

Human Kindness Foundation

a little good news

Christmas 2004

SRI LANKA, ITS PEOPLE AND ITS PRISONS

Dear Family,

Picture an island off the southern coast of India, a little bigger than West Virginia, filled with tropical jungles teeming with coconuts, bananas, monkeys and elephants, and surrounded by the Indian Ocean. That's the tiny, beautiful country of Sri Lanka that looks like a little speck on most globes and maps.

In August, Sita and I were brought to Sri Lanka by the wonderful Sarvodaya Movement, a Gandhian grassroots organization that has become a major force of hope, change and self-empowerment throughout thousands of villages across Sri Lanka. We visited their three biggest prisons, several remote jungle villages, and I gave the "Fourteenth Annual Kanchana Abhayapala Memorial Lecture" to a public audience in Colombo, Sri Lanka's biggest city, which has a population of several million people, and feels like New York City at rush hour.

About 75% of the seventeen million people in Sri Lanka are Sinhalese Buddhists and the primary language of the country is called Sinhala. Hindu Tamils make up the next largest group – about 18% of the population – and the other seven or eight percent are split between Muslims, Christians and others. Sri Lanka was freed from British rule in 1948, shortly after India's independence.

But increasing tensions for several decades have escalated between the Tamil minority and Sinhalese majority, and at this point there is almost a civil war raging that has resulted in thousands of deaths. There are occasional acts of terrorism such as car-bombings and assassinations, followed by predictably over-zealous governmental reactions. There are complaints of oppression and injustice and torture – all the political realities that are so common throughout the world, yet for some reason look so much more tragic, foolish, and unnecessary on a small island where it seems like it would be so much easier for people to figure out how

to get along with each other, sipping coconut milk and eating delicious banana custard.

We human beings seem to find it impossible to keep things simple and direct. We seem to resist the obvious fact that everyone in our population – wherever we live – must have access to the necessities of life, must have a fair chance of providing a decent life for their loved ones, and must have a

voice in the decisions that affect their lives. When *any* government provides this access to all its population, that nation will be secure and peaceful. Oh sure, there will always be street crime – individuals acting selfishly to get things they want, or taking revenge on people who have wronged them – but that's a whole different thing than what has always been called a "Movement."

What creates a movement is injustice, unfairness, any systematic way people are treated solely because they are ____???. You can fill in the blank with any color, nationality, religion, gender, sexual orientation; you can fill in the blank with how you view war, or taxes, or marriage or schooling or abortion.

In our own lifetimes, in our own nation, you and I have seen the Civil Rights Movement, Anti-war Movement, Native American Rights Movement, Women's Rights Movement, Gay Rights Movement, Anti-Death Penalty Movement, Pro-Choice Movement, Pro-Life Movement, Animal Rights Movement, Homeschooling Movement, Prisoners' Rights Movement and several major ecological/environmental movements – and they're all really about the same principles. People want to be heard. They want power in the decisions that affect their lives, they want their government's laws and policies to reflect their most basic values, they want fair access to cultural and ecological resources, and they want a reasonable degree of freedom to live as they choose, so long as it brings no harm to others.

So, beautiful Sri Lanka is mired in one such struggle, and we can only send our prayers and blessings that both sides will find it in their hearts to sit down with each other and figure out a way to live in goodwill so they can enjoy their wonderful island nation together.



From Sita's journal: August 27th: Bo and myself at the lecture hall with Dr. Ariyaratne and the sister of Kanchana Abhayapala, a young human rights lawyer who was murdered in 1989.

SARVODAYA

Our hosts for this trip were the dedicated people of Sarvodaya, Sri Lanka's largest and best known nonprofit organization which has made an enormous difference in the lives of Sri Lanka's poorest people. Sarvodaya was created in 1958 by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, who has been called "the Gandhi of Sri Lanka." Sita and I were pleased to spend a lot of time with Dr. Ari, as he is called, as well as his wife, adult children, grandchildren and his many followers.

