

The Phoenix of Faith

by Sharon Singer

À la suite d'une expérience de trahison marquante, une femme tente de donner un sens et une direction à sa foi.

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When my family gathered to honour our mother's eightieth birthday several years ago, an early step in my faith-doubt duet began. My brother arrived from Washington State, and as we caught up on our lives, he told me that he was reading of a man's experience with The Divine Mother. I skimmed the book, feeling an unusual tingle of recognition and hope as I read about Mother Meera, the young Indian woman considered a saint by some.

I've been leery of teachers. Apprehensive about total surrender to another human being, I've preferred to pursue my growth in other ways. A seed was planted in a time of accelerated opening to my spiritual nature, however. A call became distantly audible and I responded with a fearful, quiet "yes."

December

Soon I was diving in the stormy waves of doubt. My husband and best friend of 17 years pursued an attraction to a close family friend, the woman who was godmother to our daughters. I was shattered. She received him. I was dumbfounded. Devastated. The betrayals were crushing; the loss, indescribable. He wept with the horror of it all as though it

was a force of nature that had somehow happened inexplicably.

My life was turned upside down. Sleep was elusive, and my appetites dried up. I shuddered throughout the day with bewilderment, confusion,

and a bone deep chill. I was barely functional, undone by this pain and loss that were bigger than me.

Being betrayed by someone who was a sister, tore at me. I kicked and raged, wailed and grieved. I had held her when her husband left. As the attraction with my husband mounted, she assured me that she wouldn't be the woman with whom he'd "act out"—especially given the recent experience of her husband's desertion. Naive and scared, I believed her. At this same time, it turns out, she was writing him steamy letters. I found them in his office.

Where are You God/dess? How can You stand by and let this happen?

Trust was shredded. With nothing to place my faith in, there was no meaning. Betrayal hung in the air like sulphur.

July

The inner upheaval spilled into the outer world. My daughters and I were on our way to the country. It was raining and the freeway was congested in a long construction zone as an eighteen-wheeler whooshed by. The car flew off the highway out of control.

Look out! Hold on!

Great Mother! The oncoming lanes of traffic are ten feet away! I'm bearing down on the brakes and there's a decisive moment when time slows and the car stops and flips, over and over and over. There's the crunch of metal and

gravel, and the smash of the windows cracking. The car's rolling in the median of the highway. I feel something strange, an energy, an instant of being held—our bodies are miraculously protected inside the fractured mess. We've literally been turned upside down, on our heads. The vehicle is crumpled and totalled. As if this isn't enough, I think I felt an invisible energy intervene and shield us!

Oh my God. We were nearly killed! What are we going to do now? When does this nightmare end? What's going on?

I was laden with fear and endless questions following the trauma of betrayal. It was inconceivable that I'd lost my husband.

Why has this happened? I thought our love was vital and enduring. We've shared so much, so deeply, and he still says he loves me. What does it all mean?

Am I being punished? Does anyone deserve this pain? Is it karma? He talks of God's will. Can this be? What's Your part in this God/dess? Did You save us in the accident? Was that an illusion? Were all those sweet years with him illusion too? Why have You permitted the loss of my beloved?

I was afraid of life, afraid of not grasping the lessons I was "meant" to be learning. The dark side of seeking the opportunity in whatever occurs, consumed me.

If I can't perceive the value in what's facing me, how will I get by? What's going on? If I don't understand the lessons, how can I spare myself further hell?

Barely able to contain myself in the mornings, I mustered a will power I didn't know existed, in order to bring love to the girls while waking them for school. I snuggled in next to their warm innocence, silently begging for the strength to be the mother they needed. Making breakfast; packing lunches; getting the trash and the recycling box out on the right days; brushing out the hair tangles; gather-

ing ponytails without leaving lumps at the temples and crown (a critical standard for fourth graders)—it was all a trial. Then the girls were on their way to school and I'd return to the empty house to take a big breath, bursting into heaving sobs. Waves of rage would sweep through me. I howled "No!" dozens of time, stamping my feet, yelling at the Divine.

Where are You? Who are You? I hate You for this. I hate You. I don't deserve this pain, this soul splitting loss. You're mean and cruel. I'll never forgive You.

Day after disconsolate day, I swore bitterly at God/dess, railing, shaking my fists as I spewed the outrage that devoured me.

