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'God has freed me'

Unparoled Soering maintains innocence in Haysom slayings

BY CARLOS SANTOS
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

LAWRENCEVILLE — Jens Soering, the brilliant University of Virginia scholar imprisoned for a notorious 1985 double murder, is now a devout Catholic and intellectual Bible-thumper, anxiously awaiting the debut of his book on spiritual freedom as well as his first shot at worldly freedom.

Soering's 250-plus-page book about an ancient form of Christian meditation called centering prayer, written from prison in longhand, is scheduled to be published in

October by Lantern Books. The book is titled "The Way of the Prisoner."

His interview for a possible release on discretionary parole, the first in his 17 years behind bars, is scheduled for this week. Soering's convictions occurred before parole was abolished in 1995.

"I can't close myself off to the possibility of a miracle" of being freed, Soering said in a recent interview at the Brunswick Correctional Center, a medium-security prison in Lawrenceville. "Is it realistic? Probably not. God has freed me in a way that's meaningful to me and through my writing to others.

But he may well choose to free me physically as well."

Much of Soering's prison day is now spent in prayer, reading and writing — especially about his spiritual transformation, prison reform and occasionally his own professed innocence.

"On a purely worldly level there's a continuing injustice going on in my life," he said. "I'm incarcerated for a crime I did not commit."

A jury, long ago, unanimously disagreed

SEE SOERING, PAGE B4 ▶



CARLOS SANTOS



1987, STEVE HELBERG/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Inmate Jens Soering still insists he is serving time for murders committed by his former girlfriend, Elizabeth Haysom.

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'GOD HAS FREED ME'

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From prison, Haysom writes for local publication

Elizabeth Haysom, now 39, is locked away at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where she apparently spends much of her time reading and writing.

She doesn't spend time talking to the media, unlike her former lover, Jens Soering, who has used the Internet, media interviews and books to deny murdering Haysom's parents in 1985.

Haysom freely admitted her guilt as an accessory to the murder of her parents, saying she encouraged Soering to kill Derek and Nancy Haysom, who she felt controlled her life. As part of a plea bargain, she was sentenced to 90 years in prison.

"In some ways I'm more guilty than he is," Haysom once told a detective. "He loved me beyond reason. I loved him beyond reason. I used that love to put him in this position."

At her sentencing hearing in 1987, the judge

called her sensitive, gifted, poised, intelligent and articulate. He also called her a liar, a cheat, a manipulator and a drug addict.

A written request for an interview was answered by Haysom with a short note, illustrated with a picture of an African village cut from a magazine, politely declining a chance to talk about the murders or Soering.

But Haysom does have a public face.

She is a columnist now, writing occasionally for the Fluvanna Review, a bimonthly publication that covers the community news in rural Fluvanna County.

She writes about what life is like in the county's state prison, publisher Eric Allen said. So far, she has written four or five columns that she contributes without payment, he said. The columns are titled: "Glimpses from the Inside."

In one column, Haysom talks about how a prisoner's life is stressed by shakedown.

"Every shakedown is different and we never know quite what to expect, so it strikes like judgment day," she wrote in a March column. "Even if it is an extra spoon or too many pencils, seemingly innocent and unimportant items, it is contraband if it contravenes the [Department of Corrections] personal property quota. . . . I always have too much paper, too many books because in order to function properly, I must have lots of books and paper."

She is also listed, with a photo, on an Internet prison-pen-pal service called Women Doing Time. There she describes her prison job as "computer aided drafting" and states she has "some college" education. Haysom was beginning her second year as an Echols scholar at the University of Virginia

when she fled to Europe with Soering to escape authorities.

She also notes that she doesn't drink or smoke.

Haysom, who has been up for parole every year since 1996, also writes about her plans once she is freed. "My dreams are to live a creative and generous life as a Christian, to return to college and obtain a degree in scientific and technical illustration and then to develop a successful free lance business."

