



UU Sangha

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IN MEMORIAM: JOHN DAIDO LOORI, ROSHI

By the Rev. Robert Tokushu Senghas

John Daido Looi, Roshi, one of the outstanding American teachers of Zen Buddhism, died at age 78 in his Abbacy at the Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York on last October 9. I am a senior student of Daido in the Mountain and Rivers Order (MRO), which he founded. He was my teacher beginning in 1982, and I would like to say a few words about him.

Daido came from very modest beginnings. His mother, a widowed Sicilian immigrant with an Ellis Island name, raised him in Jersey City in a family that had had no one of higher education. He forged a birth certificate at 16 and so became a Boatswain's Mate in the U.S. Navy and served on sea duty. When a civilian Daido connected with a settlement house in Jersey City, where he developed a love for the intellect. He received scholarships to undergraduate and graduate schools in chemistry and served as a vice president of a company making food additives. Becoming disillusioned with the underlying values of his work, he resigned and became a professional commercial and art photographer, with study with the outstanding American art photographer Minor White.

He was not satisfied with his Roman Catholic upbringing and sought a spiritual path in Zen Buddhism, first in New York and, after he had encountered Taizan Maezumi Roshi, at

the Zen Center of Los Angeles, as a monastic with Maezumi as his teacher. In 1980 he founded the Zen Arts Center in Mt. Tremper, N.Y., which he hoped to become a center for practice of Zen arts. He saw, however, that that structure did not facilitate adequate Zen practice, and he made the center the Zen Mountain Monastery, a real monastic site. Daido was influenced by the spiritual practices of monastic Catholicism, even though he no longer could identify himself with Catholicism. Daido at first was the Vice Abbot of the monastery, with Maezumi the Abbot, until Daido finally received full transmission in the Soto lineage



Photograph by Rachel Looi Romero

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Notes from the Editor

Greetings.

In this issue we remember John Daido Looi, Roshi. We begin with a memorial by the Rev. Robert Tokushu Senghas, a Unitarian Universalist minister, one of the founders of the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship, and Daido Roshi's student since 1982. UUBF President Rev. Judith Wright also recalls him as her teacher. We close with a reprint of Rev. Wayne Arnason's journal notes on "Searching for a Teacher", which we first published in Vol. 2, No. 1, Fall 1997. This is the only time we have repeated ourselves but, read now, the journal entries point to the long and deep relationship between Daido Roshi and Buddhism within Unitarian Universalism.

Daido Roshi led a sitting and gave a talk at the first UUBF Convocation at Garrison, New York, in 2005. He spoke on the importance of concentration and discipline and told us that, if we counted our breath, it wouldn't do to say to ourselves, "... nine; out will make ten ..." because it won't: go back to one. (The reality for me was "out makes one" but no, it didn't.) He also said, several times, "**don't move**" and, "**sit up straight**".

I am not a student of Daido Roshi but I have been able to attend two haiku retreats at Zen Mountain Monastery. These and the many other weekend retreats have given many a taste of monastic Zen. I appreciate the formality of the monastery, but alas:

all black zendo—
my official Buddhist cushion
rejected

Nothing is permanent and all things are of a nature to change but Daido Roshi took care that the institution he founded would continue beyond him.

descending the mountain—
the mountains are walking, also
descending the mountain

Gassho, Robert Ertman, Editor

(all black zendo— was published in issue # 19 of *bottle rockets*, the haiku journal edited by Stanford M. Forrester, who taught the haiku workshops.)

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from Maezumi and became Abbot a few years later. Besides Maezumi the great influence on his life and work has been Dogen, the great 13th century Japanese Zen Buddhist.

My personal contact with Daido began in 1982, while I was serving as Unitarian Universalist minister to the congregation in Burlington, Vermont. Before becoming a UU minister, I had been practicing law with a large firm in San Francisco, where I first encountered Zen. It was, however, “library Zen” with books by D.T. Suzuki and Alan Watts and a few contacts with Shunryu Suzuki. Later when I became minister in Burlington I realized I had to do the real thing—zazen with a teacher—and I found the Zen Mountain Monastery in the Catskills. From the time I first met Daido I knew I had found my teacher.

I shared common values with Daido, much of it unspoken but real. In his Navy service and my own service in the U.S. Marine Corps we shared a trust that progress—spiritual, artistic, or in any other fundamental way—required in us devotion to a discipline. Not blind, unquestioning obedience to outward authority, but the understanding that we have to develop our own practices, at first with a guide who is farther along the path than we are, and then gradually softening the teacher/student bonds as we progress.

From before our American Revolution, we Americans have been suspicious of authority, often with good reason. But those of us who wish to become proficient in athletics or music or art or acting also know that we have to be willing to accept that there is much we need to do first with self discipline to get to the point where we become our own teacher. Daido knew that and did it with Minor White and Maezumi Roshi, and I embarked on that enterprise with Daido.

At Zen Mountain Monastery Daido maintained many elements of Zen practice characteristic of Japanese Zen monasteries (more than many other American Zen centers), and they continue today. Daido often said that for his generation it was a major responsibility

to maintain the essence of the Zen practice he received, and he was concerned that some of the essential elements embedded in that practice were being lost in some of the American practice. The liturgies at ZMM are mostly Soto, and Daido also encouraged the practice of Zen koans, which are more typically found in Rinzai but are now becoming more widely practiced in Soto groups, thanks in part to Daido. (Daido had both Soto and Rinzai full transmissions, which very few Americans can say.) At ZMM students have the choice of pursuing a koan track or a shikantaza track. ZMM flourishes today with Dharma descendants, a branch in Brooklyn, N.Y., a communications and catalog center, an environmental organization, and affiliates in various parts of the U.S. and beyond. Daido also leaves a legacy of some 20 books.

Daido always recognized the basic principle of Buddhism: that the ultimate authority for our own life lies within ourselves, and that the rôle of the teacher is to facilitate our recognition of our own Buddhature. All the teachings, disciplines, practices, and liturgies are *upaya*, skillful means to the ultimate freedom that can come to one who has followed that way, just as ultimate freedom comes to the creative artist who has mastered his or her discipline. When I saw Daido in Dharma Combat (a formal event in which students question the teacher before the rest of the sangha and the teacher responds to the teaching opportunity), there were occasions when I saw students seek approval, confirmation, or praise, and Daido would not accede. That was because he clearly discouraged a student to become dependent upon him for approval. In other words he avoided creating dependency on him and counterdependency by him—the mark of a real teacher.

And so, Daido, we say goodbye, and we recognize one who followed the way. In the words of Catullus, “In perpetuum, frater, ave atque vale.” And in words which Daido would recognize from his childhood, “Requiescat in pace, Giovanni.”

Dharma Cat

By John

He arrived a little more than a year ago, frightened but curious about his new surroundings. His caretaker's transfer to a new facility precipitated his sudden change of residence. Of those who were aware of his move to a new home, most thought it was good. In fact, some would have labeled his previous caretaker as abusive, even though outward signs of physical abuse were not visible. There was no way to know that soon he would be experiencing violent seizures as a result of his mistreatment.

His name had been given to him by his original caretaker, and, while it was descriptive, it also lacked something. It was incomplete. Once he had settled into—and taken charge of—his new home, and his character and personality emerged, it became obvious that the single moniker of “Smoky” was inadequate.

In some of my reading, I'd learned that the honorific, *geshe*, rather loosely can be defined as “virtuous friend.” It seemed to fit him, so his name became Geshe Smoky Cat.

This grey tiger-striped tomcat has spent his entire life—all one and a half years of it—in prison. And a year ago, when I dubbed him with the honorific, I could not foresee how he would come to embody his name and the effect he would have on the lives of many people. In addition to the people he encounters in prison, numerous other people, from California to New York and on to England and Italy, have heard of Geshe Smoky.

His most direct impact is on the men in the prison living unit that he calls home. Every day people come by “his” cell to see him and maybe scratch his chin. Others ask about him. For those moments when these people are scratching his chin or listening to stories of his antics, they abandon the negativity that often pervades their minds and they experience peace and happiness. For many, it's the only peace and happiness they will have all day.

Although I practice Tibetan rather than Zen Buddhism, I have a favorite Zen saying:

“No snowflake ever falls in the wrong place.” While I do not claim to understand the Grand Scheme of Things, I intuitively know that Geshe Smoky Cat and I did not cross paths by accident. From the first time we met, he became an integral part of my practice.