Sarvodaya has a village-based model of empowerment to help the rural poor to take more control over their resources and their lives. They send hundreds of staff and volunteers to thousands of villages helping to initiate "Shramadan" projects where everyone gets together to accomplish a specific task such as creating a community water system or improved waste processing, or building a home for people who live outdoors. Their volunteer lawyers sit for hours in jungle villages hearing the practical problems of people who have no identification, or who don't know whether or not they own the tiny piece of land they have lived on for many years – things like that.

It is truly amazing how many projects Sarvodaya is involved with, and how deeply respected and loved they are throughout their nation. Sita and I were privileged to have been introduced to their work. We send our deepest thanks to Dr. Ari and his family, plus our guides Shirani, Shevon, Charika, Taranga and others whose names we did not master enough to attempt mentioning!

LITTLE MIRACLES

In one of our jungle village visits with the Sarvodaya staff, I spent a little time with a woman and her two children who had been living in a paper hut or outdoors for quite some time. The village project was trying to coordinate how to build her a sturdier shelter sometime soon. We wished her a speedy transition to a better home.

A week later, when Sita and I were taken to the Colombo airport for our return flight home, I tried to cash in my remaining Sri Lankan money – 4,200 rupees (about \$42 cash) – and was refused by the exchange service because I

did not have my original receipt from when I got the rupees. I certainly didn't have much use for rupees in America, and 4,200 rupees is a pretty big hunk of cash in Sri Lanka. So I



Aug. 24th: Near Ratnapura, in the rainy central jungles of Sri Lanka, a woman and her two children in their home, built from cardboard, paper, and tarps.



Aug 24th: Our "spare change" put the roof on the woman's new home.

provide the whole tin roof of her new dwelling. The woman and her children are now living indoors in their dry and secure hut.

SRI LANKA'S PRISONS

As our car approached Welikade Prison, Sri Lanka's largest maximum security facility, I noticed a lot of commotion at the entrance. About fifteen ceremonial dancers in beautiful red and black costumes and several drummers were gathered in front, and several officials were with them. I turned to our guide and said "What's all that about? What's the occasion?" She said, "Oh, that's for YOU! That's your welcome to the prison."



Aug. 21st: Hmm, my memory may be faulty, but I don't recall ever being welcomed like this at an American maximum security prison... ☺. That's Bo and me at the rear in the center.

Sure enough, Sita and I were escorted to the center of the throng, the dancers and drummers began their spectacular show all around us, put flower garlands around our necks, and then, still dancing, led us into the prison grounds like a parade. What an experience!

We then discovered that the dancers, who were extremely skilled and professional, were all inmates. Wow. Then we met with the warden for awhile – he was one of the officials leading us in – and then sat in on the end of a three-day prisoner meditation retreat, where about two hundred prisoners were waiting to meet us.

No troupes of dancers appeared at other prisons we visited, but the welcomes were all as enthusiastic and warm as the first. At each facility, the warden himself greeted



us and spent time describing his facility, programs, and struggles to us, and then we met with very open and sincere prisoners, and some staff, who were curious about our work.

At Mahara Prison, one English-speaking prisoner came to the front and gave me and Sita two extraordinary coconut-husk necklaces with a little blue “jewel” in the center which was actually made of pieces from a blue plastic toothbrush.



Aug. 24th: The man on the left made the necklaces – the one on the right is our English speaking prisoner friend. That’s Bo in the back, already looking and feeling sick.

These are really superb necklaces which took months to make. The prisoner explained in perfect English that his friend (whom we then met) made them for us. The English-speaking prisoner knew all about us because he has had a copy of *We’re All Doing Time* for many years. Imagine – in the middle of a jungle in Sri Lanka! Sita & I were very moved by how far across the world *We’re All Doing Time* has reached, and the gratitude and respect shown toward us.

