

9/21/21

In the Stream of Consciousness – Part Two  
Chapter 17D: When You Are Wrong

We didn't actually get to this story last time, though it was on the docket, so here it is at last, a favorite of mine. It served us well when Andy asked Charles right off about his recollection of it, initiating a cascade of anecdotes from the one of us who was there in person. It led to an analysis of the role of the guru in our development, toward the end.

“That which is right when you are wrong is God,” was a familiar saying Charles heard more than once. He told us, “In my own mind I thought that the Guru was always right and you were always wrong. He was God. It was understood that on some level, when you talk about God, you're talking about the Guru, the leader.” He went on, “It's not really metaphysics we're talking about. That line passed into the conversational repertoire. Everyone knew it. People would toss it out, meaning various things. And he didn't always fill in the context, which would determine the meaning. Nataraja Guru had a huge repertoire of one-liners; sometimes he meant the opposite of what he was saying.”

I mentioned that because of the snappy comeback element, it doesn't at first seem paradoxical, but the more you think about it, the more profound it gets. I invited the class to weigh in on the many interpretations it can have. For me, the first level was the guru poking fun at the gentlemen's conceit that they were confident they knew what God was and wasn't—a typically human self-deception. The line turns the smugness on its head, taking away the pompous element and cleverly sabotaging it.

Charles agreed: there are people who think they're always right, you can see it a mile off. We've all been like that. You show by your attitude how you feel smarter than other people. One thing he's saying is that whoever deflates you is God. He added, Nataraja Guru was very opinionated, and often aggressively so,

and so there were times when he was making fun of himself for being a know it all.

Bill contributed that it's our confusion and our ego that create situations where we think we know everything. When it comes apart, then there's a place in you that knows, that is released. The guru's role is to teach you what your true self is.

The potent line brings up the spiritual dilemma of how you can ever know if you are wrong, and how can you then determine what is right with any kind of reliability? We routinely take recourse in an authority figure, but they are also potentially flawed, so we shouldn't depend solely on them. We're reluctant to admit we're wrong because it opens the door to uncertainty, and the ego becomes vulnerable, making us tend to resist even valid authority.

We didn't talk about another important point of the story, "The existence or nonexistence of God is to be determined by its definition," but knowing the definition of an abstraction, especially a charged one like God, is essential to meaningful communication about it.

I've been rereading parts of Nataraja Guru's autobiography, and he really was self-deprecating in an understated way. It's really a very charming work, displaying what an intense genius he was, with a really sly sense of humor.

Charles agreed he was very entertaining, a dog and pony show 24 hours a day. He got up at 3 or 5 AM, and he'd have coffee in a circle with the early risers, one of whom would be taking dictation about his meditations of the night before. He was always writing books by this time, late in his life. He had things laid out methodically, and would be meditating on some arcane subject that night. Then he'd start dictating in the morning. He adjusted his talk to whoever his stenographer was. It was a way of training, being a stenographer. Bennington was one who could keep up with him.

It was such a rarity to have Charles reminiscing, we eagerly took it in. An elder talking about a halcyon, long-departed time sounds like another good definition of God. There is a new link in Part II to some audios of the Guru in action.

Charles went on, how Nataraja Guru was the hub, and a big wheel of activity was revolving around him. All kinds of people were pulled in and passing through, the program and the audience were never the same two days running. Since his classes were mostly in English, he didn't have the same old swamis day after day, as more traditional ashrams did.

Steven asked him how people managed to find their way to Varkala in those days, before the internet?

Charles was momentarily surprised. Back then it was word of mouth and accidental strokes of luck. You heard about something, and you went off looking for it. You might find something else.

Charles gave the example of an English woman, Victoria, who was some kind of high-class debutante, a blue blood, and she was crazy. One day Nataraja Guru was taking his regular walk, and he came to a railroad crossing with a small signal box that was buzzing. There was this girl there, with her hair wildly cut, who was doing a puja to Ganesha as if he was this box, all by herself in the middle of nowhere. Nataraja treated her as a father would, he told her she needed to have some care, and he took her back to the Gurukula. He gave her the name Sakhakani. She was a wise girl, but she was really lost. She became one of the entourage, and Charles spent many hours talking to her.