She also plans to "build a unique home with an awesome garden and to travel adventurously."

Soering said he has not had contact with Haysom since he wrote her a letter in 1986. He last saw her at his 1990 trial when she testified, in great detail, against him.

— Carlos Santos

Excerpts from
Jens Soering's
"The Way of the Prisoner"

"... began my Centering Prayer journey at the harsher of Virginia's two supermax prisons, where murderers schemed to rape me and the guards fired their shotguns almost every other day."

"To me contemplation is very much like jogging. . . . There is always one more second to shave off one's personal best, one more temptation to overcome. So we stay on the road and become lovers of solitude, of early mornings, of sweat

Soering

— FROM PAGE B1

with Soering. That jury, after hearing 10 days of evidence including testimony from Soering himself, took only four hours in June 1990 to convict him of the murders of his girlfriend's parents. He was sentenced to two consecutive life terms but with a possibility of parole.

Most of Soering's adult life — almost half his entire life — has been spent in various prisons, including a London prison and several Virginia prisons: Southampton, Mecklenburg, Keen Mountain, Wallens Ridge and now Brunswick.

He has become what prisoners call an old head, adept at a hard life. He has been shot with a rubber bullet, fended off an attempted rape, struggled with suicidal thoughts and — guilty or not — kept his sense of self-respect in a world where kindness is seen as a weakness.

"I am at a point now in life where I've never been this happy," said Soering, who was 18 at the time of the murders and is now 36. "I know it sounds loony, but it's what centering prayer had done to me and through me to help others."

Soering's life turned loony shortly after he met Elizabeth Haysom, another first-year University of Virginia scholar with whom he began a passionate, bizarre and ultimately sick love affair. Their tale of love and murder, served up with good breeding and good manners, captured the



1990, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



1990, UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL



have yet to kill, possible the ultimate act of crushing."

♦ ♦ ♦

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Soering describes his work as "a how-to book" on learning to practice centering prayer and "a review of main Christian traditions" of meditation.

The book also calls for prison reform and prison volunteerism — a form of centering practice — and serves as a pulpit to proclaim his innocence. The book is being published by the New York City-based Lantern Books, which has found a niche in publishing books on spirituality, animal rights, vegetarianism and psychology.

Soering said he will receive 8 percent of the net sales. Virginia law prohibits profiting from crime, but it is unclear how or if the law will be applied in Soering's case. Similar laws in other states have been found unconstitutional. Soering said the discussion of his trial takes up only 10 percent of the book and is not an integral part of it.

Sarah Gallogly, his editor at Lantern Books, said publication is still on schedule and that the paperback will sell for \$17.95. The small publishing house publishes about 30 to 40 books a year, she said. Gallogly said Sister Helen Prejean, author of "Dead Man Walking," has endorsed Soering's book.

"The Way of the Prisoner"

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"To me contemplation is very much like jogging. ... There is always one more second to shave off one's personal best, one more temptation to overcome. So we stay on the road and become lovers of solitude, of early mornings, of sweat physical and spiritual."

"In the end, my father succeeded in saving my life: the death penalty charges were dropped. But the damage to his career and reputation was incalculable. No medieval monk flogged naked at the altar before his brethren endured even a fraction of the humiliation my father endured."

"Describing my criminal case is fraught with dangers for me. There are those who, perhaps quite understandably, will view 'The Way of the Prisoner' as nothing more than an elaborate attempt to manipulate my way out of prison."

"If I, a convict serving double life sentences, can be transformed, then surely, surely so can you!"

"I dream of being paroled and living again in Germany... even of working as a janitor in one of Germany's great medieval cathedrals, since prison life has made me a master of the mop and toilet brush."

"Things were, and are, and will be truly as they should be; and they are good! As crazy as it sounds, I feel I have been undeservedly blessed with this life. I feel grateful and at peace."

