

AVI-USA CONNECT

Fall/Winter 2019/2020 Newsletter

Issue 13



Entrance to the Japanese Garden

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Auroville International USA (AVI-USA)

PO Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818

www.aviusa.org | facebook.com/aviusa

The Ever-Present Encounter with the Soul: Infirmities, Challenges and End of Life

My experiences at Desirée

By Doratheia Thompson

A few months before another much anticipated pilgrimage to Pondicherry to experience the ever-emanating presence of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, I had this persistent inner prompting that while there I should work with the older, infirm ashramites in one of the Ashram homes. I had never before visited any of their facilities nor had any idea how they were organised or structured. I nonetheless put out my yearnings to a very kind person in Pondicherry, who wisely advised me to wait and see how I felt when I arrived. This was indeed a wise suggestion because the voice of the soul can often be misread, misinterpreted and confused amongst the myriad of voices that inhabit our inner consciousness. However, a continued strong inner pull, over time, is usually a good sign that the calling is indeed the voice of the soul.

When I finally did arrive in Pondicherry for a two-week stay, the prompting was still persistent so I proceeded with my request. I was introduced to Dr. Alok Pandey, who after getting permission from the relevant persons, invited me to join him on one of his several daily rounds at Desirée.

Desirée is a beautifully maintained facility, dedicated exclusively to the care of ashram inmates needing some kind of assistance in their everyday chores. During that initial round, Dr Pandey quickly introduced me to the 30 plus residents housed there, adding a brief relevant comment on a few. He was very cordial and accommodating and as we parted, he simply said, "Come as you like when convenient and spend as much time as you like."

I left Desirée that first day feeling exhilarated, moved and yet a bit perplexed. There was a certain amount of initial confusion and uncertainty. I had listened to the soul's call

and now, having been graciously granted the opportunity to do this work, how was I to proceed? How was I to carry it out? What precisely did I hope to do and in what manner? The residents in this facility represented such a varied population, with a wide range of challenges and capabilities, from highly functioning to end-of-life. How could I structure an approach that would work for each of them?

After sitting with the confusion for a while, a clarity emerged, suggesting that the way I could best serve this very varied population was to attempt to connect with their



Workers at Desirée.

souls, their psychic being, to something in their depths, each in their own very unique way. The task was to find that bridge, that door, that entry-point, most accessible to each one, whether through music, a caress, a hug, stroking a hand, asking about their story, sharing a beautiful scent, sharing the beauty of a flower, speaking about the Mother and Sri Aurobindo or reading a line from *Savitri*.... I would need to envision and experiment with a very unique approach, custom tailored for each.

Having reached this place of clarity in direction, it then became quite joyful to think of specific ways to potentially ignite that spark, make that connection and touch their soul that was so visibly present, speaking behind their glance, their eyes, their body language, their smile and even their reticence.

I later recognised that this approach was not novel but actually one I have tried to employ in my work in the consulting room. It is always an ongoing crucial first step to ascertain at what level of consciousness the individual is presently indwelling. To ask the

question, how can I reach and connect with him or her at

whatever level they are, at the moment? How do I meet them where they are, forge a connection so that trust might develop, so that the greater work of transformation through a connection with the psychic being can ensue?

One of the very first residents who caught my attention was M. She carried a regal and tenacious presence even though her fragile body was now mainly reduced to skin and bones. I later learned that she was an old-time ashramite who would shortly be celebrating her 89th birthday and that the Mother herself had given her that name. M has been lying flat on her back for nearly 5 years, not uttering a word for most of that time. She was, however, quite clear on how to communicate her preferences, clenching her jaw tight when the staff attempted to feed her porridge, but accepting milk freely when it was offered. When I first approached her, she appeared reticent and unwilling to connect, clearly communicating even in the midst of her silence. Behind that veil of silence, however, stood ever so visibly, the soul of a refined, present, alert and accessible being.

On my second visit, her guard was gently loosening and I could see a trace of a sparkle in her eye and a more relaxed trust. By the third day, her guard had totally dissolved, replaced by a warm, welcoming and trusting presence. We forged a strong bond and subsequently, immediately upon seeing me, she would fix her gaze into my eyes, forever, unwaveringly, and smile from time to time. I would stroke her face and head without breaking our gaze. As I stroked the crown of her head, I would mentally convey to her the message that she could give herself permission to move on, if and when, she felt it right to do so and to remember to exit from this place.

When I arrived, often her fists would be tightly clenched shut. I would gently press my index and middle fingers into her clenched fist loosening her grip and she would respond



Doratheia Thompson

by relaxing her fingers as I stroked her beautifully elongated hand. Each subsequent encounter was an experience of delight and I would joyfully anticipate seeing her again the next day, mentally envisioning or orchestrating what I might do or bring to deepen that connection, to bring her another small experience of joy. Whatever small effort I made was returned a thousand times by the joy that the encounter sparked.

While visiting her for the last time before I left, I sensed I might not see M again in this bodily incarnation. I wished I could be there for her at that very important moment of transition. There are many ways that one can assist another during those very sacred moments. I shall cherish the memories of my time spent with M forever.

On the opposite side on the spectrum, relative to levels of infirmities, was S, a highly functioning middle-aged man suffering from chronic fatigue. One could see, simply from how he laid out his few worldly possessions, that this was a man who brought mindfulness, order and care to everything he did. (One can often see the totality of a personality in a single gesture, just like a whole landscape can be reflected in a single dewdrop.)

S was the ultimate gentleman. Each time I arrived, I would ask him, how are you? He would immediately respond by bringing the conversation to quotes of the Mother or Sri Aurobindo and I would marvel at his devotion. Each visit, however, would evolve to this same endpoint, very quickly. After a few visits I said, "I truly appreciate your knowledge and certainly your devotion to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but for the moment, I'd really like to know a bit about you. How are you? How is it for you to be here?"

