



# **An Authentic Life**

## *A Spiritual Autobiography*

**Steve Bohlert**

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Sky River Press  
Pahoa, Hawaii

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• **Authentic:** (in existentialist philosophy) relating to or denoting an emotionally appropriate, significant, purposive, and responsible mode of human life. (*New Oxford American Dictionary*)

• **Authenticity** is a technical term in existentialist philosophy, and is also used in the philosophy of art and psychology. In philosophy, the conscious self is seen as coming to terms with being in a material world and with encountering external forces, pressures and influences which are very different from, and other than, itself. Authenticity is the degree to which one is true to one's own personality, spirit, or character, despite these pressures. (*Wikipedia*)

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## Author's Preface

I started this book in the mid 1980s when friends said my story would make an exciting movie and encouraged me to write it. At the time, I thought I had nothing new philosophically to contribute, but people might benefit from my experiences and avoid some pitfalls on the spiritual path.

Since then, I had many more experiences that led me to write *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism*, which is my unique philosophical interpretation of the Chaitanya devotional tradition. *An Authentic Life* shows how my perspective developed over the years as my philosophy evolved, and I created a new synthesis of East and West. These two books are really a set that shows how my life and teachings mesh.

I thank my wife and friends who read the manuscript over the years correcting my mistakes and encouraging me. I hope you find it a good read. Aloha.

Steve Bohlert  
June 12, 2012  
Pahoa, Hawaii

## *Chapter 1*

# IN THE BEGINNING

When I was seven years old, I hung out in a rubble strewn vacant lot in Ridgewood, New York wondering, "How did I get here? How did I wind up with this family? What's it all about?" I felt like an alien from another planet somehow stranded on this strange planet that lacks love--like Superman only I didn't have superpowers. I was a scrawny kid who lived in a tenement and felt existential alienation and angst at an early age.





I was born December 29, 1946, in Brooklyn to Ruth and Bill Bohlert. Mom was a petite twenty year old. Dad was twenty-five and served in the U.S. Air Force during WWII in England doing radio repair work. He started a radio and TV repair business after the war.

Movies and newsreels of WWII played a large role in shaping my view of life along with the starkness of life in Brooklyn/Queens. My father didn't seem to like me and said demeaning things that hurt my feelings.

"When they were giving out noses, you thought they said roses and said, 'Give me a big red one.'"

"Dad, where do I come from?"

"A crow shit you on a fence post and the sun hatched you."

Looking back, I can see he may have been joking, but then I felt the joke was on me, and it wasn't funny.

We first lived in Glendale, Queens with his parents, John and Minnie, along with my great aunt and uncle in their brownstone row house. My grandparents clearly loved me and my earliest memories are of them.

John had a strawberry garden in the backyard that he fertilized with ashes from the coal furnace and watered from a rain catchment cistern. He made candy for Schraff's, and he did not accept a promotion to foreman. He made great candy and brought home plenty of samples.

I laid in my crib at night listening to cops talk on the way to the corner precinct house as eerie rectangles of light from headlights moved along the dark wall. I bathed in the kitchen sink and played with PT boats and frogmen. When I was older, I bathed in the



big tub, and Grandpa timed how long I could hold my breath underwater. He and I took many walks together by the railroad tracks to a park with a playground and wading pool. On our walks along Myrtle Avenue, he taught me to support local merchants rather than big department stores in Manhattan.

At an early age, I was taught to pray before bed, "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. And if I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."

That was real reassuring. Made me start thinking, "What have I gotten myself into? What's it like lying in the grave dead being eaten by worms?" And so forth. That idea of the temporary nature of life stuck with me, and I still often wonder if I'll make it through the day. I think, "This is a good time to die--doing what I love."

Mom's parents, Eleanor and Spencer, also lived in Queens, and we visited them on weekends. Spencer was the comptroller for the Vanderbilt Hotel in Manhattan. He usually wore a three piece suit and owned a car. We enjoyed watching baseball together. He took me to see the Brooklyn Dodgers. We walked in Prospect Park after Thanksgiving dinner at his apartment.

When I was four, we moved to Ridgewood, and my brother Mike was born. We lived in a cold water, walk up apartment with a kerosene heater. The bath



tub was in the kitchen so pots of hot water from the stove could be added for bathing. My father worked for Fernandez Detective Agency as an armed guard and got the name "Wild Bill." I regretted living on the Queens side of Linden Street because Brooklyn across the street was so much hipper.

There was a Catholic church down the block where I played with friends climbing among the statues of saints on the facade and peering inside the dark mysterious church. A Lutheran church up the block was where I attended Sunday School and played Little Boy Blue in the Christmas play.

When I was eight, we moved to a new four bedroom home on a quarter acre in Lake Ronkonkoma, on Long Island about fifty miles east of the city. The area was rural then. A wonderful woods right behind my backyard with wild blueberries was my new playground. I made a tree house, underground fort, lean-to, and log cabin. I enjoyed the outdoors, archery, fishing, hiking, ice skating and sports. I loved this country, soon to be suburban, environment until I became a teenager. Then I wanted to be in the city with a hip culture and things to do other than hang out in the bowling alley.

Dad got a job installing fences and fenced in our backyard where we had a garden, chickens, pidgins, rabbits, and a dog. Then he worked in a delicatessen that he soon bought. It was a family operated business where I also worked starting at ten years old. We formed a bowling team with shirts that said, "Bill's Deli." Life was good. We lived the American dream with a house in the suburbs, a new '58 Chevy sedan, and a Ford pickup.

Dad bought another deli and suffered a disabling stroke while working there. He was legally blind and couldn't walk fast enough to get a seeing-eye-dog. We lost both stores due to the cheating clerk we left in charge. Dad never worked again. We quickly went from middle class to poor when I was thirteen.

I was a bright student but hung out with a rowdy crowd. When I graduated sixth grade, I got a medal from the Daughters of the American Revolution for my knowledge of American history. In high school, I

was on the wrestling and cross country teams as well as a member of the National Honor Society. I was a rocker who smoked cigarettes, drank, danced, and partied. I worked in the school cafeteria, then a deli, and caddied the summer after graduation.

I wanted to be an artist. I pictured myself living in a Paris garret painting. My mother and guidance counsellor persuaded me to become a computer engineer. I am good at math and science, and the missile race was on then. Dad preferred I get a job and help support the family. He accused me of being too smart for my own good and lacking common sense.

I saw college as a way to leave home and get away from my father who was bitter and often put me down. Mike was his favorite, and the two of them enjoyed picking on me. Mom supported me and taught me to do what I want as long as I stayed out of trouble and my father didn't find out.



I got congressional appointments to the Air Force and Coast Guard Academies plus an NROTC scholarship. The Air Force Academy wouldn't take me because I couldn't broad jump far enough. The Coast Guard Academy

wouldn't take me because I had too much acne on my back that might stain their pretty white uniforms. So, I accepted a full scholarship to Pratt Institute Engineering School in Brooklyn and got a thousand dollar student loan to cover living expenses.

Although my family wasn't religious and didn't attend church, after his stroke, Dad took a mail order course with Mom's help, and he became an ordained minister. He set up a church in our home basement and invited family and friends. Of course I had to attend. He preached angry, hell-fire-and-brimstone sermons no one wanted to hear. Fortunately, this did not last too long, and he unsuccessfully pursued other ministries.

In my senior year of high school, I thought, "I should find out about God, the nature of the soul, the purpose of life, and the afterlife before I leave home." I attended adult confirmation classes at a local Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. The pastor answered my questions with unsatisfying dogma, and I saw the church as a social club. The sermons put me to sleep. I stopped attending soon after confirmation.

After graduation in the summer of 1964, I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. It proved a seminal, life changing book. Kerouac presented a captivating, alternative vision of life in stark contrast to the dull suburban life I lived. Like him, I searched for beatific experience found by living life fully--both materially and spiritually. Since then, I follow the road of life as a dharma bum.



*Jack Kerouac*

I was seventeen and the drinking age was eighteen, but I drank in bars and elsewhere for a couple of years by then. One night, I hitchhiked to my favorite party spot, Tavern on the Lake, where they had live rock cover bands. Three guys and a girl picked me up. I sat in the back with the attractive dark-haired girl and one guy. They were all

friendly.

One of the guys said, "Tina's a prostitute. We're going to a motel with her, and we need a few more dollars for the room. For five dollars, you can make it with her in the parking lot while we go inside for a drink."

I said, "Sure," and that was my first sexual intercourse. It was straight forward and unromantic, but we both enjoyed it. The guys finished their drinks and were ready to go. The windows were fogged up, and we were still going strong. They told me, "Hurry up!" I've never been one to hurry sex. It's to be savored.



I packed my suitcase. Mom drove me to the train station, and I moved into the Pratt dormitory, an old converted mansion where I shared a room with two other engineering students. I made the rounds of fra-

ternity parties and started classes. After two weeks, I knew I did not want to be an engineer. I tried transferring to the Pratt Art School, but because my scholarship was in engineering, I couldn't. I put minimal effort into engineering classes, studied English composition, sociology, and existential literature electives, hung out with the art students, and sat in on life drawing classes.

Joe's Bar on Clinton Street became a favorite hangout for me and many of my classmates. They had good food and drink as well as a congenial atmosphere. I also made regular trips to Greenwich Village and the Lower East Side, where beat culture was in full bloom. Sometimes, I walked there across the Brooklyn bridge.

My friend Joel, a student from Brighton Beach, introduced me to his friends, and I dated a Lebanese Jewish girl. We told her parents that my name was Steve Levi, since they only let her date Jews.

Toward the end of the school year as finals neared, my student loan money was running out. I got a job selling magazine subscriptions on the streets and door to door in Brooklyn and the Bronx with a multiracial crew of young people. After work, we went to a pool hall in Harlem, scored some pot and hung out together.

When school ended, I dropped out and moved into a garret in Bedford Stuyvesant. I shared a large room divided in half by stacked milk case shelves with a black, jazz bass player. I got a job doing layout and proofreading for a check printing company in



Harlem. One of my coworkers was a fellow beat who lived in the Lower East Side.

He turned me on to a sugar cube of LSD. I went home and tripped at night. I saw the interconnectedness of all things. I also saw how crazy New York was. I looked out the window at the city and realized New York wasn't a good place for me to live. I decided not to spend another winter there.

## **On the Road**

A cold, drizzly day in October 1965, I stood at the entrance to the Jersey Turnpike hitchhiking to Mexico City with a duffle bag and guitar. I hit the road in search of enlightenment, adventure, and romance. Kerouac, the existentialists, LSD, pot, and the Village scene fueled my spiritual quest.

A series of rides took me to Kansas City. Wander- ing around stockyards at night between Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas, after three days on the road dealing with rednecks, gays, cops and sundry others, I decided to go Greyhound.

On the bus to Laredo, I met Paul, a young Mis- sourian on his way to San Miguel de Allende, an artist colony in the mountains north of Mexico City. While drinking tequila and eating in Laredo, Paul per- suaded me to go with him.

We took crowded, hot, bumpy busses to Guadala- jara, and from there, a train crowded with chickens, goats, vomiting babies, and poor Mexicans. We ar-

rived in San Miguel early in the morning and went to a hotel where birds sang loudly in a courtyard tree. After a good huevos rancheros breakfast, we went to our room for much needed sleep. The next day, we rented a comfortable house for twenty-five dollars a month.

On our way home from the bars and restaurants at night, a gang of young Mexicans followed us and yelled insults because we were long haired gringos. I was accustomed to carrying a knife and ready for action. However, after several nights like that, even though we were able to avoid violence, we cut our hair, and I took on a more Poncho Villa look with long side burns and drooping mustache after I shaved my beard.

One night, Paul and I ate filet mignon and drank tequila at a restaurant. We met two charming sisters from Queretero named Maria and Lupe. A couple of days later, Paul and I went to Queretero to see them. After a day of meeting the family, shopping, dining, visiting the church, and promenading around the square we took the girls home. As we got ready to leave, their brother, Raul, told us where the local brothel was located.

Paul and I liked hiking in the mountains around San Miguel. One evening, we sat on our rooftop drinking wine and watching the sun set. I said, "This is beautiful, but can you imagine what it's like to see the sun set into the Pacific? I've never seen the Pacific. Have you?"

"No." Paul replied.

"How far is it to the coast?"

"About three hundred miles."

"Isn't Puerto Vallarta west of here?"

"Yeah! How'd you like to go there?"

"Yeah! Why don't we walk straight across country to Puerto Vallarta? We can go talk to Raul and find out what the terrain and the natives are like between here and there and if we should attempt it." I suggested.

"Hey, that's a good idea."

We went to Queretero, and Raul gave the go ahead. We said good bye to Maria and Lupe. Paul bought a pistol, and I bought a big sheath knife along with canteens, boots, and big sombreros. We talked of what it would be like to live as *banditos* in the mountains. Maybe we could rustle a couple of horses.

We returned to San Miguel and got our things. Stuffing our packs with sausages, bread, cheese, and canned goods, canteens filled with wine, we set out early the next morning. The first day's hike took us further into the mountains than we had been. Sunset with the lights from San Miguel shimmering in the distance looked magical.

The magic wore off. Eating cactus pears and pulp, we marched on sore feet in new boots. Drinking from streams, being chased by farmer's dogs, and sleeping in the cold, high desert nights with just one blanket each--after several days we headed for a road.

After a month in Mexico, Paul was broke, and I only had enough money for one bus ticket to Mexicali, on the California border. I took the bus with our

packs and bought a bottle of Benzedrine at the pharmacy to keep me awake during the trip. Paul hitchhiked to meet me. When I crossed the border, a customs agent went through my bag and found the bottle of Benzedrine.

I told him, "I'm a college student. I don't usually use drugs, but I had to stay awake during the trip and keep an eye on my bags so no one could steal them. I bought the pills legally down there and just forgot to take them out of my pack. I wasn't trying to smuggle it. Please don't ruin my life." He gave me a warning and let me go.

I went to a pawn shop and sold my guitar. Then I got a good meal. I slept in the bus station on the Mexican side for a couple of days waiting for Paul. When he arrived, we took a bus to El Centro, California. We checked into a cheap hotel and got work picking asparagus. We came down with Montezuma's revenge and had a hard time picking in the hot sun. We only made enough to pay for our room and meals. We saw the job as a dead end. I made a collect call to Grandma Minnie in New York, and she wired me a couple of hundred dollars.

## **Haight Ashbury Hippie**

We took a bus to San Francisco to check out the North Beach beat scene and get some good work. The night we arrived, we slept sitting in chairs in the bus station. The next morning, we asked for directions to

North Beach and were told, "North Beach is an old, dead scene. You're not beatniks, you're hippies. You should go to Haight Ashbury." We followed that advice and rented a cheap room at the corner of Filmore and Oak in a black district near Haight Ashbury.

There was indeed a mutation of beats into hippies, and the Haight was just beginning to become the center of a new subculture. Frisco seemed clean and beautiful. I was amazed I could walk down wooded paths in Golden Gate Park and not be mugged. The Haight scene was real low key and mellow. The long hairs were friendly, and I noticed a big difference in consciousness between people I associated with here and in New York. People here seemed less violent, friendlier, and generally more consciously evolved.

I got a job making sandwiches downtown at Goldberg's Delicatessen for the holiday season. I attended the first dance at the Filmore Auditorium sponsored by Bill Graham. The Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane were on the bill. They were local bands that played regularly along with a number of other greats. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore in North Beach was a major attraction for me. I went there to browse and buy books by poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure and Gary Snyder as well as books on Eastern spirituality, which various beat writers had introduced me to.

At the Blue Unicorn coffee house, on New Year's Eve, 1965, I met Lydia. I just turned nineteen, and she was a thirty-one year old bohemian, divorcee. As the new year began, we went to Wes Wilson's pad. Wes

was an artist who did psychedelic posters for rock concerts. Wes and his wife were Lydia's friends. They let us spend the night in the living room. We made love there. With her pleasant face, full body and long brown hair, Lydia looked beautiful like one of Rubens' voluptuous nudes.

Lydia was a social worker in Sacramento. We drove there in her MG sports car to spend a few days together. She played the piano and recorder. We listened to Bach harpsichord fugues on the stereo. We fell in love, and I wanted her to move to San Francisco with me. She didn't want to give up her job, and I didn't want to give up the San Francisco scene. We spent weekends together.

One weekend in January 1966, when she came to Frisco to visit me, we were going to the Trips Festival put on by Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters at the Longshoreman's Hall. In the afternoon while shopping on Haight Street, we stopped at a shop that sold hand crafted leather and earrings. There we met Carolyn who ran the shop with her husband Richard. They were also going to the Trips Festival, and we decided to go together. This was a psychedelic extravaganza with acid punch, Andy Warhol, and the Velvet Underground. Since Carolyn and Richard's shop was only a couple of blocks from my room, I visited them regularly, and we became friends. We were all from New York.



When the holiday season was over, I lost my job at the deli. Paul moved to a girlfriend's place, and I couldn't

afford to rent the room we had shared. I moved to a cheap Tenderloin hotel on Turk Street where I paid thirty dollars a month rent. I often went to St. Anthony's for lunch and the Anchor Rescue Mission for dinner. St. Anthony's was a big cafeteria style place frequented by many bums and winos. The Anchor Rescue Mission was run by black Christian women in a storefront. They made everyone listen to a sermon and sing hymns before dinner. The good food they served made it worth it.

I panhandled on Market Street and went to a commune in the Haight to see friends with pot and acid. Around midnight, a couple of people went to a donut shop and got huge bags of free day old donuts that we quickly devoured.

I got a notice from the draft board to report for an induction exam. I didn't bathe, shave or change clothes for a week. The night before the exam, I stayed up all night at the commune on acid. The next morning, I took a bus to the induction center in Oakland.

A sergeant told us to fill out the forms and not to check anything wrong with us that we could not get a doctor's verification for in two weeks. Not being able to afford a doctor, I didn't check anything, but made a note that I had many things wrong that I didn't check. I went through the physical exam wearing brown plaid boxer shorts and engineer boots. When they wanted to take a blood test, I made a scene saying, "No, don't stick me with that! I can't stand needles."

When I got to the psychiatrist's office for an interview, he saw my note and told me I should check

whatever was wrong with me. It said something like, "Do you or have you ever." I checked everything I could think of from bedwetting to nightmares, drug use and homosexual tendencies. Stuttering and appearing like a mental wreck, he saw I wasn't Army material and gave me a 1-Y classification saying there was no need for future reexamination.

As I checked out to leave, they asked if I wanted counseling to get myself straightened out. I told them, "No, I like being this way." They gave me a voucher for free lunch at a local restaurant, and I left a free man.

## **Carolyn and I**

After a while, I got a job as a substitute carrier and clerk with the post office. I rented a studio apartment in the Haight and did abstract painting. I entered my work in a post office art show in Golden Gate Park.

Carolyn and Richard decided to give up their shop and wholesale earrings they made. They suggested I share a two bedroom apartment with them. I agreed. At the time, I was going with a cute eighteen year old named Mary who I met at the Avalon Ballroom. She lived with her parents in Daly City. When she visited me, we did acid and made love.

One day, we sat in the living room talking. There was a loud knock on the door and we heard, "It's the police. Open up." Richard grabbed his shotgun and stood pointing it at the door in case they broke in,



while I ripped up the pot plants we grew in the living room and threw them in the fireplace, which was burning at the time. After we destroyed the evidence and put the gun away, we opened the door to find a friend of Richard's who decided to play a practical joke. That was the end of the friendship.

I bought a BMW 500 motorcycle. I took Carolyn for rides at night. We parked in Golden Gate Park, went in the woods, and made love. We even made love in the kitchen while Richard was in another room.

Richard bought a BMW 250, and we took a trip to Big Sur. Carolyn rode with me since I had the bigger bike. We raced down the coast at 105 miles per hour. The wind rushed under my helmet visor, and I breathed in gulps while Carolyn crouched behind me to break the wind.

We rented a room at the Redwood Lodge. Richard stayed there while Carolyn and I went to the Enchanted Forest to drop a thousand mics of acid each. We sat on the bank of a stream naked, became absorbed in colors and patterns, and then broke into the white light. A couple of young women swam up stream from us. After some time, I regained external consciousness and dove into the stream feeling at one with it.

We heard a couple of fishermen approaching from down stream. We were in no condition to deal with them. We grabbed our clothes and ran up the hill into the woods. After the fishermen passed, we made love. We felt primitive and talked of going over the hill,

never returning to civilization again. However, we thought we might be hunted like animals, and as darkness set in about us, we made our way to the lodge.

The next day, we headed back to San Francisco. Richard's bike broke down half way. Carolyn and I continued home. We couldn't live with Richard any longer and decided to get our own apartment while he waited for his bike to be fixed.

The first day we looked for a place, we were hit from the side by a drunk driver as we went through an intersection. Fortunately, no one was going too fast. The bike still ran, and we were scraped and bruised.

The next day, we stopped at a light at Market and VanNess, one of the busiest downtown intersections. The light turned green, and I took off. A second later, I was flying through the air. My hands broke the fall. Then the bike landed across my legs. I lay in the middle of the intersection with my broken left wrist flapping. A red sports car went through a red light, and I smashed into the side of it. Fortunately, a motorcycle cop, right behind him, called an ambulance and tow truck. The bike was totaled. Carolyn bounced off the back, landed on her ass and only suffered bruises.

The ambulance took us to an emergency room where my arm was put in an elastic bandage and sling. We took a bus to the apartment we were going to look at on California Street and rented it. We made love on the hideaway bed that came with the apartment. When I put weight on my wrist, I blacked out

on top of her. The next day, I had my wrist set and put in a cast. We moved our things into the new apartment before Richard got back.

I was unable to work for several weeks and collected worker's compensation. We spent our days smoking and doing acid while listening to Dylan, Indian *ragas*, and Jefferson Airplane. We explored the outer reaches of the mind and enjoyed the heavenly pleasures of tripped out tantric sex as the two of us became one.

When my wrist mended, I returned to the post office, and Carolyn also got a job there. We decided to save for a trip to Yucatan Mexico where we could live as hermits in the jungle. We adopted a macrobiotic diet and flew kites from our rooftop feeling renewed youthful exuberance. At City Lights Bookstore, we bought a number of books on Asian spirituality to take with us.

We reduced our possessions to what fit in our packs and boarded a Greyhound. The ride down the California coast was so smooth, it seemed like we were sitting still watching a movie go by. We made love in the back of the bus with Carolyn sitting on my lap.

When we reached Colima, Mexico, we got a hotel room. Carolyn was sick. We went north to Sayula and rented a house where she could recuperate. I read the *Bhagavad Gita* and was impressed by how loving Krishna seemed. By the time Carolyn recovered, I had a bad case of Montezuma's revenge. We decided to go back to San Francisco in December 1966.

We rented a room in a commune on Ashbury Street. Kris, a Haight Street shop owner, and her son lived in the next room. Mark D'Atillo, who was later to become Vishnujan Maharaj, his wife Jan, and their daughter lived upstairs. The Haight was blossoming with be-ins, acid, and hippies.

Carolyn and I studied some Eastern books like the *Bhagavad Gita* while in Mexico, and their advice was to accept the guidance of a spiritual master to further progress. The knowledge could not be gotten from a book alone. To attain true enlightenment one needed a *guru*, a spiritual teacher.

## *Chapter 2*

# THE KRISHNA MOVEMENT

It was a warm, sunny January day in 1967. The Human Be-In was the culmination of the acid spiritual revival that swept the nation in the mid-sixties. It was hosted by poet Allen Ginsberg and acid-guru Timothy Leary, presiding priests of the hippie culture. It included bands like the Grateful Dead and Jefferson Airplane, poets Gary Snyder and Michael McClure, and the Hell's Angeles who were supposed to provide security. Acid was handed out free at the gates of the soccer field, but Carolyn and I brought our own.

This was presented as the great liberation by boat Buddha spoke of when a large group of people attain liberation together. Over two hundred thousand hippie pilgrims came to the holy city from all over the country for this happening.

Ginsberg led the assembled congregation in chanting mantras and invocations. A sky diver parachuted in, and music that included chanting Hare Krishna carried the crowd to a drug enhanced spirituality of oneness, egolessness, and hope. However, when the Hell's Angeles beat up a human being, the energy seemed to crumble and fall.

As twilight approached, Ginsberg announced that we had not attained the desired liberation since we were coming down and were still where we started

out, so we should march to the sea and chant for the incarnation of the Maitreya Buddha who promised to liberate all people. However, most of the people there had a "Well, now the party's over, let's go home" attitude.

I saw that LSD wasn't the way to spiritual liberation--coming down one more time. I lay in the woods just to the east of the soccer field in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, crying and being comforted by my lover, Carolyn. As I came down, I realized after almost two years of taking LSD religiously that it would not bring me the desired eternal liberation I sought. I felt utterly devastated.

I hated coming down. LSD and the Human Be-in weren't just a fun drug experience for me. They were a means to spiritual liberation--release from the sufferings of this material existence. The goal was to merge with the white light and not return. Void out--lose all sense of individuality and egotism. Become one with the divine. I went to the Human Be-in with high expectations of attaining this goal, but they were crushed.

I believed in God and reincarnation. That was the main thing keeping Carolyn and I from taking a very large dose of acid and jumping off the Golden Gate Bridge together and leaving this material existence. We didn't think it was that easy to escape. It was like cheating on a test or copping out of what we were here to do.

While sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll were great, they just weren't enough. Our spirits longed for more. We

wanted to experience life on a higher plane without the ups and downs of LSD. We actively sought a spiritual teacher among those who made their way to San Francisco.

Walking to Golden Gate Park near Kesar Stadium a couple of days after the Human Be-in, we saw an old storefront at 518 Frederick Street that was being set up as the "Sri Sri Radha Krishna Temple." A notice in the window said the bands Grateful Dead, Great Society and Jefferson Airplane endorsed the temple and to stop by if interested in helping out. We were interested. I felt like we were being led to new hope for the future.

I came home that day with *The Oracle*, a hippie newspaper that carried an article saying A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami, the founder and spiritual master of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Inc., was coming to the Radha Krishna Temple to give a series of devotional yoga classes.

The article said Allen Ginsberg knew him from the Lower East Side in Manhattan and called him the "downtown swami." Ginsberg said he was worth checking out, and Ginsberg carried weight with us as an older seeker whose opinion we valued. Carolyn and I were eager to meet Bhaktivedanta. Our desire to find meaning and purpose in the absurdity of life was intense.

January 16, 1967, a few days after the Human Be-In, we walked down Haight St. on a beautiful sunny morning and passed the Print Mint, a psychedelic poster shop, and noticed a sign saying that Swami

Bhaktivedanta would arrive at San Francisco International Airport that afternoon. A motorcade would form in Panhandle Park, and anyone who wanted to go to the airport to greet Swami was to meet there and bring a flower, fruit, or incense offering.

Carolyn and I went home to get incense and pot. We picked flowers in Golden Gate Park, and walked to the Panhandle, a strip of grass and eucalyptus trees that ran between Fell and Oak Streets a couple of blocks north of Haight Street.

Disciples from New York with long hair and beards led chanting of the mantra--Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare; Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. They played bongos, congas, a kettle drum, hand cymbals, tambourine, and a small pump organ called a harmonium. Many danced. Carolyn and I joined in the chanting, which lasted around an hour.

A devotee announced it was time to go to the airport. We rode with people who also came to see Swami for the first time and smoked a joint on the way.

As we arrived at the airport gate where Swami was to arrive, Ginsburg led chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra as he played his harmonium. About fifty people sat on the floor chanting while many others gathered around to look in wonder and bemusement. The chanting went on for about another hour. I felt higher from it than I did from smoking pot or taking acid. It was a natural spiritual high.



Here was this group of hippies sitting on the floor chanting like a bunch of lunatics, being stared at by a crowd of straights, and I didn't care one bit. I was usually self-conscious, but now I felt above the mundane reality of my situation--untouchable. Everything felt right.

When Swami's plane arrived, people lined up at the gate to greet him. I imagined my guru would have long matted hair and beard, wearing simple rags, straight out of a jungle cave like the picture of a guru that appeared earlier on the cover of "The Oracle." Swami Bhaktivedanta emerged with shaved head and bright pinkish saffron robes, a big smile, and a glowing effulgence around him. I said to Carolyn, "He's real! He's real! He's my spiritual master."

Allen Ginsberg stepped forward with a large bouquet of flowers, and Bhaktivedanta graciously accepted it. Other people gave him flowers and fruit that he accepted smiling graciously. I was too blown away to give him my flowers. We followed Swami down the airport corridors chanting "Hare Krishna." A black 1949 Cadillac Fleetwood waited for him in front of the terminal.

When Swami got outside, he stopped and handed the flowers he was given to the people. He put his arms up and started dancing. Everyone started chanting and dancing intensely. Swami brought it to a climax, muttered a benediction, got into the back seat with Mukunda and Allen Ginsberg. Hari Das drove off wearing a chauffeurs cap. We went to the temple to hear what Swami had to say.

The small storefront temple was full of guests and Swami's disciples. Incense wafted through the air. He remained in his apartment upstairs in the same building. Only his disciples from New York could visit him that day as he was too tired from the flight to receive many visitors. His disciples in the temple led more chanting, served a vegetarian meal, and invited everyone to attend morning and evening classes as well as a Sunday afternoon "love feast."

The devotees served curried vegetables, fried pastries, spiced fruit, rice, and fried curd balls soaked in sugar water. Being on a simple macrobiotic diet, I thought the food contained too much sugar and spice. I had a hard time even identifying what the sweet balls of fried cheese were since I didn't eat milk products or sugar.

Some years later, I spoke to Bhaktivedanta about that first experience at the temple. He said the cheese balls were "ISKCON bullets, and when they pierce the heart they kill the material propensity and develop attraction for Krishna."

We were eager to hear Swami Bhaktivedanta's teachings the next day. Since we lived only a few blocks away, it was easy to attend his classes. Sitting on a cushion on a raised platform, he chanted Hare Krishna before and after each lecture and made a point of emphasizing its potency as a means of attaining enlightenment and love of God.

"Krishna is the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Radha, his consort, the Divine Mother, is addressed as Hare. Krishna means the All Attractive, and Rama is

another name of God meaning the Supreme Pleasure Eternal."

I resonated with God being male and female halves engaged in an eternal love affair. It tangibly embodies the idea "God is love."

Swami stressed that God is a person, and we are "parts and parcels" of God formed in God's image. We have eternal spiritual identities that transcend this bodily concept of life. Our purpose is to serve God--Krishna.

However, I was an adherent of the Buddhist concept of void, Vedanta's impersonal Brahman, or the White Light I experienced on LSD trips. I wanted to merge with the impersonal oneness and lose individual identity. I preferred the egoless state of pure consciousness I experienced peaking on acid to the suffering of this world. Buddha said, "Life is suffering." As I put it, "Life sucks." I wanted out and didn't want to come back again.

Swami explained that because the soul is individual and personal it can't find satisfaction in impersonal oneness and therefore eventually returns to the material plane. Swami offered a way to reach a spiritual plane of variegated, personal bliss where one could remain eternally. "Stay high forever" was his slogan. It sounded real good to me and many other tripped out hippies. If only it were so easy.

Swami advocated "no intoxication, meat eating, illicit sex, or gambling." I didn't have a problem accepting no meat eating or gambling, but I was heavily into sex and drugs such as LSD and pot. I was an an-

archist, and Swami advocated the strict authority of scripture and the disciplic succession of which he was the current representative.

I often came to class with questions. Sometimes Swami answered them during the lecture without me asking. I felt like he read my mind. Other times, I asked them during the question and answer period after each lecture. Swami Bhaktivedanta seemed to know what he was talking about and had an answer for everything. He spoke with unequaled authority and self assurance. He didn't speak of vague possibilities, but of Absolute Truth.

Allen Ginsburg often came to the seven a.m. worship. One morning, he sat on the storefront window ledge putting on his shoes to leave. I asked, "If everything is void, where do all these people and things we see come from?"

He replied, "At some time before the beginning of time, phantasmal noises and things started happening in the void. They gradually developed until we got to where we are now."

I didn't think his answer was satisfactory. It didn't explain this variegated life or the experience that when I peaked on acid and lost ego consciousness, I came down as the same person again. The ego appeared to be a permanent reality rather than a temporary illusion.

Swami's explanation of the eternal soul and Krishna, the Supreme Personality of Godhead, being the cause of all causes seemed a more plausible and complete explanation of our origin. I decided I

wanted to be like Swami and know what he knew. The only way to do that was to follow his path.

After living together for six months, Carolyn and I argued and talked of breaking up. We asked each other what we planned to do. Both of us wanted to follow Swamiji, as his disciples called him. We went to his apartment to ask for initiation.

Swamiji sat on a madras cloth covered mattress on the floor of his bedroom-office.

"We'd like to be initiated by you."

Swamiji beamed broadly. He remembered us from his classes during the previous month. He knew I had monist tendencies, the desire to merge with God's undifferentiated oneness, and he tried philosophizing with me, "If I asked you to jump out the window, would you do it?"

I said, "Sure." I thought, "This is a test." I read about someone who upon being rejected for initiation threw himself off a cliff and when his dead body was brought before the master, the master said, "Now he is ready for initiation," and brought him back to life.

"That is another thing," Swamiji said.

Pointing to a print of a painting on the wall of an old devotee named Surdas with a shaved head and a lock of hair coming out of the top, Swamiji said, "You should shave your head like that."

Being a long haired, bearded hippie who decided to never cut my hair, I said, "I don't think I can do that. Krishna had long hair. Rama had long hair. Jesus had long hair. Why do I have to shave my head?"

Rubbing his head, Swamiji replied, "Because now you are following me, but that is all right. You are still young and there is time. At least shave your beard and cut your hair like a gentleman."

Then he explained various dietary rules such as not eating meat, fish, eggs, or onions. I asked, "Why not onions?"

"In the *Puranas*, it is said that a meat eater once killed a cow and ate it. Not being able to finish it, he buried it like a dog buries a bone. When he came back to dig it up, the cow was gone and there was an onion in its place. Onions come from cows, so we don't eat them."

I thought, "If I believe that, I'll believe anything he says."

Carolyn and I lived together but weren't married. She was divorced from Richard. Swamiji said we needed to marry or live separately. I had promised Carolyn I would stay with her the rest of my life and asked what she wanted to do. We decided to get married.

We went downstairs to a room behind the store-front temple where the devotees were meeting. When we announced, "We're going to be initiated," Mukunda, the temple secretary said, "We'll let you work with us, but we won't be your friends."

"We didn't come here to join your social club but to take a spiritual master." I replied.

The next morning, I shaved my beard and cut my hair so it was short in the front and long in back.

"How's this?" I asked Swamiji in his apartment.

"You should cut the back also," he replied.

One Thursday evening, in February 1967, Bhaktivedanta Swami initiated Carolyn and I. We dedicated our lives to a path of enlightenment under the direction of a spiritual master who claimed an unbroken chain of spiritual masters that went back to Krishna himself.

In front of an altar, devotees formed a circle around a wok filled with dirt. Swamiji sat with his back leaning against a wall with the wok in front of him. Carolyn and I sat on cushions opposite him.

A number of devotees muttered mantras on their prayer beads, and four of them read aloud at once from four different Vaishnava scriptures. Swamiji drew a pattern in the dirt with colored flours and built a fire in the center using splinters of wood dipped in clarified butter. Carolyn and I repeated mantras after him and threw a mixture of barley, sesame seeds, and ghee in the fire saying, "*Svaha!*" as an offering. As a final offering, we placed a couple of whole bananas in the fire.

Then Swamiji chanted the Hare Krishna mantra on our large, red wood prayer beads to show us how to do it. He instructed us to chant at least sixteen rounds of 108 beads a day. It took us about ten minutes to chant one round of the Hare Krishna mantra in the beginning. Chanting a round with the whole congregation out loud was a regular part of morning worship.

