

Human Kindness Foundation

a little good news

Summer/Fall 2002

TRANSFORMATION: JERI'S STORY

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Jeri Becker has been in touch with our organization for many years. In the early '90's, she helped arrange a workshop and visit by Bo & Sita to her prison. Earlier this year, Madri Devi Irani, one of our staff, visited Jeri to conduct this interview. First, Madri's reflections on the visit:]

My visit with Jeri Becker just ended. I'm returning to my home, and she's going back to her cell. She will be strip-searched, even removing her dentures for inspection. That's the procedure after having a visit at Correctional Institution for Women (CIW) in Frontera, California. Her first few years at CIW, Jeri didn't allow herself any visits because of such humiliating requirements. Now, as a yoga teacher for many years, she tries to see the strip-search as just another yoga *asana*, or posture. Inmates at CIW must wear their hair up all in the same way, wear just one piece of jewelry if any – a ring on the ring finger. Jeri is issued one pair of shorts and washes them daily.

CIW is located across the street from a manure waste-processing plant. A constant stench of feces permeates the air around the prison. Loads of flies are attracted year-round by the waste plant and by the cows in several dairies which surround the prison. Sometimes when she's walking outdoors, Jeri will get shortness of breath, and her roommate Vonda feels pain in her lungs. These women don't have any choice about inhaling human waste and smog 24 hours a day.

After four parole denials, the loss of her parents and so many years in an unhealthy environment, Jeri says she relies on the goodwill and prayers of others to keep her going. Yet she feels her health and energy declining, and yearns for the California parole board to come to its senses and release her after 22 plus years served on a 25-to-life sentence.

Mahatma Gandhi's practical example and teachings are an inspiration & support to Jeri. I can see his influence on her -- she's a full time spiritual activist with great personal courage and commitment. Another of Jeri's inspirations is Vonda, her roommate of seventeen years —“the most beautiful woman I've ever met.” Vonda works with psychiatric patients at the prison, creating a full spectrum program, including yoga, music, and arts & crafts. She has enduring patience, says Jeri, to be working in that capacity for so many years.

Because CIW would not allow Jeri to be interviewed, I had to get on her visiting list as a friend, and was not allowed to bring a tape recorder along, or even a small notebook. I memorized some questions for the interview, and trusted the flow of it for the rest. When I left Jeri, I sat for a while in the parking lot furiously scribbling whatever I could remember of our several hours together. Jeri also sent me several articles she has written for various magazines, and I have filled in some of the gaps with her own words from those articles. Jeri's life is a remarkable testimony to the triumph of our human spirit over bleak, difficult and even dangerous conditions.

What kind of woman were you when you went inside?

The first thirty years of my life I weaved a tight cocoon around myself. Ignorance, insecurity, fear made up the wrapping, and effectively sealed off a confusing jumble of painful emotions. I thought my cocoon would protect me, keep me safe. Good Catholic girls were always polite, agreeable, pious and composed. We were taught not to question the articles of faith.

Feminine qualities – intuition, feeling and creativity – were not valued. My artistic efforts were minimized as a 'nice hobby' that kept me quiet, so long as I didn't make a mess. Intuitive ideas were whisked away by statements such as, “Doesn't she have a wild imagination?” In school, the nuns completed the job my parents began at home — the notion that thinking was superior to feeling (and that priests were superior to nuns).

Facts, logic, and analysis were the foundations of the universe. Femininity was frivolous, childish and vain. I quickly learned what would win approval and what parts of myself to keep deeply hidden. I practiced drawing and storytelling in secret – in the basement, on the blackboard so it could be quickly erased. I wrote voluminous stories of magical women with special qualities who could fly and fix everything. I kept those stories carefully hidden under my mattress.

By the time I was an adolescent, I was such an expert at hiding my feelings and expressing only what other people wanted, that I lived in a state of continual emotional turmoil and confusion, feeling like an imposter with parts of me missing inside. I was sure everyone else had it all together. I didn't know that other teens, adults, even nuns were leading equally dishonest lives.

The '60s and '70s were turbulent times. In my twenties I imagined myself to be so free. I lived in a houseboat community on the Sausalito waterfront, near my brother who is ten years older. I attached myself to him, and clung tenaciously to what I perceived to be his ideals and power. But the tighter I clung, the more he seemed to move away. I tried to imitate those who were popular and intelligent. I tried using my sexual power to gain acceptance and love. I sought answers in the occult, in exotic religions, in philosophy and art. Eventually I tried drugs, and briefly believed I had at last found release from all the pain and confusion. It was wonderful. I didn't feel anything at all. So I reinforced my cocoon with the drugs of the day, burying myself in walls of denial, becoming blinder to the reality around me.

