

Sri Sarada Society Notes

Dedicated to Holy Mother

Fall 2011 Volume 17, Issue 2

LESSONS ALONG THE TRAIL

A NOTE FROM JAYANTI: I had the opportunity of hearing Reverend Kevin Bucy of the Universal Spirit Center in San Diego, California, tell of his summer trek along the snow-covered John Muir Trail in the Sierra Nevada mountain range of California. With his permission I've adapted the theme of his talk for SRI SARADA SOCIETY NOTES. As Kevin observed, it isn't necessary to go into the wilderness to experience God. Yet the majesty of nature serves to heighten one's experiences of the Divine presence as well as of the obstacles within us that regularly block our awareness.

This winter saw the most snowfall since they began recording snowfall in the Sierras. It was still like winter along the trail, which meant that we didn't know where the path was. To have to go 200 plus miles in a particular direction after having lost the trail is a bit disconcerting.

There were moments along the trail when I experienced the majesty and the awesomeness, the power of nature, and felt as if I wasn't observing it or witnessing it. I was connected. These were moments when I was in a relationship with the power of nature, with its magnitude and mystery. I was part of this bigger thing and so easily I recognized it as God...so easily.

Then there were times that threatened to rob me of these experiences, make them go away or seem "less than." These dangers were not bears or snow-covered mountain passes or rapid rivers, not anything in the wilderness. Rather, they were things in me, tendencies I had brought into the wilderness that threatened an open-hearted, intimate experience with the mystery and the power and wonder.

EXPECTATIONS: First to threaten my intimate experience with what was going on were the expectations that I was bringing to the trail about what I needed to have happen for me to feel safe or that I was having a good day. For instance, having less snow or arriving at the perfect camp site at the end of the day, or having less pain and fatigue would make it a good day for me—as opposed to simply letting the journey bring what it brings. I'm labeling this the "It will only be good if..." threat. Those expectations tell us that this life or this relationship, this job, this experience "will only be good if," as opposed to just letting it be what it is.

LOOKING AHEAD: The next threat came from the fact that we had to travel a certain distance each day in order

to keep on schedule. So what tended to rob me of my awareness of the majesty around me was that I would be looking ahead to that daily destination as if getting there was all that mattered. Another way of saying this is that we tend to be asking ourselves: "What is the next thing I have to do or plan for? What's next on my list? What is going to happen?" We then live in the future and the future never comes. So, while living somewhere other than right where we are, we miss what or who is here next to us.

ANTICIPATION: It is customary to exchange information with hikers coming in the opposite direction about what lies ahead. So the potential for fear and anxiety is pretty intense. I found the next threat came when I would get lost in the worry and play a situation out in my mind again and again. And it always came out to be the worst-case scenario. In my mind I crossed snow-covered passes so many more times than the crossing before me, and the actual challenge was never as bad as the one I imagined. How often we let the worry of anticipation, playing over and over the possible dangers, rob us of our joy?

"PUSHING ON": About seventeen days into the trip I was getting really tired and hurting. I entertained the idea of "bailing," of cutting the trip short. Immediately my mind resisted: "But I need to do this and *I need to do it perfectly*"—even though my body was saying something else. And then I had the thought, "What if, for me, this journey has come to an end?" Choosing to leave the trail was a significant spiritual practice for me: Recognizing something is complete when it feels complete, not when it's "supposed to be" complete.

The one thing common about all these threats is that they were all happening in my mind. None of them were "out there." In these moments when I disconnected from the intimacy of what is, I was in my head, I was living from a mental concept. When I was able to leave the mental concepts and come into the present moment, I became aware that the very fabric of our world is beauty and order. It is beyond a beauty and order that happens when everything goes my way. It is a beauty and order that is grander than my individual life. My life cannot contain it, but it contains my life. I am a part of it. And it is simply a question of being aware of and open to this realization at every moment.

IN MOTHER'S WORDS: "My child, this mind is just like a wild elephant. It races with the wind. Therefore one should discriminate all the time. One should work hard for the realization of God."