Swamiji said, "What is your name?"

"Carolyn."

"From now on you will be known as Krishna Dasi."

I thought that at initiation Swamiji would say that we were Krishna, but he explained, "Dasi means maidservant."

"What is your name?"

"Steve."

"From now on you will be known as Subal Das."

I was disappointed that I wasn't Krishna. I expected at initiation Swamiji would reveal we are God. What he taught was we are infinitesimal parts of God one in quality with God but different in quantity.

We practiced celibacy for a couple of days following the rule of no illicit sex now that we were initiated. Fortunately, our wedding took place that Saturday evening.

Carolyn borrowed a white *sari* from Kris, who lived in the commune with us and ran a Haight Street boutique. I borrowed a saffron *dhoti* from Hayagriva, who came from the New York temple. *Saris* and *dhotis* are traditional Indian clothes adopted by the Krishna movement. They consist of a long piece of cloth that is wrapped, pleated, and draped in men's and women's styles.

We spent the day preparing a feast. I went downtown to get rare spices, a case of milk, and ten pounds of butter so Swamiji could cook milk sweets. The temple was decorated with many flowers I picked in Golden Gate Park that morning.

There was a fire sacrifice similar to the one at initiation. After traditional Hindu vows, instead of ex-



changing rings our cloths were tied together. Everyone joined in chanting. The feast was delicious. Afterwards, everyone chanted and danced. I played the kettle drum and danced so ecstatically, it was hard to keep my poorly tied *dhoti* from falling off.

Krishna Devi (her new married name meaning goddess) and I went home and made love on a flower strewn bed. Even though we were only parts Krishna, we enjoyed the same pleasures he did according to late medieval Indian devotional poets such as Govinda Das and Vidyapati whom we read. I thought of Radha's jug like breasts as she straddled Krishna making love to him as Krishna Devi straddled me while I fondled her breasts. We are different in quantity from God, but similar in quality. According to scripture, Krishna took 16,108 wives when he was on earth five thousand years ago. I had one.

Contrary to Swamiji's teachings, I began my devotion to Radha Krishna with a *tantric* view of sexuality and spirituality. It stuck with me over the years.



Swamiji starred at the "Mantra Rock Dance" held in the Avalon Ballroom, Sunday, January 29, 1967. Allen Ginsburg and acid-rock bands the Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, Moby Grape, Quicksilver Messenger Service, and Big Brother & the Holding Company were on the bill. The biggest names in the art, Ben Van Meter and Roger Hillyard, produced a multimedia light show.

About five thousand people packed the place. Devotees began the show with chanting and some

musicians joined in as incense filled the hall. Moby Grape played until around ten.

Swamiji arrived and came on stage where he sat on a cushion. Allen Ginsberg introduced Swamiji and chanting of the Hare Krishna mantra. Swamiji spoke about chanting and asked Ginsberg to lead. He led some really ec-

static chanting while playing his harmonium. The audience joined in as well as various band members, as pictures of Krishna were projected on the walls. The audience held hands and danced along with Swamiji. This ecstatic chanting and dancing went on for over an hour. Swamiji gave the benediction and left. The other rock bands continued the show.

The next morning, the storefront temple was crowded with people who were at the Avalon the previous night. Many of them were up all night. Ginsberg recommended this early morning worship for those coming down from LSD.



A group of devotees continued to open shows at the Avalon Ballroom chanting from the stage as people came in. We got in free this way. Then we danced to the bands. This was our culture, and it was a way of dovetailing it with our spiritual practices. I remember one night when Swamiji's personal servant, a young man from New York named Ronchor drifted off into the strobe lights saying, "I'm stayingggggg..." as the rest of us prepared to leave. Swamiji was very disappointed by this. Ronchor soon left the movement. For some, the pull of hippie life too strongly conflicted with Swamiji's teachings.

Swamiji stayed in San Francisco a couple of months longer. Sunday afternoons, Swamiji and his band of disciples went to Hippie Hill in Golden Gate Park with a sound system and instruments. We chanted with a large group of people who congregated there and joined in. Swamiji played cymbals or a clay drum and led chanting with a microphone. He was the center of attention. The loving reverence his disciples showed him caused onlookers to regard him with curiosity and respect. His presence established the ancient historical quality of the chanting in the midst of this hippie gathering.

After chanting an hour or more, Swamiji would stop and address the crowd, "Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. This is the sound vibration, and it is to be understood that the sound vibration is transcendental. Because it is transcenden-



*Subal seated left front, Krishna Devi dancing left rear,  
Swamiji chanting at microphone.*

tal vibration, therefore it appeals to everyone, even without understanding the language of the sound. This is the beauty. Even children respond to it..." After speaking about five minutes, he started chanting again.

I danced as Swamiji showed us, but some devotees thought I looked like a wild, Native American dancer. Swamiji also danced with his disciples and other hippies. He moved in a stately, elderly way, deeply pleased and smiling at the often wild and sensual enthusiasm of those around him. We invited everyone to the temple for a feast, chanting, and lecture.

Swamiji and his disciples sometimes went to the Psychedelic Shop that sold drug paraphernalia, incense, posters, etc., on Haight Street to chant and lec-

ture in its meditation room. It was covered with madras bedspreads, lit by flashing colored lights, and a strobe light. The smell of incense filled the air. Usually there was a small group of disciples and a few hippies.

One night, I dreamed that Swamiji took me to the Psychedelic Shop. We slipped in under the door. The gods Shiva and Indra were there. Swamiji introduced me. Indra, the king of heaven, threatened to stab me with his shining sword. Then they started laughing and said they were just testing me. It was a vivid dream and left a strong impression on me.

Another night, Swamiji initiated several people, some of whom were mentally unstable from the effects of drugs. Afterwards, I stayed at the temple alone in the basement to mimeograph the latest issue of *Back to Godhead*, our monthly publication, which was edited by the New York temple.

When I got home, Krishna Devi was terrified. She could see a ghostly form that looked like a demon out of the Tibetan *Book of the Dead* that came home with me. We chanted to Krishna and his ferocious half lion, half man form, Nrisingha Dev to protect us and drive the ghost away. It worked.

The next day, we told Swamiji what happened. He was pleased with us for depending on Krishna. He said, "I used to rent a very nice house in Calcutta for little rent. It was haunted, so no one else would live there. I sat in my rocking chair and chanted Hare Krishna. The ghost would be standing there but he

would not approach me. Always chant Hare Krishna and it will save you."

Swamiji went to New York for three months to teach his disciples there. He suffered a stroke which almost killed him. His disciples were upset, and we wondered how we would carry on without him.

Swami Chinmoyananda, an Indian who taught a philosophy of becoming one with impersonal Brahman, came to Haight Ashbury to give a talk. Several devotees went. During the question and answer period, I challenged things he said. I used quotes from *Bhagavad Gita*, the main Hindu scripture, to back up my argument and felt I did a good job of it. Some devotees thought I was too heavy on Chinmoyananda, but when Swamiji heard about it, he was pleased.

When Swamiji returned to the Bay Area, the devotees got him a house on Stinson Beach to recuperate in relative seclusion. Kirtanananda, Hayagriva's former gay lover from New York, came with Swamiji and lived with him as his servant. Although no one was supposed to see him without permission, Krishna Devi and I went there by bus along with Upendra who was going to serve Swamiji.

Swamiji was glad to see us. He said, "I saw the agents of death coming to take me away. But I prayed that I live because my disciples need me. Krishna saved me."

Swamiji seemed transfigured and more effulgent than before. He asked me to lead some chanting. I sang Hare Krishna to a melody we learned from a Ve-

danta Forest Ashram record. I wanted to see what Swamiji's reaction would be.

"Have you been lecturing in the temple?" he asked.

"No. Do you want me to?"

"Yes, you are becoming advanced and should practice for opening your own temple."

"Where do you want me to open it?"

"You're an American and know better. You decide."

Krishna Devi and I walked on the beach and talked things over. We decided to open a temple in Santa Fe, New Mexico since we heard many hippies were going there to get away from the Haight during the "Summer of Love" when teeny boppers and speed freaks overran the area.

I lectured once in the San Francisco temple, got some other devotees interested in going, and prepared to hitchhike there with Jananivas to start the temple. Jananivas and I flipped a coin to decide who would be temple president. We thought Krishna would decide the outcome in that manner. I won although I was never attached to the position, and it was a big responsibility running a temple at the inexperienced age of twenty.

Before I left, we held the first American Rathayatra Festival in San Francisco July 9, 1967. Rathayatra is an annual festival held at Puri, India for centuries involving three large wooden deities of Krishna, his brother Balaram and sister Subadra, pulled through the streets on large wooden carts by thousands of people. The deities are taken to the Gundicha temple where

they stay for a week reenacting the meeting of Krishna with Radha, the lover of his youth, when he was an older king at Kurushetra, and their return to Vrindaban.

Our procession began on Haight Street and continued to the ocean along the south side of Golden Gate Park. The three Jagannath deities Shyamasundar carved out of big blocks of wood were placed on a canopied flatbed truck he drove. A group of devotees sat with the deities chanting and playing instruments over an amplifier.

I danced wildly the whole time in front of the truck slowly making its way down Haight Street while a motorcycle cop told the driver to hurry it up. I remembered how Chaitanya danced in front of the Rathayatra cart in ecstasy five hundred years earlier as Bhaktivedanta described it from the *Chaitanya Charitamrita*.

The crowds in the streets loved the festival. At the beach, devotees passed out food we prepared and offered to the deities. Some of us also unwittingly ate LSD spiked food hippies gave us.

Then, about thirty devotees got on the flatbed truck and drove through Muir Woods to Swamiji's house at Stinson beach for a feast and a talk about the significance of the festival. The drive and devotees carrying the deities down the beach on a canopied platform reminded me of something out of a Fellini film. It was surreal--the deities seemed to float down the beach in slow motion on the devotees' shoulders



as if they came from another time and place. They did.

Kirtanananda and Swamiji prepared a wonderful feast. Swamiji talked about the Rathayatra festival in India and how Jagannath left Puri to go to Vrindaban to see his friends and lovers. The deities spent a week at the beach with Swamiji just as they stayed at a sea side temple near Puri after the festival there.

Kirtanananda was the first Western disciple I saw with a shaved head. I thought, "Now that I'm going to start a temple, I'm ready to shave my head." I saw this as a sign of commitment. A couple of devotees helped me shave. They left a lock of hair in the back called a *sikha*, which is the sign of a Vaishnav or Krishna devotee. I kept my head shaved for the next eight years.



*Swamiji the night before leaving*

Krishna Devi freaked out when she first saw me with a shaved head. She thought I was entering the renounced order and would leave her. I assured her that was not my intention.

Jananivas and I planned to go to Santa Fe the same day Swamiji left for

India. Swamiji was going to get help from *ayurvedic* doctors or die in the holy land of Vrindaban. He gave a powerful talk in the temple the night before his departure asking his disciples to carry on with their spiritual progress and spread the movement he started. Many devotees were moved to tears by the thought of separation from Swamiji and the mission he gave them.

The morning of July 22, 1967, before leaving, Swamiji initiated a number of new disciples, some of whom were only around for a day.

I planed to go to the airport to see Swamiji off, but there was no room in the car for some new devotees. I let them have my seat since some of them spent little time with Swamiji. I went home with Krishna Devi, and cried feeling love and separation from Swamiji. He completely reshaped my life giving me new meaning and purpose, and I didn't know if I would see him again. Krishna Devi comforted me. After a short while, I got myself together.

## **Starting Temples**

Jananivas and I took a bus to the freeway ramp and hitchhiked south. We heard Seton Castle was for rent outside Santa Fe. It's a huge, fifty room haunted hacienda that was the home of Ernest Thompson Seton, one of the founders of the Boy Scouts, located in the Sangria de Christo Mountains about six miles out of Santa Fe in Seton Village. Mrs. Seton rented to us. The

rent was a reasonable one hundred fifty dollars a month.

I phoned for Krishna Devi and other devotees to drive down and join us. About half the Haight Ashbury temple came. I taught classes daily, hiked in the mountains, managed temple affairs, and worked down the hill in the printing and wrought iron shop run by the Seton's son.

We soon discovered Mr. Seton's ghost lived in the castle along with a number of Indian ghosts from the local burial ground. The castle was left just like when Seton lived there. His buckskin jacket still hung on the chair at his desk. There were numerous Indian artifacts he collected. Our skin crawled when we entered some unused rooms. Sometimes the ghosts entered our quarters and bothered us.

A Hopi medicine man and artisan lived in the village. He was a friend and tried helping us free the castle of its numerous Indian ghosts. We were unsuccessful using both Hindu and Hopi methods such as blowing conches, trying to get the ghost to enter a feather, chanting, and burning incense. The Hopi explained that there were Indian burial grounds near by, and they left spirit guardians to guard their land.

Swamiji wrote me instructions for running the temple and encouraged me to continue with faith in Krishna and guru. The Albuquerque newspaper did a feature article about the temple. Swamiji was happy to receive a copy and pleased with my work.

However, Krishna Devi also wrote to him about separating from me. He said there should be no sepa-

ration, and if it was unavoidable there should be no more sex or remarriage. So, our marital problems continued. Devoting my life to God didn't insure happiness on all levels.

We made trips to the Llama Foundation and New Buffalo communities in the Taos area. Our 1950 Ford panel wagon got stuck in the forest at the Llama Foundation. The community was new, and the roads weren't good. We cut down trees with a hatchet to get out.

At New Buffalo, I lead chanting in a teepee one night when Richard Alpert (later to be Ram Das) joined us. A big peyote ceremony was going on. Devotees took part in the festivities but didn't take peyote.

We went to a hot spring on the banks of the Rio Grande down in the gorge. We bathed naked in the spring and went in the rapids to cool off. There was another hot spring in the Hemes Mountains that we enjoyed going to also. Krishna Devi and I would sometimes sunbathe naked on the castle roof and make love. While we were more disciplined than before initiation, we were still young American hippies.



Harsharani, a woman who joined us from San Francisco, got a letter from Nandarani, who went to Los Angeles with her husband, Dayananda, and Uddhava to start a temple. They wished they had someone like me to help them get started. I didn't enjoy temple administration. I thought the Seton Village temple

could carry on without me. Krishna Devi and I flew to L.A. to help out.

We stayed in a room at the storefront temple on Pico Boulevard. Relations with Nandarani deteriorated quickly. Dayananda, an ex-Marine and computer repairman, was neutral but had to support his wife. They felt we threatened their position of authority since we were more experienced devotees. Uddhava was impartial and simple in his dealings. He was one of those truly humble devotees who had no aspiration for position or power. He was there simply to serve. Unfortunately, temple politics became a strong, driving factor in temple life.

Swamiji was pleased with our activities there and wrote:

Your service attitude encourages me because Krishna can never be an order supplier. We should always remember that Krishna is the only order giver. His order is received through the agency of the spiritual master. The bonafide spiritual master is the manifest representative of Krishna. The spiritual master is described in the scriptures as good as Krishna because he is the most confidential servitor of Krishna. To please the spiritual master is to please Krishna. On this principle we must advance our Krishna Consciousness and there is no danger.

Pleasing Swamiji was most important for spiritual progress. He saw me as a dependable leader capable of carrying out his orders faithfully--unlike Kirtanananda who Swamiji made a monk and sent to London to start a temple. Instead, he went back to New York and caused dissent.

One day, a Tarot reader came to the temple and did a reading for me. My significator card was the Hierophant. I saw the impending breakup of my marriage in The Tower. For days after the reading, I experienced visions of an old house on a wind swept hill with bare trees--perhaps on an English moor. I felt this was where the person in charge of all evil on earth lived. This was my first Tarot reading, and I didn't have another for many years. It opened me to a level of psychic phenomenon I was uncomfortable with. However, years later, I became a professional Tarot reader, but I no longer use it.

A guy who regularly came to the temple invited the devotees to come to one of prominent yogi, Swami Vishnu Devananda's classes. Swami was critical and offensive to our religious beliefs as he misunderstood them. I answered his challenges then left with the other devotees.

We went to Griffith's Park on Sunday afternoons to chant and have a love feast. We were well received by many hippies who congregated in the hills above LA. I preached regularly in the temple and at Sunday feasts in the park. I was interviewed about Krishna consciousness on a radio show broadcast from a hip

bar. Swamiji was well pleased with my work and planned to be in L.A. soon.

I was serious about spiritual growth. Swamiji taught abstinence from sex, except married couples could do it once a month for procreation. I found this difficult to follow since I was married to an attractive woman whom I was accustomed to having frequent sex with. I thought it would be easier not to be married and not have sex at all than to be married and follow the once a month rule.

I wrote Swamiji that I was interested in taking *sannyasa*, the renounced order of life, which was celibate and the highest of all the social and spiritual orders according to the Vedic teachings. Swamiji stressed renunciation for attainment of full Krishna consciousness. Krishna Devi became upset when she found out about this letter.

Swamiji quickly responded, "In my opinion, your wife and yourself are nicely executing my mission and please try to follow my instructions and you shall never be unhappy." I was happy to hear this since I loved Krishna Devi and enjoyed married life. I like having a life long companion and an attractive sexual partner. However, Bhaktivedanta's teachings swayed me to believe that renunciation was required to make serious progress on the spiritual path.

We were in L.A. about three months, when we found out the Seton Village temple was falling apart. When Swamiji got this news, he wrote me that I should again take charge there and maintain the tem-

ple singlehandedly if need be, even if no one came, just as he had done in New York when he started out.

We got to Seton Village as the last devotees prepared to leave. Thinking a downtown location might work better, we rented a storefront on Water Street near the plaza in downtown Santa Fe. It had a small apartment in back where we lived. All the other devotees left town except for Dan, a new devotee who helped out. He got a small apartment next door to the temple.

Swamiji was glad to learn that we were reopening the Santa Fe temple. He made a point that once a center is opened it should not be closed. He also wrote that he would soon be one of our guests.



I turned twenty-one in December 1967. I needed to fly to New York to collect a trust fund from an accident when I was eleven years old. It wasn't much money, but it would sure come in handy. Krishna Devi also wanted to go and see her parents in Manhattan. However, she needed to stay in Santa Fe and keep the temple open as Swamiji wanted.

Swamiji wanted me to manufacture incense by hand using what he thought would be cheap Mexican and/or Native American labor. I think he wasn't aware of the cost of labor, materials, etc., in this country, and thought we could compete with Indian incense. Gargamuni, more of a business person than me, later started Spiritual Sky Incense by dipping punks in diluted essential oils and packaging them.



They were toxic and made devotees who were around large stocks of incense sick from the fumes.

I flew to New York and went to the temple at 26 Second Avenue, on the Lower East Side, where I met devotees whom I heard about and /or corresponded with. I slept on the carpeted floor of the storefront temple with most of the male devotees. The next day, I visited Krishna Devi's Jewish parents, and they received me well.

When I went to my parents' house in Lake Ronkonkoma, Long Island, my mother was glad to see me, but my father didn't want me to spend the night. We never got along well. My mother told him she would leave with me if I couldn't stay. He gave in and let me spend the night.

I explained that Krishna is God and my beliefs weren't different in essence from what Christ taught. "If Christ sits at the right hand of God, who is God? What does God look like? He's Krishna." My fundamentalist Christian father couldn't accept this.

The next morning, I took a train to Riverhead, the Suffolk County seat. With the aid of a lawyer, I got the trust fund and returned to the New York temple. After two weeks in New York, I flew home to Santa Fe.

I noticed Krishna Devi seemed to be real close to Dan while I was away. I suspected she was having an affair since she initiated one with me while she was married to Richard. After a few days, I confronted her with this and made her choose between Dan and me. She chose Dan. I told her to get out. She went next

door to Dan's apartment. I threw her belongings on the sidewalk.

The next day, I was still upset. I decided to fly to Los Angeles and see Swamiji who just returned there from India. On the way to the bus depot to take a Greyhound to the Albuquerque airport, I saw Krishna Devi and Dan heading that way about a block ahead of me. I thought, "I'm gonna beat the shit out of Dan. He's kidnapping my wife which the *Vedas* say deserves killing."

I caught up with them in front of the state capitol, threw down my pack, and jumped Dan. After a bit of a scuffle, I got Dan down and banged his head on the sidewalk a few times. A crowd gathered, tried to pull me off him, and kicked me. They threatened to call the cops and yelled, "Leave him alone!"

I replied, "He's kidnapping my wife! I've got to stop him!"

However, I knew I was out numbered and there was no reasoning with them. I beat a hasty retreat, grabbed my pack, caught a cab for the sixty mile ride to the airport, and boarded the plane on time.



It was four days after Swamiji's arrival. He got up from his afternoon nap, walked into the front room, and there I was. He was surprised because I was supposed to be in Santa Fe. I explained what happened.

"Don't worry." Swamiji told me, "I will write a letter to Krishna Devi and tell her to come back to you. You can go back to Santa Fe tomorrow and everything will be all right."

Swamiji and I went to evening worship at the temple, and I spent the night at his place. When we got back from the temple, Swamiji said he was hungry and wanted to eat. It was *ekadasi*, a fast day when grains were not eaten by devotees. Swamiji ordered us to make curried potatoes with yogurt. When asked what the dish was called, he gave a Bengali name that meant "whatever happens to be around the kitchen."

He previously said yogurt shouldn't be eaten at night because it gives bad dreams. When I asked about this, he said, "Don't worry about that! We must eat." I thought Swami wanted to make sure I ate well due to my long trip.

The next morning, I flew back to Santa Fe. Swamiji was calm in my presence, but I later learned that he was deeply disturbed by the affair. Krishna Devi was his disciple, and he performed our sacred marriage ceremony. He wrote a letter for me to take to her asking us to be an ideal couple cooperating in Krishna consciousness.

When I got back to Santa Fe, Krishna Devi and Dan were gone. Meanwhile, in L.A., Swamiji received a letter from her. She wanted to stay in the Krishna movement with Dan.

"This is all nonsense," Swamiji exclaimed. "I will simply go back to Vrindaban and sit and chant Hare Krishna. Why should I do this? Why should I deal with this quarrel between husband and wife? This is not the business of a sannyasi."

Swamiji wrote a strong letter to Krishna Devi in care of the Santa Fe temple urging her to come back to

me. He wrote to me that if I felt too heavy-hearted, I could live with him for a while.

Before his letter arrived, I left Santa Fe for L.A., thinking, "I can't take this anymore. I'm going back to Swamiji."

Swamiji sat on the porch in a loin cloth getting an oil massage in the noonday sun. When he looked down the driveway, he called out, "Subal!" I approached him and offered obeisance.

Swamiji asked, "You got my letter?"

"No," I replied.

"Yes," Swamiji nodded, "you got my letter. I have written you and said that if you are feeling too heavy-hearted, you may come here and live with me for some time."

I moved into the crowded front room of Swamiji's apartment. I slept right outside his room with only a curtain separating us. In the middle of the night, I heard him dictate his translation and commentary of *Bhagavat Puran*.

Swamiji asked me to carve a set of Radha Krishna deities. I went to a lumber yard and bought a block of mahogany. There was a scrap of wood from the half of the block which Radha was to emerge from, and Swamiji wanted Jagannath deities carved in bas relief from that.

Swamiji said, "Krishna is in the block of wood already. You just have to learn to see him there. You can learn to see him in everything." I still practice this teaching and it is an important part of Universalist Radha-Krishnaism.

Swamiji took much interest in the progress of my work and said, "Radha should have big breasts."



Goursundar and Govinda Dasi, a couple from the San Francisco temple, also lived with Swamiji and served him. One day as Govinda Dasi, Rayarama, and I sat with Swamiji in the shade of a neighbor's tree, Swamiji observed a pair of white butterflies. "Just see these worms," he said, pointing to the butterflies. "Here there is husband and wife. The whole world is in this bondage."

Knowing I was still lamenting, Swamiji continued to speak about the topic on both our minds. "It is not so wonderful that Krishna Devi has left," he said. "What is wonderful is that we are able to stay and serve Krishna. The *maya* (illusion) is so strong. It is Krishna's divine energy. And for someone to actually stay engaged in Krishna's service is very rare. The living entity is practically helpless under the sway of *maya's* power and can only cry out to Krishna for help. But we have to pray at every moment that the power of *maya* does not disturb us."

Swamiji liked the deities I carved and wanted them cast in brass. They eventually wound up in the London temple. Swami also liked the small Jagannath deities I carved and painted. He wanted plaster castings made of them so they could be in every home. I also carved a pair of Krishna Balaram Jagannath deities about a foot high for Swamiji. They were later installed in the Seattle temple where the woman who

was to become my next wife worshipped them before we met.

One day, a group of disciples were with Swamiji in his apartment. Govinda Dasi asked if there were a more respectful title we could call him by.

He said, "Yes. You can call me Prabhupad. *Prabhu* is Lord and *pad* is feet. The spiritual master is the lotus feet of the Lord. That is what we called my guru also."

Looking back, I see this as a watershed event. Since then he has been known as Prabhupad. It created a rift between him and some other disciples of his guru. I also think it changed the way he perceived himself, especially as the movement rapidly grew worldwide.



One morning, Goursundar drove Prabhupad to the doctor in an old VW bug. I was in the back seat. The car was painted with Hare Krishna sayings and couldn't do forty miles per hour on the freeway. This attracted a motorcycle cop. He stopped us and although I was a passenger in the back seat, he checked my ID over the radio and found there was a warrant for my arrest for an unpaid ticket from when I drove that car months earlier.

I was arrested and booked. The sacred beads tied around my neck at initiation were cut off, and I was placed in a cell. I got one phone call and used it to call a devotee asking him to bring me bail money.

When I got back to Prabhupad's, he was glad to see me and said the kitchen didn't work right without

me. His lunch was late and the *chapaties* (round whole wheat flat breads) didn't come out right.

When I went to court, I got a suspended sentence. Prabhupad said that was because I wore a Jagannath deity on a string around my neck.

Mukunda and I arranged for Prabhupad to appear on national television on the Les Crane Show. Life magazine featured Prabhupad's picture and an accompanying story as part of an article, "The Year of the Guru." The influence of Indian gurus and their American disciples grew rapidly in 1968.



*Prabhupad 1968*

Prabhupad and I took a walk every morning. At times, he wanted me to go to San Francisco and start ISKCON Press. Other times, I should go to New York and live with the celibate men. Yet again, he said I should go back to Santa Fe and maintain the temple.

When I asked why he changed his mind so much, Prabhupad said, "I have my plans, and you have yours, but, Krishna has his plans, and that's what we have to follow."

I flew to San Francisco with Prabhupad, Gour-sundar, and Govinda Dasi. I stayed there about a week and then returned to Santa Fe.



I managed the Santa Fe temple alone for several months and led a full worship schedule even if no one came. Sometimes it was a week between visitors. I made plaster castings of the Jagannath deities, painted them, and sold them in craft shops on Canyon Road along with incense I got from San Francisco.

When Dan and Krishna Devi asked Prabhupad how they could better serve him, he said, "Send money to Subal to help him maintain the Santa Fe temple." They sent a hundred dollars a month.

A Yaqui Indian couple came to the temple regularly for a while. The woman pushed a baby in a stroller and did the talking. The man couldn't talk except in grunts and sign language. He made violent gestures of stabbing and cutting the throat with a knife. His wife explained that he hunted bears with a knife.

A young Chicano couple also came regularly. I carved a large Balaram deity to accompany the Jagannath Krishna Jananivas carved. I installed them over the altar like in San Francisco.

After a couple of months, a hippie named Joe moved in with me. Joe was the kind of guy who climbed into the Salvation Army clothing donation bin in the supermarket parking lot across the street at night to get free clothes. Swamiji expected him and a college boy to help me run the temple and pay the rent.

It was spring, and heavy thunder storms in the mountains caused a flash flood of the Santa Fe River.



A car floated down the street and bumped into the temple door ringing the string of bells hanging on the door. Thinking someone came in, I was shocked to see water getting knee deep in the temple.

I put as many things as I could on the altar and in the bath tub to keep them dry and rescued a couple of kittens. The landlord came when the water receded and helped us push three inch deep silt that settled on the temple floor out the door with pieces of plywood.

That evening, many people from the neighborhood came to the temple to pray and thank God for saving them from the flood being any worse than it was. A group of hippies from the mountains north of Santa Fe came too. It was the largest worship held in the Water Street temple.

One of the hippies was Anthony, the cousin of Mark, who Krishna Devi and I shared the commune with on Ashbury Street when we were initiated and married. Anthony informed me that Mark was recently initiated in San Francisco and became Vishnu-jana. Anthony later became Rebatinandan Swami and then Shambu.

The next week, Joe and I prepared a feast to celebrate Krishna's appearance day on earth 5,000 years ago. We were disappointed no one come to share the food with us, but later in the day, Anthony and his friends came and finished most of it. After leaving the temple, they went to the plaza to hang out and were arrested on a variety of petty charges such as vagrancy.

A couple of days later, fiesta took place in the plaza at night. Mariachi bands played, and people had a big party. Joe and I went there to chant Hare Krishna. A small crowd gathered around to listen. Soon, a couple of detectives came and arrested us for disturbing the peace and assembling without a license. The crowd yelled for our release, and some people threw bottles and cans at the cops.

When they took us in and booked us, Anthony and his friends chanted in the cell block. I was put in the same cell as Anthony. I told the story of when the fifteenth century devotee, Hari Das Thakur was arrested in India as a form of religious persecution. He told the other prisoners they were fortunate to be in jail because they were free of material distractions and could concentrate on Krishna. After the story, the cell block resounded with Hare Krishna chanting late into the night and again early in the morning. We also experienced religious persecution.

We all went to trial in the morning. Joe and I were given suspended sentences and placed on probation. I went to the local American Civil Liberties Union lawyer to appeal the decision, but he agreed with the judge that it wasn't right to chant in public places or in the streets. Chanting in the streets was a major evangelical activity of the Krishna movement since its founding five hundred years ago.

A local hippie rock band offered to do a benefit concert for the temple. I wrote Swamiji asking if it would be all right for them to set up and play in front of the altar. He replied that it would be fine since we

needed money by whatever available means as long as it was done for Krishna.

It seems, "When we need money to carry on Krishna's work, we can resort to any available means" was the standard for all work in ISKCON. This attitude of Swamiji's was one of the main reasons ISKCON became as corrupt as it did.

Realizing I needed experienced help for the temple to become self sustaining, Swamiji wrote that he asked another devotee to send me money monthly. He also asked an experienced devotee named Umapati to join me.

A hippie named Pat moved into the temple. He was quite tripped out. Umapati, a veteran devotee from New York also came as promised. One day, I hitch hiked to Albuquerque to appear on a college radio show. When I got back, Umapati was gone. After some time, Joe and also Pat left.

I got a telegram telling me to call San Francisco right away. Since I didn't have a telephone, I went to a pay phone and called the temple. Goursundar told me Prabhupad was going to initiate *brahmins* there like he did in New York, and I should try to get there in a couple of days. This meant I would officially be a Hindu priest.

I hitch hiked to L.A. in one day, spent the night at the temple, then went to San Francisco. I arrived in the evening and went to Prabhupad's apartment. No one was there. I went to the temple and was surprised to see an initiation ceremony going on. I was told it

would be the next day. I walked in wearing a Panama hat, fatigue jacket, and jeans.

Prabhupad saw me and said, "Subal! You're just in time. Go in the kitchen, wash your hands and face, get a banana, and come sit down." The banana was to be an offering in the fire sacrifice.

I and several other devotees were initiated as *brahmins* or priests. Prabhupad taught the *gayatri mantras* and gave the sacred thread, which was the mark of a twice born *brahmin*. This act broke with the rigid caste system that said one had to be born in a *brahmin* family to be a *brahmin*. Prabhupad said, "It is based on one's qualities not birth." This was also his guru's practice.

The initiation was moved up a day because the devotees were invited to celebrate Lord Rama's appearance with the Indian community the next day. Prabhupad lead chanting and gave a talk at the celebration. Indian women prepared a feast.

Prabhupad thought I needed a helper in Santa Fe. Tosan Krishna, a new devotee, hitched back with me. It was financially difficult to manage the temple. I got various odd jobs as Prabhupad pushed me to become independent of financial assistance from other temples. He wanted all available money for his printing activities. I moved furniture, parked cars, put up rides at a carnival, and laid pipeline in the desert.

I received a letter from Prabhupad saying I should go to New York and help Rayarama publish *Back to Godhead*, the Krishna movement's monthly magazine. A country-western singer at the hotel lounge who be-

friendened me gave me the plane fare. Tosan was left in charge soon to be joined by Pat who was now Patit Uddharan and another devotee who had been sending a hundred dollars a month to help support the temple.

I struggled and was not real successful in Santa Fe from a certain perspective, but I had many good experiences. Huh! Maybe that's the story of my life.

## **Back to Godhead**

I wrote several articles for *Back to Godhead* and did some printing. Now, my main work was writing, doing layout, and coordinating with the printer. The magazine had a circulation of 5,000 copies a month when I joined it. Devotees sold it on the streets by approaching people in downtown areas of big cities.

It was a thirty-two page magazine with a glossy full color cover. Composition was done on an IBM typewriter by Jayadvaita. Damodar was the art director. Rayarama, who also wrote for Marvel comics, was senior editor. Cover articles featured Dr. Spock and the Beachboys. I wrote articles about "The Real Revolution," "Drugs and Ecstasy," a review of Bhaktivedanta Swami's *Teachings of Lord Chaitanya*, and others.

I lived in the first American temple Swamiji started at 26 Second Ave. near Houston Street on the Lower East Side. We regularly chanted and danced in procession on the streets. Sometimes at night, along Fourth Street on the way to Greenwich Village, people

threw tomatoes and bottles off rooftops at us. Drunks regularly attacked us, sometimes grabbing one of the female devotees, some of whom were high school girls. Male devotees fought them off.

Friday and Saturday nights were especially good to go out and chant. The streets were packed. Devotees fit right into the wild New York scene. Men dressed in traditional Indian clothes called *dhoties*, and most had shaved heads with a lock of hair at the crown. Women wore *saris* and braided their hair, often keeping their heads covered with the *sari*. Devotees wore a white clay mark on the forehead indicative of their religious order.

We marched along chanting Hare Krishna and dancing. We stopped at busy corners, lined up to gather a crowd, and stayed in one place until the cops came and told us to move on. When a crowd gathered, one of the devotees gave a talk, invited people to the temple, and asked them to buy a magazine. Devotees circulated among the crowds with "Back to Godhead" magazines and big conch shells to collect money in. This often went on until two in the morning.

Brahmananda was president of the New York temple. He was a big stocky guy who had taught public school. He was a big lovable teddy bear unless provoked. He ate more than anyone else in the temple. The daily fare was rich Indian style food that was offered to the Lord before the devotees ate. It was said to nourish the soul as well as the body. Everyone got all they wanted. Brahmananda and some of the other

men used large pizza pans as their dishes. In the morning, we prepared a big pot of hot cereal full of fruit and honey in a cockroach ridden apartment on Avenue A and brought it to the temple in a shopping cart. The cereal crew finished any left over cereal so it would not be wasted.

Prabhupad visited New York and taught me accounting. He had a shrewd business mind. He managed a chemical company after college and then started his own pharmaceutical business, which he managed until he was fifty. I was put in charge of the magazine's accounting and became business manager as well as associate editor.

The temple rented a loft a couple of blocks up Second Ave. from where it was originally founded. The loft formerly housed a tuxedo rental place. It was closed for some time and dirty. We put on old tux's and high hats and cleaned. We built bunks and a shower in the back where celibate men lived. The wood used for the bunks came from a torn down tenement and had bed bugs in it. Much spraying finally got rid of them.

Brahmananda's younger brother Gargamuni returned from the West Coast. Gargamuni started the Spiritual Sky Incense factory in the basement of the temple. He had to move it because people complained about the strong smell of the essential oils used to make the incense.

