

# Mother Love

## A Personal Journey

Embracing the Wound/Tempering the Steel



Lori Kirstein

## Gratitude and Pranaams

This book owes its existence to the grace of my beloved Ammachi, and to my friends who both read and listened to these words! I love them for their bravery.

Endless pranaams to my unfathomable Mother, Ammachi, to whom I am devoted, and who fuels my quest for Love's reality in my life's many twists and turns.

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## INTRODUCTION

Women have always been the center of my emotional life.

When my mother died in my 21<sup>st</sup> year of life, I was plunged into a searing loneliness. For years, no matter what I tried, the daily awareness of loss remained.

Nine years later I met a woman who brought back everything my mother had been to me and then some, and my faith in love was restored. But She was an Indian guru – an enlightened master – and She lived then, as She does now, in India; I could not stay with Her, nor She with me. The loss of my mother hit me all over again. What good was this great spiritual master to me – much as I suddenly adored Her – if I could not be with Her all of the time?

Three years after that, in the midst of the worst emotional crisis of my life to date, I found myself in therapy with another remarkable woman, a woman who would, over the next eleven years, re-parent me. Among the many things she offered me was the opportunity to become part of Group, a gathering of six women who would meet weekly for the next six years. From the seemingly secular advent of Group I learned sacred lessons of community, communication, integrity and emotional truth.

Throughout my life I have been challenged, directed, nourished and sustained by women. They have all been my most profound teachers. From my earliest years I was exposed to the soulfulness of the African-American experience because the two house-cleaners – “maids”, they were called in the near-South of Cincinnati, Ohio – who took care of my brother and me while my parents worked, were Black. Bonnie, the first of these financially poor but religiously strong women would take me to her home in the poor section of Cincinnati, where I would play “jax” with the neighborhood children, and later be put down for a nap in a bunk bed in a room with a modest picture of Jesus on the wall. Bonnie died early, taken by cancer, but not before making me aware of the heartfelt, soulful differences between the people in her financially poor, Black neighborhood, and the often too-careful people in my parents’ middle-class, White neighborhood.

The next woman to take over the housecleaning tasks was Sarah. She stayed with us for more than 20 years, through my mother’s passing, working thereafter for my father, even after we kids left the house. Sarah was the only one in the car – the day of my mother’s burial - that broke down and wept when we drove away from the cemetery. Not ten minutes later she pulled herself together and organized and served the food for the family. Women are strong.

Small wonder that when the most powerful of teachers slammed into my disordered but seemingly comprehensible life, it would be a woman.

Spirituality had seeped into me through Bonnie and Sarah, and through my mother, in the form of love, but religion had never taken hold because my family had somehow

managed its practice. We were instead social Jews – family friends were most often Jewish – with a Jewish dedication to education and the arts. So, when my mother died, my heart closed, unsupported by any kind of religious or spiritual understandings...until, that is, Ammachi appeared. For those first ten days that I knew Her, I came home to love. But drawn as I was to personal growth and spirituality, I had been as yet unaware of the existence of great masters. Unexpectedly introduced to this woman, this *being*, who embodied love in every conceivable way – whose mere presence introduced me to bliss – left me confused when She left.

The confusion led to questions and growth and always more questions.

Although I first bought in to the judgments of those around me who disliked my questions – those who said I “thought too much” – I eventually came to an appreciation of my questions as a spiritual path, my own form of seeking. And that is what the pages of this book are about, a book that I wrote not because I think that those who read it should consider me an expert of any sort, but because I want to share my growth, my mistakes and triumphs with others: (1) in order to share the ways in which I have tried to, and in some ways succeeded, in getting at this mystery of Mother Love – this feminine mystery of spirit, and how we can “use” it in our lives in an active way, *before* enlightenment, *before* we are perfect, to make life better and less alone; and (2) to provide encouragement through revealing my struggles with my mental/emotional challenges. Mother is a mystery. Should we expect anything else besides awe, bliss, confusion? She should not exist and yet She does exist. She defies our ability to define or even understand Her, other than to say that She is divine, and to shake our heads at wonder that we should even experience this phenomenon.

So many paths present themselves in a lifetime. The paths of strict religion offer security: safety and certainty in rules. The paths of extremism offer the security of knowing that one is trying to one’s utmost, so that if one fails it is not for lack of trying. If one were searching for the best spiritual path by living in a stable environment where external changes were minimized, perhaps one could feel assured of success? Yet even those who live in ashrams, yoga retreats and the like are not guaranteed success. The clear reality is that we live lives full of change, riddled with challenges. If we look for one externally defined path, in particular a path that does not allow for our human changes, we can well miss the mark. So the question is: how should one seek? And what, in fact, are we seeking?

I thought that I had found the answer with Ammachi, and I took to the prayers and the songs with great dedication. But meditation did not take as well, which caused considerable fear on my part that I would be given Godly “demerits” for my lack of talent in that area. And my first and longest stop on the seeker trail was perfectionism. Mother Herself was clearly perfect, and it was my job to be precisely like Her: perfect; or if not perfect, at least efforting perfectly.

The fact is that I did find the answer with Ammachi, but it was in fact multifaceted, and was not the answer I first heard. No matter how many times She told me, “Don’t worry,

Mother is with you,” I thought only to redouble my efforts to be “better”. This was not Her fault, for She never asked for followers nor for dedication to anything but to one’s own self. It was merely the depth of my spiritual misunderstanding.

And when I went through a serious mental illness, I wondered how Mother could allow this to happen to me. Was I not Her daughter? Was She not “capable” of rescuing me from my suffering? It was to this type of question that I applied my questioning mind.

For some reason, I never ran from Ammachi, even when She caused me tremendous confusion. As a result of instead sticking with the questions, I have come to some understandings and some practices that help me in my path through life. Nothing can save us from experience, but transformation is possible, learning is possible, and help is available.

We seekers are all in the same boat. We are all looking for what will bring us feelings of love, or even transcendence. We are all looking for answers in one way or another that will reveal to us why we do what we do, how we can do better, why we are who we are, why – in short - we are here. Mine is just one life and as such is no more nor less remarkable than anyone else’s. What makes me feel the compulsion to tell my story is a many-sided desire. I feel a great need to share my experiences with - and personal responses to - arguably the greatest saint the world has ever known, as a sort of historical journal; I wish to share with you my journey as an ignorant innocent, a traveler through mental illness, and a student of the divine through the exercise of independent thinking and questioning. And I wish to share the answers I came to that have provided at least an operational, growing understanding of Mother’s grace and Her spiritual reality in my life.

While Mother is the purest and greatest example of living spiritual Truths, She does not ask us to follow Her, but seeks instead to awaken us to our own heartbeat within our normal, human, imperfect lives, from day to day, moment to moment. It is a very simple teaching, and anything but easy.

As far as I’m concerned, it’s the only game in town.

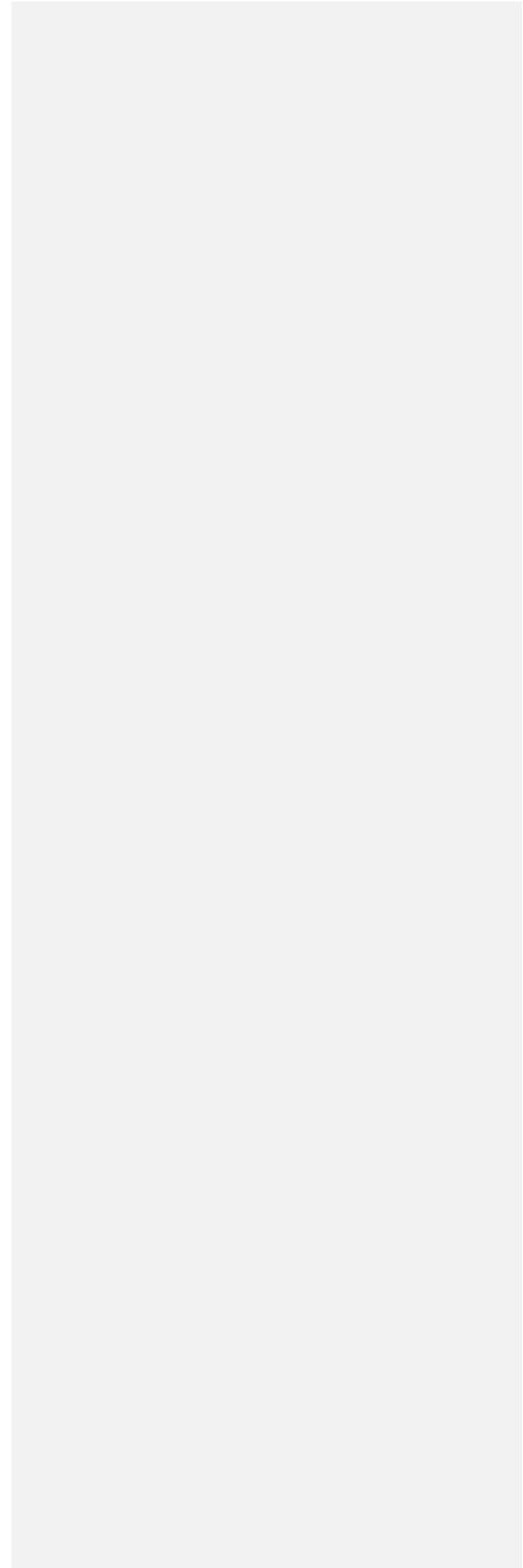
**“The guru instructs by metaphor and parable, but the pilgrim learns through the telling of his own tale.”**

**- Sheldon B. Kopp**

***If You Meet the Buddha On the Road, Kill Him!***

# PART I

## Lost and Found



**“It is not a sign of ignorance not to know the answers. But there is great merit in facing the questions.”**

**- David Mamet, True and False**

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**Chapter One**

***“Oh, it’s just a little Indian woman!”***

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***1988 - Boston***

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***Jeanne Kirstein***

The family life into which I was ushered at birth was a fortunate one, full of love and laughter and music. A younger brother eventually came along to mar my only-child status, but we both survived the adjustment. We were both tucked into our beds at night by our parents with kisses and words of love; to say goodnight to anyone in our house without an “I love you” attached was unthinkable. My parents were classical musicians and teachers, and we lived modestly on the top floor of a duplex. But at the end of my first day in first grade, I was dropped off at

our new home. I don't even remember having been prepared for the change; maybe my parents wanted to surprise me!

So at the end of that school day, I found myself dropped off in front of a large Tudor house built in the 1920's. Not only did the new house have space I could never have conceived of before, but leading up to it was a large rolling hill in the front and in the back was a huge backyard, complete with non-operational (but climb-able) stone birdbath. *This* was heaven. We were even provided with next-door neighbors who had three children our age. Instant friendships. Instant playmates. Instant bliss.

Life was good. My parents were teaching and performing and the family was doing well. Every once in a while my father would leave the country to travel with the The LaSalle Quartet - the center of his professional life. For six weeks, more or less, my mother, brother and I would be left to our own devices while Dad would send letters home that regaled us with tales of exotic foods. My father was a gourmand, and to me a bit of a mystery. And while I loved my father, Jack, it was my mother, Jeanne, who was the love of my life.

Jeanne Kirstein was a well-known pianist in the Cincinnati musical community of the 1960's and early '70's, a professional pianist of tremendous expression, and a beloved and insightful teacher. More importantly, Jeanne was a phenomenal woman with the gift of motherly love. She taught me so much about love – how much love can be felt through a simple touch, and shared laughter; how openly one can share through art – music in particular. She eventually taught me how much love can hurt when its object is removed from sight, and how love can last when everything else fades.

The world saw mostly her musical skill. For my brother Andrew and I, trailing behind her to her many performances exposed us to the fun of being behind the scenes, where we were privy to backstage knowledge that audience members would never catch. Mom performed with string trios and symphonies and ballet companies, and Andrew and I roamed with respectful curiosity through the so-called "green rooms" of various locations, from Music Hall with its massive symphonies, to smaller stages throughout the city, learning about the part of the arts that is not glamorous but is nonetheless captivating.

Our mother was booked as a symphony soloist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra every other year in the 1960's, and we would listen for months beforehand as my mother practiced nearly non-stop from early in the morning until late at night. Mom would hum the orchestra parts as she practiced, until we became adept at humming them *for* her when we were in the room, which always made her smile at us. For myself, I was so attached to my mother and to the music that as a little girl I would take naps under the piano even while the notes rained down around me.

Finally would come the big performance night at Music Hall. We would dress in our best clothes and make our way to the velvet box seats that were reserved for us as the family of the soloist. I was just a little girl, but I felt hugely special - that was my *mother* up there, beautiful in specially-made dresses, playing so gorgeously, watched and musically adored by a hall *full* of people. She was *mine!* I could hum along to each and every note that she played, because I heard her practice each and every day, because her music was in my veins, and I was her daughter. What I didn't like quite as much was sharing her with so many *other* people who loved and adored her, but at least I got her attention when we went home.

Because my mother always enlisted my opinion while she practiced, I invariably went backstage after her performances and reported how many errors she had made. I figured I was doing my job to let her know how *few* errors she had made, and therefore how wonderfully she had done. I guess she knew this because she never remarked on my lack of tact and backwards thinking other than to sweetly thank me.

In the 1960's she met the famous composer and eclectic soul, John Cage, when he attended a house party in Cincinnati. Hearing her play, he told her that he would call her someday to make a recording of his music. She was enthusiastic about the idea, naturally, but just as naturally supposed that she would never hear from him again. After all, he lived in New York and moved about with the most avante garde of artists, and she was a middle-class housewife with a husband, two kids, a house, and back-burnered dreams of fame.

But he did call her up, in the late 1960's, and ask her if she would record his Music for Prepared Piano, and his Music for Toy Piano. Thrilled to the core, she agreed. And while she was in New York doing the recording at the Columbia Records studios, she had an experience that spoke volumes about her values. At the tail end of one of her recording sessions at Columbia, she saw musicians who looked just terrible, she later told us "They must have been recording all night! And they were a mess! I couldn't believe they were famous musicians!" All agog, we asked, "Who *were* they?" "They were *Blood, Sweat, and Tears!*" my mother said (a famous rock and roll group of the 1960's/1970's), "And they didn't look rich and well-known. They just looked tired and hungry! Rings under their eyes, and so dreadfully *thin!* They looked *terrible!*" Star struck she wasn't. We children could not make the same claim. It was breathtaking to be a part of this kind of world. We thought it would last forever, and we would forever be The Kids of The Kirsteins, basking in reflected glory.

But of course, things change. Yes, I always knew that my mother could make everything alright, just by holding me. If I became tangled up emotionally, just to see her, talk to her and be held in her loving, comforting smile would put my feet back on planet earth. "It's alright," she would say, and I would know that it was.

But in the end, everything wasn't alright. She contracted breast cancer when she was 44. I was 11, my brother was 8, and my father was terrified. This was devastating to a family that had never pondered nor discussed the "darker" sides of life, even when Mom's own cherished mother had died. After I was taken to her hospital bedside so that she could tell me that she had not in fact come into the hospital to deal with bursitis, but to have a biopsy performed – after she had told me that she had breast cancer – and after she told me not to cry, my father and I went home and studiously did not discuss it. I was 11 years old and taking my cue from him. He had no cues to give me. Nor did my mother; she too was now in a foreign emotional country.

Especially wounding to me as a blossoming young woman was the fact that now I was growing breasts while she was losing hers to mastectomies, and I felt guilty. How could I grow into my womanhood – "flaunt it in her face", it seemed to me – when she was so clearly being wounded by what she perceived as the loss of hers? But certain things cannot be held back. We were fortunate that our love for one another survived everything we went through, but unfortunate that so much went unspoken.

The cancer started in 1968, and over the years it would come, and go, and then come more, and then again recede, like ocean surf, gradually moving further up the beach of her physical being until in 1979 she died late one night after declaring to a visiting student that, "Guilt is useless." Whatever she had just seen of her life that had brought that realization, the student told me that it seemed to free her. I was glad of that. But I was also devastated that it was to a student and not to me that my mother had uttered any of her last words. After Mom's passing, in the middle of my last year of college, I finished my degree and then got busy trying to find a way to outrun the grief and the loss.

The light of my childhood – the light that I had never questioned, and the light that I had now feared the loss of for 11 years, had gone out. Without it, I had no compass. Emptiness and fear filled me.

Where to turn for help? Family? No, because my father was outraged that I would not return home immediately; as for me, to do so would have meant facing a "family" home that no longer contained the glue of that family: my mother. I could not face that. Religion? No help there, because religion had taken a back seat in my family. Although we were Jewish, our attendance at temple was limited to friends' bar and bat mitzvahs. Special holidays were celebrated mainly at home, and weekly celebrations of any kind were nonexistent. Non-religious, we were, rather, "social Jews", my father's feelings on that identification being immovable since living through Hitler's reign.

In fact, the more I learned about religions, the more I saw only the man-made divisions – the us-vs.-them qualities – and, of course, the historic killings in the name of God. If God were that good, I reasoned, He (or She) would decry that

killing, *particularly* in His or Her name. I decided that religion and I were a very bad mix but I could not deny that certain seemingly religious ideas were important to me: being good to others, for instance. But why? Just because my mother had told me so? Maybe that was good enough, but still religion gave me no answers and so I let religion lie there for many years, a jumbled mystery of unexplained rules.

When I had first entered my teens, experiencing the inevitable confusions of that age, I found that in the early stages I held one idea that was helpful. "At the very least, be true to yourself," I would think about that idea whenever situations got complicated, and that would help me sort out what actions and thoughts were necessary, and which were not. But as the years went on the complications grew overwhelming, the idea of being true to myself faded into incomprehensibility and finally became useless. For many years I even forgot I had ever said or thought anything about being "true" to anything at all.

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In 1985, still unable to make any sense of a life without my mother, at the age of 28 I moved to Boston, away from the loss, leaving my father and brother behind in Cincinnati, Ohio. An aunt and uncle took me in while I tried to find my footing in a new city.

I worked, friends came into my life and went out, and I wondered what I was supposed to be doing with my life. Then one day, spirituality, an unexpected guest, came looking for me.

Home after a long day at work, bored with television, I picked up a book that stood, a seeming outcast, among the many tomes of accountancy in my uncle's bookcase. It was one of the popular books of the day, Out on a Limb, by Shirley MacLaine, and although I had not yet heard of it, I picked it up with a sort of passive curiosity and began to read...

...and didn't stop until I had finished.

The book had the unanticipated impact of "turning on the light" for me internally. For the first time I read ideas that affirmed my childhood understandings about being good to others and being true to oneself. And it put these concepts into a definable form called "spirituality" that I could actually identify with, study and imbibe! Heaven! I read the book start-to-finish in a matter of hours, and I felt enlightened, in a literal sense! For a month I continually felt full of Light-with-a-capital-L and I wandered through my life smiling at others everywhere I went (and receiving warm smiles in return!), understanding on a visceral level that we are all made of the same stuff, on the inside. We all have exactly the same sorts of challenges as human beings, no matter what a person appears to be. I remember thinking, "Some of us carry our wounding on the outside, and some on the inside, but we are all alike." At the end of that month, the light disappeared

without warning and left me disappointed and depressed. I no longer felt that understanding connection with the world that I had experienced so briefly. People on the street no longer smiled back at me. Instead, they reflected back my redoubled fear.

I both yearned for my mother and refused to allow myself grieve. As for my father, he and I were now on the outs. We spoke to one another, but he continued to carry and express that anger about what he termed my “desertion” of him – my continued refusal to return home to live - and we drifted further and further apart.

Living in Boston during that time was my introduction to the New Age “field” of personal growth. I began to attend workshops, serious about healing myself of my grief, and equally serious about the upside-down endeavor of *forcing* myself to feel *joy*. I read many books and listened to many tapes and spent a lot of money. I haunted *Seven Stars*, the well-known Cambridge New Age bookstore, looking for books that would illuminate me the way that Out on a Limb had done. None did. I felt even more depressed.

But I did find something else at *Seven Stars*: I found a brochure for someone calling himself a spiritual guide. I had tried therapists back in graduate school, but they had not done a thing for me. This guy sounded different. Maybe he could hear what I had to say. Maybe he could explain the strange new experiences I was having.

For some time we worked together as guide and seeker, and he gave me a hand to hold in this new spiritually-motivated path I was attempting to identify and walk. Before long, however, we had reached the end of our guide-and-seeker relationship, and had reached the most important reason for our association: he invited me to go see his guru, whom he had met during her first visit to the U.S. the previous year.

He said, “You should come see my guru. She’s going to be here next week, and she’s the real deal.” He was immediately treated to my skepticism. “Guru?” I said with a sneer, thinking *How ‘60’s of you!* But seriously – *gurus!*? Didn’t that go out with The Beatles? *Come on...* And “the real deal”? What did that mean, exactly?

But I did go see her, that first night in Boston in the summer of 1988. He had convinced me when he told me that she and her people played authentic Indian music, and made no concessions to Western tastes. This was extremely clever of him; he knew that my parents were musicians, and that I would be unlikely to turn down something like this. Okay, I would go.

A small, white meeting house of some kind was opened to visitors for this special event. Upon entering, I noticed that everyone was taking off their shoes, so I

followed suit and then found myself a bit of floor to sit on, as everyone else was doing. There were no chairs in the room at all, but being young and flexible, this was appealingly easygoing. After what felt like a long time waiting, there was a sudden commotion at the far side of the room and then everyone stood up. I couldn't see anything for a while, and then the sea of people shifted and there She was, this tiny woman in white, smiling flamboyantly and walking toward the front of the room.

I hadn't expected Her to be so small! I remember my first thought: "Oh, it's just a little Indian woman!" And the next thought I had – oddly prescient, given that I did not yet have any experience of Her – was that if She weren't wrapped tight in that white sari of Hers, She might just dissipate into thin air.

She sat on the small stage with Her entourage – four or five Indian men also dressed in white. With the help of one of the men, She led us in meditation, then in singing – but it was in an Indian language, and I felt adrift there – and then Ammachi (or "Beloved Mother") sat in a chair to do what I had been told was The Best Thing On Earth: hugging. Or *darshan*, which I was told meant "to see the guru". Ammachi's darshan is historically unique. Most – if not all – of the great beings that have come to the earth to lift us out of our self-imposed muck will not allow themselves to be touched. In India, there is the added prohibition of being female. Amma, however, feeling so passionately that people need to know the physical touch of a truly loving mother in order to heal, flouts both of these prohibitions and takes us into Her arms to love us as only a Divine Mother can do. This is "darshan" of a unique sort; a blessing of a truly remarkable magnitude.

Well! In Ammachi's second year visiting the U.S., there was no order about the proceeding at all. All of us – maybe 60 – started scooting towards Her on the floor from all directions, and I became furious. "We're all ruining our clothing doing this! What on *earth* is going on here?" I was thinking. I repeatedly thought of getting up and leaving – this was undignified! – but I stayed. I had been told about this hug of Hers, and I wanted to see what this was about for myself.

Gawd, it felt as though it took forever! My mind was in an angry, uncomfortable uproar and I wanted *out* of there! Soon!

...and then it was my turn. I was in Her arms, held face-down over Her thighs.

...and then I looked into Her smiling face

...and then I got up and I left.

I hadn't felt anything remarkable at all! And now I was just as furious as I had been in that meeting hall, but I had no one at whom to aim my feelings. I felt just crazy! I went home and paced for an hour, railing at Her for making me feel this

way - railing at Her about how undignified the whole process had been! Looking back, I wonder if - since I had lost my mother eight long lonely years previously - my fury also had something to do with "Where the hell have You *been*?!", and something also to do with the kind of fear that I feel when I jump into a brand new way of living, of which this was certainly the most profound, and unfamiliar, example. I decided that I was *not* returning to see Her the next night. No way. Nope! That was *that*.

Then my phone rang.

It was my spiritual guide friend, asking for a ride to the Meeting House the following morning. I was going to work, but I told him that I would drop him off before I went on to work. I wonder...was it that ride that made me go back the next night? I was very attached to this man, and if he was going to be there - if he thought this was something worth attending - then perhaps I should be there too? All I know is that I did return that evening, and that that evening's experience differed completely for me.

This time, when I heard the singing, I could sing along a bit too. After all, there was a lot of repetition in the words, and in the unfamiliar sounds I suddenly heard more familiar Jewish strains. I found myself thinking, "If you follow that voice, you will find your way home." Suddenly, I was in love - passionately, completely, beyond recall. I felt shot through with a love-with-a-capital-L that I had never felt before, even with my own adored mother, Jeanne. This feeling was absolutely what life was all about - of that I had no doubt at all. Now, I wanted to be nowhere else but with Ammachi.

The Light that I had unquestioningly basked in as a little girl in my mother's arms, the Light that I had briefly experienced from reading Out On A Limb; it was back. And this was a Light of a magnitude and warmth and completeness that I had never dared to even imagine. No wonder that I fell with grateful ease into basking in that Light, bowing out of days of work to sit with "Mother".

Who was this being who had so suddenly engulfed my life? Why was I soaked through and through with a level of bliss so pure that even my customarily doubting mind couldn't dim its Light? Well, when I met and fell in Love with Amma, my devotion - an emotion I hadn't considered outside of romantic love - was awakened, because without warning I had encountered (and to my small degree merged with) the energies of that from which the true world springs: Divinity - Divine Love - Divine Light - Divine Expression - and all housed within the body of a young, beautiful, enchanting, impossibly and uninterruptibly beaming woman! Because my experience was complete - physical, spiritual, emotional, mental - there was no room for doubt that what I had just met was God-in-a-body, that Holy Grail of experiences which people over millennia have sought lifelong with, it must be said, various degrees of success; the kind of experience that has given birth to countless stories of renunciation; the kind of

experience for which many have given up everything, their life's goal now attained.

So there I was, sitting with God in female form, my heart swollen open with devotional fervor, my mind blissfully absorbed, focused and grateful; my eyes full of light, and seeing only Love; my body relaxed and shot through with shakti. This was it; this was what life was all about.

Ammachi was a young woman that year – 35 years old. She was born “enlightened” (utterly aware of and identified with the presence of God within) to a humble couple in a fishing village in Kerala, India in September, 1953. As a baby, she sang songs to the Lord – a practice that has never stopped – and as she grew older, her meditations became more intense. She would often fall into states of bliss that would perplex and disturb her family members. Imposed on at 9 years of age to take over the care and feeding of her brothers and sisters when her mother suddenly fell ill, Sudhamani (her birth name) would sing to her Beloved Lord, Krishna, of the sadness of the world - its cruelties, neglect and ignorance - dedicating her work and its fruits at His feet. Thus she turned all of her efforts into something called “karma yoga”, the practice of making an offering to God of one's work, thereby benefiting not only one's self, but the world, with service.

Entering her teen years, her inner identification with Lord Krishna became so overwhelming, it could no longer be held within, and Sudhamani one day succumbed to that identification openly. Overhearing a family singing prayers to Krishna as she walked past their courtyard, her identity as Krishna blossomed forth openly and she walked into their midst. Soon, neighbors were gathered to witness this young girl's “transformation”. Pushed by their desire to witness a miracle – some proof that Krishna was indeed in their midst – the young woman reluctantly acceded to their request, scolding them for asking for something as passing and unimportant as a physical miracle. But the water was brought in a vessel which she stirred with one of Her hands and prayed over. The water turned into a sweet drink, a pudding called *panchamritam*, and was poured into the hands of all those present, a divine “prasad” (or gift).

Eventually, Mother's identification grew beyond Krishna to the Divine Mother, and She decided that what individuals – Her children - needed was a Divine Embrace in order to heal into their beautiful true selves. Her mission began in that small village, and has grown into a worldwide phenomenon that has spawned organizations of humbling service: hospitals providing free open-heart surgeries, schools, orphanages, food for victims of tsunamis and floods both in India and America. I find Her service to the world to be almost unbearable in its beauty, as it points out how small my contribution sometimes feels. Yet I have also always found it easy to recognize the beauty and blessing in having such a remarkable model of practical and incomprehensibly comprehensive Love.

Mother's story, longer and more remarkable than I can adequately relate, was written most beautifully by Her senior Swami, Swami Amritatmananda: [Ammachi, A Biography of Mata Amritanandamayi](#). For me, however, I needed no more information in those first days with Her. The experience of simply being in that presence was all that I needed.

The morning darshans quickly became my favorite time. In those early days, there were no videos, no large crowds, no music – only the murmur of people quietly moving up to Mother, and quietly away. One sat in a room lit by simple sunlight, filled with the quiet of a new morning, and watched Mother's beautiful face, her slow and constant loving movements. One felt one's heart swell and open while waiting for Her to gesture fluidly in one's direction with Her beautiful, brown hand. Moving carefully through the field of others' crossed legs, feeling positively bathed in grace, one dropped to one's knees, and laid across Her legs, in Her lap, for precious, long minutes. Sometimes Mother would sing and sway back and forth while you lay there enveloped in a timeless bliss. The blessings were like rain, and the feeling was one of utterly pure and endless intoxication.

And my senses were completely seduced -- the sounds, the exotic smells of incense and sandalwood, the remarkable sensation of non-burning heat when I sat close to Mother, which I often did, and Her love that emanated through and through my whole being...I couldn't get enough. I could well believe that I had traveled on this earth with this great and loving being in other lives because suddenly anything Indian felt familiar. So what if none of this experience made any sense to my rational mind! I was happy, thoroughly and deliriously happy for the first time in at least 10 years. When Her Boston visit terminated, I followed Her to New Hampshire, the last stop on the tour. The time for questioning any of Her behaviors - or mine - had not yet come.

In New Hampshire She gave Her first darshan in a large auditorium. I sat on the floor watching Her, basking in the view of Her smile and the unbroken flow of ease and love She offered with tireless repetition, but indisputable individualism. Her actions, Her beauty, the awe I experienced, the timeless sensation – all kept me immobile for a long, loooooong time. Finally, only mildly curious, I looked at my watch. *Four hours had passed. What?!* While I had sat there admiring this tiny Indian woman, four hours had passed! *But I'm just a little non-religious Jewish girl from Cincinnati! What am I doing sitting at the feet of a guru, adoring Her?!*

I had no answer but I didn't need one. I just needed to be with – and bask in - Her.

Mother's 1988 New Hampshire site for darshan was a small partial tent in someone's backyard – roughly the size of a lean-to. Maybe 30 people attended. The remarkable amount of time we had had with Her in Boston was doubled, possibly tripled, in New Hampshire, and one could not help but realize how

blessed we were to be of such an intimate number. We strung flowers for decoration, one peaceful, woodsy, New England afternoon... we took a walk with Mother through the silent forest, crowded around Her, dazzled moths to Her unexpected flame... and one evening four or five of us received a quick and unexpected darshan when, standing on the sidewalk beside a small town hall - the building we would be occupying for the special ceremonies of *Devi Puja* and *Devi Bhava* - Mother happened to exit. Without warning we were blessed with effusive hugs and smiles.