Can you tell me about your crime?

On the day of the crime I was seeking heroin, as I had been for the previous three years. I had lost all sense of judgement and

purpose other than procuring my next fix. A heroin addict gave me money to get drugs from a dealer in Sausalito. The dealer took the money but never returned with the drugs. In desperation, I returned to the addict and told him what happened. I did not foresee the danger when he and I headed back to the dealer's houseboat – which is akin to saying I put on a blindfold and drove top speed down the freeway, not considering whether anyone would get hurt.

When we arrived, I was raging, demanding my drugs. The dealer responded with anger and told us to go away. My addict friend pulled a gun, the dealer grabbed it, they both fought over it with more angry words and the gun was fired. The dealer was dead. And although I had the momentary presence of mind to stop any further violence and see that we needed to get help, I still didn't want to leave without getting my drugs first. It is this insanity that I had to confront in myself.

I feel terrible remorse for the man who died and I feel extremely responsible for his death. The memory of these events fills me with pain, regret and guilt and also the responsibility I have felt toward his son all these years. I also feel tremendous remorse for the pain and damage I did to my own family. My mom died bearing the shame of my behavior and my crime, and my dad died without having the comfort of his daughter to see him through his final years. It breaks my heart to think of it all.

I landed in a prison cell, cocoon still intact. Little did I know that it was God shaking my little artificial world. God alone knew it was time to wake up my sleeping soul. It was time to ask myself the question I had long avoided: "Who am I?"

What was your reaction when you heard your sentence?

Shock, disbelief and denial. But I did have a profound spiritual experience soon afterward.

I was riding aboard a small security plane being transported to CIW to serve a 25-year-to-life sentence. Bound up in hand cuffs, leg irons, and waist chains that weighed nearly as much as I did, I sat squashed in a seat between two huge male prisoners. The tattooed arm of one of them, just inches from my own, was twice the size of my thigh. I tried praying with all my heart, but fear, mingled with despair, overrode my best efforts. Then I spotted a blue light on the dashboard of the instrument panel and began to concentrate on it to the exclusion of all else.

Suddenly everything but that blue light dissolved. Closing my eyes, I still saw nothing but the blue light. I could subtly sense the light expanding with my breath until I was totally absorbed in a very safe and sacred space, feeling surrounded and protected by the presence of God. Thus I awoke to a very special reality, though perhaps to those around me, I may have appeared to be asleep. This awakening would take time to blossom since I would still have to face and heal the beliefs and habits which brought me to prison.

Was that when you awakened to the spiritual journey?

I was exposed to the practice of yoga and to my Guru, Paramahansa Yogananda, in the 1960's, before coming to prison. When I was thirteen, I read his most well-known work,

Autobiography of a Yogi, although I was unaware of the implications at the time. Even as a child I had a strong yearning for things spiritual but it wasn't until I landed here that I awoke to it as a conscious participant.

Do you relate to the term "transformation?" Do you feel you've had one or many? What do you consider the beginning of your transformation?

Yes, I relate very much to transformation. My earlier life became a sham as I tried to hide my addiction from others and myself. As painful and futile as that effort was, it didn't compare to the pain of my soul screaming in agony at 4 AM — the emotional pain, self-loathing and shame I could not ignore or opiate into oblivion. Those late night revelations were my first real spiritual experiences, but I did not know how to act on them. If I had, I'm certain they would have been transformative. But to look at myself honestly was too painful to bear.

When I came to prison, it could no longer be avoided. Suddenly I found myself extricated from all the external props of my life that I had so strongly identified with. I was taken to a six-by-nine-foot prison cell, my whole reality shattered. And in that cell, I had to reevaluate my whole concept of freedom. There was no doubt that I had lost my liberty but what about my freedom? What part of me was restrained by the confines of the prison cell...and what part was not?



Jeri Becker

No longer confused by drugs, I could see things more clearly. The pain of being abandoned by friends subsided as I realized I had only been leaning on them for a false sense of identity. "Artist...addict...sister..." Only by surrendering these outer layers to the stillness of meditation did I begin to sense the truth. A silent objective witness began to emerge from within, and I began to see who in fact I really was: A divine child of God, an infinite spirit in a world of change.

During 1981-82, the year I was in solitary confinement, there was nothing but raw truth – and God's love and presence. I made that crucial first step of recognizing the dishonesty of my life, forgiving myself and everyone I had held responsible for hurting me. It takes such an intense awakening to recover from drug addiction. The surrender must be genuine and complete. It takes tremendous courage and faith. Nothing else works.

