

Preparing for the Winter Journey

To Sri Aurobindo and the Mother:

In eternal gratitude for the incredible love and “divine cunning”, with which they have guided me through life.

Prolog

Following is as a succession of snapshots of “little” incidents that have remained vivid in my memory: “moments of the soul” whose significance became much later clear to me. I see them now as the signposts of the road I travelled. They reveal moments when the Divine Grace intervened most visibly in my life, or when my soul managed to break through and alert me of things yet to come. I see them as an irrefutable proof that we all carry in ourselves an entity that knows far ahead and better than our minds. Seen from this point of view, I hope my story will be of some interest to other seekers as well.

The story is woven around the theme of love, and how to transform it from merely human love into a more divine form. It is the topic that has most fascinated and challenged me all my life. The plot of the story winds through three stages of growth in which I have experienced love very differently: The early phase of childhood and adolescence, in which love was covered up by thick layers of unconsciousness, followed by the phase of manhood when love became conscious, but was still hampered by the domination of the head, and finally the phase of maturity and ripeness when love slowly developed into an inner blissful self-giving without expectation of return.

Parts of the story are written in the third person, others in the first-person form; some are written in the past, and some in the present tense. This is because I saw myself sometimes a detached spectator reviewing my life from a distance; at other times I relived, while writing, incidents that have moved me deeply in the past.

The story is true in the sense of being an account of actually lived experiences, but some outer details relating to other individuals had to be modified, for obvious reasons. To write succinctly, I had to leave much unsaid; I hope the readers will not mind weaving for themselves a coherent picture from the following scattered brush-strokes.

On an autumn afternoon, Lodi, California

His morning work done, and following his habitual routine, he carried his lunch and a few books to the little garden and installed himself in the sunniest spot. In front of him lay the star-shaped lotus pond where gold fishes and tadpoles swam merrily. The lotuses had lost their bloom by now, but they were to him the everlasting symbol

of the One who has given him everything he cherishes in life. Around him were trees and blossoming shrubs; a little further behind vineyards stretched far and wide. Above him arched a marvelous dome of serene light dotted with little puffs of white clouds.

Having finished his meal, he made himself comfortable in his garden chair and closed his eyes. He waves of ecstasy and bliss came towards him from all sides: from the roses, the birds, the butterflies, the bees and from the tiny lizards bathing in the sun at the edge of the pond. His limbs became heavier and heavier, as stillness settled upon him more and more. Ecstasy and bliss now began to well up from his inner being as well. In front of his inner eye, the sunny spaces of his life stretched with undiminished splendor; he could revisit countries where he had lived and commune with people who have long disappeared from his life. The self-torment, disappointments and sorrows of earlier years seemed now shrouded in a soft haze, as if belonging to someone else, with whom he had been intimately associated, and of whom only memories remained.

A state of wonder and awe got hold of him. He wondered about the long and unplanned journey that took him, fifty years earlier, from his native country, made him study, work and live in other climes and meander in terrains he hadn't heard of before, only to bring him finally to his true niche: the spiritual community in where he now lived.

Egypt

1947 I was four, maybe even three, years old; living with my parents not far from the Pyramids of Giza. I still hear my mother calling for dinner; she had just heated a puree our governess Paula had prepared for my brother and me before taking off for a personal matter of her own. Paula had been hired by my parents after my birth, and since then, she had rarely left us for more than a day or two. Every time she left, I clung to her crying frantically for fear she might not return.

My mother was the only one around that evening who could feed the children. She was in particularly high spirits, full of tenderness and smiles. It will be the only time that my mother will ever feed or prepare a meal for her children again. She was soon to succumb to depressions that will keep her mostly bedridden and totally absorbed in herself for the rest of her life.