Prabhupad wanted the circulation of "Back to Godhead" increased to 25,000 a month. Brahmananda, Rayarama, and I arranged for Dia Nippon to print it

in Tokyo and ship directly to major Krishna centers, which rapidly grew around the world. Dia Nippon also took over printing Prabhupad's books.

The New York temple was run more heavy handedly than the West Coast style I was used to. Perhaps I was just used to running things myself. I became dissatisfied.

Prabhupad visited the New Vrindaban farm in West Virginia, which Kirtananda and Hayagriva started when they left the movement for a while. They were gay lovers in the Lower East Side before becoming devotees. After Kirtananda returned from India, where Prabhupad gave him *sannyas* and the title of swami, he dressed in black with a sleek, black cape and recommended all devotees do this. He also preached unorthodox doctrines. Devotees spit in his face, which made Prabhupad angry.

I hitchhiked to New Vrindaban, located outside Moundsville, West Virginia to meet Prabhupad and ask his permission to start a temple in Philadelphia. Some young guys from Atlantic City, New Jersey offered to help me. I prostrated myself before Prabhupad, grabbed his foot that was sticking out from behind his desk, and held it to my head. Prabhupad patted and rubbed my head giving his blessings.

## **The Philadelphia Temple**

Nayan Abhiram drove me to Philadelphia and dropped me off at the bus depot. I left my backpack in



a locker and headed to a downtown park. I met some people who lived in a theatre commune in West Phili. They let me stay with them until I could rent a place.

I found a furnished brick townhouse for reasonable rent. A new devotee, Lalita Kumar, two of his friends from Atlantic City, and Nayan Abhiram, who was more experienced, joined me. We stored most of the beautiful antique furniture that came with the house in a spare room. We sat and slept on the floor. The living room was made into a temple. We kept the Persian rug and baby grand piano there, built an altar, and began regular worship.

It was a much more comfortable living arrangement than in New York. I had my own room, which doubled as my office. The others lived two to a room. The atmosphere was more relaxed. Everyone was there because they wanted to be and worked cooperatively. Philadelphia was a much saner city than New York, even though the cops gave us a harder time.

Devotees went downtown afternoons and evenings year round. In winter, they went in department stores and the subway to warm up. They chanted Hare Krishna and sold *Back to Godhead* magazines and Prabhupad's books. This supported the temple. The devotees took time to preach to interested people. A couple of young women moved into the temple as a result.

I managed the temple and did most of the cooking. I brought the devotees dinner in the evening and spent part of the day downtown with them. I led most of the worship and gave sermons. This was shared

amongst the devotees, but I was temple president and a senior devotee--in the Movement three years now. I wholesaled Spiritual Sky Incense in Philadelphia and Atlantic City.

We also went to Atlantic City to chant and distribute literature and were arrested for not having a permit. Prabhupad taught the devotees to "Let sleeping dogs lie," meaning don't get involved with the government anymore than you have to. Sometimes it was unavoidable. We managed to get out of jail the same day.

I became friends with a *yogi* from India who moved to Philadelphia with his family. His name was Amrit Desai. We went to his house to chant and talk about Krishna. He also had an *ashram*, retreat center, in the country and invited us there. Amrit had a number of disciples and was favorable to Krishna consciousness.

Vrindaban Chandra moved to the Philadelphia temple from Los Angeles. He was into theatre and helped organize plays for the Sunday feasts that got good turnout. I performed Vrindaban Chandra's wedding ceremony, and we had an article in the *Philadelphia* magazine with pictures.

I taught *Bhagavad Gita* free university classes at Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, and St. Joseph's College. Enrollment was good.

We bought a new, blue Chevy van. We often traveled to the Washington, D.C. and New York temples for combined street chanting and festivals. We went to



*Devotees gathered in New York. Subal seated second row left.*

big peace marches in Washington, The Atlanta Rock Festival, Randal's Island Rock Festival, and other places where we were an integral part of the scene. When Prabhupad was in Boston, we drove there to see him.

## Chapter 3

# ITINERANT MONK

I felt quite happy with life as president of the Philadelphia temple. I heard Prabhupad was going to initiate Brahmananda, Gargamuni, and Vishnujana as *swamis* in the renounced order of life. *Swamis* or *sannyasis* are considered the highest order of life in ISKCON and Hindu society. They teach the other orders since they're considered completely surrendered to Krishna and free of material desires.

When I was married in Los Angeles, I wanted to be a *sannyasi*. Now I thought, "I don't care if I become a *sannyasi* or not. I'm already living like one and have everything I want. Let them do it, and if I have to send people to them to be initiated, that's all right."

Soon, Adwaita called from Boston. "I hear you're going to take *sannyas*. Congratulations!"

"This is the first I've heard of it." I said. "Who did you hear that from?"

"Brahmananda called and told me."

I called Brahmananda in L.A. He said Prabhupad thought I was ready, and I should fly right out.

I put Nayan Abhiram in charge of the temple and bought a plane ticket for the next day. One devotee came in my room, offered obeisance, and cried due to my leaving. I brought her into the movement. She wished me luck, but was sad to see me go.

A van full of devotees picked me up at the L.A. airport. They brought food for me to eat on the way to the temple. When I got there, I went to Prabhupad's room. Brahmananda and others were there. I entered and offered obeisance to Prabhupad.

Prabhupad said, "So you've come. You know it's been postponed for another month until Krishna's appearance day in New Vrindaban."

I was shocked that I came all that way expecting to take *sannyas* only to find that it was postponed a month. This required real renunciation.

That evening, the other prospective swamis and I sat with Prabhupad in his private walled garden. He said to me. "Do you know what *yasya prasādāt bhagavat-prasādo yasyāprasādān na gatiḥ kuto'pi* means?"

This was from a prayer to the spiritual master that devotees sang every morning. I said, "It means if the spiritual master is pleased Krishna is pleased. If the spiritual master is displeased, there is no way of pleasing Krishna."

"Yes! And I am displeased."

"Well, tell me what's displeasing you, and I'll do whatever I can to correct it. After all, I am going to be a *sannyasi*."

"*Sannyasi* or no *sannyasi*, any disciple should be willing to do anything to please the spiritual master."

Prabhupad wouldn't reveal what bothered him. I was new in Los Angeles now and didn't know what was going on. The next day, we decided we didn't want to wait a month to take *sannyas*. Brahmananda

talked Prabhupad into going ahead with the initiation as planned. Kartikeya and Devananda were added to the list of prospective *sannyasis*.

Prabhupad told me to get bamboo to make our staffs. I said, "I'll go look in the yellow pages and see where I can buy some."

Prabhupad said, "You don't find bamboo in the yellow pages. Go look on Hollywood Boulevard in Century City."

I got a devotee to take me there in a pickup truck and cut twenty-four pieces about a half inch in diameter from a cluster of bamboo in the dividing strip of the road. We worked quickly hoping not to get caught in broad day light.

That night we made our *tridandas* or staffs. We were entering the Tridandi Sannyas Order as we believed Chaitanya did. Four bamboo rods a hand's breadth taller than the initiate were bound together with a long strip of saffron cloth symbolizing body, mind, intellect, and soul surrendered to Krishna.

Initiation took place late the next morning with two hundred devotees gathered in the temple enthusiastically chanting Hare Krishna. Cushions were set out on the marble floor around the fire altar. Prabhupad sat on his throne. Dayananda and the initiates sat on the cushions. Dayananda served as priest performing the ritual fire sacrifice.

We initiates shaved our heads that morning. Now we were given new saffron robes in the style worn by *sannyasis*. We went in a back room to change. We came out and offered obeisance to Prabhupad who

handed us our staffs. We had the titles His Holiness, Tridandi Swami Maharaj added to our names.

Afterwards, we went to Prabhupad's room along with some of the other intimate devotees. Prabhupad instructed us, "A *sannyasi's* soul resides in his *danda*. You should take them everywhere you go. Don't beat each other to death with them like the Yadavas did." The Yadavas were Krishna's descendants who killed each other with clubs after he died.

Prabhupad was scheduled to visit the Boston temple and ISKCON Press. It was decided he'd stay in Los Angeles, and Brahmananda, Gargamuni, Vishnu-jana and I would go in his place. A couple of days after the initiation, we were driven to the airport in a van. We were given food for the trip so we wouldn't have to eat airline food.

We boarded the plane with our *dandas* and stored them under our seats for the trip. A stewardess told us they would have to go in the baggage compartment. We explained that our spiritual master instructed that they be with us always. The stewardess insisted they go in the baggage compartment, and we refused.

Police were called in. We buckled our seat belts and prepared to resist. The cops came and tried to remove the *dandas*. Brahmananda Maharaj yelled, "You killed Christ and now you'll have to kill us." After further discussion, the strong arm of the law prevailed, and the *dandas* were stored below. The plane took off a half hour late as a result.

Devotees in Boston greeted us new swamis with chanting at the airport as they had planned to greet Prabhupad. They drove us to the newly redecorated temple and gave us a foot washing ceremony when we entered. I felt uncomfortable about this. We also stayed in the room they arranged for Prabhupad's stay.

After several days, we were driven to New York for a week and then to Philadelphia. Brahmananda, Gargamuni, and Vishnujana Maharajas went to Washington, D.C. while I stayed in Philadelphia to finish turning temple affairs over to Nayan Abhiram.

The plan was that the three swamis would return to Philadelphia, and then, the four of us would go to New Vrindaban for Krishna's appearance day. From there, we'd go to Europe, Africa, and then India.

I phoned my mother and gave her the news. She and my sister drove down to see me at the temple. I was dressed in saffron robes with a shaved head, lock of hair in back, and a clay mark on my forehead. Mom always accepted me and encouraged me to go for it. She told me to take care of myself and keep in touch. I wrote her regularly, about once a month keeping her updated.

I got a call from Rupanuga in Buffalo, New York while the others were in D.C. He just returned from Los Angeles and wanted to tell me some important things. I drove the temple van to meet him.

There was a major shakeup. Brahmananda and Gargamuni were accused of trying to take over and reduce Prabhupad's authority, which was total. They



wanted to run ISKCON, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, as a cartel with them in charge. Vishnujana admitted being envious of Prabhupad.

Devananda, Prabhupad's secretary, was implicated by giving Prabhupad's mail to Brahmananda and Gargamuni before Prabhupad got it. They often replied to the letters and forged Prabhupad's signature. Prabhupad was afraid of being poisoned by his own disciples as his spiritual master had been. He ate little--mostly raw food.

The *sannyas* initiation was a way of giving these four a second chance. Brahmananda and Gargamuni were removed from administration but saved face. I just happened to be ready and was included in the initiation. Rupanuga warned me to be careful of the other three swamis and not be too influenced by them.

A new group of twelve disciples called the Governing Body Commission (GBC) was formed. The world was divided into twelve zones and each commissioner was in charge of spreading Krishna consciousness in his zone. Rupanuga was one of them. Their first meeting was to be in New Vrindaban at the time of Krishna's appearance day. Several of them from the U.S. were in L.A. with Rupanuga. Prabhupad was going to Japan and then to India accompanied by Kirtananda, Devananda, and Kartikeya Maharajas.



When Brahmananda, Gargamuni, Vishnujana, and I reunited in Philadelphia, I confronted them with what I heard from Rupanuga. Brahmananda explained that he just tried to take some of the responsibility from Prabhupad as Prabhupad encouraged him to, so he would be free to do his translating and preaching without so much anxiety over management. Gargamuni's position was the same. Maybe they did get carried away, but they thought they were doing what Prabhupad wanted. Sure Vishnujana was a bit envious, but he was now remorseful and didn't feel he challenged Prabhupad's position.

The four of us decided to stick together and do our best to serve Prabhupad. We went to New Vrindaban in the van with the Philadelphia devotees. We played tapes of Prabhupad chanting Bengali devotional songs as we drove across Pennsylvania. Gargamuni was afraid the GBC would lynch him.

We trudged up a hill carrying our luggage on a dirt road in ankle deep mud. Gargamuni walked into a mud pit that sucked him down to his waist like quicksand. We managed to pull him out.

When we reached the farm at the top of the hill, Hayagriva, GBC for South America, greeted us, "I see you brought your sticks. Have you come to joust?"

He insisted on taking a walk with Brahmananda and Gargamuni to talk privately. He was in Los Angeles with Rupanuga and others where he heard allegations against them. We were given a ten foot diameter aluminum tube dome covered with sheet plastic to stay in. Devotees gathered from all over the world. It

was an opportunity to renew old acquaintances, make new friends and enemies.

The three swamis admitted their mistakes, warned of the danger of the same things happening with the GBC, and promised to be better examples in future. I believe they weren't corrupt, just a bit overzealous, heavy handed, and results oriented in carrying out Bhaktivedanta's wishes. They emphasized the importance of respecting the spiritual master as a representative of Krishna.

Brahmananda Maharaj was the main spokesman. I backed him up with scriptural quotes and theological arguments like his legal counsel. Vishnujana Maharaj won the devotees over by his ecstatic singing of Krishna chants. We clearly took the spotlight away from the GBC.

The Governing Body Commission held its meetings in an A-frame house. We were invited to work out an agreement. The *sannyasis* were to oversee the spiritual growth of the devotees. The GBC was in charge of management and maintaining standards.

Krishna's appearance day was observed with fasting, chanting, reading scriptures, and lectures. That night, as we huddled in the cool, damp dome, we felt like we were on a bad acid trip. Things went so differently than we expected when we joined the movement. We faced hostility from some of the leaders and wondered how to deal with it.

The next day was Prabhupad's appearance day. We continued our fast until noon. We worshiped Krishna and the spiritual master. Homages to

Prabhupad that devotees wrote and published in a book were read. At noon, after a chanting session, we feasted.

Meanwhile, Hayagriva phoned his former (?) lover, Kirtanananda Maharaj, who was in Tokyo with Prabhupad. He accused us four swamis of preaching Mayavadi impersonal philosophy and saying the guru is God, which was considered a blasphemous heresy.

The GBC drove us to Detroit in a van along with the Detroit devotees to await word from Prabhupad what to do with us. We were told to stay in the attic, and only a few authorized devotees could talk to us.

Prabhupad said we had to leave the movement and could not preach in the name of ISKCON, but we should still be respected as *sannyasis* and not harmed. Brahmananda, Gargamuni, Vishnujana, and I each packed a shoulder bag and bed roll. We wrote a letter to Prabhupad explaining our side of the story.

We set out on foot with no money. I smiled and waived good-bye feeling this was Krishna's mercy saving me from a corrupt organization that I was happy to be rid of. Now, I could just depend on Krishna's mercy. We went to the post office and begged enough money to send the letter to Prabhupad in India where he would be shortly.

We decided to head south since it was fall. We walked out of Detroit, preferring walking to hitchhiking. We stopped in a vacant lot near the Ford plant to rest. Some boys on bikes came to check us out. It was like the good fairy or aliens from another planet had

come. We were the strangest people they had ever seen. They went and got their mothers to come and bring us food. This touched our hearts, showed us that Krishna was watching out for us, and everything would be all right.

We walked completely out of town and spent the night under a tree near the highway. We were four American men in our early twenties with shaved heads, saffron robes, staffs, bedrolls, shoulder bags, and no money or organizational affiliation. We were completely dependent on Radha-Krishna's mercy and our wits.

The next morning after walking for a while, we started hitchhiking to Ann Arbor, Michigan, which had a reputation as a liberal college town. We went to the University of Michigan, chanted, and led programs. A student we met on campus let us stay at his house for a couple of days.

Then we hitched to Bowling Green, Ohio and spent the night at the home of a professor we met in the park. He bought food that we prepared an Indian style feast with. The professor invited his friends to an evening of feasting and chanting.

From there, we went to Toledo and then to Dayton thinking, "Here's straight middle class, Midwest America if ever there was one. What's going to happen here?" To our surprise, we were well received as we chanted on the lawn near the student union of the University of Dayton. Students gathered around and listened. Some joined in. We talked with the students and arranged to speak in a couple of classes. Students

put us up in the dorms, and we spent several days there.

When we woke one morning, Vishnujana Maharaj was gone. Brahmananda, Gargamuni, and I went to Antioch College, in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where we found him chanting on the lawn with a group of students. He used to have a rock and roll band which practiced in the basement of the Haight Ashbury commune he, Krishna Devi, and I shared when Prabhupad first came there in 1967. Vishnujana was an excellent guitarist and vocalist who used to jam with the Jefferson Airplane before becoming a devotee. He had a magnetic charm.

We traveled together again and fortunately got a ride all the way to Gainesville, Florida, thus avoiding hitchhiking through the South, which presented a threat considering how we looked. We arrived late at night and stayed at a fraternity house. The next day, we went to Cocoa Beach.

We continued on to Tampa, but got stranded in Plant City. We tried hitching on the freeway, but the state trooper told us we had to hitch on the ramp. Standing on the ramp, we could see the city cops cruising by frequently. We were hungry, and went to a church to look for help. We found no one in the church, and when we came out the cops were there. We were loaded into a cop car with our staffs and bedrolls and taken to the station for questioning. We were afraid the cops might beat us up, but we were driven to the edge of town and told to keep going. It

was raining, but we managed to get a ride to Tampa, where we spent a short while before going to Miami.

We pulled into Miami in the back of a pickup truck full of greasy engine parts. We were left off in Coconut Grove, and we lay in the grass in front of a restaurant. We could hardly stay awake and went to a park by the ocean to sleep.

When we awoke in the morning, a cop was there. He told us it was illegal to sleep in the park, but he didn't believe in bothering people for victimless crimes. He was quite friendly. Later in the day, as we walked through town, a cop car stopped us, and they advised us not to go the way we were headed because there was a black ghetto ahead where there would surely be trouble. They gave us a ride to where we were going. These Miami police were the nicest cops we ever met.

That night, we walked out of town and came to a church. The church board was meeting. We went in and explained we were mendicant Hindu monks traveling and preaching. One of the board members offered to put us up at a motel where he had a business account. He drove us there after the meeting, got us a room and credit at the restaurant. We were very thankful.

We spent the next night on Miami Beach in a cabana behind a hotel. A couple of cops woke us in the middle of the night. They said, "A hurricane is coming we're evacuating the beach." After questioning us, one of the cops drove us to the Salvation Army in Miami. It was an awful place full of drunk derelicts. I had

nightmarish dreams. I enjoyed the hurricane the next day, however. It reminded me of when I ran in hurricane winds as a boy on Long Island.

We received a letter from Prabhupad. He said we were forgiven and should forget the whole ugly incident. Unfortunately, the lying GBC version still circulates on the internet.

I was to go to Amsterdam and preach. I called Rupanuga who arranged my plane ticket to Buffalo. From there, I flew to New York for a connecting flight to Amsterdam. The money Rupanuga gave me was a few dollars short, so I begged the balance in the New York airport terminal. I arrived in Amsterdam with twenty-five cents, bedroll, shoulder bag, and staff.



*Subal's passport photo*

## **The European Tour**

Immigration officials held me for eight hours until Maurari, the temple president, came with a letter guaranteeing my maintenance while in the country and a train ticket on to Hamburg for me to leave.



I stayed with the devotees in their apartment outside Amsterdam in a stark concrete building. On Friday evenings, we went to "De Kosmos," a hashish club and bar, to chant and lecture on Krishna consciousness in one of their basement rooms. We also chanted at rock concerts.

One notable concert was in the Friesland. Some devotees were from a British rock band called "The World." They used a combination of electric and traditional Indian instruments. George Harrison and the London temple put out a couple of records of chants that were in the British top ten at the time.

A Dutch band named Kala played an electric Indian synthesis. They invited us to the concert and put us up at their house. Three concerts at once took place in three auditoriums within the same building. Kala introduced us at the beginning of their set and started it off with the two groups chanting together. I led the chanting. The agreement was to open the set with chanting, then Kala would perform, and then the devotees would have a set.

The audience was so excited by the chanting they wouldn't let us stop. They called for different chants that they heard on records. I jumped off the stage into the crowd chanting and dancing like a madman. The rest of the group joined me. We penetrated the drunken crowd and got them chanting and dancing. Then I lead them out of that auditorium in a procession through the other two and back again.



After spending a couple of weeks in Amsterdam, I took the train to Hamburg. I was greeted with surprise at the temple because they just got the news about events in New Vrindaban. When Krishna Das, the temple president got back, we talked about what happened there. We knew each other from San Francisco and had similar outlooks about how to practice Krishna consciousness.

I spent several days in the industrial loft that served as temple and dormitory. I lectured with a German translator. The loft was unheated on weekends, and it was the middle of winter. The shower was in an unheated basement several blocks away.

I received a letter from Prabhupad asking, "Please stabilize this movement which I have started." I wondered how I could do this. I was just one person and the problems with the organization were major. I struggled for years to keep the movement pure. It seemed a losing battle.

I read an essay by Bhaktisiddhanta Saraswati, Bhaktivedanta Swami's guru. It was titled "Be Humbler Than a Blade of Grass." In this essay, I got the message, "The only thing I can do to stabilize this movement is to be an example of how Krishna consciousness should be practiced."

I went to the West Berlin temple by train. I saw machine gun towers, barbed wire, and tanks along the East German border. Some border guards that came on board to check passports seemed as cold and inhuman as Western media frequently portrayed them. The effects of World War II were still clearly

visible on many Berlin buildings although some areas were rebuilt. The temple was in a downtown office building. Bath water was heated in pots and poured into a galvanized tub.

From Berlin, I went to Paris. The devotees' small apartment served as residence and temple. They rented a room in a nearby hotel for me. They frequently chanted, danced, and collected donations in the streets. They looked like a band of rabble as they emerged from the subway and danced down the street chanting Hare Krishna while keeping an eye out for *gendarmes* who drove by in buses.



I lectured at the American Center, American High School, International University, and Theosophical Society. At the Theosophical Society, after my lecture, which was translated into French, an old Frenchman stood up during the question and answer period and asked, "What is the difference between Madvacharya and Shankaracharya's interpretation of Vedanta?"

I was glad to have such an intelligent question asked of me, and I explained the difference between their respective personal and impersonal views of God. Another older man stood up and said, "I accept everything you say. How can I follow you?" I was moved by the man's enthusiasm and told him, "Come to the temple, chant Hare Krishna, and study *Bhagavad Gita*." He did.

In the mornings, I walked around a park with a pond where there were swans. The weather was much milder than in Holland or Germany.

I went to the London temple next. It was in a row house near the British Museum where devotees found writings of Bhaktisiddhanta and his father, Bhaktivinode Thakur, who introduced Gaudiya Vaishnavism or Krishna consciousness to the West in the late nineteenth century.

One of his early works, *The Bhagavata*, greatly influenced me. In it, Bhaktivinode described his spiritual search, which included a study of great Western philosophers and Jesus. He was Unitarian in his outlook, but then he discovered the eastern savior, Krishna Chaitanya and the writings of his followers. He embraced these teachings and became their proponent.



*Bhaktivinode Thakur*

Bhaktivinode said, "Don't believe everything you read in old books." He wrote that many descriptions of hell are interpolated at later dates to please kings and keep people in line through fear. I believe that's true of many religions as the establishment co-opted them.

Bhaktivinode wrote many poems that became popular songs with devotees. I developed a strong

attachment to Bhaktivinode and his natural style of devotion.

I also visited small Krishna temples in Manchester and Edinburgh. I preached at a church in Manchester. A young man of Indian, Sikh decent from Africa accompanied me as an assistant. He wanted me to go to Africa with him. I thought it was a good idea. There were no Krishna temples in Africa, and if I went there I could keep going deeper and deeper into the jungles to keep ahead of the GBC and their politics. I wrote Prabhupad asking permission to go to Africa to preach, but I was advised to stay in Europe for the time being.

After some time, I returned to the continent. I was in Berlin when I got a letter from Prabhupad asking me to go to London right away and help Mukunda get Queen Elizabeth to donate land in Regents Park to build a temple.

I caught the first available flight, rushing across the tarmac to board just before it took off. Arriving in London, I made a plan with Mukunda, who I knew from when I joined the San Francisco temple. An American college football player named Jim became my assistant. We went to a fabric shop and got some new cloth for me to wear. Jim and other devotees prepared a gift wrapped box containing books, magazines, temple-made sweets, and flowers. I wrote a letter requesting an audience with the queen.

Jim and I went to Buckingham Palace. Jim wore saffron robes and carried the package. I wore my new robes, carried my staff, had a freshly shaved head,

and the white clay mark of devotees on my forehead. We walked up to the front gate looking as impressive as we could. A London bobby stopped us. "Where do you think you're going?"

"We're going to see the queen." I replied.

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No."

"What's in here?" the bobby said as he grabbed the box out of Jim's hands. He started opening the box. The bow was pulled off and dropped to the ground.

"What do you think you're doing? That's for the queen!" I challenged. The bobby became very apologetic, picked up the bow, gave the box back to Jim and told us we could go on.

We strode across the parade ground where the palace guard marched back and forth. The doorman greeted us and said, "The queen is out of town."

"We'd like to see her secretary to set up an appointment."

We were shown into the secretary's office. We gave him the gift box and letter requesting that he get them to Her Majesty and try to arrange my meeting with her.

After a few days, the box was returned. The sweets and flowers were not in it but the books were. There was a letter from the secretary saying that the queen did not accept unsolicited gifts and that an audience was not possible at this time.

I soon received a letter from Prabhupad telling me to go to Bombay to help organize a large festival. I raised money from devotees and Indian friends of the

temple. An Indian travel agent booked me on an Air India charter flight to Bombay.

## **Adventures in India**

As the plane descended into Bombay, March 29, 1971, I saw white high-rise buildings surrounded by shanties. Poorly dressed people walked carrying bundles while the rich drove cars. As I stepped out of the plane, the distinct aroma of India filled the air, a mixture of spice, smoke, dung, and open sewage.

I had a fifteen day entry visa, no return ticket, and twenty-five pounds sterling. Gurudas, who I knew since the early days in San Francisco, met me at the airport with a letter from Prabhupad guaranteeing my maintenance and fare out of the country.

We went to tea at the home of a wealthy Indian who was a life member of ISKCON. For 1,111 rupees, people became life members, received a set of Prabhupad's books, guest privileges at temples, and other favors. Although 1,111 rupees was worth about \$140 on the foreign exchange, it had the buying power of about \$1,111 in India. ISKCON used this successful fund-raising method extensively. Many rich, influential industrialists, politicians, and business people became life members. In India, Krishna consciousness is part of a mainline religion known as Vaishnavism.

Gurudas, his wife Jamuna, and I sat at a white wrought iron table in the garden with Mr. Gupta. Uni-

formed servants brought tea and crumpets in British style while we engaged in polite conversation.

Gurudas, Jamuna, and I went to the high-rise apartment building where Prabhupad and his disciples rented an apartment. It was in the same building as the Pakistani consulate.

I hoped to celebrate Chaitanya's appearance day with Prabhupad, but he was out of town at the time. Devotees went into the streets and chanted in celebration.

They planned a week long festival in a large tent at Cross Maidan, a grassy park in downtown Bombay. Prabhupad said, "If you're going to go hunting, hunt rhinoceros. That way if you don't get one no one will think the worse of you because who can get a rhinoceros anyway. If you do get one then you are the greatest hunter." This festival was his successful attempt to bag a rhino.

Prabhupad wanted to be the biggest guru in India and then the world. He used his western disciples to establish himself. He planned for many years to go to America and bring disciples back to India. He thought Indians want to follow American ways, so let them see how Americans take to Krishna consciousness.

I was in charge of publicity. I handled the media, organized a press conference, arranged posters and banners, helped with other arrangements, and did fund-raising.

The festival was a huge success. During the day, we chanted, gave lectures, sold literature, distributed



free food, showed slide shows, and led tours of photo exhibits. At night, Prabhupad came and chanted with his disciples then lectured to the twenty-thousand people who filled the tent.

In April, 1971 after the successful Bombay festival, I went to Delhi with Kshirodakashayi, an Indian devotee who had lived in London. Kshirodakashayi was going to help me get my visa extended, and then we were to start a temple in Delhi. We went to the Minister of the Interior to get a three month tourist visa so I could be in the country legally since my fifteen day entry visa already expired.

Mr. Sharma, an old friend of Swamiji's, arranged for us to stay at the Devidayal Dharmashala, which was an inn where groups of people came for weddings and other occasions. Sharma provided meals at his nearby apartment. He had two teenage sons and had promised one of them to Swamiji.

Sharma asked if I wanted to go to Vrindaban, the childhood home of Krishna according to Hindu tradition. I heard about Vrindaban from a hippie in Santa Fe who went there, and ever since I cherished a desire to go. I wanted to experience Krishna consciousness rooted in its native culture. I was attracted to Swamiji because he seemed to represent an old, established tradition that leads to eternal life in Braj with Radha-Krishna. At least that's how he presented himself to his western students.

Braj exists as a district in India where Radha-Krishna are said to have manifested their earthly pastimes some five thousand years ago. In Braj, the town of Vrindaban is the main pilgrimage place for Radha-Krishna devotees and is said to be non-different from the spiritual abode. Of course I wanted to go! I would have walked eighty-five miles down the banks of the Jamuna River to get there. Sharma took me on the train.

We arrived in Mathura, the district capital, and took a bicycle rickshaw the remaining eight miles to Brindaban. A crow shit on my shoulder as we drove out of Mathura. I didn't know if this was a good sign or not, but I took it as a welcome. It was a long hard drive through arid country with sparse vegetation, and I felt sorry for the rickshaw driver who worked like a beast of burden. This is but one of many social tragedies blatantly visible in India, but certainly not unique.

When we entered the outskirts of Vrindaban, I asked the driver to stop. I got out and romantically rolled in the dust as the *Bhagavat* said Akrur, a great devotee of old, did when he traveled in his chariot from Mathura to Vrindaban to get Krishna and Ram. For a devotee like me, Vrindaban represented the stage upon which tradition said Radha-Krishna played in their earthly lives. Being there represented

an opportunity to live the myth more deeply and seek out other avenues of spiritual advancement.

Chaitanya's followers wrote much of the tradition's literature in Vrindaban. Here was my chance to live and practice where they and many great devotees lived and practiced. I wanted to immerse myself in this spiritual place of pilgrimage. Of course, it's still an earthly place and not all spiritual.

We went to Keshi Ghat, a bathing place on the Yamuna River. I said, "You expect me to go in there?" as I stood looking at the huge tortoises lurking in the water looking up at me.

"Yes, don't worry about them. They only pinch."

I got up my courage and went in. I thought, "What can go wrong bathing and standing in a sacred river murmuring prayers?" Yes, I only got pinched while saying my *mantras* in the sacred waters.

Sharma's relatives were priests at the Radha Raman temple. He arranged for me to stay at the house of one who was out of town. It was across the street from Seva Kunja, a walled garden where, as the story goes, Radha-Krishna went to relax with their girlfriends after dancing in the forest. It's said that no one can spend the night there without going crazy or dying because Radha-Krishna still go there every night, and the sight is too much for a mortal to behold. A number of stories tell of devotees who spent the night

there and went mad or died. They say even monkeys leave there at night.

Tradition says Krishna went into the forests around town and played his flute at night. When his flute song reached their ears, his girlfriends left everything and rushed into the forest to rendezvous with him. They yearned to taste the nectar of his lips as his flute did while he played it.

Without reserve, they threw themselves in his embrace kissing his lotus lips and tasting his mouth, which was scented and his teeth stained red from chewing betel nuts--a mild intoxicant and aphrodisiac. They pressed their firm jug-like breasts against his garlanded chest and entwined themselves around him like a creeper about a tree.

Krishna expanded himself into as many forms as there were girls and danced with them in the forest. The girls sang, and Krishna played his flute. After becoming weary from dancing, the girls laid down their clothes and made love with Krishna for what appeared to be an eternity. They then went for a cooling bath in the Yamuna River. Splashing and playing, they appeared like a herd of elephants.

In the early morning hours, the band of young lovers went to the beautiful garden of Seva Kunja to enjoy sweet drinks, spicy pastries, milk sweets, and other refreshments. Then, after more dancing, they slipped home to bed before their families awoke. This

is one of the most beautiful traditional stories of Krishna and his girlfriends.

There are many tamal trees in Seva Kunja garden. These trees have blackish bark that is often compared to Krishna's skin color. One especially black tamal tree allegedly was the one Krishna clung to when he wept in separation from Radha. Although Krishna had many girlfriends, Radha was number one. Unless she was present, the love sports were incomplete.

Sometimes, Radha-Krishna had a lover's quarrel, and she spurned him for a while. At such times, he wept in separation from her. Once, weeping and clutching the black tamal tree, his touch formed *shalagramas*, black sacred stones. The god of love wept in separation from his beloved. Nearby at a golden tree, Radha experienced separation from Krishna.

The garden has a small temple, a pool that Krishna magically made with his flute to give water to the thirsty cowherd girls, raised platforms for them to dance and sit on, and many rhesus monkeys. The packed white clay ground was swept clean.

That evening, Sharma took me to some of the 5,000 temples Vrindaban is famous for. Some are quite palatial while others are simple rooms in people's homes. First we went to Radha Damodar temple where Swamiji lived before going to America. He continued paying rent on these two rooms, and when he didn't like the way things were going with his western dis-

ciples, he threatened to go back there and live a simple life. In the meantime, the rooms were locked.

Jiva Goswami, one of the six main apostles of Krishna Chaitanya, founded Radha Damodar temple four hundred years ago. The back courtyard houses the remains of Jiva Goswami, Rupa Goswami, and other saints as well as a place where Rupa practiced devotion. Devotees circumambulate the temple and tombs, bow down before them, and chant the holy names constantly.

When it was time, the priest awakened the deities from their afternoon nap and offered them food, water, incense, flower, peacock fan, flame, conch shell, bells, chanting, etc. This ritual worship is performed several times a day.



*Radha-Damodar*

Next, Sharma and I went to the Radha Balabha temple. The deities were still closed. Some devotees came in and offered obeisance. Several musicians played beautiful music and sang devotional songs

near the back of the courtyard. Devotees milled around the courtyard chanting and talking. Sharma and I sat on a stone veranda in back of the courtyard waiting for the worship ceremony.

Some older devotees came, offered obeisance to me, and touched my feet. I felt unworthy of such treatment by people who engaged in devotional practices longer than me and live in such a holy place.

When the doors in front of the deities opened, they stood there beautifully. The deity room was situated on a raised marble stage in front of the temple. There was a four foot high black stone deity of Krishna and a slightly smaller brass Radha. They were dressed and decorated gorgeously. It is said that they self-manifested and revealed themselves to a great devotee. The worship and atmosphere at this temple was excellent, and it is one of my favorites.

Sharma took me to visit some of his relatives. Then we went to a temple in the home of a devotee. His deity was also said to be self-manifested.

A Radha-Krishna play was enacted in an open theater. Apparently, this occurred regularly. Children and teens in ornate costumes performed. The audience came and went freely.

After visiting a couple of other temples, Sharma and I returned to the house where I was staying, and Sharma left to catch the train back to Delhi.



*Radha Raman*

I heard the bells ringing at a nearby temple and rushed there for the last worship. It was the Radha Raman temple founded by Gopal Bhatt Goswami, an apostle of Chaitanya. The deity was said to have self-manifested four hundred years ago out of a *shala-gram*. He is about nine inches tall and quite attractive.

After worship and tasting remnants of food offered to

Radha Raman, I headed home. In Chaitanyaism, it is customary to offer food to deities during worship. Small portions are distributed to the congregation after worship. It's believed to embody the mercy and presence of the deity as in Christian communion bread.

I took a wrong turn and wandered around the maze like streets of Vrindaban. I found some other large temples we passed coming into town. I entered a walled garden and heard the eerie sound of peacocks crying in the trees overhead. I didn't know what it was. I was enchanted by the exotic beauty of the place with its stone pavilions. After wandering for some time, I finally found my way home.