She was wildly promiscuous, had studied men of every possible background, on purpose, as sexual partners, in the 60s in London. She told him she was in Kabul one time— in Afghanistan the market, heats up at 9 or 10, with lots of activity—somehow she was in shorty pjs and she had taken acid, she was very stoned and got lost from her hotel, didn't know where she was. She was wandering through souk in Kabul, and one of the merchants came out of his stall and told her she was in danger, please come away with him. She did, and got out of that okay, slept it off, and later figured out where her hotel was.

Charles himself found Nataraja Guru through two Indian ladies named Chandra and Latti, who were famous in the scene, the greatest of the secretaries, most efficient. Both had Masters

degrees from Boston University, and they were Montessori teachers. They adopted him on the spot.

He met them randomly, in Bergamot, Italy. They said, we can tell what you are, you don't know this, but we adopt you. They were disciples of Harry Jakobsen at the time. They told him about gurus and read to him from Rousseau. One was a brahmin and the other was from the merchant class. Chandra was having nightmares, flashing back to her house being attacked by Muslims during the Partition. (Partition displaced at least 15 million people and over a million were killed.) She remembered a baby falling past her window, mobs outside and up and down the stairs, aiming to kill all Hindus. She was protected by Muslim neighbors who hid her family in their apartment and lied to pursuers. Charles' mind was blown by her accounts.

They invited Charles to their apartment, made amazing teas with 20 different little dishes, and told him they knew what a guru is. They told him, to his surprise, they would never consider marrying a man if he hadn't been educated by a guru: everyone in India understands that a man is not fully a man unless he has been trained by a guru.

Later, when Charles was back in London living with his wife, they called and said they were in guru school [Gurukula], gave him the address of the World Commune in Belgium, and said their guru was coming. Charles jumped on a boat, crossed the Channel from Dover to Ostend, and set out. He was walking in the rain late at night in Latem, lost, when he saw a car coming through the dark. It stopped, but Charles didn't speak French or Flemish. He said only "guru" and they replied, "Get in." It was Paul and Nicole Gevaert. and they were driving to Morocco. They took him back to the Gevaert house, which was the Gurukula.

When he entered the house, he was met by a dining room scene, a long table with people on each side, and at the far end was Nataraja Guru, looking like a little owl, with goggle glasses and beret askew, all bundled up in many coats because it was cold that season.

By the way, Nitya also looked exactly like an owl when we first met him.

Andy asked Charles about what became of the two women. Chandra died 5 or 10 years ago, and he didn't know about Latti. They had become socially-minded Montessori instructors in Dharamshala. Near the end of his life, Nataraja Guru drove them out. They were very stubborn, and didn't accept that he really wanted them to go. They were able to do skilled work for the guru, for years. They could accomplish whatever he assigned. He must have felt he really had to force them to leave. He would humiliate them publicly, including about being homosexuals. When he was on the rampage, he was terrible. He wasn't always nice. At last they packed up. They finally saw that they had to go. They had finished with him forever.

Andy was intrigued that they had been disciples of Harry Jakobsen, as he also had gotten to know him. Harry, who always spoke of him as Dr. Natarajan, met Nataraja Guru in New York in the late 40s. He had a very rugged early life, growing up in the far north of Norway, in Trondheim. He was in the merchant marine, and described his life aboard ship as extremely dangerous, doing things like being on watch in the middle of the night in a gale, with huge waves. At a certain moment he jumped ship in the US, living as an undocumented worker through the end of WWII. He was eventually caught by the FBI and given an alternative: we're either going to ship you back to Norway or you can work for the government, you can build a torpedo tube for us in exchange for citizenship. They knew he was a master engineer, and he did the job. Despite his talents, he was very conscious of his own lack of education, not just in a mystical sense but in the sense of not being educated or well-read. Because of this, he cultivated an admiration for people who had an intellectual education. Nataraja Guru struck him as both a guru and a brilliant human being. He told Andy it was like a bolt out of the blue to encounter this man, and he was not shy about presenting himself to him. Some of that story is found in Part II.

Harry decided he would found the first American gurukula, in the New Jersey mountains, a place that gets very cold in winter. One time Dr. Natarajan had come to stay there, and there had been a blizzard, closing off access. The place had a wood burning stove, but Harry, who knew it was low on firewood, couldn't get to the cabin, and several days went by. He finally made it, and found Nataraja Guru sitting on top of the stove as the last embers were dying out in the icy room. Harry was amazed. "What are you doing?" The Guru replied, "I'm making this place holy."

