

Guru Nitya Turns 100
by Scott Teitsworth, Compiled 2024.

The year I first took LSD, 1968, I turned 17. After nearly two years of exploration, the medicine returned me to my deeper being, as I have written about elsewhere. It was the most important event of my life. A crucial takeaway was realizing Indian gurus (along with the saints and seers of all times) were teaching in their various ways how to regain a permanent residency in That Place, and I was aware psychedelic medicine by itself was always going to be somewhat of an up and down proposition. Its lasting value was granting you a taste of what you were looking for, yet you still had to learn how to move in.

As a corollary, I realized “what I wanted to be when I grew up” was someone who helped people get back in touch with their true selves, a condition which was universally present, no matter how well disguised, and was at heart what everyone was searching for anyway. We unconsciously long for the inner bliss that is paradoxically always alive in us, yet lies buried under the demands of fitting in to a socially conditioned world. I would soon find out the Gurukula philosophy, as taught by Guru Nitya Chaitanya Yati, offered a solid, scientifically acceptable perspective to engage with what we glibly refer to as “the true Self.”

Little did I realize that “growing up” was a lifelong proposition, one that is barely begun by the age of 18 or 21, when adulthood is officially certified. By my late teens it was obvious I had a long way to go before I could be of any value to anyone. I needed to *understand* what was going on first. (Some truth-seekers in that era did it the other way round, teaching prior to understanding, with decidedly mixed results.) Although my final breakthrough trip in 1970 sustained me for many months, morphing into a near-permanent state of mind that is still quietly present over fifty years later, I knew I needed a guru to get me properly oriented to my Self. I also knew Stanford University

wasn't supplying what I was after, other than top-flight LSD, the best being Owsley's Orange Sunshine. Unofficially, I should add.

I took a permanent "leave of absence" from Stanford, met up with my future wife, Deborah Buchanan, and, like the Simpleton of fairy tales, headed out to seek my fortune. Our road trip ended in Portland, Oregon, pretty much by accident, and we learned about an Indian guru's first class here, on the Bhagavad Gita at the downtown First Methodist Church, by a very happy accident. It was as though Deb was already being magnetically attracted to this Swami Nitya fellow before she had any conscious idea of his existence.

After Nitya's first class session, in the Fall of 1970, we agreed as we walked out the door that we had at last met someone who *knew what they were talking about*. Nitya had such an air of assurance, such palpable compassion and profound awareness, that we were blown away. All the other teachers, pundits, media-darlings etc. we had encountered were faking it, at least on the most transformative topics, tentatively proposing hypothetical concepts that seemed to us without a firm basis. Nitya radiated a genuine confidence that was palpable. Tangible. We realized we had hit the jackpot, and it soon became apparent that Nitya and Deb had an extremely powerful intuitive connection, almost like a past life relationship.

After a few classes, Nitya asked the attendees to keep our same seats for each class, because he had special individualized teachings he was sending to each of us, and he needed to know where we were in the room. Once I had my regular spot, I began to have astral visions of arrowlike bolts of light coming from him in a rainbow arc, striking me in my heart region. There was a continuous flow of them, amplifying the meaning of the words he was speaking and electrifying my whole body. Going out the door at the end of every session, I felt like I was floating in bliss a few feet off the ground.

Such was the tenor of the times that the class was tape recorded and rebroadcast on KBOO radio. Some years back I tried

to retrieve the recordings, but the station had archived only back to 1974, before discarding all their old tapes. Too bad! Much of the general purport of those classes has found its way into my Gita commentary as well as Nitya's own book, and I did immortalize one highlight in an article called *Wealth and Poverty*. Two other articles contain much about the early days with Nitya: *Flip-Flop* of 1983, my first substantial piece of writing, and *Gee You Are You*, 1990, a pun that still amuses me. They lead off the Articles page of my [website](#), so there is no point in recounting the antics I included in them. *A Moldy Yogi Retires*, on the same page, is an account of my tangible service to the Guru over my lifetime, and the audiobook *Coming Back to Ourselves*, relates a few more teaching stories.

I wrote *Wealth and Poverty* in the late 1980s, but it's about that first class, and it conveys the flavor of Nitya's ultra-engaging teaching style:

Wealth and Poverty

If you keep an open mind, occasionally you learn something new. Once, many years ago, I was taking a class from a wise old Indian philosopher. Everyone in the class shared at least one common belief: that America was fabulously rich and India untouchably poor. (This was back in the Seventies, before Reagan's revolution has in fact bankrupted the country.) At one point during the lecture this fellow said, "America is a very poor country, while India is incredibly rich." The statement shocked us to the point of outrage. What could this guy be talking about?!