Space does not permit me to relate all of the Dharma-related “aha” moments I've experienced with the little gray cat, but I will share this one: whenever negativity begins to pile up, and I start to lose focus on what's important, I look at Geshe Smoky Cat. His countenance immediately reminds me that I need to let go—and just *be*. It's what he does so well. He sits, grasping at nothing; he's just here, now.

In some respects, his practice surpasses mine and I'm convinced that when he's reborn it will be in the human realm for all the happiness he's effected as a Dharma cat. Until then, and until our paths separate, may Noble Lady Tara protect us and every being who hears (or reads) his name.

John is a prisoner in Oklahoma and a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship.



Bliss in the Present Moment:

A review of Jill Bolte Taylor, *My Stroke of Insight*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2008 pb. ed.

By Phyllis Culham

Jill Bolte Taylor entered nirvana while taking a shower on Dec. 10, 1996: “As the language centers in my left hemisphere grew increasingly silent and I became detached from the memories of my life, I was comforted by an expanding sense of grace. In this void of higher cognition and details pertaining to my normal life, my consciousness soared into an all-knowingness, a ‘being at one’ with the

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universe, if you will. ... My body was propped up against the shower wall and I found it odd that I was aware that I could no longer clearly discern the physical boundaries of where I began and where I ended. I sensed the composition of my being as that of a fluid rather than that of a solid. I no longer perceived myself as a whole object separate from everything. Instead, I now blended in with the space and flow around me. ... For the first time I felt truly at one with my body as a complex construction of living, thriving organisms. ... It was clear to me that this body functioned as a portal through which the energy of who I am can be beamed into a three-dimensional external space.” (41,42,43,45)

Then, verbal communications from what neuroanatomist Taylor calls her “left mind” broke through her “bliss state,” informing her that she was having a stroke and was close to death. But before the reader reaches that shower in 1996, or the three chapters on how a permanently damaged “left mind” managed to prod a dangerously “euphoric” “right mind” through a forty-five minute effort to summon medical help without words or numeracy (a forty-five minutes which outdo in the telling any suspense blockbuster ever filmed, even though we know the author survived!) Taylor explicitly insists that the reader NOT skip two preliminary chapters on the brain. (Ultra-simple and clear line drawings illustrate the brain in those two chapters and record the timed progress of the stroke in following chapters.)

Indeed, skipping the scientific background would be a mistake, since those chapters set up the “left mind” “right mind” distinction and illustrate the importance of “the present moment.” As Taylor says, in descriptions which would resonate with Thich Nhat Hanh on “interbeing,” “Our right hemisphere is designed to remember things as they relate to one another. Borders between specific entities are softened... . To the right mind, no time exists other than the present moment, and each moment is vibrant with sensation. Life or death occurs in the present moment. The experience

of joy happens in the present moment. Our perception and experience of connection with something that is greater than ourselves occurs in the present moment. To our right mind, the moment of *now* is timeless and abundant. ... The present moment is a time when everything and everyone are connected together as *one*. As a result, our right mind perceives each of us as equal members of the human family. It identifies our similarities and recognizes our relationship with this marvelous planet which sustains our life. It perceives the big picture, how everything is related, and how we all join together to make up the whole.” (30)

The “left mind,” on the other hand, is the non-Zen mind of labels and chatter: “Our left hemisphere language centers use words to describe, define, categorize, and communicate about everything. They break the big picture perception of the present moment into manageable and comparable bits of data that they can talk about.” (31) As if that were not enough to bar us from nirvana, “One of the jobs of left hemisphere language centers is to define our *self* by saying, ‘I am.’ ... It is the home of your ego center... .” Its chatter keeps us confined in the past and what Thich Nhat Hanh would call “habit energy:” “...our left hemisphere creates what I call ‘loops of thought patterns’ that it uses to rapidly interpret large volumes of incoming stimulation with minimal attention and calculation.” (31,32) Nonetheless, we cannot fall into dualism and label the “left mind” bad. If it had not kept interrupting Taylor’s bliss state with verbal, factual questions about her cognition and bodily functions like balance and why they were not normal, she would have been found days later dead in her tub.

As Taylor says later, “I remember that first day of the stroke with bitter-sweetness. ... I felt like a genie liberated from its bottle.” Her “glorious bliss” and “escape into bliss” sound remarkably like a classic koan: “I understood that Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor had died that morning, and yet, with that said, who was left?” Although she felt “enormous grief for the death of my left hemisphere consciousness,” she also

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experienced this as the Great Liberation (while lying, near death, in the emergency room): "... without the emotional circuitry reminding me of her likes and dislikes, or her ego center reminding me about her patterns of critical judgment, ... I was no longer bound to her illusions or self-induced limitations. ... I had spent a lifetime of 37 years being enthusiastically committed to 'do-do-doing' lots of stuff at a very fast pace. On this special day, I learned the meaning of simply 'being.' ... I stopped thinking in language and shifted to taking new pictures of what was going on in the present moment. I was not capable of deliberating about past or future-related ideas because those cells were incapacitated. All I could perceive was right here, right now, and it was beautiful. My entire self-concept shifted as I no longer perceived myself as a single, a solid, an entity with boundaries that separated me from the entities around me. ... Now, released from that restrictive circuitry, my right hemisphere relished in its attachment to the eternal flow. I was no longer isolated and alone. ... Despite my neurological trauma, an unforgettable sense of peace pervaded my entire being and I felt calm. ... I was simply a being of light radiating life into the world. ... In the absence of my left hemisphere's negative judgment, I perceived myself as perfect, whole, and beautiful just the way I was." And that was from a woman who had felt the moment, long before rescue, when her right arm had "died," and she had perceived it as severed from her body. (68,69,70,71)

I do not want to leave the impression that the only interest of this book for UU's with an interest in Buddhism is that it brings together literary descriptions of enlightenment, nirvana, liberation, or whatever we want to call it, with a UU-type deference to science of the brain, melded in this case by a participant-observer, accidentally albeit uniquely qualified to record sophisticated observation of the process of a stroke correlated with her subjective experience of that process. Her description of trying to deal with medical personnel while unable to take in or to dispense information with any speed, while feeling acutely the intentions

and emotions of her visitors, will be usefully cautionary to anyone in the "helping professions." Of course, she ran up against the trials of lay life in the physical world during her recovery; she wanted not to be a burden, and therefore she needed money; she needed to transport herself. Her capability of doing math at the level of balancing a check book and budgeting had been permanently compromised by the stroke. Any compassionate person trying to help with such a situation will be heartened by this realistic yet optimistic account of the problems of recovery.

Nonetheless, as that recovery progressed, she had to confront the implicit koan: who is it who recovers? And "recovers" what? She desperately wanted all her "left mind's" skills and competencies and even professional knowledge back, but, as she says, "Frankly, I did not want to give up Nirvana." "The question I faced over and over again was, '*Do I have to regain the affect, emotion, or personality trait that was neurologically linked to the memory or ability that I wanted to recover?*'" Could she "recover" "without...my egotism, intense desire to be right, or fear of separation and death? ... I didn't want to lose my connection to the universe. I didn't want to experience myself as a solid separate from everything." (131,132) As the mixed blessing of her "left mind" came back, she was able to retain a Zen-like observer of the contents of the mind: "As my left brain centers recovered and became functional again, I spent a lot of time observing how my storyteller would draw conclusions based on minimal information. For the longest time, I found these antics of my story-teller to be rather comical. At least until I realized that my left mind full-heartedly expected the rest of my brain to believe the stories it was making up! ... In the same vein, as my left mind enthusiastically manufactured stories that it promoted as the truth, it had a tendency to be redundant—manifesting loops of thought patterns that reverberated through my mind over and over again." (144-145) At that point Taylor's conviction that even children must encounter the

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“need to tend carefully the gardens of their minds” with “discipline” sounds amazingly similar to the “tending the seeds in the garden” metaphors of Thich Nhat Hanh (144, see also “tend the garden of my mind” 154,) watering some seeds and encouraging them to overgrow others. I became envious when Taylor regained the connection with her family AND did it without carrying along the history in all the “stories.” She also retained a new awareness of what different attitudes or activities felt like in her body, an asset which sounds much like the Vipassana body-scan. She says of meanness and worry, “Frankly, I just didn’t like the way these attitudes felt physiologically inside my body.” (144) Although she does not use the term mindfulness in this regard she also adds, “When I become conscious of what cognitive loops my brain is running, I then focus on how these loops feel physiologically inside my body.”

