

Adventures of a New Age Traveler by Mariana Caplan

Radical Spirit: Spiritual Writings from the Voices of Tomorrow [Ed. Stephen Dinan]

There were no welcome banners at the entrance to California as I had imagined from the way Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell and Kate Wolf sing of it. The Rainbow Family didn't throw a welcome party just because I had arrived. Instead, I spent my first weeks in Oakland, looking out between the steel bars of a dusty attic-bedroom window, wondering what the hell to do with my life. Occasionally I would dare the walk between myself and the Underground, where I would pass the afternoon getting on and off at random stops, trying to figure out where I was and waiting for something significant to happen.

On a balmy September afternoon, while sitting on hippie hill in Golden Gate Park with my journal, I divided my priorities into four:

- 1) find a spiritual practice that is practical and utterly ordinary;
- 2) land a solid job;
- 3) get a place to live;
- 4) get myself into therapy to find out what the hell I have been running from all my life.

I did okay on the spiritual thing—landing myself as a Vipassana Buddhist with a Jewish teacher from the East Coast. Pragmatically speaking, Buddhism meant that I'd sit my butt on a cushion every morning for a half-hour trying to catch a glimpse of my breath between the entourage of visitors that frequented my mind. One evening a week I would attend dharma talks, during which my nice-Jewish-boy teacher who didn't know I existed would try to persuade us to act like human beings.

Twice a year I'd go to the desert in southern California for a 10-day silent meditation retreat with a crotchety European meditation teacher. Hour after hour she instructed us in her shrill German-English accent about how to feel the flow of air as it brushed the hairs at the entrance to our nasal passage. She demanded 'round the clock practice, so when we used the toilet we were requested to feel the texture of cheap toilet paper in our hand, experience the friction as it collided with our ass, and inhale the stench of the outhouse without turning away from it. Mindfulness, they said.

Watching an invisible breath for ten consecutive days without speaking to anybody can get pretty brutal, so my fellow meditators and I would deal with our frustration by doing things like dropping a fork during lunch so everybody would look our way or clearing our throats too loudly as we organized ourselves on our zafus. One day I purposely slit my finger while cutting carrots for lunch. It's not that I decided the moment before that I would cut myself, but the instant I did it I knew that it had been intentional, and I drank up the attention like a cool lemonade as people came over, fussed with my hand, and showed some concern for the fact that I was alive.

Seven days into the third retreat I could no longer endure the inner workings of my mind. The teacher had refused my fourth request for a meeting to discuss my sanity, her German accent was driving me nuts, and when she

asked which of my feet had touched the floor first that morning I wanted to punch her.

In spite of my concerns of the karmic implications of ditching a meditation retreat, a spiritual teacher, and my own mind, I fled. At 3:15 in the morning after all were sound asleep, I secretly packed my bags, crept over to the main building, left my good-bye note, and silently climbed into my white Honda with the green hood. After driving in first gear out the sand driveway, I cued my cassette player to Cat Steven's *Wild World*, and blasted my way out of Joshua Tree at 90 miles an hour.

In spite of such rebellions, my spiritual practice was sound. God didn't punish me for breaking out of meditation jail, and through studying the Buddhist scriptures and beginning to familiarize myself with my own mind, I finally realized that my mind is no different than everybody else's. Therein, I discovered I was not crazy.

Meanwhile, the home front became less and less "conventional." Within days of moving into what appeared to be a sanctuary of goddesses, I discovered that I was living in a witches' coven. To befriend a witch is one thing, and to live with one, or many, is quite another. The presiding witch of the household called herself Luna. She had a tiny frame, huge breasts, tattoos all over her body, deep green eyes and a different color hair every other week (ranging from bleached white, to psychedelic green, to bald, to black witchy braids). Luna ran a magic store in the city, but made her rent by working as a "sacred prostitute," tending to the sexual fantasies of a few wealthy donors who made sure that rent and food were covered. She painted her room forest green, covered the floor with soil, dragged in stolen trees, hung bones on the walls, and draped black fish netting from the red velvet canopy that covered her bed. Luna drank wine in the morning, smoked hash in the afternoon, and spent hours concocting witch potions, both to help those she cared for and harm those whom she didn't. A bona fide bisexual, any shape or size individual might emerge from her bedroom in the late mornings.

But Luna's main squeeze was Jo, the other witch who lived down the hall in the dark blue bedroom painted like the night sky. People like Luna earn their title as witches, even if they are wicked and demented, whereas others are just witch wannabes. Still, Jo could get away with just about anything she wanted because she was so cute.

