

The Naked Eye

A Fond Farewell

BY MARK MATOUSEK

In bidding adieu, our longtime columnist reflects on how a greater plan is always unfolding beyond our limited awareness.

The man in the slippers was bugging me. Know-it-alls always bug me, which is what I assumed he was, padding around the retreat center in his mukluks with a yellow pad and pencil, openly flaunting the meditation teacher's instruction not to read or write for the nine days we were supposed to be doing nothing but walking, sleeping, eating, and meditating.

I'd managed to leave my own journal behind, along with books, music, and cigarettes. But like a junkie without a fix, I was itching to write, and here was this fellow openly scribbling and wandering off to the garden while the rest of us struggled in the meditation hall. I tried to ignore him but couldn't; like anything you try to avoid, he seemed to be everywhere I turned. On the last day when our group broke its silence, and the man in the slippers (a shrink, it turned out) walked toward me with his wife (an editor), smiling, I looked for a quick way out but realized the meeting could not be avoided.

"You remind us of a friend of ours, which is why we've been staring," Chuck said. I hadn't noticed them staring at all.

"It really is uncanny," his wife Anne agreed. In moments, my pent-up resentment toward Chuck was gone and the three of us were chatting in the temple room like old friends. We discussed what we did in "real life," as opposed to the rarefied retreat world. The Simpkinsons, it turned out, published and edited this magazine—and by the time we left to pack our suitcases, we had agreed that I would write for them as soon as a suitable story arose.

Thus began the happiest, most intimate, and mutually fulfilling relationship I've had with a magazine in my professional life, and since this is the last column I'll be writing for *Common Boundary*, I'd like to take a little space to reflect on this relationship, not only in its per-



sonal aspects, but as an example of how life sends us our greatest gifts in unlikely packages, often in moments when we least expect them. No one knows if it's fate or timing, chance, odds, or synchronicity that imbue minor events with major repercussions, but most of us have known such gifts. They seem to appear accidentally, pointing to a mysterious order beyond what we perceive with our senses, an uncanny design unfolding beyond our control. This design into which we're being woven reveals itself mostly in retrospect, when we see how events have linked together. Nowhere in my own life has this

pattern been more instructive and intriguing, or taught me more about faith, than in my relationship with this magazine.

On that day when I met the Simpkinsons, I was 33 and flat broke, with no career save the unremunerative, story-to-story struggle of freelance journalism. Having spent the previous five years devoted to spiritual seeking, coping with friends' deaths from AIDS and my own uncertain health, I'd arrived at a spot too far out on a limb, without a home of my own; traveling incessantly among teachers, ashrams, and retreat centers; enormously lost despite what I'd learned about the dharma. "Live like a bird on a dry twig, ready to fly away when it snaps," an Indian holy woman said. But I'd taken this motto too literally and found myself unable to put down roots or, in the words of another master, "dig in one place." This ardent seeking had left me immature and unbalanced; underneath the mystical glow, I was desperate for balance, home, and love.

As a writer, the Simpkinsons gave me this home and the chance to discover who I was beyond the economic necessities of merely being a pen-for-hire. They allowed me to interview the people I found most inspiring—Stephen and Ondrea Levine, Thomas Berry, Sogyal Rinpoche, Matthew Fox. But even more important, they gave me the opportunity to write about personal matters I'd managed to avoid until then, a move that altered my life and changed my professional aspirations in ways I could never have predicted.

In 1991, long before incest became a household word in this
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Illustration by Tim Cook

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country, I introduced Anne Simpkinson to a therapist and survivor of childhood abuse named Ariel Jordan, who was doing groundbreaking work in the field. I hoped she would allow me to write at length about this frightening, then-taboo topic. Where other editors might have balked, Anne agreed to let me go forward, and the result of this decision, which we called "America's Darkest Secret," was nominated for a National Magazine Award (Chuck, for the record, brought his slippers along to the luncheon at the Waldorf Astoria). Having written personally, publicly, for the first time, I realized from readers' responses that my own stories could be of interest to other people. Like opening a window onto a landscape I barely knew was there, I discovered right under my nose a thousand, nearly forgotten tales I wanted to tell.

What happened next still boggles my mind and must be described in veiled terms to protect the privacy of certain parties. In essence, the story is this: After spending three months living in Germany with the Indian adept Mother Meera and being given permission by Anne to describe that experience, I was contacted by someone who'd seen the piece, traveled to Germany, and (this is the mysterious part) been given an envelope by Mother Meera's assistant to deliver to me in New York. On the day I dropped by this stranger's house to pick up the package, I was surprised not only that my story had inspired her to cross the Atlantic, but that she had been following my work in *Common Boundary* for some time. What's more, she was a publisher who, when I described the book I wanted (but lacked the courage) to write, told me with great enthusiasm that, first, I could do it, and second, that someone might actually want to read it. After years of self-doubt, this encouragement by a knowledgeable party came like manna from heaven, and when months later she began her own publishing house

and offered me a book contract, I felt more blessed than I could say.

This change of fortune signified more than a jump in career or revenue; it symbolized a coming of age and a boon to my wavering faith. I realized that pursuing what I most cared about—regardless of how off-putting and uncommercial it seemed, regardless of professional status, the derision of peers, and the siren call of bigger, louder, and more lucrative—could direct my life in wonderful ways that I could not have planned. It reminded me that there is a Tao—a flow and purpose to how life proceeds—in which we participate naturally if we persevere, reserve judgment, and tell the truth. Ironically, these are the very principles that Anne, Chuck, and I were practicing on our cushions when our paths first crossed.

I don't believe in beginnings and endings; I do, however, believe in timing, trying not to miss life's exits, making room for new things to happen. One morning this spring, I realized that I'd already said enough in this space, it was time to move on and to give someone else the chance to speak. I felt as if I was talking too long; I was hearing the sound of my voice in a room where everyone else was listening, and wanting to stop before I got boring, self-absorbed, or repetitious. There's great relief in turning aside to listen and wait for your next entrance.

I'm happy to have had the chance to speak so personally for so long to a readership of like-minded people whose letters have helped me remember—often when I most needed reminding—that personal stories about common questions have value beyond the person who writes them; that the effort to understand our lives, to examine the texture of mind and spirit, is as precious and necessary as I have come to believe it is. To all of you who share this commitment, and especially to Anne and Chuck Simpkinson, my partners in this ongoing journey, I say, quite simply, thank you.

Mark Matousek's new book, *The Boy He Left Behind*, will be published this winter by Riverhead Books. He can be reached at MMATOUSEK@aol.com.

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