

The Face of God

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It was my first trip to India. It had come together in just three short weeks from idea to airplane. As an economically challenged single mother of three children, it was far beyond my expectations that “dabbling” in yoga and meditation would take me all the way to India. Once there, it somehow seemed so natural to wake every morning at 3 a.m., and to spend the day chanting, meditating, and working in the ashram (residential yoga center).

After ten days of the ashram routine under the direction of the resident Guru, I settled in one day for the afternoon nap. At the end of the hour, I could not wake myself up. I dimly heard the other women in my dormitory room as they quietly dressed. They left to resume their day of spiritual practices. I sunk deeper until I submerged into a delicious unconsciousness, an inner space that has no time.

Abruptly, I awoke terrified. Still lingering before my inner gaze was the echo of a face, fading away faster than I could hold onto. I had seen the face of God! I wanted to go back inside and see it again. The fear that awoke me became an incredible longing to see that face again, or at least to stay in the awe without bolting awake. I dove inside . . . or rather, I tried to. I could touch the edges of that sleep, which I now know was deep meditation, but I couldn't find my way inside.

Reluctantly, I arose and dressed. I meandered through the gardens heading vaguely toward the main courtyard, still remembering the face of God. Actually, I couldn't remember the face, only that I had seen it. I was consumed in the memory, and in the desire to see it again.

My Guru was sitting quietly in the courtyard. I had seen others go up with questions in these informal times, though I had not yet done so. I knew I must ask how I could see God again, for no one else could possibly know. I approached, knelt and said, “I saw the face of God.” He listened to me and looked at me silently. I realized I had not asked a question, so I blurted out, “I want to see it again.” “Aaaah,” he smiled, “You will.” I wondered when that would be, but did not think to ask. I took a seat and stayed in that sweet silence as we sat there together. Then he arose and went inside.

I never forgot that I saw the face of God, but I did forget to look for it. Maybe I never really knew how, for it had been a gift of grace. Grace gave me many years of study and sitting silently with my Guru. Then his span of years on earth ended. I continued my yoga and meditation practices diligently for a time, and then I lost even those. Finally that inner yearning became too painful to ignore. Ten years after that first journey, I traveled to India again. I went to celebrate my Guru's life on the third anniversary of his death.

Planes arrive in India late at night. I stayed in a hotel to await the morning light and the taxi that would take me to the rural ashram the next morning. I awoke before the sunrise, gripped with agonizing grief. Though I knew and felt his presence inside me, only at that moment did I realize my Guru was gone. I could not contain it in silence. My travel companion awakened as I began to cry. She sat with me. She held me. Nothing helped. Finally, she pulled out her chanting book and began singing the morning chant, a Sanskrit text honoring the Guru.

I paced the floor, but began to feel calmer as his undeniable presence became more tangible. I was standing on the balcony looking at the lightening sky as she reached a verse I knew well. The Sanskrit poetry describes that the Guru is beyond form, beyond words and beyond time. As I looked into the sky, I recognized again the face of God. That face was the sky, the whole sky. God was always looking at me, and I hadn't known.

Now I know I am always bathed in His sight, supported by His presence and His love. I look up at the sky frequently. I always see the face of God. This has continued to develop and deepen in the intervening years. Now, I see the face of God in every face, and in the light that shines through everyone's eyes. I know God is looking through my eyes, too.

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