

# PRISON-ASHRAM PROJECT

A Little News Magazine

Fall 1989

## GRIEF IS JUST LOVE WITH A BAD REPUTATION

*Sonny boy I know that you can't stay,  
You have to find your own way, and I love you.  
Sonny boy I know you'll take your stand  
And you will find a good man inside of you,  
Sonny boy.*

-- from a song, *Sonny Boy*, by Bo Lozoff, 1989

Josh, our only child, has left home. He's a bright, handsome, healthy, kind, talented eighteen-year-old, and now he's off to find his own Great Adventure. For now, that means living in L.A. to further his acting career which he's been pursuing since the age of nine. Sita and I are so proud of him and happy for him, and happy too for the world, because he'll surely be sharing his gifts to make it a better place. At the same time, our hearts are broken into a million pieces over the loss of our child into adulthood.

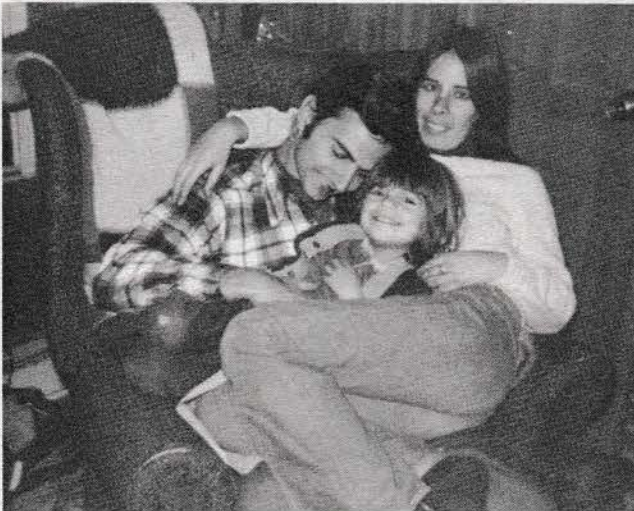
Our child-raising years are over, and they came and went so fast we can barely grasp it. I don't think I've ever felt more pain in my life, even over my father's death.

Yeah, yeah, Sita and I know all the standard consolations our families and friends have been offering: "Oh, you'll see him a lot!" "He'll call!" "You'll always be his parents." "You'll love each other even more," and on and on. And you know something? All those things are true, and they don't take a damn thing away from our hearts being broken. Because there's nothing wrong with our hearts being broken. There's nothing wrong with screaming in agony over the passing of Josh's childhood. There's nothing wrong with opening the drawers

to his dresser, seeing every drawer empty, and gasping in pain like my heart is being wrenched right out of my body without anesthetic. I built that dresser, along with his bed, by cutting the trees, milling the boards and crafting every little bit of it with love for my precious boy. There's nothing wrong with me and Sita sitting silently in the evening, holding hands and allowing the tears to flow down our cheeks as we listen to the aching emptiness in our home -- the home we all built together, nine-year-old Josh taking a million swings at each nail on the roof and bending more than a few of them beyond belief, Sita always keeping one eye on him no matter what else she was doing.

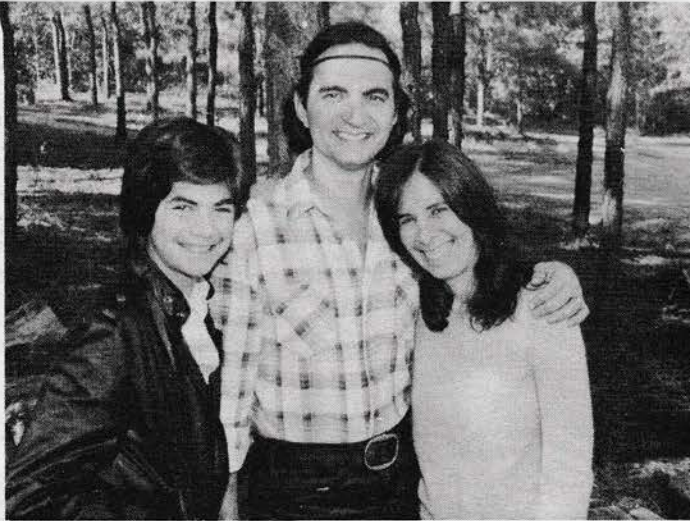
There's nothing wrong with letting your heart break, because it's always Love that breaks it. Each time it breaks, it grows back bigger (if you let it) and then it can hold even more Love. Then it breaks again, grows bigger

