Hot Gravy: A Story of Hope and Healing
by Jacques Verduin

As the year comes to a close, we’ve been reflecting on moments that have touched us and buoyed our spirits. “Hot Gravy,” a story of hope and healing, redemption and forgiveness, captures one such moment. It is featured in the “Guiding Rage Into Power (GRIP) Course Book,” developed by Jacques Verduin, founder of GRIP, a yearlong program that enables prisoners "to turn the stigma of being a violent offender into a badge of being a non-violent Peacemaker." We invite you to take a few minutes to meet Jacques, Radha, and a “Lifers Group” in San Quentin and share in the power and poignancy of this program—and the human heart.

The knock on the door was from the sheriff. He came to tell her that her son had died and how. She recalls losing every bodily fluid she could possibly lose at that moment. To this day, when she hears a knock on her door, her heart jumps.

A few years later, I find myself seated at a dinner party with a man named Gary. He introduces me to his wife, Radha, and we strike up a conversation. At some point she asks me what I do. I answer and when our eyes meet she tells me her only son was murdered. We stare at each other for a moment, not sure if this is the end or the beginning of the conversation. I ask her if she is willing to tell me more about what that was like. She agrees and suggests we meet at Rodeo Beach near the Golden Gate Bridge. It turns out it’s one of her favorite spots to go for healing.

On the day we meet, Radha has packed a picnic for two. She teaches me how to recognize the carnelians among all the other small pebbles in the sand. Radha has a knack for finding them and shows me how. For an instant, there is just the sound of breakers rolling onto the beach, washing the small pebbles to reveal their colors and shapes. It is easy to forget why we are here. While we are still on our knees looking for pebbles, I ask her for her son’s name. “Christopher,” she whispers and for a moment the sound of his name hangs in the air. I breathe deeply and ask how he was killed. His life was taken by a roommate, during an argument over doing the dishes. As the disagreement escalated, she said, his roommate went into his room, picked up a gun, walked out, and shot Christopher four times. He died shortly thereafter.

Radha goes over the whole event to make sure I learn all the details. I learn how the coroner keeps the body for as long as necessary, so you not only lose your son but you can’t grieve in the presence of his body because it has become part of the forensic evidence. Radha reads me the poem that his girlfriend had written to him. She says she had to talk down some of her son’s friends who, in their hurt, wanted to retaliate. We sit down, have something to eat, and stare at the horizon as if something might appear there that could undo the tragedy.

Before leaving, we look for some more carnelians. “Here!” she says as she takes my hand
and pours her small collection of stones into my hand, “You can have mine and share them with your son.” All I can do is nod my head and squeeze the small stones in my hand while trying hard to swallow something large. I remember going home and hugging my two boys for a long time, feeling just how vulnerable it is to love and to be a parent.

During a subsequent meeting at Radha’s house, she shows me the newspaper clippings of the crime and shares photos of her son at different stages of his life. The Impact of the crime was tremendous and I had never seen the consequences this up close. When she tells me about spreading his ashes on Mount Tamalpais, I can only imagine scaling that mountain with a box of ashes and releasing to the winds what used to be my son. I ask how she possibly could go on.

“There is one more thing I want you to see,” she says. She takes me to her bedroom where she shows me an unusual piece of art, created in honor of her son. There, on one of the walls hangs a large quilt. The quilt has 21 squares, each one representing a year of life. It was done with great care. It represents life in a very memorable way, transcending life and death the way only art can. One square pictures his preferred foods and another one of his favorite animals. Yet another relates to his namesake, Christopher Robin. It is beautifully done, a testament to a short life, well-lived. Later I learn that quilts symbolize family heritage and that some are comprised of clothing worn by generations of family members. This one is different and unique altogether.

Radha teaches me about the other side of crime, the victim side, and she makes sure I get to see all of it. After four or five meetings, when she finishes telling me her story, she asks, “Do you think I can see what it is that you do? Could I come to the prison?”

I tell the men in my Lifer’s Group in San Quentin about my meeting with Radha and they are intrigued. I share her request to come inside the prison and meet them. They assure me that she would be welcome and that they would be honored by her presence.

For many people, but particularly for victims of a severe crime, crossing the threshold of San Quentin is a strong experience. The place looks ominous and the clanging of the heavy gates as you pass through is loud and foreboding. Radha and I walk in, arm in arm, as we go through several gates. As she enters the room there are 17 men waiting, all life-sentenced (with parole), all classified as violent offenders. She looks so small when she takes her seat among them.

