

# **Generations Connect: Variation on “Om Namah Shivaya”**

**by Carlos Gonzalez**



**Patience  
For now there is destruction  
Later  
much later  
gate gate paragate parasamgate  
under the rubble  
a strong vulnerable sprout breaks ground  
and embraces  
the sky.**

I began to write this piece above as I was listening to the wind rustling the leaves of the trees in the valley below. I'm sitting on a grassy knoll, under the overhang of what serves as the front porch of the Straw Bale Lodge donated to Narrow Ridge, a retreat in Tennessee, by Mac Smith, a former professor in Miami who taught for 30 years at the college where I've worked for 22 years now. He also launched a series of programs that have blossomed into a several communities that focus on Earth literacy.

I'm not sure why I need to write the paragraph above, but it seems important to name him, name the place where I'm working, and in doing so remind myself that the work I do is somehow tied to others who have come before me. This "before me" part has been important in the past. Connecting to the ancestors has been a lifeline that in some of the more challenging times of teaching has allowed me to find my way when the path was unclear or encumbered by my own confusion. What I'm noticing more and more is that those who follow are becoming more relevant. What is dawning on me is that I am now becoming more of an elder or lifeline to those who come after me.

I'm also realizing that I'm coming to the end of the summer of my teaching life. I sense the beginning of the fall season and note a number of things.

One that stands out vividly is the notion that the kind of education that I'm interested in is not one that easily translates into objectives and goals. I realize that I'm interested in the ancient notion of education, which the word itself suggests, is to draw out, to invite into awareness. This is what I consider to be my role as a teacher in relationship to my students. It's also the type of role, that when I'm at my best, students invite me to play and they play as well. Together we draw out for one another what is already there but may be overlooked. And the drawing out is not exclusive of learning a skill. It involves and requires so much more than merely writing an essay, resume, or figuring out a complicated calculus.

These reflections and my writing came after spending an afternoon touring Narrow Ridge, an Earth Literacy Center and community in East Tennessee in the foothills of the Smokies, where my school sends students every spring. I came up this time as a chaperone. As I live among 13 young people for this short time, I'm challenged to hold the tension of living from one's ideals while often finding that the choices made don't come close to reflecting those. Like the young people I have accompanied, I live with the disorder of my own mind and life, wanting to live consistently within my ideals and coming up short time and again. This understanding does not jive well with my notion of being an elder.

The disconnect and discomfort in my own mind regarding elderhood is part of the generational gap and chasm that has existed for far too long. The young and old don't relate to one another enough by living and working close together. The segregation that started with industrialization and children being put in schools that were away from their grandparents and parents most of the day, and that were modeled after the factories the parents worked in, planted the seeds of a wisdom deficit that we keep bumping into and find no real way to address. We have become an uninitiated culture unaware of how to be. This is true of young people and of those who are not quite old but getting there.

These particular 13 students remind me in their youthful exuberance of wanting to be, and of being aware of life itself, of exploring the possibilities of living in a way that affirms rather than denies life. They are able to do this so freely and quickly as they step away from the constraints of the classroom and find themselves in a quiet space meant to invite awareness rather than distraction. When joining them at meals, it is clear as I hear them share that they also search for ways to live with the brokenness and disjointedness of life. Our lives are lived in the up-rootedness of urban spaces, where neighborliness is often absent, where green spaces are islands engulfed not only by roads and buildings, but surrounded and steeped in the "always on" culture of social media and smartphones. What's different, it seems, for them is that their desire for wholeness has not yet spiraled down through the challenges

of living long enough to experience many of the obstacles inherent in existence itself. They haven't yet experienced the tendency that happens as we grow older to give up or grow disillusioned and disheartened by the alienated culture.

Narrow Ridge is named after a line in Martin Buber's book *Between Man and Man* (2002). It's a pertinent thought that can serve as a signpost for all of us: "I do not rest on the broad upland of a system that includes a series of sure statements about the absolutes, but on a narrow, rocky ridge between the gulfs where there is no sureness of expressible knowledge but [only] the certainty of meeting what remains, undisclosed" (Buber, 2002, p. 218).

The narrow ridge of which Buber and this place remind us is that tenuous spot where we meet all of life not as objects but as subjects. It's a tenuous spot because we do not stay on the ridge easily. We walk it with great care and humility, honoring and becoming aware of the ultimate mystery of existence and life itself. Too much effort or too much trying, and we fall off the ridge. Too little effort and too little awareness and the same thing happens. I'm not even sure that we can use the word tenuous. The narrow ridge is a point that seems out of reach for most. For me, I don't know if I'm on it for more than mere moments, and then off again.

