

Human Kindness Foundation

a little good news

Christmas 1996

WHEN EVERYTHING GOES WRONG

Go ahead, light your candles and burn your incense and ring your bells and call out to God, but watch out, because God will come, and He will put you on His Anvil and fire up His Forge and beat you and beat you until He turns brass into Pure Gold.

——— paraphrased from Sant Keshavadas

Dear Family,

The above quote may sound a little scary, but actually, doesn't it also provide some comfort? Don't you and I often feel just beaten all to hell by our constant struggles, by the unwanted situations or annoying people in our lives? We may feel bruised, defeated, exhausted — but then remember, "Is this what it feels like to be beaten and beaten until I am pure gold?" If we can take just the littlest bit of faith that way, maybe we can go on one more day. Faith is the key. But we so often misunderstand it by a mile. We create a so-called faith which is more like a letter to Santa Claus for everything we want, and then when we don't get it, we "lose our faith."

Sita and I, along with a few members of our staff, recently spent a day on death row in Raleigh, North Carolina. I gave a couple of talks and we were able to spend some time hanging out with the condemned men. One of them approached me to express his appreciation for our visit, and to share his glad tidings that Jesus has saved him. Now he knows that his next court appearance will go in his favor. He said Jesus will not allow him to be executed. He'll be sprung from prison; reunited with his family. Jesus won't let him down. The fellow beamed and said he has "complete faith."

An elderly woman recently wrote that she always had strong faith in God and was devoutly religious, but then she developed bladder cancer. Though she prayed, followed all the right regimens, and even traveled great distances to be blessed by holy sages, God did not fulfill her expectations. Her faith was shattered.

Does Jesus not love our condemned friend if the court upholds his execution? Is God betraying the prayers of the elderly woman if she dies of cancer?

Better Catch Up On Religious History

If we take even a brief look at the history of the great world religions, it becomes clear that faith and religion have more to do with our response to things going wrong than with our problems being magically set right.

Faith is a profound acceptance of life's Ultimate Goodness no matter what happens.

It's a willingness on our part to accept any immediate situation — execution, cancer, loss, betrayal — as part of God's power and Grace and Love for us, like the following story from the Sikh religion illustrates:

One of the great Sikh warrior/gurus was captured by the invading Mughal army. The enemy emperor was very excited to have finally defeated one of the pillars of the Sikh faith. He summoned his soldiers to bring the prisoner to him.

Bound in chains, the Sikh general was forced to his knees before the emperor. The emperor mocked him and said, "Let's see your great faith save you now!" The Sikh General calmly replied, "I can write down a magic formula which will shield me from all harm."

The emperor was furious, and shouted, "Bring this lunatic a paper and pen!"

The Sikh general wrote a few words, folded the paper and kept it in his hand. The emperor said, "Now, cut off his head!" A soldier raised his sharp sword, cut off the Sikh's head, and his body fell lifeless to the ground.

The paper was taken from his hand and read aloud: "You can have my head, but not my Faith."

The Holy Ones of every religion came here to show us the way that a person of faith can respond, not to a world which supports or rewards our faith, but to a world which often despises, condemns, rejects, exiles, tortures or even murders us for it.

Jesus didn't come to get us off of death row or heal our cancer or patch up our worldly problems. He came to inspire the courage in us to live as He did — to love others and dedicate our lives to the common good. Faith in such a way of life is a very radical choice, because it is opposite to nearly everything we have been taught. It is extremely unpopular, too. He got killed for it. So did many of his apostles and disciples through the centuries.

But if we make that choice and stick to it, we will touch something so incomprehensibly perfect and loving and wonderful that it no longer matters so much whether we get our heads chopped off or spend the rest of our days behind bars. Once we touch that Love, the rest is small potatoes. Hard to believe, but true, I promise.

Saint Stephen touched that Love, and it was so fulfilling that even as an angry mob stoned him to death shouting "Blasphemer!!", all he could cry out was, "Father, please don't hold this against them." Imagine such Love!

Mahatma Gandhi touched that Love. As an assassin's bullet tore into his brain, his immediate response was, "Jai Ram!" ("Hail God!").