THE WAY OF MUSIC

Music has an extraordinary power to help us in our spiritual practices. Instrumental music carries us to realms where words do not go. When that abstract beauty is combined with words expressing great spiritual truth...music's emotional power, combined with its rhythmic repetition, helps our subconscious minds easily absorb spiritual content on many levels.

From the "Vedanta In Song" website

Western devotees of Vedanta have long appreciated India's rich musical heritage. Yet the unfamiliar languages and styles have often kept us from reaping the full benefit from spiritual compositions, bhajans, and chants.

Subrata (Jay Traylor) is among a growing number of longtime devotees who are dedicating their talents toward helping to make Vedantic teachings more readily integrated into Western culture. For more than two decades devotees in San Diego have been uplifted by wonderfully singable Vedanta-inspired songs written, composed, and orchestrated by Subrata. Now all may enjoy this treasure, as individual song recordings, lyrics, and sheet music are made available from <http://vedantain song.com> (see page 4).

ILLUMINATING LOVE

SOME INSPIRING ILLUSTRATIONS OF SRI RAMAKRISHNA, HOLY MOTHER, AND SWAMIJI AND THEIR LOVE, by Swami Tathagatananda, Vedanta Society of New York, 2011, pp 186. Reviewed by Joan Shack.

In *THE MASTER AS I SAW HIM*, Sister Nivedita writes: "Our Master has come and he has gone, and in the priceless memory he has left with us who knew him, there is no other thing so great, as his love of man." Irrespective of one's impressions of the life and contributions of Swami Vivekananda, these pointed words of one who knew him so well are reason enough to pause and reflect. When all is said and done, it is his "love of man" that Sister Nivedita concluded was what he bequeathed to those who knew him.

This is the unifying theme of Swami Tathagatananda's newest offering to spiritual seekers worldwide: Religion is love. Swami Tathagatananda uses illustrations from the lives of Sri Ramakrishna, Sri Sarada Devi, and Swami Vivekananda to inspire the reader to put religion into practice in a particularly relevant form: loving concern for mankind.

Providing minimal background and personal comments, the author simply relates documented episodes which speak for themselves as to the meaning of real religion. This book is unique in that it provides illustrations of all three in one publication, thereby making the common theme of loving concern all the more transparent and more powerful. Many books have been written on each individually. This is one of the few which looks to the whole, the sum total of the

Ramakrishna movement as defined by those who were its life source.

Illustrations from the life of Sri Ramakrishna exemplify forgiveness, service, and boundless mercy—teachings common to all religions. Ramakrishna forgave a man who had vilified him, himself crying for the suffering of that man's young child. We see how the poverty of the village people he encountered while on pilgrimage moved him to tears, prompting him to repeatedly insist that their plight be ameliorated. Even during the last days of his life at Cossipore, he continued to serve in many telling ways. For example, he slowly crawled across the floor in pain in order to offer Girish Ghosh water from his own hand.

Sri Sarada Devi's love took the form of accepting every person as her own child. Her simple, uncomplicated acts as a mother carried service to humanity to new heights. Her house was everyone's house: monk or householder, Hindu or Muslim, hardened criminal or social elite. "They are all my children" was her rejoinder to those who would have her act contrary to the movements of a mother's heart, even when enjoined by caste to do so. Many are the accounts of devotees who recorded that they found the physical likeness of their own mother in her benign face.

Her last words of advice serve all ages, all her children, and are conclusive proof of the universality of her love: "Learn to make the world your own. Nobody is a stranger, my dear."

As for Swamiji, the illustrations chosen by the author, some well known, some relatively unknown, are testimonies to a heart which bled for humanity. Swamiji and his brother disciples came upon a man lying on the roadside barely clad, soiled and crying piteously from the pain of dysentery. They lifted him up, assisted him in traveling to their place of residence, bathed him, clothed him, and treated his condition. Another instance: to inspire courage in the workers helping those afflicted by plague in Kolkata, Swamiji came to live in a poor house of afflicted people. He wrote a pamphlet listing effective anti-plague measures and sanitary precautions that could be adapted by everyone to counter the spread of the plague and then saw to its distribution.