I turned to God in deep meditation and to my amazement, She answered from the very depths of my soul. In the kind eyes of Divine Mother, I finally saw my own self reflected with compassion. Holding fast to Her hand, I learned to dance in this life and let my true self emerge in Her radiant warmth.

I began to meditate daily using a technique I had learned years ago but seldom practiced. Now it seemed only natural to sit still and follow my breath into the quiet silence which exists at the core of our being. And in that silence I found where real freedom lies. I understood the message of Christ's death and resurrection—that we are so much more than this limited physical body. And I experienced for the first time the actual presence of God as Father/Mother and felt a sense of strength, comfort, and peace that did not come from myself.

The journey is ongoing and filled with twists and turns. I still encounter strong winds of change. But no longer blinded, I can

see the brilliant light of day and know that it remains even when obscured by clouds. I can rise above worldly worries, fears, and problems on the wings of prayer and rest in the peace of God.

Soon I had to return to everyday awareness and face the routines of prison life. Now I understood my life's meaning and purpose. I didn't need to figure it all out by myself, only surrender to God's will moment by moment, day by day. Even the sting of the injustice of a life sentence was neutralized by knowing that I was dependent on God alone, accountable to God alone.

What are your personal spiritual practices?

Kriya yoga, mantra, chanting, hatha yoga, meditation. The practice of Kriya is known only to those who have been initiated. In 1988, by special arrangement, I was initiated by Swami Kriyananda and Jyotish through tape, letter and phone. I also practice prayer through inner dialogue with my Creator.

What's been the hardest test of your transformation? Both particular events and ongoing struggles.

During my forties, I began to heal my relationship with my parents. We became close and I hoped to be with them as they grew older. But my mom died first. Especially after her death, which my dad had a hard time with, my hope was to get home before his age and health required him to go to a nursing home. He also died while I was trying to make parole. I'm heartbroken that I was not released to be with them in their old age.

I will be up for parole for the fifth time this Spring*. I have the support of many friends, the trial and sentencing judge, the trial attorney, and even a state senator, all of whom speak strongly for my release. But the state of California isn't granting parole to lifers. Even after serving twenty-one years, fulfilling their requirement of finding a parole plan and financial support to get me started, they continue to close the doors to someone who has atoned for her past and who offers her life up in service. After the last parole denial, I had never felt so cut off from God as I did on that long walk back to the cell, unable to pray or even cry out, "Why have you abandoned me?" I never felt so beyond God's reach, and I discovered that there is no greater pain than feeling beyond the pale of God's comfort.

Another test of faith has been my lifelong struggle with my health. Being a vegetarian and having multiple food allergies has been a challenge in here. About ten years ago, my immune system broke down to the point that I became unable to use foods as nourishment, and instead food began poisoning me. My weight dropped to a dangerous 76 pounds and I was close to dying. It was only by God's grace, not medical intervention, that I am still alive. And my health continues to decline because of the conditions here. I live mostly off fruits, cereal, and graham crackers, and pick wild greens daily. These seem to be the most wholesome things available for my condition.

How do you feel most of service to others?

I feel most of service to others through the yoga class I have taught here for fifteen years. It's a beautiful shared experience and the high point of my week...and so often participants tell me it is the high point of their week. I just close my eyes and breathe into the space at the beginning of each class, without a plan—this is something I learned along the way. I used to be such a meticulous planner until a wise friend asked me one day if the Universe would disappear without my careful micro-managing of it? I had to laugh...it was a breath of fresh air I

needed!! So often after the class one or more of the women will say to me that the class brought them exactly what they needed, but I don't take credit for ANY of that. All I do is "get out of the way" and it flows.

Also I feel of service through the 12 Steps class I have been facilitating once a week for the past six years. It is a true women's support group, continually evolving. The members change every nine to twelve weeks but I often have people who return. Much of my growth and personal discovery occurs through teaching yoga and the 12 Step group.

In my position as a Peer Helper in charge of conducting orientations, I come into contact with a steady stream of new arrivals. Their obvious low self-esteem, showing through their anxiety, tells me that no judge could have handed out a sentence harsher than that which life had already imposed on these wounded ones. My duty is clear – to love them, treat them with dignity, kindness, that has been so lacking. Sometimes I fall short of the mark, giving in to my own impatience with their endless questions, demands, and general neediness.

When I get bogged down in routine paperwork tasks—typing names, numbers, housing units on endless streams of yellow chronos, or the prison's return address on fifty identical envelopes, how often my mind wanders to the "next-thing-to-do" on my perpetual list. Ah! But this is what I have learned – *no matter what the activity, this moment is the important thing.* My duty is to spiritualize each moment, giving it my full attention, doing the best I can, and surrender it to God. As I become more mindful, I've developed a policy of "People First."