It Doesn't Always End So Badly

When the Chinese invaded Tibet, they killed countless peaceful monks and destroyed most of the monasteries. One Chinese General was especially known for his barbaric cruelty of disemboweling monks with his sword while they screamed for mercy. At one remote monastery, word came that this particular general and his band of soldiers were on their way. All the monks fled to the hills except one elderly monk who sat calmly in the main hall.

When the general arrived and heard that one monk had not run in fear, he was enraged. He threw open the doors of the great hall, strode over to the small man and screamed, "DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM??! WHY, I COULD TAKE MY SWORD AT THIS VERY MOMENT, PLUNGE IT INTO YOUR BELLY AND REMOVE YOUR ORGANS WITHOUT BATTING AN EYE!!"

The elderly monk looked into the General's eyes and softly replied, "But do you know who I am? Why, I could allow you to take your sword at this very moment, plunge it into my belly and remove my organs, without batting an eye."

The General meekly lowered his eyes, bowed, backed away, and ordered his troops to leave the monastery at once.

So it's not that things always turn out badly. Indeed, every religion is full of such stories about the incredible power of pure faith. Faith has indeed healed the sick, raised the dead, parted the seas, moved mountains.

But it's a serious mistake to think that such outcomes are the point. They are not, and never have been, the point of faith. They are just *demonstrations* of the Power and Glory we're dealing with — not guarantees. The elderly monk in the story above was telling the truth: He really would have been just as calm and fearless if the general had indeed disemboweled him. His faith was not tied to a particular result. He knew it was small potatoes.

Miracle stories serve to remind us that if God wanted our problems to be miraculously solved, they would be. So if the court says, "Execute him," or the doctor says, "Sorry, ma'am, but you're not responding to treatment," or Pontius Pilate says "Crucify Him," then we know that God had the power to change it and didn't. So we can walk calmly even through the valley of the shadow of death, knowing "Thou art with me." No bitterness, no doubts, no panic.

When Jesus left His disciples the final time and said, "Take courage and be of good cheer, for I am with you always," don't forget that He was speaking to a group of men who would be imprisoned, despised, hunted, executed. Jesus knew that, yet said, "Be of good cheer."

God's Power, Our Power

The issue is surely not one of power. Jesus has the power to save our death-row friend from execution, just as He had the power to spare Himself from the indignities and abuses He suffered at Calvary, or to pave an easier way for His apostles. Yet He didn't use His power to do so. And of course God can cure cancer, and sometimes does. But not usually. Jesus didn't heal *all* the lame; He didn't give sight to *all* the blind; He didn't raise *all* the dead.

A friend of mine was once suffering from kidney stones. One night when he was in unbearable pain, he cried out to Jesus, "Jesus, take this pain, please," and was startled to hear in response, "But I just *gave* it to you."

God creates beans, fire, water, and a pot. God creates the principle that beans will taste better and be digested more easily when they're cooked. God creates the principle that water boils when heated with fire. Then it's up to us.

We have the power to abide or not abide by these principles of God's law, to use or not use them to make a good meal. We can choose to put the pot on our heads, eat raw beans and pour the water onto the ground. We can do all sorts of silly or ignorant things with the best of ingredients and the most wonderful natural laws.

God's power designs and creates unlimited possibilities; our power is to bring the best of those possibilities to life in the world instead of the worst.

Look around at the world. People say, "Why does God allow children to starve, why does God allow innocent people to be murdered, why does God allow so many wars?" But God has merely created all possibilities, including the ingredients necessary for a miserable world or a wonderful world. We have the free will to use the ingredients in a way which will bring more peace or more suffering. That's our choice, yours & mine, all the time.

We continue to choose anger over Love, fear over Love, national boundaries over Love, greed over Love, race over Love, self-protection over Love. God has given us Free Will so that we can make such choices. If we don't like the way the world is going, then we can begin to choose differently right now, today, right here, wherever we are. Waiting for everyone else to change first is a fool's game. Waiting for others to love us first, before we are willing to love them, is a fool's game.

