

## **A Modern Mystic**

*A Personal Account by Marie Gundersen*

*In the first part of this article Marie has summarised her two previous articles (Knowing Nothing - A Sacred Journey Part 1 and Part 2 published in Emergence in 1999 and 2000) and also added material relevant to her story. The latter part of the article describes the unfolding of this process from 1999 to 2006. Ed.*

Unexpectedly in 1975 while stepping across the threshold to my bedroom I experienced what can only be described as an inner calling. In that moment I made a vow to serve the Divine - instantly I felt my life had meaning and purpose.

Two years earlier I had an unusual encounter in the lift of the office building in Oslo where I was working. Waiting for me in the lift was a man wearing a dark robe, carrying a large bundle of keys and a bottle of water. I did not see his face, neither did we speak while we were in the lift together. The two of us (or should I say three because I was pregnant at the time) travelled FROM GROUND FLOOR TO THE SEVENTH FLOOR. [The capitalizing of these words happened unintentionally when Marie was retyping this article! Ed.] When I left the lift he mysteriously vanished. Due to other extraordinary experiences surrounding this meeting I was given to understand he was an 'extra-terrestrial' and that this meeting had spiritual significance. Who this person was has remained a mystery.

I moved to Australia with my four-year old son in 1977. Since the meeting in the lift there have been a series of out-of-body experiences and visitations by a spiritual being, all of which seemed like initiations. One night I woke up and saw a spiritual being sitting at the end of my bed. He touched my big toe and stretched it into a cone shape. I could see this but did not feel anything. When I looked at him again I could see a stream of pale blue and pink light around his head. This was the first time I had seen an aura and I was surprised that it had these colours. Immediately, as if he had read my thoughts, the colours around his head changed into a golden glow. This looked like the haloes that I was familiar with from religious pictures. I did not understand what was going on.

Something else that I found perplexing was the presence of a pearl-sized blue light at the periphery of my vision. This light and the out-of-body experiences ceased after a few years. Eventually I found a book by Bonnie Greenwell\* about the Kundalini process where she described some of these phenomena. She refers to the big toe as a starting point of the ascent of the Kundalini to the seventh chakra.

These had been happy and fulfilling years. I had always been a deep-feeling person with a positive outlook on life. My activities were child-oriented and down to earth. By the end of 1981 I remember thinking "What now?". I had reached the peak of happiness and was ready for new challenges, I suppose.

In 1983 I remarried and was practicing meditation. I had read a couple of books by J. Krishnamurti which inspired me to start the awesome task of staying present observing thoughts, feelings and actions. This became my main focus whilst living an active life. Over the years, maybe as a result of this intense watchfulness, a process of inner changes happened which left me unsure of my place in the world.

In 1987 I had the unusual experience of being told by an inner voice that: “You will be turned inside-out”. This message was repeated a few times and when I woke up the next morning my body was in a state of shock. Rapid heart palpitations and extreme fear lasting about ten seconds, then no symptoms for about the same time, then on again. The symptoms were not thought-related, it felt like a physical phenomenon that I had no control over.

I was in this state for over two years, day and night. By that time I had had medical check-ups by a heart specialist who could not find anything medically wrong. I felt like I had no protection from external influences and my nervous system was highly alert. During this time I had so much physical energy, maybe due to the excess of adrenalin, that I hauled rocks dug up from around our 60 acre property and helped build a stone cottage. I also planted hundreds of trees and carted buckets for watering. There was no-one to talk to about these symptoms. My doctor would have liked to prescribe Valium and send me on stress leave but personally I wonder whether all the physical exertion might have saved my life. Eventually I had acupuncture treatment which eased the palpitations.

Around this time I noticed that my meditation was continuous; no in and out of awareness. In 1990 my husband and I moved to the cottage we had built and enjoyed a simple lifestyle with no power and mains water. One night at the end of that year something extraordinary happened. In the evening I had some sort of insight that from now on the focus of my meditation was to change – to be aware of the sacred (God) rather than my inner and outer world. I also went to bed that evening with a feeling of satisfaction from having handed in my last assignment for a professional counselling course. I mention this because what happened next was so unexpected and so life-changing that it seems important to include what state of mind I was in at the time.

I woke up in the middle of the night overcome by vertigo. A tremendous force or energy had permeated my whole body – a spinning sensation in the centre of the head made it impossible to move and I was nauseated by the vertigo. I sat on the bed, feet on the floor while my husband held my hands saying that he could feel the energy flowing through them. We sat like this for three hours before I was able to lie down. During this time we both heard a throbbing sound and I could see a white light the size of a person from the corner of my left eye. It was these two phenomena that convinced us not to call an ambulance. I remember uttering, “My God, my God!”.