again, and on and on. That's how we gradually surrender all the boundaries we place on Love, so that one day we can open fully into the boundless Heart of God. If we avoid intensely painful experiences, we give up a great deal of spiritual power. The pain of our hearts stretching past the breaking point is one of the most meaningful spiritual initiations of a lifetime. Who ever said that life is supposed to be just happy or neutral or even bearable? Life is high drama, tragedy, comedy, adventure, mystery! We can't cross the Ocean of Existence by hiding in a safe little harbor! As George Bernard Shaw put it, "I want to be thoroughly used up when I die."





There's a spirituality on the rise these days which is terribly lopsided toward positive feelings and experiences. It started out all right about ten or fifteen years ago -- encouraging people to be more positive and stop causing so many self-created problems in their lives. But somewhere it blurred the line between self-created pain and natural, important pain. Now its main message seems to be to avoid pain and negativity at all cost -- avoid, ignore, deny, re-define -- anything so long as you stay positive. You're not supposed to say "oh shit!" when you get a flat tire or hit your thumb with a hammer, you're supposed to say something like "oh well, let go and let God." You're supposed to stick countless affirmations all over your refrigerator door to keep brainwashing yourself with positive thoughts. There's a whole raft of books and cassettes these days which basically teach you how to distort the realities of your life until they all look positive.



But why? When we really know that it's all God, we can play all our parts honestly, saying "Oh shit" at the flat tire and "how wonderful" at a wedding; we can say "damn it, look at those gas prices," and "thank God Johnny made parole;" we can say "I've been depressed lately," or "this is a great period in my life," with equal wisdom. And we can allow major milestones, like our children leaving home or the death of a loved one, or being sentenced to prison, to help us explore the profound mysteries of love and grief no matter how long it takes or what it looks like to our friends. We don't have to take advice like, "Okay, listen, you've had a good cry, now it's time to get on with your life."

Clinging to the positive side of life is not spiritual wisdom, it's spiritual wimpdom. The true seeker sees that neither positive nor negative, nor life nor death, are what they seem. As Walt Whitman said, *Every moment of Darkness and Light is a Miracle*. So when

you get kicked in the stomach, you don't have to force a smile and say "my, what a miracle!" You can double over and go "ooooff!" because doubling over and going "ooooff!" is a miracle too, and it's a lot more honest one.

Obviously we don't walk around hoping to get kicked in the stomach or run over by a train, but life will bring us many natural moments of pain and struggle anyway. We lose people we love, we get injured, sick, betrayed, lonely, afraid. Even Jesus experienced those natural human struggles. The new "affirmation" spirituality seems to be based on fear and denial of everything that hurts. But true spirituality allows us to experience *all* of life -- not just the easy parts -- with fearlessness, respect and honesty. One prisoner used to sign all his letters to me, "loss and gain, pleasure, pain, all the same." Life really *is* a miracle, just as it is, without dressing it up in funny hats or pretentious affirmations.

There's a story about the great Tibetan guru, Marpa, who lived hundreds of years ago. When his son died, Marpa cried for days, weeping and wailing in absolute agony. His students, though compassionate, were amazed to see an enlightened being in such an intense state of grief. Finally, a senior student approached him and said gently, "Master, you have taught us that everything in life comes and goes, and that it is folly to try to hold on to anyone or anything. You have taught us that these bodies and these identities, and even birth and death, are nothing but illusion. How can you carry on like this over the loss of your son if it is all just illusion? Marpa looked up and replied, "Yes, it is indeed all illusion, but this is *heavy* illusion!"