She was young, barely twenty, and a flaming red lesbian. Freckles all over her body, a fiery mane of red hair (the kind people pay thousands for), ruby lips, a pink complexion, and arrogant as high hell. Jo had been raised by hippies, getting anything she wanted by screaming loud enough, and had left home and lived on the streets as a teenager. She did phone sex for a job, and we would often lie on her bedroom floor rolling around in suppressed giggles as she verbally masturbated faceless heterosexual men on the other end of the line with hilarious descriptions of herself as a six-foot, skinny blonde. Jo was a pussycat on the inside, but she also wore a sheath of daggers.

There was one person, however, around whom Jo was as subservient as a willow tree, and that was Luna. Jo was Luna's servant—literally. Jo was Luna's backup lover whenever Luna didn't have somebody else in her bed. She was also her sister, friend, confidant, mother and child. To say they were codependent

would be an understatement, though together they created a chemistry that could light up a room. What finally got to me was when, in a fit of anguish over Luna's latest affair, Jo confessed that Luna had told her that she had been her slave in a past lifetime and that this is how their relationship was to continue in this lifetime... and Jo believed her!

The third player in our scene was Kathy, an ex-surfer girl from Malibu. Bleach blonde, tight muscles, tall and confident, Kathy had quit surfing when she was diagnosed with Epstein Barr virus, and had moved to San Francisco to get over her surfer boyfriend who had dumped her for a Cosmopolitan model.

Kathy and I liked to think that we were outside of the household psychosis until Mistress Luna was on sabbatical to her native Nashville. That night as we three remaining coven-mates lay on my black futon, presumably cuddling in my dark rose room with the large tree painted across the wall, we explored the fine boundary between an intimacy between women that is purely sensual, and one that is erotic. We slowly experimented with the difference between loving one woman, and loving two. We lived in that electric suspense for hours, not knowing what might happen from one moment to the next, until Jo finally broke out laughing. We all joined in, grateful, and got up and ordered in sushi.

Much as I enjoyed the status of "bi-sexual" on my increasingly self-aggrandizing spiritual resume, I nonetheless began to feel an old familiar hunger: Men. I figured a sexy, spiritualized man could provide an important training ground to test my newfound spiritual hypotheses. Plus, he would undoubtedly provide more raw material for therapy even if it didn't work out. A no-lose proposition.

In this way I began to attract a new breed of men (or the same old breed disguised under a new set of clothes) that over time I came to call "Zen boyfriends." I use the term "Zen" loosely here, because a man doesn't have to be a Zen Buddhist to fall into this category. He could be a Tibetan Buddhist, a Sufi, or even a practitioner of some obscure brand of yoga. The more rigid the tradition, the better for this type. What defines a Zen boyfriend is the manner in which he skillfully uses spiritual ideals and practices as an excuse for his terror of, and refusal to be in, any type of real relationship with a woman. He is both too identified with his balls to become a celibate monk, and at the same time too little identified with the wider implications of them to take responsibility for them. The result: a righteous, distant and very intelligent substitute for a real man.

Andrew was a great example of a Zen boyfriend. He was tall, bright, charming and strikingly attractive. He was creative, well versed in spiritual scriptures, a great chef, and exceptionally funny—but he couldn't give in to a woman if his life depended on it.

This is how a typical morning went for Andrew and me:

At 4:30 a.m. his alarm sounds (not a simple ring or buzz, but the schizophrenic chirping-bird type of alarm). "Andrew, your alarm is going off."

"Press the snooze."

I oblige. Then at 4:38 it goes off again. "Andrew, get up!"

"I'm too tired."

By the fourth snooze I was wide awake, while he dozed away like a baby in arms. When he'd finally open his eyes sometime around 5:30, I was

undeniably and un-spiritually pissed off. Without even a word or a glance in my direction, he would roll out of bed and head for the bathroom. I would listen with mounting rage as he gargled his Chinese herbs, did an hour of tai chi on the creaky hardwood floor, and then adjusted himself on his *zafu* to meditate. Often I would get up and meditate as well, but since I didn't practice the same form of meditation as he did, he said we couldn't practice together. Finally, just before 8—approximately three and one-half hours after the alarm had first sounded—he would come in and tell me he was making breakfast. Yippee. During breakfast his rule was silence so he could read the paper over organic oats and mint tea, both without sugar.

The argument was always the same:

“Why do you set your alarm if you're not going to get up?”

“It's important to hold the intention to get up early. The energy for meditation is strongest between three and five in the morning.”

“If it's so strong then why don't you just do it?”

And then:

“Andrew, it would make a big difference to me if you would at least say ‘good morning’ when you get up.”

“I want my meditation to be consistent with the delta waves that are activated during sleep, and speech interferes with this.”