He looked at me rather perplexed. But slowly he started to open up about his personal experiences, beginning by telling me about the structure of his day. He began his day with a 4:30 wake-up call followed by his bath-time. As he continued to share his per-

sonal story, an ease and aliveness seemed to come over him. After a few visits, I noticed he started placing an empty chair, positioned right in front of his, anticipating our daily chat. As we sat there, I would at times clasp his hands in mine as he shared his story. This I sensed was likewise foreign to him but he quickly became comfortable with the joy of touch and presence.

One of the things that I continue to grow in understanding and appreciation of is the gift of Presence. It is that state of soulful, pure, non-judgmental, undivided attention to the other. When we are there for another, wholly – in body, mind, spirit and soul – such an encounter is whole, holy, healing and an ultimate gift. It provides the ground from which souls can commune. In those moments, I felt our souls did in fact reside somewhere on common and holy ground. In parting, S gifted me a beautiful blank journal, inside which he had tucked three small sweet photos of the Mother. This is a man owning no worldly possessions, save his few cherished books. I was deeply moved.

Another striking personal encounter was with A. During our quick initial walk-through, Dr. Pandey mentioned that this was a woman who had suffered a very dark chapter in her past and that the Mother herself had taken her in as a young woman, as well as her daughter, and that A has been here at the Ashram ever since.

When I would first see her upon arriving, I would often find her twitching, especially in her lower extremities and she would often be bouncing up and down on the bed, lifting her entire fragile body off the bed and collapsing it forward, with her outstretched fingers touching her toes. This she would repeat again and again. I would gently approach her, stroke her arm and head and face, simply repeating the mantra, "Relax, relax, relax". Then I



Intersection near the Ashram area

would ask her to join me in reciting the word, "Relax", which she would, in a gentle whisper. After holding her previously clenched fist for a short while, stroking her and inviting the energy of relaxation to come over her, one could see a beautiful calm descend over her face, her body and her entire being.

Situated in another area, at the far end back-room, was a man whose face reflected the innocence of a beautiful young boy. His face radiated with an ethereal glow and his curled lips suggested a joyous inner peace. He too, like M, did not speak and the few times I stopped to be with him he was holding a book in his hands, at times upside down. Yet every time, tucked in his book was a photo of the Mother. When I reached out to gently stroke his arm, he responded with automatic recoil. Touch, at this moment, at this point of our relationship, was not something he could embrace. His body-language clearly conveyed his inner state, a preference, I could certainly respect.

I was reminded of one of the key principles of *Aikido*, a form of martial art, which relies heavily on the 'Art of Not Doing'. Rather, it teaches specific techniques to simply move out of the way so that the outcome can have the least negative impact. The act of not doing can at times be the most powerful, the most effective and the most generous, vis-à-vis, the myriad of things we think we need to do or want to do. Knowing what the soul needs at every moment, in an ever-shifting landscape, is a creative process, full of challenges and possibilities.

The very first resident Dr Pandey had introduced to me was Daisy. Daisy was not her



Cycle rickshaws near the Ashram

CONNECTIONS

THE EVER-PRESENT ENCOUNTER WITH THE SOUL CONTINUED

actual name, but a name that could perfectly suit her. On our first meeting and during a few subsequent visits, she appeared cheerful and sunny and her smile and pigtails certified her inner joy. Daisy has an androgynous cultural look about her. On first meeting her, one could not easily ascertain her ethnicity, either from her outer appearance or from her accent. In this initial work of attempting to connect with the soul of another, understanding the other's cultural and historical influences (as best as one can, for one can never intellectually know the other completely) gives one a clue as to how and where one might connect, where the bridges and points of entry might lie. On a broader level, I believe that even in the world of psychology, politics, mediation, etc., cultural differences are a most important aspect, often not given enough import, yet it is a factor that greatly shapes the way one sees and experiences the world.

On subsequent visits to Desirée, especially in the late afternoons, I could find a much more somber Daisy. Once I found her half sitting up, grasping her bedside railing, deep in a conversation with herself. She did not appear willing to engage and so I asked her, would she prefer having alone time? She nodded in a "Yes" gesture. Daisy appeared to be reliving a piece of her personal history, perhaps replaying an emotionally impacting event from the past. I cannot say for sure. I had known Daisy for such a short time and I had no factual history of her past. I was, however, reminded that the rich threads of memories and personality traits that construct our reality in all stages of life were ever-present, even in dementia. Perhaps in her moments of intimate dialogue, Daisy was engaged in some deep inner work of releasing, at the subconscious level? We don't know for sure what Daisy's experience was or the deeper working of the psyche. But I do believe it is fair to say, that we must allow room for a myriad of possibilities and a trust in the infinite intelligence of the soul.

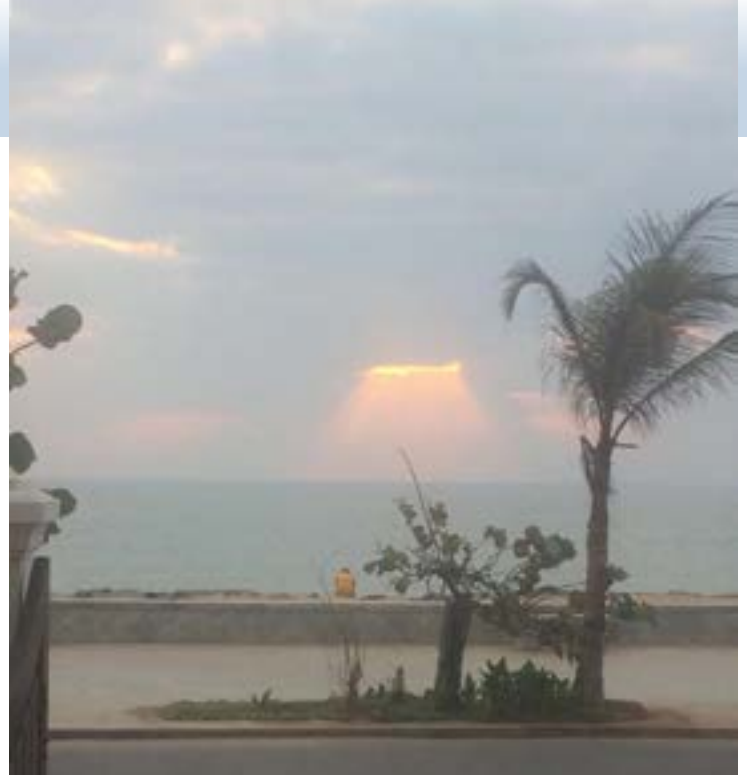
This brings me to the last resident's story I shall share here and if we were to invite the mythic imagination to spring forward from its other worldly realms, one could envision her as the spiritual Lover of Tagore. The first time I saw LT, she was leisurely stretched out on her bed, softly singing lines from a handwritten notebook. She appeared deeply engrossed in her inner world, so I felt it completely untimely

