

On The Path Once More

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Introduction

This paper is about my taking of a class, “Spirituality and Inspired Leadership”, my initial concerns for my personal preparedness and the ongoing search for my own understanding of my self. I will identify some of my concerns and personal struggles that have pervaded my thoughts prior to this class as well as some initial misgivings.

Following this I will explore my perceptions of the texts I read in the week running up to the first class. I will then progress through the first four classes with a few highlights, comments, observations and thoughts as I have written in my journal. Throughout the paper I will be referring to a few class texts, and quotes from them, as guideposts, principally, “The Essence of Self-Realization, The Wisdom of Paramhansa Yogananda” by J. Donald Walters, “Meditations of Anselm, Letters from an Elder Teacher” by David C. Jones and “The Te of Piglet” by Benjamin Hoff. In my discussions I will endeavor to keep my own past history left in the past unless, of course, the issue is large enough that history be warranted in order that the explanation is more meaningful. But I will try to keep these to a minimum and maintain as much as possible the discussions in the ‘here and now’. This paper is, after all, is about my present, today, now, and will lay the groundwork for my ongoing efforts at trying to understand who and what I am and how this may be a form of leadership from within (and in that I will spoil the plot and tell you, now, that it is). To end I will sum up this experience through my impressions and thoughts regarding this rekindling of my spiritual journey and desire for its continuation in the future.

1. Initial Concerns

I first signed up for the course “Spirituality and Inspired Leadership” because it was highly recommended by many of my fellow students as well as two Professors. The Professor for “Spirituality and Inspired Leadership” came highly recommended and nearly all said it was a course I was ready for. I must admit that I worry when so many people are all pointing in the same direction. Trust issues, perhaps? Is there something about me that they find it necessary to gently lead me into this kind of direction? I know I have very good friends and I do trust them, but what, exactly, was this kind of course in the first place? “Spirituality and Inspired Leadership”, is that an Education Administration course? I have zero interest in becoming an administrative leader. Is it a ‘spirituality’ course then? That may be interesting, but is it something that will wander about the edges of psychiatry and psychology forever trying to link the unconscious with the conscious and the paranormal? Or, in the end, is this actually a course about ‘spirituality’ and the ideas of God or Gods, great minds and the human condition. In any case, I do believe that all things are available to all people all the time, but that we only see them when we want to, or are able to, or are ready to. Was this one such moment for me? Perhaps this was such an occasion, a synchronous opportunity that should not be missed and one that I should seize and jump in.

The following day I electronically signed up and went to the bookstore to pick up the books. As it turned out my advisor came with me and she ended up helping me gather all the texts together. We were in a light and jovial mood. I met Dave, a soon to

be classmate, there in the bookstands as he was doing the same thing. The advisor began sorting through and putting books onto my outstretched arms. Soon she came upon the ‘Sayings’ books.

“Which do you want? How about *this* one, ‘Sayings for Suffers’?” she said with a chuckle. It was plopped onto my growing pile. With a big grin she went on excitedly,

“You simply *must* have this one,” ‘Mentors and Tutors’ was added to the pile, “And especially this one ‘Sayings for Cynics’.”

“Actually,” she went on with glee, “You should get TWO of those!” I protested, but not too harshly as we were having fun.

Later in the day my mind came back to that comment and I asked myself, “Am I really cynical? Is that how people view me?” I wrote later that night that I thought I was critical, yes, but not cynical. Cynicism, as I understand it, has a negative outlook on humanity and life in the end. While I may have a negative view of some of the things I see and hear and can be overly critical and skeptical of them, I am basically an optimist in the overall outcome of things. I have faith in humanity. I don’t really know why, only that I do and that I am an optimist. Maybe it is just from having seen so many students come through my classes saddled with so many adversities and yet go on to such great things. That makes me critical, not cynical. I further wrote that perhaps my overly critical nature makes it look as though I were cynical. I further postulated that maybe this course on ‘Spirituality and Inspired Leadership’ was *required* of me at this time to deal with my overly critical nature of not just others but of myself as well. Maybe it could vault me over that fence of lack of trust and help me to progress, to move on. I then and

there decided to fully accept this next step and see where it would take me. As Kriyananda quoted Yogananda as saying, “A good rule in life is to tell yourself simply, “What comes of itself, let it come.””¹