Sri Lankan prisoners work in many types of prison industry, and we were given tours of the various weaving looms, coconut oil pressing operations, sewing shops, soapmaking and kitchen facilities. Bear in mind that most of these industries operate without electricity! Foot pedals, hand cranks, and pulleys provide the power, and it was very humbling as well as educational to be reminded of how much can be

accomplished without what most of us would call “modern conveniences.” The inmates make clothes for all the prisons, plus soap and some prison office furniture.

Speaking of furniture – one of the rough parts to adjust to is, that a prison cell in Sri Lanka means just that – a concrete cell with nothing in it. No bed, no mattress, no stool – nothing. You live and sleep on a concrete floor. Death Row prisoners spend 23½ hours a day in their bare concrete cells.

Although Sri Lanka continues to sentence people to death, no execution has been carried out since 1976. In my public lecture, I encouraged the people of Sri Lanka to go ahead and make it official that they have banned the death penalty



Aug. 24th: Here we are with the warden of Mahara Prison, a good man.

since they no longer use it anyway. Sita and I were shown the gallows in Bogambara Prison, built to accommodate three hangings at one time; it was a very grim sight.

All in all, prison is prison, regardless of the many cultural or environmental differences between such diverse nations as Sri Lanka and the USA. People don’t want to be there, and some, like most of you reading this newsletter, are doing everything they can to deepen their spiritual lives as well as improve their practical situations

PAYING OUR DUES

I got sick in the middle of our stay in Sri Lanka, some sort of minor lung infection that I took antibiotics for, and the local doctor instructed me to stop taking my malaria-prevention pills until I finished with his antibiotics. It all seemed to go okay, but then a couple days after coming home, I got *really* sick and within a week my doctors here were convinced I had malaria, and treated me for that (the treatment consists of three days of some enormous, nauseating pills that almost feel like chemotherapy).

Well, I did get a lot better, but not totally. And then, a few days later, I started getting really sick *again*, and so did Sita. Back to the doctor, tests showed we both had Dengue Fever,



This is a typical Sri Lankan cell – there’s nothing inside but a concrete floor.

another tropical mosquito-borne disease which has no treatment or cure. It's epidemic in some parts of the world and some people die from it. We apparently didn't have a fatal case of it, but we were both pretty sick for a couple weeks and are still, two months later, slowly recovering our energy. It was a very rough September!

That made me realize how awful it must be to get so sick in a concrete cell, without sympathetic friends, family, and doctors around to keep you in positive spirits. There must be many Sri Lankan prisoners who endure Dengue Fever – which is also called “bone-crushing fever” because it can be so painful all over the body – by laying in their concrete cells all day and night being too weak to eat or move. The human spirit endures so many things on this Grand Journey we all share! Hopefully every illness or misfortune we

suffer can strengthen our bond of empathy with all creatures. This one certainly did that for me and Sita.

Perhaps everyone reading this (this means you) can close your eyes for just a moment when you finish this paragraph, and feel your empathy and compassion for all creatures who are suffering at this moment in countless places around the world – the lonely, the sick, the depressed, the injured, the forgotten, the fearful, the dispossessed – and send a simple blessing of goodwill and encouragement. Don't imagine your silent brief blessing is meaningless. Even Jesus said that our *thoughts* count as much as our actions. Give yourself a moment to send out encouraging thoughts to all those who may feel discouraged all over the world.

GOODWORKS

Inmates Give Warden First Humanitarian Award

Editor's Note: This article was written by Larry Langston, a longtime friend of ours in the Nevada State Prison.

Warden Budge put none of us in prison, but it is true that he is charged with keeping us here and how he keeps us here is what's in question.

There are some who feel a prison sentence should mean continuous punishment throughout incarceration.

There's no argument, that except for the rare case, we put ourselves in prison. And we did it through our poor choices and decisions – and contrary to what some may think – we are suffering the consequences.

Most of us will get out of prison at some point and that raises another question. What kind of person is being released, not so much to, but *on* society?

Warden Budge, coming up through the ranks in his career, has seen first hand the detrimental effects of warehousing inmates. He has seen hundreds of inmates caught in the revolving door of recidivism. He might not have a cure for the disease, but he is attempting a treatment – using large doses of compassion.

