

Human Kindness Foundation

A Little Good News

Spring 2011

A LOCAL CALL

Varanasi, India, January 29, 2011 (from Sita Lozoff)

Dear Family,

I've shared my journeys to India with you all before, and I'm actually in India as I write this. This time I'm with our son, Josh, and Janaki and Dylan Nicastro for part of my journey. Many of you may remember Arjun Nicastro, Janaki's husband and Dylan's father, who was an important part of our project during the few years we were blessed to know him after his lengthy incarceration. He died of leukemia four years ago.

India is a country filled with poverty and struggle—so what has been the attraction for me?

There's an old joke which has explained my feelings about India: A man wanted to make a phone call to God, so he calls an operator in the U.S. to ask for the charges. The operator replies, "\$10,000." Next he calls from France, and is told the call will be 1,000 francs. This goes on as he travels to several countries, with each operator giving very expensive rates. Finally, he is in India and asks the operator how much it will cost to place a call to God, and the operator responds, "20 rupees" (about 50 cents). So the man asks, "Why does a call to God cost so much in every country but India?" The operator responds: "From here, it's a local call."

So my friends, in the past, this has been my attraction to India—when I've been here, I've felt the presence of God effortlessly, as if this is God's home town. I'm now at the tail end of my fourth visit to India, and I'm reflecting on a shift in this perspective.

This trip, I've felt very little change from my general state of

consciousness. In other words, I feel as close to God in Durham, NC, as I do in Varanasi, India. What I used to come to India for is now a part of my day to day life wherever I am. I'm getting a glimpse of the Peace that the sages talk about, and just that glimpse is really so wonderful.

What brought about this transformation in my daily life, that makes it unnecessary for me to travel to India to experience the presence of God? My best guess is the daily practice of *communion and community* has been pivotal.

For many years, I've been encouraging others to do *communion and community* also. *Communion* in this regard is a daily spiritual practice. Bo's books provide many examples of possible practices, and I encourage you to find a few that speak to you most deeply. *Community* means helping out in whatever way is possible. For example, if you're in lockdown, this could mean praying for others. The reason I'm bringing this up now, dear

friends, is to tell you that it works! *Communion and community* is how I have lived my life, and I believe it is why I am able to experience peace and the presence of God more and more in my daily life.

It's not about the circumstances of my life; it's about the daily work that I have chosen to do. No matter what your circumstances are, you can choose to do that work, too. I promise you that it's worth the effort.

And I promise you that, no matter where you are, it's a local call to God.

Love and blessings,

Sita

Janaki and Dylan Nicastro, Sita and Josh Lozoff



Notes from India



Rishikesh, India, January 16, 2011 (from Janaki Nicastro)

Yesterday we put Arjun's ashes in the Ganges along with the ashes of Sita's mother. We created the ceremony ourselves. I think Arjun would have liked that.

It was a rainy day, which is good luck in India. I had brought two pages filled with photo printouts of Arjun. One had three photos: our marriage photo, Arjun with Dylan as a baby, and the last family portrait. The other was a collage done for Arjun's Life Celebration. It was wonderful to look at all the pictures together and reminisce.

When the rain subsided we proceeded down the ghats to perform the ceremony. Josh got into the Ganges and put his grandmother's ashes in. Dylan did the perfect tribute only he could have dreamed up. He turned one of the photo pages into an

airplane and flew it out onto the Ganges during the ceremony. We used the other page as a holder for the flowers, incense and candle we floated down the river in memory of Arjun. We all chanted as we put the ashes in the river.

Delhi, India, January 20, 2011 (from Josh Lozoff)

During our time in India, one highlight was our visit to the Sanjay Gandhi Animal Care Centre. Located in New Delhi, the Centre is home to literally thousands of animals at any given time, from abused camels and goats rescued from the slaughterhouse, to wild monkeys and birds too injured to care for themselves. Spread out over only a few acres, the Centre provides food, shelter and compassion to all the animals that come their way. They have a full veterinary practice and a staff of 100 to treat and care for the animals, and even ambulances ready to respond to calls about injured, abused, or sick animals in the sprawling city.

