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In the Stream of Consciousness

Chapter 10 – The Shameless Prodigal and the Joyful Pilgrim

The second of a series of meditations on friends of Guru Nitya features someone well-known to many of us, who first appeared on the scene in the original Portland Gurukula in late 1971. He was in many ways typical of us scruffy hippies in those days, yet his dedication eventually blossomed into a crowning series of achievements that we couldn't mention without revealing the name of this intentionally-anonymous exemplar. It turns out few of us were serious enough to make any mark on the greater world at all. He is one who did.

One of Nitya's motivations, wherever fate carried him, was to encourage intelligent spiritual and intellectual investigations. He landed in an America where the former virtue was in active conflict with the latter. Academic intelligence had become stale and rigid, and much of it was dedicated to oppressive, elitist beliefs, so disdain for it ran high. Nitya's enthusiasm for intelligent discourse was surely out of joint with the dominant paradigm of those days, and he is to be commended for his patience in coaxing some of us back to a more complete use of our capacity. He must have been more shocked than he let on at the shabby state of affairs in the once-upon-a-time Hope of the World, the United States of America.

Nitya could see the potential for greatness within everyone, even those who were utterly unaware of it themselves, and he shaped his teaching to elicit what he could. He held to a "wait and see" attitude with people, when his first impulse might have been to throw up his hands in despair. You can get a sense of that in reading this chapter.

Nataraja Guru being a fierce and uncompromising teacher, Nitya was dubious of introducing the young man to him in India, invoking the lamb-to-the-slaughter image he resorted to more than once:

Those who are familiar with the biographies of Naropa and Milarepa know the kinds of games oriental gurus like Tilopa and Marpa play. My Guru was not the honey-oozing, goody-goody type. Although he was not capricious like Tilopa, he was as determined as Marpa. Bringing a young and innocent seeker before him was like throwing a lamb to a hungry tiger. So I was somewhat puzzled and amazed to see the Guru giving his very tender care and affection to this young man, without scaring him too much or punching his nose every now and then.

Although both Nitya and Nataraja Guru supported breaking out of orthodox mental frameworks, they didn't give anyone permission to be a misfit. There is a greater harmony than social or religious orthodoxy, and by not fitting in with those you run the risk of not fitting in with cosmic harmony at the same time. At times this is a subtle distinction, as Nitya implies:

When it was almost certain that I was to step into Guru's shoes to steer the ship of the Gurukula, he gave me some very cryptic instructions, one of which was to not encourage laziness or create misfits. It took me some time to find out the operational meaning of "lazy" and what exactly he meant by a misfit. It is harder than you might think to tell the difference between a person who is simple and one who is a simpleton.

This also hints at something that isn't universally known. Of the top three of Nataraja Guru's main disciples who were in line to succeed him, Mangalananda Swami had tragically died, John Spiers had disadopted him, and Nitya was somewhat noncommittal. He well knew his Western hippie disciples would have zero credibility in India. Nitya was struggling with the Guru's ferocity, pondering a breakaway and taking a "leave of absence" that included the American sojourns of the early 1970s. Nataraja

Guru was confronted with the prospect that his lifetime achievement of instigating the Narayana Gurukula would be leaderless after his death, and collapse. He was desperately looking for a successor. During return visits to India in '71 and '72, Nitya eventually accepted that he would take on the role, and Nataraja Guru instructed him accordingly.

There is certainly an appeal in spiritual renunciation for freeloading, and Nitya is musing about it all through the present chapter. The modern materialist attitude is that all renunciates are freeloaders, but Nitya well knew the value of those who are truly dedicated to freedom and piercing the veil of their own ignorance. Outwardly, there might not be much difference, but operationally there is no comparison. One tough job for the head of an institution is to weed out the misfits from the genuine gems.

Modern India is extremely puritanical, and sannyasins are expected to be sexual renunciates, along with surrendering all other attachments, familial, vocational and the rest. Nitya's advocacy of abstinence wasn't going over well here in the US, and he reluctantly began to modify his conceptions about what constituted true renunciation. He also regretted the commercialization and degradation of the image:

Now there are several young people in the West, like my friend, who want to adopt a pattern of life which is easily recognized in India as that of a renunciate. I don't mean the celibate aspect of it, but rather the aspect of living as an orphan in God. Conversely several holy men of the East are now setting up their establishments on the High Streets of western cities, and striving to compete with the best business tycoons of the West. If there is anything which may be called social confusion, it's what we see in the lives of these people.

Nitya boils the dialectic down to its synthetic essence:

In spite of the social disparity of the East and West, anyone resigning themselves to the will of God should find everywhere the one protective hand providing them with the manna of life. It cannot be limited to any particular time or place.