In 1893, Swamiji began his address at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago with the words, "Brothers and Sisters of America." His message was universal acceptance of all religions as "different paths which men take...all (of which) lead to Thee." In the global world of today, his message has gradually gained wider acceptance since his time. But presently, as the grave consequences of hatred, fear, and greed afflict humanity worldwide, universal love of the kind so aptly illustrated in the lives of the three luminaries in this publication needs to be manifested by the votaries of all religions. We are indebted to the author for the timely inspiration this publication provides.

WHO WE ARE: Sri Sarada Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the furtherance of Holy Mother's inspiration in the West, particularly as it manifests through women.

DUNGANNON'S NIVEDITA

Sister Gayatriprana writes of her pilgrimage to Sister Nivedita's hometown in Ireland.

A year ago I was introduced to Jean McGuinness, who wanted to know all she could about Margaret Noble from someone in the monastic order Margaret had belonged to. Jean had taken early retirement from an academic post in order to study the Irish language. The degree she was taking required her to write an essay in Irish Gaelic, but she had been wondering just quite on what subject. After a lot of nonproductive Googling, she was walking down the main street of her own hometown of Dungannon, when something caught her eye. It was a white and blue plaque that Jean was certain had not been there before.

Jean at once got in touch with Mr. Maurice Hayes, the gentleman whose researches into the notables from Tyrone (the county in which Dungannon is located) had led him to have the plaque installed. And as soon as Jean heard even the bare outlines of Margaret's life, she was hooked. Margaret would be the subject of her essay in Irish! She invited me over to meet with her in Dungannon and tell her all I knew about Sister Nivedita.

I found myself in Dungannon at the end of May this year, participating in a celebration of Margaret/Nivedita. The first day we heard tributes to her attitude of discipleship and commitment to Indian tradition; her international impact on thinkers on art and human creativity; and how the close cultural and political ties that existed and still exist between India and Ireland provided for Nivedita links and precedents which she employed in her far-reaching work in India.

The following day we were taken on a tour of Dungannon on which every paving stone seemed steeped in the history of Ireland's struggle for freedom. I understood why the town is recognized as a leader in civil rights and revolution—and why Nivedita, taken to India by Vivekananda primarily to further women's education, inexorably found herself drawn to inject into India's burgeoning struggle for freedom her Irish fire and her focus on Vivekananda's message of the spiritual basis of India's national unity. This insight tied right in with my own talk that evening at the Craic Theater, where Jean's dramatization of Nivedita's life was to take place. I spoke of how difficult it was for Nivedita, a humanistic, democratic, independent-thinking, modern woman on fire with the need for the freedom of both Ireland and India, to work with the massive passivity and self-satisfaction of Mother India's millennial culture, which at times seemed about to snuff her out forever. I also mentioned Sarada Devi, who had silently and unwaveringly stood behind her beloved Khooki, and given her the support to keep going in her mission to raise India through the power of the Divine Feminine.



Jean's play "Awakening a Nation," put on by the local talent, quickly plunged us into the core of her relationship with her guru Vivekananda with a reading of the words from his letter of June 7th, 1896: "Religions of the world have become lifeless mockeries. What the world wants is character. The world is in need of those whose life is one burning love, selfless. That love will make every word tell like a thunderbolt."

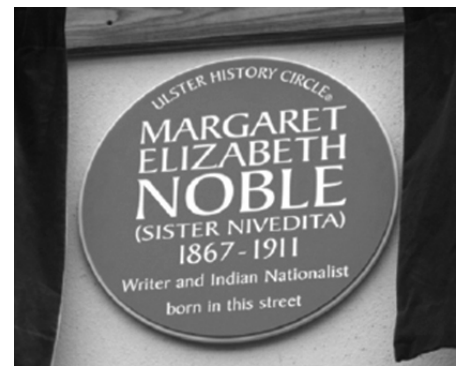
This wonderful beginning suffused the whole play, which covered her work with plague victims in Kolkata, with Aurobindo to resist British tyranny, and after a period of interior struggle, her launching out on her international lecture tour. Once again, Jean's choice of materials was stunning, and we suddenly realized just what a force Nivedita was for change, although she met with so much opposition and obstruction, both in India and in the West.