Warden Budge demands that we be treated as human beings. He has seen our positive response to kindness and



our enthusiasm over opportunities to better ourselves.

Despite strong resistance and resentment from both inside the prison and out, he has accomplished fantastic things in Nevada State Prison.

And it is not so much the physical changes that Warden Budge has made in the prison that deserve recognition, as much as the emotional and spiritual relief he has granted us. In more ways than one we truly have become – “free on the inside.”

For the most part, we no longer have the sense of “us against them,” and remarkably, we can feel we have an ally in Warden Budge – someone in charge who will listen to us and care about what's happening in our lives.

Those of us who have been in this prison a long time consider Warden Budge a humanitarian.

He is firm yet fair, approachable, reasonable and always looking for a way to help us feel better about ourselves.

Warden Budge knows helping us become better people “in here” will mean we will be better people “out there” and maybe, just maybe, not need another trip back to prison.

Warden Michael Budge is the very deserving recipient of this prison's first-ever award of this nature – not because of what he has done – but because of the kind of person he is to have done it.

God bless Michael Budge.

LETTERS

Dear Bo,

I'm writing as a sometime prisoner who finds himself periodically incarcerated for non-violent civil disobedience. I have worked with prisoners as an advocate on the outside, but it's another story to be in there imprisoned with them. The brutality of the prison system, the racism/sexism/homophobia of our society, present special challenges within the prison itself.

Recently I found myself in a holding cell in Central Lock-Up NYC (The Tombs), with about 15 other men. The difficulties of that environment I could handle. I have years of experience in meditation, prayer, non-violence workshops. However, one disturbing situation was very difficult to know how to handle.

Some of the young men were being very mean to a vulnerable white guy. As much as I knew that the victimizing was coming from men who had been victimized themselves, as much as I breathed in the dark and breathed out the light, as much as I knew that non-violent action often uses surprise and humor, I had very few good ideas to defuse the situation. No one was being physically hurt, and the white guy eventually asked to be moved, but I go over and over the scene thinking what more I might have done.

What I did do was to keep a close eye on things, all the while praying and doing tonglen (dark in, light out; both for the "victim" and the situation and my own fear). In a subtle way I let people know that I was an ally of the "victim." I wasn't able to find other allies. I did some distraction, like asking questions. One of my fears of intervening directly—besides thinking that it would never work—was that then I would become the object of their taunts and threats, and possible physical violence. All in all, this was a big learning experience for me.

Once again, thanks for all your work, your life. You are important to me.

Peace, N

Dear N,

We read and discussed your letter around our dinner table, which of course always includes a few ex-cons, including formerly violent ones. It sounds to us like maybe you're overlooking the real meaningfulness of your experience in the Tombs – maybe it wasn't intended to

make you fret over how you may have done a better job at defusing violence. Maybe it was intended to teach you the humility of realizing that all the methods and goodwill in the world are not enough sometimes.

All of us seasoned activists, especially prison activists, have had to accept such humility. The prison environment is a microcosm of all the worst elements of our dysfunctional society, and it is pretty arrogant to think that as long as we remember certain principles, every experience will have a Hollywood ending. Sometimes the very best we can do is pretty meager indeed.

From our perspective, this experience would have been received as a great reminder that it's not Bo or N or Sita who "do" anything in those situations. We open ourselves and all our skills to being used as an instrument of God's will in that particular situation, but we do not see ourselves as the doer.

And of course, you mentioned personal fear, which will always limit our openness to being an instrument. Fear is linked to the sense of being the doer, so our aim is always trying to open past that small personal self and then let it rip. Sometimes that means doing very little, and at other times that may mean saying, like Chief Joseph, "This is a good day to die."

So every now and then an experience like the Tombs comes along to let us see where we're at and how far we have to go. It sounds like you did fine, really, so long as you now apply the lessons you received.