— FROM PAGE B1

with Soering. That jury, after hearing 10 days of evidence including testimony from Soering himself, took only four hours in June 1990 to convict him of the murders of his girlfriend's parents. He was sentenced to two consecutive life terms but with a possibility of parole.

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Soering's life turned loony shortly after he met Elizabeth Haysom, another first-year University of Virginia scholar with whom he began a passionate, bizarre and ultimately sick love affair. Their tale of love and murder, served up with good breeding and good manners, captured the attention of the international press.

Derek and Nancy Haysom were murdered at their Bedford County home called "Loose Chippings" on March 30, 1985. Derek Haysom, 72, was a retired Nova Scotia steel executive. Nancy Haysom, 54, was an artist, related to Lady Astor. The two had apparently just finished dinner when the murderer attacked them in a rage, hacking at their necks and stabbing their torsos with a single-edged knife, nearly decapitating both of them.

Bedford authorities eventually turned their attention to Soering and Elizabeth Haysom, asking for fingerprints and blood samples to rule the pair out as suspects. Haysom gave police samples. Soering did not. The two took off for Europe eight months after the murders. They eventually were captured by British authorities, who first arrested them on check-fraud charges.

Soering confessed to the murders several times, in detail and with descriptions that one British detective said had the "ring of truth." But the Soering-Haysom love fest quickly soured. Haysom testified for the prosecution, saying she waited in a Washington hotel room the night of the murders while Soering, with her encouragement, drove to Bedford and confronted her parents. She said her parents wanted to end their relationship and Soering, in his rage, killed them.

In August 1987, Elizabeth Haysom pleaded guilty as an accessory to murder and was sentenced to 90 years in prison. She is being held at the Fluvanna Correctional Center for Women, where she has been denied parole since 1995. Her mandatory release date is May 20, 2032. She refused a request for an interview for this article.

Soering recanted his confessions, saying he made them up to protect his one true love from a possible death penalty. Soering said it was he who waited — unknowing and innocent — in the Washington hotel room while Elizabeth drove to see her parents and, possibly with the help of an unknown accomplice, butchered them.

Soering admits, however, that "there is no way to know if I am innocent." He added: "There is only one person responsible for all the suffering inflicted on my life, and that is me and my big mouth."

Ricky Gardner, then the chief investigator in the case for the Bedford County Sheriff's Department, said he was happy to hear of Soering's religious conversion. But he is still absolutely convinced of the genuineness of Soering's confessions — five in all — and of Soering's guilt.

Gardner, in England to interrogate Soering shortly after his arrest in 1986, sat with Soering twice at a police station and listened as Soering confessed.

"There's no doubt in my mind that he was telling the truth that day," said Gardner, now a captain in the Sheriff's Department.

"There were too many inconsistencies and no inconsistencies between his story and her story. ... He even demonstrated what he did on me."

Gardner said that "to sit and listen to him tell the story and see the emotions he was



1990, THE ASSOCIATED PRESS



When Elizabeth Haysom testified against him in 1990, Jens Soering reacted in disbelief. Two juries concluded they plotted to kill her parents, Derek and Nancy Haysom.



1990, UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL



1990, KEITH GRAHAM/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

During Jens Soering's 1990 trial, Bedford County Commonwealth's Attorney James Updike displayed a footprint of Soering and a footprint taken from the crime scene.

displaying ... there was hatred on his face for the Haysoms. ... There is no doubt."

Before his convictions, Soering's life seemed bound for success. He was a bookish nerd and intellectual who, he said, not only had never gotten even a speeding ticket but had never had a desire to speed. He was a self-described "goody two-shoes."

Soering had a full four-year scholarship to the University of Virginia as a Jefferson scholar. He was a well-heeled, well-bred prep school graduate and German diplomat's son whose life was Bach, Latin and mathematics. "That was a long time ago," said Soering, whose recent accomplishments include Bible correspondence courses through the Salvation Army and the tithing of his meager prison wages to an organization called Feed the Children. He has donated about \$4 or \$5 a month to the charity since October 1996. He has the receipts to prove it.

