

Human Kindness Foundation

a little good news

Spring/Summer 1997

NOTHING PERSONAL....

I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high wall that I was imprisoned; no, it was God who surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell but it was not the tree, I knew it was God. It was God whom I saw standing there and holding over me His shade. Or I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a bed and felt the arms of God around me, the arms of my Friend and Lover...It was not the magistrate whom I saw, it was God, it was God who was sitting there on the bench. I looked at the Prosecuting Counsel and it was not the Counsel for Prosecution that I saw; it was God.

— Sri Aurobindo, 1908

Dear Family,
Many years ago, before he died, my father-in-law said there was one thing I had told him in the 1960's which made him look at his life differently. I asked him what it was and he replied, "You told me not to take my life so personally. That was the strangest thing anyone had ever said to me. But it affected me deeply."

The above description by Sri Aurobindo (imprisoned for revolutionary activities against British rule in India), is the ultimate direct experience of not taking things personally. His description is not daydreaming or poetry or philosophy; it's as real and clear as seeing your own hand in front of your face. It's not something merely to believe in; we must understand that one day we will see with those same eyes.

Impersonal Love

Those of us who have had the good fortune to spend time in the presence of a holy man or holy woman, a true spiritual master of some sort, have had at least a glimmer of the experience of impersonal love. On the one hand, the love of such people is immense and intense and incomparable; that's what draws people to them. Yet on the other hand, it is not in the least bit personal. You know that they love the person next to you just as intensely and totally as they love you, and the next one after that and the next one after that...

The love we feel from a master is not because we are pretty or rich or smart or clever or good; it's not a love based on anything personal. Rather, it's an oceanic and impersonal love based on the Big Truth of the Universe: God alone exists. And God is Love. That's what they see in every direction: **It's all Love, and it's not personal.**

We are caught in our small identity, while they are seeing our Large Identity. We are concerned with getting what we want, avoiding what we fear, protecting our lives at all cost; while they simply love us whether we are dead or alive, happy or unhappy, addicted or not addicted, in

prison or in the White House — these are all meaningless trivial details to that sort of Love.

The Holy Ones love because Love Alone Is. And they teach us that such Impersonal, Unconditional Love is the only kind of love which does not lead to endless suffering.

Impersonal Conflict

When Aurobindo, in the above story, saw the jail and the prosecutor and judge as God, he was freed from the personal drama entirely. He was then acting in a play written, produced and directed by God, and starring God as all the characters. That doesn't mean he passively accepted injustice or evil; quite the contrary. I'm sure he turned in a brilliant performance for his own defense.

But like Jesus, it no longer mattered to Aurobindo whether he personally was found guilty or not guilty. His defense was not to save his own skin, but rather it was to defend right versus wrong, oppression versus democracy. He didn't care whether he spent his life in prison or in a palace; he was already free, he would be much the same in either environment. So without personal fear of any consequences, he could be the very best champion of his cause. He was fighting for something larger than himself.

Total truth is necessary. You must live by what you say. Men will hate you for telling the truth. They will call you names. They may even kill you, but you must tell the truth. If you live in truth, God will always stand with you.

— Neem Karoli Baba

If you have ever watched a true martial arts master (not the movie guys, but rather the ones who would never glorify violence by doing such a movie) in action, then you must have noticed how impersonal their behavior was. They are calm like scientists, focused like meditation masters, and free from the clutches of anger or fear.

The bulk of training in martial arts is to move beyond personal anger and fear in order to heighten one's powers of attentiveness and gracefulness. It is never another person whom you are attacking or defending against, but rather you are taking a stand against aggression and hostility. That's why every genuine martial art stresses peacemaking first and physical conflict as a very last resort. No martial artist is anxious to harm or humiliate another human being if it can possibly be avoided. Violence is never used in service of a personal grudge, but only to defend the weak or uphold order and justice.

A noble Samurai warrior pledged to track down and kill the man who had murdered his master. He spent every waking moment for three years hunting his prey. To avenge his master's death was the most sacred duty to a Samurai. His life would be a failure if he did not do so. Finally, after tracking him through cities and towns and far-flung ports, he cornered the killer in an alley. It was definitely the right man, there was no doubt about it. The Samurai drew his sword and prepared to fulfill his duty, when suddenly the murderer spat in his face.

The Samurai hesitated for a moment, then sheathed his sword and began to walk away, his head hung down in shame. The man was so shocked that he ran after the Samurai and said, "But wait; I am indeed the man you sought. Why did you not kill me?" The Samurai replied, "Because I got angry when you spat in my face."