The Buddha said that the biggest mistake we can make is to want to be loved. How much we are loved by others is often outside our power. But what is within our power is our choice to love others. On the cross, hated and mocked, Jesus chose to say, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they do." He loved them. He showed us the Way. He provided an example of following the Buddha's advice: Focus on your ability to love, not your demand to receive it.

Choose kindness, choose love and unselfishness, choose faith, choose humility, even on death row or in the hospital or out on the streets sleeping under a bridge. Very often our immediate environments or circumstances are not under our control, but our choice of Faith and

Love always is. We will not be judged by what others did to us, but by how we responded. As a society, we will not be judged by how much crime there was, but by how we dealt with it. Look at the sad choices we're making!

Worldly Failure and Spiritual Success

Many of you who receive these newsletters consider your lives to be a miserable failure. Great! You're halfway there. You are "poor in Spirit." **Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.**

From the eyes of the Spirit, it is never too late to turn it around. And once we do, all those very things we considered to be our worst failures turn out to have been the very building blocks of our compassion and humility.

I love the story of Simon Peter. He was the boldest, the bravest, the most macho of all Jesus' disciples. When Jesus asked all the apostles, "How do you see me?" Peter was the only one who had the guts to say, "I see you as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God." Peter was a no-nonsense kind of guy. But he wasn't humble. He hadn't failed enough yet. He thought he was tough.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus hinted that there would be some trouble. Peter's response: "Well, even if the others run away, **I** will never leave you, Lord; **I** will never betray you." Jesus said, "Oh, Peter, you're just like all the rest." Peter's reply: "No way, Lord. **I will not betray you. I would give my life for you!**" Jesus said, "Peter, before the cock crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you ever even knew me."

No way. Not Peter. Tough guy. Righteous con. Not a coward. "Jesus is wrong this time. I'll prove it to him."

We all know how it turned out, but have you ever thought about why? And why would Jesus then make that very same coward the rock of His church for all time to come? He ran away. He lied. He chickened out. He betrayed Him. He failed miserably to be a decent human being. And that is precisely what made him ready to be the rock of the church. The one quality Peter lacked was humility. He thought he was better than all the rest, better than you and me. How then could he lead us to salvation?

So Peter's most miserable worldly failure led to his greatest spiritual success. His pride was humbled. That's what it took.

You and I have failed many times. We have let people down. We have been cowards, cheats, liars. We have hurt ourselves and others. If we allow our failures to open us up instead of shut us down, if we allow them to humble us instead of defeat us, then every lousy thing we have ever done can be turned into the very foundation of our devotion and compassion.

Do you "free-worlders" think you are better than a convict? Do you convicts think you are better than a snitch? Do you snitches think you are better than a baby-raper? Then you haven't failed enough yet. We are not better than anyone. That's the message. We have no right to look down on anyone, no matter what they have done.

Every human being contains the highest of the high and the lowest of the low. Peter had to find it out the hard way. I hope you and I don't. Peter must have been so ashamed and humiliated, he probably never wanted to show his face again. But he did. He came down from his lofty perch. He didn't quit or run away. He didn't try to forget all about it. He accepted his flawed nature, opened his heart and moved forward a quieter, gentler man who knew he indeed was "just like all the rest." He could then become the saint we are all destined to become.

Putting our Failures to Good Use

Without Peter's failure, there may have been no Christian church. Without my failures, there would certainly be no Human Kindness Foundation, no *We're All Doing Time*. Without your failures, you may not have the credibility to help some of the young kids on your cellblock or in your neighborhood to find a more decent way of life than guns and drugs.

So the question is, are you using your failures yet? Are you getting the spiritual point of your failures, and moving into a lifestyle devoted to faith and kindness and helping others? You and I deal with many people every day. Every one of those people hopes we are kind and humble and unselfish. They don't care where we learned it. They don't care whether it came easy or hard, or through failures or successes. If the building you are sitting in catches on fire, the people around you don't care where or how you developed courage; they just hope you've got it now so you can help them!

One thing you can begin taking for granted is that every person you meet who seems to have courage, dignity, compassion and humility, has experienced failure and weakness and shame. So don't be an egomaniac and feel like you're the only one, or you're a worse one than the next. Everybody's got that stuff. Our spiritual victory rests only on what we are willing to do with it.