to disturb her. Instead, I struck up a conversation with her sister, whose bed stood immediately across from her chanting sister's. She spoke of LT's condition, describing her memory loss and how little could be done to reverse this debilitating mental degeneration. During a subsequent visit, I was able to connect with LT and asked if she was willing, at a later stage, to sing for us a few of Tagore's poems put to music. The following day she was fully prepared for the invitation. Four of us circled around her in that large sunlit room listening, in quiet attentiveness, as she transported us on the wings of her voice, singing beautifully a few Rabindra sangit.

Serious loss of memory, I have often thought, is one of the most debilitating, challenging and difficult losses to experience and bear witness to. And yet, here I was forced to pause and question and reconsider this mostly universally-held belief. Here was someone who could enter and inhabit fully, deeply and meaningfully the world of Tagore. Was this perhaps a more gratifying and soulful space to inhabit than what we may call, normal reality?

This statement is in no way meant to make light of all the pain and disorientation that dementia and other types of memory loss bring, not excluding the practical, physical, emotional, psychological and social losses and pain. But in bearing witness to LT, in that moment, one is brought to ask the question, what deeper layer of experience might be there below the pain and suffering?

During my stay in Pondicherry, I found myself referring to the residents of Desirée as my friends, both in speaking to others and in my own inner self-talk. Why had I chosen to call them friends? Perhaps because my heart understood that there was no hierarchical division between them and me, that we were in essence fellow spiritual beings, simply in different places and at different points in time on



Sunrise in Pondy

our journey? Perhaps because they were ashramites and beautiful souls who had devoted their entire lives to a calling and service. Perhaps because these were beings whose souls were awake, ones who I could easily forge an intimate connection with and call 'Friend'.

Later I wondered, why had there been such a deep soul yearning to do this work? Was it because of a life-long fascination with the mystery and beauty of both death and birth? Was it my own recent health issues that had plunged me into a process of reflection and meditation that had ultimately made my relationship with death and dying more intimate and accepting? Was it because of the nature of my work, where the emphasis is always on one's own personal work? Was I following a personal and professional mandate to explore my own inner depths so that I could be of greater service? Whatever the ultimate or combination of motives, I was very grateful to have had the prompting and the trust, even when the path or the final destination was not at all clear.

Yet, I was ever so cognisant of how much more could have been done. There were still so many individuals that I had not connected with. Stories I had not heard. Histories I had not gathered. I was also keenly aware that my contribution, in relationship to the entire playing out of this soul-enriching encounter at Desirée, was such a very small part. So many supporting conditions were in place to allow my small contribution to take root.

Desirée is housed in a beautiful three-story Gothic-inspired building with a soaring ceiling and flooded with light. The quarters are spotless, fresh smelling and spacious. Residents who cannot feed themselves are individually hand-fed. Those who cannot bathe themselves are bathed and oiled frequently. I noted and appreciated the exchanges of affection and care between the residents and the care-providers. I was keenly aware and thankful to all of them for their difficult and tireless work. Without this foundational prerequisite work, whether physical, environmental, medical or emotional, then the effort of soul-tending, which we were attempting to enhance, could not have been possible.

The American psychologist, Abraham Maslow expounds in his Humanistic Psychology that an individual rises to higher and higher levels of satisfaction and well-being when the lower-rung human foundational needs have already been met. For example, in order to arrive at psychological well-being, such as the feeling of belonging and the joy of close relationships, then basic needs, such as food and shelter, must be satisfied. The levels ascend up to self-fulfillment through self-realisation and transcendence. The Mother not only fully understood the value of this premise but applied it years earlier to Her broader work of community building. She structured the ashram in Pondicherry and a community in Auroville where all of needs of the individual are taken care of. This she believed would allow the person to devote himself to the greater work of a psycho-physical and spiritual evolutionary transformation in keeping with one's true nature. Similarly, all was in place at Desirée for my small effort to take root. I was exceptionally grateful to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for their trust and willingness to so graciously accommodate my request.

The experience at Desirée continues to pay forward with ongoing memories, reflections, contemplations and meditations. One of those musings is on our cultural col-

lective vision of old age. It is often said that in old age, there is a return to infancy. Like children, in old age, there may be a loss of control of bodily functions, an inability to speak, feed or care for oneself, a lack of coherence and logical thinking. But what I also noticed is that in this later stage of life there is often, also, a beautiful return to innocence. Many of the qualities that we cherish in children, like spontaneity, a deep desire to connect, a willingness to share, to be present, to be held and tenderly touched are likewise, there, in this later phase of life. What if we were to outpour to this population the same joy and self-sacrifice we do to our infants and children?

Why this return to Innocence in old age? Perhaps the spirit is no longer hidden, masked by our strong fixed ego-identity? Perhaps the Divine is preparing us for a return to our origin? Perhaps the soul is finally free to allow its light to more easily shine forth? Perhaps we are being given the opportunity to complete some evolutionary work we have chosen to carry out in this lifetime?

