

THE TIMEBOUND TRAVELER

HOW MY JOURNEY AS A SEEKER CAME TO AN END

DAVID NEWMAN

NON-DUALITY PRESS

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To the great one who wears infinite disguises...
Thank you for revealing yourself to me, for dissolving myself into you, for keeping the dance and the mystery alive... and for the joy and challenge of attempting to describe this indescribable journey.

How I Came To Write This Book

Realization is to get rid of the delusion that you have not realized.

- Ramana Maharshi

This is the story of an extraordinary journey that I embarked upon over the course of almost three years, and predominantly on the inner planes. It began unexpectedly on the evening of November 8th, 2010 and ended in late August 2013. An *unraveling* would be the most accurate way of describing what took place during that time. You may ask: *What unraveled?* The simple answer is: *Me*.

Over the course of those three years, something was taken from me that I didn't even know was up for grabs, as its very existence seemed intricately woven with mine. When it was gone, though, I was still there and significantly less encumbered. In fact, an entire spectrum of my personal suffering went along with it. My transformation was marked by a perceptual shift that both revealed what I had been looking for my entire life, and put an end to my path as a spiritual seeker.

My journey was fueled by the support of many wonderful beings who emerged at the perfect time to guide me. Each offered a unique way of pointing to the unspeakable truth that was waiting for me at the end of the search. Out of gratitude for those dear ones who led the way for me, and in my desire to help point the way, for you, the reader, I have shared my story.

David Newman
December 5th, 2013



LIGHTNING STRIKES

*Only those who are ready to become nobodies
are able to love.*

- Osho

The beginning of the end came on Monday, November 8th, 2010.

That day, all was well... or so I thought. My life was good, very good, in so many ways and yet there was still something fundamentally unresolved. I can see this in retrospect, knowing now that there was an underlying and unsettling dissatisfaction that stemmed from a search for something that I never thought I could find.

I engaged in spiritual practice every day, including chanting, yoga and meditation. I did this to express my devotion, to center myself, to find peace and pray. On the surface this sounds positive, and it was, but I had lost touch with the very question that had inspired my journey many years ago: *Who am I?* I had kind of let it go, I had stopped thinking that I might find a conclusive answer. I guess I was content to leave things as they were and continue with my

spiritual practices indefinitely, ignoring the need, the deep desire for truth that was lying in wait just below the surface of my daily life. However, a deeper force within me was less willing to skim the surface of truth in this way, and it would make itself known soon enough.



My search for truth began with my very first reflective moment when I was six years old. I looked down at my body and asked: *Where do I come from? Who am I?* It struck me as somehow both important and mysterious. At that time I had no answers and life went on.

The first real introduction into an inner life was a few years later when my parents took my brother and me to learn TM (transcendental meditation) in the 1970s. We went to a center just outside Philadelphia to watch videos of a little Indian man, a guru (my first exposure to one of those) named Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. To my brother and me, the whole endeavor was quite comical, especially Maharishi's high-pitched voice. We had to pinch ourselves to avoid laughing hysterically. Nonetheless, I was initiated into TM and connected to the practice in my own way.

From that moment on, I began what in my world is called *sadhana* or spiritual practice. I meditated for twenty minutes twice a day, and found it to be calming and refreshing. It helped to relieve the stress in my life, which, at that age, was mostly related to

homework! TM also officially began what I would call my life as a spiritual seeker: a search for something other than what life had to offer; or at least a way to make life more meaningful and fulfilling.

After that there were more chapters in my life as a seeker for truth, but on November 8th, 2010 my identity as a seeker took a death blow. As I write this it is Tuesday, November 12th, 2013 – exactly three years ago on a Tuesday morning, I awoke to a new life. At the time, it wasn't pretty.



A *lightning bolt* – that's what it felt like on the inside and, like a lightning bolt, it seemed to come out of nowhere. I didn't plan for it or consciously ask for it – I couldn't have, since I wouldn't have known what I was asking for. November 8th, 2010 was an ordinary day in a happy life. My wife, Mira, and I shared a deeply satisfying relationship (she was pregnant with our daughter Tulsi at the time). I had a loving family, and a fulfilling career. I enjoyed an inspiration that was both spiritual and creative and I was part of a worldwide community of dear friends and kindred souls. So, as I went to bed that evening, I wasn't anticipating that an earth-shattering event would come along and change the course of my life.

Several hours after I had fallen asleep, I awoke feeling oddly disoriented. I walked into the bathroom, stood by the window, and there it happened:

I was given a vision of my own absence!