Taylor makes it explicit that she is not writing just for an audience of stroke victims, although she aspires to be encouraging to them. Her point throughout is that the “right mind” she learned to rely on is available to everyone with a brain, and her techniques of observing the contents of her mind and the effects of her thoughts on her body are doable by all; and bliss is within our reach, without a near-killer stroke. She concludes, “...I whole-heartedly believe that the feeling of deep inner peace is neurological circuitry located in our right brain. This circuitry is constantly running and always available for us to hook into. The feeling of peace is something that happens in the present moment. It’s not something that we bring with us from the past or project into the future. Step one to experiencing inner peace is the willingness to be present in the right here, right now.”



Phyllis Culham is Professor of History at the U.S. Naval Academy. Long, long ago, she graduated from the University of Kansas with a double major in classics and psychology. She and her husband, the editor, are facilitators of the Mindfulness Practice Group of Annapolis.

Buddhist Rites for the Unborn Dead in America

“Water Baby” Ceremonies to Relieve the Suffering of Parents and Families

By Frank Tedesco

As Buddhism in America matures it will naturally enter into all aspects of people’s lives, even the most sensitive and intimate. Matters between parents and children in birth, aging, sickness and death require the wisdom of buddhadharma because they are the fields of much attachment, deep and explosive emotions and consequent suffering.

When parents lose a child, whether the child is young, or grown-up, or even dies before birth in miscarriage or abortion, they often suffer deep grief that may last for years, even decades, because they have lost part of themselves with the child. Some assert the unfortunate parents “inevitably” suffer remorse albeit suppressed. This prolonged sadness is especially true for mothers who have borne a child or children from their own bodies. Some say they never get over the loss. A son or daughter who has chosen a mother’s womb or has been karmically thrust there for whatever reasons is a member of the parents’ family, even if the child is known only to the mother herself. The child may have been given a name or perhaps died before being named. These nebulous beings (or streams of consciousness), who have been fortunate to have finally arrived at human conception in the wheel of life, are worthy of our generous prayers and offerings just as any beloved child born alive into a happy family. They have reached the rare and precious realm of human birth in their spiritual evolution and are capable of learning and practicing the dharma and achieving liberation from suffering. They, too, are potential buddhas who can teach others to awaken and realize buddhahood for the sake of all beings. Americans who study Mahayana Buddhism and especially Zen Buddhism are very attracted to this ideal of unconditional,

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universal love and many have found memorial services for their children lost during pregnancy especially comforting.

According to UUBF member and Buddhist scholar Dr. Jeff Wilson, author of *Mourning the Unborn Dead*, at least a dozen American convert Zen centers spanning the United States have frequently conducted Buddhist ceremonies for babies lost during pregnancy. At least four centers conducted a single ceremony as of early 2008. It is my guess that many more dharma centers would offer ceremonies for unborn children if they were commonly known. This particular rite of mourning the unborn dead that follows the Japanese *mizuko kuyo* form of ritual “has gradually come to the United States over the past four decades” according to Dr. Wilson. It was introduced into this country through the practices observed in immigrant Japanese-American temples and American Buddhist interest in the rituals as taught by their foreign teachers and observations during travels in Japan. As abortions in particular have become more frequent with America’s increasing population and the liberalizing of sexual behavior, coupled with the decriminalization of abortion with the *Roe* decision, parents’ need for spiritual consolation for their lost babies has risen whether they be Buddhist, secular agnostics or Christian.

Mizuko kuyo or “water baby/child offering” seems to appeal to both sides of the “culture war” over abortion since the ritual can be modified and interpreted with emphasis either on the pain and loss of the baby’s life itself or on the suffering of the mother or parents without concern for the fetus. The rite itself doesn’t require belief in a Buddhist world view or that the infant spirits are angry with the mother as in Japan or Korea but rather focuses on remembering and/or ameliorating the relationship between the parents and the child. Performing the ritual with its hand-made bib for the bodhisattva Jizo, toy offerings to the lost child or children, and prayers and meditation, allows the bereaved parents and friends to relieve pent-up sadness and begin to achieve some degree of emotional resolution or closure with their feel-

ings for the lost loved one(s). Jeff notes that about twelve to fifteen participants is the normal attendance level at centers in general according to his experience, although a single person may request a private rite.

As in Korea and Japan, the bodhisattva most closely associated with the dead and lost pregnancies is Kshitigarbha, Jijang Bosal in Korean or Jizo Bosatsu in Japanese. American Buddhists have become most familiar with the Japanese form of Jizo. All varieties of Jizo statues are found in Japan and American Buddhists have appropriated or adapted these statues for their own use in Zen centers and Buddhist gardens. They are famously found with small red bibs tied around their necks as offerings of protection for the lost babies. In place of a Buddha statue or Avalokitesvara (Kwanseum in Korean, Kannon in Japanese), cute Jizo figures have a special role, almost like the saints in popular Catholicism, for protecting travelers, children and women who are having problems. Jizo carries a bright jewel to illuminate the darkness of fears in hell and a pilgrim’s staff with six rings to warn animals and evil doers to avoid mutual harm of offence and defense. His original name in Sanskrit means “earth store or earth womb”--signifying the storehouse of mother nature from which we are born and where we descend when we are buried or descend into various hells underground because of our karmic transgressions.

At Great Vow Monastery in Klatskanie, Oregon, where Wilson attended the ceremony in 2006 led by the abbess Jan Chozen Bays, the Jizo-inspired water baby ceremony lasted three and a half hours. This time included a twenty-five minute explanation of the history and cultural context of the ceremony in Japan, the philosophical understanding of causes and conditions in Buddhism, its differences with Western thought, and the passing around of many different pictures of Jizo, so that participants of different ages and needs could become more personally involved with the healing mission of Jizo. Chozen instructed participants to make “tokens of remembrance” for the person being honored and to write their name, age, cause of

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death and a message to them. After sewing or creating these tokens in silence for the most part and sinking into their feelings about the departed, participants walked solemnly to the Jizo garden outside where they chanted in English at an outdoors altar and dedicated merit to the deceased. Each participant would then find a Jizo statue (or Virgin Mary statue) in the woods to dress and give offerings or bring their own to set up alone in solitary worship. All would gather again after their private worship, and listen to a concluding teaching from the abbess, bow to each other, and return indoors to the monastery for tea and brownies. Unlike the practice in many temples in Asia, no fee or donation was required by the monastery or the abbess.

According to Wilson, Americans attracted to Buddhism for the most part do not believe in malevolent spirits or ghosts as in Asia. They do not fear the dead. Death is not considered polluting in any way. Most do not believe that abortion is a violation of Buddhist morality or precepts but a woman's right to make a difficult decision for herself in a non-judgmental way. Feminist thought strongly influences how Americans "do Buddhism" and many women clergy strongly support women's power over their own bodies and lives. Unlike their male counterparts in the traditional East, according to Wilson, European and American Buddhist clergy do not "shame" women into submissiveness and second-class stature.

Water baby rituals American-style are designed to assist liberated women in dealing more adequately with their lost pregnancies losses and go on to live emotionally freer lives in the future, thanks to Jizo Bodhisattva and the American Buddhist clergy who wisely use him to assuage the pain of the bereaved and guilt-ridden.

I recommend readers take a look at Jeff Wilson's book if they are interested in exploring how Americanized water baby rites may be able to bridge the divide between pro-life and pro-choice factions in our fragmented society. There are many facts and in-depth discussions of the abortion issue in the tome which will help clar-

ify what all the angry noise is about, contextualized in a description of the Japanese- American Buddhist world and American Zen Buddhist converts' permutations. The book is written for historians and theoreticians of American religious life. It is not easy reading for non-academics. The book does not explore how non-Japanese ethnic Buddhists handle the unborn dead and abortion, nor how converts to other traditions like the Tibetan, Taiwanese, Korean or Theravada variants approach fetal life and death. There are centuries of historical experience and subtle wisdom yet to imbibe. Jeff Wilson is to be commended for setting a high standard of quality and comprehensiveness in his study of a more popular American Buddhist sectarian development.

