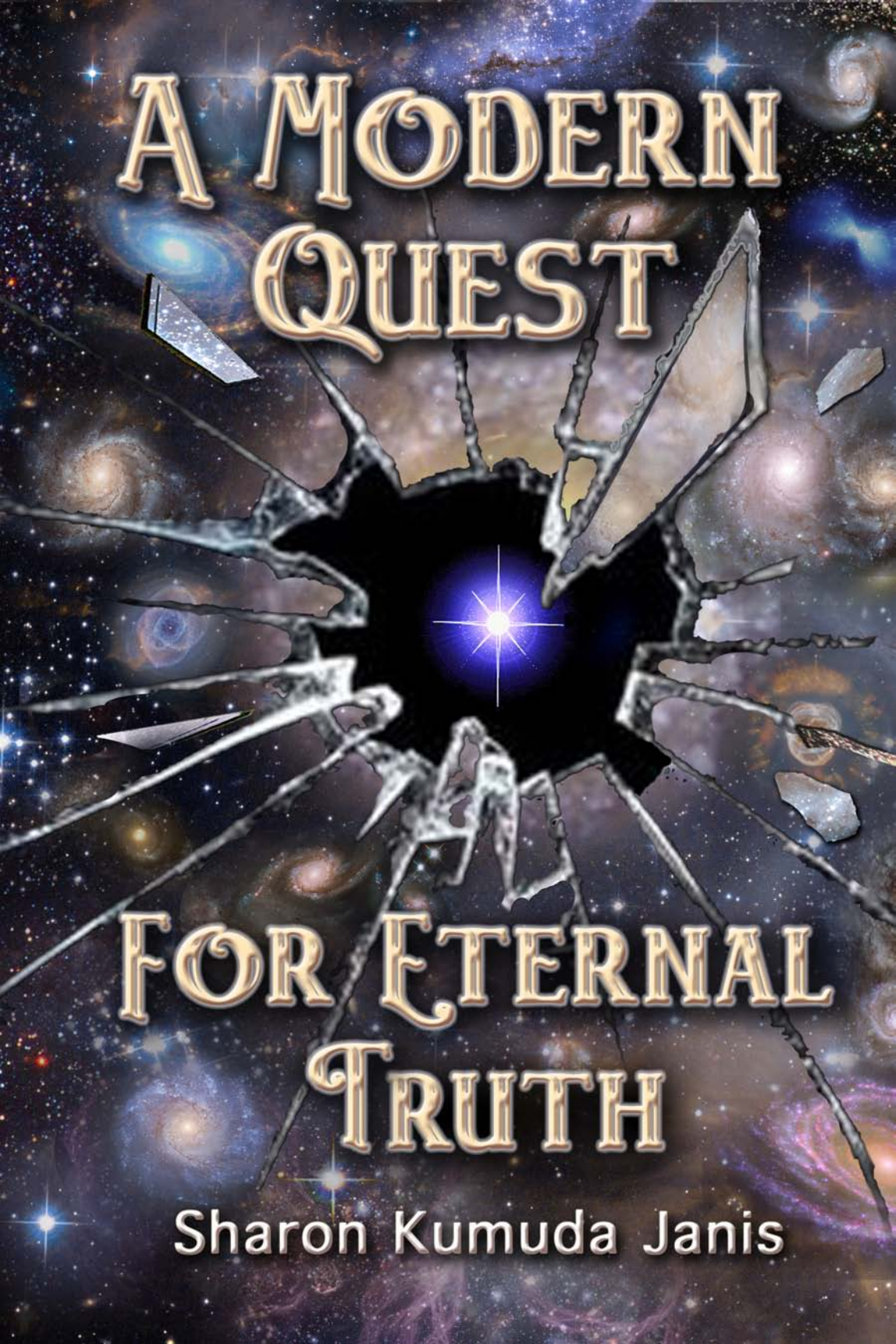
A Modern Quest
For Eternal Truth
Sharon Kumuda Janis

A MODERN QUEST FOR ETERNAL TRUTH

Reviews for the first edition of

A MODERN QUEST FOR ETERNAL TRUTH

In a larger sense, this memoir is a dialogue between Indian spirituality and Western psychology. The question that Janis answers is: "Can a westerner come to know Indian spirituality and flourish in its depths, even when it is alien to western ways of knowing?'" She answers with a resounding "yes."

—Publishers Weekly

Inspired by deep guidance and inner listening, this book aims to bring readers to "a sense of wonder and respect for their own journey" and a greater regard for others on their paths.

—NAPRA ReVIEW

A beautiful and poignant spiritual odyssey that is equally provocative and touching, informative and enlightening, humorous and heartbreaking.

—Joseph Chilton Pearce

It is a book that is very difficult to put down—the kind that keeps you up at night beyond your bedtime.

—21st Century Books

It's a good story, and for those of us who are interested in what exactly goes on in those ashrams, it's hard to put down... Few writers so far have told the tale of what it is like to live and study, heart and soul, with the likes of Muktananda.

—RALPH: Review of the Arts, Literature, Philosophy and the Humanities

A MODERN QUEST FOR ETERNAL TRUTH

By the author of *Spirituality For Dummies*
and *Secrets of Spiritual Happiness*

Sharon Kumuda Janis

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The names of certain people appearing in this book have been changed where deemed appropriate.

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For You

A Modern Quest For Eternal Truth

Table of Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter 1: Awakening	5
Chapter 2: A Being in Time	11
Chapter 3: All in the Mind	17
Chapter 4: I Chose This?	23
Chapter 5: Speed, Winning, and Jesus Christ Superstar	37
Chapter 6: Exploring the Unconscious	49
Chapter 7: The Threshold of Life	59
Chapter 8: When the Student is Ready	71
Chapter 9: Magical Meeting	77
Chapter 10: Toward the One	85
Chapter 11: Who is Shiva?	91
Chapter 12: Destiny Calls	99

Chapter 13: Winter Wonderland 113
Chapter 14: This Karmic Dance 125
Chapter 15: The Fruits of Surrender 135
Chapter 16: That Gracious Glance 145
Chapter 17: Farewell 153
Chapter 18: Totally One With Him 163
Chapter 19: Clothed in Devotion 183
Chapter 20: Nemesis 193
Chapter 21: She Still Thinks She Did It! 205
Chapter 22: Perfect Mistakes 219
Chapter 23: Taming the Beast 227
Chapter 24: Leaving the Ashram 239
Chapter 25: The Great Guiding Force 251
Chapter 26: The Wish-Fulfilling Tree 261
Chapter 27: Kumuda Gump 271

PROLOGUE

IT STARTED AS A LOW RUMBLING. I had barely sunk into the arms of sleep after a late night editing session for the animated television show "X-Men," when the world went mad. The earth, metaphor for all that is stable and dependable, was dancing. But this was not a gentle dance; it was *Shiva*, dancing a dance of destruction. This was a display of physical force unlike anything I had witnessed before.

Instinctively, I jumped up and ran to the alcove I had designated as the "earthquake spot" just days earlier, when two small shocks had rumbled through town. During my five years in Los Angeles, we'd had a few small temblors. Most had occurred during my workdays at various television studios, where I'd usually joke about the shaking walls and occasionally impressed co-workers with my bravado. Those small tremors were nothing like this.

I was also working double duty as film editor for the kid's show, "Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers," and in my groggy state, with my apartment shaking violently from side to side, I visualized one of the Power Ranger uber-monsters picking up our building and shaking it back and forth. I wondered for a moment if I might be dreaming — but dream or no dream, I had to pay attention to the present moment while holding tightly to the doorframe to keep from being tossed around.

As sounds of destruction played around me, a glass shower door in the apartment upstairs shattered, and my neighbor's 35" TV smashed against the wall.

In my mind's eye, I envisioned a jagged line running up the coast. This shaking might only be the edge of something much bigger, perhaps with the entire west coast crumbling at its seams, swallowing thousands of lives with each quaking gulp.

I wondered if this was the "Big One" we would use back in Michigan as an excuse to never even *consider* moving to California. Regardless, if not "THE" big one, this was certainly "A" big one, and I was possibly about to die.

The large water heaters on the floor above could crash through my ceiling at any moment. The entire building could collapse, squashing my body like a bug. These could be my final moments as me.

"Now what am I supposed to do? I should know this!"

I thought I had made peace with the idea of death many years earlier, during a decade of deeply spiritual, monastic-style ashram life. Yet now, with the walls closing in on my existence in this world, my pounding heart cried out with dejection at the large gap between where I was and where I'd hoped to be during my last moments of life.

Within the expanded time frame of full-attentiveness, I looked back. Once upon a time, drenched in the ashram's spiritual teachings and editing hundreds of videos for my guru's work, I had anticipated that my death would come as a great merging into the Grand Source of all, as promised in one of my favorite Indian texts, *The Bhagavad Gita*, where Krishna tells his disciple Arjuna: "Whatever state of being a soul remembers at the moment of death, he goes to that very state of being. Therefore, at all times meditate on Me (the Supreme Soul); keep your mind and intelligence fixed on Me. In this way, thou shalt surely come to Me."

Now it was too late. The angel of death was tapping his toe right before me, and I had been wasting my precious time on TV shows and Hollywood minutiae instead of preparing for my inevitable time of ascension from this world.

A century's worth of work for one chance to surrender.

— JALALLUDIN RUMI

Why couldn't this most important threshold have come when I was beyond personal identification, living a life completely devoted to God, when I was listening to divine teachings, chanting holy mantras and serving our spiritual community selflessly? Why couldn't this time have come when I was filled with the powerful Shakti energy, supported by a spiritual community and the tangible inner and outer experience of grace?

Had my death come then, I would have surely leapt over this threshold into a far greater level of evolutionary existence. Why did it have to come now, when I was just like everyone else, absorbed in ephemeral things that, according to some spiritual philosophies, don't even exist?

Greater than my fear of death was a sense of embarrassment at having wasted the precious gifts of spiritual wisdom I'd received and experienced throughout those years. With the walls shaking around me, I cowered before my God, but couldn't readily find that holy presence.

First, I tried to place a familiar face on the looming immensity of Universal God, invoking the images and remembrance of my spiritual masters. Then I repeated a Sanskrit mantra as the shaking continued, in hopes that the holy syllables would magically lift me up. I wasn't even praying as much to survive the quake as I was to be in the right state of consciousness. If these were meant to be my last moments in this world, I wanted to leave from a mountaintop of elevated awareness, instead of from the valley in which I had been dwelling. But how could I make the leap? Was it even possible to break through untold layers of illusion in these last few moments of personal existence? Could I become immortal at the threshold of death?

The rumbling stopped.

The cacophony of smashing, crashing and creaking also stopped. There was dead silence and blacker-than-black darkness.

A voice pierced the stillness. "Holy shit!"

I had to chuckle. It was one of the guys who lived on the second floor.

I was in my body, on the floor, still on earth, and in shock. I'd been given another chance.

Next time, I had to be ready.

Clearly, I was going to have to find a more dependable way to relate to this unnamable, perhaps unknowable Eternal Truth. But first, I had to remember what had already been learned.

Chapter One
AWAKENING

Life is a series of awakenings.
— SWAMI SHIVANANDA

AT TWO-AND-A-HALF YEARS OF AGE, I discovered the existence of grace. Life was comfortable enough at the time. My family lived in a small house in a reasonably safe area of Detroit. My sister spoiled me as though I was her personal doll, and our grandmother lived just across the street.

We were fortunate to have grandparents living nearby, because even during those early childhood years, our parents were "just not that into us." They weren't really prepared for the responsibility of rearing children. Both were single children who were barely twenty when they had married, not so much from love as to fulfill social expectations at a time when most of their friends had already "tied the knot."

I'd guess my parents would've liked to have been free to explore life and find true love instead of rushing to take lifelong vows of commitment, but in their social circles of the mid-1950s, the only respectable way out of their family homes without generating judgmental gossip was to "get hitched."

Even before the wedding cake crumbs were cleared away came the inevitable next question: "When are you going to have children?" So there we were, my sister and I, more products of society's expectations than of true love.

Our early childhoods included toys and birthday parties, but almost completely lacked the usual elements of touching, cuddling, loving care, and sweet cooing words that come when parents truly want to have children.

I suspect the maternal instinct was bred out of our family's genetic pool a few generations back. For example, even though I enjoy and respect children as precious, naturally spiritual beings, I haven't felt a strong pull of maternal instinct to give birth to one of "my own." I'd imagine this was also the case for our mother.

Previous to the middle of the twentieth century, a certain amount of mother-child bonding would take place of necessity while a baby was breastfeeding. However, marketing efforts right before my birth had convinced many mothers that feeding their babies with manmade formula was healthier than breastfeeding with mother's milk. Most mothers probably still held and showed love and attention to even their bottle fed babies, but in our family, expressions of affection were extremely rare.

Perhaps the lack of early parental bonding contributed to my monastic and artistic tendencies. For a soul whose destiny is monastic in nature, removing the subsequent effects of early childhood parental bonding can open the door for certain unusual life experiences, making it more natural to follow one's own drummer. Of course, I didn't know about such things at the time, and only realized that our family was different from most when I would watch other young friends interacting with their much more attentive parents.

By the time I'd reach marriageable age, staying single wouldn't be quite as shocking to society, so I never felt any social expectation or family pressure to get married. This freedom from outer expectations of marriage gave me an opportunity to live in ways that were more in harmony with my nature, which thus far has been happily single and without progeny, aside from the fruits of my creative works.

One of the few times our mother gave me personal advice came when I was around seven years old, when she told me, "If you want to be happy, don't ever have children." Though said with her usual subtle combination of insult and dry humor, I think this ended up being good advice that set the stage for focusing my attention, time, and energy into other areas of interest. Not having children probably also contributed to my feeling of responsibility to contribute to society by giving birth to other works.

As a young toddler with somewhat inattentive parents, I had quite a bit of independence to wander around the neighborhood. Once I came home from my wandering at age three without my clothes on, having apparently been molested by a fellow who had called me into his garage.

Although my parents more or less swept this event under the rug, one of their friends told me a few details about what happened a couple decades later, at which point I had a general memory of where the offending house may have been located, if not the specifics of the event itself.

Another time when my parents noticed that I was missing, they walked and drove around the neighborhood looking for me, until I was eventually found sleeping on the floor between my sister's bed and mine.

I also enjoyed wandering off in stores, which in the early 1960s would bring the extra boost of hearing my name called over the loudspeaker, "Lost child, Sharon Janis."

One Sunday morning, at age two-and-a-half, I jumped out of bed full of energy. Our parents would sleep in until the afternoon on Sundays, and my sister was also asleep, so I unlatched the back door and went outside to play in our backyard.

Surrounding our yard was a medium-sized chain link fence that I'd recently been eyeing as a possible challenge to overcome. Several times, I had tested the fence out, putting my feet into the holes and pulling myself up off the ground, link by link. Each time though, I'd chickened out and had to fumble my way back down. This time, I decided to climb all the way to the top.

Carefully, I inched my way hand-by-hand and foot-by-foot, up the fence. I made it to the top, but then suddenly was falling, and landed with a bump in the field on the other side. Everything shifted. I had never been alone in this field before. There was my house, but it was behind the fence. I was not quite ready to repeat the whole process and climb the fence again to get back home.

To my left I saw a familiar spot, though from a new angle. It was the Episcopal church that stood two doors down from our house.

I didn't know that it was a church or even what a church was, having been brought up without any religious exposure at all. My sister and I used to play in the church parking lot, which was usually empty of cars. The lot was now filled. Walking closer, I could hear music coming from the building, and saw that the usually dark windows were glowing with bright colors!

As I got to the door, it opened like magic, revealing a woman's legs and knees with a red skirt just above my eye-level – one of my earliest visual memories. With a big smile, the woman lifted me up and carried me into the room and down an aisle.

What a party! The room was filled with lights, music, and smiling people dressed in bright colors singing songs. This gathering looked even better than the birthday parties I'd been attending for the neighborhood kids.

In spite of being in this unfamiliar place filled with strangers, I wasn't afraid. My parents would sometimes leave my sister and me with various friends and babysitters while they taught high school, so I had become generally trusting and comfortable with strangers.

Even with the unfamiliar nature of this church experience, at that young age, the experience of having things be unfamiliar was actually familiar. Being in this church was kind of like being in a dream world. At age two, the worlds of wakefulness and dream are not so easily distinguished — whatever is happening, real or imagined, is what is happening.

A few minutes earlier, I had been in our backyard, then over the fence, in the parking lot, and now I was in this colorful, magical place with happy people singing and smiling at me. I didn't know about grace or karma, but in my own nonreligious way, it felt as though the "gods" were smiling upon me.

After the church service ended, several women gave me a cup of juice and asked what my name was. To their surprise, I was quite articulate for two-and-a-half, and gave my full name and address, as well as my parents' names. I told the friendly women that my family lived two houses away and that they were still asleep. I assured them that I knew how to get there by myself, although they kept an eye on me as I walked down the front sidewalk to return to my nearby home, where I arrived before my parents awoke.

For the next several weeks, I went to this Episcopal church every Sunday. I never told anyone about it, and can only guess at my motivation for concealing this grand discovery. My silence may have come from a fear that if I spoke about it, the fun would end, as had been the case with other things I'd enjoyed playing with that my parents had taken away for one reason or another.

Surprisingly, none of the church officials personally walked me home or contacted my parents regarding my church attendance. They did put our family on their mailing list, but the flyers went all but unnoticed.

One day, I came home from church wearing a lapel pin with a cross and the words, "Jesus Loves Me."

After my mother awoke that afternoon, she saw the pin and asked where it had come from. I told her it was from church, which apparently was a big surprise.

My mother called my father, and as I sat on the couch, they took the "Jesus Loves Me" pin away and told me I could never go back to that church again, because I was "Jewish," whatever that meant! For my atheist folks, it probably meant not getting chastised about their toddler toddling off to church on Sunday mornings by their more religious Jewish friends and relatives, including my grandmother, who lived right across the street.

This event brought a devastating blow to my young psyche. Although I had been upset about not getting my way before, this was a more painful frustration, one that stood out in my long-term memories. This church was a magical, colorful, and love-filled place, and now I wasn't allowed to go there anymore? It was as upsetting as anything else I had encountered during my first two-and-a-half years of life.

Perhaps Jesus wasn't happy about it either, because just a few months after this incident, my mother slipped in a donut shop and, as I was told at the time, "cracked her head open," which brought our family other challenges as and after she healed. Nevertheless, I am grateful to have had a chance to enter a place filled with spiritual power so early in my life, especially while growing up in an atheist, though officially Jewish household. After this unexpected glimpse of heaven amidst my daily experience, I believed in magic. I knew that something new and amazing could appear in the blink of an eye, or with the opening of a door.

However, the disappointing side of this early experience also rippled through my subsequent personality development. When I'd discover something really beautiful, precious, and exquisite, I would tend to clam up, fearing that it might be taken away.

Chapter Two
A BEING IN TIME

A FEW MONTHS AFTER THE DISAPPOINTING END of my church attendance, I turned three years old, with another awakening on the horizon. Many friends came to our house for the birthday party, bringing a big pile of gifts for me. I was the birthday girl. I was *special*.

This was my first intense social introduction to the concept, "I'm special." Until this time, I couldn't be special, because in a sense, I was all there was. The experience of separation had not yet settled into my psyche, so everything existed in relation to me. But today I felt special in a new and different way. The children and parents sang a song to me, brought me gifts, and later came up one by one so I could receive and give each one a kiss on the cheek, a display of affection that was rare in our usual family life. As we feasted on birthday cake, I sat at the head of the table, queen of the ball.

Due to no particular effort of my own, it was "Sharon's Day." I was different and unique, an individual worthy of being celebrated. I was separate, and it felt pretty darn good. On this day, seeds of duality and egocentricity were planted in my personal experience, along with some pleasant feelings that would anchor the experience of separation and feeling special as a positive experience. Surely, birthday celebrations have had similar effects on many children during their initial personality formation stages of childhood growth.

Our family was not big on any kind of loving expressions such as hugging, kissing, or even saying sweet words to each other. Spending a couple hours having a group of kids and adults be so sweet and loving toward me was an impactful experience for this newly turned three-year-old.

In the midst of unwrapping my presents, I held up a mirrored toy and saw my own reflection. That was me.

Me.

I stared into the mirror, entranced by my happy face. As the world and party faded away, I began to think, "I'm three, I'm three, I'm three." Just a few days earlier, my mother had explained to me what three was. I had been one, then two, and now I was three. Standing there, unwrapping birthday gifts, I looked at my face in the mirror, and had one of the most startling realizations of my life.

One day, I WOULD BE FIVE!

What a shock! I would not always be exactly the way I was in that moment. Time slipped its noose around my neck. I was a separate being, locked in a linear world. I was going to keep getting older and older; change was inevitable. Life would never again be so simple.

Another surprising realization came two months later, when I had a chance to meet Santa Claus in person at the mall. This was an exciting event for me. Even though we were Jewish atheists, my parents had allowed me to somewhat believe in the general idea of Santa Claus, without getting into too many details. I had heard that Santa knows if you've been bad or good, and that he brings toys to good children, of which I considered myself to be one.

After waiting in line to meet Santa, I felt great excitement and awe as he lifted me up to his lap with a big smiling, "Ho, ho, ho." Santa asked me some questions, and seemed delighted by my answers. I really liked Santa.

As we chatted, I saw that Santa had a piece of tape stuck on his beard. He probably didn't know it was there. I reached up to remove it, and his whole beard came off! This apparently explosive incident was followed by a lot of commotion by Santa's helpers, who rushed over to help put Santa's beard back on.

At first, I thought I had somehow pulled Santa's actual beard off, which was a horrifying thought. Then I was less horrified but still disappointed to realize that Santa was a fake. Probably some of the other kids watching were also disappointed. My parents thought it was the funniest thing ever, and told all their friends about how I had pulled off Santa's beard.

This was not to be the last time I would upset some people and amuse others by intentionally or unintentionally revealing truths behind the facades!

During my early childhood years in Detroit, Michigan, we lived not far from the famed eight-mile road, with our grandmother's house right across the street. On many mornings, my sister and I would walk to her house and stand at the back door chanting, "We want breakfast! We want breakfast!" Our grandmother would welcome us with a loving smile and serve us scrambled eggs, toast, and a few drops of coffee in a cup of warm, sugary milk. Grandma Fritzi (short for Fredericka) loved to feed the birds and squirrels, and I also learned to relate to these little creatures. I had a favorite squirrel named Timmy who would follow me around the yard, gently taking peanuts from my hand. Once I even allowed him into my grandmother's house for a visit. Grandma Fritzi was not thrilled about this. He was, after all, a wild squirrel. Fortunately, Timmy behaved himself and left quietly.

At age four, I proclaimed to my family and friends that I was going to die in a car accident when I was nineteen. I don't know how this idea came to me — perhaps it was a way to encourage people to talk about death. As an inquisitive child, I was surprised to note that even my richest sources of information were reluctant to discuss the topic of death.

I was intrigued by the idea that people could just completely disappear forever. On my third birthday, I had realized I was a being in time, and now age four brought the sobering information that one day, sometime in the future; I wasn't even going to be here. Every single person was going to die. What a shocking and intriguing concept!

Obviously, my death prophecy didn't come true, although sweet Diane, my closest friend and neighbor during those early childhood years, did end up dying in a car accident when she was nineteen.

Later that year, our parents drove my sister and I to get our measles vaccinations at a school auditorium where shots were being given to a large group of kids all at once. During the drive, my six-year-old sister started getting nervous about the impending injection, whining about how she didn't want to get a shot.

I, on the other hand, was feeling quite brave about it all. I took over the role of big sister, and proceeded to give some wise advice that I'd probably heard previously from a doctor or nurse. "The shot will happen so fast, it will be over before you even feel it. There's no reason to be scared about a little shot."

I was enjoying this new position of authority, preaching my wonderful four-year-old sermon about the importance of giving up fear. My parents in the front seat seemed to be impressed with my maturity as well. This was probably one of my first tangible experiences of pride.

Once we arrived at the clinic, I don't know what happened to my wise little soul. All my bravado fell away, and I was overcome with terror. "Oh no! A shot!!!" Screaming at the top of my lungs, I ran to hide in a corner, and learned that it can be easier to give advice than to follow it. I also experienced an example of how pride can indeed cometh before a fall.

Another distressing lesson came when I was in first grade. Kindergarten had been easy and fun, consisting mostly of games, naps and cookies, but first grade required real schoolwork. This was when my rebellious nature first expressed itself into the world. I refused to do homework. I didn't want to do it, and I wouldn't do it. My parents didn't really keep track of my assignments, but would occasionally get a note from the teacher saying that I wasn't doing the work, usually leading to a spanking or other punishment.

Part of the problem was that I already knew much of what was being taught, at least in terms of reading and spelling, if not mathematics. I was already reading on a fourth grade level, and our first-grade teacher often asked me to help the other students with their reading. You might think that having this edge would make it easier for me to zip through the assignments, but it didn't work that way — I was bored.

My parents were concerned about my poor academic showing, but knew I had enough intelligence to do the work. After all, at age two, I had been able to sing all the verses of "Where Have You Been Billy Boy," a feat that would often draw gasps of surprise and praise from onlookers.

Although there wasn't much personal interest in these abilities from my parents at home, they did seem intrigued by my skills in learning certain things. My mother had tested with a 160 IQ, and was a member of the "genius" group called Mensa. When I was age five, they took me to have my IQ professionally tested, and were happy when I surpassed the test boundary of 160.

But this ace test score also meant there was no excuse for my refusal to do schoolwork.

In the 1960s, we didn't have labels like "attention deficit disorder," so fortunately I was not made to take any brain altering pharmaceuticals for the purpose of improving my schoolwork.

A battle ensued. My parents told me that if I brought home one more note from school, I would be severely punished. So, when my teacher handed me the next note, I didn't bring it home. Instead, I put the envelope in my coat pocket and conveniently forgot all about it until the next day, when I told my first outright lie.

As I was leaving the classroom that afternoon, my first-grade teacher asked if I had given her note to my parents. I couldn't bear to confess that I had intentionally or unintentionally forgotten about the note, and instead lied and said, "Yes." Then she asked if they had sent back any response, and I replied, "No."

Before this moment, I had never really considered blatant lying as a viable alternative to getting in trouble. I was surprised by how easy it had been to lie, although there was an uncomfortable knot in my stomach at the same time. What if my teacher had asked a specific question in the letter and was expecting a parental response? I had neglected to even read the note myself and, in fact, had forgotten to even remove the unopened letter from the pocket of my coat that was hanging in the hallway.

The teacher didn't say anything more, and so I turned around to leave, thinking I may have gotten away with the deception. Just then, one of my classmates came running into the room with the envelope. It had fallen onto the hallway floor through a hole in my coat pocket.

Our teacher took the still unopened envelope and looked at it. She rose up and pointed her finger at me. "Now you're going to get it."

As she walked out the door, I followed, begging her not to get me in trouble. But she wanted to teach me a lesson. She wanted me to be scared; after all, I had just lied to her face. While walking up the school stairway, she continued to describe the trouble I was going to be in, as I stayed at the bottom of the stairs, pleading for mercy and hoping to avoid the inevitable spanking. It didn't work.

I think this may have been the experience that taught me not to lie. If so, I will always be grateful to my first-grade teacher for this lesson.

Chapter Three
ALL IN THE MIND

AT AGE SEVEN, I wasn't keen on playing with dolls or even playing with many friends, but had more of a leaning toward the sciences and learning more about the world. I enjoyed thinking about life, and would sometimes sit in the bathtub for hours, telling stories and giving philosophical lectures to an imaginary audience.

My favorite toy was an extensive chemistry set, consisting of various chemicals and scientific instruments my high-school teacher parents were able to bring home from the chemistry departments in their schools. I had a Bunsen burner, two professional quality microscopes, and several shelves filled with bottles of chemicals. For hours on end, I would explore the fascinating, unseen worlds that were hidden in common substances with my high-powered microscopes.

Sometimes I would follow experiments described in the high-school books, and other times I would just heat different chemicals up and mix them together to see what happened. Some of my creations smelled really bad; others fizzed over on to the table. Most just changed color or did nothing. Fortunately, none of them blew up the house!

With my parents teaching psychology classes in their respective high schools, the bookshelves in our house quickly filled up with psychological tomes: books on gestalt, transactional analysis, multiple personality, autism, and dream symbolism, written by Freud, Carl Jung, and various researchers and pop psychology writers. Throughout my youth, we had a steady stream of hot new psychology books flowing through the shelves in our den.

I enjoyed reading the interesting ideas in these books, as well as the book of class teaching notes that my mother had put together. It began by stating: "The average person likes to believe he knows most of the time why he thinks, feels and acts as he does. Psychoanalysis holds this is not true. All the things we think, feel and do are largely dictated by the unconscious, over which we have little control." Now that was something to think about. Clearly, my interest in knowing more about life was going to inherently involve learning more about the nature of the mind.

My folks were intelligent and interested in exploring various social and psychology fads in the freestyle 1960s, which would include chanting with the Hare Krishnas, hanging out with witches, smoking pot (which they called "grass"), and eventually swinging and swapping sexual partners with their friends, inspired by the risqué 1969 movie, "Bob, Carol, Ted and Alice."

When I was seven years old, my folks signed up to take a three-month course in hypnosis. I asked if I could take the class with them, even though this course was only meant for adults. The instructor said yes, and with that, I had a front row seat in a small group course setting to witness some amazing things. What I saw there radically and tangibly expanded my understanding of the mind's power and vulnerability.

On the first day of class, our instructor hypnotized a woman. Paul told her that his finger was a lit cigarette, and touched the tip of his finger to her arm. The woman winced with what was clearly a real sense of pain. It was disconcerting for me to see someone so uncomfortable for no real reason at all, just from being touched by a finger she'd been told was a lit cigarette. I didn't know whether to feel sorry for her or not.

The woman returned to our class later that week with an actual blister where the nonexistent "lit cigarette" had touched her arm. I was amazed. From this event, I realized that our experience of what is true or false, painful or pleasurable, may have absolutely nothing to do with what is "really" going on. How could I ever again be certain that *any* pain — even with physical evidence like a blister — is real?

A few weeks later, Paul hypnotized another woman who was dressed in a very proper business-style red skirt and jacket. He gave the woman a posthypnotic suggestion that would take effect after he "brought her out of trance." Paul instructed the woman to jump up and down and act like a gorilla every time he said the word "Yes."

After the woman came out of trance and walked back to her seat, one of the adults prompted Paul with a seemingly innocent question, while the rest of us watched with smirks of anticipation.

As soon as Paul responded with the magic word, "Yes," the woman started jumping up and down, doing a gorilla dance, complete with sound effects. The woman looked perfectly normal and well dressed, but she was acting totally nuts.

This demonstration of unconsciously guided blind obedience had profound implications, and was entertaining to watch as well. Paul hadn't drugged the woman or threatened her with a gun, yet she was behaving in a way she would never have imagined behaving in public.

But what shocked me even more was the woman's response to seeing this ridiculous behavior coming out of herself. Here she was, acting very strange in front of all these people without any conscious explanation for her own bizarre behavior. She was, after all, acting like a gorilla.

I would have expected her response to be one of shock or confusion, such as, "Hey, why am I jumping up and down acting like a gorilla?" Maybe she'd figure out there must have been a hypnotic suggestion, since she had just been hypnotized in a hypnosis class.

But no. The woman smiled nervously and made up a completely lame excuse for her behavior, saying, "I've always liked gorillas, and when I get silly, I like to act like them." Her mind had filled in this irrationality just as proficiently as it fills in the blind spots of our visual fields and histories in our dreams — with false, manufactured information.

> *Illusions commend themselves to us*
> *because they save us pain*
> *and allow us to enjoy pleasure instead.*
> *We must therefore accept it without complaint*
> *when they sometimes collide with a bit of reality*
> *against which they are dashed to pieces.*
>
> *— SIGMUND FREUD*

Without reading the latest neuroscience research or the ancient texts of yoga, I learned by direct observation at age seven that the world as we know it is a mirage, *maya*, an illusion.

Our life-experience is created and projected by our minds — distorted by inner and outer elements we may know nothing about.

The idea that I was in control of a stable world crumbled, as I realized that whatever I think I know may have nothing to do with the way things really are. The fairy-dust of subconscious programming can make us feel that what we experience is independently real, honest, logical, and authentic, even when it is not.

This intelligent woman seemed to actually believe that she had always acted like a gorilla when she felt silly. The other woman's skin had been burned by a cigarette that didn't even exist.

Because of my youth, this discovery may have impacted me more than my much older classmates. I hadn't yet learned to ignore the implications of what I saw. I hadn't yet developed all the defense mechanisms we adults use to keep our world-views consistent, filters that make incongruous experiences palatable to our accepted belief systems. At such a young age, our impressions of the world are constantly being usurped and updated by new information, responsibilities, and experiences.

I was still in the foundation-laying stages of personality development and worldview creation. It wasn't so strange for me to see shocking new evidence that forced me to rethink my belief system — it happened all the time.

After witnessing these hypnosis demonstrations, I realized that even experiences that seem to be coming from the external world might be created solely by my mind. I could see a little more clearly how people were getting themselves totally wrapped up in nonsensical dramas — struggling to put out painful, burning cigarettes that may, in reality, be nothing more than benign fingers or subconscious suggestions.

At one point during the three-month hypnosis course, the students split off into pairs to practice hypnotizing one another. My partner was an older man (although at seven, I pretty much considered anything over twenty as "old"). We went into a separate room so I could put the man into a trance.

I used all the techniques we had been studying, and to my delight, the man started showing signs of going under. His facial muscles relaxed and his eyelids closed without fluttering. The man's breathing became deep and even. I walked him down the imaginary staircase into his unconscious mind. "You're going deeper and deeper."

He replied, "Deeper and deeper."

The man started to repeat everything I would say, in a very monotone voice. I was amazed and proud of myself. I had actually hypnotized somebody. But then, he began to improvise, and murmured, "Going deeper and deeper, beyond the world."

Wait a minute! Beyond the world? Our teacher hadn't prepared us for a runaway subject. The man continued to drone on, "Beyond the world, beyond the galaxies...."

I later found out that the man had been practicing self-hypnosis for some time. Once I brought him to the threshold of his subconscious mind, his familiar methods kicked in. But at the time, I had no idea what was happening, and was starting to get scared about this man's unscheduled side trip into the cosmos.

I frantically tried to bring him back with my squeaky seven-year-old voice. "Back to the galaxies, coming back to earth!" I didn't want the rest of the class to think I was too young to do it right or that I'd somehow lost this man out in space. My hope was to bring him out of this hypnotic trance quickly, before anyone else knew what had happened.

Nevertheless, the man continued. "Beyond the universe, beyond the galaxies, never to return…."

I ran to get the instructor! It took Paul more than ten minutes to bring the man back to his normal consciousness.

That night I lay in bed, thinking about what had happened. I contemplated my fear that this man was getting lost in the universe, and a question boomed through my awareness: "Where did he go?"

It appeared that this man's mind was not in his body, yet his awareness was somewhere. According to the evidence before me, he had apparently traveled out into the universe, at least in his own mind.

While lying in bed contemplating all this, I felt myself rise up out of myself. Just by imagining this man's journey out into the universe, I was able to see stars as well. The vision was similar to science films that pull back from a spot on earth, expanding to show our solar system and galaxy, before moving out to show the greater universe. But I had not seen any such films at the time, and had no real context through which to understand what I was seeing in this inner vision.

Chapter Four
I CHOSE THIS?

WHEN FILLING OUT THE REQUEST LIST for this lifetime, I must have checked off "learning to be independent from too many people" as a priority. Many times during my life, beginning around age seven, I also felt as though I might have come into this world with a "Kick Me" sign.

My early childhood had been filled mostly with fun pursuits and events, including going to zoos and parties. Both of my grandmothers lived nearby and would generally make sure we were taken care of and fed, even though our folks were not the most caretaking of parents.

Our move from Detroit to the suburbs when I was seven brought some positive benefits, including getting to have my own room. However, other things quickly went downhill in our family life and at school.

From the moment we entered our new school, my sister and I became instant outcasts. I think the main reason for this was that we were quite unkempt, so didn't make a good initial impression. Our parents were off to their schools early in the morning, and nobody usually helped us to get dressed or gave much guidance on things like taking good care of our appearances. The only event resembling parental grooming that I remember from my childhood was when my mother saw that my thick hair was full of knots, and made me sit in the basement while she tried to pull a comb through — not carefully, but roughly, with maximum punishment and minimal effectiveness. I suppose she was trying to teach me through pain to comb my own hair more regularly, although it also gave her an opportunity to express her occasional sadistic streak.

With little guidance, my sister and I dressed ourselves in some strange clothing combinations, which did not build a positive image for us in our more affluent new school. We were definitely not dressed for success.

Take, for example, the orange tennis shoes. They had been on sale for two dollars each, and my thrifty mother snatched up ten pairs: five for my sister and five for me — these were pointy-toed, bright orange tennis shoes that we had to wear with pink dresses, green skirts, and purple blouses, clear, visible evidence that we had parents who simply didn't care. Between our mismatched clothes and unkempt hair, my sister and I walked into our new suburban school looking quite unimpressive.

Another major problem arose for me after we made the big move. In my old Detroit school, we had been learning to print at the end of first grade. I had learned how to read and print even before starting elementary school, so first grade had been easy breezy in terms of my *ability* to do the work, if not necessarily in terms of my willingness to do it.

Now I was attending a much better school system, and my second grade classmates already knew how to handwrite! I hadn't even started to learn handwriting. Suddenly, I went from being a class genius to a class dunce, and an outcast to boot.

After years of relatively pleasant relationships with my peer group, I was now a "cootie." For the next five years, I would be bullied, scorned, and treated to a front-row view of how human cruelty manifests even in cute young children.

At first, I didn't know how to respond to this experience of being teased. I would answer back with some clever or sarcastic answer, but that didn't seem to help at all. The other kids wouldn't appreciate my humor. Clearly, there were no extra points given for cleverness in this new game of teasing the outcast. Anything I said made things worse, so I learned to stay silent.

Upon reflection, I learned some important though sobering personal lessons during these years of almost-daily persecution. First, I learned to control my anger. I learned to remain quiet and generally peaceful, even in the face of unkind actions.

I learned that it was possible to go through suffering, while remaining somewhat above the circumstances. Such challenges can teach inner strength and promote a personal desire for ultimate freedom. Perhaps my soul had chosen to undergo circumstances that would set the stage for these experiences and lessons.

I also learned to feel content while just being alone with myself. Although I would form some valuable relationships and friendships later in life, they were not based on needing to fill something that was missing inside myself. If destiny brought a friendship to me, I would experience it in the moment, but I didn't seek out relationships to fill a gap in my life. And when a karmic connection with someone began to wane, I would usually be able to wish the person well and move forward without too much drama, at least on my end. I remember being struck when a childhood friend's father said to me, "You are truly a free spirit." It was one of the few times I felt that someone had recognized my nature beyond the façade; his words also helped me to recognize my own nature more clearly.

By the time I was eight, our parents realized that they had very little in common. As years went on, they grew to dislike and at times despise one another. Our house became filled with a regular backdrop of yelling and screaming, insults and accusations. In modern times, a couple that has become so unhappily incompatible would have the option of getting a divorce. However, this was in the 1960s, and society frowned upon divorce. My parents certainly did not want to be criticized or ostracized by their families and peers!

No, they were stuck with one another, and with us — which was probably a blessing for my sister and I. Having two disinterested parents trying to keep up the appearance of having a normal family life was probably preferable to living with single parents who had already blown their reputations, perhaps choosing to live less responsible lives. By the time our folks got divorced, I was sixteen and fairly independent, so my outer circumstances were not as disrupted as they might have been if our folks had divorced earlier.

Nevertheless, even with our family structure intact, my sister and I were somewhat on our own from an early age. By the time we were in grade school, our parents had started to hang out with a partying crowd, and we often didn't know what time they would be coming home. But we grew to like it that way — after all, when no parents were home, there was nobody to bug us or tell us what to do. We often had the whole house to ourselves. Only upon hearing the sound of the garage door opening would we run up into our respective rooms and close the doors. Most of the time, my sister and I just wanted to be left alone. Not surprisingly, we grew up lacking certain social skills.

As my school peers grew from second to sixth grade, they became more merciless in bullying us few unlucky souls, the school outcasts. In a way, it was like being famous, except the attention was negative. We had songs composed about us and our families, including that blockbuster hit, "The Janis Family started when Mrs. Janis farted," sung to the tune of "The Addams Family" theme song.

One Polish boy in our class was called "Polack," and a fat girl was called "Bubbles," as though these were their actual names. I didn't have a specific name, but was called whatever came to mind for the kids wishing to tease.

One girl who wore big, thick glasses started calling me "four-eyes" — it seemed she didn't quite understand the term. Sometimes we outcasts were pushed around physically. Our every move was scrutinized. When Valentine's Day rolled around, you could be sure that our nicely decorated boxes would be empty of cards.

One day I got into a bit of trouble at school for swearing while standing in the lunch line, after a hyperactive kid jumped in front of me, pushing me back. Being an outcast often meant being at the end of the line for things. I was upset at being pushed back, and called this kid a "bitch." He then threatened to tell on me for cussing. Who knew "bitch" was a bad word? It was an often-used thread in the argument tapestry at our house.

Still, even this childhood interpersonal turmoil brought some unique opportunities along with the troubles. The lack of fitting in with my classmates did make me feel like an outcast, but it also supported my development as a more emotionally self-sufficient person.

With little support at school or at home, I learned to depend on myself. I didn't get quite as indoctrinated into the worlds of groupthink that can come with entering social circles of close families and childhood friends.

During recess, instead of playing with the other kids, I would often sit off to the side, observing their behavior as a kind of entertainment reality show. I would spend the time watching a squirrel gather food, or enjoy the contrast of sitting quietly in the midst of noisy and playful activities.

In the fertile ground of inner silence, I would think about life. I evolved my own morals, desires and goals, at least to some degree. I learned to support and stand by myself no matter what. There was no need for me to put myself down, because plenty of others were doing that for me.

I came to realize that it wasn't necessary for me to be exactly like everyone else. I didn't have to conform my views or ways to make other kids like me, because they wouldn't anyway. I could be eccentric; I could be aloof. I could be myself without putting on masks to please others.

By this time, I didn't really even want the other kids to like me. Many of them seemed obnoxious and immature. After having a view of what lurked within some of these cute little kids, I didn't really want to be friends with them. Even while feeling somewhat on my own, I had a certain sense of peacefulness and contentment about my lot.

This lack of social interaction during childhood would show up later in my life as a certain naiveté about social structures and human nature, along with a general tendency toward reclusiveness. Perhaps some of these qualities may also indicate some touches of what might have some place on the wider autism spectrum.

Within two years after our move from Detroit to the suburbs, our family was hardly eating any meals together. My mother had finally become tired of slaving over a hot stove cooking "Hamburger Helper" every night. She and my father had discovered that they could afford to eat every meal in restaurants by using two-for-one coupons from the Detroit Entertainment Book. My mother sold the books, and would occasionally breach proper teacher-student etiquette a bit by asking her high school students to give her coupons for her favorite restaurants from their parents' books. Thus began my mother's coupon clipping effort that grew into big organized boxes and eventually led to an article in the Detroit Free Press calling our mother a "Coupon Queen." The reporter somewhat humorously documented how, with careful coupon planning, she had been able to get two full bags of groceries practically for free.

During these years, my sister and I received a generous allowance and had the freedom to go out on our own and do some things other parents might not allow. We were spoiled and neglected, all at the same time.

From age eight or so, my meals consisted mostly of TV dinners, canned soups, toast, and/or ice cream, which I would often have the luxury of selecting when we would go grocery shopping. I don't recall there ever being any family discussion about whether I was eating nutritious foods. On most days, the closest I got to a wholesome meal were the none-too-savory school cafeteria lunches.

Our parents had a fairly active social life with their friends and colleagues, and would occasionally host parties in our house for their fellow high school teachers. These gatherings were usually filled with wild drunkenness, sometimes including the smell of herbal entertainment, with peals of laughter and loud music shaking our house late into the night while my sister and I tried to go to sleep upstairs. Observing their raucous behavior gave me a certain insight into the likely facades of some of my apparently prim and proper schoolteachers as well.

By the time I was ten, our parents had jumped onto the swinging bandwagon of free love and wife swapping, as depicted in the 1969 movie "Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice." Soon, both parents were having affairs.

My mother had an eight-year affair with my father's best friend, who eventually became her second husband. My sister and I knew about this affair, because Mindy had skipped school one day, only to hear Ada and Randy coming home for a little "afternoon delight."

Mindy hid in her closet, cringing and listening in as they laughed while asking, "Why do we always screw on Milton's side of the bed?" My sister told me about her experience the next morning at our school bus stop, bringing to my usually open and honest personality the burden of a big secret to keep.

Ada had gotten Randy a job at the same school where she worked, and for years, students from her school would ask me if the rumor about them having an affair was true. It was almost as if some of these students were the paparazzi, grilling me about a celebrity rumor.

During the same years, my father had affairs with various women, many of whom he apparently picked up at bars. Several times, I awoke to hear my father stumbling into the house early in the morning, with my mother screaming at him about how he had been "out screwing whores." I didn't know exactly what whores or screwing were, other than in a very general sense.

All this fighting was pretty much my introduction to the topic of sex and relationships. Therefore, it is no surprise that in the future, I would not be especially drawn to sex or marriage, making me a good candidate for living a more monastic-style life. So yes, perhaps my soul did choose these circumstances after all.

One of my father's affairs was with a woman named Rusty, who I subsequently worked with at a local delicatessen.

Only after several weeks did I realize that our restaurant's hostess was the same Rusty my father had moved in with for a time while my folks were still married.

My father also had an affair with Mrs. Jackson, my high school government teacher. His old best friend Randy, who was by this time my stepfather, recognized Mrs. Jackson during a parent teacher school open house that he and my mother attended.

Randy remembered Mrs. Jackson clearly, having driven her and my father from bars to hotels many times in previous years. Mrs. Jackson was married with children, and went way overboard during class to portray herself as a puritanical prude. Oh how I had to hold my tongue when Mrs. Jackson would play "Mrs. Ultra-Innocence," after Randy told me about her barhopping affairs with my father. Even if she had recognized Randy during the open house, Mrs. Jackson probably would have never imagined that he would have told me about something so salacious regarding her and my father.

I almost spoke up a number of times during that school year, but censored myself, and sometimes just barely held my tongue. What could I really say with all the other students sitting in class? Why reveal this teacher's misdeeds and expose myself to whatever repercussions would come from speaking up about such things? This year of frequent self-censoring taught me greater self-control, but also created some blocks in the "throat energy center" of communication that Sanskrit sages have called, "Vishuddha Chakra,"

Dear old Mom had some difficult tendencies to go along with her general disinterest and lack of maternal instinct. Even with her high school students, she would be nice to her favorites and not very nice to students she didn't personally like, who would occasionally throw eggs and paint on our house.

Ada was often rude and demanding at home. If we were singing or doing something that made noise she didn't want to hear, she wouldn't say, "Oh dear Sharon, would you please keep it down?" Ever a conserver of words, Ada would simply demand, "End it," which was sometimes our only conversation of the day. We were expected to figure out who she was talking to and what we were doing that had to end.

Sometimes I wondered if our mother's head injury when I was three had created some psychological issues. She would take offence at small things and sometimes respond disproportionately.

Going out to eat with our mother would often result in a poor waitress being mistreated with the food, service, or dining experience not being up to snuff for the queen. Once we went to three restaurants in a row, waiting in each one to see what might displease her majesty. Restaurant number three also didn't quite make the grade, but after making us walk out of two prior restaurants, she had to settle.

Once we took a trip to a Heinz factory that was several hours away. We weren't really outdoorsy folks, and there wasn't much else to do in Michigan, so occasionally we'd take trips to factories and other things our father found interesting.

The Heinz factory was clear on the other side of Michigan, so that trip required a two and a half hour drive each way to watch ketchup being manufactured. It was wintertime, so the car windows were rolled up. As usual, our parents were smoking throughout the drive. Some years later, I would also start smoking, from age twelve to seventeen, but that was still a few years off. Nevertheless, I'm sure my sister and I smoked many cigarettes worth of secondhand smoke in enclosed spaces during our childhood.

In the middle of the drive, our mother farted. Of course, this is a natural bodily function, but Ada's gas was stronger any anyone else's I've encountered. She would release the bomb and then laugh as everyone would gasp for air. On this day, when the gas bomb went off, my sister and I entertained ourselves by making a big fuss and rolling our windows down to get some of that freezing cold fresh air. It was a time when we stepped just a bit over the line of our usual, fairly respectful behavior, and Ada let us have it, not by yelling, but by silence.

When we got to the factory, my sister, father and I hopped out of the car, but Ada refused to leave her seat. Thus ensued a lengthy process of Milton using every technique he could come up with — asking, begging, cajoling, good cop, bad cop — to convince her to come into the factory with us. It took a long time, but finally she did concede, although we all kind of moped through the ketchup tour.

These kinds of events contributed to creating certain personality qualities in me moving forward, beyond some subtle cringing for a time when I'd hear the word ketchup. Such events reinforced my tendency to stay quiet and not express what I was thinking, even when a stinky situation arose. I also learned to be more compassionate and remember that words and actions can hurt people's feelings, even if they don't show it as blatantly as Ada did.

Ada on the other hand, wasn't very compassionate at all. In fact, she seemed to enjoy saying things that would make us feel insecure or unloved.

My sister got more of our mother's brunt than I did. Mindy was super sensitive and more like our father in many ways, so in that regard, I was treated as slightly more of a favorite by the queen of the house. Also, I was fairly stoic, whereas Mindy would give Ada the kind of emotionally distraught response a sadistic person likes to receive from their efforts.

One day, Ada was insulting my sister about being overweight in front of Ada's secret boyfriend Randy and his wife, who at the time was our mother's close friend. My sister finally exploded in anger, and yelled out, "Why don't you go f**k Randy!?!" Then she ran upstairs into her room and slammed the door shut.

Now, I had a friend over at the time, one of my new friends. I rarely had friends over, but this new friend was going to spend the night, and we were playing in my room at the time.

Up the stairs stomped our mother, screaming and yelling at my sister. She started banging on Mindy's door, but was unable to open it. Our bedroom doors didn't have locks, but Mindy had set up her big heavy dresser close enough to the door that she could sit with her feet against the dresser and her back against the door, and nobody could get in. Believe me, I had tried.

As Ada screamed and pounded on my sister's door, my heart sank. My new friend was totally freaked out by this scene. I would venture to guess that she had never seen anything like this in her home.

As my mother pounded back down the stairs, we peeked out of my bedroom door to see what was going on. Up Ada came again, with a hammer in hand.

I shouted, "No!" as my mother started banging the hammer into my sister's door, screaming and yelling hysterically, with my sister also yelling behind the door. It was quite a dramatic scene.

With all the teasing I had received at school, it took a lot to get me embarrassed, but this definitely reached that threshold. My mother kept hitting the hammer until she broke a hole right through my sister's door. I was pleading with her to stop, and my friend got upset and quickly left to go home, never to return.

The hole stayed in Mindy's door for a long time, as an every-day reminder of what can happen when Mom gets upset.

"But I don't want to go among mad people,"
Alice remarked.
"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat:
"We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."
"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.
"You must be," said the Cat,
"or you wouldn't have come here."

— LEWIS CARROLL

Our family had a middle-class household income, and we received frequent extra help from my grandmother, who had created a successful drapery-making home business after her first husband died.

With my grandmother's help, we took our first family vacation overseas to Europe when I was nine. My sister and I were excited about the trip, but we knew that being with our parents full-time was not likely to be a barrel of fun. We were correct!

Right after landing in France, I started feeling stomach flu symptoms. While walking through the Louvre, I became increasingly nauseous.

At first, I didn't say anything, hoping the queasiness would go away. However, as we stood examining the Mona Lisa for what felt like far too long, I realized I was going to throw up and ran for the closest Louvre bathroom, which basically consisted of a hole in the ground with footprints on either side.

My parents tended to believe that all illness is "psychosomatic," created by the mind. This was a theory they had picked up while doing research for their psychology classes.

My mother's class notes explained her philosophy: "We sometimes condition behavior that is not wanted inadvertently. For example, a child is ill and the parents make a big fuss over him with positive reinforcements of gifts and attention. Illness should be checked and basically ignored. It seems cruel, but doesn't reinforce the illness."

Although this approach may have value on a theoretical level, it created a rather distorted response to disease in our family. When ill, I would be left in my room and mostly ignored, sometimes for days on end. I remember hearing my mother say, "If she gets hungry enough, she'll decide to get better."

I don't think they responded this way with the specific intention of inflicting cruelty on us, nevertheless this philosophy served as a convenient excuse for them to avoid acting as caring parents, even during our most needful times.

Here we were in beautiful Paris, and I was sick to my stomach and throwing up in the Louvre. My folks had some discussion about whether I could be dropped off to stay alone at the fairly cheap hotel we were staying in, but that didn't seem acceptable. So we continued on to the Eiffel Tower.

In order to see the view from the top, it was necessary for us to walk up many flights of stairs – there may have been some construction work at the time that made lower elevators inoperable.

We began the trek, but soon I was lagging behind. I felt so sick that I had to use the arm rail to help pull me up each step. At first, my parents accused me of being overly dramatic, and then they just walked on. My compassionate sister stayed behind to help me.

Eventually, we arrived on a level with an elevator. Our parents were waiting there, still irritated. "Because of you, we have to take the elevator the rest of the way!" I felt bad, but was relieved not to have to crawl up any more steps. Fortunately, it ended up being only a 24-hour flu — so who knows, maybe the ignoring method actually worked.

We drove through other nearby countries after France, visiting museums and trying to follow our father's new book, "Europe on $5 a day," which meant going through occasional problems with bugs and things at cheap motels and hostels.

During our short time in Germany, the main tourist attraction for our family was the Dachau concentration camp, where we spent a day looking through the barracks, photos, and gas chamber. Our father was quite interested and almost obsessed with Hitler. I once sat in on one of his high school history classes, where he went on for a little too long about Hitler's missing testicle. Our visit to this scene of the crime at Dachau was especially interesting for him.

Leaving Germany, we visited some distant relatives in Hungary. After we spent some time in Budapest, my folks went off to travel with the adult relatives, leaving my sister and me to spend three days and nights in a communist youth camp where nobody spoke English, including our two cousins who had little interest in spending time with us.

Early every morning, we all had to stand in rows wearing the communist style attire of brown shirts with red ties, as the other kids chanted government sanctioned Hungarian slogans.

Our family went overseas again when I was thirteen, this time to Spain. While there, we took a "nice family drive through the mountains." As usual, our folks were arguing, with our father dishing out one of his favorite retorts to his nagging wife, "Ada, be nice! If you can't be nice, be normal!"

As we drove higher up the mountain, our mother began to insult our father more and more vigorously.

He was a nervous, insecure man who could usually take a lot of taunting, but this time, he finally snapped, and started to yell. "This is it! I've had it! We should all die rather than be subject to your constant bitching! If you say another word, I'm going off the cliff!"

We were driving on a curvy mountainside road that was barely big enough for two cars to move past each other slowly, and there was no guardrail. Our father sped up until we were careening around the curves. More than once, we seemed to touch the edge of the cliffs, about to go over.

My sister and I sat in the back seat, clinging to one another and nearly crying as we begged our mother to stop nagging him. Instead, she told him he was a "stupid ass."

He began to yell louder and louder. "This is it! We're all going to die! Anything to get away from you!!!"

My sister and I held each other and prepared to die.

Somehow, we did survive, and made it back to the hotel, where my sister and I had a hotel room adjoining our parents' room.

Once safely inside, we slipped into one of our usual techniques for relieving anxiety, and started to make fun of their ridiculous behavior. We took turns playing our father and mother in the scenario, nagging and fighting with each other. We tried to do it quietly, but our folks ended up hearing us. We actually got in trouble for imitating their craziness!

On a more positive side, our folks were quite open-minded. They were two of the first high-school psychology teachers, which brought an ongoing flow of interesting information to our bookshelves and to my inquisitive mind. I had the treasure of solitude and freedom in my own room, with the space to explore my interests.

Many of my classmates were Jewish and religious enough that they would go to Hebrew classes after school. I'd heard about these mysterious classes and one day went with a friend to her Hebrew class, since we were going to her house afterward. Just being in that classroom for one hour made me so grateful that we were atheists.

It was hard enough for me to do regular schoolwork without having to memorize all those strange looking letters on top of it. I had other interests to explore, and was not interested in doing things that didn't feel relevant to my life. Even at age seven, I walked out, never to return, after my first pre-Girl Scouts "Brownies" meeting, when the Troop Leader announced that we were going to start with earning our research badges by writing reports on the history of Southfield, Michigan.

"I'm out!"

I'd often have various toys and projects out in my usually messy room. Every now and then, just as I was about to go out with my few friends, my parents would say that I had to clean my room first, so I became an expert on quickly pushing everything under the bed, and usually forgetting about it.

My father once lifted up my bed to find a pile of toys, tape dispensers, scissors, pens, pencils, and much more — a story that, of course, had to be shared with all of their friends as well as our mother's high school students, who would ask me, "Are you the daughter who won't clean up your room?"

One of the effects of receiving these kind of questions from my mother's students was that I learned not to worry too much about being private with personal information, perhaps in some cases to a degree that may have already made a few readers a little uncomfortable.

Through having my mother "tell on me" to her high school classes at that early age, I learned a lesson that some have learned in more painful ways — that all of our actions can potentially become public knowledge, which many would especially come to learn several decades later, with the advent of the internet and social media.

I also learned that if a story is interesting or educational, it is worth sharing — whether that story is about my messy room or about the same parents who taught me to share information perhaps a bit more honestly and less filtered than many families would.

I can imagine myself before this life-breath, choosing these parents who would give some challenges, but who also set the stage for an inner independence that opened many doors for new experiences and blessings. Even though our family situation may seem undesirable to some, the lack of parental support and expectations did have a place in my soul's journey through this life.

On a modern quest for "Eternal Truth," the opportunity to be free from family binds, rules, dysfunctions, and expectations can be a great and rare blessing.