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find myself anywhere. I was bewildered and confused. Everything appeared dreamlike, but I was wide awake. I perceived life with everyone and everything in it... but I was not there! The one in the center, who had always been in the center, was missing, yet everything else remained intact. It only lasted for a moment, a few seconds at most, and yet it radically changed and shaped everything that was to follow. Extraordinary? Yes! Wonderful? *No!* Terrifying is more like it. The part of me that saw itself as separate and at the center of everything, kicked and screamed with intense fury and fear.

Now, please understand, I turn fifty this year and I've had many spiritual experiences. Many of them have been quite wonderful, liberating, transformational and even sublime, but this was none of those. I was in a state of utter shock, my entire nervous system was on fire, and my mind... let's just say that a state of primordial fear would be an appropriate description.

In great distress, I got back into bed, and something extremely disconcerting began to take place. Terrifying thoughts started to arise in my mind. I actually prefer the term 'thought forms' since to a large degree they were quite visual. They scared me to the very core; so much so, that I would begin to shake, almost uncontrollably. My wife, Mira, had to actually hold my feet and breathe with me until the intensity subsided. I can only guess that this felt like what some would describe as a bad LSD trip. I got

very little sleep that night and, when I woke up the next morning, I felt broken.



The next few days were difficult, to say the least. My take on this, on how a life's worth of spiritual practice had led to this defining moment, was summed up in one word, *insanity!* I pretty much became incapable of participating in life in my usual way. I was bombarded day and night by deeply disturbing visions and by the intensity of the fear that arose in me as a result. I felt like something very bad and dark had latched onto me and wouldn't let go. I felt helpless and powerless. I was sinking fast.

The frightening visions that I was confronting were of me doing heinous acts, even harming the ones I loved. It was as if there were a force propelling me to do terrible things against my will. These visions seemed to arise spontaneously, and no matter how hard I tried to suppress them, they would reappear, and sometimes more violently than before. All this generated immense fear in me, as there was some irrational part of me that wondered whether I could ever actually do such a thing. This tied me up in knots of terror and panic. It was at this point that I was compelled to ask a fundamental question that had been central to my yoga practice since it had began, but one that, until that moment, I hadn't been forced to address: *Are my thoughts actually mine?* Or stated another way: *Am I my thoughts?* Up until then, the

discomfort of 'self' consciousness perpetuated by the constant stream of thoughts was more akin to a dull pain, and one that I could live with without much difficulty. However, what consciousness was dredging up now was sharp, relentless and unbearable. It drove me to intensify my inquiry as to the nature of my true identity. At a moment's notice, the bar had been lifted and the stakes were raised. I was left with a choice: lose my sanity, or my false identity. I chose the latter!

It was both the loving support of my family and close friends, and my many years of spiritual practice, that helped me to keep my heart open, and to stay strong during this dark time. I strove to embrace what had happened as a gift of grace rather than to succumb to the notion that something had gone terribly wrong. It reminded me of how the spiritual teacher Ram Dass had used the term 'fierce grace' to understand the transformation that he had undergone after a stroke that left him speechless and half paralyzed. This is well documented in the film entitled just that, *Fierce Grace*.



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BOLO BOLO

God respects me when I work; but God loves me when I sing.

- Rabindranath Tagore

It was through Ram Dass's classic book *Be Here Now*, that I was first introduced to Neem Karoli Baba, or Maharajji as he was known to his devotees. *Be Here Now* chronicles Ram Dass's journey to India and how his meeting with Neem Karoli Baba changed his life.

Several years after discovering this book, I came to know Neem Karoli Baba in a more intimate sense. In 1998, I had just moved into a new apartment. Nancy, my sister-in-law, an attorney and artist, asked me what I wanted as a housewarming gift. I told her how I was inspired by the great yogis and saints of India and asked whether she would consider painting a portrait of one of them for me. At the time I didn't have a guru *per se* but I did have a stack of books about many of the great ones, including: Nityananda, Anandamayi Ma, Ramana Maharshi, Amma, Neem Karoli Baba and others. I asked Nancy to swing by my apartment to leaf through the books and see if any