Deep bows to Jeff and those grappling with the loss of children who have not seen the light of day. And deep bows to millions of unborn "baby buddhas" lost to us in the past, the present, and the future.

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Frank Tedesco is a member of the UUs of Clearwater, Florida where he has led a UUBF chapter for years. He earned a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies during his fifteen year residency in Korea. He is teaching Buddhism and East Asian religions at the University of South Florida in Tampa for the Spring term, 2010. See

www.truedharma.org and www.truedharmaworks.org for more about his life and work in the US and Korea.

Corrections:

March 30, 2009.

One Man's attempt to launch a humanitarian organization from behind bars.

By Christopher Huneke
August 2009

I. DESOLATION

“We cannot survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together.”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

The darkened space of a closet-sized San Quentin prison cell is perhaps one of the loneliest places in the world. I would know, I spent eighteen months on the fourth story of a cold cell block. Through the narrow windows spaced far apart, I watched the distant grassy hills change hues from a lush green to an amber gold and then a rusty mahogany. Since the sun didn't shine through the north facing wall, the seasonal transitions became my only clue to the passage of time.

Such an absence of progress is an experience any prisoner can describe. The cracking walls, the massive rampart doors and the creaking five-story cell blocks tell stories about the utter permanence of isolation and monotony. For more than 150 years, San Quentin has been a desolation where life comes to a grinding halt.

Academics have described the effects of extreme isolation on prisoners:

“Many prisoners begin to lose the ability to initiate behavior of any kind – to organize their own lives around activity and purpose. Chronic apathy, lethargy, depression and despair often result... In extreme cases, prisoners may literally stop behaving”

-Professor Craig Haney, UC Santa Cruz as quoted by Atul Gawande in *The New Yorker*,

Haney, whose opinions are cited in the recent ruling written by a Federal three-judge panel which found that California offers negligent healthcare to prisoners, argues that such separation from normal social interaction fosters anxiety, panic, withdrawal, mental disintegration, possessiveness, semi-catatonic staring, slowed brain activity, hallucinations and a craving of any activity.

Think about that for a minute. How would you react if you were locked in a cell no bigger than a walk-in closet stuffed with a double bunk, sink and toilet positioned right next to where you lay your head at night?

I wondered how I would possibly survive such a long stretch through desolation. At first I attempted to keep my mind active. I knew that without constant effort I'd wither away. So I began to fold origami animals to hang from the ceiling, the contrast between playfully bright paper and dingy walls creating surreal mobiles. Next I started sketching scenes of nature filled with luscious waterfalls, thick forests of redwood and glorious fields of flowers. I hung them on m walls using cardboard to fashion reclaimed frames. I even created a makeshift planter out of an empty milk carton and planted the seed sprouts from apples given to us at chow.

Soon the days melted into nights. The weeks bled into months. What little orientation I had was predicated on predictable guard movement. We knew that we'd see the officers when they had to count the population but the highlight of our day was always mail call.

Mail call was routinely run at four-thirty. The guard hauled the correspondence up the tall flight of stairs and began to slowly walk from one end to the other, pausing at one of the fifty cells to slide small bundles into the food tray slots. The process is mundane to anyone else, but to a prisoner it presented hope, outside connection and a sense of strained belonging to the people they missed on the other side of the wall. When an inmate received a letter from home, desolation was courageously held at bay.

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And so every day at four-thirty a strange Pavlovian response can be witnessed on tiers up and down the prison. The unit suddenly hushes as men listen to the clinking oversized keys and form a mental picture of the officer carrying a note from home. Perhaps a mother wrote inside a pink envelope to say she's cleared the extra bedroom, so upon release he's got a place to go. Perhaps the large green card came from a friend who wrote in reassurance that he'll pick up the payments on the work truck. Perhaps the little yellow pastel envelope decorated in hand-drawn flowers was sent from a daughter who wrote to say, "No matter what – I still love you – you'll always be my daddy."

And that's why, when the keys rings, the hands shoot out of the bars, each one gripping a plastic mirror aimed down the tier to track the officer's progress. If a man has no access to a mirror, he'll find a shard which he'll clutch, white-knuckled, pointing toward the dream.

The officer is used to the attention. She's had the mirrors angled at her for years. Being the focal point like the sun above a field of solar cells is old-hat. She's used to walking up to a cell in which both inmates are clamoring at the gate like overzealous pound puppies, their faces contorted with gregarious smiles, anxious to grab anything addressed to them. She's used to watching the inmates snap up a letter and rush back to their cookie-sheet racks where they hastily unpeel it the way a monkey grabs fruit from inside of a cage. And when she turns from passing out that last piece of hope, she knows all the eyeballs will slowly retract back in through the bars. Desolation wins three quarters of the time.

My efforts to resist lasted for months but eventually my resilience began to ebb. I began to tire of folding animals whose only chance at animation would be an errant breeze. My art became stale after I realized I was projecting what seemed to be an increasingly distant past into the graphite on the page. Desolation was creeping into my mind blotting out my creative thought like a slow moving cancer. It was wiping me clean and in its place it laid the blackness of despair.

Except for an occasional sprinkling of my apple seedling, I dropped all of my creative

activities and descended into the escapism of books. Somewhere in the scattered ink filling their pages I hoped to wring some form of amnesty.

But for all the amazing places I traveled in the adventure lands of J.K. Rowling, Isaac Asimov and Carl Sagan. I found myself drawn to the books based on social realism. I began to read authors like Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Amy Tan (*The Joy Luck Club*), and John Steinbeck (*Of Mice and Men*) and I realized these authors spoke to me in a way that was more personal. The books I now gravitated to were Sandra Cineros' *The House on Margo Street*. Arthur Golden's *Memoirs of a Geisha*, David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars*, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Orhan Pamuk's *Snow*, Jeffery Eugenide's *Middlesex*, Khaleed Hosseini's *The Kite Runner* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies*.

I realized I was relating to these books on intimate levels. The central themes shared parallels with my life. I was responding to stories of separation, marginalization and barriers in communication. It was like each novel contained a metaphor for the desolation of prison I was now living.

But there were other books that spoke of real prisons and contained narratives of resilience, persistence and determination. One of these is Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* which gave me perspective and a sense of purpose.

Frankl was a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. A Jewish psychiatrist, he was imprisoned in some of the worst concentration camps of the war. Frankl personally saw hundreds killed and documented how incarceration haunted the inmates who remained. It was through Frankl that I first understood what it was happening to me through the desolation of prison:

"Intensification of inner life helped the prisoner find a refuge from the emptiness, desolation and spiritual poverty of his existence, but letting him escape into the past... our thoughts often centered on such details and these

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memories could move on to tears..."

-Vicktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Available through the CLF Prisoner Ministry as an offering from "the Book Project.")

With Frankl's insight burning inside of me, I began to identify with other people who had written from inside a prison cell. Martin Luther King Jr who wrote "A Letter from Birmingham Jail" once said "even the most starless midnight may herald the dawn of some great fulfillment." Gandhi wrote, "Socrates quietly embraces death in his dark and solitary cell and initiates his friends and us into the mysterious doctrine that he who seeks peace must look for it within himself." Even Shakespeare whose Hamlet lived in a prison within his own mind added "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so."

This thread of strength was summarized convincingly by Dietrick Bonhoeffer, the Christian chaplain executed by the Nazis after plotting to overthrow Hitler. Years after his death his constituents gathered what turned into the collection *Letters and Papers from Prison* in which Bonhoeffer states, "I've learned here especially that the facts can always be mastered and that difficulties are magnified out of all proportion simply by fear and anxiety."

Based on the realization that I had a conscious choice to accept desolation or resist. I began to search for supporting philosophies. I found truths in MLK, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, the Dalai Lama, Confucius, Taoists and Wiccans. But one source in particular seemed to consolidate the advice. In *The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching*, Thich Nhat Hanh writes:

"It is well worth investing in a Sangha. If you sow seeds in arid land, few seeds will sprout. But if you select a fertile field and invest your wonderful seeds in it, the harvest will be bountiful. Building a Sangha, supporting a Sangha, being with a Sangha, receiving the support of a Sangha is the practice."

I flipped through the book to find out

that a Sangha is a Buddhist spiritual community. They were pointing out that the answer to desolation was to make a conscious choice to build a community of invested supporters.

Not long after, a prison gang began to assert their power over the cell blocks. Inmates began complaining about thefts, manipulations and extortions. Then one day the guards suddenly locked down the block. Someone had been found writhing on the ground. His throat had been sliced and blood was pooling like a red sea.