"In America, you have so much money and material goods," he went on. "But your attitude is one of extreme poverty. You all hold out your hands and cry and whine that you don't have enough, that no one is doing anything for 'me, me, me.' You are like the worst kinds of beggars. No amount of material opulence will satisfy you." We shifted uncomfortably in our seats—perhaps a lot of us matched that description. Many of us were always

complaining without helping, taking without giving, filled with unwarranted desperation for...what? We were like lost children trapped in adult bodies, still crying for their parents to come and comfort them.

“In India we have few material goods, but we are nonetheless rich. If you are hungry, the poorest person will share his last crust of bread with you. So many people will offer you a place to sleep, clothes to wear; they will walk with you to show you to your destination. They don’t ask if you’re a member of a particular sect or religion or political party, they deal with you as a human being. Their arms are always open in trust and friendship, no matter whether they have a lot or a little to give. That is real wealth. That is how truly rich people behave.” Many of us hung our heads in shame. Right there a resolve was born in us to change our attitudes, to replace our impoverished sense of ourselves with an outlook of calm contentment and fearlessness—in other words, of psychological wealth. Looking back to that class, I see it as a most important step in gaining maturity, in becoming an adult in the actual sense, as opposed to what passes for adulthood in our manifestly immature society.

“Many of you are standing there holding out your cup and crying and begging to have it filled. But grace is showering us on all sides. The universe is fabulously rich. The problem is that you are holding your cup upside down. You have only to turn your cup upright, and the many blessings this life is full of will fill it to the brim over and over again. Thank you.” The professor strode off the stage, leaving us rooted to our chairs, pondering and pondering again.

As there was no gainful employment to be had on the West Coast at that time, Nitya’s classes and some excursions with him to Empyrios, a wacko intentional community in an old farmstead in Sandy, Oregon, were the main features of my existence. Portland was appealing to my outlook: a crumbling, unpretentious town, with a burgeoning alternative culture. Deb and I had adopted a

move-toward-vegetarianism resolve shortly before we arrived; Nitya spoke strongly in favor of it as a spiritual precept, and we rapidly adjusted to it. Portland's first all-vegetarian restaurant opened around then: The Wayfarer, in a shaky building more like an abandoned warehouse, next to a small room where art films were screened. The New Age was being born in the boonies!

Nitya's class ended around Thanksgiving, and he invited Deb to join him for an around the world tour, where they would go deeper into her spiritual development. Her parents okayed it, and it was a quick decision for her between that or staying in a crummy apartment with a ne'er-do-well hippie and working as a cocktail waitress at Jake's Famous Crawfish. I drove with her back to the East Coast, went home to Connecticut and found a job delivering dry cleaning, so I could save money for when Nitya returned, as had been proposed. The "ultimate end" of my relationship with Deb, very painful for me, was a tremendous blessing for both of us in the long run, in more ways than I can count. Deb's travels with Nitya in 1971 are related in the American edition (2003) of Nitya's autobiography, *Love and Blessings*.

After saving up some \$\$, and being given a used Volkswagen bug with a roof rack by my parents as a "get thee gone" gift, (they were not amused I had dropped out of Stanford and was advocating psychedelics), and naming it Fearless Fred, the Cosmic Traveler, after the Dan O'Neill cartoon character, I convinced my best friend, John, (Deb's brother), to join me in heading back to Portland to meet the Swami. (Nitya would be promoted to Guru of the Narayana Gurukula only after the death of Nataraja Guru, in 1973.)

John and I were wild and crazy kids, but pretty much everyone at that age sorely needs intelligent feedback from outside sources, because we are invariably deluded by the fads of the day, and our brains are busy metamorphosizing. As this makes it hard to examine ourselves clearly, we need constructive criticism, and we have to be prepared to treat it as essential to our wellbeing. One of the tragedies of even the spiritualized social world is that it's

saturated in sweet, happy, nice stuff where you hug and love and no one criticizes anyone, so the minute you're challenged, you take off in search for something "nicer." By doing so, you never really get the necessary feedback to break through the socially-oriented mask of your persona, which is, after all, a strategy devised by an infant.

Spirituality all too often functions as a way of prettying up the social mask and making it a really nice one. We all agree a nice mask is better than a horrific one, but the point of a spiritual search is to discard the mask and return to authenticity.

Possibly the hardest part is letting go of the positive notions we most identify with. As we grow up, we become convinced our mask is who we are, as it is our best attempt at fitting in up to that point. And everyone else identifies with our mask, too: if you stop being who they imagine you are, you're going to hear complaints. The pressure to conform is strong! A guru or therapist, by contrast, is helping you uncover your true self beyond the persona. Allowing someone you trust to give you feedback is a delicate balancing act, and you need to be determined to not reject their critical input. I was about to find out just how tough a task it could be.