Faith and Failure

Maybe it seems that this Christmas message started out to be about faith and led into the subject of failure. But the two are not so separate. Our death-row friend and the elderly lady with cancer express a type of faith which is tied to getting a particular result. Peter the Apostle had a faith which seemed to be as much in himself as in Christ. Both kinds of faith can lead us into failure because they are limited. We can then "lose our faith" as the elderly woman did, or we can allow that failure to lead us into a deeper, humbler faith in the Glory and Mercy of God, as did Peter. The choice is in our hands.

Sita and Josh and I, along with all the members of our community, wish you every blessing during this Holy Season. We love you and are grateful to know you. May you take courage and be of good cheer. You are never alone or unloved, and there is a saint within you patiently yearning to be expressed more fully through your life.

Bo + The Family

THE RABBI'S GIFT

This story concerns a monastery that had fallen upon hard times. Once a great order, as a result of waves of antimonastic persecution in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the rise of secularism in the nineteenth, all its branch houses were lost and it had become decimated to the extent that there were only five monks left in the decaying mother house: the abbot and four others, all over seventy in age. Clearly it was a dying order.

In the deep woods surrounding the monastery there was a little hut that a rabbi from a nearby town occasionally used for a hermitage. Through their many years of prayer and contemplation the old monks had become a bit psychic, so they could always sense when the rabbi was in his hermitage. "The rabbi is in the woods, the rabbi is in the woods again," they would whisper to each other. As he agonized over the imminent death of his order, it occurred to the abbot at one such time to visit the hermitage, and ask the rabbi if by some possible chance he could offer any advice that might save the monastery.

The rabbi welcomed the abbot at his hut. But when the abbot explained the purpose of his visit, the rabbi could only commiserate with him. "I know how it is," he exclaimed. "The spirit has gone out of the people. It is the same in my town. Almost no one comes to the synagogue anymore." So the old abbot and the old rabbi wept together. Then they read parts of the Torah and quietly spoke of deep things. The time came when the abbot had to leave. They embraced each other. "It has been a wonderful thing that we should meet after all these years," the abbot said, "but I have still failed in my purpose for coming here. Is there nothing you can tell me, no piece of advice you can give me that would help me save my dying order?"

No, I am sorry," the rabbi responded. "I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you."

When the abbot returned to the monastery his fellow monks gathered around him to ask, "Well, what did the rabbi say?"

"He couldn't help," the abbot answered. "We just wept and read the Torah together. The only thing he did say, just as I was leaving - it was something cryptic - was that the Messiah was one of us. I don't know what he meant."

In the days and weeks and months that followed, the old monks pondered this and wondered whether there was any possible significance to the rabbi's words.

"The Messiah is one of us? Could he have possibly meant one of us monks here at the monastery? If that's the case, which one? Do you suppose he meant the abbot? If he meant anyone, he probably meant Father abbot. He has been our leader for more than a generation. On the other hand, he might have meant Brother Thomas. Certainly Brother Thomas is a holy man. Everyone knows that Thomas is a man of light. Certainly he could not have meant Brother Elred! Elred gets crotchety at times. But come to think of it, even though he is a thorn in most people's sides, when you look back on it, Elred is virtually always right. Often very right. Maybe the rabbi did mean Brother Elred. But surely not Brother Phillip. Phillip is so passive, a real nobody. But then, almost mysteriously, he has a gift for somehow always being there when you need him. He just magically appears by your side. Maybe Phillip is the Messiah. Of course the rabbi didn't mean me. He couldn't have possibly have meant me. I'm just an ordinary person. Yet supposing he did? Suppose I am the Messiah? O God, not me. I couldn't be that much for You, could I?"

As they contemplated in this manner, the old monks began to treat each other with extraordinary respect on the off chance that one among them might be the Messiah. And on the off, off chance that one of them might be the Messiah, they began to treat themselves with extraordinary respect.