The moment it became personal, the Samurai was no longer upholding honor or justice. The moment it became personal, he was no longer a Samurai, but just an angry man with a sword. He knew, from his own training and the spiritual teachings of the sages and saints, that his action and its consequences changed completely in that one moment.

It's Not About "US"

What a hard teaching to explain — that life is not really about "us," it's not about people and events, as we think it is; it's actually about Divine Principles being played out on the *stage* of people and events. As people and events, we are essentially meaningless — "Life's a bitch and then you die." But as agents of the Divine, as characters in the never-ending "Play of God," we are heroes and heroines grappling with good and evil, loss and gain, pleasure and pain, hope and despair, compassion and apathy, generosity and greed, perseverance and laziness, courage and cowardice, love and hatred — the classic, universal forces which naturally oppose each other in each of us and in the universe as a whole.

All we know of historical figures, biblical figures, ancient martyrs and tyrants, is what they stood for. We don't especially know how tall they were or what their voices

sounded like or their favorite color or whether they had bad breath, because our interest in them is not personal. All that's relevant for us are the principles they lived and died for; the inspiration or lessons they left behind. The story of Daniel in the lions' den is not meant to teach us about a man named Daniel, but rather about the power of faith. When our parents tell us about the boy who cried wolf, it's to emphasize the consequences of lying, not to tell us about a tragedy involving some boy and a wolf. The characters are not personally important, just the principles. The same thing applies to the events. If it had been Daniel in the wolves' den and the boy who cried lion, would it make any difference?

If Only We Could See That About Our Own Lives!

We have a very short life-span, really we do. As Shakespeare put it, "We strut and fret our hour upon the stage, and then are heard no more." Yet we put all our attention on personal concerns, and on an endless chain of specific events which are no more important in themselves than whether the boy cried wolf or lion or locomotive. Our lives are about sacred principles, just like the lives of the characters in those stories.

We are given moment-by-moment opportunities to choose well or poorly. Choosing well, according to the saints and sages of all religions, is to choose the unselfish, the compassionate, the merciful and generous. Choosing poorly is to choose the selfish, the fearful, the short-term gain, the vested interest. It doesn't matter what our excuses are or what others have done to us. If you choose well, you represent the best of the sacred principles; if you choose poorly, you represent the worst of them.

All suffering comes from cherishing ourselves.

All happiness comes from cherishing others.

— old Tibetan saying

We are put here to love, respect and help each other. If we love, respect and help each other, we experience the connectedness between us and we touch the deeper meaning of life. If we don't love, respect and help each other, but instead get lost in fending for ourselves, protecting ourselves, acquiring riches for ourselves, etc., then we miss the point of being born, we miss the meaning and purpose of life by a mile. It's not personal. It's just the way we are designed.

Impersonal First

"This is the teaching of India:

**A God not only impersonal, but personal
also — personal more perfectly, because
Impersonal first."**

— Swami Kriyananda

A friend once asked, "You and Sita and Josh have such a strong bond. What's the secret?"

My response was, "The secret is that we all love the Dharma (Spiritual truth, the Way) more than we love each other." Even as it came out of my mouth, I could hear

how awful that sounded in our contemporary culture. Wasn't I supposed to say, "We love each other more than anything else?" But the truth is, first the impersonal, then the personal. Loving God, truth, Dharma, the path, first, is what gives a proper context to the love we have for each other. Without a context, personal love can be the road to hell. "Baby, I love you more than anything. I would do anything for you. I'd lie, cheat, steal or kill for you."

That sort of love never ends well. It always ends, but not well. It is emotion without intelligence. Emotion can be wonderful when guided and controlled by wisdom, but without it, it's as dangerous as a sportscar careening all over the highway with no driver.

Our lives must be about something bigger than the emotional self. Jesus said, "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven, and everything else will be provided." In other words, recognize the biggest, loftiest, eternal principles first, then play your part with gusto.

Be as quick to defend the rights of a stranger as you would a member of your family. It's the rights you're defending, not the person. Be generous to the poor, whether you know them or not. It's mercy you're expressing, not personal affection. Forgive those who have wronged you, not because they deserve it, but because forgiveness is on the side of the saints, while grudges and vengeance bring the world one step closer to destruction. Take sides constantly with what is highest, noblest and good. Then see what happens.