As I was getting ready to drive back out West to Portland, I received a letter from Nitya, displaying the exuberance and gentle modesty he also shared with so many others. Fifty years later, I marvel at how profoundly his visions (and presence) have truly found a home in my thoughts:

Sydney, 7/16/71

Dear Scott,

All these months you were so far and yet were very close to my silent thoughts and prayers. Your growth and unfoldment are of great importance to me for more than one reason. The flowers that bloom and wither away in the hidden bushes of obscurity secretly proclaim the inherent potential of this good earth to conceive and generate beauty and goodness. How much more

would you be a promise as a man and not a flower, in human society and not in the bush, in the wake of a new age and not in obscurity? How much I wish your youthful blood will pulse with my inarticulate prayers, and my spiritual visions find a home in your thoughts. Perhaps someday we can make it together in a way different than I lived with Debbie.

When man marvels at the eyeless look of the sun which so much gladdens his heart, how much more when he finds the soulful gaze of a man of love and compassion. May love be your riches and compassion your expression. When a man cannot even adequately love the little violet in his garden, it is no wonder I feel so miserably poor in pouring out to you what you so richly deserve.

Love and Blessings,
Nitya

Two months later I had joined him in the first Portland Gurukula, and was learning that what was pouring into me from him was far from sugary, empty calories. It had a bite.

Upon arrival in Portland, around the beginning of September, 1971, John and I realized we had no contact information for Nitya, and our money was fast running out. No problem: there was a nice, empty woodland near the archery field in beautiful Washington Park, practically downtown, and it was the brief dry season. I recall living off a quart of milk and a bag of cookies per day and sleeping in the Park in a sleeping bag. I had no idea that in 50 years homelessness would become de rigueur in the US, and our city forests would be filled with permanent campers.

I do not recall how we found the house that Anne Morin and Peter Oppenheimer had lined up for Nitya—probably through Portland State University, where Nitya was slated to teach the Gita again. The Overton House was just off 23rd Street, the hip part of town back then. We were met at the door and invited to throw down our sleeping bags in one of the second-floor rooms. It was a big house, almost completely bare of furniture, that eventually

cradled 14 seekers and many visitors. Including the commodious attic, there was ample space to share. Furnishings drifted in.

There is so much to say about that bountiful first year of the Portland Gurukula. It was anchored by the PSU class on the Gita, and provided morning and evening classes with meditations, along with a hatha yoga wakeup session, in the main room. There was never any organized money or chore contribution during the two months I lived there. At first I relied without a qualm on the generosity of others for food, and hadn't a care in the world. Hey, I had just turned twenty, and the world was my oyster. Nancy Donner, Marcelle Chiasson, the Kaufmans, and others frequently brought edibles by for dinner, and it all seemed to happen like magic.

I was incredibly fortunate to have found a teacher I respected highly, and who could be unabashedly critical, so long as you had asked for it. I casually invited it, simply by asking him to teach me, not realizing how ferocious a self-examination was in store. I approached Nitya on the basis of what I had read in Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which espouses the sweet and nice approach: you go to a guru and they give you some blessings and you evolve into this amazing being. Simple! I figured the minute you find your guru, your search is over and everything is fine, so I naïvely asked this electrifying teacher if he would be my guru and instruct me.

He immediately began lambasting me with some serious criticisms, without any reassurance, like telling me "Sure, I'd love to!" I was stunned, and my self-identity began to crumble. Later I realized if I had known that, yes, this is my guru teaching me, it would have provided a comfortable layer of ego-defense. But he didn't even let me establish that. He just went right to town pointing out my numerous faults. Luckily, I already had a sincere respect for him, so I didn't just walk away. I wrestled with all of that and learned a tremendous amount, in the long run. But it was not exactly *fun*, in any classical sense. Stripping off the mask is a painful process, and I experienced several years of intense pain and

self-doubt over the work we were doing. I'll share a few examples as we go along.

Most of us living in the Portland Gurukula were in our late teens and early twenties, a privileged group of kids who were well used to being catered to by adults, and we let the guru cater to us, too, hardly even realizing it. It was just our default setting. Other people did things for us and we didn't even know enough to express our appreciation, much less pitch in to help.

After almost a week of freeloading (life was so intense in the Gurukula that Peter Moras has very reasonably estimated it was a month, in his memoir), Nitya called Peter M. and me, and one other fellow who was truly a freeloader, into his room, and told us we needed to find work and contribute to the finances and maintenance of the place. We found a sweltering job making \$2 an hour moving plants and hay bales around at a nursery in well-named Boring, Oregon, about 15 miles away. We cruised to it in Fearless Fred. It was good training for us potential hoboos, to pay unpleasant dues for a most pleasant cause. I don't believe the third person, already an alcoholic, ever showed up—he left our scene soon in search of easier living.

On that first work day, Nitya noted in his diary that we had missed the meditation and morning class, and wrote “Somewhere man has to pay for freedom. Necessity is one of the legs on which freedom rests. I was happy to see that they were alive to the situation in which they are living.” (We wouldn't have been alive to anything if he hadn't told us straight out....) Because of our job-related absences, he began to include important ideas from his classes in the diary, so we could catch up later. I hadn't remembered this when I started doing the same thing while teaching the Gita at the Unitarian Church in 2004, the inception of my weekly Class Notes. Many Unitarians attended irregularly, so I began jotting down the main points so they could keep up with our progress.