I was in my early twenties when I first heard that story, and my understanding of it for about ten years was that Marpa admitted to being thrown off-center by the heaviness of his son's death. But as I grew older and opened my heart further, I realized Marpa's point was actually that there's nothing off-center or unenlightened about carrying on as he did. Life is indeed an illusion of sorts, but sometimes the illusion is light and happy, and sometimes it's heavy and sad. The freedom of spirituality is that we're free to laugh or cry as each situation warrants. Spirituality is about learning to live in Truth each moment of our lives, it's not about imitating an egoic model of enlightened behavior. As an old saying goes, "Before enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water. After enlightenment, chopping wood and carrying water." The differences are tremendous, but not necessarily visible from the outside.

Besides, as pain and pleasure get really intense, they become mysteriously similar. Isn't it hard to tell when someone is crying tears of agony or tears of joy? Many times, even the one who's crying isn't sure. Agony and ecstasy are forever intertwined. If we avoid the agony, we push away ecstasy as well. I've been in



ecstasy several times, and I've also looked very closely at the nature of grief while right in the middle of it. The core of each is the same. Look for yourself.

Grief is nothing other than Love with a bad reputation. It's forceful and a little scary just because it's so internal and undistracted. It's definitely trying to break our heart, but that's good, not bad. We say that grief is a "sense of loss," but what does "loss" feel like? What's the feeling made of? As I look through our family album and see a youthful Bo & Sita holding our beautiful baby boy, and I face the incomprehensible fact that those sweet, sweet days are gone forever, what is that lump in my throat and pain in my heart? Isn't it made of love and joy and gratitude and awe and wonder?

So, these days we ache, and I wouldn't trade it for the world. It's so much more powerful than feeling nothing, or feeling superficially positive. It's an ache filled with nostalgia and wonder about how life rushes by, no matter how happily or how sadly we live it.

Most of us had pretty shitty childhoods, didn't we? I mean, I don't even remember the day I first left home at sixteen. I just wanted to get out of there. I certainly never helped build the family home or sat around playing rock and roll guitar with my dad, like Josh did. My dad was in his forties when I was born, and he was paralyzed from the time I was nine until he died fourteen years later. My mother worked all the time to take care of him and us four kids. My brothers and I unloaded trucks or did construction as soon as we each got big enough to work. You know what I'm talking about. Many of the people reading this newsletter had it a hell of a lot worse than I did. So you just couldn't wait to get old enough to leave and find something better, and there's this little part of your mind which hates childhood itself for having been so painful.

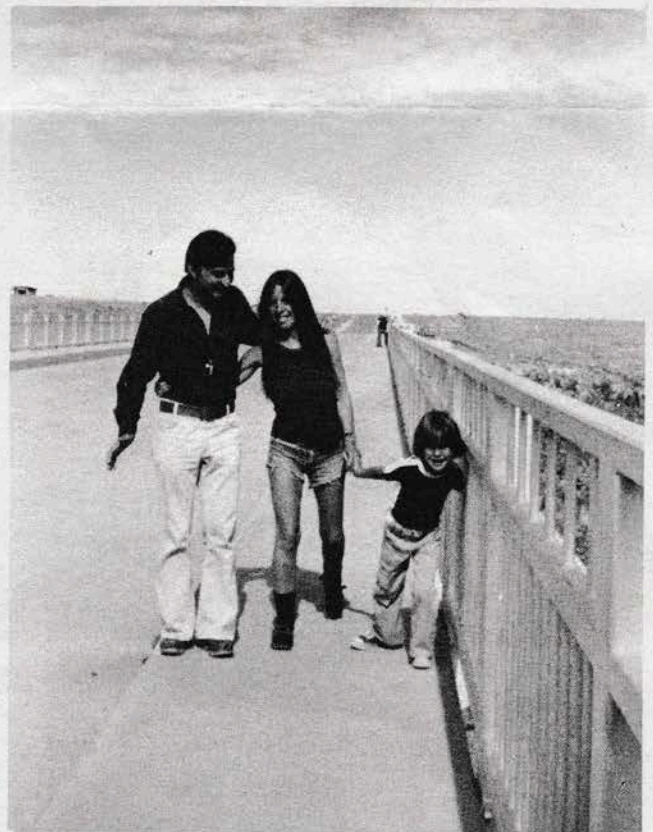
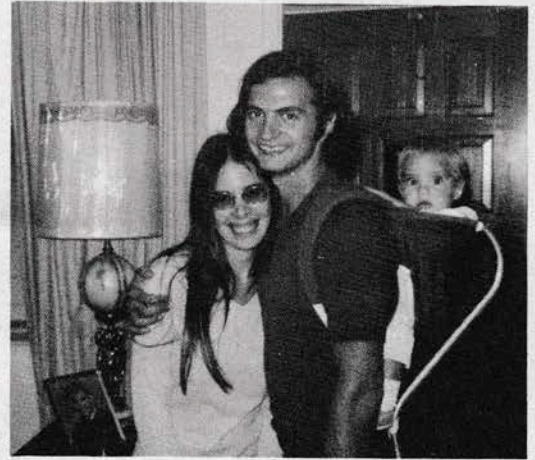
At the other extreme, Josh had a great childhood. When he was born, Sita and I had a chance to *be* the parents we wished we could have had -- youthful, healthy, hip, loving, supportive. Josh has been appreciated, respected and enjoyed every day of his life. Imagine how much it hurts to see Time march brazenly into our cozy little home and split up our threesome forever. If life hurts when it's this good, and life hurts when it's so bad, it's hard not to be filled with wonder, isn't it?