My fury towards the woman involved was stunning. I imagined the satisfaction of her teeth crunching against my heel as I kicked her in the scheming mouth, and tremors of disgust coursed through my urgent body. There seemed no way to discharge the sickening feelings I had about her.

Nighttimes were different. After getting my children to sleep, I sank into my bed, weeping until my eyes ached. If anger came, it was usually towards my husband who had abandoned our marriage and left me with this unspeakable grief and wrath. Night inevitably brought me, terrified and dazed, to my knees. Rarely was I angry at God/dess once the day's light was spent. I pleaded to be sustained and healed. Desperate for faith. I beseeched unseen guides, angels, teachers.

Please lift the pain and get me through this. May I be held and protected, as the hurt and loss are taken. Please show me the other side.

November

J. went to see Mother Meera when she was in Germany, and returned speaking of the integrity she'd encountered. I reread the book about this holy woman, prompting a further opening, and, more questions.

What draws me to Mother Meera? Is this part of a blind desperation to stop the pain? Am I turning into a flake who

would run helter-skelter from psychic to swami seeking healing?

What voice am I to listen to? How will I know what to do to recover? Can I ever really open to any holy person? Can I afford not to? Can I tolerate any further disappointment?

I found myself thinking more about Mother Meera, who's face sometimes floated before me. I prayed to Her tentatively, asking for help.

January

M. called. She asked me to go with her to see Mother Meera.

I may need to make the trip. There has to be some meaning to the disintegration I'm living. If it's possible to heal the emotional pain I'm in, being in the presence of a saint might up the odds.

Heartache and rage still roared through me, and my physical health deteriorated. My sacro-iliac joint became excruciatingly inflamed. I was in bed, on ice, for nearly a month. As well, my liver wasn't functioning properly. My family physician suggested that I find a way to let go—to relieve the inflammation in the hip joint, and to find my way to forgiveness.

Forgiveness. The very word fueled anger, and brought nausea. I prayed for help, not sure of the point. I didn't know what God/dess meant and I didn't know what to think of this reported living saint. Yet something essential wasn't working within and I couldn't tolerate both the physical and spiritual discomfort. The choice was mine to make—either work on developing my faith, or bury it. I addressed my prayers to God/dess and Mother.

Please help me to know You and to open to Mother Meera and Her help. May the sincerity of my prayers be deepened.

I couldn't pray for forgiveness.

Early April

My journey to Mother Meera's actually began with the two months of bed rest, acupuncture, homeopathic and chiropractic treatment that

was necessary for me to be well enough to go. While fearful of being duped and further hurt, unrelenting anguish and doubt kept delivering me to prayer. Living within a huge question mark of fear and confusion I didn't know where else to turn.

Why such painful loss? What's happened to my best ever friend? How will I ever be restored?

I felt very like a pilgrim when in Germany to come before this incarnation of the Divine Mother. I was desperate for the pain to be lifted, and for my heart to be healed.

Darshan is the bestowal of grace by a divine entity. On the nights when *darshan* is given, 200 people gather near Mother Meera's home in a small village north of Frankfurt, waiting to receive Her blessing. I arrived clutching jumbled fervent prayers in my heart, and anti-inflammatory pills in my pocket.

It is affirming to assemble with the others who have travelled great distances to receive the grace offered by Mother Meera. The atmosphere in the house prior to Mother Meera's entrance, is an extraordinary mix of hushed meditation and electrified anticipation. Punctually at 7 p.m. She sweeps into the room, a diminutive figure in a brilliantly coloured sari. Her work is carried out in complete silence, from an upholstered white leather chair, receiving people before Her one at a time.

I sit in the darshan room earnestly praying to open, to feel worthy, and to somehow find the trust to surrender. The booming voice of doubt keeps warning me to not be silly or blind. I'm afraid to believe in anything or anyone in case I meet betrayal once more, and then become morbid and bitter. It is not a quiet meditation!

The room was jammed with reverent, hopeful people of all ages. Several small adjoining spaces are also filled with the overflow. Given the large numbers, it's extraordinary that stillness prevails for the two-and-a-half-hour duration of *darshan*. As an individual feels moved within, s/he proceeds to one of the tiny aisles, until the "waiting chair" is vacant.

One remains in this designated seat while Mother Meera encounters the preceding person. Somehow this all unfolds in an orderly way, as everyone files soundlessly before Her.

My heart speeds noticeably when I'm first in the aisle, and pounds with terror by the time I take my place in the "waiting chair." I'm afraid both of Mother Meera's power and of meeting yet more of my own inadequacy.