Yet, if there is such soul and innocence behind the veneer of aging, death and dying, why do we, generally speaking, shun away from it all? And here I am referring more to the West in general and to the USA in particular. Why do we in the USA, for example, spend billions in grasping onto youth? Why is there such a desire to look, feel and act, forever young? Why is there this feisty irreverence, a certain level of denial towards death and a false sense of immortality? Typically, funeral rituals in

the USA echo this same theme. Corpses are embalmed and faces made up beautifully, hair fashioned, woman's nails painted, etc. At times the dead body looks more attractive than the person did in decades. All of this is not so much to criticise or lay judgment on these rites and rituals, but to ponder a bigger question, what have we lost in this process of desperately holding on to youth?

Are we denying ourselves the grace and beauty that these later years of life might offer? Are we unable to peer through the door

of wisdom to see the end of one evolutionary life-chapter that is giving way to the opening of another? Are we running away from death and in so doing remaining gripped by fear? When we look into the eyes of a gravely ill person, are we in pain not so much for the other, but because we see mirrored there our own inevitable physical demise? Has this fear and denial cut us off from ourselves and subsequently cut us off from our fellow human beings? Are we so blinded by unprocessed fear that we are unable see past it, unable to connect with the eternal indwelling soul that stands before us in the aged and the dying.

"The unconscious world is the spirit's self-made room,
Eternal Night shadow of eternal Day.
Night is not our beginning nor our end;
She is the dark Mother in whose womb we have hid
Safe from too swift a waking to world-pain.
We came to her from a supernal Light,
By Light we live and to the Light we go."


My time at Desirée was a deep and lasting experience that gifted me with sparks of connections that bore witness to the blossoming of deeper and beautiful moments and the forging of relationships. When the conditions are created for souls to commune, there is such beauty and aliveness.

This brings to mind one of Rumi's poems:

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
There is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
The world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other

Doesn't make any sense."
(translation by Coleman Barks)

In reaching out and touching the beautiful souls at Desirée, my Friends, they rewarded me in return a thousand-fold, gifting me with moments that were moving and fulfilling, opening up the heart to feelings of joy, expansion and love, allowing the "soul to lie down in that grass".

Doratheia Thompson is an integrative psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City. 



Ashram street

Auroville Life Education Center

by Oga Cho

In 1991, an Aurovillian had a vision. She would somehow lift up the lives of disadvantaged young women in Auroville's surrounding villages. She knew many of these girls and women faced a lack of educational and work opportunities, family obligations, financial constraints, and repressive cultural attitudes toward women. Begun under the generous shade of a tamarind tree for its first classroom, Life Education Center (LEC) was born to offer an alternative to the dark reality of living on the streets or in unhealthy home environments.

With no funding, but sheer determination and dedication of the founder and few volunteers, a learning center for young, underprivileged village women began to take shape and grow.

Today, supported by grants and donors, LEC has nurtured countless women to develop skills through a vocational training program. LEC's entrepreneurial venture offers young women tailoring and embroidery training. They sell their creations, grow and thrive among the community of women supporting each other. They imagine their lives in a new light and act to make that vision a reality. And I am one lucky Auroville frequenter who became a friend of the LEC family.

My husband and I began spending time in Auroville about eight years ago. We had come across it by chance when an intriguing image online of a giant golden UFO-like structure caught our eye and led us to the Auroville website. As longtime meditators who had jumped off the stress-inducing rat race in America and Auroville seemed precisely what we were seeking. We went immediately to check it out.

The first time in Auroville was an exercise in confusion. Looking for a "community," we were quickly lost in the scattered town-

ship. Where was our welcoming committee? We felt like tourists tripping in the paths of locals who tired of our asking the same old questions about Auroville. At least my husband and I did not make the all too common mistake of many visitors—offering "free" advice on how to better run Auroville.

It was on that first dizzying visit, that I knew the only way I could understand this

unique community was to get involved. I met Ela, a long-time Aurovillian from Germany who offered workshops in Integral Yoga, Sri Aurobindo's philosophy underpinning Auroville. For newbies like us, it was most enlightening. I told Ela of my desire to know Auroville beyond what is accessible to casual visitors,

about my background in Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) management. That connection led to an introduction to LEC.

Like the ever-thriving Auroville itself, LEC has grown to a solid education facility with its own campus at the edge of Kottakarai village. The focus continues on vocational

training in tailoring, training in Tamil as well as English language, and most importantly, counseling young women to explore their inner selves and their environment.

LEC programs have evolved to reflect the changes in developing India, going beyond survival from dire poverty, to creating ever new and bolder opportunities for the young village women who want to spread their wings wider than traditionally and economically allotted them.

My personal involvement with the LEC participants over the years has ranged from providing feedback on LEC programs and organizing Open Houses to offering small donations, linking potential donors and friends, assisting in the development of LEC website (www.life-education-centre.org), editing LEC publications, and co-writing grant proposals.

I treasure the life-long friendships I've now made, the joy of being included in the LEC family outing to Tiruvannamalai and other festivities. When by chance I encountered an LEC graduate who a few years back could barely meet the eyes of a foreigner, I was deeply gratified to perceive the dramatic



Devi (l) and Oga (Rt.)



Tailoring at LEC



LEC Team




At the Goyo Silent Restaurant

change in her. She now meets my eyes and proudly works at an Auroville café in charge of the cashier box.

One year I invited the LEC students and teachers to Goyo Silent Restaurant run by a fellow Korean and Aurovillian friend. More than a dozen women came dressed in their finest, with fresh flowers pinned in their hair. We all laughed and giggled as the women gamely tried eating with chopsticks, before sensibly going back to eating with their fingers, the original chopstick. Since then, lunch at Goyo has also become an annual outing.

I know that Devi, the current director, appreciates the support I give LEC. But truthfully, it is I who am most grateful to be on the receiving end of this exchange. Without LEC, my time in Auroville every winter would still be great. My days would still be filled with yoga, swimming, whizzing on a scooter through the forests, feasting on delicious food in the numerous restaurants within Auroville, shopping local crafts on the main road shops, making new friends from around the world who gather in Auroville during the northern hemisphere winter months. But without LEC, the rest of my activities, as wholesome as they are, would feel merely self-indulgent. LEC infuses deeper meaning to my time in Auroville. LEC reminds me that Auroville only makes sense when it is connected to the wider circle of life.