*Darshan* became even more unbelievable. Because there were so few of us, we would receive two or three hugs, particularly during a morning. She would gesture to us, one by one, to come to Her lap. And when she had gone through the group, She would start all over again! For me, this was truly swimming in the Ocean of Divine Bliss. Ordinarily I would by now have been thinking, "What shall I do when She goes?", but I wasn't. My mind was mercifully, abnormally quieted by the bliss of what I have come to see as my reunion with my Divine Mother.

Devi Bhava ushers in a special kind of darshan. Devi Bhava means "Mood of the Divine Mother" (Devi means Divine Mother; Bhava means Mood), and it is beautiful and powerful. It begins with the Devi Puja ("Ceremony of the Goddess" - Puja means Ceremony) which the brahmacharis, or monks, told us was a blessing for one's entire family line. For the Devi Puja places were laid on the floor in sets of four with an oil lamp in the center, and for each participant a spoon with a piece of camphor in it. A small scattering of flower petals were laid on little 2x2 squares of white paper, and small plastic lids (for the upcoming cups of holy water) were laid beside, as were envelopes for donations to Mother's charities. When the Puja began, the brahmacharis chanted names of the Divine Mother, and we chanted back the prayer as instructed - "Om Parashaktyai Namah!" - after each one, lifting a flower petal to our hearts and laying it gently before us, offering ourselves to Parashakti, the Divine Goddess Herself. We were directed in lighting the camphor on our spoons, and waving the flame before the Goddess, or our chosen deity. Mother has never been one to direct us to any particular religious path, but asks us only to invest ourselves in divine realities: love, compassion, self-knowledge and so on. At the end, we stood and turned in a clockwise circle three times, chanting "Om Parashaktyai Namah", asking to be forgiven for any mistakes we might have knowingly or unknowingly committed. At the end of the puja one night, in the lull that happened before the Bhava began, someone in my circle looked at my face and cried out to the others, "Look! *Krishna!* She looks just like Krishna right now!" At that moment I was indeed feeling Krishna as a smiling presence within me, brought about by the puja. "I," I thought to myself, "am on the right path!"

**Lord Krishna**

Devi Bhava itself begins when, after praying to the Divine Mother, Amma Herself comes out dressed in a beautiful silk sari, the crown of the Divine Mother on Her head, and again performs darshan, but this time with even more divine energy. I was told that during Devi Bhava, Mother removes even more “veils” of Her humanness in order to give us an even deeper experience of the Divine. It certainly had a power and a majesty that left an impression. I also couldn’t help but notice that for the entire night, Mother’s left leg went up and down, jiggling in a rhythm directed by invisible music. When I asked about that, someone suggested that perhaps She did that to stay grounded, as so much divine energy was flowing through Her during the Bhava. Who knows!

No one told me that the end of Devi Bhava is worth staying for in a big way, so it wasn’t until the following year that I would have that remarkable experience. And that was too bad, because the end is miraculous (as if the rest of the time with Mother isn’t?!). The first – and possibly most miraculous? – thing that happens all those hours later is that Mother simply ... stands ... up! After Lord knows how many hours of using Her hands, arms, back to wipe our tears, talk to us, give us Her attention, Her compassion, Her laughter. After Lord knows how many hours of bending forward, picking up, accepting offerings and offering us prasada, She simply stands up! She doesn’t groan, or wince. She simply stands up. And then She drops still more “veils”, allowing even more of the Divine Mother energy to be revealed and to envelop us. The brahmacharis begin to sing and play songs of even stronger joy and power, and everyone files past Her in a large circle. As we pass, She showers us with flower petals, smiling so enigmatically and looking at us with eyes so deep and dark, that there is no doubt in those moments but that one is in the presence of God. The flower petals are the physical reality of the grace that She is showering.

After everyone has filed past Her one time and then settled down in the room, Amma continues to stand, each hand filled with flower petals, and sways slightly, dousing us now with Her smile, Her energy. Then, before we can see Her go into samadhi (complete identification with God, which removes outer awareness and plunges one into inexplicable bliss), which I was told She always did after the Bhavas, the sari curtains that have been erected for the event are drawn and She is gone from our sight, and the heart breaks because She has disappeared with a shocking suddenness. That moment has brought me to tears for many reasons: I have been so moved by what She has given us selflessly for so many



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“An unbroken stream of love flows from Mother towards  
all beings in the universe. This is Mother’s inborn nature.”  
—Mata Amritanandamayi

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interminable hours, without rest, without food, without even a moment's break in the sharing of Her joy and love and delight with us; I have also been incapable of resisting my emotional body's reaction to the sudden opening of my heart, felled into un-self-consciousness by the absolute knowing that I have just been given an inestimable, divine gift.

In those early years, after the Devi Bhava was over and Mother had again donned Her "whites" – Her usual white sari – She would come out and help us clean up! She always acts as an example to us. But this level of devotion and service often feels incomprehensible; stunning.

That first year, when the programs were all over and Mother departed, I was angry again, and confused. For ten days I had lived the high life – blissed out, blessed out, submerged in shakti, sitting with a seeming human being who I now believed to be God Herself! Now I was supposed to go back to a life that was far from satisfactory, and one that led inevitably back to depression? My life had been a patchwork-quilted affair to begin with. Mother had arrived, split me open, inserted Love for Her into my very cells, showed me that everything I had ever felt to be true about life could be embodied in a human body – and one that called itself my Mother! - and then She just *left*??? And I wasn't going to follow Her?

Why wasn't I on a plane to India right this minute? Why did I feel no pull to do so when all I wanted to do was be back in Her presence? How could I go on without Her? What had happened to me? What could I do with my life – heck, with even the next ten *minutes* – now that I saw just how far it was from that bliss that I had felt for ten long, out-of-time days?

What was I supposed to do *now*???

.....

I decided to do the only thing I knew how to do: study, read, continue to learn all I could about the spiritual path, and try to be *just like Amma*. I'm a good student, but like all others in our culture, I was accustomed to an unquestioning style of learning: I accepted everything as gospel – no boundaries. And without a teacher to guide me, I got intellectual/emotional indigestion. Forgiveness? Heck yeah! *Everyone's* forgiven! (Never mind that I hadn't yet processed *any* of the feelings.) Be kind to others? Sure! (Never mind that I left myself no room to scream when hurt – even to myself). I took in the equivalents of both "Turn the other cheek" and "An eye for an eye" as being equally relevant, and found myself more and more confused. That was the bad part. The good part was that this indigestion slowly grew my need to question.

It is said that you can't grow true faith without honest doubt; I believe that, because without the ability to question what you are told, what are you believing in? Probably just something that sounds good, but that when put to the test

might fail you, not being what's of the most use for you personally. My Boston years were rife with people who spouted spiritual sayings with ease – “trust your heart”, “surrender to God”, “have faith” – but I had no idea how to use this so-called information. Trust my heart? Excuse me, but do you have the book on that? Can I get the directions to that locale? It did not immediately occur to me to ignore or reject these sayings as being less than useful for me at the time. In those days I saw my questioning as a bad thing. I had been held in the arms of the Mother – I shouldn't be doubting, should I? And there were so many people around me who scolded me by saying, “You think too much!” Angry with and disappointed in myself, I punished myself with bitter self-hatred for years before I came to understand the beauty – and the unexpectedly Jewish nature – of my questioning.

There was one so-called fact that I did have the sense *not* to ingest. I found in the early times that the rumor-mill was active around Amma. One that was reported to me was that Mother wasn't going to be in the body very long; that in fact, She would be dead in two more years! The man who told me was very disturbed by that, but I just looked at him and said, “You know, I don't know if that's true, and I'm not going to spend the next two years worrying about it! I'll deal with it if it happens!” He was grateful for that thought. Me, I was astonished and relieved to hear myself say it, as it was uncharacteristically balanced for who I was at the time.

The year that followed my first meeting with Mother was like holding my breath. She only did Her U.S. tour once a year then, so it was a long haul between visits. So I went back to my life. I worked, I took guitar lessons, I hung out at the local new age bookstore, and I waited for Mother to come back. Meditating was definitely not for me – I just fell asleep! Plus, I had no patience to keep trying, so I just limped through my year attending the odd *satsang* (or “gathering”) now and again, and deciding quite consciously to just let the whole thing go, since it didn't seem to apply to my daily life. I would just have to wait until Mother returned to get my spiritual “fix”.

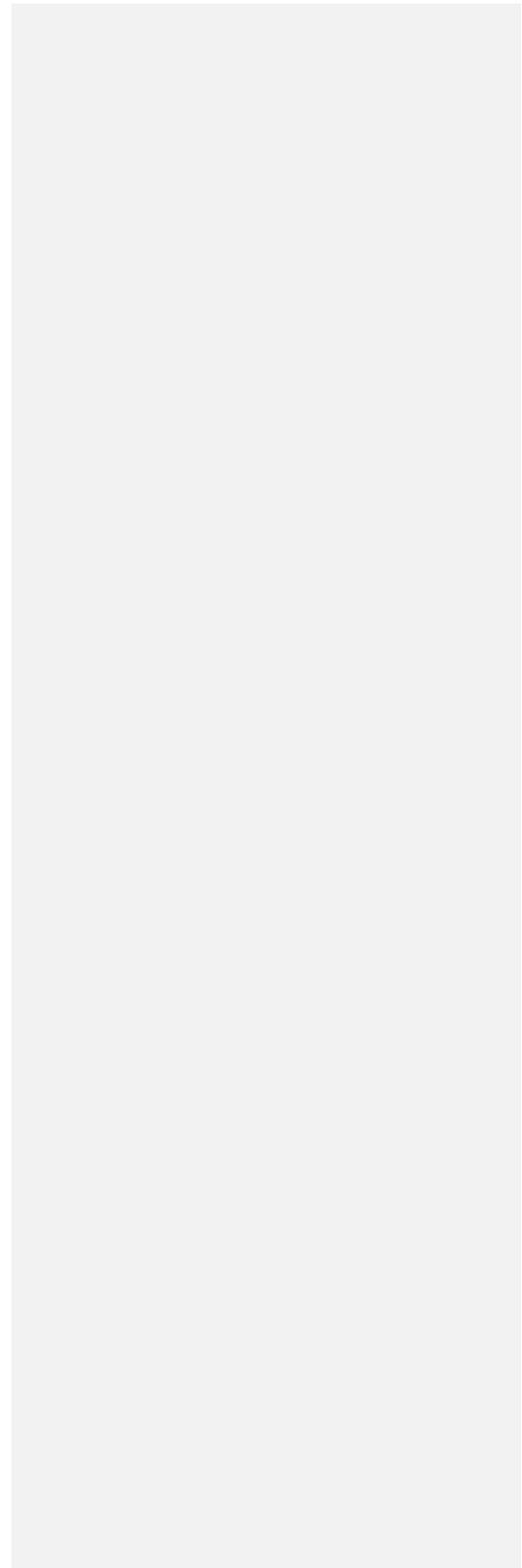


**and the flowers cried...**

...and the flowers cried...  
unnoticed in their slender loveliness,  
the rain spilled over iris petals,  
slowly, slowly flowing, tears on silk

...and then the sun came out  
and enveloped them with bright golden love,  
rays of exquisite tenderness.

...and the flowers danced...  
swaying in the currents of wind  
fresh-blown from the heart of god.



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**Chapter Two****Intoxication**

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**1989-1990–Boston**

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Mother was back, and I once again shelved my work for the chance to be with Her. The feelings of ecstasy and light that had washed over me the year before returned, modified somewhat by expectation, but there nonetheless. There were more people this year, but not so very many that it would keep me from spending a lot of time sitting physically close to Her. And this year there were malas (prayer beads) and other things to buy to keep after Her departure.

Since I had met Her, I had been attending more and more personal growth workshops, wanting to get to the core of my unhappiness, certain that if I could find out what was wrong with me - clean myself *of* myself - I would come to be happier, “earning” Mother’s approval, and keeping that feeling of Light. At one workshop event, during which we danced to free ourselves of our negativities, I threw myself about violently like a rag doll, trying to bring something up from my chest and out! What I was trying to be rid of, I’m afraid, was me, but I of course didn’t know that at the time. I instead landed myself in physical trouble, straining my neck so badly that for three days I actually had to use my hands to lift my head!

So much for *ridding* me of me! On the contrary, I now had to focus intently on myself and the healing I needed. I ended up learning that if I used what the Kripalu yoga teachers called “micro-movements”, I could actually feel my way into proximity with the muscles of my neck, and help with easing the tension. It became a powerful lesson for me about self-healing. I realized that I could have a direct impact on my physical state, and that it is far better to have that impact with gentleness than with violence. First, however, I had to spend most of three days on my back with ice packs under my neck.

The extreme nature of this experience was not foreign to me – I was walking what was for me the extreme way, rather than the middle way. Everything I tried, I tried to the *nth* degree, moved by the notion that if I just tried hard enough I could accomplish whatever I wanted, as I had done with scholastic goals in my life. However, this spiritual kind of goal necessitated something I had no tools for: compassion for myself, understanding, and patience. These things were out of my reach, and even barely perceived as applicable to my own being.

There was, however, a teacher I met who was and is more than in touch with self-compassion. I was fortunate enough to find myself sitting with meditator and writer Stephen Levine, and his wife Ondrea, at a workshop in Brookline, Massachusetts. His books on death and dying, on meditation, on methods of birthing oneself into life through greater consciousness, greater awareness, greater compassion and loving-kindness were known to me, and I was thrilled by

the possibilities the workshop might provide. When he and Ondrea came to town, I signed up.

Two things from that weekend stay with me. One was something Stephen said to me directly when I requested a moment to speak with him. It was break time, and although we had made plans to meet, I couldn't locate him. Finally, I saw him sitting with a small group of people, and I moved in his direction. I was shocked to see that he was smoking! "Spiritual" people don't smoke, do they, I wondered? But then I remembered stories I had read about powerful teachers who fit no mold – whose break from traditional mores struck me more as a part of their mystery than a reason to doubt their wisdom. When Stephen saw me, he jumped up and said, "*There* you are! I was looking for you everywhere." And I said something I thought was marvelously clever: referring to myself, I said, "Yeah. Me too!" at which he laughed, and replied, "Oh. Okay! Next question!" and although he laughed, the way he looked at me seemed serious and insightful. I could tell something profound had probably just been said; what to make of it, well, that was another story.

The second thing that happened during that workshop was a spiritual experience I had not at all anticipated. We were all told to pair up for a coupled meditation. One of each pair was to lie down on the floor, face up. The other half of the pair was to sit beside their prone partner but not to touch them in any way. The prone partner was to close his/her eyes and breathe normally, and the seated partner was to closely watch the other's body, inhaling when his/her partner inhaled, and exhaling when the partner exhaled, adding the sound, "Ahhhhhhh" to the exhalation. The sound was to be audible to the partner, but not loud.

When it was my turn to lie down, I had a most extraordinary experience. I was lying there, trying not to control the rhythm of my breathing, but rather to let myself simply be, when I fell into a "space" in which I heard every single person in that hall breathing, in and out each in their different rhythms, *but in one amazing and somehow timeless moment, I heard all those disparately spaced breaths as somehow occurring in the exact same moment.* This was for me the direct experience of the spiritual tenet that there is only the now, that everything is happening *now*. Ah, to be able to hold that understanding...

Workshops were always fabulous, but back on Planet Earth I had to do some focusing on work. I had nothing resembling a career, but paying the rent seemed like a good idea. I had no goals other than continuing to put one foot in front of the other, because there had one only been goal in my life that I had consciously known - to love and care for my mother - and now she was gone, leaving me rudderless. When asked "What do you want to do with your life?" and "What do you enjoy?" I had never had an answer. There was nothing in the business world that I really wanted to do. The family's focus had been on Mom and her illness, and as the caretaker of the family I had felt only a dragging sensation within me whenever I considered focusing on work rather than my mother. Now that it was

Mom's absence rather than her illness that dogged me, the dragging feeling turned to a slow-moving depression.

But one does have to work. So I became a secretary since typing quickly was something I had done for many years, and done well. I was none too thrilled about it, because as one of The Kids of The KIRSTEINS, I had been expected to do Great Things. Secretarial work seemed to hold none of the glamour of "Great Things", which really galled me, but I had no other way to make a living, so I went on. Meanwhile, the depression started to deepen, but I didn't know that was what it was; I just thought I was doing something wrong. I mean, I was in my 20's, for heaven's sake! I should be really *really* happy! Maybe if I went to parties, or bars, with my friends, and tried to have a good time...? Nope. Maybe if I tried to find a really good job that I could actually – somehow – like...? Nope. Maybe if I went to personal growth workshops that were really intense...? Well...for the time that I was there, it was pretty fabulous, and I felt like I was making progress, but then I would have to come home and feel cruddy again, so: Nope.

For the nine years before Ammachi arrived I wandered through my life feeling incredibly bereft. I looked for love, I looked for purpose, I looked for certainty. I didn't find them.

But then Amma found me! And the questioning began. I needed Mother, and I loved Mother, but I wondered what good it was to have her; how could I "use" her in my life? Someone told me that if you cry for Mother, She will always come, so I decided to try crying! One Saturday, I set up my tiny living room with a table full of Mother things, and I planned to spend the entire day calling for Her and crying for Her, until She arrived! I would not give up, I decided!

After an hour, I was exhausted and dispirited, and not crying at all. I felt like spitting. Someone was apparently lying to me. It couldn't be Mother, could it? Was I such a horrible child of Mother's that She would never come to me? Maybe I was supposed to move to India to be close to Her all the time? Maybe that was my only way to be happy! But India? That was so far away! I couldn't possibly. But I wanted Mother's love – was that what it would take? What was I supposed to do?

I used to say, back then and for many years after that, that I just wished I knew where to put my feet. I meant that I didn't know how to live my life, make decisions, just be me. As soon as Mother would physically arrive, it seemed that my confusion disappeared, and where my feet were made no difference to me. In the first two years, I went straight for the intoxication of Her presence, rather than planning at all for the time when She would leave.

.....

During the year of 1989 I met another great being named Shri Shri Shri Shivabalayogi Maharaj - a name usually shortened, thankfully, to Shivabalayogi. We called him Swamiji. The same group of us that followed Amma showed up at Swamiji's meetings, bees to the sudden abundance of honey. Shivabalayogi was a very practical soul, and he loved to laugh. His answers to questions were down-to-earth and easy to understand, and I loved sitting with him, because it felt so simple. With him, lessons and meditations were a cool breeze to the mind and heart, rather than the burning love I felt around Amma. But while I loved the difference, my mind demanded to know if I was his disciple, or Ammachi's. People who "knew" more about the path than I were quick to tell me that once you find your guru, you should stop seeing *other* gurus! Being equally quick to worry, I fretted about my visits with Shivabalayogi...but I didn't stop going. He was too much fun.



**Shri Shri Shri Shivabalayogi Maharaj**

Swamiji's appearance in my life gave me a lot of food for thought, and a lot of food for amazement as well. Being a shakti junkie – shakti being the high energy that great beings emit, and that can give you a very clean sort of "high" that is no more and no less than a direct connection to your own divine energy - I always made sure to be at least the third person in line to enter wherever Swamiji would be sitting, so that I could sit at his knee; this habit of mine led to an incredible experience.

One of Swamiji's meetings was held in the living room of a small local home. The living room was so small we all had to squish together extremely tightly, and the area through which devotees passed to receive Swamiji's blessing was incredibly narrow. Up through this devotee-lined aisle squeezed a large man who knelt awkwardly in front of Swamiji to receive his blessing and ask whatever questions he might have. Happily shakti-soused, I sat just an inch or two behind him, to his right. My unfocussed eyes were resting on the man when suddenly I saw a ball of multi-colors shoot through his back as if Swamiji had lobbed a ball of love through the man's heart. I don't ordinarily have visions or see auras or anything of that nature, and I looked up at Swamiji in surprise. He met my gaze instantly and smiled at me in acknowledgement. Yep, his smile seemed to say, you saw correctly. *Wow*, I thought. Dazzling.

One of my favorite times with Swamiji happened at another program in a beautiful spiritual center in downtown Boston - a gorgeous house of some three stories with an interior luscious dark wood and spacious rooms. During the question and answer session that Swamiji customarily offered, one of the hosts asked Swamiji if he would like some juice to drink, and he said that he would prefer orange juice. To their regret, there was no orange juice in the house, and they offered him any number of alternatives. Politely and smilingly, he declined, saying he would have liked orange juice and he thanked them for their offer, but no.

As usual, I sat in the front row, eager to feel the energy. Having a close view of the divine leela taking place, a thought suddenly took hold: *I should get Swamiji some orange juice! After all, one is supposed to serve the guru, no?*

I fought the impulse – after all, who was *I* to serve Swamiji? I didn't even know if he was my guru or not – but the impulse remained. In the meanwhile, I found the opportunity to ask a question of my own. "Swamiji," I said, "I am a ridiculously fast typist, but I don't want to keep being a secretary. Can I be something else?" Swamiji smiled at me and said, "You can be anything in this life that you want to be. You just have to persevere."

Well, the perseverance wasn't going really well for me in terms of getting out of secretarial work, but at least he had said that I could be anything I wanted to be. I sat back to listen to others' questions, and the orange juice impulse resurfaced with a vengeance. Finally it forced me to my feet and out the door. Downtown Boston – let's see, what was open? Oh yeah, there was a fruit store down the street – I could buy oranges! Oranges? Now, I'm no Einstein but I'm also not ordinarily so focused on only one solution that I ignore all others. However, I believe this was a divine setup. I had to have *oranges*. It never occurred to me, I swear, to buy orange *juice*. Good Gawd Almighty! I hotfooted it to the fruit stand just as the man was closing and locking the door. I pleaded, I begged, but he said nope, he was done for the day. What to do? Swamiji had been talking for a long time now, and would probably stop soon, and then everyone would leave

and my purse and keys would be locked up in that house. How would I get home? The worry dogged me, but I couldn't stop now! (I was on a mission!) I continued to charge up the street.

Then, like a beacon, a lighted sign a short distance away reminded me how close I was to orange salvation: it was a big chain grocery store. I ran up the street and burst, panting, into the store, ran to the oranges, grabbed a bag, paid, and ran like a mad woman back to the house. There, they ushered me up to the second floor to the kitchen and helped me cut and squeeze the orange juice. Grasping my prized glass of juice, I made my way as self-effacingly as I could to my space in the front row. I placed the glass on the floor, waited for the most unobtrusive moment to deliver it, and then slid it toward Swamiji. He spared me a quick glance and a smile and went back to answering questions, but did not pick up the glass.

On and on went the question and answer session – far, far longer than he customarily favored. The last person to address Swamiji was a doctor who had a question about her practice. The question now eludes me, but the answer was stunning, because when he answered, saying, “Well, it’s all about *perseverance*, isn’t it,” he looked at me, smiled, nodded, picked up the glass of orange juice, and drank it, leaving me with my mouth hanging open. Then, of course, he delightfully laughed.

During another remarkable time, I and about five or six other women received an unexpected baptism! Swamiji’s extraordinary story of awakening included having been taken by Shiva Himself up to the heavens; on the way back to earth, Shiva had taken Shivabalayogi too close to the sun, unintentionally burning him. So, to cool him, Shiva dipped Shivabalayogi in every body of water on earth before depositing him back on the planet. As a result, it was said, Swamiji was crazy about bodies of water.

The final visit in 1989 was a meeting house on Cape Cod. As luck (or karma?) would have it, word filtered down to a few of us about the place and time of Swamiji’s departure from Boston, and about twelve of us devotees ended up escorting Swamiji’s car to the Cape. We were hoping like mad that he would want to stop and take a swim.

Our hearts leapt when Swamiji’s car suddenly took an unplanned exit, stopping at a beach parking lot. This was unbelievable grace! We all jumped out of our cars and followed him down the beach to the water’s edge. One of our number picked up every stone he walked on. We all watched as he shed the piece of cloth he customarily wrapped around him, and with the help of his translator made his way down the beach, dressed in nothing but black socks and loin cloth, with his sweet rotund belly preceding him. Into the water they went. I don’t know about everyone else, but I was wishing I had the nerve to run in there with them. Maybe all of the women were feeling the same thing, because suddenly Swamiji

indicated that we should come in, and all of us women rushed into the water, clothing and all. For some reason, the men stayed on the beach. It was an odd and interesting split.

All I could think was “baptism, baptism, baptism”. My God! How else would a non-religious Jewess like me get a baptism? What an honor! What an unexpected blessing! What a problem we were going to have when we got out of the water! Many of us were wearing white, which was going to be less than modest, and all of us were going to be cold on this cloudy day. Fortunately, someone had sweaters and various types of pants in her trunk; we all ended up warmly, if oddly, clothed, and then off we went to the meeting house.

Sitting there that night, full of the light of the joy I felt at having been so free as to just plunge into the sea with a great saint, and one that I loved, no less, I found myself thinking something at Swamiji. “Can you hear me?” I thought to him, musingly. *No way!* I answered myself. But the next moment, without any planning on my part, I heard myself actually *yell*, in my mind, “*Can you hear me?!*” and Swamiji actually jumped, surprised by the “shout”, and turned to look at me as though I had truly yelled aloud. I put my hands over my mouth, and thought to him, “I’m sorry.” He just looked away, since I had nothing to really say...

So...was Mother my guru, or was he?

.....

The intoxication of these two saints was different. With Mother, I felt warm and swaddled. With Swamiji I felt bubbly and light. Perhaps it was a matter of wait-and-see, but I had the feeling that Mother was my guru because with Her I had to work harder... whatever that meant...

I never directly asked either one the guru question, but I remember sitting in Mother’s “question lines”, many times for hours, writing ridiculously long letters about my troubles which brahmachari Amrit, her senior brahmachari and translator, would read to Her for us. I did this many times, but I only remember two of the answers. The first came from my question about all of my woes about my mother being dead, and my being so unhappy, and not knowing what to do. Mother simply said, “Don’t brood,” which made my jaw drop. *Jeez*, I remember thinking, *If I knew how to do that, I wouldn’t need Your advice!*

The more lasting answer – lasting because it rang in my ears and my confused mind for years and years afterward, and lasting because She gave me the answer in so many other situations over the years afterwards – was, “Don’t worry. Mother is with you.” There was one summer where no matter what I asked – and I asked many, many questions - that was the answer: “Don’t worry. Mother is with you.” Well...so *what???* I mean, what the heck is *that* supposed to mean? Hey, I even asked others, and they either didn’t know, or said they did,

feeding me answers about faith. What I knew about faith was virtually nothing, so such answers left me equally clueless.

Fortunately, my intoxication and love for Mother was so strong still that these questions did not demand immediate answers. I could just sit with Her, and bask in the warm love I felt. But Mother quickly showed me that there was, in fact, more.

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That year the retreat was in New Hampshire on a farm/spiritual center run by a married couple who were, of course, devotees. It was a smallish farm, with an equally small barn in which all meditations, darshans and bhavas were held. The most moving and impactful experiences with Mother in 1989 and 1990 came for me during the New Hampshire retreats at the farm; it was a bare bones type of place and felt positively biblical.

Bare mattresses on floors of the farmhouse were all the accommodation we had or needed. Showers were to be five minutes or less in duration to spare the strain on the water tanks. Everyone was to sign up to work for at least an hour in keeping with the ashram ethic of performing seva. At 9:00 AM, Amrit gave a teaching, at 10:00 AM Mother gave darshan while we sat on the rug-covered, uneven floor of the barn, feeling like pilgrims in stories that we had never quite believed.

Chai was available beside the kitchen, where a long awning had been set up for the protection from the sun of both food and workers. Lunch was served at 1:00; at 2:00 or 3:00 one could sit with Amrit and learn to sing bhajans, and at 4:00 was an hour of meditation with Amma. At 6:00 or 7:00 dinner was served, handed to us by Mother Herself. Then darshan again, complete with bhajans and meditation.

One had the feeling those days of complete retreat from the world, from worries; of walking on hallowed ground, which indeed one was. But contrary to my romantic expectations, the amount of light present did not decrease one's personal problems, or interpersonal snafus. Unequipped to deal with myself, I instead continued to sit as close to Mother as I could, to get as much shakti as I could, believing I would be healed of my feelings, as I had been completely unaware of them when with Her that first year. All I was doing was distracting myself from the increasing power of my unaddressed emotional issues. I became a Mother junkie, and insufferably self-righteous. With my pockets stuffed full of Sanskrit vocabulary and spiritual "isms", I must have annoyed everyone, young and old, relative and friend alike. May they forgive my innocent failings.

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Nonetheless, those were golden days, filled with the unexpected and with wonder. Just to watch Mother sitting for the periods of time She does is a wonderment to me to this day. You can see Her stillness within Her movements,

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and you can actually sense Her breathless state in the uncrimped continuance of loving words, embraces and glances She showers on Her devotees. In Her presence, it is possible to believe in timelessness, because She is it and demonstrates it.

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At the end of the 1989 tour, I received my first experience of Mother's non-physical presence in my life. It happened when I volunteered to help set up the place settings for the Devi Puja, thinking that in this way I would secure a place to sit that would be very close to Mother! Sari fabrics hung as "curtains" around the ceremony space in the center of the room, and because the barn was extremely small, few would be able to sit directly in front of Amma. Those few that would have that honor would be able to see Her, while those that would not were going to have to sit down the left and right sides of the barn, where they would not be able to see Her during the Puja at all. I did not want to be one of the unlucky ones who would sit on the sides!

As I and my fellow helpers were finishing up with our seva, another more senior helper came up to us and said, "There are new people coming tonight to see Mother, and they have never met Her before. Would you be willing to sit back there for the puja? I know it's asking a lot, but these people are new." My heart dropped. I wanted to decline – oh boy, did I want to decline! – but reluctantly, as a group, we three or four women said, "Okay." As I turned to pick up my cushion, the senior helper tried to soothe us, saying, "Mother will bless you. I know it!" *Yeah. Right*, I thought to myself. *Sure She will*. But as I picked up my cushion and started to pick my way over the flower petals and oil lamps that now dotted the floor, I felt a strong upsurge of warmth curl up in my belly and travel through my heart. *Okay*, I thought. *Thank You, Mother. Wow, that was interesting*. I sat down at my new place, now not so much angry as sad. We were waaaay at the end of the barn now, and wouldn't be able to see Mother at all!

This was *not* what I had planned!

We saw Mother come into the barn, and then She disappeared from sight, sitting in front of the sari curtains to begin the puja. I knew that now She would be blessing the water, and I loved that! I loved the way the little flames of lit camphor would skate gracefully along the surface of the water, set in motion by Mother's beautiful hands. I wanted to see that! I wanted to see that close up! I had never been able to sit close for that, and I really really wanted to!

Tears started to run down my face. I wanted my Mother, and the emotion was unstoppable. I kept thinking to Her, "I'm sorry, Mother. I'm sorry that I'm crying, but I miss You. I miss You, Mother!" The three other women with me noticed that I was crying and tried to help me, offering me hugs and Kleenex, and then when it was clear that I was inconsolable, left me to my crying. I apologized to them as well, saying, "I'm sorry. I just can't stop crying." When it became clear that they could not comfort me, they turned back to the front of the barn.