1951 I must have been 8 years old when, for the first time, I became aware of the dynamics between the opposite sexes. In the rarely-used study of my father, which was then my hiding place and sanctuary, I was browsing the shelves for a book not too difficult to read. I grabbed a large volume on the performing arts and was flipping through it, when a ballet scene caught my attention: a ballerina standing on one leg, with her other leg stretched horizontally; her male partner bending on her pointed foot, barely touching it with his hands, in profound adoration. The uncommon motif of the scene, the beauty of the dancers, the elegance of the costumes and the grace of the movements seemed to me to come from a different planet. I experienced for the first time an entrancing mixture of ecstasy, mystery, awe and bewilderment. The scene both captivated and shocked me and I could not explain to myself the fascination and hold it had on me. At that moment I had lost the simplicity and unity of being of early childhood. I could know then that regaining my lost simplicity and unity will be the major endeavor of my coming years.

That a man should adore a woman in that way was something I had never heard of or read about till then; and I was not sure if it was "the right thing to do". The first clue for resolving my conflict came many years later, after I had acquired some familiarity with Indian spirituality and become aware of the inborn need in all human beings for worship and adoration. India also taught me to see the Divine not only as the mighty Creator and Lord of the Day of Judgment, but also as the loving Universal Mother and the Goddess of supreme charm and beauty... more about this later in the story...

1953 It was the end of the school year, and the students of the middle school had just received their certificates. Though I was the youngest of the class, I had received the highest scores. The school bus dropped me in front of our house; I galloped the stairs, certificate in hand, to my father's room. I knew how happy my results will make him; he had always maintained that success at school was the key to happiness and success in later life. The school must have already informed him; I see him coming towards me with beaming face and wide open arms. He takes me up in his embrace and covers my face with kisses. It will be the only time he will ever show me his love again.

My father was a self-made man who had managed to rise from middle to upper class by erudition and hard work. Now he was working himself to death to "secure a good life" for his children, and to spare them the battles he had to fight himself. Unfortunately things did not work out as he had hoped. The military coup of July 1952 had just taken place a few months back, and the new regime was quickly changing the destinies of Egypt. As a finance specialist, my father must have sensed that the fruits of his labor will soon be taken away from him. Nobody suspected on that day that he had only one more year to live.

1957 I do not remember how my classmates convinced me that evening to go out with them. I had been moved up a grade to be in the same class with my elder brother; most students of the class were two years older than me.

The evening started harmlessly enough; we all went to a late movie followed by a snack in one of the cafés of downtown Cairo. One of the boys suddenly suggested we go “prostitute hunting”, an adventure he had heard the guys of the higher grade bragging about. The group approved; we drove to the outskirts of Cairo where prostitutes stand at night waiting for customers. They found a poor shabbily-dressed woman of venerable age, who must have been so desperate to accept to step in a car driven by a bunch of hyped young teens. To avoid police patrols, one of the boys had to drive around in dark streets, while the others took turns in trying their luck with the woman in the back of the car. Finally they stopped the car and put her out accompanied by insults and jeer. I no longer recall if they had given her any money; they didn’t have much of it in their pockets anyway. The utter brutality and brutishness of what I witnessed that evening, still haunts me today.

This incident stands in my memory as the exact opposite pole to the ballet scene, so full of adoration, tenderness and grace, which had moved me so deeply six years back. The ballet scene left me with an ideal to dream of in the following years: I intensely yearned for a love of total self-giving to someone higher, better and nobler than me. I was not much concerned about the “practicality” or the chances of fulfilling such a highly idealized dream; dreams have their own reality, and they can make us happy, even when they don’t materialize. I was somewhat baffled and bewildered that nobody around me seemed to feel or think in the same way. In moments of doubt, I suspected even that something might be wrong with me.

What a comfort it was, when much later I discovered, that my ideal and dream had been, for millennia, part and parcel of the traditions of India: India that paradise of the soul where the Feminine is worshipped everywhere. I could see then how the worship of a Universal Mother and Goddess has given India much of its characteristic charm, gentleness and tolerance. I also saw how the gentleness and compassion of the Madonna, the examples of the women saints and the works of caring nuns - have all prepared the ground in the Christian world for a growing charity, welfare and social justice.