The next day, I went to an old temple on the outskirts of Vrindaban that I passed on the way into town. It was deserted. Supposedly, the priests were killed or driven off by robbers known as *dacoits*. Beautiful peacocks sang and danced on its sandstone walls.

Near by, I found a lake of the Jamuna River where I swam. It was Akrur Ghat where the great devotee Akrur was said to experience a vision of Krishna in the lake five thousand years ago. Krishna Chaitanya stayed there on his visit to Vrindaban some five hundred years ago. I was thoroughly entranced to be on the same ground where my mythical heros walked. I lived the myth and immersed myself in it.

I walked in a forest where cuckoos sang in the trees, cows wandered herded by young boys, and I saw a gnu, which looks like a cross between a cow and a deer. In many ways, to my mind and belief, life here went on peacefully and quietly like five thousand years ago when Radha-Krishna are said to have incarnated and displayed their pastoral pastimes.

I joined the Krishna movement and came to India for this sensation. I was the only Westerner in town, and I fully experienced Radha-Krishna devotion in its homeland. Although western influence was increasing in Indian life, living in Vrindaban was like living in another time as well as another place. I wanted to drink it in and experience it on its own terms.

I was quite enthusiastic. For me, this simple life and eruption of inner feelings was what the devotional tradition was about. Devotees can't obtain it living in a busy environment, expanding movements, bureaucracy, and accumulating money to build magnificent structures and empires. The devotional ideal clashes with these things.

I felt at home in Vrindaban like I lived there in previous lives. I felt I was an Indian renunciant in my previous life. Why else was I so attracted to this austere foreign lifestyle, and why did I feel so at home here? Swamiji said his early disciples were associates of Krishna Chaitanya in previous lives in India, and we took birth in America to help spread Krishna consciousness throughout the world. I believed this could be true.

Walking through the bazaar, a leper woman whose fingers and toes fell off due to the disease grabbed me. She pleaded, "American *sadhu*! American *sadhu*! Holy man, save me!" She fell at my feet begging. This was another shocking encounter with the miserable reality of many poor outcastes in India.

Swamiji often said a renunciant was not to be touched by a woman, what to speak of a leper woman. I didn't know what to do. I chanted and offered my blessings. Breaking free, I ran into the nearest temple to collect myself. It was the Sahaji Temple, a large, ornate marble temple with crystal chandlers

and good deity worship. They kept a ping pong ball balanced on a stream of water from a fountain in front of the deity of Krishna for his amusement.

Discovering Vrindaban's darker side, I sat in back of the temple collecting myself. A party of pilgrims came through to see the deity. As they left and saw me, they threw coins at my feet. I gathered them and threw half to Krishna. I took the other half and bought a large glass of hot milk in the bazaar.

I stopped carrying my monk's staff. It attracted too much attention. Most renunciants in town didn't carry a staff. It's a sign of office and high position in a caste society--one who can meet out punishment and interpret the law. However, the mood of the devotees of Vrindaban is "humbler than a blade of grass" as taught by Krishna Chaitanya. We are the "servant of the servant of the servant of the cowherd girls of Vrindaban" who were Krishna's greatest devotees because they gave their all to him.

I was torn between the potential depth of spiritual beauty and the depth of poverty and harsh living conditions that exist side by side in India. It seemed a combination of heaven and hell. Hindu scriptures say earth is a middle planet with aspects of heaven and hell. Whether we take it literally or metaphorically, this is apparent in India.

I considered returning to the U.S.. I didn't get inoculations before entering India and would need

them to get back into the U.S.. I went to a clinic in Delhi to get a smallpox vaccination. A number of Indians were also there for vaccinations, and it seemed like the doctor used the same needle on several people.

I went to another public health clinic to get a cholera shot. The nurse got the needle out of a box in her purse, wiped it off with cotton and what I hoped was an antiseptic, and injected me. To be pierced by a needle was forbidden for renunciants by ancient Hindu law--what to speak of being touched by a woman in the process! I didn't know I could pay to get the health certificate stamped without getting the shots, and I didn't think this nurse's touch was going to make me fall from my vow of celibacy.

That night, I came down with a fever and felt quite sick. One of those needles was not clean. The next day, my assistant, Gunarnava, and I went back to Vrindaban. The following day was Krishna's birthday. People celebrated all over town. In spite of still being sick, Gunarnava and I visited a number of temples. I met an American couple who often came to the Philadelphia temple while I was in charge there.

The next day, they visited me. It was Bhaktivedanta Swami's birthday. They invited me to join them and visit Neem Karoli Baba, Ram Dass' guru, whom they came to Vrindaban to see.

We went to his temple on the edge of town, It featured a large Hanuman deity. Devotees at this temple chanted Ram mantra twenty-four hours a day over a loud speaker. We sat on the veranda and Babaji sat on a wooden cot wrapped in a blanket. He asked me to lead some chanting. Everyone joined in. Then we talked a while.

Gunarnava and I returned home. We prepared a feast for our guru's birthday, and had lunch. Although following tradition, we fasted since the previous day, I couldn't eat much.

After lunch, we took a rickshaw to the Rama Krishna Mission Hospital on the main road leading into town. My skin radiated bright yellow. I was weak and diagnosed with hepatitis. I stayed in the hospital a few days recuperating in a ward with many poor suffering Indians. Gunarnava brought me meals and medicine from the pharmacy in town. When I regained some strength, I requested to be discharged. They said I had to stay longer. I had Gunarnava arrange a rickshaw, and I walked out as they yelled for me to stay.

I was still weak and got a cane to help me walk. It was also handy for holding off the packs of wild dogs that roamed Vrindaban and attacked people who were alone at night or in early morning. Dogs are not often kept as pets in India, except by westernized people like Bhaktivinode Thakur. In Vrindaban, there

were so many wild dogs that the police went around shooting them once a year.

There were also many wild pigs rummaging around town competing with the dogs for garbage and stool that piled up in gutters where sewer water ran in open streams. Men and women came daily and swept the streets with handleless straw brooms and metal scoops to pickup garbage and excrement. They put it in hand carts they then dumped at a spot to be picked up by a tractor or ox pulled trailer.

In the bazaars, shops lined the streets and were raised a couple of feet above the cement road to avoid flooding during monsoon season. Proprietors sat on cushions in the open storefronts displaying their wears and dealing with customers. Other merchants used hand carts in the street. Most of the traffic was pedestrians, with some bicycles, rickshaws, ox carts, and a few cars and trucks. There were no side walks, and the streets were about twenty feet wide. Most of the buildings were painted, stucco brick. It felt like an old medieval town, especially in the evening when people lit their dry dung burners in the streets to cook dinner, and pungent smoke filled the air.

Native residents of Vrindaban were born and raised there, but many people, especially abandoned widows, came from other parts of India, especially Bengal where many follow Krishna Chaitanya. Old pilgrims come to Vrindaban to die in the holy abode

of Radha-Krishna. Others come as part of their life journey seeking purification and enlightenment. Large parties of pilgrims come for major festivals. I wondered about the spirituality of some people who pushed and shoved to get on a crowded bus to Mathura or harassed me for being American. Over time, I learned that personal and social problems are much deeper than I understood then.

That night, Gunarnava and I attended musical plays depicting Radha-Krishna and Chaitanya's pastimes at the home of the head Goswami of Radha Raman temple. We were guests of Dr. Kapoor, a friend of Swamiji's. He translated the gist of the plays for us. I was impressed and moved by the depth of devotional emotion presented in a simple yet highly artistic manner. We returned several nights for continuing performances of the plays.

Swamiji sent a group of devotees headed by Tamal Krishna to Delhi to help start a temple and organize a big festival like we had in Bombay. He wrote me, "What are you doing in Vrindaban? Return to Delhi immediately."

I was greatly disappointed because living in Vrindaban was *my* reason for being in India. Swamiji had other reasons. I am a spiritual warrior and Swamiji was my commander. Gunarnava and I took a night train. We traveled third class unreserved, which was the cheapest way to go. I got out of the hospital

about two weeks earlier and was still weak. I climbed into the luggage rack to sleep.

The devotees lived in a large apartment. Since I was too weak to go out and do much, they made me treasurer. They instructed that when devotees ask for money I was to say I didn't have it and disburse only what was required for minimal essentials. They considered this necessary to keep overhead down and have money to expand preaching programs. I didn't like being in that position. It was typical ISKCON mentality, and I tried to distance myself from it.

Sometimes I was so weak I laid on my blankets on the floor holding my staff and prayer beads feeling like I was about to die. I went to homeopathic and ayurvedic doctors seeking a cure. I have little faith in western allopathic medicine since it deals with symptoms through chemical and surgical intervention rather than getting to the source of the disease, which in this case seems to be a dirty needle that was part of their system. Finally, an ayurvedic physician cured me using a combination of herbs and precious metals ground together into a medicine. I got most of my strength back within a few days.

One day in Swamiji's room, I and a couple of other devotees sat with the mayor of New Delhi and Swamiji. India and Pakistan were at war over the independence of Bangla Desh. There was an air raid and blackout. Swamiji said to close the shutters, but don't



turn the lights off. "If they want to drop a bomb on us, let them. We will see it as Krishna coming in the form of a bomb to kill us." The mayor didn't object.

Prabhupad sent Brahmananda Maharaj to West Pakistan and Gargamuni Maharaj to East Pakistan to preach after spending some time preaching in Florida. They were in danger in Pakistan due to the war and religious persecution. They came to Delhi for refuge. Gargamuni was held at gunpoint at the airport in Pakistan, and Brahmananda was in a temple that was strafed by machine gun fire. Swamiji said, "You should have stayed, but now you are here and safe, so that is all right."

Something strange happened in Los Angeles involving Swamiji, Brahmananda, Gargamuni, and Vishnujana right before I arrived to take initiation into the renounced order with them. It is still not clear to me what really took place, but Swamiji's attitude probably stemmed from that.

The Delhi festival was just as large and successful as the Bombay one. Special guests included the mayor of New Delhi, the Minister of Defense, and the Canadian High Commissioner. We monks formed a circle around Swamiji and used our staffs as a barricade to keep the throngs of people seeking blessings from crushing or tripping him as he walked from his car to the stage, since many people tried to touch his feet as he walked by.

The owner of a vacant Sanskrit school in Vrindaban offered Swamiji the use of it. It contained a treadle operated letterpress. Swamiji wanted me to take charge of it and look into starting a Hindi edition of *Back to Godhead* magazine using the press. I was glad to get permission to live in Vrindaban again. I was joined by Australian and Indian disciples.

It was a stucco building. The front door opened on a long narrow room. Then there was a courtyard with two rooms and a veranda on one side and one large room containing the press on the other side. These rooms only had bamboo slat lattice work for walls on the courtyard side. Sometimes, while we were out, monkeys broke in and ransacked the place. Sometimes, when we ate on the veranda, monkeys jumped from the courtyard walls and stole food from our plates. There was a small lockable room in the back that served as a kitchen. It opened on another courtyard. There was no toilet. We used the alley or the river bank.

On hot summer nights, we slept on the veranda. I lay on the concrete between two thin pieces of cloth that I wore during the day. Mosquitoes swarmed around, and any part of my body that wasn't covered got bit. Sleep was difficult.

We sometimes begged door to door for food--a common practice for those devoted to religious life in India. Most people were glad to give a little, espe-

cially if one asked in the name of Radha by calling out "Radhe!" to get the people's attention. Residents of Vrindaban consider Krishna's lover, Radha, higher than him. Swamiji told us, "In Vrindaban, if Krishna comes without Radha, the devotees will say, 'Go away and come back when you have Radha with you.'"

I went to Mathura to see Brijabasi & Sons who published beautiful devotional posters that were popular with Radha-Krishna devotees. I was happy to see the original paintings of some of my favorite prints in their home. I wanted their advice about what to do with the printing press. They advised that it was not worth bothering with. A bigger more modern press was needed for the job. I agreed with their assessment.

The two other devotees left, and I was at peace alone in Vrindaban again. I adjusted to life in India and was willing to undergo hardships to maintain a simple contemplative life in this place of pilgrimage and myth.

I became friends with Dr. Kapoor, a large friendly man. He wore traditional white clothes as many married Indians do. Dr. Kapoor spoke English well. He was head of a college and a philosophy professor. He was also a learned devotee who wrote books and gave talks around town regularly. He was warm and friendly to me. Both Swamiji and Dr. Kapoor sepa-

rated from the Gaudiya Math, the institution founded by their spiritual teacher Bhakti-siddhanta Saraswati.

After the death of Bhakti-siddhanta, Dr. Kapoor was inspired by another spiritual teacher, Gauranga Das, and adjusted his practices accordingly. Gauranga was from a contemplative disciplic succession whose approach entailed entering the mood of the cow-



*Dr. O.B.L. Kapoor*

herd girls who are Krishna's greatest devotees. I was extremely interested in this practice, since it was a viable means to live the myth, or enter Radha-Krishna's reality here and now.

Dr. Kapoor referred me to Gauranga Das who lived alone at the north edge of town in Raman Reti. Although he looked like a *Mayavadi sannyasi*, he was a great devotee of Radha-Krishna.

As we sat on the flat roof of his home, he informed me that some gurus tell their disciples what their spiritual identity is and how to meditate on their personal pastimes with Radha-Krishna. He didn't want to tell me that information without Swamiji's permis-

sion. He asked how many rounds of beads I chanted. I said, "Sixteen."

Gauranga advised, "You should increase your chanting to sixty-four rounds a day minimum, but if you don't know your relationship to Krishna, how will you maintain that? If someone you don't know does something very wonderful, you will think, 'O, so what.' However, if your son does something ordinary, you think, 'How wonderful.' So we must know what our relationship to Krishna is. For the time being just think, 'I am his. He is mine.' as you go on chanting Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare/ Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare." I took his advice and had it in mind when writing the English mantras found in *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism*.

He also recommended, "Never leave Vrindaban. In Vrindaban, you will gain energy for developing your Krishna consciousness. Everywhere else you will be drained. Here people are chanting Hare Krishna twenty-four hours a day. They are always remembering Krishna's pastimes."

I became a friend of another god brother of Swamiji named Purushottam Das. We talked about developing the amorous relationship with Radha-Krishna. We translated charts that outlined the chief girlfriends relationships with Radha-Krishna as well as other information unavailable in English. Neither Purushot-

tam nor Dr. Kapoor were aware of Bhaktisiddhanta, their teacher, ever revealing a disciple's relationship with Radha-Krishna.

When Swamiji visited Vrindaban, I got Dr. Kapoor to come with me and ask him about revealing the eleven moods of my devotion as a girlfriend of Radha-Krishna as was commonly practiced in Vrindaban, since Swamiji never taught us about that. Dr. Kapoor was the one who introduced me to the concept. He acted as my advocate and argued the case for me.

Swamiji said, "This is not done in our line. One must realize his relationship for himself. One cannot just jump ahead. When one is ripe and ready, it will be revealed from within. . . . I am a cowherd boy."

I still wasn't satisfied. I knew there was more. By this time, I thought Swamiji held his disciples back from developing an amorous relationship with Radha-Krishna and engaging in the meditative states used to develop that mood. Swamiji wanted his disciples out collecting money, building temples, "spreading the movement," not sitting around chanting and meditating on their earnest spiritual desires and enlightenment along with its accompanying sense of bliss. One of his slogans was, "Work now. *Samadhi* [enlightenment] later." I thought, "No. *Samadhi* now. *Samadhi* later."

Swamiji had his own way of doing things. He was businesslike and authoritarian. He single handedly started the Krishna movement in the West. His disciples ran it, but he had the final say on everything. We listened to him or risked the wrath of God--or so we were told.



Gargamuni Maharaj came to Vrindaban and moved in with me. We enjoyed each other's company and practiced devotion together.

I went to the Jamuna River several days after my last visit, and I was amazed to find it rose thirty feet and was a mile wider. Melons and squashes floated downstream. Farmers evacuated their field huts by boat. A quiet stream, knee deep and fifty feet across, became a raging torrent. Gargamuni and I enjoyed jumping in and riding the current to Keshi Ghat.

Brahmananda Maharaj and a photographer couple named Bishaka and Yadubar visited. Gargamuni and I gave them a tour of Vrindaban. We circumambulated the town along a trail that devotees walk barefoot as an act of devotion.

We went to Akrur Ghat. The three monks wanted to see if we could make it to the other side of the river and back. We easily waded the first half, and a sandbar was in the middle. From there to the steep crumbling sand bank on the far side was a hundred feet of fast moving deep water. We swam hard and made it

to the bank, grabbed on, and pulled ourselves out of the water to avoid being swept far downstream.

Dry thorn bushes covered the shore. We picked our way upstream with bare feet to have a better chance of getting back to the sandbar before being swept downstream where there was no sandbar or hope of getting back to the other shore.

We dove in and swam as hard as we could. Brahmananda and Gargamuni made it to the sandbar. Unable to make much progress, I was swept downstream to the end of the sandbar. As my strength gave out, I thought, "This is a great place to go. Drowning in the holy Jamuna should liberate me."

I relaxed and let my feet drop to tread water as long as I could. My feet hit sand! I walked onto the sand bar. The three of us made it back. Bishaka and Yadubar watched all this through their telephoto lenses not knowing what to do.

Another time, we three monks went to Seva Kunj and sat in a grove of small trees towards the back. We soon realized we were surrounded by rhesus monkeys. Gargamuni said, "Let's move carefully and try not to excite them and get out of here!"

We got up and started walking away. The monkeys followed. We started to run. We dropped a couple of things but didn't go back for them. The monkeys yelled and shook their fists in hot pursuit. We made it to the gate where there were sticks to hold the



monkeys at bay. Our monk staffs would've served us well in that situation.

We went to Govardhan Hill, which the *Bhagavat* legend says Krishna lifted to protect his devotees from torrential rains the storm god Indra sent as punishment for their not worshipping him. We got a room at an inn for the night, but the many mosquitoes in the room kept us from sleep. We got up in the middle of the night and walked to Radha Kund. It was eerily beautiful walking down the moonlit road in this mysterious spiritual place.

According to tradition, Radha Kund is holier than Vrindaban because it's the bathing place of Radha, Krishna's lover. This is the holiest place on earth for her devotees. It is a deep pool with a stone walkway and steps going down into the water. When we ar-



rived, a *Bhagavat* reading was going on in one of the temples on its bank. We went in and joined the audience.

When the sun came up, we swam in the pool. We noticed a tree on which large bats with red heads hung upside down. There also seemed to be a large serpent in the water with a rippling black body. We joyfully dove in nonetheless. I swam down as deep as I could. It got dark and cold with no sign of bottom.

With the coming of winter, it was getting cold. Gargamuni and I bought rope net cots and quilts. Still, it was cold and hard to sleep at night in our open unheated rooms. We bathed with cold water in the mornings.

Devotees organized another festival in Jaipur, Rajasthan. Gargamuni and I attended. Jaipur is a beautiful city in the high desert built by Hindu kings who resisted Moslem conquest. Some of the main Vrindaban deities such as Radha Govinda, Radha Gopinath, and Radha Damodar, were brought there for safe keeping. The Radha Govinda temple is the largest and most popular. They hosted the festival.

The evening worship and chanting was incredibly beautiful. Devotees chanted "Govinda jai jai, Gopala jai jai, Radha Ramana Hari, Govinda jai jai" or all glories to Krishna, the lover of Radha. Swamiji lectured. In the mornings, there was a smaller program.

Swamiji and his disciples were invited to many homes and restaurants to eat. We were celebrities. Hindus consider it good fortune and a duty to feed those who dedicate their lives to God. It was especially prestigious to feed the famous Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupad and his western disciples, whom he called his “dancing dogs” or “dancing white elephants.”

One afternoon, I asked Swamiji if I could skip going to eat again. He said, "No. You are a young man. You can take it. You should go." He didn't go. Sometimes the food was excellent and sometimes too spicy and oily, which made us sick. This time, it happened to be real good.

Gargamuni and I told Swamiji about our difficulties living in the Sanskrit school. He told us we could live in his rooms at Radha Damodar temple. This was a great honor. He had a study-bedroom, and a kitchen with a seat that looked out a stone grille to the tomb of Rupa Goswami. Both rooms opened on a veranda joining the main temple courtyard. There was also a toilet with a cold water tap. We bathed by pouring water from a bucket over the head or crouching under the tap.

Swamiji lived in these rooms before going to America, and continued to pay the inexpensive rent on them. He arranged for the Delhi temple to send us one hundred rupees a month to live on and pay the

rent for him. This was about ten dollars American. We became his caretakers. The rooms were unused for several years. We eagerly returned to Vrindaban.



Gargamuni and I cleaned years of dust from Swamiji's quarters and moved in. We found copies of *Back to Godhead* published before Swamiji went to America. They were four or eight page tabloids. Some contained an on going debate between Swamiji and Dr. Radha Krishna, the philosopher president of India. We also found unpublished manuscripts of Swamiji's that we typed for publication.

Swamiji's god-brother Ananda Prabhu joined us. Ananda was a humble cook. He moved into the kitchen and cooked for us. Meals were simple vegetarian fare cooked on a charcoal burner. All food was offered to Krishna, and we ate his remnants as tradition prescribed.

Gaur-kishor Goswami, the head priest of the temple, lived across the courtyard with his large extended family. They inherited the position and earned their livelihood from temple income, which included rental properties. The temple wasn't wealthy like some. However, its history makes it special to Chaitanya's line of disciplic succession. Gaur-kishor gave tours to pilgrims and received donations from them.

This room was warmer at night than the Sanskrit school. Gargamuni and I enjoyed living in such a holy

place and following in our guru's footsteps. We visited other temples and holy places regularly. I now chanted sixty-four rounds of Hare Krishna mantra daily as Gauranga Das recommended, studied the philosophy intently, and discussed it with devotees.

Gargamuni returned to Delhi, but I stayed in Vrindaban. I loved living there absorbed in devotional practices twenty-four hours a day. This was the path to perfection I sought. Scriptures confirmed it as the surest way to the spiritual world of Radha-Krishna. Pure love of God is the goal as well as the means, and living in Vrindaban greatly aids devotional practices.

Swamiji visited because land was donated in Raman Reti at the edge of town. When Swamiji visited me, he said, "Ah! Subal you are living just like I used to. This is very nice. This is very nice."

The next day, I told him, "I want to stop living in your rooms and receiving an income from the Delhi temple. I just want to wander around Braj begging for a living and chanting the holy names constantly."

I wanted to follow in the footsteps of many great devotees, follow my bliss, live the myth, and be free of obligations to ISKCON. I felt the organization was going in the wrong direction, not contributing to my spiritual development, and I wanted to be free of it.

"Oh no. You must not think like this. It's not enough to just come and say you love Krishna. Krishna wants to see what you are going to do for

him. What have you brought him? You are an American. You must build a skyscraper for him."

"No, Prabhupad. Please don't make me do that. You have so many disciples who are raising money and making temples. Just spare me so I can live here and engage in my devotional practices."

"You must do it. It is my order."

"I have no money. My clothes are ragged. I'll need a brief case and train fare. I don't speak the language very well."

"How much money will it take?"

"One or two hundred rupees."

"Here's one hundred. I'll also tell Rohini-nandan Maharaj to travel with you."

Rohini-nandan was Mr. Sharma's oldest son who was recently initiated by Swamiji and made a monk. Sharma promised him to Swamiji before he left for America. Now, he claimed him.

This was just another example of Swamiji's emphasis on tangible results. I was interested in raising my consciousness. He misidentified the institution of ISKCON, its temples, and possessions with Krishna like a businessman. Naturally he attracted business minded disciples who were more in tune with his goals than I. By delivering the results he wanted, these ambitious people gained control of the organization and its direction.



Rohini-nandan Maharaj came to Vrindaban to join me. After a couple of days, we took a train to Agra. There we got a room at an inn and went downtown to raise funds from business people to build a temple in Vrindaban. We saw the Taj Mahal's splendid white shimmering beauty across the Yamuna River, but we didn't visit it since it wasn't a holy place, and we weren't tourists.

We met a businessperson who knew Swamiji before he went to America. Swamiji also came to him asking for money. It was difficult fund raising there, especially since we weren't used to it. We soon went to Gwalior.

Gwalior was a quaint little town that still had much of the beauty from when India was ruled by wealthy kings with ornate palaces and forts. Swamiji tried to establish the League of Devotees there before moving to Vrindaban. He only attracted a couple of disciples. Rohini-nandan Maharaj and I stayed at an inn again.

Another Westerner was staying there. He lived in India for years and was very thin. He may have been strung out on drugs. He told us about Rajneesh, and how he made Westerners renunciants without requiring they give up drugs and sex. I thought this was a perversion of the Vedic renounced life I aspired to follow.

Rohini-nandan and I preached and fundraised in Gwalior. We went to Kanpur after a few days. Kanpur is a bigger city on the Ganges. We stayed with a businessman who knew Swamiji and helped him when he was in Kanpur preaching and fund raising before going to America.

Rohini-nandan couldn't take the strain of life on the road fundraising. He begged me to let him return to his family in Delhi. I wasn't into dragging anyone along with me and let him go. I felt a certain exhilarating thrill following in Swamiji's footsteps, traveling alone in India under the orders of my guru.

I visited the large, opulent Radha-Krishna temple built by the Singhanias, a wealthy textile manufacturing family. When Swamiji went to New York, he tried getting them to fund a temple there. He was unsuccessful. I went to see one of the younger Singhanias and got a donation from him.

I continued on to Allahabad where Swamiji lived most of his married life and had a pharmaceutical business. Allahabad is at the confluence of the Ganges, Yamuna, and Saraswati Rivers known as Triveni, which is sacred to Hindus.

I stayed at the monastery of a devotee in Chaitanya's line across the Ganges from the city. I walked down the banks of the Ganges to where the three rivers converged. It was midsummer, so the water was low. Farmers grew melons and squash on the



sandy bank. They dug holes about ten feet deep to the water level and used buckets to water their crops from the holes.

They put many human skulls on poles like scarecrows. Indians often threw bodies in the river. I saw one being eaten by vultures and dogs. I bathed in the waters of the confluence and prayed for purification and Radha-Krishna's blessings.

Living in the ashram on the banks of the Ganges, I concluded my commentary on "Sikshastakam," eight verses in which Chaitanya was said to have written the essence of his teachings. Some consider them to be the only writings Chaitanya left, while others consider them a later compilation. The rest of his teachings were passed on through his disciples writings like Jesus' teachings.

*Back to Godhead* published my commentary in two installments as "Lord Chaitanya's Mission and Precepts." I received many compliments on this writing and considered it my best to date. I republished it as a pamphlet in 2004.

I went to Benares and visited a Shiva temple Chaitanya visited on pilgrimage five hundred years earlier. I stayed in an inn and visited other parts of the ancient holy city. I also continued fund-raising.

From there, I went to Bihar. After a stay with a businessman, I decided to go to Vrindaban to rest, re-

new my energy, and see how construction was progressing.



Gurudas and Yamuna Devi were in charge. They only put in a well with a hand pump and didn't begin construction. They went to Calcutta with most western devotees to celebrate the Jagannath Rathayatra Festival.

I got sick and went to the Delhi temple with another American disciple. It was a bare room at an inn. All the devotees were in Calcutta. We laid our blankets on the bare concrete floor and rested. We lay there sick for a couple of days. We needed food and medicine. We only had enough money to buy one or the other.

We decided to risk spending the money on cab-fare to go downtown and raise more money. We went to the shoe shop of a life member where we met Gurudas and Yamuna on the way back to Vrindaban. They gave us money and assured us the Delhi devotees would return soon. We went to a restaurant, ate a good meal, and then got medicine. We soon felt better.

The Delhi devotees informed us that Tamal Krishna Maharaj was recruited to raise money for the Vrindaban temple. He planned a trip to Hyderabad in south India for this purpose. I phoned and arranged to join him in Calcutta.

Tamal Krishna, three celibate male students, and I took a train to Hyderabad, which is a Moslem stronghold that sought to be part of Pakistan when India became independent in the 1940s. We took literature and slide shows of ISKCON's activities around the world. We also had letters of introduction from two Calcutta businessmen to their Hyderabad branch managers instructing them to provide full assistance to us.

The managers met us at the train station. They arranged our stay at a good vegetarian hotel and meals at their homes. They also provided introductions to leading businesspersons of Hyderabad and a chauffeur driven car for our use.

Tamal and I arranged a press conference and got front page coverage. We received many speaking invitations and did two or three programs a day. We also visited prominent businesspersons for fund-raising. Tamal and I quickly became celebrities and were busy from early morning to late night.

At one night program, we chanted on an outdoor stage while the large crowd sat on rugs on the ground. We encouraged people to get up and dance, but security police with sticks told everyone to stay seated and maintain order. We stopped chanting and said we would not continue unless the people could get up and dance. The police had to give in.

The Shankar-acharya of Puri, a powerful religious and political leader of India, gave a series of lectures

in Hyderabad then too. He wrote a letter to the editor of the local paper saying, "Hindus beware! CIA agents and Christian spies. Anyone who sees their faces will go to hell." I replied with a letter to the editor of my own. A prominent businessman who had followed Shankar-acharya said, "I don't know why he is saying these things about you. He must have gone crazy."

We had a couple of large outdoor events attended by about eight thousand people. Sankar-acharya's henchmen came and distributed leaflets with a similar message as his letter. When they got on stage and tried to disrupt the program, people from the audience dragged them off.

We raised 35,000 rupees in three weeks. Our reception was so good, we said we would return soon with Bhaktivedanta Swami.

We returned to Calcutta and hired an engineer named Sharma. Tamal and I went to Vrindaban with him. There we hired a Moslem labor contractor. I became onsite manager and constructed temporary living quarters and offices. They were brick buildings with straw roofs. Tamal went to Delhi to hire an architect and order building supplies.

I stayed in a house across the street from the land while construction progressed. One afternoon on the road, a snake charmer put on a show for a group of locals. After taking a collection from them, he came in my office wanting a donation. I said no. The snake

charmer sat on the floor and took a cobra out of a basket. He put it on the floor. It started crawling toward me. I sat at the desk and stared the snake charmer down. He grabbed the cobra just as it was reaching me. The cobra bit him in the neck as he pulled it back, but it didn't appear to bother him. He put it back in the basket and quickly left.

The engineer showed me a hoop snake in a stack of bricks. He said it could put its tail in its mouth and roll down the road like a hoop. He also showed me a king snake that looked like it had a head at either end of its body. The laborers also found a milk snake which they chased into a tree. It was said to be able to wrap itself around the hind legs of a cow and suck the milk out of its utter.

An old monk died at a neighboring ashram. They dressed him and carried him on a chair while chanting in procession to the burning place by the river.

Some western devotees stayed at Radha Damodar temple. One of them, Biharilal was an underwater demolition man during the Korean War. He was thrown out of a number of temples as a disturbance.

Being a construction manager and riding herd on a group of ruffians was not why I wanted to be in Vrindaban. Disgusted, I took my staff and begging bowl and walked along the banks of the Jamuna planning to leave and live as a mendicant. The water

level was high, and I walked in chest deep water to get around areas where the trail was washed out.

After walking for sometime, I headed back thinking I couldn't desert my duties like that. When I reached my office, I heard arguing coming from inside. Again, I decided to leave and just walked on by. Chaitanya Das, a Sikh devotee who was the treasurer, ran down the street after me.

"Maharaj! Maharaj! Biharilal is trying to steal the cash box."

I handed him my monk's staff and begging bowl. Furious, I ran back to the office, grabbed my walking cane and told Biharilal to put the cash box down and get out. He did.



The temporary buildings were soon finished, and several devotees including Ananda Prabhu--the cook, Sharma--the engineer, and I moved in.

When a truckload of steel rebar for the foundation arrived, the driver demanded to be paid for the steel before unloading it. The shipment was prepaid, and I wasn't going to pay again. The driver threatened to take the steel to Mathura and dump it there. I jumped on the truck, opened the hood, and threatened to pull out the distributor cables if he didn't call his company and confirm that the order was prepaid. He did and the matter was settled.

Workers dug the foundation of the Krishna Balaram Temple by hand with laborers carrying the dirt out in metal pans on their heads. Swamiji wanted to pour the first concrete when he came to give a series of *Nectar of Devotion* lectures at Radha Damodar temple, which devotees from around the world would attend.

*Nectar of Devotion* is Bhaktivedanta Swami's rendition of Rupa Goswami's *Bhakti-rasamrita-sindhu*, which is the introductory volume to *Ujjval Nilamani*. It contains elaborate descriptions of devotional principles, their benefits, and stages of progress on the devotional path. Devotees looked forward to these lec-



*Rupa Goswami's place of devotion*

tures due to the sweetness of the subject and their location at Rupa's place of devotion, which may be where he wrote.

Arrangements were made for devotees to stay at the Maharaj of Bharatpur's palace at Keshi Ghat on the Yamuna River. It was a beautiful old sandstone palace where many people went to bathe on the steps that lead down into the water. There was also a small temple where worship of Yamuna was carried on regularly.

Swamiji came and stayed in his rooms at the Radha Damodar temple and lectured in the courtyard. However, the whole thing was marred by a couple of unfortunate incidents.

The Maharaj of Bharatpur was offended when a silver deity throne he sent and wanted to be paid for was returned. He sent thugs from Delhi. They harassed and beat some devotees in town then went to the palace.

I was at the construction site in Raman Reti, when a devotee, who slipped out the back of the palace, came and informed me of the situation. He said Biharilal suggested pouring burning kerosene off the ramparts onto the attackers. Things did not look good.

I took a rickshaw out of town the back way to the Mathura highway. Reaching the highway, I hitchhiked to Mathura with some Westerners in their Land Rover. I went to the District Magistrate's office and



requested police protection, which he provided. Things quieted down, and the lectures continued with police guards on duty.

A young Bengali caste priest came and wanted to join us. Swamiji put him in my care. He lived in the room next to mine with three western devotees who helped me. They complained that he wouldn't work, slept late, and didn't follow devotional practices.

I chanted my rounds early one morning when a devotee came to tell me this priest was still sleeping, and they couldn't get him up. I took my water pot with some water in it and poured it on his face saying, "This isn't a hotel. If you want to stay here, you'll have to get up early, chant your rounds, follow the devotional principles, and do some work."

He laid there silently fuming, and I returned to my room.

When I came out a short while later, he was waiting there with a bucket of water, which he threw on me. Yadav-acharya, a black devotee from Detroit, saw this and laughed. However, when the priest raised the metal bucket to hit me with it, he didn't think it was funny and ran to my assistance.

I avoided the blow. We fought with the priest, who was no match for the two of us, and yet, he kept fighting. Yadav-acharya, a good street fighter, pulverized the priest's face and gouged his eye. Finally, the priest gave up and ran off.

In India, to beat someone with bare hands was not a crime. The priest went to the nearby police outpost at the edge of town and told them we used a knife on him. His face was such a mess they believed him. They came and arrested us. I accused the priest of attacking me. The three of us were marched through town and taken to jail. After a while, we all dropped charges and were released.

When Swamiji heard about this, he was furious. He ordered me to apologize to the priest and beg his forgiveness. I did, but I didn't like it at all. Swamiji chastised Yadav-acharya and I in front of our god-brothers. He called us ruffians. It was humiliating.

However, after he calmed down, when we were alone, Swamiji realized I was burned out. He said he could understand that being a construction manager wasn't my line of work, and I was a preacher at heart. He suggested I go to Hyderabad with him when he left Vrindaban. This was a welcome invitation.

Work on the temple foundation progressed satisfactorily. Swamiji poured the first cement into the forms before leaving.

Tamal Krishna, I, and others accompanied Swamiji to Hyderabad. We stayed on the estate of a prominent ISKCON life-member. We held a public festival that attracted much attention. Along with a large amount of cash donations, we were given a plot of land in downtown Hyderabad to build a temple on.

