

The Voices of Angels Foundation

www.thevoicesofangels.org

Winter 2009



GREETINGS FROM THE DIRECTOR

Dear Chaplains of California,

It seems to me that to really address the current challenges of our time, we need to help individuals and communities find peace within themselves and with others of different faiths and cultures, bridging the secular and religious pluralism of our modern world.

While attending the *Why Religion Matters* lecture series in San Francisco in 2004 inspired by Huston Smith's book by that same title, I heard various speakers eloquently represent their different faiths. I was also reading his book *Why Religion Matters* during this time, and I was deeply moved and changed by an unfolding understanding of the all the worlds traditions as keepers of our true nature. Over a period of months there was also a deepening recognition of all the traditions meeting within the heart. I mused how wonderful it would be if everyone could have the opportunity to experience what I had witnessed. In 2008 I asked Huston Smith for an interview specifically for our Voices of Angels newsletter to share with chaplains and those institutionalized. My hope and prayer is this interview of Huston Smith with his life long experience and inquiry into the world's religions, will illuminate others and offer a taste of the insights and opportunity I was given.

Since I regularly volunteer in jails and prisons and have found people always have questions about religion, I had brought in copies of the *Illustrated World Religions* and *The Soul of Christianity- Restoring the Great Tradition*, both authored by Huston Smith. They loved his books. I was able to buy used soft cover copies for the jail, and they became the topic of several of our meetings. I shared with the men in the Voices of Angels Wed afternoon group in the Monterey County Jail that I was scheduled to have an interview with Huston and asked them what questions they would like me to ask on their behalf. Their questions became the majority of the interview. It became a collective journey of inquiry, and I subsequently shared this interview with them in the jail.

I would like to express my gratitude for their help and desire to learn. It has been a great gift to me as well. May we all learn and grow together in peace and understanding.

Sincerely,

Shannon Frediani,

Director, *The Voices of Angels*

WHY RELIGION MATTERS

An interview with Huston Smith

Shannon Frediani: "Out of all religions, what is the most basic or golden commandment?"

Huston Smith: "Do unto others as you would that they should do unto you. That is the golden rule, and Confucianism has what has come to be called the silver rule- Do not do unto other people what you would not want them to do unto you." Shannon Frediani: "Out of all religions, what is the most basic or golden commandment?"

Shannon Frediani: "I had an inmate ask another question very similar to that- Do all religions have the two following basic commandments:

- 1- Love God.
- 2- Love everyone as yourself?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, right on."

Shannon Frediani: "Their third question was: How do you train yourself, your mind, and ears to hear God's guidance and voice?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, by stillness, and (to) open ones' mind, and invite that instruction. (pause) I can elaborate on that. There is a well known protestant hymn (singing): Take time to be holy. Speak oft with the Lord. Forgetting him never, abide in His will. So, you want to open yourself, and you need a little help, you need a little help even at that stage, apart from the input, to be attentive and alert to what will come."

Shannon Frediani: "Alert to what comes. Thank you, and that openness is definitely important. Yes that reminds me of a personal prayer practice of mine, that I want to not only hear accurately, but heed accurately. It is a two step process, the hearing is only the first part."

Shannon Frediani: "Another inmate asked: I understand suffering is a way to get stronger, but why do some people suffer so long, so much, without positive result?"

Huston Smith: "Very good question. Very good question. Is it appropriate, even legal to say 'I don't know' when I am being interviewed.

You know, I think this whole area, and truth to tell, all of life and all of the world, is a huge mystery. We are born in mystery, we live in mystery, and we die in mystery. Now, why do people suffer? Some people have the cross to bear, to suffer so long and apparently undeservedly. Well, the



(continued on pg. 2)

"Every culture finds its deepest values in its religious and spiritual traditions and it is from this point of view that each religion makes a contribution to the global family."