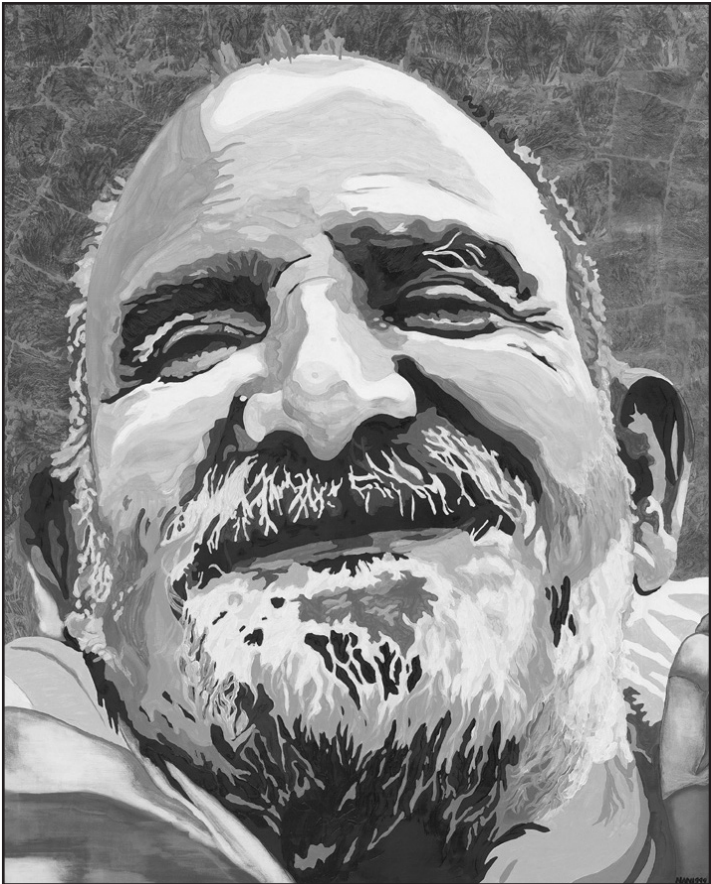
of the photos jumped out at her. She agreed and came by a few days later.

As she looked, I stood by, until she turned to me with great enthusiasm, and said, 'I've found it!' She held out *Miracle of Love*, a compilation of stories about Neem Karoli Baba. The page was opened at a photo of him. As she showed it to me, she said, 'I've never seen a smile with this much joy; I need to paint this face.' And that's just what she did. Over the next few months, Nancy devoted herself to painting that image. Eventually, she completed the painting and invited me to come over and see it. She escorted me back to her studio, opened the door and introduced me to the rest of my life.

When I looked in, I was speechless. I had not expected the size and the impact of the painting. I was also struck by the beauty of it, and by the remarkable energy that it exuded. I remember my first thought: *Is this paint or nectar?* I was spellbound. It's truly amazing how a loved one can, sometimes unknowingly, channel a transformational moment that changes the course of your life's journey. This is what Nancy did for me through this painting and I am forever grateful, and connected to her. As soon as the finished painting came to my home I got out a hammer and nails and hung this special gift on the wall directly above my altar. If my apartment was a body, I had installed the heart!

After placing the painting on the wall, I lit a candle and a stick of incense and sat down to meditate. For some time I gazed at the compelling image and

then closed my eyes. As I relaxed, my heart began to open wider and wider. I began to experience a warm feeling of elation, and a deep sense of peace. Although the feeling was somewhat familiar, there was something undeniably different about it. The difference was characterized by a sweetness that was completely satisfying.



The feeling intensified and became even more wonderful. Then, suddenly, these words just appeared in my mind:

*I manifested this painting for you, because I want to be this **big** in your life.*

My eyes opened spontaneously and there was the smiling face of Neem Karoli Baba staring back at me, both animated and alive. I knew that these were his words! I began to cry, uncontrollably. These were not tears of sorrow, but tears of joy. I had come home and everything was to change.

When this life-altering experience occurred, I was a yoga teacher, and owned and managed a yoga center in Philadelphia called Yoga on Main. I had opened the center about six years back, and since then had been practicing and teaching yoga. I had studied in the *Viniyoga* tradition, and had learned from skilled yoga teachers in other systems as well. I had ultimately developed my own eclectic synthesis that I called *Inner Fire Yoga*. At the center I gave training programs for yoga and taught regular *asana* classes. I integrated *pranayama* (breath practice and awareness), Vedic mantras, and meditation into my classes, and on occasion taught separate classes on the philosophy of yoga. Though I very much enjoyed teaching and practicing yoga in this way, I had also been yearning for a shift in my practice and in my inner life; I hadn't expected that it would come in the extraordinary way that it did through that painting on that night. After this profound transmission occurred, my life moved in an entirely new direction,

and I was spontaneously ushered into a new spiritual path known as *bhakti yoga*, or the way of devotional love. Neem Karoli Baba was known to be one of the great masters of the bhakti path, and somehow he had transmitted the essence of the practice to me that night. From that moment on, I was a *bhakta*!