The bottom line is, we can live life fully as ordinary human beings, and at the same time see the bigger, transcendent picture. We can face success, failure, health, illness, birth and death as mortal humans, and simultaneously as immortal souls. We can be free enough to enjoy our highs, endure our lows, cheer our victories, and bitch about our defeats, all with an underlying sense of perspective and humor. Our attitude and vision may spare us from 90% of the suffering people bring into their lives through worry, greed, pessimism, anger and so forth, but there's no reason to run away from the 10% of "natural suffering" which comes into each life. We have much to learn from it. That's what Jesus referred to as "being in the world but not of it."

Seeing the way things really are -- which is why we try to quiet our minds and clear our vision through meditation, breathing, prayer, study, etc. -- we can play our parts with great power in every stage of our lives. We can live out a full, uncensored human experience in a way that brightens our

Light as we get older, because even though the body decays and falters, our hearts and souls can be free of fear, aversion, and the countless limitations we imposed on ourselves before we knew better.

And tonight, Sita and I can be free enough to feel the joy of God, and also hope for Josh to call and say hi. What a full plate!





## Meditation To Find Love Within Pain

Sit straight and quietly, eyes closed. Focus your awareness on your heart-center (right in the center of your chest), and imagine that each breath is going into and out of that spot. Now bring up any sense of loss or grief, such as a loved one who died, or abuse or neglect in your childhood, or happier times which are gone now. Don't dwell on the details, but rather let the pain itself grow in your heart. Feed it with your breath. Be alert not to automatically shut the pain off or push it away when it gets intense. As the pain grows, just breathe deeper and deeper.

Feelings of blame, shame, guilt or bitterness may arise as your pain gets more intense. Remember that this is a meditation practice. Don't get stuck in the "who's" or "why's" of your life. Just feel all your pain, and keep letting go of everything else on each out-breath.

Take this opportunity to look closely at pain while you're feeling it. What is the nature of the feeling? What is it made of? Again, don't go off into the details of your home life and so forth; you're looking at the feeling itself, not the thoughts and memories which brought the feeling into your heart.

If you allow all your pain to fill your heart, one of these days your heart will burst open into God's own Love. Who cares whether it hurts along the way? It won't kill you. In fact, it'll make you stronger and more alive than ever.

The keys to this practice are simply your willingness to feel what's inside of you, and your discipline to sit straight and keep breathing rather than letting the feelings overpower you.

## Upcoming Concerts, Talks, Workshops

**September 19th - October 7th:** Our fourth annual rock & roll concert tour in North Carolina prisons. The Bo Lozoff Band will perform and will also coordinate inmate performances in ten prisons this year.

