

Following the depth perception

By Stephen Muratore

On the day after Thanksgiving, in the year 1976 of the Christian Era, I boarded a train in Penn Station that would carry me to Boston. Long train rides are good for thinking, and I had a lot to think about. I had abandoned a promising career, and had said goodbye to my family thinking I might never see them again.

As an eight-year-old altar boy of St. Hugh's parish in Huntington, I would be dropped at the door of the church before six on weekday mornings by my father on his way to work. Fr. Casey had given me the key so that I could let myself in. Once inside, I would prepare the church, the altar table, the vestments and Eucharistic elements for the celebration of the Mass. A good half hour before the priest arrived, I would work alone on these tasks.

The church, a building half a block long and as high as a hill, was midnight-dark, lit only by a few sputtering votive candles, when I entered. I entered the church from the side, slowly found my way to the main aisle, and walked its length in the dark silence toward the altar. After genuflecting at the foot of the altar, I walked down the transepts toward the entrance to the vestry. This is where the morning's holy work would begin. Finding a taper, I would proceed through another door into the apse to light the altar candles. Until this moment, the church had been in near-perfect darkness. It was this darkness as much as the light that broke into it—this darkness; the pre-dawn silence, the vastness of the church echoing the rustling of my cassock and the small scuffling whispers of my solitary ministrations within it—it was this dark silence that brought the Holy to me. A luminous presence embraced me in this rich darkness, in this stillness pregnant with deep mystery. The divine found me through the yearning of the dark church: in power, and in peace, and—strange to feel through awe—with love.

By the time I turned 16, however, the Church meant to me nothing but restrictions, and I wanted out. I got out as soon as I left home, when my mother couldn't make me go to Mass anymore. But those early-morning intimations of the sacred in the dark church never left me.

Throughout my college years, I ingested ideas that built in me a conviction that the world we ordinarily perceive is just the outermost layer, the epidermis, of the world as it really is. I'd picked up strands of this concept in a philosophy course, *Theories of Knowledge and Reality*, in books about the thinking of Einstein and Heisenberg, in a religious studies course by William Irwin Thompson with an unassuming title like, *Myth, Culture and the Evolution of a Planetary Consciousness*, and in the free-flowing currents of hippy café philosophy of the time. Matter is just a crystallization of energy. Matter is only the way our senses perceive dense vortices of energy. The universe is a diaphanous pellicle of energy fields, layer enfolded within layer, shimmering, ever-moving, billowing in the cosmic breeze.

Also, ever since the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi taught Transcendental Meditation to the Beatles, college campuses had been receiving strong injections of popularized wisdom from the East, gurus, spiritual practices, oriental metaphysics. The world we perceive is an illusion. Matter is only one crystallization of Mind.

The drugs *du jour* supported these concepts with empirical perceptions. Bodies melted into their surrounding environments. Hard physical reality itself melted, folded, dripped, shimmered: a panoply of color, a fabric of vibrations.

These concepts and perceptions were at the root of my fascination with electronic arts and with music. The very medium of these arts is energy: electrons igniting the phosphors in screens, electromagnetic waves buzzing the earth's magnetosphere, vibrations of air we perceive as sound.

Into my life came the teachers with their teachings. The portal to the world of spiritual practices, for me, was a weekend workshop taught by students of Oscar Ichazo, the Bolivian founder of the Arica school. The Arica school taught, "...a body of techniques for inherent consciousness-raising and an ideology to relate to the world in an awakened way." The presenters told us that their techniques could open our perceptions to the dimensions of reality that lie behind the physical world without the use of drugs. One weekend of Arica's syncretistic batch of techniques

didn't get me "there," but it opened my mind to the possibility that various spiritual practices might indeed push open the doors of perception. Over the next few years, I tried several practices toward this end.