Impersonal Practice

And this is always the central purpose of spiritual practice: To be clear-minded and courageous enough to uphold what is right and good. It's often hard to tell the difference between right and wrong. If our minds are fogged by drugs or alcohol or lust or anger, then it's virtually impossible. We stumble around in confusion, and even when we try to do good, most often we're like a bull in a china shop, blundering about wrecking things.

To choose well, we must live well. We must respect our minds, bodies, and spirit. Self-discipline is essential. True tolerance and goodwill are essential. These qualities don't come about by reading a book. **We must devote ourselves to practice and study and good works. We must take care of ourselves, not for selfish reasons, but simply because if we're not in good shape we won't be very helpful to others either.**

It's not personal. It's much bigger than that. Each of us is the full repository of good and evil, each of us is the hero of God's divine drama being enacted on Earth, each of us is creating the future of the world with each decision we make.

Go + The Family



Father, there is little to tell..

My consciousness has never associated itself with this temporary body.

Before I came on this Earth, father, I was the same. I grew into womanhood. Still I was the same.

When the family in which I was born made arrangements to have this body married, I was the same.

And father, in front of you now, I am the same. Ever afterward, though the dance of creation changes around me, in the hall of Eternity, I shall be the same.

— Ananda Mayee Ma

LETTERS

Dear Bo and Sita,

Thank you very much for the books and newsletter. It was good to read your newsletter and spiritual book again. I really enjoy your positive and religious outlook into life. I just wish I could see life as good as you do. Your Christmas newsletter, I have many parts highlighted, that's what I also do to my Bible (also the Spiritual and We're All Doing Time books), important lessons, ideas, to help me become a stronger human being.

When you told 'Hurting Bad M,' (in your last newsletter) "suicide is a coward's way out," how can you say that, for mental suffering is like cancer, it eats away at you until there's nothing left of you inside? We know we will get a new body for the second resurrection. If you have repented for your suicide and things you have done and are truly sorry, you will be forgiven. For it will be the last time you sin.

How could you want a person who's suffered his whole life in depression and abuse to just hang in there for the next 50 years? Even you wrote the pain is still there, you get tired of it after awhile and no medication takes it away (anti-depressants). So you go up and down with your mood swings, never knowing when it's going to change. Doing O.K. one second, the next all your energy sucked out of your body, no strength, just lying there on your mat. Would give anything to end it there. And that's on anti-depressants. At least it's better to be on them.

Without the medication, can't do anything. I know that I'm not alone and unloved. Jesus is there for me and has forgiven me. Before my crime, I believed God was dead because of what was happening in the world. But now I know He's alive and it's going to get a lot worse before the end comes around. Before prison, I was a broken person, everyone walked over me and alcohol controlled my life. But I gave the power to alcohol and people to control me (I learned that in prison after 3 years.)

When I was outside before, I was in my own prison already. Now that I'm in prison, even though it's a third-world country prison, I have control over my life. For one, I don't drink. Two, I know I have biological depression that I must take medication for the rest of my life. It's something I couldn't do on my own.

Take care. God bless all of you there — praying for all of you.

M.

Dear M,

I appreciate your compassion for people suffering from depression. And I appreciate that in these modern times, there is a lot of emphasis on ending suffering, and the reasoning sounds very humane — like Doctor-assisted suicides, etc. People obviously don't want to be in constant pain, mental or physical. So ending it sounds like the kindest thing to do. But that modern view is a very limited view of both life and death. Our fear of pain & suffering has become a god in its own right.

The classic spiritual teachings do not have the same view. In a spiritual view of life, pain has a great deal to teach us. Neither cancer nor depression are merely random accidents that we have to get rid of in any way possible. They are conditions which have a place and purpose in our journey to enlightenment.

Scriptural phrases like "He marks the sparrow's fall," and "Every hair is numbered," are reminders that nothing is meaningless or accidental. The spiritual view sees everything as connected and embraced by the Infinite Intelligence, so we accept and work with whatever conditions we find ourselves in.

Even modern doctors are now "discovering" that spiritual faith and positive views of life play a tremendous role in health and healing.

So the decision to commit suicide in order to escape from pain or depression or cancer or Alzheimer's disease is second-guessing the Infinite Intelligence which gives us those conditions in the first place.

The spiritual teachings are generally very clear about suicide not being an honorable or productive way out of depression or anything else. Some of the ancient traditions actually describe pretty horrible afterlife consequences of suicide. I have no doubts that you would be forgiven, I have no doubts that you would have opportunities to make up for your mistake, and so forth — God is not a vengeful or spiteful presence. You say Jesus has forgiven you and is there for you, but what was His own advice? "Take up your cross and follow me."