Because the forest in which it was situated was beautiful, it so happened that people still occasionally came to visit the monastery to picnic on its tiny lawn, to wander along some of its paths, even now and then to go into the dilapidated chapel to meditate. As they did so, without even being conscious of it, they sensed this aura of extraordinary respect that now began to surround the five old monks and seemed to radiate out from them and permeate the atmosphere of the place. There was something strangely attractive, even compelling, about it. Hardly knowing why, they began to come back to the monastery more frequently to picnic, to play, to pray. They began to bring their friends to show them this special place. And their friends brought their friends.

Then it happened that some of the younger men who came to visit the monastery started to talk more and more with the monks. After a while one of them asked if he could join them. Then another. And another. So within a few years the monastery had once again become a thriving order and, thanks to the rabbi's gift, a vibrant center of light and spirituality in the realm.

— Chassid, from "Stories of Spirit, Stories of Heart," by Jack Kornfield & Christina Feldman

Isaac M. ...

PRACTICE: "KINDNESS AS A MARTIAL ART"

Terry Dobson, an American martial arts master and former U.S. Marine, was a big, powerful man who learned nonviolence by studying the Japanese discipline of *Aikido*, which means "Way of Harmony." In Aikido, the emphasis is on restoring peace rather than winning a battle. Terry told many stories to illustrate that the "enemy" is usually no further away than our own mind and heart. This is one of our favorites:

The train clanked and rattled through the suburbs of Tokyo on a drowsy spring afternoon. Our car was comparatively empty - a few housewives with their kids in tow, some old folks going shopping. At one station the doors opened, and suddenly the afternoon quiet was shattered by a man bellowing violent, incomprehensible curses. The man staggered into our car. He wore laborer's clothing, and he was big, drunk, and dirty. Screaming, he swung at a woman holding a baby. The blow sent her spinning into the laps of an elderly couple. It was a miracle that the baby was unharmed.

The train lurched ahead, the passengers frozen with fear. I stood up. I was young then, and in pretty good shape. I'd been putting in a solid eight hours of Aikido training nearly every day for the past three years. I thought I was tough. Trouble was, my martial skill was untested in actual combat. As students of Aikido, we were not allowed to fight.

"Aikido," my teacher said again and again, "is the art of reconciliation. Whoever has the mind to fight has broken his connection with the universe. If you try to dominate people, you are already defeated. We study how to resolve conflict, not how to start it." I listened to his words. I tried hard. I felt both tough and holy. In my heart, however, I wanted an absolutely legitimate opportunity whereby I might save the innocent by destroying the guilty. "This is it!" I said to myself, getting to my feet. "People are in danger and if I don't do something fast, they will probably get hurt."

Seeing me stand up, the drunk roared, "Aha! A foreigner! You need a lesson in Japanese manners!" I gave him a slow look of disgust and dismissal. I planned to take this turkey apart, but he had to make the first move. I wanted him mad, so I pursed my lips and blew him an insolent kiss. "All right!" he hollered, "You're gonna get a lesson!"

But a split second before he could move, someone shouted "Hey!" It was earsplitting. I remember the strangely joyous, lilting quality of it — as though you and a friend had been searching for something, and he suddenly stumbled upon it. "Hey!" I wheeled to my left; the drunk spun to his right. We both stared down at a little old Japanese. He must have been well into his seventies, this tiny gentleman, sitting there immaculate in his kimono. He took no notice of me, but beamed delightedly at the laborer, as though he had a most important, most welcome secret to share. "C'mere," the old man said in an easy tone, beckoning to the drunk. "C'mere and talk with me." He waved his hand lightly.

The big man followed, as if on a string. He planted his feet belligerently in front of the old gentleman, and roared above the clacking wheels, "Why the hell should I talk to you?" The drunk now had his back to me. If his elbow dropped so much as a millimeter, I'd drop him in his socks. The old man continued to beam at the laborer. "What'cha been drinkin'?" he asked, his eyes sparkling with interest. "I been drinkin' sake," the laborer bellowed back, "and it's none of your business!"

"Oh, that's wonderful," the old man said, "absolutely wonderful! You see, I love sake too. Every night, me and my wife — she's 76, you know — we warm up a little bottle of sake and take it out into the garden, and we sit on an old wooden bench. We watch the sun go down, and we look to see how our persimmon tree is doing. My great-grandfather planted that tree, and we worry about whether it will recover from those ice storms we had last winter. Our tree has done better than I expected, though, especially when you consider the poor quality of the soil. It is gratifying to watch when we take our sake and go out to enjoy the evening — even when it rains!"