I spent three days in bed before I felt steady enough to walk around. My life quickly returned to normal with no apparent physical side-effects from the ordeal that night. Again I checked with my doctor who, despite there being no visible symptoms, could only suggest a massive inner ear infection!

I had by then read about the Kundalini process but was left wondering whether, even if it was Kundalini, something had gone wrong, especially as I soon discovered that I had lost my emotional responses and that my short term memory was impaired. For various other reasons we had to sell our property soon after this event, a property we had laboured with love, and here was I feeling no attachment at all. This was very hard for family and friends to understand. It was as if there was nothing left of me; photos from the past might as well have happened to someone else. I was neither able to feel disappointed nor excited. In actual fact, wherever I went it was all the same. Going on a holiday to be inspired by beautiful scenery became meaningless. Initially I continued further study and also worked as a counsellor, but it became apparent that anything involving concentration created a sensation of ‘overheating’

and intense 'tingling' in the brain. This accumulation of energy in the head also affected the short-term memory and eventually I was forced to adopt a simple lifestyle based around the home.

I kept an open mind as to what had happened, from the possibility of brain tumour to ego death, although I thought at the time that ego death wasn't supposed to happen to ordinary people like me. And moreover, the limited reading that I had done gave me the idea that bliss is the immediate outcome of ego death. Years ago I had often experienced states of bliss and had known the sacred as an inner source of inspiration. Even as a child I could rely on this source to sustain me through hardship.

My emotional connection with God was now gone. Hereafter I was reliant on faith, trusting that I would be guided even though I could not feel God's presence. What had ceased was the reflexive movement which operates in time, a movement that makes it possible to have an emotional reaction to what we observe (physically or mentally). This sudden shift into the present moment had also created an uncomfortable feeling of compression in the solar plexus.

Then one evening, most unexpectedly, an inner voice clearly said: "You are eligible for a demonstration". I did not know what to make of this and went to sleep not expecting anything to happen. In the early morning I woke up in a most wonderful blissful state. Although this feeling only lasted a couple of minutes it somehow showed me what I was able to feel. In this lifeless state that had been my existence for so long (about four years), it was immensely important to feel that, at what seemed my darkest hour, I was being guided and there was light at the end of the tunnel. I also discovered a book called "Dark Night of the Soul". It was a Godsend. It described the state I was in and gave me a message of hope for a positive outcome.

Around that time I saw a Jungian psychologist. His starting point was suggesting Alzheimer's Disease. I was again reminded about the ignorance and lack of experience of professionals about altered states. During my year of consultations I was at least able to talk to someone who was prepared to listen, and as I discovered books by the Grofs (Spiritual Emergency) and others, I could then pass this information on to my psychologist!

In 1994 I decided to seek advice from a Burmese meditation master giving a 30-day retreat in the Vipassana method. I discovered during the retreat that there was no opportunity for me to discuss anything as it was a silent retreat. We reported on our meditation practice daily, and Sayadaw U Pandita smiled approvingly when I reported on my neutral state.

I was not used to meditating sitting cross-legged so eight hours a day sitting motionless became an exercise in transcending one's pain threshold – mindfully! Energy gradually built up during the retreat creating a sensation of a 'solid' column or rod of energy extending down the spine. The phenomenon enabled me to sit fully supported during meditation. When pushing my back against this force I could 'click into' different positions much like being in a reclining chair!

Prior to the retreat, the strong energy in my head had gradually intensified and focused in the forehead. Heat, light and vibration seemed to create a 'veil' between me and the outside world. Was this the reason for the memory loss and my lack of emotions? This question was not answered during the meditation retreat. However, I had started to laugh there and I noticed afterwards that the energy had shifted to the solar plexus area.

Over time my memory gradually improved, not from concentration as before but by allowing memories and information to appear out of nothingness. The stillness was so profound (and still is) that it seems like words and sentences just 'arrange' themselves there and then.

During the following years I spent time overseas then came back to live in a different part of Australia. The different lifestyles and environments did not change my inner state. I had spent over a year in Norway caring for my elderly parents and working with handicapped persons. Outwardly I was busy; inwardly I existed in this timeless, formless space. The usual experience is to live with an endless variety of emotions which colour our days and motivate our actions. Living in the present without these highs and lows means there is not much going on!

This state of nothingness was not a comfortable space in which to remain still. I realized I had kept myself busy to avoid staring into this inner vacuum. Staying still also meant that I was more aware of the intense energy in the head which felt like the effervescent bubbling in a corked champagne bottle. Having seen there was nowhere to go outwardly, it was time to turn my attention to the inner void. As I focused on the unease in there, I could see that it was related to a loss of my personal (emotional) self. For years I had felt very isolated in not being able to find anyone else who had had a similar experience.