Andy had gone to visit Harry at the behest of Nitya. He hardly had any money, and there was the medical complication that Harry had just suffered a heart attack, so Andy was staying at his sister's house. He knew he shouldn't spend another night with her, as he could see he was imposing on her family—he was just a weird person who had dropped in on them. He started looking for a place to live, with a firm conviction that God would protect him, a naive confidence that something would turn up. Yet nothing did turn up, and the sun was going down, and still he had no place to stay. In the middle of Clearwater, he came across a truck parked in a field, and on the windshield was a note, *truck will not start - back in the morning*. The door was open, so Andy crawled in the back and found some discarded newspapers for blankets. He alternated between freezing in the truck and drinking coffee with the local cops off and on all night at a shop across street.

The next morning he went to Harry's, and Harry was freaked out. He said "Where have you been? We almost called the cops." When he calmed down, he was delighted to hear Andy hadn't found a place, but he scolded him, "You didn't do one thing. You didn't look *everywhere*." He gave him a penetrating look, and suddenly Andy remembered there was that one place clear across town, with a room for rent. He had knocked, but no one answered, so he moved on. He went back and yes, there was a room for him. When Andy described this, Harry told him story of the stove, as it seemed related. Harry had many years of discipleship with Nataraja Guru.

Steven was taken aback about the two lesbians being expelled from the gurukula, having believed there was no prejudice in it about such things. He remembers Nitya describing John Spiers, who was well respected and openly homosexual, so he thought it was not a big deal. This needed some explanation.

Charles told him that there were times when he skinned John Spiers alive. Nataraja Guru could be a different person, sometimes a scary person that you didn't know. His disciples were misfits and crazies, and he had to be a bit crazy to relate to them on their level.

Charles talked about how the Guru's disciples always noticed that Nitya's disciples were nice people. They thought—especially Curran and Freddy, the gangster and the pirate—that nice people were dull. We were crazy, and that made us interesting. We started slowly becoming aware of Nitya, and then his disciples started coming. Debbie was in fact the first, in 1971. Nitya's disciples were well adjusted, which was proof that not only they, but Nitya too, were worthless.

The line in L&B about Nataraja Guru being a lion tamer in the circus, was not mere hyperbole.

Steven was shocked that a guru would pick on the social stigma in anyone's identity, maintaining it is cruel to focus on that as something that needs to be deconstructed to know your true self. He asked if you would you do that to a black person, for instance? He hoped we are now in a different place. Steven has wrestled with the idea of the guru as the ultimate authority, and that we are supposed to put utter trust in their authority. Gurus are also products of an environment in which bigotry exists, cultural biases exist, and Steven reserves the right to remain somewhat critical.

The point is well taken, but I don't think that's what was going on. To break through a person's ego resistance, which is the strongest force in the universe, it sometimes takes a shocking outburst. Nataraja Guru used to say "A bad disease needs a drastic remedy." To make transformation real, a guru must at times attack what you defend as your self-image, whatever it might be. It's very painful, yet when done well, very liberating.

Charles clarified that when things went wrong with the Guru and the women, they had been his close companions and had been his secretaries and maids of all work for several years. They were accepted as lesbians without further ado, but it was time for them to go. Charles was someplace else, staying with Mogapa Swami at the time. He happened to drop back by right then, and it was clear to him that they were clinging, they had over-adopted Nataraja Guru. He gave hints that they should hit the road, and they ignored them, thinking whatever the guru does or says, you accept it as a teaching, and stay put. But that is not what was happening. He told them forcefully to go and they still wouldn't. That's when he started talking about homosexuals, just as if somehow or other that was part of their problem.

I underlined Charles' point that the two women were due to move on, presumably for their spiritual wellbeing. The guru must have realized he had to wipe out any vestige of their holding on, so he had to be ferocious. They went on to live the lives they had wanted to, all along.

Andy has had some abusive treatment himself, and recognizes Nataraja's angry streak. Nitya did it too. Nancy Y spoke the other night about her upsetting treatment by Nitya. In the early days, everyone got some of it. Nitya's way was that you should never experiment with people. He believed he could intervene if he enjoyed sufficient trust on the part of a disciple, so they wouldn't jump ship when the going got tough. Since everyone's structure is a bit different, there has to be a strategic application of pressure to their egos. Outsiders may not appreciate what's going on. Andy is forever grateful for the two weeks of tough treatment he endured under Guru Nitya. He never took him for granted after that, and was always a little scared of him. Nitya had a dangerous quality in what appeared to Andy's ego. Because of this experience, he sincerely doubts that the treatment of those ladies was bigotry.