By far the two species in largest number at the Centre are dogs and cows. It is hard to describe the number of stray dogs roaming the streets of India. They are everywhere. Most seem sick in some way: limping, skin problems, eye infections. It's heartbreaking. There are hundreds of dogs at the Centre, grouped according to their needs: a place for sick dogs, for puppies, for those recovering from mange and other skin diseases. I don't know how the Centre continues to take in and care for them, but they don't turn anyone down.

In addition to providing shelter, food and medical care for thousands of animals, the Sanjay Gandhi Animal Care Centre provides another, possibly more important, service to Delhi's massive stray dog population: a sterilization program. The Centre's workers bring in street dogs from all over the city. The dogs are spayed or neutered, given veterinary attention and several days to heal at the Centre, then released back where they were picked up. This seems to be the project with the potential for the most long-term impact. There is no way any organization, even the most dedicated, could take in all of the stray dogs in Delhi. But by carrying out a steady spay/neuter program, the Centre is making a big difference in the number of new strays born into such a sad and desperate situation.

Without having spent time in Delhi, it might be hard to understand how miraculous a place like the Sanjay Gandhi Animal Care Centre truly is. Being in India means being witness to – along with all of the beauty and spiritual power – a lot of suffering. Watching cows limp through traffic and litters of puppies scavenge through trash can feel overwhelming. I often felt the plight of animals was almost too extreme to even attempt to address. But then we stumbled upon Ambika Shukla, director of the Sanjay Gandhi Animal Care Centre, and her amazing staff. From what I gathered from our brief tour, they are barely getting by, and constantly overwhelmed by the number of animals in need. But they do their work anyway. Doing the best they can with love, compassion, our prayers, and from what I can see, faith that if they do their work, the support will come. Amongst the suffering and struggle all over the world, it's always comforting and inspiring to meet people simply and devotedly doing their part to help out. We certainly met some of those people at the Sanjay Gandhi Animal Care Centre in New Delhi, India.



PRACTICE: COMMUNION & COMMUNITY

The letters on pages 3 & 4 are about how some of our friends made communion & community part of their lives while they were incarcerated. For Bo's original article called "Communion & Community," see pages 89 to 95 in Deep & Simple.



Rafael Ramirez, Tennessee Colony, TX

When I was inside it seemed that the real joy of my day was the literacy class. Even under those most trying of cir-

cumstances and environmental conditions, the women show up every day, eager to continue learning the mysteries of the English language. They were not required to take this class but did so of their own choice, which motivated me to give them 100% of what they came for. Despite their diagnosis as mentally ill or developmentally disabled, I did not find anything lacking in their intelligence. Their problems came much more from poor education, lack of attention, lack of concentration, and mostly, lack of self-esteem. So, the first order of the day was to give them all the love and attention they so desperately were seeking. I would say that even if there is not an official "literacy class" in your prison, that you'll always be able to find someone you can work with in this way—even privately. —Vonda

My first teacher arrived in the form of a book — *We're All Doing Time* — which I clung to with all of my strength. I began to follow the spiritual suggestions within the book and establish some sort of disciplined routine. At first I could only sit for 5 minutes at a time—my restless mind could not take more. Gradually, I was able to extend that time, and it is now the best part of my day.

As my inner life began to untangle, my outer life followed suit. I've learned that life isn't about what I can selfishly get out of it. It's about what I can put into it to make this a better place. I lead two meditation groups at my facility and am a regular participant of both AA and NA. I also volunteer to help out the treatment program at this facility, and I'm working with several others on a regular basis, helping them to deal with their own problems and issues. I'm considered an elder in my community, and because I treat everyone with kindness and respect, others treat me likewise. In my prayers each night, I give thanks for the lessons that I've learned, and I ask to be a channel for divine wisdom and love. I strive to be a beacon of light and hope in the darkness of prison life. My greatest pleasure is to help others and then see them learn to help themselves. Life is really great. I am happy and at peace with myself right where I'm at. I am far from perfect, but I'd like to believe that I am an asset to my environment and that I've made this a nicer, kinder place to be. —Robert



Francis Leary, Amarillo, TX

I've been out of prison for a few years now, but while I was in prison, on most days I got up around 4am, and I'd do hatha yoga, followed by meditation, then prayer—about an hour and a half collectively. Throughout the day I would bend, stretch, or breathe in a more conscious manner to help me get centered again.

