

INTRODUCTION

MY PRISON WORK started in 1988 when I was invited to give a few presentations on the subject of forgiveness. At the time I was writing a book on forgiveness, a subject I had lectured on for many years. One of my first prison talks was at the Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI)-Gardner, a medium security prison for men. When I spoke with the psychologist who coordinated the program, he said that he would post some flyers around the prison announcing the upcoming talk. But, he warned me, because my lecture was not being offered as part of an ongoing group, he didn't know if many men would attend.

As I drove down the highway the morning of the talk, I wondered if more than a few men would voluntarily show up for a talk on forgiveness. At that time the population at MCI-Gardner was 700. When I arrived at the room where the talk was to be held, 120 men were waiting for me to begin.

I was deeply moved by the response of the group; by the thoughtful questions they asked, by the insightful comments they made, by their desire and willingness to share their own experiences with me and with each other. I was surprised by the large number of people who stayed around after the presentation, eager to learn more.

I was so moved and uplifted by the response that by the end of my visit that day, I knew that I wanted to continue to work with prisoners around the difficult and challenging issues of anger, guilt,

remorse, shame, forgiveness of others, and the essence of emotional healing, forgiveness of oneself. I was sure that many prisoners would welcome the chance to use time in prison as an opportunity to heal if they were offered direction and encouragement.

Since that first day, I've offered presentations to hundreds of men and women in prison, and led numerous 7 to 15-session courses entitled "Emotional Awareness/Emotional Healing." I've also facilitated a year-long group for lifers and long-termers. The Emotional Awareness/Emotional Healing course has served as an important turning point for many. As one inmate said, "This course has given me a new outlook and a new direction. It has been a transforming light in a darkening world."

Not everyone who signed up for the course did so because they thought they would benefit from it. One man came up to me after an introductory talk and said, "I'm going to sign up for your group just to prove you're wrong." I told him he was welcome to attend. All I asked was that he bring some openness. By the last session he was sorry to see the course end. It had helped him cope with prison life. He felt much more in control. His ulcers stopped acting up. His relationship with his wife and children became kinder and more honest. He began to find comfort in a spiritual life that he had lost touch with for years.

For those who were ready, the course offered guidance on how to manage stress and transform some of the anger and frustration that is innate to prison life. For the first time, many of the participants found the safety and direction to start recognizing and healing the emotional wounds that fueled their addiction, violence, and criminal behavior. They had an opportunity to learn to care more for themselves and others and to feel more in control of their lives. Many began to connect with a deeper spiritual reality.

As a result of the enthusiastic response to the courses, I created the Lionheart Prison Project (now called "The National Emotional Literacy Project for Prisoners"). The goal of the project is to share

as much of the spirit and content of the Emotional Awareness/Emotional Healing course with as many inmates as possible. I have attempted to capture the essence of the course — respect, encouragement, new teachings and ideas, practical “hands on” exercises, questions for reflection and self-exploration — in the following pages. The goal of the Project is to distribute eight to fifty copies of this book, in English and in Spanish, free of charge, to every prison in the United States.

Is This Book for You?

Houses of Healing: A Prisoner's Guide to Inner Power and Healing is for anyone who is interested. Clearly some people in prison, like some outside of prison, want little or nothing to do with personal growth or emotional and spiritual healing. Some people aren't interested in this inner work. Some aren't ready for it. Yet after teaching in the prisons for more than seven years now, I have seen that more and more people want the guidance and direction to help them use their incarceration productively. Some women and men aren't actively looking for emotional and spiritual healing, but when the guidance to do the work actually becomes available to them, they choose it. We can't choose what we don't yet know exists.

Perhaps you've been looking for some way to make sense out of your pain and suffering. Perhaps you simply want some relief. As Joe, a participant in one of the classes said, “This work has opened up the door that I had been so desperately trying to reach and open myself.” I feel confident that if you are open to what you find here, prison can be a “house of healing” for you. You *will* find some relief. And, like Joe, you will increasingly discover the true meaning of greater power and freedom.

Perhaps you've already been using your time to heal, seeking emotional and spiritual growth in recovery programs like AA or NA; in a prison ministry; or in individual or group counseling. If,

like many people doing time, you are already on a path of healing, I hope this book will serve to further support and inspire you. I'm glad you are choosing to read it.

Maybe you haven't ever read anything like this before. Perhaps boredom or curiosity drew you to pick this book up. If you read through these pages and participate in the exercises, I think you will discover your curiosity has served you well. Welcome to a new adventure!

I find that many people in prison don't seek support or healing because they don't feel good enough about themselves to even try. Troy, a young inmate, said "When I first looked into this class I didn't think that I was worth trying to better myself. I have never really liked who I was and how I led my life." People who feel bad about themselves often feel like they don't deserve a decent life. They feel like they're not worth investing any effort in. In truth, we *all* deserve to heal and feel better about who we are. In case you feel this way, I want you to know without a doubt that *you are worth the effort*. You do deserve to have a life that is more positive, hopeful, and loving than the one you've had.

If you shy away from reading and learning something new because learning has been difficult or discouraging in the past, it is important to realize that learning does not depend on what grade you completed in school or your past success. It depends on your willingness to learn now. You *can* learn — if you are willing to have some patience with yourself along the way.