2. The Texts

I began reading the books beginning with David C. Jones’ thin ‘Sayings’ collection. As I dog eared page after page, I laughed out loud at many of the quotes in “Sayings for Cynics”. It struck me as a collection of dark humour to be sure, but always with a point of truth and somewhat sad. I ended with the thought that cynicism is perhaps a place to play for a moment, but most certainly not a place to live. I can’t imagine a classroom with a teacher leader as a cynic, that room would be a dark and dreary place indeed. The next book was “Sayings for Mentors and Tutors.” This little volume made me smile at the wisdom within it. As I read it, I recognized many of its truths as I reflected upon my own life as a teacher and saw faces from past classrooms and schools. My favorite chapter ‘A Mentor’s Self Advice’ has written in its margin with my sloppy scribble, “Put these on my walls in my classroom!” And I think I will. The third big little book, “Sayings for Sufferers”, introduced me to Sathya Sai Baba, particularly in his answer to “the root of all chaos and trouble...” and the idea of self and its power within and without. In my heart I have known about this, have practiced it and seen it work its wonders. I have avoided delving further into this phenomenon for I am afraid that I shall ruin it in some way, break it and possibly lose it. And yet, and yet, I believe that I could go far towards my own self-realization if only I would have the courage to do so. I feel I am that close.

The next book I read was J. Donald Walters' "The Essence of Self-Realization". I had great difficulties with it from the start. I was thinking too materially, too historically and culturally to get anywhere. I could not come to grips with the idea of a Hindu guru speaking of the Christian God and its religion. Of course I laugh now at my silliness, but it taught me a couple of great lessons. Once I figured out that to Yogananda, God was not a Christian God, or a Hindu God, but that what he was talking about was self-realization as the great concept of spirituality itself, and then it was very easy to read. He was speaking of spirituality of the self as being central to what God is, and I can crudely sum it up as this: I am God and God is me. You are God and God is you. We are God and God is we. Everything is God and God is everything. I am everything and everything is me. Within that all relationships between oneself and with others, all in various stages of self-realization, becomes possible. As Yogananda said, "It isn't necessary to think of God with form. It depends on a person's nature. Some people find more devotional inspiration, just as you do, in a formless reality."² "Never imagine that you can win God's love if you can't win the love of your fellow creatures. As you love Him, so should you love Him in all."³ These ideas began to help me form the idea of what self-realization really was about. And as I read the book I wrote more and more in the margins as I conversed with both the author and Yogananda. I did a presentation on just such a conversation and to give a taste of it, Yogananda said, "God gave you intelligence that you might use it properly, to solve the mystery of your existence."⁴ I wrote in the margin "There is no 'mystery of existence'. Our 'intelligence' insists that there is but it is a delusion. The animals have no such angst." It has been a wonderful experience reading this book and I will have to read the book again soon.

My next book “Meditations of Anselam, Letters from an Elder Teacher” turned out to be my favourite. As a teacher myself it spoke to me the greatest, I saw in every letter a former student, or a colleague, or a student teacher. Before I read even one page I had written on the frontispiece “How do I know if I’m making a difference?” Of course I have the answer to this materially in my binders of letters, cards and notes and things I have received from students, parents, colleagues and student teachers over the years. A professor from my undergraduate years once said that if you received one such memento, ten other students had thought of also doing so. So, yes, I do make a difference, and I know this to be true spiritually as well. My students have helped me over the years deal with the loss of loved ones, a bought of tumors and hospitalization, failure of my marriage, but they have also experienced my joy at the birth of puppies, moments of laughter and sharing as I did silly things like step into the garbage bucket or trip over the damn overhead projector cord as I excitedly got lost in the moment as I explained some point to them. In turn I have helped them with their losses and their joys, their hopes and their dreams. Sometimes we throw the schedule away and have heart to heart talks about real things in their lives, their fears and mine. They tell me about their parents, their siblings, their friends and enemies, about good choices they have made and the bad. I tell them about my fears and I am constantly amazed at how much they care and how helpful they are. We all are leaders at some time or another in the classroom. All of this can’t be done if there is no spirituality amongst us. The room fairly pulses with it and they all can feel it as much as I. As one student once wrote, “You treat us as people, not just as students.”