1961 The sun was about to set on a hot summer day during the fasting month of Ramadan. Men, mostly from the disadvantaged class, were gathering in the foyer of the mosque: policemen guarding nearby embassies, taxi drivers who had been confined to blistering cars all day long, petty peddlers, street sweepers... etc. Their lips were visibly cracked from thirst; they had been subjected to a ferocious heat all day, and haven’t had a drop of drink since dawn. The much awaited “canon” shot, that announces the end of the day’s fasting, has just sounded: the men drink some water, eat a few dates and arrange themselves in rows for a short prayer of gratitude. They

sit in small groups on the floor around large dishes of black beans. A mosque clerk hands out to each of them a couple of pita loaves, a few shallots and a handful of dates. They take turns in dipping bread into the dishes to scoop up mouthfuls of the black stew. At the end of the meal, they light cigarettes and drink tea offered to them by the same clerk. Their voices become louder and livelier with their growing sense of completed duty and the wafting of the cooler evening breeze: How good life can be!

Soon the Muezzin will call for the night prayer; some will perform it and hurry to catch one of the busses that will carry them to the less fortunate quarters of Cairo where they live. Others will linger on to listen to the Koran recitations traditionally held in mosques every night in Ramadan. They will soon be ecstatically swaying to the rhythm of the verses, thrilled by the feats of the biblical prophets, chilled by descriptions of the blazing hellfire that awaits the wrongdoers, and elated by the rewards and boons promised in heaven for those who fast Ramadan. They have by now forgotten the aches and ordeals of the day and leave the mosque fortified enough to carry on one more day.

I liked to frequent this little mosque not far from where I lived; the Imam in charge seemed always to choose for his recitations the Koran passages I like most. They are the early passages of the Koran; the Prophet was then still a happy trader living with his family and in the habit of retreating alone to a mountain near Mecca to meditate. They are wonderfully mystical and poetical; they call for submission to the compassionate Creator, praise the marvels of his creation, call for brotherhood and justice among men, and retell in a captivating way the stories of the Old and New Testaments. The Meccan verses have a different timbre from the later verses received in Medina after Mohammed had taken on himself the responsibility of defending and organizing the growing community of illiterate and unruly Bedouins that had followed him there.

How I have wished, already then, that the Meccan verses would be revered as the core of the Koran. A quarter of a century later, a Sudanese reformer dared publically to suggest rearranging the Koran in two parts, one containing the “ever-lasting message”, the other the “temporal” verses that were tailored to suit the needs of that particular community at that particular time. He was executed by his government in 1985.

1963 The last day of senior exams at the school of engineering, Cairo University. With a heavy heart, I enter the electronics lab: my graduation project was not working; it had to be tested on that day. The project consisted in designing an oscillator covering a certain range of radio frequencies. The examiner looked in dismay at my shabby box and started immediately to fumble around in my circuit trying to find proper nodes, where he could attach the probes of his testing device. He turned the tuning dial: a sigh of bewilderment and relief rose up from my depths. I could hardly believe my eyes: a perfect sine wave was standing on the oscilloscope screen! My circuit was

working after all; I had tried any number of times before, but could never bring it to do that. The examiner must have changed, by his random fumbling, the stray capacitances of the wires and components in a way that made resonance possible. What was the probability for such a thing to occur at the exact moment that counted?! I had just experienced one of the saving miracles of my life. The examiner smiled, and something in my soul smiled as well. Now the goal I had strived so desperately to achieve in the past years seemed closer than ever before.

1964 The ship destined for Genoa, Italy, is still standing at one of the piers of the port of Alexandria. I am on the top deck waving goodbye to college friends, who had travelled all the way from Cairo to see me off. It was end of October, the sky was overcast; Alexandria seemed forlorn and desolate after the summer vacationers had left. Inside me things were quite different; a new phase of life was about to begin. Hard work and "luck" have helped me in securing a highly prized scholarship, one of the few destined to a Western country that year. The scholarship was the only way I could leave a world that had been collapsing in front of my eyes. In the last ten years, I had to put my emotions on hold and to push myself to the utmost to reach this moment; and now it has come. I was supremely happy, and the ship was about to leave. I will not return to Egypt after twelve years, and by then, I will be a different man.