As he struggled to follow the old man's conversation, the drunk's face began to soften. His fists slowly unclenched. "Yeah," he said, "I love persimmons too..." His voice trailed off.

"Yes," said the old man, smiling, "and I'm sure you have a wonderful wife." "No," replied the laborer. "My wife died." Very gently, swaying with the motion of the train, the big man began to sob. "I don't got no wife, I don't got no home, I don't got no job. I'm so ashamed of myself." Tears rolled down his cheeks; a spasm of despair rippled through his body.

Now it was my turn. Standing there in my well-scrubbed youthful innocence, my make-this-world-safe-for-democracy righteousness, I suddenly felt dirtier than he was. Then the train arrived at my stop. As the doors opened, I heard the old man cluck sympathetically. "My my," he said, "that is a difficult predicament indeed. Sit down here and tell me about it."

I turned my head for one last look. The laborer was sprawled on the seat, his head in the old man's lap. The old man was softly stroking the filthy, matted hair. As the train pulled away, I sat down on a bench. What I had wanted to do with muscle had been accomplished with kind words. I had just seen Aikido tried in combat, and the essence of it was love. I would have to practice the art with an entirely different spirit. It would be a long time before I could speak about the resolution of conflict.



LETTERS

Dear Bo & Sita,

When I was 15 ½ I met a girl 18 who was perfect. We did everything together. She and I were virgins, so we were both our first loves. All through our relationship she showed nothing but unconditional love.

However, after 5 or 6 months of our 2½-year relationship I began to test her and verbally abuse her. She went away to college so I missed her terribly. That only lasted for a year. That whole year I constantly made her jealous on purpose by sometimes making things up. Please understand I did this because I missed her and thought that by doing this she would move back home from college.

It worked. The next year she enrolled at home. However, I did not stop. I kept on verbally abusing her. I also made up stupid rules for her to live by. I did not even believe in them, I guess I made them up to test her unconditional love. She always passed! I constantly broke up with her over petty things. Well, one day when I did, she did not come back. For eight months I felt dead inside.

On the end of the eighth month, I took a hatchet to her house and killed her so my pain inside would stop. It was a brutal murder and I started crying and begging God right after for it not to be true. Four months later I was arrested and received thirty years for my crime. I have been in jail for three years now.

I thought that by killing her my pain would stop. Now it has come back tenfold. It is the same pain I had for eight months when we were apart. I am considering suicide. All I think about is her. I get so jealous even now, even though she is dead. I keep wishing for that one last chance to win her back. I know this is different from your other letters but I am looking for some love and someone who will not just say "get over it."

Bo and Sita, you could not imagine how I feel. You could not imagine the love I had that is gone now for everything, even myself and the will to live. Please Bo, write me back soon.

Love, Hurting Bad, M

Dear M,

You did a terrible, terrible thing. You know that. You can't take it back. You know that, too. You'll be experiencing the consequences of it for the rest of your life — whether you get out of prison or not. You know that, too. So you already know all the things that look hopeless and painful and make you consider suicide.

But what you don't know is that life is *solely, totally, entirely* a spiritual journey. Even now. Even for you. It is never too late. Think of Dismas, the thief on the cross next to Christ. If it was ever too late for anyone, he would seem to be the guy: His whole life was a total bust, he was crucified and in the middle of dying. Yet even then, he chose to surrender to the spiritual journey and Christ told him, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise."



artwork by Gilbert Gutierrez, Tx

And here I am 2,000 years later talking about Dismas to encourage you not to give up. His crimes, his failures, his life were not wasted. Yours need not be wasted either.

In every religion, murderers have gone on to become saints. That doesn't mean it's easy, nor does it mean the pain all goes away.

If you take a selfish path, basically just trying to make your pain go away, you will be living in hell. If you take a deeply spiritual, unselfish path of trying to gain wisdom and compassion and dedicating your life to something meaningful, then you will experience the genuine Mercy of God in its purest, highest sense.