A bhakta is someone who devotes his or her life to the path of devotion or bhakti yoga. I had known about bhakti yoga, and dabbled in it, but now I was being thrust into it, full force. In addition to devotional love, bhakti is also considered to be the path of grace, as surrender to a divine perfection plays a far greater role than exerting effort in the practice. Bhakti yoga is one of the four great paths of the ancient yoga lineage. The other three are: *jnana yoga* (self-inquiry), *raja yoga* (mind mastery) and *karma yoga* (selfless service). Uniquely, bhakti is a lunar path, meaning that it is emotionally based and seeks to heighten the devotional feelings of the practitioner as a means toward liberation. It is a practice that is centered in the heart, and aims at fostering a deeper state of surrender, ultimately leading to a vision of life's underlying unity. The sweetness of the bhakti way comes from adoration of the Divine expressed in a particular form and through practices such as chanting, ritual offerings (*puja*), visualization, meditation and the capacity to behold the Divine everywhere. As a result of the deep bond of love between the lover (the aspirant) and the beloved (the chosen form of the Divine), spiritual union, which is the goal of yoga, is ultimately reached. However, the bhakta is never

concerned with the goal but rather stays immersed in devotion as its own reward. Often devotional rapture, even ecstasy, is expressed through art, music and poetry such as in the great mystic poets, Rumi, Kabir, Hafiz and Mirabai. The teachings of bhakti have been disseminated through generations by saints such as Sri Ramakrishna, Neem Karoli Baba, Anandamayi Ma, Srila Prabhupada, Amma and others, and in the ancient scriptures such as *Bhagavad Gita*, *Narada Bhakti Sutras*, *Srimad Bhagavatam* and *Ramayana*.

It is difficult to fully describe the level of rapture, even exaltation, that occurred when bhakti (devotional love) came alive in me while gazing at Neem Karoli Baba's image. Bhakti came into my life, took me by the hand, and exposed me to an entirely new way of seeing and experiencing life. Suddenly, I was living in a new paradigm, one that was alive with the capacity to behold the loving spark of creation in everyone, and in all things. Simple everyday exchanges with others, and ordinary experiences, became infused with feelings of loving compassion and a heightened sense of spiritual wholeness. It was as if a code had been cracked in my being, and an unseen key had unlocked my heart. In other words, my heart had opened! I could sense my newfound guru's graceful hand in all situations and his loving glance in everyone, and I felt great love for him and his presence in my life. Everything that unfolded seemed as if it had been perfectly planned that way, as if it were serving some higher purpose. It didn't matter that I perceived myself as separate from this

grand plan, for just being a part of it was deeply satisfying and infinitely fulfilling.

It's as if a light had been turned on inside of me, and it filled me with a passion to share what I had found with others. I hadn't planned on becoming a teacher of bhakti, but that's just what happened. I was permeated with a love that wove its way into every aspect of my life, and I knew that the expansive love that had blossomed inside of me had the capacity to do the same in others too. Bhakti transformed my inner landscape, uplifted my life and turned me into a much happier person. The intensity of these loving feelings was expanded and strengthened by the bhakti practices that I engaged in at the time.

Foremost of these practices is an ancient chant practice known as *kirtan*. Kirtan is a form of devotional chanting that involves singing the names of God (and Goddess). It is often done in a group (but can be practiced alone) and in a call and response style using mantras in either Sanskrit or in other Indian dialects. Some sing kirtan while visualizing the particular image of the God or Goddess to which they are chanting as a devotional form of both meditation and prayer. Others, however, chant simply for the joy of the experience, and connect more generally to the healing vibrations of the sound itself.

I became deeply enthusiastic about kirtan. These heart-opening mantras had a powerful and healing effect on me and I chanted them ceaselessly. Chanting evoked aspects of the Divine whole and afforded me the opportunity to express the depth of gratitude

that I felt for the gifts that had been bestowed upon me. Kirtan brought something alive in me that had pretty much remained dormant through my entire life, and that is: devotion! The devotion that I felt activated immense love in me... a kind of love that wasn't connected to another person, or even an ideal or desire. It was truly unconditional love, one of the foremost and wonderful symptoms of bhakti practice. This instilled in me a direct understanding as to why bhakti practitioners wish to maintain the illusion of separation and suspend the fulfillment of their desire for spiritual union. As for a bhakta, to savor the sweet nectar of his or her devotional longing, in and of itself, becomes the goal of the path. The great nineteenth-century saint Sri Ramakrishna expressed this sentiment, when he said: *I want to taste sugar, not become sugar.*

Before these profound changes had occurred in me, I had always felt that to express my devotion was to somehow give away my power, or to misdirect my spiritual energy to something 'outside of myself.' However, now the sweetness of devotional expression brought me great joy, and it came naturally, seeming to just flow through me. I was deeply grateful, and wanted to say *thank you* in a million ways. Singing kirtan gave me a vehicle through which I could now channel the love that was overflowing from my heart. I was enraptured in the spirit of bhakti, and it was kirtan that fueled and energized this state of grace.