I decided to 'use' Krishnamurti's approach more actively to 'explore' the dark depths of the void and to invite the unease to unfold. It grew in strength as I focused on it until one day some little event triggered off a spontaneous 'rebirthing' experience where I knelt on the floor, curled up in a foetal position and cried. My breathing was rapid and rhythmical, and I watched while letting it all out. I felt peaceful after a few minutes. As I stood up, my husband (who had stood by concerned but not interfering) and I heard a chorus of birds singing like we had never heard before. We didn't think of looking outside at the time as we were both focused on how quickly I had recovered and how peaceful I felt.

Since then I have become aware that in the depth of this void of nothingness, the sacred is – the two are the same and I am it. The sacred is there, very faint, and an inner quiet and receptiveness is needed to notice it. There is a quality about it that makes me feel humble.

In early 1999 I had some Transpersonal Breathwork sessions with Karen Daniel. These showed that the Kundalini energy was active and that the process could be trusted to take its natural course.

I was also very fortunate to meet Lena McGregor who works as a clairvoyant and Pranic Healer in Lismore. I went to her initially because of the vibrational energy and pressure inside the top of the head as well as some anxiety and unease in the solar plexus. (In the past this symptom of anxiety would be particularly strong at night. Feelings of oppressive despair and total annihilation would often wake me up in the darkest part of the night only to disappear suddenly just before dawn!)

Lena identified the loss of personal self as liberation and congratulated me on my achievement! It was now possible at last, to drop the mind's preoccupation with there being something wrong with me. Towards the end of the year a new phenomenon appeared – a kind of high pitched bell-like ringing, a pleasant sound inside my head which I mainly noticed at night.

For some time my reality had been a fluctuation between the no-self and the faint presence of the sacred. I became aware of the mind trying to recapture or recreate the right conditions for the sacred to stay. The unease resurfaced at times. It became a pointer, prompting me to look deeper. I did this in a state of surrender and trust in divine guidance. I had learnt from Krishnamurti's teaching that the answer to a problem is in the problem. And so the unease, associated with emptiness and lack of identity became my object of meditation.

I saw that beyond the self and the no-self, my reality/identity was That which appeared from moment to moment in consciousness – or Seeing. (the Seer and the Seen had merged in the no-self state).

A friend who had heard me describe the state I was in lent me Bernadette Roberts' book "The Path to No-Self". This was the first time that I had come across a written description of the no-self, an expression I have since adopted. Her book helped to normalise my own state and I acknowledge her invaluable contribution in writing about the contemplative journey with such detail and insight. I agree with Bernadette that "... union with the divine is a knowing beyond an archetypal image, idea, experience or perspective."

On December 10th, 1999, not long after finishing this book, I had a dream where I died. A man announced that my pulse had stopped. I was aware that, as I was about to die my breathing would stop. As I realized that this was the end, I drew my last breath. To let my mother know that this was my very last breath, I placed my hand in hers. While expecting a gasp to follow I woke up.

During the week that followed, the unease started to resurface. The dilemma was: 'What is it that sees when there is no Seer?' This was again a spiritual conundrum to be solved experientially, not mentally. For hours every day I paced up and down the corridor needing to move physically while this deep enquiry was going on. The result was most unexpected: on December 17th the Seeing dissolved into Pure Awareness! The outcome was immediate clarity and a sense of homecoming to a natural state. I knew without any trace of a doubt that the seeking had ended. The feeling of unease ceased as did the concentration of energy inside the top of the head.

A new physical phenomenon, that I became aware of later that day, was that something had aligned itself behind the centre of the eyebrows. This manifested as seeing with 'one eye'. What had disappeared was a vibrational energy behind the forehead that I had felt for many years. This energy had created a sensation of being cross-eyed without in any way distorting the actual physical vision.

This natural 'state' which mysteriously appeared on that day in December is not a state of a resurrected personal identity. There is still 'no-one home', 'nowhere to go', no 'inside/outside' and no sense of self-importance. But all is well! There is no conflict or need to change anything. Beyond the known and the unknown is Pure Awareness, the essence of consciousness. Pure Awareness is timeless and vibrant, timeless because without the personal self and its emotional projections each moment can be met spontaneously.

*The following is an update of Marie's process. Ed*

All through my journey I found little information describing the stages leading to union with God. Over the years I kept a journal detailing changes in consciousness, unusual symptoms

and experiences in the hope that one day it would make sense. I often felt bewildered and isolated, not knowing what was going on or where to turn for advice.