“Even two words—‘good’ and ‘morning’?!”

“Yes, even two words.”

“How about a hug then?”

“Same thing.”

“Then why doesn't cold water on your face or flushing the toilet screw up the delta waves?”

“I need space. Conversation closed.”

Men need space. All women know this. But some men need two parts space for one part intimacy, or even ten parts space for one part intimacy. But with Andrew, and other Zen boyfriends, it was more like 98 parts space to 2 parts intimacy. What they really want to be in relationship with is a stone goddess, not a woman.

It was lose-lose proposition with Andrew. Exactly why I wanted our relationship to work so badly in the first place is a worthwhile question, but I am a woman, and the more a man withdraws into himself, the more a woman chases him there to draw him out. Andrew told me that our relationship wasn't working because I wasn't spiritual enough. What a blow! He complained that I wasn't an experienced meditator and that my three short years of meditation practice didn't enable me to understand my mind the way he understood his mind, thus rendering me incapable of a “spiritual relationship.” When he lamented that I only meditated a half hour a day whereas he meditated for an hour, I painstakingly began to meditate for an hour. When he complained that since I studied Vipassana Buddhism instead of Zen Buddhism that I couldn't really understand his true aim, I started reading Zen and altered my meditation. Finally, he said that even though I was starting to walk the path of Zen, that his teacher taught in a very particular way that was distinct from other schools of Zen. But when I told him I wanted to meet his teacher, he said that I had already taken over too much of his life, and that he was entitled to keep the very thing he

treasured most—his teacher—for himself (even though she taught publicly throughout California.)

Our relationship ended over a winter weekend at a rented condo in Lake Tahoe with his mother. I should have had the foresight to realize that for some men, having their girlfriend and a mother in the same house is the very thing that takes them over the edge.

We began to fight over his special Zen knife—as if that is what we were really arguing about. He had this stainless steel knife he had bought from some Japanese Samurai chef that he used to cut vegetables and fruits when we cooked. The knife had to be held a specific way, used at a certain angle, and could only touch the cutting board with a minimal degree of contact. He was proud of his knife and had given me special permission to use it as I was his girlfriend. That Sunday morning he came downstairs while I was preparing a fruit salad with a dull paring knife.

“You can use *my* knife if you’re careful.”

I nodded and continued chopping walnuts.

“Well aren’t you going to use it?”

“No.”

“Well why not?” he retorted, Zen compassion void from his voice.

I finally looked up from what I was doing. “There are so many damn rules attached to your Zen knife that I’d rather use a plastic picnic knife than bear the consequences of touching it the wrong way.”

He told me once and for all that I simply wasn’t enough Yin to match his Yang, I told him his spirituality was seriously deranged, and the relationship ended, though I missed him terribly for months.

Jake was another one of these scared guys who hid behind his spirituality. He was a Zen Buddhist when I met him, but had become a Vedantic non-dualist before we split up, which is as bad if not worse in terms of Zen-boyfriendness. We met at a narcissistic, eco-retentive, save-the-earth weekend workshop, but that’s another story.

Two days after the workshop, as I sped off the Golden Gate bridge and headed up 101 north toward my country home after a full day of seeing therapy clients, I noticed a tall man pounding on a drum while standing on top of a beaten up VW van alongside the highway. He looked familiar, but I couldn’t be sure. I got off at the Mill Valley exit, drove back down the highway, turned around again, and pulled up behind his van. Sure enough, it was Jake. He told me that the workshop had inspired him to do a new form of political eco-protest. Once a week, he said, he planned to stand on his van alongside the highway and call out the list of endangered species while pounding on his drum. When I asked him what he hoped to accomplish by this, he said that he didn’t know, but that he was intuitively guided to do it. Strange as it sounds, I was impressed.

He asked me out on a date. The first night we ate vegetarian lasagna, Caesar salad and Haagen Daz by candlelight in his living room, and then rolled around his balcony for hours while Mickey Hart played on the stereo and Sausalito danced at our feet. The next morning, he told me he needed space. And in this way, our Zen relationship developed, in the small gaps between the large spaces.

Jake eventually left for India (a spiritually disguised, intimacy escape plan I myself was to later model after), and returned a year and a half later looking very monk-like in his white cotton Indian garb and ivory shawl. His long hair had been cut to shoulder length and had grayed, his skin appeared to have permanently tanned, and small wrinkles marked the corners of his eyes. He said he had thought about me a lot and would I like to go out for dinner? As I was between boyfriends (again), and as he was quite handsome in his new guru-look, I agreed.