-H.H. The Dalai Lama in foreword of *The Marriage of East and West* by Bede Griffiths

Buddhists of course, would say, that they had done bad things in an earlier life. And being, myself convinced of the parity of the world's eight religions. I am myself a Christian, that happens to be my tradition and I would not wish it any other way, but I acknowledge the right of others to have in their traditions equal wisdom, because I do not think that God plays favorites. So that's one explanation. But, I would not say, I don't discount it; but neither do I think that gives a definitive answer, and I think it is still a mystery why some people seem to suffer so much and for so long."

Shannon Frediani: "They also asked: In other religions, is there the same idea that sacrifice and suffering in life, leads to beneficial results after death? In other religions besides Christianity?"

Huston Smith: "Well, I would nuance that a little differently. The crucial thing is how we respond to suffering. That makes the difference in the future of this life. I do believe that when we, as the India- Indians say 'that when we drop the body,' which is a very good phrase because it's not only the body we drop, but somebody who is doing the dropping, there is something more than the body.

St. Paul said that 'We rejoice in our tribulations for our tribulations breed patience and out of patience comes hope.'

That is a fragment of it, but there is more to it. Suffering is a teacher. The question is, 'Are we good students? Or are we not?' Suffering can help us to empathize with the millions and billions of people in this world who are not as fortunate as we are. It is appalling how many people are starving in the world. Our suffering can hone us to be more aware, and not to just dismiss the suffering of multitudes, and give some thought to what we might DO in the way of either personal aid overseas or getting political and helping to rectify the tremendous inequality of wealth."

Shannon Frediani: (asked in Spanish by a Latino inmate) "Some of us are Catholics; other religions say it is wrong to pray to Virgin Mary and other saints. Why do they think this is wrong?"

Huston Smith: "Stupidity and lack of information. Even the Catholics will be emphatic- We do not pray TO the Virgin and Saints but pray THROUGH her to her son. Now I've wasted no words, I think that says it. If the question is, it is not just others think it is wrong, the Catholic theologians think it is wrong to pray 'To'.

Shannon Frediani: Another question was, "Ultimately with all the different rituals, practices, and beliefs, would you say they are serving the same God?"

Huston Smith: "Well, who is the they here? In principle the rituals and such, are in the service of the same God, so the answer would be 'Yes'. If we want to come down to individuals, nose counting and so on, then it depends on their understanding. One can hope that they agree with this answer or through contemplation and reflection, they will come to it.

Shannon Frediani: "He followed it up with: "Do all religions lead us to serve the same God?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, there are eight authentic, that means revealed religions by the same God. Of course, there is demonism and Gaia, which are not authentic religions."

Shannon Frediani: "You know because I am curious... What are the eight authentic religions?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, I will take it in the order of my book. There is, Hinduism, the Chinese religious complex- Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are like strands and every literate knowledgeable Chinese is all three. Now let me see: Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Islam, Judaism and Christianity. I think that is seven rather than eight.

Shannon Frediani: "On the Sounds True series (Religions of the World) you had mentioned Native American and indigenous."

Huston Smith: "Yes, ... Thank you. My regard for those indigenous religions has just mounted and mounted, until I am absolutely convinced that their wisdom is the equal of the historical."

Shannon Frediani: "Even if they are not historical do you consider them in the revealed religion category?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, because they were born. In Genesis, we are told that God after making the world and the heavens and all of that, took the dust of the earth and at that point, human beings were simply mud creatures, until He breathed the Spirit within. And I am absolutely convinced, that every human being has a spark of the divine in him or herself. Our mission in life is to fan and nurture and feed that, until it infuses our life. Aldous Huxley was a lifelong friend of mine. A very generous man, he befriended me. He and his wife were deeply religious, not institutionally, but in his own feeling. He has a little tiny poem. Let's see if I can remember it:

The choice is always ours. Then let me choose

The longest art, the hard Promethean way

Cherishingly to tend and feed and fan

That inward fire, whose small precarious flame,

Kindled or quenched creates

The noble or the ignoble men we are,

The worlds we live in and the very fates,

Our bright or muddy star.' (Aldous Huxley)

Huston: "It's lovely."