This simple rule has nearly cured me of impatience. It makes establishing priorities so simple – an envelope or deadline is never more important than a woman standing in front of me. I am fortunate, in a sense, to be here in this prison. My job is assigned to me. I needn't be bothered by personal motives of ambition, greed, and prestige which can become so compelling in the work force out there. I am free to open up to lessons as they unfold, to meet each challenge as it arises, viewing it as an opportunity for service and increased understanding. And in that context, to perceive this work as "yoga" – the union of the spiritual and the physical. Isn't that what we're all here to learn?

So to me, service is not a duty or an event. It is an attitude of love, respect and caring. How do I feel most of service? That is EASY when you live in an environment surrounded by so much pain and suffering and confusion. Just keep your eyes, ears and heart open, and don't let a chance pass to love, listen, or reassure. Genuinely care. God places opportunities in our life no matter where we are.

Since Dad died and the Governor has slammed the door on lifers ready to parole, I have found that the ONLY antidote to grief, suffering and despair is LOVE & SERVICE, & MORE loving service...reaching out and genuinely CARING about those "who others pass by". This energizes my soul and brings me back to the moment. It restores meaning and joy in living. At times when I personally feel I cannot go on living (in here), I just go on loving...and life goes on.

**Jeri's parole hearing finally resulted in an approval. However, the governor has rejected 82 of 84 such parole approvals for lifers since he took office. Please keep Jeri in your prayers as she waits for final word of her possible release.*

LETTERS

Dear Bo & Sita,

Greetings once again! Yes my story is quite a story, one that I wish did not belong to me. I've spent the past 6 months since my late brother was successful at cheating the law by taking his life trying without vain to join him.

This mission I am on is not an easy one. I guess the inner peace you all talk about and the morphine-like peace I am seeking cannot be one and the same, or is it?

My brother and I made a pact to die together and for some unknown reason I was not allowed the luxury of breaking on through to the other side with him. I feel like I have let him down because his last words to me were "I love ya brother, I'll see ya on the other side."

I got to hold his hand and say goodbye to my brother E before the EMS carried his body out of the jail and I am sure the peace I am seeking he had finally found because he had the most serene look on his pale blue face I had ever seen on my brothers face. He had cheated the law and the law was about to cheat me. They drove me immediately to the emergency room where they shot me up with the antidote to morphine saving my life -- for what!? To be paraded in front of their circus they call justice. I've been mad at the world ever since they saved my life and in a failed effort to get the death penalty, two months after my brother's death I stabbed and attempted to kill a fellow inmate. I hope he knows it wasn't personal and that he has someone some where looking out for his poor soul. I could've over looked the small beef we had but because of the mission I am on he fell victim to another one of my senseless acts against my fellow convict, and man!

You would think the state would let me carry out my mission before I succeed in taking another human life and they are forced to carry out capital punishment.

If you pray for me, pray only for my success in my endeavor because I'm tired! With love and respect!

T

Hey T,

I'm sorry to hear you're down so far that death looks like it's way up there as a goal to reach. We'll all die soon enough, little brother; we get a little closer every day. I'm 55, and I can sure feel it in

these tired old bones. Dead man walking. So I'll just walk as well as I can down this long last mile. And enjoy the hell out of it, even with the aching old bones and a zillion old injuries that make me feel stiff like a robot.

You have the same situation. You don't know how long your last mile is – maybe a day, maybe 20 years, maybe longer. If you have any spiritual belief at all, little brother, then somewhere in you is the sense that suicide is not cool for your soul's journey. Some religions say you pay for it in the afterlife, other religions say you suffer for it in your next life – but they all state very strongly that it is not a good idea and does not put an end to your misery. What do you think about that? Are you so sure that it's okay, that you want to go up against the deepest, wisest people ever born, who say it's not? Does that sound like a good bet for a betting man?

So maybe E wasn't the lucky one. Maybe you were. And maybe you can pray for your brother every day, that he finds his way out of any mess he created by the way he died. Your prayers will definitely help him. And that's a good reason to stay alive – so somebody will be praying for him.

And about you – I absolutely agree that from your present outlook and your present state of mind, the future looks like it's not worth living. So you have two options: die, or change your outlook and state of mind. You've tried to die and it hasn't worked out, so why not try the other road for a while? You can always go back to suicide later if it doesn't work out for you.