All of a sudden, there was the sound of a small commotion. I could hear Mother’s voice, upraised and sounding demanding, concerned. The puja had hit a snag? I asked my companions, but they didn’t know either. There was the unexpected sound of movement and then, like a light bulb turned on, there She stood! She had left Her seat, seeming to have been drawn by my heart’s yearning, and come around the concealing sari-curtains and stood there, looking frowningly into the dark recesses of our little aisle of seated people. Then it seemed to me that she spotted me. “Ahh!” she said, and beamed, and held out Her arms to me, and I held out my arms and said, “Amma!”, all smiles now, but for the *happy* tears. She stopped that ceremony for *me*?! For the purity of my longing for Her?! Yes, She did. Oh. My. Goddess!

Many years later, I met one of the women who had been seated with me, and as far as she is concerned, Mother left Her seat for *her*. To each their truth, I say. I will not deny that woman her perception; nor will I deny mine. Besides, Mother makes every move She makes for all of us, simultaneously. My truth is that Mother blessed me that evening by answering my heart’s call, and I will never ever forget that moment. I will also never forget that when She saw me, and reached out to me, I felt that I “saw” a shining path of light travel from Her to me, and for a long while that night, I felt very special, and I knew that Mother was really truly aware of me.



When Mother was close, I didn’t feel so lonely, and I felt more at ease with myself. For me such things were, as much as the simple fact of Her, the miracles of Her physical presence in those days. Unconsciously, I was moving toward self-awareness; my first year the only feeling I recognized in myself was the light of shakti; my second year I recognized which of my feelings eased in me when Mother was around. My third year was going to be a steep trip into all that was unhealed, and there would be no retreat from myself and the journey I had to take.



“Unresolved grief is like a low-grade fever. It flows in peaks and valleys. Sometimes it spikes into almost overwhelmingly afflictive emotions; at other times it lies almost dormant, nearly comatose, just beneath the surface, until a shadow crosses the heart and releases it.

It is not uncommon for those with unattended sorrow to lean toward addictions of all sorts, from food or drugs to dangerous behavior and other forms of self-mutilation. Unattended sorrow affects our appetite, whether in the form of overeating or self-starvation. Distressed by continuing uncertainty, we swallow everything that comes close, and feel guilty that we are not somehow different – less pained, less hungry, less depressed – than we are. And shame, like a dishonest lover, calls to us from the shadows and slows us yet more ... woeefully reaffirming our guilt. As one person said, ‘I eat too much because I eat too much.’ Alcoholics also voice that same rationalization, rather than noting beneath their smoldering suffering that they drink because they feel empty (psychologically empty, a feeling of rootless vacuity) or conversely because they feel too full (psychological heaviness, a deadness of the spirit).

Sorrows that are lost in the shadows can either numb our sexuality or turn it frantic. We become so numb we cannot touch or be touched, cannot feel or be felt, cannot love or be loved. Or, from that insensitivity, we become sexually destructive to ourselves or someone else.

The pain has been there for as long as we can remember, so familiar that we barely recognize it until the impact of unmistakable loss stares back at us.”

- *Stephen Levine*

*Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart*

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## Chapter Three

### A Call to Arms

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**1990-1991–Boston / Cincinnati**

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The year of 1991 was going to be an emotional roller coaster for me as I was pushed through the door to emotional maturity. I went kicking and screaming.

My brother Andrew called me, shortly after Mother had left America for the European leg of Her tour, and told me that our father had had a stroke. Andrew was panicky, but when pressed could not describe anything about Dad's behavior that was particularly alarming, only telling me that something was terribly wrong. I had not been very close to my father for years. We had been in a tug-of-war over my absence after Mom's death, and for some time he even made weekly telephone calls to me, accusing me of abandoning him, and of not caring. So when Andrew phoned me and couldn't convince me that something really was wrong, now that Dad was back home from his brief hospital trip, I was in no mood to drop everything and go home...that is, until a friend of my father's phoned me a few weeks later and said, "If you want to say goodbye to your father, you'd better come home. *Now.*"

After a few moments of continued internal resistance, I told him I would come home.



**Jack Kirstein**

My relationship with Dad had not always been so stressed. As a little girl, my father was my hero, a man of alluring mystery due to his travels. He was a world-class cellist and 20-year member of The LaSalle Quartet – a classical string quartet that traveled the world performing classical and avant-garde pieces. During his tenure with the quartet, they won prestigious Deutsche Grammophon recording awards, and were wined, dined and generally fêted throughout Europe. In the 1950's he was invited to join the rest of the Quartet members in teaching at the University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music, which he gladly did.

Once or twice a year, the Quartet would leave relatively sleepy Cincinnati and travel to Europe to perform. The big moment of those trips was for me the moment of his return to the Greater Cincinnati Airport, when we could see what gifts he had brought us. For me he always brought a doll from the country he had just left, and I just couldn't wait to see what kind of doll it would be this time! Once, he came back from Japan with a 1-ft. tall geisha doll, which had earned the disapproval of the women who sold it to him. How could he gift a young girl with a *geisha*? He brushed the objections aside; he knew I would love the new doll; his outlook on life was not always appropriate, which certainly had its pros and its cons.

Unsurprisingly, the trouble between us began when I hit my teen years. "Women's Lib" came into my life, complete with a group at my high school, Walnut Hills High, hilariously called "W.O.W." – Women of Walnuts. I came home with demands that my father address my 14-year-old friends as "women", and my father nearly had a coronary over that. Suddenly, I couldn't let anything he said pass by without remark. I didn't want him using the word "broads" to describe women, and I objected to anything he said that was less than modern in its awareness. I was hyper-aware of all things related to respecting women, and this made my father feel judged and angry.

The trouble continued in my late teens when, although my mother's cancer was progressing, I chose to maintain a life of my own rather than stay at home. After some bickering between my mother and father, I was permitted to attend a college in Vermont, and even though for those first two years Dad was bitter about my absence, my mother was vocal about wanting me to go on with my plans. But Mom was quickly growing sicker, and fights between me and my father grew bitterer; when she died, he made a habit of accusing me during our weekly telephone calls of having "abandoned" him. We did subsequently come to an uneasy truce, but our relationship was strained for many years thereafter.

Because I had been doing so much reading about relationships and awareness during my New Age studies, I came up with a way to try pulling the family back together. We never talked about Mom, and during one of my visits home, I asked my father why we never spoke about her, and suggested that we do so now, in order to heal. She had been gone for a number of years, so perhaps

now was the time to do so - now that we were over the shock of her passing. My effort fell flat, however. He rebuffed me with disbelief, astonished that I would offer the family up to such a painful discussion. I retreated angrily, astonished that he wouldn't want to join me in healing. It is clear that we didn't understand one another.

Until that S.O.S. call from my brother, I had no reason to consider returning to Ohio and my family's disconnect. However, it now appeared I would have to at least make an appearance and do the dutiful daughter thing. I booked a five-day trip.

At first, I saw nothing wrong with my father. He was his same old obstreperous self: stubborn, emotionally guarded, rigidly opinionated and patriarchal. But one night we stayed up late together, watching a movie – a common activity for us over the last few years, as it was one thing we could do without arguing. It was about midnight when my father heated up some coffee and brought it into the living room. While we were chatting, he mentioned that he was having trouble sleeping lately. Laughing, I said, "Well, it could be the caffeine, couldn't it!" He looked at me blankly, and said, "What's caffeine?" I said, "You're joking, right?" He had to be joking! Earnestly, he shook his head no. Shocked, and instantly going on auto-pilot, I explained what caffeine is as though there were any way that my father could not know this fact.

By the fifth evening of my visit, I had a feeling in the pit of my stomach that my father wasn't going to make it; I cried in my brother's arms when that feeling first hit me. I was going on 33 years old, but I was not ready to be the parent in this relationship. In fact, the thought wasn't even in my head as a possibility. On day seven of this "visit" I was leaving to go back to my life – such as it was - and that was that!

No. It wasn't. On the morning of the 6<sup>th</sup> day, I sat in my room listening to a tape of the chanting of the 1,000 Names of the Divine Mother, when I heard a knock on my door. It was my brother, politely knocking to tell me that Dad was lying face-down on the living room floor, not moving. Shock is an interesting thing, isn't it? I am sure that even Andrew couldn't say why he paused to knock; and didn't just yell or call out for me or burst into my room yelling!

I ran to the living room, and there was Dad, face down but conscious, in a cold sweat, and extremely pale. I told Andrew to call 911 – I'm good in an emergency; it's afterwards that I need serious help! – and I set about reassuring my father. The paramedics came quickly, and I got into the ambulance and went with Dad to the hospital. He had left his house for the last time.

How remarkable that it was during the playing of the 1,000 Names tape that my father succumbed. I had to hope that there was grace in this trauma, but I couldn't find my faith in that. Not yet.

For a few days, Dad went in and out of rational thinking. Then he was just out! He spoke sentences that were grammatically correct, but made no sense, having as their subject “judges” and “dirty sticks”. Everything made sense to Dad’s mind, but no one else understood him, which made him angry. Then a fever claimed his body and made him even more irrational, to the point where I had to agree to have him tied down to the bed. This had to be a bitter blow to a man of his prideful nature; miserable, I felt it for him.

My brother, meanwhile, was going to his day job, and only rarely checking in at the hospital, as he was so disturbed by Dad’s illnesses that he was having panic attacks. Sometimes he would come to my room to talk at 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning, unable to sleep for the panic that gripped him. I was spending 12-14 hour days at the hospital with my father: in at 6:00 a.m. to speak with the doctor, and home at 7:00 or 8:00 at night to go through my father’s papers, setting up a filing system so I could discover the state of his finances. I was beside myself, unprepared for the magnitude of the decisions that the doctors were requiring of me. I didn’t even know how to make decisions for *my* life! How could I do it for my father’s?! And my prayers to Mother were bringing no answers, no solace.

On the 8th day of my father’s ten-day hospital stay, I pulled the car into the garage, and pounded on the steering wheel, crying as I now seemed to do every night! I didn’t like my strong and stubborn father being ill, and I didn’t like not knowing what to do, and I didn’t like suffering like this! I stormed up the stairs to the living room, unrelieved by my tantrum in the car, and I started to rant at Mother. “Mother,” I panted, “I have heard and read so many stories about people who call for You when they are in trouble, and You come! Like the woman who was going to be raped, and when she called for You, Your face became *her* face and scared the rapists away! There are so many stories like that! Well, here is what *I* want! ***I want my father back!*** I want him back just like he was, and I want him back *now!* *That’s* what I want! And if You don’t grant me this just because I’m not Indian, well then You’re not who I think You are.” I gave that a little thought, and then said, belligerently, “I hope that’s not disrespectful. But that’s what I want. ...Amen.” I had no idea how to pray. In fact, I’m not sure I knew what prayer was! But it turned out that I had, in fact, just prayed.

I then went to bed and got up in time to get back to the hospital for my usual 6:00 A.M. doctor vigil. Sure enough, as I expected, my father was unchanged. I hadn’t really expected my *angry* prayer to meet with more success than all of the other prayers I had uttered, without any obvious results. After the doctor had departed, I waited for my father to wake up. A couple of hours passed. At 8:00 a.m. I heard my father’s voice, “Lori?” I said, “Yeah?” And then, after a brief pause, I heard my father’s voice again, but this time it sounded different – a little deeper, a bit more present: “*Lori?*” I looked at him. “Yes, Dad?” And he was looking at me, really looking at me, and not in the foggy way he had been for all the previous days. *Holy crap! Can he be back?*

“Lori,” my father said, “where am I?”

“In the hospital,” I said, breathlessly. “You had a stroke.”

Incredulous, my father said, “I *did*?”

“Yeah. You did. *My God!* How do you *feel*?”

“Fine! Good!” My father was still assimilating the information, and trying, no doubt, to remember anything from the previous days. I filled him in on what had been happening. And then I called my brother and told him to get over to the hospital. “You won’t believe what’s going on!” I cried. At last - *at last* - the ordeal was over!

My father asked for a telephone, and started calling his friends, telling them what had been happening, and saying things he would never have said ever before about how proud he was of his children, of having such wonderful kids who would care for him this way, and how much he loved us. This was far more expressive than the Jack Kirstein I had always known. In fact, all that day, everything he said and did was so full of gentleness and love and open-heartedness, I could only think that the stroke had been Mother’s way of getting my father to change. It never occurred to me that the change would be temporary. Yet, at five o’clock that evening, to my vast disappointment, my father started to fade; his clarity, the loving gentleness and all the rest of it, went away. He was once again back to his state of suffering, and my mood plummeted alongside his.

It was only years later that a friend of mine explained the proper way of looking at that day, in light of the prayer that I had spit out the night before in my fit of anguish: “Mother,” he said, “answered your prayer! She gave you as much time as She could. It was not your father’s karma to come back, but She gave you a day with him.” What a tremendous, incalculable gift. I was terribly lucky to have Her in my corner, but how long it would be before I could see any of these days as worthy of anything other than a shuddering distaste!

Dark hospital days continued. Each day held unexpected surprises, some positive, some negative. In the morning, my father might be doing badly, and in the afternoon he might have made an advance so small that no one but I noticed it. Wanting very badly to reassure him but unwilling to lie, I became my father’s barometer of health. I would constantly point out the positive changes, no matter how small. Doing this so many times for more than a week gave me my greatest gift of those days: I formed the new understanding that one must see what is, but nevertheless believe in infinite possibilities. I realized that that understanding is a moment-to-moment reinvestment of thought and attitude, and I realized as well that those possibilities could lead to positives...or negatives; it was therefore

best to just stay open and aware, ready for anything, and unrelenting in expecting better things.

Ten days had passed. My father was only this side of sanity, having just the day before recovered from numerous days of a kind of dementia brought on by a rare blood infection that took three specialists five days to identify. As a result, he was now on special drugs that were administered intravenously several times a day. He needed nursing care. This was when the doctor chose to announce that he would release him. *Release him?* I argued with the doctor, but he was adamant, citing insurance reasons. Privately, I cited the doctor's incompetence – after all, he was the one who had watched my father lose 60 pounds in two months, and chalked it up to dieting, which was something my father did not do.

But nothing could be done. The doctor would not be budged, and he was releasing my father the next morning.

When I returned home that evening, I was out of answers. Exhausted, dispirited, I sat down and stared at the living room table, thinking, "Well, this is a fine mess. Mother, I don't have a clue what I'm supposed to do now." A short time later, the phone rang. It was my father's therapist, Henry – a heartfelt and profoundly intelligent man, acupuncturist, and retired neurosurgeon (not to mention a Yogananda devotee and ardent meditator) – calling to see how my father was doing. I was so glad of a friend to tell my troubles to. I already knew Henry a bit; a few years ago I had acceded to a request of my father's and had gone with him to a counseling session so that I could meet the man who was both counseling him and teaching him to meditate. I liked Henry instantly. Obviously smart and even more obviously caring, he was a remarkable psychiatrist. As for my father's opinion of Henry, it was based in trust and spiritual experiences, and it was unshakable. Scant hours after my father's first stroke had led to his having a small auto accident, my brother was forced to wait to take him to the emergency room; Dad refused to go until he had first spoken to Henry.

So, when Henry called me that night, it was like the hand of God reaching out to steady me. After I had explained the problem, Henry thought for a second, and then said, "Well, I have medical rights at 'X' Hospital. Why don't you just bring him over there to the psych ward and we'll admit him as a psych patient?" Oh my God – the word "grateful" pales in comparison to what I was feeling.

I fell all over myself thanking Henry, and the next day I showed up at the hospital to free my father from the negligent "care" of his doctor. I taped yellow balloons to the car – the tape subsequently took the paint off, but do you think I cared? – and I held up a big sign for him that said "Free At Last!" My father was giggling, happy to be leaving the hospital, and got into the car. It wasn't until we started down the road that he said, sadly, "I didn't really realize that I wouldn't be going home." He broke my heart. Reaching for something to cheer him, I told him that we would be seeing Henry, and he perked up.

With the worst of the crisis over, I had time to breathe – and to reassess. It was obvious that Dad’s health was going to necessitate my permanent return to Cincinnati. I was going to have to leave Boston, and to me that meant much, much more than just the inconvenience of a long-distance move. To me it actually meant leaving anything spiritual. I would have none of my spiritual friends, and I thought I would not see Mother anymore either. Those were the times of my life when I saw no shades of gray – everything was either fabulous, or horrid. This clearly fell into the “horrid” category. I was leaving spirituality behind forever – the only thing that I felt had fed my spirit since my mother’s passing.

While I felt devastated, I also knew that I had no choice. Leaving a number of my belongings with friends in Boston, I moved back to Cincinnati and started overseeing my father’s multiple transfers between the hospital and nursing home with each dip in his health.

A Boston friend had told me that I should fix my mind on Mother at all times, unalterably, and that I would “go to Mother” all the quicker from doing so. She had no idea what I would do with that suggestion. When Mother says to call on Her, I believe it is to rest one’s thoughts on Her compassion, on what one has felt in Her presence and in Her arms. My mind – hungry and angry – could only compare my frightening present to what I had experienced with Amma; it told me that I was always coming up short.

Even with this kind of mental make-up, the thought did eventually come to me that my presence and my openness to possibilities played an active part in what happened to my father during each day. I pondered the quantum physics revelation that we are all an active participant in our reality; that when scientists do experiments, the scientists themselves - *their expectations* - are part of the results. I pondered also the idea of grace, of Mother’s presence in these days. It wasn’t *my* presence, I felt, that brought the right team of rehab nurses to my father in the eleventh hour, after every other team in the city had turned his case down. He was a tough case! Felled once again by another multiple stroke that moved him from the nursing home back to the hospital, he reverted back to six months of age. Dad couldn’t speak, couldn’t keep his clothing on, and smeared his feces all over his body, keeping the nurses busy constantly changing him. We couldn’t communicate with him; because as a six-month-old consciousness he had nothing to say. After a week of this, it was getting too hard to visit him when he and his room always carried an offensive odor, and he looked at us with a blankness that broke the heart. We had to get him back, or we had to get ready to let him go; and none of the known rehab facilities would take him on. As we prepared ourselves for failure, a woman on the outside periphery of my brother’s business life suddenly announced that she was a nurse, and that she would ask her rehab team if they were up for a challenge. They were. Talk about an eleventh hour rescue! Thank You, Mother!!!

I immediately grabbed the freedom that Dad's removal to rehab afforded me, and set about reconnecting with what I considered my spiritual roots. In the summer of 1991, I rented a white van of overwhelming length, and headed to Boston to retrieve the belongings I had left there, and to sit with Shivabalayogi, and with Mother.

It's a long drive from Cincinnati to Boston -- 17 or 18 hours if you're a speed-demon, which I was. I drove like fury, straight to the hall, but arrived just after Mother had left the morning darshan. I couldn't believe I had *just* missed her! I went on to where I was staying for the night, with a friend of a friend's. Mother and Her people were staying with a couple I knew; their house had been the local satsang for the first few years. I sure wished I had an excuse to be there -- to stay there, with Amma! It was impossible, though, because the house was not large, and Mother's entourage was! I would never have dared ask.

I did receive darshan from Amma that night at the meeting hall, and it was hard to know how to feel. I was back, but I wouldn't be staying. I had one foot in each life, and neither felt steady.

The next morning, someone called from the house where Mother was staying, and asked if I could put my host on the phone. They needed another car, and thought he would be up to helping. *Oh wow*, I thought, *this was the hand of Amma for sure!* I informed them that my host had already left the house but that I had this huge white van with me, if that would help? They were ecstatic! They needed just such a van to help transport tubs and tubs of flowers to the hall.

Feeling beyond fortunate to be going to where Mother was staying, and wondering what a morning with Mother would be like, I drove like the wind! *Will She be upstairs or down?* I wondered. Darn! She was upstairs, and nowhere to be seen. But there was a lot of activity downstairs, with breakfasts being made, and a lot of hustle and bustle over the little details that surround Mother's constant pace. I tried to stay out of the way, but it was impossible. Feeling like a fifth wheel, I banged into people and things, and finally wandered out of the house, wondering what I should do, if anything.

And then, like a sudden break in a rainstorm, a magical moment happened. I wandered back into the kitchen from the backyard, and no one was there at all! The silent lack of movement surprised me. I guess they were all outside preparing for Mother's departure. And while I stood there blankly, I heard footsteps on the stairs, and a voice, and I turned around to see Mother standing there, all four-foot-almost-nothing of Her, looking at me, and extending Her arms to me and crying out some word I couldn't hear because of my bemusement. I said simply, "Good morning, Mother," and walked into Her arms. I was home. I felt so selected. So blessed. It was just a few moments, and then She released me and turned and walked out the front door. I followed Her out, squeezing

behind Her onto the tiny landing that served as a porch. She was talking to others, and I was trying not to touch Her because I thought it was disrespectful to do so unless invited to; I was trying to stay out of Her way. The truth is that I was afraid of Her. To me, She was God, and I still saw God as the root of sickness and suffering; as the punisher. In fact, I thought She might be punishing me by keeping me in Cincinnati, caring for my father!

Alarming, Mother took a step back toward me. I watched Her getting closer, and I tried to pull even farther back on that postage-stamp-sized cement porch, ready to climb right over the edge and jump – which was going to be my only option because there was no room left to move – and the edge was not a small distance from the ground. Mother suddenly turned around and stroked my heart, a warm look of concern on Her face. I understood that I was not supposed to fear Her, but I just couldn't take that lesson in.

Leaving the porch, Mother got into another van filled with fortunate children; they were going to the beach to play. How badly I wanted to go! Instead, my van was loaded with the flowers for the upcoming ceremonies, and I followed other vehicles to the meeting hall where we would see Mother later. I told myself I was doing Mother a wonderful seva, but seriously, who wouldn't have preferred to go swimming with Amma?

Morning darshan, second day, I sat in the hall, slaked with my now-familiar emotional twin-pains of depression and fear, and wondered what the hell I was doing there. I didn't belong in Boston anymore, and the depression over my new life was growing stronger. I was miserable. In my head I said to Mother, "Mother, I don't know why I'm here. I'm feeling like crap, and it's not even helping me to be here, but here I am. I don't know where else to go. I don't *have* anywhere else to go, so I'll stay, but I don't know why I should. I don't feel You at all, so what good does any of this do? What good does *anything* do?"

Darshan eventually ended, and Mother began Her exit through the devotees who were lined up in a haphazard, zig-zagging aisle from Mother's seat to the doors. I chose not to line up, although my usual custom was to do so; I felt too dispirited. But part-way toward the door, Mother suddenly took a sharp left turn, *through* the line, and started moving in my direction. Moving with Her usual speed, She came right up to me and folded me into Her arms. Without a second thought, I let my head drop onto Mother's shoulder for a few moments until I feared that that might not be appropriate, and I lifted my head. I remember being aware that the people who had been lined up had followed Her, and were settling into place around us, watching. I didn't care. With that incredible smile on Her face, Mother began to stroke my heart. Never one to miss an opportunity if I can help it, I placed my hand over Hers and followed the motion of Her hand down and down and down my chest.

And then She was moving away.

Moments like that leave one speechless, and I was no exception to that rule. The grace was redemptive in that it gave me a tiny pinprick of light: Mother had come to me without even a requesting *thought* from me; maybe Mother truly was still with me! And I even had enough presence of mind to realize that while Amma mothered me I could feel Her, even through the fog of pain. I hadn't felt Her presence at all during the morning darshan; of course, I hadn't felt much, other than hurt and confusion for such a long time, but it was scary not to have felt Her while sitting in the same room with Her. Thank God She made that beeline to me. Without that reminder of Her love and unflagging attention to the needs of Her children, goodness knows what I would have made of my visit with Her.

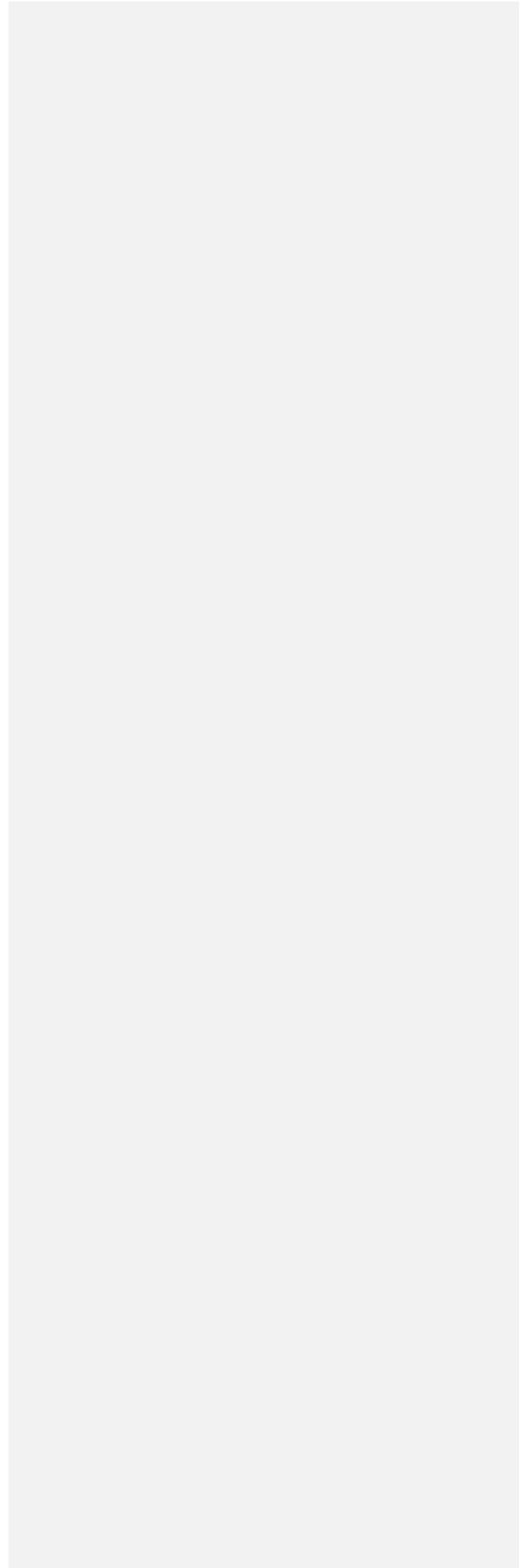
The difference between my time during the normal year, and my relatively few days with Amma was becoming very clear, very painful. In fact, I began to tell people that the only time I was happy was when I was with Amma. And while I felt proud of this fact, and as though that statement demonstrated my good sense in knowing what to be happiest about, I secretly knew that the joy – the Light that I had previously been able to submerge myself in to the exclusion of all other concerns – was leaving. The truth was that, little by little, I was coming unglued psychologically. Mother's presence in my life, however misunderstood and misperceived by me, was shaking me up, and I was heading toward crisis.

I left Boston for Cincinnati, all physical links with Boston now severed, and an unhappy but resigned understanding in place that my father was my new yoga.



## PART II

Dancing As Fast As I Can



## NOBODY

Line after line smearing off into elephantine  
Scrawls as she tries to recall which way  
The pencil goes, my friend's wife who can't organize  
Her mind to spell out her name sits staring

At the bookshelf bowed under the weight  
Of the thousand thousand rivulets of print  
She can't remember writing. Her mind keeps scabbing  
Over – and then she picks it and picks it

Until it bleeds ... and she's herself again,  
Her heart rejoicing that she's Anne and not  
Someone other who affects her like a stranger

Hiding in her bedroom, whispering with affable,  
Red-faced jocularly that if you're nobody  
And nobody's tormenting you, why do you cry out?

- *Tom Sleigh*

From Space Walk, published by Houghton Mifflin  
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## Chapter Four

### *“Take up your bed...”*

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**1991-1992 – Chicago**

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“Unresolved grief is like a low-grade fever.... The pain has been there for as long as we can remember, so familiar that we barely recognize it until the impact of unmistakable loss stares back at us.”

- Stephen Levine

*Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart*

*“The pain has been there for as long as we can remember, so familiar that we barely recognize it until the impact of unmistakable loss stares back at us.”* That is exactly what happened to me. In this year in which I was invited to make the radical transition from emotional childhood to emotional adulthood, my unmistakable loss jumped up, grabbed me by the throat and said, “Good morning! Here’s all your pain. Have a nice day.” The depression I had been fighting for years flowed through me like a tsunami, sweeping all of my mental/emotional coping mechanisms from me, leaving mental illness the next step on my path. One thing is certain: this part of my path was a most painful one, but it was also most necessary for my growth. I would now have to identify and integrate emotion into my life. Intellectually I was strong, but emotionally I had the muscle strength of an infant.

As I write this I have been many years on the other side of the worst of this challenge, so I can now say that mental illness carries the seed of great transformational power. For me, it turned out to be true that tremendous gifts wait on the other side of the emotional tsunami, and that there is assistance and the grace to get there. It was also true for me that the trek toward stability was sometimes woundingly lonely and frightening because there are both the tough internal battles and the rugged external realities of social stigmas. I was fortunate to be one of those who got the necessary help. Far too many are not so lucky.

So what’s the deal with mental illness? What *is* mental illness, exactly? Is it the image of the drooling crazy guy on the street? Is it the quiet woman rocking silently in the corner, talking to herself about nonsensical things? Yes. And no. It can look like that, but it can also be something that you don’t recognize, because those who deal with it are keeping it together in public, and aren’t speaking of it. Here is what it is, physically, at bottom: a chemical imbalance. Now, put that chemical imbalance together with a prolonged time of not being treated, and you get a complex, layered set of reactions and behaviors that, like a Chinese puzzle box, can not be opened in a “logical” fashion. Now the

challenges must be approached with sensitivity and with great attention to the individual's nature, mental makeup and emotional maturity. Just as we change our walk to accommodate a sore knee, only to find that now it is our supporting limbs that ache from the added pressure, we adopt new behaviors when our mind overloads, and find later that these behaviors need as much healing as the initial wound.

The demystification of mental illness in this culture is long overdue – especially at this time in our world history. One could certainly say that from Amma's perspective, we are *all* mentally ill, because until one sees equably in all situations, one lives in the world of duality – black-and-white, up-and-down, good-and-bad – rather than in Amma's "world" of Love and only Love. However, "back on the ranch" – you might say - of our daily existence, we must deal with our problems from *our* perspectives, take the steps *we* must take, while opening to and praying for Mother's grace and divine love.

Mental illness, like physical illness, has its range; it ranges from blindly ignorant to psychotic, just as physical illness ranges from the common cold to cancer, and mental illness is seeded all too well in a world like ours wherein the dearth of spiritual values – community, caring about and for one another, open-hearted communication – is itself an illness, making it feel so much more difficult to reach out for support. Mental illness can be approached as any other illness that requires medicine and allopathic care, but in this society there is the mistaken idea that we should be stronger than that kind of thing; we should be able to avoid it. No. It is an illness like any other; it's just deeper because our ignorance fuels our fear of it. What we do not recognize, we fear. What we fear, we avoid. What we resist – as the saying goes – persists!