Shannon Frediani: "Yes. Thank you..."

This is the last inmate question. Which religions of the world parallel or have similar dogma to the idea of consequence after death of ones actions while living? Which religions, if any, do not and why?"

Huston Smith: "All do, but now I have to expand that a little. They all agree that when we drop the body, that is not the end. The apparent person dies, but the true person does not die. If you go to geography, we are reincarnated. That word, tends to mean in a human body on this planet, but we can be in heaven. Geography doesn't fit in this sort of question. With that explication, let me go back to the question. 'Do all the religions say that there is a consequence after death of one's actions while living?' Yes! Metaphors are all that we can use. The crudest one, 'Burning in hell', I think is cruel, if you take that literally. God can be terrible, but God is not a monster, and it would be a monster if that were so. It is simply a metaphorical way of saying, 'Not everything goes. Pull up your socks and as ye sow, so shall ye reap.'

Shannon Frediani: "Thank you. There is no religion that doesn't have some sort of consequence later?"

Huston Smith: "No."

Shannon Frediani: "OK. That completes the inmate questions."

Shannon Frediani: "Lastly, I didn't want to talk about how modern society doesn't meet our deepest needs or how the scientific world view is inadequate in replacing the wisdom traditions' world view, I didn't even want to focus on how religion has been misrepresented and misused, but I thought it would be wonderful to spend a little time on- How religion DOES meet our deepest needs as humanity? and let you take it from there."

Huston Smith: "Sure. Sure. The etymology of the word religion

(continued on pg.4)

WHAT INMATES ARE SAYING ABOUT THE VOICES OF ANGELS PRACTICES OF PEACE PROGRAM:

"I am always intrigued at how the message of non-denominational spirituality seems to hold together people of such divergent 'spiritual' backgrounds: I have seen Catholic, Protestants, Fundamentalists, Muslims, Buddhists and even ardent atheists listen carefully to what Shannon says. These are people who, only a day before have been involved in physical fights (often with each other). I have seen two such fighters from a day before actually singing together.

-Michael V.

"I felt I belonged for once, and that fellow inmates with different backgrounds, different races (religions) have a common ground. Also I feel at peace with myself afterwards."

-Michael N.

"It is one of the few places and times, perhaps the only one in jail, where someone brings to our lives a spiritual environment and discussion for the purpose of bringing us together in harmony as well as teaching us about the practices in religion regarding truth, love, forgiveness, and self responsibility.

-anonymous

"It gives me a feeling of tranquility, unity and peace of heart."

-J. V.

Since these sessions, are there any practices of peace which you incorporate into your daily life?

1 silent prayer

2 practicing and brokering peace in the dorm

3 singing along with the whole dorm

4 forgetting my ego and being at peace within."

-Terry M

"The most obvious one (practice we incorporate) is how we are able to take back the feelings of togetherness initiated in the sessions to the dorm.."

-anonymous

"I find myself meditating throughout the day as well as praying..."

-James S.

"The music and silent prayer."

-Victor C.



Comments from our prison tour after an hour of sung prayer

I have had two experiences here in prison that have inspired me as a human being. One of those experiences was being able to listen to Shannon sing

-Matthew

The sound contained the silence and the silence contained the sound. The spirit was palpable, it could be seen flowing through the men in the room.

-Bret

My Sunday was fulfilled. I to be honest have never heard anyone sing like this. It felt as if she were singing to my Soul. I truly recommend her Gift to others.

-Burton

Now it is up to me to not forget again.

-Lawrence

Additional comments: What has been most meaningful and helpful?