That night officers swept through the block searching for weapons. They ransacked the cells turning everything upside down and inside out. Anything unsanctioned was tossed over the tier. Plastic bottles, books, pictures framed in cardboard, origami animals and even my hopeful apple sprouts were thrown down and swept away.

I looked down at the sea of debris piling up on the concrete floor four stories below and then at my disheveled cell missing its creative decorations. I could tell San Quentin was trying to do its best to drag desolation back into my life but this time the seeds of Sangha remained firmly planted.

II. BEACON STREET

"The danger of zeal without knowledge and sincerity without intelligence"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

My first letters sent from Avenal State prison are packed with descriptions of relief after finally having transferred from San Quentin. There the violence and the isolating environment created a crushing desolation that had reduced my sanity to a shred. Once, my escape was the dream I loved because they allowed me to escape the walls of my cell. But as desolation sunk in like a stain, my freedom had been replaced with urgent nightmares.

Still, the words of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh were not forgotten. His wisdom suggested healing through a com-

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munity called Sangha. It was a seed of promise that could grow into spiritual transformation.

Even at this new prison, every inmate seemed potential threat. Motley crews of prisoners circumambulated the track like some daily carnival parade. There were low-sagging gang-banger thugs, heavily tattooed racial supremacists and hardened psychotics wide-eyed like strung out heroin addicts. As a foreshadowing of my worst fears, a twenty-ram riot erupted on the soccer field the week I arrived.

Desolation was following me like an insidious shadow. Strange things happen when it overtakes you. Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl writes “expect the reactions of a man to an abnormal situation... to be abnormal in proportion to the degree of his normality.” If desolation hooks its claws into your soul, you will have to choose: Fight or cut and run.

But in me, the seeds of Sangha spoke and I longed to find a peaceful fellowship through which I could realize a dream of restoration. When the shades of gray close in and you don't know whether to hide in the darkness or seek emptiness of the white space think of Gordon Allport who critiqued Frankl's experience by summarizing “what alone remains is the last of human freedoms – the ability to choose one's attitudes in a given set of circumstances.” Desolation would never leave my side, it would shadow me for the rest of my life waiting to consume me. But now I knew that I could choose to fight it by seeking a spiritually fulfilling community.

At times these dreams wondered back through halcyon days spent reared in the peaceful United Church of Christ. There the pastors had spoken eloquently of love and inclusion. An optimism existed that even societies most disdained held value inside a universe of egalitarian encouragement. And so I turned to the prison's chapel to seek spiritual unity.

The inmate who led the Protestant chapel services was an invitingly handsome man named Will (the name Will is a pseudonym). He held a charismatic charm over the men who filled his pews singing to boisterous hymns and swaying to intoxicating testimonies. The manner in which he energetically paced the chapel

and waved his hands driving a fervor into his congregants made it no surprise to learn that Will was a son of a prominent black Southern Baptist pastor. He channeled that heritage through wide-open-eyes that harnessed my attention just as much as his commanding vocal presence. To experience Will's world was to feel God in a tremendous bone-shaking cacophony.

But while Will's word rolled off his tongue like honey his message was as bitter as acid. The doctrine of the loving, forgiving Christianity inside of which I had grown up was nowhere in sight. In shock I sat through sermons denouncing other faiths, identifying irreparable sins and condemning non-heterosexual lifestyles. Each sharpened point pieced my pride like a deluge of demagogic daggers. It seemed that for every facet of precious constituents, Will's congregation invented some form of demon.

I figured that the best chance of getting Will's attention was to speak to him through a perspective with which he could identify. Utilizing my constituents I assembled a selection of public statements made by prominent members of the black community, all of whom advocated marriage equality. Together we gathered press coverage that included Rev Jesse Jackson, Rev Al Sharpton, Coretta Scott King and Barack Obama who would later that year become elected US President after winning the largest popular vote in history. But the jewel of the set was a position statement affirming the United Church of Christ's commitment to marriage equality.

Emboldened, I figured William had something to ponder. Handing the clippings back, he certainly looked amazed. For a minute I thought I had prevailed. But then, he firmly stated a belief that the bible condemned gays as sinful. Despite my efforts, Will's position remained unchanged.

Shortly thereafter, a fellow inmate introduced me to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Larger Fellowship. The CLF is a wing under the Unitarian Universalist Association designed specifically for UU members unable to

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attend fellowship in person. Through their prison ministry program, I was paired with a delightful pen pal and introduced to a religion emphasizing positive action, in idle words. (For Prison Ministry information, contact Chaplain Pat at 25 Beacon Street, Boston, MA)

As a CLF member, I could feel comfortable embracing wisdom from all of the world's diverse religions while adhering to a central covenant devoted to a platform of social justice. Here was an inclusive theology that welcomed the expansive potentiality of my diverse foundation and presented an alternative to the fear mongering in the prison chapel.

Soon I had enrolled in distance learning courses and eagerly affirmed the UU covenant. My commitment deepened through principles that began by dignifying all people in recognizing their inherent worth and concluded through a reverence of the interdependence of existence. Such egalitarian principles had the potential to up lift convicts from the ancient caste-systems of theological and social hierarchies that made true reconciliation impossible. Now it was clear, as an active UU member, the CLF Prison Ministry could build Martin Luther King's beloved community, the Swahili society of Ubuntu and even Thay's egalitarian Sangha. The dream seemed possible, once again the world could be flat.

What if I could help to address the isolation, fear and hatred created by desolation? What if I could bring the community of a Sangha to other searching inmates?

Referencing a recent paper by social-networking computer scientists at Microsoft which concluded that humanity is separated by degrees of acquaintances not much larger than six-fold, I dubbed the project "Six Degrees of Conversation". Its mission: Alleviate the harshest consequences of desolation. The method would be deceptively simple. Encourage inmate's resilience by building a broad support coalition through letter writing.

III. LOVING LIFE

"[T]ransformed nonconformity, which is always costly and never altogether com-

fortable, may mean walking through the valley of the shadow of suffering"

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Before his execution for his role as a collaborator against the Nazi regime, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter sent from his Berlin prison cell, "It's a strange feeling to be so completely dependent on other people; but at least it teaches one to be grateful." As an inmate janitor earning just twelve cents an hour, I understood Bonhoeffer's anxiety. There was no way for me to pay for the social justice project I was envisioning without help.

Six Degrees of Conversation (SDOC) was supposed to launch on December 1, 2008. The project was conceived to accomplish its mission by producing a set of custom greeting cards that would be passed out to inmates during winter holidays when expectations of community produced the highest level of anxiety. Encouraging prisoners to reach out by sending greeting cards to constituents could relieve tension and promote long term support in the midst of desolation. But if the project would stand a chance, I needed to locate a source of funding.

Opening a copy of UU World, the quarterly magazine for Unitarian Universalist, I hoped to find some source of inspiration. I flipped open the cover to locate the table of contents and spotted a promotion for the upcoming UUA General Assembly. The keynote speaker for the 2008 WARE lecture was an intelligent social and environmental activist named Van Jones.

Immediately I recognized Jones' photograph and remembered an issue of WIRED magazine published earlier in the spring which described Jones' role in founding the Ella Baker center for Human Rights. I had been captivated by his work to create an alliance between the EDC's environmentalist wing Green For All and the City of Oakland, CA. Green For All, in part, helped to train formally incarcerated people in sustainable green technology jobs. Green For All seemed to match SDOC's mission of restoring dignity to the incarcerated by melding social

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and environmental concepts of interbeing. I decided to send one last proposal to Green For All and then held my breath.

But a few weeks later as the 110° temperatures beat me into further submission, I received a note from my civilian project director who fielded SDOCs communication. She informed me that we had won a generous micro-grant. An employee of Green For All had contacted her and pledged support. We were funded!

Emboldened by the news, I threw SDOC into high gear. The greeting cards we planned to offer needed to be something that prisoners would take pride in gifting. They needed to be visually striking, and yet I wanted them to feel organic, born out of the visual culture of prison life. Where would I find a talented artist who could accomplish this task?