> *"He that loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me."*
>
> *— MATTHEW 10:37*

Chapter Five
SPEED, WINNING, AND JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR

AT TWELVE YEARS OLD, I entered junior high school, where my academic achievements and social life both improved considerably.

Clothing-wise, jeans were now the way to go. It's hard to mismatch anything with jeans. This junior high school had a larger group of kids from different areas of our town, and I found some new friends and more of a social niche. With a happier disposition, suddenly school became a fun place to be. My grades went from mostly C's and D's to mostly A's and B's, although part of the reason for this impressive improvement may have been that at age twelve, I started taking significant amounts of speed for over a year.

My mother had befriended a somewhat shady "diet doctor," who had access to pure speed, and I decided to join her in this new adventure. It was one of the few times that we had at least a small amount of ongoing personal interaction. Though neither of us were more than a few pounds overweight, we would drive together every Tuesday afternoon to get a shot of pure speed and pills for the week. Each Tuesday, we would leave our appointment with packets of different kinds of tablets and capsules that would change from week to week.

During this same time, we were studying drugs in one of my school classes, and I recognized the same exact pills we were receiving, and learned some of their street names, such as "christmas trees" and "pink ladies."

My mother told me that she had once asked a student to take one of our pills to the local police station and to say they found it somewhere and needed to know what it was. Assuming the event took place as she told me, the police did test the pill, and told the student it was some of the strongest speed they'd ever seen — again this was in 1972.

As a child speed freak, I obviously found myself needing much less sleep. With nobody in my family noticing whether I'd eaten properly or at all, I would go for days eating almost nothing, and did end up losing those few extra pounds. Some nights, I would sleep for a single hour before going to school. My brain was buzzing all the time.

One positive side effect of the speed was that it made me really smart. Practically overnight, like a newly intelligent Charlie Gordon in the *Flowers For Algernon* book and "Charlie" movie that had passed through our book shelves and played on our basement film projector a few years earlier, I suddenly went from hating math to loving math. I loved algebra. I loved geometry. I also loved doing crossword puzzles and especially enjoyed solving logic problems. I'd often stay up all night reading, thinking, and going through at times a full crossword puzzle book in one night.

After years of barely passing from year to year in elementary school, I was now placed in a special advanced math class for the whole city. We were learning some of the computer languages prevalent in the early 1970s, long before computers became mainstream. Our school's very limited computer filled nearly half of a small room.

That same year, I wrote an essay for my seventh-grade English class contrasting Freud's topological and structural theories. I was still interested in psychology and continued to read all the latest books from my parents' classes. I liked the idea of tracing behaviors back to different scientific theories. It seemed to be as important as anything else I was learning.

During this time, I met Larry, who would become special to me. He was an adorable boy with a small physique and a somewhat feminine face. We hit it off right away.

Larry used to laugh hysterically as I told him all the horror stories of my home life — he couldn't get enough of the entertainment. It was so healing for me to be able to laugh with Larry about my family circumstances.

From that point on, my response to difficult family circumstances changed from distress or ignoring, to inner glee.

Whenever my parents were acting particularly insane, I would be chuckling to myself at how much Larry was going to laugh when I told him about *this* one. I came to realize how entertaining life could be with the right storyteller and audience, and how much more pleasant challenges were when you could see them as a good story.

By this time, I was spending less time at home. My family almost never ate meals together except when we went to restaurants, which we'd often do a couple times a week. My friends' parents became concerned about my home situation and would often invite me to join them for meals. For a time, I would regularly eat dinner at one or the other of my friends' houses.

At age thirteen, I got my first full-time job as a waitress in a local restaurant called, "The Purple Pickle." According to law, I had to be over eighteen to work there, however, my parents had previously taken me to a seedy section of downtown Detroit to get a fake I.D. that said I was eighteen, and I looked old enough to pass.

Still on speed, I'd leave school at 3:15 p.m. and work at the restaurant from 4:00 p.m. until midnight, when one of my coworkers would drive me home. Then I would spend the nighttime hours doing homework, reading books, and solving logic problems or crossword puzzles before getting a little sleep before the next long day of school and work began.

My speeding mother would be up most of the night as well, so we spent some rare time together during this phase, and even occasionally managed to have a bit of light conversation. I'd work at the restaurant after school from Monday through Friday, and on weekends I would often baby-sit.

I had started my babysitting career at age nine, watching the toddlers and infants of my parents' friends when they would go out until all hours of the night, In spite of still being a child, I looked like a teenager and was often trusted with more responsibility than other kids my age.

The adults would usually stay out past midnight. There I would wait on their couch, bobbing in and out of consciousness for hours. I'd keep the television set on most of the time, trying to stay awake.

Even though I was allowed to fall asleep, still I felt guilty when I did. After all, I was being paid by the hour to baby-sit.

Little did I know how these efforts were stretching my consciousness. The practice of trying to stay awake while sleep descends takes a lot of mental self-control.

I would stay right on the edge between wakefulness and sleep for hours on end, in a state that some psychologists have called the *hypnogogic* state. It was uncomfortable, yet there was also a blissful transcendence in traveling with just a sliver of awareness up and down the layers of consciousness, subconsciousness, and unconsciousness, for hours on end. Being familiar with Freud's topological theory of these levels of mind at a young age, it was the main map I would use to understand these consciousness expanding experiences, which were like dipping down over and over into a deep ocean, then back up again.

While still taking those speedy "diet pills," I had a lot of energy, and became a thirteen-year-old workaholic. Along with waitressing full-time at the Purple Pickle restaurant, which continued for about a year until their management somehow found out that I was not eighteen after all, I would work on many Saturdays, babysitting for three kids whose mother was away in a mental institution. This was an orthodox Jewish family, and it was the first time I encountered kosher kitchen rules, which I wasn't naturally good at following, since I tended not to follow things that didn't make sense to me.

Once I mistakenly washed a milk pan in the same sink load with the meat dishes, and the family had to do some kind of purification ritual that I heard involved burying the pan underground for a time.

This dish protocol was one of only a few facts I'd learned about Judaism or any religion by that time, and it didn't do much to change my atheist mind about the silliness of religions in general. Another strange part of this situation was that the oldest girl I was babysitting for was a half-year older than I. But the family didn't know that; they thought I was eighteen.

By nature, I wasn't very comfortable with deception and lying, but in my family, it was somewhat of an accepted and expected way to go for certain situations.

In my mind, I wasn't harming anyone, although if it had been discovered that I was working all those hours, maybe the restaurant would have gotten in trouble. I just didn't think of those possible repercussions, and felt that if I was willing and able to do a good job, then details such as specific age weren't that important.

Of course, now I can see why it wasn't right to lie about my age, but at the time, I was acting more on how I was brought up and less on the laws of karma and dharma.

Even as a very young child, one of my assigned jobs was to crawl on disgusting bathroom floors and go under the stall doors to unlock them from the inside, so my mother could avoid paying the coin entry that was required on many bathroom stalls in stores and other locations at that time.

It's not that we couldn't afford those coins, so I'm not sure why it was considered so important to avoid doing so. Maybe my mother just didn't like spending money on something that she probably didn't feel should be charged for, when there was an — albeit illegal and disgusting — way out.

In terms of my journey, maybe these experiences were the universe's way to get me to associate unethical behavior with crawling on disgusting filth, and to teach me to do my best to "stay clean" once such things became my choice to make.

Our folks had also asked my sister and me to lie in certain other situations, such as to my grandmother, who didn't agree with some of our family's decisions. Such disagreements are probably not so unusual when it comes to family expectations and relationships, but most families would probably not go quite as far as we did to hide the point of dissention.

For example, Grandma Fritzi didn't think we should have a cat, because she didn't personally like cats. However, during most of my childhood we had at least one cat in the house. Once I brought home a friend's cat with five kittens, and our cat had also had a couple litters of kittens.

Instead of just telling our grandmother that it wasn't her business or apologizing that we were sorry to disappoint, but we wanted cats very much and were not going to be able to follow her wishes in that regard, my folks would have us lie and hide the cats whenever Grandma Fritzi came for a visit.

This set the scene for some of the dramas that my folks seemed to enjoy and laugh about later, as we'd spend those visits hoping none of our cats would start meowing or clawing to get out of whatever room we'd hid them in.

During these years, I started to regularly play pinball. My folks had purchased full-sized pinball and ski-ball machines for our basement.

Through playing these games in a peaceful space, I learned how to sense and ride the tides of fate, as well as how to let go of my controlling mind so the innate skills of my subconscious mind and the support of universal flow could come through, although I didn't yet have names like "universal flow" to apply to these experiences.

There were times when my personal energy was low and I knew that every ball would shoot right down the middle, out of reach of either pinball paddle and clearly predestined for extinction. Then came other times when I would slip into an extremely confidant, relaxed, and alert "Pinball Zen" space. With deep mental focus, I'd feel a sense of stepping back, out of myself. I was there, but more as an onlooker, allowing my subconscious abilities to come through. With my mind settled in a quiet place beyond the usual mental chatter, I would orchestrate the game strategy, with my hands serving as proficient soldiers.

I soon found another more profitable game that applied the same approach, becoming a radio show giveaway winner. As part of the hot marketing plan of that time, our local radio stations started holding phone-in contests where callers could win various prizes. I hadn't previously listened to enough radio to really take note of the contest enough to think it would be worth trying to win, but one day when I heard a station about to give away a record album I'd been wanting, I dialed the number and won. Free albums! I developed a new interest in this phone-contest game, and decided to figure out the ropes.

I noticed that most of the stations scheduled their contests at the same time every hour. Some stations had so many phone lines that you would actually have to call before the contest was even announced to have a chance of winning. I spent hours keeping track of each station's schedule and practicing dialing each number really fast, using the traditional dial phone of that time, where phone numbers with eights and nines required special patience. After winning many contests, I was able to get one of the newfangled push-button phones that wouldn't become popular with the masses until several years later.

Winning was like going to work, only better. Sitting in my bedroom, I was winning free things nearly every day. Sometimes I'd win two or three contests in a row.

Within a few weeks, each of the stations had told me I could no longer win their contests, since I had already won so many times.

If a situation like that arose years later, I might have wanted to be more fair and step back to give others a chance to win. But even more than winning all the items, I was really enjoying the game — it was much more interactive and "real world" than playing pinball. One of the nicer DJs did allow me to use someone else's name for winning, explaining that part of their problem was not wanting to say the same name over and over for so many contests.

My solution, proper or not, was to put together a list with the names and addresses of my few friends and my parents' friends — with each person's permission — to use for winning, keeping track of which prizes needed to be mailed to or picked up from where and under whose name. I was a phone-contest entrepreneur.

Within a few months, I had won tickets and transportation to a Kiss concert in Chicago, $150 cash, a one-year's supply of spaghetti, T-shirts, and probably a hundred record albums. I won so many albums that my parents brought me a full-sized record display case from a local store that was going out of business.

While playing all these contest games, I was learning to combine strategy with intention to achieve a goal.

Once, I won twenty-five albums with one call. First, you had to be the right caller. Then, you would have ten seconds to say as many albums as you could with title and artist, and you would win however many albums as you could name in those ten seconds. I really practiced for this.

First, I made a list of the shortest album titles that also contained the artist's name. That was easy because there were many live double-albums out at the time, such as, "Bowie Live," "Kiss Live," and "Frampton Live." Then I would call the phone number for "time," where a woman's voice would continually say, "At the tone, the time will be X hours, X minutes and X seconds. Conveniently, her declarations were exactly ten seconds apart, the same timing as the contest.

I practiced my list for hours, and then managed to make it through as the right caller.

Ten seconds ticked away as I executed my well-rehearsed stack of words. The buzzer went off, and the radio DJ said, "Wow, that was great! You must have gotten at least eight to ten albums in there." Most people who hadn't prepared so extensively could only say three or four titles and artists in the ten seconds.

Still on the air, I explained, "No, that was twenty-five titles and artists."

The DJ said, "I'm sorry, but there's no way that was twenty-five albums." I suggested that he play the tape back at slow speed. He agreed, and came back after the next song to announce that I really had won twenty-five albums.

Then, at age fourteen, I experienced my first opening to the remote possibility of the existence of God. My initial church experience at two-and-a-half had been long buried beneath a mountain of subsequent events. During these years, I had avoided learning anything about religion. I was a total atheist, as was the rest of my family. It's not even that I denied or disliked God; I had simply never considered such a thing as a possibility.

I considered religion to be a crutch for those too intellectually weak to face the brutal reality that ultimately we will never understand what is really going on here. I thought the idea of some "God" sitting above and judging it all like Santa Claus with his list of who has been naughty or nice seemed preposterous; in my mind, it was a non-issue. I did enjoy attending churches a few times with friends, but had to hide those visits from my folks. They were fine with me going out "partying," but in our family, going to church would have been a real act of rebellion.

The only time I can remember the word "God" being spoken in our house was during a party, when my father got drunk and started running around the house yelling, "I am God!" And even that carried a bitter memory, because I mumbled, "Yeah, spelled backwards," as a joke, and was sent to my room.

Somewhere along the line I had heard the word "Jesus." I knew he had something to do with religion, but had gotten to age fourteen without knowing the story of Jesus at all. I wasn't even sure what the Bible was, although I knew it was some kind of religious book.

The Americana movie theater near our house offered weekly one-dollar matinees, and I'd often ride my bike there and watch movies by myself. One week, I went to see "Jesus Christ Superstar: A Rock Opera," only because it was the only movie playing that I hadn't already seen. I almost didn't go because of the title — obviously a movie about Jesus was bound to have something to do with religion — but it had rock music, so I decided to go.

This musical dramatization may not have been authentic in details; however it did communicate the archetype of the event. The story touched my soul in a way that nothing ever had. I walked into the theater in one world, and left in quite another.

These actors seemed to have really tapped into the essence and emotions of the historical figures they portrayed. Their passion was potent, and sparked a new shift inside me. I was inspired by Jesus' intimate relationship and personal dialogue with God. He even yelled at God during one song. Many times, I would have liked to have had a God to yell at!

During the difficult phases of my childhood, there had been no clear sense of any higher being to pray to, ask for blessings, or to watch over me. I generally felt that I was more or less on my own. It's not that this movie immediately transformed me into a believer, but it did open up a previously untapped spiritual passion deep inside my soul, a part of myself that perhaps at least wished I could believe.

Soon afterward, I painted my first oil painting with scenes of Jesus from the movie. I would usually cover up the painting-in-progress in my bedroom to keep it hidden from my atheist parents, which was easy enough to do with them being pretty uninvolved in our daily lives by that time.

While attending junior high school, I became part of a clique, hanging out in a neighborhood several miles away from mine with a group of kids who had less money but were friendlier and less pretentious than those in my neighborhood. Most of my friends were barely making it through school, but they were fun. Many had a certain street-smart intelligence that wouldn't necessarily be evident to those who might judge them from their school grades.

In our school, there were two basic groups of kids, the freaks and the straights. The freaks were the wilder kids, while the straights were generally more intellectual and focused on school. I straddled the two worlds. I was definitely one of the “freaks,” and spent most of my time with them, often smoking and drinking together, in spite of most of our clique being underage. On the other hand, even with my wild nature I was able to get good grades and chat intelligently with the “straights.”

I think it was during this time that I realized it was not necessary for me to fit neatly into any one mold. Having spent much of my childhood as more or less a loner, I was now learning to meet each person on his or her own level.

I didn't have to be stuck in one persona. I could kick back with the freaks one minute, and discuss philosophy or science with the intellectuals the next.

During junior high school, I also learned what I was good and not good at doing. I came close to failing Home Ec., where the girls were expected to learn about cooking and sewing while the boys learned wood working or auto mechanics.

In Home Ec., I discovered that my mother's lack of domestic interest and abilities were likely genetic. The baby doll pajamas I tried to sew properly were, let's just say, not wearable.

After we baked chocolate chip cookies in class, my parents received a notice from the teacher that their daughter was failing Home Ec. because "she's eating the ingredients." At least my folks knew enough about the education system and teacher idiosyncrasies to have a good laugh and pin the notice on our refrigerator door as an award.

At the same time, I continued to develop more skills as a visual artist, using oil, acrylic, watercolor, pastels, pencils and pens. I even sold a few paintings and commissioned portraits.

In high school, one of my art teachers took an interest in me. Ms. Mack was an artist and filmmaker. She invited my friend Debbie and I to a screening of some of her film work at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. During the next summer, I would have an opportunity to take an art class at the Cranbrook Academy, a special and much appreciated birthday gift from my parents.

Ms. Mack sponsored us to join the Detroit Area Film Teacher's group, even though we were not teachers. Every week, the group would watch a feature film and listen to some discussion about how the movie was made.

Debbie and I were much younger than the other attendees, and once again, I was in the midst of adults watching some films that were definitely not PG-rated. But nobody seemed to be concerned about it, least of all my parents. After all, my folks had taken me at age eleven to see the shockingly dark movie, "A Clockwork Orange," which involved violence, rape, and torture.

My high school art teacher showed us films she had made to two contemporary songs, Don McLean's "Vincent," and Harry Chapin's "Taxi." I was moved and impressed by her work, and decided to make a music-based film too. Debbie agreed to help.

Five years before MTV began broadcasting, Debbie and I made a music video to David Bowie's song, "Rock and Roll Suicide." I was the director and camerawoman, and Debbie was the actress. Debbie's father had access to media equipment, and offered to edit our short film.

Debbie was quite a dramatic little alcoholic at the time, often asking me to use my fake ID to buy her beer and wine. She seemed to enjoy having a chance to act out her not-so-secret teen angst and suicidal tendencies in our film.

As part of our art class, we also learned about an artist who made movies by hand drawing directly on each of twenty-four tiny film frames per second. I occasionally enjoyed focusing my mind on painstaking, creative work, and decided to make one of those films as well.

I had already been accepted by the University of Michigan, and was no longer concerned about my high-school grades. Indulging my rebellious nature, I went from class to class with a big box containing film, ink pens, and two roller mechanisms.

While each teacher gave their lecture, I would be sitting there in the middle of class, working away on my own little project. My literature teacher forbade me from working on it during her class, while the chemistry teacher thought it was a bold and humorous thing for me to do. Another teacher expressed a personal interest in the artistic merits of the project. Fortunately I did still manage to graduate, and was now ready for the next step on my journey.

Chapter Six
EXPLORING THE UNCONSCIOUS

AT SEVENTEEN, MY TIME FOR FREEDOM ARRIVED. I left home and entered the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. It was a big shift for me to move from our Detroit suburb with family stresses to this university town that was filled with beautiful old buildings, trees, an abundance of intelligent people, and plenty of interesting courses to take. Stepping into this new land, I felt a strong sense of personal expansion that also manifested as an expansion for my inner life.

I would live in a dorm room on the artsy north campus with a sweet, conventional young woman from Delaware. Although we got along well, I'm sure Mary Jo must have wondered about her unusual roommate. While she was out enjoying the college life, I would often sit in our room for hours at a time with my eyes closed, playing my newest game.

The new sense of freedom from my previous life had inspired me to consider more deeply who I was and what I wanted to do and be. With this came a clarity that my first interest was to learn more about my mind and the reality it presented to me, an interest I'd had since taking that hypnosis course at age seven and reading many psychology books in the years since. I was following my inner guidance to, as the Greek Delphic maxim says, "Know thyself."

I began to use the self-hypnosis techniques learned in that hypnosis class from a decade earlier to explore my inner consciousness, and to study the mechanisms of my mind. Sitting quietly in our dorm room, I would turn my mental focus inward, sometimes for hours at a time.

I'd begin by using the standard techniques for putting myself into a hypnotic trance state, but then something unusual would happen. Like the man I'd tried to hypnotize during our class at age seven who started guiding himself out into the cosmos, "never to return," I would enter into a state of mind completely different from any other I had known. The experience was somewhat similar to daydreaming, but had a more enlightened quality, although that word wasn't really in my vocabulary at the time.

Sometimes I could feel the physical energy patterns of my brain shift as this opening took place. Then I would sit with eyes closed, watching as new understandings began to move through my awareness like a flowing river of insights.

With marijuana all but legal in Ann Arbor at the time, I did use a pinch here and there. Minor drugs weren't a big deal in my family. My sister and I had found our parents' stash of joints when I was in fifth grade. At twelve, I grew a pot plant in my room, with my folks telling their guests, "Sharon has taken up botany," and bringing them up to my room to see my botany result, for laughs. After our folks split up, my father and I smoked pot and hash together a few times, which is when I discovered that teaching school in Detroit gave him access to better quality products than I could usually get.

By seventeen, I had stopped smoking marijuana at all in social situations and had no interest in "getting stoned," but occasionally smoked a small pinch as what felt like a brain tonic. I found that a small touch of herb could be helpful for improving my sense of well-being, as well as for enhancing my contemplative and creative efforts. If I hadn't yet completed an assignment for an upcoming class, I could have a puff and at least write a paper that would fetch a good grade due to being filled with interesting insights, if not a lot of outer research.

My inner explorations didn't feel dependent on the occasional herbal assistance, but a small amount did help me to sit quietly and seemed to soften the edges of my usual egocentric awareness enough to allow me to explore this newly discovered dimension more fully.

Every now and then, I would try to bring an especially delightful understanding from this river of insights back into my normal consciousness. If I could bring back even one morsel of this treasure, I thought, it could transform the entire world.

But by the time an insight came through the porthole of consciousness wrapped in the clothing of language, I would be left holding a frustratingly inadequate representation of what had been so clear and lucid just moments earlier. It was as though I was allowed into this room every day, where delicious secrets of the universe were completely accessible. But when I left the room, only the smallest crumbs would fit through the door.

These inner explorations became more important than anything else in my life. From the space of that higher perspective, it felt as though everything I had been calling and thinking of as "the world" was in fact just a baby fingertip of the real, whole, universal world. It was all so big, so full, so rich and symphonic.

Delving deeper into the uncharted waters of my own consciousness, I began to withdraw my attention more and more from the "outer world," becoming more reclusive than usual. I was still able to go to classes and maintained an outer facade of normal social chitchat with my schoolmates, but couldn't really discuss with anyone the grand spaces I was accessing inside myself.

In a way, the ostracizing I'd received during my childhood had equipped me with enough of an independent nature to be able to enjoy having a deep personal experience that may not fit into the belief systems, awareness levels, or interests of other people.

With these new experiences, my notion of self shifted. I began to see my personality not only as a solid subjective entity, but also more objectively, as a multidimensional, biological system made up of tissues and cells of personality aspects and tendencies. At times, I'd see certain beliefs and behaviors of friends or family members expressing through me, or notice mannerisms or styles of old associates or observed behaviors in books or movies laced through what I had previously considered as *my* behavior. The dance I had thought of as my own was also being choreographed by many elements outside of my conscious intention.

My personality is 30% the last movie I watched.

— *"Goldman Sachs Elevator"*

I became less identified with myself as a specific set of opinions and behaviors, and noticed how my personality would tend to adjust to whomever I was with. The person's nature would resonate with my mass of personality potential, evoking aspects with a similar vibration to their own.

If a particular string is plucked on one violin, the corresponding string on a nearby violin will begin to vibrate; it is the same with ourselves and the world around us. While chatting with scholars, I'd find myself speaking with a more intellectual flair. While hanging out with art students, my eccentricity would become more noticeable. I was sometimes able to learn more about a person just by the tendencies, thoughts and speech patterns their presence would elicit in me. I was discovering what yoga philosophers have called, "the power of company."

From age seven, I had studied my parents' psychology books religiously. Some of those books dealt with multiple personality syndrome, a topic I had found so fascinating that I was considering using my in-progress neuroscience degree to one day research this field and its shocking implications.

Separate personalities or "sub-personalities" could apparently live inside one body, often with different voice patterns, different allergies, and different talents and abilities. Some would need glasses, while others didn't. One woman even had three menstrual cycles every month, one for each personality — a good incentive to get healed!

With deep introspection, I began to see a less dramatic but pervasive version of this kind of fragmentation in myself and in other non-multiple people. In quantum mechanics lingo, you might say that personality is both a particle and a wave, both an individual entity and a multidimensional wave within the inestimable, multidimensional ocean of life.

I could see how my friends and associates were not just individual, solid objects. Each was a symphony of personality potentials, with various tendencies becoming predominant at different times. I liked some parts of them, and disliked others. I also liked some parts of myself better than others.

Delving into previously undiscovered subconscious layers of my psyche, it became clear that personality is inherently multiple. For example, I was no longer the same personality I had been as a child, though there seemed to be an essential palette of colors from which my various character tendencies had been drawn.

I watched as fellow students would get drunk during our dorm parties, acting completely differently from how they acted in class.

I noticed that while feeling confident and supported in a group, my personality might expand into being the life of the party; whereas at other times I might appear to be very serious and shy.

In this way, I continued to observe my thought processes with a more objective eye, breaking down what I had thought of as "me" into more basic components. Through these contemplations, together with my neuroscience studies, the mirage of "I" opened up, revealing countless levels of physical, electrical, chemical, and ethereal processes that were projecting all of my experiences into the stillness of non-identification.

A few warning bells did go off as I began to peel back the layers of personality to investigate these inner workings of consciousness. Did I really want to do this? I was tampering with some delicate frameworks, the foundations of reality. I was sneaking into "programmers-only" territory of the human psyche. What if I went over the edge and ended up losing my sense of stability? Did I really want to understand more than the people around me?

Those concerns only arose when I thought about the situation with my rational mind. From the other side of higher consciousness, I felt these inner explorations were more important than anything else. While sitting quietly in my dorm room, I continued to move more deeply into my inner thought-structures, world-views, and physical sensations. Sometimes I could experience the functions within my body, such as my heart beating and my stomach working to digest food. I could feel the peristalsis in my intestines, the blood pumping through my body, and the energy moving into certain areas of my brain.

During the same time, I experienced a shift regarding food. A few months before going to college, I had stopped smoking cigarettes, which had been a habit since I was twelve. Suddenly, with my taste buds no longer numbed by nicotine, previously bland vegetables tasted delicious. My inner explorations were also helping me to experience flavor sensation in a more objective way.

While eating an apple in a state of inner focus, I could separate the individual textures, flavors and smells from the mirage we commonly refer to as the experience of eating an apple. I tasted the starchiness and felt its potato-like texture on my tongue. I could discern and separate the fructose sugars woven through it, and could appreciate the importance of smell in creating this experience of "eating an apple." Through personal experiments such as this, I began to separate sensation into its more basic components.

I was also able to manufacture the semblance of experience internally. Once, I decided to fast for three days on water mixed with lemon and honey. During the fast, I was continuing my daily practice of sitting quietly, and decided to try an experiment.

I created a huge, delicious meal in my mind. Through conscious imagination, I was able to orchestrate the various aspects of my brain to create a realistic experience of eating. I sat there during all three days of this fast, eating the most wonderful foods. I was surprised to find myself eating even more delicious meals in my mind than I had been eating in real life. Without the physical element, there was just the internal image-maker, who fools and entertains us every night with the convincing images and experiences of our dreams.

Everything tasted exactly the way I liked it. Each spice was in balance, and every crust was perfectly crispy. Each dish was a combination of all the specific elements I liked most about that food. While one might think that imagining food would make the fast more difficult, it actually brought at least some sense of satisfaction.

While exploring my unconscious through these deep meditations, I also became more sensitive to energies. I could feel the energy that pulsed through my body with every breath, and eventually, I could direct it to some degree. From this awareness, I unexpectedly developed certain paranormal abilities.

Without having ever really considered the idea of faith healing, I now understood that it was possible to move my energy into other people. I was also able to move a person's own energy within their body using only my mental intention and willpower. Right there, on the University of Michigan's north campus, I became somewhat of a faith healer.

Once I was called to a room down the hall to heal an acquaintance who had caught a terrible cold. She was sneezing and coughing, and could hardly breathe through her nose. With important exams coming up in her classes, Jan was too ill to even study. Having heard that I was experimenting with healing people, she asked for my help.

As Jan sat in a chair, I held my hands a few inches above her head and began to circulate my energy into her body with my mind. I moved my awareness into her sinus system and cleaned it out, almost as if I were sweeping debris from a hallway. I simply understood at a deep level how to do this.

And just as a good gambler knows when he is right in the flow, I could tell that my efforts were paying off. There was a subtle knowing, a certain tangible sense that my intentions were creating a healing effect in her body. As I continued to sweep away the cold from Jan's throat, outer signs of the healing also came forth.

She started to make small coughing noises that got clearer as I went on, and her breathing also sounded better. In the midst of healing her cold, I remembered that Jan also had some kind of recurring knee injury, and thought that while in there, I could help with that as well. I moved my awareness down into her knee and began scraping away at the injury.

It was almost as though I were using a tool to do this, except it was a subtle, nonphysical tool being used by the intention of my mind. Since I was already in Jan's leg, I thought it would be a good idea to move the healing energy all the way down and just clear the whole leg, into her toes. I was standing behind Jan with my hands just above her head, doing all this silently, when all of a sudden Jan asked, "Hey! What are you doing in my toes?"

This was my first outer confirmation that my ability to move healing energy was more than just imagination or the psychosomatic power of suggestion. This girl had no reason to think I would be doing anything in her legs or toes. I raised my hands away from Jan's head and she opened her eyes. Her cold had been cleared — no more stuffed-up nose or scratchy throat.

I didn't feel too egotistical about the sudden appearance of these abilities. My focus was not so much on impressing people as on my search for what exists beneath surface appearances. Still, it was fun to play the role of eccentric dorm psychic for a while.

Another time, one of the girls in the room next to mine was in distress. Her term paper was due the next day, and she had put it off until the last minute. Now she couldn't find the note cards for this paper anywhere, and was very upset, having torn apart everything in the room. I offered to help, and could feel, once again, that I was in the flow.

I sat on the young woman's bed and put myself into a trance state. Within moments, I could see an image of the index cards sitting on the bottom of the wire basket that was molded into her desk. I walked over, began taking things out of the basket, and immediately found her note cards, hidden inside some other papers.

From these experiences, I started to understand in a tangible way that we are beings of energy. We have more power to help others and ourselves than we have ever dreamed.

Around this time, I became a vegetarian. I wish the word "vegetarian" had been around during my childhood, when I resisted eating animal meat and was often punished for my refusal.

The idea of gnawing flesh and veins off the ribs and breasts of animals was repulsive to me, in spite of living in a meat-eating family and culture. As a child, I hadn't come up with a list of reasons why eating animals was wrong. It was as gross to me as if someone landed on an island where the natives regularly sliced and gobbled up roasted human flesh.

Nonetheless, during my childhood, it was not acceptable for someone to be a vegetarian. There were no such things as veggie-burgers or tofu-dogs. This was Michigan in the 1960's — everyone ate meat. You had to eat meat; it was not a choice. So I came up with a solution. Whenever possible, I would eat meat that was disguised, such as in hamburgers or sandwiches, and I refused to eat flesh off of animal bones.

During my college years, I more or less stopped eating meat all together. Years later, while studying spiritual philosophies, I would learn that many people in India are vegetarian, based on the idea that a non-meat diet is not only compassionate, but also beneficial for yoga and meditation. Perhaps the intuition made available by my inward explorations had guided me to make this spontaneous dietary change that would allow me access to more subtle recesses of my mind.

During my sophomore year, I took a medical school course on the "Psychobiology of Epilepsy" with one of the world's foremost neuroscientists, who was visiting the University of Michigan for one semester from Tel Aviv University.

Technically, I wasn't even meant to be in this course, since it was supposed to be only for high-level medical school students and doctors. But someone had neglected to put the proper prerequisites into the computer, and I discovered the discrepancy while looking through the medical school catalogue to see what the "big kids" were learning.

The entire grade for this course was based on just one paper we were to write throughout the semester. I kept putting the paper off, until a few days before the due date, when I sat before my typewriter feeling a little desperation over having neglected this important assignment. Nevertheless, I moved into a meditative trance state, and began to write.

I completed fifteen pages of personal insights and neurobiological theories in several hours, and spent the next two days expanding, polishing, and retyping the piece.

The professor gave me a B+ for the paper and for the course, which was good news for me.

Professor Myslobodsky later called me into his office to say, "I can't say that I agree with all your hypotheses, but this is the most entertaining paper I've received."

Around this time, I took a weekend workshop based on the teachings of Milton Erickson, who is considered by some to have been the most skilled hypnotist of all time. Erickson was afflicted with polio as a child, and had been confined to a wheelchair during his youth. From that vantage point, he observed the body language and subliminal speech patterns of people around him, and learned how to manipulate normally subconscious processes with conscious, intentional expressions.

Fortunately, Erickson was a good guy who used these skills to help his patients, rather than to convince shoppers to buy a fluffier, whiter-than-white laundry detergent, or worse.

Milton Erickson could put someone into a hypnotic trance just by reaching to shake his or her hand, using what he called the "confusion technique." He would move to shake the person's hand, then pull back a bit and hesitate before moving forward again, all with a very specific and skilled cadence. At the exact point when the person's mind had stopped in confusion, Erickson would simply give the command to "Sleep," and the person would enter a hypnotic trance.

Erickson was also known for telling his clients stories with precisely orchestrated voice inflections, pauses and word choices that would almost magically heal certain psychological difficulties the client might be having. Often, these were simple stories from Erickson's own life. Many patients were healed of long-term psychological problems after hearing just one of his tailor-made stories.

The implication I learned from researching Erickson's techniques was that even the simple stories of one's life can be used as a kind of healing medicine.

After taking this Erickson-based hypnosis workshop, I understood more than ever the power of my subconscious mind, and began to appreciate my own channel of input into the heretofore-random waves of life. I was discovering the power of co-creation, and felt that I now had the tools to achieve just about anything I might want in life.

This was the time to decide what I really wanted. The doors of possibility opened wide. Should I become beautiful? Famous? Wealthy? Brilliant? Respected? Loved? I sorted through all the potential desires that came up, and one by one tossed them to the side.

In the objective light of real possibility, with a sense of almost unlimited potential, each of these possible desires crumbled into insignificance. They were based on goals that had been injected into me by contemporary society; they were not my own.

What did I really want from life?

I wanted to do whatever was right, based on a big picture I could never see. I wanted to be whatever I was meant to be, and to be happy with whatever my destiny brought. How could I ask for specifics when I was embroiled in cultural illusions? How could I know what was really important in life?

After casting aside a long list of potential goals, I realized that what I really wanted was to be content with whatever was meant to be. No matter what porridge of experience was placed before me, I wanted it to taste good.

I wanted sweet times to taste good, and I wanted sour times to taste good as well. I wanted to move with the natural flow of life. Instead of asking that my shortsighted desires be fulfilled, I wanted my desires and actions to be in tune with a bigger picture of the universe that was beyond my view.

Clearly, the all-pervasive intelligence that guides the atoms and galaxies to move with such precision could choose the best path for my life. It seemed that my paramount course of action would be to get out of the way of its flow. What I really wanted was to be happy. I wanted to be contented with whatever was best, and with whatever was meant to be.

Just before setting my wish free to fly into the Universal Mind, as almost an afterthought, I surprised myself by adding a few unexpected words on top: "And I want to sing."

I wasn't a particularly good singer, and had come from a family with some seriously out-of-tune singers. But I'd always experienced a precious feeling while singing, and something inside of me wanted to include singing in this "make-a-wish" meditation.

It often takes time for the seeds of our prayers, affirmations, and personal decisions to germinate and bear fruit. First, I would have some disturbing lessons to learn.

Chapter Seven
THE THRESHOLD OF LIFE

TOWARD THE END OF MY FIRST SEMESTER of college, I read a popular book called *The Hidden Persuaders*, which described the use of subconscious, subliminal manipulation by the advertising industry.

It was the late 1970s, and anyone who paid attention while watching television, reading magazines, or listening to the radio was bound to notice certain obvious manipulations, since not all were subliminal or well disguised. Sexy women posed next to cars implied that this was one of the extras one might expect with the purchase. Some ads encouraged potential consumers to feel shame and guilt, and many included references that could act as sexual triggers.

Cigarette commercials showed happy people with large orgasmic smiles, and told us, "It's not how long you make it, it's how you make it long," or "It's round and firm and fully packed," or "Taste me, taste me, taste me!"

These manipulative tactics were already questionable and disturbing to those paying enough attention to notice them. But *The Hidden Persuaders* revealed something more sinister, an entirely different layer of deception — the realm of subliminal influence. The book showed examples of whiskey ads where images of skulls had been airbrushed into ice cubes as a subliminal marketing tactic, supposedly based on studies showing that alcoholics tended to have a subconscious attraction to death.

According to the author of this book, the word "sex" had been embedded in everything from the hair of women in magazine photographs to the surface of Ritz crackers, and he had the photos to prove it.

Many readers probably found these claims fascinating but questionable, as did I. Some of the suggestions seemed too far-fetched to be true. At the same time, I had been studying the subconscious mind since early childhood, and understood the research behind these subliminal marketing ploys. Due to practicing many self-hypnosis style meditations, I was also a little more in touch with my subconscious level of awareness.

The idea behind subliminal advertising is to get into the customer's psyche, by going underneath the skin of their conscious minds. While these potential customers' minds are focusing on one aspect of the ad, they are stealthily being fed other less obvious information to inspire them to feel that they want a particular product — not because they actually need or want it, but due to the subconscious associations and triggers that have been implanted in their subconscious minds.

It's a mini-hypnosis, a bit of brainwashing, if you will — not so different from when that teacher in the hypnosis class I took at age seven prompted a woman to act like a gorilla when she came out of trance. Paul had bypassed the woman's conscious, decision-making mind, and injected the command to behave like a gorilla directly into her much more obedient subconscious mind. The woman even responded to her irrational actions by coming up with a history and saying that she had done it before, which I'll assume she hadn't, at least not in her adult life. If Paul had told the hypnotized woman to buy his books and tapes in the back of the room, she would have certainly bought them and convinced herself that she wanted to do so.

> *Advertising is the art of convincing people to spend money they don't have for something they don't need.*
>
> — *WILL ROGERS*

I started noticing subliminal advertising in more and more places. Once I clearly heard audio clips embedded in the music track of a particularly intrusive television commercial, where beneath the loud music, you could hear sexy whispering voices saying things like, "I want it!" One magazine advertisement showed a fun-loving couple river rafting down the rapids. But if you looked closely, it was obvious that one of the woman's arms couldn't possibly have been coming from where her body was.

Either it was a poor cut and paste job, or more likely was intended as a subliminal ad, with that extra arm bringing a sense of subconscious confusion, perhaps similar to Milton Erickson's confusion technique of inducting hypnosis, where he would go to shake someone's hand, then pull back slowly at just the right rate to create confusion in the handshakee's mind. When their mind stopped, Erickson could simply command for the person to go into hypnosis by saying "Sleep" in just the right way, and the person would go into a hypnotic trance.

In a similar way, when people flipping the television channels or magazine pages saw disjointed arms in boat scenes, or skulls drawn in ice cubes, or heard sexual sounding comments barely audible just under the threshold of usual perception, these subliminal anomalies might initiate a mini-trance state in the audience, injecting into their subconscious minds a suggestion that they really need to buy the product being advertised.

In the example of the river rafting ad, that extra arm placement, though not meant to be noticed consciously, may have been intended to suggest to subconscious minds that there might be a third person joining in the fun.

Few people seeing the ad would think, "Hey, what's going on there," unless they looked closer than most people would look at an ad in a magazine. But the assumption of subliminal advertising is that even if we don't know we are seeing something out of place, such discrepancies do trigger a state of alert receptivity in the subconscious mind. Theoretically, the subconscious triggers of seeing an arm out of place mixed with sexual innuendos could trigger in the viewer hidden shame based desires, thus creating a state of subconscious receptivity to the product being pitched by that ad.

Such subliminal advertising techniques were a kind of psychic surgery, with no informed consent form for the patient to sign. That extra arm would be just one stream of the massive amounts of information our subconscious minds take in and sort through all the time.

Due to exploring my unconscious for hours every day, the subconscious realm had become more accessible to my conscious mind. I'd also been studying about subconscious symbolism since age nine, when I lectured to my mother's high-school psychology classes about dream symbolism from a Freudian point of view. After reading this *Hidden Persuaders* book, I was naturally able to detect uses of subliminal advertising on a fairly regular basis.

At first, I was entertained by this new project of finding subliminal manipulations in the advertising world, including noticing the shapes and designs of bottles and other products. I had always enjoyed the feeling of discovering secret layers of reality, and this one was available to explore practically everywhere. Just walking into a store or flipping through a magazine could be an adventure of subliminal discovery.

But then my concern for humanity took over, and the excitement turned sour. All these precious minds that made up our society were being manipulated recklessly and subliminally by forces of greed! Some of the precious keys to the control panels of our basic desires and behavior had been discovered, and instead of being used to respectfully explore human nature or to solve real world problems, our subconscious minds were being hacked for the purpose of getting us to buy more stuff!

I began to see a bleak, distorted future ahead of humanity, as the burden of seeing our world in the hands of gluttonous corporate agencies fell suddenly and heavily on my teenage shoulders. I could see a future where greed and unethical manipulations would devastate the world.

In the thirty-plus years since I had this vision, many of my fears have indeed come to pass, with people and companies using all kinds of psychological and subliminal manipulation techniques and making greed-based decisions that have devastated natural resources, polluted the waters and air of our planet , destroyed economic systems, compromised people's health through toxic ingredients and dependencies on unnecessary pharmaceuticals, and spurred human nature to worship money and buy things they may think they want solely due to advertising and social pressure.

While experiencing some of these frightening revelations at age eighteen, I began to feel sad, exhausted, and at the mercy of decision-makers I could not trust to do the right thing. At every turn was another marketing strategy looking to screw around with our precious subconscious minds. I was surprised to find that none of the few friends I mentioned subliminal advertising to seemed to care about the deception, even when they believed it was true.

But I couldn't sink into apathy about this. For me, the implications were appalling. We were being told what to think and what to want, using techniques that bypassed our conscious minds. With all the political activism taking place at the time, why was nobody protesting this intolerable psychological pollution?

It concerned me deeply to see intelligent people buying things they didn't really need, feeling things they didn't really feel, and thinking things they didn't really think. The ever-evolving belief systems of humanity were being engineered by the limited vision of some greedy companies. And ultimately, even the CEO's of those companies were nothing but puppets of — of what? What controlled it all? Who held the puppet strings?

It was all much bigger and more complicated than I could handle at age eighteen. There was no internet available at that time to explore and find others who were interested in discussing such matters. I was growing increasingly isolated and frustrated.

Nobody seemed willing to join me in what had now become an upsetting exploration. Who would want to see through my glasses and enter this madness, even if — *especially* if it were true?

Around this time, I experienced another shift. I began to see worlds of subliminal communication and symbolism, not only in commercial products, but everywhere. It was not only that the advertising industry was manipulating us through subliminal control. Subconscious communications were woven throughout the texture of nature herself.

I had discovered the symbolic quality of life, something hinted at in phenomena such as the Bible Code, where future predictions are said to be encoded anagram-style in the Bible's text, or reverse speech, where recordings of speech played backwards sometimes seem to say relevant things.

Not only did I perceive symbolic expressions in the world around me, but I was surprised to find myself using subliminal tactics on others, without my conscious intention! Who was speaking through me? Who coordinated the sexual innuendoes behind my word choices and body posture that I'd sometimes notice when speaking or standing with someone I was physically attracted to? Who was orchestrating all these announcements of my innermost thoughts? And who was receiving the information?

> *I understood that there is something in me*
> *which can say things that I do not know*
> *and do not intend, things which may*
> *even be directed against me.*
> — *CARL JUNG*

Messages were being sent through me and through all of us without our conscious participation! This went way beyond noticing some subliminal ads or an occasional Freudian slip. I began to see subliminal communication as a constant and all-pervasive thread of reality; it was like stepping into a dream and being able to interpret the symbolic elements while they were occurring.

I watched as brilliant subliminal expressions moved through people who were not even aware of their own brilliance. They thought they were saying one thing, while woven through their apparent conversations were prophecies, synchronicities, commands, insults, flirting, and more.

It was becoming clear to me that we are not just simple objects called "people," living ordinary, separate lives of ordinary events. Entire worlds of subliminal communication were going on beneath the usual surface layer of life that most people experienced. Everything coming to and through us seemed to be intricately designed and intertwined as part of a pervasive subconscious communication dance.

The spacing of my written words would tell the universe if I was feeling miserly or generous; the way I wrote the letter "I" or scribbled my signature would reveal intimate details about my self-image. Even the lines on my palm and my time of birth seemed to carry information about me.

Maybe somebody's surface consciousness wouldn't know if I slipped a mistruth past them, but their subconscious mind would surely know that, and much more, by interpreting my vocal patterns or posture positions.

Here I had thought I was in charge of my body and its actions, and now it was becoming clear that my ownership had been a fairy-tale. I was just a process that was part of a bigger process, as was everyone and everything else.

Perhaps I could have pretended to be psychic, based on my ability to perceive and translate the subliminal expressions of people around me. But this was no time for games. Everything was so much bigger and more complicated than I had ever imagined. I had no one to talk to about all of these discoveries, and it was taking a toll on my well being.

I was finding it more difficult to handle the usual level of worldly activities, which at the time included a full schedule of classes, studies, and social interactions, when so much was going on beneath the surface.

While my classmates worried about what cute boy or girl liked them in which class, I was unraveling the guts of reality.

I was on my own. I had to hold my tongue about all these discoveries, almost like an innocent person who has stumbled upon a huge illegal operation and can't tell anyone about it.

Upon contemplation, I felt that in order to fit into this world, I would have to ignore what I knew. I would have to place myself on society's puppet strings, to "dumb myself down," and censor myself from discussing these aspects of the universe that, whether completely accurate or not, seemed worthy of attention and had certainly commanded mine.

I felt even more isolated than usual, and imagined that this could after all be my fate: for the rest of my life, having to talk about all kinds of insipid nonsense while holding back this great wealth of universal knowledge that was there, waiting to be explored. Nobody around me was interested in discussing metaphysical ideas, and it felt as though perhaps nobody ever would.

Things had clearly gone too far. I didn't fit into this world, and I didn't want to fit in. I didn't want to play this game anymore. I came to the decision that it would be preferable to not exist than to spend the rest of my life living with this deep distress and intellectual isolation. Perhaps death would hold the key to my freedom.

Suicide may be regarded as an experiment —
a question which man puts to Nature,
trying to force her to an answer.
The question is this:
What change will death produce in a man's existence
and in his insight into the nature of things?
It is a clumsy experiment to make;
for it involves the destruction of the very consciousness
which puts the question and awaits the answer.

— ARTHUR SCHOPENHAUER

The decision to take your own life overrides the most basic human instincts of self-preservation. You don't even have the luxury of dying for your country or in service to a Holy Crusade for God. You simply choose to leave, on the chance that whatever comes next might be less painful than whatever is tormenting you here.

At the time, even the possibility of dissolution into eternal nothingness seemed preferable to the loneliness, concern and confusion.

I didn't have a strong attachment to anyone in this world, so the idea of leaving didn't bring up too much sadness. Many people who contemplate suicide must feel some guilt regarding the family and friends they'll be leaving behind, but I couldn't really think of anyone who would even cry for me. The blunt truth was that nobody was really going to miss me. This thought was sobering as well as liberating.

I decided to commit suicide. I would do it during Easter vacation, while visiting my parents' house. This decision had a drastic and surprising effect on my state of mind — I was able to relax in a new way. I no longer had to worry about my future or the future of humanity. I didn't even have to choose which classes I would take the next semester. Never again would I have to do anything. All of it would be over in three short weeks.

I carried this powerful secret with me for those three weeks, while attending classes and talking with friends and family as if everything was normal. A new and unfamiliar sense of gratitude came with this shift, an appreciation for all the different flavors of experience passing through and around me as I walked through my remaining days of life. Each event looked different through these new glasses. Everything was, perhaps, "the last time…"

My personal interactions carried greater depth and meaning, as I realized that I might never see that person, or any person, ever again. There was a new care for each soul I had connections with. Even strangers on the street became worthy of note. I paid attention to little things. Moments mattered. Colors were brighter. The world around me became more precious.

I was actually cheered up by my new attitude of receptivity and appreciation. I could probably have changed my mind about the whole suicide thing at this point, but that would have removed the very element that was cheering me up. What a dilemma.

Finally the big day came. I was staying in the house of my mother and stepfather during spring break. They went out for the day, leaving the yellow Dodge Dart car for my use. I picked up the bottle of sleeping pills that had been in our medicine cabinet for a long time (too long, as I later discovered!), and drove to a nearby shopping center, just to see some local people before driving off.

Walking through the mall, I was disappointed with its normalcy. Didn't these people realize the world was about to end, at least for me? Wasn't somebody going to throw a surprise party? Didn't anyone want to say goodbye?

A part of me expected something, although, of course, this expectation was illogical. People passed by me, absorbed in their own worlds. I tried to make some small talk with a man who was purchasing a cappuccino machine, but he wasn't interested in chatting.

Feeling even more empty and isolated, I left the mall and began driving north, eventually turning onto freeways I had never heard of, following an invisible map that was being whispered to me subconsciously by — by what? I didn't know. I turned when I was moved to turn, and went straight when I wasn't. I was driving to the place of my death.

My mind became peaceful and focused in the present moment. The aspects of myself based on past and future were somewhat lifted from me. I was a soul, preparing to enter a new adventure — perhaps obliteration. I was driving toward the very threshold of life. I was learning that renunciation and detachment, even under duress, can bring a certain sense of freedom.

At one point, I pulled over to a little roadside bar to use the restroom. They had a pinball machine there, and I thought I'd play a few games before moving on. I was curious to see what it would feel like to do something so ordinary en route to my last moments on earth. I played for a while and won several extra games, which I left on the machine, joking to myself, "Too bad, the world is about to lose a pretty good pinball player."

It was starting to get darker outside; the air was chilly. As I traveled further north, patches of snow began to appear along the roadside. At one point, I spontaneously turned into the driveway of a small bungalow-colony motel.

A friendly desk clerk in the office rented a room to me. He came into the bungalow to make sure the heat was on, and then left. I was alone.

It did occur to me that it wasn't very considerate to kill myself on this nice man's property. He was probably the person who would discover the body.

"The Body." What a strange feeling it was to think of *my* body as *the body*. But that's how it was going to be.

I sat down and turned on the TV. The only channel that came through clearly was showing an old rerun of "The Brady Bunch." I half-humorously berated myself, "You're so pathetic that you watch 'The Brady Bunch' during your last hours of life!" But I did watch it. This was going to be a "Very Brady Suicide."

While it played, I began to take the pills. One after another, I popped them all in my mouth. I didn't want to be half-baked and end up in a coma, so I took the whole bottle.

Not surprisingly, I soon felt drowsy. I turned off the television and went into the bedroom. I didn't even pull down the covers, I just lay down on top of the bed. A sleepy dullness was settling into my body, making me feel numb all over.

As I lay there, an energy field I would one day refer to as my subtle body started to undulate. It was moving within me, as though there was another body lying along with my physical body. My energy-body legs were moving up and down, my energy arms moved from side to side, and yet my physical body continued to lie still and unmoving.

I began to recall certain events from my life. I remember thinking at the time that the idea of one's life flashing before their eyes while they die is strangely accurate. The scenes appeared to play through like an ultra compact tape-recording.

The image I had at the time was of a DNA-like strand running through a playback head, in this case, as the projector prepared to turn off the lights. It felt like a review of the whole semester before the big final exam. Death. The real final frontier.

The idea that we can re-experience life events in our consciousness is not too far-fetched when you consider studies where neuroscientists accidentally discovered that touching a probe to certain areas of a patient's exposed brain could elicit clear and distinct sensory memories. With electric probes activating sections of their brains, some patients would actually smell the smells and hear the sounds of their stored memories, even back to childhood. It was with this kind of vivid and tangible quality that I began to re-experience certain events from my life.

The replaying of my life experiences didn't seem to be bound by usual rules of time or linearity; it was happening within a condensed period of time. This is also not so strange when we remember the extensive and elaborate dreams that can take place in our consciousness even during a short nap.

Structures of time began to crumble as I re-experienced entire bundles of memories in just moments. I had a sense that this was an opportunity to digest lessons I may have missed along the way.

The next thing I knew, I woke up and opened my eyes with the freshness of a child. There was the sun, starting to rise in the sky. It was morning, and I was alive.

I suppose a part of me was happy to be waking up in relatively good condition, but then my drugged mind kicked in. "Oh no! I'm going to get in so much trouble for staying out all night!" It was one thing to die, and quite another to deal with the wrath of my parents. Making a phone call didn't come to mind as a possibility. What would I say? I felt that the best course of action would be to quickly begin the many hours of driving to find my way back home, and to figure out during the drive what to say when I got there.

I staggered out to the car and started to drive, hoping to go in the right direction. Maybe everyone at the house is still be sleeping in and won't have even noticed that I was gone. Maybe I could just say that I'd been at a friend's house and forgot to call. I didn't enjoy making up false stories, but felt I'd have to come up with some excuse except the truth of what I had attempted but failed to do.

Though still alive, I was totally stoned from the sleeping pills, and was unable to properly control the car. I was weaving crazily back and forth all over the road. I think one car did pass by me and honk. Then red-and-white lights were flashing behind me. Time was warped by all the barbiturates, and my next image was the close-up view of a policeman's face in my car window. I tried to act as though I wasn't inebriated, but I was too far gone. He brought me into his police car and I fell asleep, which was not a good demonstration of sobriety!

We arrived at the small town's court building, where I was booked with fingerprints and photos. I gave the officer my family's phone number and was led into a cell. I lay down on the hard concrete bench and fell back asleep, dipping back into awareness only occasionally to shift my position. Eight hours later, I was awakened by the sound of my mother's and stepfather's voices coming toward my cell. I opened my eyes as they entered. They just stood and looked at me, unable to exhibit any sort of affectionate display. My stepfather asked, "What happened?"

A lie came out of me. "I don't know. I was at the mall and, the next thing I knew, I was driving my car this morning."

I wasn't a very good liar, but I was not going to tell them I had done this on purpose, requiring them to drive for so many hours. I was also embarrassed to tell them I had tried to commit suicide, because these were not exactly the most sensitive people — they would have surely told all their friends and hassled, judged, and made fun of me about this for years.

Given the made up scenario, my mother and stepfather didn't know if I had been kidnapped or had suddenly gone into some kind of schizophrenic fugue state. I felt bad for misleading them, but couldn't really see any other workable choice.

I was charged with driving under the influence, but since it was a small town and everyone was related, we were offered a package deal. The policeman was the cousin of the lawyer, who was the brother-in-law of the judge. The lawyer said that if we paid him $2000, he could ensure that the case would be closed with minimal further requirements.

Back at the university after spring break, I lived in a trance-like state, feeling quite stunned by this experience. My friends at school knew nothing about what had happened, and I tried to act as though everything was as normal (or perhaps for me, as not-quite-so-normal) as usual.

Chapter Eight
WHEN THE STUDENT IS READY

DURING MY SECOND YEAR OF COLLEGE, I was disappointed to find that the physics course I'd enrolled in was only scheduled to cover the most boring aspects of physics, with all the more interesting topics coming in subsequent semesters. I was already interested in new physics topics like holography, and had produced a video for my film class about the three-dimensional holographic laser photography process that held exciting implications for science fields from physics to neuroscience.

One of the scientists who had discovered and developed the field of three-dimensional holography was a professor at the University of Michigan. I was excited to have a chance to interview Dr. Emmett Leith for my little video, which was filmed on the university's large and cumbersome reel-to-reel videotape equipment.

After creating this video project, I was especially looking forward to learning more about physics, but this introductory course and its monotone professor were just too boring for me to stay with for a whole semester. After several days of yawning, I decided to see if I could find a more interesting replacement class.

You never know what apparently incidental circumstances and decisions will lead to massive life transformations.

While browsing the "Still Looking?" board in the University of Michigan's registration building, I found and enrolled in a course called "Consciousness." With my strong interest in psychology, hypnosis, the unconscious mind, and Freudian theory, this sounded like a class I'd enjoy.

The course was intended for upper level and graduate students, but when I called the professor and told him about my history with psychology and consciousness studies, he said I could join the class.

It turned out that the "consciousness" in this course title referred to something much bigger than the word "consciousness" as it is generally used in psychology. This consciousness had more to do with metaphysical, higher consciousness, spiritual ideas that were mostly unfamiliar to me, although they resonated quite well with my inner meditations, contemplations, and explorations.

The "Consciousness" course brought many new concepts to my mind's door. Every week, we'd have another bizarre reading assignment. First, we studied Carlos Castaneda's journeys with mescaline and his ruthless teacher, Don Juan. Then we delved into new areas of science, where quantum physics begins to merge with ancient spiritual teachings.

This was interesting stuff! We studied all kinds of parapsychology experiments, and even replicated some of them ourselves. Most of the fifteen or so students seated around a large table in this course were graduate students, resulting in a much more laid back and conversational atmosphere than my usual sophomore fare. However, I became even more laid back than that, and started skipping some of my classes while working on a small film project that was taking up most of my focus.

One week, I didn't buy the book for the following Consciousness class, since I was planning to skip it to work on the film. The book for that week was called *Play of Consciousness*, and it was written by an Indian swami named *Muktananda*.

I felt somewhat relieved about having chosen that class to skip. This was not a book I would have wanted to read anyway. New-Age physics was one thing, religious dogma quite another.

To me, God was a pacifier, a parental substitute for adults. One little psychoactive chemical in my brain could annihilate everything I have ever known. My own unconscious mind could instantly transform the entire universe as I knew it. What deity could be more powerful than that?

But after missing this class, I felt guilty. What did it say about me that I couldn't even make it to classes I enjoyed? This wasn't old skipable high school anymore. I was racking up a hefty student-loan debt. Shouldn't I at least *attend* my classes?

The next week, our professor handed me a photocopy of the handout from the class I had missed.

I looked at the handout and read a few lines. It wasn't at all what I would have expected to find in a religious writing. Swami Muktananda described some of his inner experiences from decades of meditation, including when his third-eye energy center opened. The swami's eyes had rolled upward, and he saw various colored lights, along with a tiny, shimmering blue pearl and other "hallucinogenic" images. I decided to ease my guilt and make up for the missed class by writing a neuroscience-based interpretation of the swami's experiences.

