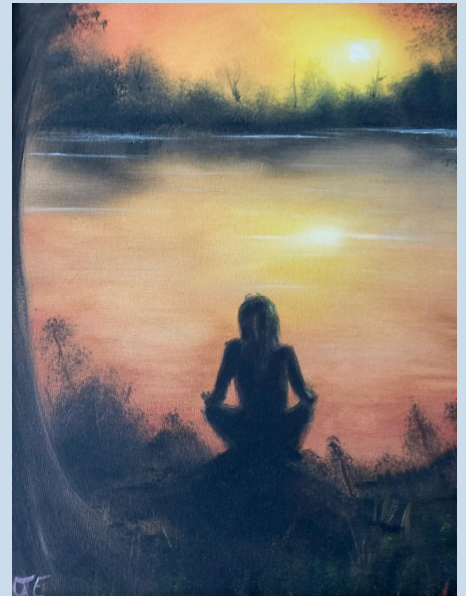
I really appreciate your newsletter and have read all of your books. The only thing I didn't get back is my family. They have completely turned their back on me, and this is eating me up inside and has me feeling hopeless. If you have any advice for me on this, I'd love to hear from you. God bless you, R.

R. - I did 19 years in prison myself, and I have some family I haven't spoken to in over 25 years because of the pain I caused. I realized long ago there was no making up to them for the wrong I did--just because I had turned my life around and will never be the person I was before, doesn't change the things I did. I hurt people and in some way there is nothing I can do about that. It tears me up inside, but I live my life now doing something about the things I can change.

Maybe the people you hurt need more time or maybe they may never want to talk to you, either way that's not up to you. I'm sure you want to cause them as little pain as you can, so it might be best to give them the time and space they need. You've got to remember, they've heard all our lies and promises before, and just because this time really is different for us, it's not to them. The best thing is to show them and prove it, instead of trying to tell them, and that takes time... maybe years. You do that by how you live your life from here.

In your letter you said your family abandoned you. To me that says you need to take a better look at your part in all this. Until you really and truly take full responsibility for your actions you can't begin to heal. I encourage you to remember that feeling of laying in that hospital bed with doctors telling you that you wouldn't walk again and begging God for one more chance... you got it!!!! If you really have faith in God you will trust that you will get just what you need for this journey—not what you want.

I know this can be hard and feels like it's not worth it at times, but it is. I swear it is and hope you get to see that for yourself. Many blessings friend, Gabe



"A Little Good News" is a publication of Human Kindness Foundation, a non-profit 501(c)3 organization. Donations & bequests are welcomed and are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. With your help, we send over 20,000 free books annually to people who request them while they are incarcerated. You can request books by writing to HKF, PO Box 61619, Durham NC 27715. www.humankindness.org

Letters

Dear Human Kindness Foundation - I want to share something with you about my life. I have a daughter who I didn't raise—I chose to use and sell drugs instead of raising this beautiful, amazing young lady. I never tried to contact her while she was young because I felt she was better off not being exposed to my insanity. I watched her grow through the years on Facebook as I went in and out of the prison system fighting drug addiction. Deep inside watching her grow, I wanted nothing more than for her to know who I am and to be a part of her life.

I was having a good run being clean, and when she became a legal adult, I contacted her. I told her I was her father, and I just wanted to get to know her and be a part of her life. We texted back and forth until I found myself in a weak situation, and I gave into the monkey that has controlled my soul for most of my adult life. I have ended up back in prison looking at a 30-year sentence. She doesn't understand addiction. I let her down and broke what little hope we had of meeting in person.

I have been steadily working on myself and trying to fix my character flaws. I have accepted God into my life, and I have prayed that I can have a relationship with my daughter. I reached out, and she set up an account where I can message her. I sent her a heartfelt message, and she hasn't responded yet. I check my messages every 30 minutes hoping to hear from her.

Do you have any advice for me? This is the only thing I can think of day and night. I will be patient and pray daily. I just felt I needed to tell someone, but if this doesn't work, I have to find a way to be alright with disappointment. I am grateful for your spiritual help, and I will continue to have faith and be kind to others. Thank you for your kindness helping me find a better way to live my life. Respectfully, Chad

Dear Chad - Thank you for reaching out and sharing so much of your journey with us. I do have a bit of advice. The first is—stop checking your messages every 30 minutes! Check once a day and each time say a prayer of love and protection for your daughter. Use the time when you are checking your message to connect with her, whether she responds or not. She might never respond, but that doesn't mean you can't have a relationship of care, love, and protection with her. It might be one that is built primarily on prayer and care instead of presence and that has to be okay. Children teach us how to love fully. They open our hearts and they break them. Your daughter can help you open your heart without ever having to respond.

If she does respond, spend your time trying to understand how she feels and not trying to make her understand how you feel. What felt like a heartfelt message to you might have been too much for her. You have to get to know her. You're starting from scratch. Start small and don't overwhelm her with your feelings. You have a lifetime of feelings for her and a lifetime of guilt and frustration that goes along with that. She also has a lifetime of feelings, wondering who and where you are. That's all really intense!

Any relationship you have with her—whether you're in communication with each other or not—has to be built on accountability without excuses. It's not her responsibility to understand addiction. It's your responsibility to fight that battle—and I know it's a daily struggle. The best thing you can do for your daughter—whether you ever talk to her again or not—is to work, every day, to be the best version of yourself you possibly can be. You're on that path already. Show love to yourself, your daughter, and those around you through your actions, which will speak far louder than words. We'll keep you and your daughter in our prayers. Peace and blessings, Erin

Please note HKF may anonymously publish letters you write to us in our newsletters or other publications. We may also publish artwork sent to us with attribution whenever possible. Please let us know if you do NOT want your work published. Thanks for filling our publications with your spirit and wisdom!



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HAPPY
80th
Birthday
Sita