Next time you are in Auroville, contact Devi (lec@auroville.org; +91 413 2622082) and arrange a visit. When visiting, keep an eye open for how you can enrich your own Auroville experience by getting involved. Find, create and offer ways of supporting this precious program for the neighbors of Auroville who are, truth be told, the under-recognized fuel that helps to keep Auroville running, day in, day out.

Oga Cho is a jane-of-all-trades and a serial migrant who these days is parked in Berlin. 

For the Rest You Lead

by Alan "Vikas" Vickers

Recently Connect received an e-manuscript entitled "Journeys Within" from our friend Alan "Vikas" Vickers who lived in Auroville during the 1970's, worked on the building of the Matrimandir and was the principle architect of the amphitheater at the center of Auroville next to the Matrimandir and the banyan tree. What follows is a compilation of these writings that cover his early days in Auroville and his life after returning to England.

If you would like the original manuscript, please email Vikas at: a.vickers.arch@ntlworld.com.

Born in 1944 in York, England, I spent my early childhood in Germany where my father was governor of prisons for German prisoners of war and war criminals. From the age of nine, I attended a military school in Dover, before studying architecture in Canterbury, England. In 1970 I left England to travel and in 1971, ended up in Auroville, in South India, where I designed the current form of the Amphitheatre next to the Matrimandir, as well as the Auroville Eco-House and other experimental buildings incorporating recycled and locally-sourced materials. I was given the name Vikas (which means Progress) by The Mother at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I practice the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo. I lived and worked in Auroville for close on 10 years, and it is there I started writing poetry, before returning to England to work as an architect, marrying and having three sons. On return in 1989 from three years in the Bahamas, I started my own one-man architectural practice in Sawbridgeworth, Hertfordshire, until my retirement in 2016.

I am still active for Auroville although I have given up long distance flights so no longer visit there. I now have time to read and reflect, do household and community tasks, draw, write poetry and essays and live in gratitude.

I was in my early twenties in 1968. I was still fully concentrated on passing my examinations to become an architect. Meanwhile, things were stirring in the world. There was a palpable Force at work at a more global level than just in France, which was compelling change and rejection of the old order and vision. In Paris that May, students had occu-



Vikas in the 70's

pied the University and taken to the streets, not merely in protest against the existing educational system, but in revolt against the whole existing state of things. The more the authorities tried to

suppress the protests, the more virulent and widespread the protests became. The workers across France joined the students. In the end, did French politics and governance change? Was there a fundamental social change?

Half way through my post-graduation work experience, I stood one day outside my huge London architectural office (over 1000 architects, engineers and surveyors!) and realized that in all the office blocks surrounding me, the Shell Centre, etc. there were armies of workers, including myself, passing around bits of paper about realities, real life situations they never actually experienced at first hand.

In my case, we were designing housing for London's poor without being exposed to or having any understanding of what it meant to live in the buildings we were designing (unless we unofficially made efforts to visit the area and engage with the people affected). Such was the mindset of the time that the homes we were designing were referred to as 'housing units', (a description divorced from the reality of human life but still widely in use even today!)

I resolved there and then to quickly save enough money so that I could travel and seek for something to become involved with that was more real, more true. It had to be something beyond this unreal world for which I had been educated and groomed. I had also by then commenced an inner search, unknowingly seeking Reality with a capital R. I sensed that I might find the 'something else' that I yearned for in India.

By 1971 I was traveling, having left the West feeling the need to seek something to give more meaning to my life than simply embarking on a career in architecture. The initial intention was to get to Australia, to go around the world. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I did know that where and what I was,

REFLECTIONS

FOR THE REST YOU LEAD CONTINUED

at that time, could not satisfy the deeper part of me that wanted something more purposeful, more relevant to the world than an ordinary little life. I wanted to find the purpose of my life.

When I was on top of a truck en-route to Kathmandu, I met a 17 year-old Swedish man who embodied the maturity, calm and wisdom that made me feel "I want some of that." He had just come up from Pondicherry in the south of India and started telling me about Sri Aurobindo, about meeting The Mother and about the beginnings of Auroville. I was fascinated. I went there and this is where I started these writings.

11th December 1971. Excerpt from my diary: The Matrimandir is no more than a great wide circular hole in the ground. It is emerging as a crater, a colossal theatre-in-the-round. But it has a most strange and very powerful character, an individuality, a *genus loci*. A spirit descends over the place. To me it's more than "the Force" that others speak of, eulogizing its intensity and power; to me, it is the total atmosphere, the energy and the matter, the ether and the earth, and the instruments of transformation, the workers. All seem saturated with this spirit, as if here were the most dense concentration on earth.

I know of other places which have their own intense, heavy characteristic atmosphere; locally I could instance the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo's room, the Mother's room. I have felt the same intensity, but of a totally different vintage, sitting atop a mountain in the Himalayas. It is as if they held a wine, a divine liquor, rich, fruity, heavy, strong; but each with a different flavor, bouquet and vintage. And you have to be a spiritual wine-taster to mark the difference and the subtlety of character.

But one characteristic they all seem to share is a sense of timelessness, despite the exterior forms and your knowledge that such-and-such a place has only been like this for X number of years, be it ten or a million. One feels the atmosphere, the spirit has always existed here, even if only on the subtle plane and not mate-

rially manifest.

Anyway, this large excavated hole, the Matrimandir in its present form, looks a bit like a scene from a Twentieth Century Fox wide screen epic, with 400 workers, men and women and children, carrying huge baskets of rich red earth on their heads. It could be a scene from ancient Babylon, or the construction of the pyramids. Timeless, eternal.

But there, in the middle, as if to give the game away, like the Shakespearean actor who forgot to remove his wristwatch, is the thin, nervous, bespectacled, plastic-raincoat-clad figure of A, the chef-d'oeuvre, strutting around with his clipboard at the bottom of the pit amidst the pools of water, a band of loin-clothed workers attending his every word. It's rich, it's beautiful, and it's funny.