A dear friend of mine in the 60's, a nonviolent and sweet soul named Barry Weinstock, was once approached by some young muggers on the streets of Atlanta. Barry was a dedicated peace activist, and he immediately released his fears and tried to befriend the muggers, understanding how and why their lives led them to do this, and so forth – and expressing genuine concern for their welfare and their futures.

He was so focused and spellbinding, they listened for about fifteen minutes without moving. And then they beat the shit out of him and took his money. Barry told us this story the day after it happened, and he did not fail to appreciate the comical lesson in humility

this offered him. Thank God life is a mystery and not a problem!

Love, Bo



Dear Bo and Staff,

Foremost, let me extend my sincere appreciation for the works of HKF and the difference your literature has made for me while serving this bid. I was an active addict and alcoholic for close to thirty years. Today, I work as a peer counselor for a chemical dependency program offered by the states' prison system while doing time. I find that addressing addiction is the same as addressing the human spirit. Each in its own way must hold to truth and work principles that are time-old.

I want to address a letter and Bo's response to a con initialed "T," which appeared in the Summer/Fall Newsletter.

"T" picked no bones about his innocence and his hostility toward Bo's work with prisoners. What was most striking was that a person can find themselves in an uncomfortable situation and still seek more discomfort. Each day at this treatment center I see individuals that are deeply scarred with wrong choices and severe consequences. Yet, their chosen path of behavior is to continue to seek destruction; even though opportunity exists to change.

I believe the reason that this article sounded so loud to me is that I am innocent of my crime and am giving ten years of my life to the state. The major difference between "T" and myself, is that I've found Peace.

Early on I was angry, full of self-pity, but a miracle happened. I was not resolved to a state of helplessness – I became responsible, I became empowered with the responsibility of freedom; active service to my brothers inside the fences. The spiritual experience has allowed my life to find balance, tranquility and purpose. Today I freely give what was freely given to me.

Well my friends, it is possible to go on and on, but I won't – please continue to keep the faith and to spread the peace.

With respect and honor, Yours, M



Dear Bo,

I need your help. There is a officer here that I like a lot. Well she is cool. I cannot tell you her name. The officers read my mail and she likes me a lot too. I think I love her. What should I do Bo? I am an inmate and she is an officer. I know that is fucked up a little. In love with an officer, is that wrong? Bo, please write me back and let me know, ok?

I do not think she knows that I love her. Should I tell her? Bo I am 24 years old and she is older than me, just a little. She is not married. She has no kids. Bo I have never been in love before. What do you think I should do?

From Your Friend, S

Dear S,

I'm glad to meet you, little brother. Yes, you've got a difficult situation on your hands. And as frustrating as it may feel, I think you already know the answer to your main question: DO NOT tell her how you feel, DO NOT find out if she feels the same way, and DO NOT even consider the idea that maybe this love between a convict and employee can somehow magically work out. All that would happen, is that it would bring tremendous sadness into both your lives, and could harm you both quite a bit.

There's a saying, "Love acts for the sake of the beloved." If you really do love her, don't bring harm into her life, even if you must sacrifice yourself. Real love is kind, patient, non-harmful, not selfish. True love burns selfishness to a crisp, and that is the opportunity you have to make something good out of this impossible love you feel.

Love is a good thing, not a bad thing. I'm not about to tell you to stop feeling love. It's one of the most important experiences in life. But a romantic love

with her could ruin both your lives, so God must have something different in mind for you and her. Feel your love for her, but then look around the prison, and realize that somebody, somewhere, loves nearly every one of these people you're looking at as much as you love her. Let yourself understand the pain of loving someone you can't be with. Open to it, don't shut it out. Let this love give you compassion for others, and patience with them and with yourself.

When you do think of your beloved, or see her go about her duties, let your love become simple wishes of goodwill and good fortune for her. Wish for her success in life, pray for her. And then, once again, look at every other guard, male and female, and realize that every one of them has "loved ones" who want them to be happy and safe just like you want her to be happy and safe.