A friend took me to a zendo and showed me zazen. Another got me to chant "Nam myoho renge kyo" for an hour. Another brought me to a Sufi retreat where we whirled like dervishes. I took some hatha yoga classes. Vidya, a white-robed, turbaned disciple of Amrit Desai invited me to a yoga retreat where her master would demonstrate *shaktipat* yoga: the transmission of life-force from guru to disciple. (Vidya was beautiful. Had she invited me to stand on my head on a bed of nails on the dark side of the moon, I would have done it.) I tried chaotic yoga, and it lived up to its name. At one point, I had personal experience of *shaktipat*--an experience of transcendent bliss I cannot explain to this day--with another yoga master. This *shaktipat* guru transmitted the energy by singing a simple tune about a bluebird, and by playing a melody on a harmonium. Finally, I settled into regular practice of a kundalini yoga taught by the followers of Yogi Bhajan of the 3HO Foundation.

Most hatha yoga teachers I had encountered before this taught us to move into the postures slowly, gently, and to relax whenever a posture became painful. The teachers themselves emanated peacefulness. They spoke softly, as though they were coaxing the life force in each of us to awaken gradually. In contrast, the kundalini teachers got us to twist ourselves into painful postures, and they told us to push ourselves beyond what we thought were our limits. "Keep those legs up, *ji*, you've got only five minutes left for this position. Does it hurt? Increase the rate of the 'breath of fire' (rapid breathing from the gut). Don't let up. Make every second count. No pain, no gain." The instructor I had most often, the head of the local 3HO ashram, did not speak softly. Sometimes he barked. Listening to his voice prompting us as we held long painful poses, I often imagined him, not very charitably, as a Marine drill sergeant.

The kundalini teachers explained their theory in this way. "Yoga is based on the idea that a well of life energy lies dormant at the base of the human spine. This often is depicted, in yogic iconography, as a serpent sleeping at the base of the spine. Yogic disciplines aim at getting the serpent--the life force--to move up the spine through each of the *chakras* until it opens the *chakra* at the top of the head, the Crown Chakra, and flies free. When this happens, the yogi becomes enlightened, and capable of heightened perceptions. Hatha yoga tries to awaken the serpent gradually, letting it take its own time to progress through the top of the head. This could take a lifetime, and the serpent may not make it to the Crown Chakra before the yogi dies. With the kundalini method, we get results far faster. We force the serpent to wake up, and then we push it up the spine. If you want the mercury in a thermometer to rise, you could just wait for a warm day, or you could light a match under it. With the kundalini method, we light the match. Yogi Bhajan said there are many ways to climb a mountain, and most of them take switchbacks and circuitous routes to the top. Our method starts at the bottom and climbs straight up to the top."

Yogis told horror stories, with some relish, of kundalini mishaps. One yogi progressed so rapidly that the "serpent" shot straight from the base of his spine to his Crown Chakra in minutes. He spent the rest of his life insane. Another pushed his practice too far, and came to feel his body burning in a hellish fire.

A quick, direct path to cosmic consciousness? Damn the aching muscles, sign me up! Also, something so hard, so painful, was bound to be good for me, no?

I wanted to get a full dose. In the summer between my junior and senior years at college, I moved into the 3HO ashram. The men slept in the dank basement, on unpadded plywood boards with thin blankets and no pillows. ("Good for the spine"!) My skin was cold and clammy when we awoke before five to start our practice. We started each day with a cold shower, and then proceeded upstairs to the room where we did a couple of hours of hard-driving yoga practice. Our diet was strictly vegetarian. I lived in the ashram for 40 days and 40 nights. It was hard work, but a couple of times during my ashram adventure, I did indeed get transcendent tastes of the inner realities I sought.