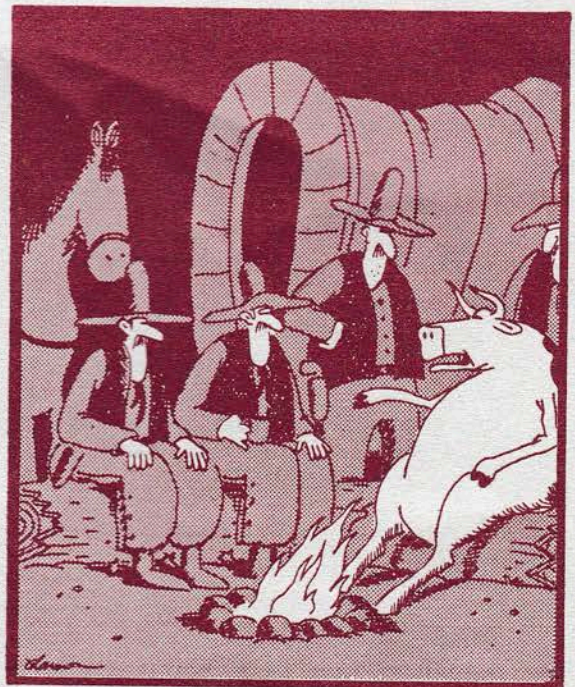
**September 29th (Friday):** The only public performance of the Bo Lozoff Band for 1989 will be a concert & dance at Under The Street, a music club on Broad Street in Durham, NC. Tickets will be \$5 at the door, with all funds going to Human Kindness Foundation. Come rock with us if you can (but don't break out to do it).

**November 2nd-4th:** Talks and workshops (both public and prison) in Calgary, Alberta. For information, contact The Yoga Centre of Calgary, #B-8, 118 11th Ave. S.E., Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2G 0X5.

**November 5th (Sunday):** Bo is giving the Sunday morning service and an afternoon workshop at the Seattle Church of Religious Science (11700 First Ave. N.E., Seattle WA 98125). As with all his talks, it's free of charge and open to all.

**November 6th-7th:** Seattle-area prison workshops.

**November 14th (Tuesday):** Bo will give an evening talk/discussion (music too) at: Unity Center of the Triangle, Woodoak Bldg., Suite GL100, 1100 Navajo Dr., Raleigh, NC 27609.



"A few cattle are going to stray off in the morning, and tomorrow night a stampede is planned around midnight. Look, I gotta get back. ... Remember, when we reach Santa Fe, I ain't slaughtered."



## RESOURCES

In response to a growing number of prisoners with AIDS who feel isolated, we'd like to offer a pen-pal link-up with a large AIDS support group here on the West Coast. If you're a prisoner with AIDS and want to correspond with AIDS patients who are living fulfilling lives, write:

HAY HOUSE  
501 SANTA MONICA BLVD., #602  
SANTA MONICA CA 90401

Habitat for Humanity welcomes applications from ex-prisoners. Habitat's work (building homes for the poor) is done by close to 400 different local projects scattered around the country. A person wanting to apply to one of those affiliate projects is best off contacting that project directly [or write Bo at Prison-Ashram Project; he's in touch with many local Habitat chapters]

A second way to be involved with Habitat in the U.S. is to work here at our headquarters. Most of our work here is not building, but office and administration. We use mostly "volunteers" but can provide furnished housing with utilities and a subsistence stipend for them. It might be a good place for someone to "get back on his/her feet." We do welcome applications from prisoners who will be released.

MARK LASSMAN-EUL, VOLUNTEER SERVICES  
HABITAT FOR HUMANITY  
HABITAT & CHURCH STREETS  
AMERICUS, GA 31709

C.C.I. is a support group for families, friends, ex-offenders, and incarcerated individuals. You are not alone, we are here. We understand the pain and frustration. Come join our family and help us grow. Our meetings are the second and fourth Saturday of the month.