Finally, Nitya refutes the widely-held negative stereotype of the renunciate or *sannyasin*:

For true renunciates there is a positive content in their psyche: the capacity to identify themselves with all sentient beings as veritable bodhisattvas and to spontaneously share their life with all. They do not enter into bargains and contracts, but contribute in measures which are greater than what they receive. They are not leeches on society. They do not cast their burden on anyone. In the *Vivekachudamani* the life of such a person is described as a rain cloud that showers the grace of sustenance on every farmer's field, and as the beautiful Spring that blossoms in abundance everywhere in the world.

This laid the groundwork for what turned out to be a fascinating group exploration. Deb noted that you can be so enamored of verbalizing your spiritual ideals you can become unconscious of your real persona, not paying attention how you interact with people in a parasitic way, or, by contrast, you can express greatest relief through a spiritual pattern of life. The choices we've faced or the patterns in our lives express aspects of this. She asked the group: what is your life pattern now, and how is that being expressed in ways this commentary might illuminate?

Steven is really wondering about this lately, asking himself, now that he's retired, what sort of lifestyle he should be pursuing and whether it should be shaped or driven by the stage of life in which he finds himself. He has the luxury of lots of time now, yet

feels pressured to use it wisely, since he knows his time is limited, and he may succumb to illness at any time. This being so, he wonders if it's wise to devote himself to spiritual matters in retirement. Is he simply wasting the little time he has?

I responded that spiritual pursuits should first of all be enjoyable. If they aren't, don't bother with them. Nitya is talking here about wholesale dedication: he was hoping to find a few extra-special types among us. Most of us are quite mediocre on that score, and that's okay. This is not an all-or-nothing business, and he learned to work well with us. Making sense of life at any level is an exciting, insightful, unstructured way of having a good time. Understanding how to love and live with your fellow beings is an ananda-filled experience. Yes, most of us have entered the "mortality zone," a term coined by the wife of our protagonist, as a matter of fact, when she turned sixty a few years back. Any of us could die at any moment, so let's not adopt a five-year-plan, or follow grueling practices unless we love that sort of thing. Live this moment to the maximum possible. Be fully alive, was his message.

Bill cited the classic Indian model of *ashrama*, that as you move into retirement you enter into a contemplative life: "I always hold that up as a model for how I spend my next ten or twenty years and it gives me a lot of comfort and a little inspiration."

Deb agreed you don't want to fritter away your time, but on the other hand, you do want to let go of the idea of control, that I'm going to program my life this way or that way. She referred to Shankara's raincloud showering grace over the lives of the people around. It includes letting go of planning and programming, of alphabetized five-year plans. There is an openness that comes with it. She concluded, you want to make optimal use of your time, but isn't every moment beautiful?

One thing that really stuck with me that Nitya taught us, was that if you look back at your entire life there is a coherent form to it. All the surprising and random-seeming happenings feed into a

coherent plan of making you who you are now. It's all well-connected and meaningfully structured, how things that you weren't ready for when you were twenty suddenly appear when you are sixty or seventy, and they fit well. All through our lives we are the same person; only the circumstances are different. Nitya likened our lives to a plant's: it begins as a seed, becomes a sprout, a shoot, branches out into its shape. Eventually it produces flowers that bring fruit. If you look at any one stage, you are only seeing a tiny fragment of what the plant is. It's a whole that can only be mentally fragmented, for analytic purposes. All of the plant's life fits together to make it what it is. In a letter from July, 1971, Nitya revealed his role:

My lot is of a clumsy old gardener who cuts and prunes the bushes and hunts out the vermin and the fungus that come to destroy the delicate buds of his blossoming bushes.

Deb made sure that everyone had a say in the class by actually calling on us. It was reminiscent of Nitya's philosophy classes—which were much fiercer, I must say—where we would all sit as still as rabbits, hoping he wouldn't mention our names, exposing our ignorance to all the other rabbits. In this instance, however, no one is ignorant of their life, so it wasn't so awful to talk about it.

Karen told us it's hard for her to grasp what Nitya is saying because she is such a 'now' person she doesn't have a plan—she just has today. She's so happy every day, enjoying life, every single moment of it, enjoying that she's happy and healthy and has family and friends to hang out with.

Jan felt the chapter is a lot about not being a leech on society or the people we're close to, instead trying to be aware and receptive, so the parts can be mutually beneficial. She admires this side of Nitya's practicality and decency—it's easy for gurus to be

up in the clouds, thinking if I have the wisdom, everyone can take care of me. He doesn't fall into that place. She could relate to Steven: when she recently turned 60, it was like a kick in the butt. She felt the pressure he did, too.