And I believe that that is where mental illness as a spiritual path comes in. It is sometimes written about as being "the shadow" - those parts of our personality that have been submerged and ignored. That was what Mother brought up in me, and thank goodness for it! I had ignored my emotional responses for too many long and painful years, allowing the pressurized steam to build under the surface because I had no idea how to safely open my emotional lid. When Mother arrived, the steam started to build up - fast. But it wasn't only my learned coping methods that had kept healing at bay; I also found later that I had an additional propensity toward depression: a low level of serotonin in my brain. Serotonin, when low, causes an emotional response that you cannot will yourself out of. You need healing. Whether it's drugs or a spiritual awakening or an honest-to-God miracle, you need healing. For me, an important tool was antidepressants, but it wasn't going to be the whole answer. More, much more, was going to be needed. Again, thank goodness.

The mental-emotional difficulties didn't come upon me all at once but over time, beginning with my mother's illness and the family's unspoken decision not to discuss it openly, and then worsening in Boston. I remember times in my late

20's when my mind would race, scrabbling away at a non-localized "place" in my mental-emotional body that always appeared to my imagination as what I called "the bottomless pit". For some time I could find a little balance, but then I would compulsively "throw myself" into this pit of depression, and I would again feel lost. Eventually climbing out, I would go on, sure that this time I could be stronger than it was. But in January 1991, back in Cincinnati facing my father's needs and my own, the depression became impossible to ignore. What occurred first were the days that I would spend lying on the floor of my living room, next to my altar with Mother's pictures, wishing I were dead, praying to Mother to heal me. No healing came, no help came. I felt abandoned, alone, terrified, and slaked. I would not, could not eat. I would shake, physically, with a fear that seemed to come from nowhere, stay relentlessly, and consumed my consciousness with a sensation of mental fogginess. I tried to stay "in the moment", as there was nothing fearful actually happening to me in these moments. No good! My in-the-moment included feeling nothing beyond this shaking fearfulness. The sensation was not new to me – I had experienced it in Boston when the feelings had first demanded more attention – but now here it was again and this time it was not moving out of my way. Instead, it was in control, and it was in control during a time when I needed self-control the most.

Where was Mother? Here I was in the most extreme pain, and praying to the only place I knew to help me, support me, save me. And yet, no insight came, no inner voice, no lessening of the overwhelming sensations. I lost weight – too much weight – living on nerve endings, actually dreading every moment I drew breath, feeling the waves of fear that passed through me constantly and in varying degrees. I called spiritual friends, teachers, but no one held the "magic" word or prayer or advice that held my salvation...

...well, almost no one. How about Amma? As the Goddess, the Divine, surely She could heal me? Why else was She here, after all, if not to offer us the healing of our beings? Obviously I would have to go sit with Her and hope that when I went into Her arms, I would magically be cured. Besides, there was no way I was missing a summer visiting with Amma. First of all, in the early days Mother only came to the U.S. one time a year, in the summer. Second of all, if there was one thing (and there often seemed to be *only* one) that I knew, it was that Mother, the Goddess of the Universe, would be visited by me. To not do so was surely lunacy. To do so was to demonstrate the only good sense that was left to me.

.....

I shouldn't have gone. Hindsight is so clear. I was not just having a nervous breakdown, I was broken. How I got to Chicago is a mystery to me; how I got back is simply miraculous.

Let's talk turkey: I was taking sharp right turns toward a psychotic break. I couldn't think clearly. Being alone in my hotel room was torturous alienation.

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Knowing no one in Chicago was hideous pain. When in Mother's presence, I didn't feel better at all, and that made me even more frightened and angry. I was *there*, after all, I said to myself. I had *come* to God, and so should be healed, right? I mean, where the hell *else* do you go when you're that unwell? Well, the answer was that I could have stayed home and taken care of myself. I would have missed seeing Mother, but Her grace would have been with me; another thing I wouldn't have been able to appreciate then, as I understood it not at all.

I remember speaking with some women about my pain, and they tried to help, but after a while they were forced to give it up, because I was entrenched. Nothing that was said could puncture my balloon of suffering. I don't mean to make light of it. I was in tremendous psychological pain. But I had not yet gotten to the point where I could take in healing of any simplicity. To my mind, it seemed that if I were "a good girl" I would be rewarded with health and happiness, and being a good girl seems to have meant living by the rules I had been given when a girl. The black-and-white method of decision-making. I would put Mother on a pedestal and imagine I knew what She would say or do to any given thing I was thinking, but I didn't know. And my mind would most often be in opposition to Mother's imagined standpoint.

The visit with Mother was an exquisitely painful one. Upon first arriving at the hotel, I almost turned around and went home because just the silence of the room -- my being there alone, for the first time without Denny -- gave me a virulent panic attack. Looking back, I can see that facing myself was the invitation, and I could not accept it.

Driving home, I had to stop every so many miles and call Mim, my compatriot in therapy, and somehow she talked me home. It is a miracle, truly, because I remember being so damned sleepy, it's a wonder I didn't wreck the car, or just pull into a gas station, and end it all. But for all the times I've wished for death, I've never felt that I got to the point where I was ready to commit suicide. I never actually thought about the best way to do it. I just prayed for death -- or, to put it more exactly, for non-existence.

Once home, it was therapy time, thank God.

Finally, I had to "give up" Mother. I had to give up my "faith" in being saved, and rise with resentment to my own two feet to find some help on my own because Mother "refused" to give it to me. I bitterly resented my seemingly unsupported rise to embryonic independence, because it was Mother who had abandoned me to my fate; She had abandoned me to my own self -- my own wounded, unreliable, unserviceable self. Emotionally wobbling, I undertook some therapy with my father's old therapist, Henry. We got off to a creaky, non-productive start. What I wouldn't know until years later was how profound a change had occurred in the moment that I decided I had to do this "all on my own". In that moment, my relationship with Mother changed; I would now be able to have a

more mature approach to my life, and to my understanding and expectations of Her presence in my life. I was learning, however angrily, to take responsibility for my own life on an entirely new level, however beginner the level.

Back in the grounding of my day-to-day existence, shaky though I might be, I still had to oversee my father's care, his multiple transfers back and forth between hospital and nursing home, his multiple strokes and various illnesses. The first year was the most intense, being my initiation into adult care: My brother was still so thrown by Dad's multiple illnesses, he retreated into his day job, and the routine of the life he had come to know. I had become the sole parent to my father, and I was as prepared for that as I was for becoming a neurosurgeon, but the job had to be done. There was no close family to give me help, and those friends of my father's who offered help were very sweet to do so, but what I needed was someone to tell me what to do! That, they could not do. I was spending endless hours at the hospital – my custom was from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM daily - and then returning home to spend the next four hours trying to organize his papers. My father's idea of filing had been to put all business papers into a drawer in his studio; it took many phone calls to financial types scattered worldwide before I would figure out how much money my father actually had for the care he would now need, where the money was, and how to collect and organize it.

My days were spent talking *at* my father (who became less and less able to connect his thoughts with his mouth, leaving me to do almost all of the talking), and monitoring his care. Because I spent so much time with him, watching him closely for any signs of change – good or bad - in short order every twitch of my father's body became known to me. More than once, I would see something small but telling in my father's face or movements, call for a nurse, and by the time one arrived, he would be physically ill. One of these times, he was diagnosed as having a major infection: one that removed him from the nursing home yet again and placed him back in the hospital. There, alarmingly, I was asked to make a big decision: remove a testicle (excuse me???), thereby removing the infection from his body immediately, or "try" antibiotics for three weeks to see *if* they would work. *What?* My choices were (1) three weeks of uncertainty, three weeks of watching my father reduced back to complete speechlessness and confusion, three weeks which, the doctors said, might or might not cure him? Or... (2) remove a testicle and solve the problem immediately? I couldn't believe that I was supposed to make this decision. *I'm the girl! My brother should be making this kind of decision, not me!*

But it *was* me. I called a few doctors, asked a few questions, and made the decision: surgery. They wheeled my father away, and I sat in his hospital room, waiting for the operation to be over. After some time, the phone rang, and it was someone from Social Services with a kind gesture for me: "Have you eaten?... No?... I can bring you something. What would you like?" I asked for a strawberry shake, and a half hour later, some woman I'd never seen before, and

never would again, showed up at the door of the room with an understanding smile and edible salvation. The moment made me think of grace, even then when I felt so weary. Moments like that are tiny, but they are so important for bringing light into a time when faith is gone and all that is left is exhaustion, uncertainty and a brooding darkness.

After a few hours, my father was wheeled back into the hospital room, waving at me and chirping, “Hi, Lor’!” as if he had never been sick, and as if he had been talking *at all* in the last two days, which he emphatically had *not!* I guessed I had made the right decision!

Another part of the suffering of these days was my inability to connect with Amma around my care for my father. I thought of Her all the time, and I suppose you could call what I did “prayer”, but I heard no “still, small voice”. I received no “guidance”. How could I really know that anything I “heard” inside was Amma? All I could honestly assume was that there was me...me, with my doubts and my best efforts that felt merely like dangerous guesswork.

With every single event of my father’s care came this roller coaster of shock, anger, bewilderment, choices, and outcome. For a while, I waited for this routine to end. But it didn’t end. In the meanwhile, much as I didn’t wish to, I had to start building my life. I had to sell my childhood home, find a place to live, find a job. And I had to do that while being emotionally wrecked. I cried often, and felt as though I had no rudder. My childhood friends were no longer a part of my life, so any support they might have provided was nonexistent. There was little to distract me from my duties – I didn’t have the time! I had to finish my trek through my father’s papers to find out if we had enough money to pay for a nursing home...or if, at 34 years old, I was going to become a nurse to my father for the rest of his days.

Once my father actually made it into the nursing home full time – no more voyages to the hospital for yet another stroke, or another infection – I was able to start making a new life. But what was I supposed to do, given that I was dealing now with both depression and no idea what type of career to pursue? I followed a friend’s advice and applied for and landed a job working as a clerk for the City of Cincinnati in the Sidewalks Division. Who knew there even *was* such a thing as a “Sidewalks Division”? The job paid the bills, and it gave me a co-worker who was my best friend for quite a while. In that friendship was clearly the hand of Amma, because the first day we met we compared parental stroke stories – in her case it was her mother – and we bonded instantly. When eventually I began taking anti-depressants, she covered for me when I was forced to take naps in the bathroom, felled into unconsciousness by the way my body initially reacted to the medication’s help with my stress.

I was indignantly sure that this would *never* have happened to me in Boston, where *Mother* was. Right...

Boston was so far away now! Now I felt far, far away from Mother, but still I railed at Her, and fumed over my inability to understand what good She was doing me *now*! It wasn't like I *felt* Her or anything – it wasn't like She was *sparing* me or anything! For God's sake, I was on *antidepressants*! How could this be? And yet...She would not leave my mind, and the stories that had impressed me in the past came to the surface with each challenge that my father led us both through.

I had read a story once about a woman whose husband was in the hospital, and as he died, she circled his bed three times as is the Indian tradition with holy beings and manifestations of holy beings (such as the holy mountain Arunachala, which is believed to be the physical manifestation of Lord Shiva). Though he was in a coma and thus unable to speak, he actually responded to her, saying "Thank you!" I was reminded of this when my father did something similar during one of his hospital stays. He too was in a coma at one point, and I made up a Mother-inspired song to sing to him while I stood by his bedside. The song was as much an effort to buoy myself up as it was to try to reach my unconscious father. But although I was making up a very serious spiritual song hoping to rouse my dad with my deep thoughts, nothing happened and I got so frustrated with the failure of my earnest efforts that out of my mouth came something silly and irreverent amidst the deeply serious poetry. My father, unconscious, suddenly barked out a laugh. Out of the blue, this man who was lying there like a sturgeon suddenly started laughing, and then just as suddenly stopped! It was amazing.

All totaled, Dad went to the verge of death three times. The third of these times, I decided that if he was going to die, he wasn't going to do it without Mother's blessing. I was going to have to take him to Chicago to see Mother – the nearest to Cincinnati of all of Amma's tour cities. (Whaddaya know! It had turned out that Boston was not, in fact, the only place to see Amma; certainly I had known that?). There was a hitch, though: he had both a catheter and a colostomy bag, and he couldn't walk. How the heck was I going to get him to Chicago, and care for him while there?

This would have been a wonderful opportunity to back out of the challenge. My mind told me, "You're not a nurse! How can you do this alone?" But for some reason, my determination was up, and I told myself, "If this were happening to Mother, She wouldn't let objections stand in Her way. So I can't either. I'm finding ways to do this. If I *really* can't, then I won't. But I'm not just taking the easy way out. I'm going to try to find a way to do it." Who knows why I thought this way? But over the next couple of weeks, I addressed the issues. I talked with the nurses and they gave me instructions on dealing with colostomies and catheters, and gave me some extra colostomy bags. And then I spoke with Mim Grace, my Yogananda devotee friend who had not yet met Ammachi. I offered

her a deal: "If you come with me and help me with my Dad, I'll pay for your trip." She agreed!

Part of me couldn't believe I was doing this, and the other part was simply no-holds-barred determined.

Told that we were going on a trip, my father was over the moon about the whole thing. This was a man who had traveled internationally for more than 20 years as a cellist, so for him, the plane trip alone was a return to normalcy. The three of us boarded a plane and got ourselves to Chicago. If anything was ever miraculous, that certainly was. Before we deplaned, I asked one of the airplane personnel to help me stand my father up so that I could get his catheter untangled from the chair and empty it since neither I nor my friend was strong enough to make that happen in the confines of the airplane. That poor man! This was certainly not in his job description! I could relate to his discomfort. There were so many things I did for my father during that time that had me marshalling my internal reactions of nausea, disgust, revulsion, fear. But I was on a mission, now, and that steward was going to help me! And help me he did.

I hadn't thought ahead to what might happen for my father once we got there. It was possible, of course, that he would look around and be upset with the scene, and I was concerned that he might be unable to say so because he hadn't been speaking much lately – what turned out to be multiple strokes had taken him first to a mute state, and then to one that was minimally expressive. I hadn't heard him speak complete sentences in months! But I wanted him to be comfortable, and I told myself that I would watch him closely for any signs of discomfort, stay just long enough for him to be blessed and then leave, if he wished. But as it happened, he sat in his wheelchair fairly close to where Mother sat, and just watched the whole thing, chin in hand, undisturbed. It was uncharacteristic of this man to be so patient with something so foreign to him, but he was.

Finally, someone came to me and said that it was time to bring him up to see Amma. I stood up and pushed his chair forward, and watched while Mother gave him darshan. She stroked his chest with Her hand, over and over again, and smiled up into his face. She stroked his arms, and his puffed up right hand that he could no longer use, and She put vibhuti on his face and hands. The whole while that She blessed him, he talked nervously! He said, "Oh! Oh, thank you. Yes, that's very nice, but it's not necessary... Oh, okay.... Well, thank you. That's okay, you don't have to ... Thank you, that's very nice of you," and so on. Mother never looked up at me once. Not even a glance. Dad's darshan was over, and I pulled his chair back to his place in the crowd, and I remember thinking, "Well, what can I expect? I'm just another person, another child of Mother's. Other people suffer worse than I do, so why should She pay attention to me? I'm no one special." But while that may have been true, I still wanted my darshan! I left my father in his wheelchair and joined the queue.

The line in those days was still floor seating only - there were no chairs lining the center aisle – which made it easy for women along the way to touch my arm and say, “Was that your dad? He’s so cute! That was so great! I’m so glad I saw that! You’re so lucky you could get your dad to come!” *Hmmm...brute force had more to do with it than luck*, I thought. But I didn’t tell them that. *Why ruin the fantasy when it has so much meaning for them?* was what I thought.

I reached Mother’s lap and received Her darshan. I remember feeling so numb from what I’d been through during the last year. I also remember feeling dully angry at the thought that now my life was going to go on in this exact way, day in and day out, caring for my dad, rather than being fabulous, whatever that meant. As far as I could see, my life was over. As for Mother, after Her lack of response to me, I didn’t expect a super-duper darshan, and sure enough, She hugged me and let me go; no fussing over me. I stood up and started to move away, accepting that I truly wasn’t more important than anyone else. Apparently, I was now behaving just the way I was supposed to; all that I had done for my father was unremarkable because it was what anyone *should* do.

But something stopped me. From behind, as I began to move away, someone had grabbed ahold of my skirt and was tugging on it. I turned back to see what was going on, and it was Mother, Herself! She was gesturing to me to come sit beside Her, which I quickly did, puzzled but more than happy to acquiesce. For a little bit, I just looked at Her while She continued to give darshan, and then She turned to brahmachari Amrit and said something. He smiled warmly, turning to me, and then spoke words that I could never have dreamed of hearing: “Mother says She thought of you almost every day this year.”

My mouth fell open. Literally, it did! My mind was in turmoil, thinking both, “*You thought of me???*” and, “I know which days You *didn’t* think of me, alright!”

There was only one response to that, really: tears. I said to Amrit, “Please ask Mother to make me a good girl, and to show me my path.” He did so, and Amma beamed, blessing me with a hand on my cheek and more smiling attention.

I’ll tell you, half the time I ask Mother things, I don’t think I really know what I’m asking for. Make me a *good girl*? What I meant, probably, was “make me not make stupid mistakes”. In any case, for a little while, I felt happy again, happy that Mother loved me, thought of me, approved of my seva over the last year. I felt like more than a devotee - I felt like a *disciple*! The depression lifted for about an hour, and then settled back into its accustomed place.

The next night – a Devi Bhava night - found my father and I side by side against the wall on the “men’s side” of the temple (traditionally, the right side, facing front, is considered the men’s side, and the left the women’s), waiting with everyone else for Mother to enter. When at last She arrived, everyone rose to their feet. My heart melted when I saw that my father was struggling to rise from his

wheelchair! A man nearby saw his struggle, and helped me get him to his feet to honor Amma. Incredible that my father's response was so instinctive.

Just as incredible was that my brother surprised us by driving up from Cincinnati in response to my telephone plea earlier that day that he come to receive a family blessing. God knows we needed it after all the years of discord after my mother's death. Andrew made that five-hour drive even though Mother meant nothing to him, spirituality seemed bogus to him, and blessings were also equally meaningless. But something compelled him to drive five hours for a Devi Bhava family blessing. Delighted, I got the three of us to the front of the stage on which Mother now sat for this special night, and there we had a problem. In order to get my father onto the stage, three strong male devotees were going to have to lift him, wheelchair and all, into the air. My father was *not* happy about this; he was terrified. At first I said to him, "Okay. You don't have to do anything you don't want to do." He looked so relieved! But only moments later my desires got the better of me, and I went against my word – ouch – and had the three devotees lift Dad onto the stage. Oh God but he hated it! And such is the possibility of instant lessons in Mother's presence, I learned there and then that I must never *force* anyone to my desires, even when the outcome seems to be so worthwhile. Mother never forces anyone to do anything; neither should I. I apologized to my father several times that night, but it didn't help me. I felt so guilty!

Up on the stage, I told anyone and everyone that we were a family, and should be blessed together. In this country, Mother always takes families together and puts Her arms around all of them as a unit, showering them with flower petals. But for my family tonight would be different, shockingly so for me. None of the helpers along the way placed us in a family order, no matter how many times I explained. Perhaps it was the wheelchair, which took up needed room and didn't allow for a grouping? I don't know. But I do know that Mother knows everything – this is, for me, a fact, proven to me over years and years of my doubting and then receiving miracles of love and aid and response – and when my family reached Her, She first took my brother into Her arms – released him - and then my father – released him - and then me. We were never blessed as a family unit. As far as I am concerned, this was Her will. But why? I don't know, but I did find it fascinating, as I had not heard of this happening to anyone else.

My brother turned around and drove back to Cincinnati that very night, and my father, my friend and I returned to our motel room and prepared for our return home the next day.

Blessings notwithstanding, my dad was still ill, I was still going to be living in Cincinnati, I was still lost as to what my life was all about, and I was still depressed, Mother or no Mother.

What was this path all about?

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Shortly before this visit of Mother's I had begun psychotherapy with Henry, my father's old therapist. He tried to help me, but I was always angry with his relentless focus on forgiving my father. Henry felt that forgiveness is particularly important when someone is about to die; but as for me, I wanted to express and explore my anger. Although Henry wasn't really making any headway with me, I stayed in therapy because the depression was hitting hard, resulting in thoughts of suicide. Those were the days that often found me lying on my living room floor, crying and calling for Mother, who never came.

For a number of weeks, I limped along in therapy until Henry stated that it wasn't "working". Me, I didn't know what therapy really was, so I had no idea if it was "working" or not! Finally, Henry said to me, "You have mentioned the idea of a female therapist several times. Would you be willing to work with one? Because I have a new therapist that just started with my practice, and she's very good." Grudgingly, I agreed, and Henry walked me to the door of her office, and stood there like a sentinel while I wrote her a note. In a few days, we had spoken, and then met. Her name was Tina. I resented her instantly. That should have been my first clue that she was going to help me tremendously.

For at least the first year I was resistant and reactive and angry as hell. She stuck with me, calm, unyielding in her truth-telling, and compassionate to the end, the end being when I gave in and accepted some help. But first came the nervous breakdown. Sounds almost romantic, if you haven't been there: "I had a nervous breakdown!" But the truth is that I came dangerously close to having a psychotic break. That is not a fun thing to do; I don't recommend it. The climax of this inner struggle occurred the night when I lay in my bed and watched the two sides of my brain argue with one another. This was actually a physical sensation as well as mental - uncomfortable as well as terrifying - so at midnight I found a way to get myself to call my therapist. Bullying myself past my polite self that said, "You can't wake her up! It's late!", I said to myself, "Well, if I'm going to be awake at midnight, my *therapist* is going to be awake at midnight!" and I phoned her service.

When she got on the line, she told me that she was glad that I had called. I hadn't expected that, and I absolutely did not believe it, but I would go with it if she was going to help me. After ten minutes of talking, she told me that I should go to the hospital. *The Psych Ward???? NO WAY!!!* Ohmigod, that made me a *loony*, if I went to the psych ward! I panicked but good! However, Tina was not budging. She said the magic words: "Lori, you are on the verge of a psychotic break. You have to do something – either go to the hospital, or call a friend who will stay with you tonight so that you don't hurt yourself." Okay. If there was anything scarier than a psych ward, it was something called a "psychotic break". That sounded like honest-to-God lunacy, and I didn't want to go there! I didn't want to go to the psych ward, and I didn't know who I could call to stay with me,

but Tina only agreed not to commit me herself if I would do one or the other. I called one of the few people I knew in town – my father’s girlfriend! – and bless her, she roused herself out of her bed at 1:00 AM and came over to stay with me. Gawd, I was grateful!

The next day, I was given a shot to begin the reconnection of the synapses in my brain, which had gone *snap, snap*, apparently (at least that was the layman’s explanation), and then I was given pills for the reaction to the shot, because the reaction caused a rictus of some facial muscles. For several days I was shaky, vulnerable, feeling as though I were a stranger to myself, and terrified that at any moment I would tip back into insanity. I found that I was able to hold on to some sense of balance only by being angry. So, although it was against my upbringing, (and certainly not part of Mother’s forgiveness playbook, right?) and it made me uncomfortable to do it, I allowed myself to be darkly, unforgivingly angry! Angry at my father – how dare he be sick and “force” me to take care of him when he’d been less than a perfect father to me? When I’d been sick, he’d not always been there for me! And I was angry at my life for being the way it was and *wasn’t*, and at Mother for not rescuing me when I had indeed cried for Her and called for Her – *as instructed!* – and *She had not come!!!* The anger itself terrified me, but the paralyzing fear of going back into a dire state won out, and I held on to this most unusual life raft.

Agonizing spiritual questions arose during my time in mental darkness: was this illness the ego? If so, I was *really* screwed, because in therapy I was working hard on nothing but repairing my ego, and the ego was supposedly “the enemy” in spiritual circles! Holy cow, was I working *against Mother?* Over the previous years people had questioned Mother about psychotherapy, and She had always responded by laughing, and saying, “No, you don’t need that!” All we needed was Her, it seemed. Whenever I would hear Her say that we didn’t need psychotherapy, I would feel guilty. How could I balance both beliefs – that we only needed Mother, and that I needed therapy to stay alive? I couldn’t. So I held what Mother would call a “doubt” in my mind - a thought, a fear that I was going against Mother by undergoing therapy. I couldn’t imagine that she would want me to be dead, so I felt sure that She would at least be glad that it had helped me stay on the planet. But I just could not let go of wanting to be the best student in the class: the *most* faithful, the *most* surrendered, the *most* efforting. This desire to be the best I could possibly be reared its head in therapy repeatedly, and Tina finally labeled it for me, telling me that I was a perfectionist, and that it would be better if I could take it easy on myself.

That was *Greek* to me! “Take it easy on myself???” Plus, I wasn’t a perfectionist! No, not!! I just had a goal, and a divine one at that! I was going to be the perfect *spiritual aspirant*, but I wasn’t a perfectionist! Oh boy, but I was confused. If it hadn’t been such a struggle, it might have been comical.

So, therapy... Until you have gone into therapy – and preferably with a really good therapist – you will not know what therapy is really about. I went in with the idea that this would “fix” me, and I would then be fine and “normal” and I would attract a wonderful mate, and I would be able to build a life that to some degree reflected my parents’ “normal” life. Nobody said to me – aside from my brother, anyway – that my parents never had a normal life anyway, so my chances of having that “normal life” were pretty low; but that was beside the point. I had high hopes!

Henry had once said to me that I should not be afraid to get some help while my father was ill; that I shouldn’t expect to need long-term therapy. Wrong! I went in to feel better, and ended up staying in for a long time for much deeper life and personality-transforming reasons. However, at the start nobody was able to tell me that therapy is not about “fixing”, but when at its best is about turning the spotlight inward, on one’s self. No one told me how difficult and lengthy that process could be.

No one could have possibly told me that my next path was about to open up, like Alice In Wonderland’s rabbit hole, right beneath my feet.



“Once in therapy, [the patient] finds himself in a new context, one that demands that he pay attention to his feelings and that he discover that in his dealings with other people things are often not what they appear to be. As a pilgrim, he is committed to enduring hardships as an act of faith. He meets on a regular and continuing basis with another human being who again will turn his focus back onto himself and the relationship of the community of men that exists between them. He will have to deal with his responsibility for what he does, at the same time that he discovers that he is not fully in control of all of his life.

“And like Bunyan’s pilgrim, the psychotherapy patient will have to learn to fend for himself, to become a lonely wayfarer whose whole life becomes one long, transforming pilgrimage. Being in treatment may show him the way he is to journey, but it will be up to him to reclaim his salvation continually by remaining on the march for the rest of his life.”

***Sheldon B. Kopp***

**If You Meet the Buddha On the Road, Kill Him!**

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**Chapter Five****“...and walk.”**

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**1993-1995 – Chicago**

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Okay...two years later I was still on antidepressants – wasn't there a time limit on these experiences??? I had never seen myself as someone who would need antidepressants or psychiatric help! I had never seen myself as weak, or as capable of being as emotionally helpless as I found myself now. I *had* to go to therapy – initially because I needed to stay alive, and then because I found that I was in the process of reinventing myself. No longer the proud possessor of my previous coping mechanisms of denial and the angry self-disgust that is one of the “other sides” of depression, I had to have help to translate my new existence, so I had to go on with therapy whether I wanted to or not and I hated that fact! I would have much preferred it to be a choice, although of course if it had been, I would have chosen to boycott, and I would not have made the strides I was to be lucky enough to make.

The first year with Tina, I was miserable to her. I was miserable, period. All of the time in Boston that I had spent reading spiritual books and trolling them for applicable wisdom - all the years of personal growth workshops that I had paid for and attended and delved into and cried through - and all that I had been through with unexpectedly untrustworthy “guides” that a nun I spoke with called “false prophets”...none of it had helped. Apparently, nothing had been of any usefulness after all. I felt miserably sure that there were no more answers to be had. So, at first, no matter what solution Tina offered, I would resist and tell her that her answers were useless because I'd already tried it, or thought about it, and it hadn't helped. There was no intent on my part to be deliberately mean by being dismissive; I felt bitter disappointment and anger, and not much else. And yet there I was - because it was unsafe for me *not* to be there - sitting in her office needing the help that I thought was useless. It was incredibly frustrating.

Eventually, though, my resistance broke. One day, reacting to one of her suggestions with my usual response of dejected rejection, Tina responded in her even-toned way by saying that she knew I had already tried everything, so of course her suggestions were ultimately useless, but she simply knew no other way to try to help. And I heard my automatic response, borne of my desire to reassure *her*: “Well, I haven't tried *everything*.” I realized – at last - that that was true. I also finally heard my hopelessness and realized its limits; I started to let her in.

During a number of early visits, Tina tried to indicate physically how my rigid fear was holding me back from moving forward. “Here,” she would say, holding up the thumb of one hand, then clutching it extremely tightly with the fingers of her other hand. “Look at how, if you hold onto something really tightly, you can't break free of it; you can't relax.” And she would tug, unsuccessfully, at her

thumb, trying to break free of her own hold. “But if you hold onto something with some ease,” and she would loosen her grip, “you can have more freedom.” And she would slip her thumb away. I would look at her with frightened anger, incapable of imagining letting go of any of my certainties. I knew that life stank, and I knew exactly what to watch out for – which was, oh, everything! – and she couldn’t tell me different!

We had a workout, those first two years. Being on antidepressants kicked my self-esteem in the teeth, and until the practical voice of a doctor that I respected told me, years later, that it was probably inherited – that my whole family probably had low serotonin levels – I could not accept that I needed antidepressants like other people need blood pressure medications. In fact, so completely had I bought in to the socially-fostered idea that a need for antidepressants and therapy made me a weak person, I tried to go off of them cold turkey twice over the years. After all, they didn’t make me feel happy and bubbly, but only kept me on a relatively even emotional keel. I decided I didn’t need them! I could just stop! Having now experienced what cold turkeying powerful drugs like these does, what I have to say to you is: *Do not try this at home!*

The only effect that going cold turkey had was to make me start bouncing off walls again. I called Tina, completely freaked out, crying, my mind unraveling in response to my altered body chemistry. Totally hip to the situation, she said, rather dryly, “Did you remember to take your meds?” “No,” I mumbled. “Well,” she replied, even more dryly, “maybe you should do that. I think it will help.” That’s how much I didn’t want to be who I was, where I was, going through what I was. I felt sure that I had failed at life; the therapy and meds were the proof, no? And Mother – oh, Mother was disapproving, I just *knew* it. I *knew* that She would not approve of the psychotherapy because hadn’t She made comments like that to rooms full of us in the past? I *knew* that now I was separated from everything spiritual, everything good. I had to keep going, just to stay alive, but I just didn’t have any clue what I should be staying alive *for!* When Mother had come into my life initially, I thought I had my answer: it was to be Mother’s good girl, and a good spiritual aspirant. Now that I was back home from my directionless existence in Boston – separated from my personal-growth-workshopping, and slammed back into a very earthy reality, complete with my need for drugs to keep going - which I saw as my “failure” - what was my purpose in life? I had no idea, but I felt absolutely certain that I was now out of Mother’s good graces.