Community was present in almost everything I did because I had come to believe that we are all connected at some level. Today I visit sick and aged people. I drive courteously. I pick up other people's trash when I can. I try to behave the best I can even if no one is watching. I still try to be of service in most things I do.

I know that every situation I ran across in prison has been repeated out here with a slightly different twist. There is kindness and greed... sincerity and falsehood... hatred and tolerance... acceptance and judgement... fear is ever present in so many ways that just being conscious of its influence makes it easier to be of service to all.

—Tall Tom

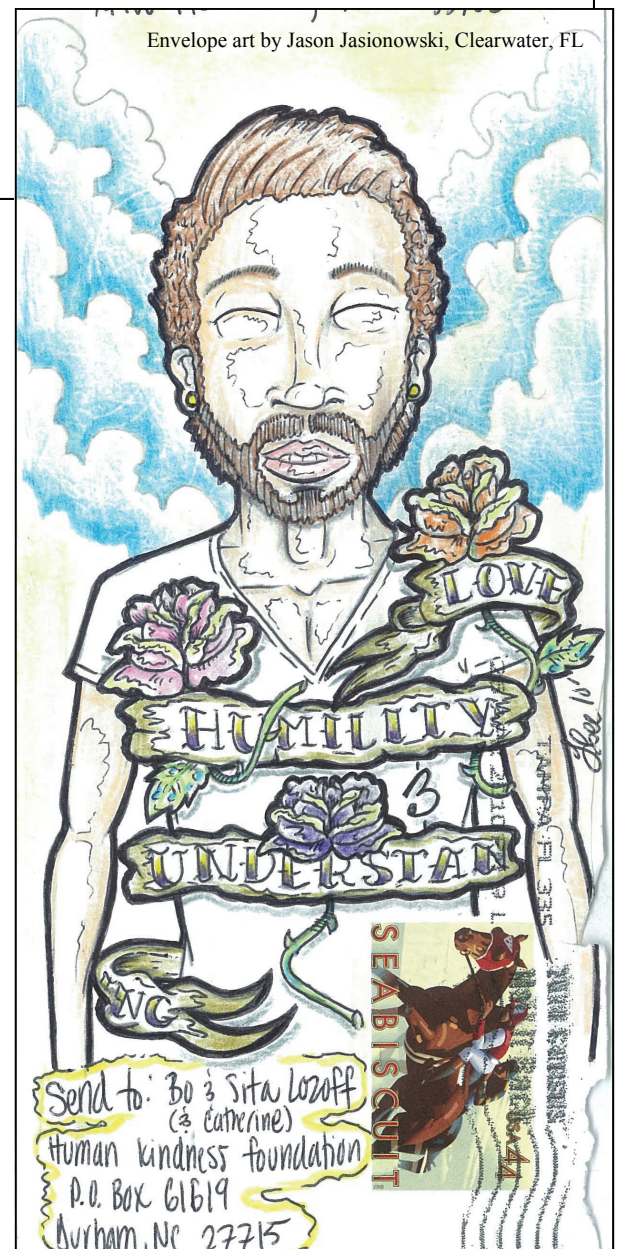
I thought of all the things I really disliked in my prison community and looked for opportunities to take at least some small steps to making it better. ANYONE can find ways to make your world around you a little better--you've just got to look hard enough and think about the small things, so I kept it simple and stayed low key. I wanted to help and do something for someone other than myself without expecting something in return, so I found ways. I thought about some of the things that bothered me like dirty bathrooms, dirty mop rooms, and trash on the yard and spent a little time each night doing something about it.

At times, *community* to me meant being willing to be the first one to forgive or make the first move to let things go when you get into disagreements with staff and other inmates--even when you're right.

I remember being in the chow hall one day listening to a guy everybody hated bitch about the food, so I gave him my cake. No biggie, didn't change the world and the guy still went on to complain about other things, but in that moment there was something deeper between us and I'd give all my pieces of cake for that. I learned quickly not to get involved with the results and just followed my heart. Take my word for it--give that last soup or stamp away to that creepy guy you normally wouldn't look at twice and see for yourself.