- The prayers that were sang.
- The message carried
- Peace
- The spirit of God
- Angel singing, free voice
- The Love ~ Her sincerity
- The prayer ~ The songs
- The word of God
- The time in meditation.
- The power of the vocals-singing
- Peace serenity ~ The love of God
- Spiritual awakening
- The songs without words brought a peaceful feeling



Which practices would you like to incorporate can you carry that forward into your life?

- I would like to find more time to meditate on the word of the living God.
- Singing/Prayer/Meditation
- I am a singer, I should sing more during hard times
- Praying without words
- All ~ Chanting with God
- The perseverance
- The chanting on things of the living God.
- By being at peace with myself.
- Yeah, Deep Breathing and Pray and Sing
- A way of bringing more peace into my life
- To love as I have been loved tonight
- I felt a spiritual connection even with the negative out there
- The humming
- Understanding Peace & Harmony

WHY RELIGION MATTERS

(from pg.2)

is *re ligio*, *re* is again and *ligio* is like ligament, to re bind them. Togetherness is good. Separation is bad because it tokens division and misunderstanding and so on. So, religion bring us, because of it's teaching about doing unto others, it puts us back in sync and in working relation with other people, but it also rebinds the parts of our individual selves because, as we have it on good authority our name is legion. We are not whole and there is a significant w h o l e and then holy. The holy does not have the w, but nevertheless, rebinding, bringing together the parts of oneself, with other human beings, and with God. This is the object of life. This is our opportunity to use these fleeting days to rebind."

Shannon Frediani: "Do you mind speaking to how religion brings order to our lives?"

Huston Smith: "Yes, Claire Boothe Luce was a Catholic. She was also very sophisticated and people, largely in the secular world in which she lived would ask her, 'Why are you a Catholic?' She would say, 'It brings a certain order into my life.' Not a bad answer, a very good answer. Religion also gives us a sense of direction. There was William Sheldon, a psychiatrist, of Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, said that, 'The deepest need within humans beings, and it's deeper than sexuality, deeper than the craving for power and wealth. The deepest need is a sense of orientation.' Because if we don't have any orientation, we have no lay of the land, and no knowledge of how we should proceed."

Shannon Frediani: "Yes a sense of direction and orientation. Yes, that is one of my favorite quotes that you included in your book- *The Soul of Christianity- Restoring the Great Tradition*. Thank you."

"It is no longer possible today for one religion to live in isolation from other religions. In almost every country people of different religions and of no religion are meeting with one another and being compelled to face their differences. For a Christian and for members of the other Semitic religions this presents a real problem. Each of them has been taught to regard itself as the one true religion and to reject all other religions as false, so that to enter into dialogue with other religions is not easy. Yet more and more the necessity for contact is being realized, and those who attempt to do so are finding that dialogue, when properly understood, is not a compromise with error but a process of enrichment by which each religion opens itself to the truth to be found in the other religion, and the two parties grow together in the common search for truth. Each religion has to hold the fundamental truth in its own tradition and at the same time to allow that tradition to grow, as it is exposed to other aspects of the truth. Thus we begin to realize that truth is one, but that it has many faces, and each religion is, as it were, a face of the one Truth, which manifests itself under different signs and symbols in the different historical traditions."

-Bede Griffiths in *The Marriage of East and West*



THE VOICES OF ANGELS MISSION STATEMENT:

To provide to the isolated and institutionalized, through its programs and music, a nourishing, peaceful, compassionate space where people of all faiths can search for truth, engage in dialogue, experience personal growth, realize their self worth, embrace the sacred, find purpose, and participate more responsibly in their community.

OUR PROGRAM OBJECTIVES:

- To seek out those in need and nourish and support spiritual practice
- To promote the dignity of all people
- To foster a culture of peace and respect
- To be an advocate for social justice

For scheduling Voices of Angels to visit your facility:

Please call toll free: **866 761-0930**

email: Shannon@thevoicesofangels.org

or write:

Voices of Angels

PO Box 2066

Freedom CA 95019

WWW.THEVOICESOFANGELS.ORG