Unselfishness and spiritual practice are your keys to the Kingdom. You need to devote your whole life to this, M. Suicide is a coward's way, a fool's way, because you'll discover that the pain doesn't end when your body dies. The pain *changes* when you have turned your life over to goodness and kindness and holiness.

You notice, I didn't say "ends," I said "changes," because ending the pain is

merely one more example of selfish thinking. That's what prompted the murder in the first place — incredible selfishness. You will not find your way out of this by selfishness. You will find meaning, purpose & strength only by changing that lifelong pattern of selfishness, which will take a lot of practice and constant vigilance.

And we'll try to help you. We try to dedicate our lives to kindness and a lot of practice — meditation, prayer, healthy diet, etc. — because we have felt this Great Love and Mercy and we know that it's really all that counts.

Nothing else matters. Whether you get out of prison or not, whether I die now or in twenty years, nothing else matters other than the ocean of love and mercy and holiness which the spiritual life is about. There are profound truths, indescribable realizations for you to experience. And no one is holding you back except yourself. I hope you decide to go for it, and if you do, we'll be going the distance with you.

How do you start? — no drugs, no booze, no scamming, no porno magazines, no lies; it means really becoming like a monk in that cell. Study my books, put them into practice. Meditate. Develop self-discipline and true kindness. See yourself as a humble student beginning a well-worn path to salvation. Whether you know it or not, you will have the invisible help and blessings of all the saints and sages right there where you are. You will have guidance when you need it.

You are not alone, you are not unloved, you are not beyond repair. Don't try to make the pain go away. Begin praying for help to allow the pain to bring you true compassion for all beings, so that you will never harm another soul. Read my story, *The Saddest Buddha*, in the book, *Lineage and Other Stories*. It's a lot like your situation. Work with that teaching for a while.

And then, in a few months, let me hear from you and see what your life looks like then. We all send you our blessings and prayers that you turn in the right direction, brother. We love you and we know you can do this even if you don't know it yourself.

Love, Bo



So Long, Donny & Frankie ♥♥♥♥♥

Two of our friends died since the time of our last newsletter, and they were your friends too even if you didn't know them: Stephen Donaldson, known to readers of *We're All Doing Time* as "Donny the Punk" (pages 224-226), and Frankie Parker, a convicted murderer-turned-monk who was executed by the state of Arkansas.

Donny's story is known by many people around the world. Arrested for a nonviolent Quaker antiwar protest outside the White House when he was 22, he chose to spend a few days in jail rather than pay a \$10 fine which he thought was wrong. He was a young man of strong principles. To "teach him a lesson," the warden placed him in the meanest cellblock in the joint, where Donny was savagely raped by more than fifty inmates over a two-day period. Dazed, traumatized, bleeding, he threw himself off the tier to escape further abuse. His body and mind were broken in ways few of us could ever imagine. That was 1971.

Donny never did really recover, yet he did an incredible job of trying to prevent that sort of thing from happening to others. He founded an organization called **Stop Prison Rape**, testified before numerous senate committees, gave scores of interviews and wrote passionately to bring this problem out of the national closet to force us to deal with the horrors which nearly every young, small offender in this country must worry about. Donny was a true spiritual warrior. Deeply injured himself, he still crawled back out to the front lines and kept fighting the good fight for the sake of others until the day he died. May he be richly blessed!

Frankie Parker, on the other hand, "deserved what he got," according to most people. He was a killer. No good. Dead man walking. The fact that, like many murderers throughout religious history, Frankie let the old self die and a new, transformed one be born, does not seem to be of much importance these days. Saul of Tarsus killed women and children, he was a much worse guy than Frankie, and he became St. Paul. But few people these days want to believe a human being can change so radically.

Frankie didn't especially believe it himself. But it happened. He was tossed a book on Buddhism once, basically as a joke, and it changed his life forever. Over a period of years, he became serious. He studied. He prayed. He meditated. He opened his heart to the suffering of all beings. He dedicated his mind and heart to compassion.