Mother was in my mind most of the time, but rarely happily. Why had She left me here in the pain of my emotional breakdown? Why had She washed me up on the dry spiritual shores of my family home, caring for my father - the man with whom I had the most turbulent relationship? And why, since She thought psychotherapy was unnecessary, had She put me in a position where I had no choice but to use it? I had almost nothing but questions.

The one thing I had no need to question was that I had to take care of my Dad. This was just common sense, rational: there was no one but me to do it! But I needed more than the rational to make me feel at all reconciled to my situation. I told myself that Mother approved of me for doing what was necessary, and although that thought was helpful, it was not entirely convincing. Plus, I wasn't sure I cared about how Mother thought of me (of course I did!) – wasn't it Her fault that I was in this miserably difficult situation?

Yet, sometimes I could see that in the midst of my hardest times Mother brought me some help. In 1992 she brought me a relationship with a man who was relentless in his support and his love for me. The relationship was romantic and sweet, and this lovely man was also a spiritual aspirant. We met in Michigan at the yoga retreat where he lived, and we became fast friends. When I left the retreat and came home, I received a call from him, asking if I wanted to move up there; he missed me! This was a tough decision, a true test of how badly I truly wanted to find a place “to put my feet”. I had often chosen geographical cures to my problems, but my father needed taking care of! That seemed pretty clear cut, but then again this was *my* life, and my relationship with Dad had been strained for years. There seemed to be room to argue that he had made his bed, and could lie in it unassisted by me, but then again, did I really want to move just to be with someone I didn't even really know? And could I really leave my father and brother to their own devices? What should I do?

Tina was out of town when the matter came up, and one morning, I talked it over with Henry. He helped me look at all the pros and cons, and just when I was waiting for him to tell me what to do, he said, “So, what are you going to do?” Crap! *My* decision! I thought for a moment more, and then figured I was going to have to tell him something; surprising myself, I told him that I guessed I would stay in Cincinnati. I expected to feel very sad about this, but instead I felt a profound happiness overcome me, welling up from inside, and I noticed that it grew stronger as the day progressed! I took this as a sign that I had made the right decision. And there have been a few times since then when a decision or an important change of attitude has given me this same inner upwelling of bliss; I never doubt its reality. It comes from something far purer and stronger than my will alone could ever dredge up.

The lovely man and I eventually became involved in a long-distance romance, and his presence in my life – his unstinting support, even when I was at my most unstable – gave me a kind of help that made the hard journey a little more bearable. Sadly, the relationship eventually foundered when my needs and reactions drastically changed due to the tremendous personal shifts that therapy was taking me through, but I always felt so grateful to him for being there for me when I was at my most unreasonable. What grace there was for me in his presence in my life.

As time went by, Tina became my voice of reason, another guru. She was teaching me things that had escaped me when I was a child, and a teenager; things that had to do with maturing in a healthy way, things like the difference between aggression and assertion.

One day when I objected to the idea that I could actually say *no* to something because that would be a kind of attack, Tina told me that the difference between assertion and aggression is that aggression involves a kind of violence – an outward anger – whereas assertion involves standing up for oneself, not backing down from one's beliefs, and it doesn't have to include violence or anger. It can even be calm, but firm. This was such a revelation to me, I remember it as one of my first conscious mental switches.

Things like that, which seemed so small, had cataclysmic effects on my understanding of who I could be, and how I could act in the world. Tina talked a great deal about acting within my integrity; and when I mistook that for perfectionism, she helped me redefine, and understand. Integrity came to mean doing what I felt to be right for me and others, even if it meant some initial discomfort on my part.

Rather than stopping me from making mistakes, she would help me learn and grow from them. Tina also talked a great deal about intimacy – not romantic intimacy, but emotional intimacy. This was a favorite topic of hers, as it has been of mine ever since. We spoke often about the ills of our society: its fear, its inability to communicate, and its judgments. It became important to me to grow into a person capable of emotional intimacy, even though it also came as a shock to me to learn that I wasn't already such a person!

Meanwhile, back on the home front, my father was coming a long way. In fact, both of us had. Where I had first pushed him for answers about what I considered his past misdeeds, because I was eager to put certain demons to rest before he died, I had now come to a conscious point of realizing that he was never going to be able to satisfy my anger, nor my desire for him to understand me in the way that I wished him to. And one seemingly normal day, I just came to terms with the fact that it was simply unkind of me to continue to push him, and I stopped. His strokes had left him unable to remember events, and his unexplored nature left him without satisfying answers to many of my questions. It was time to stop. It was *kind* to stop.

For my father's part, he seemed to have not only lost his anger with what he had for years called my desertion of him after Mom's death, but he now took to his new life at Cottingham Retirement Home with complete faith that it was the best thing for him, simply because I had made the decision to place him there. This childlike faith in my care was so unlike him, and so very moving.

Jack's faith may have blossomed in my unlikely direction, but his tact had not blossomed at all. At the end of many a long day, reading the boredom in my face, Dad would simply say a curt, "Go home", impatience clear in his tone and on his face. At first I would ignore his advice, and stay out of a sense of responsibility, but that would just make me cranky, and him crankier. After a few weeks of this, I learned not to lie, and just say, "Are you sure?", and go.

As to Mother's place in both our lives, I still went to see Her as often as She arrived in either Illinois or Michigan. As for my father, on his window sill he kept a picture of Her that I had brought to show him, the year after he met Her. Instead of just admiring my photo and returning it to me, he had kept it, referring to Amma thereafter as "our Mother", before suddenly turning to me three or four years later, saying, "You can have this," handing the picture back, and never mentioning Mother again.

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The summer of 1995 I returned to "the scene of the crime", as it were – to Boston, to visit family. Four years of therapy had changed me, but how? Maybe placing myself back into the city where my spiritual search had begun would help me weigh the changes. I arranged my visit to coincide with Mother's.

It was great to be back. I toiled around town, rediscovering the roads and New Age havens that I had known so well. I no longer had friends in the area, but in no time at all Mother had arrived, and I headed over to the gathering in Watertown to get my darshan, and to face the few people I did know and, frankly, dreaded seeing, as none of those relationships had been particularly healthy. But after I said polite hellos and put the awkward moments behind me, I moved on to talking to other, as-yet-unknown, "brothers" and "sisters".

One evening, I went to Mother for darshan, and She surprised me by stopping me as I was leaving Her, and asking me, "How are you?" Excited to be asked, I answered, "I am fine..." and then I added, "and so is my father!" She smiled at me, touched my cheek, pulled me back for another hug, and sent me on my way. It occurred to me only a short time later that I had missed a golden opportunity: I could have asked *Her* how I was doing! Here I had been worrying for years about whether or not therapy was a "spiritually-approved" activity or not, and I had missed the perfect opportunity to calm all of my doubts about how I was staying alive. I should have said to Mother, "Well, I don't know, Mother. How do *You* think I'm doing?"

I laughed about that omission for the next 24 hours. Couldn't believe I'd missed that opportunity after all of that worry I'd put myself through over the work Tina and I were doing! Next morning, I got into the darshan line, and as soon as I sat down, I fell into the deepest, most profound meditation I have ever had. It had to be Mother's grace – I was a *terrible* meditator! Couldn't sit still, couldn't concentrate, couldn't decide what to concentrate on – my third eye? my

breathing? my mantra? More often than not, I gave up pretty quickly. But here I was, sitting in the midst of the muted roar of sound that issued from the activity around Mother now that larger numbers of devotees were beginning to find Her, and I suddenly found myself sitting still, silent, endlessly calm, at the bottom of my being, as if at the bottom of the ocean. Above me, I could actually see – when I *chose* to notice (!) – my thoughts, like small black birds, passing by, ceaselessly moving. But I could – and did - just as easily ignore them and I sat in an endless silence at the bottom of my being, free from thought, free from motion, free to be held effortlessly in meditation.

Every so often, someone would tap me on the knee to let me know that the line had moved. I would open my eyes, move forward, and then slide back into that incredible silence as if it were no more difficult than breathing. As if it wasn't worth giving that miracle more than half a moment's thought.

Then I reached Mother. I had of course forgotten entirely about both my years of therapy angst, and my missed opportunity of the day before. But Mother had not! She pulled me up into Her arms, and into my ear She intoned with great firmness and volume, "Good! Good! Good! Good! Good!" I knew instantly that She was answering my question: "How do *You* think I'm doing?" I laughed out loud, a big bark of a sound that I felt sure must have deafened Her, but Mother simply gave me Her customary gift of Hershey's kiss and flower petals, and I walked away, suffused with a love that I clutched to my being like a secret. I sat down in the first available chair and smiled to myself like a Cheshire cat, my head down so as not to share this private moment. Mother was *fine* with the therapy thing, and even more than fine with me. I was a very happy girl. I felt proud, loved, cared for, approved of, and known!

Maybe that should have been enough for the rest of my days there, but it wasn't. I was still battling with the feeling that She had abandoned me to my fate, and no matter which way I looked at it, I could not fathom why She had done that, nor why all that I had done to do it "right" – like trying to choose Her over therapy, initially, until it became a choice of life with therapy rather than suicide - had not worked! In retrospect, I think I was trying to live the life of a renunciate. I had read Yogananda's book Autobiography of a Yogi, and had been struck by the story he told of being challenged to spend a day traveling without money, and without asking for anything – even food. Due to his faith, his day was full of grace. Food was provided when needed, and travel was easy, protected. I assumed that if I had had perfect faith, as he had, I would not have needed therapy, and when I had called for Amma, She would have come to me. I had not been successful, obviously. So I thought only that I should try harder, and I thought that clearly Amma must have deserted me. It never occurred to me that what I needed was to find a new way of understanding who Amma was, what I could reasonably expect from Her, and what I could reasonably expect from myself!

1995 was a year of continued settling into my new life with its far more grounded goals of earning a living, continuing with therapy, immersing myself in a new addiction - singing lessons - and in caring for my father. The therapy was reaping results, and I was beginning to create that long-sought "place to put my feet". I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel, but I no longer lived in dark bottomless pits of despair. Life was improving.

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## **Leaving Home**

If you have left your home with unresolved  
emotions,  
You are very likely treading on clouds.  
And clear or stormy, they will  
Dissipate.  
Such is the nature of terror.  
Such is the nature of grace.

### **Chapter Six** ***Shadow and Light***

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***1996 – Chicago***

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Mother had been mixing the ingredients of me all of the years since I had known her – therapy, “Father Yoga”, and artistic love reawakened - and little did I know it I was about to get cooked. My life would take another turn, and I would be free to pursue my own direction. The challenge would be to see if I could determine, then set out, on a new road with strength or if I would again fold under the emotions.

In 1996, I undertook my now-customary drive to Chicago to see Mother. It turned out to be emotional clean-up time, and Mother wasted no time in getting to work on me. Devi Bhava night, I met two women, both of them sweet and quietly strong, who had come together to see Mother for the first time. We all sat together for the Devi Puja, and as the ceremony started, I began to cry, the tears rolling out of my eyes as freely as water through an open faucet. This kind of release has come to me a number of times during visits with Mother, and feels to me like nothing less than grace itself. More than merely painless, it is a bittersweet kind of ecstasy, borne of the pure emotional honesty of yearning for the divine. Though my companions repeatedly offered me tissues and comfort, I was able to reassure them that I was, in fact, just fine.

One month later when my father died, I wondered if those tears had been for him; if they had been Mother’s way of helping me siphon off some of the grief ahead of time. At the time, however, I simply accepted the tissues and the concern of my companions.

I went up for my darshan. Leaving Mother’s arms, I walked straight across the stage, down the stairs and dropped to the ground where I pranaamed, remaining in that prostrate position, my being filled with Light, my heart shot through with divine adoration, my face bathed in ecstatic tears for what may have been 45

minutes. When finally the wave of devotion had passed, I sat up groggily, wiped my face, and walked back towards the tables where books and shawls and japa malas and such were sold. On the way there, I encountered the lovely man from Michigan. I had been praying and praying for him to apologize to *me!* Instead, I thought to Mother, "Oh, okay, Mother, have it Your way," and I apologized to him then and there, thanking him for his incredible support at a time in my life when I was in the most jeopardy.

More emotional release.

Back in Cincinnati after Mother's visit, on an unremarkable Sunday four weeks later, my father, Andrew and I, in a rare show of togetherness, went out to brunch. It was the kind of spread that makes your mouth water - many types of seafood, breads, cheeses, desserts, and everything else you could ever want to overeat. Good food is a family addiction, and my father was delighted. I made a mental note to bring him there in the future.

At a moment of no particular significance, I happened to look at my father, and I saw a shadow cross his face. I had always wondered about that saying - seeing "a shadow" cross someone's face - but it is a reality, and a strange thing to see. His head dipped just a little bit, and I saw something dark dart across his face, and then it was gone. If I hadn't been looking, there would have been no other forewarning. I quickly asked him if he was okay. As was his habit, he looked at me as though I were an idiot for asking, and said, "Yeah!" with an annoyed tone of voice. I left it alone. He did indeed look okay again. I resolved to keep an eye on him; maybe he was going to get sick again, as he had in the early days at the nursing home.

After brunch, my brother went home, and I took my father out for his weekly shopping. He loved to shop for classical music CD's. We had a nice time, as we always did, and I eventually dropped him back at the nursing home, got him settled in, and took off. Other than that odd shadow, I had been given no signs that I had just spoken with my father for the last time.

Once I got home, I was bitten by what is for me a rare bug: the cleaning bug. I started cleaning out and organizing my entire apartment. I went on like this for a few hours, happily puttering about while a movie blared on the television. When the phone rang, it was one of the nurses from Cottingham Nursing Home. "Lori? I'm sorry to tell you this, but your father has died." "What?" Everything in me went very still. "Are you serious?" I asked. Strongly, she replied that she was quite serious. There was no softness in her voice. I think she wanted to get through my shock as quickly as possible. It worked. She told me that when I had left him, one of the aides had reported seeing him sitting on the side of his bed at 5:00 PM, taking off his shoes and socks, seeming to get ready for bed. My father had always been a late night kind of guy, so this was odd. When someone came back by his room a short time later to check on him, he had fallen

backward onto the bed, taken by a heart attack that was so instantaneous he hadn't even felt it.

I asked how they could be sure that he hadn't in fact felt it, and she told me that had he felt the heart attack, he would have struggled against the physical discomfort, and that the struggle would have shown itself afterward in broken blood vessels in his face; Dad's face was calm and unmarked by any telltale redness. Apparently, my father had taken the express train out of his body. Jai Ma!

I called my brother and told him what had happened, and he said he would meet me at the nursing home. Then I called my dear friend Randy, who actually hung up on me in his haste to make it to my apartment. Randy drove me to the nursing home where we saw my dad. Sure enough, Dad looked just fine! In fact, I wasn't so much afraid of his being dead as I was of the thought that if I touched him and he sat up, or opened his eyes or something, and said, "Hey there!", I'd have a stroke myself!

The nurses had sweetly thought to put a classical CD on the player, and it filled the room with a quiet kind of mercy. My Dad had spent many of his nursing home years sitting quietly in his room listening to his classical music CD's, the only remnant of his old life. I had been told that it was common for other residents to wheel themselves down the hall to listen from the hallway, because only one man had become close enough to him to ever be invited in. The rest took a risk if they came in, and they knew it. Dad was fiercely private with his belongings and his space in the nursing home. I had even been phoned on one occasion because he had hit someone for entering his room. The combination of age and strokes had increased his determination and lowered his self-control. Though he had to put up with the indignity of living in a nursing home with people with whom he felt he had nothing in common, in his room he was king, and his room was his moated castle.

Standing beside my father's body, I found that I was unable to touch his skin directly. I just couldn't bring myself to do it! They had covered him with a blanket, except for his face, so I gingerly touched his toes through the blanket. And I sat down in a chair by the bed and chanted mantras for him, praying that he be at peace. My father had gone out with a great deal of grace, leaving without pain or fear. His impact on my life those final five years had been so profound that as I sat by his side, I found myself grateful for our journey together, rather than angry at his passing.

But the most touching moment of that day was provided by my brother.

Andrew and Dad had never seen eye to eye; they were too much alike to do anything but butt heads; bitter arguments had always been frequent. My brother had been nervously unable – and probably too conflicted in his feelings - to care

for Dad during his illness, and Dad had never understood his highly strung, artistic son; he had always been tough on him, and largely unrewarding. Andrew and Jack, never to be reconciled in this birth. And yet it was Andrew who leaned down with great tenderness and love and kissed our father on the forehead to bid him farewell.

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I was grieving for my father, but not in the way that I had grieved for my mother. My mother's death had ripped my center from me and left me directionless and emotionally shaky. With Dad, I was holding it together, feeling sad but okay...until one night, when around midnight I felt that terrifying black hole of directionlessness and groundlessness that had been my grief for so many *many* years, and I thought, "Oh crap, am I going to have to go through years of this *again*?" and then a new determination took hold. I suddenly thought, "No. I won't do it. I won't do that this time. If I'm going to get torn to pieces again before I'm put back together again, then let me do it right now instead of wasting five years waiting to address the problem." So I got out of bed and went to my altar, which held some pictures of Mother, and a piece of one of Her Devi Bhava saris that Tina had gifted me with at one time.

"Okay, Mother, here we go," I thought to Her. I pranaamed, and then sat to receive the feeling. It began to rise - dark, endless, consuming - and I felt a painful welling of tears burn in my chest and then surge up, ready to burst out, ready to drown me in a loud wail of sound. Obedient to what I knew would come, I bowed my head down to the sari. And the moment my forehead touched the sari, the burning, the tears, the tsunami-like approach of the terrifying black hole were simply gone. Like mist. As though they had never existed at all. I lifted my head and sat there, stunned.

Where had those feelings gone? Had I just repressed them? It must be that! I must have shoved them down... but I looked and looked and could feel nothing of them remaining. If they were still here, where in my self had I hidden them? I looked and looked, but they were nowhere, because they were not repressed nor held in any way by me. They were simply ... gone.

It *had* to be Mother. Maybe it was my willingness to go where I had resisted going before. I don't know. But I am certain that it was Mother's hand that reached out and said, "No daughter, I will take that. Your work in that way is done."

Now I could be sad, but not devastated. Now I could accept that my father was gone, that all parental ties to my childhood were gone. Now I could face my future grounded in my own self, however slim that ground might currently be.

Now I could live my life for me and me alone. Now, it was *my* time.

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“You will quickly see that to achieve your true dimension you have to stretch, you have to expand. ...The stretch is a great privilege. Only the artist is responsible for stretching. It’s entirely up to you. And it isn’t easy. But when the artist does stretch, the entire world limbers up.”

- Stella Adler, *The Art of Acting*

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**Chapter Seven*****What's In A Name?***

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**1997-1998 – Chicago**

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**Summer 1997**

Some of my friends had worried that when my father died, I wouldn't know what to do with my life. But every week I could count on both emotional intimacy and the pursuit of artistic goals. Each Saturday was devoted to singing: both an individual singing lesson and the group performance lesson. I considered it my spiritual work, my satsang. The highest exploration in any artistic pursuit is always of one's own self – one's resistances and flows, physical feelings and emotional expressions. I lived for Saturdays.

I also lived for "Group". One night during the work week was my individual therapy session which I thrived on, but the best event of my work week was Group - our group therapy session - a 3-hour period spent with the same five wonderful, witty, honest, searching women. Tina brought this gift into all of our lives in 1995, beginning first with a few 10-week commitments, and morphing into a never-ending week-in-week-out meeting that provided us with very adult and rarely taught subjects like emotional intimacy, interpersonal communication, responsibility, forgiveness, compassion and empathy. Bar none, Group was the most important growth opportunity of my life; it was, among all the wonderful blessings of my life, the most grounded of my studies about becoming more conscious and mature.

At the start, none of us really knew what we were doing there. Tina had gathered some of what she called her "higher functioning" clients together and cajoled, offered, begged and wheedled until we had all agreed to show up. One or two were late-comers, but by the third year of Group, we were a steady number of five, and not one of us would have ever become friends if we had not met in such a venue – a fact which in itself, over time, gave me to understand that it is indescribably rewarding to look for friendships anywhere and in new ways, rather than confine oneself to the kinds of friendships and the types of people one has always known.

Tina was masterful with us. Never putting herself in the way of our communication, she instead sought (and found) ways to help us move forward with honesty, consideration and kindness, even when one or more of us was angry or reactive.

I remember an exercise during one early session in which Tina asked us to close our eyes and move about the room, blind - using caution so that we did not knock one another down - and say hello when we would encounter someone else. I hated having my eyes closed and I hated the anticipation of being knocked down!

Feeling like a mini-Amma, I soon sat down on the floor and extended my senses to the room at large, feeling warm and friendly, like a piece of burning wood impersonally warming a space with my presence. When Tina told us to open our eyes, and then asked us how we felt, I said I felt really close to everyone. She said, "You were sitting in a corner all alone. Everyone else was shaking hands and saying hello!" The literal truth of that struck me. I hadn't really been close to anyone at all! I hadn't faced my fears of uncertainty and intimacy even in that protected setting. So much for being at all like Mother.

Emotional intimacy would have to be Tina's religion, and once I was coached in its importance to me personally, I too became an ardent disciple. If you share true emotional intimacy – being vulnerable, open, truthful, sharing, speaking and moving within your own integrity – everything you do is informed by that. And once experienced, it is my strongly held opinion that there is nothing else you can do that will be as satisfying. Tina spoke of this kind of intimacy endlessly; she spent a lot of her time off in Ecuador where neighbors are friends by definition – companions in emotional, physical and spiritual survival. To her, America felt like a cold place where we find ourselves in dire straits due to our waning sense of inter-connection. I listened to Tina as to a guru, for so she was to me. And there was a special connection between us which showed itself over the years in the ways that our lives paralleled. This made our sessions as useful to her as to me, as she often found that what I was facing was something she herself was facing at the same time. Of course, she would only tell me this much later. The most interesting example of this concerns my move to California, which occurred in 2001, but was mulled over and worked on in therapy beginning in 1999. It seems that while I had made my decision to move, and set a date, she had simultaneously been considering a permanent move of her own: to Ecuador! At 60 years of age, this remarkable woman was going to pick up stakes and move out of the U.S., to invest herself in living the kind of life she believed in, where human rather than political values dictate one's responses to life. As she had been helping me move through my resistances to the move I felt I needed to make, she was hearing all of her own resistances, and feeling supported in return.

I had always had an interest in the whys and wherefores of people's behaviors – and once I met Tina, my interest in psychology focused and deepened, forming a nice interconnection with my Boston-borne fascination with the body-mind link. I can't say with exactly what kinds of "ears" the other Group members listened to Tina's lessons, but rather than see her only as a helper along my path, I "studied" with her: I drank in her use of words, her behaviors, her methods. I scrutinized the way she worked with people. I noticed her habit of not judging, I drank in her patience and her lack of blind reactivity. I knew, of course, that she was paid to do this work, but I also saw in her – as we all did – the great love she held for the job, and also for us as individual women. She often would tell us, with a glow of warm love in her eyes, "You are, each and every one of you, remarkable women." She often told us she felt honored to be with us, to watch us grow, to

laugh and share with us. We all felt her sincerity. I felt Mother's influence in Tina's place in my life.

Psychologically, I learned, the process can be called reparenting. Personally, I know, I was growing up, expanding my emotional repertoire, learning to recognize and take responsibility for my actions, and learning to risk intelligently. As Group went on year after year, I began to open myself to these people who took a little more work to get to know. And out in the world I extended those lessons to others, beginning to take steps past my self-defined safety zones, but with some forethought, rather than with the kind of trusting abandon that had once led me to invite a total stranger into my home - an event that narrowly avoided being a rape.

What I was learning from Tina happened to dovetail Mother's teachings nicely. Mother said, for instance, that we should develop our discrimination. Surely, using some thought and instinct when committing to opening emotionally to others was in the ballpark of discrimination? Trying to listen to others' difficulties with at least a little compassion rather than with obvious impatience was another leaf out of Mother's book.

There was laughter, particularly as we recognized in one another our own nutty human behaviors. And there was also a communal kind of "holding suffering lightly", as writer and Zen teacher Stephen Levine would say. Together, we discovered the galactic power of "holding hands" in the middle of great pain, of finding the kind of wry humor that lies - honey in the rock - within every scarring situation. Together we held one another in compassion and personal truth when we were suffering, and helped each other through it with understanding and the humor of mutual identification. Who has *not* suffered, after all, no matter what type of suffering it is? We discovered the similarities that go beyond personalities, and we honored one another aloud and proudly for being strong and brave enough, intimate and vulnerable enough, to share those similarities. I had read many books about the power of such intimacy and had thought that my mental understanding covered everything; now I traveled the emotional frontiers and realities of true friendship, and came to a practical and more heart-based practice of what I had merely imagined before.

Over time, issues that one or the other of us thought would surely kill us to reveal, were in fact exposed to the light of day and proven less mighty than the power of our sharing. Some issues were referred to thereafter only when absolutely necessary, honoring either the depth of the wounding, or the verbal request of the Group member. Other issues became so softened by our joint recognition as to become non-issues. And still other issues became understood enough to be remembered with laughter. Everything ran the gamut, and Group became the one place where we all knew that even if we came in feeling hideous, we would leave feeling that we were not after all completely alone, but were in fact held in five pairs of caring arms.

As for me, I began to see the world with different eyes. I started to feel sorry for anyone who did not have the equivalent of Group. I started to agree with Tina that the world did suffer for the lack of such intimacy, honesty, caring, and even our little Group's occasionally flailing attempts at mutual understanding. I began to understand what Tina meant when she said that it is actually a good thing to have a friendship come to a place of misunderstanding, or argument, because it is only by passing through such areas that our relationships are deepened. I saw that some relationships would pass through these areas and deepen, some would end, and some would be defined by such barriers. Moreover, I saw that those "barriered" relationships are none the less valuable; they are simply different: if I could not find the intimate friend to alleviate my loneliness, I could call a less intimate acquaintance who was a good movie companion. I simply had to adjust my expectations of that evening, and be grateful for what I could have, rather than pining for what I could not. There it was again, another leaf out of Mother's book: acceptance. Mother's lessons were putting down roots for me through psychotherapy, and through simple grounding in my day-to-day life.

Not only Mother, but all great beings throughout history have spoken of the need to accept one another. But how do we do that? Through effort, certainly. But there is also a way to speed up the process, and Group provided that opportunity directly as a result of the depth of our exposure to one another. It had to do with the ability to open ourselves to one another, to whatever degree possible. So, often, the oceanic risks that began with a breath-holding response would end with tenderness and wry humor and mutual acceptance.

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What I saw, after several years of this phenomenon, was that human beings actually can come to an acceptance of and compassion for one another through an open, truthful communication that shows each of us that we are, all of us, wounded. When I see that you are wounded, and how, I suddenly see that all of your posturings, all of your behaviors and mannerisms are just your ways of staying safe. I see the child that you are, and I see that I needn't fear you for you are just like me: doing the best you can to get through, crying in the night just as I do. When I learn to recognize and have compassion for my crying out, I come to recognize and feel compassion for yours. And all of this comes about through being open and vulnerable, and communicating. But, of course, the steps that must be taken toward those sacred moments are best taken in an environment that lacks shame – an environment that is caring and loving and compassionately honest. Thanks to Tina, Group provided that.

The fact that the world wasn't Group – that the lessons about intimacy that I was learning could not be used identically in every situation in my life – was another hard-won piece of the puzzle, and it took time to really grasp. But even those difficulties couldn't stop me now. As I learned and flexed my sharing "muscle", I started to become what I now call a "deep sea diver", emotionally. I began to thirst for people's individual truth, for communication without the hazy veil of self-

deception on either side. Not everyone wants to do this (and few want to do it *all* of the time!) so if I didn't want to be insufferable I had to turn some of my attention to becoming an emotional linguist. I had to find ways to bend and flex my communication in order to respect the perceived needs of those around me. No one speaks any language well at first, and I was no exception, so I had to discover new tools for moving about my world, a world in which very few had had the advantage of any kind of Group-ish situation. And I floundered.

Especially in the first few years when I did not know how to use my new abilities outside of the Group, I would come to Tina with a situation that I did not know how to face, and ask for her assistance. After discussing the matter from all sides, she would give me some words, or a way to phrase a sentence, that would demonstrate a way to express my feelings and needs appropriately. Once, in response to a work situation, I wanted to march in and say, "Why should I do your job for you? Who the hell do you think you are? Do your own damn job!" Tina laughed gently and said something like, "Yes, that is the way you feel, but if you want to keep your job, it is probably best to phrase it differently," and then I had to laugh! She then suggested a less reactive way to express my refusal; something like: "Do you remember when you asked me to such-and-such? I am having trouble with that. I don't feel that that would be right for me to do." Or the less honest, but potentially more useful, "I'm so sorry I can't help you with that right now; I have been asked to do so many things, I'll just end up leaving you in the lurch. So I'm sorry, I can't help you." Coached in attitude and approach, I then went back into my world, using her ideas and general sentence constructions, but with my own language, and I navigated that difficulty – as I would many others - in a new way.

I suddenly saw that what had been happening was that my anger had been so repressed out of my fear of its exploding, that it came out everywhere! I felt explosive in every situation! Once I began to more often respect my need to say "no", or "maybe", or even "I don't know", my anger began to get more porous, less constant, and my expressiveness became more liquid, more expansive. My "linguistic" choices became greater. I was leaving the stark black-and-whites of my life behind, and opting for more "greys".

While I was acquiring such precious new tools for my life, I was also beginning my pursuit of acting. In the early '90's my friend Randy had entered my life when he approached me at a citywide summer program where I was singing, and announced to me that I should be in community theatre. "What," I wanted to know, "is community theatre?" Soon after that conversation, I auditioned for and was given a chorus role in a musical and realized that on stage I felt completely at home and when I auditioned for my first "straight" play a number of months later, I won the lead, and then, astonishingly, a city-wide community theatre award for playing that role. A mere two years later in 1994, my professional stage career began.

My “day job” with the City of Cincinnati had come to an end in 1992, and I had moved briefly to the next level of administrative work before taking a leap of faith borne of my new passion for acting, by attending a Master’s level acting program at the University of Cincinnati’s College Conservatory of Music, or C.C.M. – the same place my mother and father had taught music for twenty years. It was what I would call a formatively wounding experience, in that I was wounded by my teachers, and ultimately delivered by that wounding into the beginning of my acting career. After a year in school, I moved on to a year spent as an Intern at The Ensemble Theatre, one of the two local professional theatres.