“Radha has a story to share,” I tell them. “She wants to introduce someone to you.” Something happened in that room when Christopher’s name was spoken for the first time. The story of his life and the taking of his life was told in detail and when she passed the photos of Christopher at different ages, it all becomes so real. The men are deeply affected and no doubt imagining the faces of their own victims and survivors. Radha herself seems to have come alive in being so thoroughly listened to by this particular audience. She asks if she can return. The men eagerly respond, “Thank you for coming and, yes, please do come back.”

Radha returns a number of times. Over time a bond is formed, and being a Jewish mom, she slowly but determinedly adopts the whole group. One day, Radha asks me if she can bring the quilt into the prison. I tell her I think we can arrange for that. She smiles, as if secretly knowing that something is about to happen.

When I walk Radha into San Quentin that day, she hugs tight her precious quilt, smiling even more broadly. When the quilt is unfurled in the classroom, Radha explains the
The men listen intently and nod their heads as the images from the 21 patches are explained. At the end, the quilt is carefully folded and Radha asks if it can be passed around the room for everyone to touch. She explains, “Quilts are made for touching.” I remember sitting in awe, fully aware that the same hands that had taken lives were now touching the life of this mother’s son.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I receive a call from Radha. She had shared her experience with her sister and with members of a victim self-help group. Together they have come up with a plan to cook a homemade Thanksgiving dinner for the prisoners in our group. The idea is to break bread to emphasize our shared humanity and stop the cycle of violence.

At this time, we have a very community-oriented warden by the name of Jill Brown. She is known for going by the book, but also for being reasonable. At a meeting in her office I explain the whole story, as well as my understanding of how profound and unusual this would be, particularly in terms of prison policies. “Let me see what I can do,” Jill says.

A week later, I call Radha to tell her that, unbelievably, the dinner has been approved, albeit with a number of conditions, including a stipulation that the turkey be de-boned, in case someone would try to fashion a homemade shank (a knife) from the bones. On our day, Thanksgiving, everyone arrives in their best attire. Colored plastic table cloths are draped on the folding tables where everyone sits, awaiting this most unique meal. We are in the basement, underneath the substance abuse room, past a row of 12 urinals.

I ask my friend and co-facilitator Bill Glenn to lead us in a prayer and inquire about what everybody is grateful for. Later, in his own reflections on this remarkable event he would write, “The last to speak was the man to my left, Israel, a black man in his mid-forties who had been in the system since he was 17. He held the room in silent presence, and then said, ‘I am grateful for Now. No, no, for Now. NO, just for NOW. For Now. I am grateful for Now.’

Not everybody working at the prison shares our excitement about this dinner, and by the time everything gets cleared through security, the food is cold. Radha had considered this and has the forethought to bring a thermos full of hot gravy. Every time I tell this story, I have to wipe tears from my eyes, because that’s love, right? Hot gravy in a thermos bottle! That night at the table, everybody wept when they spoke about their gratefulness for the meal and the meaning of our gathering.

The quality of the food is astounding. So much attention is expressed in how every part of it is home cooked, but clearly what makes it so special is the care and the mercy that this incredible gesture represents—all being covered, abundantly, with hot gravy. It is an unforgettable experience for everyone in that room.

A couple of months later, one of the men remembers that the ten-year anniversary of Radha’s son’s death is approaching. They want to do something special for that day to honor Radha and her son. Someone suggests that we make a quilt. A number of the men panic at the idea of having to embroider, sew, and crochet their way into being quilt makers. Despite the hesitations, we decide that this is the thing to do. We also agree that we can only use materials available to us in the prison. One guy uses the pocket of his favorite visiting shirt, the best piece of cloth that he has. There is a handkerchief, a piece of a pillowcase, and even a piece of a mattress cover. Some guys draw on their fabric, a few actually embroider on theirs, and, yes, we cheat and use a fair amount of glue.

Much to our amazement, our paltry patches take on some dimension over time and
actually become a quilt, and quite a nice one. Around the time of the ten-year anniversary of her son’s death, we invite Radha to unveil our quilt. We covered it with black plastic bags that were engineered to drop from the quilt by pulling a string. Although there is some anxiety about our gift not being good enough, everyone is quite excited about the unveiling of this quilt to Radha. She has no clue what this event is about until she pulls the string. She walks over to it and intently begins to take it in. Quite quickly she realizes what has just happened. She tears up, goes around to address everybody individually and whispers “thank you,” dispelling any of our anxiety about its worth and granting us the deep satisfaction of giving something back to this remarkable mother.

The quilt now hangs in Radha’s house.

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Read more from Jacques in this two-part series on GRIP: "Deconstructing Our Culture of Violence" and "The Wisdom of Cherishing Sentient Beings Everywhere."

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