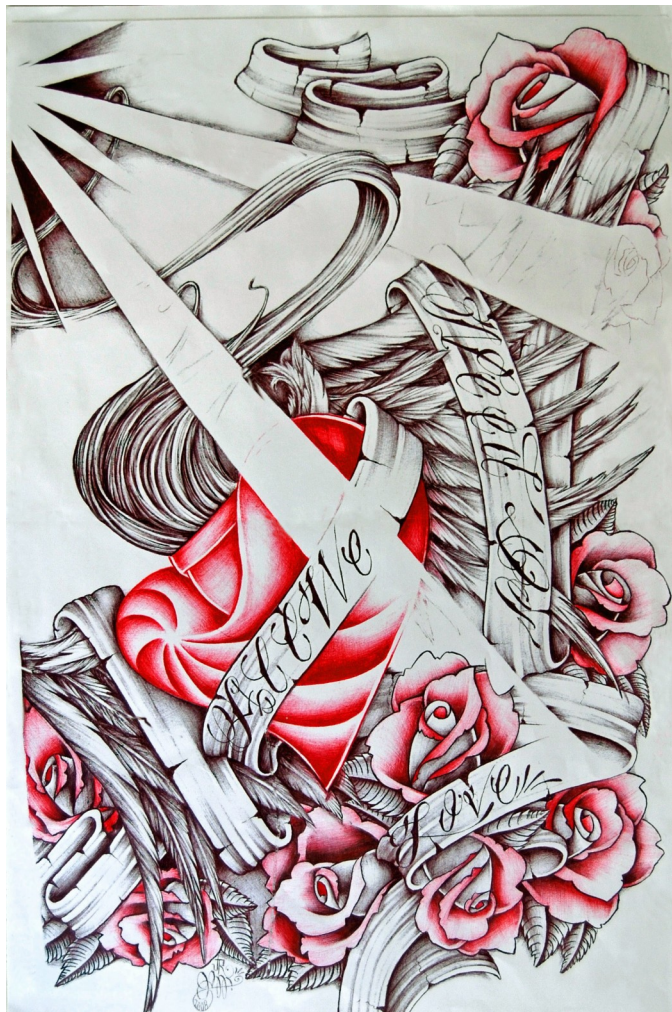
Consensus among my sources pointed to an inmate named Jesse Rugge. Twenty-eight years old, Jesse stood casually at six-foot-four, sandy hair flopping into his boy face. His lean-musculature clung to his body as if he had just walked in from the surf along the Santa Barbara coast. A comical banter sprinkled liberally on top of a playful attitude instantly made him the adoration of any group. And yet the youthful hubris betrayed a disheartening reality.

Jesse doesn't deny that he participated in the crime for which he was convicted. He even took the heat for others eight years ago. But at trial, the ring leader was round not-guilty of the charge which gave Jesse an "L", so why did it stick on him? The frat-boy pranks Jesse played were the emotional trappings of a young man who, at age twenty, had life to go.

Over the last eight years committed to rehabilitation, these are the things he carried in his corrections file: completions in numerous college-level correspondence courses, graduation from alcohol rehabilitation classes, a job as a teacher's assistant for a reentry program, a certification as a trainer in the Breaking Barriers® life skills curriculum, and a diligent passion to expand his talent as an aspiring graphic artist into a marketable employment skill.

So it wasn't surprising that Jesse leapt at the opportunity. He recognized that participa-

tion in SDOC would help to build a portfolio of published work which he could later use to secure a job. He offered SDOC full reproduction rights to a completed piece designed for a family member and promised to produce a second piece specifically for the project.



I knew that if I were at home the scope of this project would take me a single afternoon to complete. Being humble had never been a strong quality in my control-oriented style. I was used to high-levels of perfection. Attempting to work with a disparate team while relying on the grace of volunteerism and donation became an exercise of extreme patience and trust. Game-stopping events were churning outside of my domain, yet success required a complete release of ego. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and held onto faith.

The day after I dropped the second proof

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in the mail was Jesse's first parole hearing. I could sense his tension growing as he wondered if they would let him out. Calling him over, I handed him a copy of the latest proof hoping to give him a boost of encouragement. His eyes immediately flashed with hope and he clutched the card asking to bring it along to the hearing. Perhaps the talisman could bring luck.

Everyone expected the lifer's hearing to take all day. After all Jesse had a passionate pitch planned describing his reform efforts and to cap it off, he would produce the card as the embodiment of eight long years of rehabilitation. But lifers rarely win their parole hearings and it's nearly unheard of for a first time applicant. Some 99% lose every year and Jesse was no exception. The board summarily rejected his application. It was as if they had made up their minds already.

And then, to my surprise he pulled me aside to talk to me about the meeting. One of the board members had been impressed with his work in restorative projects and had asked to keep the card in his file. Now rattling in his voice I could sense a modicum of hope.

Suddenly, two weeks before launch, Jesse finished the second piece of art. The piece depicted a graceful koi fighting rapid waters in familiar tattoo stylization. He called it "Representation" and described the bold colored -pencil on sturdy bleached paper as a symbol of resilience and longevity. Holding the piece proudly up to his gregarious smile, the blues in the pool echoed the new clarity in his eyes.

Impressed as I was, this piece would have to wait for next year. Production was complete and by now packages of envelopes and sets of printed greeting cards were pouring in. Immediately I scanned for a single typo I'd identified earlier. It was still there! My printer hadn't received the last correction note in time.

That night I received a terse update letter. The entire production run had been printed with the typo. They would have to start over. Reprint everything. The words scratched deep indentations into the paper, telegraphing a palpable angst. Yet the next day a torrent of cards arrived, this time without the remaining mistake.

Much of my anxiety and stress had re-

sulted from attachments to qualities like individualism, perfectionism and control. But these were nothing more than references to a more effaceable past, a past I knew I had been chasing like an angry phantom. Now, as a convict, the struggle was too great to attempt alone. I had to learn how to accept some form of peaceful surrender.



Opening my eyes, their focus fell onto the two neatly organized stacks towering in front of me. Impulsively I pushed them over, shuffling madly so that imperfections would be found among the ideal. When SDOC launched, the cards were passed out as they surfaced yet no one seemed to notice that some of them contained flaws.

IV. RESTORATION

“Through non-violent resistance we shall be able to oppose the unjust system and at the same time love the perpetrators of that system.”

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Martin Luther King, Jr.
Strength to Love

As the first of December rolled in, I planned a launch strategy for Six Degrees of Conversation. With the exception of my inmate artist, the entire project had been run clandestinely. My fears of manipulation and extortion were still vibrant. Throughout the planning I had intentionally left my name off everything that would be made public. Even the card's poem which I had written to compliment Rugge's artwork was left without byline. I had begun to take what I perceived to be a more street-wise approach to doing time. By laying low and avoiding exposure, I could work through the political figures in the unit without needing to take a visible stand.

These men were suspicious. No one ever did nice things for inmates without reason. There must have been some kind of religious theme or the cards had been designed for a specific cause. There would certainly be some hook, some kind of annoying request. Calmly I explained that there were no obligations, the cards were not rerelegiously oriented and could be used for any occasion. The only requirement was to offer fellow inmates a bit of dignity.

To seal the deal, I pulled out a surprise I had kept even from my closest accomplices. Inside large brown shopping bags were enough cupcakes for everyone in the housing unit to receive a twin-set. Since our state-diets are generally devoid of sugar, incarcerated men consider sweets to be gold. The gambit worked marvelously. Immediately everyone threw their support behind the project. Someone willing to give away a fortune of goodies must have decent intentions.

Then one inmate pulled me aside to thank me. He explained that he no longer had financial support from his loved ones. Over the summer their mortgage rates reset and they had lost their home making it unaffordable to send further care packages.

The man was clearly embarrassed. He couldn't look me straight in the eye and so he peered from under well-worn state-issued bifo-

cal, explaining that being indigent was hard, even as a prisoner. He knew that state provided what he needed to survive but they didn't supply anything he needed to live. Now he could finally offer something nice to his loved ones. He had wanted for so long to express gratitude for their generosity and empathy over their loss, but without SDOC, he would have nothing to give this holiday season.

Twenty minutes later a busload of inmates arrived from San Quentin prison where I had spent those harrowing eighteen months locked in a closet-sized cage. Desolation flashed back into my mind and the angry ghosts of isolation stared from behind the walls. I could tell these new arrivals understood desolation too. They looked haggard, broken and desperate. Clearly they could have used SDOC but I had already exhausted the excess supply of cupcakes.