I was truly fortunate that my father had the opportunity to see me on stage a number of times before he died. Most often, he saw me on a community theatre stage, strutting my stuff in group musicals. This was not high theatre, trust me, but it was a fun evening, and I have always been gifted with stage presence, so my father, at least, couldn’t miss me up there. Dad always hated musicals with a passion, so I had no expectations that he would suddenly take to them because I was in them; and he didn’t disappoint.

After one of these admittedly cotton-candy-like shows, I removed my makeup, put on my street clothes, and joined my family at the back of the house. To my astonishment, my father’s face was drenched in tears. I said, “Dad, are you okay?” and he looked at me as though I were crazy. “Why?” he asked. I said, “You’re crying!” He looked mildly surprised, although he was still crying: “I am?” “Yes,” I answered, and then asked the question I knew was the corker: “Did you like the show?” Tears streaming, he said, “No,” and I smiled at his directness, and then he pierced me through the heart, “but I liked *you*.” Good night! He was proud of me! To the point of tears, he was proud of me!

Crikey! And it was always this way when he watched me – it never varied. He was always sitting there in the back of every hall, with tears running down his cheeks, pride plain on his face, and words of praise on his lips. *Fantastic*. For me there was a marvelous irony in his reactions, as for years I had tried to live up to what I thought was his desire for me: to be a responsible, money-making grown-up. To that end, I had tried to be as committed an office worker as I could be, given that I hated it... He had never acknowledged those efforts of mine in any way at all. Now here I was, acting, showing an aptitude for something that is traditionally warned against as being financially unstable and even foolhardy – and *that* he was proud of! Amazing. Really, ya gotta love it.

The last play of mine that he saw was Sara and Eleanor, a new work about the relationship between Eleanor Roosevelt and her mother-in-law – a famously controlling woman – during the early years of Eleanor’s marriage and her beginnings as a public speaker. As usual, my father and brother traveled to see me perform – this time at the Dayton Playhouse, in Dayton, Ohio. I loved doing this play, and I loved how I came to be invited to do it! Hearing about the opportunity, I had put on a nice dress and some heels and driven the 50 minutes

to the audition. The audition went well enough, but I was very surprised to get the call asking me to “star”. Nancy, the director, told me that I was physically perfect for the part. “How’s that?” I wanted to know. “Well,” she said, “you’re so tall!”

I am 5’5”! This was curious. When I got to the first rehearsal, I found out that the heels I had worn to the audition and my posture as Eleanor had helped with this impression, but the fact was that all of the others who auditioned were shorter than I! I had appeared to be much taller than I actually am, and so landed the gig. Nancy was very confused when I showed up for the first rehearsal. I wasn’t nearly as tall as she had remembered! Fate has a wicked sense of humor, no?

The play was a one-time-only gig, being part of a local competition for new playwrights, and my family showed up and sat, as was my father’s desire, in the back. This was no fluffy musical. I had done the whole Eleanor “bit”, the voice and everything, after haunting libraries and obtaining recordings of some of her speeches. And local people had donated the period clothing, so I certainly looked the part. This time, when I came out to see my father, there were no tears. There was pride. There was also a little awe, verbally unexpressed, but clear in his eyes. The validation was powerful, and time-released, as it happens...as I write this I am again investing myself in acting, and I feel his encouragement.

So, even though my father passed on, because of acting and singing my life felt full. I lacked romantic love in my life, as I had for so many of my adult years, and I was none too happy about that, but everything else seemed to be going better than it had been. I was continuing to work on coming into my own, finding out who I was, seeing if I couldn’t discover some kind of comfort in being me, whatever that meant.

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In July of 1997, just four days before I went to see Her, I had a marvelous dream about Amma. I was walking down the carpeted hall of a large mansion and I saw a door. Inside, lit only by candles carefully placed by the two or three young brahmacharinis, was the room in which Mother’s chair sat. I saw that Mother was sitting in Her chair. I went to the side of Her chair and knelt down, my hands on the chair arm. She placed Her face close to mine and said, intently, “Your name is --” and said a word. In the dream, what She said was quite clear, and I repeated the name back, to make sure that I had it right. She smiled and said the name again. “Thank You, Mother,” I said, telling myself I would certainly remember the name when I was awake. But when sleep left me, I could not for the life of me remember that name! Arrgh!!! All I could remember was that the name had three syllables, each with an “ah” sound. *Maybe I should ask Her when I see Her*, I thought to myself, and then just as quickly thought, *Oh, never mind, it’s just a dream, don’t be silly; what do you need another name for anyway; you don’t use the one you have from Her already!* I let the idea drop.

When the time came to go to Chicago, I was feeling some fear about seeing Mother again. Although my grief over my father had settled into a manageable sadness, I felt significantly changed, and I wondered if I would once again become ungrounded from seeing Amma, as I had in the past when my grief over my Mom had not yet been addressed. I felt unsure of my progress. Although I was usually less liable now to lose my grounding when faced with difficulties, I wondered if I would pass this particular test. Unable to forego a visit with Amma, I forced myself to make the trip, wondering all the way there if I had made the right decision.

Sadly, when I checked into the hotel I was already losing the battle. I felt alone and shaky, and to make it worse I had hours and hours to kill before Mother's first darshan would begin. Old habits were indeed kicking in, and I found myself in an emotional frenzy: mind whirling, stomach churning, and no idea how to calm myself. Then I thought of a business-related fax I had to send, and as I started thinking about how to send it, something clicked back into place: me! I was suddenly grounded again. A huge lesson had been granted me: my grounding was me, and my life, rather than some spiritual "otherness" that I seemed to feel I was "flying to" when I went to see Amma. Rather than try to fly to the arms of the divine, as it were, my path to feeling those arms lay in my seemingly mundane, day-to-day existence.

I somehow managed to be sitting in the very front of the darshan line that evening, so that after the bhajans I was the first person Ma pulled up for darshan. She gave me a dilly of a darshan -- a long, looooong darshan -- held me for quite a bit, and kept talking in my ear -- "Ma, Ma, Ma" and "Daughter, Daughter". This was wonderful, but I also had a mission: to check on my father. When She released me, I asked Her how my father was: "With You?" I asked in a very low voice, knowing that he probably wasn't. He had not seemed to me a very devoted soul, efforting though he could be, but I hoped for his sake that I was wrong in my assessment. She just smiled, looking sideways at the little jar of sandalwood paste, scooping up a dollop with her finger to apply to my forehead, and I started repeating: "Good?" If he wasn't with Her -- and I felt that, truly, he couldn't be -- then was he at least okay? And, "Good" She obediently repeated, but dispassionately. I let it go. Mother then put the sandalwood paste on my third eye area and held it there for a long time -- She hadn't given me that type of *shaktipat*<sup>1</sup> in years. As She was saying, "Ma, Ma," I was saying into Her shoulder, "In my heart; right in my heart; in my *heart*, Mother!" because one of my big aims this year was to not need the visual as much since I only see the woman twice a year! Mother then said to me, "Sit here," and waved behind Her, so I went to sit on Her right behind one of the Swamis. I had so many questions, and I had not yet asked them, nor really made the final decision to even ask them! So I wondered why She had me sitting behind Her. What was the *reason*? Why, why, why?

I thought, as I watched Her give darshan to soul after soul, that perhaps there was no reason -- that maybe my questions were useless -- that maybe all there was was giving and receiving love. Didn't mean I was going to stop asking anytime soon, but still...

After a little while, a young American woman with cancer came to Ma with her family. The girl looked to be 18, and I learned that she was to undergo chemotherapy the following morning. At this point, Ma had her sit by Her also, so I moved up onto the stage to give the girl room. Mother kept reaching out for the girl, and the girl, slowly and almost incorporeally, would reach out her good hand to Amma, but then would allow her fingers to slip away when Ma would take them as if she hadn't the strength even to hold the hand up in space. It was as if she were leaving her body at that very moment, she seemed so removed from what was happening to her. She smiled at Amma very peacefully. Amma asked to look at the arm, which the girl had tucked inside her shirt, and the girl drew the shirt aside. I didn't see it -- I was watching Amma's face, and the look of combined pity, sadness, love and compassion was frightening and beautiful. Frightening in that it seemed to me that Amma's look said, "I'm so sorry," as if even Amma could do nothing about it. I don't think I've ever seen that look on Her face before -- at least, not knowing the story in process. My mind asked the question, "Does that mean that because I sat here and saw this, that *I'll* have cancer some day, and Amma will have to give *me* that look?" but however silly that question, I have to say that if I do get cancer some day, I hope that I am near enough to Amma to receive any kind of look whatsoever.

After sitting there for some time, wondering repeatedly if She had something She wanted to say to me, which didn't appear to be the case, I left Mother's side and went to eat supper. I didn't stay until the end of darshan; I chose to go back to the hotel room and sleep.

The following morning, I was distressed because I wanted to leave. But could I? The old patterns of self-doubt were asking for admittance. I asked myself quite seriously if I wished to leave, and I felt good that could even ask myself the question, because it meant that even in the midst of all of that shakti, I was still grounded enough to be trying to take care of myself. In the end I decided that I hadn't come all that way for nothing, and that I had questions I wanted answered. I stayed.

And that morning's darshan turned out to be a biggie, starting the shakti ball rolling so phenomenally I felt sick all day. I was feeling Amma so completely, my insides were physically shaking, and I was meditating more in ten hours than I had in the rest of my life put together. The vibrations made it easy to focus inside, and the new Ma-Aum meditation that now-Swami Amrit -- previously "brahmachari Amrit" known familiarly to us Westerners as "Big Swami" - was teaching was easy to do, and easy to remember to do! Ma-Aum made me feel very peaceful.

Wanting to externally indicate my renewed dedication to Amma and meditation, I purchased a new panchaloha bracelet with Her name in the mantra – Aum *Amriteshwaryai* Namaha rather than my older bracelet that had the name of Parashakti on it. Handing it to Amma, She put it on my wrist and kissed it where it lay against my skin (bliss!), and after She released me from Her embrace, I looked at Her face and to my complete surprise blurted out, “Did Mother give me a name in a dream?” *Hmmm, I thought I’d given that question up!* Mother didn’t even look at me. She reached around me for the next person, but I remained stubbornly where I was, asking the question, wheedling smilingly like a child trying to get a treat out its mother. Suddenly Mother answered, clear as a bell and strong, but without inflection, “Yes.” So I quickly said, “What was the name, Mother?” I was rabid now. I was going to know that name!

But Mother continued to ignore me, bringing the next woman into Her lap. “What was the name?” I asked again, both hands now holding Her left knee. I thought, “I’m not leaving until She tells me!” which was unusual for me; I like to respect how busy Mother is, and not get in the way. The expression on Mother’s face was one of light annoyance, and She pinched my cheek, tweaking it, like “Ha, ha, wouldn’t you like to know, impatient puss!” She did that twice, as I continued to ask Her and smile at Her and wheedle Her. Then She waved me to Her right side, where She answers questions. I squatted beside Her, my hands on the arm of the chair, and looked up into Her face as She kept giving darshan. Now it was my mind that asked rapidly, over and over, “*What was the name?*” I felt very comfortable being there beside Her; and special, too. Finally, She said something to Swamiji, and he said, “Mother says, come back at 1:00.” I stared at him for a moment, bemused and frustrated by the answer, and he smiled, amused, understanding what that look was (“1:00? A precise *time*?” And, “She wants me to *wait?*...”). He repeated, “Come back at one,” and nodded kindly. Okay. One o’clock it is. *Mother*, I thought to myself, *is incomprehensible*.

I went and sat with my friend Shivanath, a passionate devotee of Mother’s who is full of wonderful stories. I met Shivanath when I lived in Boston. He would keep me and my roommates up until all hours of the night telling story after story about his years with the great guru Muktananda, and his more recent time in India with Mother. It was always worth losing sleep over!

There is one story that I remember – sadly for me, it is Shivanath’s to tell and not mine, but I can report that it ended with Mother holding out Her feet and actually wiggling Her toes at him, playfully, inviting him to kiss them! The feet of the guru are sacred – to touch them, to kiss them, to have them touch any part of you is considered a blessing beyond compare. Shivanath took Her proffered feet in his hands, and he kissed them and kissed them, and got so stoned he just kept on going. When he at last looked up, She was leaning Her head on one hand, patiently watching him, waiting for him to finish. Boneless, he lurched upright, and Mother wiggled Her fingers in His face as She had Her toes, so he set to

kissing Her hands. When She gave him shaktipat, he began to fall back, shakti-drunk, still nerveless and boneless, but Mother reached out one hand and pulled him back up and into Her arms. Needless to say, this left quite an impression on me, and I have yearned for years for an encounter exactly like his!

At one o'clock, returning to the beehive of activity around Mother's chair in order to learn what name She had given me, I was directed to a "name line" that snaked to one side behind Her. I had never heard of such a thing but I was game. I was also last. It took about 90 minutes to get up to Her, and then She had me up on my knees beside Her, waiting for long minutes while She gave darshan, first to a young couple -- the young man in tears of what looked like either bliss or release, and the young woman radiant with love - and then to a little boy and girl. Together, Mother and I tried to teach the little girl and boy how to play the little cymbals they each carried. It was like being adopted into Mother's family -- no, even more intimate than that. It was a moment of relating with Mother, without a sense of subservient awe on my part. It was beautiful to feel free of shame while being by Her side. Some of my misunderstandings about my relationship with Mother were well and truly leaving me, it seemed.

After giving me all these gifts - of proximity, of witnessing a man's vulnerability, of loving children alongside Her - She continued with darshan, at the same time discussing with Swamiji and Dayamrita - a brahmachari I had not yet met - what my name should be. I just kept looking at Her face. She and I got into a staring contest. As She looked intently into my face, She seemed to give a name to Swamiji - one I could not hear - and it seemed to me that She was looking for confirmation from me that the name was okay, or *something*, and I widened my eyes, which was Lori for, "I got no preference; whatever You say, Amma!" And She widened Her eyes back at me for long moments, mirroring me perfectly. What did it mean? Was I abdicating my own power by letting Her decide, and not telling Her about my dream? I didn't quite know what to make of the whole thing.

Finally, after what seemed like an awfully long time, Swamiji said "*Apama?*" She shook her head, no, at Swamiji, and he turned over the piece of paper with "Aparna" written on it, and wrote something on the other side. She took the paper from him, and carefully, gently, firmly pressed it into the palm of my right hand. Looking into my eyes, talking to Swamiji but looking at me, She said, "Arpana." Then She leaned toward me over the arm of Her chair - *exactly as She had in my dream* - and drew out the word, speaking it for me like a mantra, it seemed to me: "Aaar-paa-naa." Exactly as she had in the dream. And it sounded so beautiful.

The Swamis told me to stand up, and they said the name again for me, and Dayamrita said, "Arpana means, 'the egoless one'." I stared at him, stunned and amused that Mother would give me a name that would mean that! He apparently thought I didn't understand him, because he said again, "It means, the one who

doesn't have an ego!" And I looked at Swamiji, and back at Dayamrita, back and forth, with a look on my face that said, "Well, slap my face! Can you believe this?!" And finally, Swamiji got it, and began to smile, and then so did I. As I left, I turned and did a full pranaam to Mother in the aisle, thinking, "Well, then, let me be as surrendered as You think I am – or could be." They say that the name you are given is what you are to grow into, not what you already are. (But of course you can't grow into something that you don't already have in a latent state...) Nonetheless, full pranaams to my beloved Mother who will take me to the egoless state. Eventually...

Later, someone else told me that "Arpana" actually means "gift to God". That rang to me of service, which appealed to my new understanding of my daily life as my spiritual path. I embraced the name wholeheartedly, but privately, not wanting to share it just yet.

Oddly, it took me all day to remember my new name, because it was so different from any name I had heard. I found it awkward, but I liked the feeling I had whenever I could piece the syllables together and say it to myself: Aar-paaa-naa! Aar-paaa-naa! It felt like a wave in the ocean, like a rhythm in my chest, and around my torso. Aar-paaa-naa! Like a long, drawn-out, silent bhajan. Like an ohm, beautifully pronounced.

At the end of evening darshan, I did something I'd never done before. I went and stood right beside Her shoes. Whenever it is just about time for Mother to rise from Her chair, darshan all done, and leave the hall (or temple), Her sandals are carried to the door and laid there on a piece of silk, a blossomed flower head laid at the toe of each shoe. Then She stops by Her shoes to say a few more words to someone nearby, or to stroke the face of a child who runs to cling to Her leg. The devotee with the shoes watches nothing but Mother's feet, ready to slip each sandal on when Mother lifts Her feet.

This evening, when She came up the aisle to leave, Mother put on Her shoes, and I was the child beside Her who wrapped my arms around Her body and hugged Her. She bent over to hug someone else – probably an actual child - and I let go, feeling foolish. This evening, a beautiful pink rose was lying between Her shoes, and after She stepped into Her sandals and moved away from all of us, Her foot caught one edge of the rose and tumbled it back directly toward where I still knelt! I reached out to pick it up, frankly unbelieving that it was coming my way! As I reached, there was a little four-year-old blonde girl darting through the legs around her, and reaching for the flower as I was. We both froze. Then, without seeming to take a moment's thought, she picked it up and handed it to me, and with a look of pure unconcern and total non-attachment, said, "You can have it!" and bounced away, happy and undisturbed as only very young children or very mature souls can be.

I said, "Thank you!" and smiled at the little girl, but what came up in me was a

feeling of despair. A feeling of certainty that I would never ever be as innocent and giving as that child had just been, a feeling of guilt that I hadn't been the mature one: a child had given me not only a rose, but her innocence, and it had pierced my heart. The tears began to come, and I made it to my car before I began bawling like a baby. I couldn't immediately stop, and I cried all the way to the hotel, and I cried when I got into bed. Bathed in one of the emotions – devotional yearning - that I can love with ease, I cradled the flower to my chest until I could put it in water in a plastic cup beside the bed. I smelled it, and caressed my face with it. Mother's love. Mother's gift to me. But why????? Why did I deserve so much grace? Why? *Oceans* of unworthiness swamped me, and I felt like a lump of dark coal next to that little light-beam of a girl. Why would Mother let *me* have that flower? Obviously the little girl was *much* more deserving. (Somewhere, I am sure, Mother was thinking, "When will my darling daughter stop punishing herself, and just accept the gift of love?")

When I woke up the next morning, only four hours later, I felt like I'd been smashed in the face. I had intended to sleep in, but, as was usual with me around Mother for so many years, I woke up early, and felt I had to be there for morning darshan, early. This morning, it was specifically because I had questions to ask Her -- questions I'd begun to write down in the wee hours the night before, and I was going to get them answered as soon as I possibly could! During my talk the day before with Shivanath, I'd expressed my hesitation over asking Her about a mate, and he was frankly confused. Why *not* ask Her? I said it was because I had this belief that She already knows what we need and want, so why ask? Isn't the act of asking just proof of our doubt, our lack of faith? But he said, "Hey, listen, any excuse to talk to Ma..." and I liked that, so I started getting my questions together.

I designed a beautiful, thorough letter to Mother. I asked if I could have a marriage – saying that I really wanted to find my life-mate – and I asked Her to bless my father and give him my love, and I told Her about feeling so damned unworthy and sometimes frightened to be in Her presence, because I have so many flaws. Then I sat in line with everyone else, waiting to see Her.

As I sat there, talking to the people around me, my head was beginning to swim. A sick headache of really gargantuan proportions. Mix one sick headache with an overdose of shakti, a time constraint, and a darshan ticket, and you have a sick devotee who can't leave the darshan line. Devi Bhava is emphatically NOT the time to ask that many questions! So I was having a wonderful conversation with someone in line who I was really enjoying, but at the same time I was getting sicker and sicker until finally I couldn't speak for the pain. When I reached Mother, I gave Her my bag of goodies (incense and presents that I wanted blessed), two necklaces that I'd been wearing around my wrist, and my letter. She opened the bag and we looked down into it together, and I laughed, momentarily able to respond despite the pain - amused at Her childlike way of looking in - and tossing some flower petals into the bag to bless everything at

one time. And then She took the two necklaces out of my hand, and said, "For you?" – as if She didn't know! - and I said, "No. One for me, one for a friend." Mother had a leela for me.

One of these necklaces was intended for a friend, and had been wrapped around my left wrist for the entire morning so that I wouldn't forget to bring it. But I'd become attached to seeing it there, so I went to buy one for myself. As I bought the second one, I thought maybe I should separate them so I would know which one Mother blessed for me, and which one for my friend; maybe I should keep for myself the one I'd been wearing on my wrist, since I had become attached to it. But I just as quickly thought, "Nah, that's silly. A blessing is a blessing. What's the difference? Let go of that." And I thought I did. But when Mother blessed the necklaces, She went through a little play for me. After She blessed all the contents of the bag, She looked at a loss for a moment as to where to put the necklaces. She went to drape one on each wrist, and I laughed a little, thinking She was making light fun of my having worn one of them on my wrist. But She stopped suddenly, looking into my face, and very deliberately *chose* one, and, unscrewing the latch, put it around my neck, and fastened it there, while talking to a devotee to her right, and then gave me darshan. Ten to one, the one She gave me was the one on my wrist. I'll never prove it, but I'll never need to. That is the power of Mother. Once you have really felt Her, and experienced Her effortless response to matters that you have not even mentioned, there are some things that even a questioner like me can cease questioning.

She had me again go sit to Her right. The Swami had not yet read Her my letter. By now, I thought I might actually pass out from the pain. I held the sides of my head and looked at the ground, trying not to be ill. When the Swami finally did read Her my letter, She looked at me, and moving Her head side to side in that Indian way, said something in Malayalam, with a facial expression that seemed to say, "Oh, yuck, you don't want to do *that*." I smiled bravely, if wanly, through the waves of pain in my head, and, *certain* that She was referring to my desire to marry, said, with that damned smile pasted on my lips, "Not a good idea?" And She shook her head no, looking very concerned, and still, "Oh, yuck! No, don't do *that*." The swami told me to sit back again, and so I did, waiting for another endless amount of time. When I asked the swami what to do, he was short with me, and said that Mother hadn't said anything yet, and I should wait, he *would* tell me, but his tone sounded so curt.

I began to cry really hard, wracked by the horrifying thought that She might want me to be a nun -- or to put it more realistically, to be a devotee, but not to share my love with another human being. Thoughts went through my head. "Oh my God, does it really have to be that? Well, if it does, I'll *try* to bear it. I don't know if I can, but I'll try. Oh God, no. Oh God." And: "You know, She may have just said that so that you can come to understand how much it really means to you; you know, to make you feel so much of this pain, you weep because you won't have a partner in life." I was running my hands through my hair again and again

to press the pain away, and the tears were streaming down my face. I couldn't visually focus well anymore, and I kept pressing my scarf against my face, just trying to breathe with the pain, even breathing a color down through my head – something I was sure wouldn't do squat. I was trying *anything*. I figured Mother knew about this, and She was cleansing me, and I was not going to ask Her to make it go away. What a mistake! What else do you do with your mother? You ask for her help! Sheesh!

Mother didn't make me stay too much longer. Finally, Swami Paramatmananda told me that Mother said I must not feel that way; that people come to the mahatma to get cleansing. He was going on and on, and I was looking at him, confused, and not understanding. What was he *talking* about???? That wasn't what I had asked in my letter! Had he misunderstood, and was he now telling me the answer to someone else's letter? But I stayed still and listened, aware also that as sick as I was I could just be hopelessly lost and need clarification, which is exactly what turned out to be the case. What he was referring to, and what Mother was shaking her head and "yucking" me about, was the feelings of unworthiness I had in her presence. She was saying through him that everyone has all this "stuff", and that's why we're all here, to get Her help with it, so no need to feel unworthy - She didn't want that. And, "Mother also says," he translated, almost as an afterthought, "She will pray for your father's soul peace." Dazed, sick and rather uncomprehending, I rose. He looked up at me. "Do you understand?" He was concerned that I understood. Perhaps Mother asked him to make sure. But I did understand, perhaps more on a feeling level at that point than a mental, but I got it. I said, "Yes, I do understand. Thank you," and walked away, straight into the arms of a friend who rose from where she was sitting, and without a word took me in her arms and hugged me while I cried some more.

I had not received an answer to my partnership question. I still had no idea if I would ever be able to share my life with someone, which was my deepest and most enduring desire, but now because of the headache everything was beyond me.

Though half-blind, I managed to drive to a nearby gas station and buy some Advil. A young woman of no more than 18 sold me the drug. I was so out of frame at this point that I thought, "Oh Christ, this girl's going to be this perky little thing with no sensitivity, and I'm going to feel like smacking her!" but instead she was so concerned about me, she gave me advice about taking care of myself, and said I should go somewhere I loved and just let myself relax. "It's stress?" she said, and I just nodded. Her soft kindness was a balm to me, and in a quick about-turn I loved her dearly.

Eventually the sensations began to subside. I was getting extended minutes of not feeling like I was on bad drugs. I took to my hotel bed with a bad movie, a package of cookies, and some Diet Coke. Strange medicine, but I knew I was going to feel better soon. When I fell asleep I didn't set the alarm, even though I

knew that it would as usual be best to get to the Devi Puja early to get a good seat. Leaving that alarm alone was my small act of bravado against my customary need to be at Mother's side at every second, as well as earlier than almost everyone else! But I awoke fairly early in the evening anyway, and I decided to go but to take it slow. This was the first time in my years of knowing Amma that I understood what many spiritual people around me had called "cleansing". Scornful of the broad-brushed nature of the idea of "cleansing", I had always said to myself, "Maybe you're just SICK!!!! Why call it anything else but that?" But this headache of mine struck me as a true cleansing, both because I hadn't done anything that should have made me that sick, and because *all* I had been doing during my time with Mother was meditating, and praying for release from old patterns. Releasing, boy, was I!

It was a long Devi Bhava night. Waiting for the Bhava to begin, I was thinking about the marriage question, and I suddenly dropped into a new space about the whole thing. I felt myself receive an energy through the top of my head - a gentle, solid weight that I recognized instantly as responsibility. Was I suddenly able to receive the grace of it? Grounded enough to receive some kind of answer? Whatever the case, Mother seemed to have answered my question after all. I would have my marriage...somehow.

I did not intend to get into the darshan line until very late in the evening, because I assumed I would be there until the end. But a man in white came up to me early on and said, "Are you in the darshan line?" When I said no, he said, "Are you alone?" and I said yes. He said, "Would you like to receive darshan?" After a mental in-breath of "Is that a serious question?" I of course said yes. He explained that he was looking for single people because they liked to put them in-between the families, to allow time for lining up the families to receive Mother's darshan. I said, "Great!" and he took me up to the steps by the stage, and plopped me down there. Yay! Mother was "summoning" me!

Watching Amma and reflecting on my doubts and confusions about Her, I suddenly thought, "Oh, the hell with it. Just let me love You happily," meaning without the Oh-I'm-Not-Worthy nonsense. Then it was my turn for darshan. Before I left Amma's side, the most amazing thing ... She looked into my face and murmured with a wicked little smile, "Ah-*par*-na." And I smiled and said, "Ma," in answer to a naming ceremony that had suddenly taken place without preparation.

Then I thought, "Did She say '*Apama*' or '*Arpana*'?" At the time, I thought She said, "*Apama*," and in the spirit of Mother's leela, I went up behind Her chair and asked the Swami about it. He just said, "Whatever She named you, that is what it is," and shooed me away. I went away, but not far. I sat behind Her chair for a long long time, meditating. A bit later, sitting beside a young Indian woman, I asked Her what "*Aparna*" means, and she said, "Goddess. Beautiful." And I felt the connection between that day, and the day years ago in New York when I

caused a dual-naming “ceremony” out of fear.

Visiting Mother one summer in New York, She had given me a name that frightened me. It was beautiful and felt like heaven for about ten minutes until the fear kicked in. So the next day I went for darshan and asked to have a different name because I wanted a name that reflected what I wanted to have reflected: that I was one of the beautiful people, spiritually: happy, serene, uncomplicated. Hah! Compassionately, She gave me another name, which I no longer even remember, and it meant something sweet and kind, and felt, of course, completely unsatisfying. And here it was, all these years later, and Mother was teasing me in kind.

The still deeper aspect of that event hit me the following day while I was driving home. *Amma knew me*. In the middle of a hugely attended Devi Bhava – in the middle of the night - She looked me in the face and joked with me about my name! She had proved to me that She knows *exactly* who I am. There are no words for that feeling of identification with God. Amma. Amma. **Amma!**

However happy I felt to have been given such amazing experiences with Amma, I still found myself living uncomfortably in the split between spiritual and worldly life. Some who confront that seeming reality opt to live in ashrams. Some opt to put up with worldly life while maintaining an inner understanding that spirituality is what is real and actual. Some give up spirituality, finding no satisfying way for both “realities” to coexist. As for me, ashrams were out of the question; I could never have dealt with the lack of privacy. As far as discounting worldly life as some kind of necessary evil, I would have liked that as I felt it would have “proved” my dedication; but I now knew that my grounding and my sanity could only be found in this day-to-day life of mine – transitory, painful, incomprehensible though that life could be – so I had to find another way. Plus, there was Mother, modeling the seamlessness of the worldly and the spiritual, showing without words that the two are actually one; showing us that from a place of love, there is nothing that need be avoided or pushed aside, nothing to be ashamed of, because nothing exists outside of love; nothing.

So, “What to do?”, as the Indians say. Somewhere I had read a Jewish story about four men who were given the vision of God. Each one had a different reaction. As I remember it, one of them left his wife and children and took to a cave in the hills to meditate; one started preaching to anyone and everyone whether they wanted to hear him or not; one went stark raving mad. The fourth man ... went home and made love to his wife.

That story spoke to me. I had long ago decided that the “old way” of leaving one’s family to find the God within was no more than a selfish escape from one’s worldly responsibilities. Clearly, if God was everything, that word carried no caveat. Everything means: *everything*. So, yes, even your marriage, and your children, and the job and the bills. Everything! But the question remains for all of

us, as it certainly did for me: how do we put that understanding into action? How do we come to know – and have faith in – the divine in our mundane lives? I was going to have to find some answers to that. But first I was going to have to find some answers about my worldly life, since the time for another change was coming.

**Chicago – July 1998**

I had taken care of my father, and ushered him out of this world to the next. I had helped my brother through a hard time, and as soon as I was through with therapy, it seemed that my work in Cincinnati would be done. I could feel that the time was approaching, but how would I come up with the strength needed to make a move? A move away from all of my support systems ... it seemed a terribly risky thing to do. Still not as strong in my own self as I would have liked, I was certain of two things: I would have to make this decision on my own, and I would have to try to do without something of Mother's that I knew was unnecessary, but for which my emotions yearned: Her permission.



## Effort

I have to try.

I have to turn from the dream that  
promises reality,  
To the reality that leads to the living  
dream.

Or so I believe.

A bus, I am told, could hit me  
tomorrow.

Well then. The time for dancing my  
own chosen dance

Is now.