In my paper, I theorized that the melatonin in his brain might have catalyzed into melanin, which could possibly have given the internal perception of a color such as blue. Muktananda's rolled-up eyes may have accessed dream-like functions in the occipital lobe, creating these internal visual phenomena. I came up with a list of theories, including the possibility that the swami had simply suffered a petit-mal epileptic seizure.

It turned out that our professor was a follower of Muktananda, and soon afterwards, our whole class took a field trip to the Ann Arbor Siddha Yoga Meditation Ashram — a residential community center based on Muktananda's teachings. I was a little uneasy about going to a Hindu commune. One woman in our class told me that she had gone there once and received several calls inviting her to return. I decided not to give anyone my address or phone number. I was not interested in getting involved with some strange religious group!

As we walked into the meditation hall, I saw pictures of strange-looking, half-naked Indian men all around the walls. An American woman wearing a white Indian-style sari spoke for a few minutes, and then we started to chant. I couldn't figure out what word went where, or what the tempo was supposed to be. Still, this place was intriguing and certainly different from anything I had ever experienced. The dim lighting, candle flames, incense, and red velvet curtains created a very exotic atmosphere.

Over the next few months, I would often recall this visit to the meditation center, trying to remember the Sanskrit mantra syllables we had sung during our field trip. But I didn't seriously consider going back until several months later, after a Monday morning meeting with the "Consciousness" professor, Dr. Richard Mann.

Professor Mann and I were discussing a parapsychology experiment we were about to begin. We had received a small grant to replicate a "remote-viewing" experiment that had recently been conducted by parapsychologists Russell Targ and Harold Puthoff at Stanford University, and I agreed to be the coordinator.

In our experiment, the *outbound subject* would use a random number generator to choose one of fifty folders. Within each folder were papers and maps directing the person to one of fifty locations in the Ann Arbor area. The *outbound subject* would go to the chosen location to take pictures and speak about their impressions into a portable tape recorder.

At the exact same time, another participant called the *inbound subject* would sit alone in a closed room, trying to receive intuitive insights about where the *outbound subject* was, while drawing pictures and describing their impressions into a tape recorder.

We used different variables to expand the study, including placing the inbound subject in a *hypnogogic* trance state by running a fan to create white noise and placing halves of ping pong balls over their eyes in front of a light source. The ping pong ball setup, called the *Ganzfeld technique*, was intended to limit the subject's sensory input by creating a static visual field. The white noise was intended to do the same for the inbound subject's sense of hearing.

This hypnogogic state is considered to be a state of consciousness we pass through every night, as our awareness moves from wakefulness to sleep. Our experiment crew wanted to see if lowering the subject's outer sensory information with an intentionally induced hypnogogic state would be conducive to their perception of extra-sensory information.

Eventually, all the paperwork and transcribed tapes were given to panels of judges, who evaluated which data corresponded most closely as they attempted to match the inbound experimenter's notes with the correct outbound experimenter.

The purpose of our experiment was to see if we could find any evidence for the existence of telepathic perception using traditional scientific methods. In the end, we had several interesting or impressive correlations. The most impressive correlation of our experiment came when I was the outbound and my professor the inbound subject. In his drawings and recorded descriptions, Professor Mann expressed a fairly accurate view of the location where I was, an experience he later wrote about in his book, *The Light of Consciousness*.

Only a few decades later, while Professor Mann and I were discussing the experiment, did we realize that on that day, we had both likely imbibed some of what the professor called "Little Smoke," marijuana, which was all but legal in Ann Arbor at the time — an experimental variable we hadn't taken into account in our statistics.

Soon after beginning this project, I arrived at Professor Mann's office for a Monday morning meeting. When the professor walked into the room, I looked up and saw that he was glowing! I don't think I had ever seen anyone glow like that before. He looked like a younger, beautiful angel archetype of himself, with a blissed-out, benign smile on his face. I had to ask what had happened.

The professor explained that he had just returned from a weekend retreat at an ashram in upstate New York with Baba Muktananda. That was the swami who had written our assigned book that I'd skipped and then made up for by composing a neuro-science-based assessment of his spiritual experiences. Well, seeing the professor glow like that definitely piqued my interest in the whole swami thing.

I started to think about maybe going back to that meditation center in Ann Arbor, but it took time to get up the nerve. During our field trip, I had been driven to the center with other classmates, and didn't even have the address. This took place long before the internet or apps were available to look up such information, and for several weeks, I was too shy to ask anyone for the program times and address, lest they think I was being drawn into a strange religious group. I finally got up the courage to ask someone in our class for the location, and she told me that the main programs were held on Tuesday nights at 8 pm, and gave me the address of the building. The following Tuesday, I got into my car early so I wouldn't be late.

I got totally lost.

While driving around on unfamiliar, strangely angled streets, I was getting increasingly nervous about the whole thing. I kept looking at my watch: 7:45, 7:49, 7:54.... I didn't want to be late. Maybe they had some big rule about being punctual. I certainly did not want to get in trouble in such a bizarre place!

It was becoming clear that I probably wasn't going to find the center in time. I made a decision that if I didn't get there by 8:00 sharp, I would turn around, go home, and try again the following week.

This was disappointing, because I had really been looking forward to getting back to this place after being too shy to ask for so long. But that was my firm decision.

My watch said 7:58, and then 7:59. I turned around to go home, thinking I would have to get more specific directions before the next week.

Then, just moments after I had looked at the watch display that showed 7:59, I looked down at it again, just to confirm the closure of this decision I had made about the 8:00 deadline.

It said: 00:00. No time. No 8:00, only 00:00. The watch was dead, and never worked again. Shocked by this timely coincidence, I turned a corner, found the meditation center right away, and went inside.

The evening was awesome. I laughed, I cried, I was emotionally moved and intellectually stimulated. As we started to chant, a strong sentiment built up inside of me. I didn't know if it was related to the stopped-watch incident or because I was in such an unusual environment, but I found myself weeping softly during most of the chant. This was unlike me. I rarely cried, certainly not without good reason, and I was feeling perfectly fine.

After the chant came a reading from one of Swami Muktananda's books. His words were brilliant and wise. They echoed my own deepest insights and answered questions I had long pondered, ideas that nobody I knew had ever talked about. There was a quality about this exotic place that made me feel at home.

I looked up at the big picture of the swami in front of the hall. It was an extremely striking photo of him, with deep, intense eyes. Feeling a sense that Muktananda's awareness was somehow present in the photo, I silently thanked him, and was sure I saw him wink.

A tree as big around as you can reach
starts with a small seed;
a journey of a thousand miles
begins with a single step.

— LAO-TZU

Chapter Nine
MAGICAL MEETING

Fare forward, you who think you are voyaging.
You are not those who saw the harbor
receding, or those who will disembark.

— T.S. ELIOT

ON JUNE 1, 1979, I MET SWAMI MUKTANANDA in person. The upstate New York ashram was offering a "Health and Healing" weekend workshop, with spiritual teachings geared toward people in health-related industries. I was invited to drive there from Ann Arbor with my professor, his wife, and another fellow from the university.

Over the previous months, I had become fairly comfortable with going to the Ann Arbor center, in spite of certain unfamiliar practices, such as people lining up to bow before the guru's photo that was set on a red velvet chair in front of the chanting and meditation room. I liked looking at Muktananda's photo, but hadn't gone up to bow, even though almost everyone else at the center did.

This ability to maintain independent thought in the midst of groupthink allowed me to continue going to the center, because I wasn't too afraid of being swept up into doing anything I didn't really want to do.

I had finally started reading Muktananda's autobiography that had been assigned in our Consciousness course on the day I skipped class. While sitting outside in the backyard, I could only read a few pages of *Play of Consciousness* at a time, because I'd be drawn again and again into deep states of meditation after reading each few paragraphs.

I didn't get too involved in the center's social discourse or have many personal conversations with other participants, but I was attending every program that my school and work schedule would allow, including morning, noon, and evening chanting sessions. Even while relishing the new inner experiences that came from these ancient practices, I felt detached enough from the group where I knew I could walk away if any warning signs went off.

Six months before my trip to meet the swami, the world had been shocked by the Jim Jones cult massacre in Jonestown, Guyana. I wasn't an avid news reader or watcher at the time, so didn't feel the same level of extra concern this well-publicized incident might have brought to someone at the precipice of becoming more involved with what was certainly a "cult" in terms of being "a system of religious beliefs and rituals," although it seemed to be a positive and generally beneficial one.

This didn't seem to be the kind of spiritual group that would ask people to drink poisoned Kool-aid or harass those who wanted to leave — in fact, most devotees at the Ann Arbor center barely knew my name, in spite of my regular attendance. Now, I was about to drive to upstate New York to meet the guru behind these teachings, practices, and the big bright photo at the front of the room that seemed to look so deeply into my eyes and soul.

Soft notes of apprehension played beneath my lighthearted anticipation for the upcoming weekend trip. It is one thing to relate to somebody through a photo, and quite another to meet them in person. Mainly, I was thrilled and excited. I was taking a leap off the cliff of the ordinary into the unknown. Never had I imagined that I would one day be taking a pilgrimage to meet an Indian guru.

We drove for twelve hours from Ann Arbor to New York, with my professor, his wife, and another student. Aside from speaking a bit here and there about when to stop for gas or change drivers, we drove quietly. It was a very yogic way to begin the pilgrimage, sitting still for twelve hours in near-silence.

We arrived just in time for the evening program. I dropped my suitcase off in the assigned dorm room, and made my way to the meditation hall. The professor and his wife were going to introduce me to the swami in what was called a *darshan line*.

I became more excited as the moment of meeting came near, expecting that the swami would be happy to see me. After all, I had come from so far to see him, and had heard about how Muktananda was filled with pure and unconditional love for everyone.

We moved forward slowly in the line of greeting, until finally I could see Muktananda's face above the bowing heads. He looked very different, not quite as handsome as the photo I had come to relate to. I thought he looked better with the beard. Yet, there was a brilliant glow of energy around him, an intense visual and kinesthetic brightness that went beyond what I had perceived from his photo. The Swami was seated in a slightly elevated chair as the darshan line of people came forward to bow their heads in front of him. While brushing each person gently on the head or back with a wand of peacock feathers, Muktananda would interact with four or five people at any given time. My professor, his wife, and I knelt down in front of the swami, and Professor Mann introduced me as a student from Ann Arbor.

A beautiful Indian woman translated my professor's words into Hindi, and the swami looked at me with a very serious face, and grunted. No smile, no hug, no "Where have you been, O great disciple?" Just a serious look, an almost imperceptible nod, and a grunt. My professor and his wife got up to leave, and I realized that the meeting was over.

I began to walk away, feeling a little disappointed, when a bolt of energy shot through my body. At first, I thought I was angry. It was not my way to take much umbrage at being snubbed, but I had never felt this kind of force in my body before.

The closest label my mind could create for this power-packed sensation was the adrenaline rush one might feel from being really angry. I ran out of the hall and practically flew up to my dorm room. Nobody else was there. I jumped onto an empty top bunk and plopped down on my stomach. As soon as I hit the foam mattress, my consciousness became immediately and deeply focused inside. There, I broke through into new levels of awareness.

These inner spaces were different from the places I had tapped during my earlier self-hypnosis style explorations. These were more active, more visual, more energetic, and more colorful. A series of images surfaced in my awareness, almost like a dream, except for the minor detail that I was wide-awake. This was a new experience for me. I had never hallucinated with such vivid visions, even when taking drugs as a teen.

At one point, I was shocked by images of lizards with big scary teeth glaring at me. With this image came another big rush of energy.

Lying on my stomach, my arms and legs started to jerk up, totally out of my control. It was like the reflex action when a doctor hits your knee, except it was happening to all four limbs at once. My arms and legs continued to fly up and then come back down several more times, with continued energy bursts. You might think that I would have been frightened by these bizarre experiences, but it seems my endorphins had kicked in. I was witnessing it all from a soothing and peaceful place.

After a half-hour of this inner carnival ride, I went back downstairs to the big meditation hall to hear the swami's lecture. I no longer felt angry or snubbed. Instead, I wanted to know more about this man whose energy had already affected me so strongly.

The Swami's voice was melodic, his manner jovial. Every now and then he would break into a deep, growling chuckle. I couldn't help but smile. He was so wonderfully animated.

As Muktananda spoke, my attention was drawn to his hand movements. There was something about the way he moved his hands that intrigued me. He appeared so graceful and free. It looked almost as though his hands were dancing. Sitting there among hundreds of people, I began to imitate his hand movements. It's not that I thought about it or intended to imitate the swami. In fact, I was feeling a little embarrassed about my strange behavior. Fortunately, the audience around me was intently focused on watching Muktananda, or I'm sure they would have thought I was odd. I became puppet-like, spontaneously reflecting the swami's hand movements, as though I was in the middle of an animated conversation.

Finally, I thought, "This is ridiculous. What am I doing?" I made myself stop imitating him, and put my hands in my lap.

He put his hands in his lap.

I quickly moved my hands out to the sides. Muktananda moved his hands out to the sides. I was shocked. He wasn't even looking in my direction! This happened several more times, as I'd move my hands a certain way and watch him move his hands in a similar way. First I felt confused, and then amused — in some strange, cosmic way, the swami was playing with me!

The next evening, I had an idea. I would make Muktananda interact with me by requesting a spiritual name during the darshan line meeting.

Most of the devotees involved with this path had received Indian-based names from him. It was considered a blessed gift to be given a name by this man who many considered to be a great saint.

Then, there was the psychic element: What would this supposedly omniscient person name you? I thought a name request might at least start us off on some friendly conversation — hopefully more than a grunt!

I arrived at the front of the darshan line, and asked the swami for a name. He looked into my eyes for a moment, reached over to a little business card holder on his side table, and handed me the top card. It said, "Kumuda."

I couldn't help but feel a little let down that the swami had just pulled the top card at random. I'd expected him to take a good, careful look at my karmas or whatever and come up with a special, perfectly appropriate name on his own. Even *I* could have picked a card from the top of a stack! I had not yet grasped the concept that universal perfection can express even through apparently random circumstances. Later, I looked up the Sanskrit name, and discovered several meanings for the word Kumuda. Two of my favorites were "one who gladdens the earth" and "a night-blooming lotus flower that grows in mud without being sullied."

I bowed my head in thanks for the name card and went back to my seat. As I sat down, the strangest thing happened. It was as though someone had inserted a big straw into me, blowing me up like a helium balloon. I felt my subtle body getting bigger and bigger, really fast, and really big. I experienced myself expanding to fill the whole room, and kept growing until I seemed to encompass the whole city, and then more. I knew this was impossible, yet I was experiencing it clearly — not in a dream state, but right here in the supposedly trustworthy waking state.

The sensation felt normal and strange at the same time. I seemed to be in the wrong dimension. We're not supposed to do things like that here.

But again, I wasn't scared. Rather, the experience was ecstatic and pleasurable, as I expanded to contain all this spiritual energy. It was interesting to see how quickly I was able to let go of my usual conceptual structures of reality as soon as this new experience came into the picture. No longer was I just a person sitting there in this meditation hall. I was now an energy field, expanding far beyond my body. Thus ended day two of my visit.

On the third and final night, I went up to see Muktananda one last time. Ever the optimist, I hoped we would be old friends by now. Surely, he would be aware of all the amazing breakthroughs I had been experiencing. Clearly, they were a consequence of being in his presence.

I reached his seat, knelt, bowed my head, and looked up. The Swami was looking everywhere but at me. I waited for a few moments, then gave up and walked away, disappointed by the lack of attention, but still feeling a tangible, warm vibration invigorating my body.

With each step, I started feeling more upset. We were scheduled to leave the next morning. This might be the last time I would ever see the swami in my life. I wondered why he hadn't at least made some gesture to say good-bye.

I sat down near the back of the hall, where another shift took place. I felt "bad," not as an adjective, but a noun. I felt myself feeling "bad," without actually feeling bad. I began to experience the whole set of electrochemical and hormonal patterns that create the sensation of feeling upset and abandoned. I was able to watch objectively as my body synthesized the necessary ingredients for this "rejection soup" that I had cooked up so many times before. I watched myself preparing to, and then feeling bad. I was witnessing the emotions without being stuck in them. As my psychophysical factory synthesized this recipe of rejection, I watched peacefully from an inner balcony.

Then, a strong force began to spiral up my body. From my detached perspective, I could see this energy as containing the patterns of rejection emotion. It was the archetypal root from which so many painful branches had flowered and faded throughout my life.

Through the swirling energy, I began to see face after face of people who had abandoned or rejected me from childhood on. A montage of images moved across the screen of my mind, opening old pockets of repressed emotional energy that had been trapped inside the memories. I must have gone through years of psychotherapy in ten minutes, becoming aware of people and experiences I had long ago forgotten. Some individual faces were prominent, but the experience was essentially an indistinguishable mass of associated images and feelings spiraling up my body. My eyes were closed and I was shaking with deep emotion. It felt as though every system in my body had been activated.

Had I not been in a room with hundreds of people, I would have probably burst out sobbing with the intensity of grief energy that was moving through me. Yet I sat quietly, with streams and rivers of tears pouring out of my eyes. Not a few drops here and there, but the holy bath of deep-hearted, free flowing tears.

It was as though a "karmic Roto-Rooter" had been sent to purge my system of this mass of psychic tissue that had grown inside me through the years. The vine of childhood rejection had wrapped itself around the subsequent events of my life, coloring them with its painful flowers. Now it felt as though that vine was being pulled up by its root.

Eventually, the emotional force subsided enough for me to open my eyes. There was the swami, still seated in his chair at the front of the hall, with a long line of people waiting to greet him. I felt myself shouting to him with my mind, "What are you doing to me!?!"

To my utter amazement, Muktananda began to disappear. I could see the lines of the chair's upholstery through the image of his body. My eyes opened wide. As the swami almost completely disappeared, a bright blue circular flame formed in his place. It became a big, swirling ball of blue flames — such a bright blue that it almost looked like a cartoon. I watched this extraordinary sight for some time with my eyes open, before refocusing my attention on what was taking place inside.

After an hour or so, the program ended and I walked back up to my dorm room. All night long, my body was pulsing with powerful vibrations, my mind wonderstruck in awe of all that had happened in just one weekend.

The next morning, my car-mates and I met in front of the main entrance. As we began to put our suitcases into the trunk, I looked up and saw the swami walking directly toward us from across the street. What a surprise! His orange robes shimmered in the rising sunlight as he entered the gates from his morning walk. One woman who looked as though she'd just arrived flew into Muktananda's arms with a big hug. I felt a twinge of sadness that I would never be so free as to hug him like that — I was way too shy.

Muktananda continued walking toward us, then stopped as he reached the back of our car. Standing less than three feet in front of me, Baba Muktananda looked into my eyes. I looked back into his with a breathless innocence.

Right there, he gave me the big, beautiful smile of recognition I had been longing for as he waved at me, from just three feet away. I smiled shyly and waved back.

Though the interaction lasted for only a few moments, I had a sense that we'd met one another on a deeper level. With this simple gesture, I felt that we had silently accepted the respective roles of teacher and student.

Our smiles and waving hand gestures were like a handshake. He agreed to guide me, and I agreed to learn. I would continue my life-journey on this path. Muktananda turned to go into the ashram, leaving me with a big, goofy smile on my face.

As we began the drive home, my eyes closed. It felt as though I was being dragged into a deep pool of consciousness, like taking a bath in a realm of golden light that was more visceral than just visual. It felt as though waves of golden bliss were folding me down into new depths of consciousness as they caressed and hugged me.

The smile remained on my face throughout the twelve-hour drive, which I spent mostly with my eyes closed. My professor and his wife knew enough about what often happens to people after such a magical meeting with Muktananda that they didn't even ask me to drive. I also knew enough not to offer to drive in this state of being drunk with divine love. Every now and then, I would "come up for air," becoming aware of the car and the external world for a few moments through a thick molasses of peace. Then I'd be pulled under again into this pool of shimmering sweetness.

Chapter Ten
TOWARD THE ONE

I CONTINUED TO ATTEND programs and chants at the Ann Arbor meditation center, while taking a few more university courses and working at a campus restaurant.

One weekend, my folks asked me to stay at their house to take care of their cats while they went out of town. They still lived in our old house in Southfield, Michigan about a forty-five minute drive from the university.

I didn't really have any active friends in town, so spent most of the weekend alone, reading and re-reading a free but extensive magazine the ashram put out, which included articles about "Kundalini: The Divine Energy," and other aspects of Muktananda's philosophy.

This newspaper style magazine was filled with fascinating information that was new for me, mixed with entertaining personal stories shared by some of the monks and devotees. I was hungry to understand it all.

On Saturday night, I was feeling a sense of nostalgia while staying all alone in the house where I'd grown up. I also felt appreciation for having been able to move on from those darker times into new experiences, including most recently, the amazing and unexpected connection to an Indian guru and his vibrant spiritual path.

I went into the family room to play some of the record albums stored in my old room, and put on Diana Ross's "Touch Me in the Morning." Then, I started to sing along.

But I didn't just sing along, no. I sang like I'd never sung before. I sang like I'd never even heard before. I sang with a perfection moving through me that made me step outside of myself to listen in awe. I sang it as well as Diana, hitting every note with precision, clarity, and perfect ease. Feeling peaceful gratitude, I sang my heart out — passionate, controlled, vibrant, and alive. Then I put on Janis Joplin's song, "Peace of My Heart," and again, this beautiful singing came through and overwhelmed and entranced my mind.

I began to dance while singing, and even though I'd been able to hold my own while participating in a few disco dances around college, this was a whole new level of dance. I danced in a way that was skilled far beyond my ability to dance. It was as though I was dancing with well-choreographed moves, but even I didn't know what the moves would be until they happened. The movements flowed perfectly as I continued to sing perfectly and effortlessly.

It may sound as though these beautiful skills were coming through without my participation, like someone who might be "channeling" an otherworld entity. Rather, it was a deeper part of me that was suddenly free in that moment to sing and dance with its inherent, uncovered beauty and skill.

I was the statue that Michelangelo saw in a block of marble, the sun that blazes behind a cloudy sky. Through just a short time of delving into practices of yoga and meditation, studying the teachings of ancient spiritual philosophies, and receiving the grace of a spiritual master, I was somehow able in that moment to shed my skin of mediocrity and to "get out of the way" enough to let the brilliance of skilled song and dance shine through the temple of my body, mind, and spirit.

This wasn't the first time I'd experienced having amazing skills come through me, in spite of me. As a child, there had been times when my folks and sister would leave the house, and I would have the place to myself. Sometimes I would go into the den and play our piano like a master, watching almost as a witness as I'd compose beautiful jazz-like melodies with confidence and skill, without even knowing how to read music.

Now, at age nineteen, I was once again accessing that same kind of privately expressed magic in song and dance. Having beautiful vocals come through me was an especially great treat, because I'd always wished to have a good singing voice.

Both of my parents sang quite off-key, and my singing voice, while usually on key, was not so good in terms of timbre and tone. I'd long ago given up on ever being able to sing well.

Most likely this experience had also been sparked by having my love of singing reawakened by doing Sanskrit chanting, usually every day at the Ann Arbor center, and several times a day during my visit to the big upstate New York ashram. The magic of that spiritual path was still coming strong, even here in this empty old childhood home in Southfield Michigan.

I drove back to the New York ashram for two more event-filled weekend visits that year.

During my third visit, I attended a two-day initiation workshop with Baba Muktananda. This would be another experience-filled weekend, when I would receive his physical touch in the space between my eyebrows, and feel the descent of grace and the ascent of love.

They didn't call this workshop an "intensive" for nothing. Baba Muktananda was a rare being who had developed the ability to touch someone, either physically or through his intention, and bring forth what, for many who received his touch, was the most powerful spiritual experience they'd ever had.

Upon receiving Muktananda's touch during the long meditation session of this initiation workshop, I was carried into a tender but emotionally intense feeling of being loved by the divine.

The person seated behind me was also having an intense experience, and was basically screaming her head off, right into my ear.

I managed to stay fairly centered in my own inner space, even with this loud disruption. I especially didn't mind when Muktananda came back to our row to calm the woman down with another touch. While standing behind me once again, he brushed his wand of feathers against my back, leaving his enticing scent of heena oil on my sweater, which I would meditate and sleep with until long after the olfactory scent of heena was gone.

Back in Ann Arbor, I discovered a fascinating book, *Toward the One*, written by Sufi master, Pir Vilayat Khan. It is always great to find a book that resonates just beyond your current understanding, and this one did.

With every page, this book challenged and then expanded the limits of my understanding.

Across the aeons of time, irresistibly, undauntedly, by some uncanny internal forward thrust, the consciousness of the creature in its advance through evolution strives to touch the absolute, to soar into further dimensions.

— PIR VILAYAT KHAN

I found out that the author of this Sufi book was going to be giving an evening lecture at a church in Detroit. I wasn't usually too excited about going to different events, and it would require more than an hour of driving each way, but I really wanted to meet the Sufi master who wrote that great book.

For a moment, I wondered if it was okay to see two different spiritual teachers, but I couldn't think of a good reason why this would be a problem, and drove up for the program.

Pir was a thin man with long grey hair and beard, wearing a white woolen robe with a hood. He looked like Gandalf from the Lord of the Rings series, like one of the great wizards from medieval times.

After Pir's inspiring talk, the whole room sang together the word "Hallelujah," in the various melodies of what I later learned to be Pachelbel's Canon.

I had never heard this magical tune before, and the beautiful harmonies affected me strongly. I assumed that Pir or his followers had composed this impressive song. Each section of the room was given a different harmony to sing, and when it all came together, the sound was celestial. We were a choir of angels singing the music of the spheres. My soul was lifted high by the power of this song.

As the program ended, someone announced that anyone wishing to be initiated by Pir should go to a specific location in a hallway. I wasn't sure about being initiated, since I had recently received initiation from Baba Muktananda, who I considered to be my guru.

But I wanted to at least meet this wonderful Pir Vilayat Khan, and waited in the initiation line, assuming that Pir and I would be able to deal with the initiation question in person.

Eventually, one of Pir Vilayat Khan's assistants escorted me into a dimly lit room behind the sanctuary — it was a simple space with chairs and tables stacked against the walls.

At first, the room appeared to be empty. It took a moment before I saw Pir standing there. I walked up to him, feeling surprisingly bold. Though I was in awe of this man whose writings had carried me to such elevated levels of consciousness, still I was feeling quite comfortable. He was already a friend. Pir opened his arms and took my hands, as he greeted me with a soft smile. I looked into his eyes and proclaimed, "I want to know the Truth." I hadn't planned on saying anything like that, but this was too important a moment to waste on small talk.

Pir met my eyes and confidently pronounced, "You will." Then he smiled and asked, "Do you want to be initiated?"

I did, but I still had that question. I knew it was important to be honest and forthcoming, especially with a great spiritual being such as Pir. I told him I would like to receive his blessing, but that I had already been initiated by Swami Muktananda. I didn't know if there was a rule about not being initiated by more than one guru.

Pir's eyes lit up with a big smile. "Muktananda is a wonderful guru!" He became even more enthusiastic, "Once I saw him speaking, and in the middle of a sentence he turned into an ecstatic *dervish*! (a Sufi lover of God)" Pir took my hands and lifted them up, exclaiming, "We're all one, aren't we!?!" as he led me into a short dance together. My heart was happy. What amazing turn was my life taking?

Pir looked into my eyes and became more serious. "You should stay with Muktananda as much as possible. Learn his teachings."

I bowed my head in gratitude for the guidance, "I will."

I drove back to Ann Arbor on cloud nine, with the melody of our Hallelujah chant ringing inside my heart. Even after getting back in town quite late, I woke up bright and early the next morning to go to the Saturday morning devotional Guru Gita chant at the meditation center.

During the hour and a half chant, I continued to hear the previous night's "Hallelujah" song playing in my mind. As I tried to remember all the melodies and harmonies, they became superimposed over and through the Sanskrit verses we were chanting. Even though the tunes from my outer ears and memories were quite different, still they blended together to create a new, beautifully balanced musical montage. Entranced and a bit sleepy, I stopped chanting at one point, and allowed myself to be swept away by the beauty of this intoxicating, symphonic blend.

After the chant, I went to the meditation center's snack bar to have a cup of tea. Although I'd been going to programs for nearly a year, I hadn't really participated in their social discourse. Usually I would arrive for a chant or other program, and then leave after it was done. Those who participated more in the community seemed like interesting people; but I was in a seriously introverted phase, where words did not flow readily, and I still was keeping a small distance as I continued to explore the path.

However, after the amazing events with Pir Vilayat Khan and the powerful inner harmonies of that morning chant, I wasn't quite ready to head home. Pir's resounding recommendation of Muktananda also helped me to open up to going to the community's snack bar after our morning chanting program.

I ordered a cup of chai and sat down, taken aback by the brightness and chatter. There was extra activity in the snack bar that morning, because some fellows were installing a new stereo system. Every now and then, I would close my eyes and touch the peaceful state inside myself, and then open my eyes to experience all the activity around me. Throughout these oscillations between the outer brightness and inner stillness, I continued to hear that beautiful melody of hallelujah resounding through my heart.

The stereo installers finished plugging in the last speaker and announced that they were going to check the new sound system.

Out came, blaring at *full volume* from the speakers, THAT SAME MELODY!!! I nearly dropped my cup of tea.

I had no idea this was a famous piece of music. I thought Pir had composed the melody. And here, the very next morning, was a full orchestra playing of all the harmonies and melodies we had been singing the night before with Pir Vilayat Khan, at full volume!

A part of me dissolved in that moment, into somewhat of a Zen koan state, where my mind had nothing left to hold on to. Although I later found out that Pachelbel's Canon was a well-known composition, the mind-stopping awe I experienced from this seeming miracle had already done its job on my consciousness.

Chapter Eleven
WHO IS SHIVA?

IN FEBRUARY 1980, I was twenty years old and had recently moved into a large house owned by one of the local devotees who wanted to make the house into a kind of annex, where devotees could live with others who were also on the spiritual path.

Four or five people usually stayed in the house at any time. Mike was the owner — he lived in the basement, and rarely came upstairs, so I hardly ever saw him, even though we were living in the same house. Mike was quiet, pale, and seemed unemotional, with an odd sense of humor to boot. He reminded me of my sister's boyfriend from high school, who had once developed a plan to take over the world by blowing up Australia with anti-matter. Regardless, Mike was always respectful and friendly to me, so I wasn't too concerned.

Then there was Hari, who lived in Mike's House for a while during my stay. I had never met anyone quite like Hari. He was thin and had a very flexible, yogic body. You could tell he practiced the physical exercises of hatha yoga, because when he sat in the lotus posture — which is like crossing your legs with your feet on top — he seemed to do it perfectly.

This guy was passionate in an unusual way. He may have been a contemporary version of the archetypal "mad lover of God," or possibly, he was a bit nuts. I guess I think of him as a little of both.

Hari was always falling in love. His heart was so open that he would walk through the woods nearby, weeping as he hugged each tree. He would feel love-energy flowing into him from the leaves and would lie on the ground face down, embracing Mother Earth.

Hari used to tell me about this clear, blue light, representing the light of consciousness that he would see in the space of his head. He explained that the bones in his skull were somehow blocking his flow of *kundalini*, the powerful force that is said to move up through the nerve centers along the spine. I had only learned some basic details about the ancient science of kundalini, so this all sounded a little far-fetched to me. While we were meditating or chanting at the center, I'd occasionally look over and see him undulating with his hips, as though a spigot there turned on a flow of energy that appeared to move up his spine and into his head.

Hari seemed to fall in love with a different woman every week. He would become totally obsessed with each one, worshipping them as manifestations of the Divine Mother.

In fact, when I moved out of the annex, Hari fell down to the floor and grabbed my ankles, shouting, "Goddess! Don't leave me!" I guess you could say I was flattered. I had never really thought of myself as the goddess type, and this was my first experience of being worshipped! I couldn't imagine that Hari wasn't faking this whole divine love thing to some degree, but looking back on it now, I can't imagine that he was. For him, the experience was very real. Maybe it had something to do with drugs.

I never saw Hari take drugs, but occasionally we spoke about them. By age seventeen, I had stopped taking anything more than an occasional pipeful of pot. And now even that had mostly fallen away. Drugs didn't seem to be necessary or accepted on this spiritual path.

One day, the meditation center announced that a holiday called *Shivaratri* was coming up. Shivaratri means the "Night of the Lord," and is a widely celebrated holy day in India. The meditation center was going to celebrate with an all-night chant of the powerful mantra, *Om Namah Shivaya*, which means, "I honor *Shiva*, the source of the universe."

I thought, "I can hardly stay conscious when we chant *Om Namah Shivaya* for ten minutes during the evening programs. How am I going to chant it all night?"

Along came Hari with a suggestion: peyote, hallucinogenic cactus. I had never taken peyote, but thought it would be a challenge and adventure, and accepted his offer. Hari bought eight grams of peyote for me, and meticulously cleaned it all. He boiled the cactus for six hours so I could drink the drug without getting sick from its plant fibers.

Peyote was known for a side effect of nausea. We hoped this process would protect me from a potential puke-fest, which would have been *really* out of place in the holy and peaceful meditation hall.

I was a little nervous while drinking the nasty-tasting brew. After all, once it's in, it's in. Each sip made my body convulse, as if someone were shaking me violently. Finally, I managed to choke it all down, and went to the chant, where I could settle in for the night in my cross-legged posture, without further need for interactions or conversations.

As I sat in the meditation hall, my vision became more acute. I could see the colors in Muktananda's photo at the front of the room glowing brightly. Through the dim lighting, I began to see a bright yellow glow emanating from several of the people sitting around me.

Then, for the first time, I experienced my personal power in a tangible way. There was a wonderfully strong, bright, deep golden radiance surrounding me like a big ball. My personal power. My will power. My aura. I could see it in my mind's eye as a bright golden light. My focus changed from that of the physical body to this explosion of power that was also there. I could feel the energy pulsing through me in what seemed to be a new perception of a force that had always existed inside and around me, though perhaps not so powerfully as in that moment.

I perceived the same glow around other people, and noticed a few lines of light-energy stretching across the room from some people to others.

My intuitive understanding was that these represented the strands of relationship. I saw some particularly strong energy lines connecting one of the married men sitting up front to a woman who was not his wife, and wondered if there might be a deeper relationship going on between them that I wasn't supposed to know about. I thought, "This must be what it is like to be psychic — watching people pretend to be one thing while you can see through to who they really are or what they are really doing and thinking." The chant began at 8 pm. and continued until morning. In the deep dark hours of that holy night, I had the most subjectively REAL experience of my life.

Soon after closing my eyes, the inner show began. First, I saw myself as a white bird with large, expansive wings. I could feel myself flying, aware of how familiar it was to soar so freely.

These sensations awakened memories from my childhood. I used to often fly in my dreams. I'd fly around town and to distant lands, gliding through the sky. Flying had been one of my main modes of transportation in dreamland. But as I grew older, I had found myself unable to fly as high. My dreamtime flying abilities declined like an elderly person's ability to run. I kept getting lower and lower, slower and slower. At one point, I was unable to soar at all, and could only hover above the ground.

One night, while floating from my bedroom down the stairs at around age eight, my feet touched the ground, and I had to walk down the rest of the steps. After that, I couldn't fly anymore. Even in my dream state, I grieved for the loss.

And here I was after all these years, soaring through this expansive space of personal consciousness with huge, white wings. It was breathtaking.

I saw amazing things that night. At one point, there was a scene from what I assumed was a previous lifetime. I was a young, bald monk wearing light blue, silky robes. A man who seemed to be my teacher at that time was also in the vision. He was oriental, and quite old and thin. I can still see his kind face in my mind's eye.

This was interesting to me, because I had recently been having thoughts about being a monk. Right after I started going to the Ann Arbor center, they showed a video about the rites of passage involved with becoming a monk or swami. I had never, ever had any thought in any way, shape or form about monkhood before this. They would have had to give me the name, "Swami Atheistananda!"

Yet while watching this video, I was surprised to find a deep longing inside myself to renounce the materialistic world in favor of a contemplative, monastic lifestyle.

After this inner vision of myself as a young monk, I again became aware of the chant that had been resounding through the hall and moving through me. Even without any kind of drug, chanting can be truly intoxicating. The powerful mantras, pulsing rhythms, deep breath cycles, and openhearted devotion put the mind in a uniquely peaceful and fertile state.

Throughout the night, we were chanting the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya*, our guru's official Sanskrit mantra that he would regularly hand out to ashram visitors on small colorful cards. This mantra begins with the primordial sound *Om*, followed by *Namah*, "I bow" or "I honor," and then *Shivaya* — "to *Shiva*."

Shiva is often translated as "Supreme Consciousness," or the "inner Self." I'd also seen paintings of the official deity named Shiva, whose blue form is often portrayed in meditation on top of Mount Kailas, wearing various types of divine symbolic "bling."

I started to wonder what we were really singing to. Who was Shiva? Was he just a Hindu deity, or was this Shiva an integral part of my world in some way? Whose name was I chanting?

The peyote had created a more intense focus in my mind on the intention of my actions. No longer content to simply sit and sing this phrase without deeper contemplation, I was filled with a determination to know what it really meant.

In my mind, I started repeating my own mantra along with the chant: Who is Shiva? Who is Shiva? Who is Shiva?

My voice continued to chant *Om Namah Shivaya* with the group, but my mind was splitting its attention between the two lines:

Om Namah Shivaya... Who is Shiva?

Om Namah Shivaya... Who is Shiva?

After several hours of this focus, I experienced another shift. With my eyes closed, I could see and feel the expansive, big-picture universe around me. As I watched, the tapestry of galaxies and stars began to fold in on itself, as one might fold in all the flaps of a multi-sided box to flatten it. I also perceived a multidimensional view of my various points of interaction with the world that also kept bending and moving in; flap after flap of this reality I'd been living in folding into flat, two-dimensional, compact forms.

Within the folding, I saw faces of people from my life. Some stood out for a moment, while others passed by in large groups. Some manifested symbolically as a particular type of person or relationship. I acknowledged each recalled presence with a silent *Om Namah Shivaya*, as they appeared and then folded in with everything else.

I saw people I liked, people I loved, and people I'd had a hard time with. But in this space, I loved them all. Each one was a precious part of my experience of life in this world. I repeated the mantra with as much care and intention as I could for each person or archetype that appeared before me.

Every one received a well-wishing repetition of *Om Namah Shivaya*, as they dissolved into the psychic void. I could sense that something important was taking place, and participated with full attention.

Several things were going on in my mind at once. Externally, I was chanting the mantra; inside, my mind was repeating "Who is Shiva?" and in my vision, I was saying the mantra to all these faces from my past to thank them for whatever role they had played in this life and universe that now seemed to be undergoing a massive transformation and collapse into itself.

I wondered if this was it, if this was the end of the world as I knew it. I wondered if I would ever be able to, or would even want to recreate that construct of "reality" again. Even if I desired to unroll all the flaps and put the boxes of that life experience back together again, would it be possible?

This was new territory, and by now it was profoundly out of my hands. There was no congressman to write to, no friend to confide in. There was no turning back, because the land I had come from no longer existed.

Everything I knew had been stripped away, folded up, and dissolved into black nothingness. It was obvious, watching this reality folding in on itself, that none of it could have ever been real. It was like seeing a sideshow disassemble after the carnival; watching the tattooed man washing off the ink, and the sword swallower reset all the retractile devices in his swords. I had been fooled. I had been so gullible and naive. I had fallen for the illusion of this world. I thought things were important and they didn't even exist. I should have known better. How could I have fallen for all this again!

As soon as the idea of *again* popped up, I slipped into the awareness that this had all happened many times before, perhaps in many lifetimes. Then, the final folding of the universe took place, to the farthest reaches of anything I had ever conceived. It all folded in and smashed through the entire physical universe, until there was only flat, infinite darkness.

But right in the middle of this vast darkness was an amazing, glowing, still point of light. It was like a star or a small flame with no flickering at all. It was conscious and more peaceful than anything I had ever known.

I knew this was the seed from which had sprouted the entire world, including who I thought I was, who others were, and every idea I'd ever had. This point of light was my innermost source, the source of all. Everything originated from that point, and now had folded back into it.

So this was Shiva, the source of the universe!

For a moment, I wondered if this point of light existed in me or if I existed in it. But then it was so obvious. Both were true. In this place, even opposites coexisted perfectly. I remember thinking that, for many people, the awareness of this experience is available only after they leave the physical world. I knew without a doubt that I had been there before. In fact, this space was the most familiar place I had ever known. It was familiar in a deep way that nothing else in this world had come close to.

> *"At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is. But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity. Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards. Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, there would be no dance, and there is only the dance. I can only say, there we have been; but I cannot say where. And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time."*
>
> — *T.S. ELIOT*

Resting in the presence of this still point, I was suspended in a space between *me* and *not me*. There was just awareness. I was somewhat conscious of the personality and circumstances I had been living in, but I was not identified with being those circumstances.

I wondered if I would ever go back to the illusion. It didn't seem possible to return to things as they had been, because it was clear when everything folded in on itself that it would never reappear in exactly the same configuration.

If the seed of my life sprouted again, it would be a new illusion, a new life-dream, a new flower on the branch of human and universal expression, although I might not realize it from within the mirage. What a play!

I hoped to never let myself be fooled again. I wanted to stay with this peaceful light and not have to jump back into the illusory mirage. However, even if the mirage had to return, I wanted to remember this eternal source forever.

Om Namah Shivaya.

Chapter Twelve
DESTINY CALLS

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
and that has made all the difference.

— ROBERT FROST

DURING THE WINTERS OF HIS THIRD WORLD TOUR, Muktananda and his entourage traveled to various locations, where devotees and other guests would come from local towns and all around the world to join in the spiritual programs, workshops, holiday celebrations, and other festivities.

The winter after our first meeting, Muktananda's tour moved into a Miami Beach hotel that the talented and dedicated ashram crew had transformed into a temporary meditation ashram. For many months, the Regency Hotel Miami Beach would be filled with beautiful photos of gurus, intoxicating scents of incense, and the powerful sounds of wisdom discourses and devotees chanting Sanskrit hymns.

I had taken a semester off from school and had a chance to drive to the Miami retreat with one of the Ann Arbor devotees for a two-week visit. It was going to be amazing to experience the beautiful ocean, warm sunshine, and fresh breezes, along with all the fantastic chants, hatha yoga courses, and evening programs with Baba Muktananda and all the other great speakers.

One of the special qualities of this swami and path is that it was an energy initiation path. The initiation we'd receive with the guru's touch was a tangible transfer of spiritual energy called "Shaktipat," and the full schedule of spiritual practices at the ashram was intended to nurture, guide, and expand our newly awakened inner energy.

I'd previously gone to Muktananda's New York ashram for shorter visits, so this two-week stay was going to give me a good chunk of time to experience in more depth the disciplined schedule that Muktananda had carefully crafted to benefit the spiritual unfoldment of his disciples and devotees. It would also be a time for me to bask in the energy of Muktananda's presence, and to relish the beauty of the scenery and all the lovely and colorful characters who joined in the reverie.

During the day, ashram participants offered various forms of "selfless service," called *seva*, which would help keep the ashram going, and also helped us to learn many lessons, skills, and spiritual principles.

My first service assignment in Miami came right as my co-driver and I walked in the door from our very long drive. The receptionist asked if I knew how to type, and then asked if I would go directly to one of the teaching monks' rooms to type some timely correspondence.

Usually someone a little more known and involved with the organization would be assigned to do that kind of service, but I had arrived at the ashram during lunchtime, just as this pressing need arose, with none of the usual office workers readily available to type this correspondence up in time for the mailing deadline. After that special project, I went on to other service assignments, including housekeeping and washing stairways.

One of the stairways I got to wash led up to our guru's living quarters. This gave me an opportunity to see all the "stars" of the path, those who worked most closely with Muktananda, as they came up or down the stairs, speaking and acting more informally than they might during the evening programs. Some of them paused to give a friendly smile as they saw me on my knees washing each step with great focus and care, while others walked by, noticing my presence only as needed to walk around me. I wasn't very judgmental about such things at the time, and mainly focused on doing a good job and observing these inner circle folks with general interest.

Next, I was assigned by the "seva desk" to report for seed and spice service. Our task was to sort through bins of cumin, fenugreek, and other spices that were used in the delicious vegetarian meals that were carefully cooked by a hard-working kitchen staff of devotees, who had been personally trained by Muktananda to cook healthy and tasty food with love.

The seed-sorting supervisor seemed a bit nervous and obsessed with the perfection of our task, which I chalked up to the unusual environment we were in. Most people there were probably having spiritual explosions left and right, based on my own experiences and the sharings I'd heard from others. It would have been very easy for us to just let go into the *samadhi* stillness of quiet mind and meditate all day long, drinking the delicious devotion and Shakti energies. Lots of yogis are doing just that right now in caves all over India and other locations.

However in Muktananda's ashram schedule, along with all the meditation, chanting, study, and other limbs of yoga, we also had to serve for hours every day, performing a kind of yoga called "*karma yoga*." This service maintained the ashram and also trained us to anchor these higher states of awareness into a useful and functional life of work and service, both in and outside of the ashram.

Even during this early visit to Miami, I understood that if someone like the lady in charge of seed sorting seva seemed a little extreme, or perhaps a bit batty, it could be chalked up to the tremendous spiritual transformations she was likely going through.

Our group of spice-sorters sat outside, sorting piles of seeds and spices for several hours a day. Of course, we had to pull out any twigs and stones, but this supervisor would obsessively inspect our final work to make sure that not a single speck of dust had been left in.

Looking for lessons in the ashram ways, I considered that leaving no speck unturned in cleaning these seeds might also be a metaphor for the perfect focus needed to purify our minds, hearts, and souls of the twigs, stones, and even small particles of dust in the form of harmful habits and erroneous ideas.

After several days of this meticulous focus came an intriguing new balancing lesson.

A large load of seeds and spices arrived at the ashram and needed to be cleaned by our small crew before they could be properly packaged and stored.

Our supervisor was instructed by her supervisor to speed things up big-time, and the next thing you knew, this woman who had been pacing back and forth all day reminding us to catch every possible speck of dust, was now instructing us to only take out the larger debris. "Small stones and dirt should be left in — take out only the twigs and larger stones."

The supervisor's demeanor even changed with this shift, as she became lighter, perhaps as a result of having to surrender and give up her rigid rules. This was also a helpful and tangible lesson for me, one that I've remembered many times along my subsequent journeys. The lesson was about being flexible and making decisions based on current needs rather than previous ways of doing things.

With all these lessons, plus my guru's enlightening lectures, many interesting people, and the thrilling chants, I was enjoying quite a fruitful time at this two-week Miami retreat, until a new challenge arose.

About a week into our stay, I was sitting outside one evening, enjoying the moonlight and cool ocean breezes, when the car-mate I had driven with from Ann Arbor to Miami came by to give me some shocking news. He didn't think his car was in good enough shape to make it back to Michigan, and he had decided to stay in Miami through the spring. I looked at him in disbelief. I only had enough money to stay for two to three weeks.

Somehow, I felt surprisingly calm in spite of this new twist. My warrior spirit surfaced. Even though it seemed to be bad news, I also felt supported and empowered by the hefty schedule of spiritual practices of the previous week, and sensed that this could be the brink of another breakthrough. I had to be courageous and meet my destiny head on.

There was no use getting upset with this fellow, and there was no use crying about losing my ride home. Why not stay in this inspiring environment for a while anyway?

I went out the next morning and found a waitress job at the nearby Eden Roc hotel. The wages were sufficient to pay my room and board, with enough left over for the eventual trip back to Ann Arbor. My two-week visit expanded into nearly two months.

During this time, I experienced an intense contrast between the worlds inside and outside of the ashram. Most of my days were spent in a frenzied restaurant environment, serving food at a Miami Beach hotel. All day long I was dealing with friendly people, grumpy people, and a whole lot of flirtatious older men. Then I'd return to the ashram just in time to get ready for the evening program.

Walking through the front doors of the ashram felt like stepping from the harsh desert into a cool breeze of sweet smells and refreshing energy. The contrast gave me a new appreciation for the palpable purity of the place.

One morning toward the end of my stay, I was standing on the sundeck with a few other devotees as we watched the sun rising over the ocean on one side of the deck, with Muktananda standing on the roof watching the sunrise on the other.

The ashram's video crew came up to the sundeck and were trying to capture all of this beauty with their cameras. But there was a technical problem, and their tape deck wouldn't roll. I had worked a bit with video decks in my college classes, but was no expert to be sure. However, I had learned a technical term: *capstan servo*. I knew it had something to do with the tape turning in the deck.

Something made me walk over to the camera crew and ask them whether there might be a problem with the capstan servo. If I tried to come up with my motivation at the time, maybe I would have speculated that I was trying to show off. But that wasn't necessarily the case. Maybe I was genuinely trying to help them fix the equipment. That's a nice thought, but I'm sure these professionals were far more capable of dealing with this mechanical issue than me with my two-bit vocabulary word.

No, it was destiny. The winds of karma blew through me in that moment, and wafted through the video crew as well. The department head looked up with a surprised expression. Perhaps he was impressed that a girl could come up with such a technical phrase. It probably made him think I knew a lot more about video than I really did. When this friendly fellow asked about my video experience, I was honest about what I had and hadn't done, and told him that I had been studying film and video at the University of Michigan.

This video department head then invited me to come to the New York ashram during the upcoming summer retreat to offer service in the video department. He said that if I could pay for my room and board and stay for at least two months, I would be able to offer service with the video department.

This sounded great, but didn't seem possible. I had no savings whatsoever, and the summer retreat was scheduled to begin in just a couple months.

About to explain my situation, I happened to glance up toward the roof, where Muktananda was still standing in the distance. But now, his finger was pointed directly toward us.

In this gesture, I saw the metaphorical finger of fate, and replied to the video department head, “I'll be there!”

I walked away, wondering how I was going to manage this financially, but also sensing a benevolent force supporting my commitment. It's not that I was expecting some miraculous boon or that I could think of any way to be able to fulfill these conditions, yet a soft note of faith was playing beneath my concerns.

That note turned into a symphony back in Ann Arbor. Someone I hardly knew recommended me for an incredible job, out of the blue. The job title was "consultant for City Hall." My task was to take a list of all the businesses in Ann Arbor, and to make sure they were still there and add in any new listings.

At age twenty, I was given a shiny new Caprice Classic to drive, along with keys to the city's gas pumps. I had my own office in City Hall with a wooden desk and swivel leather chair, and was even allowed to hire one of my ashram acquaintances as an assistant.

The job was scheduled to end three days before the summer retreat in New York began, and it would pay exactly what I needed for travel and two months of room and board.

I arrived at the ashram just before the summer retreat officially began. Someone told me that the video crew was out-of-town doing a film shoot for two days, and suggested that I should sign up for another service assignment until they returned. I felt somewhat resistant about this.

To be honest, I wasn't so excited about the idea of being assigned to do a random task by someone at a desk handing out assignments.

Even though I'd offered service during my stay in the Miami hotel ashram, I didn't fully grasp the practice of *seva*, or selfless service. I had been looking forward to doing interesting video work. What if they asked me to clean toilets? The thought made me cringe.

After breakfast, there was an optional midmorning chant called *Shree Rudram*. Thinking this would be a good way to postpone my service assignment, I went to the meditation hall to chant.

The text was from the ancient Sanskrit *Vedas*, and the syllables, melody and pacing were so fast and complex that I don't think I managed to get a single word out right. Ten minutes into the chant, I lost my place, put the book down, and closed my eyes, listening to the chanting that was now very pleasant to hear without feeling a responsibility to keep up.

I tried to calm down and prepare myself for the unknown work ahead of me. It may sound ridiculous to have been so worried about a couple days of random work assignments, but for some reason this situation had pushed some of my buttons.

Perhaps due to the energy-charged environment, my emotional response was magnified out of proportion to the event. By this time, I'd heard quite a few spiritual lectures, and started to mentally file through the teachings about serving in the ashram so I could bring myself back to a more open state of mind.

I began to comfort myself with an internal dialogue, "Don't worry about what service you get. This place is a conscious field of energy. Whatever assignment you receive will be perfect for your spiritual growth. It will contain a significant message for you. This assignment will be like a big fortune cookie. Remember that nothing here happens by chance. They say the entire ashram is the body of the guru — let's see what part of the guru's body I'll get to offer service in."

As the chant ended, I felt a little more inspired and rejuvenated from this inner discourse and the powerful mantras being chanted around me. I set off to the service assignment desk, with at least a modicum of surrender.

On the other side of this "karma play" was Bonnie, the woman working at the service assignment desk. Bonnie had a difficult situation on her hands. There was a seriously unpleasant bit of work that needed to be done, but whenever someone came up to ask for an assignment, she just couldn't bring herself to give it to them.

Finally, out of desperation, she had decided that whoever came up next would be the one for this task, no matter who it was.

Right on cue, up walked the newly inspired and surrendered Kumuda, ready to find out what great message her service assignment would reveal.

Bonnie asked me and the next fellow in line to wait near the lobby stairs for our project supervisor to arrive. A man carrying two buckets with mops came up and greeted us with, "So you're the shit crew."

Our assignment was to go to a basement area right next to where Muktananda lived. Some of the monastic sewage had backed up into three rooms and a hallway. There were inches of raw, smelly slime all over the floor, including several large, soaked pieces of carpeting.

The two of us were to clean all of this disgusting mess using the most primitive of tools — mops with not enough strands, hoses with medium pressure water flow, and some jugs of cleaner and bleach. I couldn't believe my eyes. I couldn't believe my nose.

I burst out laughing at this funny cosmic joke. What part of the guru's body was I in? Here I'd been awaiting a profound message about my life, and I get rooms filled with shit? And I had been worried that I might have to clean a few toilet seats!

I was also bubbling with unexpected joy, because there was a perceptible, pulsating energy in these rooms. After all, we were right next to where Muktananda lived. I could feel a distinct spiritual vibration in the air.

As we cleaned, I became ecstatic, giggling inwardly. *Someone* was playing with me again! It was such an obvious punch line after my worries about the possibility of having to clean bathrooms, I felt that it had to have been scripted by a higher intelligence.

In that moment, a bond of friendship was established between the ashram and myself. I cleaned with great love, wearing the only pair of shoes I had, not even worried that they were being ruined by the mucky mess. Even the stench didn't bother me. "I guess this is one way to learn to be detached from the senses!" I thought, chuckling to myself in blissful glee. I couldn't recall when I had felt so giddy, and I certainly wouldn't have imagined the circumstances under which I would be feeling so light and happy. The two of us cleaned for several hours, scooping up the sludge, rolling up soaked carpeting, spraying and scrubbing the walls, and finally polishing the floors. Soon, the rooms were sparkling clean, and I had tasted the secret nectar of selfless service.

That afternoon, it was announced that there would be an extra service-shift in the evening instead of the usual chant, to prepare for an upcoming event. After cleaning myself up, I went back to the desk for my next assignment. Bonnie apologized for having given such a yucky task to do, and asked me if I liked to paint. "Oh yes," I replied, "I love to paint."

"Great," she said, "You'll like this assignment. Go across the street to the new children's playhouse, where they'll be painting the rooms tonight."

I skipped across the street. But as I arrived, the workers told me they would not be ready to paint until much later. "But we'd appreciate if you could help us with another task until we're ready," one of the supervisors requested.

"There are several dogs living in this area, and there is dog doo all over the ground outside the children's house. Would you please go around with this tin can and collect all the mess?"

What could I do but smile and pick up all the doggie-doo with great gusto?

I couldn't keep from chuckling while speaking mentally to this invisible consciousness that had suddenly become quite apparent through the events unfolding around me. "Okay, friend, I think I got the message!"

On this day, my idea about what activities were and were not pleasurable was shattered.

This experience also helped to prepare me for the great surrender essential to monastic life. It cleared away a thick layer of my ego and concepts, giving me a tangible sense of the ashram as a conscious and even comedic being.

For the rest of the summer, I enjoyed an interesting job as a general assistant in the video department. I typed scripts, labeled tapes, held the microphones for the camera crew, researched quotes, and even had a chance to assist the video editor every now and then.

The first time I worked with him, Luc was editing a talk by Baba Muktananda. Due to a technical difficulty, the tape decks were failing to line up properly for the edit, and for nearly an hour we heard the exact same five-second pre-roll line over and over again, with Muktananda's translator saying, "Know the one who knows the mind. That one is true and that is the Self."

It would play forwards, then backwards; fast-speed, slow-speed, and normal-speed. I felt as though I was taking a bath in "Know the one who knows the mind. That one is true and that is the Self."

As Luc became more and more frustrated with the broken equipment, I smiled to myself, wondering if the tape was planning to keep replaying the line until I finally got it.

I thought, "This would be the best job in the world, editing videos of our guru and his teachings. You couldn't help but get it!"

In that moment, I made my first big wish within the walls of the ashram.

I prayed and asked that I might have the opportunity to edit videos of our guru one day, even though I didn't really have much experience with video editing.

The summer continued, with challenges and blessings around every corner. The predictability of the schedule created a rhythm of days that I was able to ride like waves on the ocean, flowing out with one wave and back in with the next — moving effortlessly with the breath of God, with the rising and setting of the sun, with the easy times and the challenging tests.

I had a sense of fitting into this exotic lifestyle as if I were wearing clothes that fit perfectly, not too loose or too tight.

The video department staff were a fun bunch, and we shared many light moments while reveling in this wonderful work of capturing our guru's words and images on film.

As the summer retreat began to wind down, it was nearly time for me to leave and return to college. Muktananda and his staff were going to be traveling to Los Angeles for the winter. I thought about how wonderful it would be to join them there.

However, at this point, I was just about out of money. As it was, I was going to have to work hard and take out another student loan to pay for my fall semester of classes. In truth, my heart was no longer enthusiastic about going to college. I was confused at a major crossroads, and didn't know which way to turn. I needed guidance. Well, isn't that what a spiritual guide is for?

I finally got up the nerve to ask my teacher's secretary if I could have a private meeting with him, explaining that I wanted to discuss my alternatives of either going back to school or traveling with him, and to ask for his guidance and blessings. The secretary said that if I composed a letter describing my situation, she would present it to him. I painstakingly wrote a three-page letter detailing my situation and choices.