Then we see her sick and unable to do her work, followed by the final scene where her bier is carried in and laid down with reverence. We hear the voice of Rabindranath Tagore speaking out his final eulogy of a woman he called the Mother of the people: "He who has seen her has seen the essential form of man, the form of the spirits... She is to be respected not because she was a Hindu,

but because she was great. She is to be honored not because she was like us, but because she was greater than we."

As these soaring words are spoken with the utmost gravity and feeling, images of Margaret's life appear behind her bier, slowly moving from Ireland to India, from there to the Himalayan peaks, and finally up into the endlessly moving clouds above the Himalayas.

In the words of Dungannon's mayor, Nivedita demonstrated "the power of selfless sacrifice and how it is possible to change society through individual efforts."



From "The Golden Thread"

There's a Golden Thread That ties us all together
 There's nobody left out And that, I'm sure of
 There's a Golden Thread That ties us all together
 Oh my mind knows it as truth
 And my heart feels it as love

I am thinking right now Of my brothers and sisters
 The smile on their faces Reflects a light divine
 Though their customs and clothes
 And their language are different
 The light in their eyes is the same
 Light as mine

by Subrata, <http://vedantainsong.com>

FACING THE TERRIBLE

One day recently I was diagnosed with cancer. That night, after hearing the news, I took my dread into the meditation room, where every night for some time I had been reading Swami Sarvagatananda's *MEDITATION AS SPIRITUAL CULMINATION: YOGA APHORISMS OF PATANJALI*. This commentary on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras consists of the lectures on Raja Yoga given by the Swami from 1977 to 1981 at the Ramakrishna Vedanta Society of Massachusetts, in Boston. I had been reading over and over the Swami's commentary on Chapter Three, in which he urges one to make *samyama*, or to identify with a difficult person or thing, making it your own, as the way to minimize your fear, peacelessness, bitterness, and hatred in life. One can imagine making nice things, and friends, one's own, but the hard thing is to do that with something as feared as cancer. Yet Swami urges "complete identification with the rogue, with the rascal," and the need to "learn the art

of...not tolerating, no, accepting, not helplessly but willingly, consciously, deliberately, knowingly."

Keeping these powerful words in mind, I wasted no time asking the futile question "Why me?" but, owning my illness, took the necessary steps to begin treatment. Now that the chemotherapy part of my treatment is over, I have entered the stage in my illness that is optimistically called survivorship. At this point, "acceptance" means finding and adhering to a healthful diet, getting proper rest, and living my life fully, conscious of the fact that my remaining years may be fewer than I had anticipated. For though my prognosis is very good, the cancer could recur or metastasize, and one of the chemotherapy drugs that I was given to fight it is known to cause cancer. So it is especially now that I follow Mother's urging to "Think of me; Think of me; Think of me."

EDITOR'S NOTE: Swami Vivekananda held that Vedanta is immensely practical and Sri Sarada Devi was continuously engaged in everyday life. How do we use the tools given us by Vedanta? Do they have application as we meet the expectations and demands and rewards in our daily life? How do we know we are making spiritual progress? How has a spiritual approach to life changed, or maybe even transformed, our character?

When there is a definite connection to a spiritual principle or insight we have found that sharing some personal aspects of one's life experience can be helpful to others, reminding us all that spiritual growth is a process that comes with and through practice, not an instant jump to success. Self-reflection is a key practice. Vedanta not only allows us to own our feelings without guilt or shame or pride, but really requires that we do so in order that we use them as a means of spiritual development. We encourage submissions from our readers about how they have applied the principles of Vedanta. Submissions may name the author or be published anonymously, as is the preceding submission.

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