I studied everything from psychiatric textbooks to spiritual literature from different traditions looking for references to and explanations of these states. I found that the teachings of Buddhism and Christianity tended to focus on the actual spiritual disciplines rather than describing the symptoms and phenomena that can occur as a result of these practices.

Research of the Kundalini process has been going on for many years but is still unknown to the general public and the medical profession. Less understood and researched is the relationship between the Kundalini energy and the Holy Spirit and their roles in the process of spiritual transformation and the evolution of consciousness.

The notion that you can have instant enlightenment has become very popular. An increasing number of authors and so-called spiritual teachers promise freedom from all emotional conflict which they say can be obtained with a mind shift. In their teachings there is no need for any spiritual practice because 'everything is perfect now, if only we can wake up and see it'. Enlightenment is the catch phrase: 'once you've got it you live happily ever after'! The absence of pain and anxiety may allow a person to feel blissful for a while, but does that make a person more spiritual? If by spiritual we mean being humble and compassionate, then these qualities are acquired through selflessness and suffering rather than self-gratification.

I am concerned that spiritual seekers who have gone beyond the initial experiences of bliss, will have difficulty finding guidance and may even be led to believe that they are on the wrong path. I think it is helpful to see pain and suffering as a natural and necessary part of the process of transformation, just as is the case with childbirth: a new being conceived by the union of male and female energies grows and develops in the darkness of the womb. The contractions in labour are like the suffering of spiritual purgation - they intensify just before 'birth'. Then there is a sudden ending of pain as the infant emerges into light ready for a new stage of development.

I can relate to this analogy of birth with what happened to me on 17th December, 1999. During the night, unexpected and beyond my control, a force penetrated through the base chakra, climaxing with a blast of energy that shot up through to the top of the head. I have since realised that the energy that ascended through the body in 1999 was a reverse movement of the descending force that entered through the crown chakra in 1990 (whatever that means). The climax in 1999 was the culmination of a deep spiritual enquiry and a total surrender to God. Finally 'I' was released from the tomb of emptiness and annihilation. This ended a nine year long struggle of my own version of the Dark Night of the Soul. The mind was now free of even the most subtle constraint and resting in the centre or ground of being as Pure Awareness. This brought with it a profound sense of inner peace.

A constant tingling sensation or charge was now felt throughout the whole body. In the past this internal vibrational energy would move to different parts of the body creating 'hot spots' of increased vibration and heat. Whilst the mind remained in a quiet state, the extra charge in the head created a sensation of over-heating the brain circuits every time I tried to read or concentrate. Looking after a grandchild remained my main focus for a few years. We both enjoyed the spontaneity of play, story-telling and song. These were activities that didn't require much mental concentration.

I went through a period of waking up at night because I had stopped breathing. It was as if I had forgotten how to breathe. Sometimes it felt like I was choking. Fortunately I always remained calm. After a while, by breathing in consciously, my breath returned to normal and I soon went back to sleep.

I decided to see a doctor because breathing is important! He diagnosed sleep apnoea and referred me to a hospital with a sleep laboratory. As there were no other symptoms that fitted sleep apnoea (such as sleep deprivation) I was undecided if travelling interstate to undergo tests in a sleep laboratory was worth the trouble.

That same day I had a 'chance' meeting in town with Lena McGregor, the local clairvoyant healer who I had seen in the past. I mentioned the visit to the doctor and my uncertainty about further treatment. This led to a consultation where she offered an alternative explanation for my breathing problem. She could see that the etheric channel was open and told me that the Kundalini process had finished but the flow of energy in the throat chakra was restricted. She advised me to change my posture during the day as well as at night (tuck chin in, neck straight) and to look at any issue that needed voicing. I heeded her advice and I began singing again. My breathing at night gradually returned to normal without any need for medical intervention.

Lena had also encouraged me to tell my story and to offer my experience to others. For a while, I just sat with this thought of going public to see what I was supposed to do with it. I had noticed that whenever I shared what I knew to be true my whole being felt vibrant and energised. I had also seen that my meditation practice had increased my awareness, helped to heal emotional wounds and erased old conditioning. Seeing that others could benefit from exploring a path of self-discovery I decided to offer individual and group sessions in Awareness Meditation (using Krishnamurti's approach). In one closed group we focused on spirituality and daily life with the emphasis on personal experience. This group met regularly for a couple of years and the deep sharing that evolved was rewarding for us all.