Over the next few days, I waited, excited to think I would be receiving a personal directive from my guru at any moment.

Finally, the call came. The secretary asked me to come down to her room. My heart was pounding with anticipation as I made my way to her office. She opened the door with a somewhat serious face, and handed my letter back to me with several red lines across the page. "I've decided not to show your letter to Baba. I've highlighted the main points you made. You can just ask your question during the public darshan."

I was appalled. The reason I had gone through all of this trouble was because the situation was too complicated to be expressed in one or two sentences, in the midst of hundreds of people coming up in the darshan line.

I tried to explain that to the secretary, but she was much tougher than I. She seemed to have no compassion or concern for my situation.

I could see on her desk a stack of letters from other people like me. I was just a name on the list, a letter in the pile. Didn't she understand this was my life? Couldn't she see that this was an important decision for me?

The secretary looked impatient to close the door and get on with her work.

I turned away from her room and headed down the hall toward the stairway. I wasn't just mad at the way this woman treated me, I was mad at Muktananda. I was angry with God. "Here I am ready to surrender and do whatever you say, and you won't even take five minutes to see me and tell me what to do!"

Right by the stairway was a curtain that separated our guru's living quarters from the rest of the building. As I stormed past the thick blue curtains, I saw that they were parted in the middle. There, standing all alone, was Baba Muktananda, looking right at me.

I was so upset that even the shock of seeing him there wasn't enough to jar me out of my fury. I glared fiercely into his eyes thinking, "Why won't you let me see you?" I didn't say anything out loud since I didn't think he spoke English, but I stared into his eyes, fiercely.

Muktananda glared back, and the bolt of energy that came through his eyes hit me so strongly that I turned and practically flew up the stairs. Before I hit even the tenth step, I cracked up. My insides filled with pure humor and joy. The energy pushed into my head, my eyes, my face, and my heart.

There was a deep laughter bubbling through me that would have been extremely loud if I'd let it escape. I couldn't make such noises in this peaceful, meditative atmosphere, and managed to hold in the sound.

My body was physically doubled over, as I hugged my chest in an attempt to contain all the energy. In the midst of this explosive dance, I thought, "You won the staring contest!" and laughed some more.

I decided to return to college, including a Sanskrit class in the schedule to give myself some enthusiasm. Nevertheless, it had become evident that the University of Michigan was not offering courses on what I most wanted to learn.

Several days into the semester, I went to the Art School for my new film class. We were going to learn how to cut film using a 16-millimeter editing flatbed.

While the professor demonstrated the equipment, I stood against the door, thinking. I had returned to school, but was still unclear about my career goals. I'd been registered as a double major in film/video and neurophysiology, and now wondered, "Where should I focus my energy? Should I become a scientist or an artist?"

On the intellectual path, my goal had been to become a research scientist and to use all the information I'd learned from age seven on to help move myself and society toward a bigger view of the mind and the nature of reality from a neuroscience standpoint. Specifically, I wanted to explore the processes involved with multiple personality disorder. I believed this dysfunction could be a doorway through which to explore the foundations of human personality and self-identity, even in people without the disorder.

First though, I would probably be expected to spend at least a decade doing entry level research. I remember hearing at the time that someone in this field might have to do years of business-sponsored research like injecting frogs with pharmaceutical drugs before working their way up to being trusted with a grant to fund their own research. There was no guarantee I would still be interested in this topic so many years down the road.

Then there was the artistic side. My creative work had always been important to me. I stood there, contemplating all this while watching the film professor go on about the mechanics of the editing flatbed, and made a decision.

The people in my film classes were definitely more fun than the pre-med students. There was more laughter and enthusiasm, along with an inherent respect for the soul's spark of creativity and one's personal emotions and expressions. Plus, it would be a skill I could use to offer service to Muktananda and his foundation. In that moment, I decided that the rest of my life would be more pleasant if I became a filmmaker. Suddenly, bright splotches filled my visual screen, and I passed out.

Right there in class, I fell completely unconscious, for no apparent reason. After regaining consciousness, I went downstairs to the student cafe for a cup of juice, and soon felt well enough to take the bus home.

Still dazed, I checked our mailbox, and was surprised to find a letter from the video department in the upstate New York ashram. I was touched that they would think to write and let me know they remembered me.

But when I opened the envelope, I found a letter inviting me to move into the upstate New York ashram for the winter.

The fellow who had previously agreed to take care of video distribution for a second year decided at the last minute that he couldn't bear the idea of another freezing winter in this nearly deserted, snowed-in building in the middle of the Catskill Mountains.

Muktananda was going to be leaving in a few weeks, and if the video people didn't find someone willing to replace him, then one of the crew members would have to stay behind, missing all of the tour excitement in sunny southern California. They were motivated!

The invitation began, "Greetings from all of us here in Video at the Lord's International Center. Hopefully your trip back home was a good one, filled with grace, and hopefully you haven't yet unpacked your bags. We think we have an offer for you that you can't refuse!" The letter continued on, offering me room and board at the ashram for however long I did this service.

I was already in a state of shock from having passed out in class, and now came this surprise invitation. I thought it was compassionate of the video crew to try and find a way for me to come back. They knew I hadn't wanted to leave the ashram. Of course, they had made a bit of an error in satisfying my desire. I wanted to go traveling with Muktananda to Los Angeles, not to stay in a freezing place in the Catskill Mountains with twenty-five people I didn't know!

Still, it was remarkable to get such an invitation. I walked over to the home of my professor who had introduced me to Muktananda, and showed him the letter. His response came with a soft smile, "It's nice to be needed."

For my professor, this was a simple statement. For me, it was the universe speaking through his lips. In my narcissistic focus, it hadn't occurred to me that anyone actually *needed* me to do this work. I had assumed they were offering the position as a favor. This shifted things considerably.

I was needed. It was time to take a leap, and I decided to do it. There was no logic behind this decision; I just knew I had to go.

My warrior spirit rose up to help me through the complex transition, as I canceled classes, informed my family and friends, and arranged the many details involved with this big move to the ashram. It all went surprisingly smoothly.

We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned,
so as to have the life that is awaiting us.
The old skin has to be shed
before the new one is to come.

— JOSEPH CAMPBELL

Chapter Thirteen
WINTER WONDERLAND

MY MAIN WORK IN THE ASHRAM was to make copies of Muktananda's magnificent talks and other edited videos, and to take in orders, process checks, create financial reports, and package, label, and mail the videos to ashrams, centers, and individual devotees around the world.

The ashram building had once been part of the Catskill Mountains "borsht belt" of hotels, so-called because in their heyday, they were frequented by Jewish performers and guests vacationing upstate from New York City. Only twenty-five to thirty people were staying in this large hotel-sized ashram for the winter, so just a small portion of the building was open for the winter staff.

The rest of the building had been closed and winterized for the upstate New York freeze, except for the video room, which was located in the otherwise closed part of the ashram. The small room was tucked away with its little wall-heater between two large meditation halls that had been filled with the energy of thousands of devotees doing spiritual practices for the previous years, with hours of daily chanting, spiritual discourses, kundalini initiations, meditations, hatha yoga classes and more, taking place all summer long. And now I had this entire, highly energized half of the huge ashram building to myself. What more could a loner who is seeking spiritual growth ask for?

At first I was sending out up to fifty videotape orders a week, which kept me busy enough; but within a few months, that number grew to nearly two hundred videos a week. Along with our usual offerings, the video department managers in Los Angeles decided to start a "satsang" video subscription series that would allow ashrams, centers, and individuals to receive videos every week, every other week, or once a month. Hello, bookkeeping!

During this winter of 1980, consumer video decks became readily available, and I became busier, with more subscription orders rolling in every week. There was nobody else available to help with the increased load — we had fewer than thirty people on ashram staff. In fact, each of us also had to do dishwashing shifts and occasional overnight security guard service, along with our regular assignments.

Even if someone had been available to help, I probably would have preferred to work hard and keep my private space than to have more rest time and have someone else around who I'd have to train and supervise. I discovered that there was plenty of time to get everything done as long as I stayed focused and worked steadily.

Since I was copying videos of profound spiritual teachings all day long, I would turn up the volume and bathe my mind in the powerful words and chanting while going about my other work of labeling, bookkeeping, and mailing. For me, listening to Muktananda was like eating a gourmet meal all day long. I was hungry to learn what he was teaching. Muktananda had studied different branches of Indian philosophy, and was able to explain each of them in a way that made sense to me. Plus, he was humorous and entertaining to boot.

I've read many spiritual teachings since that time, and still feel that Muktananda generously gave the spiritual philosophy goods in a way that was especially accessible, at least for me. With a guru, it's not necessarily about getting some hypothetical "best" one, but the best one for you. I can't say whether one needs a guru in personal, physical form to achieve higher realms of spiritual awareness, as some scriptures suggest is the case.

In my experience, the meeting of my enthusiastic immersion in my guru's path with his abundant, energizing, and entertaining array of spiritual wisdom stories, scriptures, songs, and practices, lifted my experience up to levels of awareness I don't feel I would have been able to reach on my own — levels I had never even imagined as existing, much less wanting to achieve. Each time I'd receive another blessing or *Shaktipat* initiation through Muktananda's touch or look, it felt as though my spiritual journey would be energized to take another leap.

I had previously experienced expansions of worldview while exploring the realms of subliminal communications in college. Even though I was reaching new levels of awareness through those explorations, they had brought more distress than joy.

Muktananda was teaching an entirely different, bigger-picture, universally positive view of life than I'd ever encountered. For me, his words rang with truth and resonated with what felt like the wise soul inside of me.

Living in his ashram, I felt happy, at peace with the universe, and wide open to receiving grace, guidance, and the gift of a greater world view.

While living in the ashram, I didn't read newspapers or watch television. I had the opportunity to somewhat exit the time-based experience of "news in the world," to focus more deeply on the eternal wisdom that was being handed to me on platter after platter, all day, every day.

> *A happy life must be to a great extent a quiet life,*
> *for it is only in an atmosphere of quiet that true joy can live.*
>
> *— BERTRAND RUSSELL*

Throughout the winter, the ashram's video crew would send me shipments of the videos they'd filmed of our guru in Los Angeles.

Each delivery brought a feast of evening program lectures, special occasion celebrations, initiation program talks, informal footage of Muktananda walking and greeting the many celebrities who came to see him in Los Angeles, television news stories, and edited videos of these events for me to copy and send to devotees around the world. I was a happy camper in this upstate New York winter wonderland.

After several months, I received videos from a new series of Muktananda's Wednesday lectures on an obscure, ancient, intricate, and profound *Kashmir Shaivism* text called *Pratyabhijnahrdayam: The Secret of Self Recognition*, at which point I just moved a small cot into the video room.

I'd often stay there, going to sleep while copying one talk and awakening to copy another. I decorated the office with photos I had found of various sages and saints, and that little video room became my temple. Once again, I began to reconnect with the inner spaces.

A few years earlier, I had "explored the unconscious" on my own and gotten sidetracked by snags that had made life so unbearable for me that I'd tried to exit. But now, I felt protected in accessing new areas of personal and spiritual consciousness.

This time I had powerful chants, mantras, spiritual teachings, and guru's grace to help guide me to a deeper level of awareness. I was no longer on my own. I had a friend on the path, someone who knew the turf — I had a guru, and for the first time in my life, didn't feel alone.

I'd once heard of places called artist colonies where you could go for a few months and have time and space away from the hustle and bustle of usual worldly life to focus completely on your creative work. That had sounded like something I would love to do, and now, here I was in an artist colony-plus, focusing on my spiritual evolution, on learning wonderful chants and teachings, and on serving humanity and a great spiritual path by sending videotapes of my guru's form and teachings all around the world.

Just two years after trying to leave this world in despair, I'd discovered what I hadn't even dared to hope for: a place dedicated to inner growth, deeper wisdom, and a profoundly positive view of life.

When I first arrived to do this winter work, someone had told me that none of the twenty-five winter staff knew how to play either the harmonium hand organ or drums for the chants. The manager and a couple other fellows could bang out a simple drumbeat, but without any other musicians, we weren't going to be having regular chanting sessions during the winter. Well, having no chants for all those months was not okay with me, since I loved to chant. What would be the point of living in this big ashram if we weren't even going to do such an essential and wonderful practice of the path?

I decided to learn the basics. One of the drummers showed me some rhythms, and a harmonium player gave me tips on playing the chants, which I was able to learn fairly easily, since I could play by ear. Even before Muktananda and his entourage left town, I was playing the harmonium organ during our morning and evening chants, with Muktananda's swamis and teachers often present, and me alternating between tense sweating as the pages of my chanting book would occasionally get stuck, and letting go into the ever-present grace that always saved the day.

With no real musical background, I played an instrument for just about every chant during that winter, usually three times a day. This meant that along with my video work, I also had to attend every chant. It was time for this aloof teenager to learn some discipline!

Early every morning, I would play the hand-pumped organ called *harmonium* for an hour-and-a-half chanting session. I had great respect for the scripture we chanted every morning, called *Shree Guru Gita*, or "song of the Guru." This text revealed many esoteric teachings about the nature of the universe and a deeper understanding of the Guru, who is not considered as just a person or teacher by this scripture, but as the universal force that flows through the outer, physical guru and also penetrates all of creation including ourselves, lifting souls upward through the power of grace.

The teachings of *Shree Guru Gita* opened my mind into a much higher view of life. No longer was this universe just a mundane place; it was as magical as anything I had ever imagined. I couldn't believe such wonderful philosophy was so readily available, and yet virtually unrecognized in the culture from which I'd come.

Every morning, I would sit cross-legged on the ground for an hour and a half with both hands attached to this instrument. One hand would pump the accordion-like bellows, while the other hand played all the different melodies on the harmonium keys, which were set up similar to piano keys. Any attempt to remove either hand would result in a noticeable glitch. It was a definite lesson in self-control. Itchy nose? Forget it. Legs starting to fall asleep? Tough. Sleepy this morning? You can't sleep through this one. Actually, that's not quite true.

Soon after I began to play for these morning chants, a strange new occurrence started occasionally happening. I would be sitting there playing the instrument and chanting the words, when I'd start to lose outer awareness. I'd relax deeply into the sounds, rhythms and vibrations of the chant, as my fingers continued to play, almost on their own.

Sometimes I would even stop chanting for a few verses, with my head falling forward and my eyes rolled up into my head. Since I was still playing the chant properly and was also the only harmonium player available, nobody said anything about my occasional dips into that meditative state.

One day, our manager came in during the morning chant. The ashram managers at that time were notorious for rarely coming to chants, even though they were devotees as well. But on this morning, the manager not only came in, but began pulling the chanters, one by one, out of the room.

As the manager would walk up and whisper in their ear, each person would pick up their sitting pillow and chanting book and leave the hall. I was certainly curious to know what was going on!

However, I couldn't ask anybody anything, because I had to keep playing the harmonium and chanting the text. By now, I was quite alert as everybody in the room, except the drum player and me, was mysteriously led away. I couldn't even imagine what was going on! Were we missing something special? Were we at war? Was the building on fire? What was so important to call everyone out of the chant, but not important enough to have me stop playing as well? I did my best to continue giving this holy chant its due respect, but my curiosity and concern were definite distractions.

Finally, the text ended, and I found out what had happened. A contracted roofing crew had been doing some work on one of the currently unoccupied residential wings of the building that was right near our guru's living quarters.

On the previous day, the workers had peeled away the surface roof layers and placed a simple plastic tarp over it for the night, as there was no sign of rain. Well, while we were chanting that morning, it didn't just rain. It rained like hell. It was pouring so hard that the rain collapsed not only the roof of the third floor, but some of the second-floor ceilings as well.

Everyone had been led out of the chant to help keep the flood at bay. With fewer than thirty people available to help, we set up bucket brigades, catching water in some buckets and shoveling grey gunk into others. Everyone left whatever work they normally did to help clean up this mess. We were all completely wet and filthy as we shoveled away.

At one point, the security guard asked me to bring a tool to the ashram manager, who was in Muktananda's living quarters. This would give me a chance to see where my guru lived, worked, ate, and slept! I tiptoed reverently into this holy space, and found the manager.

He said, "Look, I need for you to stay here and keep changing all these buckets throughout Baba's living quarters. There are some leaks in the roof and we have to make sure his rooms remain dry. Just stay here until I come back."

The manager never came back. I was in Muktananda's living quarters all day long, until the security guard came by to lock up in the evening after the rains ended.

At first, I felt very shy about being in my guru's private room, and was careful not to touch anything. I just stood in the middle of the room or sat on the soft, light blue carpeting, watching the buckets fill up slowly and changing them when they were getting full.

Eventually, I got up the nerve to walk through Baba's kitchen and dining areas, and even peeked into his bathroom. The energy in these rooms was tangible and sweet. A charge of purity filled the air. It was like a scent, but an electrified scent that I could also feel.

Well, the hours ticked by, as I remained alone in this magical wonderland, my guru's house.

Between bucket changes, I experienced many delightful and peaceful meditations. It felt as though I had become Muktananda's friend. I was hanging out in his private room, his personal energy. And, of course, that bathroom which I had tiptoed into so reverently during the first couple of hours eventually became my bathroom. After all, I had been told not to leave the premises, and a person does have to go.

By the time I missed both lunch and dinner, it became clear that the manager had probably forgotten I was there. I could have left to find him, but why do that? I was quite happy right where I was.

Amidst all these wonderful experiences of living in the ashram came occasional tests of dealing with difficult or fanatical people. Freddie the office supply guy was one.

Being mindful and respectful of all things was part of the discipline practiced in this monastic ashram. Every corner was kept spotless, and each penny was accounted for. However, Freddie carried the practice of budgeting to new and absurd heights. He was said to have proclaimed that Post-It notes and Sharpie pens were going to bankrupt the entire ashram, and to have gotten upset when he saw our guru, Baba Muktananda, using only one side of a sheet of paper for his lecture notes.

One day, a sweet ashram resident named Ganga went to Freddie to get a new tape dispenser. She was in charge of the ashram's mailing department, and the plastic wheel that fit inside the scotch tape roll on her fairly old tape dispenser had broken. Ganga assumed it was simply time for a new dispenser, or at least a new plastic wheel, but when she went to the office supply room, Freddie asked her to go back to her office and bring the broken dispenser to him.

When Ganga handed the tape dispenser to Freddie, he said, "Look, you don't need a new dispenser *or* a new wheel. You can put a paperclip inside of the tape reel, and use this small piece of broken pencil to balance it in the dispenser." He put the flimsy configuration together for her. Ganga was not thrilled, but had an extremely amicable nature. She quietly thanked him and turned to leave.

"Hey wait!" called Freddie. "Don't you have your own paperclips down in the mailroom?" And with that, he removed the paperclip and handed the rest back to her. Ganga just smiled and walked away, without even getting angry with him. I think she must have been well on her way to becoming a saint.

Even aside from an occasional extremist, the idea of respect was prevalent throughout the ashram. Honoring each manifestation of the universe as a form of divinity was an expression of the Indian philosophy called *Kashmir Shaivism.* Muktananda expressed the same awareness when he began each of his talks by saying, "With great respect and love, I welcome you all with all my heart."

Approaching everything respectfully as a manifestation of supreme Consciousness was new to me. I had to learn many new rules quickly.

During my youth, for example, if we didn't want to finish some food, we would simply throw it away. However, the ashram brought a focus on respecting the meals we were given. We were supposed to only take what we could eat. Before putting the first bite in our mouths, we would close our eyes and offer thanks in our own individual way for this sustenance. Before eating, I would often repeat the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya* silently eleven times, which seemed to also be helpful for preparing my mind and body to digest the nourishing food that would be waiting for us at every meal.

I learned that the scriptures of India are chock full of rituals and rules, yet also came to realize that it wasn't so much that each specific rule must be followed dogmatically. For example, when entering a holy place, it is considered auspicious to place your right foot down first over the threshold and into the room. I didn't believe some bad thing would have necessarily happened if I stepped over the temple threshold with my left foot. Rather, I felt these rules were there, in part, to inspire us to live more consciously. Becoming more conscious is, after all, an important element in spiritual evolution.

At times I might be preoccupied and walk into the meditation hall or temple quickly, rushing to get to a musical instrument or take my seat. However, when I remembered to follow the rule about putting your right foot first, that simple remembrance would make me immediately aware of where I was and the holy place I was entering. While slowing down and focusing on the present moment, I would move more gracefully while positioning my steps so the proper foot would enter with a smooth stride.

Although this "right foot first" decree might seem like an eccentric rule, it was a spiritual awareness tool in and of itself. The ashram was filled with these kinds of tools.

During my first six months of ashram life, I lived without spending any money. After receiving the letter inviting me to come and paying all the necessary fees and costs of leaving school, I had arrived with only a few dollars in my pocket, and enough toothpaste and soap to last for a while. My room and board were covered, and my needs were simple.

I experienced another surprising shift during that first year. I learned to first accept and then appreciate the gift of poverty. From early childhood, I'd received a good allowance and then income from working, starting with babysitting at age nine. This was my first time living with no income and no savings.

My ashram stay began during their early years of residential living, so the kind of benefits that became standard for staff members in later years weren't yet in place. Nevertheless, I do believe that we arrive in places at the right times for our own karmic and growth needs. During this winter, I learned to keep myself content by staying free from desiring what I didn't have.

After all, three times a day I was served a delicious, home-cooked vegetarian meal, sometimes with a special desert. One of the crew guys would often bring in a bucket of fresh sap from one of the maple trees for us to drink. I had marvelous videos and an endless array of spiritual teachings to imbibe and powerful practices to do, along with a wonderful service to provide, sending out videos of my guru's presence and teachings to his devotees around the world.

Poverty is not there for the sake of hardship.
No, it is there because nothing exists but God.

— RUMI

It's as though our souls become swathed in all these layers that have been created by society, our culture, and the media. One of these layers is that of material desire. That layer was simply and painlessly removed from me. There was no sense wanting to buy anything, because I had no money. Yet I was more content than I had ever been.

I would happily hand-wash my clothes in the bathtub, since I didn't have coins for the washing machines. I didn't even think about buying the pastries and cookies that were available in the small ashram snack bar. I ate whatever was given to me, and lived with whatever I had. And, I was happy.

I did go through some external hardships, but experienced them as tests and lessons more than hardships. I felt I was being challenged to rise above my previous limitations. I was still young and flexible in terms of my habits and circumstances.

At one point during that first winter, my glasses broke. I surely could have gone to the manager and asked for help replacing them, but chose not to. I never was very good at asking for help anyway, and if everything was God and God wanted to take away my glasses, who was I to challenge that decision? I had worn glasses since age five, and wondered what it would be like to just let them go.

Here I was doing these visual jobs of video duplication and bookkeeping, and I could hardly see a thing. I had to put my face right up to the monitor to check the tapes, and stick my nose down into the invoice ledgers. I couldn't help but chuckle when someone phoned to complain that his tape quality wasn't quite right. I felt like saying, "What do you expect? The person making the copies can hardly see!"

Without my glasses, I would see only fuzzy shapes of people passing me in the hallway. Sometimes I could tell who they were and sometimes I couldn't. It's likely that some of my fellow residents may have felt snubbed if I didn't return their smiles, but I couldn't see them!

This went on for a month or two; it was a powerful experience. The lack of visual information made it easier to focus my attention inside. I felt my aloneness and the faceless quality of humanity.

The visual distractions of the outside world were reduced to a minimum, and my other senses, thoughts and feelings were given a higher priority in the experiential realm.

The most striking part of this experience came when our manager discovered my plight and sent me out to get a new pair of glasses. All of a sudden, I could see people's faces again. It was almost painful to look into people's eyes, because they carried so much power. I could see and feel the dazzling consciousness that poured out through each person's eyes.

Another challenge was to remain comfortable in spite of the cold weather. Here we were in the Catskill Mountains of upstate New York in the dead of winter, and I didn't even bring a proper sweater or winter coat with me. My folks had been unhappy that I wasn't able to baby-sit their cats for a month while they went out of town during the previous summer. To communicate their displeasure, they'd gotten rid of all the clothes I had stored in my old room at their house, one more mean-spirited action that had made it easier for me to move to the ashram and say, "So long, fare well."

Within a few months of taking off my shoes while walking through the meditation halls, my socks were full of holes. Sometimes I would run to the outside temple in my bare feet, skipping over the icy ground in my version of a frigid "firewalk." Yet, instead of feeling scarcity or need, each of these experiences carried me to a new sense of freedom. The discomfort of being cold was eclipsed by the serenity of contentment.

When Christmas came along during this first winter, the manager told me he had a gift that had been sent for me by Baba Muktananda from his temporary ashram in Los Angeles. The manager handed me a pair of top of the line, thick, bright orange socks, similar to the color and style Muktananda wore. I would have probably kept this gift carefully stored unworn in a special place, but in the cold winter temperatures, felt that it came with the guru's teaching to not get too ascetic, and to accept holy comforts when they come.

What is contentment?
To renounce all craving
for what is not obtained unsought
and to be satisfied with what comes unsought,
without being elated or depressed ever by them —
this is contentment.

— *YOGA VASISHTA*

Chapter Fourteen
THIS KARMIC DANCE

We are not human beings having a spiritual experience.
We are spiritual beings having a human experience.

— TEILHARD DE CHARDIN

AFTER THE SNOW MELTED and flowers began blossoming, Muktananda and his entourage returned to our upstate New York ashram for the summer retreat. Almost overnight, our small crew of twenty-five winter staff members expanded to hundreds and then thousands of people filling the ashram to live, sleep, eat, chant, meditate, serve, learn, and grow together.

The chants became even more resonant, wonderful, and intoxicating, as all the voices joined together to sing with full hearts, supported by excellent musicians who traveled with the tour. Nearly every evening, Muktananda gave an extraordinary lecture, generously sharing profound philosophies, divine devotional songs, entertaining stories, and plenty of humor.

The ashram guests and residents were stimulating as well. In my hometown, people tended to fit more or less into fairly consistent, suburban parameters. However, the thousands of people who attended these summer retreats came from every possible walk of life and all around the world.

Being open-minded enough to spend time in an ashram during those years before yoga and meditation became popular with the masses, these were some of the most interesting, colorful, and in some cases uniquely quirky people around.

Some were knowledgeable about topics such as tarot card reading, astrology, and various healing and bodywork fields, while others were businesspeople, artists, or celebrities.

We had wealthy aristocrats, poor folks, and everything in-between, with each person contributing to the richness of the ashram environment with whatever they had and whomever they were.

All these people from around the world added new notes to my symphony of life experience. Some were sweet and loving, while others were tense and opinionated. Yet in this spiritually focused environment, even the most obnoxious people provided fertile grist for the mill of spiritual practice and contemplation.

Most traditional gurus would teach only a small circle of disciples, but this path of Siddha Yoga was becoming more widely known, with larger crowds coming as time went on. Baba Muktananda called his work a "Meditation Revolution," declaring that he wanted to fill the world with saints.

Muktananda wanted to bring the incredible wealth of Indian spirituality and enlightened living, along with ancient practices of Shaktipat initiation, devotional chanting, and meditation, to everyone and anyone who was receptive to receiving it. He also brought his revolution to many like me who might not have thought we would be receptive until experiencing that "descent of grace."

Once someone asked Baba how he was able to work on so many people's egos and purify so many karmas all at once. With a chuckle, he answered that he didn't have to do anything; he just brought everyone together, and they worked on each other.

We used to pass this line around the ashram in a humorous way, usually as a reminder when someone was getting on our nerves.

Nevertheless, that is what was really happening. Muktananda didn't have to tell this person to be difficult with that person in order to trigger and purify that person's authority issues; the right buttons seemed to get pushed, naturally.

Each person seemed to have a different, karmically designed experience in the ashram's cauldron of intelligent grace energy, called *Shakti* in the Sanskrit language.

This summer, the ashram's video department was being run by three very different men who did not always get along or agree on everything. We called them the "triumvirate." The video room that had been my peaceful temple filled with photos of saints and sages was now filled with piles of inherently dirty video equipment and many conversations going on all at once.

And there I'd be in a little corner, doing my distribution work: typing labels, processing checks, and duplicating and packaging hundreds of videos. Some new office spaces were being quickly built to alleviate the cramped quarters, but they weren't ready yet.

Every day during the summer retreat, one of the monks would walk through the ashram and come to each department to wave a flame and a brick of burning charcoal with frankincense before the altars. Soon after the video crew arrived, this monk told us that he would no longer come to the video room unless all the video equipment being stored under the altar was moved. But with our limited space, there wasn't really any other place to keep the cameras, decks, microphones, and other accessories that had to be ready to go at a moment's notice to film a special meeting, program, or walk with our guru.

The monk's refusal brought forth a discussion about whether the God who exists in everything also exists in video equipment, but my attempts to change his mind with philosophy didn't work. I eventually convinced the monk to keep coming by placing a large pretty cloth over the pile of equipment.

It was challenging for me to duplicate all the videotapes for centers, ashrams, and individuals around the world, because the same video decks I used for copying tapes in the main room were now being used by the video crew to record programs and courses.

Consumer video was still new, and different orders required different tape formats — this was way before digital mp3 players, iTunes, Amazon, YouTube, or even the internet were available. Our copying station consisted of two three-quarter inch professional decks — one for the master and one for a copy — two VHS decks, and one Betamax deck (the unsuccessful competing format to VHS in the 1980s). Each tape had to be played in real time to produce one set of recordings, so an hour-long video would take just over an hour to set up and copy. With more orders coming in every week, an increasing amount of time was required for the whole duplication and mailing process. At one point, I prepared and mailed two-hundred videos in one week.

Fortunately, at age twenty-one I was still healthy and flexible. My response to a similar circumstance years later might have been a bit less accommodating. My concern was less for my personal comforts than on how to do whatever was necessary to make sure all the tape orders were fulfilled. When I couldn't get enough equipment time during the day to copy all the video orders, I started duplicating them at night.

Right next to the video room and the large meditation hall was a smaller meditation hall, which contained a bigger than life-size statue of Muktananda's guru, Bhagawan Nityananda, seated upon a large marble platform in a cross-legged position.

The video room was too full of cables and equipment to consider sleeping there, so I came up with a plan. During the night, I would put on one of the hour-long videos to copy in the main video room, and then I'd go into the meditation hall, curl up on the floor near the statue, and catch a bit of sleep before a timer went off to wake me up to change tapes for the next round of copies. I had to be out of the meditation room before four o'clock in the morning, so the room could open for morning meditation.

Something very cool started happening while I was following this schedule. I'd be lying next to the statue, sleeping away for that forty-five minutes to one hour, when shortly before the timer was to go off, I'd start hearing what sounded like choirs of angels singing in beautiful harmonies. This sound would eventually pull my consciousness through from sleep to the waking state, and I would get up feeling as happy as could be, often before the timer went off. Then I'd go into the nearby video room to change the tapes and do it all again.

Early on, the nighttime security guard had said that I couldn't sleep in the meditation room. However, I explained to the ashram manager that our three options were 1) for me to sleep there for now while copying tapes, 2) for the ashram to immediately purchase additional decks so I could make more copies during the day, or 3) we would be unable to fulfill some video orders. The manager gave his approval for my special snoozing spot until more decks were purchased.

After a few weeks in those cramped quarters, some extra space was built in an upstairs loft, including a small room with my own video decks to use for distribution.

During my years in the ashram, I had a few other small run-ins with security guards. Although most of the guards were friendly and barely noticeable, some of them seemed to think their purpose in life was to keep everyone else in their place.

One job of the security department was to keep overzealous devotees from lunging at our guru's feet begging for initiation, although amusingly, one eventual chief of security — who I'd recommended for the security guard position — had done just that when seeing Muktananda for the first time.

Another guard used to sit during the programs, looking out over his chanting book to eye the other devotees suspiciously. We were singing God's name, for goodness sake! Did he think we were going to steal the photos? Fake the words? Such silly, unnecessary behavior.

And yet, I had an intuition that this man somehow needed to really get into that "security guard" mentality, to feel those feelings and think those thoughts, so he could express those karmas and perhaps learn certain life lessons about the nature of power and paranoia.

I considered that under normal life circumstances, this security guard might have had to spend his entire adult life developing a career path that could have ignited these particular issues for him. However in the ashram, we had the opportunity to live and grow through many lifestyles in one lifetime.

Here, we could be a secretary one day, and our boss's boss the next. We might find ourselves planting flowers in the garden, hauling trash, milking cows, supervising crews, organizing records, managing departments, giving talks, taking care of a room full of children, studying sacred texts, washing dishes, or answering people's questions at the information desk. It was even possible to find oneself doing several kinds of service with distinctly different groups of people in one day.

Then you would go back to your six roommates. Then you would assume the role of a disciple bowing down before the great master. Then you would sit during the chant, cringing with impatience at someone singing off key next to you, and then your soul would be lifted to unimaginable vistas of bliss and ecstasy. There was never a dull moment in this place!

I had two particularly memorable security-guard experiences. The first took place in Miami, during my two-month visit before moving into the upstate New York ashram.

One day, I found a mysterious key in my suitcase, right under my clothes. After checking to make sure it didn't belong to any of my roommates, I thought of tossing it out, but then had an idea. I could imagine it as a key to my heart and offer it to Muktananda as a symbolic, devotional gesture, a way of asking him to use his magic key of grace to open my heart.

This plan made sense in the moment, without quite considering that handing an undefined key to the guru might be a strange thing to do.

That evening, we had the darshan line, where each person would come up to be in the guru's presence for a moment. I handed the key to Muktananda, too shy to really say anything. He held it in his hand for a moment and looked at me. Maybe he was wondering what the key was for. Was there a new car waiting behind curtain number three? At the time, I felt he could see the meaning of the gesture in my eyes.

Unable to bear the intensity of his glance, I bowed my head, and was brushed powerfully with the wand of peacock feathers he'd use to bless people. Feeling an influx of warm energy enter my upper back and fill my body, I started to stand up, but realized I was completely intoxicated from Muktananda's energy. In this drunken state, I was barely able to stagger back to my seat. I sat down and closed my eyes. An exquisite energy swirled around inside my body. It felt as though my aura was being bathed in brilliant light. As the darshan line ended, Muktananda began to deliver his lecture.

He spoke about how young people are so hot-blooded and rebellious. In my openhearted and energized state, I was especially touched by his words. In a way, I'd been that way myself. I didn't listen to my parents or to other figures of authority. I was protecting something inside myself from the opinions of others, yet this something inside was subtle and difficult to capture.

Listening to my guru's words, I began to silently weep with a heartfelt longing for the precious attainment of being in peaceful alignment with a greater, more divine authority that could best guide my steps. Toward the end of the program, we all meditated together for fifteen minutes. Something new had opened up inside of me, and during this meditation, my mind was filled with beautiful inner visions, thoughts and feelings. Throughout the short meditation session, I was lifted up out of myself by these exciting and intoxicating sensations.

As the musical chords brought us out of meditation, I was still feeling euphoric and somewhat dazed, but had to get up and go. My service assignment at the time was to wash the dinner dishes, and I was supposed to leave the hall as soon as meditation ended to avoid the crowds and have a quick dinner before my shift.

I began to walk slowly to the door, along with a few others who were coming from other parts of the hall. I had to focus intently on my path to avoid stepping on anyone's feet in the dimly lit hall. My glasses were stained with tears, so I took them off, bringing even more challenge to making my way.

As I was nearing the door, a security guard grabbed my arm somewhat aggressively, and held me back, barking, "Wait!" At first, I didn't know why, but as I looked up, I saw that Muktananda was also heading toward the door through a different aisle. In truth, he wasn't that close. I could have made it out the door well before he arrived.

But my guru did not walk out the door. Instead, he turned to the side and strolled over to where I was standing next to the security guard. Baba gently took my arm, and walked with me toward the exit. There, he leaned on my shoulder while putting on his shoes, and then guided me out the door in front of him. It was a beautiful and completely unexpected gesture.

Upon subsequent contemplation, I felt that it may have been my guru's will that ultimately motivated the security guard's apparently aggressive actions. It was almost as though the guard had unknowingly been holding me back not to keep me *from* Muktananda, but specifically *for* him.

It was also notable that I hadn't become even slightly angry with the security guard when he held me back. Whatever happened while I knelt before my guru in darshan that day seemed to have left me clean and empty of ego distortions, at least for a while. There was nothing inside myself that wanted to fight or take offense. Maybe Muktananda's respectful gesture of leaning on me and then leading me out ahead of him was his way of acknowledging that an important personal shift had occurred within me that day. Perhaps he had already used the symbolic key to my heart.

A similar event took place the following summer in the upstate New York ashram. I entered the smaller meditation room that we'd usually walk through to get to the video department, and as I opened the door and stepped inside, I saw Muktananda heading toward me, preparing to walk out through the same double doors I had just entered.

It would have been awkward for me to run back out the doors, so I stood and waited with my back against the wall to give my guru and the few people walking with him plenty of room to pass.

One of the security guards ran up and pulled me back out through the door I had just entered, right there with Baba walking toward us. As the guard pulled me out, he hissed, "Baba doesn't want you to get so close to him!"

Muktananda then walked through the doors and walked past me and a few others who were in the lobby. I was left in a state of confusion.

Again, I wasn't really angry with the guard, although I certainly thought he had overreacted. But his statement concerned me; "Baba doesn't want you to get so close to him." Even though this guard had said the words rather softly, in my mind it sounded like, "BABA DOESN'T WANT YOU TO GET SO CLOSE TO HIM!!!"

During this time, I was exploring a space where the Consciousness I thought of as God and the manifestation of the world around me were no longer two separate arenas.

I understood that the same "consciousness" quality that gives our dream worlds their rich depth of meaning was also present in my waking state. I recognized that events were symbolic and intertwined, with no such thing as meaningless experience.

Through the teachings and practices of this path, I had developed a simple reverence for whatever appeared before me, no matter through whom it came. Its mere appearance on the screen of my consciousness gave it significance.

And here this security guard was telling me that my image of divinity didn't want me to get close to him.

What did it mean? Was it really a message from Muktananda? A warning from the Universe? I contemplated this question all afternoon.

The old rejection sentries from my past were standing at attention on the horizon of the present moment, waiting to have an unruly party in my mind and heart. Those old tendencies pressured me to take the security guard's words at face value and play the "feel bad" game again. "Even my guru doesn't want me to get close to him."

I tried to hold my potential negative responses at bay, focusing instead on what meaning might be hidden beneath those surface words. "Baba doesn't want you to get so close to him."

Maybe the deeper meaning was that I shouldn't get too close in terms of dependence on my guru. Or maybe it was a message that I should keep a distance in my external relationship with him, so our subtle communion could remain unsullied by mundane expectations.

It's not like I'd been following our guru around; I had simply been walking through the small meditation hall as usual to get back to offering my service in the video room.

I didn't know what to make of these words, but made an effort to feel less attached to my guru, in case that was the intended message behind this event.

In the late afternoon, I went back to the same meditation hall to chant the "Evening Arati." It began with a five-minute blast of drums and other percussion instruments, while one of the monks waved a lamp of flames before the statue of Muktananda's guru, Bhagawan Nityananda.

I played the big drum and then stood near the back of the hall. One of the music people had previously heard me chanting the Arati, which I had learned to chant by heart, and asked me to chant extra loud to help maintain the pace of this acappella chant, with its variety of beautiful but complex mantras and melodies. While chanting wholeheartedly, I closed my eyes to focus completely on the pronunciation of each syllable.

A few minutes into the chant, I felt someone brush up against me. That was no big deal, but they just stood right next to me, with their shoulder touching mine. I became somewhat disturbed by this. Why did this person have to stand so close to me? There was plenty of room in the hall.

I kept my eyes closed, and tried to maintain my focus on the chant. I wasn't upset enough to move abruptly away from the person, but it was irritating to have someone practically leaning against me. I've always liked to have a reasonable amount of personal space, and this person was definitely invading it.

After a while, I couldn't help but open my eyes a tiny bit to see who could be so unconscious that they didn't even notice they were actually touching someone. I saw a flash of orange. Was it one of the monks?

I turned my head to look more closely — it was my guru, Baba Muktananda, who had been standing so close to me! This was the first time I'd seen him come to this particular chant. I lost my concentration and stumbled a bit on the next few words. I was absolutely shocked. Muktananda looked at me with a mischievous half-smile, paused for a moment, and then turned and walked away.

I thanked my lucky stars that I hadn't abruptly pulled myself away from this "oblivious person" who had dared to stand so close to me! If I hadn't been humbled by the security guard's chastisement earlier that day, I might have responded in a way I would have later regretted.

And the intricate dance played on.

Chapter Fifteen
THE FRUITS OF SURRENDER

ACCORDING TO SOME YOGA SCRIPTURES, every sound carries a vibrational resonance that affects the energy centers in our physical and subtle bodies.

Now, I was going to learn how to tune my instrument with the sounds of ancient Sanskrit chanting, and the ashram schedule was devoted to supporting this task. We chanted for hours every day, singing repetitive mantras, long-form scriptures, kirtan chants, and melodic hymns. Taking some time and care to study their proper lengths and expressions, I began to fall in love with the pronunciation of these Sanskrit syllables, and delved into exploring and experiencing their intricacies and power.

While serving in the video department, I had access to video and audiotapes of many Indian singers and chants, along with recordings of Muktananda speaking in his mixture of Hindi, Sanskrit, and other Indian languages. I would listen carefully to the subtle nuances of their pronunciation on various tapes, and began to experiment with these syllables during our chanting sessions.

After all, we were chanting the same long text every morning — I had to find ways to entertain myself. Since we were already chanting, this seemed a good time to explore the subtleties of mantra recitation.

While focusing intently on the intonation of each syllable, I would often fall into a space that surely explains why some Brahman priests from India spend their entire lives memorizing and reciting Sanskrit passages.

Many times, while chanting these rhythmic verses, I would enter into an eternal realm, far beyond the superficial level of my personality and external surroundings.

We would recite the text line-by-line, alternating between men and women. While the men sang their line, I'd have a chance to read the translation and take a slow, deep breath in. Then the women would sing our line, and I would shift my attention to the pronunciation and the regulation of my breath. I didn't want to have to stop in the middle of a line to take another breath of air, so I'd ration the sound escaping from my lungs and through my lips such that my breath would last easefully through each verse.

When I sang the syllables properly, they would burst forth with full sound, increasing the energy inside me. It was as though these syllables and my breath were sticks being rubbed together, creating friction, energy, and heat.

One experience I had several times during my first years of chanting was the sensation of hot fire blazing from just above my groin area to the middle of my stomach. It was real, tangible heat. It was not like I was visualizing some flames and interpreting them as energy. It was hot. It was fire.

Sometimes the sensation would last for as long as five minutes, as I'd close my eyes and bask in the bright inner heat. It was intense but not quite uncomfortable. In a way, the heat was also pleasurable, although it did bring up some thoughts about those who have undergone what is called "spontaneous combustion."

Then, for many years afterward, I had a different experience of the energy. While chanting away, all of a sudden I would get an inner signal that "the pot" was full. I didn't quite know what this container was or where it existed. I just had a sense that the subtle energy of my body had built up somewhere in my midsection.

Sitting cross-legged in the middle of the chant, I would put the chanting book down, hold on to both of my knees, and without making too much of a scene, would pull up just a bit, hunching my back slightly and stretching my spine.

My head would be facing downward as the explosion took place. The energy would shoot up from my midsection into my head, and out to my fingers and toes. My entire body would be ablaze.

As this energy lit up my head, I would be consumed by a deep, throbbing vibration and move into *nothing nowhere-ness*. My mind would become intoxicated with bliss, and "I" would disappear. This experience would last anywhere from twenty seconds to several minutes.

I could tell how long it had been by how many pages I had to turn to catch up after "I" returned — it was usually only a page or two. I would come back feeling refreshed and clean, having taken a big bath of healing energy on the inside. It felt as though this Shakti energy would flush through my entire system, perhaps clearing away chemical and hormonal residues from past and present stresses.

Although I didn't know exactly what these rushes were and hadn't read about any spiritual experiences that exactly matched mine, they were generally consistent with the fact that we were on a Shaktipat path, where the Kundalini energy rises up through chakras that align with the spine. Purification movements inspired by that energy moving through the various chakra centers were called "kriyas." By this time, I had received many large and small *shaktipat* experiences from Muktananda. These initiations had clearly awakened and nurtured this energy, which was now having a dance inside of me.

These experiences went on for many years. Nearly every morning, I would be treated to at least one of these Shakti energy baths. Sometimes the flow was subtle, other times dramatic. Sometimes it was sweet and loving, while other times it was like a fire hose blasting through my body and into my head. Sometimes I would sit very still; other times my body would be moved, vibrating and almost shaking with a powerful force. Even when my body would shake, I'd remain completely still inside, resting in a peaceful inner sanctum of witness consciousness.

I tried to maintain some composure so as not to draw attention to myself during the chanting sessions. But there was a point when my self-conscious mind had to let go into this delicious rush of energy. A few times over the years, I even fell forward a little and surprised the unsuspecting chanter sitting in front of me as my head bumped into their back.

During this time, I learned about another intriguing concept, *urdhvaretas*. This was a practice of celibacy in which the subtle, potentially sexual life essence is transformed into higher energies of creativity or spirituality. I wondered if this *urdhvaretas* was related to my daily energy surges, since I'd never had sex.

It might seem surprising that I wouldn't have jumped into sexual activity during my teens, especially considering the wild lifestyle of my family and friends. Maybe their lack of fulfillment was a lesson to me that sex did not necessarily bring happiness.

As a young teenager, one of my friends had confided to me the regret she felt about having broken her virginity with a fellow who worked in a traveling carnival. Within two days, the show moved on, and he with it. I decided not to make the same mistake.

Aside from some kissing and touching during a few dates here and there, I felt guided to wait until I fell in love before going "all the way." Who knew I would be spending my twenties in a monastic-style ashram?

Even so, it wasn't an issue. Just as my maternal instincts hadn't kicked in at age seven when I opted for a chemistry set over dolls, so my internal energy was not manifesting as a desire to be sexual. Instead, it was bursting forth through my drum playing and flowing through each creative moment in this rich ashram environment of chanting, meditation, study, devotion, and service.

And early every morning, as the sun was just beginning to rise, this inner energy would shoot up the center of my body with a thrill that was as ecstatic as any sensual pleasure I'd known.

Every day, seven days a week, I would wake up at four or five a.m. to shower, have a cup of delicious, freshly brewed Indian chai tea, and go to the temple or meditation hall for the hour and a half morning chant. This was how I began pretty much every day for nearly ten years, and it set the stage for powerful if occasionally sleepy days. I usually liked to work late into the evening, and would sometimes only get a few hours of sleep. Being in my twenties, I still had a lot of youthful energy.

Even though it was generally expected that ashram residents would follow the schedule, few others were quite as fanatical about attending every single morning chant. For the most part, my dedication was based on a desire to be disciplined and on my enjoyment of the spiritual experiences that were coming to me through this practice.

After a few years, there was also an element of ego involved — I had a record going! It wouldn't have been the same to say, "I haven't missed a Guru Gita chant in five years, except for last Friday…" So I became somewhat obsessive about attending this morning chanting session. Even after working late into the night, and even when feeling under the weather, I would pull myself out of bed while the world still lay in dark silence, ready to sing God's name.

During the summer of 1981, our video department once again filled up with the summer crew and equipment.

I had an extra busy schedule that included my usual, still-growing video distribution work, along with various production meetings and other obligations. Many visiting swamis, teachers, and other center leaders wanted my advice in selecting and ordering videos for various programs in their ashrams and centers — sometimes they would form a line outside my door.

I continued to attend every morning chant, occasionally dozing off at some point during the hundred and eighty-two Sanskrit verses. At the time, I was flexible enough to sit in a half-lotus posture — which is like sitting cross-legged with one foot on top — and allow my forehead or the top of my head to rest on the floor in front of me.

One of many lessons I learned during this super-busy time was the value of living in the present moment. In the present moment, everything is always peaceful and fine. All the work could get done as long as I stayed completely focused on each moment. Whenever my mind wandered to past or future, I would receive immediate feedback. The flow would become interrupted or distorted, and I'd feel an enormous burden on my shoulders. If I could keep my focus directed toward whoever was stepping into my office or whatever tape needed to be duplicated, labeled, and mailed at that moment, a great deal of productivity was able to move through me.

Many times I would walk through the hallway to the mailing center feeling like Santa Claus, holding big bags filled with packages of precious videos that were on their way to hundreds of centers and ashrams around the world.

Toward the end of summer, Baba Muktananda announced that we were going to have a seven-day, twenty-four hour nonstop chant of the traditional Hindu kirtan, "Hare Rama, Hare Krishna." The only problem with this wonderful announcement was that the ashram had a total of eight drum players available to play for all these one hundred and sixty-plus hours of chanting.

I was assigned to play three hour-long drum shifts each day — one in the morning, one in late afternoon, and one in the middle of the night. I was also scheduled to play the harmonium organ for one hour each day, in the mid-afternoon. Plus, I still had people who wanted to talk with me about ordering videos, and mailbags full of videotapes to duplicate, label, package, process, and send out each week. I continued to do all this work on my own, which was actually easier for me than asking for an assistant who would have to be trained.

With four new music playing hours added to each day, the demands on my time and energy became even greater. The exhaustion was met with my intention and enough discipline to keep doing all that was needed. This combination had a strong effect on my psyche. It simplified me. Whatever energy I had was needed for the work at hand. I was thrust into living in the NOW.

When I was playing the drums, that's all there was. When I was doing bookkeeping or mailing out tapes, my mind was completely focused on that work. While discussing with a meditation center leader what videos they might want to use for their upcoming workshop, my attention was completely focused on that person's need.

Then there was the physical challenge involved with suddenly playing drums for so many hours each day. With Muktananda's super drummers in town for the summer retreat, I'd hardly played any drum shifts for several months.

My hands soon became raw from so much drum playing. Within a few days, all the drummers were walking around with gauze and tape on their hands, even the experienced ones who had built up calluses over the years. When you hit your hand against leather fairly hard and constantly for many hours a day, with occasional bumping against the metal rims that hold the leather in place, it can cause pain, rawness, blisters, and even bleeding.

What a strange situation. Here I was with sores on my hands, and I would voluntarily sit for hours and bash those sore hands against the very surface that had caused the wounds in the first place.

I say voluntarily, because I could have opted out and refused to play, but then the other drummers would have had to pick up the slack with their own painful hands. It's not like the ashram could have just called a temp agency to request some replacement kirtan drummers.

In juxtaposition to my physical discomfort was the great happiness I'd feel while playing drums for this wonderful seven-day chant. It was really fun to play for a larger crowd of chanters than our usual winter staff, and the energy in the room would get so strong and fragrant that even the sacrifice would taste sweet.

Each chanter would be sitting, often swaying or clapping, while savoring their own blissful inner experience. And every time I hit the drum, which would usually be one to three times per second depending on the theka beat, there would be some pain.

The constant question was how much to compromise the musical quality of the chant just to lessen my personal discomfort. Each beat carried this dilemma. Every time I went to strike the drum, in that expanded space between the beats, I would balance these two issues. Usually, I played the drum with a fairly strong hand. Perhaps, I thought, this would be a good time to learn to play with a gentler touch.

And yet, at times the chant cried out for some passion, and I would do whatever it took to play with vigor, regardless of the physical pain. This was such a simple task — playing drums for a chant — yet the personal issues that arose were deep and transformational. This apparently minor challenge brought important tests and lessons about surrender, courage, forbearance, sacrifice, transcendence, and faith.

One of the valuable elements about living in this magical place was that even apparently minor details, such as whether a particular moment of the chant was as powerful as it could be, became tremendously important and significant.

While choosing how much to sacrifice our comforts for the quality of this chant, we drum players were experiencing a taste of the kind of tests and lessons that have challenged many who have sacrificed their comforts in more dramatic ways to help protect their country or the world. And we got to do it while still living in generally comfortable circumstances.

I wanted the chants to be exquisite, and intended to play my role well. It was such an honor to be able to play for this divine saptah chant with so many people chanting, especially with Muktananda still in residence.

This was a special and blessed opportunity, important enough that I was willing to suffer a bit for it. I knew my hands would have a chance to heal, and that I would once again be able to get a full night's sleep in just a few weeks. Muktananda and his entourage were preparing to move on to India, and I had agreed, once again, to remain at the upstate New York ashram for the winter to take care of video distribution.

Along with three hours of drumming every day of this seven day chant, I also had that one-hour harmonium shift to play each afternoon. On day four, I went from our nearby video room into the meditation hall a few minutes before my shift was to begin. It was wonderful to have a moment to sit down, close my eyes, and rest in this holy space.

Chanting is said to create a very pure energy. When one is internally repeating a mantra, this energy is created within one's own psychophysical system. But when a group of people chant outloud, that energy is released into the room like a shower of grace and positive vibrations. After four days of nonstop chanting, the hall felt full of scintillating Shakti energy.

While sitting at the back of the meditation hall in a deeply relaxed state, I began mulling over how much work I had left to do, and thought, "Why do I have this harmonium shift anyway?" There were plenty of other harmonium players who could have taken the time slot.

I enjoyed playing the harmonium and had agreed to play a daily shift, but that was before I'd realized how intense the drum schedule would be along with all my other work. Listening to the music of the chant, I thought, "I'm not such a great harmonium player anyway. There are plenty of people who play better than me."

Regardless, it was too late to change anything for today. I had to surrender to playing for the next hour, but made a mental note to request to be replaced on the harmonium schedule for the last few days of the chant.

As the time for my shift arrived, I sat down before the harmonium and began to play. After a few slow verses, the drummer came in with a slow beat, and I relaxed into the rhythms and started to lose my grip on "me." The exhaustion had pushed me into a place where there was just the playing of this chant and nothing else. I closed my eyes, rested my head on my arm while continuing to pump the harmonium bellows, and let go...

Falling into the blissful rest of deep consciousness, with minimal personal awareness, I started playing all kinds of riffs and trills around the basic melody. Sometimes I'd include a taste of these in my harmonium playing, but this time my filtering mind stepped aside, allowing these dramatic flourishes to be expressed more boldly. My hands were moving all over the keyboard, dancing harmonious melodies around the more simple, basic tune being sung by everyone else in the hall.

Bathed in a deep peace, I was no longer fatigued. I was residing in the boundless expanse of pure mind, as the music moved effortlessly through me. The exhaustion had taken over, and yet my will and the grace to fulfill my commitment kept the music going. This was the sweet fruit of my surrender.

In the external universe there is ceaseless turmoil, change, and unrest; at the heart of all things there is undisturbed repose; in this deep silence dwelleth the Eternal.

— JAMES ALLEN

I was awakened by a tap on my shoulder.

"Oh no!" I thought, "I must have played the wrong notes!"

I opened my eyes in a state of confusion, watching as my hands continued to play the chant. The hall monitor leaned over and whispered in my ear. She told me that Muktananda's translator Malti had phoned to send a message that "Baba really loves the way you are playing."

I would have laughed if I hadn't been so shocked.

How exactly *was* I playing? I continued to watch my hands moving across the keys. In my mind's eye, I could imagine Baba sitting in his room, listening carefully to the audio broadcast of what these hands were doing in this very moment. Fingers, don't fail me now!

Suddenly, what had been so easy as to be practically unconscious now required great focus and effort. At the same time, my subjective sense of time seemed to slow down. Although I was playing several notes per second, I found myself with ample time to have an internal discussion between each one, first debating which note to hit next, and then watching as my fingers played it. It felt as though I was suddenly privy to processes that always existed on other levels of my psyche, beneath the usual facade of my outer actions.

I was surprised and delighted. What a great phone call! Nevertheless, I couldn't indulge too much in the ego-pleasure of my guru's flattering message, because I was still on the hot seat. If I hit the wrong notes, he would know that a little praise could blow my state.

Eventually, my hour was up, and I moved on to the next task at hand. Things were so busy in video distribution that I had all but forgotten the entire event by evening. But then Muktananda's beautiful translator Malti came to visit the video room with a big smile, expressing to me once again how much Baba had liked the way I was playing the harmonium. I decided not to cancel my future shifts after all.

Chapter Sixteen
THAT GRACIOUS GLANCE

IT WAS OCTOBER 1981, and Baba Muktananda and his entourage were preparing to leave for India after three years in the United States. A final chanting session was about to take place in the meditation hall with our guru and the ashram residents who were staying behind.

After the chant, Muktananda was scheduled to leave the hall, walk out of the ashram's front doors, and go across the street to a waiting helicopter that would take him to a flight to India that would be leaving from New York City.

The tour musicians had already left for their flights to India, and I'd been asked to play the harmonium for this final chant, since I would again be the main wintertime musician. This was going to be my first opportunity to play harmonium right in front of Muktananda. Playing right in front of my guru was going to be exciting enough, but little did I know what else was about to happen.

Oh but first came the challenge, like Indiana Jones encountering flying daggers just as he reaches the doorway of the inner sanctum. My dagger came in the form of a woman who was traveling with Muktananda. I'd seen Alicia play harmonium here and there during the summer programs — she wasn't one of the main musicians, but would play for some of the chants.

Several hours before this final chant with Muktananda was to begin, Alicia came up to me in the meditation hall and told me with a very serious face that she was going to play harmonium for the chant instead of me.

I told her that I had been asked to play, but without further explanation, she simply said that she was replacing me.

Now, my usual response to something like this would have been silent acquiescence — at least silent on the outside if not inside. But I really felt that Muktananda wanted me to play. After all, just a few weeks earlier, his translator had phoned the meditation hall as I played harmonium during the seven-day chant, to send the message that "Baba really loves the way you are playing."

One day before this final chant, I'd had a private meeting with Muktananda, when he personally handed me a special golden shawl. This fine silk cloth with gold embroidery was the other half of a silk cloth that had been used to dress the statue of his guru on the day when a group of Brahmin priests performed ceremonies to infuse it with the energy and presence of Bhagawan Nityananda.

I received this precious shawl with a special enthusiasm of knowing I would be able to wear it in front of Baba the next day, while playing harmonium during this final chant of his third world tour.