Love and Blessings, Part 2, is actually Nitya's complete Portland Gurukula Diary from the first two months, closely

matching my time with him there. Checking in with it, Nitya got down to business with me on the very first day:

I called Scott to my room to see how earnest he was in asking for wisdom affiliation. He told me that he has full trust and faith in me and that he wants to give his utmost in working out his progress. Being young, he has to adjust within himself the biological urges of the body, his psychological demands and his spiritual quest. The multi-dimensional personality of a young man should not be allowed to go lopsided by overemphasizing any one single aspect.

I told him that the charm of his adolescence was gone and that now he is in a state of transition. A youthful purposiveness has to reveal itself from within. I wished him good luck. (302)

Mornings (could it really have been 6 AM?) we had hatha yoga with Nitya instructing, followed by lightly-guided meditations, often with music. A favorite was *Music for Zen Meditation*, according to Wikipedia [the first New Age album](#). I still use it for my irregular hatha yoga routine, roughly following the sequence from the old Portland Gurukula.

My recollections of the first Portland Gurukula are mainly a series of embarrassing misunderstandings, where I felt utterly clueless, an excessively self-conscious bull in a china shop. Learning decades later that being pressured, both subtly and overtly, was part of the teaching technique, has barely helped mitigate my feelings, though I'm now very grateful it happened. My country was excellent at breeding insufferable fools—still is—and I desperately needed to be put in my place. Finding *my* place, my dharma, was actually one of the main points, it turned out.

One day Nitya asked me to put on the Bedouin music for our meditation. He could see I was baffled: “Bedouin, Bedouin!” he repeated. I was still working on his accent, and he was still working on my cluelessness. In frustration he pulled out the album

and showed me: Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony. Ah! Bedouin is how you pronounce Beethoven in Malayalam.

In his guru role, I was essentially terrified of Nitya. It felt as if he was seeing my inner being—his consciousness was right inside me. It was like being under an X-ray exposure at all times, which made me (and this was a typical sensation of others, too) focus on my self and my faults, anxiously. How do you hide from someone who is closer than close to you? He was rarely perceptibly judgmental, but I was already an expert in critical self-judgment, so he didn't need to be. Whenever we interacted, I felt like a worm wriggling on a fishhook.

Nitya told us when he looked at us inwardly, we were like a white bedsheet hanging on a clothesline, with several stains on it, and he was working to remove those stains.

A gentle correction happened to me early on, confirming that Nitya could see deep into me and know what I was thinking. He wasn't just guessing or using statistical analysis, he really saw who I was, and from his perspective he knew what to do about it. You could actually sense it, and it felt like being naked to his gaze. As a 20-year-old with lots to hide, it was truly a kind of suffering.

Every morning we did hatha yoga exercises as the wake-up protocol before the classes started. At the time I believed hatha yoga was a magical, spiritual practice all by itself, and if I could one day sit in the lotus pose, for instance, I would attain true enlightenment. Of course I was disabused of all of that a long, long time ago. Hatha yoga is a way to calm and attune the body so that then you can really pay attention to your learning program. It's a nice adjunct, but hardly a goal in itself.

I was eagerly doing the poses and was okay at it, but nothing special. I really worked hard to do the Plow, where you're on your back and you bring your feet over your head to touch the floor behind you. So you're upside down with your legs in your face. I struggled and struggled with that pose for months and finally, one morning, I got it.

I thought “Man, this is really an accomplishment!” I was so proud of myself for finally making it. Right then Nitya said, “Look at Scott.” Wow, I thought, he’s noticed how well I’m doing. I was so pleased! I’m going to get a compliment. Nitya went on, very deliberately, “For a big man... he’s so stiff and inflexible. He really can’t do yoga at all.” Ouch! After the surge of ego shock, I got the message: he had counteracted my flush of pride right at the moment it appeared, helping me to neutralize it. And I did—my triumph became no big deal. Plus, the example stuck with me. I could provide the counterbalance myself in the future, and began to make it a habit. That was what *yoga* really meant. I realized Nitya was supplying that perspective for me because I was going off center; he was providing the opposite side of the equation to bring my mind back into balance. I shouldn’t have been proud or, for that matter, disappointed that I couldn’t do anything. It didn’t matter that I was good or bad at the exercise: it was just what I was doing, and it was all perfectly fine.

There was no external indication that this teaching was taking place, yet I distinctly “heard” it. He knew what I was thinking, and not only that, he very graciously, and without anyone being aware of it, brought me back into equipoise right then and there. It was beautiful.