This changing of outlook is what all my books are about, T, and I gotta tell you, thousands of hopeless convicts like yourself are very glad they didn't check out when they were feeling their lowest. In fact, I think you recently received our latest newsletter, with the main article

about my friend Rick Smith, who is one of the happiest, most together people I know. And he's doing life without parole in Alabama. Rick was definitely more fucked up than you when he first got locked up. Read the interview with him and take it personally. You have the biggest decision of your life sitting right in front of you: Are you going to do some personal work and bring some meaning into your life, or are you going to give up without ever knowing why you came here or what life is about?

I know the future looks grim. But let's face it, brother – how was your past? Any less grim? You've never had a day in your life where you knew what it was about. So now you have the opportunity. Ask, and you shall be answered. Knock, and the door will open. Seek, and ye shall find. All you have to do is start the ball rolling with your little spark of willingness, and I promise you, life will open up truths and mysteries like you can't imagine. But it takes some work on your part. And of course, being alive. Let me know what choice you make.

Love, Bo (*this correspondence is still in progress, and T is still alive.*)



Dear Bo,

I teach GED Prep, adult literacy, and English as a Second Language classes at a local county jail. As you said in one of your books, each dark prison has at least one light. Well our county jail isn't as dark as some and my light isn't as bright

RETREATS FOR EX-CONS AND CORRECTIONS WORKERS & VOLUNTEERS

Human Kindness Foundation held two weekend retreats recently for ex-cons and prison workers to come together in friendship and dialogue. Both weekends in June were highly successful in breaking down barriers and labels, and letting people meet just as human beings. The theme of the retreats was "Healing the Great Divide," and our focus was not only to break down the walls between the people at the retreat, but also to be a symbol for all sets of rivals or enemies around the world – cops and cons, Israelis and Palestinians, Indians and Pakistanis – that people can come together in goodwill and learn to understand each other's experiences. Unfortunately no custody staff attended these retreats, although they have in the past. We hope to continue offering this gathering annually.

as some, but I feel that I need to be here, if only to be a person who treats the men with respect, as fellow humans.

After the men and women leave our jail and go on to state prisons, a few of them choose to write to me. And I write back, changing the professional teacher/student relationship into a personal penpal relationship. It has been fun. I have learned more than I have ever taught. I have given and received. And I've been doing this for some time now.

Recently, I had one of those down times when a man with whom I have corresponded for ten years, got released and then "turned back" to his previous destructive ways.

It made me ask, why am I doing this? Why am I investing the time and energy and love if it doesn't do any good?

I have read and passed along your books over the years. But I remember in *We're All Doing Time* many letters where you wrote to inmates for extended periods and the men seemed to be making positive changes with their lives, but then they were back in prison within one month to three years. How do you, personally deal with this? Do you feel you still have a role to play in their lives and the lives of others when you often see the futility?

I'm not burnt out (the Holy Spirit keeps the well full), and I'm not giving up, but I am questioning. Am I really doing any good? Am I deluding myself? Since you've probably been in this space before, I'd be interested in your rationalizations. What do you see as the worth in what you are doing that keeps you doing it?

What do you see as the purpose of your Prison-Ashram Project? I know that the statement on your website is "to inspire and encourage prisoners . . . to recognize their depth as human beings and to behave accordingly," (whatever accordingly means). But what do you see as your personal purpose in all of this? Is it to aid inmates on their spiritual journey? To encourage inmates to take a spiritual journey? To add some kindness to the world? To brighten someone's day with a personal letter?

I am not looking for reassurance or encouragement. I am asking for your personal experience with doubts about the effectiveness of your work, questions about what the effects should be, and what answers you discovered.

My philosophy and yours are not the same in many respects, but we are connected in our desire to add some kindness in an unkind environment. The question is – does it do any good? Does it change anything? Or am I just spitting on a raging fire? I don't spend enough time in solitude and silence to get all the answers directly, so I am looking for some of your insights. Thanks for your time, if you have any to share. And if you don't, I understand. I know your time is going somewhere where it is needed more!

Keep up the good work. Thanks for being an example to others.

With love, J

SPEED BUMP DAVE COVERLY



Dear J,

It's good to meet you and to hear about your work. I'll try to briefly touch on your questions, and I also invite you to visit here sometime, or attend one of our prison worker retreats (held each spring) for more in-depth and leisurely discussion of these issues that crop up in our line of work. Nearly half our community are ex-cons, whose presence would make it very clear to you that there is definitely worthwhileness to what you are doing – even if it were to "fail" 99 times out of a 100, which it never really does anyway.