Germany:

1964-1966: In an earlier story, I have narrated how my "encounter" with the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother while studying in Germany became the turning point of my life. To avoid repetition, I will limit myself in the present story to those inner developments and psychological experiences of my twelve years in Germany that were not mentioned in my earlier story.

1967 Scholarship holders studying in German universities were invited that year to an orientation held in one of Germany's finest sea resorts. They were to travel together by bus from Frankfurt northwards all the way to the Baltic Sea. I happened to sit beside a young woman; on introducing ourselves we discovered we come from the same country and even the same city. In the casual conversation that ensued, we were further amazed to find out that our families shared some common ties. She was 21 years of age at that time, but she carried around her the atmosphere of a girl of fourteen who knows nothing about the cares and complications of life, and who is still perfectly happy in the fold of her family. Her joyfulness was contagious; I felt totally at ease beside her from the first moment, as if she had been a friend whom I had known all my life. Toward the end of the trip, I knew that we will be man and wife one day.

I asked her if I may write to her; she gave me her address. A month later, I proposed to her in a letter, and after what seemed an interminably long time, she wrote she would have first to consult with her parents, before giving me her final decision. A few months later, we were engaged; marriage followed three years later. I changed university and moved to Munich, where she was studying, to live with her. We shared together thirty years of life journey, after which we had, with heavy hearts, to separate.

1970 Soon after our marriage, my wife asked me one morning: "Is something wrong? Why do you grind your teeth so often in sleep?" I told her reassuringly: "O, nothing, it is just a bad sleeping habit!" This was not true though; a conflict was growing in me: the conflict between, what I then considered, my spiritual calling and my married life.

For some time, I had been intensely practicing yoga according to books written decades ago for practitioners who chose, or were expected, to lead a celibate life. And I was practicing on my own; there was hardly anyone around to guide me. I didn't know then that the Mother had recently launched the City of Auroville and invited to it all men of good will, whether celibate, married or in partner relationships. My wife did not show much interest in yoga; she had behind her a very happy childhood and adolescence and saw no reason to deviate from her former life. In contrast to her, I had witnessed a lot of suffering in others and experienced it in myself; I wanted with all my being to change. When I discovered that Sri Aurobindo's yoga was about the transformation of man into something happier and nobler, I delved into it with all the passion and avidness of youth. I tried hard to live outwardly the normal married life, while keeping yoga for myself. Things worked well at the beginning, but I was changing fast, and not always in positive ways.

After my arrival in Germany, I lost my former ambitions of worldly success and was now trying to balance my mentally-lopsided education by playing music, swimming and enjoying nature. I knew from my readings that often beginners of yoga have to be very patient and endure hardships first, before any improvements become visible; but I did not anticipate my hardships would be as great and prolonged as they turned out to be. Health issues cropped up one after the other, and I was constantly losing weight. I needed more and more hours of solitude, and became less and less "fun to be with". I had finally to consult a physician, and was astounded, when he asked me after taking my vital signs: "How did you manage to leave your bed and come here in this state? Your blood pressure is dangerously low." I lagged behind in my research and ultimately lost my scholarship. I had to return to Egypt after twelve years, my task uncompleted. Soon after my return, I met coincidentally a former colleague of mine. He looked somewhat puzzled and did not recognize me at first. When I introduced myself by name, he stared at me for a few seconds, suddenly bounced back making a full turn around himself and holding his head between with hands while murmuring: "Not possible! Not possible! What happened to you? What on earth has changed you in this way?"

My wife tried valiantly to cope with the fact that the man she chose was changing on her, without her being able to see any convincing reason for the change. She carried her grief in herself, which came at the expense of her former joyfulness and exuberance. Watching her develop in this way was much harder ordeal for me to bear than all what I had personally to go through...