A week or so earlier, Baba's translator, Malti, had given me a gift of one of her favorite outfits that surprisingly fit well enough for me to wear for this special event. My sitting cushion, which we called a meditation *asana*, was covered with a piece of orange woven rug from Muktananda's house that had also been a recent gift from him.

I had my auspicious wardrobe all ready for this event, and didn't like the idea that this unfriendly looking woman was taking my special opportunity away for no reason.

To give Alicia the benefit of the doubt, her motivations for pushing me off the harmonium may have come from a sincere belief that it was important to allow only official inner circle musicians to play for Muktananda, most likely mixed with some personal self-interest and desire to play for Muktananda's herself. Either way, here was Alicia looking nervous and uncomfortable, without a hint of smile or friendliness as she informed me that she was going to be playing harmonium instead of me for our guru's last chant in the United States.

With a deep inner confidence that this harmonium shift was meant to be my service, I broke through my usual reticent nature to speak with one of Muktananda's close swamis about it. When I told the swami about the situation, he very clearly affirmed that I was absolutely supposed to be the one playing harmonium for this chant, and his was the final word in the matter. With that, the flying dagger of Alicia fell harmlessly to the ground.

Even with all my enthusiasm for this opportunity, I couldn't have guessed what else was about to take place.

Initiation is a central tenet of the guru/disciple relationship in many traditions. There is said to be a transference of energy, a kind of deep bond that is earned by the disciple and solidified by the intention of the master.

In most traditions, this gift is given only after the sincerity and strength of a disciple have been tested for a long period of time. With spiritual power, you are given keys to the stuff from which reality is constructed. You have to be ready.

I wasn't expecting or waiting for another initiation. Many of the powerful spiritual experiences I'd already had would be considered signs of initiation. These special moments seemed to reveal what lay ahead, allowing me the taste of a more enlightened perspective before my time. After rising into these lofty states of consciousness, even when I'd find myself back in the petty day-to-day events of life, the vibration of that space would be singing beneath the surface, urging me onward and upward in my journey.

Two hours before Muktananda was scheduled to leave for the airport in a helicopter across the street, I sat in the aisle before his empty chair, preparing to play the harmonium organ for this farewell chanting session. Nobody was sure when Muktananda would enter, how long the chant would go, or how the program would end. It was going to be spontaneous.

I had been told to play and chant the slow recitation of our path's main mantra, *Om Namah Shivaya*. The only two live microphones aside from one on Baba's optional podium were focused on the harmonium and on my voice. Usually, additional microphones would be on to mix in the voices of other chanters and musicians, but most of the audio equipment from the big meditation hall had been packed up for India. Two hundred or so devotees sat in the dimly lit hall as I began to play and chant the mantra into the microphone.

After a few verses, I felt Baba brush by me, and watched as he bowed to the chair of his spiritual lineage and sat down. Muktananda sat quietly with his eyes closed, after indicating that he didn't want to have the podium and microphone moved in front of him.

Though a little nervous about playing in front of this great spiritual master, I also felt a certain confidence due to his praise for my harmonium playing just three weeks earlier. I also felt very close to him on a deep soul level.

We continued singing the mantra in call-and-response format. I would sing a verse into the microphone, and the rest of the group repeated it back.

Muktananda sat completely still, with his eyes closed. I realized at one point that he was listening to my voice, and felt astounded at the thought.

While playing and chanting at the feet of my guru, I noted once again how drastically my entire life had changed. Here was little Sharon Janis from Southfield, Michigan, now called "Kumuda," leading a powerful Sanskrit chant in front of one of the world's great spiritual masters — who would have ever imagined?

Bathed in a mixture of emotions, I was nervous, thrilled, focused, devoted, and surrendered to the inner intelligence that could do everything right as long as I stayed out of the way. For this to go smoothly, I had to remain centered in a deep inner space, beyond the potential blunders of ego.

Suddenly, Muktananda opened his eyes.

My breath stopped.

He was looking directly into my eyes, and I froze. Not outwardly — no, I continued to play the harmonium and chant the mantra. But inside I froze with his glance. Time stopped. My false, limited identity slithered off like the skin of a snake, and it was just me, the me that I've always been, even before becoming this personality. With that one glance, I was ripped open to the soul.

Now it was my soul sitting before the master. And he was, in essence, the same soul. It wasn't me playing for him, or wanting to learn from him, or trying to please him. It was just my soul and his soul, two projections of the same one light.

We began to chat. It was as though we were sitting together, sipping coffee at a café. There was that kind of informal one-on-one, or more accurately one-as-one, talk.

Where was this conversation taking place? In my head? In the ether? On an astral plane? There was no room for such questions in that moment.

As the inner conversation began, I was the first to "speak."

"I know I'm never going to see you again."

Where this idea came from, I didn't know. It was not based on anything I had ever consciously thought. It was as though an intelligence inside of me was having this conversation with my guru while I eavesdropped.

Muktananda silently replied, "It's okay — you've received what you were supposed to receive."

"But what will happen after you leave this world?"

"The seeds I have given you will continue to grow and blossom. Just keep doing your sadhana (spiritual practices)."

This conversation went on for what felt like half an hour. It was an intense discussion about my journey and the work I was to do, both in the context of my spiritual path and the world.

For that half hour, I had access to a space of understanding that had been previously beyond my reach, although it had clearly always existed inside of what I'd come to refer to as "me."

"The seeds I have given to you will continue to grow and blossom."

I understood in that moment that this is what the guru does. He is the universal gardener, planting seeds of realization into our soil of inner understanding. Then it is up to many factors, including how well we water the soil, as to when and how those seeds will sprout.

Muktananda was sitting silently the whole time, looking directly into my eyes as this conversation took place within my inner awareness.

On the outside, I was sitting on the floor before my guru, continuing to play the harmonium and sing the mantra *Om Namah Shivaya*, with my gaze completely locked onto his. It seemed as though neither of us blinked for the whole time.

This was the first time I'd experienced more than a few moments of direct eye contact with Muktananda.

When all the devotees came up in the evening darshan line, he would often look into people's eyes for a moment. Many times I had relished the uplifting force I felt flowing from Muktananda's eyes. The intensity of his glance was so strong that I would often have to avert my eyes or look down after a second or two. But now our eyes were locked, and I was not about to turn away.

May the guru's gracious glance ever dwell upon me.
It creates all worlds, and yields all nourishment.
It bestows the viewpoint of all holy scriptures.
It regards wealth as useless, and removes faults.

Always focused on the Ultimate,
It is sovereign over all universal qualities.
This glance confers the path of liberation.
It is the central pillar supporting the stage of this world.

It showers the nectar of compassion,
and reveals all principles of creation.
It is the creator of time;
pure existence, consciousness and bliss.

—SHREE GURU GITA
(v.59-60 Nectar of Chanting)

After one of the repetitions of *Om Namah Shivaya*, Muktananda sang a Sanskrit phrase that would normally have signaled the end of the chant. But the chant didn't end. Instead, while continuing to look into my eyes, he began to sing a fairly complex song from our morning services.

Fortunately, I had played many morning chants on the harmonium, and was able to play by ear. I played the melody without breaking our gaze for even a moment. I had to focus completely. I had to step out of the way and allow my subconscious mind to hit all the right notes.

After this five-minute chant, Muktananda began chanting other complicated mantras from our evening services, which I also was able to play without looking down at the harmonium keys. I felt as though he was testing and refining my current mindset, focus, and skills. Because in that moment, nothing was going to make me break the eye-to-eye union with him. He could have started a Bach concerto and somehow I would have followed. My fingers took care of the playing, while our silent communion continued.

There's prayer, and a step up from that is meditation,
and a step up from that is conversation.

— A SUFI SAYING

My guru sang the final mantras, unfolded his legs, and sat up for a moment. Breaking our gaze, he stood and briskly left the hall. Everyone else followed him outside, hoping to catch one last glimpse before our guru left for India.

I stayed seated and closed my eyes, feeling the energy moving and pulsating inside my being. What blessing had just been bestowed on me?

It helped that everyone else had left the hall. This gave me a chance to sit quietly and absorb what had just been given. I began to come back from the depths of my naked, inner being soul, into a new, improved waking consciousness.

As I sat in this holy space, relishing all the messages my guru had just shared in this inner experience of holy conversation, they began to slip from my conscious mind. I tried to hold on to them, but to no avail. It was similar to what sometimes happens when we awaken in the middle of a dream and lie there remembering events that have just unfolded within our consciousness. Yet, even while we see them so clearly, those dream circumstances sometimes slip right from our memory. Though we may try to hold on to them, they dissolve from our grasp.

And so I sat empty-minded now, yet still basking in that powerful presence. My guru and I had met one another in what felt like the closest way possible. I had never experienced this depth of intimacy with another person before.

I didn't want to leave this inner sanctum and return to dealing with the outer realms of people, concepts, discussions and events, yet I knew I must. Having savored this taste of a more enlightened state, I now had to find my way back there in my own time, through the circumstances, lessons, and breakthroughs of my journey.

We are but shadows:
we are not endowed with real life,
and all that seems most real about us
is but the thinnest substance of a dream —
till the heart be touched.
That touch creates us — then we begin to be —
thereby we are beings of reality
and inheritors of eternity.

— NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Chapter Seventeen
FAREWELL

OCTOBER 2ND, 1982 WAS ONE OF THOSE DAYS when I woke up thinking it was going to be just another day, but instead it became a day I will never forget. Muktananda had been in India for nearly a year, and was scheduled to return to New York the following summer.

The ashram manager and I had been having a bit of ongoing battle. Joe wanted to show movies to the residents, while I felt it was not appropriate to show secular movies in the ashram. If someone wanted to see a movie, they could watch it at a theater in the nearby town. To me, the ashram was a place to focus on the eternal, to break free of illusions. And what was a movie if not illusions?

Joe and I had gone back and forth on this matter several times, always ending with no movie being shown. Admittedly, I was a little smug about my victory.

However, one week earlier, Joe had called and told me that on this day, October 2nd, 1982, I was to show the movie "Harold and Maude" after lunch. "Don't argue about it. Don't try to discuss it. You are going to show the movie, and that is final."

"Harold and Maude" might sound like a strange choice for an ashram movie, since it's a dark comedy about a young man's obsession with death. Harold keeps faking his own gory death, and then falls in love with Maude, a 70-year-old woman. This was the only movie we had in the video department. I don't even know how we acquired the copy, but somehow it was there, alone on the video department's movie shelf.

I had no choice but to show it. Joe was the manager, after all, and he was pulling rank.

After lunch on Saturday, October 2nd, I asked a fellow who helped out in the video department to help me set up the big screen projector in the dining hall.

It was a particularly beautiful day outside; we were right on the precipice of a long upstate New York winter. The next six months would be filled with freezing temperatures, snow, sleet and ice. Why show a movie after lunch, when this might be the last day we'd have to enjoy the temperate outdoors? I grumbled on about this to Mark as we set up the screen.

Then, something hit me. I was overcome by a feeling of exhaustion so overpowering that I literally could not go on. I had to go to my room and lie down. I told Mark that we were not going to show the movie.

"But Joe said …"

"It doesn't matter," I told him. "We are not going to show it, and I have to go right now."

I lay down in bed and felt myself being lifted up into swirling waves of consciousness that spun my being around in circles, like water moving around a drain. I remained semiconscious for a while, watching the visual energy patterns. Then the whirlpool overtook my conscious awareness and poured me into deeper spaces, within which I could no longer maintain memory-based awareness. I stayed in this sleeplike state for nearly two hours.

Upon awakening, I headed over to the video room to continue my work. Clearly I was going to get in trouble for having refused, once again, to show the movie. But I was still in a groggy and dazed space, not yet worried about the repercussions ahead. As I entered the alcove outside the video office, I heard music coming from the small meditation hall. This confused me, because it was the middle of the afternoon. We never had chanting programs scheduled during that time. I listened closely. People were chanting our guru's name, *Om Namo Bhagavate Muktanandaya.*

I froze. Several months earlier, we had asked for permission to sing Muktananda's name during chants. We were used to singing chants that included Muktananda's guru's name, "Nityananda," such as *Om Namo Bhagavate Nityanandaya.* Since Muktananda had been in India for nearly a year, we missed him and wanted to know if it was okay to sing some of the chants with "Muktananda."

But the official reply came back saying that we were not to sing our guru's name as a chant until after he leaves his body. Muktananda's name was only to be sung after he passed.

Now, as I walked into the alcove still woozy from the experience of having my consciousness swirled into that deep, unconscious space, I heard the words of the chant being sung in the meditation hall. It was Muktananda's name.

I sat down on the floor as the implication hit me. Tears welled up, and my heart broke open. My guru had left this world. I would never see him again.

I remembered our communion as he left one year before. It truly was the last time I would ever see him.

Shocked, I went into my office and played one of the videotapes. There he was, alive as ever on the screen, talking and laughing, walking and singing.

How could I be so sad when he was still right in front of me? It was only the thought that he'd left that was making me feel a loss. Nothing else had changed. Today was the same as yesterday. I could still feel him in the air.

The soul is never born,
nor does it die at any time.
Nor, having been, will it ever cease to exist.
It is unborn, eternal,
indestructible and everlasting.
It is not slain when the body is slain.

— THE BHAGAVAD GITA (v. 2:20)

I pondered what had happened during those two hours while I slept. What was that strange swirling mass of consciousness? Where did I go?

I wondered if I'd been given a glimpse into the death experience itself, a flow into another dimension. Or maybe I'd attended a bon voyage party on an astral plane. I really didn't know, but I do know one thing. I will be forever grateful that I disobeyed authority and didn't show "Harold and Maude" on that holy day.

With news of Muktananda's passing, most of the people at our upstate New York ashram hopped on planes to go to the Indian ashram, where his burial ceremonies would take place.

I didn't have the means to go and still had to continue to do video work, although we put the subscription series on hold for a week or two.

At first, I did indulge just a bit in the ashram's prevalent group-thought that the truly devoted would, by crook, hook, or karmic miracle, find a way to get to the Indian ashram at this time.

But I quickly shifted my point of view and realized that solitude would be more in harmony with my nature in honoring my guru's passing than sitting on a plane for thirty hours en route to an unfamiliar country, where the ashram would be filled with tens of thousands of people in various stages of intense grief.

Satisfied that the Universal Guru gives us what we are meant to have, I settled into my own way of grieving and honoring Baba Muktananda and all that he'd given me. During the first week, I moved into a little room behind the main meditation hall, where I found the big wand of peacock feathers that Muktananda would use to give shaktipat initiation.

Sitting there, contemplating all this great being had given to me, I was moved to make an offering in honor of Muktananda's presence and memory.

I brought a small tape recorder and microphone into the room, and recorded all the verses of the ancient *Kashmir Shaivism* text called *Spanda Karikas,* in Sanskrit and English.

Several years earlier, in the midst of taking neuroscience classes at the University of Michigan and visiting Baba's temporary ashram in Miami, I had asked Muktananda via his translator how I could merge science and spirituality. Baba looked me in the eye and said, "You don't have to merge them, because they are already one."

I boldly responded by stating, "But I don't experience that."

Muktananda replied, "You will. You should read the *Spanda Karikas*. Do you know what that is?"

Well, it just so happened that even though I was brand new to eastern spirituality at the time, I just happened to be familiar with this extremely obscure scripture called *Spanda Karikas*, an ancient text that could hardly be found in print anywhere at the time. "*Spanda*" is Sanskrit for the supreme universal pulsation of creation, a philosophical concept that doesn't quite have an exact counterpart in general western language and thought. "*Karikas*" are philosophical spiritual wisdom poetry verses.

During one of the first times I attended the Ann Arbor meditation center, long before meeting Muktananda in person, I had arrived early and was invited to visit their small library while waiting for the program to begin.

There, I chose a book at random from shelves that were filled books wrapped in white papers that all looked alike, aside from their different sizes. The anonymous book I pulled from the shelf was called the *Spanda Karikas*.

I started reading, and was intrigued by the first verse, which said: "We praise that *Shankara* (Supreme God), whose opening and closing of eyes results in creation and dissolution of the world and who is the origin of all *Shaktis* (divine energies)." The invocation was followed by an equally esoteric commentary.

I enjoyed reading these words, in spite of the fact that they went completely over my head. Nevertheless, even though I had no idea what the verse meant, I felt as though something deep inside of me did understand.

Seeing this book as a challenge, I decided to come to the Ann Arbor center's library before each program to read that first page of the *Spanda Karikas* again and again until I could at least grasp some understanding of what it was saying. Only then would I allow myself to turn the page and move forward.

And here, just a year or so later in the Miami darshan line, Muktananda was responding to my question about how I could merge science and spirituality by telling me to read this exact same obscure scripture.

Apparently his instruction also came with a blessing, because after this meeting, I was able to finally turn the page and eventually get through the whole book with at least some semblance of understanding the philosophy.

During the two and a half years since receiving that instruction, I had studied this *Spanda Karikas* text nearly every day, especially after moving into Muktananda's upstate New York ashram full-time. By the time of Muktananda's passing, I'd even memorized most of the verses.

While sitting in that little room behind the meditation hall and honoring Muktananda's passing, I was guided to record the audio of myself reciting the Sanskrit verses and English translations of all fifty-three *Spanda Karikas*.

After that, I went on to record some other recitations, including a hymn in the *Kannada* language from South India that Muktananda had included in a special arrangement of "Evening Mantras," which he'd been singing with his swamis and close disciples during the previous year.

At the time, I was also overseeing the audio department, and had access to a rare audiotape of this half-hour arrangement of Evening Mantras. While contemplating how Baba had made these mantras available just before his passing, I decided to memorize them as an offering to him. For eight days, I lived in this little room, singing his special mantras.

One thing I noticed especially in the ashram was that when I made an effort solely for the purpose of spiritual growth, it would often bear unexpected and wonderful fruits. It was to be so with this offering of mantras that I'd memorized after my guru's passing. They would bring special blessings for years to come.

Several months after Muktananda's passing, two swamis came to our ashram from India as part of the continuing work of our path. They had learned these special mantras from Muktananda, and had been chanting them every evening in our guru's room in India with the other monks and some of the ashram managers for the previous year or so.

These monks wished to continue chanting the mantras during their visit, and so every afternoon at four-thirty, a small handful of swamis and ashram managers would gather in our guru's bedroom to chant these mantras for around half an hour.

The problem was that none of them really knew the intricate melodies very well, and the only tape available was extremely slow and difficult to follow. Therefore, even though I wasn't a monk or manager, I was invited to join in these evening mantras, since by then, I knew how to chant them by heart.

And so it was that every afternoon, at the magical hour of four-thirty, I would leave my daily work to enter the wonderland of my guru's room. It was like having a chance to go to heaven for half an hour every day. Feelings of reverence and gratitude would leap up inside me as I walked through the entrance into his simple but beautiful quarters that had been maintained pretty much just as he'd left them before his last return to India.

One day, the woman who prepared our guru's room for these daily chants was unable to get back from New York City in time, so she phoned and asked me to set up the room in her place. I happily accepted.

An hour before our chant was to begin, I entered Muktananda's room. First, I just stood there, alone in his room once again, soaking up the pure vibrations.

Then I put together a silver tray with a flame and several other ingredients to wave before the photos on the wall.

This practice of honoring the divine through outer rituals is called *puja*, and it is a form of devotional practice.

As I honored each photo of saints and sages along the wall, I would try to erase my ego personality and become a clear channel of openhearted reverence.

Slowly, I would wave the flame in three clockwise circles around each photo, opening my spirit to the grace of that saint. This combination of offering, gratitude, and symbolic waving of light created a wonderful and intimate connection with each representation of divinity.

Finally, I walked over to the large picture of Muktananda's guru, my grandfather guru, *Bhagawan Nityananda*. I'd always felt a special connection with him, and invoked even more care while honoring his image with circles of light.

As I moved the flame down toward Nityananda's feet, my glance fell upon the shelf below his photo.

There was my heart.

I immediately recalled a time two and a half years earlier, when I was about to spend my first winter in the ashram. As I exited the chanting session that morning, the ashram manager had come over and invited me to attend a special farewell meeting, in which Muktananda was going to meet with the thirty or so people who would be staying in the ashram for the winter. The manager had almost forgotten to tell me, because I was only a recent addition to the winter staff list. He told me that this meeting would be held in two hours.

In India, it is traditional to bring an offering to one's spiritual master. During the evening darshan lines where people would come up to receive Baba's blessing, they would often bring simple fruits and other gifts.

I looked in the snack shop for a beautiful piece of fruit, but found only mediocre oranges. That was not the quality of gift I wanted to give to my guru during this special meeting.

A friend had left her bicycle with me for the winter, and I decided to ride it into town to find a more appropriate gift.

It was pretty cold outside, and I didn't quite know the route. I rode up and down hills for several miles, and got lost a few times before finding my way into the small town.

It was Sunday, and most of the stores were closed. But there was a small shop that sold goods from India, and it was open.

My financial resources for this gift were quite limited. After making all the arrangements to leave school and travel to New York, I only had ten dollars to my name, with no other income expected in the foreseeable future. Having such a tight budget narrowed my options, yet I still considered each potential gift carefully.

Finally, I selected a beautiful alabaster heart-shaped container, which cost seven dollars. The heart was embellished with intricate carvings, and its cover was decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl lotuses.

In the ashram, this kind of container was often used to hold *kum-kum*, the red powder that many Indian women wear as a dot on their foreheads to signify marriage.

My guru nearly always wore one of these red dots on the area of his third eye. In a spiritual context, this mark honors the spiritual-energy center between the eyebrows, and is considered to be a symbol of one's commitment to God.

I had somewhat identified myself with this kum-kum powder, because the word was so similar to my guru-given name, *Kumuda*. I still had two dollars and change left, and asked the shopkeeper if he had any kum-kum powder that I could purchase to put inside the heart. He apologized and explained they had recently run out, but would be getting more in later that week.

While riding back to the ashram, I came up with a symbolic interpretation for this gift. I was going to offer my empty heart to the guru with this gesture, and ask him to fill it. Coming up with this metaphor made me feel better about not having any kum-kum powder to put in the heart.

I rode as hard as I could, but still arrived a few minutes late to get to the scheduled meeting on time. I ran up to my room, took a quick hot shower, and then hopped down to the small hall, where thirty or so devotees were already seated, still waiting for our guru to arrive. I sat next to the aisle toward the back.

Within a few minutes, Muktananda walked past me and sat in his chair. He gave a wonderful informal talk that touched on a wide variety of topics from his dogs, to marriage, to *Shiva* (God in His formless, attributeless aspect, beyond time and space, cause and effect, existence and non-existence) and *Shakti* (the Divine Mother of universal creation, the creative energy aspect of God).

A beautiful woman from Holland sang Indian devotional songs, while our guru explained the meaning of the verses.

Within moments, I started to feel waves of energy moving up my body. They were as tangible as any physical sensation I'd ever known, perhaps even more so. Like strong electrical waves, the pulses would start at my feet and move to the top of my head. It felt as though each wave would "pick up my scalp" and hold it high above my head.

These rushes were dramatically delicious; the music was beautiful; everyone around me was shining with happiness; and my guru was right there, uplifting and inspiring us. I wanted this moment to go on forever.

Eventually, it was time for each of us to come up for a less formal darshan line of greeting. As I knelt before Baba, he said something to his translator in Hindi. She asked me, "You're working in video?"

I said, "Yes."

She spoke again to our guru, saying something about my serving in the video department, and he smiled at me and said, "Bahut accha," which means, "Very good."

I handed the alabaster heart to Muktananda. He opened it and looked inside. Then he asked, "No kum-kum?"

I was not anywhere near able to explain that the Indian store had been out of kum-kum, and simply, softly, replied, "No."

Muktananda put the top back on, and handed the alabaster heart back to me. "You should keep this and fill it with kum-kum."

I returned to my seat with an immediate appreciation for Baba's addition to my symbolic gesture. I had wanted to give my empty heart to him, and he was commanding me to fill my heart with myself, with the "kum-kum" of Kumuda. I closed my eyes and savored the interaction.

After the last person sat back down, Baba chatted for a few more minutes, and then stood up to leave. He began to walk down the aisle toward the back door. I bowed my head as he passed by, but then he stopped. As I looked up, he smacked his hand down on top of my head, and moved it around for what felt like a very long time. It was probably only a few seconds.

Muktananda left the room, and everyone else slowly filtered out as well. However, a deep and powerful energy filled my body, mind, and spirit, and there was no way I could move.

The funny part is that my mind was still lucid and commenting to myself about all that had just happened; yet my body was completely numb and immovable for quite some time. It was a pleasant, powerful, and peaceful experience.

After the meeting, I managed to find some kum-kum to put into the heart. Instead of the common dark red color, it was more of an unusual bright orange.

But I wanted to follow my guru's instruction as soon as possible, and so filled the heart with this unusual orange kum-kum. For the next year, that heart sat on my bedside altar.

Fill yourselves first and then only
will you be able to give to others.

— *SAINT AUGUSTINE*

One year after that winter staff meeting, I was invited to see Baba Muktananda in his quarters at six o'clock in the morning, shortly before he was to leave for India. Two other staff members and I were having birthdays that week, and we were going to have a special, more private meeting with our guru, called a *birthday darshan*. Again, I contemplated what gift to offer, and smiled as the thought struck.

My heart! I would continue our symbolic dance by having filled the stone heart (my heart) with kum-kum (myself), and still offering it to him (God).

As I sat before my guru in his room, he gave me the golden silk cloth that I would wear a few days later while playing harmonium for Baba's final chant in the United States.

Gratefully holding this beautiful shawl, I had been too shy and awestruck to say anything or to even hand the heart to Baba. Instead, I left it on the floor next to where I had been sitting, and that was the end of the metaphorical heart game, or so I thought.

Coming back to the present moment just months after Muktananda's passing, there I was in his bedroom, waving lights before the photo of his guru in preparation for our daily recitation of the evening mantras, when I looked down and saw my heart on his altar.

It sat upon a delicate, heart-shaped, lace doily. I opened the top and saw that only a small amount of that bright orange kum-kum remained. Perhaps my guru had applied some of my offering to his forehead or to his guru's photo as part of his own offering to God.

Chapter Eighteen
TOTALLY ONE WITH HIM

EIGHT MONTHS AFTER Baba Muktananda's passing, our new guru arrived at the upstate New York ashram for a summer retreat. For many years, devotees had come to know and love Malti as Muktananda's translator for public programs, private meetings, and books. Malti was now Swami Chidvilasananda. Muktananda and a Hindu official had given her the rights of monkhood, and she was announced as a successor six months before Muktananda's passing.

This new guru was exquisitely beautiful, although that did not account for the effect she had on me. I had met many beautiful people before. None of them affected me like this.

I'd always felt a sense of awe when seeing, hearing, or speaking with Malti. She would give occasional lectures about spiritual philosophy during evening programs by Muktananda's request, usually with him sitting in the chair next to her.

Occasionally Baba would jump in with comments and agreements, or join in on singing the devotional songs Malti had memorized for her lectures. His participation often looked like support, although other times seemed more like a test, such as when Muktananda would sing along with Malti's bhajan and add extra musical frills that also added some challenge to her task.

Those of us who were aware of stories or had personal experiences of how gurus test and refine their disciples could see the guru at work as Malti spoke about profound philosophies in her guru's presence. The poet Kabir described the guru as being like a potter who holds the disciple up from within while shaping and transforming the clay from outside. I saw Muktananda's occasional tests during Malti's talks as lessons to perhaps keep her from becoming too stiff, overly proud of her speaking skills, or stuck on following an exact plan for her talk.

All this training from her guru helped transform Malti into Swami Chidvilasananda, an excellent, authentic, humorous, and brilliant speaker, and eventually a guru in her own right.

After Muktananda's passing, Chidvilasananda enthusiastically stepped into her new role as spiritual leader for a path that would continue to grow and shine, with abundant offerings of international retreats, books, magazines, chanting and lecture CDs and videos, an extensive multimedia website, and more.

A year or so after Muktananda's passing, some close devotees gave Chidvilasananda a nickname, "*Gurumayi*," which can be translated as "full of the Guru," or as "Guru mother," and the name stuck.

During this time, many devotees were challenged to shift their expectations, devotions, and allegiances to this new guru, who had a different look and some different personality traits and preferences from Muktananda, although she was clearly a strong and stupendously bright being in her own right.

Gurumayi's brother, Subhash, had also become a monk, and was given the name of Muktananda's guru Nityananda.

Young Swami Nityananda was also installed as guru alongside his sister, but within a few years, he stepped down from that role and gave up his swami robes amidst some misdeeds and, as he described, not feeling in harmony with playing the role of guru at that time.

In spite of the fact that Muktananda had also placed young Nityananda on the throne, a great majority of devotees on the path preferred Gurumayi as their guru. This preference would become uncomfortably visible during evening programs when the two gurus were both in the upstate New York ashram, where they would sit together on a double-wide chair, chanting, giving lectures, and ending the programs with a greeting line of darshan.

This brother and sister had very different styles of guruing, so who knows why Muktananda decided to place them in positions that seemed sure to generate some disagreements and be confining for both in terms of conforming to the actions and preferences of their sibling and co-guru.

Maybe Muktananda intended this setup to strengthen both successors to grow and find their way to solutions, in the spirit of Muktananda's response to a question about how he could work on so many disciples at once: "I just put them all together and they work on each other."

Having two gurus in charge of our spiritual path also brought certain challenges for the devotees, who demonstrated their preferences quite clearly. During the darshan time, when devotees came forward to bow and receive blessings from the guru, a long line would fill half of the aisle, often going out the door on Gurumayi's side, with only a few people coming up on her brother's side of the chair. Speaking for myself, I relished the opportunity to bow my head and heart before the one who I considered as my guru, and that opportunity overrode any discomfort and compassion that might have otherwise convinced me to go into the no-wait line to bow to someone who I didn't really feel was my guru.

The videos I was editing at the time would include one, both, or all three gurus: Muktananda, Gurumayi, and young Nityananda. My personal observation was that, although the young brother guru was nice enough and could play a good drum for the chants, his talks were often laborious and boring, with his strong accent and a small speech impediment making his words difficult to understand. I remember thinking at the time that it was hard to figure out what he was saying, and that the content wasn't worth the effort.

This newly anointed twenty year-old guru also enjoyed driving expensive fast cars, going bowling, and eating pizza, while his sister guru would attend much more attentively to the ashram work. I had a closer view since some of young Nityananda's friends worked with me in the video department, and I also had access to many informal moments that had been captured on video for our library archives. This young swami seemed to be somewhat immature, self-conscious, and not so interested or able to play the demanding role of guru for tens of thousands of devotees around the world.

When Muktananda first announced young Nityananda as one of his successors, he had said that the teenager was only entering Muktananda's university, and that it would be up to young Nityananda whether he passed or failed. Within a few years, it appeared that the young guru had failed at that role, with upset women devotees who felt he had taken advantage of them and broken his vows. At the time, this young swami decided to cast off his robes in favor of a householder life, telling Hinduism Today, "Now it is just like with Baba - one guru. When there were two it always raised questions, 'Oh, Baba made two gurus. Why did he make two.' Now there are no doubts, no feeling that one needs to choose between the two."

The ex-monk would eventually find his way back to being a swami and guru of a smaller community that probably suited his laid-back nature better than a large organization.

The main path headed by Gurumayi was to go through a process of closing its doors to the masses who had previously been allowed to freely come to the ashram — often thousands at a time — requiring food and accommodation services that distracted from the deeper peace and purpose of ashram life.

After 2004, a smaller number of residents and guests came to stay at the ashram in upstate New York, and in 2012, the Siddha Yoga website started bringing elements of the ashram experience, resources, teachings, and darshan to the world wide web.

When Muktananda first passed, some devotees had quickly left the ashram community, while others chose to stay. Even many of those who stayed had to go through certain shifts before they could truly feel part of this new guru's path. As some devotees would whisper at the time, certain people hadn't yet "made the transition."

I "made the transition" easily enough. After Baba's passing, I sent a letter to Swami Chidvilasananda, explaining that I had given myself to Muktananda and this path, and that there was nothing and nobody waiting to take me back. In the letter, I offered to stay and serve at the ashram for as long as she wanted me to stay.

Now, eight months after Muktananda's passing, our beautiful new guru was in town and residing in the upstate New York ashram.

I was surprised to see how shy I became around this guru, to the point where if I saw her heading toward me down a hallway, I would sometimes try to take a different route to avoid meeting her face to face. With so much I would have liked to say, I usually found myself unable to speak in her presence at all.

Looking back, perhaps I had a sense of foreboding about the depth of commitment and the level of spiritual work that was waiting for me around the corner. This woman touched my heart in ways that were unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

I had experienced great affection for Muktananda, and usually felt pretty comfortable around him. But this new guru moved me on a more personal level.

Pre-swami Malti and I had spoken a few times, usually when she was translating a darshan conversation with Muktananda or visiting the video department.

Once, Malti had come up to the editing room more informally to watch the Indian deity-filled movie "Jai Santoshi Ma" with a few friends. As if her usual translation duties weren't enough, Malti translated the entire movie into English for us as it played.

While serving in the video department, I had watched videos, heard stories, and seen photos from Malti's childhood and young adulthood. When she was still a teenager, Muktananda had suddenly appointed Malti as his English translator. This took place before she even knew the language properly, and each of those early talks was like watching a gem be tumbled and polished to eventually shine.

Chidvilasananda was both regal and simple, strong yet vulnerable, beautiful but humble, and brilliant while relatable — a combination of her own personal nature together with decades of committed spiritual practice and service at the feet of Baba Muktananda, empowered by the grace of our ancient lineage.

By the time Swami Chidvilasananda arrived at the ashram for her first summer as guru of the path, I had already spent many hours watching this young woman be transformed, both recorded and live. I cared about her in an almost motherly way. Yet, I also felt like a child at her feet, and a friend by her side. This feeling of love was similar to having a huge crush on someone, but with no sexual connotations — just falling deeply in love with her soul and the divine grace she represented and expressed.

Until this point, I hadn't ever really fallen in love. My parents almost never expressed anything resembling love or affection during my childhood. I had a first boyfriend in summer camp at age eight; we'd walk through the woods holding hands, while other kids followed and sang about us "kissing in a tree."

I'd dated a few times beginning at age twelve, and had my share of crushes on teen idols, but nobody I'd ever met affected my heart like either of these two spiritual masters. Muktananda had already entered the deepest recesses of my soul, and now Gurumayi was engaging me on a more personal level Me, who grew up without really knowing love or affection; me, who was free of attachment to any human being. I didn't know what it was about this woman, but she seemed to break into territories of my heart that I preferred to keep locked.

I didn't want to feel so much for her. I didn't want to become attached to anybody. I didn't want to expect her to notice me, nor to be disappointed when she didn't — but I did, and I was.

Something about this new guru ripped through all my locks. At times, it was all I could do to keep from staring at her, and other times, I could hardly bear to look.

With her entrance, my rational intellect crumbled, my heart awakened, and life once again broke into a new series of lessons. Until this time, my quest had been mostly on a path the Indian scriptures call *jnana yoga*, the attainment of inner freedom through study, knowledge, and understanding.

Now I was entering the road of *bhakti yoga*, union with the Supreme through one-pointed devotion. This was way out of my league!

When love beckons to you, follow him,
Though his ways are hard and steep.
And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you.
And when he speaks to you, believe in him,
Though his voice may shatter your dreams
As the north wind lays waste the garden.

— KAHLIL GIBRAN

Gurumayi would sit in the main lobby every day before lunchtime, often with Gregorian chanting playing over the sound system. Up to several hundred ashram residents and visitors would gather in the large lobby area before lunch each day, for the practice of *darshan* — being in the presence of a sage or saint.

Sometimes our guru would just sit quietly; other times she would conduct business or chat with devotees. There was no microphone, so most of the people sitting further back were only able to hear occasional peals of laughter or other louder sounds from the front of the lobby.

I knew these details mainly from the reports of others, because I never went to these noontime gatherings. That's how apprehensive I was in the presence of this new guru.

Conveniently, a daily chanting session had been scheduled in the meditation hall during that very hour. We were singing those special mantras Muktananda used to sing privately with his close disciples, the ones I had memorized during the week after his passing. Usually only a handful of us participated in chanting these noontime mantras, since most wanted to be in the lobby.

Either I would play the mantras live with the harmonium, or we would sing along with an audiotape of my recorded rendition that would play in the meditation hall and sometimes throughout the ashram.

One day, I felt guided to go to the lobby instead of this mantra chant. There our new guru was, seated with a large group of devotees gathered around her. The lobby had two levels, and I sat far away on the second level. Gurumayi was wearing a big pair of sunglasses, so I couldn't really see where she was looking. Every now and then, she would turn and speak with the people sitting next to her, but I was too far away to hear or lip-read what she was saying.

After a while, I started to get bored, just sitting there watching a group of other people also sit there. I had a lot of work to do back in the video office.

In the midst of this thought, I felt Gurumayi look at me. My entire body got palpably hot.

I couldn't see her eyes at all and could only assume the guru had looked at me by the Shakti energy I was feeling, but I didn't really know if she had.

My video department boss was sitting up front, right next to our guru. Gail stood up and pointed in my direction, signaling for me to come up to the front. At first, I remained seated. Why would she be calling *me* to come up there? Gail kept gesturing, and I finally gave in and motioned to ask, "Me?" She nodded "Yes."

I walked up to my guru, swimming in a sea of sensations. Being quite shy at the time, it was somewhat of a shock to be publicly marched down this aisle in front of a couple hundred onlookers.

However, with audio of Gregorian chanting drifting through the air, I shifted into a more primordial level of what was taking place. I was now the symbolic disciple kneeling before the Master, awaiting her holy command. This experience seemed to elicit ancient memories of service and devotion that were recorded somewhere within my psyche.

It was as if "I" had melted away, leaving only the archetype. She could command me to slay demons or rescue her land from an enemy kingdom. She could ask me to pierce my heart with a sword. As if in slow motion, the master turned to me and spoke.

"You should go out and earn money."

I looked at her.

She looked back.

In contrast with those more dramatic archetypal scenarios, I felt that I'd gotten off easy. I asked, "Should I stay here or go?"

Now *she* melted! I saw it in her eyes. But I didn't know what had just happened. My heart understood what was unfolding before me, but my mind couldn't figure it out.

Gurumayi spoke with great tenderness, "No, you should stay here, but work outside for a while, so you can have some spending money." With her nod, I bowed my head and walked away. I decided that instead of going to eat lunch, I would find a job.

At the corner store just outside the ashram, I bought a newspaper for the first time in more than three years. Looking through the Help Wanted section, I circled a few possibilities. Several acquaintances came by, and I mentioned to them that I was looking for work. One told me of an opening he had just heard about. A local devotee who managed a bungalow colony was looking for housekeepers. This area of the Catskill Mountains had numerous Hasidic bungalow colonies. Most of the occupants came up from New York City to stay for the summer. This job entailed helping to clean and prepare the bungalows for rental, and providing maid service once the families arrived.

I applied and immediately got the job. The owner asked me if I would like to do a bit of cleaning in his house that afternoon, and I agreed. I cleaned for just over an hour, and received six dollars in pay, which was a decent wage in 1983. Relieved at having found a job, I returned back to the ashram to set up the drums and play harmonium for our late-afternoon arati chant.

While walking through the lobby, I noticed that I seemed to have "cooties." Several friends, including two swamis, appeared to go out of their way to walk on the other side of the lobby when they saw me, without returning my friendly smile as they probably would have under usual circumstances.

This was a dynamic I hadn't quite experienced in the ashram. In Benedictine monasteries, a person being punished for some infraction is often ignored by the other sisters or brothers as part of the penalty, perhaps to give them space to process their lessons in silence. The ashram had no such official code, but because devotees wanted to please the guru and be in harmony with her likes and dislikes, many seemed to decide who they liked or disliked by whether the guru seemed to be pleased or displeased with the person, making for a certain sense of instability in many ashram friendships.

It seemed that some devotees may have interpreted the fact that Gurumayi had sent me out to work as a sign of the guru's displeasure, even though my experience of her command had been tender and loving.

Still, as with everything in this holy environment, this bit of shunning from friends became an important lesson on my journey. I gained one more understanding about the potential impermanence of outer friendships, not just in a spiritual community, but in life.

I hadn't really felt very much a part of a community or family before coming to the ashram, so didn't place too many expectations on other people. Nevertheless, this was a new lesson to contemplate, seeing people go from smiles and openness to seriousness and avoiding me within just a few hours, because my guru had lovingly given me an instruction. Of course, I also had to contemplate whether I might have responded the same way to someone else.

One effect of this lesson was to remind me that we are all inherently fallible in our understanding and interpretation of things like the guru's actions, or anything, if considered from a bigger picture view. When someone at the ashram would confidently tell me that the guru wants this or likes this or doesn't like that, I now had a place to put their assertions, no matter how boldly or confidently expressed. I also noticed then and in the years since that many of the problems or misunderstandings people would sometimes have about the path came from giving perhaps too much credence to the advice, opinions, declarations and judgments of other devotees.

In every aspect of life, we are given decisions of how much to trust the opinions of others and how much to use our own discernment, intelligence, and intuition. In many cases, we have been indoctrinated into certain thought patterns just by virtue of being born into whatever culture and circumstances we've experienced. Yet the attainment of spiritual divine consciousness and freedom requires that we stay open to transforming even commonly held worldviews and inbred assumptions.

This is where the Universal Guru and a guru in form can do the magic necessary to lift us up into new, ancient, and eternal views and experiences of life. Many of those uplifting transformations come to us during challenging experiences, such as this small bit of shunning that was teaching me to focus more intently on my relationship with God and my own inner Self.

The way to God realization, enlightenment, divine Consciousness, and the Eternal Truth is through one's own self, the inner Self.

Inspired by grace, we can get to that higher space with our intelligence, intuition, higher soul guidance, and subtle awareness. Although learning outer information is part of the process, we cannot find our own path to greater awareness by simply trusting and listening to anyone who has an opinion to share.

After this experience, I also became somewhat less judgmental about assuming whether someone was "liked" or "disliked" by the guru, whether based on outer appearances or behind the scenes rumors. I could see that there was a layer of high school flavor behavior going on in some cliques within the ashram, along with the great wisdom of the ages we were swimming in. I didn't want to get caught up in petty gossip, although it was sometimes unavoidable and occasionally also enticing to hear about any matters regarding our beloved guru and spiritual community.

I did hear some gossip about the path here and there, especially one winter when a "gossip maven" of the path was serving with me in the video department. She started giving me all kinds of secret tapes to copy, while dishing on the community's big wigs, many of whom I barely even knew. It was easier for me to keep from getting swept away by gossip after this experience of having my holy interaction with the guru misinterpreted by those who were walking by me in the lobby with their faces turned away,

While contemplating this small bit of shunning behavior, I understood more deeply another ongoing lesson, that the most important and permanent friendship is the one with God, with the Universe, with the Self. That is the friend who will always be on your side. This understanding was also in line with Baba Muktananda's main teaching to, "Meditate on your Self, worship your Self, kneel to your Self, and honor your Self. God dwells within you as you."

The shunning experience that only took a few moments to transpire as I walked through the ashram lobby guided me to lower my focus on outer expectations such as whether people greeted me with a smile or not, and to not judge my worth on the outer behaviors or expressed opinions of others, even if this kind of shunning were to continue. I felt that I was being guided to keep my focus more on the Eternal Truth, the Universal Guru, and my own deep Self, a lesson that would come in very handy as life went on.

I could understand on one more level how outer friendships are really just reflections of our one friendship with God, with the Self, and with Truth. That is the friend behind every friend, and ultimately behind everyone and everything.

Walking through the lobby after following my Guru's instruction to get a job, I contemplated the possibility that I might now be treated as a bit of a pariah around the ashram.

En route to the meditation hall, I saw Gail, my video-department boss. She had a more personal association with our guru, and often spent private time with Gurumayi and a few other devotees who we would consider as being more "inner circle," although of course the real inner circle of the guru comes from the inner connection of the heart.

Gail would often tell me that our guru had said positive things about me in their conversations, so she knew better than to worry too much about whether my being sent out to work was an expression of displeasure from the guru. As the video department head, Gail was much more concerned about having to quickly replace someone who had been running the whole video distribution department on my own.

I told Gail that my new job would begin the next day, and she took the news well, considering it would be nearly impossible for anybody to walk in and take over all of my complex bookkeeping, duplicating, labeling, invoicing and mailing duties. I explained that she didn't have to worry, because I could still help with distribution and training someone else to take over in the evenings and on weekends. I also shared my desire to give our guru the six dollars I had just earned as a way of offering her the fruits of my labor, but Gail and I both knew I would probably be too shy to do it.

After the late afternoon chant, Gurumayi was sitting right outside a nearby doorway, in front of our outdoor temple. As devotees exited the meditation hall, they moved outside to join her there. I was carried with this flow, and somehow stepped into the spot directly to the right of our guru's chair. I sat down, as if the place had been reserved for me. Normally, I would not have been so bold, but at this point I was being moved by forces beyond my control.

I hoped to be able to muster up the courage to give my guru this first income. Even though it was only six dollars, I really wanted to offer it to her as a symbolic gesture of obedience and gratitude.

But as I sat there, perfectly placed right at my guru's feet, it became clear that I would not be able to fulfill this inner prompting. I was simply too shy to speak up and hand her the six bucks.

Gurumayi looked at me and said, "You'll have to find a job." She was giving me an opening, but I wasn't able to take it. With the words painfully lodged in my throat, I was frustrated and disappointed with myself. She turned to Gail and said, "You'll have to get two people to replace her."

I looked up with hope. Gail was anything but shy, and seeing my plight, she shot back quickly, "Well, we'll have to find them soon, since she's already gotten a job."

Gurumayi looked surprised, and asked Gail, "She found a job?" She turned toward me. "You found a job?"

The excitement in my heart swelled. I lowered my eyes with a hesitant smile, and whispered, "Yes." I reached into my pocket and pulled out the six dollars, and with all the courage I could muster, handed them to her. "I'd like to offer this to you. It's my first income."

Gurumayi accepted my offering with another surprised smile. I had come back less than five hours after her instructions with not only a job but some first income as well. I didn't think of this as anything extraordinary. She had told me to get a job, and I did.

My guru asked about the work I had found. When I told her I would be cleaning bungalows, she observed, "You must be very strong from playing drums. Let me feel your muscle."

This made me smile, because I was proud of my strong arms and happy to show them off. I made a muscle, and Gurumayi reached to feel my arm, but then pulled me down into her lap. She held my head there in a hug for a few moments, lovingly stroking my hair. This may have been the strongest expression of affection I had ever received. But there, with the Divine Mother caressing my soul, my main thought was of the red *kum-kum* dot on my forehead. I didn't want to stain her robes.

She began to praise me, describing how hard I worked, and how I didn't wear a watch because I worked so many hours, often late into the night. She named some of the services I'd offered during my three years in the ashram, and to add to my surprise, some of the onlooker devotees seated between my guru and the temple began to chime in.

"And she plays the drum and harmonium for so many chants." "And she stayed here for three cold winters." "And she studies Sanskrit in her free time." "And she's so nice to everyone."

Blushing at the attention, I was transported into a trance-like state. It was not quite pleasant or unpleasant; the feeling was uncomfortable yet nourishing at the same time. Beneath my surprise was the sweetness of being recognized and appreciated right at the feet of my beloved guru.

So much grace energy was moving through me that it was all I could do to maintain my composure, yet at the same time, I was feeling still and peaceful, even comfortable. Gurumayi handed the six dollars back to me and told me to keep it forever, because "It's a good omen."

While walking away from this breathtaking event, I ran into a friend who was not aware of what had just taken place and asked if I could loan him a few dollars for dinner.

Without thinking, I began to reach into my pocket, and in my stunned state, almost handed him those blessed bills. Fortunately, I caught myself in time.

The next morning, I went to work at my new job as bungalow cleaner. These bungalows were disgustingly filthy. They required a lot of heavy-duty work.

As we began scrubbing, some of the cleaners who had worked there the previous summer told horror stories about what they'd experienced. As bad as it was cleaning the mess before us, they recalled, it was much worse once the families arrived.

One of the housekeepers said that during the previous year, she had been pressured by one of the families to scrub the linoleum floors practically until the patterned ink came off. Another described how the kids would run around dropping and spilling things right and left as if the cleaners were their personal servants. This did not sound like my cup of chai!

I considered that this probably wasn't the right job for me, after all. At lunchtime, I told the supervisor that I might not be back that afternoon or ever.

Even though this job had fallen so quickly into my lap, I thought it would be a good idea to check the Help Wanted section again for something better. I did feel a twinge of anxiety over the fact that my guru had praised me for finding a job so quickly, but after all, who would even know if I quit and looked for different work? Who would care?

What I didn't realize was that, while finishing off the morning's work of scrubbing, I was being made famous during the noontime darshan.

I went into the ashram through one of the back doors, and headed toward the dining hall. The noontime gathering had just disbanded, and everyone was getting ready for lunch. Several people stopped to mention that I had been the topic of discussion. My guru had once again praised me publicly.

This time, instead of feeling elation and joy, my heart began to sink. Gurumayi had told the whole story about how she sent me out to work, and how I'd found a job and offered her my first income that very afternoon. It did sound pretty good!

But I had sadly demonstrated the truth of "easy come, easy go." I found the job in a couple of hours and had quit in just about as long. I was a sorry specimen of a human being, and here were these fellow devotees looking at me with admiration for the great surrender I had revealed, as had just been narrated by our guru.

Each person who smiled and praised me must have thought they were making me feel really good about myself, but every look of admiration was like another dart being fired into my ego. I realized with a flash of relief that I could still return to my job that afternoon. I hadn't really, officially quit.

During the following week, I'd return home from work each day to find that I had been praised again. One day, the manager came up to me and said, "Gurumayi praised you three times with three different groups of devotees today." This left me in a sea of mixed emotions.

It was wonderful that this new guru thought I was a good person, but I didn't feel that just this one act of going out and getting a job deserved such lavish praise.

Looking back, I can see that what she was praising was my sincere inner stance of surrender and discipleship that had manifested outwardly as both my willingness to follow her instruction and the universe's response taking form as this job falling into my hands just hours after my guru had told me to get one.

Perhaps our guru was also holding me up as an example of obedience and acceptance that would inspire others to allow her to make changes as she saw fit, since she was new at the helm of this path. Undoubtedly, she was going to want to move some things around, with the direction of the path now her responsibility.

There were quite a few strong willed devotees who were ready to balk at even small changes, so it may have been that my example was shared to inspire a stance of acceptance, trust, and discipleship.

One general assumption of discipleship is to trust that whatever the guru says or does is intended for the upliftment and enlightenment of the disciple.

Looking at this event from that perspective, I came to consider that maybe my guru could see that this extreme praise was the kind of ego work I needed right now — not just to humble my pride but to also build structures of inner confidence that I had missed out on during my childhood. At the time, I had no idea why she was praising me so often, but I was grateful and amazed to think that this great being saw such worthiness in me.

Soon after being told by my guru to "get a job," the ashram celebrated Swami Chidvilasananda's first birthday as guru of the path.

Before Malti had become a swami, the ashram devotees would often put on talent shows to celebrate her birthdays. A talent show had also been planned for this year's celebration, complete with tryouts. A panel of judges assembled and watched many proposed acts to select which ones to include in the show.

Some friends and I had been gathering during the previous winter to learn Indian devotional songs called *bhajans*, and we decided to sing one of them for the panel of judges.

Soon afterward, a message came from our guru. She did not want to have any talent show this year, but requested, "Kumuda's bhajan group should sing during *darshan*."

The celebration program began with a darshan line of greeting that went on for an hour or so. As devotees moved forward to bow and personally meet the guru, our bhajan group sat just off to the side, performing Hindi and Sanskrit devotional songs for Gurumayi and more than a thousand devotees.

This was another amazing experience for me, to be singing these beautiful Indian songs right in front of our new guru.

As the darshan line ended, we completed our last song. After the audience applauded, our guru put some notes in place on her podium, and prepared to begin her talk. However, before speaking, Gurumayi stopped for a moment, glanced toward me, and asked, "Kumuda? Do you go to the *Shiva Arati*?"

The *Shiva Arati* was a chant we sang every evening in the temple. Gurumayi had previously come to this chant, and had seen me playing the harmonium for it as part of my music service. Therefore, when our guru asked, "Kumuda? Do you go to the Shiva Arati?" I knew that it was somewhat of a rhetorical question.

As I nodded, she smiled and gestured to invite me up to her chair. "Come."

Once again, I had to stand up in front of a large crowd of people, dressed in a five-dollar T-shirt, funky corduroy pants, bare feet, and a lovely blue velvet jacket that Gurumayi's secretary had brought to me early that morning as a gift from her. I walked up to the guru's seat, and she handed me a set of large Tibetan cymbals.

Singing the devotional bhajan songs had already made me feel humble, devoted, and filled with Shakti energy, and now came this dramatic, public presentation. My mind was in shocked stillness as I sat back down.

Gurumayi gave a wonderful lecture about birthdays, grace, and her experiences with our first guru, Baba Muktananda. I started to relax and enjoy the discourse.

At one point Gurumayi shared with us how she had sometimes felt resistance in her earlier years, such as when Muktananda had instructed her to start giving public talks. In the midst of this story, she said with a smirk, "It's good if you resist. Because in my life I resisted him. So if you don't resist, I won't really like you."

This was an unusual statement for her to make, and it struck me right in the gut, as it was likely intended to do.

The entire week of praise was instantly overshadowed by these new words. "Oh no," I thought, "Now she won't like me because I didn't resist her!"

One goal of yoga is to become steady beyond the opposites of praise and blame, and one purpose of a guru is to give teachings, practices, and circumstances that will help us become liberated from the chains of ego, so we can achieve the greater goals of yoga.

Looking back, I can see how Gurumayi's statement may have been a bit of balancing lesson, or even, "ego massage," coming after a week of being praised for not resisting. It also helped to prepare me for the next bounce to the praise side of the continuum.

A few minutes later, my guru's glance brushed past me once again, as she began to speak about what had occurred the previous week.

"A very fresh incident happened, and I'm totally overwhelmed by this." I held my breath as she continued. "And I won't mention the person's name because I don't want the person to turn red. I don't want you to spot the person."

She paused to give a mischievous smile. After all, our guru had been talking about this same event for over a week now, mentioning me by name many times.

If anyone in the meditation hall hadn't already gotten the news, a good hint had come right before her talk, when my guru had called me up in front of everyone to gift me with the Tibetan cymbals.

Most of the audience probably knew to whom our guru was referring, however, just in case anyone wasn't sure, Gurumayi added, "She has been working in the video department for many years now, a very, very fine girl.

"And nobody actually paid much attention to her, but she kept doing her work. She stayed here throughout the three winters. Nobody ever asked her if she had enough clothes to wear; she got her clothes from the free box. She went on like this, she has been going on. And the other day I told her she should go out and earn money. She said, 'Fine.'

"I was so surprised to see that she said, 'Fine.' She did not say, 'Well, I've been serving Siddha Yoga for three years. Why don't you give me a house, why don't you give me this, why don't you give me that, what do you mean by go out and earn money?' You know, I was kind of expecting that, but no. She said, 'Fine.'"

After my earlier note of concern that Gurumayi might actually be displeased with my overly obedient nonresistance, I was now happy and relieved to hear her praising me again.

Our guru went on to tell the whole story about how I'd gotten a job the same day and offered her my first income, placing me in a very flattering light.

Then she looked up to the large photo of Muktananda above her seat and asked, "Why did that happen? Because she's totally one with him."

Whoa…

"She's thought about him. She sees his pictures every day, editing the videotapes, listening to his voice, doing his work. I mean she has done everything in this ashram, from playing the harmonium to playing the tablas, to mopping the floor, to distributing the audiotapes, to everything, working for hours and hours on end."

Fortunately, I was able to keep a recording of this talk, and over the years would find remembrance, solace, and guidance from occasionally playing and contemplating my guru's words. The message reminded me to keep my focus on offering the service I was guided to do rather than being concerned about whatever praise or benefits I might expect to receive from those works.

Having Gurumayi praise me for never asking for anything probably also increased my usual reticence to asking for things. Being a little out of balance in this regard would contribute to some of my future challenges, while also helping to keep my focus on creative service and the quest for Eternal Truth. Remembering my guru's words and the circumstances of this event would help keep me from being swept away by greed, fears, worldly success, materialistic overindulgences, and other potential distractions.

As she told about our interaction in her birthday message, I was relieved to hear my guru sounding so pleased. But when Gurumayi looked up to the large photo of Muktananda and announced that "She's totally one with Him," I thought, "Okay, now things have gone too far."

Totally one with Muktananda? What did she mean by that? The idea of being one with this great realized being insinuated that maybe I was up there too. But I knew I wasn't!

I was a twenty-three year old kid who had been brought up in a fairly dysfunctional, atheist household before jumping into this ashram life just a few years earlier.

When my guru said that I was totally one with Muktananda, two things happened inside my mind, heart, and soul.

First, I had to stop ignoring the good qualities I had cultivated during these years of study, practice, dedication, and grace. I gained a new respect for myself and for the processes I had been through.

If my guru could even *say* such a thing without bursting out laughing, I must have attained something very precious. A new self-respect established itself in my mind and heart.

At the same time, I feared that self-esteem was only a hop away from egotistical pride. This led to a second effect of her talk. I wondered, "Why would she be trying to build up my ego? She's supposed to be eradicating it!" One job of the guru is to dissolve your limited ego so the inner Self could shine forth unobstructed.

As my guru publicly praised my actions during her birthday message, I remembered stories she had previously shared about the methods a guru can use to work on a disciple.

Gurumayi had once shared that when Muktananda was particularly tough on her, she noticed that it often heralded an upcoming positive breakthrough in her spiritual awareness. When Baba was especially nice, it was sometimes a set-up for an especially difficult ego-bruising test around the corner.

I had also heard the analogy of how a guru will sometimes pump a disciple's ego up like a balloon, so it will make a louder, more efficient pop with the inevitable burst. As I sat in the meditation hall putting all this together, my delight in being honored and praised became mixed with a shimmer of apprehension. I suspected that there might be a less enjoyable counterbalance waiting for the right moment to snap itself around my karmic neck.