You asked for my personal doubts and struggles. I have never felt personally let down or betrayed by my friends who return to prison. I don't pretend to understand the workings of karma, fate, a dysfunctional society, addictive behavior patterns, etc. I feel sad for their sake, but my friendship revolves around their spiritual journey rather than their worldly affairs. And the spiritual journey is wherever we are. Another way of saying it is that I do not see the purpose of my

work as being to help them stay out of prison. It often does, and I'm glad, but I'm in it for profound spiritual transformation – full-blown enlightenment. Becoming radiantly holy. Nothing less really holds my attention, in my own life or theirs.

So, my day-to-day work suffices unto itself. I have no goals about what they should get out of it. I have faith that whatever I offer in purity is what I am supposed to be doing, and whatever happens on their end is between them and God. I have as much faith – actually a lot more – in the unseen as in the visible, and that's why I would find it impossible to gauge how well I am doing or whether my work is "succeeding." I find this a tremendous relief of responsibility. All I have to do is do my very best, and then I'm off the hook. This is essentially what the Bhagavad Gita is about, and it's what Mother Teresa often tried to get across about her work: To herself, she was not caring for the poor; she was caring for Christ in "distressing disguise." It looks like we're serving people, but actually we are only serving God. And serving God fulfills itself; it does not need a future result.

For these reasons, I have never had any doubts. I have had the feeling sometimes that no one really understands what I'm offering or what my books are really about, but even that is not really any of my business. A tremendous amount of love and affection seem to be generated through this project and these materials, and that's fine with me. I may go to my deathbed saying "I wonder what all that work was really about," and that's fine too. I have no idea, except that it's been very sweet and special for so many years now. I am deeply grateful. And because we live in such sad times, the extra dose of sadness when someone I love returns to prison, is just a little extra dose, nothing over the line. I think we are in a culture which is descending into open madness, so how could I be surprised or confused about so many people going to prison? It's like being on the Titanic while it is sinking and being surprised that some people are throwing up over the side. But ah, the sweetness of being one of the lifeboat crew! Come and see our gang sometime and you'll see what I mean.

Love Bo



LETTERS Continued

Dear Bo,

I have to comment on the story by the "Christian Jew" who has found truth and peace. For the record, there is not a Jew alive who recognizes "Jewish Christian" or "Christian Jew," except as an oxymoron or a contradiction in terms. If one did, he would cease to be a Jew and become something else. This is a dangerous and ugly term, bringing back, as it does, thousands of years of persecution. If we are interested in truth and respect for the religion of others it is important to recognize this, and also that it is Christians who want to convert Jews who use this phrase along with much mention of Jewish custom, tradition, and scripture.

Sincerely, C

Dear C,

You probably know I have spent my entire adult life in what is known around the world as the "interfaith dialogue." And one of the subtle insights I have picked up from years of looking at problems and tensions between people of different faiths, is

that locking horns on words or terminologies is a form of violence itself. For example, when you say, "this is a dangerous and ugly term," and when you say, "not a Jew alive" recognizes the term Christian Jew or Jewish Christian, I swear to you, even though you don't think you're being violent or intolerant, you are.

Obviously the guy who wrote that letter believes he is whatever he says he is. So for one thing, you are completely invalidating his feeling of himself as a Christian Jew – whatever that may mean to him. It obviously means something very different to you. I personally am a Jew by birth and pedigree of about 5,000 years blood line back to the original Levite tribe. Why am I not as offended by his terminology as you? I guess I'm wrong too? Then we go around the world defining as right the Jews who agree with you, and as wrong the Jews who don't? According to you, I am not even a Jew if I don't object to that term.

Dear friend, please take some benefit from my many years of observing

religious intolerance. It is these well-meaning attitudes about words that are the seeds of violence and hatred. God is Love, not just words. "Messianic [Christian] Jew" were three words in about 1,000 words of this fellow's intense journey from despair and suicide to hopefulness and spiritual practice. Cut him some slack. He's on his way out of hell. If he keeps seeking truth, he will find more and more of it. And if it is true that "Christian Jew" is an oxymoron, a loving God or a loving friend will show him that at the right time – not a harsh critic who starts blaming this kid for centuries of persecution. I hope you see my point and can work with it a little. The Lord of the universe has never been a nitpicker; He wants to see our Love for each other and for His creation.

Love, Bo



GOOD WORKS

Burt Soto weaves his life's web



In 1998, not even a year after Burt Soto graduated high school, he landed in prison. With 45 months to serve, he realized that prison could become a permanent way of life, and became urgently motivated to wake up and find a better direction.

He became involved with one of the clubs at Oregon State Correctional Institution (OSCI), and after some time was elected as club secretary. This opportunity allowed him both the experience of running a nonprofit organization from within a prison, and seeing the disadvantages or challenges to doing so.