USA

1984-1997: My wife managed to survive rather well the difficult years that followed our return to Egypt. We completed our Ph.D.'s and got teaching jobs in Cairo universities. My health improved, even though I remained somewhat weakened and excessively underweight. My wife showed remarkable fortitude in dealing with the whole situation. Sunshine and hope returned unexpectedly to our lives, when our applications were accepted by an American University. We moved to the US; our teaching contracts were renewed on several consecutive years. This qualified us to apply for citizenship, and we soon became American citizens. Quiet and pleasant years filled with study, work, and occasional travel followed. Our situation became stable enough to allow us think seriously about having children, but when the gynecologist enumerated to us the risks of possible fetus deformations for a woman conceiving after forty, we gave up the idea. It was a much bigger disappointment for my wife, than it was for me..

1997 Houston, Texas: I am sitting outside in the waiting room in an attorney's office. My wife is in conference with the lawyer, who will advise her, as is customary in Islamic tradition, to reconsider her application for divorce. I reflect with burdened heart on our thirty years together since we met on a happy bus trip. We have been to each other family, daily companions and friends. And we had experienced together the ups and downs of life. It has been a good marriage; we were compassionate and caring to each other. The only reason for being in that office on that day was that we were yearning for two different worlds. She was yearning for the happiness of her childhood and considered faithfulness to family, tradition and heritage her first duty. I was yearning to participate in the preparation of a new world, in which ignorance and suffering will have no place. I had lived for decades a double life; it worked at a great cost for me, but now I could no longer dissimulate, and I wanted to dedicate myself totally to the single cause that made my life meaningful. We have both tried hard to uphold the marriage in the hope that something might still come and narrow the widening gap between us, but nothing came. Finally we had to admit the futility of continuing a life in which each of us was blocking the other's way.

The divorce was sealed, and a month later I moved to Auroville. On a couple of occasions in the following years, we needed urgently each other's help; and we had the chance to support and stand by each other again. On one of these happy

occasions, we had a good laugh when one of us remarked that our marriage has actually never worked as well, as when we were already divorced!

Auroville

Early in the new millennium: It is evening; no meditations are scheduled in the *Inner Chamber* at this time. The cleaning team is performing its routine tasks: vacuuming carpets, replacing cushion covers, and polishing columns and stairs. Following the customary practice for Auroville new-comers to dedicate part of their time to community services, I opted to join the *Matrimandir* cleaners, a choice that would lead me to one of the most significant experiences of my life.

The light emanating from the large crystal, the perfect beauty of the design, the lingering aspirations of thousands who have already meditated in this sacred space, all combined in creating in the Chamber an unearthly atmosphere. I could see her darting back and forth across the room doing her work with remarkable skill and speed. From time to time she would beckon to me to help her lift a heavy object or reposition a carpet into its right place. Our roads had crisscrossed a few times before in different venues of the small city. Though she was a key participant in several projects, I noticed that she never pushed herself in the lime-light. She was always going about one work or another with the ease and cheerfulness of those deriving their happiness from an inner source.

One evening, in the silence of the chamber, suddenly an overwhelming wave of recognition and gratitude rushed upon me: Here she was at last; the one for whom I had searched all my life, the one whom I could adore, just for the sake of adoration. Since I was not expecting any return, I was no longer subject to the fleeting joys and sorrows of human love. In the following days and months, I prayed intensely to be spared making a fool of myself by putting a holy name on a common passion. I searched my soul for any signs of reproach or disapproval, any warnings or foreboding of a pending spiritual disaster, but found none. Love, as I was experiencing it now, was very different from what usually goes by that name...

It was the day before her birthday. As "chance" would have it, I saw a vacant spot at the table where she was sitting in one of Auroville's cafes. To my question if I may join her, I got a welcoming nod. After lunch, I found myself telling her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world: "I have adoration for you!" Her reaction will remain with me as one of the most beautiful reactions I have witnessed in my life. She looked at me quietly for some time; in her expression I could read amazement, faint surprise and deep understanding at the same time. There was no trace of indignation, defensiveness or judgment in her eyes. It was as if she was telling me: "O, I have been suspecting something like this for some time. I know very well what you are talking about. But surely you know you will have to leave it at that?!" The few words she then uttered confirmed what I had already perceived; she said smiling: "You will have to be

very quiet now!", and with her usual ease she steered the conversation to a different topic.