Before long I noticed Nitya was doing a similar mental balancing act with all his students, and with the Gurukula community as a whole. He was actively neutralizing all our weirdnesses and exaggerations, in an inward way that’s indescribable. Yet I could see it vividly. In my mind’s eye the Gurukula appeared as a unicellular creature similar to a paramecium, where the nucleus kept moving around to keep the entire organism in balance, no matter what it’s shape at the moment. Our youthful follies demanded an active reciprocity from our guide, which he unerringly provided.

One day as I was chauffeuring the Swami around in my Volkswagen (no Rolls Royces for us!) he said to me, “Meditation is not just sitting somewhere with the eyes turned up, it can be

anything you do. Music, for instance, is an ideal form of meditation.” The Guru was speaking of something that had been dormant for a while in me, my intense love of playing the piano. The person squeezed into the little car could have no way of knowing of my musical interests, but the Guru guiding us certainly knew. For years I had considered attaining realization through traditional yoga practices to be my sole motivation in life, and music had been dumped in a heap with so much of the other worldly junk I was abandoning. In a short time, though, I was ecstatically involved with the piano again, learning from the profundities of the Masters of composition just as I was learning from the Masters of Oriental philosophy. Thanks to the Guru music was then and there restored as a major theme in my life. My wrong notions about it had been dispelled.

Although I had done well in my academic education, in Nitya’s presence in the classes I felt like I knew absolutely nothing. Despite it being his second language, he used English words I had never heard before, and thrashed me even in basic knowledge, asking what I knew of famous philosophers like Bishop Berkeley or Spinoza, none of whom I’d ever heard of. One time he pointedly asked me, what’s the difference between a sign and a symbol? My brain started spinning, trying to figure out their distinction. I might have said “Ummmmmmmmmm.....” He snorted, and gave a brief disquisition on the topic, the main point seemed to be proving I was an utter dope, unfit for higher wisdom. I was confused. I’d thought spirituality meant moving to a Zone of Love in All of Time and Space, transcending the brain and all such heavy lifting. It was not his way. Looking back, he was working to bring me out of a Fog, natural perhaps to a 20-year-old, but compounded of drug use, political upheaval and psychosocial strictures. I had very far to go, but the efforts he induced me to make, straining to grasp subtle ideas, got the journey started. After all, trying to understand stuff had been my inner urge from as early as I could remember. He was just helping me get back on track

with my dharma, though it was far from tiptoeing through the tulips.

Soon Nitya began a morning class on Nataraja Guru's *Integrated Science of the Absolute*. The material was dense and the commentary even denser. Maybe I was the densest one. After only a few days, Nitya called me the quasi-polite equivalent of a brain-dead Bozo, and threw me out of the class.

Thirty years later, Vinaya Chaitanya informed me that that weighty tome was primarily used by Nataraja Guru to humiliate newcomers to the Gurukula. Aha! Relief. But by then I'd realized if I'd known that right off the bat, my ego would have simply shrugged, and I would have missed out on a lot of very productive self-examination and struggle. A shocked ego can turn out to be an excellent motivator.

Love and Blessings (L&B) has an account of one very special moment in my time at the Portland Gurukula. I was never officially "initiated" by Nitya, but this may have been an unofficial version:

October 13, 1971:

I told Scott that we would take a path different from what has previously been tried. This will be without words and far deeper than words can achieve. Also in our new relationship there will not be much place for judgment. It is meant to be a lowering of the personal identity on either side, allowing the grace of God to descend. I hope and pray this will work much better.

October 14, 1971

I woke up at 3:00 a.m. The eyes were in pretty bad shape. I went and flushed them with cold water and sat in meditation and thought of Scott, with whom I had had a meditation last night. Since I decided not to have any arguments or wordy fights with him, the next best I could do was to bring our unconscious and subconscious together so as to be woven into an inner liaison. To begin with I had difficulty finding some

access to his mind. I waited for the physical light interfering with the psyche to subside so that I could look for the natural light that radiates from his own body. In fact, every object is luminous to some extent. What I was looking for was not any mysterious aura or astral light but a more intimate sight of his bodily self. It is nice to see a person separated from the clothes he wears and his physical background.

While I was waiting for this, his breath became more and more even and it was so very nice to see more and more peace enveloping us. I was right in deciding upon this approach. When we progressed in relating to ourselves through silence, the sense of duality disappeared from my mind and I was not thinking of his correction or any fault. At that moment he could be anything for me, such as a star or a little flower, a bird, a tiny crystal, a beam of light or a simple thought. In me also there was no personal identity limited or conditioned by any past notion or future anticipation.

An inner thrill that had been vibrating through me grew up into an ecstasy that drowned in it all conscious ideas. When I emerged from it, the figure of Scott became more and more clear. I slowly got up and touched his forehead. As he wanted some more time, I went to the bathroom and washed my face. We said goodnight without making any comment on our meditation. After recalling all this to mind, I went to bed.