My personal version of doing good was also just giving 110% in whatever job I was assigned to--doing more than expected and not complaining about it--maybe even doing something that wasn't my job like picking up napkins or trays left by others in the chow hall. Somehow I bloomed into an honest hard worker--not a bad trait to develop. It feels good to be responsible and have people count on you. The right motives go a long way on this path. —Gabe

One way in which I practiced *communion* while incarcerated was during count times--particularly the 4:00pm count time. I remember sitting in the block (an open dorm type setting with bunks and about 150 men), and the utterly crazy and loud commotion preceding count times--guys banging their metal lockers shut, screaming, shouting, cussing and sometimes hysterical laughter. Then the C.O. would yell "Count time!!! Standing Count!!!"....and then, utter silence. Count times were a moment of stillness within the cacophony of the block. It was a time for meditation and reflection for me. Sometimes I would do Mantras of compassion, other times the Buddhist practice of Tonglen (see *Deep and Simple* page 145) for the C.O.s and the guys in the block who were particularly angry and violent. And then more Tonglen, outward to all living beings. Over time, this practice of prayer and meditation led to a more formal daily meditation practice, that would last from 30-45 minutes. But the moments of prayer and meditation at count time, that I began with, were the catalyst which helped me move into a more disciplined and formal meditation. These moments of silence and prayer also helped me to open my heart to others and to see and feel their suffering. After all, prayer and meditation for me is not about getting something, or feeling blissed out, but about changing my heart. If I feel a little bliss in the process then that's fine, but it's not the point. The point is, how could this moment of *communion* change my heart so that I could be of benefit to others? —Dan



*Solitary (2001)**By #1145256*

I wake
 alone in my cell,
 breathing
 yet another day.

I sit
 alone in my cell,
 remembering
 all I've done wrong.

I eat
 alone in my cell,
 tasting
 nothing but regret.

I kneel
 alone in my cell,
 praying
 for a second chance.

I sleep
 alone in my cell,
 dreaming
 of another life.

I wake...

*Solitary (2008)**By Eric Remerowski*

I wake
 alone in my cell,
 celebrating
 in a brand new day.

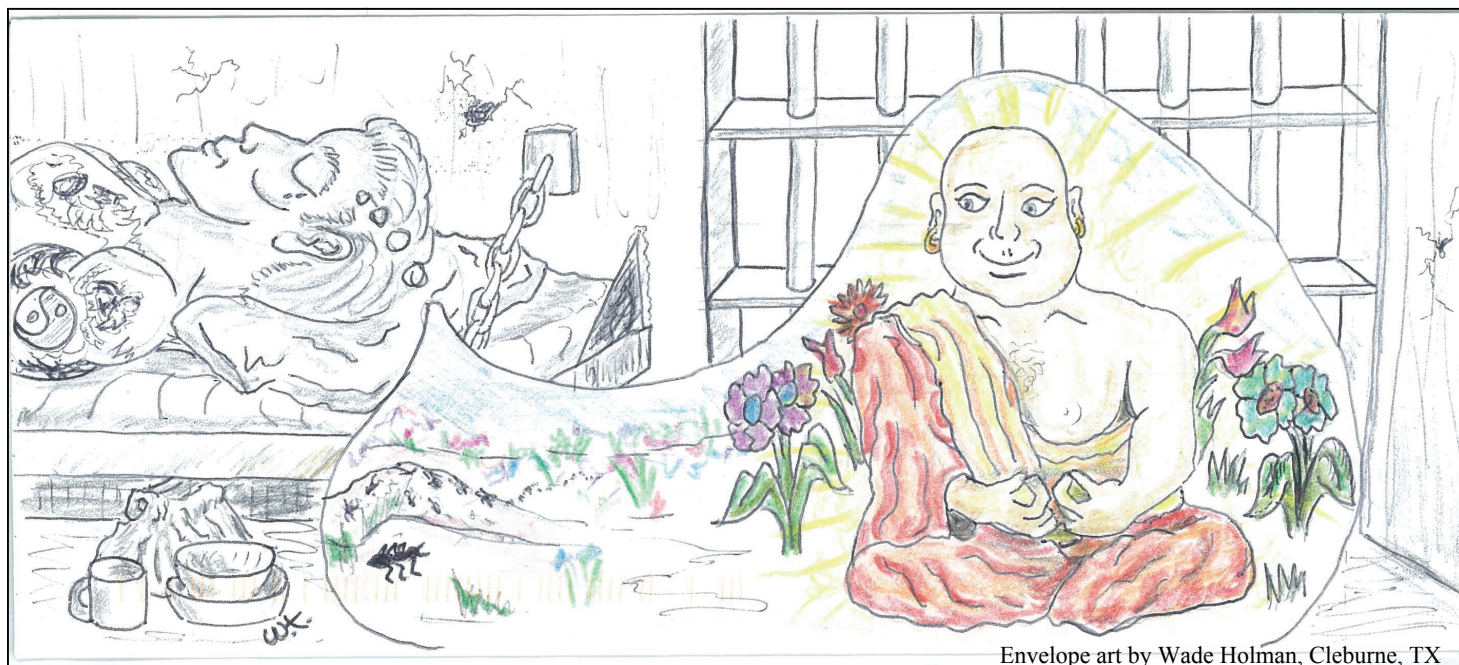
I sit
 alone in my cell,
 being
 at peace with the world.