Anselam's meditations are about all of that. He talks of trust, of love, of honour, of faith and of the spirituality of teaching, of leading and learning all at the same time. It is true. So true that I feel the most spiritually powerful when I am in the classroom with a group of students and we are discussing important issues, or just telling good jokes. I had a student once who was a joke teller. He would interrupt, be obnoxious and rude until he got his chance to tell his joke to the class. Initially it bothered me to no end, but I soon learned that he could only be happy, and we could only get on task with the days lessons, if he got to tell his joke. I finally totally gave in and then promptly went a few steps further. From that point on at the beginning of every class I would bring the overhead projector around, draw down the screen and turn down the lights and turn on the projector and this student would get his stage to tell his one joke under the lights and in front of an audience. The interesting thing was that over time his 'schtick' got better and better, as did his grades, he became funnier and funnier and last I heard he was doing standup down Stateside somewhere. We all felt a part of his growth, and as he grew so did we. It was again that equation of dealing with fear through courage towards fearlessness, in the end we all got to practice what we loved to do.

In the letter to Alma entitled "How much Freedom?", Anselam writes about how much freedom to allow in an art class by telling a Helen Buckley story. At the end Anselam says, "... wherever the opportunity arises, always try to offer the greatest degree of freedom with the love you express as a teacher. And the offering will strengthen the love immeasurably."⁵ I again wrote in the margin saying, "The Freedom to think, of thought and expression are the greatest freedoms of all." I believe that wholeheartedly, for without them there is no learning in the room. All of this is neatly summed up by

D.C. Jones with the quote on the front jacket of the book, “What else should a teacher and a student desire but the flourishing of each other? Both should be fulfilled.”

The next, and last, text I wish to talk about is “the Te of Piglet”, by Benjamin Hoff. This book is my first in depth introduction to the ‘Pooh’ characters of A.A. Milne. These characters were just not a part of our home when I was growing up, in actual fact I am hard pressed to tell what actually was. In any case I found “the Te of Piglet” enchanting. Most certainly one of the greatest points in the book is the Taoist principle of turning a negative into a positive. It is indeed a skill requiring a nimble mindset and a reserve of great power required to ward off naysayers, doomsayers and doubting Thomases. Okay, Eeyore’s, too. The greatest method of discovery I found in trying to figure out these Milne characters in terms of Hoff’s Taoism was the exercise where we seemed to have determined the fundamental characteristics of the Milne characters. The members of our group determined that Pooh was the epitome of ‘the Way’, in fact he is ‘the Way’. Pooh is utterly in the now, in the moment, accepts everything as he finds it at that moment. Before he got there, whatever he was about to encounter just wasn’t. He didn’t need to search for spirituality, for he already was spirituality. All the other characters, except Piglet, are stuck. Stuck in their characters, the wise Old Owl, the scattered and totally experiential Tigger and, of course, poor old Eeyore stuck in his negativity. It appears that only Piglet is being allowed to strive to become unstuck. This makes me feel a little sorry for those that remain stuck with no apparent hope of becoming ‘unstuck’! Is there no room for growth and change? Or is this a reincarnation story where Pooh will transcend into the great universe of the Eternity, when his time comes. Piglet may progress to the next level and perhaps return as the next ‘Pooh’, but

the others are doomed to seeming eternity stuck as they are in their characters. And I am not sure what the point of that is.