One story I have told a few times, began in the evening class of the official second day, though we'd been meeting informally for a few days previously. This much is in L&B:

Tonight I was speaking on the seventh and eighth verses of Narayana Guru's Atmopadesa Satakam. We began with a peaceful meditation. Everything was going well, with the class sitting as withdrawn as possible listening to Zen meditation music.... During the class I saw John lying down with his eyes closed. I know this is a way of listening in the West, especially

for those who have weakened their nerves with constant drug trips. It was so sad to see him in such a miserable state. I could have condoned it, but I was looking for an opportunity to correct him. The inertial *tamas* that is increasing in him had been noticed several times before. I asked him to sit up, and I spoke with sharp words. I'm sure he didn't understand why I shouted at him when he thought he was listening to me. Well, it won't hurt to be confused. He can slowly learn if he wants.

John had been lying with his feet toward the teacher, which is considered very insulting behavior in India. Nitya instructed us in proper respect at all times, and his words to John were really stinging. Both John and I were shocked, and the pain of regret went deep into us.

The next night one of the PSU professors, or was he in the medical community? who I would describe as a flake, came to dinner and stayed for the class. He sat close on Nitya's right side, and lay back on a divan with his feet practically on Nitya's lap. Pretty soon he was snoring loudly. I kept thinking, man he's really going to get it! That's *so* rude!

Contrary to my surging expectations, Nitya paid him no attention at all. He didn't appear bothered, and carried on as if we were all hanging on his every word, which the rest of us were. I was shocked again, and puzzled, but later realized that John had requested guru-instruction, and the professor hadn't. It made all the difference. As 20-year-olds, we naturally thought "That's so unfair! Everybody complains about us kids and lets adults get away with anything." Looking back, I can see that John was the one who had been honored.

On a more lighthearted note, Nitya was a fabulous cook, and Indian dishes were new to me. His basic curry was sensational, so I gathered the courage to ask him to teach me how to make it. I accosted him in the kitchen, and made the request. He told me, in India, if you ask a guru for instruction, you are supposed to bring him a simple gift of some flowers or fruit. I looked around wildly

and spotted a bunch of bananas on top of the fridge. I grabbed them and held them out to him, repeating my request in a formal fashion. He shot back, “Thief! You have stolen my bananas!”

He laughed afterwards, kind of, and soon began teaching me his technique, but the jolt of adrenaline I was hit with has kept the event fresh in my mind ever since. It may have marked my real initiation into discipleship, after all. Nitya’s account of his own initiation, in L&B, takes place in a kitchen and is an equally embarrassing moment. He was feeling very unsure of himself after Nataraja Guru asked him if he had finally come to dedicate himself, and he wavered. The Guru chided him angrily. Then:

Instead of running out of the kitchen, though, I bent down and touched both his feet and said, “Take me. I am giving myself to the Guru for whatever it’s worth.”

He laughed uproariously. Then he became suddenly calm and said, “That is right.” Thus my surrender to the Guru’s cause and my initiation all happened in a comic manner. Now many years later I understand that the gravity of my gesture and all its implications were a million times greater and more profound than I realized. (150)

As a footnote, Nitya’s boundless spirit of goodwill added an ineffable “something” to his cooking that lifted it to undreamed of heights. He served truly delicious spiritual food, very tangibly special. On plates.

One particularly stinging memory is noted in the diary. We already had a houseful of people learning from him all day long, with many more joining at class and meal times. He read the latest entry of his diary out to us most evenings, and once in a while there was some heavy criticism. It wasn’t all critical, there were many uplifting passages, but he would work in some points that we needed to take to heart. On this occasion, he wrote:

I told Peter (his closest disciple there), that I couldn't be used as a beast of burden while others sit around with a sense of ease. I know that he has no such motivation to exploit my willingness to teach or work, but there is an assumed superiority in the mind of all the aggressive races who have built up their fortune on the unwilling meekness of slaves. There is a concealed cruelty right in the heart of all their enthusiasm and kindness. As I see this ugly face, sometimes very pronounced behind their sweetness and sincerity, I cannot help pointing my finger at it. So I spoke as harshly as possible and refused to continue the lesson.

That hit me like a lightning bolt. And of course, I couldn't deny it because I identified myself with the sweetness and sincerity. That's what I was purveying. And yet he said right in the middle of that, right at the core of that, is this aggressive superiority. And in fact, that is one of the most negative elements of the ego, that we are more important than anyone else, from that perspective.

I suspect a lot of people figured—as is often the case—he was talking about someone else. But I didn't. I thought, “Oh, my god, I'm guilty, and I'd better really look into this.” We shouldn't believe it when we tell ourselves that we are really doing a great job, we're excellent, we're on the right track (especially when we're only 20 years old). All of those presumptions are just as delusory as anti-social and hate-filled presumptions, from the standpoint of the spirit within us, and we may never be able to see that without someone on the outside reflecting it back to us. When it took place in public forums, it came to be known as Gurukula Grilling, and at its most intense it did feel like being roasted on a spit.