Frankie was fine about being executed. He had made his peace. It isn't Frankie I feel bad for, it's the rest of us — a society which doesn't know what else to do with people like Frankie; a society which continues to express a message to its children that it's all right to kill people who kill people. I can't understand the logic of that myself, so how can our children?

By the time he died, Frankie Parker was ordained as a Buddhist monk by my friend, Rev. Kobutsu Malone. Kobutsu spent that final day with Frankie and witnessed his execution. Kobutsu watched the state of Arkansas intentionally murder a humble man, a follower of the one classic spiritual path of love and compassion. He may have been a man with a terrible history, but many of the great ones also had terrible histories. Whatever happened in the past, the truth in the present moment was that the state killed a man whose final message was one of forgiveness, goodwill, and nonviolence. Can we afford to lose one that way? Can we be so fussy as to insist that our good guys have only good deeds in their past? If that's the case, go ahead and scratch out nearly all of Jesus' original apostles. They were a rough crowd. And scratch you and me; we have some pretty shameful deeds in our past, too.

Donny and Frankie were as different as night and day, yet so much the same. They both took a truly terrible set of experiences and transformed them into lives of compassion for others. They had awful lives in a sense, yet they turned the Big Corner and saw that we need to be kinder to one another, and then they tried to remind the rest of us. Donnie and Frankie did formidable spiritual work with their lives. May you and I be blessed to do the same.

a little good news

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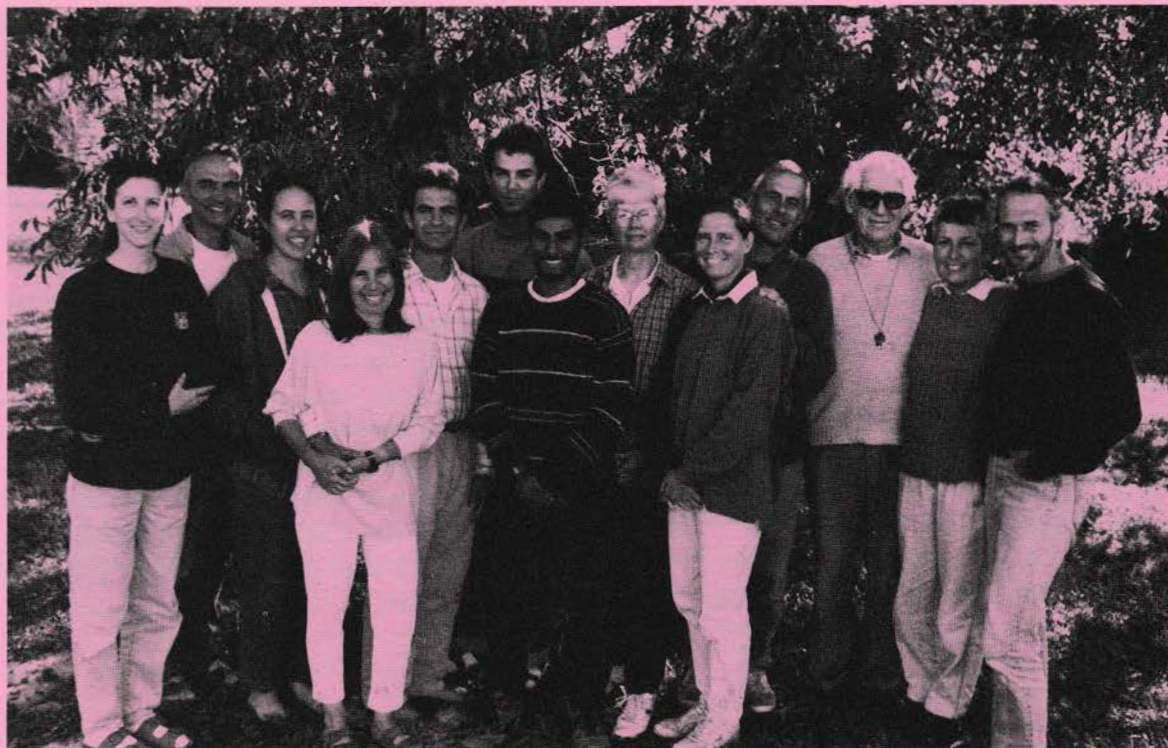


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