To me it is impossible not to move on in spirituality. I don't see an exam at the end that has a minimum score that you must attain in order to get in or move on. I can't see God as the registrar of Eternity U. determining entrance requirements and having Saint Peter with his ledger of deeds close at hand making sure who gets in and who doesn't. That idea, to me, is a particularly western man made construct, an idea that somehow one must deserve something by having done something to attain something else. Spirituality just cannot be a reward system. In our here and now world it is everywhere, it is causality. I do this and get that, I don't do this and I don't get that. We are all about that kind of thinking from kindergarten through to PhD and beyond. That applies here and now, but I do not believe that exists in the spiritual plane. I don't think one attains nor acquires spirituality and I don't think Pooh did anything to get it either. He's got stuffing between his ears after all! It is interesting to ponder that he probably did nothing to be where he is in his spirituality of 'the Way'. Well, if there is nothing to "work at", I can hear some type 'A' people exclaim, why bother? Is this then pre-destination? And is that why all the other characters are stuck? If so, then Pooh is also stuck. But he is stuck in 'the Way' and poor Piglet, then, is stuck reaching for something he'll never get. So, then, is spirituality, self-realization, an issue of attainment, predestination or luck of the toss of the die at every incarnation? Who roles the die? I can hear Pooh, "Oh, Bother."

3. The First Four Classes

Day 1

Self-Realization. There were a lot of big ideas tossed around in a rather big hurry and I felt a little pressure. I now realize that the pressure came only from myself and nowhere else, but at the time I was concerned wondering where it was coming from. A question was asked - If you were to become self-realized, if you were to reach your highest conception of self, what virtue or quality would you need most? I responded with *calmness* – the ability to listen without judgment, without my heart and mind rising and falling as others speak or do their thing, to not be so reactive. After some sharing and discussion I added another virtue – *courage* to face what the self may actually be. We eventually got around to the concept of self love being seen in our society as selfishness, but one cannot love another until one loves the self first. I then wrote the following conversation:

1 Do I love the self – me?

2 Good question.

1 Why?

2 Because it begs the question, “Who am I? And what is there to love?”

The conversation then moved to the concept of sincerity, that it was a force of concentration, unblotted honesty and pure. I wrote in my journal, “We are a tangle of compromise, second thoughts and guesses, we are insincere with even ourselves, we are inconsistent and lack sincerity. Sincerity makes every virtue real.” I was moved by this

illumination of the word sincere. There is not really much of this around these days. But then I'm not sure there ever was at any other time either. On day one of this course, I admit I had not read all the books assigned for the pre-reading. I have three and a half to go. It doesn't matter that I had all of them to read in a week. It doesn't matter that I am an overly critical reader and 'must' (sometimes I wish I didn't) have a running conversation with the author, any author, as I read his or her book line by line. My books are full of thoughts, ideas, counter arguments, examples and musings in the margins, headers, footers and along the spine, anywhere I can find space. I dog-ear the pages to remember them as important pages. Not one book can be resold as used. But, none of it matters. I do not have the reading done, even though by enrolling in this course the understanding was that I would. I said nothing in class. If asked I would have told the truth, seeing as how I wasn't asked, I didn't say anything and therefore lied. That's not very sincere of me and I regret that.

The "Fog of War" documentary I show to my Social Studies students at the end of the term as a review of the history, but more importantly as a view of the history by someone intimately involved in it and their honest personal view of the actions taken during that time. There are many lessons in this film, not the least of which is the idea of reflection and coming to terms and, hopefully, peace, on both sides, with the decisions made.

The question, "Where can these principles be used in my personal situation?"
R.S. McNamara's 11 principles and my answers.

#1 Empathise with your enemy

With those you are in conflict, know what it is that they are in conflict with you over. See their point of view and learn why they are in conflict with you. It may be that what you in fact are fighting about is the same thing and an easy, and mutually beneficial, answer can be found.

#2 Rationality will not save us

We can only be rational to a point. Logic and reason, if followed to their letter, may lead to total annihilation as the only inescapable outcome. There must be another way, the illogical and the emotional ones.

#3 There's something beyond oneself

It's not always about you and yours. Some days its about others and sometimes we have to think of them and what's right for and by them.