HELEN GARNER  
COALITION OF CONCERNED INDIVIDUALS  
BOX 15493  
DETROIT MI 48215

Offender Aid & Restoration works to help jail inmates in a number of ways. O.A.R. presently has 10 offices in 6 states, and manages one-to-one volunteers, halfway houses, bail funds, job training & placement, etc. Want to start an O.A.R. chapter in your area? Write or call:

DAVE EBERHARDT, BALTIMORE O.A.R.  
401 EAST EAGER ST.  
BALTIMORE MD 21202  
(301) 396-8066, 396-8067

The Urgent Action Network of Amnesty International consists of people from every walk of life -- including prisoners -- who agree to be on call to write letters on behalf of political prisoners in urgent situations. We produce a monthly Urgent Action appeal containing explanations of prisoners' situations, background information, and recommended types of response to be the most helpful. The UA participant receives a different case each month and a monthly update on past cases. For more information on becoming a UA letter-writer, contact:

URGENT ACTION NETWORK, AMNESTY INT'L  
BOX 1270  
NEDERLAND CO 80466

## OTHER NEWS

### Update on Texas Book-Banning

Not much to report about our struggle with the Texas Department of Corrections over their banning of my book, *Lineage and Other Stories*. TDC has received about 300 letters from prisoners, psychologists, chaplains, professors, writers and all sorts of other readers asking them to reconsider their decision. So far they haven't budged, so now we're moving closer to court action.

If you haven't read *Lineage and Other Stories*, it's free to prisoners (or staff) and \$7 to non-prisoners.

### *Todos Estamos Encarcelados Is Here!!*

Our Spanish-language edition of *We're All Doing Time* is finally here. Its title is *Todos Estamos Encarcelados*, and like our other materials, it's available free to prisoners or prison staff (\$10 U.S. funds to non-prisoners).

If you have already requested a copy, you don't need to write us again. You'll be receiving it any day now (if you've been transferred since requesting it, please write us immediately so we don't send it to your old address).

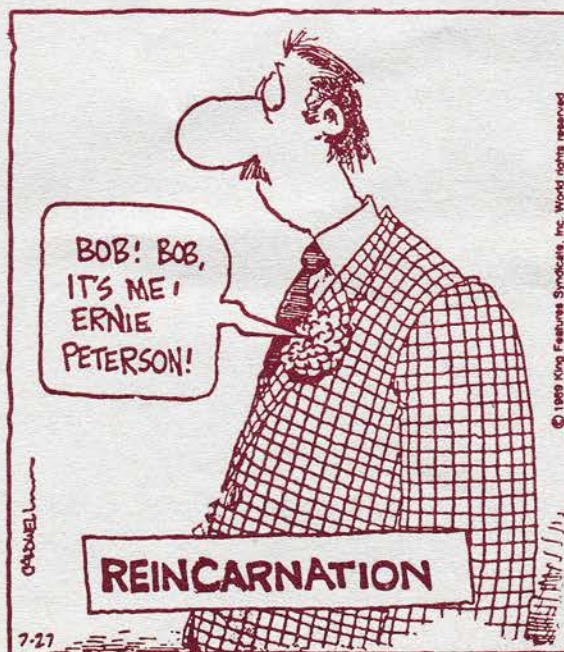
If you or anyone you know speaks Spanish better than English, just drop us a line and we'll send a copy.

### Threshold Books to publish *Lineage and Other Stories*

We're happy to announce a general-market edition of *Lineage and Other Stories* will be published by Threshold Books, of Putney, Vermont, in spring of 1990. Threshold's maxim is "Books of spiritual significance and high literary quality," so we're very flattered by their interest. At that time, *Lineage and Other Stories* should be available through nearly any retail book store. The Human Kindness Foundation will receive all royalties from book sales.

**Caldwell**

by John Caldwell





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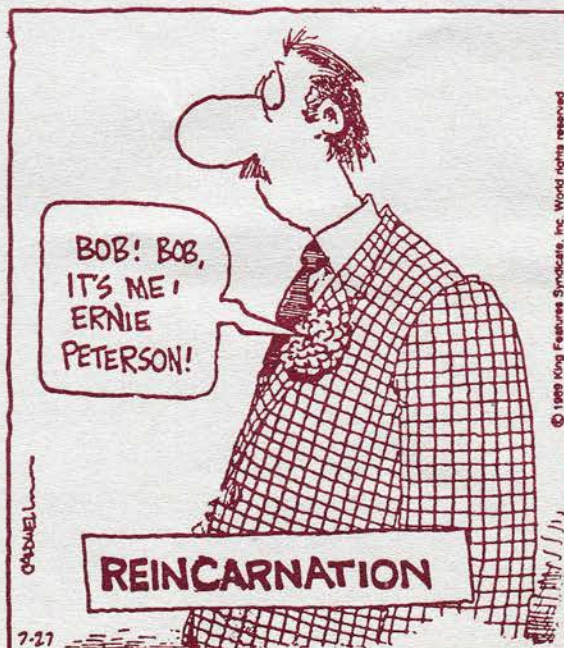
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Dear Bo,

I was recently sentenced to death and currently live on death row. I am a male-to-female transsexual but have not had the surgery and it doesn't look like that's going to be possible now due to my death sentence.