I eat
 alone in my cell,
 savoring
 every single bite.

I kneel
 alone in my cell,
 communing
 with my Higher Self.

I sleep
 alone in my cell,
 flying
 as Pure Consciousness.

I AWAKEN!...



Envelope art by Wade Holman, Cleburne, TX

LETTERS

Dear HKF and Staff,

I'm writing you on my daughter's 21st birthday. Please, can you pray for her and my son Pat Jr, for I hope one day they will come see me in this wall of a place.

I'm very much free inside, but the Devil tries to get me away from God, but I will not give in to him. I'm free, but I just can't forgive myself for what I did by taking another life and doing 10-20 years for 3rd degree murder.

Bo's books help me so much, and I sit and go to my own world with God, but I

always seem to think of my crime at times—what else can I do? I love God and I want him to always look over me like he does, but I wish sometimes that I could take my victim's place. I ask God to help me deeply—maybe I'm not asking in the right way...

My sister is very angry at me after 6 years. I finally received a letter from her saying that she will never forgive me for what I did, and that I took her nephew away from her. I killed my stepson, Chester. I was so angry at Chester's father for lying to his son and mother that I took it out on my 18 year old

stepson. I can't forgive myself for what I did to Chester. I tried to kill myself, take pills for an overdose, and even tried to cut my neck. That's why I ask God and hope you all can help by prayers.

I just needed to talk and ask for a little more help with my walk. God bless you all, and I hope and pray that someone will hear my call.

God is with me I know,

Respectfully yours, In Jesus,

Brother Pat

Dear Pat,

I just wanted to write a little something to let you know we haven't forgotten about you. The longer letters we get here sometimes take a little while to respond to. I've read your letter, and though you've got a lot of work to do, you are on the right path and I hope you won't give up just because it seems hopeless at times.

Before working here at HKF, I did 19 years in prison for murdering a family member, so I really do know what you're dealing with and all the guilt that comes with having done such a terrible thing. I spent 10 years of my time just sitting around feeling sorry for myself, like most of the other guys there, but when I started working with Bo's books and making them a part of my life, I found what I needed to get up

off my ass and do something about the mess I created. You really do have a choice as to where you go from here!

You didn't say much about Bo's books, but I really recommend you go back and spend some time with them. *WE'RE ALL DOING TIME* is still a part of my life today, and I still open it up and read some of it at least a couple of times a week. If you really want to make a better life for yourself and give something back for all the hurt you've caused, I suggest you work with it. Don't just read it – live it! The help you're longing for is there — you just got to keep looking and keep reaching out to GOD. He won't leave you empty handed. Practices like meditation and prayer really helped me clear my mind and slow down long enough to see my situation in a whole new light, so I strongly urge you to devote all the time you can into some daily practice. If you're wanting to feel closer to GOD, like you said in your letter, this is a good step to take.

The pain you feel is always going to be a reality for guys like us, it just comes with what we've done. Your sister and everyone else may never ever forgive you. I have family that still won't talk to me. Forgiveness was never my goal and not something that seemed like my place to worry about. All I knew was I didn't want to cause anyone else any more pain. Pat, you can live the rest of your life, even if it's in prison, as an example of a guy that did some really horrible things but has turned his life around and now has something to offer others. I felt I owed that to the people I hurt, and I know you do too, so get to work.

You're in our thoughts and prayers, Pat.

Your friend, Gabe

P.S. Also, reread "The Saddest Buddha" in *Lineage*. Although your story isn't exactly the same as the monk in that story, what he does with those feelings of sadness over something he can't take back can be relevant to you—it was to me.