Chapter Nineteen
CLOTHED IN DEVOTION

AFTER MY SUMMER JOB ENDED, I returned to full-time service in the ashram, now as the main video editor. My wish from three years earlier had come to fruition. All day long, my job was to watch uplifting videotapes, read enlightening transcripts, research profound quotes, design devotional video montages, script topical films, and to produce and edit artistic outer reflections of all the powerful transformations that were occurring inside me. This service of editing my guru's videos was as fabulous as I had thought it would be.

Several years earlier, while attending the Ann Arbor meditation center as a student of neuroscience and film-video at the University of Michigan, I had considered the spiritual quest as somewhat of an experiment. I tended to have a generally scientific approach toward life anyway, with my occasional, half-joking line, "I'm just here to study the species," and a paper I wrote about human beings for one college class, titled, "Bugs with Brains."

I had wondered what effect this spiritual path would have on my consciousness, whether this arena of ashrams, gurus, Sanskrit chanting, meditation, and spiritual wisdom would really open new doors to greater awareness and understanding.

Even before discovering this new world of eastern spirituality, I had been "exploring my unconscious" through self-hypnosis style meditations as part of my personal quest for greater knowledge. In a sense, these new ashram-based experiences were a continuation of those previous explorations.

In fact, it was my scientific research approach that had helped me to feel comfortable while jumping into such an unfamiliar new world, which is what the ashram was to me — a world filled with new ideas, new rules, and challenging and interesting new people and circumstances.

I wasn't too worried that I might be joining somewhat of a religious cult, because in my mind, I was conducting a personal metaphysical experiment that could end at any time.

However, during these past few years of ashram living, my laissez-faire, free-lance approach had shifted into a long-term commitment, and during one morning chant, I noted that transformation.

While chanting the *Guru Gita* text in our meditation hall with the other ashram residents, I started thinking about how my life had changed. I closed my eyes and took an inner glance back at the course of my journey thus far.

Usually I never looked back at who or where I had been before moving into the ashram. I was now Kumuda, an ashramite and creative video servant who was helping to uplift the world while living a disciplined and devotional monastic life. There was no need to look back or forward in time. My focus was on giving and receiving the profound gifts within each moment.

By this time, only one person still called me "Sharon" — a fellow student from the University of Michigan who would occasionally visit the ashram. Oliver had attended the same "Consciousness" course as me, and through it, had also become involved with our guru and community.

It would actually disturb me when Oliver would see me in the ashram and say, "Hi Sharon!" I didn't want to correct him, because telling people what to do or not do wasn't my way, but I would cringe a bit when I saw Oliver, hoping that nobody would hear him calling me "Sharon." That name belonged to someone from an entirely different era, almost a different lifetime.

It was silly to feel disturbed from being called by my birth name, but the feeling was there, nonetheless.

While continuing to chant the Sanskrit syllables of *Shree Guru Gita* by heart with my eyes closed on this early winter morning, my mind took a rare glimpse back into an overview of my journey. I looked at my pre-ashram life and what I'd been like as a teenage college student, before discovering the ashram and guru.

I recalled the amazing sequence of events that had brought me to this new life.

In the midst of remembering my investigational approach to the ashram as an experiment of sorts, a line came to mind with an official declarative flavor that had me chuckling inside for quite some time. The line was simply, "The experiment is over." No longer was I watching this journey from outside as an interested, objective observer; when it came to spiritual liberation and the quest for Eternal Truth, I was now "in it to win it."

Part of the practice on this path was to meditate on the Guru. As a Jewish disciple once said, "I don't come to my master to hear his discourses, but to watch him tie his shoes."

In spite of having only occasional direct conversations with my guru, I felt close to her. She would be so candid and authentic in her talks, shining with wisdom and humility, while sharing many very personal thoughts and stories.

As we chanted together, Gurumayi would sway freely and occasionally shout the chant out in ecstasy, without holding back any of her deep devotion.

Since I had access to all of the ashram's videos, I also had many opportunities to watch my guru in more private circumstances, like a video fly on the wall. I liked what I saw, and decided to trust this new guru with the keys to my heart.

I jumped headlong into the yogic practice called *bhakti* — deep-hearted, deep-soul devotion.

For many years, devotion would consume my attention and inspire new challenges and breakthroughs on my journey.

Through devotion, I became more willing to change, to suffer the pain of breaking out of old habits and comfort zones. My consciousness became absorbed in the contemplation of my beloved, this Guru who represented divinity for me.

Her every flowing movement seemed to indicate the gracefulness of God. Her smile would burst forth in my heart like a dramatic rising sun.

Her tender words melted my sharp edges, and her pointed reprimands moved me beyond the limitations of personal identification and encouraged me to improve my ways. Through this formless Guru in form, I was able to have a continuous interaction with universal Grace and divine Consciousness. Everything I did became a love offering to God through her form.

On the path of *bhakti yoga*, we worship the highest qualities that we are not yet able to see in ourselves through the form of another. We can love this image, this wonderful reflection in the mirror of consciousness, as we could perhaps never love ourselves.

The end result of this devotional path comes when a merging takes place between lover and beloved. Through one-pointed focus, this intimacy is created and nurtured, until it breaks through the imaginary walls that appear to separate "I" from "Thou."

You are my mother and my father,
You are my relative and friend,
You are my knowledge and my wealth,
You are my all, O Lord of Lords.

— THE VEDAS

During the winter of 1984, I received a phone call from the swami who was overseeing the Ann Arbor ashram, asking if I could come for a week to help them produce a video inviting our guru to visit Ann Arbor.

I was actually ready for a little break, since I usually worked on video editing seven days a week. I was especially up to doing something fun for our Guru, and looked forward to having a visit back to Ann Arbor, where I'd first encountered this spiritual path in the midst of my university studies.

Gurumayi and I had been having a bit of a dance via letters, in which she was trying to get me to lighten up. One letter said, "You need to lighten up a little more... I hope you do lighten up. It's very difficult to see a face which is so serious all the time."

I responded with a sincere and humor tinged letter of gratitude for her guidance, and then received this response: "I was delighted to receive your sweet letter. One thing is that your letters are always quite light so maybe it's just a facade that you like to wear — God knows for what reason." I contemplated my guru's message, and realized that she was pointing out something I hadn't quite been aware of doing. I started noticing how I often did allow my exterior facial expression to look serious.

One reason was that I just wasn't very body conscious or used to having a lot of social interactions that involved expressing emotions outwardly. Until receiving my guru's message, I hadn't quite realized just how serious I looked.

As for my serious face being a "facade," I could see how this was also the case, and contemplated possible reasons why I might consciously or subconsciously want to project a serious facade.

From past experiences, I knew that having people be jealous of you could bring all kinds of problems. Some people might enjoy having others be jealous of them, but I tried to steer clear of invoking anyone's jealousy.

For example, here I was offering service in what I considered as the best *seva* job in the ashram — peacefully watching our gurus and studying their teachings from morning to night, day after day, week after week, and year after year. In part, to avoid triggering jealousy in fellow devotees, I would go out of my way to not brag about my good fortune.

Perhaps the serious facade Gurumayi mentioned in her letter was my subconscious way to stay freer from the greed and jealousy of others. I preferred to have devotees think I was very hardy for staying in the winter blizzards of upstate New York more than feeling jealousy about the precious gems I was also receiving.

It seemed to be good timing that right after I'd received these "lighten up" letters from my guru, this light-hearted swami who was managing the Ann Arbor ashram called to ask me to come out for a week of creative fun as we'd script, film, and edit a video inviting Gurumayi to visit Ann Arbor. This would also be an opportunity for me to give something back to the community that had helped me take my first steps on this path.

Members of the Ann Arbor community had already sent invitation letters and an audio recording to Gurumayi, but no visit had yet been scheduled, so they wanted to up the ante with a video. The current Swami there knew me from the ashram video department, and had the idea of bringing me back to produce an invitation video. I said, "Yes."

It turns out this Swami was drunk on the same wine of divine love as I, and that much of the Ann Arbor community was also experiencing great devotion for our beautiful and brilliant new guru. All this devotion, coupled with my guru-inspired efforts to lighten up, brought forth a video that was filled to the brim with goofy, bizarre, clever, humorous, and devotionally adoring ideas.

The gist of the video was a series of mock news reports showing all the extreme actions the city of Ann Arbor was taking to prepare for Gurumayi's proposed visit.

We showed the supposed Ann Arbor mayor and his assistants, played by local devotees, kneeling outside in their suits trying to burn piles of snow with matches and lighters so the streets wouldn't be slippery for our guru's arrival. Devotees' children were hard at work with plastic building tools, constructing projects for the visit.

We filmed students jumping for joy in the middle of campus and intently studying astrophysics books that, when filmed from behind, revealed photos of the guru inside the book. We even took a trip to Hell, Michigan and filmed the city's snow-covered signs to show that Hell had indeed frozen over, so it was time for the guru to come to Ann Arbor.

And the video worked! A three-day visit to Ann Arbor was added to Gurumayi's travel schedule.

Even though I rarely traveled with our guru's tours, I was able to vibrantly join in from my little video room in the upstate New York ashram by watching, logging, and editing beautiful videos from hundreds of original recorded videotapes of our guru's travels.

Boxes of tapes with recent talks, celebrations, and informal moments were continually sent back to our department by the video camera crew from around the world. Part of my job was to process the tapes as they arrived and make sure everything was labeled properly. I was also expected to watch and log the tapes from beginning to end, since I had to know what new footage was available.

Two boxes of videos from Gurumayi's stay in Ann Arbor were delivered late one evening, soon after her visit. I collected the tapes and took them up to the editing room for a late night viewing session. I was especially looking forward to seeing the happy faces of all those friends I'd recently worked with to produce the invitation video, as they now got to enjoy the fruits of our devoted creative efforts.

There she was, our guru, sitting informally outside with these friends after arriving in Ann Arbor. I settled in to watch the whole tape.

First, our guru made a joke that included the Confucius quote, "I hear and I forget. I see and I remember," regarding some invitation letters and audio recordings they had previously sent that hadn't made as big an impact as the video.

Then Gurumayi described how great the video was and how much she'd enjoyed seeing each person's face.

Now, I'd imagine someone had probably told our guru that I had traveled to Ann Arbor to create this video. She most likely also knew that I would be soon be carefully watching this informal talk on video.

Gurumayi began speaking more dramatically when she brought up our devotional video production. Then she exclaimed, "I don't know who came up with the idea for this video, but whoever did is either quite genius or absolutely crazy!" My ears perked up, as I laughed out loud and felt a blast of grace energy. The devotees sitting around our guru also laughed, and I'm sure sent me some of the good energy vibes they were all bathing in, as they remembered who had scripted and filmed the video.

Our guru continued with a smile. "Because things really manifest when you're super-intelligent, or when you're totally gone. So either this person is a super genius or a super lunatic!"

Oh, I had a great deep laugh! It felt as though my guru had reached through the screen to give me a big shot of giggly, humorous, ego-busting praise and blame Shakti energy, and I smiled and chuckled inside myself for days.

The video we had produced in Ann Arbor was entertaining, outrageous, funny and clever, but in unusual ways that certainly could qualify as that place where genius and lunacy meet. Having my guru point out that juncture reminded me to find a balance, without going too far over that line. The humorous flavor of her pointed message through the video screen also helped me to recognize and become more accepting of my artistic nature, including those genius, eccentric, and sometimes "out there" kinds of ideas that you may even be able to find here and there in this very book.

Around the same time, my wardrobe came up as a fertile ground for new lessons of self-awareness and surrender. Most of the ashram residents and visitors dressed nicely, because part of the teaching of this path was that the body is a temple of God.

I did understand the idea of honoring your body as a temple of the indwelling spirit of God, but still didn't like to dress up. I felt more comfortable wearing simple clothes that were not at all constricting, preferably made of natural fibers. I had sported the "grunge" style long before the term was coined.

Also, with my limited finances, it wasn't as though I could just run out and buy a fancy new wardrobe, even if I had wanted to. Most of my clothes came from the "free box."

Near the ashram's laundry room, was a "free box" area where people could place garments they no longer needed for others to sort through and use. Much of my wardrobe came from there. It was like having our own little free eBay, with a mixture of expensive clothes, crummy clothes, and mostly decent to acceptable clothes.

I was contented enough with my simple but adequate wardrobe; however, my guru seemed to prefer that I didn't have to sort through other people's discards for my clothes.

According to certain yoga philosophies, it is best for a spiritual practitioner to not eat other people's leftover food, or wear used clothes, so as to maintain one's own purity of energetic vibration.

While praising me in her birthday talk during the previous summer, Gurumayi had mentioned as an example of my austerities that, "she gets all her clothes from the free box."

After that, I had been called to the finance department and given a generous clothing allowance gift so I could purchase some new clothes. Too bad the money didn't also come with good taste in clothes!

Actually, it's not all my fault. Two fairly elegant women with high positions in the ashram were thrilled and practically drooling at the opportunity to take me shopping. I was clearly ripe for a makeover, and these women eagerly volunteered for the task. The three of us drove to Paramus in New Jersey to shop in some outlet stores.

As usual, with my overly acquiescent nature, I went along with what these women thought I should purchase. When I did mention my preferences, they were barely heard under the excitement these women were having coming up with a new wardrobe for Kumuda.

I ended up not having enough self-will to insist that I wanted to find clothes that fit my style. When I voiced concern that the red sweater they had picked out for me was itchy, they said I would get used to it. One of the women somehow convinced me to buy a pair of tight jeans that seemed to have no place in an ashram environment, where cross-legged sitting was part of our daily practices.

At the same time, I assumed that my guru wanted me to dress differently, and clearly these women knew a lot more about fashion than I did.

This shopping event was one of many balancing lessons along these lines during my journey. I aspired to follow the spiritual wisdom of seeing God in everything and everyone.

One would expect that when established in that vision, whatever and whomever comes to you would be the Divine bringing whatever you need to have or do. Why would you want to say "No" to God? If God wants you to buy that itchy red sweater, how can you refuse?

The problem is that God in the form of these two women chose uncomfortable clothes that weren't really ashram or Kumuda friendly, so I ended up with a batch of expensive and uncomfortable clothes that I hardly ever wore.

After our long but ultimately wasteful day of shopping, I only had a small amount left from the clothing allowance. With it, I went out on my own to one of the local stores and bought a fairly inexpensive white knitted sweater with a hood. I thought it was a nice article of clothing, although, upon reflection, it was probably kind of funky.

While wearing my new white hooded sweater through the lobby one day, I looked up and saw Gurumayi walking toward me, followed by a large group of devotees.

Though it didn't occur to me at the time, what my guru probably saw was this disciple who had just received a generous clothing allowance, dressed in an ugly, cheap sweater.

Gurumayi came up to me, and began to speak somewhat sternly in Hindi. One of the Indian monks translated with his own dramatic touch. He was kind enough to keep the volume low enough that the entire throng of people couldn't hear the words.

"Look at you!" the swami whispered with his strong accent, "Even if a ghost were to see a person dressed like you, he would run away! Even a ghost! He would run away!"

At first, I was confused by this message. Wouldn't getting ghosts to run away be a good thing? Who wants to have ghosts around? But the tone of my guru's voice made it clear that this was definitely *not* a compliment.

As my guru and the crowd continued to walk by, I turned and walked over to the basement area to make my own contribution to the free box.

Upon reflection, I can imagine Gurumayi's possible motivations for pressuring me to dress better.

My desire to wear funky clothes probably reflected a certain lack of care from my childhood, when nobody had bothered to teach me how to dress nicely.

Being a spiritual guru, she had a knack for picking up on these kinds of things. Also, I had never learned how to put together acceptable combinations of clothes, and would often break the rules in terms of color and fabric combinations. Maybe my guru could see that the ability to assemble an acceptable outfit would be valuable for me in the future.

Chapter Twenty
NEMESIS

The play is enlivened by the presence of troublemakers.
They are necessary to lend zest to the play —
there is no fun without them.

— RAMAKRISHNA

DURING MY FIRST WINTER IN THE ASHRAM, a man had come from Los Angeles to supervise the building and landscaping preparations for Muktananda's upcoming summer retreat.

Ralph was the kind of guy who wore Armani jackets and dark sunglasses — more stylish than most people I'd met, and clearly a VIP.

Along with video distribution, I was taking care of all of the ashram's mailing needs at the time. Upon arriving, Ralph asked me to come to his room to pick up, package, and mail a box of Valentine's Day chocolates to his wife, who was with Muktananda's tour in Los Angeles.

Ralph seemed like a friendly enough guy, and he even offered me a little sampler box with four Godiva chocolate hearts for myself. At the time, I had no money to buy any sweets, much less top quality chocolates like these, so I was especially appreciative of his delicious gift.

Ralph was from the Middle East, where he'd been through some heavy-duty war situations. He once shared the story of how he had been running for his life through the streets of Lebanon with bombs going off all around him, when he saw the image of a man's face guiding him to safety.

Years later, Ralph encountered Baba Muktananda and recognized his as the face that had guided him and likely saved his life.

Soon after meeting Muktananda in person, Ralph jumped fully into serving and participating in the spiritual path, and quickly worked his way up into increasingly higher positions of responsibility in the ashram hierarchy. When I first met Ralph, he was head of the construction crew and the landscaping department. A few years later, he was pretty much in a position to oversee everything being done in every department of the ashram.

Ralph was quite competent and seemed to have endless energy. There were some rumors about him being a little too attracted to some of the younger women, but I didn't get too involved in such rumors.

Having been brought up by high school teachers who had quite liberal ways, it didn't seem to be my business or relevant whether someone had strayed from my personal beliefs of what is proper behavior. Years later would come other balancing circumstances to teach me that sometimes it is important to pay attention to someone's behavior behind the facade, but for now, my focus was on the steps of my own path.

Ralph's mentality was different from any I had known before. This guy could be the kindest and most charming man in the world one moment, but in a flash he could bare his teeth and attack. He was a case study of what can happen when someone is given an extreme amount of power over hundreds, even thousands of devotees who were offering their selfless service and participating enthusiastically and obediently on this spiritual path.

We hadn't signed up for Ralph to be our guru, however we generally trusted that he was following our guru's instructions, by virtue of his authoritative nature and proximity to Gurumayi. Through Ralph's presence in my life, I gained a lot of inner strength and learned many difficult but important lessons, as did many others in our spiritual community.

This, in a sense, was what I had come to this spiritual school for. I wanted to be transformed. I wanted to learn to respond to the universe in a new way. I wanted to rise above pettiness and get rid of all the garbage that had accumulated on top of my pure soul. I wanted desperately to grow into that great being I now knew was inside myself. Ralph probably had similar goals, but seemed to require different lessons to get there. Somehow, all of our tests and lessons fit together.

Ralph's often-abrasive behavior gave new challenges to many students and devotees of our path, along with a few chuckles here and there. I could do a decent imitation of Ralph's accent, saying some of his more legendary phrases, including "Hey, do you have kidneys for brains?" These Ralph imitations helped keep my friends and me entertained and chuckling, even when he was giving us trouble.

Through the wisdom of ancient scriptures, we had come to understand the Sanskrit term *tapasya*, which translates as "burning." As much as we might prefer for everything to be smooth and easy right away and all the time, on the road to personal and spiritual freedom, adversity can be grist for the mill. It's like sandpaper, smoothing our rough edges.

The choices we make in responding to our individual life situations are part of what the Indian scriptures call *sadhana*, spiritual practice, our efforts to consciously participate in the personal evolution of our soul through this journey of human experience.

During these ashram years, many wonderful people came into my life. There were sweet moments, light moments, joyful and blissful moments — so many amazing, powerful blessings.

Yet, when I look at the life lessons that created the greatest leaps of understanding, faith, self-awareness, and inner strength — not to mention those that would be most entertaining for my audience to read about — most of those lessons and personal triumphs came from people like Ralph, or other circumstances that might be viewed as challenging.

While these events were occurring, I couldn't always see the positive transformations coming from the difficulties, however, with reflection, hindsight, and a more objective eye focused beyond surface comforts, these challenges and subsequent breakthroughs are some of my most treasured times.

From the soul's bigger picture view, what is most important may be the growth that comes from an event, whether the outer circumstances are sweet or bitter.

Early on, I learned what might happen if I talked back to Ralph.

In 1984, my guru invited me to join her and a small group of devotees on a driving tour through the state of Maharashtra, in India. Gurumayi was scheduled to give large-scale programs for tens of thousands of Indian devotees.

My guru had recently expressed being pleased with my video work, and it seemed that she wanted to give me the gift of this experience of traveling with her through the holy land. I was happy and excited to be going to India to travel with my guru.

Originally, I'd been scheduled to be part of a full video crew that was going to be filming our guru's tour, but after I arrived in India, the traveling entourage was pared back to around twenty people, without the video department.

I sent Gurumayi a note telling her that I was fine with whatever she wanted — if it wasn't meant to be for me to go on tour, then I'd be happy to stay in the Indian ashram or go back to my video work in the upstate New York ashram.

Instead of leaving me behind or sending me back, Gurumayi brought me along anyway, and assigned me to shoot super-8 film with an extremely loud film camera, whose footage would hardly be good enough quality to ever use in any proper video edit. I assumed the super-8 filming was just for an archival record of some of the events, and also an excuse to bring me along.

The evening programs were usually too dark for recording, and whenever I stood up to film a bit of Gurumayi's talk with that loud film camera, thousands of audience members would turn from watching her to looking at me and into the camera. Since nobody seemed too concerned about this super-8 footage, I just filmed a few bits and pieces here and there, some video snippets of what was happening on the tour for the archives.

One day, Gurumayi was standing outside, talking informally with the maharaja whose family land we were using for programs. With super-8 camera in hand, I started filming a few shots of their conversation, first as a wide shot, and then a closer scene of the maharaja's face, panning over to Gurumayi's profile. In spite of the very loud camera, neither looked over to see what I was doing or to ask me to stop filming. Then I noticed Gurumayi's beautiful hands. Behind her back, she was moving bead by bead of her rosary-like *japa mala*. Traditionally, one repeats the mantra inwardly with each turn of a bead.

I was moved to see my guru engaged in silent focus on the highest while in the midst of this conversation with her royal host. I thought it would make a beautiful image, and moved in to get a closer shot of her hands.

At that moment, Ralph came up behind me and sneered, "Why do you always shoot stupid things?"

I turned around, and was so surprised by Ralph's absurd comment and lack of politeness that I took a quick shot of his face with the camera, and said, "There. Now I've got another one."

Of course, Ralph was far from stupid, and I would usually have been more polite and surrendered and not felt it was my job to put him in his place, but that's what I did and said, and soon I was to pay the price.

Within a few days, I was mysteriously sent back to the United States, with my guru quickly turning toward me and saying, "So you'll go back to South Fallsburg. They need you for editing."

I was fine about going back to the upstate New York ashram, where I knew my way around and had a lot of opportunities to offer wonderful service, although I had some questions about how the decision may have come to pass.

Another challenging experience with Ralph occurred the following year, during an evening program in Los Angeles.

Our guru was giving programs at the Criterion Theatre in Santa Monica for several months, and she had brought me to California from the upstate New York ashram to take some video classes at UCLA, and to direct the cameras for her programs whenever my class schedule allowed.

As video director, my task was to tell our three cameramen what to film. I sat just to the left of our guru's stage, looking at a console of small video monitors. The cameramen and I would speak back and forth as softly as possible through our system of audio headsets.

While everyone else in the room was sitting quietly and focusing their attention on our guru's words of wisdom, my assignment was to keep talking. I would direct camera one to go in for a close-up, camera three to zoom out to a full-body shot, and camera two to pan faces in the audience.

I had to make sure that the camera angles for any point during the talk would edit together properly.

On my first day as director, Gurumayi came out from her meeting room behind the stage and sat in a throne-like chair to give her lecture.

As she spoke, I directed one of the cameras to film some cutaway shots of the audience watching, laughing, and reacting to what she was saying. These kinds of clips would be useful in adding color and ambiance to this talk, and could also be used to cover any edits for future talks filmed in the same theater.

Here was my guru espousing profound spiritual teachings that I wanted to hear and learn, yet I could no longer let myself become absorbed in what she was saying. Instead, I had to pay attention to what each of the cameras was filming. It was fun to have this new responsibility, although I couldn't help but notice that I might be missing some valuable teachings at the same time. This concern was mitigated by the fact that, as the ashram's video editor, I would eventually have the opportunity to watch these talks not just once, but probably many times.

We were in this huge theater with thousands of people, and they were all sitting completely silently while listening with full attention to our guru's words.

It almost sounded as though Gurumayi was giving her talk in an empty room — that is how still and quiet everyone would become.

And there we were, the cameramen and me, gabbing away in a nonstop stream of whispered directions.

"OK, camera two, go in for a close-up; three, get some medium-wide shots of the audience."

"Should I get that same group we shot before?"

"No, maybe do a pan of the men's section right behind you."

On we went, throughout the lecture.

The phone next to me began to flash. The only other phone hooked up to our system was the one in our guru's meeting room behind the stage. Since she was in the hall giving her talk, it was Ralph who was staying in that room, watching all that we were filming from his own set of monitors.

I answered the phone and heard a terse voice with a Lebanese accent say, "Hey you, director. Why do you always shoot ugly people? They all look like you!"

It was Ralph.

Not since my childhood had anyone insulted me so blatantly. This event gave me the opportunity to learn how to make a choice. I could let Ralph's insult get to me and respond with anger or victimization, or I could let it go and stay focused on the important and demanding task in front of me, continuing to direct the three cameras with positive energy, care and love.

Because of my desire to serve, I just let it go. I didn't think, "Oh no, I must be ugly," nor did I think, "No, I'm not!"

I simply put the phone down and continued to perform the task before me.

It took all my focus to surmount the other potential responses waiting to bring me down, but the insult never really caused any significant friction in my self-esteem. I was learning to let things go, learning to laugh something like this off in my mind.

Of course, looking beautiful wasn't on my list of priorities either. I hoped to look pleasant, but really didn't wish to become super beautiful. That just didn't seem to be on my plate this lifetime. I had also noticed that outer beauty could bring certain other complications that might not fit in with my love of solitude and peace.

I hoped not to be disturbing to look at, but in spite of Ralph's words, knew that I wasn't "ugly." Having managed to avoid ending up with my fathers big hook nose in the genetic mix, I'd always tended to feel generally grateful and contented with my simple looks.

Still, these and other occasional challenges of being insulted were bringing up some forgotten pockets of my psyche, including a childhood where being ignored was often punctuated with insults.

Perhaps these similar circumstances were coming up now because my growing spiritual foundation was strong enough to support transforming some of the limiting personality patterns I had accumulated during this and perhaps other lifetimes.

In the space of grace, right there in the meditation hall with our guru's presence bringing forth the wisdom of the ages, those old patterns of insecurity from being insulted were easily lifted up into new levels of self awareness. I was gaining more freedom from previous ways of thinking and responding.

That's why I didn't explode or storm out the door when this man gave me a hard time. Even though I might have felt upset or frustrated on one level by certain events, from a higher perspective I saw that these challenges were just the right medicine for my spiritual growth. They pushed me into a new strength, a more dependable emotional steadiness, and a greater foundation of self respect.

Ralph was a worthy sparring opponent — he was intelligent, creative, confident, and fun. One reason this man had so much stature around the ashram was due to his admirable dedication to our guru and the organization. He worked tirelessly, and was often able to complete magnificent projects within seemingly miraculous deadlines. I also liked Ralph and appreciated his enthusiasm and charm.

Sometimes he was absolutely sweet and loving toward me, acting almost like a big brother, but he could also be demanding and rude.

Perhaps because Ralph was so busy supervising projects in many departments, he was not always consistent in his behavior.

Ralph's undependable nature required me to learn how to be more patient and flexible in my responses when dealing with him, and others in the future.

Soon after I took several excellent extension film classes at UCLA, came the chanting video challenge. It was another ashram winter for me, although instead of the thirty staff we'd had during my first winter, we were up to hundreds who would keep the ashram going year round.

I had been asked to make a special video that would explain the meaning, purpose, and benefits of the devotional practice of chanting God's Name to newcomers and old timers alike.

I wanted to use all my new education to produce this video about a topic so dear to my heart.

Also, I had recently received several messages from my guru, expressing her dissatisfaction with the quality of my videos and her hope that I would improve my skills.

While receiving these disapproving messages, I would still be assigned to script and edit many video projects that would be sent to centers and ashrams all around the world. Therefore, it seemed that my guru's words were mainly intended to inspire me to improve my abilities, which they did.

In one impactful letter from this correspondence series, my guru said she was praying that I would make progress in the skill that I've got, adding, "So far I haven't seen one video that tears me apart and makes me feel, 'This is it, this is it, this is it! So I'm waiting for this video. When will it be?"

I truly wanted to create that one video — and hopefully many videos — that would make my Guru's heart sing. This quest had become an important part of my spiritual path, leading to this current opportunity to create a video that would introduce and unfold the power of chanting God's name to spiritual seekers around the world.

I wanted this chanting video to be a perfect, wonderful, skilled, and fabulous video that would make my guru exclaim, "This is it! This is it!"

Along with learning many new filmmaking techniques in the UCLA extension courses I'd attended during Gurumayi's tour in Los Angeles, I'd also been reading books and putting considerable effort into improving my skills. These included learning to be a better producer, scriptwriter, and editor, since I almost always created these videos on my own from scratch to finish. Usually, my final videos only needed to be approved by whatever manager or department head was in charge of approvals at the time, who would almost always approve the videos outright or with a request for only minor changes.

With the more easeful schedule of another upstate New York winter, I had time and space to really focus my energy on this chanting video project. I poured my mind, heart, and soul into creating a video that could bless tens of thousands of devotees and ashram and center guests. I researched quotes and footage, and would receive inspirations during my meditations and chanting practice of what to say and include in the piece. After coming up with a polished script, I put together a carefully crafted first edit.

Ralph had recently arrived at the upstate New York ashram for a short visit, and would be in charge of approving videos while he was there. I was really excited to show him this video, because it was the most professional one I had produced. I thought he was really going to like it.

Ralph had been sweet and brotherly to me when he arrived. He even gave me a gift of a gold toned watch ringed with cubic zirconium diamonds that certainly looked fancy, which was a bit in contrast with my simple clothing style. When I phoned his office, Ralph told me to bring the video right on down. I took the tape to his office and popped it into the VCR. Ralph sat down to watch, and I hit the play button.

However, right before the video began, several construction crew staff entered the room to show Ralph some plans. He got up and walked over to an entirely different section of the large office with his back to me and the television screen. As he looked over their paperwork, I hit the pause button.

Ralph turned around quickly to say, "Just keep it playing."

I rolled the tape again, and looked over to see Ralph still standing far away with his back to the television, talking away. The video played on with the sound barely audible, then it eventually ended. I pressed the rewind button so Ralph could watch it after his meeting.

Ralph finished talking with the crew workers and came back over to where I was seated. He looked me right in the eyes and said, "Forget it. It's lousy. Don't ever show that video to anyone."

My jaw dropped in shock. Ralph had been friendly to me since arriving, so I was not expecting this dramatic shift back into combat mode. I had been caught off-guard. I could have said "But you didn't even see it," but obviously we both knew that he hadn't seen the video. He was playing a game, perhaps making a power play.

I didn't know why he would want to throw away this beautiful project, although as usual, I contemplated the events from the mundane level as well as spiritual ones. I considered that it was even possible that our guru had instructed Ralph to crush my dreams of creating a superb video, which perhaps were entangled with certain threads of ego and limited self assessment and identification.

Certainly, this event and all events are part of the play of the Universal Guru, the great creative Consciousness that writes every script. For the guru, a video is of less concern than the evolution of disciples, something we learned many times in the ashram, where projects would be cancelled or redone fairly often.

Our responses to such challenges were supported by some of the ancient spiritual stories we'd studied that helped to explain how we might be able to learn and grow from certain challenges.

In one well-known story, a guru named Marpa had told his disciple, Milarepa, to build a large tower by hand. Once this monumental feat was completed, the guru told the disciple that he had built it in the wrong spot, and instructed Milarepa to dismantle and rebuild the tower elsewhere. This same sequence of events happened nine times, at which point the disciple was exhausted and suffering from cuts and bruises, and refused to rebuild the tower again.

Eventually, Marpa explained that Milarepa had been carrying the karmic burdens from ten terrible sins that he'd performed in previous lifetimes. These ten karmic debts were holding back Milarepa's potential for spiritual freedom in this life.

Each tower represented one of those sins, and all the *tapasya*, burning, and suffering that Milarepa underwent while building and tearing down those towers was, on a metaphysical level, freeing him from the karmic burdens of those ten sins.

Marpa explained that since Milarepa had not completed the tenth tower, he would have to do more years of spiritual practice before attaining the great eternal Truth. In time, Milarepa the disciple became a great guru in his own right.

In the face of such stories, my test of having to shelve a beautiful chanting video project that I'd worked hard to create — while very difficult — was certainly not as challenging as what Milarepa had to go through. Maybe I needed to experience this level of surrender in my creative service to grow into even more guided and abundant creative works in the future.

Even though I thought shelving this video was a bad decision, there was no other manager for me to turn to for help. Ralph was responsible for approving or not approving the videos, and that was that. I thought of writing to our guru about what had happened, but didn't want to complain. One of Gurumayi's secretaries had previously communicated to me saying, "It seems that you are always doing fine without great 'problems' and Gurumayi is always glad to hear from those who have such attainments." After receiving a message like that, I really didn't want to be one more person sending a letter of complaint to the guru.

Having Ralph squash this beautiful project was both difficult and easy to take. It was painfully difficult until I worked within my mind and heart to let go and experience some detachment from all the work and care I had put into this project, even detachment from my hopes of making a video that would please my guru, and perhaps even make her say, "This is it!"

The *Bhagavad Gita* says that a seeker of higher truth must become free from excessive focus on the fruits of actions. This goal makes sense on a metaphysical level as well. Whatever good and positive efforts and energies we put into the world do seem to reflect back, though often in ways that are beyond our understanding, or in another time and place — perhaps even in a different lifetime or dimension. We must therefore find the inner strength to continue to do good even when confronted with disappointing apparent results from our sincere efforts.

At first, I was upset by Ralph's unfair treatment and the ruining of a project that could have inspired and uplifted many devotees and visitors to the path. I could feel rumblings of frustration and anger starting to eat away at my well-being, so I had to move my experience above the event and into the Supreme Self that is beyond all events, all efforts, and all videos.

I moved into a new space of acceptance that whatever happens is the will of the Supreme. This shift is different from going into numbness or denial. It is a way to become greater than any obstacle by moving into identification with the conscious energy through which all circumstances are created.

The important thing was that I had performed my service with devotion and care. It was not necessary for my actions to achieve any more outer result than that. Nothing done with love is ever wasted.

> *Success is going from one failure to the next without a loss of enthusiasm.*
>
> — *WINSTON CHURCHILL*

Chapter Twenty-One
SHE STILL THINKS SHE DID IT!

IT WAS 1987, And Gurumayi had returned to the upstate New York ashram for the summer retreat, just in time for a festive celebration of her birthday on June twenty-fourth.

Ralph was in full-on creative mode, with a big budget of funds that had been donated for the elaborate festivities, plus a growing selection of devotee celebrities who wanted to offer their talents for Gurumayi's birthday celebration.

England's singing sensation Lulu would sing, "To *Her* With Love," as a full symphony orchestra played on a stage that had been built in the middle of our lake, complete with ballet dancers.

Numerous garden workers had actually sculpted the surrounding hillside into seat-like sections that a large crew of garden workers had quickly overlaid with fresh sod.

Fireworks exploded in the sky together with an intricate laser show. One of India's top musicians, Bhimsen Joshi, sat with us on the water's edge, singing exquisite devotional songs.

I'd had the opportunity to contribute my own little offering to the celebration. Still serving as video editor, I decided to create an audio recording that began with rolls of laughter from our first guru — Gurumayi's guru — Baba Muktananda. The laughter came from many different video and audio recordings, blended into one another to create an audio waterfall of Muktananda's great deep laugh.

Then I painstakingly researched through the multimedia archives of Baba's talks, and edited individual bits of his words so that after the laughter, his voice would say, "Chidvilasananda? Happy birthday, happy birthday, and happy birthday. I love you, I love you, and I love you." The word "happy" came from one of Muktananda's talks in Miami where he had said, just before beginning a long chant to celebrate the spring holidays, "Happy Easter, Happy Passover, and Happy *Om Namah Shivaya*."

The word "birthday" came from a talk in 1979 when Muktananda mentioned that his birthday was coming up in a few days, when he happened to say the English word "birthday" in the midst of his Indian dialects. I sorted through many years of birthday and near birthday videos, audios, and transcripts to find that gem!

Like those commercials that would come in subsequent years, bringing old singers and dancers back to life through visual effects, I found and assembled what sounded like a personal audio message to Gurumayi in Muktananda's voice. I suppose having had her announce to the world during her birthday celebration a few years earlier that I was "totally one with him" may have given me a little more chutzpah regarding such things than I might have otherwise had.

I ended Baba's newly assembled laughter and message with an obscure recording I'd found during my research for this project. On this audio tape that nobody had head since the day it was recorded, Muktananda sang a traditional devotional song, "Avadali Gurumayi Hridaya," whose refrain translates as: "I love my Gurumayi with all my heart."

Gurumayi means "Guru mother" in the Marathi language, and "filled with the Guru" in Sanskrit. Devotees had given Swami Chidvilasananda the informal name "Gurumayi" after Baba Muktananda's passing, so it was extra-special to find this obscure audio recording of Baba singing what was to become his successor's nickname.

During our evening celebration, I was seated close enough to see Gurumayi watching all the performances near some dimly lit lakeside foliage.

After one performance, the stage lights went down, and Muktananda's face appeared through a laser effect in the sky. I looked over to see Gurumayi as the audio of Muktananda's laughter rolled across the lake with an incredible presence that I couldn't have even imagined while hearing it in the editing room.

Muktananda's rolling laughter was followed by his carefully crafted birthday wish of love and then singing her new name. My guru placed her hand over her mouth in surprise.

The next day, one of Gurumayi's assistants came by the video room to ask for a copy of the recording. She said that, out of all those amazing celebrity performances and entertainment, this Baba message had been our guru's favorite gift.

I felt that our guru's response was a demonstration of her discipleship and showed how one drop of her Guru's divine love could outshine all the finest entertainers of this world.

As one of my favorite Sufi qawwali songs says, "Just one small drop of the wine of Your love, and this world with all its beauty is drowned forever."

A new devotee had arrived on the scene that year to direct the video for this birthday celebration. Tony was an accomplished music video director who had offered to oversee the filming of the whole weekend of festivities.

The ashram's video department had several decent cameramen, but Tony brought a new professional flair, challenging all of us to move our skills to a higher level. He was a charismatic, strong-willed, and humorous man who I immediately liked.

Ralph had been in charge of the birthday bash, and was excited that his extravaganza was being filmed by an artistic professional like Tony.

After the weekend, Tony was scheduled to fly to Vancouver to direct a music video with famed producer David Foster. Ralph asked Tony to take all the tapes to Vancouver and edit the birthday video there; Tony agreed to do it only if I would fly out with the tapes to work with him.

Ralph called me over and told me that I was going to be traveling to Vancouver to work with Tony for a week or so. I had zero interest in leaving the ashram for even one minute — especially with our guru having just arrived back in town after the long cold winter.

However, I was there to serve, and accepted this assignment with a positive attitude, as was the monastic way.

I flew to Vancouver and found that Tony had arranged for me to stay in a very expensive hotel. Tony was used to having his travel expenses paid by the media companies he worked for, and tended to go first class all the way. However, my hotel bill was being paid for by the ashram, with money donated by devotees.

I didn't want to waste any of this offered money on unnecessary extravagances, so as soon as I arrived at the luxurious hotel room Tony had booked for me, I went looking around town to find a less costly place to stay.

Tony and I met that afternoon, and he told me that things were busier than he had expected with his music video project. He didn't know if he'd have time to make the birthday video after all.

Well, that wouldn't do. I'd just been sent across the country with boxes of videotapes to assist in getting this project done.

I asked how I could help this to happen, and Tony instructed me to log the fifteen to twenty hours of tapes, describing each shot and putting stars next to the best moments that would be good to include in the video. I spent the next few days going through every tape and meticulously organizing and typing up log sheets with descriptions, time-code numbers, and ratings for each shot.

Then we went into a fancy studio editing room with a professional editor, who Tony would direct during the two-day session.

I immediately appreciated Tony's artistic sense. He looked for unnoticed moments, and played different shots together on different screens to see what interesting juxtapositions the universe might suggest. He would slow down some of the shots and superimpose various images in interesting and beautiful ways.

Watching him, this style began to make sense to me. It was as though I had tapped into his mode of creative thinking. I could almost predict the effects as he chose them. Once again, I was witnessing the power of company, as my own artistic sense expanded while watching his artistry in action.

Tony hadn't had a chance to watch any of the tapes, and depended on me to recommend which sections and specific shots to include. At one point, he had to leave for a few hours, and entrusted me to work with the editor in his absence. As though I had been directing edit sessions all my life, I slipped into Tony's chair and somewhat into his mentality. The section I worked on came together with a style similar to his, indistinguishable as far as I could tell.

It was an intuitive process. The editor would look at me for the next shot, and I would quiet my mind and listen for inner guidance while looking through my well-organized log sheets. I was even giving specific lengths and speed timings for each dissolve or slow motion effect, down to the frame.

This was all somewhat new to me. I had already edited many videos, but our equipment back at the ashram was not quite professional. We didn't even have a way to properly access time-code numbers that were usually encoded on each frame of videotapes, making it difficult to precisely control the parameters of each edit or line the tapes up in the same configuration to make changes. But now I was in a big fancy editing room with an expert editor and all the equipment we could have wanted back in those linear editing times, before the advent of Avid and Final Cut Pro non-linear systems. The experience was very positive and comfortable.

During this week, Tony seemed to want to build up my self-esteem —he had overheard Ralph speaking to me in a somewhat dismissive manner, and felt that I had natural filmmaking potential. Tony kept telling me what a great editor I was and how the ashram didn't really give me the respect I deserved. He thought I should insist that the ashram upgrade their equipment and that I demand to be treated as a professional if Ralph and others were wanting more professional video productions.

Tony's suggestions were absolutely appropriate in a worldly context, but they clashed with my world. Part of me tried not to even hear some of the things Tony was saying, because they were nearly blasphemous in contrast with my simple monastic surrender. Nevertheless, his words went into my consciousness.

I returned to New York with a beautiful video, a determination to be treated with more respect, and apparently with a somewhat inflated ego, although I didn't quite realize this at the time.

I met a friend in the hallway and told her all about Tony's encouragement, explaining, “I think he's right. I need to insist on being treated with more respect and make sure we get the time-code equipment needed to do a good job.”

I must have sounded like a typical Hollywood player, however we were living and serving in an ashram, with a focus on self-surrender and communion with the Divine. This friend was a secretary to our Guru’s secretary, and soon after, the friend phoned and asked me to set up the new birthday video to play through a cable connected to our Guru’s living quarters.

Gurumayi had gathered there with a few devotees to watch the video together. As it ended, the phone next to me rang. I picked it up and heard a woman's voice that sounded like it might have had an Indian accent — I couldn't quite tell if it was my guru or her secretary — saying, “That was a great video.”

I replied, "I'm glad you like it."

The person on the other end was on a speakerphone, and I could hear some giggling in the background. This made me a little uncomfortable. Were they laughing at what I had said?

The unidentified voice continued, "We didn't know you had such a great skill. Tell me, from where did you learn this great skill?"

I was confused. The wording of this question alarmed me. It seemed to be a set-up. Of course Tony had been responsible for the video, but I'd also participated substantially.

Tony had told me that he was going to tell Gurumayi and Ralph what a great editor I was and what a good job I had done with helping to make this video. When asked, "Tell me, from where did you learn this great skill?" I hesitantly replied, "I don't know. Through the years, I guess."

Again, I heard giggling, then a click, and the phone went dead. I was left feeling perplexed. I had a sense of having done something wrong, but couldn't figure out what it might be.

While walking through the woods after lunch, I encountered one of the older monks. He called me over and hinted, "It seems that you still haven't lost what you came here to lose."

It took me only a moment to figure out he was talking about my ego. I asked, "What did I do wrong?"

He looked off into the trees. "You took credit for Tony's work."

I was surprised to hear this. It hadn't occurred to me that my words might have sounded that way. I tried to explain to him that I had been responding within the context of our guru's questions, and also that I had substantially contributed to the video, but the monk didn't seem interested in hearing my explanations.

Upon returning back to the video room, I received a call from a fellow devotee who was in charge of the finance department. I had been given a budget to pay for all the studio and traveling costs.

But even after all my care for keeping our expenses low, this head of finance had decided to apply a different exchange rate for my Canadian expenses than the rate I had gotten.

The finance fellow told me with a serious tone that he was going to deduct several hundred dollars from my next stipend, speaking as though I had dishonestly declared a higher rate to — what — embezzle funds from the ashram?

I didn't care about the fact that he was going to deduct money from my stipend — in fact, he must have known that when the ashram raised my stipend rate during the previous year, I had told the finance department that the new larger amount was more than I needed. Therefore, I was especially surprised that this head of finance, who had known me for years, was practically accusing me of stealing by ignoring the Canadian exchange rate I had paid, which apparently was a larger percentage than whatever rate he had found. Maybe he was wanting to teach me to be more precise in saving receipts.

Oh and on the same day, a crown fell off of my tooth, because in the ashram, as sometimes in life, when it rained it poured. But along with the rain came grace. Right after the crown fell off, I encountered a visiting acquaintance who was a dentist. He had a few tools in his car, and was able to cement the crown back on right in the editing room's bathroom.

Later the same day, I was telling a friend about that morning's strange phone call with our guru, and the swami's suggestion that I'd taken credit for someone else's work. I predicted, "I'll bet Gurumayi is going to talk about this during the program tonight." I remembered our guru's birthday talk several years earlier when she had praised me so publicly, and wondered if the scales would be balanced tonight.

A few hours later, I sat with several thousand other devotees in our beautiful outdoor pavilion for the evening program. I wasn't so sure that my prediction would come true. It didn't make sense that our guru would take up public time to denounce me for something so insignificant, yet something inside was preparing me for a new challenge.

Our guru began to speak. "The poet saint Kabir said, 'When I was enrapt in myself, O beloved, your face was hidden from me. Now that I see you, I am no more I. I know now, this path of love is much too narrow. Two cannot walk here, only one.'"

I wasn't quite sure what this poem might have to do with my situation, but I suspected it could be the opening to a talk about my ego. My suspicions were correct.

Gurumayi told the whole story about how this wonderful music video director had edited an extraordinary production of the recent birthday celebration, and how this unnamed person in the video department had dared to take credit for his work.

My guru even imitated my response to being asked where I had learned such a great skill: "Through the years, I guess," she recounted with a look of incredulous astonishment. The audience made tsk-tsk sounds, as they shook their heads in judgment.

The story sounded especially awful the way my guru told it, because it appeared as though I had stayed in the ashram while this hotshot director flew somewhere and edited the video all by himself. It's not that our guru didn't know I had gone to Vancouver — she had seen me right as I was leaving with my suitcases.

I interpreted this minor fudging of the story as a clue from my guru that this lesson wasn't necessarily about any serious infraction I had specifically committed. It was not a call for me to start over-analyzing my words or feeling guilty and getting down on myself about whether I'd accepted a bit of praise for helping to edit a video. I had returned to the ashram from this editing trip with a budding arrogance, and my guru was going to chop it off before it took root in my karmic soil.

I sat in the audience listening to the story. If it hadn't been about me, I probably would have been laughing with everyone else about this poor schmuck who clearly didn't have a clue. But this time I *was* the schmuck!

Our guru continued, saying that if she hadn't liked the video, that person probably would have said, "Well, I didn't have anything to do with it, it was that guy in Vancouver."

The audience roared with laughter. I actually don't remember all the exact words, even though I had access to recordings of most talks in the video department. In this case, our Guru's words weren't all recorded. That's because something very strange happened during her talk about me — the power went out.

These kinds of power outages happened occasionally during programs in India, but this was the first time it had happened in the middle of a program at the upstate New York ashram. Gurumayi's microphone lost its power. The video decks scrunched the tapes, clicking loudly as they snapped off. The entire sound system took a power hit. Our guru stopped speaking, and we all waited in silence for the power to come back on.

In a minute or so, the video and audio machines snapped back to life and began rolling once again. The sound system popped back on, and after humming to check the microphone, our Guru's public reprimand continued, with her asking what a big ego this video person must have to take credit for someone else's work.

By this time, I was roasting. I didn't know if it was a wonderful or awful experience, but it was unquestionably intense.

This powerful moment blotted out everything else in my mind. I was in the NOW! My thoughts and judgments stopped. I was simply present as an outlet of Consciousness observing the play. It had nothing to do with me, and yet all of it had to do with me.

Suddenly, the power went out again.

I became alarmed as this coincidence repeated. My first thought was, "Who is doing that?" I felt as though some ethereal being was trying to protect me, but I didn't want to be protected from this blessing, regardless of its challenging form. I looked at the large photo of Muktananda hanging above Gurumayi's chair, and prayed, "Baba, please. It's okay, I can handle this."

I heard the videotapes being scrunched once again as the electricity came back on. The whole situation was dramatic and confusing. A part of me almost wanted to laugh, while another part was horrified. And beneath it all was a deep peace, just watching in a nonjudgmental way.

Other hints about the deeper nature of this lesson were woven through the rest of Gurumayi's talk, but I was too stunned to digest them at the time.

At one point, Gurumayi was describing Muktananda by saying, "No matter what Baba did — no matter how much work he did, no matter how much he sacrificed himself — he always repeated, 'I do nothing. My guru does everything. I sit under the wish-fulfilling tree of my supreme Guru, and through his grace, everything takes place.'"

This quote really helped to clarify the lesson as I continued to unwrap the blessings in this experience. As years and additional experiences came forth, I would pay more attention to that feeling of allowing grace to do the work through me, without feeling as much pride or ego about my works and accomplishments.

This experience and many others taught me to step back, both in terms of control and egoic identification with my works.

This stepping back brought forth a state of creative grace, where ideas and inspirations often flow together with skill in ways that have been beyond what I might have thought I could personally do.

As Muktananda said, I do nothing. My guru does everything. I sit under the wish-fulfilling tree of my supreme Guru, and through his grace, and her grace, everything takes place.

Eventually the reprimanding talk ended, and we began to chant. Usually, I'd sway and sing loudly during the chants, but on this night I sat stiffly, barely able to recite the words. I looked at my guru and mentally asked for her grace. "Please help me to have right understanding about what is happening."

After a few moments, Gurumayi looked at me. I expected a scowl, but she surprised me with a big, bright smile. I could almost hear her saying, "What can I do? It's my job to free you from your ego!"

I couldn't believe that she would give such a generous smile after expressing so much displeasure with me. Nevertheless, just in case I was mistaken and the smile had been intended for someone seated next to me, I chose to not go up in the darshan line that night. I didn't quite have the guts to meet her face to face.

The next morning, I was working on a new video edit. We were going to have a course called "From the Finite to the Infinite," and I'd been asked to come up with a video for it. I started by mixing Sanskrit chanting with classical music, playing over a video montage of flames licking up in slow motion around shots of twirling galaxies.

While compositing all this universal glory, I received a phone call from someone who told me that Gurumayi wanted to see me outside the front doors of the ashram.

I took a moment to center myself and put on my mental and emotional armor of surrender and trust, then headed out of the editing room door toward my fate.

Our guru was seated outside with a few devotees at her feet, and others seated further back. I bowed and sat before her. She was not smiling as she asked how I dared to take credit for Tony's work.

It was clear that we were not going to ease into this.

I mustered up my courage and tried to explain the situation. "I knew that you knew Tony made the video. I thought you were saying I did a good job assisting him."

My words appeared to shock her. Turning to the other devotees sitting with us, our guru exclaimed, "She STILL thinks she did it!"

They seemed to be just as appalled by my explanation, which left me even more perplexed. What had I said wrong? I tried again, this time adding a little more detail.

"You see, Tony was working on another project at the time, and I selected the shots and also helped with the editing."

My guru looked as though I had just uttered the most ridiculous statement in the world. "She STILL thinks she did it!"

Now I was sweating, and thought that maybe it would be good to abridge my description significantly. "I logged the tapes."

"She STILL thinks she did it!"

I was practically ready to say that I had just made the coffee, when I glanced toward the monk seated next to me. He gave a look of kind encouragement that somehow helped me to know what to say.

I experienced an inner shift, and started to realize that this was not about who did what. It had nothing to do with the video or with Tony or me. I glimpsed that we were dealing with an entirely different level of identification with action.

It is the universal energy that does everything. Everything happens through Grace, every moment born anew from that ever-flowing stream of creative Consciousness. The person who logged the tapes in Vancouver was not the same person sitting before my guru today. One universal creative expression is moving through and as all of us.

In that moment, I opened up to a new vision of the universal play. I had heard the words "I am not the doer," being quoted in the past, but now I glimpsed a deeper meaning behind these words. I felt "I am not the doer," more clearly in my own experience and world view. I looked my guru right in the eye and said with complete honesty, "I had nothing to do with that video."

Gurumayi gave a slight nod and paused for a moment. Even though she was acting stern with me, I was feeling peaceful and a bit exhilarated. I loved being carried into new understandings, even if the external circumstances appeared to be alarming.

My heart was happy just to be in my guru's presence. Her bright energy soothed my soul as we began the next phase of this lesson, which was learning to bear criticism.

Our guru started to insult me, first saying that my seated posture was stiffer than the nearby pillar. Then she commented to the others sitting closely that none of my videos were good, and asked one of the women sitting there if she agreed.

Charlene was serving the ashram through public relations and program designs. She'd worked with me on a few videos, and had often told me what a good editor I was and how much she liked my work.

But this was a game that Charlene seemed to know quite well due to her proximity to the guru. She seemed to know how to play her role in this kind of ego massage scenario, and agreed with our guru. "Yes, her videos are mediocre."

Hearing Charlene say this actually helped me to feel more at ease, due to her previous praise for my work. I was better able to see the experience as part of the Guru's work to humble and teach her disciple.

Even while being outwardly insulted, I didn't feel too insulted or angry. There is no way that anyone watching could have known what was taking place for me beneath the surface of this external event.

Every time my guru recited another criticism, I would immediately turn it right back and mentally ask her to heal and remove that flaw. I felt that she was pointing out qualities that had been blocking me from the freedom I sought, handing them to me one by one, as I offered each one back to her purifying grace.

We were working together. The process was intuitive and natural. I didn't understand all the deeper implications of what was happening, yet my subconscious intelligence saw this as an opportunity for inner cleansing, and embraced it.

My guru's words also reflected back to me some of my own insecurities. I worried that I was stiff and boring, and that beneath my outer surrender, I still had a lot of ego. I also worried that my service wasn't quite good enough. Everything my guru mentioned had a ring of familiarity — these were my fears about myself.

However, as my guru enumerated my faults, I began to notice how silly they sounded, and realized, "Hey, I'm not really that bad!" Her vocalization of my deepest fears helped to dissolve my identification with them.

All I could do was look at my beloved guru with an open heart and gratitude for whatever karma-surgery she was doing. With each passing minute, I could feel myself becoming lighter and filled with an increasingly vibrant energy.

The guru is the potter, the disciple is clay,
molding and molding, he amends the flaws.
Within he supports him with love,
without he deals blow on blow.

— KABIR

My guru continued speaking to the small group seated with us. "Look at her. Nothing gets to her. She's like *Mount Meru*." Mount Meru is a mythical sacred mountain from Hindu and Buddhist traditions, although I think the main point was that I was stiff like a mountain.

She then turned to me and said that I had the toughest shell of anyone on the path, and added, "I've been trying to break your shell for years, and I can't do it!" With that, my guru threw her hands up in a gesture of exasperation.

I looked into her eyes and prayed silently with all my might, "Please don't give up on me. Break my shell. Make me free!"

Here I had been trying not to respond emotionally to my Guru's taunts, and now it seemed that this was exactly what she had wanted me to do. She wanted me to get in touch with my deeply hidden emotions, but even after all her chastisements and insults, I still remained apparently unmoved.

This shell she referred to was the hard covering of defense mechanisms that had formed and sheltered me during my difficult childhood. I wasn't yet ready to let go of this dear old friend, my protective shell.

Eventually, I was dismissed and returned to the editing room. Still in a state of shock, I took refuge in continuing my work on the "From the Finite to the Infinite" video, compositing video footage of flames licking up in slow motion around shots of twirling galaxies with a mix of Sanskrit Chanting and Pachelbel's Canon.

As I looked at the images on the screen, I began to see blue flames appearing over them. I closed my eyes. The blue flames continued to play across my inner field of vision. I opened my eyes and looked around. Still there. For several days, I saw these blue flames.

The next morning, I ran into Charlene, the woman who had participated in discussing my mediocre editing skills. She wanted to tell me about an amazing vision she'd had during the meeting with our guru, a vision that synchronized surprisingly with what I was still experiencing.

Charlene said that as Gurumayi started to question me about taking credit for Tony's work, she had seen blue flames shooting from our Guru toward me, circling around my body. Each time I gave an excuse and received another reprimand, she saw more blue flames surround me.

When I finally said, "I had nothing to do with that video," Charlene said that she saw this mass of blue flames enter into me.

Your stream-water may look clean,
but there's unstirred matter on the bottom.
Your Sheikh can dig a side channel
that will drain that waste off.
Trust your wound to a Teacher's surgery.
Flies collect on a wound. They cover it,
those flies of your self-protecting feelings,
your love for what you think is yours.
Let a teacher wave away the flies
and put a plaster on the wound.
Don't turn your head.
Keep looking at the bandaged place.
That's where the light enters you.

— JALALUDDIN RUMI

Chapter Twenty-Two
PERFECT MISTAKES

WHILE LIVING IN A MONASTIC SETTING filled with spiritual and esoteric protocols and rules, one is bound to make blunders. I was able to learn valuable lessons from some of mine.

One mistake took place while I was in the middle of editing a video. It was summertime, so the ashram was filled with thousands of people and a lot of activity. By this time, I had an editing room to work in, and would usually close the door to focus on scripting, researching, and editing my ongoing list of video projects.