I was taking female hormones for a couple of years under a doctor's care in preparation for reassignment surgery. Since I arrived here the medical staff has refused to continue my estrogen therapy. It is absolutely vital to my psychological well-being to continue this treatment, and even the doctors I have seen here in prison agree to that fact. But I have run into an ultra-conservative political wall and getting the treatment looks grim at this point.

The other problem is that I've been infected with the HIV virus. I don't have full-blown AIDS yet but the doctors give me the prognosis, due to the somewhat rapid decline in my t-helper count and the presence of HIV-related symptoms, that I will develop full-blown AIDS in the next 18 months.

The state department of corrections has a unit that provides care for people who are HIV-infected, but due to my condemned status, I can't be transferred there. I am the only person who is permanently assigned to this prison who has HIV-related problems.

I am receiving none of the special care that my illness requires. All my attempts to get proper care have failed. This facility just isn't equipped for a condemned transsexual with AIDS and I am very concerned at the attitude of indifference to my problems.

I know that these are very unusual problems, and I don't know what you or anyone else can do about them. But please send me your book and tape, and offer any assistance you can.

sincerely, J

Dear J,

Hope you've gotten our package of materials by now and that you find some of the answers you're looking for in them. We have no knowledge or skills to make suggestions about the complex legal issues over your gender treatments and HIV-related stuff, but the blue card enclosed with your books has some helpful addresses on the back which you can try.

Although you didn't specifically ask for any personal advice, I'm going to offer a little, and hope it doesn't offend you. Here goes: J, you're on death row, you're in a gender Twilight Zone, and diagnosed as HIV-positive. Don't you think maybe it's time for you to focus your remaining energies on your inner work instead of legal/medical issues? I'm not saying you shouldn't try to get better treatment or anything like that; again, the legal resources on our blue card may be able to help.

But I'm talking about your energies. At a certain point, life slaps us upside the head hard enough to make us consider the truly profound issues -- which, frankly, have nothing to do with gender, sex, health, race, age, or any of the other "packaging" we find ourselves in.

That's really what my books and this project are all about. This isn't a sweet support group, it's a radical spiritual resource which few people use to its fullest. Given

your situation, it seems like if anybody decides to go all the way with us, it should be you.

So when you read the books and newsletters, don't read them as nice liberal affirmation-type spirituality. Let's cut out all the bullshit. Read them openly and try to see that we're talking about truths beyond space and time, beyond life and death, beyond the countless conditions which fill our lives. We're talking about the Great Mystery. There truly is one. We're talking about a part of you which is free and joyful beyond your wildest dreams. And it is absolutely independent of whether you complete your sex-change, fulfill your death sentence, or contract AIDS.

Again, I don't mean to offend you by all of this. But I do hope it has some spiritual shock value which can jumpstart you on a new course of how you decide to spend your time. I wish you all the best of everything in whatever you try to do.

Your Brother, Bo

Dear Bo,

Thanks for your recent newsletter. I agree with you 100% on your comments concerning the "Convict Code of Honor." It is not worth to live by and it is certainly not worth to die by. I recently did some research on it, and I thought your readers might like to know its true history, and maybe help them make up their minds about abandoning the code (as I have).

You have it partly correct when you state that this so-called code of honor was established by New York's petty criminals during the prohibition era. You could add that this took place because at that time, it was one of the rare periods when the city of New York was trying to get its cops to live up to the same laws as the rest of the citizenry. So they imprisoned a large number of cops for such crimes as bribery and extortion. These former cops kept up their previous profession in prison and they established this so-called code, in order to protect their activities against other prisoners. The Convict Code only works against prisoners, and as soon as we realize this, the better.