In the few months that followed, a mostly silent friendship grew between us. I had several chances to express, by little symbolic acts my devotion to her; she always received my gestures with dignified humility and simplicity. We were linked by our dedication to a common higher goal, and it was understood that this goal was the base of any relationship between us. I had learned the art of deriving abiding ecstasy and bliss from an occasional smile or a tiny symbolic act. I had no need for more.

After a few months, I had to leave Auroville; urgent matters waited for me elsewhere. My sun disappeared behind dense clouds for some time. Ultimately it reappeared, now transformed through distance into a bright star that never fails to guide me when I am in the dark. Several years later, I can still in lucent moments feel her presence and see her walking ahead beckoning to me to hasten my steps....

Knowing her has assured me that the archetype of the Feminine I was dreaming of was not just a mirage. Through her I discovered that what I always wanted all those years was to be allowed to love. I had managed somehow to live without being loved; what was much harder was not being able to love. I started to see my bent for adoration in a wider context, and I no longer suspected it to be some kind of refined eroticism. Many experiences had been necessary to teach me how to love properly, but once the lesson was learned, the one worthy of love and adoration appeared in my life. She has set me free from my former romanticizing weaknesses and yearnings... All the deprivations, pangs and joys of my meandering path have proven to be exactly what I needed to understand that human love is nothing but a tiny current from the universal ocean of divine Love, and that the one whom we adore is only the gatekeeper who admits us into the eternal gardens of paradise... After her, the chapter of human love was happily closed for me; I became ready to dedicate myself to the next chapter: that of widening love into something... truly divine.

2008 Auroville: My short visit to Auroville was about to end. During my stay, I met, as usual, with my Aurovilian friend Walter, and he has again suggested I should translate Sri Aurobindo and the Mother into Arabic. I had always succeeded in evading his suggestion by one "convincing" argument or another. Walter hasn't given up; he mentions casually that a Japanese professor, an acquaintance of his, has just finished translating "*The Life Divine*" into Japanese. I cringed when I imagined what a colossal project that would be for me, with my technical and non-literary background, and with the shreds of Arabic still in my command.

The taxi that will take me from Auroville to the Chennai Airport was already waiting for me outside, when Walter appeared on his motorbike. He pressed a book in my hand saying: "Translate this!" It was a compilation of writings by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother with the title: "*Integral Healing*." On the long flight back to Cairo I read, at

random, short passages in the book. In the next weeks, whenever I had a long break between the classes I was teaching, I translated at random short passages from the book. This exercise filled me with peace and serenity. Slowly it dawned upon me, that translating Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is the best occupation I could pursue during my retirement. I continued teaching till the end of the semester and resigned from my teaching position. A month later I moved to the *Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham* in Lodi, California.

Walter had given me a new focus for my life. In the following years, I became more and more aware that contributing to bridging the gap between the world I was born into and the world I consciously chose is the task for which I had been unknowingly prepared since childhood.

2016 The earlier incidents given above have been written in 2013 after I discovered having prostate cancer. This explains why I chose the title "*Preparing for the Winter Journey*" for the story. In writing it, I tried to take stock of my life and to say farewell, in a subtle way, to those who have played major roles in my life. Now that the cancer has been removed and the Grace has given me a fresh term of life, I am in the fortunate position of being able to report on recent positive developments.

Gratitude wells from my heart for having lived long enough to see the main aspirations of my life come true. A greater equality has manifested in the last years, accompanied by an increased energy for work. I had to go through an extremely painful experience lately, but after the initial impact subsided, the words of Sri Aurobindo: "It is finished the dread mysterious sacrifice" (Savitri, Book 6, Canto 2) kept welling up inside me for days and days — giving me comfort and hope. Whenever I am still attacked by doubts or sorrow, I remind myself of these words and look at the enfolding drama with a smile...

Epilog:

The sun has gradually shifted in the sky; he was now in the shade and was beginning to feel the cold. He remembered all the things he was planning to do that afternoon, but lingered a few minutes more hoping his inner voices might still have something to communicate to him. When nothing came, he started to stir and to set his stiff limbs into motion. He knew that any further reflection and musing would have to wait for another day...