If you commit suicide to escape from depression, have you taken up your cross and followed Him? Seems to me that's a way of putting aside your cross and saying you don't want to shoulder it anymore.

Dealing honorably, patiently and creatively with depression would seem to be taking up your cross and following Him. Accepting it as a condition of your life, and using it to develop more compassion for others — as it already has helped you do, obviously — would be more like what He had in mind, wouldn't it? Think about it.

Love, Bo



We may rest assured that nothing whatever happens on Earth without God's permission.

What a source of consolation to know that even the sufferings and adversaries which God sends us are for our very best, and have in view our eternal salvation.

Ah, how great will be our shame when we stand before the judgement-seat of God and see clearly the loving intention of Divine Providence in sending us those trials which we tried to evade, thus battling against our own Salvation!

— St. Alphonsus Liguori

Dear Bo,

I got your book by mail last week from a friend and I thought that it could be a good complement to the book I'm studying, The Sacred Tree. It's an unpublished book written for and by native Indians. It's a very deep and spiritual book.

I'm not a native Indian as such, but my mother was. I never met her but she has always been in my heart. It's a long story and it is the starting point of my drug problem. I was adopted by a white family from Montreal and I was raised in the city and in the country. My parents had a country house near the Canada-U.S. border. I had a lot of friends at the time, but I preferred to stay alone, in the forest and with the animals. People were calling me wild man and it did hurt me, even if I didn't know why at the time.

From 1 to 13 I had no problem. But from 13 to 18, I froze my feelings and emotions with alcohol and drugs, so much that I often ended up OD'd in the hospital. From 18 till today, I spent it in jail for hold-ups. I'm now 40 years old.

My fight has been between my spirit and my heart. I have always known that I was different from others, and later, that I had Indian blood. I knew it because of my body, my dreams, what I like (nature, animals, solitude) and my spirituality. This has also been confirmed by native Indians whom I met in a self-help center for Natives.

The fight is between the Indian in my heart and the white man in my spirit (family, education, culture, etc.). I escaped both for 40 years now. How can I solve this contradiction knowing that "no native Indian has ever loved white man, and no white man has ever loved native Indian?" (Sitting Bull).

Bo, how can I feel at ease with myself being a "white Indian?" You know the history of native Indians in America: fights, alcohol, reserves, despair, shame, humiliation... I always felt ill at ease with the white man ... I have a lot of knowledge about natives but I'm white. It's hell!

Sitting Bull also said, "When we honour a white man, he feels it in his head and his tongue talks. When we are friendly toward a native Indian, he feels it in his heart, but the heart has no

tongue... the Great Spirit gives man the means to defend himself, he puts it in his heart and in his head."

I spent the last 20 years of my prison life in books and studies. I finished high school and college. My head is full of knowledge, but it doesn't matter:

If the Earth is not my mother anymore
I don't know where I come from
I don't recognize my brothers
Becoming aware of one's self
is knowing how to love one's self
To protect one's self and the Earth

How to love myself? The Sacred Tree and your book, your teachings, your wisdom put me face to face with myself — the native Indian and the white man are looking in each other's eyes. And I have to solve this conflict to rise spiritually and feel good with myself and others.

If you can show me which direction I should take, I will follow it because I trust you. Peace and Love to everyone that the Great Spirit (Wakan Tonka) has put on your road. To you my brother and sister, I put my fist on my heart and I bend to you with humility.

Your brother, R.

Dear R,

I appreciate your struggle for identity. But all races, religions and cultures have a very temporary purpose. They are not a "final" identity for any of us. Their purpose is to give us a framework, a tradition or set of viewpoints, from which to make progress in our spiritual journey.

When our journey is complete, we are no longer white or black or red, no longer Native or French or Chinese, no longer even Christian or Muslim or Hindu — we are finally a complete human being in the very best sense.

In the old days, most people had no awareness of traditions other than the one they were born into, so they practiced that tradition exclusively and intensely. But you and I have been born in an age when we have been exposed to many traditions, not just one. This is neither a blessing nor a curse in itself — it depends on how we use that awareness.

In my own life, I draw a great deal from Hinduism, Buddhism, and

Christianity, a little from Native traditions and a little from my birth religion of Judaism. That does not mean I stay on the surface; I go very deeply into God. But I find that Natives provide the best insights about nature, while Buddhists have the best instruction in meditation, Hindus the most devotional forms of chanting, Jews the best sense of humor, etc. So I have no conflicts in drawing from all of them. I have no conflicts about "Who am I?" as you seem to have.