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## Chapter Eight

### *Preparing for Flight*

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1999-2000 – Chicago / San Ramon

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#### **June 1999**

#### **San Ramon – The First 1999 Visit**

They say “be careful what you wish for”, but in my case I really should have been a little more careful about what I loved: the arts, and the stage. And growth. But it was too late for new choices; I had found myself, and now I was going to have to take what I had found and flesh it out. I was going to have to face the fact that Cincinnati was not the place for me to pursue my dreams of performing, or continuing to grow.

Clearly, it was going to take some serious work to peel myself away from Cincinnati, to convince myself that I could survive the separation from everything I had worked so very hard to create: community, emotional support, doctors I trusted, streets I knew in childhood and knew again in my first real adulthood. How could I leave all of these support systems? I couldn't. Not right away, at least. First I had to spend time talking the matter into the ground. Tina and the Group patiently walked me through my questions, my doubts, my desire to move and my terror about actually following through on that dream.

The idea that I might have to “move on” had come about in 1997 when I took an old friend up on an offer to come out to San Francisco for a short visit. I had never been there, and I thought a trip would be nice, but “nice” didn't cover it. I was taken by the place, absolutely smitten, and terrified by the fact that I had fallen in love with the city.

Maximizing on my unexpected courage, while there I took the opportunity to do a major audition for Theatre Bay Area, an artistic umbrella group that annually holds general auditions in front of hundreds of theatre owners, managers, casting directors, and so forth. The actors get only two minutes to wow 'em, but for that two minutes you have maximum exposure. This was the most important audition I had ever done; like Dorothy, I wasn't in Kansas anymore. To my relief, the audition went well, but that wasn't all. My truly big moment came about an hour after the audition, when I went to lunch.

I had gone into a nearby deli, wanting something that felt familiar after my big act of bravery – my father often took me to the Jewish deli when I was younger, and I feel close to him whenever I go to one. While I was there, someone tapped me

on the shoulder. A woman introduced herself as co-owner of a Jewish theatre group. "We just saw you in your TBA audition," she said, nodding over her shoulder at two women sitting in a nearby booth, "and we want to hire you." *Hire me?* Oh, hell yeah, baby, now *this* was a *sign!* Thrilled to the soles of my feet, I nonetheless had to turn them down! Arrgh! But can I tell you how cool I felt that I had to turn them down because I was *already booked?* Back in Cincinnati I had been cast in The Secret Garden with the Cincinnati Children's Theatre, and that play was going to show at exactly the same time as theirs.

Boy oh boy, I had to be on the right path! I was going to have to go back home and prepare myself for the prospect of actually moving, because my opportunities were apparently going to be here!

For five years I had been studying with an unparalleled voice teacher, Paul McCready, immersing myself in voice production, solo singing, and most importantly the bliss of the learning process. All of these areas of study were musical and spiritual "food" for me. Together, Paul and I had gone through my first forays into vocal recitals and their aftermaths when we would address everything that had gone "wrong". Further along the road, in 1998, I went to San Francisco to be part of a cabaret competition, and to Paul's less-than-tactful surprise, I won the first round. He had been certain that San Francisco would provide many others with far more experience than I, but it hadn't! After that, of course, we had to shift my study of vocal production and style to the jazz idiom, which Paul could do effortlessly. Paul was and continues to be a master of voice; he not only taught me how to sing correctly, he taught me how to hear the inner workings of the voice – even my own - and how to self-evaluate. I didn't like contemplating leaving the bliss and benefit that was my weekly singing lesson, in order to move to the Bay Area.

Maybe I could just take little trips here and there to begin to expand into an artistic career? Mo, God knew I couldn't afford to fly back and forth from the Coast, so I was in fact going to have to make a choice. But I didn't want to make it quite yet. Maybe I could concentrate on closing things out – that would take a while!

Closing out therapy, now there was an odd concept. I'd been in therapy for so many years now. No longer the wounded and unformed person who had walked into Tina's office, I had been "growing legs" psychologically, but I couldn't really imagine what it would take to make me feel strong on my own. I started discussing the pros and cons, fears and hopes, in Group and individual therapy. As for my friendships, how could I ever close them out? I was reassured that I would have no need to – everyone would be there for me, wherever I went.

Theatre would obviously not have to be closed out. Both theatre and music had come together under a professional banner, at long last, when I landed a gig with Cincinnati's Children's Theatre in 1997. I was cast in The Secret Garden in two

small, character-heavy roles. The young girl who played the lead was a natural actor and professional – a girl of maybe eight years old – and was both astonishing and a delight. My favorite part of this play revolved around this little girl. The fact that my name, Lori, sounds like the British word for truck – lorry – never ceased to tickle this girl. I had one scene as Mrs. Winthrop, the snooty British headmistress whose purpose is to take our heroine away to an awful school, robbing her of her new family and blossoming life. The young heroine would make it a point to deliberately turn her back to the audience so that she could say her line to me - “I hope you get hit by a *lorry!*” - grinning up at me with a mischievous twinkle in her eye, daring me to maintain my straight face. Then she would turn toward the audience for her next line, her face set in appropriately angry lines. I love theatre as much for the behind-the-scenes as for what the audience sees.

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My first visit to San Francisco in 1997 coincided with one of Mother’s visits to the Bay Area, so before going back to Cincinnati I went to Mother’s San Ramon ashram for a day. I expected to feel great there, and to be happy to see Her. Instead, I had experienced the familiar, hated sense of confusion. Mother was there, I was there, and I was going to leave for Ohio before She left San Ramon? I had *never* made a decision like that before, and it made no sense to my lock-stepped mind. I went into a tizzy, trying to decide whether to stay there with Her, or to go ahead and get on the airplane that evening and fly home. In the thick of my relentless indecision, I went up to one of the Swamis and asked him whether I should stay with Amma or take my scheduled plane trip home that very afternoon. He looked at me with a you’ve-got-to-be-kidding smile and said that since She was Amma, of course I should stay. I had expected more; I had expected the kind of depth of psychological and real-world understanding that had become the norm for me in all of my therapy, both individual and group. I was naively thinking that someone who had been a monk for decades would have asked me, as my therapists would have, the kinds of questions that would bring me clarity. He didn’t. As a monk, and an adoring son of Mother’s, there was only one answer he *could* make. The whole thing revved up my nerves. Unable to make the “right” decision, I nonetheless got into the car and started driving to the airport, but I was in bad shape. My fear about not making the “perfect” decision had morphed into panic, so I spent some time lost on the highway before I found my way to the airport. I reached Cincinnati safely, but my confidence in my new growth was not only tested – it was dented.

Fortunately, it was time for one of my regular visits with the psychiatrist who prescribed my anti-depressants. I loved this man. He is a Zen Buddhist, a musician, a very fine psychiatrist, and his looks remind me of Harpo Marx, wacky white hair and all! I would only see him every three months or so when my meds needed to be re-prescribed, but whenever we met, we’d end up talking about spirituality, and about my life from that perspective. But where my spirituality had initially led me into whirlwinds of thought, his had made him grounded,

integrated, living what seemed to be an exceptionally balanced life that, although dedicated to a lot of paid service in the world, was also dedicated whole hog to the search for Truth.

So I brought him my dilemma. I told him what had happened at Mother's ashram. "How does a person *decide*?" I wailed, frustrated. "How was I supposed to make that decision? What is the right answer to that kind of thing?" And he gave me a calm look and said, matter-of-factly, "So how much is enough?" Like water against rock, everything in me stopped. "W-What?" I stammered. "How much is enough?" he said. "I mean, is it not enough until you're with Her *all* of the time? Do you have to move to India to spend enough time with Her?"

For a few moments I thought about what he'd said. He was right! Good Lord, I thought, he's absolutely right. There's never really a perfect moment to leave Amma; and the only way to see that was for him to show me the dilemma in extremes and to take the grounded path. He always did that for me: turned on the bright and practical light, in the face of which a lot of emotional twistings either unwound or died in the "heat". He told me, after we'd worked together for a few years, that he didn't speak with any other client about spirituality, and that he had no idea why it always felt therapeutic to do so with me. Made me feel as though I'd given him as much of a gift as he'd given me. I'd like to think so, anyway. He helped me a great deal.

## July 1999

### Chicago – The Second 1999 Visit

After all of that *stürm und drang* about leaving Mother "prematurely" in San Ramon, I ended up having three visits in all with Her that year, and the winnowing away from my Cincinnati-based life began almost immediately and without my conscious awareness.

Sitting in the darshan line, I saw my ex-boyfriend – the lovely man from Michigan - standing nearby, and I gestured to him. I knew this would be the last time we would speak, as I would soon be living on another coast. Happily, the conversation went well, even though I still felt badly that I had ended the relationship without gentleness. We parted amicably, but we parted, this time with less drama and with more of a sense of finality.

At the same time as I was letting go of my ex, I reconnected with a woman from Michigan whom I had known only in passing. We found that our humor and outlooks were the same; our friendship was cemented there and then! One Devi Bhava night around 2:00AM, we ended up having a hysterical, shakti-filled dinner, laughing ourselves sick over the idea of calling the smaller Amma dolls

“Mini Ma” after the Austin Powers movies and “Midge Ma”, for the slightly larger ones. Maybe it was the power of suggestion, but that Chicago visit is when I bought my first Amma doll. Cruising the bookstore – an oft-repeated endeavor that served as both exercise and distraction – I picked up an Amma doll that I could not put down, so I bought it. When the Amma dolls had first hit the scene in the mid '90's, the whole thing had struck me as odd, seeing grown women walking around with dolls in their arms. Then I bought mine, and although I ended up relegating Her to my bed, I can tell you that there is magic in those dolls, which have within their stuffing something of Mother's – some of the flower petals that Mother showers on everyone at the end of a Devi Bhava night. When you fall asleep with one of those dolls in your arms, you actually feel comforted. And when you awake, you will most likely find that the doll has not left your arms!

### **November 1999**

#### **Ann Arbor – The Third 1999 Visit**

I didn't really even know I was going to see Amma in Ann Arbor, but events kept piling up. My boss suddenly went out of town for nearly the entire week; work was not heavy during that time; the second-in-command had no problem with my going; I had a very intense dream about my mom during the first part of the week; and finally, I got such a rush of energy that for two days, I had enough to light up the city. So, the day before, I went out and purchased Traveler's Checks and an AAA Triptik to aid me on the road. So...I guessed I was going.

Thursday night at the gathering, Swamiji talked as he always does about Mother's teachings on meditation: that it is the superhighway, that it is like gold. I had never been “good” at meditation, and I felt concerned that I was missing out on the good stuff about Mother. So when I went back to the hotel, I set up Her picture next to the bed and I settled down to have a little talk.

When I was a little girl, at times of my greatest frustration or confusion, I would sometimes talk aloud to God. It always seemed to me that someone or something was listening; that the silence of the room itself held a weighty presence that was attentive to what I had to say. And I always felt better after having these little talks. But for some reason the practice never became a habit of mine.

Now, in this impersonal hotel room, I spoke to Mother about my doubts about meditation, about how it didn't seem to really do anything for me, and I didn't seem to be able to keep it going. The talk settled me a bit, and I thought maybe I should get up and try for the question lottery (the question “line” approach – first come first served – had gone away now that there were so many people wishing to ask Her questions). I could ask Her what the best meditation for me might be!

The next morning, I went in search of a piece of paper to write my questions on, figuring that if I was chosen, I'd be ready. Someone gave me a couple of pieces of small notebook paper, and I sat down to write my questions. All of us wannabe questioners had been asked to understand that if we were indeed fortunate enough to ask Amma a question, and were going to be there that night, we would not receive darshan. Being beside Amma and communicating with Her about our questions was certainly darshan enough, so no one was deterred by that information. I wrote my questions:

1. What is the perfect meditation for me, personally? When I close my eyes, I want to see You so that I can feel You.
2. May I kiss Your feet? I have long desired it.

To be honest, I had not "long desired" to kiss Her feet. I had long desired to have an experience like my friend Shivanath's! I wanted to be shakti-drunk too! But it was also true that I wanted to kiss Her feet, so I left that in the note.

Finished with my writing, I took a walk around the hall, and came across a little group of devotees clustered around Swamiji. His energy felt so clear, so strong and beautiful and male and warm. Not huggy-feely warm, but warm like intense spiritual energy is warm. I persevered in getting his to ask him about something that had been bothering me since the previous night. I said, "I feel that Mother is in everything that happens to me, and that Mother is with me. That She is the cause of everything that happens. So if that is true, where is the separation between spiritual life and so-called real life." Even as I said it, I heard how there was no reality in that possibility. And Swamiji smiled in a rather distant way, and did that Indian head tilt thing that I find charming, and said, "Why do you have to make such a distinction?" And I said, "Thank you!" and meant it, and then rushed on before he could walk away. I said, "I don't meditate very well, but I like to pray to Mother because then I feel some peace, then I feel Her. Can I pray as a meditation?" And he said, instantly, "Yes. Prayer is better." And moved on. He hadn't given that much thought, and the answer had felt glib to me, but it was Swamiji, who had been with Mother for so many years! Perhaps my question was answered. Still, I had – as Mother puts it – "a doubt".

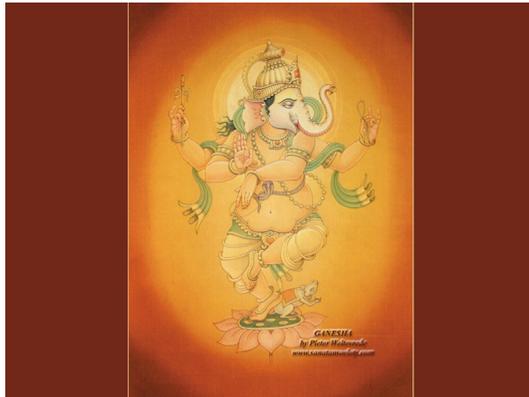
I went to sit down in the line for people with questions and found myself next to a man in his late 20's. I told him about my talk with Swamiji, and he proceeded to tell me a story about a doctor who found himself waking in the night with an undeniable urge to speak to Mother. So he began talking to Mother every day, about day-to-day stuff, about spirituality, about everything and anything. And the doctor's heart opened. He became suffused with love -- it flowed through him like a river -- and when he visited with his patients in the hospital, he just shared that love in his words and actions, and it became difficult for his patients to let him leave them because he had so much love that he shared.

I could not believe this man was telling me this story! I could also not doubt that my question had been answered. I wondered if I should give up my place in line, but I thought, “No, I’m here for a reason. Mother wants me here for a reason.” *Mother wants me here?* Whenever I hear myself say that, I have to check myself. It’s such a convenient out when I don’t want to take responsibility for my decisions. So, truth was: *I* wanted to be there. So I stayed.

But I did rewrite my questions:

- 1) May I use prayer as a meditation? [Rather than: what is the perfect meditation for me.] I want to feel bhakti for You and Ganesha.
- 2) May I kiss Your feet? I have long desired it.

Ganesha is the elephant-headed Hindu God who is the remover of obstacles. I have heard him referred to as the householder’s deity, because he takes care of the day-to-day things that fill and sometimes obstruct our day. His posture in any given picture represents another aspect of his being – whether he is dancing, reclining, sitting, or standing.



**Ganesha, The Remover of Obstacles**



I had had an extraordinary experience with Ganesha when I first met Amma. I thought it a little odd that people would worship a god with the head of an elephant, but I bought a poster of Him and took it home. During one of my periods spent in front of my altar, I looked at Him and suddenly found myself feeling like a 16-year-old; in His eyes I saw a 16-year-old boy and I felt that part of my girlish being respond in kind. I felt shy and blushing, and connected-with in a way that I had mostly missed when I had actually been 16 years old. From that day I felt a connection to Him that was easier than my connection to Amma, but

somehow not separate. In this year that I asked Mother for bhakti and a boon, I felt that if I had both Mother's fire, and Ganesha's cooling and childlike presence, I could make it through anything.

When I finally found myself sitting there beside Mother with my questions, I told the translator what Swamiji had said about prayer being a fine replacement for meditation, and added that I wanted to know if Mother thought so too. I rested my elbows on a piece of wood that was affixed eight inches below the arm of Mother's chair. Propping my chin on my joined hands and looking up at my Mother, feeling marvelously unfancy and simple and ready to hear anything, I heard the translating Swami say the word Swamiji, so I knew he told Mother in the way that I told him. And She looked at me over the head of the devotee that She held in Her beautiful, chocolate-brown arms, and Her eyes were inscrutable. Somewhat fierce. I could not read Her. Silly statement, I know, but these weren't the eyes of melting love, nor were they cold, they were in some sense piercing, in some sense waiting. For what?

Next thing I knew, I was being both pulled and pushed to the front of Mother's chair, in front of Mother's feet, and She was pulling me into Her arms, to chant, "My daughter, My daughter" into my ear over and over again and yet again. She held me endlessly. I was surprised, almost shocked, and simply uttered, "Oh!" as I was pulled around to receive Her darshan. It was a long one, and lovely, and utterly unexpected. I wasn't supposed to get darshan if I was having my question answered, right? And I was definitely coming to see Her that night!

She let me go, and I leaned down to find Her foot with my hand – I figured She was answering my prayer about Her feet right then! I found the edge of the cushion, but before I could do more than draw breath, I was being pulled back with great force by at least two sevites<sup>2</sup>. These people were NOT fooling around. I protested at the force, saying, "She was answering a question!" meaning, She was going to let me kiss Her feet, but of course I knew no such thing. I stood up and began to walk away, but the Swami motioned me back and answered the questions that I had forgotten I'd even asked. "Amma," he said, "says that it is okay for you to use prayer as a meditation." I felt joy like a child feels joy: very simply. I clapped my hands, actually, a smile blossoming all over my face. "And as for the second question, Amma says that She will bless you with that event." Oh God! Oh bliss! Oh Amma!

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Devi Bhava darshan. A sweet young man sat beside me in line who had just met Mother two days earlier. He asked a question or two, and then I tuned him out by meditating, which is what felt to me an appropriate action when approaching God (!) during Devi Bhava! But at one point, he saw that my eyes were open, and he leaned toward me. His eyes were riveted on Mother as he said to me, "Have you ever noticed Mother's smell? She smells *so good!*" (Okay, I thought, *so we're going to talk after all.*) I told him to smell my arm

where I had Mother's Rose scent, and he dubiously said, "It's faint, but yeah..." I thought nothing more about it.

Finally in my Mother's arms, rocked over and over, She spoke to me, "My daughter, My daughter, My daughter." My nose was comfortably crushed against Her chest, and it seemed to me that I was crushed against flowers, as if She were still wearing the garland. It seemed to me that I could *feel* the flowers. Remembering the young man's words – "She smells so *good!*" - I breathed Mother in and smelled jasmine, a strong scent, a yummy, *yummy* scent, and I kept breathing Her in, breathing in the jasmine. And it was another long, blissfully warm, sweet, complete hug of total love and devotion. For *me!* (As another devotee said, in one reported story, "I don't know why She loves me so much - I certainly don't feel that I deserve it - but She does!") And then Mother held me away from Her and I looked up into Her eyes like a child, my head a little bent, feeling a little shy suddenly, and I looked into Her incredible brown eyes, and I noticed the silver of Her crown touching Her forehead, and I just loved Her. It was suddenly simple, and I simply said, "Ma..." and Her face lit up as if I had just accomplished something major, and instead of letting me go after that long hug, She took me back into Her arms and hugged the stuffing out of me and rocked me and said, "Goodgoodgoodgoodgoodgoodgoodgoodgood!" which sounded like, "Goodygoodygoody," too, because she emphasizes the "d". And I laughed my delight, there against Her chest, because the word "good" is our little secret code for spiritual success, initiated all those years ago when She had erased my fears about therapy's role in my path. I was thrilled that She had used "our" word.

She released me and I went to sit at the side of the stage, next to the sweet young man, and I felt so happy. After some time, I looked up at the young man and I told him that because of what he had said to me in line, I had smelled Mother during darshan, and that She smelled like jasmine, like heaven. He smiled back at me at me very sweetly. I threw my arm around his shoulders, he folded into me and like children we stayed this way for a few long moments, delivered into simplicity and childlike love.

I felt that now if I could just let myself believe it, I had a new kind of active relationship with Mother. I could talk to Her – pray to Her – and just be myself. I prayed to Her to help me maintain this new relationship.

.....  
**July 2000**

**Chicago**

Working my way forward to the time when I could bear to actually move away from home, I continued to audition for and be a part of professional acting gigs

for both theatre and commercial work. The first time I had left Cincinnati, at 19 years old, I had not left with maturity. This time when I left, it would be because I would have truly grown up.

Lisle, Illinois was the location for Mother's summer "Chicago" visit. I got there by car and spent a relaxed evening having dinner and watching television. The changes in me were now very real, and I felt extremely grounded.

Perhaps the mind-blowing event of the following morning was proof of that.

My wake-up call on Amma's first day in Illinois came as planned, and I lay there fully awake, but with my eyes closed, thinking that I should talk to one of the Swamis who has written books, in order to see if I should turn my notes about Mother into a book – the book you now hold in your hands. And then the thought came to me that what I should *really* talk to him about is how and where to live cheaply in the Bay area ... maybe even at the ashram itself. And as I thought this, the bed *tilted a full 45 degrees to the left!* But unlike the feeling of a physical jolt that one ordinarily experiences when one feels oneself falling, my body remained unmoved and at ease. I had drunk nothing alcoholic with dinner the night before, and I had no natural fever to make me dizzy, but the bed continued to move. I kept my eyes closed, waiting to see if it would stop as a result of my awareness that it was happening. But it didn't. It continued to tilt, and I finally opened my eyes because this was something I had to see! I was almost disappointed that the bed had not actually moved; but clearly something profound had occurred. Some kind of literal shift. A friend suggested later that perhaps my energy had shifted. I had thought of that myself and I suggested that it is some kind of permanent shift into a new, higher level of experience. But who knows? I can tell you, though, that it was really really cool!

In all the years that I had known Amma and kept notes of our visits, I had never written down any of Amma's words – only my own experiences. But that night, I brought pen and paper and took notes for the first time. Among other marvelous things, Amma spoke of this:

- 1) Work is for purifying the mind.
- 2) A compassionate heart invites God's grace, but don't underestimate nor ignore the importance of practicality: if there is a dead dog in your well, don't go to the temple to pray for it to stop stinking; get it out of the well!
- 3) Mentally, one needs the attitude of a small child – beginner's mind. That gives patience and alertness to learn everything. That is "right mental attitude".
- 4) Sharing of feelings and emotions gives mutual love and faith and

reduces and eliminates 90% of our physical and mental woes.

How marvelous to have these notes to refer back to! Would I read them every day? No, honestly. But I added them to my writings in the computer that I had been keeping since 1988.

The following morning, I was in the darshan line by 7:45 AM. The line was moving at a good clip, and I prayed to be able to spend at least a little extra time sitting by Mother before it was my time so that I could bask in Her for a bit! Sure enough, I got up to the front of the line, and was suddenly held back by the line monitors while Mother received a couple of families. And then I was moved towards Mother's left side. I was pulled toward Her and I went face down across her crossed legs so that my cheek rested on the downward outside slope of Her right thigh. I seemed to be left there for a longer time than I anticipated, so I snuggled in, readjusted the top of my head to fit more snugly against Her belly, my cheek against Her thigh. Oh Bliss! Then She pulled me up and looked into my face and pulled me against Her shoulder – I had expected to be released! This was a wonderful surprise! – and said into my ear, "My daughter, my daughter, my daughter," and She said it over ... and over ... and OVER again, so many times. And then, when I'd decided, "Fine, I'm just going to lie here against Your shoulder *forever*," She put Her hands on my shoulders and pushed me upright, gently but firmly. I looked into Her face. She was smiling at me. I'd said, "My Mother," once or twice while on Her shoulder. Now She seemed to reply to me, saying, "My daughter, okay?" I answered, "My Mother," and She pulled me back to Her, cheek to cheek, and said again, "My daughter, my daughter, my daughter..." over and over, and then pushed me back *again* and looking into my eyes, said, more firmly, "*My daughter. Okay?*" and I said, "Okay!" and smiled at Her, and She took my face in both of Her hands and gave me *the* most deeply personal, loving *delighted* smile I have ever received from Her. Hare Om!

Perhaps Mother was trying to narrow that troubling gap of worldly/spiritual understanding I had been struggling with. Or perhaps She was trying to get me to understand that I was going to be held in Her "orbit" even while I went through the difficult task of moving to California.

Or maybe She was just loving me...

The next morning, I received a lesson either in honesty, or in understanding that I don't know what the heck I'm learning at all! It was time for tokens, and the token man made an announcement that this morning's darshan was only for those who (1) had not yet met Amma, or for those who (2) were not going tonight to Devi Bhava, or for those who (3) had not seen Her before on the tour. Hmmm...well, I didn't see Her before *Chicago*, I rationalized. So I stayed in line but I wasn't completely comfortable. He repeated his message, and I thought, "I'll buy some flowers and then he will *have* to let me stay so I can give them to Her." And I

was thinking how shifty I was being, but I did it anyway, thinking, “Mother, I’m leaving this up to You. If You want me to see You, wonderful. If not, okay.” When the line began to move, it seemed that the first 3 people or so had questions for the token taker that, once answered, disqualified them from staying in line. My turn, and he said, “Have you seen Mother before?” I said that I had, but not before Chicago – and I’m feeling stern as I say it, and I’m rather staring him down. “I saw Her yesterday,” I say, and with a look of “Oh, never mind!” he gives me a token and nods me inside. These were the days when you received a token with a specific number on it, rather than a range (0-50, or 100-150, and so on). The token was number 2! Good Lord! I went into the hall and the line monitors at the rear of the now-empty line told me to go ahead and sit inside of the ropes. I was first in line! There was plenty of room beside me for another person – as there always is in the “two-lane” darshan line, but I was up front, and Mother was going to be sitting in meditation not 5 feet in front of me. I was hoist by my own petard because I didn’t know what to do with the two conflicting emotions of excitement and guilt. I felt I shouldn’t be in that line, but I wasn’t leaving.

Amma entered the hall and there was the usual bustle of all of us standing, and the pada puja being done for Her at the back of the hall, and then She was there right in front of me, bowing to us all, sitting. In front of my left foot were flowers for Amma and my purse, as well as a picture of me with a friend, M. Our relationship had been undergoing some painful breakdowns, but I still loved her dearly, and thought to bring the whole thing to Amma so that She could bless or dismantle the whole thing. The purse, the flowers for Amma, and the picture were all neatly stacked to one side, with the picture almost entirely obscured by the flowers, but when Amma sat down, She fixed Her gaze with rigid attention on the small pile, and regarded it for long moments with a noticeably serious expression on Her face! I was thinking, “What?! What is it, Mother?” There was nothing unusual in that space that She could have been looking at. I thought later that She must have been seeing the picture, and that as She already had *me* in front of Her in person, She must have been regarding M. – our strained friendship - intently. It wasn’t until several months later, when our friendship fully disintegrated and ended, that I wondered anew about that look of Mother’s.

Mother settled back into Her familiar meditation pose, the lights in the hall were extinguished, darkness descended upon the hall and meditation began. Once or twice I opened my eyes slightly to see that WOW! Yeah! Amma’s white form was actually there, right in front of me! So close! So amazing. The devotee with the darshan ticket actually numbered #1 was beside me now, but when darshan began, Mother reached for me first. Because I still felt as though I’d cheated my way into the darshan line, I was feeling terribly guilty at the same time that I was looking around for friends - “look where I’m sitting!” I was not at all sure that I hadn’t somehow conned my way, coerced Mother (HAH!!! As if this were even possible!) into letting me be in this line. I was feeling that I must be the only long-time devotee in line, the only one rude enough to take time away from new

people – that I'd broken the rules. No one could ruin a good moment for themselves like I could!

But actually, I was doing so much better. All of these years with Amma, I had never been at ease – I had felt like an anxious child during all of Amma's tours, running hither and thither so as not to miss anything. If I thought Mother was going to be in the hall, I had to be there two hours early to get the perfect spot. If I wanted to ask a question but needed some sleep, the sleep went out the window. I was constantly fueled by the fact that Amma was divine, and that I could not miss even one moment with Her! Now I seemed to be able to take my time, beginning to understand that Mother might be with me in those moments outside the hall as well. In fact, I was able to have a leisurely dinner before Devi Bhava; that need to rush to the hall was gone. In fact, I felt no need to rush anywhere this year, except to be up early for morning darshan line. I had no questions (that in itself was amazing!), so I calmly disposed of that possibility for myself, and my "job" became to relax whenever I felt my energy hitch into that should-space wherein I thought that I "should" feel more this-or-that right now. Things were definitely changing for me. Good thing, as I was now actively planning my move – more and more actively working through the issues of fear and self-doubt. I needed this change more than ever...and it was happening!

A few hours before I received darshan, I visited Amma's store. One of the women there showed me some malas – prayer beads that one uses to say one's mantra<sup>3</sup>. The first was a beautiful moonstone and amethyst. But really, I didn't need it. Then the woman said, "Mother wore this during Devi Bhava. It's filled with Her energies." I don't know what made me ask, but I said, "Where did She wear it?" and of course the answer was "San Francisco." I clutched it to my face, eyes closed, and accepting the inevitable, I told them that I would take it.

I would take whatever reassuring signs I could get!

## **November 2000**

### **Ann Arbor, MI**

A first-time event was happening: one of my friends from Group agreed to come with me to Ann Arbor for a small vacation - and during Mother's time there - to meet Her just once. I had been equally fine with the idea of her accompanying me to Ann Arbor and *not* meeting Mother, but now that she wanted to receive Mother's blessing, I was excited to think that finally I could share this experience with someone I loved so much – someone who knew me so well, except for this aspect of my life.

For weeks before our visit, I had told her repeatedly that if the "Mother scene" wasn't her cup of tea, she could leave the hall without fear of upsetting me. She

had said, "Oh. It's not Love-Me-Love-My-Mother?" and I'd laughed and said, "No, it isn't. Truly. I just really want to share with you what this important part of my life is about, that's all. And I guess I'm excited to share Her with you, to give you this blessing of even just seeing Her! Is that okay, that I'm excited about that?" And she had answered, "Yes."

We waited in line for darshan tokens, and we could have had, actually, the first two numbers, but she wanted more time than that to acclimate, so we took some middle numbers; 200-something. Then my dear friend took a few steps into the nearly-empty darshan hall and burst into tears. This was absolutely not her modus operandi, as she hated crying in public. Never did it! I took her into my arms and comforted her for as long as she'd let me, and then we took a couple of chairs and just sat.