Drawing by Albert Flores, before he was deported to Mexico.

Dear Bo (and of course Sita too),

Sending my deepest love and gratitude for all you have given me. It has now been six years since my last drink — all my bills are paid, am off probation and parole, I have the best job I have ever had in my life, and my spiritual roots grow deeper and deeper into the Dharma soil. My foundation is firm — you planted good seeds when I did my time. I am watering and weeding them daily. Thank God I made it through some very rough waters. — Jim

Dear Bo and Sita,

I hope this letter finds you both well. I'm looking at five years for theft and have already served 17 months on another grand larceny charge. It seems that after hurricane Katrina I lost my head—I'm from Bay St Louis, MS, one of the hardest hit by the hurricane. It was wiped off the face of earth. I lost everything, even people I love, and I pretty much flipped out.

What I wanted to ask you is, can a really bad experience change you for the better? A little background: After the storm, I didn't care much about me or what I was doing so when I got arrested in New Orleans, I spent a month in jail, and that was where I learned to be a monster.

After being beaten and beating up others, I know that I don't want to do this anymore. I want to be different. What can I do to keep on the right track? Any words

of advice would be appreciated.

In Christian Love,

Johnny

Hi Johnny,

I'm sorry to hear all that you've been through between hurricane Katrina and your terrible experience in jail. You ask "Can a really bad experience change you for the better?" Well, of course it can, Johnny. In fact, that's usually what does change most people. Bad experiences can change us for the better or for the worse, depending on how we use them. In fact, there's a chapter in my book *Deep & Simple* called, "Worldly Failure, Spiritual Success," about the difference between being humbled or being defeated by our painful experiences. Being humbled changes us for the better and opens our heart to caring more about others. Being defeated changes us for the worse and closes us off to others. Spend some time with that chapter.

Johnny, life is not a series of problems, it is a deep, spiritual mystery, a great adventure that guides us toward God. Some really horrible things are part of that mystery. They are not accidents, they are not random mistakes. They are tough but necessary steps along our journey toward becoming wise, unselfish people who realize what life is really about. It's about caring for others, even when you're locked up for crimes you committed before you changed. We are all right where

we need to be, and we have the ability to change for the better every hour of every day. The keys are simple: unselfishness and compassion. That's what my books are about, that's what my own life is about, nothing more. Nothing else has any value except this spiritual adventure we are on. And it's not for sissies!

Hope you find the books useful for your adventure there. We send all our love and blessings from here,

Bo



Dear HKF,

Man, I can really relate when Ray Neal had to go through the "growing pains" when he first got out. I wasn't gone for very long, but when I first got back out here in the free world, I almost went wild! I got drunk, man. It almost got out of hand, ya know? But I've calmed down now. I just didn't enjoy that stuff the way I used to, ya know? This morning, I looked out of the living room window, and the bright sun was pouring through, and a big furry bumble-bee was in the window cleaning himself and rubbing his legs on his antennae, and he cast this neat-looking insectoid shadow on my desk. I thought to myself, "This is really beautiful, and if I were drunk, I would've missed it." I am happy.

Peace, Love & Happiness to you all! J.G.



At the time of this writing, our dear friend Rick Smith is in hospice care, seriously ill with Hepatitis C. This photo is from a recent visit to the Alabama prison where Rick has lived for 30 years. Arjun Nicastro was Rick's cellmate for many years. Here are some of Rick's thoughts about his life in prison, from a 2002 interview published in the HKF newsletter.



Bud, Janaki, Dylan, Rick, and Sita

At night I practice a discipline that is awesome in scope. It's called "retrospect." I mentally go over my day and specifically notice any errors I made. Retrospect also makes me live differently during the day because I know I'll be looking back at the day that night.



The biggest service is example, especially with the young men in here. They need to see their elders with the right attitude. When men in here can see a fellow convict who is clean, sober, non-violent, and peaceful in his lifestyle, it gives them hope. Men in here will listen to you if you're not a hypocrite. You can't speak about things if you're doing the things you speak against.



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**“All water
is the
Ganges.
All land is
Varanasi.
Love
everything.”**

**—Neem
Karoli Baba**

Drawing of Neem Karoli
Baba by William Becker,
Susanville, CA