Darshan has two components. The first is *pranam*, when you kneel before Her and She takes your head into Her small, firm hands. During *pranam* Mother Meera works with subtle energy lines in the body, undoing the knots that are obstacles to our spiritual development. After 15 or 20 seconds, the pressure of Her fingers releases. This is the signal to rise and meet Her gaze, for the transmission of *darshan*. It is said that Mother Meera looks into every corner of the person before Her, to ascertain how She can best be of help. This was precisely my experience. With a steady gaze She peered throughout my consciousness. Each time I knelt before Her, I found myself praying with all the sincerity I could muster.

Please take the pain. I have too much fear. Help me to move on, beyond the debris of betrayal. May Your light heal me. Please, please, thank You.

The last time I was before Her, rising from *pranam* I met Her eyes to be overwhelmed by a rush of spontaneous gratitude. I looked lovingly into those unwavering clear eyes and my heart danced with joyous thanksgiving, astounding me. I thought joy had died.

Late April

I returned home with a gentle inking of hope. I continued to pray to Mother Meera to stay close to me, and to help me keep my tender heart open. These strands of new faith were very delicate. My prayer practise mercifully began to deepen, answering the prayer that it would. Mother Meera was becoming my opening to God/dess.

May

I became haunted by old fears and to my disappointment, tumbled into a dark hole of doubt. My hip still hurt; God hadn't revealed Him/Herself to me, at least not in a lasting way; and my neurotic habits persisted. I'd never welcomed a teacher before, and felt I wasn't cut out to have one.

Depressed, I turned to my journal to regain myself. Caught in overpowering negative energy, I wept with torment. Scrawling anxiously, I began to pray, calling to Mother Meera.

I'm afraid to believe in You and afraid not to. I'm choking on old pain. Please take this from me Mother Meera. I need help—I can't do it alone. Free me from the limitations that have caught me. May the space that is left be the ground of a new fulfilled life.

Working with the misery, still crying and asking to be delivered, a startling thought came before me. I was to use all this! I was to *use* the brokenness, the lack of trust, the dark descent, and meet with others about it. I was to write about it, not leave it all behind. I was to move out *with* it, and explore how others live their lives with meaning despite inevitable setbacks.

I doubted the idea, but it took hold of me and didn't let go until I took it seriously. I looked at pictures of Mother Meera and wondered, *Are You giving me this work? No, that can't possibly be. Anyway, I don't know how to do it.*

The energy grew in spite of my thin conviction and I slowly came to trust the inner urgings. That is, I trust them, except when I don't.

Two years later

The force continues to build, and the project, even as it changes, is part of both my passion and my renewal.

When I dare to know that I have been deeply affected by Mother Meera, the writing—the stories, the poems, the interviews—all feel like a blessed gift of grace. What I am most grateful for is the prayer practise that is becoming my own. I used to choke

on the word "God" or "Goddess" and flinch at the thought of prayer. "Pray" felt like a nasty four letter word!

Who prays? I wondered with fear and arrogance.

Right wing conservatives; fanatics who fight wars over God; Greek, Portuguese, and Italian widows, who wear black for decades; narrow-minded Muslims, Catholics, Protestants, and Jews; missionaries who manipulate in the name of bringing salvation to the heathen; people who are too scared to face reality; ungrounded champions of a new age....

When I part the gauzy drapery of shame to allow my prayers to rise, they frequently take the form of gratitude. Gratitude invariably strengthens me while cracking whatever is crusting my perceptions. The Divine Mother is teaching me about the beauty of prayer and of cultivating a loving acceptance of what is. Thank the heavens!

I've interviewed dozens of diverse creative people. Most of them count on their relationships with the divine to derive the meaning and nourishment needed to sustain complex lives. This is an important teaching for me, encouraging me to further accept the growing call to a deeper sense of the sacred. The faint voice of the soul requires many awakenings.

It's not that doubt no longer exists—I still get hobbled by it at times, especially as the business of the divorce drags on. Now, however, I am more accepting of the rhythms accompanying my surrender, and increasingly appreciate the questions that skepticism composts.

Sharon Singer is a writer and poet, and a single mother to two creative daughters. Her poetry has appeared in Poet's Podium, Explorer Magazine, and is forthcoming in Sunstone and Canadian Literature. She is currently working on a book about faith and doubt.