In the early 1970's I was engaged by Dr. Chamanlal Gupta (an environmental scientist and disciple of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, attached to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry) to design and build an integrated Eco-House in Auroville. The funding for the project was provided by the Government of India. The project incorporated natural ventilation and cooling, rainwater harvesting (subsequently abandoned by the current occupants who filled in the water tanks below the building!) with a sand-filtration system to remove impurities from the water, structurally integrated solar panels for water heating, waste recycling to give compost and produce methane biogas for cooking, and a proposed aerogenerator (windmill) for the generation of electricity (not completed).

The construction itself used rendered brickwork walls with appropriate shading



Construction of the Amphitheater

devices. The flat roof construction comprised three different experiments using locally produced materials.

It was concluded that an autonomous dwelling was probably an inappropriate scale for the effective and economical use of alternative energies.

Auroville's objectives somehow embodied the core and essence of the revolutionary spirit and hopes for a global change not just to a new vision, a new world order of things, a new kind of society, but to a new consciousness and even physically, to a new kind of being, which might make such a fundamental change possible. For to change the order without essentially changing the consciousness has always been the reason for the downfall and failure of all revolutions. And to change the consciousness requires that the individuals constituting any collective, change within themselves, then work together with others at a community level, spread the message and be the example, eventually (hopefully), leading to a societal change. Not easy, unless the individuals feel so suffocated by the prevailing system, that they can see, not just with their eyes and in their minds the necessity of change, but feel its need in their hearts with a need as great as the need to breathe. And that they are prepared to undertake the necessary discipline which will firmly root the change in the whole of their being. As I discovered in my own inner journey, such a colossal change, although its need is the consequence of a sudden insight, cannot be achieved instantly, and certainly not quickly at a collective level. It is too often a case of three steps forward followed by two or three steps back.

Auroville's pioneer phase saw its first potential citizens as having come endowed with the spirit of Paris 1968 and the Woodstock generation. Without these rebels and pioneers,



Vikas playing flute in the Matrimandir



Matrimandir begins.

Auroville would arguably not have been settled. Certainly the Indian spiritual aspirants, even the younger ones, seemed to me to feel more comfortable with a life of clean white dhotis and the comfort of the ashram with its rituals, order and stability. Some of the western pioneers saw out the pioneering stage of Auroville's development, planted the 2 million trees that changed the face and microclimate of the proposed 'city' area and its surrounding region, and then started leaving as Auroville moved through its struggle for self-governance and independence from the rule of the old order into a more settled but eventually more bureaucratic and staid society. Perhaps it became a society resembling in many respects the old order it had hoped to replace. The early pioneers were also having to make a choice between a life with its libertarian sense of freedom, with either a Club Med or a hippy laissez-faire atmosphere and the more demanding atmosphere of yogic discipline. Did some of them, in the process, also lose the fire of their original hopes and dreams?

Revolutions, then, are seeds planted in a society whose general mass is gener-



A with clipboard

ally not likely to have the will to change if it means losing its comforts and patterns of habit. Transformation among the mass of a society can only happen gradually and has to be preceded by an inner change of vision. It is only when enough people deeply feel the necessity for change that anything begins to change, and that often requires that a state of profound discomfort with the existing order of things becomes widespread, even unbearable. But the seed has been planted. Its growth is inevitably resisted by all that feels the existing order is under threat. In Auroville, after 50 years, when characteristically such utopian and idealistic movements would have imploded, it is still growing.

Peace Bird

Peace bird, pale blue plummet

What dreams will wing to heaven with your flight?

What night-born cry the soft winds cleave?

What swift descent and golden Grace

Your gull-reel rolls to praying clay?

Perhaps to fly, to freely fly

To sail and soar on wide-winged winds,

To glide the blue and unhorized vast

The spanless space, the breeze of light,

To be the pale blue bird in flight.

My search has been for a vision and understanding, to use de Chardin's phrase, of "the within of things". To change one's way

of seeing the world it is necessary to change one's consciousness out of 'this earth-bound littleness'. In my case, a work still very much in progress after more than 48 years, but by following Sri Aurobindo's 'Integral Yoga' I definitely feel that I am somewhere in the foothills. And rather than make a wretched battle out of the process, I have aspired to walk what Mother called 'the sunlit path', which requires a surrender to the inner guide, who, one anyway discovers, has been leading us even when we thought we were doing the yoga.

For The Rest, You Lead

In the endless cycle of our ant-days

Driven, moved by unseen hands

Fulfilling mirage yearnings that we think are ours,

Something stirs within a well of tears unspoken,

Needs the sunlit passage, needs the summit,

Needs the lucid purity unsullied

Which can bear the coronation

Of the light of Truth.

Not to strive, to struggle,

Confused, deceived by cravings reason-justified.

To be untouched by all that hinders;

Unsuppressed, unummified, alive and flowing,

Joyous, natural, unpretending,

Unblocked, released and giving,

Laughing, playing, living

In the safety of surrender

Is our only need.

For the rest, You lead.



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REFLECTIONS

The Secrets of Yoga

by B

From the rocking chairs on the porch of the Seabeck Conference Center you look above the Hood Canal up at the snow-capped peaks of the Olympic Peninsula—a certain vastness appropriate for our 2019 AUM (All USA Meeting) near Seattle, Washington. About sixty of us were fortunate enough to be there. The theme: Oneness. The view from the front porch of this historic site, recycled from processing last century lumber to processing a new consciousness, offered a panorama of garden, lake, sea, forest, mountain and sky, all at once. Deer grazed on the lawns. The meals: memorable.

I was dropping in from India (Auroville) and I had promised the “secrets of yoga” to Bill Leon who organized the event with a local team. But first I have to tell you the advice from a friend when she heard about my “secret” topic. When I got to Seattle however, I didn’t have the guts to follow her approach. She had said: “Oh, you’ve got the perfect way to do this and it will be so clear, so short, and so simple that nobody will miss it. All you have to do is stand up there and say: ‘my name is B, that is the secret of Yoga.’ Then you sit down.” She said I could also add how I got to be B by taking the “ill” out of Bill.