It's true that in our 20s we weren't thinking about the limitations of our life. We were immortal. Now the time limit looms large in our thinking: what do I want to do with it? There is actually a fine balance between not being inert while not being overbearing, either. Neither lazy nor domineering. It's the mysterious synthesis the Gita refers to in its fourth chapter:

17) One has to understand about action and understand also what is wrong action; again, one has to have a proper notion of non-action; the way of action is elusively subtle indeed.

18) One who is able to see action in inaction and inaction in action—he among men is intelligent; he is one of unitive attitude, while still engaged in every (possible) kind of work.

When you get it just right you are like the rose bush. Or Karen.

Nancy told us how, for the first two-thirds of her life, it seemed like outside forces motivated her the most. The choices she made put her in circumstances that required her to act in a certain way and pursue things in a certain way. She has done all the things she was called upon to do, and now she's older she has to be more of the motivator to find room for things she enjoys: her garden, cooking, sharing with friends, intellectual stimulation. For all of it she has to be the instigator, now. She feels the best part is she can do it in her own time frame. She can relax and let it unfold, finding it more meditative, a process that is more satisfying. It's a much more comfortable flow of things that are now part of her life. Yet all through she has been the same, she's never felt like a different person.

Anita retired five years ago, sold the home she'd lived in for forty years, and moved to a state where she knew no one. She's been greatly challenged to create a new life. She's gone to classes, met people, spent time with her not-too-distant family. She's getting to a point in life that she's starting to be offended by the invisibility of seniors, and it's uncomfortable. She wants to shout, "Hey, I'm here, I count!" She's gotten involved in political activity, and other healthy things, to compensate. Nonetheless, this time in her life has not been anything she anticipated, and she has a lot of concerns and anxiety, along with a lot of contemplation. She has enjoyed the freedom of not having to drive through traffic to work, of no one telling her how to spend her time, so it's a mixed bag, of course. She definitely doesn't want to float through it and not be awake,

I sympathized about becoming invisible, which happened practically overnight to me, (many years ago now) going from existent to nonexistent in the public eye. No one warned me about it. It hurts at first, but eventually I gave it a better framing: old people have become so vast we are simply incomprehensible to youngsters. It's okay we don't matter to them: we just have to matter to ourself. I figure every generation has that experience, every individual even. Karen corrected me on that, as she didn't think Nitya ever had that experience, and to some extent that's true. Many people loved and cared for him, and he them. They still do, twenty-two years after he died. Yet he felt like many people imagined who he was, and it was nothing like the real Nitya. A guru in India (and elsewhere) is a caricature, and they saw him as his appearance, not as the wise elder he became. The real issue is that we have loved ones who stick with us, but in public we're ignored, and it takes some getting used to. It's also hard for those of us who aren't the most cuddly or inviting to maintain loving connections with our friends in private, and this is most crucial to a happy late-life time. It's good to be with people who understand us, because we've had similar generational experiences. Getting together is good.

Deb told us how early on she spent a lot of time trying to figure things out, but now she doesn't feel that compulsion as much. At our age you have a sense of where you want to garner energy and focus it, daily as well as in big choices. She recalled years ago being at Breitenbush Hot Springs, where there was a handsome, young guy who was the center of adulation. She just watched the scene happening, how he was thinking how great I'm so wonderful, and his admirers thinking the same, but she saw enveloping it was this amazing life force going through him, and he only thought it was him—it was an eternal truth happening once again, taking another opportunity to manifest itself. She's now getting to the point where she can think of everything as a cosmic flow of energy. Nonlocal.

Susan said, "If I died tomorrow I would feel I've had a good life with no regrets, great friends, family." Yet because of the pandemic she has curtailed most of her life. She still feels like she does when she rides a roller coaster—she can't think of anything else till the ride's over. She goes into suspended animation, just holding on until it ends. She can't listen to music or dive into deep stuff, since the covid ride isn't over yet. She's living day to day, not making any plans.

Kris also feels like she's in limbo, having taught one way or another for forty years, and then retiring during the pandemic. All the schoolteachers had to go home, and she didn't even get to say goodbye, much less celebrate her retirement. All the plans and the things she thought she'd be doing — travel and volunteering with kids, and so on — haven't happened yet. Now she has a puppy, and is busy trying to figure out her relationship to it. She lamented how you're used to feeling safe when you do things, so the virus is a barrier she didn't expect.

She didn't mention how now in America, you have to wonder if you're going to be shot any time you go out by some insane person sporting military armaments, pumped up by the internet mafia.