Jan admitted to being surprised and disappointed by the abusive side of gurus, but is trying to keep it in context.



Andy responded that he didn't consider his experiences as abuse, they were corrective, but prone to being misinterpreted by anyone who is not privy to their relationship. For him, it's part of the baggage of our archetypical picture of spiritual teachers, especially coming from popular concepts of Zen, where teachers whack you with a stick if you get out of line. Nitya wasn't that way at all. Andy once asked him why he wasn't being tougher on him. Nitya replied, "It's because your voice in me is not strong enough." It implied that he was willing to correct him, but there had to be more depth to their bipolar relationship before he would undertake it.

Steven shared that he most values the friends who tell it like it is, who are honest in pointing out his faults when necessary. He has seen that in relationships in general, they go through these kinds of phases, where tension builds up to a critical level, there might be a fight, and then afterwards there is a wonderful resolution. It's not like you go back, because the relationship has deepened. In his experience with Nitya he was reprimanded and hurt, then that night found a cartoon by his bed of a chick breaking out of its shell, signed, Love Nitya. It told him that what he'd gone through was a process of growth. Nitya gave him a hug the next day, and he felt incredible bliss in it, and their relationship was different from then on. He had administered his medicine in a dose that Steven could stand, then he quickly picked him back up and healed him with his love.

Some of us took a lot longer to catch the drift.... I know in my case, if I'd thought that what was happening to me was part of an education program, I would easily have remained impervious to its effects. Not knowing laid me wide open, so I could make the most of it—or, better, it could make the most of me.

As Andy put it, we are all motivated by agendas. Nitya didn't have an agenda, so you couldn't manipulate him. That's what truly allows for real trust.

A guru with an agenda is a dangerous thing. Neutrality is absolutely essential. It is a measuring rod to sniff out charlatans—

look for the agenda behind their façade. They may not even be aware of it themselves, but it will be detectable.

I wanted to close by putting the idea of abusive behavior to rest. Gurus at their best, like Nataraja and Nitya, are the most generous people, giving their whole lives to others. They aren't motivated by money or adoration; they care about helping people adjust their lives to optimize the experience of being in a body. They are in it to care for people's hearts and minds, and the adjustments they administer might look superficially abusive but are very artistic, well-conceived psychological work. It takes supreme skill. And it has to be invited.

It can go wrong in the hands of the inept or the selfish, and that's why it isn't part of mainstream legal therapy. That's probably right—for every true guru there are a thousand bad imitations. You are supposed to become “realized” to be anointed a guru, but anyone can claim it. The proof is in the pudding.

My time of suffering was long (still is) but I shudder to imagine what my life would have been like without the blessing of Nitya's sharp intervention and ego downgrading. Modern life is essentially an ego-building game, and they grow so huge they can blot out the sun. We never notice, because the ego is “us.” My gratitude goes out to those brave souls who took us on, for our own good. It can't have been fun to do battle with us, but they performed it within a neutral balance, and so weren't brought down by it, as ordinary therapists would be. I doff my hat, and doff my head to them.

We closed with a reading of How Harry met Sally, er, Dr. Natarajan. Another “accidental” cross-pollination that bore fruit.

## Part II

### When You are Wrong

Once I was accompanying Nataraja Guru on the train from Delhi to Amritsar. Among our fellow passengers were two

gentlemen who were workers of the Indian Communist Party in the Punjab area. Seeing our saffron robes and our beards they took us for religious people, and wanted to discuss some of the fundamentals affecting human life.

The older one asked the guru, “Sir, do you believe in God?”

Nataraja Guru replied, “I cannot answer that question unless you tell me what you understand by the term ‘God’. The existence or nonexistence of God is to be determined by its definition.”

The elderly gentleman pursued his point, “And what is Guruji’s definition of God?”

Nataraja Guru gave him a slight smile and a look and answered, “That which is right when you are wrong is God.”

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Another treasure trove has just surfaced. I haven’t had a chance to listen in yet. Let me know what you find:

this is a single link

( <http://thesovereign.myasia.cloud/index.php/s/Gs7JLT8NGPRcce3> ) to all the audio files of Nataraja Guru. I've had them in cassettes, Shyam with the help of some friends recently converted them into mp3 format and uploaded them on to the cloud. They're transcribing them as well,

AUM,

Vinaya.