I was raised by an extinct species: liberal Republicans. My parents taught me the ideals of America, such as skin color doesn't matter. Everyone is equal. Everyone is equally due fairness and justice. You should treat people as what they are, not by how they

look, in any sense. Or where they're from, and so on and so forth. I have always thought of myself as an egalitarian person.

My self-image was this non-violent, sincere, kind, loving fellow, and yet the guru could see there was some ugliness there that needed to be rooted out. Unless he brought it to my attention and I brought my attention to an intense level, it was not going to go away. We pad our darkness with protective mythologizing so we can leave it alone, hoping it will just disappear on its own. But of course it doesn't. The collapsing social contract of the US in the present is evidence of the significance of what he showed us, and how thoroughly it has been papered over with empty words. The land of freedom and equality has become the land of hate and hierarchy, admittedly a minority position that paradoxically dominates the conversation.

Another shocking correction was on its way. All my life I have believed in nonviolence. I attribute part of that to my mother, who was tough but kind, and whenever I did anything mean as a kid, she would shake me or pinch me and say, "Do you know how that feels to someone else?" So even when I was little, I was thinking about the pain I was causing, and empathizing with other people's and other animals' feelings. That had been reinforced through a number of incidents in my life to where I was sure that I was really flush with *ahimsa*. I was a determinedly non-violent person, and I must have been proud of it, on some level. Nonviolence is not a problem, but pride in it can be ego-inflationary.

Over my two months in that first Gurukula, my relationship with Nitya got steadily more tense and intense, until I knew I had to have a serious talk with him about what was going on. I felt I was being accused of all sorts of things I didn't believe were true, though I had been trying very hard to look closely at myself. I went to his room, and he met me with coldness and a hard expression. I pleaded my case of being misunderstood. His response was, "You're mad! I don't trust you! You will go out and get a gun and come back and shoot me! Get out!" As a lifelong, dedicated

passivist, it blew my mind. I loved him dearly, and wouldn't dream of harming him, ever. Could one of my certainties about myself be that far off? My persona was totally oriented towards peace, love and kindness, but again, that must have been just a part of my mask. By attacking me right where I thought I was unassailable, Nitya forced me to enlarge my sense of self outside of my persona. Very disorienting, to say the least. I was seriously baffled, but it did appear that I was being evicted.

In short order I found another place to move to—a three-bedroom house for \$65/month, utilities included—and gathered my meager possessions. John and Debby Twombly would come with me to the Williams Avenue house. Heartbroken, I was carrying my things out to my car. He was standing in his doorway, and beckoned me inside. He sat at his small desk and I stood before him.

“Now that you've decided to leave, I want to tell you the three things I've been attempting to teach you.” What's this? *I* was the one who wanted to leave? We had been working on things? I must have missed something. The first of the three things was how to live without a crutch, which could include everything I used to support my self-image, though he might have specifically meant get-highs. Suffice to say my psyche was shredded, but the point here is that we had had a long and intense relationship, even though I hadn't realized it.

Anyway, the word was out in the Gurukula that I had chosen to drop out. Nitya's blast left me without the slightest grip on what had been happening, and I would spend several years parsing through it, often filled with pain and regret. I was totally unsure of myself, while at the same time being confident that he was truly a guru and teacher of the highest caliber. How had I failed so utterly?

Over five decades, I have gradually come to appreciate the benefit of being treated that way, something no one, especially an American, would volunteer for. We mainly sign up for programs that reinforce what we already buy into. I felt Nitya's love and I

felt his blessings, and while the latter were very far from seeming loving, they did the lion's share of shaping who I would one day become. My gratitude runneth over.

In this business, as in every business, balance is the key. When we distinguish different elements and divorce them from their unitive context, we lay the groundwork for fear. Yet paradoxically, making no distinctions also has its downside. Nitya knew this personally from his travels, and he was also speaking about his time in America when he said, "If an Indian should go to China, Africa, or Europe, he would find it difficult to distinguish one person from another in the country he was visiting."

This had once impacted me. Having spent the fall of 1970 in Nitya's Bhagavad Gita class, including various field trips and directed meditations together, and the fall of 1971 living in the Portland Gurukula, I assumed he knew me pretty well.

After being thrown out of the Gurukula (or deciding to leave?), over the next year I performed a ferocious self-examination, wondering how I could have failed so utterly with the finest teacher and human being I had ever encountered. The next fall Nitya returned to Portland again and taught more courses at Portland State University. I would slip anonymously into the back of the classroom, and was again amazed and uplifted by his magnificent teaching style. It took a long time before I worked up the courage to ask to talk with him again, but once I did, he invited me to the room where he was staying.

I professed how hard I had been trying, to learn yoga and rectify my psyche, and I was willing to work with him again, and see if I could do better. I had a very odd sense he wasn't paying much attention to what I was saying; there was a coldness and distance, and I felt weirder and weirder. Soon I took leave. He had been polite, but also the epitome of a guru who doesn't take any notice of irrelevancies. It felt like a profound rejection, and it impelled me to two or three more years of suffering self-doubt.

