

Introduction

BEGINNING THE RETREAT

Today I embark upon a journey unlike any I have taken before. It would be fair to say that I am somewhat experienced in spiritual matters, but this day marks a new chapter in my life, a daring departure from the adventures of my youth. It is only now, after long years of deep meditation, traveling to meet honored sages from distant lands, and after sharing my insights with thousands of thirsty aspirants, only now am I ready to enter this strange labyrinth. To have sought such high lessons before this may have led to my demise, for only now I am ready to sidestep the possible snares and temptations I am sure to encounter. Were I to have begun such a journey in my youth, there is no telling where it might have ended or what my fate would be. I am ready now, and so I step forward to begin my retreat, opening the door that leads to the hallowed hallways where my journey begins and ends — the mall.

How did I end up here to begin with? Oakville Place, forty minutes outside of Toronto, seems a strange place to begin this odyssey. I am better known for my foreign travels to countries like Bosnia, Iraq, Kosovo and Northern Ireland where I have

promoted peace and sharpened my own spiritual methods and insights. I have written books on these great adventures, lectured around the world, and have performed my concerts in cathedrals and national theaters. I cannot decide if this new phase, the one that begins today, is a step forward or a step back. After all, I despise the mall... always have. I have gone to great lengths trying to avoid these walls and to dodge the effects of its seductive vapor. But also, it seems that I am no different than those who have gone before me, all the millions of shoppers who grace the corridors of malls such as this around the world. And it is precisely for this reason that I have decided to stay, for in the end this is how we prove ourselves. I must be willing, I have decided, to dive into the place where my resistance is highest, for it is here, on the branch furthest from the trunk of the tree, that the greatest lessons lie.

Many years ago I heard this call. When I was eighteen, a month after I had graduated from high school, I determined to leave the world of common desires and enter a monastery. I had been raised according to a strict Irish code that decreed a single recourse for a child bent upon the spiritual realms I enjoyed — priesthood. To this day, my mother regrets the day that, a year and a half later, I left those sacred corridors, as if she had somehow failed her son, her family, and God. After all, a mother such as mine measures her worth by a standard that may seem strange and foreign to most... for in the end only one thing matters — giving at least one son to the church. And yet the day I became a candidate in the order of Friars Minor is still etched in a favorable manner upon my brain. I remember opening those massive doors and being greeted by the other brothers. I remember rising early and joining the community for morning prayers and mass. And I recall how happy I felt to eat my meals in the penetrating silence of the monks' refectory, thinking that I had found my life, my purpose and the answers to every question I could ever have hoped to ask.

How could I have known how dramatically my life would twist and turn away from that time? And yet, there was one thing that never left me — the sense of the great value in leaving the mundane world and entering a spiritual retreat. The retreat may take place in the country, or in the desert, or in some hidden and secluded place, and it always follows a predictable rhythm of silence, reflection and sacred study. Whenever the harried pace of my life required such pause, I would begin the search, and each time it would end in a place very much like the monastery where I first began my quest.

Until now! The door I opened here at the mall could not be more different than those others. I stood and held the door open for two women pushing huge strollers, familiar patrons of this and every mall. Finally, when I too was within the bright, artificial environment with the muffled music and pretentious confidence, I knew that my spiritual journey had begun. As soon as I had conquered the beginning prejudice, I realized that this was the perfect place for me to begin this personal descent... or ascent, whichever.

A retreat such as this challenges the very foundation of one's life, and I realize that I have, until now, merely scratched the surface. After all, those other retreats were so easy for me. I have always thrived in the lighter air of spirit and soul, while all along it was here, in a shopping mall, that my greatest challenges lay. If I am to break free from the final chains that bind my life to mediocrity, then I must search out the environment where I am least at home. Then the shadows of my unconscious mind will rise before me that I may gain the power to vanquish what would have destroyed my soul. If I can but resist this tide as it sweeps across my life, then and only then will I be proven worthy. What greater, truer, more sacred place could I choose for this journey than what seems opposite in my mind — the mall.

"Yes," I said to myself, "this is what I have been waiting for. I pray now for the grace to spread my wings and fly through these artificially illumined corridors, to sink my roots deep into the ground in a place where no earth can be found. If I can make it through this, then anything is possible."



"Where are you calling from?" Karin asked.

"I'm at a mall outside Toronto," I said to her. "I hate malls, you know, and that's why I wanted to call. I have an idea I want to share with you. This place seems to have sparked something in me."

There was a long moment of silence on the other end of the phone, the sort of empty space that says more than words. If I could have crawled through the phone into my publisher's head, I'm sure I would have heard something like:

"Oh my God, here we go again. Two days from now the Spring Catalogue is due and now he wants to change everything... again. How am I going to get him to stick with one idea... to come up with a concept and stay with it? The other books weren't like this at all. He came in with a proposal and even made his deadline. This latest adventure seems to change daily. What is it now? The title? The subtitle? The whole book?"

"What's wrong with the direction you've been going?" she finally asked out loud. "I like everything you've written so far. Why not..."

"It just isn't working for me," I said. "It's boring, and I think I have writer's block. Every time I sit down to write I go blank. Then I came here and it all began flowing again."

"At the mall?"

"Yes, of all places... at the mall. I've been sitting here all morning looking around at the people and the stores. You know, I was wrong... the mall can be a very spiritual place. You just have to look at it in the right way."