One day, while in the midst of lining up a video edit, my phone rang and I answered, paying only minimal attention. A coordinator from the ashram's very active summer children's program was calling to ask about whether I knew of a quote from Baba Muktananda for their upcoming intensive workshop.

I'd become somewhat known for being a bit of a "Rainman" figure in terms of remembering quotes that I'd seen in videos or read in transcripts, sometimes by the exact date. Gurumayi once joked that if I ever left the ashram, they would have to put electrodes on my brain to find all the videos, which was also a nudge for me to help put together a better video library system.

I was only paying minimal attention as this woman on the phone asked me something about whether I knew of a quote by Baba that would be good for their upcoming Children's workshop. I guess my inattentive assumption was that they were looking for something to use to inspire a title for the course. I didn't really think it through, because my focus was not on being fully present in the conversation, but on the edit I'd been lining up.

I responded that Muktananda has said things like, "Everyone is a child of God; the flame of love shines in everyone's heart." Surely there were at least a couple good potential titles in there.

The woman thanked me, and I went back to my edit, and all but forgot the conversation until a month later.

One of the ashram visitors had come to speak with me in the editing room, when his two children came running up to the room, dressed in their best clothes and filled with excitement. They had just attended the children's' intensive workshop and were showing their father some of the gifts they'd received. One of the kids pulled out a laminated photo of Baba Muktananda that had been given to each child who attended the program. And there, below Muktananda's face, surrounded by flourishing designs, was his famous quote, "Everyone is a child of God; the flame of love shines in everyone's heart." Signed, Baba Muktananda.

I was a bit horrified to see my made-up quote being attributed to Muktananda, although at least it was the kind of thing he had surely said before, if not in that exact sequence of words.

I have recalled this incident many times in my life, while reading words attributed to various people, especially ones who are no longer here to correct the record. Sometimes, while reading quotes in certain ancient scriptures that don't seem quite right, I've remembered that just a few years after Muktananda's passing, with an entire library of official books of his words readily available in his own ashram, a whole lot of children went home that day with a quote that Muktananda hadn't officially composed. If this kind of mistake could happen unintentionally just a few years after our great being's passing, I could just imagine how many intentional and unintentional adjustments must have been made to various religious scriptures and texts over the centuries.

Another "mistake lesson" came one summer evening when the ashram's main cameraman at the time invited our guru to come to the video department to bless our new camera. Usually the whole department might join in for an event like this, but Trent had arranged for our guru's blessing visit to take place without inviting other members of the department to attend. Trent had his own vulcan-like ways, so nobody had too much concern about the oversight.

Instead, I went to the evening chanting session in the big meditation hall right outside of our main video room, and was contentedly chanting away when someone tapped on my shoulder. Our guru had asked this person to call me out of the meditation hall so I could come and wave a puja flame to inaugurate the new video camera.

Puja generally refers to rituals that honor a deity — it is a form of both worship and blessing. In the Indian tradition of *puja*, a flame is often waved in a circular motion before the person or object that is being worshipped or blessed.

I was more than happy to be called upon by my guru, and left the chant to go into the video room. Along with happiness I also felt excitement, mixed with a tinge of fear. Every interaction with either of my gurus seemed to produce some dramatic occurrence, either just inside myself, or both on the inside and outside. This walk to enter my guru's vortex of karmic cleansing energy after being called by her was a walk into the tides of destiny. Anything could happen.

This was a guru in whom I had placed my trust and commitment of obedience. This was a guru whose mere glance would often cause a revolution inside my heart and soul. This was a guru who could be gentle or ruthless — whose gentleness also contained ruthlessness, and whose ruthlessness contained gentleness.

Spiritual growth can demand change, and change is sometimes ruthless. I wanted to attain the highest experience of Eternal Truth, and I knew this could mean breaking my limited but comfortable notions about myself and the world. "Is it possible," I wondered, "to want and not want something at the same time?"

The experience I was about to have in the presence of my guru might manifest through her face, words, or personality; but for me, it would be an interaction with the Divine Creative Force, the Universal Guru. In my understanding, whatever was going to happen would have little to do with the guru's personal characteristics. It is the force that moves through the guru, and through the guru-disciple relationship of trust and commitment, that is said to carry "the grace-bestowing power of God."

When I walked into the video room, my guru was looking somewhat serious as she instructed me to perform a *puja* to bless the new camera. For our main programs, *pujas* were performed in a very specific way, using a silver tray and a wick that had been soaked in clarified butter.

Included on the tray would be several symbolic objects, including rice, turmeric, and kum-kum. Usually, a flower and a piece of gold jewelry or a coin would also be placed on the tray to represent beauty and abundance. In fact, just two days earlier, the ashram had held a special celebration that included an event called the *mahapuja*, or "great puja."

All the residents and visiting devotees had been invited to wave their own special, properly organized tray and flame to the statue of our grandfather guru in the temple. Thousands of people participated in this event, each with his or her own specially decorated silver tray to wave before the statue. The women wore brightly colored saris, and most of the men wore either suits or Indian-style clothes.

The mahapuja was an exquisitely beautiful event, but I had skipped it just as I might have skipped a class in high school. I never really liked wrapping myself up in a sari, beautiful though they may be. I also disliked group functions in general — especially ones that involved waiting in line for a long time.

Even though I was living harmoniously in a spiritual community, my independent spirit and reclusive nature remained. I wasn't one to do something just because everyone else was doing it. In fact, I was less likely to participate in things being done as a group, including this beautiful devotional ceremony.

During the mahapuja event, I had worked for a while on editing a new video in the editing room. Then I went up to the roof and watched the mahapuja from that elevated view. Nearly all the residents and guests were there, lined up around the gardens with their fully decorated bodies and trays. A slow-moving line of lights streamed into the temple doors, and I could see several rows of puja flames being waved in harmony inside the temple.

Chanting music streamed through the fresh evening air. The devotion and love was palpable. Sitting on the roof watching this impressive scene, I felt that observing from above was a perfect way for me to experience the beauty and holiness of this profound event. Then I went back to the editing room to continue working on the current project.

Here we were, just two days later, with Gurumayi in the video room asking me to perform a puja to the new video camera. We had no tray or other puja ingredients available in the video department, so I picked up the altar's candle for what I assumed would be an acceptable substitute. Department and personal pujas were often done by simply waving a candle.

But as I prepared to wave the candle flame in front of the camera, my guru spoke with a reprimanding tone.

"Not with a candle! You need to wave a tray with a wick, kum-kum, turmeric, and rice. How many pujas have you done? Didn't you participate in the mahapuja two days ago?"

Gulp. You can't hide anything from these gurus! I mumbled, "Um, no. I was editing that night." (Well, I was!)

My guru's glow tangibly increased as she began to berate me. "You're *jad*!"

"Jad," pronounced "jud," is such a wonderful word that I really wish it had an English counterpart. It doesn't exactly mean stupid. The best translation I've heard is, "inert, like a log." When applied to a person, it is that state where you are not aware of what is going on around you. You're not paying attention. You're not noticing connections between different things or thinking properly about what you are doing or should be doing. *Jad* is that state when someone is talking to you and you're not really listening. Or an elderly woman may be in need of help right in front of you and you don't notice. You're just staring blank-eyed right in her direction.

Gurumayi turned to the other people in the room, "She's *jad*! She's *jad-ananda*!" Now, the Sanskrit word "ananda" translates as supreme bliss. All the swamis on our path had names that ended in "ananda." Therefore, "jadananda" would translate as, "the bliss of being inert like a log."

I felt bad that my guru had discovered my lack of participation in the beautiful mahapuja, but at the same time, I was filled with *Shakti*, the sublime energy that surrounded her presence. Each time my guru said "She's *jadananda*!" another bolt of energy would enter me. I started to feel giddy from the bliss. Someone who knew how to prepare a puja tray went with me into the meditation hall to get one properly assembled.

I was experiencing some discomfort after being berated for doing something wrong — or in this case for not doing something right like participating in the mahapuja, which was intended as a beautiful practice for everyone to attend and experience. But sometimes with my loner nature, it was challenging for me to step out in such a public way, especially while wearing a sari, which I'd never quite gotten the hang of adjusting and pinning properly.

I had been relieved to avoid all that, but now felt that skipping the mahapuja had been a mistake, with my guru giving a disapproving look, though with a definite sparkle in her eye. Along with my concerns was a spiritual energy that seemed to lift me high above the arena of right and wrong.

Part of my awareness was catapulted into a blissful state of mind that left no room for self-judgment, guilt or shame. Maybe this was the state of "jadananda!"

It was also interesting for me to be called *jad*, which is sometimes translated as "stupid," because deep inside, I did have some issues about intelligence. I had gone from being a class genius in first-grade, to the class dunce in my new school the next year. I'd registered an I.Q. test score above 160 at age five, but then nearly flunked several years of elementary school. I surprised myself with brilliance about as often as I embarrassed myself with dull-witted blunders.

By calling me "jadananda," it felt as though my guru was clearing away both the insecurity and pride from my heart. I didn't have to be proud of my intelligence, nor embarrassed by my ignorance. There was a sanctuary beyond this pair of opposites.

Mistakes are the portholes to discovery.

— JAMES JOYCE

Another dramatic "mistake" took place toward the end of the summer, just a few days before Gurumayi was to leave for India. Instead of saying farewell to all the staff members in one large program, she decided to meet with us in smaller *darshan* meetings, based on our departments. Everyone was looking forward to being with our guru in a small group. It would certainly up our odds of having some much-treasured personal interaction.

My department's darshan meeting was originally scheduled for noon, but at ten o'clock a.m. I received a phone call informing me that our meeting had been changed to ten-thirty.

I went upstairs to my room to prepare myself, and even surrendered to using a bit of make-up for this special occasion. I changed into a fresh outfit and made my way down the stairway, hopping happily as I tended to do. This stairway was just a few feet from our guru's meeting area, and halfway down the steps, I saw that the meeting was already in progress.

You might think that hopping down the stairs intrusively right next to my guru's meeting would be the mistake of this story, but no, it was just foreshadowing.

I walked more gently down the last few steps and then, like Maria running into the abbey after singing on the hills, bowed my head somberly while sitting down amidst the small group. Two of my roommates and about eight other friends were sitting before our guru. But while settling in, I realized that something was wrong.

These friends were discussing business, but not video business. They were discussing trips they would be taking to various meditation centers as a traveling *satsang* group, giving programs and making sure that everyone was behaving properly. Although these were friends and roommates, they were not the people from my department. I hadn't paid enough attention to notice this before sitting down. I realized with horror that this was not the video department meeting I was supposed to be in. *I was in the wrong darshan!*

I looked back into the carpeted lobby. At least 100 people sat patiently. Many were probably waiting for their departments to be called forward. I looked over at the clock, and saw that it was only ten-fifteen — fifteen minutes ahead of my scheduled meeting. I turned back toward my guru and the small group I was sitting with. As if I hadn't just crashed their meeting, they continued to discuss matters that were none of my business. What should I do now?

If I got up and walked away, surely my blunder would not go unnoticed. I would have to deal with the situation right then and there, and I was feeling way too shy for that. I had hoped for an interaction with my guru, but not like this! In addition, the large group of people waiting in the lobby would see what a silly thing I had done and would certainly laugh at me. Also, the truth is that I was right where I would have liked to be, at the feet of my guru. I decided to postpone my fate.

After a few minutes, I started to loosen up, and even began to chuckle with their jokes. I felt like a kamikaze pilot — inevitably there was going to be a confrontation about my being in the wrong meeting, so why not enjoy the ride down?

Finally, the jig was up. Gurumayi told one of the monks, “Let's go around and have each person tell where they're going.”

I wanted to laugh, but managed to control myself. She was always so creative. Each person gave his or her response, and finally it was my turn.

I looked up and didn't quite know what to say. My guru broke the ice and asked the supervising monk, “What is Kumuda doing here?”

I was pleasantly surprised when this monk very kindly tried to justify my presence by explaining that I had rushed to finish a batch of video edits for them to take on their travels, which was true.

But I knew it was a feeble attempt. I had to 'fess up.

"Well, I was told to come for a farewell darshan, but it appears I'm in the wrong darshan." With that, I bowed my head and stood up to walk away.

My guru spoke, "Did I ask you to leave?"

I turned and looked into her piercing, dark eyes. "No."

"Then why would you leave? What a big ego you must have to leave when I didn't even ask you to leave. How many years have you worked in the video department?"

I responded, "Six."

"And what have you learned in all that time?"

Inside, my mind was giving its unspoken commentary, "To keep my mouth shut at times like this."

I sat back down.

As the meeting continued, two other devotees made the same mistake I had, and wandered into the meeting. Both were stopped and asked to wait in the lobby. This was a punctuation to my lesson about moving beyond mistakes. I would not have been brought to this meeting and allowed to remain there if it hadn't been God's will.

You might ask, "Well yes, but what about the two people who were sent away?" I could see in that moment that they too were brought to the meeting through God's will, specifically to be sent away. I also began to understand more deeply how, in spiritual terms, having a "big ego" is not necessarily about praising or thinking well of yourself. In Sanskrit, the word for *ego* is *ahamkara*, which literally translates as "I-maker."

This *ahamkara* ego is what creates the sense of "I am," as in "I am a man, I am a woman, I am rich, I am poor, I am happy, I am beautiful, I am flawed, I am special, I am unworthy, I am in the wrong darshan," and so on. *Ahamkara* creates and sustains the illusion that we are separate from the life process within which we exist.

Even though the part of me that got up to leave the meeting thought that "I" had made a mistake, my guru's chastisement made me realize that, on the level of universal perfection, no mistakes are possible.

That universal perfection included the mistake I thought I'd made by entering the wrong meeting, as well as the mistake I thought I'd made by getting up to leave.

After this lesson, life became a little easier.

Chapter Twenty-Three
TAMING THE BEAST

MY OCCASIONAL NEMESIS RALPH had been unofficially overseeing most of the ashram departments, with his main focus on construction, landscaping, and special events. But after the music video director Tony came through town, Ralph suddenly got the Cecil B. DeMille bug and wanted to be the supreme director of taking the ashram's video department into a whole new direction. Ralph was a talented and intelligent man who could do many things well, and had a strength of confidence that perhaps dipped a little into delusions of grandeur and a sense of unbridled power.

It seemed that Ralph saw my long-term presence in the video department as an obstacle to his quest for video greatness. He wanted to bring in more people like Tony, who were accomplished in the world and had received accolades and awards for their work. Even though I'd been creating videos for the ashram for many years and had taken some film courses at the University of Michigan and UCLA extension, Ralph wanted more accomplished professionals, even if the ashram had to pay more for them.

But how was Ralph going to get this longtime staff member out of the video department? I'd heard some mentions around the ashram that Ralph would sometimes use certain unscrupulous methods to get his way, but I was surprised to have it happen to me.

First, Ralph told me to send a certain video to the main ashram in India. He gave me this instruction himself, and then had his assistant phone me twice more on his behalf to make sure I was going to send it. Then, after I sent the tape, Ralph told our guru that I had sent it without permission. I was awakened one evening with a phone call.

Ralph was on a speakerphone, and judging from the pauses in his speech and the background sounds, it sounded as though our guru was listening as well. Ralph scolded me for sending the tape without permission, and I just stood there silently and let him do it.

It seems kind of strange that I didn't defend myself and say, "But you told me to send the video!" That just wasn't my way. We both knew that he had told me to send the tape. I wasn't about to fight, especially not with a pro like Ralph, and even more especially not with our guru likely present on the phone line.

The next morning, I received a call from the service assignment desk, who informed that my seva assignment had changed. I would be working in the garden now instead of the video department.

I had a two-sided response to this change. On one hand I thought it was pretty lousy that this man had been able to lie and get me booted out of video. But at the same time, I also had a sense that it was fine. Maybe a change of scenery would be for the best. In fact, the video department had been changing over the previous few years, and not in ways that were necessarily conducive to my nature.

I pulled out my spiritual philosophy arsenal to remember that whatever was taking place ultimately had nothing to do with Ralph. He too was just a pawn in this karmic game.

Later that day, I sat in our beautiful ashram gardens under the sweet sun and fresh breezes, plucking deadheads from rose bushes. A smile grew on my face. This wasn't so bad, after all. No more responsibilities, no more deadlines. I felt embraced by nature, touching her beautiful handiwork, repeating the mantra, watching my breath move in and out while breathing the fresh mountain air, and having space and time to contemplate and digest that the amazing blessings and teachings I'd received in the hustle and bustle of my previous eight years of service in the ashram's video department.

A sense of blissful contentment began to pulse through my body, and warm my heart. This is what I had come here for, after all, this peace. In the silence of performing this simple work, I began to hear the words of inner wisdom that had been guiding me through the previous years. My life had been too full and busy to really sit quietly and hear the words, even though I had felt their guidance and grace. Now I could listen to the teachings of my heart and soul for hours every day.

Another perk from serving in the garden was that I now had an assignment that required me to wear the most comfortable clothes, such as my pair of blue jean overalls that would usually be covered with dirt by mid-morning.

I made a choice to enjoy the change, rather than resist it. I could have felt embarrassed or upset about doing such hard and dirty work, but out of kindness to myself, I chose to see the situation with some detachment and humor.

Once, for five days in a row, my task was to shovel horse manure into a large garden bed next to the temple, just outside of a long glass hallway. There, I was on clear display to all the well-dressed executive-type ashram residents who would walk through that hallway to get to their meetings in the elegant new section of the ashram. I couldn't help but chuckle to myself as they walked by, often with a side peek out the windows, trying not to stare as their faces nevertheless revealed the horror of seeing me hacking away at piles of horse manure for hour after hour, day after day. Even my guru seemed to glance and quickly look away when she walked by.

I could imagine the anxiety some of the ashram staff members must have felt, seeing me — a long-term, hardworking staff member — shoveling mounds of smelly horse manure all week long. Perhaps some were fearful they could be next.

That week, I went shopping with a couple friends at a local department store, and found the perfect addition to the scene — a large T-shirt with the slogan, "Are we having fun yet?" I certainly would have worn the questionable shirt, had a friend not caught me at the cash register and snatched it from me, insisting that it would be in poor taste.

I was pleased to see my surrendered and good humored response to this potentially painful turn of events, and felt it showed that I had risen above certain levels of petty ego, anger, and frustration. However, a few months later, I found out there was still a ways to go.

One of the managers asked me if I'd like to start working part-time in the cowshed along with my garden work. The ashram already had one sacred cow, and a new, pregnant cow would be arriving in a few days. A dairy farmer from Ireland had been taking care of the barn thus far, but the managers thought it was going to be too much work for one person, as the ashram's cow family expanded from one to three.

With my love for animals, I knew I was going to like this new position. The next morning, I put on my blue-jean overalls and stepped into the cowshed, eager to begin this new service. I was met with an icy-cold stare.

It turns out that Patrick the dairy farmer *did not* want an assistant, and had told the manager so. He also told me so. This big macho man was not happy to have anybody invading his personal space, much less a city slicker girl who was not hot or sexy enough to make it worth losing his privacy. In a way, I couldn't really blame him. I certainly would have enjoyed the solitude as much as he did, and the cowshed is considered one of the holy places of an ashram.

The first thing Patrick did was to position me behind Lakshmi the cow and tell me to milk her. I don't think I'd ever even touched a cow, much less milked one. Certainly, I didn't know that you're supposed to milk a cow from the side and not from behind, where Patrick had placed me. I sat there and pulled her udders in different directions. Nothing came out, but I kept trying.

"Are you sure there's milk in there?" I asked.

"Yep, she's full o' milk," he replied, glaring at me as I continued to pull the udders at different angles, to no avail.

Suddenly, the cow lifted her tail and splashed a big shower of urine on top of my head. Patrick laughed heartily at his practical joke.

Patrick did act a little friendlier to me afterwards, but his moods were inconsistent. One day, he'd be welcoming and almost flirtatious, and the next he would be running around, throwing buckets across the barn and at the cows, yelling obscenities at the top of his lungs. I had never witnessed such super macho behavior before. It was interesting, but disconcerting at the same time. I would have preferred to have observed it through a one-way mirror.

After a few days, our new cow arrived. We received a message that our guru wanted to see both cows together in the newly landscaped area next to our main temple. Excited by the prospect of spending time with our guru, Patrick and I attached leashes to the cows and headed toward the gardens.

Patrick led the new cow, and I walked with Lakshmi. Being brand new to this service, I was a little nervous about walking such a huge creature on just a small leash.

I had to hold tightly, because Lakshmi kept pulling away to go toward Patrick. She was quite attached to him, to the degree that Patrick and others would joke that they had been married in a previous lifetime. Lakshmi seemed none too happy to have an unknown person guiding her leash while her beloved caretaker was walking another cow!

The woman in charge of landscaping had recently reprimanded Patrick for allowing the cows to walk on the grass. Their hooves left only barely noticeable dents in the lawn, but this woman was very insistent that we only walk them on the pavement. However, the cement was hard on the cow's hooves, so they would keep pulling off toward the grass. Since our guru had personally asked to see the cows — who we didn't want to be uncomfortable or agitated — we decided to allow them to walk slowly on the edge of the grass.

As we reached the temple area, our guru arrived, and told us to release the cows from their leashes. This did not sound like a good idea. What if they ran out into the nearby street? But our faith was stronger than our doubts, so Patrick and I unleashed our respective cows.

They took off running, but didn't run away. Instead, the two cows dashed up and down the garden hills together, like two huge puppies playing with one another. They'd run up one slope and slide down another, tearing up the sod with playful bovine glee.

I couldn't help but chuckle while thinking about the poor landscaping woman. So much for a few subtle hoof prints along the edge of lawn! And she couldn't reprimand us about this situation, because it had been at our guru's request. We all laughed with delight, watching the cows play. I wondered how on earth we would ever catch them.

At that point, my guru spoke without even looking at me. "Kumuda, go get Lakshmi." Here these two enormous animals were bucking wildly across the garden, and my guru was asking me to get one of them? It was testing time again. This was a direct command, and I was somehow going to accomplish it.

I moved into a place of faith and set out to get the cow. As I neared the area where the two 1000-plus pound cows were romping, Lakshmi stopped and looked over at me. She walked slowly to where I was standing, and stood still as I put her leash on. Then she walked right next to me like a well-trained puppy as I brought her effortlessly to our guru.

I felt that my centered state of mind and faith had come together with grace of the guru's command to placate even a wildly bucking animal. Too bad I didn't learn this lesson well enough to use it with Patrick.

One day Patrick and I would be sipping fresh cups of warm milk together while sharing our stories; and the next day I'd walk in to an icy silence or raging fury, with him throwing objects across the barn, hitting the cows, and shouting curse words that I hadn't heard in many years.

Thus far, I'd enjoyed a relatively peaceful eight years in the ashram, but after spending time in close proximity to this person who obviously had some major anger issues, I now found myself dealing with a new feeling of anger that began festering beneath the surface of my mind and feelings. Where had this inner upset come from? I thought I was beyond all that! Where was my equanimity, my peaceful state of mind?

When a sage is angry, he is no longer a sage.

— THE TALMUD

Part of the problem was that this challenge came at a time when I was weaning myself from many years of working in the video department. There, I had listened to the most sublime wisdom of the ages all day, every day. I would spend hours upon hours, morning till night, reading powerful talk transcripts, looking for uplifting quotes in scriptures, watching my gurus in action, listening to their voices, contemplating their teachings, and putting together artistic video expressions that would be seen by tens of thousands of devotees around the world.

During those years of video service, no matter what anybody said or did to me, there was always a spiritual teaching speaking to me in the next moment, guiding me into a higher perspective. For all those years, my awareness had very naturally been held high by the bridge of these videos. Whenever I started to lose focus on my quest for Eternal Truth, the next moment would bring a reminder of the higher wisdom. This had been a great blessing.

But now that world was gone. Now I had no more videotapes, no more audiotapes, no more transcripts, research, or divine artistic expressions — instead I had days filled with hard physical labor and this big brute who was giving me a hard time.

I thought it might help if I delved more deeply into the practice of meditation. After all, this was a meditation ashram, and meditation was one of the main practices both Muktananda and Gurumayi taught for achieving inner peace and spiritual awareness. Maybe a steady practice of meditation would help bring back my peaceful state of mind.

There was an empty bunk bed above mine, and I decided to turn it into a meditation spot and start getting up early every morning to begin the day with this wonderful, peaceful practice of meditation.

I had one concern about this enthusiastic plan. Way back before my first winter in the ashram, I had spoken to my first guru, Baba Muktananda, asking, "I'll be staying here for the winter, working alone in the video department. Should I allow myself to meditate whenever I'm moved to, or be more disciplined in my meditation?"

At the time, I was waking up extra early to sit for meditation for one hour before the morning chant, a common length of time for daily meditation on our path. Having only thirty or so winter crew staying in the large ashram would offer an opportunity to meditate longer or more times during the day.

I had hoped Muktananda would give guidance and his blessing for expanding my meditation, but truthfully, I had entered a space where the state of meditation continued even while I played musical instruments or did my service work of video duplication and distribution.

Sometimes I could hardly finish the bookkeeping chores, because my eyes would keep rolling up, carrying me into deep states of meditation.

Because of these experiences, I hadn't been too disappointed when Muktananda replied to my question about how much to meditate with a surprising response, stating, "You don't have to sit for meditation anymore. *Seva* is the highest meditation."

Even his translator looked surprised by this comment, because disciplined meditation was an important part of Muktananda's ashram. He hadn't said I should not or could not meditate anymore, just that I didn't have to.

From then on, I would meditate only as guided, when I was in the mood, and also came to recognize even more the meditative elements of all the practices, including chanting and service.

I sometimes pondered why Muktananda might have steered me away from sitting regularly for meditation and toward focusing more on seva. Maybe he could see in my eyes the many hours I had spent "exploring my unconscious" in college. Maybe he knew that my assignment now was to integrate those deep spaces into this world, and into my service work. Or perhaps he was guiding me to experience the natural state of inner absorption that sages like Indian poet *Kabir* described, where meditation becomes smoothly integrated throughout one's experience of life.

I don't have to close my eyes or plug my ears;
I don't torture my body in the slightest.
With my eyes wide open I laugh and laugh with joy,
Seeing his beautiful form in everyone.

— KABIR

Sometimes, while editing talks about the importance of disciplined meditation, I would feel a little guilty that I wasn't doing it myself. Nevertheless, I also believed that each individual seeker has his or her own path to spiritual evolution, and my guru had very clearly told me, "You don't have to sit for meditation anymore. *Seva* is the highest meditation." To follow a strict schedule of meditation after that seemed to miss the spirit of this message from my guru.

It had been easy to see my video service as meditation. In the editing room, I would sit cross-legged while watching the highest truths pass before my eyes seven days a week, three hundred sixty-five days a year.

But now I was serving in the garden and the cowshed, doing all this physical, worldly work of milking cows, shoveling dung, wheeling barrows, dealing with this macho man's anger, and having to witness his abusive behavior toward the ashram's sacred cows. After years of relative contentment, I was now walking around unstable, upset, concerned and angry. Maybe a more disciplined practice of meditation would help heal my frustration and bring me back into a more peaceful flow.

Clearly, I needed to meditate more, but I didn't want to just dismiss Muktananda's message when he said, "You don't have to sit for meditation anymore." So I wrote to my current guru, Gurumayi, who was in India at the time, to ask her permission and blessings to begin meditating regularly again.

I reminded her what Muktananda had said about my not having to sit for meditation anymore, and explained that I felt adding a more disciplined meditation schedule would help with some of the challenges of my new service assignment.

It was like magic. The letter had barely left the front door when I was noticeably drawn into a deeper state of inner peacefulness. I thought, "Why wait for an outer response?" and set up the top bunk bed as a meditation area. I started waking up extra early every morning to meditate, and enthusiastically jumped back into adding a regular meditation practice to my daily schedule.

Although the letter had barely left for India, I felt as though my guru's subtle consciousness must have heard my request. Spiritual grace was already answering my letter through blessings of sweet and beautiful meditations, bringing a growing sense of peacefulness.

Two weeks later, my guru's external reply arrived. I took the precious letter up to my new meditation bunk. Holding it close to my heart, I first had a short meditation. I wanted to receive my guru's precious blessing from a completely open space. Slowly, I opened the envelope and unfolded the beautiful stationery. After an introductory paragraph by the secretary, my guru's response was placed in quotes: "Ah Kumuda. No meditation."

"No meditation?" That was a surprise! I put the letter back into its envelope, and instead of sitting to "meditate" on this message as I would have usually done, I instead began to dismantle my new meditation bunk. I took any directive from my guru very seriously, and this one was quite simple and clear. For a disciple, the joy of receiving a command from one's guru tends to outweigh the disappointment of what that message might be.

"*No* meditation" seemed to be quite strict compared to Muktananda's more general message about my not *having to sit* for meditation anymore. I trusted that Gurumayi must have discerned that the experience of not meditating would be beneficial for my journey in some way.

After receiving this new directive, I started actively trying to keep my consciousness from moving into meditation. Almost all of the ashram's programs included a short or long group meditation session. All the other devotees would be seated in the darkness, trying to quiet their minds by repeating the mantra and watching their breath. And there I would be, trying to keep my mind thinking so I wouldn't fall into meditation.

This "no meditation" decree seemed strange, but I'd heard quite a few traditional stories about gurus giving apparently illogical directions to their disciples, so felt it was important for me to obey my guru's instruction.

I later considered that perhaps my plan to use meditation to avoid or numb the tensions I was feeling from the challenging outer circumstances was missing the point of the great wisdom our gurus had shared about the true, universally spectacular purpose of meditation — for the individual soul to expand our experience into the Universal Soul.

Maybe it was the complete loss of meditation in my life that left me so vulnerable to my lower nature in the cowshed.

At one point, Patrick was taking our new calf up to Cornell University because she was having a problem with her knees that made it difficult for her to stand or walk. On the way, the calf fell out of the truck into the freeway, but Patrick only noticed a half hour later that the calf was gone.

Fortunately, when he went back to find Cassandra, she was unhurt on the side of the road with some drivers who had pulled over after they saw her fall.

Around this time, the local livestock vet came to cut off the growing buds of Cassandra's horns, which is best done when a calf is young. I brought Cassandra out to the field and asked about the procedure. The vet said that he almost always used a numbing agent when removing the horns with the cautery iron, but that for some reason, Patrick had told him not to use any sedative or pain medication for Cassandra, a decision this vet disagreed with. I thought this sounded nuts. It wasn't like the ashram couldn't afford a few extra dollars to treat this sacred cow properly and not put her through excruciating pain.

I asked the vet to wait and went off to find Patrick, who boomed and shouted at me to "Stay out of this," then went out and told the vet to do it without any pain medication. I was as traumatized as the calf to watch her go through such unnecessary pain. After this, neither Cassandra nor I were ever quite the same.

I considered that this might be a balancing lesson to the one I had learned with Ralph. That situation had taught me to find surrender and detachment in challenging circumstances, without speaking up in a critical way, but this one seemed to be requiring me to deal properly with situations in which detachment was not forthcoming.

It was one thing for me to have to suffer a bit, but I couldn't just stand back silently and watched these beautiful sacred cows be abused.

I finally went to the managers, but none of them seemed to care about the problems I was witnessing and experiencing in the cowshed. Gurumayi had once reprimanded me for never standing up for myself. Now I was trying to speak up, but all my efforts seemed to be in vain.

I wondered if my "standing up for myself" muscle had atrophied to the degree that even my communications about our sacred cows being mistreated were of no interest to the managers or anyone else. I was somehow unable to communicate the problem sufficiently to find any appropriate remedy, as Patrick's violent behaviors continued in the cowshed.

I told the managers that this guy was kicking the cows in anger, and that I was afraid he might harm me in one of his violent rages, and was shocked to hear them just laugh it off, "Oh yes, Patrick can be bullheaded, can't he? Ha ha."

This just made me angrier. After all these years of going through challenges and not complaining, these managers were ignoring this problem and acting as though I was just a whiner. What injustice! What disrespect!

At the same time, I really loved being with the cows. These brown Swiss cows were very sweet and had a great energy. I could feel their pure energy, and would sometimes sit on wood shavings with the cows in the evenings, reading scriptures or chanting Sanskrit texts.

When our new cow Jyoti gave birth, I got to pull the calf out, and fell in love with Cassandra as she opened her eyes for the first time and looked at me with her beautiful long eyelashes.

Patrick heard that I'd been complaining about him, and started to act meaner, becoming more angry and aggressive. When I suggested that we use a nonpoisonous cleanser for the cow's drinking bins, he sneered and poured Lysol right into their water.

As my service supervisor, he would set up potentially dangerous tasks for me to do, once insisting that I wheel barrows filled with cow dung over a series of wooden planks so precariously balanced that there could have easily been a disaster. If I questioned anything, Patrick would fly into a rage, yelling about how incompetent I was.

Sprinkled into these tumultuous times would still be those few good days when we would drink fresh warm milk and feed cookies to the cows and ourselves while sharing personal stories with each other.

I never knew when I arrived at the cowshed whether I'd be encountering Dr. Jekyll or Mr. Hyde.

Early one morning, I arrived to do my work, and found that Patrick had locked the barn doors. He tossed out a bag of my belongings onto the ground, and bellowed, "You'll not be working here anymore! Don't come back!"

He couldn't do that!

This was the service that I had been assigned to do. I had grown to really love these cows. I lovingly bathed, fed, and played with them every day. The vet once said that our cows were cleaner than most people he knew. They were my friends, the first source of sweet affection I'd known in a long time.

And now I was being ripped away from them because this brute didn't feel like having me around anymore. You couldn't go around firing people in this monastic environment — it just wasn't allowed!

But when I appealed to the managers, they said that maybe it was for the best after all, and it was back to full-time garden work for me.

The unresolved tension from these events remained with me during the next year. It triggered an overwhelming echo of victimization from my childhood, and made the heavy garden labor I was doing start to feel like a punishment.

When all these troubling feelings took over my usually peaceful state of mind, I just didn't know what to do with them.

Eventually, summer came, bringing new blessings and challenges. We were working arduously to build an outdoor pavilion, and being one of the main garden crew staff, I was pick-axing, shoveling, planting, and running large excavators and front-loader tractors for long hours every day. The cowshed became a vague memory as all of my energy was turned toward the demands of this new project.

Chapter Twenty-Four
LEAVING THE ASHRAM

I HAD BEEN LIVING IN THE ASHRAM for close to a decade when my guru told me it was time for me to go. This decree did not come in a sweet or gentle form. In fact, the outer circumstances were so tough that I wondered if they were specifically intended to make me more receptive to the idea of leaving.

The previous months had been difficult, both physically and emotionally. Our garden projects had become heavy labor, and the work hours were long and exhausting. Even after our new pavilion was inaugurated, there were still so many rocks to move, trees to transplant, gardens to maintain, and acres of sod to lay. Those of us on the garden staff often worked from morning till night, often covered in dirt, and we usually ended up missing the daily chants and even the wonderful evening programs with our guru.

What had been a fairly pleasant romp through monastic life was quickly becoming boring and laborious. Most of my days began with a very early morning chanting session with a couple of other die-hard *Guru Gita* chanters, followed by a quick breakfast and then a full workday of pick-axing, laying sod, shoveling and planting that often went from six-thirty in the morning until dusk or later.

The woman in charge of the garden was a sweet-looking tough cookie who seemed to often be distracted by her obvious crush on Lon, the head of the ashram's construction crew. Anna would act bossy with our garden crew to an extent that I hadn't quite experienced before — sometimes acting almost as though we'd been assigned to do hard labor as a punishment in some kind of prison camp — then she would turn schoolgirl giggly as she went off with Lon for another meeting.

Anna kept us working hard, and if there wasn't something that had to be done that day, she would make something up, such as having us sort through hills of rocks without telling us exactly what we were supposed to be looking for while sorting them, and then having us put all the rocks back in the original pile the next day, saying that we didn't do it right. Anna seemed to think that showing off how hard her garden crew could work reflected positively on her in the eyes of some ashram higher-ups.

Along with all the physical challenges of this new service was the absence of any outlet for my rather abundant creative energies. I'd always had some channel for expression, whether music, painting, or filmmaking. Now, with hard physical work filling each day, my creative juices were building inside like a pressure cooker.

Although my body was sore during much of this time, all this physical work was also beneficial for my physical health in the long run. I'd been living quite a sedentary life during my many years of video editing; so the garden work did help to get me into stronger shape.

During June 1989, I received a rare phone call from my family. They were going to be celebrating my grandmother's eightieth birthday in Michigan, and they wanted me to fly from the Catskill Mountains ashram to the Detroit area to attend the party. I had gone back for two short visits during the previous ten years.

I wasn't close at all to my family and none of them really understood or cared enough to find out more about what I was doing — for which I was actually grateful. This precious part of my life was not up for my birth family's opinions.

Whenever someone in my family dared to mention anything negative about my living in this strange spiritual place, I would confidently explain that I was happy there, and let that be the end of the story. I did hear that my mother added a section on "cults" to her high school psychology course curriculum in my honor, which I imagined was her way of communicating her thoughts about the matter, since we'd rarely ever had an actual conversation about anything meaningful, even during my childhood.

Since our guru was in town, I wrote to ask for her permission and blessing to go back to Michigan for my grandmother's party, and was given the okay by Gurumayi herself during a rare opportunity I had to wash up from the garden work and attend the darshan line.

While attending my grandmother's eightieth birthday party back in Michigan, I was disheartened to find that I could no longer honestly say I was happy at the ashram.

I did not tell my family that I'd recently been fired from the illustrious job of cowshed worker, or that I was doing extreme hard labor for long hours every day, but they noticed the effects of the sun on my skin and knew that I was now assigned to gardening work instead of video editing.

At one point, my grandmother and I were speaking alone, and with tears in her eyes, she asked what I was doing with my life. "How can you be digging holes in the earth? You should be a doctor! You should have servants doing that kind of work for you! They don't really care about you."

I felt touched to have someone express care about my well-being — something I'd rarely experienced before — but I didn't really give too much credence to her words. I basically chalked my grandmother's concerns up to her lack of understanding about the spiritual path I was on. However, her words and emotions did seem to spark something in my subconscious mind.

After I arrived back at the ashram, an inner turmoil started building inside. It was all too much — the long hours, the strenuous work, and the harshness of our supervisor. As the weeks rolled by, this work was feeling more and more unpleasant to me, even though I tried to do the inner work needed to stay steady and surrendered. Instead, I found myself in a tumultuous ocean of undigested emotions that had previously been covered by my carefully constructed latticework of defense mechanisms and philosophical theories.

My shell of emotional defenses had finally cracked, and I was overwhelmed with crashing waves of vulnerability and unfamiliar emotions. If someone was kind to me, I would be overwhelmed with gratitude and sentimentality. If someone was unkind, I was hurt to the core. The defense mechanisms that had protected me from my feelings were nowhere to be found, and the flames of raw emotion leapt up at every turn. I didn't know what to do. I wanted to talk to my guru about it, but what would I say?

Instead of speaking up, I withdrew into a deep depression, walking through each day in a state of unrest. It got to the point that I had to even ask my friends not to talk to me. I could no longer speak. The inner turmoil would not allow words to come through.

At that point, I realized that I had to tell my guru about what I was feeling. I knew that bringing up something like this to our guru could lead to unknown results in my life, but I'd crossed into some kind of inner emotional hell, and needed her help.

I suppose my hope might have been that she would assign me to one of the ashram's less grueling and more creatively fulfilling departments, although I didn't have a specific outcome in mind.

With trepidation, I walked up in the darshan line, looking around at a very full meditation hall. I wondered if I should postpone the encounter and think about this further, but the feeling of depression was too deep. Even if my guru became angry, I had to tell her what I was going through.

I moved close to her, face to face, and spoke softly, "Some things happened when I visited my family, and I'm experiencing a lot of turmoil." This was not at all how I'd planned to introduce the problem, but I was nervous, and my words didn't follow my plan.

Gurumayi pointed, telling me to sit in a spot by her chair, next to where Ralph was seated and assisting with the flow of the darshan line.

Ralph asked me to tell him what was going on with my family. I had only meant to use my family trip to place the turmoil in a timeline context, not to insinuate that the problem began there.

But my words were not coming out the way I intended. "I visited my family recently, and some things happened. I've been experiencing a lot of turmoil and confusion, and I can't break out of it."

Ralph leaned over to tell my guru what I had said. With a somewhat sarcastic tone, she asked, "What happened, did they beat you?"

This seemed to be a strange question, although it may be that the inner turmoil I was experiencing did have some roots in certain undigested feelings I still carried from being beaten, not so much with a cane, but certainly in other ways by family and others during my childhood. Those memories had been neatly packed away during this past decade of monastic life. I almost never even thought about my pre-ashram days.

During my recent visit to my birth family, I had already been in a vulnerable state from dealing with the cowshed ordeal and doing many months of hard-labor garden service, with no creative outlet.

Clearly, the trip back to the place of my childhood in combination with my vulnerable state of mind had opened some kind of subconscious Pandora's box of undigested emotions. In this way, looking with a disciple's eye for finding deeper meanings in the words of the guru, this question about whether my family had beaten me might make some sense. I was sitting at my guru's feet feeling overwhelmed by her question and the confusion and contemplations billowing up from my subconscious mind.

I responded, "No, they didn't beat me," and tried to put my current problem into words, but was overwhelmed by the intense energy that was pulsating around my guru's physical presence and blasting through our interaction. My brain cells were being zapped, and all my rehearsals went down the drain. Out came the words, "Well, one thing is that my grandmother talked to me, and it just raised these doubts."

Hello?!? What was I talking about? I watched as these words came out that had nothing to do with what I had intended to say during this important conversation with my guru.

Gurumayi looked at me and shook her head with a puzzled brow, as if to say, "She said something? So, what's the big deal about that?"

At that point, Ralph interjected to ask me, "What did she say?"

I couldn't find a way to backtrack from this uncontrollable path of conversation, so I continued. "She asked me, 'What are you doing there all this time? You should go back to school. They don't care about you.'"

Why was I saying all this? Why couldn't I just tell my guru that I was creatively stifled? Why couldn't I simply ask for a service-assignment change? Who was making my lips express all this information that wasn't even relevant to the problem? I hadn't thought my grandmother's words affected me at all. She had no concept of the world I lived in, and couldn't understand that my goals and aspirations were not based upon materialistic desires or long-term financial security. At the time, her words had slid right by me. So what was she doing here now, entering this conversation between my guru and me?

When I expressed that my grandmother had said, "They don't care about you," my guru's concerned look turned fierce.

"And you believe her?"

I was lost in a whirlpool of words, from which I couldn't free myself.

Of course, I hadn't believed my grandmother. My guru had blessed me, fed me, clothed me, and given me an amazing place to live, work, and experience the essence of a happy spiritual life. She had brought me on a trip to India, paid off my leftover student loan, sent me to video school in California, and given me a chance to explore my artistic abilities and creatively share the fruits of my own spiritual lessons, feelings, studies, and epiphanies with open-hearted devotees around the world. Of course my guru cared about me.

Why had I brought this statement to her? What subconscious agenda was trying to break through my intentions and hijack this conversation? I replied, "No, I didn't believe her. But it created this turmoil."

She scrunched her face. "I'd better stop talking to you or I'll get depressed."

My guru's sarcasm almost brought a smile through my fog of gloom. Even during other challenging times, I had always been able to stay generally peaceful and contented.

She paused while continuing to interact with the row of four to five people at a time who had been coming in front of her throughout our conversation, and then looked back at me. "You should leave and go out to work."

Ralph was sitting next to me, and seemed genuinely concerned by this dramatic twist and my unusually somber demeanor. Maybe he felt a little guilty about having been the one who lied to get me booted out of the video department, leading to my being placed into all the hard garden labor, now leading to this. He whispered to me, "You should have talked to someone, a swami or someone, instead of just dumping this on Gurumayi. She expects more from you after all this time."

How had things gotten so out of hand?

Ralph continued, "You should go and contemplate this."

I thought, "No kidding!"

I asked him if our guru was serious about telling me to go out to work, explaining, "I want to stay here. I just want to be happy again like I've been all these years."

He replied softly, "Don't ask again, or she may insist on it."

I bowed my head and walked away from what was surely one of the strangest conversations I'd ever experienced. What had just taken place?

I went into our beautiful temple, and sat against the wall. I wanted to contemplate this event, but every time I started to analyze what had just happened, my mind would be drawn into a stillness that stopped my thoughts.

If I started to think about what might happen in the future, my worries also dissolved into this still space. I was impelled so effectively into the present moment that there was no room for thoughts about past or future. All I could do was to rest in the eye of this new life storm that had been set in motion and was now swirling around me.

The next morning, I arrived at the gardening shed as usual, where I received a message asking me to meet our guru in her lobby-adjacent meeting room. I had already been feeling the potency of this encounter all night and morning long. It was as though the upcoming event had created ripples on the lake of time that became even more tangible as I walked toward the meeting room.

My guru was seated there, along with five or six other people. I bowed my head and sat before her, sat before my destiny. She looked at me sternly and instructed, "Tell them what you told me last night."

I was relieved to have an opportunity to try and say it the way I had intended. But as soon as I started choosing my words, she stopped me and said, "Tell them what you said last night. You'll have your chance to speak."

I became focused once again in the present moment. Part of me was concerned about the tone this meeting was taking, while another part was cheering the undeniable power of it all. Mostly, I was relieved that we were going to deal with the difficulties I had been going through. At this point, I was surrendered and willing to do whatever was asked of me. There was nothing to do but to let go and be carried by the waves of destiny.

After I shared some of our discussion from the previous evening's darshan line, Gurumayi said, "Tell your life history."

This surprised me, because she had never really asked much about my pre-ashram life circumstances.

My mind moved into what felt almost like a trance state. It was powerful to be sitting right in front of my guru and to have her graceful glance focused on me and my circumstances. The "dark night of the soul" I'd been experiencing made it easier for me to let go of self-consciousness as we moved forward.

Only many years later, while writing the first edition of this memoir, did my guru's command to "Tell your life history," take on a possible bigger meaning than just to tell my story to the small group of people assembled in that meeting.

As one Sanskrit scripture says, "The Guru's every word is mantra," a quality I had already experienced many times, with many more to come.

As I made an effort to respond to my guru's request, at first, the words felt stuck, but then they started arising from a still, inner space. Almost without my orchestration, the words moved up and through my heart and mind before being expressed outwardly as speech.

I recited a few basic facts from my life history, as my guru watched me intently. I felt that her blessing energy was entering into each event I invoked, infusing my life history with grace. It was as though she was blessing my past from within the present moment. Here was this pre-ashram life that I had blocked out of my mind, and now she was walking through it with me, perhaps also reconnecting me with my history to prepare me for what would happen next.

Gurumayi asked some of the handful of people there what they thought my problem was. A metaphysical author suggested that maybe I was going through a dry spell.

"No, it's not a dry spell. With a dry spell, you feel numb. She's in *turmoil*," my guru explained, dramatically stretching out the word turmoil.

An Indian man who didn't even know me suggested that maybe I was angry because I had been moved from a high prestige service like video into the garden.

Gurumayi looked at me. "Is it true? Are you angry?"

I replied, "No, I'm not angry."

She responded, "Yes, you are."

What could I say? The truth was that even if I had been angry, I probably wouldn't have known it. I had not been allowed to express anger throughout my childhood. That would have elicited more punishment or cruelty, whether from my family or the kids at school.

From an early age, I had learned to put my emotions off to the side, where even I was unaware of them. So maybe my guru was right. Maybe I *was* angry.

Then my guru said that she didn't know why I would be angry about being moved from the video department, since my videos were an embarrassment to the foundation.

She also added, "Nobody ever cries while watching your videos," which was strange to hear, because even though I wasn't the most professional filmmaker, my videos were full of devotion, and often inspired viewers to tears.

Still, this was not a totally unfamiliar message. While working in the video department in previous years, Gurumayi had first sent letters enthusiastically praising my work, only to eventually send other letters where she asked me to "make progress in the skill that you have got," because "So far, you have not produced anything that is close to being acceptable."

As my guru once again brought up the topic of my video deficiencies during this intense meeting, I wanted to express something that had been a burden on my heart. I tried so hard to make good videos for her, and indeed, many devotees had enjoyed my offerings.

But clearly those efforts had failed. My guru was not pleased with the hundreds of videos I'd edited, and I was out digging ditches and doing work I didn't enjoy and wasn't really good at doing, instead of being able to offer service through my creative skills.

I responded to my guru's criticism of my video abilities by saying, with heartfelt sadness, "That's one reason I feel so bad. I feel like I let you down."

My guru turned her head to the side. I felt that she didn't want me to see that my words had touched her. I whispered, "It's true."

She turned back and looked directly into my eyes. This part is difficult to describe, but I actually felt her conscious awareness entering through my eyes. I could feel it travel down into a deep core of my being. There, I could feel her looking into my soul. It was like a "souloscopy". After a few moments, I sensed her consciousness moving back up through my body, and then exiting through my eyes once again.

She had made her decision. "You should go out and work."

With my mind in a state of shocked surrender, and still surrounded by a bright halo of peacefulness, I let go of all the potential fear-based reactions to this monumental decree.

I looked up into my guru's face, bowed my head in gratitude for her grace in any and every form, and asked, "Where should I go, and what should I do?"

The last time Gurumayi had told me to go out to work, it ended up being a short-term, local job that I worked at for a few months while continuing to live in the ashram. I didn't think I'd get off so easy this time, but anything was possible. In that moment, I let go of my deliberative, judging mind and my false sense of control and personal preference.

I was not even thinking about whether I hoped she would tell me to go to Los Angeles or New York City, although I certainly would have had preferences in that area. The bright light of grace, surrender, and trust outshined my worries or hopes for receiving one instruction over another. My guru looked at me very seriously and replied, "Go wherever you want and do whatever you want."

My heart sank a bit upon hearing her words. It sounded as though she didn't really care about where I went or what I did. She was going to let me go, just like that, without any apparent concern for my future choices.

Instead of seeing this response as a guiding light on its own — a promise that grace and divine guidance would be found in trusting my bliss by going where I wanted to go and doing what I wanted to do — I was feeling a more ego-based desire to receive her tangible guidance. I wanted my guru to tell me where to go and what to do, but instead, she was pushing me like a baby bird off an unknown cliff.

Then, my guru added a surprise, and told me that I should repay all the money the ashram had spent on me during my years living there.

Although some might question whether I should have been asked to repay such funds, my internal response was not about whether this request was fair or unfair. I certainly did feel great gratitude for the gift of ashram life that many others had paid to experience, and would have wanted to support the foundation's work and help give others the blessed opportunities I'd had, regardless of being asked to do so.

I could tell that this decree was not about repaying money. It was a gift of grace, giving me an important support that would shine a bright light on my new steps. What might sound like a tough command to someone watching outwardly instead struck my heart with deep love, and brought an inner smile to that intense moment.

I felt that this was my guru's way of giving me the strength to go out there and do well, along with being a way to keep our connection vibrant. She was using my own devotion and aspiration to serve to inspire me to be successful in the next phase of my life.

My guru believed in me, and now it was time for me to believe in myself. This unusual command somehow gave me the faith and incentive I needed to enter the next phase of my life with a positive and ambitious mindset.

Personally, I had no desires for money, success or fame. If I had left without this command, I might have ended up living a frugal life doing some simple video work, maybe for a charitable or non-profit organization. However, this directive pushed me onto a different course, the route of seeking to be successful. I was able to go out into "the world," and do whatever I did as an offering to my guru. I wouldn't settle for less than *she* deserved.

I wasn't so good at taking care of myself, but I had enough enthusiasm and devotion to do even the impossible for my beloved. I could even become successful for her, hopefully while remaining free from the bonds of worldly ambition or greed.

I walked away from this meeting in a state of shock. My body was pulsing with adrenaline, but the turmoil I'd been going through had lifted. I now had a new challenge to meet, a new command to fulfill. I was back in warrior mode.

As I walked away down a long hallway, one of the women swamis who didn't know I'd just been asked to leave the ashram called out to me joyfully. She enthusiastically said that they had just shown one of my videos at an introductory program, and "everyone in the hall was in tears!"

My guru hadn't told me to leave right away, but I always tried to follow her directives promptly. This command was so intense that it felt as though I was holding a big ball of fire. I would have to face my fear of leaving, and I would do it quickly, while still in this surrendered state, before the gremlins of fear and self-doubt had a chance to make their way into the mix.

I made plans to leave for Los Angeles in ten days, on August 11th, 1989. One of the ashram's summer guests kindly offered me the use of his little cottage in Santa Monica for a month. With just over one week left to prepare for this substantial move, I was busy.

I had to make a demo reel of my video work, put together a resume, say goodbye to old friends, pack my belongings, and get advice about what to do once I arrived in Los Angeles.

I was in red-hot, command-following mode. Resting in a state of faith and surrender, I was just "doing" — no thinking, no worrying, just doing whatever was required to make the move. I didn't know what I was going to live on in Los Angeles, but had a place to stay for a month, and a few hundred dollars saved.

Just two days before I was scheduled to leave for Los Angeles, the financial officer of the ashram found me outside the temple, and handed me an envelope, saying, "This is for you."

Not knowing what communication might be in the envelope, I walked back to my room, sat on the bed, and closed my eyes, moving into a state of inner openness. Then, I carefully opened the envelope flap.

Inside was a stack of the most beautiful, crisp hundred-dollar bills I had ever seen. This currency seemed to shimmer with light. I knew these bills would be a great blessing on my new journey.

Chapter Twenty-Five
THE GREAT GUIDING FORCE

WHAT WAS IT LIKE to re-enter "the world" after spending nearly a decade living a monastic life? Or, let's rephrase that: What was it like to enter Hollywood, the embodiment of illusion, after spending so many years seeking Eternal Truth?

Upon leaving the doors of my beloved ashram, I experienced a mixture of emotions, thoughts, and feelings. I felt peacefulness, excitement, fear, confidence, insecurity, ambition, wonder, faith, and trust, along with the challenges of a continuous stream of new situations, people, lessons, tests, and blessings.

One difficult moment came when I realized it would be best to use my American name in work situations. Whenever I'd introduce myself to someone as *Kumuda*, there would be some inevitable question about the origin of my exotic name.

I didn't want to lie, but also didn't want prospective employers to know right away that I'd just hopped out of nearly ten years in a monastery. Not everyone would have a favorable view of gurus and ashrams, especially in those pre-yoga and meditation boom days, just on the threshold of the 1990s.

After ten years of being Kumuda, it seemed that I would have to become Sharon once again. It was not an easy transition. In a way, I resented having to answer to this name. Sharon had been locked away long ago with all the painful childhood memories associated with her. As far as I was concerned, Sharon had been a victim, while Kumuda was spiritual and powerful. I did not want to become Sharon again.

Soon after moving to Los Angeles, I received a letter from my guru that gave a subtle guidance for this situation. Along with the gratitude and excitement of having a letter from my beloved guru delivered to my new Los Angeles apartment, I was horrified to see that the secretary had typed my American name on the envelope. Sharon Janis? I certainly was not Sharon Janis to my guru! I was still KUMUDA!

Feeling a bit distraught amidst the joy, I opened the envelope and unfolded the letter. It began, "Dear Kumuda."

Immediately, a deeper guidance came forth that answered my unasked question about which name to use. I was to be Sharon Janis on the outside and Kumuda on the inside.

In a way this made sense. Why throw a pure soul like Kumuda out into this gnarly world? I wanted to protect and keep that part of myself safe and clean from worldly effects and vibrations. I didn't want Kumuda to have to be out looking for jobs, struggling with mundane desires and goals, or even carrying the burden of success. No, Kumuda would represent the part of myself that stayed free from the burning flames of worldliness — the lotus flower that lives in mud, yet remains free from stain.

I began to use the name Sharon Janis for work-related situations. Sometimes it would take a while for me to remember when someone asked my name. Occasionally I would answer, "Ku... Sharon," or take an uncommonly long time to answer the seemingly simple request, "What is your name?" One person even asked me, "Is that a hard question?"

Moving to Hollywood after ten years of monastic living brought other technical challenges regarding finding employment. When I'd apply, some interviewers would ask about my previous salary. How could I say $100 or even $500 per month? I would have been laughed out of Hollywood.

Yet, part of my discipline was also to be as truthful as possible, which only occasionally came down to being technically honest while knowing the person would probably misinterpret the words.

When asked how much I'd earned in my previous job, I'd sometimes answer "Oh, thirty to thirty-five." They would, of course, think I meant thirty to thirty-five thousand dollars per year, while I'd chuckle inwardly at the unspoken "cents per hour."

After leaving the monastic environment that had been my home for so long, I did not ease slowly into "the world."

I was quickly hired as a freelance editor for a new television program that was one of the first official celebrity tabloid shows. "Hard Copy's" massive success eventually contributed to the tabloidization of the entire news and media industry, so chalk one thumb down on the scoreboard for my personal goal of using my creative skills to help bring light to the world.

Prior to its first season, "Hard Copy" had purchased two very complex and expensive sets of video post-production equipment. The brands they purchased were hardly ever used in the Los Angeles television industry, because they were especially and unnecessarily complex.

The operations manager for the show was having a hard time finding free-lance editors who knew how to use this obscure equipment, and decided to set up a day of training for potential hires. An editor I met had told me about this rare opportunity to apply for work on a nationally broadcast show.

When I called Hard Copy to inquire about the editing job, the operations manager told me about their day of training on the equipment, which was conveniently scheduled for the next weekend.

I attended the full day training along with seven editors who were also interested in the freelance position. These guys had been professional editors for quite some time. I was the least experienced person in this group by far — not to mention the only female there. My lack of experience showed up even in our small talk conversations. I became concerned about my obvious disadvantage, and felt some chinks forming in my self-confidence. It didn't look like I had any possible chance of landing this job.

During the training, some eyes in the room clearly rolled as I asked for definitions of some fairly basic broadcast industry terms. This group was way over my head professionally — they knew it and I knew it. I was feeling uncomfortable about being the dummy of the group.

At this point, I might have released the whole idea of working for Hard Copy, told everyone at the training that it was nice to meet them, and left. Why spend all day working so hard and feeling so inadequate when I had no chance of landing this position? Under normal conditions, I would have probably gone out and found myself a nice little semi-professional job editing for a small company instead of trying to jump on to this big-time Paramount Studios television show.