#4 Maximise efficiency

Do not waste your energy in solving conflict. The most direct route is preferred, it'll lead to the least amount of total damage and continued ill feelings.

#5 Proportionality should be the guideline of war

Do not immediately go to physical violence when negotiation and compromise have not had the appropriate time to work their magic.

#6 Get the data

Don't make assumptions based on beliefs and guesses. Often your best guess is in reality the worst one.

#7 Belief and seeing are often both wrong

What you believe is right because what you are seeing may be entirely wrong. Unless you know the other intimately you may very well be wrong in both your beliefs and in what you think you may be seeing.

#8 Be prepared to re-examine your reasoning

If its not going right, look at it again, fix it. Don't assume because it worked last time it will unfailingly work this time, or because a book says it so that it is so.

#9 In order to do good, you may have to engage in evil

To win you may have to incur some losses. You may have to compromise your beliefs, and inevitably someone is going to get hurt, but it make be all good if the pain is short term. This also may mean that what you feel are good deeds can be viewed by the other as highly evil and dangerous.

#10 Never say never

Try not to talk in absolutes. Words like never and always can come back to haunt you and disprove your original intent.

#11 You can't change human nature

People are people, and nothing has changed in the basic thinking processes, the basic motivations, or the basic drives.

All of McNamara's eleven points can be used in all walks of life. I am doubtful if they came from any real understanding of spirituality, but they did come from years of service in real world situations. Spirituality, however, could use these as a means for understanding between one's self and the other. It seems more likely that these 11 points are really McNamara's credo developed from his own real world and real life experience.

Day 2

The class began with a discussion regarding the ideas of Religion, spirituality and heresy and I wrote, “where religion is a path to a goal, namely a relationship with God and is a product of time and space, usually transformed into less than flexible tradition.

Spirituality is an inquiry into the nature of self and an interest in God not of God. In the process of an individuals search for spirituality it necessarily leads to heresy from the group. As one searches more and more for one’s spirituality more contradictions will be found within the established religion. Heresy then is a natural, logical and inevitable product of the search for spirituality. This may be costly to your relationship with the traditional religion.”

It seems to me that organized religions would not favour individual and independent searches for spirituality. It would render them superfluous, I should think, and that explains the sometimes regular and spasmodic efforts of established religions to regain lost members to the fold through promises of reorganization and realignment. These ‘concessions’ are usually merely enticements and the traditional religion has no intention of reshaping its ways. If appropriate results do not come from these enticements other means of obedience may be employed such as the threat of punishment by excommunication and exile from the community.

The class then moved on to the films ‘Triumph of the Will’, depicting Hitler’s rise to power in the early 1930’s, and “Ghandi” which tells of the mahatma’s life and death. Watching Triumph of the Will upset me. It seems the older I get the closer and more meaningful are my parent’s experiences during the 1930’s and 40’s. That period

most certainly shaped their lives, gave them demons they have had to live with for their entire lives. It is amazing how the 'spirit' of the entire German nation was usurped (there is no other word for it) for the use of a single person. I liken it to a pyramid scheme where the people at the bottom, hopeful of a taste at wealth and power, put their savings into the plan. Of course we know that the only people who reap any rewards are those at the top and that in the end the people on the bottom lose everything. Could it be possible that an entire nation's spirit could be lost in a spirituality pyramid scheme?

The spirituality of Gandhi's leadership in South Africa, and later in India, was quite different even though the reverence the people felt for their leader was equally as strong in Gandhi's India as it was in Hitler's Germany. The difference lay in the level of choice the people had to become involved and to participate. In Hitler's Germany everything was tightly controlled and participation was encouraged and monitored. Not to participate could be seen as treason and the potential for some form of punishment was quite great. With Gandhi in India, however, rather than tightly control the spirit of his people he let them choose whether to participate or not. Unlike in Germany where the people freely gave their lives and spirit to Hitler, the people of India did not see their lives nor spirit as belonging to Gandhi, there was reverence but there was no subservience.