Swamiji asked another American renunciant to manage the project, but he refused. Swamiji then asked me.

"I thought you agreed that construction management wasn't my line of work," I objected.

"We must be prepared to do anything in Krishna's service," he argued and again pressured me to take the position.

A wealthy contractor built a house for himself and his family to live in--a luxurious modern home situated in the hills overlooking Hyderabad. It could just as well have been in the Hollywood hills. One wall in the stairway, ten feet wide and two stories high, was covered with natural amethyst crystal. One day, while going down the steep driveway with his family, the brakes on his car failed. They crashed into a stone wall and were injured. They concluded the house was haunted, and they shouldn't live there.

They allowed me and several devotees to stay there. We also felt it was haunted. I really wasn't into managing another temple construction. Tamal Krishna sent Keshava, an experienced American manager, to take over. He created dissension and tried undermining my authority as spiritual leader of the group.

I told him, "I don't need big houses and temples. If you want them, you can have them. I'm going on pilgrimage."



By train and bus, I went to the temple of Narasingha-dev known as Singhachalam near Visakhapatnam. The deity presents himself in a two-armed, threefold-bending human form with the head of a boar and tail of a lion representing the legendary boar and half-lion-half-man incarnations of Krishna.

The priests daily apply layer upon layer of sandalwood paste on the Lord's body to cool his great anger. The sandalwood is removed once a year during the Vaishaka period (April/May), bringing thousands of pilgrims on that day to see the Lord's form. Otherwise, when you come close, what you see is the deity covered by a mound of dried sandalwood paste.

The square temple architecture is incomparable, and the spire beautifully carved. The temple buildings are black granite carved with forms and pastimes of Vishnu, especially his incarnation Narasingha.

In 1512, Krishna Chaitanya is said to have visited the temple and left his foot prints in the stone at the entrance while on pilgrimage in South India. Chaitanya sang and danced before the deity of Narasingha in great joy. That night Chaitanya told those present with him how that deity of Narasingha manifested. Sitting around Chaitanya, the devotees heard about Narasingha's pastimes with rapt attention.

This temple sits on top of an 800 foot hill. A bus goes to the top of the hill. The temple can also be approached by climbing the hill, which has 800-1,000 steps. I was sure Chaitanya walked up the steps. Even though I wasn't in the best physical shape, I did too. I stopped along the way to catch my breath and admire the view. I felt it worth the climb to visit this sacred temple, follow and touch Chaitanya's footprints.

I continued by train to Puri on the east coast of Orissa where Chaitanya made his headquarters after entering the renounced order. I stayed at the Gaudiya Math (a monastery founded by Swamiji's spiritual teacher) on the seashore near Haridas Thakur's tomb. I visited the room where Chaitanya lived, Tota Gopinath Temple where Gadadhar Pandit lived, and other holy places. I was unable to enter the Jagannath Temple because I'm not a Hindu, even though I carved and painted a number of Jagannath deities worshipped in western temples. Haridas Thakur, a close Moslem friend of Chaitanya, was unable to enter either, so I didn't feel bad.

As I walked along the beach, I remembered Chaitanya who threw himself in the ocean there. I watched the waves and fishers to relax and rejuvenate. The sunshine, fresh ocean air, exercise, and re-immersing myself in the myth restored my strength.

I went to Calcutta and stayed at the ISKCON temple briefly. I continued by train and boat to Mayapur,

the birthplace of Chaitanya. ISKCON owned land there. Jayapataka Maharaj was constructing a guest house-temple. I stayed in a small thatched hut near the cow barn with Guru-kripa and Yasoda-nandan Maharajas. They introduced me to Lalita Prasad Thakur, the son and disciple of Bhaktivinode Thakur and brother of Bhakti-siddhanta Saraswati, A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami's guru, who Dr. Kapoor said was my best hope for learning the process of becoming Radha's girlfriend.



We surreptitiously took a boat and train to Birnagar, Bhaktivinode's birthplace. Birnagar was famous in Bengal as the wealthy village Ula at the time of Bhaktivinode's birth. However, the village was devastated by cholera in 1857. Many died and others like young Bhaktivinode and his surviving family members fled. The village became a ghost town taken over by jungle and wild animals.

Lalita Prasad told us how after retiring, he went to his father's birthplace to live. He cleared the jungle and faced down wild tigers and snakes. The walled compound contained a number of small Shiva temples and a Durga temple that were mostly neglected. Lalita Prasad worshipped his father's Gaur-Gadadhar deities in a temple on the roof until he could no longer climb the stairs. Then, his disciples continued their worship.

Lalita Prasad was in his nineties when I met him. He walked only with assistance and spent the day sit-



*Lalita Prasad Thakur*

ting on his wooden cot in a small room where he also slept. He was a bit hunched over, and he read using a small magnifying glass. His clothing might include the simple white cloth worn by contemplatives, a white tee shirt, beige sweater and black blazer that he called his office coat, which he wore when

he was secretary to the governor of Bengal. As I sat on the floor at his feet looking up at him, he looked a lot like his father, Bhaktivinode Thakur, whom I saw many pictures of. I was awed by him. I realized he was the fountainhead of wisdom I sought all this time.

Lalita Prasad was happy to see us. He told us many things that broadened my perspective of devotional yoga. His personal presence deeply touched me. However, he wouldn't give me the initiation I desired without Swamiji's approval.

“I wanted to teach him [Swamiji] these things, but he was not interested in hearing them. Even my brother, his guru, did not know these things.” Lalita Prasad said, “What can I do?”

My perspective on devotional matters rapidly changed. We visited Lalita Prasad a couple more times. He had given Guru-kripa a piece of a *gunja* seed and *tulsi*-wood bead necklace his father, Bhaktivinode Thakur, wore. Guru Kripa broke off a small section and gave it to me. It remains one of my most cherished possessions.

I stayed in Mayapur until Gaur Purnim, the full moon day celebrating Chaitanya’s birth. I cared for Swamiji’s brass Radha-Krishna deities in the cottage temple at the front of the land where he had stayed. I especially liked bathing and dressing Radha.

A devotee advised me to return to the West and preach to a receptive audience rather than fundraise and build temples, which was all that was going on in ISKCON India. After all, how long could I stay in Mayapur doing devotional practices before being ordered to go on another mission? He advised me to contact Jagadish, the ISKCON Governing Body Commissioner for Canada.

## **The Canadian Tour**



Jagadish arranged my airfare to Toronto. I flew out of Calcutta, March 27, 1973. I changed planes in New York and was shocked to see how businessmen looked. Most of them had long hair and wore bell-bottoms. Did the hippie revolution succeed while I was away for three years?

Jagadish bought a new blue school bus the devotees setup as a traveling temple complete with kitchen, toilet, and shower. It was better than my accommodations in India. I was to travel west across Canada with Bala Krishna and several other men. They would chant, cook, serve food, distribute books and other things like incense. I would preach.



*Subal left with bus devotees and Jagadish right.*

Since the bus wasn't quite ready, Jagadish flew me to the Montreal and Vancouver temples to preach and enliven the devotees with tales of India, which was foreign and mysterious to most Westerners. I especially liked Vancouver's hippie atmosphere.

When the bus was ready, we set out with high spirits. We spent a night at a lake with a hippie couple in their geodesic domes, which were well furnished and decorated in an Asian motif. We chanted and shared meals with them. It was wonderful to see the Northern Lights on a clear starlit night.

We made our way westward. I was disturbed to learn of the new book distribution techniques people like Tripurari and Rameswar introduced to ISKCON. Men with shaved heads wore wigs and regular street clothes to avoid being identified as Hare Krishna devotees because people avoided them. They often distributed things like incense and flowers at events to get donations without people knowing who they gave to. They learned change-up, con, and hustle techniques.

We were well received in Regina, Saskatchewan. Some interested people from there went with us to Saskatoon and then to the Calgary Stampede, a big rodeo. The bus was parked in an open area near the Stampede grounds. We distributed food, chanted, and I preached.

However, I was unhappy with the way things were going. From what I heard about life in the Toronto temple, I couldn't in good conscience advise new people to go to the temple to be used, abused, chewed up, and spit out. Institutional concerns and fundraising took precedence over people.

I returned to Regina, rented a house and started a preaching center. It was good for a while preaching to the new devotees, some of whom had a rock band. However, as a renunciate, I wasn't interested in running a center. My duty was to travel and preach. One of the men had a station wagon. Several of us drove to Toronto. He decided to stay at the Toronto temple and gave me the car. Some of us went to the Buffalo and Boston temples.

Going down the Massachusetts Turnpike in heavy rain at eighty miles an hour with me driving and three other guys, the car had bad tires, and we started to hydroplane. I tried to maintain control, but we spun around three times. Fortunately, traffic wasn't too heavy allowing me room to maneuver and pull out of the spin without crashing into anything. When we came to a stop, I exclaimed, "Jesus Christ!" We stopped parked on the shoulder, facing the right direction with some minor scrapes from the guard rail and a blown tire. We put on a spare and continued on our way at a slower speed feeling thankful.

In Boston, I met a new devotee who had studied violin at the Boston Conservatory. He gave me a generous donation and wanted to travel with me. I explained the rigors of the road and my destination unknown. He wanted to come with me. Jananivas went with us too.

We traveled down the East Coast, stopping at the New York, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C. temples. Then we traveled and preached our way through Virginia and Kentucky. We wound up at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a university town. It was Christmas break, and not many students were around. Sitting in the parked car at night, I wondered what I was doing there. Although I yearned for my homeland while in India, I felt out of place here too. I decided to go back to India, perhaps to spend the rest of my life. It was much easier to live as a mendicant monk there than in North America, and I wanted to see Lalita Prasad again.

I left the new devotee at the Washington temple. Jananivas and I drove to New York. I sold the car to the temple, got an entry visa, and bought a round-trip ticket to Delhi. Jananivas got money from his parents and went with me.



It felt good to be back in India. Jananivas and I landed in Delhi, December 12, 1973. It was almost nine months since I left India to go to Canada. The smell of

ding and spices in the air as I got off the plane was exhilarating. It felt like I was home again. The weather was sunny and crisp. The exotic sights and sounds seemed familiar. I had an entry visa that would allow me to stay in India for years, and I considered spending the rest of my life there.

We took a cab to the Delhi ISKCON temple and stayed the night. Delhi held no attraction for me. The temple engaged in business and politics as usual.

The next morning, we went to Vrindaban by train and horse cart. The weather was colder than previous winters I experienced there. Heavy clouds kept the sun from warming the day. Even the best inn had no heat. The temperature was in the thirties and forties Fahrenheit (in the single digits and teens Celsius).

After a few days of visiting holy places and enduring the cold, we took a second class train to Bombay, which has a milder climate. Tamal Krishna and Keshava were in charge of the ISKCON temple. They told me there was nothing for me to do there. Business and politics were their way of life, and they knew it wasn't mine. However, they wanted my assistant Jananivas who they could use.

I bought a first-class train ticket to Puri, on the other side of the subcontinent. I stopped-over at the Hyderabad temple briefly, and reached Puri two weeks after my arrival in India.

Again, an elderly god-brother of Swamiji's rented me a room at the Gaudiya Math monastery on the beach of the Bay of Bengal. The weather was pleasant. I spent two weeks walking on the beach, swimming, body surfing, chanting, and visiting places of pilgrimage associated with Krishna Chaitanya and his associates. I enjoyed being on my own, free of ISKCON's influence.

## *Chapter 4*

# NATURAL DEVOTION

I took advantage of this freedom to see Lalita Prasad Thakur. ISKCON devotees weren't supposed to visit him. Swamiji and ISKCON leaders considered some things he said controversial and offensive. I knew only Lalita Prasad could teach me what I wanted to know about developing my relationship with Radha-Krishna.

I took the train to Birnagar, and I passed through Calcutta without stopping at the ISKCON temple. A rickshaw brought me to Lalita's house located on a quiet residential street in this small town.

Bhakta Ma greeted me at the door and invited me in. Bhakta Ma was around fifty, had short hair, and didn't speak much English. She took care of Lalita Prasad for twenty years. She was born when his mother died. His mother charged this newborn girl with the care of her son. Lalita was a lifelong celibate. He allowed her to move in with him only after he was seventy so people wouldn't be suspicious.

Lalita Prasad sat on his wooden bed wearing his black office jacket, a beige sweater, and white cloth chanting Hare Krishna on his prayer beads just as he was a year earlier when we first met. He had a large

frame, short white hair, and stubbly beard. He was now ninety-three. The room was dim and dingy, but it



*Lalita Prasad Thakur*

seemed like heaven to me.

I offered prostrated obeisance to him. He was the river of wisdom I returned to India to plunge into and drink deeply from. This old man looked beautiful and had a warm radiance about him.

"Oh, Subal Maharaj, you've come back!" he said with a

big toothless grin.

"Yes, I want you to teach me how to develop an amorous relationship with Radha-Krishna. I couldn't ask my *guru maharaj* [Swamiji] permission to study with you because he would say no again. You're the only one who can tell me what I want to know. I came here without anyone's knowledge and can stay with you. Please be merciful."

Lalita Prasad replied, "Well, since you have no one else to teach you and are eager to learn and you've



come all by yourself prepared to stay, I'll tell you what you want to know. I wanted to tell these things to your *guru maharaj*, but he didn't want to hear them. Even my brother didn't know these things. Our father never taught him.

"Before you can know your relationship with Radha-Krishna, you have to know your disciplic succession. The line that your *guru maharaj* listed in his *Bhagavad Gita* was made up by my brother Bhakti-siddhanta. He was rejected by our father, Srila Bhaktivinode Thakur, and his guru, who was Bipin Bihari Goswami. Bhakti-siddhanta spoke against Bipin Bihari from the stage of a large public gathering in Calcutta. He called him a caste *goswami* and a *sahajiya*.

"When our father heard about this, he said, 'You should keep out of religious affairs. It would be better if you went and lived in Mayapur alone. Chant Hare Krishna and pray for Lord Chaitanya's mercy.'

"But, when our father Bhaktivinode Thakur died, I went to my brother and said, 'Who will carry on our father's teachings now that he is gone? You are the oldest.' I was working for the government like our father did, while he was doing his spiritual practices and was a scholar. 'You're the one to do it,' I told him.

'How can I do it when I've been rejected by our father and his guru?' was his reply.

""You're smart. Make up a disciplic succession. Who will know?' He did it. When he went to Vrinda-

ban to preach, the *babajis* there could tell he made it up. It did not jive with known historical facts and relationships between the personalities mentioned.

“Bhakti-siddhanta approached Gaur Kishor Das Babaji, a highly respected hermit saint who was an intimate associate of Bhaktivinode Thakur, for initiation a couple of times and was rejected. When Gaur Kishor died, Bhakti-siddhanta got word of it and claimed his body saying he was his only disciple. No one else there had been initiated by him to dispute my brother’s claim, and Gaur Kishor was in no position to object.

“Bhakti-siddhanta also said Gaur Kishor was a disciple of Bhaktivinode Thakur. Gaur Kishor studied under Bhaktivinode, but was initiated in another disciplic succession. Then, Jagannath Das Babaji was said to have been Bhaktivinode's guru. Actually, he was his devotional guide, babaji guru, and a close friend and associate. Bipin Bihari Goswami was Bhaktivinode's real initiator guru.

“Bipin Bihari was in the line of disciplic succession from Sri Jahnava Devi, the consort of Nityanand Avadhut. Jahnava Devi passed the teachings on to her adopted son, Rama-chandra, who passed them on through the line of succession, which included a number of other women--not the line of well known male saints that Bhaktisiddhanta made up.”

This is my and Bhaktivinode Thakur's true disciplic succession:

- (1) Jahnavā Thakurānī
- (2) Rāmā-chandra Goswāmī
- (3) Rājā-vallabha Goswāmī
- (4) Kṣṇā-chandra Goswāmī
- (5) Rudreśvar Goswāmī
- (6) Dayaram Goswāmī
- (7) Mahēśvarī Goswāmīnī
- (8) Guṇā Manjarī Goswāmīnī
- (9) Rāmāmanī Goswāmīnī
- (10) Jogeśvar Goswāmī
- (11) Bipin Bihārī Goswāmī
- (12) Bhaktivinode Thakur
- (13) Lalitā Prasad Thakur
- (14) Subal Das Goswāmī

Swamiji's line of "infallible disciplic succession" was not what it was cracked up to be. The actual succession was real people like you and I who searched for truth and found it to one degree or another. The original inspired teachings from Chaitanya were handed down reasonably intact, but definitely altered with passage of time. I saw substantial changes in the nine years I was in ISKCON. As I learned from Lalitā Prasad, Bhakti-siddhanta Sarasvatī organized and institutionalized the movement in the 1920s. He also shifted the focus from natural devotion, which emphasizes living the myth, toward regulative devotion,

which doesn't lead to Radha-Krishna but to institutional, organized religion that puts its own life and welfare ahead of spiritual development.

Before then, gurus such as Lalita Prasad Thakur and Bhaktivinode Thakur took disciples and sent them off to lead their own lives. They weren't pressured to live in monasteries dependent on the guru. Family life was encouraged. Bhaktivinode Thakur was a family man with many children as well as a magistrate, author, poet, and great devotee. He became a recluse after leading a full life.

Following the rising tides of Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission's Hindu revival, Bhakti-siddhanta revived Chaitanya's movement throughout India, started temples, and sent disciples to Europe. His disciples ran the Gaudiya Math centers that he started. Tirtha Maharaj was one of the most cunning and became overall manager in spite of Lalita Prasad warning his brother about him. Lalita Prasad dropped out of an active role in his brother's ministry then. When a beautiful marble temple became the Calcutta headquarters, corruption set in.

Lalita said, Tirtha Maharaj tried poisoning his guru, Bhakti-siddhanta, a couple of times, but Bhakti-siddhanta made it to Lalita Prasad who saved him. Finally, he was poisoned and locked in his room so he couldn't go for help. It was the kind of poison known as a "Russian heart attack." They took his body from

Calcutta to Mayapur for cremation to avoid an autopsy. They made a couple of unsuccessful attempts on Lalita Prasad's life too. In this way, the Gaudiya Math fell prey to money, power, greed, and politics, just as its offspring ISKCON did in turn.

In his spiritual body, Lalita Prasad Thakur considered himself a girlfriend of Radha. He said the only way to attain this position is by the grace of someone already in that position. Traditionally, it's a confidential circle entered by invitation only. He entered it by the good will of his father and teacher, Bhaktivinode Thakur, who entered it by the good will of his teacher, Bipin Bihari Goswami.

I pass this most confidential information on through my books. Although I don't accept formal disciples, anyone who reads my books may accept me as their spiritual teacher and guide, receive my blessings, and my warm open invitation to all to become Radha-Krishna's girlfriends as I explain in *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism: The Way of Natural Devotion; A Practitioner's Handbook*. This entails an ever new bestowal of love and hope in our lives without becoming a slave to a guru. Thus I welcome everyone to participate in this greatest human good.

I begged Lalita Prasad to initiate me into this unique spiritual knowledge. He agreed to teach me because no one else could, but I was to keep it secret for the time being. If anyone asked who my teacher

was, I was to say Bhaktivedanta Swami. He didn't want to disturb the situation and go over my guru's head, but he wanted to bestow his good will and grace on me. He acted with utmost ethical integrity in this matter.

He described the eleven traits to be adopted: name, age, abode, group, service, color, dress, protection, sustenance, attitude, and commitment. These eleven traits depict the personal spiritual identity through which practitioners express love to the source of all life from which we emanate. Since love is a personal act and a reality that lies deep within, it is non-different from us. Rather than keeping it abstract, nameless, or formless, practitioners intensify it, idealize it, and transform their personality to thoroughly conform with divine love. They strive for relations with its idealized beautiful personal form--Radha-Krishna. Abundant personal love has many attributes. With these eleven, practitioners start the contemplative process and build on them throughout their life.

Lalita Prasad said I could pick these attributes myself since I'd be spontaneously attracted to my natural position. I wanted his guidance since he was much more familiar with these affairs than I, and he graciously agreed.

Babaji asked Bhakta Ma to help pick a name for me--Sudha Manjari (Sudha is nectar and a *manjari* is a fragrant flower on the creeper of love). He had me

pick an age I wanted to be from ten to thirteen. I said thirteen even though I wanted to be older, but I didn't want to push it since he didn't offer that option. (In traditional Indian society girls were ready for marriage at that age. We see it as symbolic of youthful blossoming and readiness to enter the mysteries and realms of love. I later changed it to eighteen.) He told me my skin color is golden and my dress sky blue, "a beautiful color combination." He asked me what service I liked performing best. I said, "Bathing and dressing Radha." That became my eternal service. He told me the name of my abode--Mahananda Kunja, a bower in Brindaban that provides great bliss. I am in Lalita Sakhi's group. She's Radha's most confidential girlfriend. Lalita Prasad Thakur and Bhaktivinode Thakur are in her group too. Our greatest desire is to please Radha-Krishna. Lalita Prasad told me not to change any of these attributes without informing him and to always meditate on them.

From one of Bhaktivinode's books written in Bengali, Lalita Prasad translated the pastimes of Radha-Krishna during the twenty-four hours of the day. In our meditations, Radha-Krishna engage in a daily routine. The devotee, in her idealized spiritual existence, improvises with and mixes herself into these pastimes through meditation and visualization during the day as events unfold. In this way, practitioners develop a spiritual life, gradually transferring con-

sciousness from the limited material plane to the spiritual plane of supra-consciousness where these idealized love pastimes go on eternally in ever new ways. Lalita Prasad taught me this technique of self-actualization, and I applied myself to it.

After a couple of weeks drinking the honeyed nectar from Lalita Prasad's lips, Bhakta Ma told me he was tiring and needed to rest. He told me to teach in the West where it was more needed. He gave me a copy of Bhaktivinode's printed list of his disciplic succession with their spiritual identities and a place to add my name and information to the succession after his.

## **I Need a Way Out**

I went to the Mayapur ISKCON temple. They gave me a room in the original thatch-roofed bungalow by the road where I practiced the meditation Lalita Prasad taught me and began translating a book of poetry by Bhaktivinode Thakur. I was torn whether to continue being a disciple of Bhaktivedanta Swami or go to Lalita Prasad Thakur and beg to stay with him. I decided to stay with Swamiji since he was my initiator guru and Lalita Prasad Thakur encouraged me to do so.

It was spring, and devotees from the West began arriving for Chaitanya's birthday celebrations. The



new three story building was ready to accommodate them. I was glad to have separate quarters. Many became sick with dysentery shortly after arriving. Dinanath, a black devotee, lead wonderful kirtans in the first floor open air temple. He reminded me of James Brown at the Apollo.

Another black devotee, Sudama Maharaj came to Mayapur. I first met him in San Francisco when I received second initiation. Now, he was Governing Body Commissioner for the

Pacific region of ISKCON, headquartered in Honolulu. He invited me to Honolulu to help him develop the temple.

Although I had thoughts of spending the rest of my life in India, I was realizing the impracticality of doing that. I wanted to preach to receptive Americans. I also witnessed the downhill slide of ISKCON as a spiritual movement, and I thought I would prefer leaving ISKCON in Hawaii rather than in India.

Chaitanya's appearance day occasioned a riot provoked by instigators sent by rival priests in Na-



*Subal center on morning walk with Swamiji left*



*Subal center marching in celebration of Chaitanya's birth.*

vadwip. There were minor injuries and damage to property. The priests were envious of our influence in developing Mayapur as the birthplace of Chaitanya rather than Navadvip where they claim he was born.

Bhaktivedanta was joined by Sridhar Swami, his god-brother, as guest of honor. Sridhar was a much respected Vaishnav scholar and devotee. He avoided many of the scandals that shook the Gaudiya Math and established his own branch of the sect.

I went to Vrindaban with Swamiji and a group of his disciples and toured the surrounding area of Braj by bus. One of the highlights was bathing in the Yamuna River with Swamiji. It was a wonderful tour and a great way to end my stay in India except for one disturbing incident.

On a morning walk in Raman Reti with a group of disciples, Swamiji said, "Just like the Muslims converted people with a sword in one hand and the Koran in the other, we can approach people with the *Bhagavad Gita* in one hand and a gun in the other. 'Do you accept Krishna?' 'No.' Pow! Not now, but later when we are more powerful.

"*Archye vishnau*...when we will teach military art, with *tilak*, soldiers will chant, 'Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna...' (laughter) We want that. Marching with military band, 'Hare Krishna.' You maintain this idea. Is it not good?"

Hridayananda, "Yes, Prabhupad."

Swamiji, "When there will be military march of Krishna conscious soldiers. Anyone who does not believe in Krishna, 'Blam!' (laughter) Yes. The same process as the Mohammedans did, with sword and Koran, we'll have to do that. 'Do you believe in Krishna or not?' 'No, sir.' Blam! Finished. (laughter, Swamiji laughs) What do you think, Madhudvisa Maharaj? Is that all right?"

Madhudvisa, "Yes."

Swamiji laughing, "What these communists can do? We can do better than them. We can kill many communists like that. (laughter) Then it will be counteraction of communist movement. And, you think like that. 'Why you are sitting idly, no employment? Come on to the field! Take this plow! Take this bull.

Go on working. Why you are sitting idly?' This is Krishna consciousness movement. Nobody should be allowed to sit down and sleep. They must find out some employment, either work as *brahmin* or as a *kshatriya* or as a *vaishya*. Why there should be unemployment?

"The same example. Just like I am, this body is working. The leg is working, hand is working, brain is working, belly is working. Why there should be unemployment? You just stop this unemployment, you will see the whole world is peaceful. There is no complaint. And, they'll very happily chant Hare Krishna. Hm? Nobody's working in this field. They're all drawn to the cities to work in the factory. Condemned civilization. That communist emblem, what is that?"

"Hammer and sickle."

Swamiji, "Yes. That is good."

Indian, "Yeah, good."

Swamiji, "But no hammer. Only this... What is called?"

Devotees: "Sickle."

Swamiji, "No hammer. That will be our emblem. Only sickle. Not hammer. The hammer has hammered the whole human civilization. So just make a counter-emblem. The communists will appreciate."

Devotee: "Sickle and tilak."

Swamiji, "Eh?"

Devotee: “A sickle, and then a tilak.”

Swamiji: “Yes, that is good idea.”

I was there. It was no joke as some claimed! Of course he was smiling and using his cane as a gun, but it was just like he’d talk about starting a new temple construction, how to sell more books, or anything else. He charmed us into doing things. What kind of teacher tells jokes like that, knowing his students cling to his every word, and that this was being recorded. Of course, most of his disciples were yes men who didn’t think.

As for me, I was shocked. I felt he really crossed the line this time. Yet what could I say? ISKCON had become a militant fundamentalist cult, and I wasn’t alone in my suspicions--hundreds, even thousands of people went through a similar experience with ISKCON after me. I started looking for a way out.

## **Honolulu and Fiji Temples**

I left India April 26, 1974. I stopped in New York and Los Angeles to preach and visit old friends on the way to Honolulu. The temple was a six bedroom tract home in a subdivision on the outskirts of town. About forty devotees lived there. Some slept many to a room in separate men’s and women’s bedrooms. Some camped in the back yard. I was given my own room. Sudama Maharaj had his own room and Tarun Kanti,

the temple president, slept in his office. I was given a small automatic pistol to keep by my bed. The neighbors didn't like the early morning chanting, and the situation was volatile.

In spite of that, I was well received. The atmosphere in the Honolulu temple was good. They emphasized chanting and preaching. Other than cramped quarters, devotees were treated well. There was little friction in the temple, and one devotee who didn't like the way things were was asked to leave. I



*Subal, Oahu 1974*

felt enthusiastic again about the possibility of preaching in ISKCON. In the mornings, Babhru often drove me places to walk, snorkel, or body surf. I really enjoyed body surfing, and O'ahu has great places to do it. I chanted 64 rounds of beads daily, studied, preached, and talked with devotees. I had no administrative duties and was free to be the resident *sannyasi*.

A woman devotee got backstage and talked with singer-songwriter Cat Stevens. She told him there was a swami at the temple he should meet. He agreed. We arranged to meet over lunch at a devotee's home. I

had no idea who he was so I listened to a tape of his music.

We picked him and his starlet girlfriend up in Waikiki in our little VW bug, and drove them to a pleasant suburban home where several of us had lunch with them, talked, and chanted. He was quite open. He taught us an African chant and told us how his father taught him to sing.

I was flown to Hawaii, the Big Island, to install deities at the farm temple in Hamakua. The temple was a simple, old style Hawaiian building. I saw the end of the rainbow right there in the yard as I stood on the temple steps. I was also taken to Waipi'o Valley. I and Jagat, my assistant, walked down thousand foot cliffs on a steep four wheel drive road to a lush valley floor with a river and beautiful black sand beach. The valley is a mile wide at the coast and six miles deep. Thousands of Hawaiians used to live there and in the next large valley up the coast named Waimanu, which can only be reached by foot, boat, or helicopter and is considered uninhabited. The walk into the valley wasn't bad. Going up was hard for me, and Jagat helped pull me along with a towel we each held an end of.

Back in Honolulu, I found out one of the devotees was going to visit his friend, Alfred Ford, the grandson of Henry Ford, in Teton Village, Wyoming for a week. I had him ask Alfred if it was OK for me to go too. It was, and I did. He lived in a condo and worked in a local grocery store. I preached and made presentations to Alfred for a week. He agreed to donate

\$250,000 through the Ford Foundation for the purchase of a new Honolulu temple. He also drove us around the majestic Grand Tetons in his Ford Explorer and Citroen.

On the way back to Honolulu, we stopped in Denver to visit the temple and preach. Then we went to San Francisco for the Rathayatra Festival. The San Francisco temple was on Mission Street in a former mortuary and was said to be haunted. It certainly was dreary. One of the devotees asked me not to lead chanting while I was there because they had others who sang better.

I said, "The quality of chanting doesn't depend on one's singing ability, but on the quality of one's devotion." I was offended. So, we rented a nearby motel room.

Swamiji came for the festival. We spoke privately, and he ordered me to Fiji to start a temple because an Indian businessman, Mr. Punja, offered \$50,000 and help raising more. I objected, but there was no getting out of it. I was one of Swamiji's international trouble shooters and had to accept the assignment. "It is my order. You must do it," he said again.

Mr. Punja bought me a round-trip ticket, and I went to Lautoka, Fiji, September 22, 1974. I disliked being in Fiji. It was hot and humid with many mosquitoes. There was no body surfing, but great snorkeling, especially when Mr. Punja took me out on a boat. It was also not the type of preaching I wanted to do even though Swamiji wrote telling me how pleased he was with me for doing this.



Swamiji often used the phrase *yasya prasādāt bhagavat-prasādo yasyāprasādān na gatiḥ kuto’pi* which means, “By the mercy of the spiritual master one receives the benediction of Krishna. Without the grace of the spiritual master, one cannot make any advancement.” However, it often seemed to mean, “You’d better do it or else.”



I was spoiled by life in Hawaii. I was out of management for over a year and deep into my spiritual practices. I found it difficult chanting even sixteen rounds of *japa* when I was doing sixty-four. Meditating on my spiritual identity was mostly out of the question.

Mr. Punja rented a bungalow for me and several devotees to work out of. Since he paid the rent and our startup costs, he wanted to handle temple finances. I knew the person who controls the finances controls everything. I had to deal with finances and temple politics. I stayed in Fiji two and a half months like this and became depressed.

When I received a letter from Swamiji saying he was extremely pleased with me because I did something “tangible . . . without any consideration of your self-interest” to please him, this was no longer acceptable to me and was the final straw. I didn’t become his disciple to raise money and build temples, especially not as a monk. My self-interest wasn’t in tangible things, but in developing my Krishna consciousness. I couldn’t be sure Swamiji was writing his own letters then.

I went into the mountains with Vijaya-dhvaja Das, a devotee who knew the area well since he lived there before me. We stayed in Fijian villages, and I sought to discern my path on a vision quest that lasted about a week.

I decided to go back to Honolulu. If my friends were still in charge, I'd stay there. If not, I'd leave the movement and start a new life.

The devotee accompanied me to the airport. I lay on the ground crying by the side of the road leading to the terminal as I dealt with the enormity of this move. It was to be the death of my old life and the beginning of the new.



I arrived in Honolulu Friday, December 7, 1974, and was taken to Govinda's Restaurant. Sudama Maharaj, and Tarun Kanti informed me they were resigning on Sunday because now that we had a beautiful temple, leaders from the mainland were coming to take over. About twenty other devotees planned to leave also. I said I'd join them.

When we had forty devotees living in a six bedroom tract home on the outskirts of Honolulu, no one cared about us. When we had a grand mansion, guest house, grounds, swimming pool, and tennis court in the consular district, mainland ISKCON leaders wanted it. We decided to resign before they arrived.

We smoked a joint together at a sidewalk table in front of Govinda's. Then they took me to buy new clothes. I bought aloha shirts, pants and a Panama hat. I let my hair and beard grow, but it was still short.

That night, I went to Waikiki. I had steak dinner at the Sizzler, went to bars, drank beer, and danced.

The next day, I rented an apartment. At Sunday morning worship, Sudama, Tarun, and I gave our resignation speeches. I said ISKCON was no longer a viable preaching vehicle and couldn't invite people to temples in good conscience. My first reason for leaving was corruption that was overlooked or supported by my guru. The second reason was ISKCON wasn't conducive to my spiritual growth and my guru was holding me back.

I changed clothes, buried my staff, sacred thread, and robes in a swamp and began a new life. I stayed in Honolulu busing tables at Govinda's Restaurant and making pukka shell necklaces at a devotee's home until Swamiji came. I wanted to speak with him face to face before ending the relationship.

In February 1975, Swamiji arrived. I met with him in his room and said that if I could go to the Los Angeles temple, find a wife, and live as a married man, I'd consider working with ISKCON. He agreed, but then a devotee told me he changed his mind and I couldn't do that. I told Swamiji I wouldn't go to ISKCON temples any longer. He said, "You know what to do. Make your home a temple." I carry out these last instructions still.

Alfred Ford and Swamiji were both at the Honolulu temple. Ford sat up front on a raised seat next to Swamiji and just a little lower, with Kirtanananda standing in back of them. I, Sudama Maharaj, Tarun Kanti, and some other devotees were in the back of

the room being called demons while Alfred's praises were sung. Money trumps again. Swamiji called us demons because we resigned from ISKCON during morning worship one Sunday in December, 1974.

I believe my life until that point was a relearning of what I knew and attained in my previous life. Since then, I've been doing the work of this life—figuring out how to teach natural devotion in the West as Lalita Prasad Thakur instructed. There are no rules and regulations for natural devotion, what to speak of its adaptation to an indigenous western culture. To avoid teaching a foreign religion that causes major disruption in people's lives, I make it easy to attain that which was difficult and costly for me to attain.

## Chapter 5

### NEW LIFE

I moved to Wailuku, Maui and shared a shack with my former assistant Jagat. We got jobs as stock clerks at Long's Drug Store and rented a two bedroom condo. Those jobs didn't last long. Jagat acquired money from his family and started a vegetarian restaurant at Mr. Natural's Health Food Store in Lahaina. I managed it with the promise of a share of future profits.

Mr. Natural's was a hip place with reggae music playing most of the time. Alice Cooper's ex-wife was a customer and invited us to some great parties at her house. Sometimes I lived in the kitchen after hours while people smoked pot and had sex on the picnic tables outside. Other times, I slept in the back seat of my car at the beach or on the beach. Sometimes my friend Monica and I slept in the old whalers' prison or in a graveyard. No one would disturb us there. I thought it was quite *tantric* even though we did not have a sexual relationship.

Some early influences on me at this time were *The Samurai Trilogy*, three Japanese films depicting the life of Miyamoto Musashi, the greatest samurai who became a hermit, philosopher, and artist in an obscure

village. He wrote *A Book of Five Rings: The Classic Guide to Strategy*.

Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* strongly influenced me. It's the story of a young *brahmin* who becomes a wandering ascetic, meets the Buddha but chooses not to follow him, learns the ways of the world from a courtesan and a business man, then becomes a ferry operator. It was made into a beautiful movie.

A hippie, biker type named Jubal helped at the café. He introduced me to many occult things like the hollow earth theory, UFOs, alien colonization of earth, etc. I saw a number of UFOs on Maui. Once, a group of people watched the sunset at the beach in Lahaina. We saw a flash of light in the sky. Rather than spread out evenly, it looked like an ethereal V2 rocket coming at us sideways. It got bigger as it approached; then, it vaporized above our heads. We all saw it and couldn't explain it.

A local psychic predicted that a tidal wave bigger than the one that sank Lemuria would hit Maui at a certain time. He said the only really safe place was a cave on the rim of Haleakala Crater at 10,000 feet. I'm not a big believer in psychics, but it sounded like fun to go check it out.

I drove my old Plymouth Fury up a rugged dirt road. A rock cut my tire. After changing it, I continued on to the summit. Near the summit, I came upon the psychic walking down. He asked if I could give him a ride. I said, "I thought you predicted a huge tidal wave tonight."

“Yeah, but I couldn’t get the night off and have to go to work.” He washed dishes at a Lahaina fish house.

I continued to the cave where I spent the night with about fifty men, women, and children. It’s a primal experience living in a cave like that even if only for a night. There was a great sunset, sunrise, and views. Over all, it was worth it although a four wheel drive would have been better.



Jagat realized he could get people like Jubal to help just for meals and let me go. My friend Jivananda, who was initiated by Swamiji around the same time as me, lived in Wailuku. He knew of a shack in Iao Valley near his home that was abandoned and in disrepair. He helped me make it livable.

We went through a graveyard to get there. Good thing I had experience with graveyards and thought it was great. Then we walked along an irrigation ditch a short distance to a small shack in a mango grove. There were also coconuts, avocados, and breadfruit right in the area. A stream flowed further down the hill. The shack needed work, but we thought it was worth it.

Jivananda and his wife Bina let me stay in a spare room. It was quite comfortable staying in their old Japanese-Hawaiian style home. My room had a small balcony that I sunned on in the early morning. They also ran a secondhand store that was mostly stocked from the dump. People threw away some lovely

things that made their way to my shack, like a multi-colored grass room size rug.

First we repaired the structure. Then Jiva and I dragged corrugated sheet metal roofing from another old shack and put it on. Inside, we covered the metal with beautiful white brocade drapes. A little white paint, a low Japanese style table, an oil lamp, and I had a home complete with front porch. It was the hermitage I always wanted.

I studied tai chi there with my friend Sebastian James, a dashing Londoner who looked like he just stepped out of the Renaissance Fair. He really did and knew the belly dance groups who performed there. I admired him and his roguish charm with women. He was a silversmith by trade. I also studied kendo at a local dojo and practiced with a bamboo sword.

One night on acid, I went around the property with my sword and dared anyone to challenge me being there. I felt not myself as I am in this life, but rather like a previous life in which I was a samurai. Next, I experienced another life as a Japanese princess, and then another as a queen in Lemuria. It was as if I was in the bodies of those persons successively or rather that they temporarily awakened in this body.

Another time while tripping in the shack in the middle of the night, I lay on the floor deep in prayers of separation from Radha-Krishna. I heard knocking on the wall. I couldn't imagine who it was in the middle of the night in the forest. Was it Krishna?



As I regained outward consciousness, I called out, "Who's there?" It was a woman devotee from the Philadelphia temple when I was in charge there. I married her and her husband. Now they split up and she was on Maui.

I said, "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

She replied, "I thought I'd find you up chanting." She came in and we spent the rest of the night together in devotion.



Many people reported seeing UFOs flying in and out of Iki Crater in the West Maui Mountains and believed there was an underground base there. Jiva and I decided to check it out. We talked with a park ranger who gave us a topographic map of the way to the crater. He advised us not to go and told us of a *National Geographic* expedition that was lost there many years ago.

Bina drove us up the coast to the trailhead. We took light packs and barely enough supplies for a couple of days. The going was tough. At one point we crawled through a tunnel boars made through the thick foliage and hoped we wouldn't meet a boar. In another area, we took turns falling on the ferns and flattening them so we could make a trail since we didn't bring a machete. As we reached higher altitudes, the terrain became a peat bog. When we stopped to rest, our feet disturbed the moss and uncovered a stack of glass drinking glasses and other items that obviously were there a long time. We won-

dered if it was the remains of the *National Geographic* expedition and hoped we wouldn't wind up like them.

We reached a plateau and the clouds came in making visibility poor. We spent the night sleeping on moss. I dreamed of an underground UFO base run by what appeared to be humans in Nazi-like uniforms.

The next day, we continued our trek to Iki, which isn't so much a crater as a column of lava left after the crater and volcano eroded from around it. We saw no evidence of UFO activity although we saw footprints that appeared to be the size of a child or small woman wearing a heeled rubber boot in a remote location where no one was supposed to be.

The way we came was too difficult to take back. Any other way had to be better. Since we were in the middle of the smaller part of Maui that looks like her head on a map, and since we came from the East, we continued west to Lahaina even though we didn't have a map of that half of the mountains.

We climbed higher along steep cliffs, straddling a narrow razorback ridge with drops of thousands of feet on either side to get to a summit. The views were fantastic. We could barely see a small group of people on a distant summit.

We called out to them, "Where did you come from?"

They replied, "Lahaina."

We headed for that summit to follow their trail down to the coast where we could call Bina to pick us up. In one place, the trees were so thick we climbed

along on the low branches from tree to tree. In another place, the mud was knee deep. We were out of food but got water from a rock pool near the summit. We drank water and cayenne pepper for energy. We reached a pineapple field and happily ate some. When we got to a phone, we called Bina and told her to bring us food.

I wrote an article about our little adventure, and it was published on the front page of the *Maui Moon*, an alternative newspaper.



I met Vyas (Kanupriya Das) around this time. He was a ladies man as well as a Vedic astrologer. I didn't believe in astrology because I never felt like the grounded, practical Capricorn I was supposed to be. Vyas explained that I was really a Sagittarius according to the sidereal, Vedic system he used. This made more sense to me on a deep spiritual level. He read my chart, and I was impressed. We became friends, and he taught me astrology. I use it for insight into archetypal personality makeup and life patterns.

I lived in an ideal hermitage, in an ideal setting, but I was dissatisfied. I was doing the chanting and meditations I wanted to focus on. Yet I thought to myself, "What good does it do anyone for me to sit here by myself chanting? It's like masturbation. It's much better to find someone to share the love with. I need to find a way to reach out and continue teaching."

I knew a devotee named Jake. He had money and wanted to start a vegetarian restaurant and wholesale food business. He offered me a position as partner

and manager in exchange for a share of future profits. Fool that I am, I said, "Yes."

He rented a former bar from a pleasant Japanese couple who made tofu and potato chips that they wholesaled. We named it Golden Moon Foods and Café. We flew to Honolulu and bought a used mixer, meat grinder, and patty maker. We developed a line of frozen veggie burgers with a picture of Chaitanya and devotional sayings on the label.

We hired an excellent baker who made whole wheat buns for them and a professional waitress to help with the restaurant. Customers sat on cushions at low black enameled tables. We offered the food to Jagannath deities. The meat salesman who sold us the equipment ate one of our burgers and said, "I can't tell that this isn't meat."

It was fortunate that I decided to expand my world. One day, a group of tough young locals came to my shack. They said their uncle owned it. He wrecked it and didn't want anyone living there. They said that I didn't want to mess with him, and one of them showed me a nasty scar on his knee that uncle gave him.

I said, "I just need a couple of weeks to find a place to live."

"Do you have any marijuana?" they asked.

"No, but I'll give you forty dollars for a couple weeks rent, and you don't tell your uncle so I have time to get out."

They accepted my offer. Jake let me live in the restaurant office. I moved out of the shack quickly. Good

thing I did because a friend told me the locals came back a couple of days later, shot my lock off, and used the shack to party.

The former drummer of Paul Revere and the Raiders had a local bar band, and they played at the restaurant. A woman did hula and Tahitian dancing. It was a happening place and sometimes there were more people in the kitchen smoking sacrament and partying than there were out front.

Jake and his wife Nancy invited Jivananda, Bina, Sebastian, and I to their home for Christmas Eve. It was the first time I celebrated Christmas in a family setting since I left home over ten years earlier. I found a boar skull on a back road, and I knew it was the perfect present for Sebastian, since he was into skulls and bones. I wrapped it and gave it to him. When he unwrapped it, a scorpion crawled out of it. It was quite a surprise, but we got it outside without it stinging anyone. Just goes to show, you never know what might be living in your skull when you're done with it.

I went to a cow pasture on cliffs overlooking the ocean early one morning with a couple of friends. We ate fresh psilocybin mushrooms growing from the cow dung until we couldn't eat anymore. I lay on my stomach, naked in the grass having out of body experiences similar to those Carlos Castaneda described involving shape shifting and flying. When I regained external consciousness, I was sunburned, and we were in a surreal landscape like a Salvador Dali painting with dolphins playing in the ocean below. I also

did peyote with a couple at their Haiku home. Shamanistic natural drug induced altered states of consciousness were definitely part of my emerging consciousness and world view.

One day, I was going to Haleakala Crater with some friends for a day hike into the crater, which is like the moon. Moon landing vehicles were tested there. We picked up a woman we knew who planned to hike through the crater and down the other side to the ocean. She was poorly prepared and wore flip-flop sandals.

I said, "That's a long hard hike. I'd feel better if you let me go with you."

She agreed. We spent the night on a cinder cone in the crater on a beautiful full moon night. The next day, we hiked from ten thousand feet to sea level. We spent that night on the open front porch of a country store with a view of the ocean. We saw luminous light beings on the lawn in front of us as well as over the ocean.

Madhuvisa, a former ISKCON sannyasi I met in India, came to Maui and looked me up. We went out partying in Lahaina. At a bar, we met Rena, the ex-wife of a member of the Kingston trio, who Madhuvisa knew from the Morning Star commune. She took the two of us home with her. We took turns pleasing her, and she gave me her blessings being pleased with my prowess. Her bedroom was a temple dedicated to Shiva-Shakti, and she was a skilled tantric practitioner.

Jake thought Madhuvisa would be a better manager than me, so he let me go. I was on Maui a year and a half. I felt like my time in heaven was up, the fruits of my good karma ran out, and it was time to go back to the mainland. It was in Mother Maui's womb that I transitioned from a *sannyasi* to the person I am today.

Sebastian let me stay at his cabin in Boulder Creek, California. This gave me a start. There was a strong connection between Maui and Boulder Creek among my closest friends Jiva, Vyas, and Sebastian.

## **On the Mainland**

Sebastian's cabin was on a dirt road at the edge of town in a group of cabins with a communal garden in the middle and Boulder Creek behind. There was a small open bedroom under the cabin with a view of the creek and redwoods. That's where I stayed. Fleetwood Mac's *Rumors* album, that I listened to repeatedly, symbolizes that time for me.

I got a job working for a devotee in Felton making Lightening Bolt Surfboard jewelry. It was a decent job until shop politics drove me out. Sebastian and his partner Jackie returned from Maui. Sebastian gave me a shark tooth earring and a deer antler chelum he made.

I moved into a two-bedroom cabin in the same compound with Pierre, a French Canadian who cooked at Incredible Crepes in Felton. He got me a job

there as a cook and waiter. That was fine until the coke-head owner's country western singer girlfriend wanted my job.

I felt discouraged. I visited the Berkeley temple. There, I met Dinesh, Dan Donner, who I beat when he took Krishna Devi from me. She left him for another guy too. He invited me to stay with him. As he drove me from Boulder Creek to his place, I said, "Someday I'd like to know what it feels like to be a comfortable fat cat instead of a hungry lean wolf."

He said, "Be careful what you wish for."

I slept on his kitchen floor and worked for CAL-CAN, California Citizen Action Network, doing door to door canvassing to petition for better nursing home conditions. After work, the canvassers got together to eat, drink, smoke, and party. They introduced me to Patti Smith's music. I saw her as a soul twin since we were both born around the same time not too far from each other. I embraced the Berkeley punk/new wave scene.

Yet, canvassing and sleeping on Dan's floor wasn't appealing, although I was happy we were now friends. Bob, a grower who owned the Boulder Creek cabin I stayed in, said I could move back there with him rent free. I did.

Vyas came to Boulder Creek and stayed with Dharma and his wife up the hill from me. He and I hung out together regularly, and he continued teaching me astrology. There was a fringe devotee community there like in Maui with many of the same people



including Jiva and a few others I met in Boulder Creek.

I ate an *amanita muscaria* mushroom, which some say was the apple in the Garden of Eden. It allowed me to go deeply into myself and see the cosmic connection between myself and all beings including those who came before me. Sebastian introduced me to the pleasures of opium. I also enjoyed hashish and hash oil, which devotees brought from Thailand.

Bob moved out and I rented the other bedroom to David Brooks, an older bohemian artist/philosopher. We became good friends and continued our relationship over the years.

Vyas told Jane Thrall to visit me. She did, and we spent the night together on psilocybin mushrooms. We realized we were married in a previous life and decided to continue that relationship by moving in together. She was a twenty-one year old aspiring photographer who worked in a photography store in Burlingame. I moved into her apartment behind a beauty salon.



Through the CETA jobs training program, I worked as an attendance clerk at Redwood City High School. I had a one year contract and saw it as an opportunity to gain a little financial stability. I started the day with a joint and a pot of espresso. I smoked another joint in my car at lunchtime. My desk was face to face with the probation officer's desk. Nancy and I got along fine. It was my supervisor, old Tina McCarthy, who was hard on me. I hung in there for the year. After

work, I often went to a health club and did the triathlon—sauna, steam room, and hot tub.

My mother and sister visited me. It was the first time I saw them since Philadelphia, right after I took *sannyas*. We had a good visit and got reacquainted.

I networked and preached in San Francisco at places like the Unitarian church. I went to the New College of California and spoke to the dean about teaching there. She said I knew more about spirituality than the professors due to my first hand experiences. Yet she couldn't hire me because I lacked a Ph.D., and she couldn't give me one based on my life experience. She referred me to Malcolm McAfee who ran a university without walls named Paideia and could grant me a degree.



Malcolm had a postdoctorate in sociology and was a Presbyterian chaplain at Stanford. He went into alternative education and encouraged people to be generalists rather than specialists. Paideia met in a San Francisco coffee house in the evening.

He told me to read *The Social Construction of Reality* as the basis for our discussions--based on which, he granted me a B.A. in General Studies through Study of Religion and the Whole. I could've done graduate

work with him, but the time and money was more than I wanted to invest.

One day, I came home from work and found Jane took all her things and left a note for me. What a shock! I thought our relationship was good. She moved in with the postman who delivered mail to the store where she worked. It wasn't too long before he pulled a gun on her, and she came back to me. We rented a new apartment and started over.

My contract with the school ended, and I didn't want to apply for a permanent position. I met with Jeannine Bish, a clairvoyant, industrial psychologist at the Whole Life Center in Palo Alto. She asked me to finger paint as we sat on the floor and talked. That was my job interview to become a staff member. I offered introductory hatha yoga and t'ai chi classes as well as astrology and tarot readings. I became friends with Jeannine, Rev. Rosa Miller a Cuban Gnostic priestess, and a Sufi healer who worked at the center.

One weekend, Jane and I went with a girlfriend to her condo in Lake Tahoe. Jane told me she couldn't live with me any longer. We were together about a year and a half. The difference in our ages and life experience was too much for her to deal with. I was thirty-one, she twenty-one. She wanted to grow on her own.

I moved into a cooperative living arrangement in a large, comfortable home in Palo Alto. It was a good place to live, but I had difficulty meeting expenses. I drove down to Los Angeles to check out the temple.

I met my old friend Dan Clark (Damodar) who was the president of the Washington, D.C. temple. He invited me to join the New Age Caucus. They were looking for a state networker. He worked there with Dan Maziarz (Dharmadyaksha), the director. We talked, and I accepted the job. I rented a small apartment with an ocean and mountain view a couple of blocks from the beach in Santa Monica. I loaded my belongings into my Chevy Caprice and moved there in late 1978.

The New Age Caucus was a great little organization that promoted green politics. Some of the main thinkers we worked with included Mark Satin, *New Age Politics*; Theodore Roszak, *Person Planet*; Hazel Henderson, *Creating Alternative Futures*; John Vasconcellos, author and state legislator.

Susanne Taylor, a supporter, held great parties at her Hollywood hills home that we attended with Timothy Leary. I knew John Fahey who did a benefit for us. I went to Richie Havens hotel room and smoked with him and his band after a concert at a holistic conference where we had an exhibit. I went to Laura Huxley's home and spoke with her about seniors doing child care for young couples so they could have a break while the seniors and children benefit by the association. Then we held a press conference at the L.A. Press Club with her and actress Susan Anspach.

I met and knew many wonderful people and enjoyed the glamorous highlife of L.A. while I did meaningful work promoting issues like the environ-

ment, decentralization, feminism, holism, and peace. We had a good influence in these areas. It was some of the most meaningful work I did and great fun.

I became alarmed when I learned Rameshwar, ISKCON GBC, was our sole source of funding. I pleaded with Maziarz to diversify funding so we wouldn't be dependent on them or subject to a sudden cutoff. He assured me the funding was secure and refused to seriously look for other sources.

Sure enough, Tamal Krishna came to town and under his pressure, Rameshwar cut us off. The New Age Caucus had no reserve funds and closed. Before long, I lived on my friend Dave Brooks' back porch in Silver Lake.

I went in the hills above the observatory in Griffiths Park on an LSD vision quest. As I stood on a hilltop overlooking L.A. lying in the smog below, cars running around like ants, I looked up and a hawk circled above my head. I thought, "I don't need all this. I'm going back to Hawai'i and live in Waimanu Valley."

While on the Big Island in 1974 to install deities and do an initiation, Jagat and I hiked into Waipi'o Valley where the road ends on the northeast shore. I remembered hearing about Waimanu Valley, accessible only by foot, boat or helicopter where thousands of native Hawai'ians lived before the Europeans came. I figured it could support me.

I sold or gave away my possessions except for what I could carry in a backpack. I bought topog-

raphical maps of the area. After saying goodbye to friends and lovers, I flew to Hilo.

## **The Big Island**

I spent a couple of days at the Hilo Hotel recovering from jet lag and getting the gear and supplies I'd need to live off the land and the ocean by gathering and fishing. My pack was quite heavy, but I was in much better shape in 1980 than I was in 1974.

I hitchhiked to the end of the road at Waipi'o Valley and got a ride with a guy who turned me on to bud. I walked down into the valley, easily forded the river, walked along the beautiful black sand beach and made camp for the night at the foot of the ancient Hawai'ian switchback trail up the northwest cliff face.

Early in the morning, a group of locals with guns and dogs went up the trail to hunt boar in Waimanu. I followed them. The path is worn a few feet deep in places and is like walking in a trough. After about an hour and a half, I reached the third gulch where there are small pools and a little waterfall.

The trail continued up and down a series of ravines, about eight miles in all. The switchbacks and heavy pack made for slow going. I twisted both my ankles on slippery rocks hidden in tall grass. I reached Waimanu in late afternoon. Waimanu is a stunning deep valley framed by escarpments, waterfalls, and black-sand beach. I climbed down the steep trail, picking papayas and other fruit along the way.

The hunters had a hut on the bank of the river at the base of the cliff. I forded the river and got knocked over by an ocean wave. There were boulders on the riverbed. I slipped and got a little dunking. I clambered ashore, went inland a little, and picked a campsite. My watch stopped working.

After I set up camp, the locals invited me to visit. I easily crossed the river in my swim trunks minus the pack. We shared some herb and talked. They were putting strips of boar meat on hooks to hang in the smoker.

I said, "I'd be glad to help."

They said, "You're the first white guy who ever offered to help. Usually, they just want to take."

I said, "I appreciate your hospitality and am happy to help out."

They asked, "What food did you bring?"

I said, "Chia seeds, wheat berries, cayenne, and fishing gear."

They said, "Take some smoked boar. You'll need it." I gratefully accepted it and went back across the river.

The next day, as I explored the valley, I met a white guy living at the other end of the beach. He lived there for months growing sacrament. The previous week, a helicopter airlifted him out due to the worst storms in fifty years. High surf, wind, and rain continued.

We shared a pot of cowboy coffee made with beans grown in the valley. He showed me a taro patch and other places to find food. He also gave me

smoked boar to hold me over since he was leaving for a while. The high surf made fishing difficult, so I appreciated the boar. After a couple of days, I was alone in the valley.

Waimanu once had a sizable population, but was now abandoned. I remained there alone for several days. I found it difficult since the winter storms and high surf continued. I decided to get out too.

When I reached the Waipi'o River, it was too deep to ford with a pack. I asked a local surfer to ferry my pack across on his board in exchange for some smoke. He agreed, and I swam across. When he saw my dry, brown, compressed Columbian, he said, "I haven't smoked any of that in years. Here, try some of *da kine*." We smoked with his friends.

They said their Land Cruiser was full, but I could ride on the bumper to the top of the valley. I happily accepted. I stood on the front bumper looking forward, leaned back on the hood, and rode it up the steep grade like a surf board.

From there, I hitched to Kona where the weather would be better. I met my friend Dharma from Boulder Creek who now lived in South Kona. He told me about his friend John who might help me out. John was a tall, long haired Georgia boy who grew and sold herb. He had a house in a subdivision with a private beach.

He said I could camp on the beach, use his house, and work for him. It was a beautiful secluded cove with great snorkeling. I was happy camping there for a few months with a big bag of shake in my tent. One



morning, I went snorkeling naked where I snorkeled every day. Right when I was going to dive, I saw a small shark below me. I power stroked into shore and didn't like snorkeling there anymore.

I helped John grow and clean herb, did yard work and house painting for him at an hourly rate. Someone gave him an old car in exchange for a debt, and he wanted me to take the car in trade for what he owed me.

Mother's Day 1980, John got home from lunch in Kailua with his attractive blonde wife and the Filipino woman from next door. It was suspected his wife and neighbor were having an affair. John probably was smoking, drinking, snorting, and arguing. I didn't know all this. I said, "John, I don't want that car. I don't even have money to put gas in a car. I want the money you owe me."

He snapped and pulled a nine millimeter on me in a two handed crouch position and threatened me. I said, "If you want to shoot me shoot me. Otherwise, I'm going to get my things and get out of here." He backed off. I went to the beach and packed up camp. Guess I caught him at a bad time.

John drove down to the beach in his black Ford LTD with tinted windows. I didn't know what was going to happen. He apologized and gave me the money he owed me. I moved on.



I spent the night at Dharma's house. He and his wife weren't getting along well either. It wasn't cool for me to stay there. I headed to Hilo side and camped on the

beach. From there I went to a park on the Hamakua Coast. Next I moved to the Queen's Bath subdivision near Kalapana. Queen's Bath was a little rock pool with brackish spring-fed water. I set up camp near Carlo and his wife's tarp.

Sometimes I wandered in the forest just wearing boots and carrying a large bolo knife. Other times I yelled at the sky, "Krishna, if you're there why don't you do something? Strike me with a thunderbolt. I dare you! Just show me that you're there."

I read Carl Jung. One day, I read about an Indian chief who asked the Great Spirit for guidance in dream before retiring for the night. I did the same. I was careful to address my prayer to the Great Spirit, not Krishna or Swamiji.

Yet that night, Swamiji came to me in dream along with several disciples like Tamal. We were on the terrace of a big stone temple. I could see that Swamiji had feet of clay.

He said, "What are you doing here alone? You should go back with your God brothers."

Although he died several years earlier, in 1977, he said that after he died, he would communicate with us in dream. This was no ordinary dream. I asked for guidance, and even though it wasn't what I wanted to hear, I thought I better do what he said. I got up, packed camp, said good-bye to Carlo and headed for Gaursundar's farm on the Hamakua Coast.

## *Chapter 6*

### FOLLOWING A DREAM

I left ISKCON after eight years as one of its international spiritual leaders because it became corrupt and materialistic. Swamiji said I'd return someday. He died in 1977. In the summer of 1980, he appeared to me in dream and told me to join my god brothers and not be alone.

Gaursundar lived with two women in a farm house. He let me stay in a yurt a little distance away. It was comfortable and adequate for my needs. I like Gaursundar, and he was gracious and hospitable to me. He wanted to live a quiet, reclusive life. I was ready to preach, and I didn't want to impose on him.

I heard how much more corrupt the movement became since I left six years earlier. I felt it was time to come out of exile and throw the charlatans and money changers out of the temple.

I went to Kona to see if I could hitch a ride on a boat to Honolulu but was unable to. Atmarama, a devotee from the Buffalo temple, invited me to stay at his coffee shack in Captain Cook with him and his partner. I stayed in their second story loft.

My old friend, David Brooks, visited me from the mainland. He gave me airfare to Honolulu. Dave and I went to a local restaurant where he bought me a teriyaki steak dinner. I felt like a soldier preparing for

battle or a prisoner on death row being offered his last meal. At least I knew it would be the last meat I 'd eat for a while. The next morning, we took a cab to the airport. We had breakfast, and I boarded a flight to Honolulu. Dave took a later flight back to L.A..

I phoned ahead and left a message on the temple's answering machine asking them to have someone pick me up at the airport. No one came. I took a cab.

When I arrived, the temple president greeted me. He said he sent Babhru to get me, but he was late. He invited me into his office to talk. I told him Prabhu-pad's instructions in dream was why I came.

"You can just stay here briefly 'till Krishna's appearance day. I called Rameshwar Maharaj, and he said the only places you can go in the movement are L.A. and New Vrindaban." Rameswara Maharaj was the Governing Body Commissioner for Honolulu, L.A., The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, etc., based in L.A.

"I'll go to L.A. At least I have friends there." I lived in L.A. the previous year. I figured I could handle that. They wanted me in a larger more secure center where they could closely watch me and prevent me from gaining influence. In New Vrindaban, I'd be isolated on a remote farm where I experienced enemy attacks in the past.

I left and the president telephoned Rameswar. He called me back to the office and informed me, "Srila Rameswar says the only place you can go is New Vrindaban. We'll pay your airfare. You can't stop over at any other temples on the way."

"I'll think about it."

They perceived me as a threat to ISKCON and its leaders. Being one of Bhaktivedanta Swami's early disciples with a reputation of being learned and well spoken, I was a dangerous unknown element who might upset the balance of power and cause devotees to question the way things were run. I was always an outspoken maverick.

I went to the park and threw the *I Ching* asking advice what to do. It told me to enter the arena of sacrifice at the proper time. With my undaunted attitude, I'd make a strong impression. This was to be done as a matter of course in dealing with family or community.

I felt like Jesus going to Jerusalem to face his worst enemies in their stronghold. I went back into the movement to throw the money changers out of the temple. New Vrindaban was the most corrupt temple in the movement. Jesus used a bull whip. I'd at least need an Uzi. That wasn't a realistic choice for me. I'd depend on Krishna, my personal power, ability to speak and write, bare hands, and a couple of knives for protection.

I needed to stay in Honolulu a few days. I went to Waikiki where Gargamuni Maharaja set up a table on the street to sell jewelry. He told me, "When I was in Bangkok, I found out why it's called Bh-bhangkok ... You know I meet a lot of women here and some of them pay to take me out."

Bali Mardan Maharaja, former GBC and president of the New York temple, and his wife Taitareya, supposed daughter of Toyota, also hustled jewelry.

Govinda Dasi, who was just on the Big Island with Bharadraj, visited the Honolulu temple and recorded interviews of me to get material for Satsvarup Maharaj's biography of Prabhupad. Although having frail health, she's an attractive woman, and I enjoyed her association. We both joined the movement in February of 1967 and lived together with Prabhupad and Gaurisundar, her former husband, in L.A. 1968. She had a bad reputation for her "loose habits," breaking the rules and regulations, but she was one of the purer devotees I knew.

The devotee I met in Boston and traveled with before returning to India, tended the gardens of the estate I got donated in 1974. But I couldn't stay. A number of devotees knew me from the old days. It was good to see them again.

There were also a number of gays who went to bars and used drugs, as I heard on the Big Island. The temple president planned to buy a sail boat to go around the islands evangelizing with a party of devotees.

I celebrated Krishna and Prabhupad's appearance days and enjoyed Hawaii while I could. West Virginia would be cool in early September.

The temple booked a U.S. Air flight that stopped in L.A. and Baltimore. I insisted on spending the night in Baltimore before continuing to Pittsburg by Greyhound and car to New Vrindaban.

I arrived in Baltimore early in the morning after a long night flight. Two devotees met me at the airport in a van. We picked up my backpack at the baggage claim after a long wait. At the temple, a large brick house with spacious fenced yard, I was given a room and food. After a nap, I wandered around and met some devotees. Bina, the woman I lived with in Maui, was there. We had a pleasant talk on the front porch.

The next morning, they drove me to the Greyhound station for my journey to Pittsburgh, which took several hours. I was met at the bus station and taken to the temple, a three story row house. I was given lunch, and driven to New Vrindaban a couple of hours later.

Arriving there in the evening, I was taken to see Bhaktipad, formerly Kirtananda Swami, the guru of the community. I explained how Prabhupad appeared in dream and told me to be with my god brothers.

"So what do you want to do?"

"I want to preach in schools and colleges."

"Anyone who preaches in my zone must have a shaved head."

"I'll do what I have to."

Radhanath was assigned as my assistant and watchdog. I spent a few days in New Vrindaban. I was asked to give a lecture in the temple at the morning worship. I still spoke proficiently and authoritatively on Krishna consciousness.

I met Kunja Bihari, who I knew in Mayapur, at the Sunday feast. He left the movement and happened to

be passing through. He pointed out a woman named Sucitra who was interested in me.

"You should check her out."

"How old is she? She has grey hair."

"She's not too old. It's just premature graying. She owns a house trailer and a jeep wagon. She says she'd like to meet you."

She saw me looking at her and we smiled back and forth. Then Radhanath and I went to Pittsburgh where we began setting up lectures in Pennsylvania and Ohio. I was given a small room on the third floor.

Radhanath shaved my head. I had him take me to K Mart to get a hat so I would attract less attention when I went for my morning walks in the park near the temple. I got an Irish crushable and a scarlet dress shirt and a tie. I wanted a suit to do my college engagements in. Radhanath wanted to buy me a cheap brown polyester, but I opted to put in some of my own money and get a beige silk and wool blend three piece with an Edwardian cut that made me look like a river boat gambler or gangster. I thought it might attract the young coeds.

Sucitra spent the night at the Pittsburgh temple with her two kids, a boy named Purnima eight years old, and Krishangi, a six year old girl. They were going by train to North Dakota to visit relatives on the old homestead where her father was raised.

I just got my new suit and wanted to show it off to her. I put it on and went down stairs. She was surprised at my appearance as were the other devotees.



They also stayed at the temple on their way back. Sucitra and I both shared an interest in astrology. I showed her and the kids old movies of Prabhupad that I had access to. We were both older disciples of Prabhupad rather than our god brothers who took over as gurus since his death.

After several weeks preaching on campuses with attractive coeds and living in a small room alone practicing a life-style that was a matter of necessity, I was horny and wanted a female companion. Illicit sex or sex outside of marriage was not permitted in the movement. I had to think of marriage. There were no eligible women in the Pittsburg temple.

I talked it over with Radhanath. He discouraged me from marriage thinking it better to be celibate. I wasn't interested in that. He said there were eligible women on the farm. On our way back from a speaking engagement in Cleveland, we stopped at New Vrindaban.

I told Kuladri, the president of the community, that I wanted to get married. He pulled out a roster, and went over the list of single women. All of them were disciples of Bhaktipada except Sucitra. One of them was an attractive new devotee recruited at the Rainbow Family Gathering. I couldn't trust her, as her loyalties would be divided between me and her guru who I worked to undermine.

Sucitra was the only choice. She was a disciple of Prabhupad, an astrologer, poet, actress, independent, and eccentric. I needed an ally I could trust and share intimacy with. She was attracted to me too.

When I announced my choice, the temple authorities tried talking me out of it. They said she'd be trouble. She was erratic. If I wanted a roller coaster ride I could marry her, but if I wanted a smooth peaceful marriage I should try one of the others.

I returned to Pittsburgh. A few days later, I got a call from Sucitra. "There's going to be a party here tonight. Do you want to come?"

"I always like a good party. What's the occasion?"

"Bhaktipad's going away for a while, and we're having a going away party."

"OK. I'll be there as soon as I can."

Radhanath drove me and tried talking me out of seeing her the whole way. We came in by the back road and went to Bhaktipad's house where the party was. Sucitra wasn't there. Everyone doted over Bhaktipad and said he was great. The big event was when he stood on the front porch and threw cookies to devotees on the lawn who eagerly scrambled for them like dogs for a bone.

I went to the temple, which was the community center. Sucitra was there with a couple of women friends. We talked awhile. I said I needed a place to stay and would like to stay with her. She said OK.

We drove to her trailer which was parked in the woods near a creek. She asked if I wanted to go into town or to the bar and get some beer. It was late, and I said I didn't need any. I asked if she had any smoke. She had a little hash that we smoked. Then we made love most of the night and missed morning worship the next day.

She was working on a video movie of the *Ramayan*, an ancient Hindu scripture that devotees from L.A. were shooting on the farm using Prabhupad's Palace of Gold, as the demon's palace. Sucitra was an actress and prop manager. I got a bit part playing a courtier in the demon king's palace. Sucitra looked beautiful in a long black wig. Her son Purnima played a dwarf who entertained the king.

I spent a couple of weeks with her in the trailer. We became the talk of the community. We would have to get married or separate. She was on SSI and told me she was crazy. I thought she didn't seem crazy--just eccentric and Bohemian. We discussed marriage and what we expected from each other. An agreement was worked out, which she later broke.

We were married in the predawn outside the temple by a priest who was also a heavy equipment operator and previously was a symphony conductor. It was a simple ceremony to say the least as befitting our fallen position in the community.

The theatre group doing the movie was planning a tour of Europe and India. They wanted me to be their road manager. It sounded like an exciting opportunity for Sucitra and I to work together.

When I discussed this with Kuladri, president of the community, he wasn't in favor of it. He said the theatre group was flaky and the tour probably wouldn't happen. He was right.

He offered me a position as editor of the *Brijbasi Spirit*, New Vrindaban's monthly journal, which wasn't published since the previous editor left. Later,

I found out he was murdered by the community hit man.

I took the job, which paid fifteen dollars a week, and Sucitra became associate editor. We used an office in the white house at the entrance to the community, which was also used for administrative offices.

The stories Sucitra told me of life in New Vrindaban, as well as my personal experiences there, showed it was not the pure spiritual community it claimed to be. Kirtanananda Swami ruled the community in a cruel, despotic way. He later served time for conspiracy to commit murder. He's also guilty of a number of other crimes.

Anyone who questioned the way they ran things was crushed, driven out, or killed. The administration reminded me more of the Mafia than a spiritual organization built on love and trust. They even had their own militia.

When ISKCON Press moved to Pittsburgh from New York, they sent me to help. I made friends with the press devotees, became production manager, and a partner in the business, which Kirtanananda agreed from the beginning would be an independent for profit operation that made donations to New Vrindaban or other projects voluntarily. All money we received from New Vrindaban was a loan to be paid back after we were set up and making money. We edited, typeset, laid out, and printed the *Brijabasi Spirit* at a low price in reciprocation for use of their building and loan.