Jake thought he had become enlightened, though he wouldn't have dared to say as much. He had become a student of one of those Indian teachers who skillfully create mystical experiences in their groupies by momentarily cutting through their psychological blocks, and then declare them enlightened from the experience. In such a situation, the master gets a swollen head and an immense reputation for being able to enlighten people, and thousands of Western hippies who are afraid of really living life get to think that they have risen above it, and then proceed unsolicited to try to bestow the same boon upon others.

Jake was a living example of such a situation. The first night was all right, as far as Zen boyfriends go. I enjoyed hearing of his adventures over a cappuccino, only occasionally irritated by his references to having "seen through the nature of reality" or having "become one with everything." Of course by early evening he needed space, but that was to be expected.

The next day, however, as we walked in Muir woods, he tried to do his spiritual number on me. In order to understand his spiritual approach in a sentence, non-dualism is based on the tacit recognition of the oneness—or non-separation—of all things. It means that "I" doesn't exist separately from you or any other animate or inanimate being or thing: all is one. However, there is a big difference between being able to spew these words (as I just did), and living as one who abides eternally in the truth of this reality.

"Jake, if we are going to hang out together I need to feel like you're really here with me and not always so detached," I opened the floor.

"But who is the 'you' who wants to hang out with the 'me'?"

"I am the me and *you* are the you!"

"There is no difference, so we can never really be apart or together—it's all the same."

"You're full of shit."

"But who do you think is the 'me' that is full of shit?"

"I think it is YOU!"

"Who's getting angry?"

"I'm getting angry."

"Look into my eyes, what do you see?"

"You."

"Look more deeply. Now what do you see?"

"I see a lonely man who thinks he's enlightened."

Extremely frustrated and teary-eyed, I walked away and sat on a log by the stream trying to figure out why it was so important to me to try to get through to him.

"Why did you come all the way over here to cry?" he sat down beside me, fully believing in his own innocence.

I looked at him with that end-of-the-relationship look in my eye. "Because there is no one there to hold me if I cry, and I'd just as soon cry alone than cry with nobody."

And in this way came and went a couple more Zen boyfriends. Yet in the end, I blame not them but myself. For as distant, arrogant, righteous and terrified as they were, it was I who sought them out, I who tried to open them in the ways I wanted them to be open, and ultimately I who recreated my childhood pattern of not feeling loved by eliciting the same response in my relationships. I could have just dated a nice Jewish boy after all.

Alas the internal quandary of spiritual intimacy that emerged through my relationships with the Zen boyfriends necessitated the accompanying emotional processing of those issues, and thus I sought out a therapist. Overwhelmed by the 986 listings under the category "therapy" in the San Francisco yellow pages, I remembered a business card I had been given at a bisexual women's gathering. In the recesses of my canvas army bag, I found the telephone number for a healer named Iris, and called her up. The next day I was seated in a plush, baby blue armchair across from my projected New Age mother.

I had exactly two sets of feelings about Iris: I loved her and she drove me crazy. I loved her because she listened to me so closely that tears came to her eyes when I was in pain, and because she made it unquestionably clear that she cared about me far beyond her role of therapist. She drove me crazy with her New Age proclivities. From day one she was trying to push Archangel Gabriel and every other angel she knew on me. She channeled the Great Mother and every other known and unknown goddess into the room with us. She would give me weekly reports on the shade and size of my aura, and would trance out with rapid eye-blinking as she received a psychic message from her spirit guides about what I needed to do about one dramatic situation in my life or another. She put crystals in my lap and insisted that I surround myself with rose, lavender, and effervescent lights.

I came into our second session and told her that if I was to do therapy with her, that I needed all angels, guides, gods, goddesses, channels, mediums, tarot decks, crystals and auric cameras to remain outside of the room or I was out of there. In this way, Iris and I proceeded with our weekly sessions. Our agreement for normalcy generally held up, only occasionally being interrupted with conversations like this one:

"I hope you have a wonderful, enlightening, and profoundly peaceful holiday," she would say in her smoky voice as we parted before the winter holidays.

"Yeah, you too. What are you going to do for the week?"

"Well, tonight I'm going to finish wrapping presents for my kids, and hang their stockings on the mantle?"

"You have kids? I can't believe I've been working with you all this time and you hadn't told me."

"Oh no, not *those* kind of children. I like to celebrate the holidays with my *inner* kids."

Our therapy was successful in spite of her undercover angelic interference, but still I wanted more, lots more. In fact, I have wanted more of any and everything I could get since I was four years old, and so I set out to

conquer the therapeutic circuit. You name it: movement therapy, pseudo-tantra, Rolfing, underwater massage, voice dialogue, hypnosis, encounter groups...