Eventually Burt and a couple of friends started a nonprofit organization called Bright & Successful Futures (BandSF). Its main purpose is to design vocational/intervention programs to reduce recidivism for prisoners and those at risk. They also managed to set up a website for BandSF. The website helped them attract attention even from behind the prison walls. This "window to the world" gave them the idea of trying to develop websites for other clubs and organizations in the prison.

Soon they discovered *InterConnection*, an organization that provides no-cost and low-cost websites and internet hosting to nonprofits in developing countries. With help and encouragement from InterConnection and one of their co-founders, Burt and his friends established a spin-off called *OuterConnection*. OuterConnection's purpose is to design and host websites for prison-based organizations. They provide ad-free hosting and web design at little or no cost to interested organizations, giving these organizations a chance to get their message out to a worldwide audience.

Besides OuterConnection and BandSF, Burt also served on the board of an organization called *Reaching Beyond The Walls*. He used his time in prison to help others and to develop himself mentally and spiritually. Burt was released May 10th, 2002, and will soon be starting a job working for the State of Oregon. He feels his goal of finding a good direction and worthwhile purpose for his life has been fulfilled more than he could have ever expected.

[For more information on OuterConnection, see our "News, Notes, and Offerings" page.]

NEWS, NOTES, AND OFFERINGS

RAM DASS VISITS KINDNESS HOUSE

On Monday, June 3rd, Bo's and Sita's old friend and teacher Ram Dass visited the headquarters of the Prison-Ashram Project that he and Bo co-founded so many years ago. Ram Dass turned seventy-one recently, and is confined to a wheelchair as a result of a major stroke in 1997. All of our staff and community were pleased to welcome him and a few friends for lunch and a tour of our organization.



KARMA BOOK STILL AVAILABLE TO PRISONERS

Larson Publications has funding to send out more free Karma books. The book *What Is Karma?* by Paul Brunton, is being offered free to prisoners in the US and Canada. The book is a positive view of karma: What karma is, how it works, its relation to forgiveness and freedom, and how to get it working for you. (Please check your regulations to make sure you can receive the book. Also, be sure to tell them about any special requirements, and include your ID#.) Write:

Larson Publications, Dept K
4936 Route 414
Burdett, NY 14818

UPDATE ON BO AND SHABARI MA

Our founder, Bo Lozoff, and another community member, Shabari Ma Case, are rounding the final lap in their year of silence. Shabari Ma's year will end on September 2nd, and Bo's on the full moon, September 21st (which is also Sita's birthday). They're both doing fine, though not without the understandable challenges of ten months spent in silence. Bo will probably end his year with another 40-day retreat. If so, it will begin on August 12th. Please keep them both in your prayers.

100-DAY NOBLE SILENCE PROGRAM

Free Dharma instructions (meditation, Buddhist spirituality) are available for anyone in or out of prison, and to institutions anywhere in the USA or Canada. This is NOT a Book, but rather instructions. For more information write:

Dharma Instructions, NSPP
5725 NW 237 Terrace
Lawtey FL 32058
904-782-1069

TEXAS BUDDHIST GROUP NEEDS A HAND

Two Texas prisoners are trying to start a newsletter for and about Buddhist prisoners in Texas. They're interested in hearing from anyone in the "free-world" who can help with printing and distribution. They're also interested in Texas folks who want to receive the newsletter, and those who have suggestions or contributions of writings or artwork. If you're interested, write: (Include your ID#, and be patient, it could be a while before the first newsletter goes out.)

Carl Horne 418860
MW Stiles Unit
3060, FM 3514
Beaumont, TX 77705-7635

FREE WEBSITE FOR PRISON BASED/RELATED ORGANIZATIONS

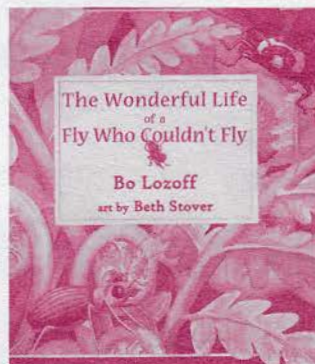
OuterConnection is a nonprofit organization that designs and hosts websites for prison based/related organizations. The organization must be non-profit and be registered as such. They are also looking for volunteers to help design websites. For more information, write:

OuterConnection
PO Box 3496
Eugene, OR 97403

Email: info@outerconnection.org
www.outerconnection.org

BO'S FIRST PUBLISHED CHILDREN'S BOOK

Hampton Roads Publishing will be releasing Bo's newest book, *The Wonderful Life of a Fly Who Couldn't Fly*, in September. It's a beautiful rhyming full-color hardcover picture book with some of the most extraordinary illustrations we've ever seen. The story is about a fly with no wings, and the way she adapts her life not just to endure, but to thrive and become old and wise. The ending is especially magical.