Andy wanted to endorse the idea that life has an invisible pattern that is playing itself out. He retired from teaching art eight years ago, and has found it very interesting to be liberated from the institution. Now there are fewer walls between him and his creative impulses, which is very nice. He's always had immense changes in his life, which he calls God's ten-year massive readjustment plan. As two years ago he lost his partner, Bushra, his retirement goes along with the profound reinhabiting of being a single person. He admits to being bewildered, with his life still working itself out in a very strange way, which he chalks up to the invisible pattern.

I noted that in his most recent Gita lesson in the class I conduct, he describes himself as "a supervisor of accidents." A charming way to describe the witness. Accidents are part of that invisible shape you get to supervise, but not direct. Being invisible, the template of our being often arrives as a surprise, or an accident.

For Andy, the metaphor that makes sense is creating a piece of art. There is the initial inspiration, and then cool things come together, and then you have no idea what you're doing and many things don't work, then, sometimes, you have a breakthrough, and it really works. He often wonders, "Am I overthinking this?" He is spending a lot of time alone, battling with his artwork. He feels like he's learning the same lesson over and over, that he shouldn't overthink it. He now works on his computer, which preserves every error he ever made, and he can see how much he corrects his work. Then all of a sudden an accident happens and everything works beautifully, bringing him cosmic joy and realization.

I wondered, since he was achieving spectacular results at the end of this process, if the overthinking served to push him through the full development? And maybe it was necessary?

Andy replied it's as if your stream was pouring over rocks and hitting smooth patches: the whole thing had to be in there. It's not exclusively negative, and it's certainly not exclusively pleasurable. It's the mystery we intend.

Nitya's concluding paragraph speaks to all of us about the mystery, about the invisible pattern of each of our lives coming to fruition:

One has to speculate and risk many things just to gain economic security. How much more should you be prepared to risk when you finally decide to burn all your bridges behind you and walk into the unknown to greet the true meaning of your life. The only assurance my friend needs from me is my heartfelt blessing of "Good luck."

For the closing meditation, Deb read us an amazing poem from the current, and first native, US poet laureate:

Speaking Tree
by Joy Harjo

I had a beautiful dream I was dancing with a tree.

— Sandra Cisneros

Some things on this earth are unspeakable:
Genealogy of the broken —
A shy wind threading leaves after a massacre,
Or the smell of coffee and no one there —

Some humans say trees are not sentient beings,
But they do not understand poetry —

Nor can they hear the singing of trees when they are fed by
Wind, or water music —
Or hear their cries of anguish when they are broken and bereft —

Now I am a woman longing to be a tree, planted in a moist, dark
earth
Between sunrise and sunset —

I cannot walk through all realms —
I carry a yearning I cannot bear alone in the dark —

What shall I do with all this heartache?

The deepest-rooted dream of a tree is to walk
Even just a little ways, from the place next to the doorway —
To the edge of the river of life, and drink —

I have heard trees talking, long after the sun has gone down:

Imagine what would it be like to dance close together
In this land of water and knowledge. . .

To drink deep what is undrinkable.

Part II

From Beverley:

Thoughts and associations arising on reading *The Shameless
Prodigal and the Joyful Pilgrim*

Who would true valour see,
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be,
Come wind, come weather
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent

His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

Christian hymn by John Bunyan

Now I am thinking about who Nitya wrote these essays for and when. This one is about the time in 1971 when he first came in contact with young American students in Portland, and in particular those who sat at his feet looking for guidance about leading a spiritual life. My impression is that they were written later when greater understanding arrived for him about his own psychology and what he thought and felt at the time as he assessed his followers then.

The young man in this chapter is in some ways typical but, perhaps, driven by a more extreme inner calling for a spiritual life. Nitya says that beneath his scruffy appearance he sensed “a beautiful smiling soul” – hence the ‘joyful pilgrim’.

This reminds me of what Jesus said to his disciples once.
(New Testament, Luke 12: 22-32)

Be not anxious for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than the food, and the body than the raiment?

Behold the birds of the heaven, that they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; and your heavenly Father feed them. Are not ye of much more value than they?

And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit unto the measure of his life? And why are ye anxious concerning raiment?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God doth so clothe the grass of the field, which today is, and to-morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you. (The

word translated here as lilies actually means colourful wildflowers.)

I have my own concept of someone who has “a beautiful smiling soul,” but not drawn to any particular spiritual or religious way of life. By simply being who they are and not by anything they do, they bring happiness with them. I get this feeling from certain authors as well as people I meet and interact with. How to describe it? I do not think about this when it’s happening but now I ask myself what is this quality they have? I feel good about myself when I’m with them. Indeed I like myself when I’m with them. I do not feel weighed down and exhausted or even contaminated by being with them after they leave, but instead feel light hearted and refreshed.