Without prompt, men who had earlier received the gifts suddenly rushed over to the incoming inmates offering hospitality and assistance. Others located extra cards and then volunteered sweets from their own personal supplies ensuring that the mission of SDOC would be fulfilled.

Leading these men was William. He beckoned me to follow and we charged out to meet the transferees. Quickly I began to pass out cards while William followed up with the sweets.

One of the new arrivals was a feminine transgendered man. Handing him a card, I greeted him and wondered how William would react. He had been virulently opposed to non-heterosexual marriage, claiming that his religion believed it was an irredeemable sin to be anything but straight.

Undaunted, William stepped up, the two met eyes. The chapel leader offered a package of twin-cupcakes while the transgendered inmate thanked him by offering his hand. In a soft voice he offered William praise, "May God bless you." William paused. Then a bright smile blossomed across his face and he responded, vigorously shaking the extended hand, "And may God also bless you."

V. CONVERSATION

“I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transfigure myself and heal the people involved”

Martin Luther King, Jr.

Of course, it was only a matter of time before the word got around that I had organized the project. I tried to shy away from the attention as much as possible. I still didn't want the exposure. I felt the project was an equalizer. It wasn't about me.

One man sat down, waxing with me over the good feeling SDOC had brought to the unit. It was clear he had a difficult time expressing his emotions so I encouraged him to share his thoughts. With a few probing questions I soon realized that his concern was less about what SDOC could accomplish and more that an inmate had shown positive leadership. The man had focused on the idea that someone could become a role model for growth, even if he was a prisoner himself.

This was far beyond the scope of responsibility I had sought. I didn't want the baggage that comes along with being a role model, particularly one who was a prisoner. What if the exposure made me a target? What if people became jealous? What if the administration decided I was a nail sticking up too far? My strategy for survival depended on keeping a low profile, and it was clear that was going to be a problem if I continued to operate SDOC.

I began to second-guess running the project. The benefits had been positive but would the costs to my safety outweigh them?

It was then that William, the charismatic inmate preacher who ran the chapel, asked to speak with me. He began by bowing his head in a fellowship prayer blessing the positive progress SDOC had made among our unit's brotherhood. Then he segwayed into a story. William had led a tough life and had always dreamed of starting a humanitarian organization to address those roots. He had attended some college before getting caught up in the drug scene which led to the crime for which he was

now doing time. But he hadn't given up on the goal of launching his project. The problem was that desolation made everything so difficult, he didn't know what could be done to organize from inside the walls. Still he was inspired. If I had succeeded, maybe he could too.

William asked me to advise the launch of his own humanitarian project. I could coach him on creating a business plan, writing a grant proposal and navigating project management cycles. Together we agreed to begin the process on Dec 25th, the birth date of Christ.

At that point SDOC went far beyond offering equity and dignity to marginalized prisoners. The restoration project could actually inspire other inmates to chase their own dreams. Change could now be affected exponentially. SDOC was now not just a charity but also a growth-oriented multiplier that expanded through new social justice projects. The concept of an interrelated web had been proven through Six Degrees of Conversation, but more importantly, it was a game changer.

Thich Nhat Hanh was right: it is well worth investing in Sangha. But your community may be much larger than you realize. MLK envisioned a vast beloved community, and Six Degrees of Conversation may indicate that it exists. Our interrelatedness isn't restricted by walls of barbed wire. It isn't separated by pronouns like us or them. To borrow from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, what unifies us are our emotions.

The next time you see an orange jumpsuit on TV don't immediately change the channel, Prisoners may not show it but they feel sadness just like you. In fact we all may share something in common. Perhaps you're trapped within a life sentence too. Maybe yours is unresolved anger, a sense of guilt, a prejudice or a fear. How heavy are your chains? Believe me, I feel your pain but are you willing to feel mine?

Christopher Huneke has previously written for *UU Sangha* under the pseudonym "Hu". His last piece, "Non-Violence and Forgiveness in San Quentin Prison" was published in *Friends Journal* (Aug, 2009). Recently he

has founded the first Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at Avenal State Prison affectionately dubbed Gathering Religions Unitarian Universalist Prisoners (GRUUP) which is sponsored by the UU Church of Fresno.

Jesse Rugge continues to practice his graphic art. His next parole hearing is in 2010. This time he will discuss his participation in three restorative justice projects.

Will (William) is a pseudonym. He continues to preach for the Pentecostal congregation. He is working on two restorative justice projects. "Healing Wounds Ministry" is still in incubation. !Change We Can! Is a seminar series of life skills for inmates.

SDOC II will launch in December of 2009. Due to the weak economy, it remains unfunded. To learn more contact Kathy at biglakeon9 AT verizon.net

!Change We Can! is Will's first social justice project. It seeks to present existing life skills workbooks in more accessible seminar-style formats that better suit people with low reading skills, processing skills or suffer from cognitive disabilities such as ADHD. It is currently being reviewed by the mental health and education departments of the prison for feasibility. The program is inclusive and seeks to accommodate all forms of diversity.



UU Tarpon Springs' Linda Gradual's Plate. Photo by Frank Tedesco

Message from Judith Wright, President of UUBF

Sunday in our UU worship services across the continent, many of us celebrate both Joys and Sorrows. And this issue contains both the joys and the sorrows of this time in the history of UUBF. Let me "light" two candles, one of joy and one of sorrow.

A candle of joy.

Of course, the fourth Immeasurable is that of joy, and such joy is ever present. Joy arises as I read this issue of The UU Sangha, wonderfully and creatively compiled by our dedicated editor, Bob Ertman. And, Joy arises in me as I take on the role of being your new president of UUBF, grateful to those who have come before me, and hopeful that I and our Board can help all of you as UU Buddhist practitioners in ways that are meaningful to you.

A candle of sorrow.

There has been deep sorrow, and profound sadness this fall with the passing of Daido Looi Roshi, whom a number of us, as current and past UUBF Board members experienced as our Zen teacher. Bob Senghas' tribute to Daido Roshi is in this issue, is touching and I clearly resonate with Bob's memories of Daido Roshi. As Daido Roshi's student for nine years, I, too, am grieving for his passing. I have many stories of Daido Roshi, but let me just share one.

I had recently become a new UU chaplain in a Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. Attending a sesshin, I found myself during dokusan (private interview) alone, and face to face with Daido Roshi. Struggling with my anxieties about my new role as chaplain, I sought advice from my teacher. I asked Daido Roshi, "What can I possibly say or do when I meet the children and their families? The suffering is so great."

I "expected" him to give me "some Buddhist things" to say or do. He sat very still for what seemed to me a long time. He looked into my eyes, and said, "Love them." And then he rang his bell. I jumped up, dazed for the moment, and then was later profoundly grateful.

Note, reprinted from Vol. II, No. 1, Fall 1997, with additional material.

SEARCHING FOR A TEACHER — JOURNAL NOTES

By Wayne Tonjin Arnason

After twenty-five years of fairly consistent meditation practice, initially with Transcendental Meditation, and later in a Zen style practice, I came to the conviction in 1993 that I needed to establish a relationship with a teacher if I was to go any further with my practice. Many possibilities presented themselves. Charlottesville, Virginia, where I lived at the time, has Tibetan teachers readily available due to the presence in town of Jefferey Hopkins of the University of Virginia. There was a recently opened Zen Center, Mountain Light, in Albemarle County a short drive from my home. Two members of my church had advanced farther than I in their practices— one with TM, and another as a student of Robert Aitken of the Diamond Sangha. Each of them was willing to share their experiences and to help me with further explorations.

I was also aware of the teachers that some of my colleagues in the UU ministry have found. James Ford was a Diamond Sangha member. Several clergy within the Southeast UUMA attended Thich Nhat Hahn's 1993 retreat at Omega Institute and came back from that practicing the precepts and sitting together at our chapter meetings. I had known Bob Senghas since 1972, and was aware that he had become a senior student of the Zen Mountain Monastery in New York, where John Daido Looi, Roshi was Abbot.

All of these possibilities excited me but left me confused. How does one find a teacher? I began by talking to the friends and colleagues who had made such a commitment about how they had come to their decision. I tried to learn more about the communities their teachers had founded. With a sabbatical period ahead of me,

I resolved that during 1995-96 I would intensify this search with some personal visits. These notes are excerpts from a personal journal I began at Thich Nhat Hahn's 1995 Retreat at Omega Institute.