The book will be available "at fine bookstores everywhere" as well as through us. We're sorry we won't be able to send out free copies, as it is not our book, and we can't afford to buy them for free distribution.

a little good news

is a publication of Human Kindness Foundation, which is non-profit and tax-exempt under section 501(c)(3) of the IRS code. Donations and bequests are welcomed and are tax-deductible to the full extent of the law. All money goes directly to support HKF's work, helping us to continue producing and distributing free materials to prisoners and others, and sponsoring Bo Lozoff's free lectures and workshops and other projects of the Foundation.

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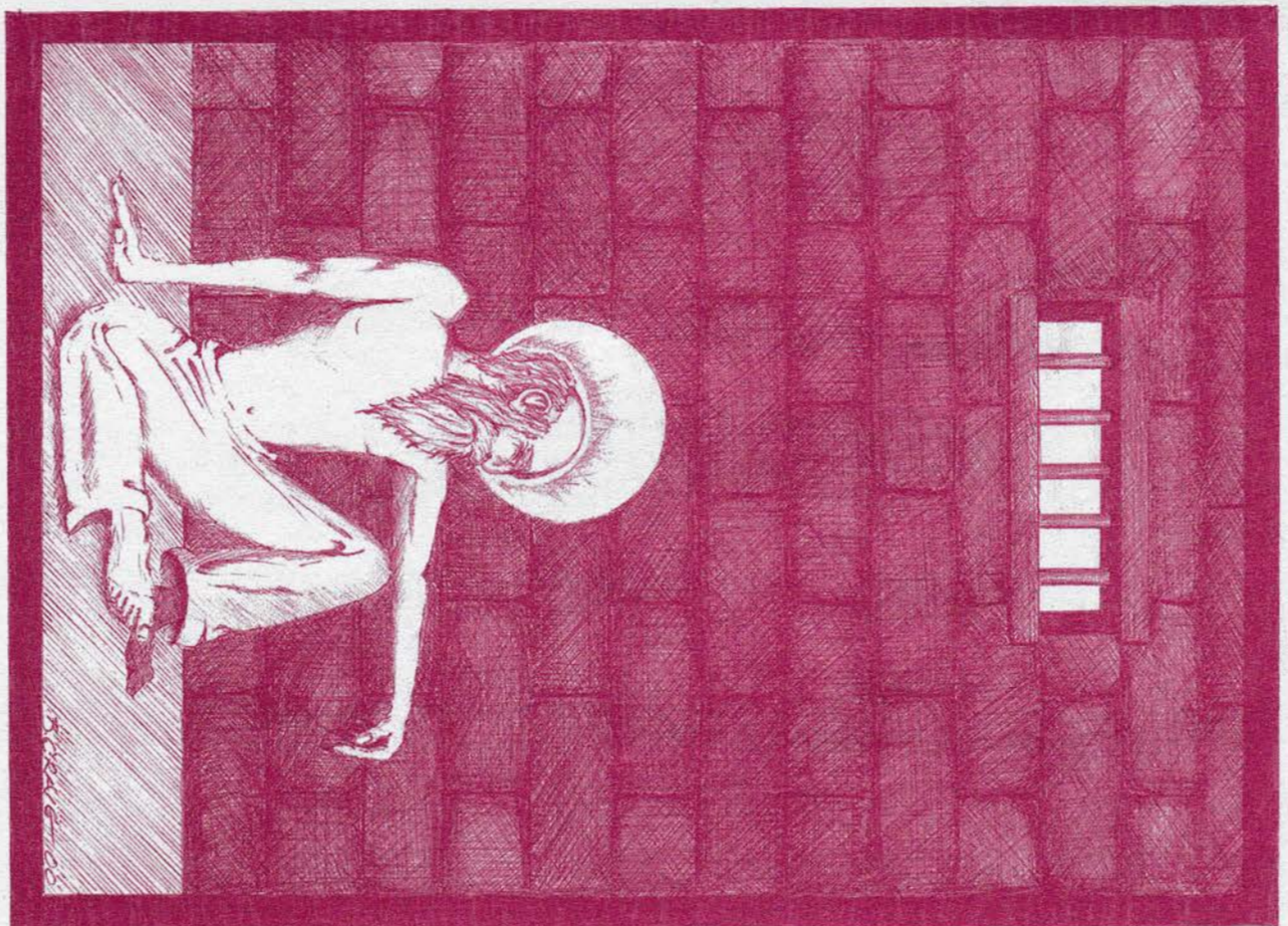
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