Basically, what I'm saying is, go ahead and explore what love is *really* about. You cannot have a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship from this love you feel, so get deep *spiritual* mileage out of it instead. Believe me, it can help you much more than you can imagine. Don't stop yourself from loving her; just let it turn you into a loving person.

Love, Bo



Dear Bo,

I hope when you receive this missive, you and your family are in the best of health. My name is D, 32 years old, and a paraplegic sentenced to Life.

I read your book Lineage and Just Another Spiritual Book, and found it to be very useful. I have a thousand complaints that are similar to everybody

else's, but I'll spare you the repetition. I'm glad someone is glad to voice their opinion, without being afraid.

However, I had to sneak this question in on you Bo: How do I cut ties with a woman who's been there for me when I was broke, paralyzed and incarcerated? I know my reason for holding on is corrupt, but I "honestly" believe she deserves someone better than me. Do I keep on lying, manipulate, and justify my actions to her? Or just call it quits?

Well Bo, just another convict looking for words to justify my behavior. Thank you for everything.

D

Dear D,

I'll give you some feedback as best I can, considering that I hardly know anything at all about the situation and am hundreds of miles away.

The spiritual journey is about living in Truth. If your relationship with this woman is not in truth, then straighten that out. It's not just a matter of "calling it quits;" maybe that will happen or maybe it won't, as you bring yourself into truth with her. Take one step at a time. You obviously don't feel right about your relationship, so look honestly at what that is and deal with it directly, no games. She may surprise you if you begin to deal openly and honestly.

We have connections with people for many reasons, some obvious and others unknown. The best way to allow those connections to be what they need to be is to proceed along in simple truth and goodwill. Many relationships run their course, some weaken, some strengthen. Let life do it, not the agitated mind full of concepts and distortions. And the way to let life follow its own course in relationships is simply to be straight with everyone you know, never manipulative, nor scheming, clever or self-serving.

God brings people into and out of our lives. You have a spiritual journey and the woman in question has a spiritual journey too. Be real, be sincere, and let God do God's part. Work on your journey and allow her to work on hers. The best way she can do that work is to know all the facts of who you are to each other and what is in your hearts.

Love, Bo

NEWS, NOTES, AND OFFERINGS

CAROLINA BIODIESEL UPDATE

Our biodiesel project is still chugging along, but at a far slower pace than we had first envisioned. Our fundraising efforts brought in a very small fraction of the million dollars we needed to open our own plant, so we have had to shift gears and focus on distributing “store-bought” biodiesel instead of producing our own for the near future. As of this writing we have one employee (an ex-con graduate of Kindness House), and are seeking funds to buy our own tanker. We are also placing several storage/distribution tanks in a few locations and we have many people, including local municipalities, willing and eager to begin buying their supply of biodiesel fuel from us.

Although our own factory sits empty for the time being, we are making arrangements with a local chemical company to produce biodiesel to our standards as our subcontractor. This partnership may help us get up and running until we find the funds to buy and install the expensive equipment required to make our own fuel.

BO'S MUSIC GAINING ATTENTION

As we mentioned in our last newsletter, ALL the proceeds from both of Bo's wonderful music CDs are being used for this biodiesel project. If you have not yet bought *Whatever It Takes* or *Stumbling Toward the Light*, you're missing out on some truly great songs and performances, and also missing out on an easy way to support cleaner air, jobs for ex-cons, and reducing our dependency on foreign oil.

In fact, not one, not two, but *three* of the songs on Bo's new CD (*Whatever It Takes*) won honorable mention in Billboard Magazine's International Songwriting Contest from among tens of thousands of songs submitted from all over the world. Bo has also been named a finalist in the annual NC Songwriter of the Year competition [*we'll replace this with whatever happens on Nov 6th; let's schedule Bob Klatt anytime after that, like the 8th*]

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www.humankindness.org

*All proceeds go to support our work.
Order by December 16th for delivery by Christmas.*



a little good news

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