But something was amiss. The ashram threw into bold relief something that had bothered me throughout my samplings of oriental spiritual practices: most of them were rooted in Eastern cultures, religions, and philosophies. They had grown from world-views outside of the Western religious and philosophical traditions. The Eastern paths

that were taught on Western campuses brought with them a repudiation of the Western traditions. The gurus implied, or stated outright, that Western culture, based on rationalism and materialism, was bereft of mysticism and of paths to an expanded consciousness. University book learning was looked down upon. The advances of science were trivialized. The gurus had a strong anti-intellectual streak. In the ashram we lived, as much as possible, in the culture of traditional India. We ate Indian food. We wore turbans. We chanted in Punjabi.

It did not make sense to me that anyone should have to cut off his cultural roots in order to expand his consciousness. Abandoning the West, I'd be abandoning my own psycho-somatic make up. I'm a Western person, containing the genetic and cultural endowments of Italy and the Roman empire. Renouncing all of this, at best, I'd become only a facsimile Indian. How could the fulfillment of my human potential require the denial of so much of my own composition? I hoped instead for a spiritual path that incorporated Western culture and its Judeo-Christian roots.

During the summer after my sophomore year in college, a young man walked into the health food store where I was buying yoghurt for my lunch. He was wearing Catholic-style clerical garb, with a Roman collar, but his clericals were blue in color, not black. He was luminescent. I could not take my eyes off him. He met my glance, smiled, and said, "It's the Light you are seeing." He introduced himself as Brother John, told me he was a Brother in the Holy Order of MANS, and invited me to attend one of their services in a chapel the Order had opened off campus. "Services?" I asked. "You are a Christian order?" Brother John's smile felt like a wink. "Our services are probably not like others you have experienced."

As we both left the health food store, Brother John pulled a pipe from his pocket, filled it with tobacco, and started smoking. Every spiritual discipline I had encountered until then required abstinence from smoking: a necessity for attuning the body to higher energies. "You smoke?" I asked Brother John.

"I need it to keep myself grounded," he replied. "I eat meat too. We've got so much of the Light running through us we'd just float away without it."

I found the Holy Order of MANS chapel the next Sunday, and entered before services were to begin. Brother John met me at the door, and invited me into the chapel. The chapel occupied the living room of a small family home. Three waist-high candlesticks formed a triangle in front of a wooden altar. Two candelabras sat atop the altar, and the Order insignia emblazoned its face: a cross inside a triangle inside a circle inside a square. A little shrine in one of the back corners of the chapel held a portrait, I think *Christ at Thirty Three* by Heinrich Hofmann. There was a *prie-dieu* in front of the portrait. As I walked into the chapel, all my nerves tingled to the vibration of a sweet high note. I felt my body become suffused with light and peace. Brother John looked at my face and saw that I felt it. "Just wait until the service," he said, smiling, and beckoned me to sit next to him, meditating, until the service had begun.

It took me a couple more years to get my degree. Then, I got a plum of a career job right after I graduated. But I worked there at Manhattan Cable Television only long enough to pay off my student loans: one year. I went home, taught my mother to drive, and had Thanksgiving dinner with the family.

My family wanted to know why I would join an organization that required me to abandon my career, renounce all my worldly goods, and sever communication with family and friends. I said, "We're now able to explore the bottoms of the oceans. We've put a man on the moon, and will explore outer space. But we have not even begun to explore the inner space of the mind and the other dimensions of the universe." It seemed, at first, that my words had fallen on stony ears all around the table. A hippy cousin broke the silence with, "Man, we all know there are more dimensions than we can see. You are the only one who is doing anything about it."

A few days later, I got on the train for the Holy Order of MANS novitiate center in Boston. When I found it, I walked up and down the street before the center for a good 30 minutes, asking myself again and again whether I should knock on that door.

Footnote A book was written about the history of the Order: *The Odyssey of a New Religion: The Holy Order of Mans from New Age to Orthodoxy* by Phillip Charles Lucas. Many in the Order, including many of the authorities, were unhappy with the book. By my lights, however, it is a fair treatment of the subject, and not unsympathetic--even though the sentence Phillip quotes from me is a personal embarrassment.