When the pain got almost too intense to bear, in desperation I wrote to my former girlfriend Deb, who was still one of his main disciples. Eventually she got back to me. She had asked him about my visit. He remembered meeting a young man, but hadn't recognized me! He told her, "I thought at the time that that fellow was somewhat Indianized," because I'd called him Guruji. Otherwise I was just another anonymous student as far as he was concerned.

It's easy enough to see that pretty much everything in my experience had been my own projection, and so in the long run it was an exceptional learning opportunity to learn to reduce the habit. But it was tough going! Even knowing that he really hadn't recognized me took a long time to sink in. Years later, when he owned up to his inability to recognize foreigners, I knew exactly how important that skill was. Not everyone is a disciple, so even gurus need both distinctions and unifying insights working together.

A few more random memories:

Along with macrobiotics, the 1970s brimmed with zillions of food manias, spawned, in part, from the psychedelic realization that "You are what you eat." The realization was a metaphor, of course, referring to the thoughts you imbibe, but in the hallowed religious tradition it was, as usual, taken literally.

Coffee has always gotten poor press, despite passing its scientific examinations with flying colors. I was disturbed that Nitya was a (quite moderate) coffee drinker, and in one of our family gatherings I asked him about it. With twinkling eyes, he answered, "Cream is sattvic, sugar is rajasic, and coffee is tamasic. When blended together, the gunas are in perfect harmony."

Another time I asked him why spiritual people liked sugar so much, with the unspoken implication that it was bad for you, anticipating a lengthy explanation. He smilingly replied, "Because

sugar is... sweet.” I burst out laughing. Some things are simple, after all.

In Ooty one time, I was the kitchen cleanup guy, and I would always scrape out and eat every last drop of food from the pots, before washing them. Nitya knew I was often hungry, and once when he saw me working furiously at it, he told me how he would put a little rice in the pot and swish it around, and then you could get it all on a plate easily and eat it up. This is one teaching of his that I took very seriously, and still practice!

A guru-correction I received one time was in a sizeable gathering in Ooty, back when alcohol was still a major taboo, and illegal in South India. It has always been contrary to Gurukula custom. Nitya had been discoursing on the refined, spiritual ways to cope with the problems of life, and how not to get too caught up in going around in circles. Then he proclaimed to everyone present, “But Scott...” (Dramatic pause), “doesn’t get caught up in such kinds of endless machinations.” (Another pause.) “When he is upset, he just pours himself two tall beers and forgets about his problems.” Talk about a double-edged compliment! Beer never tasted quite so good to me after that, and I could never use it as a solution to my mental state without hearing his voice in the background. That was back in the heyday of the football player “Too Tall Jones”, so some of the Americans called me Two Tall Beers for a while afterwards. Oof!

The only siddhi of Nitya’s I have personally witnessed, is expanding space in the vicinity, which probably falls under the category of *mahima*. Nitya would hold classes for twenty or thirty of us in spacious rooms, where we would have no sense of being crowded. After his passing I revisited a couple of those places, and they were inexplicably tiny! I thought they must have been remodeled, since we couldn’t possibly have fit in them, but they had not. Somehow he brought a vast ambience, more like an extra dimension, into the cramped quarters in which we met with him. I expect he never intended it to happen, it just did. There is a

photograph in *Love and Blessings* of at least seventeen of us in his room in Varkala in 1980, with Nitya sitting at a desk and bookshelves behind him. When I took it I was standing in the doorway, far enough back to include almost but not quite everybody. On a subsequent visit I learned the room is roughly 8 by 8 feet, barely big enough for the two cots it now holds. Look at the picture and you cannot square it with its actual size no matter how you strain your brain.

For several years, Nitya put on a monthlong music festival at the Fernhill Gurukula. Fred Cantor and I were invited in 1989, and were treated to a full slate of amazing musicians, many of them truly world class. Nitya had a vision of life being a symphony of values, and he encouraged artists in all fields to participate.

Fred performed on guitar on several occasions, and I managed a concert at the YMCA on their battered old grand piano. In those days there was one tuner for the whole of South India, who made one complete circuit every year. Private schools and a few individuals had pianos; all had been shipped from England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and had suffered much over the decades. Most did not make pretty sounds. The Reina of Jaipur, in her late nineties, attended my concert, allowing me the pleasure of knowing I had performed for a queen, once in my life.

Nitya masterminded the whole festival, a genial host overseeing the needs of so many visitors. Several dozen of us stayed on site, and every evening the prayer hall was jammed with a couple of hundred eager listeners. I found that attending any show with Nitya amplified my appreciation manyfold, and it seemed everyone felt mysteriously inspired by the pageant. I guess you could call it another of his siddhis.

Nitya's motto, late in life, became celebrate, celebrate, celebrate! We did.