October 7, 1995: This journal is a gift to myself at the Thich Nhat Hahn retreat. It symbolizes what feels like a new start in my life. Taking seriously the precepts and acting on what I've learned this week would involve a new start. Mindfulness can be seen at the heart of all religious practice in any tradition. It can be practiced where you are, so the question arise for me - why do I need to go to a monastery to practice it? Have I already found my teacher? I need to decide this afternoon whether I will do the Precept Ceremony and how many precepts I will take. Can I let go of alcohol and media that are toxic? Should I? Joan Halifax said today: If you're going to drink, don't take the 5th Precept. I feel the same way about the First Precept, which implies vegetarianism. My feeling is that I should take the 2nd through 4th and look towards the taking the 1st and the 5th at the retreat Joan will lead in March on Being With Dying."

October 8, 1995: Re-reading Precepts 2-4 after the Ceremony. I am convinced they are a greater challenge to me than I presently can imagine. I can see where they will invite and invoke the first and fifth precepts. I find each day here I have felt more relaxed and comfortable with the practice, and look forward to the challenges ahead as I try to bring the practice into my daily life.

October 9, 1995: In bed, at home, one day back from the retreat. Maintaining some degree of balance. Probably should meditate twice a day.

October 12, 1995: Now three days after coming back from Thich Nhat Hahn's retreat, more of my normal life patterns start to reassert themselves, but I am still able to connect with

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the deep joy and peace inside and keep my practice steady. We will see.

November 26, 1995: At Mountain Light, starting my sesshin. It looks like a very vigorous period of retreat and practice, especially the two forty-five minute sits in the late morning. It comes at a good time for me. I'm ready and open.

November 27, 1995:

Stacking a cord of wood
My task for the morning
My task for a lifetime
Big pieces on the bottom,
Smaller on the top.
Bring a pleasing order out of chaos
And then die
And return to chaos again.
What is there to be found in the wood pile?
In the spaces between the logs
Absolutely nothing.

Later: The book about the Desert Fathers surprises me with the same wisdom that is in Zen—it is all there in the present moment. God is there in the present moment and God wants to be known. Is it possible to get past the preoccupation with thought, judgment, and wishing things were different—to be still, and know that I am God?

Later: Not too many questions for the teacher here. I told her my expectations for sitting are not high, that more centeredness and longevity around being with my breath is all that I hope for. My sense is that if I am to become a student here, it will be me that will do the asking. She says it is the conviction of the student that is most important.

November 28, 1995: A deep conversation with the teacher this morning. I am "shopping around" she says, which means that I'm not ready yet to be a student. My commitment isn't clear enough.

Later: There was a fly buzzing on the floor of the meditation hall this morning. Every so often

it would make a noise but could only spin itself around on the floor in circles. That's how my commitment to practice feels to me right now. I want to ask more about recognizing the teacher. Is it like falling in love?

Later: She says that this recognition does not come without an act of will. It is not something that just happens...It is clear that she doesn't want to be my teacher right now. It will take an act of will and surrender on my part to make that happen.

December 1, 1995: Arrived at Zen Mountain Monastery and settled into my dorm. There must be twenty-five students attending this Introduction to Zen Training.

December 2, 1995: After caretaking, a talk from the senior students on the meaning of practice and work. Then Daido speaking about liturgy and precepts. Both good clear talks...but Daido!! What an engaging presence and personality he has! I was impressed, and joyful, just to be in his presence. Perhaps this evening I have a chance for dokkusan with Daido. We've had instructions on how to meet the Abbot and tips on what to consider as a question. Our instructor told us to remember that this is a tradition of mind to mind transmission. We are meeting the Buddha here. What would I ask? What would I say - if I met the Buddha?

6:15 AM December 3, 1995: Did not receive dokkusan last night. The question is still up in the air.

12:10 PM December 3, 1995: So the question I finally asked him was this: How do I work with the fear I have of losing what my life is now if I put practice at the center? Daido replied: Fear arises from expectations and also from attachment. You have to remember that the practice involves releasing attachment, so that you are free to be one, to love, to work, to live in harmony, in oneness with all that is. Later he proceeded to speak to these same questions in his

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Dharma talk.

12:20 AM December 4, 1995: Home again after five hours of driving and listening to tapes about home practice and Zazen. I feel more and more comfortable and confirmed that this is the path for me.

March 14, 1996: Back from my first weekend sesshin at Zen Mountain Monastery. I have been contemplating what a lifetime commitment means and how many of them I have made in my life. Not many. This may well be one of them.

March 24, 1996 (after four days at Upaya Institute): The last morning at Upaya was wonderful. The Precepts ceremony was deeply moving. I smiled the whole way through and felt very open and connected to it. I found myself flashing on ways that I have violated the precepts at different times during the ceremony, but I also heard myself say: That was then. This is now. I felt tremendous love and respect coming from Joan Halifax and that was an important part of the transmission. When I told her upon leaving that I felt I had decided to "sign on with Daido", I felt good about her response. Somehow that affirmation from her was important to me.

June 2, 1996: My 46th Birthday. I am awake and in the zendo at Zen Mountain Monastery before 6 AM, feeling joy and excitement. Seeing the Guardian Council today and declaring my desire to be a student of the monastery is the most wonderful birthday gift to myself that I could imagine.

Later: Just before seeing the Guardian Council. Daido told a story this morning about a zendo cat who had a rat trapped in the narrow branches of a small tree. He asked the students: What do you think is going to happen? The students all said; The cat will get the rat, but Daido said: I bet on the rat because for the rat it was a matter of life and death. Later when they looked again the rat had escaped. I am becoming a student here because I'm betting on the rat

too.

Later: After Guardian Council and a nap - the Council pushed me. They wanted me to express the pain that drives me to seek to be a student here. The true meaning of taking refuge is revealed when you touch that pain. I am not very good at expressing it, I guess. They kept pressing, but apparently my answers satisfied them. I was accepted as a student. I feel good-exhausted - a little scared... but very happy!

Looking back on these journal entries from fourteen years ago I am both humbled and inspired by the intensity of that time of searching in my life. My first encounter with Daido Roshi is more vivid in my memory than these words can convey. It was a recognition of the qualities of someone who is awake, someone who is a Buddha. Ever since that day, Daido Roshi has been teaching me that the practice is not about who he is, but about who I am, and that we are both Buddhas. Tokushu Senghas' moving front page tribute to Daido did not mention that, like so many other religious seekers, he passed through Unitarian Universalism on his way to taking up a dedicated Buddhist practice. John Loori was employed as a religious educator at the Middletown Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in the early sixties during the ministry of Rev. Ronald D. Marcy. Daido enjoyed telling me the story of being pushed out of this position because the religious education curriculum he created was too non-theistic and science oriented for the members of the congregation.

Despite this negative experience with Unitarian Universalism, he was always receptive to the many individual UU seekers that came to the monastery, and was respectful of the dual commitments and identities that I carried as a UU minister and a Buddhist.

In creating a sound monastic training center and transmitting the dharma to three teachers and two dharma holders, Daido Roshi has insured that an accessible, disciplined, and authentic Buddhist practice is available to all in this country who care to see it out.

Mountains and Rivers Sutra

Preceptor Kai of Mt. Dayang addressed the assembly, saying, “The blue mountains are constantly walking. The stone woman gives birth to a child in the night.”

The mountains lack none of their proper virtues; hence, they are constantly at rest and constantly walking. We must devote ourselves to a detailed study of this virtue of walking. Since the walking of the mountains should be like that of people, one ought not doubt that the mountains walk simply because they may not appear to stride like humans.

This saying of the buddha and ancestor [Daokai] has pointed out walking; it has got what is fundamental, and we should thoroughly investigate this address on “constant walking”. It is constant because it is walking. Although the walking of the blue mountains is faster than “swift as the wind”, those in the mountains do not sense this, do not know it. To be “in the mountains” is “a flower opening within the world”. Those outside the mountains do not sense this, do not know it. Those without eyes to see the mountains, do not sense, do not know, do not see, do not hear the reason for this. To doubt the walking of the mountains means that one does not yet know one's own walking. It is not that one does not walk but that one does not yet know, has not made clear, this walking. Those who would know their own walking must also know the walking of the blue mountains.

— Dôgen, 1240 (excerpt), Tr. by Carl Bielefeldt , The Soto Zen Text Project

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