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Here’s the charming snippet where Nataraja Guru first meets Harry Jakobsen, in *Autobiography of an Absolutist*, Chapter 33. The Guru was speaking at the Ramakrishna center in New York, where he showed that even *he* was human:

I remember speaking the following week at an evening gathering at the special invitation of Swami Nikhilananda. The subject I had chosen was "How to Read the Gita" and I remember how as I went on developing the subject which was all original ground which I was myself bringing under the plough for the first time, I began to fumble, becoming more and more conscious of the New York audience used to formal sermons all readymade and well-ordered. I began to suspect that I was cutting a very poor figure as a speaker before them. Soon the thought took away whatever little confidence I could muster up in nicely finishing my speech. Instead the loss of confidence progressed in negatively geometric progression, and as a result all could see me fumbling and casting about in an effort to find correctly sequential sentences. The abruptness with which I apologized for my speech made the situation worsen to its last limits, and after admitting to the audience that I could not go any further, I came to the undignified close of a subject that was otherwise so dear to me and one on which I later wrote a whole work. In short, I fumbled and flopped and was a failure especially on a pulpit where speeches with classical finish usually came from Swami Nikhilananda and others.

Strangely enough, this failure, for which I have never ceased to be fully ashamed, had its compensatory side as I learnt later. The failure worked out to be the only stroke of a strange chance that brought me good luck when I was broke in my situation and wanted a miracle to happen not only to pay for the typewriter that I had ordered but even to eke out a living in the States as I had planned to do. Returning was equally difficult as staying on and there was nothing to choose between the alternatives.

### A Miracle Happens Again

The miracle did happen again. There was in the congregation or audience a simple Norwegian sailor who had jumped ship and settled down in the States. He was a full-blooded man to whom

mystical interests came normally and who was beginning, vaguely at first, to take some interest in spirituality or mysticism of some unconventional type. He was the owner of a machine shop and an expert inventor of tool grinders, known for his genius in several States in and round New York and just making good as a self-made engineer. Tall and well-built, with all human instincts in normal function he was also a natural mystic who had confidence in penetrating any problem that any other human being could. He had a contempt for eggheads who pretended to know more than they actually did.

This rather shy and sensitive man was listening to my speech that day and watching me too as he told me when we became the best of friends forever a month or two later. He admitted then that he felt a strange attraction for me creeping over his whole being just when I began to cast about for words in vain and finally failed floundering. He had established a sympathetic kinship with me which became further signed, sealed and delivered, as it were, to him just at the time he watched me admit my failure to make a good speech and abruptly broke off.

This was just the thing that worked in my favour with him, so finally and fully as he admitted, that he decided straightaway that he had found the man he was looking for to teach him. That I was introduced by Swami Nikhilananda as a direct disciple of a Guru in India and that I could still be found a failure in that characteristic way was for him too good to be true. After the lecture when all were dispersing, one Mr. Home of Lyndhurst, who was a friend of the sailor turned machine-shop owner, whispered to me that he had found someone in East Orange who would give me a cheaper room on the other side of the Hudson in East Orange, New Jersey. It turned out soon that it was none other than Harry Jakobsen, the same mystically disposed machine-shop man. He was there himself to confirm the availability of the room. It was to be free and I could be his guest as long as I liked.

All was fixed and understood in a trice, and the next day he came in his car to take me from my hotel round the corner uptown

with luggage and all for a drive of about 40 miles to his home. Luck has a way of turning the most difficult corner quickly, and what should have been the reverse soon happens by the pressure of the hand of luck, to be primed like a water pump just that favourable way, which, once started, gives water forever. This is what I have called the “figure of eight principles” hiding behind chance events when it works anywhere. Rains come down after many such figures of eight efforts, as one can see if one is trained to watch rain clouds as they darken or clear many times before the downpour. (325-7)

### Part III

Jay wrote: Enjoyed reading Charles’s story, and thought it as a kind of fairy tale. To find Guru just by saying, “*guru*” and *they replied*, “*Get in.*” is a miracle! It happens and I have faith in this type of communication. What followed was also amazingly amusing. Life is a miracle!

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From Dipika:

Nice one!

Interesting bits on the Gurus. In my understanding, a true Guru cannot be a friend, he may be friendly at times but more often he needs to keep you on the path so unless he is direct... it probably will not get through to the disciple.

It must have been hard for the Gurus to have the right amount of love & Teachings for disciples from totally diff backgrounds.... but here you all are and such warm, caring beings!