"If you come in with the wrong attitude then all you see is the commercial crap and the people walking around as if they're asleep. Change the intent and everything else changes as well. It's like being on a retreat, like I'm back at the monastery or something. They're all angels in here teaching me about God, and truth, and enlightenment."

I stopped for a moment and listened to myself. I'm sure Karin thought I had gone off the deep end. Hours earlier I could have been seen pacing back and forth down the long corridor, from Sears at one end to The Bay at the other, lost in a daze of confusion. It all began as a sort of defense mechanism that helped me cope with the real reason why I was at the mall in the first place. A week earlier I had come here with my fiancée to search for an engagement ring. We had been making the jewelry store rounds for several days by then and by the time we arrived at Raffi Jewelers at the Oakville Place Mall I was nearly ready for a nervous breakdown.

As it turned out, Peter, the young manager at Raffi's, was the most helpful of the lot. I was impressed at how skillfully he attended to Siri Rishi, not too firm and without being a pushover. That would have been the kiss of death, for as confident as she seemed, the 'Love of my Life' required more than a little guidance. To leave her to her own devices, at least from my perspective, would have been disastrous. Peter and I seemed to be developing a powerful psychic connection, as if he could read my thought and knew exactly how far to let out the line before slowly, almost imperceptibly, reeling it back in again.

Before we left the store that day we were a single step away from a decision. Then, the following morning, we returned with confident smiles. Peter could see us from the rear of the store and came out to greet us.

"So, you're back," he said. "Does that mean the quest has ended? Are you ready to make a commitment?"

There was something about the way he said those words that knocked me off balance. I wasn't prepared to defend myself so early in the morning and had let my guard slip far too low. Siri Rishi, on the other hand, brightened her smile and squeezed my hand.

"Yes, I think he is," she said to him... or me... I'm not really sure which. "I mean, yes we're ready to put down a deposit."

It was a good save on her part and it seemed to take the heat off, if only for a moment. Wherever it was we were going, we would do it together, as a couple, as two people deeply in love. I smiled and let out a nervous sounding laugh. She looked at me out of the corner of her eye to make sure I was still with her, then stepped up to the counter.

Minutes later the deal was done. Siri Rishi described in detail how she wanted the ring to look, and Peter, just as he had the previous afternoon, responded with masterful skill. I just stood there watching, certainly overjoyed at the prospect, but another part of my brain was spinning out of control, lost in a sudden haze of strange confusion.

"How do you feel, honey?" she asked me.

"I feel fine," I said as I regained my composure. "I feel great."



"Are you sure you feel all right?" Karin finally asked, breaking the spell of my day dream.

"I feel fine. I feel great. What makes you say that?"

"Well, it's just that you can't seem to make up your mind what you're going to write about. This is at least the fourth idea you've had, and if we're going to get this into the Spring Catalogue we need something solid."

"The mall thing is good," I said with a little too much enthusiasm. "I mean, I think this could be a very good angle. When most people need a break or a spiritual retreat, they go to the mountains, or the desert, or to a monastery, to pray for a week. I've decided to spend a week at the mall and see what spiritual insights come to me. Think about it... it's so very original."

"Let me make sure I'm hearing this right. You want to spend a week in the mall? And how is this going to...?"

"Think about it this way," I said as I spun around, nearly wrapping the phone cord around my neck and strangling myself. "The masters have always said that enlightenment is not a change, but a recognition of what can never change. Do you see what I mean? Why not find enlightenment in a mall? It's filled with ordinary people, all of whom are fully enlightened without even realizing it. What if I spent a week talking to them, watching them? I should be able to experience enlightenment anywhere, not just beneath a Bodhi Tree. Maybe a mall would be more effective than an ashram because it's so real. I'm not running away from the world like you might think. I'm running toward it."

Once again... silence.

"Do you think I'm crazy?" I finally asked.

"I'm not sure," Karin said. "It's actually a wonderful idea... in

a strange sort of way. But I have to ask you... are you under some stress? You seem different somehow, almost as if..."

"Grist for the mill," I said whimsically. "I wouldn't have come up with this idea if I was in a normal state of mind. I would just keep writing the boring book I started already. But this is so... it's so different... and wonderful. Why not take whatever neurosis I'm experiencing and make it work for me. Some of the greatest works of art have come from very difficult circumstances, you know."

"Okay, but you're all the way up in Toronto. What are you going to do if you end up chopping off your ear, or some crazy thing like that?"

"Karin, don't worry. I'm totally under control. Yes, this marriage thing has put me in 'shift mode' right now, but it's really a good thing. I'm happier than I've ever been before. It's just going to take me a little time to settle into the new rhythm. Writing this book will help."

"In a mall."

"Yes, in a mall. Why not? This is the modern equivalent of the Town Square, or Main Street in Middle America. This is where normal people go to shop and socialize... not people like you and me... well, you know what I mean."

"All right, go for it," she said. "But there's no going back this time. The catalogue goes to the printer in a week, and as far as I'm concerned you're writing a book about finding enlightenment in a mall. It does have an interesting ring to it."

"Now you're thinking like a publisher," I told her. "Leave it to me... it's going to be great... I hope. Either that or you may want to reserve a room for me at a mental hospital somewhere."

I hung up the phone and took a look around me. A woman

with an enormous stroller nearly wounded me, two thirteen year old boys gave me a passing look of contempt, and I saw a man standing nearby trying to console his two year old son who had just dropped his ice cream cone.

"Let the retreat begin," I said out loud.