My friend stayed through the singing and the talk, but she was crying continuously as she sat there. Finally, after a long spell of waiting, it got close to our turn to get in line. When I whispered to her that our numbers were coming up, she panicked, so I left her to sit and I moved closer to the front of the room to watch Amma for a while. When I next looked up from where I was sitting, my friend was gone! Things she had purchased from the bookstore were still on her chair, but she was gone. I checked for her shoes. Gone! I checked for her coat. Gone! I grabbed my shoes and coat and went out to the cars. Her car was gone! What to do now? I went back inside, and put my shoes and coat up and walked around wondering what to do, when suddenly she was there in front of me, saying, "Thank goodness! I went looking for your shoes and your coat, but they were gone!" She told me that she had felt panicked about going up to Mother because she was worried that once she got down to get Mother's blessing, she wouldn't be able to get up (she had a great deal of difficulty moving). So, unable to think in the hall, she had gone outside, moved her car to the back of the building, and had come in to tell me she was going back to the hotel.

I never felt afterward that I could ask her about her experience, but my personal feeling was that she got what she needed. I had that much faith, at least. Plus, even though Mother had in fact turned out not to be her cup of tea, my friend and I had a wonderful time in Ann Arbor, both before and after Mother's visit.

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**Faith: "The F-Word"**

My notes for this trip said: "Amma says that what you offer another with a compassionate heart is *received first by God, every time*. Never is it refused." Man, I was glad I had that in my notes! I was so glad I had started *taking* notes!

Meditation, Amma says, gives us: material prosperity, peace of mind, and spiritual advancement. Made it sound medical, methodical, scientific! Well it *is*

scientific, according to Indian teachings. And I remembered that my fear of flying had disappeared after I had chanted the Thousand Names of the Divine Mother while on a flight to Boston. Very cause-and-effect!

But what about faith – that centrally located spiritual concept, that *unscientific* thing? When someone has cancer and they are suffering, I wanted to know, in *what* are they having faith? Hasn't God in fact let them down by "allowing" them or possibly "gifting" them with this disease? If so, in what would that person have faith? And if it were in fact the other way around and we are solely "responsible for our reality", then – again – in what are we having faith?

I was raised by two loving parents, and two Black women who cleaned our house and helped with raising us kids while my parents pursued their careers. Bonnie took care of us when we were really little, and she died of cancer when I was about six years old. Sarah then worked for my family until I sold the house to pay for Dad's nursing home. Spending a lot of time at Bonnie's home, and then at Sarah's home, and playing with Sarah's kids who she would sometimes bring to work with her, I noticed something special. I noticed that the Black community had its roots in a relationship with God. I noticed that no matter how bad things would get in life, they would praise God. In fact, it seemed that the *worse* things got, the more they praised! I never understood it, but it stuck with me. What also stuck with me was the way gospel would open my heart and make me tingle with an automatic feeling of joy.

Now, here in my 30's, I had in my life another black woman – albeit Indian rather than African-American – and the question of faith had become very important. I still didn't know why Mother had allowed me to have a nervous breakdown. I still didn't know why the Black community praised God when things were going badly. I still didn't know what the heck "faith" *meant!*

In Chicago, the day before Thanksgiving and during one of Mother's satsangs, I was sitting with some women who had been on the path for a long time, as I had been. I turned to them after the talk and all the singing was over and I asked them, "What does it mean to have faith?" Three faces turned to me, ready to answer. I said, "Together, we have a combined total of something like 9 million 300 thousand 24 lives! We should be able to come up with this answer." One of them made as if to answer, but I forestalled her by saying, "*If it doesn't* mean to believe that God will make everything turn out perfectly for you, *what does it mean?*" Now the three faces looked blank, stunned. And we found that we could not answer the question adequately. Try as we might, we failed. Finally we just agreed that I was going to have to get up early the next morning to get into the question line to ask Mother.

The faith question haunted me all evening and into my sleep. My mind was working it from every angle. If faith wasn't the belief that everything would be perfect, what was it? And what were we having faith *in*? What good did it do to

have this mysterious faith thing? Did it make life better? How? Hadn't I had faith in Mother to rescue me...when She hadn't, all those years ago?

The next morning, I awoke at precisely 5:00AM, coming to consciousness as seamlessly as if I had never slept, my mind seeming to have worked all night at the faith question, much as a knitter patiently works at an error in her work. I made my way downstairs to the question line, and even though it was the crack of dawn, five people still managed to be there ahead of me. I found that the Indian woman sitting beside me with her little 2-year-old son was the leader of the San Diego satsang, which was helpful; I had been wanting to learn the pronunciation of The Thousand Names, and she lovingly taught me. In return, I pronounced for her the sentence I had been taught in Mother's native tongue of Malayalam. Mother had laughed merrily at my pronunciation when I'd tried it out on Her, but this woman was impressed that I had attempted the hire-wire act of speaking Mother's language.

We question line people were eventually herded into place in the hall. Mother came, and we all settled down. I was waiting my turn to ask my question, sitting in the line that snaked down the carpet to Mother's right, when Mother turned Her head, leaned slightly forward and looked straight down the line at me for long, long moments, just smiling, open-eyed, as if she already knew my question and was amused by it. As for me, I felt an energy go through the top of my head and down right into my heart. She *did* know what I was going to ask, and She was giving me a direct answer. I wanted to know what it means to have faith, and She was answering, "Feel *this!*" That's the thing about Mother: a lot of direct experience that lacks words to explain. But that's okay, I'll take the experience!

Uncomplaining eons later, I reached Mother, and Swamiji motioned to me to stand up. He asked Amma my question and then translated, "Mother says you should have faith in action." I said, "Huh?" and he explained, "Spontaneous action, arising from within. Work. You should take the first job that's offered to you, and then you move on, keep moving forward." I shook my head in confusion, wondering if what She was answering was the question I *didn't* ask, which was, "What do I do about a job?" now that I was out of my most recent job and going a little broke. I said to Swamiji, "I gotta tell you, that confuses me." He leaned down and spoke to Mother again, and when he straightened, he said, "Mother says you should have both." Now I was frustrated. "Both *what?*" I asked, and he said, "Faith in action *and* faith in God." Ahhh! Now we were getting somewhere. "But *that* is the question!" I emphasized. "What does it *mean* to have faith in God? Does it mean to have faith that God is *there?*" and Swamiji said, "Yes. That God is there, that He truly cares about you, and that your prayers are heard." Well! That left me with no other question - none except the big one, "How on earth do I do *that?*!" So, with the uneasy feeling that I had somehow answered my own question without understanding my own answer, I let it drop. I asked instead about the remainder of my question: I had asked for a blessing on my life and my spiritual practices, and also on the lives of those I

love. He said, "Oh, yes, Mother said She will say a prayer for you about these."

About 30 minutes later, one of my friends from the night before caught up with me and said, half-serious, that she was really angry with me. "You and your questions!" she scolded. "Only *you!*" I told her that I had gotten my answer, but that the question had wakened me at the stroke of 5:00AM that morning. She glared at me and said, "Yeah? Well, me too! Exactly the same moment! 5:00AM! And I woke up thinking about it! Only you would ask a question like that." And forever after that, she would only call faith "the F-word", jokingly unwilling to say the word that had pulled her from sleep with its nagging mystery.

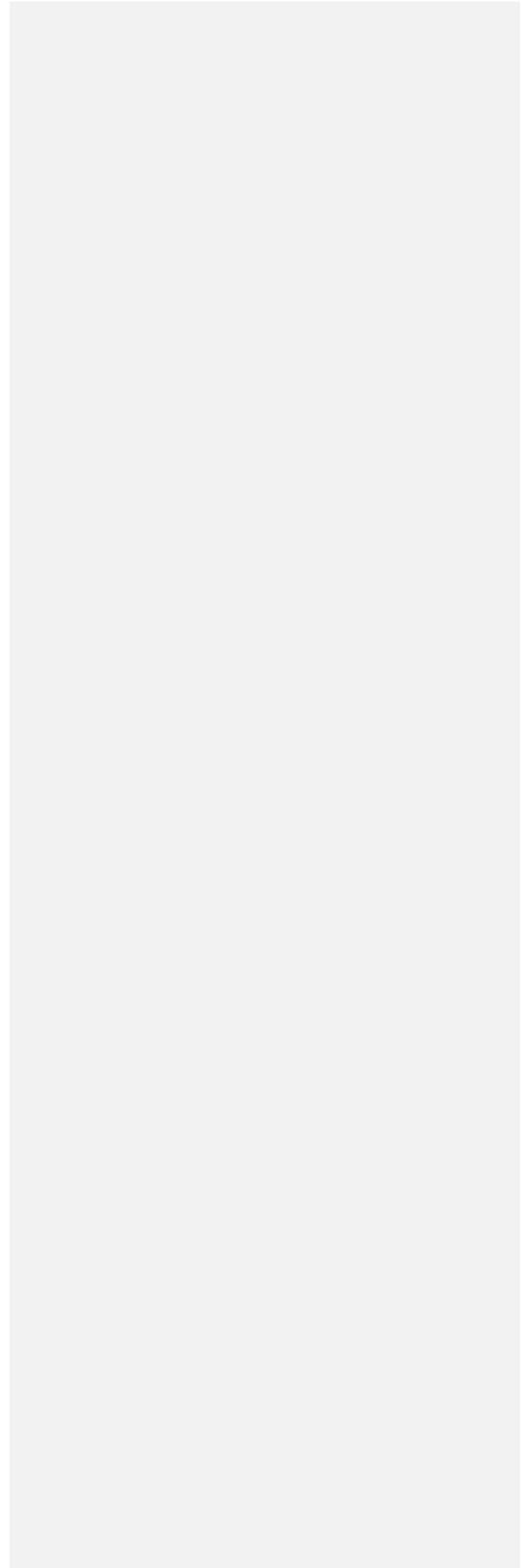
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*Truth without Love is a weapon.  
Love without Truth is an addiction.*

- *Karunya Jane Church*

## PART II

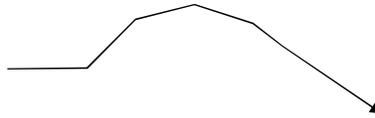
Kali's Oven



Not I

Don't follow my words.

*They will lead you nowhere*



as words must.

If you seek outside of yourself, try to  
take with you  
at least one guideline:

that whatever you find,  
your God-given right  
is to judge the fit.

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## Chapter Nine

### *Kali-fornia*

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2001 – Chicago / San Ramon

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#### **June 2001**

#### **San Ramon, CA**

The year 2001 was eventful, and it ushered in a decade of increasing darkness. Terrorism in New York City, a tsunami in Southeast Asia, Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, and “Hurricane Bush” in America. Always more.

In July of 2001, I finally moved: took the big step and moved out to Oakland, California. People ask me sometimes if I moved to be closer to Mother’s ashram. Nope! I moved because I wanted to be a jazz singer. Hmm, that dream didn’t end up bearing a lot of fruit...maybe I *did* move out here to be closer to Mother’s ashram!

In June I came out to California to look for an apartment. I had made the decision with the help of friends, and until then had resisted the temptation to do what I’d seen so many others do: ask Mother if it’s “okay” to do it. Over the years, others I’ve known have asked Mother’s permission to start a job, leave work, go to India, marry, and so forth – and She has answered them. I had learned over the years that Mother’s most common answer to *my* questions was: “Don’t worry, Mother is with you.” Would She even answer such a question if I asked it? Unknowable without trying. Additionally, I was still efforting at *not* asking, since I felt sure that when Mother said “When you have faith in yourself, you have faith in God,” She wasn’t kidding. I wanted to stick to that understanding, no matter how much I doubted it!

Making sure that my apartment-hunting trip coincided with Mother’s visit, I spent my first morning at the M.A. Center in San Ramon. Horse country! I had been here once before, but somehow the area was not at all what I expected. California’s horse country is so dry in the summer, it turns the hillsides to straw, a yellowed color which is known as California Gold but which just looked to me like dried up grass. If you want green hillsides and lush scenery, you have to wait until the Fall and Winter months.

Once Mother showed up in person, all I wanted to do was sit with Her all day. No, that’s not true...what I really wanted to do was to avoid looking for an apartment. It was such an emotionally difficult thing to do all alone, and the sticker shock was incredible. Back home, \$475 had gotten me a month’s worth of rent, heat and water in a large one-bedroom apartment with a dining room,

living room and even a sunroom at the front of the place. I had been warned about the prices; now I had to face the music.

I started making appointments to see apartments late enough in the day to allow me to see Amma at the beginning of the day, and also late in the evening. That is how I came to meet Vince, an apartment manager who spent most of his days wandering about the East Bay showing apartments, signing people up, and making a few extra bucks from the entire exercise. I took one look at the guy – he looks like my mother's father – and I listened to him speak – he is originally from Cape Cod, Massachusetts and maintains his long "a"s, saying things like "cahn't" instead of "can't", and reminded me of my mother's New York accent – and I thought, "My God, this guy could be my entire family!"

He took one look at me and fell in love.

I thought that stuff only happened in fairy tales, but he experienced it. I had no idea of that at the time, of course, but I did know that he was interested. I thought, "Hey, the guy looks about 62. Too bad it's not gonna happen for you buddy, but I'm 43. That's a little too old for me." He showed me an apartment that was too small for my needs, insisted on taking me out for a Coke, and promised to keep an eye out for the right kind of place for me to rent. Nice of him, but it did nothing for my general sense of panic and my lack of trust; I was certain I was on the hopeless quest. The days of searching quickly took their toll on my emotional equilibrium. I absolutely hated being this far out of my comfort zone.

I wanted out of this stress, so I brought a few questions to Amma. It boiled down to: **(1) I'm moving here from Ohio. Can You/will You help me to find an apartment and a job here? and (2) Do I have to look, because I'd rather spend time with You!** Back in 1989 I met a woman in New York City who had asked Mother for a job, and within a week, had one! To me, this spoke of rescue. Certainly Mother would rescue me as well, and an apartment manager would show up at the ashram and hand me a lease? ...

Finally, it was my turn. I handed the Swami my question. He began to read to Mother, and I heard the word "Ohio" and then Mother snapped something at him – oh God, I'd ticked Her off! - and he stopped speaking instantly and turned around to look at the singers. He gestured to one of them, and that man instantly arose from his place and came to Mother's side. The Swami handed my note to the second man, and departed speedily. The new translator began to speak to Amma, and again I heard the word "Ohio". This time the translator was allowed to finish. Amma continued to give darshan. I held my breath and waited. Mother released the devotee She had just blessed, leaned sideways toward me, and looked deeply into my eyes for long, long, long moments. She then turned back to giving darshan, during which She sort of spat some words out over Her shoulder, and the translator gestured to me urgently to "Get up! Get up!" I stood,

and he said, "Mother says you can try that, and She will help you." "Try that?" I thought. "Uh-oh, that means I probably won't make it." So I asked him, "Does that mean that Mother doesn't want me to do it???" He looked shocked and disbelieving. "No! Mother would say that if that is what She means. No, She is saying you do that, and She will help you." I nodded but I wasn't convinced. Her tone had been strict and I had quaked a bit at the look in Her eyes.

This wasn't the rescue I'd been hoping for. Crud, I had to get this taken care of – over and done with. Why I thought I'd be rescued, I couldn't say; it hadn't happened during a nervous breakdown – when the lesson had been for me to stand on my own two feet - and she wasn't about to stop the healing process now!

I didn't see Amma the next day, nor the morning after that as I rededicated myself to the search. But Thursday was the last day before the Retreat which I wouldn't be attending, and I wanted to see Her before She became inaccessible to me. So on Thursday evening I went to "say" my goodbyes.

The next day, I went looking for that blasted apartment that Mother had said *two days ago* (did I mention a small impatience problem?) that She would help me with. Off to an incredibly inauspicious start, the first thing I did in the morning was lose the cell phone I had rented. Aargh! That was going to cost me hundreds of dollars, per the agreement I had stupidly signed. The second thing I did was encounter an unkind man who was showing me an apartment in Oakland. He was so nasty and I felt so beaten that I left that apartment on Montecito Avenue, crying. I walked down the street crying, and I prepared to get into my car, grateful that I would soon be able to sit and sob to my heart's content in relative privacy.

Not so. As I reached for the door, a car horn sounded right behind me. Crud! I turned around to gesture that I would pull out in a second, and Vince, who had shown me the apartment the other day, pulled up beside me, jumped out of his car looking thunderstruck, and said he'd been calling me all morning. Crying, I told him I'd lost my #\*\$%@ cell phone or I would have been reachable. The "coincidence" of seeing me out of the blue overwhelmed him. He couldn't get over it. He took me to see an apartment that he said was "perfect" for me. The "perfect" apartment was on the same street I had just left. I would in fact move there a month later.

Life is strange. And I guess Mother did in fact rescue me!

**July, 2001**

**Naperville, IL**

My last Chicago trip before my big move to California and I was scooting along in the darshan line, chanting the 1,000 Names. I realized when I started feeling a bit breathless that it was because I was getting physically closer to Amma. When I made it to the stage where She sat, She looked at me and raised Her eyebrows at me, like, "Oh! You're here! Good!" Sweet! And when I got to Her, She looked at me with O-shaped mouth and wide eyes, as if to say, "Ohmigod! You!" Very playful. I made the same face back, and we laughed together. I completely forgot that I had meant to ask Her about the trouble I had had with my mantra since I had received it in 1989. However, when I happily went into Amma's embrace, She said into my ear, "My daughter, my daughter, my darling, darling daughter, *mantra*." I had to laugh out loud; Mother had just told me She knows of the problem, and not only will She take care of it, but it's already in Her hands – always has been, probably.

Just like my move to California.

Just before I got to my feet, Mother pinched my chin, hard. As it was, in fact, my jaw and my teeth that tended to get tense when I did japa internally, Her pinch on my chin was not random. Some words of Swamiji's returned to me - "Nothing that a mahatma does is random or without meaning. Nothing."

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I thought I was ready to move, but I had no idea of what would be demanded of me.

To live in California's Bay Area is to invite growth because it is so enormously challenging, both financially and interpersonally. Even though I came from the Midwest, with its snow and ice storms, I never knew emotional cold until I moved here; a common theme I have heard from others beside just myself is that it is so very difficult to become friends with people "out here". There is a different level of beginning interaction for acquaintances in the Bay Area than there is for Midwesterners. In the Midwest, when you meet someone new, you can expect a certain depth of interpersonal warmth that contains some vulnerability, some grounding, and some willingness to risk. In the Bay Area, that initial depth of interpersonal vulnerability and risk is much shallower. As far as I can figure, a major challenge of living here seems to be that there are so many coexisting cultures and financial strata, there is a tendency for people to feel timid about others. Because it takes more effort to break through those fears, the value of community is too often bypassed for the value of distractions. When I moved here I quickly felt wounded by the general shallowness of the interpersonal interactions I was involved with. Thinking about California – well, brooding over it, to be honest, in the first two years – I decided that California is literally Kali's

Oven: Cali for “Kali”, and fornia for a form of “forno”, Italian for “oven”. To be here demanded a willingness to bake. I was apparently going to need new skills.

July 20, 2001 was the date of my actual move to the Bay Area. It would be a long hard haul before I would feel at all at home there. Years, in fact. And the beginning of my stay was not auspicious. On September 11, the jet-bombing of the World Trade Centers occurred, putting a violent exclamation point to my – and the world’s – sense of separation from the familiar. But there were new hands to hold, fortunately. My apartment guru Vince and I became close, and then a couple. Directly across the hall from my new home lived Steven, who would become more a brother to me than simply a dear friend. And I was approached at the ashram by a woman named Jane, who had heard me speak at Amma’s 48<sup>th</sup> birthday gathering, and who subsequently became a spiritual friend.

Thrillingly, I introduced Vince to Amma through a pamphlet, and he became absolutely enthralled. He waited impatiently to meet Her in November. I felt certain that he was one of Hers. I just felt it in my bones, and I was lucky that my bones were right. When later I introduced Vince and Jane, we instantly became the Three Musketeers, always finding ourselves happiest when drawn together to talk and share at Mother’s ashram.

By 2002, my friends back in Cincinnati sorted themselves into those who would always remain friends, and those who could not handle the separation.

I had come out to California to be a singer. But Amma used my choice to teach me to grow relentlessly, to live in a place so foreign in aspect from my Midwest roots that I would have to grow even beyond what I had learned through therapy’s transformations. And I was blessed now to be able to spend more time with Her than I had since the first uncrowded years in Boston and New Hampshire. Our relationship became closer, my integration of Her love and care deeper, my yearning for Her more authentic.

And final irony: it is my acting career, rather than my singing, that has proved to be the open door to my creative professional life.

Except, of course, for singing to Amma.

I am still, challenges notwithstanding, incredibly fortunate. I had Jeanne, my mother, when I was a baby, when I was a girl, when I was a young woman. She taught me about love, and in her touch I found something that, looking back, I can even call divine. Those were years of emotional innocence, and I can draw on that when I forget everything else. And I have Mother - our Divine Mother - who loves us beyond logic, and who has said She will take any uncounted number of births to guide us to the goal of Self-realization. In other words, She will settle for nothing less than our living in Love.

So where does human love and divine love meet? Where does one begin and the other end? Are they two different things, or somehow secretly one and the same? I think that they flow side by side, as two rivers merged at the seams while we are learning, and finally becoming one as our awareness opens. And I find Mother to be the living proof of that complete merging. We are, all of us – devotee and skeptic - incredibly fortunate to be here when the divine being has put Her feet on the earth...and wrapped Her divine arms around our human beings.

There is nothing but water in the holy pools.

I know, I have been swimming in them.

All the gods sculpted of wood or ivory can't say a word.

I know, I have been crying out to them.

The Sacred Books of the East are nothing but words.

I looked through their covers one day sideways.

What Kabir talks of is only what he has lived through.

If you have not lived through something, it is not true.

- *Kabir*

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## Chapter Ten

### "The Ego Has Landed"

- Robbie Williams CD Title

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#### 2006-San Ramon

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A compassionate heart invites God's grace, but don't underestimate nor ignore the importance of practicality: if there is a dead dog in your well, don't go to the temple to pray for it to stop stinking; get it out of the well!

-Amma

It seems that yesterday I met Amma. Yesterday was 18 years ago.

What good has it done me? Perhaps it would be hubris for me to say that I know. But I do know that one thing I have learned along the way is that spirituality works best when married to grounding. I also know that I have had the good karma to be one of those who has spent some time close to Her, physically. I have been blessed with the grace of remarkable experiences. I have been introduced to the God-force in a body that, like mine, is female, and therefore more spiritually recognizable in a way that God-the-Father never was for me.

From the beginning, in one way or another, the question always arose: if I had the good sense to recognize the divinity of this being, why had I not chosen to live with Her, or at least follow Her all summer, every summer? Answers that others proffered did not satisfy. "You're a householder." (True.) "Mother wants you out in the world." (Who says? She never said that to me.) "The world is where your work is." (Again, who says? Plus, this only leads to another question: "Why?") "You would be a terrible ashramite." (Which is absolutely true!) This year I finally realized the answer that made sense for me.

Look at Mother. Look at how She inspires others – by example. She serves, and others are inspired to serve. She loves, and others are inspired simply to do better. A conversation with a friend, recently, inspired me. He is not a lover of religion; finds it divisive – which factually it is, as it separates one group from another. He said something similar to a story of Mother's when he said that people get trapped in the forms and never find the essence of spirit. The image then came to me of all of us as unlit candles, coming to Mother, the Living Flame, to be lit, and then being sent out into the world to inspire others in ways that are seemingly small, and in ways that are impressively large, and in all ways in between.

Our world is suffering from a terrible drought of the spirit. Kindness has become remarkable rather than commonplace, and violence has become commonplace

rather than remarkable. Mother needs all of Her children – those who serve alongside Her physical body, and those who serve by making their journey out in the world while internally holding Her hand. It makes sense that not all work can be accomplished at Mother's physical side. And I understand that my life is not only *not* ashram-bound, but that my life still has spiritual value. So, "Mother wants you out in the world" turns out to be true after all! But it wasn't true until I came to that understanding within my own experience; no matter how good the explanation, if we cannot apply it in our own life, it is useless.

I am reminded of a story that Mother often tells. She says that when we concentrate on the form of spirit – that is to say, religion – and we ignore the spirit itself, it is the same thing as concentrating on the finger that points to the fruit of the tree, rather than going right to the fruit to feed ourselves. I will not be popular for suggesting that even the physical reality of Amma Herself can distract us from the fruit. The fruit is us. Naturally. That is why She tells us again and again to meditate.

Our love of those who, like Amma, like Jesus, like Buddha, embody the divine, is profound. But that love itself can make it most challenging to take that hardest of steps: to lodge that love, and indeed that being Him or Herself, within our own selves, our own lives. I believe that when Amma tells that story, She could as easily say that She is the finger that points to the fruit, and that the fruit is our Selves - that hidden reality that awaits our exploration. I am reminded also of the story of the end of St. Francis's life: his disciples were grieving his imminent death, his departure. He admonished them, saying, "But where would I go? Have I taught you nothing?" For beings like St. Francis, the understanding in place is that of the one reality that is indivisible, beyond the body, uninterrupted by time or place.

So I have come to understand that my job is not to follow one more leader – even my best notion of what God is – but to nurture those sparks of identification within myself, to remain and grow and light not only my way, but that of anyone my modest light attracts...while still holding my Mother's hand.

My earthly mother was my everything, and she gave me my first experience of what love looks like and feels like. As Kabir wrote, "If you have not lived through something, it is not true." Mom graced me with a true knowing of what love is. But when she left me I let go of what I knew, too frightened and aggrieved to hold on to that which now hurt so badly to be without. And then along came Amma, the Mother of all Mothers, and showed me what Divine Love looks like and feels like. She too left me, at least physically and at least once a year, and again I had to let go. When these women were not by my side, physically, what could I claim as my own? My answer for so long was: nothing.

This has now changed radically.

As I finished the first few drafts of this book, I knew something was missing – something that would tie it all up in a neat, pretty little bow. It couldn't be a traditionally happy-ever-after story, could it? I can't claim enlightenment, so I couldn't end with a flourish - a "Ta-da!" I'm not at the end of all struggle. But neither am I at the beginning of all seeking. I was forced to put the book down and wait for the answer. Then came Winter 2006. The holiday season, cloaked as it always is in expectations of joy and new beginnings.

What the holiday season does not at first reveal are the necessary winnowings without which the new beginnings can not come into being. This year, however, the winnowings came fast and furious – friendships disappeared, my job began to end, Vince's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and my 49<sup>th</sup> reminded us that time is precious, and extended family illnesses raised concerns. Through the winnowings came a realization that I have spent far too much time spiritually "shoulding" on myself – as Stephen and Ondrea Levine would say – and editing myself far too much, verbally. Time to stand up to my fears of rejection and speak even more of my truth with friends, with family. Time to let go of my ideas about Mother, and instead embrace me; listen to my own voice, and do only what makes me feel good, trusting that who I am is good enough, right enough. By so doing, I can know when I make mistakes and learn then and there, rather than always holding myself back, judging myself by dint of what I *believe* to be right and wrong about my behavior and then only guessing at what I have learned.

Recently I told Vince that when we meditate I do not feel lifted or calmed. He was shocked. "Then why do it?" he asked. Why indeed! Good question! The ashram "party line" is to do what Mother has told us to do. She has given us mantras, and the IAM (Integrated Amrita Meditation) technique. These are sacred gifts, but even sacred gifts can be unusable if used at the wrong time. I have a meditation of my own that I am developing after 19 years, that gives me more than the years of banging my head against the walls of "should meditating" that I have been doing. Perhaps this will prepare me for the gifts that lie embedded in the IAM Meditation. Or perhaps this is my version of the IAM and that is all that I need. Many of us have seen the T-shirt that says: "Meditation...It's Not What You Think". Indeed. It seems that both of my mothers have been prepping me for this return to my Self, my self, and myself. No one outside of yourself can make those steps for you that bring you to you, and to move away from those powerful external signposts is a challenge, for sure. True strength is my desire, and it can not come from living with Amma, which I am not slated for. Even if I could, She too will leave Her body, and I do not wish to be once again bereft of all identification. And hasn't She been preparing me for all of these years to stand on my own two feet, knowing that She truly is with me?

When these thoughts first came to me, I had to admit that I might be wrong. But I also had to admit that I had once again come to the end of everything that I thought I knew. I was bored, and I was filled up with certainties about the



**One last story (2006 – Summer):**

**Kollam!**

Went for darshan. Amma bent me sideways deeply, as she’s been doing lately, and Ma’d and Darling Daughter’d me and I looked into Her face, thinking I was so clever, and said, “Kollam!” which I thought meant “I like it”. At least, that is what I’d been told by a speaker of Malayalam. Ma looked a bit blank, and Gita, who is always at Mother’s side, bent to me. “What did you say?” she asked. “Kollam,” I replied. “What?” she said. “I was trying to say ‘I like it’,” I replied. Gita laughed and translated to Amma, who also laughed. Gita told me, “You said, instead, ‘I’ll kill you’.” I burst out laughing and put my head to Amma’s right arm. “No!” I laughed, “I don’t want to kill Amma!” Ma was talking quickly. Gita said, “Amma says it is good for you even to say this.” Then Gita said something about the ego, and how Kali kills the ego. And Amma gave me a very, very, fierce Kali face, complete with flashing smile. Standing now, I smiled at Amma and said, “Okay, Amma, I know I’m in trouble. I’ll go now.” I was laughing and happy. This was the longest spontaneous conversation with Her. Language...always a challenge. Jai Ma!



## **Recommended Reading**

### **By Stephen Levine**

**Healing into Life and Death**

**Guided Meditations, Explorations and Healings**

**Turning Toward the Mystery: A Seeker's Journey**

**Embracing the Beloved: Relationship as a Path of Awakening**

**Who Dies?: An Investigation of Conscious Living and Conscious Dying**

**A Gradual Awakening**

**Unattended Sorrow: Recovering from Loss and Reviving the Heart**

**A Year to Live: How to Live This Year as If It Were Your Last**

### **By Swami Amritaswarupananda**

**Ammachi: A Biography of Mata Amritanandamayi**

### **Published by M.A. Center**

**The Awakening of Universal Motherhood**

**Amma's address upon receiving the 2002 Gandhi-King Award in Geneva, Switzerland**

### **Other Books**

**Eat, Pray, Love – by Elizabeth Gilbert**

**Anatomy of the Spirit – by Carolyn Myss**

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> “Shaktipat” is a touch of the guru. It is the awakening of the spiritual energy and is delivered by a touch on what is called the third eye – that area just above and between the two eyes.

<sup>2</sup> A “sevite” is anyone who does a service for another without hope or expectation of payment. The word service is translated “seva” – so anyone who does seva is a sevite.

<sup>3</sup> American Heritage Dictionary defines “mantra” as “A sacred verbal formula repeated in prayer, meditation, or incantation, such as an invocation of a god, a magic spell, or a syllable or portion of scripture containing mystical potentialities.” These days, and for the past number of years, Mother gives mantras during Devi Bhava, at the request of anyone who makes the request. The well-known “Om Namah Shivaya” is a mantra which indicates that one is saluting the divine – Shiva – within the one to whom one says it. If one is saying it to oneself, it is a calling out to the divine within one’s own self.