The question remains did these two leaders use the spirit of their followers? Of course they did, but Gandhi's methods were superior in the end for when he was assassinated the people continued on without him in body by continuing with him in spirit. There, in India nothing had changed. With the German people, once Hitler had exhausted the pyramid scheme of their collective spirituality and many of his people's

lives, it was gone. He ended up committing suicide and the people's spirit blew away like leaves in a gale! They were hopeless and defeated, with nothing in reserve they surrendered unconditionally to the allied powers.

Day 3

This was the first of the presentation days. I did my presentation questioning what the term God meant for me and what Yogananda had said it was for him as documented by Kriyananda in his book "The Essence of Self-realization". I have written and discussed much of this earlier in the paper and so will refrain from repeating myself. After the presentations the idea of sacrifice was discussed which led me to the question of unresolved issues. I wrote in my journal, "Past issues that did not end in a pleasant way for me and others close to me are a darkness that prevents me from moving on. In many other streams I am progressing but others are blocked and are blocks themselves. I need to leave them behind, accept them for what they truly are and then leave them and move on." I further wrote that I needed to "eliminate resentment." I have come to realize that these impediments are of my own making, these events and injustices are only in my mind. I keep them alive and I alone give them strength to make shadows over any progress any longer. Its time to let some things go!

Day 4

This day was a big day for me. Fabulous presentations opened further doors. The one on self-fulfilling prophecy was very memorable. I try not to accept any information from other teachers regarding students, I want them all to come freely and be able to have a fresh start. I came to the realization however, that I do not give myself the same break, that I invite the self-fulfilling prophecy to come in through my own self! This revelation

was a shock! Is this some form of predetermined judgment of my self, by my self?? It seemed like a macabre nightmare. What was I doing this for? A short time later, through a very innovative free form writing, I confronted myself with more thoughts and ideas that largely spelled more emotional turmoil. From there we went on to discover and then create these things called credos. I finally chose “Do no harm”.

Conclusion

It is now the end of the second week and the first week seems a blur, but it has been a very fascinating experience. I feel now that I have been solidly put back on the trail of discovery for my self. Some issues I will need some help with in order to finally and forever resolve, accept and then leave them behind. I will have to re-read the teaching of Yogananda as a means to further explore self-realization. I will continue to write my thoughts and feelings down as a method of clarification and perhaps of cleansing and purging my self of un-necessary, and maybe harmful, clutter. I believe my credo and motos are valid for me as recognition of who and what I am to me. I have truly discovered that I have to stop being so hard on myself. I have to learn to be more kind and considerate to myself and I have to let myself go a bit to relax and enjoy what there is to enjoy – everything! Before I can continue on this path I must find the source of the personal self-fulfilling prophecy that seems to be a barrier for me.

I will also continue my work in my classroom as both a leader and a learner. In my own way, like Anselam, I will continue to mentor students, student teachers and colleagues with compassion, love and a little bit of humour. I will try and be better.

I at least know now, more than I ever did before, that I am not a cynic! I am too optimistic! But I can appreciate the message of the cynic, laugh with him and then walk away back into the light. I have also come to recognize that some parts of me are ‘The Sufferer’ and I must do what I can to solve those issues and heal myself, some things have gone on long enough.

And finally, and by no small measure, I can say for the first time I have a much better understanding of what ‘God’ is to me now. My own spirit feels a greater connection to my self and I have not felt this content for a very long time. I feel I have progressed, a little at least. More needs to be done, I will need to find some help with some of it, but I am back on the road I wandered away from some time ago. I know I am surrounded by much love, family and friends, I know I am surrounded by healing spirit and I know I will be just fine.

Endnotes

¹ J. Donald Walters, *The Essence of Self Realization, The Wisdom of Paramhansa Yogananda* (Nevada City, CA:Crystal Clarity, 1990), p. 88.

² Ibid., p153

³ Ibid., p. 185

⁴ Ibid., p. 8

⁵ David C. Jones, *Meditations of Anselam, Letters from an Elder Teacher* (Calgary:Detselig Ent.Ltd., 2005), p. 64

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