The real answer to "Who am I?" is that we are not any of the identities we think of ourselves. It's only the "small self," the ego, who needs to feel "I am Native," or "I am white," or "I am Christian," etc. Our real selves are human, and therefore every Great Tradition or Religion belongs to us to draw from as we see fit. Any identity we take for ourselves limits us to a very small piece of the world.

The Great Chiefs were not small thinkers. Jesus, Buddha, Krishna, were not small thinkers. They all knew that any man with a kind heart was their brother. Any religion or practice which helps us be kinder and braver, is a good religion or practice. Any which tempts us to feel superior to our brother is a bad religion or practice. It's that simple.

So as my gift to you, I give you the whole world with all its races, religions and traditions, to draw on in order to become a free, kind warrior of the spirit. They're all yours now. Use them. If you find it valuable to focus intensely on Native practices for a while in order to become bigger and kinder, then by all means do that. But not because "I am a Native, I am not like whites."

You are like me, and I like you, and we are both like everyone else: We are in training to be kind, courageous, patient, unselfish, humble; we are in training to be complete Human Beings like all the great Holy Men and Holy Women of every tradition.

Read my book again from that view, and you will find it's a helpful guide to becoming whom you really are — which is way beyond any name you could ever apply. May the new year of 1997 find a whole new bigger, brighter, fearless R. I send you all my love and blessings.

Your brother, Bo



Richard A. Braun

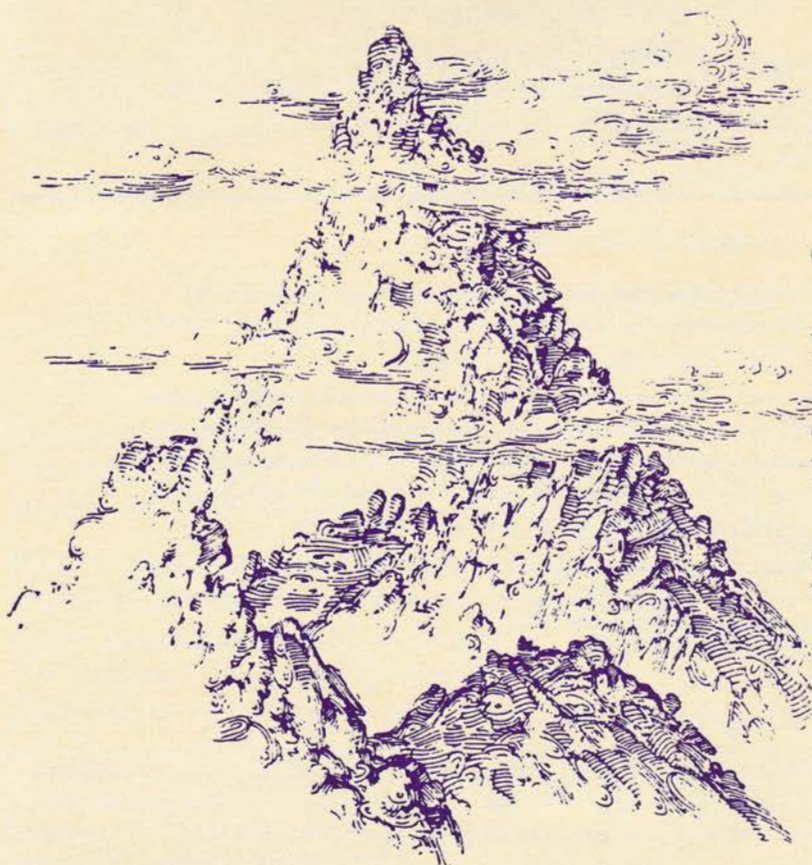
*Human Kindness Foundation
route 1 box 201-n
durham nc 27705*

sponsor of the Prison-Ashram Project

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Durham, NC
Permit No. 205



recycled paper



The Mountain of Decision


"How long have you been a monk?" I asked.

"A real monk? Not long. It took me fifty years to get up the Mountain of Decision."

"Do you have to see first before you decide, or is it that you decide first and then you see?"

"If you'll take my advice," he said, "you'll drop the questions, and go right up the mountain."

From *Tales of a Magic Monastery*
by Theophane the Monk

 NOW AVAILABLE ON TAPE!