

This is the introduction to my memoir in progress, **Songs of the Inner Life**.
-- Gaea Yudron

INTRODUCTION: THE FRUIT OF LIFE RIPENS

*There's just no accounting for happiness,
or the way it turns up like a prodigal
who comes back to the dust at your feet
having squandered a fortune far away.*
--Jane Kenyon

There's so much about one's life that one does not understand until afterwards, sometimes long after. Time has to wash things over and over in its persistent waters, scouring, polishing, rubbing, smoothing down the rough edges. Then given even more time, the juiciness dries out, distilling the essence. If you live long enough, you have occasion to contemplate the meaning of events and patterns more deeply. I've had some time to do that.

I began writing this book when I was 53, during what turned out to be the last years of my second marriage. It seems odd now the way I assumed that I would always live in that funny wooden house, which was as much a carpentry experiment as a dwelling, built room by room in the 1970s by the residents of a long-gone commune called Rainbow Star. It was the kind of structure that many first-time visitors would call charming. Which I attribute to our nostalgia for the rustic life. They never tried living in that funky little place, with its odd ups, downs, nooks and crannies. It was the devil to keep clean, but even so I was fond of living there. From its windows, I gazed out into the vast mystery of the night sky, listened to the wails and howls of coyotes on nearby hills, the mating calls of the wild turkeys, sounds of tiny frogs, and the surprising snorts and bleats that deer sometimes make.

As I navigated my 50s, I contemplated my life, delving like a dowser over the terrain of memory, and writing. My writing desk faced north, looking out on a broad grassy meadow that rolled up into round hills ornamented with oak, pine and chaparral. The landscape was beautiful in its own way, but a far more wrathful terrain than the lush pastoral and soft seaside landscapes that easily attract me. In the rainy season, the dense clay soil glued itself onto your boots in 5-pound clumps, as if to say human, you are not meant to go far. In the summer, the ground dried out until it was brick-hard, but not before splitting open, revealing long angry-looking fissures.

When I sat at my desk and looked out the window towards the bottom of the meadow, I could see a 34-foot high statue of a Buddha called Vajrasattva. Vajrasattva's body was white; his garments were blue. He wore a jeweled golden crown. With his peaceful eyes and beatific smile, he sat there like a great ship from another dimension that had docked by magic in the mountain valley. Well,

you may say, even if it is a very large, colorful image of a Buddha a statue is just an inanimate object. This is the way modern people tend to think.

In Tibet, the boundary between animate and inanimate, tangible and intangible, spiritual and physical, was more flexible and it was accepted that sacred statues sometimes spoke. In Tibet the presence of spiritually accomplished beings changed the landscape. Spiritual masters left footprints and handprints in solid rock. Of course, they changed the hearts and lives of flesh and blood humans, too. I know my life has been changed by Tibetan masters. My long relationship with one Tibetan master led me to settle in that valley.

Further up the meadow at the top of the hill there was another welcome sight-- the temple called Tashi Choling, which means place of good fortune or happiness. The temple, built according to traditional Tibetan architectural standards, was a splendid, three-storied structure with white walls, red columns, and roofs colored gold. These two elements, the Vajrasattva statue and the Tashi Choling temple, altered the natural setting, opening other layers of resonance.

For many years I lived at the foot of the temple in that rustic cabin with my husband and our daughter, close to my spiritual teacher and sangha or spiritual community. But one October day I left suddenly in an awful jangle of desperation and heartbreak. My marriage exploded. How else to describe a moment when everything familiar shatters with such velocity? I mark the date my marriage exploded by recalling that a week later Princess Diana was killed in a car wreck.

I lived through the explosion, but felt like the living dead for months. And I did flee the place I assumed would always be my home. Always. Home. Assumed. These words can bring a great deal of instruction. Losing that particular refuge at the foot of the temple, along with the other losses I suffered, sundered me. When I pulled the pieces of myself back together again, I was not the same woman. Not on any level.

By the time you reach 70, which I have, you have endured various kinds of bliss, travail and loss. And you come to certain conclusions. One of the conclusions I have come to is this: no earthly home can ever take the place of what that temple means to me, to my heart. That temple, its splendor, stillness, majesty and outrageous beauty, is my real home. Don't think I am pontificating because I'm not.

And yes, I get nostalgic at times. I miss the sounds of the coyotes and the frogs. A certain lover, now long dead, a full moon night on Cape Cod...living in the fairy tale village of Bolinas. But lets face it, things were never really as great as we remember them. We burnish them and place them in our memory treasure. "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be," as satirist Peter De Vries says so well. Though sometimes nostalgia seems more like what Spanish poet Juan Ramon Jimenez wrote, "Sharp nostalgia, infinite and terrible, for what I already possess."

I spent so many years trying to find myself, trying to understand what I already embody. This seems to be a task peculiar to women. Men don't spend half as much time on it, to make a blanket statement that some men will inevitably protest. Like many other females, I lacked confidence and certainty about my identity, gifts and life purpose. Finally, through a long voyage colored with experiments in skin shedding, name changing and re-invention I found my so-called self. Let it be said again-- I found myself—hallelujah! Not only that, but I came to accept myself. I came to love myself. At this stage of life the need to try to impress anybody has been greatly reduced.

Childhood is finished, adolescence long gone, early adulthood and middle age, vanished. Yet even into my late forties, I held onto the hope that by some special magic provided to myself alone I would escape aging, not to mention dying, that somehow, I would be borne along on the beneficent stream of time, nicely preserved at a pleasant age, say 30 or so, hair all shiny black, body slender, with the smooth skin of relative youth. What a struggle it was, surrendering that fantasy. It took years of releasing, mourning and grieving. I 'm not saying it's completely done yet. But much of it has lifted off.

I find that I am content in my own company. This must be what I need at this time in my life. My daughters are grown. I've been single for over a decade, and I'm sailing toward 70. I don't know if I will live till the morning or until I'm 80. But I do know I am in the winter of my life. And that gives everything I experience and want an edge.

The Universe continues to be generous, there is no doubt about it. I have found it worthwhile to have a sense of humor about its abundance. Once in awhile, I have the urge to go up to the top of the nearby mountain and just shout "*J'accepte! J'accepte* already!" as loud as I can, in the hope that the Universe will reconsider my case, and speaking to itself as I'm sure it does, might say, "I think she has learned her cosmic lesson, don't you?" and lighten up on the red hot lava flow it kindly sends me from time to time in its infinitely wise way. However, I suspect that I am still not finished being smelted in this particular crucible. *J'accepte, j'accepte*, smiling. *J'accepte* in whatever mood or circumstance. I am learning acceptance. So far, I have discovered that it is not pushing away. It is not giving up. It is just allowing things to be as they are.

And I have to say that there is something profoundly ironic about the long, arduous journey to find oneself, if I am any example. Because as it turns out, it's all about letting go. The day will come and I will be "laying down my mantle" as they say in gospel songs. I will have to let go of everything, the venerable old body, memories, predilections, opinions, causes, passions. It seems wise to practice now, before popping the cork.

That's why I'm offering this whole heap of stories, these songs of the inner life. Some of it may be slightly embroidered. In fact, I love embroidery. I am not an avatar of the school of photographic realism. Realism, like nostalgia, is overrated. Did it happen or didn't it happen? As a person with quite an active imagination, I often wonder myself. Here's the bottom line: If I have kept it in my memory treasure box this long, it happened. Yet, it is all a fiction. I'm a fictional character. I made myself up, just the way you did.

And we have come a long way on our journey, both of us. And perhaps we still have a long way to go.