I had little personal ambition in terms of career or income. All I really needed was enough money for a place to live, preferably on my own after so many years with roommates. I needed a car and enough cash for necessities.

Nevertheless, one thing stopped me from settling for a simple, sparse life — my guru's command. If I settled for a job paying $10 or even $20 an hour, how could I ever repay this elusive "debt" my guru had placed upon me? Clearly, she intended for me to go beyond my comfort zone. I couldn't settle for mediocre. I had to go for the best.

Courage attracts miracles.

— GURUMAYI CHIDVILASANANDA

I decided to stay in the daylong training session for "Hard Copy's" editing equipment, in spite of the apparent futility of doing so. Surprisingly, after about five hours, the playing field became more level.

Even though I didn't know as much as these other editors did to begin with, I processed the new information quickly, and was at least on par with the other guys in terms of using this complex editing system by the end of the day.

In fact, of the eight editors training that day, I was the only one who even went back to "Hard Copy" to apply for the job. The others must have decided that it would take too long to really learn the complex audio and video systems that made up the "Hard Copy" editing room. I'm sure they'd all worked in many other places using more user-friendly equipment. Why place themselves under that kind of stress and pressure for some freelance work when they could just find jobs that used more familiar editing systems?

But, for me, this was a unique opportunity. Yes, it would take effort, and yes, I knew it would be stressful to attempt something so difficult. But I wanted a job; I needed a job. This was an amazing opportunity for someone who had so little experience with professional editing — a nationally syndicated television show.

I arranged to spend my next two weekends at "Hard Copy," studying all the manuals and practicing on the system. The operations manager was impressed with my dedication, and immediately hired me.

My first assignment was to edit a piece about Princess Diana, who was still alive at the time.

Even with my lack of media exposure during the previous decade, I fortunately knew who Princess Diana was, since her big wedding had been one of the few broadcasts we'd watched in the ashram's video department during the 1980s.

Working with one of Hard Copy's producers, I started putting together a musical montage of Princess Diana using several hours of unedited footage that showed her in different locations. While watching footage of the Princess greeting her adoring fans and walking by the paparazzi, I noticed something.

Even before my years in the ashram, I had been aware of different layers of subconscious communication, and the deeper psychological impacts of our word choices. During my ashram studies, I'd learned about the power of words on a bigger, metaphysical level.

One scripture described the power of words as "Matruka Shakti," the Mother Power that produces the threads from which our experience of life is woven.

While going through hours of Princess Diana videos for this Hard Copy montage, I became a bit horrified to hear what people were shouting, and concerned about the potential effects of these words that were being uttered or shouted toward this woman, sometimes hundreds or thousands of times each day.

As she walked about, people and reporters were shouting out, "Princess Di! Princess Di!" I thought that this was not a very good affirmation to have people saying to you all the time — it sounded as though these folks were shouting, "Princess, die! Princess, die!"

My second project was a bit more demanding. It was a three-part "sex survey," that included montages of celebrities and interviews with regular folks about their sexual preferences and fantasies. I spent several days working with a man and woman producer team who had no idea that I was completely new to the television industry, the equipment, and virtually the entire world. I was certainly new to a three-part series on sex!

These producers were fun and enthusiastic, and wanted all kinds of snazzy effects in their pieces. This was "Hard Copy's" first season, and the show's style was really wild and glitzy — they toned it down a bit in future seasons.

Snazzy effects required even more complex equipment operations, way beyond anything I had ever done, and I was trying to do them well and efficiently on Hard Copy's new, complex equipment while the producer team waited patiently.

I must have built up a lot of neuronal brain connections during that week. I was probably thinking harder than I'd ever thought before.

I was on the hot seat continuously for eight to ten hours a day. Still, I must have put on a decent act, because the two producers had no idea I had just come from an ashram, or that I had never done this kind of editing before. In fact, they praised my work to the operations manager.

Their suspicions only arose one time as we were editing a montage about which celebrities people liked to fantasize about during sex.

We were scanning through footage of celebrities, when the male producer asked me to edit a shot of Michelle Pfeiffer into the montage. I had never heard this name before, and asked if she was the blonde or the brunette. The producers both looked at me as though I was joking, as the woman teasingly asked, "What planet are you from?"

I thought, "If you only knew...."

This three-part series on sex was very educational for me. I hadn't discussed or really even thought much about sex before, certainly not for the previous ten years of monastic life. I knew very little about sex, mostly what can be assumed logically, such as what would likely go where. But these people in the "sex survey" video were talking about things like g-spots and fantasizing about one person while they were having sex with another.

The producers had asked one group of interview subjects, "How much money would it take for you to give up sex for a month, and how much for a year?" I was shocked by their answers. These people were asking for hundreds, thousands, even millions of dollars! One large, husky security guard woman even declared in a deep voice, "Nothing could make me stop that!"

We enjoyed imitating her during our long days of editing, as we found various humorous places to interject ourselves saying, "Nothing could make me stop that!"

I had been hired for the "Hard Copy" job on a freelance basis, and continued to seek other work. I edited several music videos, did a stint at the local CBS News, and put together a "Candid Camera" special with Allen Funt himself. I knew my karmas had seriously shifted when I was hired to write and edit a trailer for a movie called "Life of Sin," which did at least feature Raul Julia, one of my guru's devotees who had come to the ashram.

Four months after arriving in Los Angeles, I went to Disney's studio on the Paramount production lot to apply for an editing job with their brand new station's "Prime-Nine News."

In those pre-cable news days, KCAL's Prime Nine News was going to be the largest local news operation in the world, with more than five news shows each day.

Editing the news wasn't something I'd had in mind as long-term employment, although I had been thinking it would be great to get a job with Disney. At this point, everything was a learning experience, and I was open to whatever the universe had in mind.

While filling out the forms for KCAL'S Prime-Nine News, I looked up, and was surprised to see Mark, the operations manager from Hard Copy, walking up to me enthusiastically with a big smile.

"Hey Sharon!"

I asked him, "What are you doing here?"

Mark replied, "I'm the new operations manager; I'm running this whole show, just tripled my salary. What are you doing here?"

I held up the application, "Applying for an editing job."

Mark said, "Great, you're hired." He had been impressed by my dedication in coming in for two weekends to learn the Hard Copy equipment, and had also received good reports from the producers I'd worked with. He walked me upstairs to introduce me to the vice-president and station manager.

Mark praised me to the skies to them. I had no idea this boss thought so highly of me. I had never been praised so lavishly by someone who barely even knew me! This was my first experience of being schmoozed.

All the other editors for this effort had been carefully selected from news organizations around the country — they were the best of the best. And here I was, having had practically no experience with editing news, hired right off the bat.

Not only was I totally unfamiliar with the terms and traditions of news production, but I barely even knew what had been going on in the world for the previous decade. Nevertheless, I accepted the job.

There couldn't have been a better way to catch up on worldly events than to edit the news. I was surprised to find how little had really happened during my monastic ashram decade, considering the thousands of magazines, newspaper articles and television shows that had been continually produced throughout those years.

I suppose if you had to choose a decade of world events and pop culture to miss, the 1980s were as good as any. Within a short time, I caught up with most of what I had missed, although certain intriguing gaps occasionally showed up for years to come. I was relieved to have found such a good full-time job just a few months after leaving the ashram.

I tended to be fairly cheerful in general, but was especially happy to be doing such interesting work that plugged me right into the heartbeat of Los Angeles and the world.

One co-worker asked me if I woke up singing every morning, and the funny part was that I would still chant the Guru Gita on most mornings, either at the local meditation center or on my own at home. So yes, I did wake up singing.

One surprise came when my boss called me into his office to tell me that two of the other editors were jealous of my skills and that I should watch my back. Even then, I stayed open and friendly with those editors, and enjoyed ongoing special moments and conversations with this new work family, as anchors, reporters, producers and writers would come up to my edit bay to give me scripts or sit and work with me on short news stories or intricate features.

In news editing, deadlines can be extremely tight. An event occurs, and the footage is rushed to the station. In pre-world-wide-web 1990, more timely or important recorded videos would be beamed in via satellite feeds, with most other footage brought to the station on tapes. Often, we'd have a short time to edit a piece, using all the best shots and piecing them together to follow the voice-over narration track. These were known as "crash and burn" stories, because they had to be put together under intense pressure.

The main scheduler and some of the reporters started calling the "crash queen," because I'd edit the pieces in whatever time was needed, while remaining calm and even joking with the nervous reporters and writers who were often wringing their hands, certain that there was no way to finish editing their stories in time for broadcast.

I actually enjoyed these challenges, because they gave me an opportunity to tap into the same kind of surrender and faith I had learned during similar time deadline challenges in the ashram. These situations gave me a chance to step back and watch in awe and gratitude as everything always seemed to come through beautifully, and usually right on time.

I would say "yes" to nearly any request, trusting that the Great Guiding Force of Grace would somehow fulfill my commitments. I'd also say yes to doing a number of free-lance and charitable jobs on the side, along with my full-time job with Disney.

In the ashram, I had worked long hours every day without any need for a timesheet. Regardless of how hard I worked, my "pay" would be room and board and a small monthly stipend that increased over the years.

My natural inclination was to approach my work at Disney with the same sense of dedication and freedom from counting hours, but we were in a union. Working without pay was not allowed.

Soon after I started editing for the news show, one of my co-workers had to take me aside to lecture me that I was supposed to request extra pay for a missed lunch even if I hadn't been hungry when the producer asked me to work through my lunch hour.

At the time, I was enthusiastic and willing to put in extra time and effort, sometimes even sneaking in on weekends to work for free on a particular piece. After all, I had just spent ten years offering every action to God through the practice of selfless service, or *seva*.

The pieces I produced were intentionally positive. I felt it was a blessing to be able to serve humanity by creating uplifting messages that would instantly be broadcast on the air, into the homes of viewers across Southern California. With all this dedication, I was honored with many awards during those first few years in Hollywood.

Within three years, I had won a Los Angeles Emmy award along with seven Emmy nominations. I'd won two Golden Mikes, an International New York Festival silver award, a National Associated Press Board of Director awards for "Best Television Enterprise," an L.A. Press Club Award, and more. I received first-place awards as "best editor" for Los Angeles, and "best news feature editing" for the state of California.

Winning so many awards gave me a bit more prestige around the studio. Some of the producers and reporters I worked with were also winning awards from our projects as well as other projects. At times, reporters would wheel and deal with the scheduler to get me as their editor. It was a definite confidence boost for this previously well-humbled monastic.

Barely a day went by when I didn't hear some form of extreme praise for my work at least once, including being called a genius regularly by some of the best reporters and producers in television news.

When my special pieces would air, the news anchors would often introduce them by saying things like, “Brought to you with the magical touch of our own Sharon Janis.”

And so, as fate would have it, in the same Paramount Studios stage where “Star Trek” and “I Love Lucy“ were filmed, I had the chance to experience a small taste of Hollywood stardom.

Chapter Twenty-Six
THE WISH-FULFILLING TREE

AFTER TWO AND A HALF YEARS, I left Disney's news station, and was hired to edit and co-produce a low-budget feature film titled "Beretta's Island." The movie was being produced by Mr. Universe bodybuilder Franco Columbu, and it would include a cameo appearance by Franco's best friend, Arnold. Yes, *that* Arnold.

For the next few months, I would be eating a whole lot of Italian dinners and drinking considerable amounts of wine, including the homemade brew whose production was filmed as part of the movie. I hadn't consumed any alcohol during my ten years of ashram life, but as a teen, had often used the fake I.D. my folks had gotten for me to go to bars with friends, so I'd imbibed my share of alcohol during those teenage years.

I would spend Thanksgiving evening 1992 sipping peppermint schnapps in side-by-side recliner chairs, chatting about "mooovies" for a couple hours with "the Terminator" himself, Arnold Schwarzenegger. He seemed to enjoy chatting with me very much while puffing on cigars and explaining how they had done various effects in his movies. I hadn't seen any of the movies Arnold mentioned, since I'd lived in the ashram during the 1980s, but I couldn't bring myself to tell him that. Anyway, I was enjoying his descriptions, and figured I could always look up the movies later.

Arnold and I already had several significant connections before our Thanksgiving meeting, so when Franco said, "Arnold, you remember Sharon," Arnold responded with full Terminator accent, "Of course I remember her, we only met five times already. She saved your whole mooooovie."

A few weeks earlier, Arnold had also expressed admiration for my work. While I was still finishing the film, Franco frantically called one day to see if I could quickly put together a short trailer that he could show while pitching "Beretta's Island" at the MIFED international film festival that was only a few days off.

Producing, scripting, and editing a trailer in three days would be quite a feat, although I'd been given even tighter deadlines when creating certain videos in the ashram. Through those projects, I had learned to stay calm and focused, reaching into grace, allowing the brilliance and creativity to come forth, and working steadily with faith to complete each project with respect and love, done well and on time. That skill had also come in handy when I was editing news stories in Hollywood, with many pieces that had to be edited and broadcast on air within just a few minutes. Now, that same skill was going to come in handy in creating this movie trailer.

I quickly wrote a four minute script, recorded the narration track, and started editing. The trailer began with soft Italian music and beautiful dissolving scenes that Franco and his crew had filmed on the island of Sardinia. Then came the words, "Sardinia, island of peace, beauty, tradition, love, far from the evils of the world… until now." Cut to rock music with a fast and loud montage of shootouts and fight scenes from the movie.

Since the trailer was needed so quickly, I used my own voice for the narration, assuming we could re-edit the trailer with a more professional voice for future uses beyond the upcoming festival.

I finished the trailer just before the movie's cast and crew came together for a "wrap party" at the director's home to celebrate the end of the production phase of the project. Franco was going to be leaving for the MIFED festival soon after with copies of the trailer, and he wanted to show it to everyone.

Arnold had also come to the party, and sat down in front of the screen with his cigar in hand. I was excited to have such a media superstar see my work, even though I'd had to put it together so quickly.

After the video played, Arnold said, "Show it again."

Over and over again, as the piece played through and then ended, Arnold would say "Show it again," until the four minutes had extended into a half-hour. Then he put the cigar in his mouth and stood up, proclaiming with an authoritative tone, "That should have taken three months to do, and she did it in three days."

There we sat a few weeks later on Thanksgiving evening, drinking Peppermint Schnapps as Arnold described to me various creative choices and technical effects from his movies.

Some months later, I had an opportunity to visit the upstate New York ashram for five days. I was excited to be making this pilgrimage, although it also brought up some feelings of apprehension and anxiety.

While living in the ashram, I had been used to meeting the inevitable challenges with a peaceful inner space of humility and surrender that came from the extensive spiritual practices and my simple ways.

However, after working in Hollywood for three years, I was no longer as humble and accepting as I'd been during my ashram years. I was concerned that my new Hollywood persona would clash with the quiet monastic I used to be.

For the next five days, I would not be hotshot Emmy award-winner Sharon Janis, but Kumuda, the supposedly humble disciple. Could my ego shrink quickly enough to handle the lessons awaiting me there? Was my faith still strong enough to carry me through the challenges?

A shuttle service from the ashram came to pick up another woman and me from the New York City airport. I introduced myself, and she introduced herself as Robin, and then went into apparent silence. As we set off on our two to three hour drive, I tried to make small talk with Robin, who didn't seem too interested in chatting with me.

Under normal circumstances, I would have probably stayed quiet for the long drive, but I was already feeling anxious about the upcoming visit, knowing that a few days at the ashram could sometimes take my confidence level down a few notches. That concern, combined with Robin's lack of interest in communicating with me, seemed to have brought my feelings of insecurity to the surface, adding a flavor of bragging to my words.

After mentioning that I had just co-produced and edited my first feature film, I moved the conversation into more daring territory.

It's not that I was sitting there consciously trying to come up with ways to impress this woman, but my subconscious insecurities were expressing themselves through me. It felt important to me that Robin and I find some positive note of contact, perhaps to create a good omen for our stay.

I told Robin that every time I came to visit the ashram, I always saw our guru within the first ten minutes. It's true that this had happened many times, but I spoke these words as if challenging fate itself, as though I was so connected with the underlying forces of this universe that I could dare to declare something so unpredictable and unlikely.

Robin still looked as though she thought I was odd, but there was a flicker of interest in her eyes. What if it was true? She certainly would like to see our guru as much as anyone.

When we arrived at the ashram doors, there was no guru in sight, so Robin and I went to our respective rooms to drop off our luggage. Then, I headed downstairs to visit the main temple. Robin did the same, and we both arrived in the shoe room at the same time.

As we took off our shoes, Robin smirked at me and said, "So where is Gurumayi? I thought you always see her within ten minutes?" It wasn't that Robin was a sarcastic person, but she had been listening to my obnoxious routine and probably wanted to teach me a lesson. It had been around ten minutes since we'd arrived, and our guru was nowhere to be seen. I mumbled a discouraged response.

Robin and I had both planned to go into the temple en route to an ongoing chant being held in the nearby meditation hall. We wanted to kneel in reverence before the bronze statue of our grandfather guru; however, the temple was locked, so we paid our respects from outside the glass door.

I arrived at the door feeling like a dolt, but as I knelt and touched my head to the holy ground at the threshold of this temple, the magic of surrender began to enter me.

I moved into a state of witness consciousness, where I could see that I had acted like an idiot, but I wasn't identifying with the part of myself that had acted like an idiot. From this experience of greater self, I also had compassion on myself. Once again, I felt the awareness that everything was fine and ultimately perfect. There was no place for guilt or shame, and no need for embarrassment or fear. Whatever had happened was perfect, and whatever was going to happen would be perfect.

Through this posture of surrender — while kneeling before an image that represented the Divine — I took refuge in an awareness of the Conscious Force that moves through all. I was able to let go of my insecurities and step back.

While kneeling before that locked temple door, layers of defense mechanisms and wrong understandings gently opened up to reveal the light of awareness they had been obscuring from my sight. Feeling rejuvenated in spirit, I stood up and turned to go to the chanting hall. Robin stayed at the temple door with her head bowed.

As I turned the corner, there, walking toward me in the hallway, was none other than...

Yes. It was her!

My heart leapt as I saw my guru heading in my direction, walking with her secretary and one of the women swamis. She stopped at the meditation hall doorway to look in on the chanting session, as I stood off to the side, watching with a loving, open heart, feeling happy and grateful to see my dear guru.

As Gurumayi turned, she looked at me with deep, piercing eyes, gave a mischievous smile, and exclaimed, "Ah, it's the famous one!"

I was shocked to hear her call me this for several reasons. First of all, I had just been feeling pretty insecure about myself for the previous few hours.

And here was the one person whose opinion I most treasured, calling me famous. She said it with more of a friendly tone than sarcastic, although with a mischievous smile.

It didn't even occur to me that my guru might be referring to the success I had already achieved during my few years in Hollywood. I wondered, "Does she think I want to be famous? Does she think I've got the ego of a famous person? Is she seeing something in my future?" I also wondered if perhaps she was giving a concealed message to the higher consciousness that expresses through and as my life, with the power of her words.

Just one week before my trip to the ashram, I had experienced a new understanding about the power of the guru's words. One of the teachings we'd previously studied in the ashram comes from the philosophy of Kashmir Shaivism, the sutra phrase, "*Kathaa japaha*: A great being's mundane conversation constitutes the invocation of prayer."

I'd understood this to mean that even the casual words of a spiritual master are powerful and full of deeper meaning and potency. But one week before my trip to the ashram, I had a tangible personal recognition of the power of my guru's words in action.

Lying in bed one morning, thinking about returning back to what I considered my spiritual home, I looked back at all that had happened since leaving the ashram.

The first thing that stood out was that so many of my wishes had been almost magically fulfilled!

I had initially come to Los Angeles hoping to get a job with Disney, and I got a job with Disney. I wished I could live in Santa Monica, and there I was. I wished I could win an Emmy award, and I had.

I wished I could edit a feature film, and I had just co-produced and edited a feature film for Arnold Schwarzenegger's best friend, having had no real experience with editing or producing theatrical shows or movies.

There was no logical reason for me to have gotten this job, other than Franco liking me so much when we met that he decided to go with me instead of another highly accomplished editor he had been considering.

It is almost impossible for a news editor to move directly into feature film editing. I had never edited a single drama scene. I had never learned how to read a movie script or interpret the meticulous production script notes. Nor had I ever used the kind of equipment I used to edit the film.

In fact, our movie would be one of the first times the Avid editing system was ever used to edit a feature film, although soon it would became one of the top industry editing systems. With my lack of experience and expertise in movie editing, there was no reason I should have gotten that job.

While lying in bed mulling over all this in my head, my eyes widened as I remembered a story my guru used to tell about a man who sat under a "wish-fulfilling tree."

While walking through the wilderness alone one day, a poor man happened upon a large tree. Settling down under its cool shade, the poor man closed his eyes and began to daydream.

How nice it would be to have a beautiful woman sitting there beside him. Suddenly, he felt a presence, and opened his eyes to find an exquisite woman sitting there, looking at him with big, beautiful eyes.

"Such a glorious woman," he thought. "If only we had fancy servants here to bring us delicious food and wine." Suddenly, two servants appeared, ready to serve the man and his new lady friend a gourmet meal.

The man sat with this beautiful woman, eating, drinking and having a wonderful time, when he stopped to think. "I wished for a woman, and a woman appeared. I wished for servants, and servants appeared. I wished for delicious food, and it appeared. There must be a demon around here!" And the demon appeared.

"Oh, no! He's going to eat me alive!" End of story.

I thought of how I now found myself in a similar position, where I seemed to have been sitting under a wish-fulfilling tree in terms of my career. Yes, I'd put considerable effort into all the accomplishments that had come my way, but clearly they had also come from a place beyond my efforts; these boons had come from grace. It seemed as though my wishes were somehow being amplified into the world as it manifested around me.

While considering all this with gratitude, I began to hear inside myself the words my guru had spoken several years earlier when she told me to leave the ashram. "Go wherever you want and do whatever you want."

When my guru first sent me out of the ashram, I had heard these words as being said with impatience and indifference. I felt a little sad to hear them, and interpreted my guru's words to mean that she didn't really care what happened to me anymore, "Go wherever you want and do whatever you want." But while lying in bed early that morning, I heard the same words being spoken in my guru's sweet, loving, enthusiastic voice, "Go wherever you want and do whatever you want." It was like a beautiful song, a positive affirmation, an empowering blessing.

I wondered if my guru had intentionally disguised this blessing with a stern exterior, perhaps so my ego wouldn't grab onto it and ruin everything. Without deeper contemplation, my egoic nature might have risen up to think, "Hey, my guru said I can do whatever I want!"

Even if Gurumayi hadn't had all these specific intentions when saying this line, I understood that blessings can naturally flow through the words of elevated souls, even when they are not aware of all the prophetic meanings and potent incantations that may be flowing through their speech.

As I arrived at the ashram a week after this epiphany to find my guru walking toward me, saying, "Ah, it's the famous one," I was keenly aware of the power behind her words. Gurumayi then joked with her secretary and the swami, asking if they knew how famous I was. They certainly did!

I stood there with a sheepish grin, not quite understanding what the point of this "famous" talk was, but assuming there was more going on beneath the conversation than I understood.

At that point, the woman to whom I had just bragged on the shuttle bus that, "I always see Gurumayi within ten minutes of arriving," turned the corner and stopped as she saw us. There we were, my guru and I, just as I had boasted to Robin earlier. Okay, so maybe it had been fifteen minutes instead of ten — it was still impressive. After wallowing in, regretting, and then transcending my pettiness and insecurities, I had been vindicated and uplifted by the hand of grace, and I felt greatly blessed.

During the first full day of my five-day visit to the ashram, some of the garden workers saw me and thought I might be able to offer service in their department. Several huge gardening projects were underway at the time, the largest being the construction of a massive hill behind the main ashram building that was intended to be used for some kind of special programs.

A line of trucks was driving in and out of the gates all day, dumping load after load of soil onto the pile. Ralph was still in charge of designing the ashram gardens, and he had quite the extravagant, if often impractical, flair.

The garden folks had a meeting with our guru at lunchtime, and asked her if it would be okay for them to assign me to work in the gardening department during my five day stay. I had no gardening skills, but a couple of the crew members remembered that I had served in the garden for a time before leaving the ashram.

First, our guru nodded and gave her approval. Then, as the garden workers stood up to leave, she added, "Kumuda should be in charge."

This statement made no logical sense. There were already several very skilled department heads supervising all these projects. Was our guru saying that I — who barely had any gardening background — I, who was only going to be there for five days, should be in charge? When the gardening folks told me this, I had to laugh.

Soon afterward, I was brought outside to speak with Swaroop, a fellow who had been the hands-on overseer for all the garden work before I came along to be in charge. Swaroop had already heard about our guru's new decree.

My appearance may have been a source of stress for him, since his work schedule at that time was extremely demanding.

The last thing Swaroop needed was to have a complete landscaping novice who was visiting for five days being put "in charge" of anything relating to this extensive garden work.

In our monastic-based ashram, you might go along doing your work as if it were an actual business. But there was a unique infrastructure that would sometimes jump out and surprise you when rules were changed, positions rearranged, and projects canceled or redone over and over again. The work in this place was not about outer efficiency.

We were on a quest for Eternal Truth. We were treading a spiritual path of inner transformation, to which we were deeply committed. We wanted to be worked on. We wanted our false expectations to be crushed. We wanted our egos to be broken. We just didn't always like it when such things actually happened!

Swaroop clearly didn't know what to expect from me. We hadn't had any significant previous interactions, so he was probably concerned that I might come in with a big power trip, bringing more confusion and aggravation to his already burdensome schedule. Maybe he wondered if our guru had said I should be in charge because I had some control issues to work through, or to teach him new levels of sacrifice, even in the midst of his demanding responsibilities.

Swaroop looked at me with a concerned but surrendered face, and said, "I'm not really sure what it means that you're supposed to be in charge."

We were standing in front of the veritable mountain of soil that had been amassed over the previous week by the nonstop train of dump trucks. I pointed to it and said, "Well, for starters, you should clean up that pile of dirt over there."

Swaroop looked stunned for a moment, and then realized that I was joking. He was a rather serious fellow at that time, and I think this was the only time I saw him come even close to laughing up until that moment. Between the long hours and my being put "in charge," Swaroop's emotional resistance had probably worn quite thin. So he did manage to crack up at my joke, and invited me to their garden project meetings, where I just tried to be a blessing and light hearted addition however I could.

Swaroop's tests must have worked, because when I would see him many years later, he had become a very joyful and jolly fellow.

On my journey, I now had a new message from my guru, right in the midst of my recent revelations about the power of her words. My guru had said, "Kumuda should be in charge."

Her words didn't make sense at all in terms of my being in charge of these garden projects. No, this was a personal command, an instruction from her deeper consciousness to the consciousness that lives in and as me.

In a subtle way, my guru's words ushered in a sense that I was now on my own. I had to move into the next limb of this journey, and learn to receive greater guidance from within. "Kumuda should be in charge," not in charge of others or a garden project, but in charge of my own lot in life. It was time for this bird to find her wings and fly more freely. My gurus had often declared, "The disciple must become the guru." It was time for me to discover the subtle meaning behind this statement.

Thus began an inner shift that was empowering and painful, as I grieved the diminishing of my dependence on her external guidance. This time there was no statue or next guru to pacify me. I had to go deeper. I had to become a channel of grace unto myself. It wouldn't always come easy.

Chapter Twenty-Seven
KUMUDA GUMP

PEOPLE HAVE OCCASIONALLY ASKED ME, sometimes with a bit of judgment, how I could have left a peaceful monastic ashram life and jumped so fully into Hollywood. Some have acted as though I must have given up on my spiritual life, when in fact I was just following the instructions of my guru as part of my spiritual journey. Therefore, it is understandable that I would strive to do well and fit in wherever I was.

One element of the monastic mindset is to accept whatever you are given and to willingly do whatever God, the Universe, or in the case of the ashram, whatever your guru or the service desk ask you to do.

I had been spiritually prepared to move my journey outside of the ashram, because one of the teachings of my gurus was to see God in the world. This was one of my guru's main teachings. It was based in part on the ancient philosophy of *Kashmir Shaivism*, a fairly scientific view of how everything in the universe is made up of supreme Consciousness. From that perspective, one should be able to experience the divine "Play of Consciousness," anywhere, including Hollywood, where Muktananda had also spent time giving programs, meeting celebrities, and being interviewed on various news and entertainment television shows in the early 1980s.

I was also somewhat comfortable with the Hollywood scene, because our ashram had been popular with celebrities. Superstars like Barbara Streisand would usually come only for pre-arranged private meetings with our guru away from the crowds, but many other celebrities would come and join in the ashram schedule — meditating, chanting, and serving with the rest of us, though generally with closer seats and somewhat fancier, though still simple, rooms.

Most devotees were so enthralled with our gurus that we weren't as excited about celebrities as others might be. For many of us who were deeply embracing the devotional path of *bhakti yoga*, there was our guru, and then there was everybody else (who from a higher perspective were also forms of the Universal Guru).

Most ashram residents didn't watch television shows or movies, so we often didn't even recognize famous people. One long-term ashram resident told me that she was eating lunch at a group table in the dining hall one day with actor William Hurt at the same table.

When the woman asked what he did for a living, Academy Award winner William replied that he was an actor. She then asked if he had been in anything she might have seen, which actually may have been refreshing for William to hear as he delved into his deeper spirit beyond fame while visiting the ashram.

Another time, I was visiting the ashram soon after drinking peppermint schnapps and chatting with Arnold Schwarzenegger on that Thanksgiving evening.

Anjali, a very sweet longtime resident, came up to say hello, and as we chatted, she asked if I'd met any celebrities in Hollywood.

"Yes, quite a few," I happily responded.

"Who have you met?" Anjali eagerly asked.

"Well, just a couple months ago, I spent Thanksgiving with Arnold Schwarzenegger!"

Anjali asked, "Is he famous?"

I chuckled and thought, "Why did you even ask?" Of course, just a few years earlier, I probably wouldn't have known who he was either.

My favorite celebrity moment in the ashram took place during one of John Denver's visits. As a teen, I had greatly enjoyed John Denver's music, which, along with the music of Cat Stevens, really stood out in the musical landscape as being melodically appealing, pure, heartfelt, and uplifting to the mind, heart, spirit, and world.

John loved Baba Muktananda tremendously, and announced during one evening program that he had written the song "Perhaps Love" to express his love for Baba.

John performed several times in our meditation halls for both Muktananda and Gurumayi. He was also close friends with famed architect, author, and futurist Buckminster Fuller, and considered both Fuller and Muktananda to be his mentors.

During Muktananda's visit to Los Angeles in 1981, John had arranged for "Bucky" Fuller and Muktananda to meet privately, and it was a meeting filled with big smiles, wonderful conversation, and a loving exchange of gifts.

This meeting had been videotaped, and I'd watched it many times while working on various projects as the ashram's video editor. I thought John would really enjoy seeing this video, especially with both of his beloved mentors having passed on.

I invited John to my edit bay to show him the footage of this joyful meeting, and he was as wonderful, gracious, sweet, and thrilled as I would have expected him to be.

After moving from the ashram to Los Angeles, I didn't really go out of my way to meet or help create famous people, but like Forrest Gump, I often found myself in amazing situations, some of which would come to light years later.

During my seven years in Hollywood, I met, worked with, learned from, and helped quite a few nonfamous, famous, soon-to-be-famous, and one or two infamous people to achieve greater success in their careers.

One definition of "Guru" is "the grace bestowing power of God," a power I'd come to know very well while living in the ashram, and also while stepping into Hollywood.

This grace bestowing energy seemed to come together with my general intention to live in a way that was of service, and from this combination arose an ability to help others to envision, connect, and find their way into better jobs, and sometimes on to new career paths.

My first incidence of this magical touch came just a few weeks after I moved to Hollywood. I had been hired to edit a music video on editing equipment I'd never used before, which was quite a frightening scenario. But this was my first job offer, and I wasn't about to turn it down.

On the day of our editing session, I decided to follow the more scenic directions from Santa Monica to the valley through Malibu, while feeling some trepidation about having had the chutzpah to agree to edit a video on equipment I didn't even know how to use. At the same time, I was excited to have my first post-ashram job.

While driving through miles of woodsy back roads, I looked over to see the edge of what looked like a fancy Hindu temple. It couldn't be!

I had to turn the car around to see what it was, and drove into the parking lot of a large Hindu temple complex filled with statues of many of my favorite deities. I only had time to hop in for a few minutes, but after that good omen surprise, I felt protected and nearly worry-free.

I arrived at the studio early and found the previous editor cleaning up after his session. I boldly asked the editor if he might be able to give me a quick overview of the equipment, and like an angel sent from heaven, he generously agreed. David spent nearly a half-hour showing me how to use the system, and I was ultimately able to edit and complete the video to the director's satisfaction. As a statement of faith and gratitude, I forwarded my entire check from this first project to my guru's foundation. It would be the first of many offerings of love from my new career in Hollywood.

A couple months later, I received a call from the ashram. It turns out that Ralph, who had apparently orchestrated my removal from the ashram's video department, was already becoming active as the ashram's new filmmaker. In Ralph's mind, he was Fellini, Bertolucci, and Spielberg all in one, as he set about to produce a video view of our path's Indian ashram, which was beautiful, exotic, and filled with exquisite and interesting plants, grounds, history, practices, statues, temples, foods, and people.

Ralph brought in all kinds of fancy Bollywood cranes and dollies that could pan through the air and get more exotic shots. He had various ashram residents perform scenes over and over to film them walking, chanting, or practicing yoga, until the scene was just right. But now they needed an editor who would come to India and edit this masterpiece. I had recently moved to Los Angeles, so the ashram phoned and asked if I knew of any good video editors who might be willing to come to India for six months to work on this project.

Of course, I wanted to suggest myself, but knew that wasn't going to happen. None of the few editors I'd met seemed like even remotely possible candidates for this project, so I said that I didn't know of anyone to recommend, but that I'd keep my eyes open.

While chanting the next morning, a face flashed on my mind's screen. It was that fellow David, the editor who had so kindly showed me how to use the equipment for my first video editing job. It was strange for me to have someone's face pop up like that. I thought that maybe I should try to get his contact info and see if he might be interested in spending half a year editing at an ashram in India. My hopes weren't too high, but why not ask?

I sleuthed out David's phone number, and called him with the possible job. David shared with me that his heart's desire was to make music — he had a small band, but wasn't able to make a living from it, so he did the editing jobs to support himself and his musical aspirations.

In hopes of convincing David to consider the job, I told him, "You'd find lots of great music in the ashram — every day they have hours and hours of different kinds of chanting with Indian instruments and ancient raga melodies."

This sparked David's interest, and after some negotiations with the ashram management, he did go to India to edit the video, and then stayed beyond the six months. While there, David Stringer also discovered his love for Indian chanting, and in subsequent years became one of the more famous and traveled singers of group kirtan chanting, bringing the joy of singing God's name — one of our guru's main gifts and practices — to people around the world.

Soon after arriving in Hollywood, I purchased a list of media company addresses and sent a batch of my meager but nicely designed resume packets to various studios and production companies, including places where I probably wouldn't have a chance of being hired. One of these recipients was Alan Funt, the creator and host of "Candid Camera," a television show that began in the late 1940s.

I'd grown up watching Candid Camera, which revealed a great deal about human nature by placing people in funny, challenging, or ridiculous predicaments to see how they would respond. Alan was in his mid-seventies by this time, and still producing occasional specials.

Seeing Alan Funt's address in the media list, I thought there was no way he would ever hire me. I imagined that he'd probably been using the same editor for the past forty years.

Nevertheless, I decided to mail resumes to him and a few other seemingly impossible places as an offering to the winds of destiny and the Will of God. It wasn't my place to limit the possibilities, and this was my way of making a statement to the universe that I was open and willing to get a good job.

A few weeks later, while working as a free-lance editor for the show Hard Copy, I received a phone call from none other than Alan Funt himself. Alan spoke with a very thick New York accent as he asked about my resume.

"I see you've been editing in New York for years." This was technically true, since the ashram where I lived and edited videos was in upstate New York. "But have ya cut comedy?"

I put on my best tough New Yorker affectation and responded, "Alan, I've edited in New York for years; I've cut everything."

This statement was also technically true, because in the ashram, I'd produced and edited all kinds of videos, including many comedy pieces. In fact, during one summer, our video department was asked by our guru to create a "Candid Seva" video for one of the ashram courses that was meant to bring a deeper understanding and experience of "selfless service."

The video crew went out and set up all kinds of hidden camera situations to provoke people and see if they would react angrily, but in general, the surrendered devotees accepted these challenges without too many complaints.

We edited what we could from these disappointing efforts and sent the sample tape to our guru, who responded by sending the message, "You don't know how to do Candid Camera right."

And here I was in Los Angeles just a few years later, with Alan Funt himself phoning to interview me as a possible editor. I especially wanted to work for him because of our guru's comment. Alan hired me on the phone and asked me to come to work at his in-home studio the next week.

When I excitedly told some people at Hard Copy about my call from Alan Funt, they immediately said, "Don't take the job!"

Apparently Alan had a reputation for being grouchy and firing editors quickly. But I wasn't about to turn down a chance to work with this legend and learn how to do Candid Camera right. I could handle a little grouchiness — I'd been through Ralph at the ashram!

For the next month and a half, I worked with Alan on a show called "Funny Money," and was told that I was the first editor to make it through a whole show with him in a long time. Alan did yell a lot, but fortunately not at me.

I would often feel concerned about Alan's health, as he'd blow up at some of the production staff, turning bright red while shouting. This was a little different from the usual charming Alan Funt I had watched while growing up, but I still liked him and felt that we had a special connection from the first time I walked into his living room.

Before we even introduced ourselves, Alan had motioned for me to sit next to him, and said, "Watch this."

On came a video clip of a dog being fitted for a jeweled necklace per his deceased owner's last will and testament. This was meant to be a gag on the jeweler, but the jeweler seemed too excited about making a big sale to risk it by questioning the scenario, so it ended up being more a study of the jeweler kissing up to the dog and the dog's attendant, which was interesting for about thirty seconds of the ten-minute video.

After the piece ended, Alan turned to me and gruffly said, "Ya didn't laugh."

My reply to his statement set the stage for a very good and respectful working relationship between us. With my usual innocent honesty, I said, "Well Mr. Funt, that's not because I don't have a good sense of humor." From then on, Alan insisted that I had to approve every piece before it could be included in the show. Here I was, just a couple months out of the ashram, and I was editing and helping to produce a Candid Camera special with Alan Funt in his house!

During my first two years in Hollywood, I also played a role in helping Charlie Rose, subsequently of the "Charlie Rose Show" and "CBS This Morning," to find his greater destiny.

About a year into my full-time job with Disney's "Prime Nine News," I was offered a free-lance job on the side, film editing for a new television show called "Personalities." The producers wanted to duplicate Hard Copy's style and success, so they were especially interested in hiring an editor like me, who had actually worked on Hard Copy.

The host of this new show was very talented; he was Charlie Rose, who has since become famous as one of media's great interviewers. But at the time, Charlie wasn't well known, and therefore had been hired to anchor this second-rate tabloid show. Charlie's job was to introduce stories on camera, and to produce some of the pieces.

One day, I was scheduled to work with Charlie to edit an interview he had just filmed with Bob Hope. It was a great interview, with about an hour of raw taped footage that we had to cut down to five minutes. Actually the whole hour was great. Bob was sharing personal stories and tossing out one-liners, as young Charlie encouraged him with laughter. The interview was filmed with two cameras, so I was able to cut back and forth to match the pace and enhance the viewer's experience of this conversation.

Editing just five-minutes from this hour-long interview meant cutting out a lot of good stories and moments. Charlie and I watched through and selected which parts of the interview to keep, and put together a very nice five-minute piece.

We sent in the final edit to one of the executives in charge, who was very interested in keeping the show fast-moving and tabloidesque.

The executive sent a message back saying that five minutes was too long. We would have to cut this great interview down to just two and a half minutes. "We have to keep the show moving fast, fast, fast."

Charlie was understandably upset with this edict. He immediately said, "I'll take care of this," and ran off to talk the executive producer out of cutting the piece down any further. After all, Charlie was the show's on-camera host, so you'd think the executive producer would have placated his wishes for something so minor.

But no, the exec was firm — we had to cut this fabulous hour-long interview down to just two and a half minutes.

Charlie looked close to tears as he came back to the editing bay. He was clearly feeling emotional distress about being the face of such a schlocky enterprise. I agreed that it was a shame to chop something so fabulous down to just a few sound bites to make room for one more insipid tabloid story.

In that moment, I believe Charlie was so upset that his vulnerability opened him up to a deeper layer of his soul. Emotional moments can sometimes trigger major life transformations, and I got to be part of Charlie's when his happened.

One ability I've had is to sometimes glimpse possible potentials or destinies of what kinds of works and endeavors people could do that would be a good use and powerful expression of their styles and talents. I don't know if these impressions are always right, but some have come to successful fruition in people's careers.

Even though Charlie and I had only recently met, we'd had a good creative working relationship, especially while editing this interview. It seemed as though the shock and anger Charlie was feeling had opened him up beyond his usually stoic demeanor, a change I could see in his face.

We started talking on a soul-to-soul level, as though we were old, caring friends.

I told Charlie that this tabloid show was clearly the wrong kind of format for him, and suggested that the Bob Hope interview was so entertaining that it could easily have stood on its own as a full show. I wondered if Charlie could create and sell a simple hour-long interview show that would be similar to the full Bob Hope interview. "People would love to watch some good, intelligent conversations with celebrities and newsmakers."

Charlie agreed and asked me to come back to the FOX studio with him on Saturday to edit a demo video of his full hour-long interview with Bob Hope that he could use to pitch a new interview show. Even though we both worked at the studio, I tend to say we "snuck in," because our mission to get Charlie a new reel had to be done behind closed doors, with some fudging on what we said we were there to do.

Within a few weeks, Charlie was gone. I heard a rumor that he had gotten a new show, but didn't communicate again with Charlie until more than a decade later, when Bob Hope passed. By then, the "Charlie Rose Show" had become a successful staple on public television, and I sent an email to let him know that I still had the short version of his old Bob Hope interview, also reminding him of our story. Charlie enthusiastically responded and asked me to send the tape to him so he could copy and then return it. Charlie also said that he was going to show the clip on his show and tell our story of how his show first came to be, but I didn't see that show if he did.

Charlie Rose's story is proof that we never know what grace may be waiting behind even our most upsetting challenges, if we're alert enough to catch ourselves, seize the moment, and act from the space of deep soul Self that is often hidden beneath the waves of daily life.

That deep Self is sometimes a bit more accessible during times of intense emotion. As we cry out and ask the universe for help or guidance on what to do, the veil of mediocrity can lift to reveal a possible new destiny.

> *In that state is the Spanda principle (the energy of divine creative pulsation) firmly established to which a person is reduced when he is greatly exasperated or overjoyed, or is in impasse reflecting what to do, or is running for life.*
>
> *— SPANDA KARIKAS, 1:22*

I experienced quite a few of my own career mini-miracles as well. Soon after leaving the ashram, I met someone who had won an Emmy Award, and thought, "How great it would be to win an Emmy award and bring it back to my guru in the darshan line as a gift and trophy!"

With this thought came a visual image of wrapping the golden Emmy award in red velvet and offering it to Gurumayi, saying, "This really belongs to you."

I had this Emmy award vision just before I started working for Disney's KCAL-TV as a full-time editor and occasional producer. It turns out that there's hardly a better way to win an Emmy award than to work for the news, since each region has an Emmy Award competition. With our TV station in the Los Angeles market, my pieces would be eligible to win a Los Angeles Emmy award, which was considered to be nearly as prestigious as a national Emmy.

Two pieces that I edited during my first year after leaving the ashram were nominated for Emmy awards, but I didn't win. The next year, I had a near-record four nominations, and finally won with the last of the four. The Emmy ceremony took place just a week or so before my Guru's birthday celebration in upstate New York, which I was already scheduled to attend. I flew to the ashram with my Emmy wrapped in red velvet, ready to bring my vision to life.

While moving forward in the long *darshan line,* I was feeling shy about speaking to my guru, as usual. At times, I had barely been able to even properly answer my guru's questions — she once described me during a public talk as being "reticent."

I think there are probably a few explanations for this tendency toward reticence in my guru's presence. One is that my mind and heart would become so united when I was before her energy and consciousness that my waves of thought would calm and settle down into a greater field of awareness that was not conducive to forming and speaking words. Another explanation was that I was probably afraid I might put my foot in my mouth and say the wrong thing.

During a previous visit to the ashram, I had purchased a box of top quality Belgium chocolates to bring back to my co-workers at Disney, hopefully with the guru's blessing. Usually I was too shy to ask or initiate many conversations with her, but this was for the hundred or so people I'd been working with on so many creative projects. I wanted to share some of this path's blessing with them.

Holding the box of candies in a shawl while kneeling before my guru in that previous darshan line, I had been unable to recite my planned request about wanting to bring blessings back to my co-workers at Disney, and had barely managed to eke out the words, "Please bless the candy."

Although I'd felt a bit foolish for giving such an abridged request, a blessing was nevertheless showered upon those chocolates. While sitting on a chair in the back of the room with that shawl-covered box on my lap, it became so hot that it was difficult to continue holding the bundle. This must sound strange, but it was a very tangible and almost painful experience of holding something that was very hot.

When I returned to the newsroom after my ashram stay, I walked in to find almost everyone there in a generally somber mood, with no smiles to be found. Even with friends welcoming me back, there was a low energy quality pervading the room.

It seemed like a great time to bring a blessing, so I went person by person and gave each one a chocolate, telling them that it had been blessed by my guru.

Although I felt a little shy going full out with the guru blessing part of the chocolate gifts, by that time, I had proven myself enough as an editor and reasonably centered person to get away with saying something that was quite unusual, especially at that place and time.

The executives, writers, producers, anchors, and reporters around the newsroom were generally respectful while receiving their blessed candy. Only our most curmudgeonly reporter made fun of the gesture, but even he still accepted his delicious Belgium chocolate.

Feeling relieved at having gotten past my reticence to complete this chocolate blessing request and distribution task, I headed upstairs to my editing bay to start piecing together news stories for that evening's newscasts.

About an hour later, I brought a tape down to the newsroom, and wow, it was an entirely different vibe. Everyone was laughing with bright smiles. The room was filled with positive energy. The flavor I remember of that moment almost reminds me of a party with beach balls flying here and there, although they were still at work. As I stood looking around and hearing peals of laughter ringing out from various parts of the room, I felt shocked although not necessarily surprised by this shift.

One of the writers shouted out, "Hey Sharon, what was in those chocolates!?!" Others asked if they could get seconds of the blessed candy, and one of the producers held up her wrapper and said she was going to save it.

Now, a year or so later, I was back in the darshan line, preparing to offer my newly won Emmy award to the guru. This time, I wanted to get it right and not become tongue-tied before her as I had many times before.

I practiced my script: "Gurumayi, when I first left the ashram, I had a vision that one day I'd bring you an Emmy award wrapped in red velvet and give it to you, saying, 'This really belongs to you.' So I'm here today to say that this really belongs to you." At that point I would unwrap the red velvet cloth and hand the Emmy award to her.

I gave myself a stern lecture about coming through for myself this time, and as I bowed before my guru, was pleased to be able to successfully say the words, unwrap the red velvet cloth, and hand the Emmy award to my guru, according to plan.

She received my offering with a smile, held it for a few moments, and showed it around to the folks gathered there, saying, "Look, Kumuda won an Emmy." Then she handed the statue back to me saying, "You should keep it," which I somewhat reluctantly did.

Now I shouldn't leave out the Kumuda Gump trivia fact that I had an interesting chat with Johnny Depp in his movie trailer. My close friend and roommate at the time was playing the sultan's favorite wife opposite Johnny Depp in Don Juan De Marco, and Jo brought me into his trailer on set to introduce us before filming their harem scene.

I entered the trailer and saw Johnny playing cards shirtless, with harem-style makeup on his face, looking exceptionally beautiful.

After Jo introduced us, Johnny kept insisting that we had met before. I thought, "Not unless you've been to the ashram," but was pretty sure he hadn't been one of the celebrities to mix with everyone at the ashram. I assured Johnny that we had not met, at least not in this lifetime.

I also worked with quite a few journalists who would find their way into various national media markets, including Jane Velez Mitchell who went on to host her own show on CNN's Headline News network.

Several times, I edited local sports with Keith Olbermann, who eventually went on to greater fame at ESPN, MSNBC, and other media outlets.

I was not the ideal person to be editing sports, knowing almost nothing about any games. Keith seemed like someone who could be demanding to work with, but since I was only there to substitute for his usual editor, he showed great patience when I barely even knew which sport we were editing, much less that "cut to the glory" meant to show a close-up of whomever had just made the successful play.

During these Hollywood years, many of my friends were in the television business. In Los Angeles, all you had to do was go out for a meal, and you might be waited on by a scriptwriter or actor waiting for their big break.

Producers, directors, casting directors, actors, and all kinds of film industry crew would also attend chants and programs at my guru's Santa Monica meditation center. I'd leave the hall after our Shree Guru Gita chant, and have nice hugs with various friends, including Bea Marcus, the original "I've fallen and I can't get up" elderly actress, who had the sweetest smile and a heart of gold.

After leaving Disney, I edited and co-produced the B-movie "Beretta's Island" with Arnold Schwarzenegger's best friend Franco, and then did freelance work for various projects and studios, including editing many news stories and news features at KCBS in Hollywood, before I was ready to find another full-time job.

But first I would have another visit to the ashram, and an opportunity to bathe in the guru's "grace bestowing power" before stepping into whatever would be next for me in Hollywood. I went into the temple and looked at the statue of our grandfather guru.

I usually just said, "Thank you," or repeated a mantra while bowing to his silver sandals, but this time I prayed for the right job, asking, "Please put me where I should be."

Soon after going back into the main ashram, I walked by a bank of payphones and decided to phone home to check my messages. After all, you never know how quickly the answer to a prayer can come.

And lo and behold, there was a message from an assistant editor I had met a couple times, telling me that if by chance I was looking for a job, he had heard there was an opening for an editor on a brand new children's television show called the "Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers," which was set to debut in the fall.

The assistant explained that this show was only scheduled to run for one season — in fact, the owner of the production company, Haim Saban, had been trying to get television stations to give the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers show a try for years. Finally, the head of FOX Children's network decided to give it a chance for one season. One season or not, it sounded like interesting work, and seemed to have appeared in response to my prayer.

I met the show's producer and viewed some of their delightful Japanese-designed characters. The show was like a live action cartoon — it was "eye candy" for children that also aspired to give good morals along with the fights and battles.

Power Rangers eventually became the number one children's television show in history, playing a role in sparking more interest in martial arts for young people, and raking in billions of dollars through a shocking number of tie-in products. For years, it was a top selling Halloween costume, with toys galore, including figures of the power ranger kids and villains and the super Megazord.

One Christmas season, parents across the land were trying to get the Green Dragonzord for their kids, but production had stalled, and there weren't any left on any store shelves anywhere in the country.

It was impossible to get a Dragonzord, but somehow as editor of the show, I was able to procure one. I brought the Dragonzord as a perhaps symbolically intriguing gift to my guru — it was certainly an unusual offering.

Knowing how all the events at the ashram seemed to weave intricate patterns with everyone's karmas, aspirations, and even seemingly mundane wishes, I could imagine a child receiving this impossible to find Dragonzord from our guru and thinking, "Wow, she must really be God!"

The president of Saban once told me that our company earned more just from the sale of Power Rangers sneakers than from all the worldwide distribution of the television show. While editing Power Rangers, I was also hired to train the producers of NBC's national promos on how to use their Avid editing system.

After I'd edited one of the first feature films using their system, the Avid company recommended me to NBC. NBC was happy to hire me for a good rate, but their producers were not happy. They were used to directing the editing process and having professional editors make just the right cuts.

So the producers would usually convince me to edit their promos for shows including *Seinfeld* and *Frazier*, while showing little interest in learning how to do it themselves.

That job was a little flexible, since it depended on the producers' schedules, and my job editing the Power Rangers also had some flexibility, so somehow I was working two full-time jobs at the same time, right down the block from each other. Neither place knew about the other; it was like having a "job mistress" on the side.

Once the first season of Power Rangers was edited and starting to broadcast on FOX Children's' Network, one of the executives at Saban asked if I would like to edit their other very popular animated show called "X-Men," which was a precursor to the popular X-Men movie series that would begin seven years later.

This executive who hired me for the job told me that the guys I'd be working with were "real assholes," which was a strange thing to hear when being invited to take a job. But when I met the producer, he was a lovely and intelligent person, with such a great smile that he and his wife had once been the couple in a Close-Up toothpaste commercial.

My other co-worker for X-Men was a vice president of Fox Children's' Network, who was very appropriately named Sidney Iwanter, pronounced, "I want her." Sidney was very intelligent and creative, although nearly every time we went out to eat during an editing session, he would flirt with the waitress or whatever nice looking women were around.

Sidney also had a quirky and self-depreciating sense of humor that helped him to write some of Wolverine's great dialogue in the shows. Once an old friend from the ashram came to visit me at the studio, and went out to eat with Sidney and I. As usual, he was flirting with her, but this time in a way that seemed to hold more promise for him.

After my friend left, Sidney exclaimed, "Could you feel the sexual chemistry between us!"

I looked at him pointedly, and said with a long drawl, "No."

"Don't tell me she's a lesbian!"

"Bingo!"

A month or two after I'd completed work on the first season of Power Rangers and started working on X-Men, FOX realized that this Power Rangers show was going to be a hit and signed on for more seasons.

I was editing with the X-Men producer when Haim Saban, the owner of this production company and a soon-to-be billionaire, came in to my editing bay and said to the producer, "You can't have her anymore. We need her for Power Rangers. She's the only one who understands the show."

I chuckled. Haim had been born in Egypt before his family moved to Israel. He had a humorous way of saying things, with a flavor and accent that reminded me very much of Ralph back at the ashram. In fact, Haim looked like he could have easily been Ralph's brother.

When Haim would see me in the halls, he'd say things like, "There's that lousy editor," and I would know it was his way of saying that I was an especially good editor.

I had recently stopped working on that second temporary full-time job with NBC promos, so told Haim, "I can edit both shows." After ten years in the ashram, I was used to working steadily. Socializing wasn't of much interest to me, so I had time to fit in many interesting projects during those years. It would be even easier to edit both X-Men and Power Rangers, because at least they could be edited in the same room at the same company.

Then, in spite of my usually unsavvy business skills, I added, "But you'll have to pay me twice."

Haim squinted his eyes, "That's a lot of dollars."

I replied, "That's a lot of hours," and he agreed.

The next year, when the associate producer of X-Men left to produce another show, I also became the associate producer as well as editor of X-Men, while still working as a full-time editor for Power Rangers.

At the time, these were the number one and two shows in children's television history. I was basically working two and a half full-time jobs for the same company, and after I eventually left, I was told that the company replaced me with one part-time and two full-time employees.

At one point while still working on both shows, I was asked to design and edit a music video with scenes from the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers television show, not as an extra project but as part of my usual work for the company. The song was based on the show's theme song, "Go Go Power Rangers," with a few extra guitar licks and other touches. The new version of this song had been produced for Atlantic Records by an unknown music producer in England.

I never met this producer, but found out about the fellow years later while reading some of his autobiography and hearing him speak on the Ellen Degeneres Show.

This producer's first projects in the music business had not succeeded, leaving him penniless and living with his parents. He had the idea to produce a more rock 'n' roll version of the Power Ranger's theme song for public release, and had a friend who could arrange for a music video based on the song to play on the popular United Kingdom show, "Top of the Pops." This unknown, penniless music producer's name was Simon Cowell.

A director who worked with Atlantic records flew over from England with the music track. The fellow was supposed to work with me, but he wasn't familiar at all with the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers show, so he basically sat for several days gleefully applauding while I found the shots and did my editing magic.

This director was so thrilled with the video that he said he would give me an additional credit as co-director, since I designed the video, although I never heard from the director or Simon again.

But that was fine with me. My experiences at the ashram had taught me to not get too carried away with receiving credit or specific benefits for the works that the creative energy allowed me to be a vehicle for creating.

Although I had delved a little more into the Hollywood mentality of winning awards, I still aspired to stay free from too many concerns about outer accolades of this world.

Beneath all the outer work and accomplishments was a simple wish to follow my guru's command in a way that could be a blessing for my journey, my guru's work, and the world.

For me, this Power Rangers music video was a great reverie to do. I loved editing to music, and especially enjoyed an opportunity to use all the colorful and exciting footage from the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers series archive. The song was good too.

A few weeks after completing this music video, I heard that it had shown several times to great acclaim on England's "Top of the Pops" television show.

In fact, that Power Rangers song became so popular that it amazingly shot up to number three on England's charts.

Simon Cowell made a lot of money from this song's success, and the rest is history, eventually leading to American Idol and his other endeavors.

I feel fortunate to have been able to play a part in helping to spark the success of many people, such as this man who sparked the careers of so many great musical artists. Since I worked on the video with Simon's representative who flew over from England, Simon and I didn't personally meet, but in subsequent years, I would enjoy his works with a special smile.

These Hollywood years brought many other circumstances where I was able to add some touch that would help to spark a new career shift for people. I always hoped to be a blessing to whomever I'd meet, and it seemed that the universe would sometimes guide me to people who were meant to receive a touch of the "Grace Bestowing Power of God" that I'd been drenched in during those years of monastic ashram life.

With simple and positive intentions, I would offer my skills and suggestions as guided, and as years went by, I'd see again and again that many of those whom I'd helped were doing quite well in ways that built upon what I had offered to them.

Little did I know that the Universal Guru was about to teach me some big and difficult balancing lessons, including the disheartening experience of watching as my actions in mistakenly helping an unethical person into a position of extreme public influence would come to cause serious damage to the world during some of the most important years of choices for humanity to make.

I had rarely experienced major regrets for anything I'd done thus far in my life, but all too soon, a deep and ongoing sense of regret was to become my companion for many years to come.

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