What I ended up doing was an elaboration on a combination of insights and texts that had helped me most over the years. I prepared it as a virtual take-home document to be sent to everyone on the email list of the conference. No power point, no handouts, nobody had to take notes they would later discard. A “zero waste” presentation that would be archived on the internet forever—if you are linked or enlightened. Anyone reading this who likes it can send me an email (bgr8ful@auroville.org.in) to receive that doc which I cherry-picked and boiled down here for *Connect*.

So, as you already know, the secrets of yoga are not exactly well-kept. The real challenge is not in the information which is, of course, at our fingertips with a smart phone or a laptop. It’s only when “the rubber hits the road,” as Jack Alexander says, that we get foxed by our conditionings, our daily routines, and our priority list. To internalize the “secrets” is what I am doing.

Sri Aurobindo had his epic heroine Savitri tell me simply and directly “the magic

of our golden change,” is awakening the heart “to feel love and oneness.” All right. The conference theme happened to be Oneness. Most significant then that this A.U.M. Became the launch of the *One Book*, a lifetime work of Bill Leon and Ron Jorgensen who compiled from the cultures of the world essential expressions of Oneness. Feeling the love and oneness became the intention of the A.U.M. 2019. We felt in our experience of Oneness the energy of it, which is, of course, love.

In 1920, when someone wanted to translate *Secret of the Veda* into Gujarati, Sri Aurobindo objected: “it is not complete and there are besides many imperfections and some errors in it.” When I read the book, I didn’t find any errors; it seemed very complete. At the end, he does say the secret will remain because people don’t really get it. That secret is summarized in one Sanskrit word: “satchitananda” (awareness that you are aware creates bliss). Just be. I am. That is a fundamental secret of Yoga, the Veda, and Life. Willingly, knowingly saying “yes” to life looks like all there is to it. That works for me when I add my context of aspiring to live an integral yoga that will nurture the experiences to sustain such insights,

However, this may not synch for those who have not had the life-blessing of familiarity with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother’s work as a guide. In our present-day context, I found two books that I would recommend for anyone which will lay out the essentials in an understandable way. These books are readily available: *Biology of Belief* by Bruce Lipton and *A New Earth* by Eckart Tolle. Eckart’s last sentence is: “A new species is arising on the planet. It is arising now, and you are it!”

What has helped me the most to live the “sunlit path” in Auroville are *Savitri* and *Mother’s Agenda*. Opening these troves, my being lit up with the secrets, solutions, experiences and more than I ever bargained for.

Right in the beginning of *Savitri* is that essential reversal of consciousness from “out there” to “in here” (it’s in Canto IV appropriately titled: The Secret Knowledge).

We may find when all the rest has failed
Hid in ourselves the key of perfect change.



B on the path

In *The Supermind and Mind of Light*, Sri Aurobindo links it to the supermind: “The secret truth that emerges in Supermind has been there all the time, but now it manifests itself and the truth in things and the meaning of our existence...”

Fortunately for us, the Mother was questioned by Ashram students about the “secrets.” She gave understandable explanations with images: “It is very simple, as you will see. The Infinite is the inexhaustible storehouse of forces. The individual is a battery, a storage cell which runs down after use. Consecration is the wire that connects the individual battery to the infinite reserve of forces.” Or “The Infinite is the river that flows without cease; the individual is the little pond that dries up slowly in the sun. Consecration is the canal that connects the river to the pond and prevents the pond from drying up.”

With these two images, I think you will understand.

Beside “consecration”. Mother told the students on 21 March 1956, “As Sri Aurobindo says, “We know the Divine and become the Divine, because we are That already in our **secret** nature . . .”

She didn’t want to keep anything secret: “If secrets remain secrets they defeat themselves.”

The Mother wanted to put it out there. She said, “After much study and observation, I have a sort of “spiritual ambition” (if it can be called that) to bring to the world a sunlit path to eliminate the necessity for struggle and suffering.”

I first learned about the sunlit path from Morweena Donnelly an Irish professor at Cambridge who wrote: *Founding the Life Divine; an Introduction to the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo*. She deeply influenced Edith Schnapper who was also at Cambridge. Edith became a founder together with Joy Calvert of Auroville International UK. Morweena com-

missioned a large stained glass window that combines the symbols of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Joy and Edith stored this window for decades until it finally found its home in the Solar Kitchen of Auroville.

In the center of the dining room facing east, this many-splendored window greets the hundreds who daily come for lunch with a sunlit path. That window gets me every time I eat there. I read Morweena's book before I came to Auroville and was captivated with what I thought was a key revelation from Sri Aurobindo that she had highlighted. I was dismayed that nobody else ever did. None of the commentators on Integral Yoga in their writings or talks ever said more than a passing remark about the sunlit path. Everyone knows the phrase, but if you go deeper, no one seems to have a clear understanding of what it means and worse, there can be a dismissive view. The Sri Aurobindo Ashram even published a popular compilation titled *The Sunlit Path*. In that book there is no mention of the sunlit path. I found that only Satprem who compiled *Mother's Agenda* seemed to really get the significance of the concept even

though he personally may have struggled with its implementation. Mother came down hard on him for his negativity. She insisted: "... you don't need to suffer; it's not necessary. That's what I want to tell you." (*Mother's Agenda, Vol. II, p. 36*)

Satprem later wrote: "And perhaps the whole work of Sri Aurobindo and Mother is to have brought the world the possibility of a sunlit path on which suffering, pain and disaster are no longer necessary in order to progress." (*On the Way to Superhumanhood, p. 146*)

B discovering the Sunlit Path: Sri Aurobindo is clear that he and the Mother blazed a path for us and so please don't try to repeat that: "It is because we have the complete experience that we can show a straighter and easier road to others – if they will only consent to take it. It is because of our experience won at a tremendous price that we can urge on you and others: "Take the psychic attitude – follow the straight sunlit path ... do not insist on the hard, hampered, roundabout and difficult journey." (*CLE, Vol. 24, p. 1332*)

He clarifies where the secret is in case we haven't read *Savitri*: "... the secret is in

the heart, not in the mind – the heart that opens its inner door and through it the radiance of the soul looks out in a blaze of trust and self-giving. Before that inner fire the debates of mind and its difficulties wither away and the path, however long and arduous, becomes a sunlit road not only towards but through love and Ananda.