It became evident that New Vrindaban was trying to take over the business. We drew up an agreement outlining our plan of operation and presented it at their weekly board meeting. Our proposal was accepted. They also agreed that we could keep the business in Pittsburgh. However, Kirtanananda then decided to move it to New Vrindaban where they could keep us under closer control. They tricked my partner, Antima, into moving ISKCON Press to Pittsburgh by telling him he could use the Pittsburgh temple, but an agreement of sale was already signed on the building, and we had to be out in June.

Kirtanananda and his men became increasingly suspicious of my motives for being there and the power I attained. They kept a close eye on us. When I withdrew \$3,000 from the bank so we could make a get away, they found out within hours.

That evening, Kuladri, Radhanatha, and two enforcers--a blacksmith and a kung fu teacher arrived at the Pittsburgh temple to question us. I threw the money in Kuladri's lap and said we withdrew it to repay a loan from a New York friend who was there in the room at the time and lent the money to my partners. Kuladri said we should repay New Vrindaban first, but since the other guy was there we could pay him. We did. After Kuladri left, he lent it back to us.

Antima went to New Vrindaban for questioning the next morning while his wife Gunya, my wife, our two children, and I packed to make a get away. After being grilled and released, Antima called from a pay

phone on the road. He said the two goons were coming to get me and take me to New Vrindaban for questioning about "what I really believed," and we should be ready to go when he got back. Their plan was to provoke me into saying something "blasphemous," beat me or take me up the hill and shoot me.

I tried renting a car but couldn't since we didn't have a credit card. When Antima returned, we took what we could carry on our backs, went down the stairs, and walked out as the woman in charge of deity worship was on the phone to her crazy husband, Vana, a couple of blocks away. He had guns and wanted to kill me for marrying Sucitra who he wanted as a lover or second wife. Seven of us piled into the temple van and sped to the nearest U-Haul rental place where we rented a truck with cash. Japa returned the van so we couldn't be charged with theft.

Antima and Gunya rode in the back of the truck. Sucitra and the kids were in front with me driving. We headed to Coney Island where Antima's family lived. They pursued us, but we escaped. Japa and his wife joined us a few days later.

## **Family Man**

Antima's mother was a renowned Puerto Rican psychic. She told me I had three spirit guides--an English knight, a French writer, and an Indian chief. It seemed to fit. Sucitra and I rented a small apartment near her home.

I regularly took the subway to Manhattan and looked for work in publishing. It was a time of adjustment for Sucitra, Purnima and Kishangi. The kids were raised in New Vrindaban where they were abused and unaccustomed to anything else. They got to play on the beach and ride bumper cars.

Our money was limited. We stayed with my mother on Long Island. Purnima freaked her out when he told her he would burn down the house. I think he couldn't believe people lived like her, although it is just a modest tract home, after the harsh life he lived. He had a hard time adjusting and was a discipline problem.

I felt more at home at my mother's than ever before. We moved there from Brooklyn when I was eight. Now I was thirty-four. My father died ten years earlier. My siblings were married and lived on their own. My relationship with my mother deepened over the years.

Sucitra got money from her aunt in Capitola, near Santa Cruz. We decided to live on the west coast, so we flew there and stayed with her aunt. Sucitra and I did a short stint as telemarketers for the San Jose Mercury newspaper.

Then she got more money from her family. We rented a house in Soquel. We met some writers at the Catalyst, a Santa Cruz bar, restaurant, and concert hall. They were planning the Fifth Annual Santa Cruz Poet Tree Festive All in November 1981 at the Civic Center.

The main organizers were Jerry Kamstra of Peer Amid Press and poet, F.A. Nettelbeck. This was a major beat poet, all star reunion featuring Lawrence Ferlingetti, Amiri Baraka, Gregory Corso, Ishmael Reed, Fernando Alegria, Lourdes Rivera, William Everson, Wanda Coleman, and other greats. It was a three day festival with a book fair on Saturday and entertainment at night by The Humans, Andy Narell, Max Hartstein and the 25<sup>th</sup> Century Jazz Ensemble.

We invested some money, and I became a partner. I sold advertising and put together a newsprint souvenir poetry paper. I was box office manager during the show. I hired a friend who knew kung fu as my bodyguard.

My son, John Govinda Bohlert, was born in late October by emergency C-section. John and his mother came to the festival. His young ears were exposed to poetry, punk rock, steel drums, and jazz. I hung out in the back room smoking and drinking with the poets and musicians having a good time. However, there were severe thunderstorms opening night, and we lost money.

We moved to Ashland, Oregon after the festival to start a Whole Life Center. We wanted to be far from population centers, and Ashland was one of the most remote places. We bought an old pickup truck, loaded our stuff in the back, and the five of us packed into the cab. It was a long drive.

We rented the first floor of a house on the main road at the edge of town. We printed brochures and started the Whole Life Center at our home.





I did sidereal astrology readings and taught *Bhagavad Gita* and mantra meditation. We didn't make enough money doing this. The woman who lived up stairs had a lover, Robb, who worked at a local horse breeding stable. He invited me to work there

with him.

I rode horses only a couple of times while in high school and knew nothing about working with them. Robb, a young black guy, said he'd show me the ropes. The owners were out of town. Robb took me to their house. We drank their liquor and had a smoke. Then he showed me the barn and horses. He said my main job would be to clean the stalls and help out. Robb helped me saddle up owner Jeff Pettyjohn's quarter horse Red. I took him for a ride past my house to show Sucitra and the kids. I got Red back to the barn, and that was my initiation into horse ranching.

They owned two stallions, a thoroughbred and an Arabian. We mostly bred thoroughbred mares. They were spirited horses and things got wild at times. Doing manual labor and working with horses helped ground me.

In June 1982, Jeff and his wife Marilyn Coe, who had the real money, moved my family to their hundred-forty acre ranch in the Cascade Mountains on Little Butte Creek, twenty-three miles out of Med-



*Steve and John, Little Butte Ranch 1982*

ford, Oregon. I managed Little Butte Ranch surrounded by BHM and Forest Service land. We lived in a hundred year old log cabin with an addition. The water was from a spring near the highway. We had a wood stove, propane cooking stove and hot water heater, and a Honda generator.

We got a golden Labrador named Yella' and a couple of kittens for the kids. Sucitra planted a garden. My first job was to go into the beautiful climax Douglas Fir forest and clear the irrigation ditch from where it met Little Butte Creek, through the pasture, to the pond and another ditch where we installed a good sized hydroelectric generator. The power company ran a line to it and bought electricity from us..

It was great going into the forest every day, wading in the stream moving logs and boulders--what beautiful work. When the pasture was irrigated, geldings stayed in it. We had chickens for eggs and goats to eat the blackberry bushes.

A logging company did a seedling cut and harvested trees from the ranch. We used a railroad flatcar to make a bridge across the creek so they could harvest the other side. I used an Alaskan mill to cut huge slabs of board from a tree to make planks for the bridge.

One night, my family and I returned from Medford. I went out on the second floor balcony to smoke. I could see a fire across the creek where a loader and other equipment was located. I grabbed a shovel and drove there. The fire was too big to put out with a shovel. I called the Forest Service to send a truck and crew to put it out.

I cleaned up after the loggers finished. It was hard work piling slash in the hot sun for burning while RVs headed down the road to fish and camp. The loggers left many primo down trees, and the owners wanted hardwood trees like oak and mountain laurel removed so the fir would grow better.

I made a deal with the owners to work for them half time for half pay. The other half time, I ran a firewood business off of the ranch. It was really hard work, but I made a bit more money that way. I worked in the woods in sun, rain and snow. The first snow fell on Christmas Eve. It was beautiful going

out early Christmas morning to walk in the snow covered forest.

In those days, I started the day with a three egg omelet, coffee, brandy, herb, and a cigar. I headed out in my 4X with my dog, chain saw, and mall. Sometimes I hired a helper.

In June, we completed our one year agreement and moved back to Ashland. We just made ends meet at the ranch. I needed to start preaching again. I started Steve's Yard and Ranch Work. A couple of small ranchers were my regular clients.

Sucitra got more money from her family and bought an ancient, hand-fed letterpress, and handset lead type. We rented a small downtown office, and I started Sky River Press. I did general printing on the letterpress, and I worked freelance for a couple of other print shops using their more advanced equipment. I published *The Forest Farmer's Handbook: A Guide to Natural Selection Forest Management*, by Orville Camp. It received praises for its sustainable, ecological approach to forest management.

Sucitra and her two kids changed their names. They became Asha, Mark and Kristi. Asha and I became involved in the arts scene. We produced and appeared in variety shows at cafes. I started teaching The Path of Love at the Golden Mean Bookstore downtown. I did PR for Actors Workshop and played flute for one of their original plays, "The Lewis and Clark Expedition."

## Chapter 7

# UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

Asha and I went to Sufi meetings at a practitioner's home for spiritual nourishment. However, they provided nothing for the kids. We decided to look for a church. Asha was raised Catholic, but that was too dogmatic and hierarchical for me. I looked on the newspaper church page. It said the Ashland Congregational United Church of Christ (UCC) was holding a special worship led by the women. It was close to home. We decided to check it out.

Worship included a reading from Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet*, liturgical dance, and a slide show with narration describing God's presence in nature. The congregation included adults with mental handicaps from a group home. When one of them acted up, the pastor, who sat in the back, went and sat with her. It was cool. I thought, "I can handle this."

A couple of days later, I met with Pastor Norm Broadbent in his study. I told him my background and said I wanted to work with him.

He said, "How would you like to teach an adult class after church about eastern religion and Christianity?"

I said, "Fine."

Asha and I attended church regularly. Children attended the first part of worship then left after the

children's sermon to go to Sunday school downstairs. Norm was a recent graduate of Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, and he came from a family of United Church of Christ (UCC) preachers. The congregation was a small group of committed, progressive Christians who took the issues of peace, justice, and the environment seriously. I organized the Green Movement in Ashland, and they let me use the fellowship hall for meetings.

Norm held a class for new enquirers that he encouraged Asha and I to attend. We explained that we didn't believe all the traditional Christian dogma. He wore a button that said, "Question authority," and replied, "We don't have a dogma or creed. As long as you believe the general spirit of the Statement of Faith, you can be a member." We didn't have a problem with that and joined Pentecost Sunday in Lithia Park.

Norm soon resigned to accept another call. I became a deacon in charge of pulpit supply. We went without a pastor for several months. My job was to find someone to preach on Sundays. Some Sundays, I preached. Thus, I began Christian preaching.

With three children in a small duplex, it was hard for me to do devotional practices at home. I attended morning mass at the Catholic church. The priests were quite friendly and invited me to breakfast in the rectory with them. Fr. Jeremiah was a young guy who wore jeans, T-shirt, and running shoes under his alb for mass and played pool at Cook's Bar downtown.

He and I hosted an ecumenical study group at the Newman Center--*The Prophetic Parish: A Center for Peace and Justice*. It encouraged churches to become centers for a national movement of radical social change and gave practical suggestions for bringing that vision to life. We developed a plan for local action. The Ashland UCC is peace and justice oriented. The Catholic position is often good except when it comes to women and gays.

The UCC church hired me as church secretary and janitor. When we got an interim minister, I worked with Ross Knotts, an old United Methodist minister. One day I asked him, "Christ says in John, 'No one comes to the Father except through me.' I also believe in Krishna. How can I reconcile this? My guru used to say, 'Christ, Khristos, Krishna, what's the difference?'"

"If Christ equals love and Krishna equals love, then Christ equals Krishna." Ross replied.

I could accept that. Love is the answer--the highest manifestation of God and the way to God. God is love. Thus I follow the eternal religion, which is beyond sectarianism. All true religions are the path of love.

The church formed a search committee to find a new permanent minister. They invited me to represent new members and deacons. We considered a number of candidates and interviewed two in person. We hired Caren Caldwell, who also just graduated from Pacific School of Religion. She was active in

community organizing and married to a community organizer, Rich Rodhe.

The Green Movement in Ashland mostly attracted people who wanted to do projects like plant a garden in an alley. I wanted a more political activist approach. Rich provided that. He worked for Oregon Fair Share, a Citizen Action group that dealt with issues affecting poor and middle-class people. He recruited me to join as the church's representative. Caren was also actively involved. I worked with them closely, and the three of us became good friends.

I became the chair of the deacons and then the chair of the social concerns committee. I moved from the local to the statewide level of Oregon Fair Share--first serving on the state council, then as Vice-president, and then as Acting President.

I heard that Geraldine Baldassarre, a woman who started a newspaper in California, moved to Ashland. I wanted to meet her to explore what printing and publishing ventures we might do together. I later hired her as my commission sales person.

She attended a Fair Share conference and heard Caren speak. She was impressed to see such an empowered woman and started attending our church. She felt right at home and already knew some of the members. She also became the editor of Fair Share's newsletter.

I flew to Washington, D.C. as Fair Share's representative at a Rural Coalition conference. I saw some of the sights there too. I became friends with a couple of black organizers from Montana. We liked to smoke



sacrament together. We went to the ghetto to get some on a street corner and visit their friends who lived there. They told us of hard times they and the neighborhood faced under Reagan's policies.

When I got home, I wrote an article about the conference for the Fair Share newsletter. Geraldine made some editorial changes. Rich told her she needed to show them to me. She was afraid I might not take them well, but came to the print shop where I worked in the basement during lunch hour when no one else was around. She was relieved that I accepted her changes so well.

She came to Sky River Press and helped me put out a bulk mailing to promote *The Forest Farmer's Handbook* that I secured a grant from the Fessenden Foundation for. I took her out to dinner afterwards to show my appreciation.

Meanwhile, my relationship with Asha was not good. My son was the main thing that kept us together. She was emotionally unstable, and I never knew what kind of mood I would come home to. Sometimes I just went back to the office and ate out. My stepchildren, Mark and Kristi, never accepted me as their father and caused trouble. One day, out of the blue based on a lie Mark told her, Asha told me to move out and threatened me with a restraining order.

I packed my stuff in the station wagon, bought a couple of bottles of wine to celebrate my freedom, and went to Rich and Caren's house where they let me stay a few days until I found a place. Geraldine rented rooms in her house, so I went to see her. She

didn't have a room available, but we smoked and talked. I rented a small house trailer.

One night, I was at Jasmine's, a local club, with some friends. A blues band from Portland played. Geraldine came with some friends to celebrate completing Rich's community organizing class at the college. It was a weekday night, and I had to work the next day. I was just about to leave when Geraldine asked me to dance. I put my hat and coat on the speakers. We danced until closing--even to a tape during breaks. It was intense, and others sensed it too. We said good night, but that was the night we fell in love.

I knew that if she didn't call me, I had to call her. I asked her to a church "prom" held at a member's home. Everyone was to come dressed like they dressed for their high school prom. I never went to a prom. I wore a sport coat and slacks.

I picked up Geraldine at her home. She blew me away when she came to the door wearing an antique, black evening gown. I never saw her like that before. She was beautiful. After the prom, we went to Jasmine's to continue partying.

She asked me to do



her horoscope. I was amazed at how similar her chart is to Asha's, but I consider Geraldine a new, improved model. The two of them became friends. After reading Geraldine's horoscope to her, we made love on the sofa bed in my downtown office. That was often our trysting place. We made love at night, slept there, woke in the morning, made love again, cleaned up, went to breakfast, and my printing work started late.

A room opened up at her place. I slept in her bed and used the other room as our office. She wrote travel guides, and I helped her. I became the southern Oregon organizer for Countdown '87, the Campaign to Stop Contra Funding. Geraldine coordinated volunteers. I was active in the Sanctuary Movement for Central American refugees through the church. We worked closely with Caren and Rich becoming good friends.

Geraldine became Caren's secretary. One evening, she said, "Wouldn't you like a job like Caren's?"

I said, "I sure would. Would you like to see what I'd have to do to get a job like that?"

I had some seminary catalogues in my file drawer. I considered seminary when I was with Asha, but she wanted nothing to do with it. Geraldine rejected Harvard because of the location, but said she'd move back to the San Francisco Bay area where I could attend Pacific School of Religion or San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS).

## Student in Care

I applied to both schools and began the process of becoming a student in care of the Oregon Conference of the United Church of Christ, which started preparation for ordained ministry in the UCC. First, I spoke to Caren about it. I provided written information of my plans for ministry, my faith pilgrimage, biography, and how I understood my call. Then the deacons interviewed me and gave their recommendation. An interview with the Committee on the Ministry at the conference office in Portland was the next step.

Geraldine and I drove there in my old Plymouth Volare station wagon. It made it to the top of the hill on the street the conference office was on and died. We coasted downhill and parked across from the office. I wasn't having a good day. I had a cold and took cold medication. We arrived early to have dinner before the interview, but there didn't seem to be any restaurants nearby. We found a corner grocery. I got a sandwich and a beer that I ate in the car. Then I smoked a joint and was ready for the interview.

The interview went smoothly. We discussed my call to ministry, my relationships with A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami and Lalita Prasad Thakur, how Swamiji appeared to me in dream, how I experienced Jesus accepting me on the beach in Hilo when I prayed to him, and many other things.

One of them said, "With your background, you should study with the Jesuits. We don't have much to offer in terms of spirituality."

They accepted me in care, and I began a three year process leading to ordination. A member of the committee, a pastor in Boise, Idaho, served as my advisor. There was intense scrutiny by my local church, the committee, and the seminary to ascertain fitness for ministry before they would ordain me or anyone else. I think this is good practice.

Geraldine and I attended an introductory seminar for people considering seminary at Pacific School of Religion (PSR), a UCC related seminary on a hill in Berkeley overlooking the bay. The pastor of the local Disciples of Christ church said, "Don't enter the ministry unless you have no other choice." His reasoning was that it is so hard you will not last unless you're totally committed.

Barbara Brown Zikmund was dean, and she held high academic standards. My B.A. was unaccredited, and while she wouldn't come right out and say it, that's why they wouldn't accept me.

We also visited San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS), a Presbyterian Church (USA) seminary across the bay in San Anselmo. It's a beautiful setting with wonderful old, castle-like buildings in an upscale suburban location. Caren suggested I apply there because she took an SFTS Old Testament course from Marvin Chaney.

She said, "He looked so straight and formidable when he entered the room, but then he said the most radical things."

We met John Irvine, Director of Admissions, who welcomed us warmly. He didn't care that I belonged

to a different denomination or that my degree was unaccredited. I think he enjoyed recruiting people like me to diversify the student body. He arranged a tour of the campus and a room for the night.

It was my birthday, so Geraldine took me out to dinner at a great Italian restaurant. The next morning before leaving, we asked John, "Is it necessary to be married to live in student housing?" He replied, "I think it would be a good idea."

SFTS accepted me and gave me a tuition grant. I got a scholarship from Eastern Star, a Masonic order that helps seminarians, and I had student loans. I sold Geraldine's house rather than using a realtor, and from the commission, I paid off my previous debts and had a little money to start with.

SFTS had student housing in Berkeley as well as San Anselmo since it's part of the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) in Berkeley, consisting of nine seminaries from different denominations as well as Jewish and Buddhist institutes. There was cross registration at the schools, so I received a progressive, ecumenical education. We decided to live in Berkeley where we'd be more independent and in a happening environment.

Geraldine's parents, Joe and Inez, lived in Fremont and her sister Linda lived in San Francisco. I got to know them on our trips to the Bay Area. We sometimes stayed with her parents. Inez asked, "How come you're going to seminary and yet you're living together?"

Geraldine said, “Oh Ma, it’s not that kind of church.”

Joe was friendly, and since I didn’t get along with my father, I was happy to be well received by both Joe and Inez.

Geraldine wasn’t sure if she wanted to get married. We discussed it and called John Irvine to see just what he meant by, “I think it might be a good idea.” It was his way of saying, “Yes.” She accepted my proposal. We set the date for May 2, 1988, shortly before we moved to Berkeley.



It was a church wedding conducted by Caren Caldwell that included readings from *Gita Govinda*, hymns, and communion, which we helped serve. Her husband Rich Rodhe was my best man. Geraldine’s sister Linda was maid of honor. My son John was ring bearer. Inez and about twenty-five friends attended in-

cluding Asha and Kristie. We served champagne, seltzer, and cake at a reception in the fellowship hall of the church where we hung posters of Jesus, Radha-Krishna, and Shiva.

Afterward, we went to lunch at a restaurant with family and a few close friends. The two of us drove to Brandon on the coast and spent a three day weekend at a motel. That night we walked along the beach, and it started raining. In spite of my umbrella, we got soaked before we reached a restaurant for dinner, but we didn't care. We were in love, and that was all that mattered.



We moved into a sublet apartment for the summer until our permanent apartment became available. I found the remains of cannabis joints around the bed. That was my last smoke for many years. Seminary and pastoring a church were different from my pre-





vious life. Drinking was commonplace among seminarians and pastors, but smoking cannabis wasn't.

Geraldine's parents held a reception for us at their house, and her friends held one at the Sunol pool. Geraldine founded and published the local newspaper, *The Sunolian*, and was a leader in the referendum to save the Pleasanton Ridge for park land before she moved to Ashland.

I found part-time work in printing and copying shops to help defray expenses. Geraldine got good paying nursing jobs and enrolled in Women's Studies at San Francisco State University.

We lived in a one bedroom apartment, which looked out at the back of the GTU bookstore and parking lot. Vans regularly shuttled from there to the San Anselmo SFTS campus. Riders went free and drivers like me got paid. The other campuses where I studied, the GTU library, UC Berkeley, Telegraph Avenue, and many other great places were in walking distance. BART, high speed light rail, provided access to many Bay Area locations. We chose a great place to further our education.

At orientation, I met John Lersch and Chris Von Lobedan. We became good friends. John was a former college professor and football coach who lived down the hall from me. Chris worked at the boat harbor in Marin and lived with his mother.

There was a fantastic reception at the seminary president's home. Randy Taylor was a southern pastor in the civil rights movement and a leader in the Presbyterian Church (USA). He was a gracious and

inspiring model for seminarians. He threw quite a good party with abundant appetizers and wines. I'm sure Jesus would've felt comfortable there because he partied too. We weren't the staid Christians some imagine.



My son John regularly came and spent time with us, and we spent shorter periods in Ashland visiting him. He got to know Geraldine's family, and that was good for all of us.

SFTS recommended that first year students study Old Testament rather than New Testament since

most of them were less invested in the Old, and it would be less of a shock to their faith. Marv Chaney turned out to be all I hoped he would be. We analyzed the various strands of texts that comprise the Pentateuch, which was said to have been written by Moses. Marv questioned whether Moses ever really existed or whether an exodus from Egypt ever took place as the Bible described. He saw Israel formed by alternative communities starting in the Judean hill country. The original J strand of the Pentateuch was King David's founding document for a united Israel and as much of a political statement as religious.

One sobbing young female student said, “How can I ever preach on the Books of Moses again after what we’ve done to them?”

Marv explained, “It’s possible to develop a second naiveté with this information as background. One can also look at things as real within the narrative world of the story.”

I thought, “How can we not preach this stuff? This is great. People should know about it.”

I was never one for dumbing down sermons or Bible studies to the lowest common denominator, and that often got me in trouble with my congregations. I asked Marv to be my advisor and mentor, and he graciously accepted.

There was much activism regarding Central American issues at the seminaries and in the Bay Area that I joined in. During intersession, I took a class on Central American refugees at the Jesuit school taught by an activist. It included field work.

In the spring, I took a class called Evangelism and Social Witness at PSR taught by Leontine Kelly, the first black, woman bishop in the United Methodist Church. She was a strong, outspoken Christian preacher and a leader on peace and justice issues. I liked her and later took a preaching class from her. I prefer a more spontaneous, black preaching style to the manuscript writing and reading style taught at SFTS.

I studied Reformed Theology, a required course at SFTS, with Ben Reist. I managed to get through it with a B without reading Calvin and Barth, two pil-

lars of reformed theology who I found boring. I much preferred Tillich and others.

Ben said, "If you're going to study the Bible, you should cut the leather covers and gilt edges off of it. It's a book, and should be read as such." "The best way to study theology is to open a bottle of wine or pour a glass of brandy." "If a little Buddha rubs off on Jesus and a little Jesus rubs off on Buddha, so much the better for both of them." "Reformed theology is reformed and ever reforming. It is not stuck in a rut or carved in granite."

I worked during the summer, and my son John came to stay with us for a few weeks. I always wanted him to be with me full time, but that didn't happen. Driving him back and forth kept us in touch with friends in Ashland.

Presbyterians at SFTS had to take and pass both Hebrew and Greek. As a UCC student, I just had to pass one or the other. I tried Hebrew for a couple of weeks and dropped out. It was too hard. I took Basic Greek I in the fall of 1989 and passed. There was a month long Basic Greek II class that I was supposed to take in the intersession where we would do nothing but Greek for a month.

I approached Polly Coote, the professor and registrar. I said, "You know and I know that when I finish this course, I'll forget everything you taught me and never use it again. The UCC doesn't require that I know Greek. I hear that if someone tries, you never fail them. I'd like to study independently at home and just take the final on a pass or fail basis."



*On vacation in the Oregon Cascades*

She said, "OK. Let's see how you do."

I bought a *Greek for Idiots* book and studied at home. I also took a Leadership Development in the Parish course at the Unitarian Universalist school.

I arrived for the Greek final. Chris Von Lobedan said, "You know, last week Polly told us what to expect on the test. Let me explain what you need to know."

We spread out some books and notes on the trunk of a car and had a last minute cram session. Good thing I like to be early. I took the final and passed.

In the spring of 1990, I became bored with school, constant assignments, and pleasing professors. In-

ternship was a welcome relief. I did part of it at the University of California campus ministry with Bill Ing as my supervisor. We engaged in peace and justice work together. I also started a group called Agnostics Anonymous to encourage thinking people to question their beliefs. I taught that it isn't necessary to believe in the virgin birth, physical resurrection, miracles, etc., to be a Christian. Doing ministry on a large, progressive campus with little support was challenging.

I also interned at Calvary Presbyterian Church. Pastor Larry Petersen was my supervisor. We shared leadership of worship, funerals, preaching, teaching, etc. He showed me how things are done in the church. The congregation welcomed me. A Sri Lankan congregation shared the building. Of course, being an intern didn't prepare me for parish ministry. The pastor always gets the heat from the congregation, not the intern. After I graduated, Larry left ministry and became a printing sales representative.

In the fall, I took a class called Jesus the Jew. It was taught by Christian and Jewish professors and attended by students of both faiths. It was an informative historical look at who Jesus really was—a Jew from birth to death. This along with work such as the Jesus Seminar did sorting out in a scholarly manner what parts of the Bible the historical Jesus said and did and what was added by later tradition gave me analytical tools that I later used to develop Universalist Radha-Krishnaism.

I attended a Religion, Law, and Legitimate Government conference at First Congregational UCC where I was an associate member. I attended the conference for credit with William Sloane Coffin and Robert MacAfee Brown as my teachers, and Matthew Fox as one of the main speakers. These men are theological giants who influenced me greatly.



I, many of my classmates, Geraldine, and all kinds of people took part in massive antiwar demonstrations in the Bay Area. It was Bush I's Gulf War. I saw Christian ministry as a way to combine activism and spirituality. My seminary training took place in a progressive, ecumenical activist environment. I became a process-liberation theologian.

In my senior year, I started applying for a position to begin after graduation. A UCC advisor said, "If you want to get a church quickly right out of seminary, apply in the Midwest. There are many small churches looking for pastors."



I applied to churches in the Midwest, on both coasts, as well as campus and justice ministries. I did a telephone interview with a church in Clinton, Iowa. Then they flew me there for a face to face interview.

I took many pictures to show Geraldine since she was skeptical about moving there. Clinton is an old industrial town on the Mississippi about 45 miles north of Davenport and about an hour and a half drive west of Chicago. American flags and yellow ribbons all around town didn't bode well.

The Community Congregational Church was on the north end of town next to a funeral home. The parsonage was on a side street behind the church, and then the large church school and office building was across the alley. The church had about 250 members.

I was lodged at the Best Western Motel, hosted by and interviewed by the search committee. I told them I was only interested in working there if they were open to serious changes that would allow them to attract new, young members. They needed to become a mission oriented church. I warned them about my progressive views and made them aware of my background. They said I was who they were looking for. I said OK.

Next, Geraldine and I flew there for my election. I met the congregation in informal settings, preached on Easter Sunday, and they voted to call me as their pastor right after church.

I gave what Geraldine called "a very intellectual sermon" about the resurrection on Easter Sunday when more than the regular church goers were pre-



sent. Still, they voted to call me as their pastor, and I was the first in my class to get a call.

Art Hoogheem, chair of the Search Committee and moderator of the church was a grand, old gentleman. He was high school principal to generations of Clinton students. He was a forward looking, wise person and supported my ministry. Dan Schott, vice-chair of the Search Committee and chair of the deacons was more conservative as were many church members.

We returned to Berkeley to finish our schooling and arrange my ordination. Theologian Robert McAfee Brown was the keynote speaker at my graduation, May 25, 1991. Geraldine's family attended. We went out to lunch with them, Chris Von Lobedon, John Lersch, and his wife Janet Riley, who



*Geraldine's parents Joe and Inez, sister Linda, and Steve at graduation.*

graduated the year before. That night, Chris, John, Janet, Geraldine, Linda, and I went to dinner at a Middle Eastern restaurant where they had belly dancing. It was certainly a day to party--I received a Master of Divinity degree.

After I submitted an ordination paper, I was interviewed by the Committee on Ministry and the Oregon Conference UCC. I was ordained at Ashland First Congregational Church, June eighth. Geraldine performed a liturgical dance that she choreographed. My son John attended. Dan Schott and his wife came to represent the Clinton church.

John returned to Berkeley with us. We rented a U-haul, drove to Fremont, and spent the night with Geraldine's parents. They gave us some old furniture. Then we headed east to Clinton.

## **Iowa Pastor**

When we arrived in Clinton, church members helped us unload the van and move into the parsonage. A couple of months after I began my pastorate, I was formally installed as pastor and teacher of Community Congregational United Church of Christ, Clinton, Iowa. I made the transition from being a *brahmin* and *sannyasi* in India to being a Christian pastor in the Midwest. This gives me a unique dual religious and cultural spiritual perspective.

I bought a used Stratocaster and amp, then replaced my Casio keyboard with a Roland synthesizer.

Geraldine bought a drum kit, and the parsonage rocked.

The church joined the Town and Country Alliance for Ministry, a church-based community organizing group associated with the Gamaliel Foundation in Chicago. One church member and I attended a week-long organizing training. In this way, I worked for positive social change.



*Geraldine & Steve in front of  
parsonage*

I introduced many new ideas to the church. Some members were receptive while others weren't. The conservative members wanted to keep things the way they were in the past. I and others knew this was impossible and undesirable. Growth requires change.

Unfortunately, the previous pastor, Leon Wilhite, retired but continued attending as a church member. He said he wouldn't interfere in my ministry, but his presence was a reminder of "the good old days." Leon was an elderly, easy going, non-controversial, midwestern pastor of the old school--quite my opposite. His wife was much less easy going, critical, and ready to speak her mind, especially among the women's group.

Divisions between old and new, young and old were highlighted at a church council meeting in January 1992 when the newly elected officers began their terms. Julie Kettler, a young mother and homemaker, was elected Financial Secretary and therefore based on the bylaws, expected to serve on the Finance Committee. However, the committee chair, George Gramer opposed this. He wanted to keep the previous Financial Secretary on the committee. Someone argued that he should be allowed to have his way since he chaired that committee for twenty-five years.

I said, "With all due respect to George and all he's done, but I don't think anyone should serve on any committee for 25 years." People were shocked. This ended my six-month honeymoon period and began a three and a half year effort to remove me as pastor.

Following Iowa Conference UCC recommendations, I lead a small study group using denominational materials to help us understand what it means to be "open and affirming" of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people. A lesbian from the community who wasn't a church member attended. She felt more comfortable being out with us than she was with any other group. Her presence helped change some church members' views by simply allowing them to get to know her and see she wasn't so different from them. Since most members didn't attend the study group, they voted against becoming an open and affirming congregation.

The need for openness was further emphasized when I did the memorial service for the son of a

prominent church family who died of AIDS with his life partner present at the church. Yes, even children who grew up in the church were gay. I felt the congregation rose to the occasion.

I also taught comparative religion and prayer courses. I enjoyed teaching adults because the ones who came were there because they wanted to be. They became my core supporters. Teaching confirmation was much less fun because the youth usually didn't want to be there and weren't interested in learning.

As conflict with the conservatives intensified, I tried using conference staff to mediate. I also started looking for a new church. I studied conflict resolution and systems theory, which should be major course requirements for anyone planning to go into pastoral ministry.



Being a pastor used to be a low stress, high prestige position. Now it's high stress and low prestige. ISKCON suffers tyranny of its leaders. The UCC suffers tyranny of lay leaders who often have more power than the pastor. Entrenched families who've sometimes been in the church for generations, feel it's their church and the pastor should carry out their wishes and preach the way they want him or her to.

What's the use of having educated, ordained clergy if they lack the power to carry out their task of ministering according to God's direction as they understand it? The decentralized, nonhierarchical structure of the UCC gives too much power to the local congregation and too little to clergy.

When the opposition managed to get a majority of supporters on the church council, they voted to fire me. They said if I left voluntarily, they would say that I resigned.

I said, "No, I want it on record that I was fired so that whoever follows me knows what kind of people you are."

Unfortunately, they hired Dan Schott to be my replacement. He enrolled in seminary after I went to Clinton and was considered the most conservative UCC student in his class. He and his family were instrumental in ousting me.

When the Area Conference Minister, Beverly Travis, and the chair of the Church and Ministry Committee learned what happened, they agreed that the council had no right to fire me. It had to be done by a vote of the congregation. A special congregational meeting was called to validate the council's action. Beverly told them that if they had any integrity they should not support the council. They did. I was given ninety days notice.

Fortunately, Jack Seville, conference minister for the Northern Plains Conference UCC, read my ministerial profile, liked it, and circulated it to churches in North Dakota, although I expressed no interest in

serving there. Two churches interested in hiring me flew Geraldine and I there for interviews.

We didn't click with the first congregation, but things went well with the second in Valley City, a town of 7,000 in the middle of the prairie, sixty miles west of Fargo. Jeff Miller, a young grain elevator operator, was chair of the search committee and church treasurer. We hit it off well and remained friends for the four years I was there. At first, Geraldine said she didn't want to move to Valley City. After soul searching with the help of some church women, she agreed, and I accepted the call, which came just in time.

The Valley City church had sold their parsonage. They lent us money for a down payment on a small home. Stan Johnson, one of the search committee members, was a banker and helped us get a mortgage loan. This situation was much better--we lived in a small stucco house several blocks from the church, accrued equity in our home, and had more privacy.

The church paid a moving company to transport our belongings, and we drove our two cars to our new home. As we left the Clinton parsonage, I shook the dust off my feet and moved on.

## **The Northern Plains**

We arrived in Valley City about a month before I was to begin work. This was a welcome break after four stressful years. They had an interim minister, Van Jollie, a Methodist who was a missionary in Africa along

with his German spouse, Fritza, and their little one year old daughter. Previously, as a youth minister, he took groups on canoe trips at the Boundary Waters in northern Minnesota. He was organizing one for the church. Geraldine wanted to go. I reluctantly agreed to go since I already experienced enough outdoor adventures and was almost fifty years old.

I told Van, "This is no youth group outing, it's more of a senior citizen outing, so pick an easy course."

He didn't heed my warning. We borrowed heavy aluminum canoes from a Methodist camp and took much camping gear and supplies that we portaged long distances. Stan Johnson, a fifty year old, was with us the first day with his wife and son. He said that he hadn't done anything so grueling since Marine basic training.

We all struggled. Fortunately, I brought a couple of bottles of Black Velvet, and Jeff Miller brought bourbon and rum, which eased the pain. We made our way to Lac de Croix on the Canadian border. I found that we could have driven there, launched the canoes, and paddled around the lake for a week. I was dumbfounded that we didn't do that. We canoed for eight days through beautiful, mosquito and deer fly infested wilderness and covered about fifty-five miles. When we got back to Ele, we headed to a bar for burgers and cold beer. At least Jeff and I had a good bonding experience.