Sincerely yours, F

Dear Bo,

I hope this finds you and yours steppin' high. Things stink on this end, but who gives a shit?

You know, I'm not writing to fuck with you or anything, but I've waited a long time to speak my peace about what you said in reply to my last letter (Summer '88 newsletter, about being in prison and his girlfriend being on death row). I just wonder, if it were Sita sitting on death row, would you find "beauty within the ugliness" then? I don't think so.

So how the hell am I supposed to? You don't have to answer that... you don't even have to answer this letter as far as that goes. I just wanted to say what I wanted to say. I did.

B

Dear B,

Back to the drawing board, brother, because you still don't get it. Yes, if it were Sita on death row, or my



mother, or me, or my son, it would still be beautiful amidst the ugliness and pain of it. I'm not just blowing smoke, I'm giving you a teaching you don't quite understand.

There's a great mystery going on. This is a lot bigger ball game than you realize, and you have to quiet your mind to understand. I KNOW it hurts; please don't think I'm being casual with you. I'm just trying to point you in a very real direction of ancient truth and other levels of reality. If you get tired enough of feeling like you feel, what do you have to lose by looking upward and inward? It's not bullshit, I swear.

Your brother, Bo

Dear Bo and Sita,

Today read your spring newsletter, "Fearless Adventure..." and it hit the spot. The spot being a pain, a voidful feeling deep within. And this when I'd just come from Mass! I tried an Amy Grant tape, no luck; how about Wanda Jackson...nothing. "Something" made me search your newsletter, which "I hadn't had the time" to read yet... then came the tears and the knowledge of what was painning me. I did unearth a bit of my pain (of which I was totally unaware -- I'm a great one for positive thinking, gratitude, affirmations, etc., etc.)

I could not bear the pain of feeling separate from God. Somehow I had a vague feeling this morning that I needed to feel closer to Jesus but "I" couldn't make it happen. And then reading Bo's words told me I was okay and on the right path (however shaky and feeble).

I'm a recovering alcoholic (9 years sober), Alanon, codependency group, Cursillista, returning-to-the-flock Catholic, etc... and believe me, this is giving me a new life. But in the past year or so (after years of fear) I've had the courage to face the fact that my two sons are in prison; had the courage to read *We're All Doing Time*, the courage to become involved in one son's recovery and therapy in

prison. And the courage to say "no" to the other son (hardest of all because of my guilt and his manipulations) but still love him and pray for him. This was one of the back-burner things which was troubling me this morning.

The other was a decision of whether to accept an invitation to serve in the Peace Corps in Africa for two years. This is the dream of a lifetime, and took a year to get through paperwork, but now I know that I could not run away from my family again. My service is going to have to be right here, and that's okay.

Thank you both for opening a door -- not only for "prisoners", but for those of us prisoners outside the walls who must bear the burdens along with our sons, daughters, help carry their crosses and lighten their loads, and assume our responsibility along with the rest of society. "There but for the Grace of God."

You know, when Bo talked about "I gotta get BIGGER to hold that one" -- I am realizing that thru your book and words I am indeed getting BIGGER. I attend lifer's events (my sons are not lifers) and chat with the men at picnics, etc., and can feel compassion -- not the former fear and repulsion. I can love my sons and not their deeds. And who can judge my deeds versus theirs? I know I am capable of murder, and can lie, steal, cheat, cause pain to others...

You know, though, that you have blown away many of the concepts which I've been incorporating into my life these days -- "let's keep it positive, baby!, etc... But what you have given me to put in its place -- the prospect of becoming a "Spiritual Warrior" -- Yahoo! I am learning ways now to become more deeply, honestly involved in the lives of my family, friends, and community. Thank you.

I Love you both, J

*We are now on the wheel of life that turns and turns, we wander forever from one birth to another. Here we are kings, there we live out all our life on the tip of a blade of grass.*

*What is this life flowing in our bodies like fire? What is it?*

*Life is like hot iron, ready to pour. Choose the mold, and life will burn it.*

*Mahabharata, retold by William Buck*

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