... the hidden springs of sweetness will reveal themselves if you persevere, even if now they are guarded by the dragons of doubt and unsatisfied longing. Grumble, if your nature compels you to it, but persevere." (*CLE, Vol. 24, p. 1631*)

I don't think it gets better than this. We even have a "grumble" clause. You can't say now that anything has been hidden from you. And, let's give Sri Aurobindo the last word:

"Love and Ananda [Bliss] are the last word of being,
the secret of secrets,
the mystery of mysteries."

B (William Sullivan) lives in Auroville in the Trashmahal, a house he designed, next to International House. The One Book, Leon & Jorgensen, available on Amazon.

UPDATES

Japanese Garden and Pavilion of Silence

by Noel

Our Japanese Garden and Pavilion of Silence, designed by Japanese Aurovillian artist and landscaper Jyoti, has been intended to be both a space for silent contemplation in the ancient tradition of Japanese gardens while also being an additional educational element for the Botanical Gardens as a whole— where children, school groups, and people from around the world come to experience and learn about nature and plants while experiencing different landscaping



Rock installation

that Japanese gardens are famous for.

Our garden is also meant to be an educational space for Japanese cultural activities, where traditional tea ceremonies and other Asian events can be offered and experienced. We wish for this space to reflect the truth that beauty can be used to inspire greater consciousness and peace in the world.

With the help of many generous donors we were able to complete the Tea Pavilion, which we call the Pavilion of Silent Reflection. This is one of the major focal points of the garden, so we are happy we could make this big progress! We are grateful to all of you who have contributed and supported this project

so far. Please see the photos of the progress made with the tea pavilion, as well as the entrance gate and other features of the garden. We are also happy to share that we have recently received enough funds which should allow us to complete the rest of the Japanese Garden in the coming year. We are grateful for everyone who has supported the project on every level. We will share more pictures once the garden is completed, and will be happy to welcome everyone to visit sometime.

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Pavilion of Silence

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EVENTS

AUM 2019, A Few Highlights

By Bill Leon

In June, 66 people from across the US, Canada, Brazil, Germany, India and other hives of sadhaks came to Seabeck, Washington for the 2019 All USA Meeting (AUM), sponsored by the Sri Aurobindo Association, Foundation for World Education, and The New Consciousness Foundation. On land next to Hood Canal and beautiful second growth forests on the Salish Sea, where ancient Salish Indian tribes fished and gathered clams for millennia, and where Euro-American loggers arriving in the 1850's built logging camp housing still in use, we gathered to share insights on how Integral Yoga can help humanity address the current social and environmental crises of the world. Edith Stadig was a masterful facilitator of the comfort details for all participants.

After some creation stories from local Native story teller, Paul "Che oke ten" Wagner, Karen Litfin set the stage by describing our global predicament in terms we could understand and react to by answering the question: "How can we as practitioners infuse our inner lives into



Bill Leon and Karen Litfin at Seabeck

social and political modalities commensurate to the evolutionary challenges of our time – and find joy in doing so?" Next morning, Rod Hemsell laid a philosophical foundation for our thinking and response to crisis through reason and responsibility. Many other speakers shared ways we can enhance our understandings and actions in numerous, creative ways: through personal transformation, discussed by Charles Flores; poetry (led by Ron Jorgensen with shared original poems by many others); shamanic journeys led by Raina Imig; heart-centered meditation led by Savitri from the local Alive and Shine Center; purification tips shared by Guruji-Ma via Karun Das; listening to Mother's secrets of the Yoga presented by B; thinking about death as a way to lash us into a deathless state (again from Karen Litfin



AUM Group photo with Earth Ball

with contributions from several others); and through music, dance, film, physical culture, pranayama, and Purna Yoga in various forms (led by, Don Salmon, Jan Maslow, Alan Baiss, Joseh Garcia, Wendy and Julian Lines, Paul Sawh, JV, Lynn Aebi, and Sandra Storwick). In between events, Bex Winnick pulled out her fiddle or guitar and played classic, old time country tunes. Laughter was abundant throughout. Once again volley ball did not happen but ping pong and horse shoes did.

A funny, suddenly transformed session that Ron Jorgensen and I planned on Oneness (based on our 45 years researching expressions of oneness across nations, settings, time periods, and situations) evolved based on the spirited sharing of many.

We had developed 5 exercises to invoke people's direct experience of oneness. At the beginning of the session, I asked (somewhat rhetorically), "What is oneness, anyway?" Then, realizing the depth of wisdom and experience in those in attendance, I said, "Really, I am sure you know. Anyone

want to share a thought or experience?" Then one after another, as Vikas Sharma rushed around the room with a mic, people shared an amazing array of personal stories, events, inner experiences, and communal involvements that illustrated the breadth and depth of oneness in real, human ter facilitated. At the end, standing around a large Earth Ball, we experienced a collective identity with the Earth and each other via an expression by local artist/poet Joe Miller and settled into a long, profound silence no one wanted to end. Perhaps it hasn't.

This event and the others where we interacted showed me that we don't really come to be taught as much as we come to share and be in space and time with each other. And through this sharing we find our deep, collective wisdom that can guide us through our individual and collective crises and creations to a flourishing future. Whenever you need it, do it at AUM, but also at home, with others, and alone.

Please join us for **AUM 2020 July 23rd-26th** at **Trinity Retreat Center in West Cornwall, CT** to celebrate Mother's Life and Legacy on the centenary year of April 24th, 1920 when she returned to Pondicherry to stay.