I decided I was old and couldn't do all the things I used to do. I thought, "Well, now that's out of the



way and don't have to worry about getting old." I later learned there were three women in the church over 100 years old. That's really old.

Jack Seville hosted an orientation for new pastors at a church camp that Geraldine and I attended.

North Dakota is a whole other experience from the rest of the U.S. and

took some getting used to. I even took a recommended

course, North Dakota

101, that helped new-

comers understand

the culture. Jack was

a good conference

minister who genu-

inely cared for the

pastors in his confer-

ence and protected us

from our congrega-

tions as much as he

could. He officiated

at my installation, and we played a duet—Jack on re-

corder, me on bamboo flute, and Geraldine played

snare drum.

Riley Rogers, a black retired pharmacist originally from Chicago, was mayor of Valley City, which is almost all white. He and his white wife had to go to Minnesota to get married after college in Jamestown due to racism making it illegal in North Dakota. He belonged to my church. I asked him to recommend a



good community organization for me to get involved with. He was a Rotarian and recommended I join the Rotary. I had something more radical in mind, but there wasn't much going on in Valley City. I joined the Rotary, which I enjoyed. I formed a friendship with Riley and had fun with the other Rotarians.

Our first winter there was unusually bad. Over one hundred inches of snow fell and stayed on the ground from Halloween to Easter. Temperatures dipped to minus forty degrees with a wind-chill of minus seventy. I found it invigorating. The thought of serving this church until retirement seemed appealing. I was ready to settle down and accept the role of a small town pastor in the upper midwest. I didn't try to make changes like in Clinton. Some church members had good ideas, and I helped facilitate them.

There was an excellent UCC clergy support network in North Dakota. I made some good friends among the clergy including Ron and Dot Francey, a clergy couple that we got together with in Fargo because it was half way between our churches. I was also friends with Steve Johnson, the Methodist pastor in Valley City.

Geraldine worked briefly at the state mental hospital in Jamestown. Then she became the director of a center for abused women where she ran into trouble with a dysfunctional system. After going on a silent retreat to discern her future, she applied for a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and began Faith in Action, an ecumenical volunteer agency to

assist the elderly and others to remain at home. It was a successful project that continues today.

Harley McLain was a church member, son of a UCC pastor, and an old hippie who ran for U.S. President and Senate. He also sings and plays guitar. We jammed together many Sunday afternoons. I played lead on my strat. Harley played acoustic rhythm and sang Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Grateful Dead, etc. We performed together at Second Avenue, a Fargo club where some great bluesmen like Cocoa Montoya and Jon Hammond performed. We also did some songs at church worship. We became good friends, and I enjoyed getting together with him and his family.

My mother visited us, and we went to the badlands in southwest North Dakota. We stayed at the Roughrider Inn where Teddy Roosevelt stayed with his men. We also saw an outdoor play about him. It was a big disappointment that my son John never wanted to visit us in Valley City. I hoped that when he got to be a teenager, he'd want to live with me, but that was not to be.



While the previous pastor left the area and served another church, a former pastor from long ago moved away and returned to Valley City with his wife after retirement. He had dementia, was argumentative, and criticized my baptismal policies.

I felt baptism was for people who joined the church or children of members. It is an initiation rite or a promise made by the parents that their children will become confirmed members. As clergy, it was my duty to protect the integrity of the sacraments. This became an issue when I wouldn't baptize children of nonmembers or the grandchildren of members whose grown children didn't belong to the church. Jack Seville came and preached on this subject, backed me up, and answered questions after worship. Jack was an excellent conference minister who always encouraged me.

In seminary, I learned to write sermons and read them from the pulpit. Jack suggested I speak extemporaneously from my heart and share my thoughts more freely. I took his advice and preached that way

since. It's the way I preached before seminary and is natural for me.

I also stopped wearing my black Geneva robe for worship. I preferred a contemporary look, worship style, and music. We even started a coffee house night of music, poetry, fellowship, etc.

Things went fairly well at church. The level of conflict was low compared to Clinton. Yet after three years, I felt like I was slowly dying inside day by day. I decided to do something about it. Geraldine and I discussed our future. I am a prophet by nature, and always used my pastoral ministry to further the gospel values of peace, justice, and integrity of creation. I worked hard to pastor conservative, rural Midwesterners. I did my best, but we're from such different cultures and world-views that I couldn't meet their expectations no matter how much I suppressed my more radical nature and tried to serve their needs.

I phoned Jack Seville and asked him to meet with me and the pastoral relations committee because I wanted to leave pastoral ministry. We met in the church lounge, and I informed every one of my decision.

Jack said, "Steve



*On vacation in Winnipeg*

you're a good pastor, and I'd like you to reconsider your decision."

To the committee he said, "Steve may not be the pastor you want, but he's the pastor you need. You should do your best to work together and support him."

We all agreed to do our best to minister together.

I also started looking for church based community organizing work or campus ministry, especially in the San Francisco Bay Area. I interviewed with a campus ministry in Northern California, so I scheduled other meetings there too. I went to the Bay Area for a couple of weeks and stayed with Geraldine's family.

I met with Don Stalhutt, a UCC minister and community organizer I knew when we belonged to the same church in Berkeley during my seminary days. We had lunch at a Mexican restaurant in Martinez where he organized. He gave me tips for the interview I scheduled with the community organization he founded in San Francisco and other organizations I'd meet with. He was one of my ministry role models since seminary. I went into the church wanting to work for peace, justice, and integrity of creation. Church based community organizing is an effective way of doing that. I met some leading Bay Area organizers and labor leaders, but nothing clicked leading to a job offer.

I got to know Inez, Linda, and her partner Miguel better. We had a pleasant Thanksgiving celebration with some of their neighbors. I enjoyed big city life for a little while and hoped I'd find something eventually.

By the end of the year (1998), Jack returned again at the request of the Pastoral Relations Committee. The church wasn't pleased with me as their pastor and wanted me to leave. Jack negotiated for me to stay six months at full pay while I looked for another position and performed only essential duties. Living in Valley City wasn't an advantage when doing a national job search, especially in the Bay Area and other progressive urban areas. I continued looking for non-parish ministries. However, after a couple of months, Jack suggested I give pastoral ministry one more try.



I updated my ministerial profile and began another nationwide search. Comstock Park Congregational UCC, a small suburban congregation outside Grand Rapids, Michigan was interested in me. They flew Geraldine and me there.

Marilyn Free, a deacon and search committee member, met us at the airport. She took us to an outdoor pops concert at the Canonsburg Ski Resort. There we met other search committee members who brought a picnic dinner and blankets to sit on in the grass. We had a pleasant evening enjoying the music and getting to know each other casually. We stayed at a motel near the church. The next morning, Jack Klepser, the moderator, took us on a tour of the area and to lunch. In the afternoon, E.J. Ericson, a realtor congregation member, showed us homes for sale.

In the evening, the committee interviewed me at Jack's house. I was surprised to see a couple of hard-bound books by Rush Limbaugh prominently dis-

played on his book shelves. This was a red flag, and I clearly explained my positions on women's and gay rights, peace, economic justice, and the environment. I always let congregations know my progressive views ahead of time to find a good match and avoid trouble down the line. They always seemed to not get it and said, "You're just who we're looking for. Sure we're open to change and growth." It seems like they thought I'd change, assimilate, and become one of them--going native as clergy called it. Of course, I thought they'd change and embrace the paradigm shift I offered. It seems we were both wrong.

Sunday morning, I preached at St. John's UCC on Grand Rapids westside--a common practice for pastoral candidates to preach at another church called a neutral pulpit. The search committee from the calling church attends and sees the person in action in a real church setting without the rest of the calling congregation present. After worship, the committee met in a classroom to make their decision. Then they called Geraldine and me in and offered me the position. I accepted.

We went to the Blythfield Country Club, an upscale place where Marilyn and John Free were members. We ate a wonderful brunch in a private dining room then began contract negotiations. The UCC has standard contracts and pay standards for ministers. Unfortunately the committee didn't adequately understand all the details and expectations, which is regrettably common. It's also common that ministers don't negotiate adequately for good pay and benefits;



therefore, many congregations like this are used to getting off easy. They wanted to pay me much less than the customary salary, which is about the same as a public school teacher with equivalent education and experience.

I said, "How about if you all write down your annual income on a sheet of paper, and I'll accept the average income. If I'm to live among you and be your pastor, I need an adequate income to live somewhat like you."

Suddenly, they were happy to give me what I asked for previously, and the contract was agreed upon.



July 25, 1999, was the date set for me to return and do a candidate sermon for the Comstock Park congregation, after which the congregation would vote whether or not they wanted me as their pastor before signing the contract. They flew Geraldine and I there for a more extended stay at a less expensive motel so we could buy a home. They didn't pay enough for us to live in the suburbs with them, and after eight years in Iowa and North Dakota, we were ready for an urban experience.

E.J. helped us find an old two-story, three-bedroom home in a fairly hip, progressive inner city area of Grand Rapids two miles from downtown and six miles from church, which made our church and home life separate. Grand Rapids has a quarter million people with about a million in the county. North

Dakota only has around 660,000 in the whole state. It felt good to be back in civilization again.

I preached and the congregation had a question time after worship. They voted to call me as their pastor. Although Comstock Park was now a suburb, the older members remembered its rural past. Coming from North Dakota must have given them certain ideas about me. We went to lunch with Ron Shoemaker, the chair of the deacons. Geraldine and I went to Charlie's Crab on the Grand River for dinner to celebrate my call and her birthday. We felt the day went well.

We returned to Valley City, sold our house, and wrapped up my ministry there. Geraldine found someone to take over Faith in Action. We agreed to do our own packing to save the Comstock Park church some money. We decided to never do that again. The movers didn't come when scheduled, which delayed closing our house sale. We left for Grand Rapids in our vehicles. We had to be there to close on the new house.

## **Grand Rapids**

Fortunately, we had enough money to close the purchase in Grand Rapids. We took possession of the house and stayed in a motel while we waited for our furniture to arrive. We read Buddy Guy was playing at the Orbit Room, a local club, and were excited about going to see him. He is definitely one of the all

time greats. One of the perks of living in Grand Rapids was great entertainment.

Ron Shoemaker told us about Rev. George Heartwell, who ran the Heartside Ministry for the homeless. He was a city commissioner too. Geraldine and I met him for coffee to network. She was looking for work, and I was interested in ministry opportunities. George recommended Faith in Motion, a group working on public transportation issues. Geraldine and I both got involved and increased bus services.

I began work at the church. It was a small old wooden building that was well maintained. The sanctuary seated a little over a hundred. I had an office with a private toilet and an outer office for my secretary. My ministry included a weekly men's Bible study breakfast at a local restaurant, and a women's lunch time Bible study with the sewing circle. I enjoyed meeting with these people. I formed supportive relationships with area clergy, although I felt there wasn't as much comradeship as there was in North Dakota perhaps due to our isolation there.

The church was in a growing suburb and wanted to grow too, but we were limited by the building and parking lot. Leaders were willing to consider remodeling or relocating. I let the lay leaders take the lead on this. We went through elaborate planning retreats and even hired a consultant, but didn't manage to change the building or grow.

The music director and I attended a contemporary church music workshop. We formed a church band, in which I played electric guitar to attract young people.

My preaching style was improvisational, although I spent plenty of time preparing. I preached from a few notes in my Bible, which I kept in my hand. I moved about the stage wearing a remote mike that clipped on my lapel. It was a charismatic style I learned from Larry Peterson, Leontine Kelly, Jeremiah Wright, Cecil Williams, and others.

I was formally installed as pastor and teacher close to Thanksgiving. My mother and son visited, attended the ceremony, and Mom cooked the Thanksgiving turkey. I was happy to have my family together for these special occasions. John didn't visit for four years when we lived in North Dakota. Now he was a young man who joined the Army National Guard when he turned eighteen and was a senior in high school.



My pastoral duties included preaching and leading worship, confirmation classes, Bible study, visiting members, attending church meetings and functions, as well as involvement in wider church activities. I worked hard to be a good pastor and fulfilled my duties faithfully. Pastors get involved with the wider community and work for the common good. At last, Grand Rapids had enough progressive organizations for me to get involved and make a difference.

The Interfaith Dialogue Association (IDA) held an annual Thanksgiving worship. I contacted their director, Fred Stella, to see about getting involved with them. When he heard I was formerly with the Krishna Movement, he wanted to get together since he was too. Now he was the local Self Realization Fellowship (SRF) leader, an actor, and entertainment broker. We formed a deep and lasting friendship. I helped plan the annual IDA conferences. Our church band played at one of them.



I served on the Clergy Advisory Committee of the local Planned Parenthood. I felt it was important for me to be a progressive clergy voice to counter the strident cries of conservatives. Protecting a woman's right to choose is important to me, my denomination, and other progressive Christians.

A local chapter of Call to Renewal (CTR) started. It was a national movement to end poverty started by Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, a progressive Christian magazine that helped lead me to the church years ago. I chaired the livable family income working group. George Heartwell, denominational leaders of the Christian Reformed Church, the president of the Kent-Ionia AFL-CIO Labor Council, a couple of economics professors, a representative of the Catholic diocese, and other religious leaders were in my group. George, who was now head of the Leadership Devel-

opment Institute at Aquinas college, drew up a proposal for the city that favored contractors who paid workers a livable income. We worked hard to get this passed, but although George was elected mayor, we couldn't get it passed by the city commission. It was a great group to work with, and we held some big, important consciousness raising events.

I worked with Concerned Clergy of West Michigan to counter antigay prejudice in this largely conservative area. We commissioned an original play, *Come In From the Rain*, which we produced at the Wealthy Theatre to sold out audiences. It dealt with the church's connection to homophobia. I moderated a panel discussion of clergy and the play's director on public access television to promote it and discuss the issues involved. I also moderated after performance panel discussions between clergy and audience.

The same gay director, whose Actors Theater performed at the community college theater, tried presenting *Corpus Christi*, a passion play by Terrence McNally dramatizing the story of Jesus and the Apostles. Some consider it controversial due to its depiction of Jesus and the apostles as gay men living in modern day Texas. A national, right wing group managed to get its production at the community college theatre canceled. Large, gay friendly Fountain Street Church offered it's sanctuary for the production. Concerned Clergy lent its support and a panel of clergy, including me, to speak after the play. It was well attended and made an important statement. I went to a

gay bar with some friends afterward and was well received for my efforts.

September 11, 2001, Geraldine and I were on a brief vacation in Northern Michigan. We walked into a hotel restaurant for breakfast and saw the first plane go into the tower on television. Of course, I was shocked. When I saw the second plane go into the tower, I said to Geraldine, "This is Osama bin Laden's work or Bush's." I was right on both counts. Who else stood to gain by it?

After breakfast, we got a late start on our boat trip to Mackinaw Island. News about the tragedy was broadcast all day and night when we returned to our hotel room. This seemed quite serious and people everywhere were upset. I cut our vacation short and went to Comstock Park Church to comfort people at choir practice and see how everyone was doing.

I accepted the UCC perspective of the situation, and said some of the same things that Jeremiah Wright said, which Barack Obama later denounced him for saying. Obama was a member of his congregation. I called for calm understanding of the event considering how flawed U.S. foreign policy caused the blowback.

I got active in the peace movement, attended rallies and vigils, which got my picture on the front-page of the *Grand Rapids Press* letting everyone know where I stood. Many in the congregation didn't have as progressive a view as me or the denomination.

Geraldine became chair of the church's mission committee. In the summer of 2002, the federal welfare

law that Clinton passed was up for renewal. The House passed a regressive bill that would hurt poor people. The UCC, other denominations, Bread for the World, and Call to Renewal advocated for the Senate to do better. The mission committee and I planned a special worship to address the issue.

Because I wasn't totally conversant with the subject, I wrote a sermon using UCC and other resource materials. The hymns and prayers were about economic justice for the poor. The mission committee set up a letter writing table in the fellowship hall to encourage members to write to our senators. The next day, Jack Klepser stopped by my office.

He said, "I got home from my lakeside cabin yesterday. I visited a couple of prominent church families, and they were quite upset about yesterday's worship."

"That's too bad," I said, "but I have freedom of the pulpit and won't have you or anyone else telling me what I can and can't preach about. I'm tired of your complaints."

After a brief conversation, I saw him to the door, looked him in the eye, and said, "If you'd like my resignation and think a majority of the congregation would too and that they can survive the loss of another pastor, let me know."

A week later, I got a call from Jack saying the church council would like to meet with me. I asked why, and he said my resignation. I contacted my clergy mentor, a retired pastor, and the area conference minister. I met with my mentor to discuss how to



handle the meeting and what terms to ask for. The area minister attended the meeting to mediate.

I got three months of minimal duties with full pay while I looked for work. Failing to find work, I would be free of all duties and get three more months full pay and benefits.

## Chapter 7

### FREE AT LAST

Shortly after resigning, I was browsing in a Saugatuck bookstore when the title *Why Your Life Sucks and what you can do about it* by Alan H. Cohen caught my eye. I bought and read it. It helped me get in touch with how I want to live.

I looked for work in community organizing and nonprofit management. Failing to find a match, I decided to be self-employed. I rented a wood paneled office in an office building with a lobby and receptionist.



I became a life coach, spiritual guide, and wedding minister along with continuing my ecumenical peace and justice ministry. I took business workshops and wrote a business plan. I joined the community media center, studied web design, and launched [stevebohlert.com](http://stevebohlert.com) to promote my services and provide a blogging platform. My motto was, “Realize your full potential, live life abundantly, and love extravagantly.”

I supported my friend and colleague, Mary Martin when her congregation tried to remove her as pastor

of Wallin United Church of Christ. We held a wonderful, spirit filled worship one morning when Mary, me, and three others preached. About sixteen new members joined the church that morning in support of Mary. Worship lasted over two hours in a predominantly white, mainline Protestant church. Sure, Mary and the three other preachers are black, but the mainly white congregation responded with enthusiasm shouting their "Amen's" and "Hallelujahs" with enthusiasm, not noticing the passage of time. Still, conservative church leaders drove Mary and her supporters out. They started their own church. These were tough times for pastors who had to choose between job security and integrity. Mary and I chose to maintain our integrity.

I had a booth and was a presenter at a holistic health conference where I met a couple of women Reiki practitioners who invited me to join them in a holistic center they were starting downtown. Since the other businesses in my building didn't draw customers to me, this sounded inviting, and I took up their offer.

In November 2003 Geraldine and I vacationed in northeast Italy for ten days. We flew on Lufthansa and were impressed by the superior seating, food, and service compared to American airlines. I took *Total Freedom: The Essential Krishnamurti* with me.

I was attracted to Krishnamurti and Osho who rejected organized religion and rigid belief systems in favor of personal freedom and self realization of one's unique identity in relationship to the Ground of Be-

ing. I benefited from my involvement in religion. Yet I find all religious systems lacking.

I'm fully me as totally as I can be at this moment. I'm constantly growing, evolving, changing. I am an instrument of God-dess, a vehicle for God-dess to work through. I am pure spirit. I am embodied. I am.

We visited Verona, Treviso, Venice, and spent a memorable weekend with Geraldine's cousins in Crespano. Their TV showed the bodies of seventeen Italian soldiers killed in Iraq being returned to Rome--the largest number killed since WWII. It was a somber event.



I told our hosts that we didn't support Bush or his war. This opened an interesting discussion for the rest of the day as we discussed our similar views on war, globalization, the environment, economics, etc. We happily learned they weren't only distant blood relatives but also kindred spirits.

We liked seeing ancient buildings house chic, modern shops and restaurants in beautiful downtown areas. Vital, bustling downtowns existed for hundreds or even thousands of years there. Yet one of the first places we visited because it was close to our hotel on the edge of Verona is a shopping mall, and near it was a UCI cinema that shows American movies dubbed in Italian.

I must admit, I found it refreshing that Italians are much more relaxed about sex and alcohol than conservative, Calvinistic West Michigan where they protested the posters at Victoria's Secret at the mall. In Italy, such posters abound as well as nudity in TV commercials. Some U.S. cities prohibit the sale of alcohol, and in cities that sell it there are many restrictions. In Italy, alcohol is sold most everywhere at a low price, often in "bars" that also sell coffee and snacks, which we consider coffee houses.

I'm a spiritual person, but I also embrace sensual pleasures. I don't think a dualistic split between the two is good. Repression and denial of sensual pleasure is unhealthy. God-dess gave us sex, food, alcohol, and so many other things to enjoy. Of course, moderation and responsibility are best. Yet individuals need to decide what's best for them and not let some holier than thou, life denying religion or government dictate what's acceptable.

Back home, the Kent-Ionia Labor Council awarded me the Eleanor Roosevelt Human Rights Award, which recognized my three years unsuccessful work to get Grand Rapids to approve a Livable Family Income Incentive Proposal.

In January 2004, I began writing a systematic theology, which developed over several years into *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism*. I published these early writings on my blog and website.

I listened to radio news extensively. I thought the advances of the previous century that increased our freedom and improved the lives of ordinary working

people were quickly being stripped away with little notice by the public. I also learned about the imminent danger of rapid climate change.

I enjoyed living in Grand Rapids. We owned a comfortable, old home on the east side close to downtown, Eastown, and East Grand Rapids. There were many fun things to do. I had an interesting circle of friends. Life was good.

However, Geraldine and I felt our way of life threatened. The number one threat was the possibility of Bush stealing the next election again. We couldn't imagine what damage he'd do in another four years. We wanted to move to another country because of this. Our decisions were complicated by threats of severe climate change and an impending major energy crisis. Where could we go to weather these storms? We also wanted to simplify our lives and lower expenses.

We considered joining a sustainable, spiritual community. Where I really want to go is Radha-Krishna's spiritual Braj, but I'll have to wait until they're ready to take me there. Until then, we tried to discern God-dess' will for where and how we might live keeping all options open.

I wasn't making a profit and made mortgage and car payments. I amassed credit card debt. Our situation wasn't sustainable. Geraldine and I considered alternative living options ranging from Auroville in South India to Morning Star in North Michigan to a co-housing community forming in Grand Rapids.

We walked to a meeting of this co-housing community at the Wealthy Theater. We noticed a new shop called Above and Beyond a few doors from the theater and stopped in before the meeting. It had a coffee and tea bar, books, art, jewelry, imports, and a meeting space. Owner Phil Tigner behind the counter and the shop reminded me of a store in Saugatuck where we used to go. I introduced myself to Phil and found he relocated the shop from Saugatuck. We arranged to meet the next day.

Since I rented my first office, I wanted space for classes and worship, but they were unavailable at an affordable price. Phil offered rental of a small office right behind the cash register, use of the shop for meetings after hours, and commission on sales I made--all for less than I paid at the Healing Garden.

Phil told me he's gay. He wanted me to know that upfront, and of course, it was fine with me. A craftsman and an artist, John and Ed, along with their partners, Sandy and Samantha, were also involved with the shop. I found it a good atmosphere to work in and soon moved there.

In the transition period, Geraldine and I drove my Nissan Maxima to New York to celebrate my mother's eightieth birthday. We stayed a night with Geraldine's uncle Corky and family in Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania on the way. We spent a week with my family on Long Island. Then we vacationed at a hotel in the Pocos and visited our pastor friends, Ron and Dot Francey, in Ohio on the way home.

Shortly after I moved into Above and Beyond, the city redid the whole street blocking traffic for a long time. The Wealthy Theater also closed for a period further reducing customer traffic.

Still, we held successful drum circles, poetry readings, and classes. My wedding ministry did well. I often performed two or three weddings a weekend. I did sidereal astrology and tarot readings, and I taught Thursday night *Bhagavad Gita* classes.

Sunday mornings, I led The Gathering--a spiritual gathering of seekers, pilgrims, and sojourners who met for spiritual development. I offered an experiential, eclectic interfaith approach to spirituality. It brought together cultural creatives who can't accept old, traditional religions at face value and seek a new vision for life because they recognize the old one isn't working. It helped people find community and feel the strength of like minded people gathered in common purpose. I presented a spirituality grounded in everyday life and concerned about peace, justice, and the integrity of the environment.

I updated some of my early writings and critically studied Chaitanyaism. The cross pollination of Chaitanyaism and Protestant scholarship took root in me and my writings. Each generation needs to adapt and develop the teachings for current circumstances and present a living faith rather than a dead faith stuck in the past.

On Radha's appearance day, I wrote this poem:

**To Radha**

As a gift to you my dear queen of Braj,



I lay my life at your feet.  
My only desire is to be your girlfriend.  
To always behold your beautiful form.  
To massage, bathe, and dress you with my love.  
When oh when will my desires be fulfilled?  
Be kind and grant me your mercy soon.  
My heart longs for you. I can't stand the separation.  
Let me join the young beauties surrounding you,  
And help unite you with your beloved Govinda.  
You mercifully let me remember you in this way.  
Live in my heart always while this separation exists,  
And let me return to your bower soon.



I struggled to maintain quality devotional practices while living an active urban lifestyle. Although 2004 was a good year for us, we didn't like the way the country was going. Above and Beyond was not doing well financially and was about to close. Geraldine and I continued to explore more fulfilling and sustainable lifestyle options.

A devotee realtor on Maui told us that land was still affordable in Puna, Hawaii. Geraldine and I went there for three weeks in late January to mid-February 2005. We stayed at the old Wild Ginger Inn in Hilo. It felt like coming home to me, and Geraldine quickly fell in love with the island. We found a third acre of jungle in a remote upcountry subdivision that we liked and scraped together enough money to buy it.

I read *Hindu Encounter with Modernity*, a critical theological biography of Bhaktivinode Thakur, that affirmed my path. Nineteenth century rationalism,

Christianity, and Unitarian thought influenced him. We are both essence seekers concerned with eternal truths. Bhaktivinode presented Chaitanya's teachings in a new way to Bengali intellectuals of his day just as I adapted those teachings for thoughtful Westerners today. I felt Bhaktivinode blessed my calling, and I deepened my critical theological approach to Chaitanyaism.

Followers of Narayan Maharaj stayed at the inn during a week-long festival that featured him. I had some good talks with one of them. At the urging of devotees and Geraldine, I went to the final night of their meetings. While devotees who know me from the past greeted me warmly, I wasn't able to sit through much of the program. I couldn't stand to listen to the rhetoric or take part in the gushing adoration of "Gurudev," which seemed like a personality cult. The guru seated prominently above the deities didn't seem right either. Like the Protestant/Catholic split on views of clergy, I see a more humble, less elevated role for the guru or teacher as I redefine the role.

Geraldine saw our move as a chance to start a new life and renamed herself Jahnava after the woman who founded my spiritual line. I felt much better in Hawai'i than I did on the mainland. Hawai'i nurtures life and eases the struggle for survival.

Phil stayed at our house while we were away and did home repairs getting it ready to put on the market. With the help of a realtor who happened to live upstairs from Above and Beyond, it quickly sold just

as the market started to collapse. We hired an estate sale business to sell everything else we owned except for personal items that we shipped by the post office. We escaped just in time.

## Home

In late April 2005, I returned to Hawai'i. We held a farewell party at our house the night before I left. I stayed in a Hilo hotel for one night and then in a vacation rental gazebo for a couple of weeks. I got back to the land the morning the surveyors were here. I hand cleared the jungle removing invasive species to better see it and set up camp. I felt like Adam in the Garden of Eden, and I missed my Eve. Jahnava joined me after she finished packing and visiting her family in California.

I bought a 1998 Mazda B4000 pickup and rented a storage unit in Keau'u to put our belongings in. When Jahnava arrived, we moved into our tent and put up a tarp kitchen. My Rasta friend Conrad in Grand Rapids lived in Hawai'i for a long time. He taught me to build with pallets, use a propane refrigerator, and other jungle survival skills.

Our dome cabin tent had a carpet, air mattress, plastic drawers, and was under a 10x20' tarp tied to trees. The kitchen was a 10x20' tarp on a metal frame with tarp sides. It included a propane refrigerator, counter top range, tables and chairs. Our compost toilet was under a 10'x10' tarp with reed sides. We col-

lected rainwater from the tarps in garbage cans for washing. Our shower was a pallet to stand on, a five gallon bucket of water, and a yogurt container to pour water over ourselves. We set



*Steve working at the kitchen table.*

up a 10x10

screened gazebo with a plywood floor that served as a living room. Since we don't have cell phone reception, we had a landline telephone on a hundred foot extension cord so it could be used in any room because Jahnava worked as an on-call nurse at a boarding school for troubled youth in Hilo.

I knew we could live like that based on my previous experience here. Many people live similarly. Before coming back here, I remembered the yurt I stayed in on Hamakua side, and I researched them on the internet. A building boom in Hawai'i caused land and construction prices to sky rocket since we bought. We designed a ranch style home, but found the cost of construction was out of our reach without going into debt, which we wished to avoid. We wanted better shelter before the rainy winter arrived.

We opted to build a thirty-foot diameter vinyl yurt that we bought from Pacific Yurts in Oregon. We hired a contractor to build a post and pier foundation and

flooring for it. A carpenter and her assistant helped us set up the yurt. We happily moved into it on Thanksgiving Day after seven months in the tent. We continued using the tarp kitchen and bath for two more years until we could afford to build a wood kitchen, bath, and lanai addition.



I thought of innovative ways to reestablish my full ministry of spiritual teaching, life coaching, weddings, and networking. I updated my PR materials and website. I paid for newspaper advertising. I worked on this autobiography and posted parts of the manuscript online. I tried a vegetarian diet again, but I found it wasn't healthy for

me.

I regularly rented a booth at the Pahoehoe Sunday Market where I was available for spiritual guidance and life coaching, which included the option of using sidereal astrology and/or Zen Tarot. Wedding ceremonies could also be arranged.

I considered myself an eclectic universalist. I felt Bhaktivinode's mandate to write an indigenous Western interpretation of natural devotion to Radha-Krishna. I wrote blogs and essays that I posted on my website.

A neighbor recommended I speak to Roger Christie, cannabis sacrament minister and counselor with

The Hawai'i Cannabis (THC) Ministry. I looked him up on the web and read his site thoroughly. He impressed me as a sincere, dedicated crusader for freedom of religion. Joining the THC Ministry and using the tools Roger provided was said to be an effective way to avoid arrest by asserting our religious right to use cannabis sacrament.

I met Roger at his second floor, bay front office in downtown Hilo. I introduced myself and gave him my brochure. We spent over an hour and a half as he explained the basis of his ministry. Roger and I agreed that it's really too bad Swamiji cut people off from the sacrament. Cannabis, mushrooms, and other psychedelics known as entheogens are often conducive to development of love of God-dess. We met a couple more times. I joined his ministry, and he offered me use of an office to teach The Path of Love classes based on Bhaktivinode Thakur's *Sri Chaitanya-Shikshamrita*.

Few attended my classes, and after several weeks, Roger asked me to pay rent to use his room. It wasn't financially feasible for me to drive to Hilo and pay rent. I held Universalist Church of Radha-Krishna meetings at our yurt. Jahnava and I met every Sunday morning for months. Hardly anyone else came.

As I developed my theological position, I reached out on the internet to recruit devotee scholars to collaborate and update Chaitanya's teachings and Radha-Krishna's pastimes. Unfortunately, most Western devotees of Radha-Krishna are literal fundamentalists and not open to the changes needed to develop

an indigenous Radha-Krishna worship as Bhaktivinode Thakur desired.



I moved to the jungle to live a peaceful contemplative life. Instead, I find myself in a war zone--a war declared by federal, state, and local governments against the people of the Big Island. It's called Green Harvest and is supposedly intended to eradicate cannabis growing. Green Harvest has been going on for over thirty years with disastrous consequences: economic devastation, reduced supply of cannabis with resulting price increases, which leads previously happy, peaceful cannabis smokers to turn to ice in epidemic numbers with ruinous social consequences.

In May 2006, I watched from my backyard as an unmarked, yellow helicopter lowered two guys from ropes and picked them up again with my neighbor's plants 150 feet from my home and personal garden. They return regularly to terrorize and raid the neighborhood. We're oppressed by an alien, colonialist government that co-opted the local government against the interests of a majority of the population.

We held a meeting to plan a protest demonstration at the Hilo airport intersection. We had a good turnout for a first time effort. The passing motorists response was great. During a level red terrorist alert at the airport, we protested helicopter terrorism of our neighborhoods.

Roger Christie persuaded the county council to consider a ballot initiative intended to end cannabis eradication efforts and redirect personnel and funds

to methamphetamine education and treatment programs. The county council invited testimony at a public hearing. People directly affected by the anti-cannabis raids gave moving testimony. Jahnava and I testified as a former drug rehab nurse and retired pastor. A teen court judge in favor of legalization and regulation, a supportive substance abuse counselor, and others spoke knowledgeably about the detrimental effects of suppressing cannabis production.



After expending effort and money to promote my ministry, I found little success. I decided to stop life-coaching and astrology to focus on my personal spiritual growth and writing. That's really why we moved to Hawai'i. We have a sustainable lifestyle that allows me to be a reclusive spiritual practitioner and writer. I wanted this for a long time, and I'm grateful that it's my reality. Our home is a Radha-Krishna temple, and we see it as Braj. Our love is a reflection of their love.

Making an ancient, foreign religion relevant to a new time and setting requires radical departures from the past that entail a degree of audaciousness few seem to possess. I reexamined my faith with a beginner's mind--letting go, embracing doubts and new ways of looking at things, meditating, and reading extensively. I went to Ecstatic Dance at Kalani, Universal Dances of Peace, and the drum circle at Kehena Beach. My beliefs developed new clarity and depth. I continue to grow and revision my faith in a way that works for me at this stage of life, in this place, now. I'm fortunate to be here.



I deconstruct and reconstruct the tradition to offer a new vision for today that uses the best practices available from all sources. This was Bhaktivinode's desire, and he's my role model. Just as he was a visionary in his place and time, so I am today.



Through my website, I attracted the attention of Mike Valle. He was an atheist who earned his Ph.D. in philosophy of religion by defending atheism. However in the process, he realized atheism is as indefensible as theism. Through Schopenhauer, he came to Bhaktivinode, and through him to me. He teaches philosophy of religion at Scottsdale Community College in Arizona. He read my web essays and liked them. We corresponded, and he helped me put them in book form as a systematic theology.

Zvonimir Tosic corresponded with me and also helped. He's a Croatian artist, designer, and philosopher living in Melbourne, Australia. I now had an ideal editorial and design team for my project. Work-



ing through the internet, the three of us hashed out ideas, refining and stretching my thinking. Jahnava also read and discussed the manuscript with me offering many helpful suggestions.

I wrote a book proposal and submitted the manuscript to several publishers. It was promptly rejected.

Prepared for this, I revived Sky River Press and self-published *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism: A Spirituality of Liberty, Truth, and Love* in October 2009.

While Zvonimir did the book design, I wrote more esoteric teachings I wasn't ready to include in the first edition, which laid their philosophical foundation. I described the process of creating a spiritual identity as a girlfriend of Radha in Braj and how to participate in Radha-Krishna's play. I combined these new writings with the first edition to form an expanded and revised second edition.

I sent a copy of the manuscript to author Nori Muster who wrote a favorable review of the first edition. She offered many valuable editorial suggestions to make my writing more succinct.

Zvonimir did another outstanding job of designing the book in both case-bound and paperback formats. It was published in August 2011 as *Universalist Radha-Krishnaism: The Way of Natural Devotion; A Practitioner's Handbook*, and it's available worldwide.

In late 2010, I joined the Hilo Photography club and became an avid photographer. It gives me a means of creative expression and a way to interact



with the community and environment. I'm friends with other photographers--some of whom are accomplished artists.

I'm content with my life and where it led me. I wish the same for you. Aloha.