In just one night, while gazing at a painting, everything had changed, and I somehow knew that a

wondrous adventure into the nectar of my own heart had just gotten underway!

Neem Karoli Baba (Maharajji) continued to visit me in many ways, including in my dreams. One dream in particular changed the way I viewed both my spiritual practice and service to others. Even amidst my new bhakti glow, remnants of an old way of being would creep back in and shift my attention away from my heart and back into my head. This would happen sometimes as I lay in bed in the evening. I had developed a recurring habit of trying to figure out my life as I was going to sleep. This would keep me awake, since my mind could never find resolution. Eventually, I would wear myself out and sleep would come.

However, one night, I had a novel idea. How about I put the question to Maharajji and see what happens?

Understand that I was raised by two professional parents. My father was a cosmetic surgeon, and my mother, an attorney and state Supreme Court Justice. So, growing up, the career choice options that were presented to me were not lawyer, doctor, yoga teacher and kirtan singer. The last two were of my own creation! Even though I was achieving 'success' as a yoga center owner and teacher, there was still something in me that felt deficient. I believed that what I was doing was somehow not enough.

So, that night as I lay in bed wondering what I should do with my life, I put the question to Maharajji and prayed for the answer. I knew that I had exhausted my own conditioned responses. Before

opening the yoga center I had graduated from law school and often thought about supplementing my teaching with a part-time law job. However, there were also other possibilities that occupied my mind in these late night moments. Perhaps I should enroll in an MCAT course and add a medical degree to my law degree? Or maybe I should study for the GMATs? That way I could get an MBA and become a high-powered yoga entrepreneur. That's how my mind worked at the time. Though I loved teaching yoga, it hadn't fully satisfied my need for external validation. Would Maharajji come and save me? He did – but it wasn't how I had imagined!

Soon after I drifted off to sleep, Neem Karoli Baba appeared in my dreams. All I saw was his face. It was violet and swirling. As he looked at me, I made my case. He listened intently. I looked at him and he looked at me. There was a pause, and then he said:

Bolo Bolo!

... and he was gone!

I awoke immediately. The part of me that *knew* got it! The other part was confused and disappointed. *What an irrelevant and overly simplified response to such an important question. What kind of saint is he anyway?* Here, I guess it would help to tell you what the word *bolo* means. It is a Hindi word that literally means 'speak.' However, in the context of kirtan, it is taken to mean *Sing!* The part of me that *knew*, ran with it. The part that didn't would eventually catch up.

I had been a musician and songwriter for much of my life, but had let it go in recent years to pursue other interests. After this dream, I began to explore my musical roots again, but this time with devotion as my muse. Along with my newly discovered passion for chanting, I wrote new songs that came forward almost spontaneously, and without effort. I was also eagerly putting my own musical imprint on these traditional mantras. Combining ancient kirtan chants with my original devotional songs soon became a labor of love. It would eventually become my signature approach as an artist. In 2003, I recorded my first CD entitled *Soul Freedom*. Soon thereafter, I began to receive invitations to sing at yoga and spiritual centers around the country. As the interest in my music grew and the frequency of my travels escalated, the logistics of maintaining regular yoga classes and managing the yoga center in Philadelphia became increasingly difficult.

Around that time, Maharajji came to me in another dream, and said: *You will be asked to go and, when you are, go*. Eventually, I let go of my involvement in the yoga center altogether and, at the age of forty, I became a traveling gypsy!

I went on to record eight more CDs, chant with countless communities, and share my music all over the world. I have been singing for the last ten years, and it has been a remarkable and satisfying journey. It has worn me down (in a good way), but never worn me out. The spiritual, heart-centered nourishment that is exchanged when I chant with others, and the

love that I am shown in the communities that I visit, feed me in the deepest of ways. The simplicity and sweetness that accompany this kind of a lifestyle have provided some of my greatest learning opportunities. The repeated exposure to the presence of love and the essence of heart through kirtan has permeated my cells and empowered me to live with a greater sense of lightness and transparency of spirit. Neem Karoli Baba has been with me every step of the way. Did I mention that he left his body in 1973? At the time I was nine. In case you are wondering, I never did meet him... or did I? I like to say that we met on the inner planes. And by the way, I don't lie in bed and wonder what I'm going to do with my life anymore. The words *Bolo Bolo* took care of that!