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TURNING WHEEL*

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Mindfulness at the Gates of Hell

by Cator Shachoy

Driving into the Sunnydale projects, at first glance, the greenness of it is most striking. It doesn't look so bad from the outside. This is San Francisco in February, and everything is in bloom. The beauty of fresh grass and green trees is beguiling. Looking closer, the other side begins to reveal itself. The windows of the homes here are all barred. The buildings are cinderblock, and the paint is peeling. Walls and stairways are crumbling. It must be garbage day—big garbage bins are everywhere. But garbage is also in the streets, and the streets are empty of people. Stepping out of the car, there is a certain feeling in the air. It is familiar to me from other tough neighborhoods. A feeling like something is out of place. Growing up in Baltimore in the body of a white person, I felt this same tension when I strayed into unfamiliar areas—the environment told me that *I* was out of place—I did not *belong* there. I am reminded of a time years ago taking the subway home from the BWI airport. Stepping onto the waiting train, the feeling in the air was so thick, it could be cut with a knife—and it wasn't just the humidity. What was it, what had just happened? Looking around, I saw that I was the only white person on the train. There was a quiet in the air, and a feeling of unknowing, like standing on the edge of a precipice where the whole world falls away into

wide-open space.

Last spring Youth Yoga Dharma went onsite to the Sunnydale Projects in San Francisco. We had been a mere three blocks away at “The Village”—a newly built community center in Visitacion Valley. Through collaboration with the nation-wide agency Florence Crittenton Services (FCS), we offered a “Parent Wellness” stress reduction program for parents on welfare. This program incorporates mindfulness, yoga, and the Native American practice of Council, where we discuss how we are bringing these practices into our daily lives.

Parent Wellness is offered in conjunction with the “LEAP” (Learning + Earning = Achievement + Power) job-training program. The idea is to give the participants “life skills alongside job skills,” so they have tools to identify and reduce stress and learn to manage the challenges of their lives. All of this is designed to give them more resources to get out of the hell they are living in. This spring FCS made the dramatic step of moving the LEAP program from the relative safety of The Village, to go three blocks down the street into the Willie Brown Teen Center in Sunnydale. The idea was to show the Sunnydale community that they are really *there* for them—trying to help people find new