For therapeutic recreation, I took up contact improvisational dancing. Walking into the dance studio I was met by four walls of mirrors, a jug of spring water, and all sizes, shapes and colors of bodies swirling, undulating, shaking and pulsating to world beat music. Couples who appear to be having sex with their clothes on in the middle of the floor are actually practicing contact dancing, which involves synchronizing yours and your partner's bodies such that you move as one person and surrender to the creativity that results from the connection. In other words: sex.

The basic rule for contact improvisational dancing is that anybody is free game. Couples who come together must be prepared to have somebody else crawling through their beloved's legs, and horny single people need to know that just because somebody slides down the front of them and wraps themselves around their feet, that this has no implications in terms of their wider relationship to that person.

In this way, many an evening was spent hanging on some man's back, being thrown into the air by some macho dancer, lying on the floor in pretend contractions with a group of women, or rolling about in a clump of people. Dance orgies were an ideal form of New Age foreplay, though the nights following it were often spent thrashing about my bed in yearning for a kind of orgasm that dancing just couldn't provide.

My internal mad scientist spared me no healing extravaganza until I reached the pinnacle of experimentation with Ariela and Ahmed, a middle-Eastern couple who were long-term apprentices of a Peruvian shaman. They had studied a brand of neo-shamanism that combined the intake of enormous quantities of organic and synthetic psychotropic drugs with music and sound. I must say that in spite of my initial skepticism and critical hindsight, these guys were no fools. They had laser sharp minds and the perceptivity of police dogs. They invited you to play on the razor's edge, and if you were willing to show up, they would hang out with you right at the brink.

Long days and nights were spent lying blindfolded in my sleeping bag on the floor of their unfurnished "journeying" room. I tempted the edges of Godliness and madness in the hopes of catching the express train to enlightenment, as the stereo alternated angelic symphonies with police sirens and funeral music in an attempt to leave no inner arena untouched.

When all is said and done, I wouldn't recommend the process. I am an experience junkie, and I got my experience, but what changed in my life as a result? It is relatively simple to blast open the psyche, and more often than not the person suffers no lasting chemical or emotional consequences (ask me again when I'm 75), but sustaining such states can only happen over the course of years and years of spiritual training. I was no different than all the other people I knew who attempted to use drugs in our shared hope that we could find some shortcut, some backdoor, some easy way out of the necessarily arduous road to God.

Having said that, I credit Ariela as the springboard that threw me into what was to come next.

When I showed up the following week at Ariela's conventional-looking therapy office for my drug integration session, she asked me how I was doing. I told her I felt bound by 300 pounds of iron chains, and that if I didn't break out of them I feared I might really go mad.

"So what are you going to do about it?" she said with a tough-girl challenge in her voice.

I reiterated my now familiar story: I had finally settled down in California. I didn't want to go anywhere or do anything (more) outrageous. I had a fall job at a hospice and was going to help people die so I could deal with my denial of my own death, and I wasn't about to give up the first stability I had found since popping out of my mother's womb.

Ariela walked across the room, kneeled down, and placed both hands around my neck in a grip that is uncharacteristic of a 105 pound woman. She repeated, "What are you going to do about it?"

She had succeeded in taking me by surprise. "Stay in California?" I squeaked.

"Fuck off. Are you going to sell out this early in life or are you going to do something?"

I was impressed. She had crossed a line of therapeutic formality that had been disturbing me for years, and had successfully commanded my respect.

"I want to follow my heart. I don't even know if I have one, or where it is if I do, but I want to follow it anyway."

She loosened her grip. "So, I repeat, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to India."

"When?" she demanded.

"Next week."

Thus was launched what would become a long and not undramatic journey, but one that took me to my long sought-after Teacher. With less outer fanfare, he began to catalyze a slow and painstaking dismantling of the spiritualized personality I had so carefully constructed. My adventures until that point had forged grooves of longing in the soul and hints of deeper understandings, while at the same time they had strengthened my ego to a position where it could receive the first blows of the Master's great wrecking ball – sometimes with dignity, and other times far less gracefully. You use the ground to get off the ground, and in this way I became initiated into my eventual profession of spiritual bottom-crawling. Those first years of New Age antics were an extended course in "Spiritual Discernment 101: What Not to Do." Next to come was an eight-year sequel entitled "Spiritual Discipleship: Who and What You Are Not." The spiritual "highway" often more closely resembles a muddy path. The potholes and ditches change their location, and the legs of the discerning traveler grow stronger, but the road never ends. But I'm in it for the long haul, so I stumble onwards, determined to walk until I fall off the cliff of the great void, or until the Great Mother sucks me back into her body, whichever comes first.