I have been living on my own for a few years now - a necessary change to a simpler lifestyle. During this time I have noticed a gradual inflow of spiritual light. This inner light creates a kind of luminosity experienced both inside my head and externally. Thoughts entering my mind are highlighted and an assessment (judgement) of these thoughts happens instantly. In this state, where the mind is often silent, awareness is open, receptive and focused. Even the most subtle and fleeting thought of self-centredness does not pass unnoticed. This inner judgement is not done by my personal critic but is a new feature produced by the presence of this divine light (Holy Spirit). I am convinced that it is this presence of pure love and light that causes any contrasting impurities in me to be highlighted and amplified. I welcome these 'exposures' because in my heart it feels right and just. God's pure love both purges and purifies and nothing can be hidden from divine light. When I see my own shortcomings and flaws there is often an instant rush of heat in the body.

Speech is difficult. Thoughts are fragmented and cannot express that which is whole and holy. If I engage in idle small talk or frivolous conversation it shows up immediately as an impurity and can result in me feeling 'drained'. The mind seems to require a great deal of silence and there is a need for solitude. The nervous system is more charged and sensitised with the extra light; at the same time there is an increased vibrancy and vitality in this state and I have less need for sleep. Consciousness is no longer in the body but seems to operate the body from above, extending into space formless and free.

Until recently this inner state of peace and tranquillity had been fluctuating. There was union with God (as pure love, the essence of consciousness) and then periodically the absence of this union which I experienced as a hollow feeling of aloneness. I was in an expanded and elevated state that could not be sustained. These fluctuations and feelings of separation from God were not precipitated or changed by any external event.

About two years ago I discovered “The Complete Works of St John of the Cross”. It was like finding a friend, someone who wrote of experiences I could relate to and who knew the path ahead. Feeling so attuned with his teaching gave me the impetus to look for spiritual connection in the contemplative tradition of Christianity. I searched the internet and found the Camaldolese, a contemplative branch of the Order of St Benedict. This led me to Father Michael Mifsud, the Prior and Regional Chaplain for the Australian and New Zealand Camaldolese Oblates. In talking to Fr. Michael I was able to validate my experiences within a Christian context. He felt I had a genuine mystical union with God. This acknowledgment was very helpful because I had seen myself as a freak for so long.

For some time I had felt a need to be part of a spiritual community, so joining the Camaldolese Benedictines and meeting other contemplatives was important. Their commitment to interfaith dialogue also appealed to me. It was on Fr. Michael’s advice that I looked into becoming a member of the Catholic Church. This was a new direction for me. I had left the Protestant Church long ago as it seemed irrelevant to me, though I had continued to use The Lord’s Prayer, which my grandmother had taught me as a child. From when I was very young I knew that a loving God sustained me and was present within. It had not occurred to me that this inner presence was the same God spoken of by the church.

After a time of study and prayer to discern what I was meant to do I became a Catholic at Easter 2006. I have since become a Camaldolese Benedictine Oblate. The decision to join the church was also influenced by a vision of the Cross in 1976. This is what happened:

I had been spending time in the local library researching different religions while my son was at pre-school. This research project had gone on for some time. I used to take Patrick home on my bicycle. It was winter with lots of snow on the road (nothing unusual for Norway). I was focused on cycling in the track made by the wheels of the vehicle ahead when I happened to look up. The clouds parted and there appeared a clearly outlined cross in the sky. Somehow I understood that the vision was just for me so I didn’t stop to share this experience with anyone nearby.

Leading up to the conversion as part of the Catholic Church’s program of initiation, I underwent three rites of healing and received blessings. After the conversion at Easter I continued to attend weekly Mass. During this time I noticed that some inner change was taking place. The state of tranquillity and luminosity expanded and union was maintained without any large fluctuations. This was truly grace - an unexpected and welcome blessing.

I have discovered that with a more elevated state of peace and tranquillity there is less motivation to do and achieve. There has been a withdrawal of the life force that drives or governs the desire and motivation to act. On a practical level I have therefore become less effective. I am in a meditative state of being, absorbed in silent prayer.

I gaze at this mystery which I cannot describe because it is not separate from me - it cannot be reflected on. God, as the Beloved, is that mystery which I worship and which is worshipping in me. And at the same time God is who and that which I humbly serve.

**References:** Greenwell, Bonnie. *Energies of Transformation*. (Shakti River Press 1995 - first publ.1990) Roberts, Bernadette. *The Path to No-Self*, (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1991.) *What is Self?* (DeVorss & Co., U.S.A. 1989.) St John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul*, (translated and edited by E. Allison Peers, Doubleday, New York - first publ.1959).

*Postscript: I wish to thank Gini for encouraging me to write these articles and to acknowledge her skilful editing. Sharing our stories is a way of validating and normalising our experiences as well as contributing to a better understanding of what the spiritual journey entails.*