He embraced Christianity in 1994 and became a confirmed Catholic in the spring of 2002 during rites held in the prison's visiting room.

He is in the honor building at Brunswick, reserved for those inmates who are well-behaved. Soering said he has never committed even a small infraction while in prison. His prison job, for which he receives 45 cents an hour, is to represent other prisoners accused of infractions.

Soering awakes at 4:45 a.m. every day to pray, writes in his cell for several hours in the morning, performs his prison job

and reads and watches the news in the evening. He is in bed by 8:30 p.m.

He reads the Bible every day. "I'm pretty good with the Bible," he said.

He practices centering prayer three times a day. The 20- to 30-minute spiritual practice is done on a plastic chair in his cell, his ears plugged and his eyes blindfolded to block the noise of prison life.

"Is there meaning to suffering?" Soering asked. "Can even something this horrible have meaning? I find centering prayer makes sense of one's prison, other people's prisons and dealing with my own anguish."

He says his book takes the place of the child he will never have. The book is titled "The Way of the Prisoner — Breaking the Chains of Self Through Centering Prayer and Centering Practice."

Though Soering writes of his Christian love for people now, his writings back when he was arrested stand in stark contrast. Here are a few excerpts of his writings from letters he sent Elizabeth Haysom.

"... does she realize how mean I can be or am?"

"I don't know whether I can resist this. I can see myself depriving people of their property quite easily. Your dad for instance."

"I've felt this, I'm feeling it now inside me, this need to plant one's foot in somebody's face."

"I have not explored the side of me that wishes to crush to any real extent — I

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"I feel I have what matters in life in the end. It's not the self. It's what you can do for others. You can help others from prison," Soering said. "Your suffering doesn't have to be a definition of who you are."

He has written to the governor asking that Elizabeth Haysom be released from prison at her next parole hearing because he says it is his Christian duty to love his enemies. "In a worldly sense, she is my worst enemy. She killed me. If she told the truth she could get me out of here."

The jury heard hours of Haysom's graphic and detailed testimony about the murders as she said Soering related them.

"Jens said it was the greatest thing he'd ever done, that it was a selfless act," she testified in 1990. "He said that he'd done it out of love for me, that the only drawback was that no one would ever know."

Soering has written for the Parole Board a 15-page explanation of how the crime occurred, professing his innocence of the murders but his sorrow for his actions after the crime and the resulting pain to the surviving Haysom family and his own family. He will have friends, including former Deputy Attorney General Gail Marshall, attending a second part of his parole hearing scheduled in August.

Marshall, who represented him on appeals, including a final, failed appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court in January 2001, said she believes Soering is innocent. "I feel morally certain," she said, adding the evidence against him very thin.

She is concerned that because parole was abolished, it will affect Soering's chances unfairly. "We have to be careful we don't de facto adopt a no-parole policy. ... Careful consideration should be given to applicants that appear to be worthy."

Soering, a German national, would be deported to Germany if freed. "He would start a new and productive life," Marshall said.

At Soering's sentencing hearing in September 1990, the brother of Nancy Haysom read a statement after the hearing to reporters. Risque Benedict said then: "My appeal is that in any future parole hearing, neither my niece, Elizabeth Haysom, nor Jens Soering ever should be paroled. Elizabeth Haysom has been called a pathological liar and I think she is exactly that. It is my belief that Jens Soering is a psychotic and a psychopathic killer."

Soering is a meticulous record-keeper, a controlling perfectionist even from prison. He is alternately humble and arrogant, charming and pitiful, brilliant and insightful. Soering, who struggles with self-hatred, believes everything that has happened to him has a purpose. Prison life has not defeated him — at least not yet.

"Whatever God throws my way. Everything is for a purpose. If God wants me to be shot again, I can take it."

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