Many people don't invest any positive energy in themselves because of a profound sense of resignation. They have a belief that it's not worth trying because no matter what they do, life won't ever get any better. As Julio wrote, "I've always tried to find a source I could begin to address why I was guilt-ridden, afraid of loving, and why these kinds of feelings were causing me to literally lock myself up into a pattern of drugs, jail, and denying myself to mature. Before this course I had resigned myself into being worthless because I had always run from responsibility and had been a druggie so long I

thought it was all I would ever be. But now I've found a way of dealing with feelings that were doing me harm.... Life is going to be worth living again." If, as you read this, you are feeling resigned to having a life that looks like it's always looked and feels like it's always felt, know a better life is possible. Life *can* change for the better. Even if a part of your mind is saying "that's not true" or "this person doesn't know what she's talking about," I say to you as Julio said to me, *life can be worth living again!*

If you are incarcerated, I hope this book will guide and inspire you. Rather than letting yourself be emotionally deadened and depressed by your prison experience, you can use this time to wake up to your true self, to a depth of personal power and self-respect the likes of which you may not have known before. Then you will be able to appreciate what your past has to teach you, without defining yourself solely in terms of your past actions or personal history. You'll see new options and move on knowing that you can have a happier, more satisfying life. As difficult as the prison experience can be, I know that prison can be transformed into a house of healing for you. I've seen it happen many times before. I've seen it happen for people who didn't imagine that their lives could be different.

In addition to guiding and inspiring, I hope this book will serve to dispel some of the prejudice and stereotypes about incarcerated men and women. In this country, the media portrays — and the public perceives — most prisoners as all being pretty much the same. Prejudice against prisoners, like any other prejudice, means we see people whom we pre-judge as static and unchanging. We decide they are horrible or stupid or no good, or whatever. And then that's the way they are! When we see through a filter of prejudice, we don't see people-in-process. Prisoners, like everyone else on this earth, are in the process of changing. They are in the process of becoming more wounded, or they are in the process of growing, learning, healing.

When we look beyond our pre-judgments and see the potential for growth and healing in others, we have to let go of our static images and assume a more responsible attitude to the way we treat that person or group. Seeing prisoners as people-in-process challenges us as a society to respond to prisoners in a more humane and intelligent way. Quite honestly, some of the most thoughtful, mature, compassionate people I have ever met are people in prison doing life and long-term sentences. Many have murdered. They committed their crimes many years ago and have used their time to grapple with their actions, the impact of their actions, their feelings, and their profound and appropriate guilt and remorse. Out of a difficult past they have re-created themselves as humans of great depth and compassion.

There is a healthy potential and creative power in you that we need in our society. But first you probably need to be guided, as we all need to be guided, beyond the psychic prison of misguided judgments, limiting self-definitions, and closed hearts. Only then will you (or anyone) be able to recognize and choose positive, constructive, healing options.

I am confident that if you bring some patience, openness, and courage to the thoughts and self-reflective exercises in this book, you will find that prison can and will be a “house of healing” for you. The experience of inner power and freedom are your option and your right to claim.

Some Suggestions for Using This Book

As you read through the following pages you will notice that in addition to the general text there are a variety of self-reflective exercises. When you come to one of these sections, rather than reading at your usual pace, take some time to reflect on them.

The sections set off by the directions to “Pause and Reflect” are usually a series of questions to ask yourself. You may answer them in your mind, or you may find it helpful to write your answers down.

From time to time you will see “seed thoughts.” These are thoughts that are boxed and set in bold print. Seed thoughts are ideas that can serve to inspire new insight and awareness. You are encouraged to write each seed thought on a piece of paper, and carry it with you or put it in a place where you will see it often. Whenever you notice it, pause for a few moments and think about its meaning.

There are also longer exercises and visualizations. Before you read them get comfortable and then allow yourself to freely imagine the scenes that are described.

If you find yourself excited by this book you might want to share it with others. You could start a small support group, reading the book, discussing the concepts, and sharing your experiences if you want to. Or, you may want to introduce this book and some of the ideas and exercises that follow to a support group you’re already in. Another great way to share the ideas in this book is by reading it out loud to someone with difficulty reading.

Throughout this book you will find many first hand accounts by prisoners. As you read their writing, I ask you to keep in mind that most of them were written by average prisoners who chose to participate in my classes. Their writing offers an intimate visit into the lives of the people who have led the way. These are people who have not allowed personal pain, peer pressure, societal numbness, and the darkness of fear to stop the light from shining in. They offer a look at the healing of individuals who have committed crimes but who didn’t let their past stop them from transforming their lives. Their personal stories bring us into lives where greater personal peace and dignity have been restored.

To Readers On The Outside

Although this book is written primarily for men and women who are actually in prison, to varying degrees we are all prisoners of our own limiting beliefs and fears. As the title of prison educator Bo Lozoff's book aptly reads, *We're All Doing Time*. The issues of personal healing are certainly not limited to the prison population. Because we're all doing time — whether you are a family member or a friend of a prisoner, a prison volunteer, a prison employee, or anyone else — I hope the guidance in this book will be useful for you. We have all been locked out of our own hearts for far too long now, held captive by our fear and lack of love. The following pages can serve as a guide to help free us so we can find our way back into our hearts. And in the true spirit of healing, discover the desire to take others with us.

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Note to all readers:

I wish to express one regret to all readers but especially to incarcerated women. Although I have taught in the one women's prison in the state where I live, the opportunities for working with women have been limited. As a result, in the pages that follow there are far fewer personal accounts by women than I would have liked.