On this particular day, without the use of a textbook or PowerPoint, my students and I got a small glimpse of living in that balance and awareness, of living as Daniel Berrigan says in his introduction to Dorothy Day's autobiography *The Long Loneliness*, of living ". . . as though the truth were true" (Day, 1981, p. xxiii). This happened as we walked up and down hills and saw and heard the story of Narrow Ridge. We spent a couple of hours not only walking, but seeing first hand a physical manifestation of a vision where humans attempt to live in conscious awareness of their own place in the Universe. Through its relationship to the land, built structures, and governance, the Narrow Ridge community shows visitors how a small community tries to walk the ridge together, to navigate between a culture of mass consumption and one of great care.

As we walked, we visited with a number of the human residents of Narrow Ridge. Each offered us a part of their story. Each left us with a bit of the stirring that happens within when we meet another person who has tried her best to live life in service, in love, in truth.

In the process with these 13, I was reconnected with the question of what happens when young and old gather to intentionally learn from one another. And all along the ridge, I'm thinking again and again about the lifeline of ancestors and my own role as an emerging lifeline to others. As often happens from these gatherings when we invite the ancestors, ourselves, and the young together on a journey, we learned the unexpected.

Near the end of our week at Narrow Ridge, we took a day trip to Eagan, just south of the Kentucky border. Eagan is a border town, on the margins so to speak, and as such has been a mining town since the early part of the twentieth century. As we approached the town, it was clear to see that we were entering another America, one that was rich in beauty, culture, and so-called resources, but one that had been used as the source of cheap energy for more than 100 years. All around us we could see the effects of coal extraction, sides of mountains cut in perfect angles, exposing veins of coal that were the remains of our prehistoric ancestors. Our bodies also knew we were in a different America. Many of us had difficulty breathing the air. It was as if the air had become heavy. In reality, the air was heavy with the coal dust of the mountain that was being removed right in front of our eyes.

The point of this trip was to visit the site of a mountain top removal. This is a euphemistic term for something much more gruesome. We were there to witness the decapitation of a mountain, a slow execution fueled by my own, our own, desire and need to cheaply power our modern way of life. I say cheaply because none of us have paid the full cost of the coal that has been extracted from the mountains there. But the mountain and the whole communion of beings who call it home have and are paying the full price.

Eagan felt like a developing country where large landholders control most of the land and do with it what they will, even when this means that area residents suffer dearly with the poisons that are the detritus of extracting energy—either in the form of food (always in the form of some kind of monoculture) or of fossil fuel to keep the economy running.

It was raining on this day and what we could see was the torrents of brown runoff coming down from the side of the mountain. Every barren or almost barren hillside was a flowing river of milk-chocolate-colored water, all flowing to the bottom where mountain streams brim with a cocktail of chemicals and dirt that kills most if not all of the fish and wildlife who call these streams home. The effects on humans of this runoff is equally disastrous as flash floods because the erosion is now commonplace. No trees on the mountain means no roots to hold the soil in place. We are an uprooted culture in so many different ways.

We tried getting to the top of where the coal company had removed the mountain, but we could not. The rain was too much and the road was becoming impassable. Instead, our guide, Gary Garret, a resident of Eagan, an elder in training, and a volunteer at the Clearfolk Community Center, showed us a cemetery on the side of the road. It was the part of the mountain top that had not been carved out for coal. The cemetery stripped of the mountain all around was left as an island of the dead, a monument to short-sightedness on all levels. That it had not been carved out like everything else

was a miracle. We suppose that it was left there to respect the remains of the residents who once called the mountain home. But what we witnessed was obscene. The dead in that cemetery like the living have no real resting place as the mountains continue to be chopped up and killed. Chief Seattle's words rung in our ears:

And when the last Red Man shall have perished, and the memory of my tribe shall have become a myth among the White Men, these shores will swarm with the invisible dead of my tribe, and when your children's children think themselves alone in the field, the store, the shop, upon the highway, or in the silence of the pathless woods, they will not be alone. In all the earth there is no place dedicated to solitude. At night when the streets of your cities and villages are silent and you think them deserted, they will throng with the returning hosts that once filled them and still love this beautiful land. The White Man will never be alone (Smith, 1887)

As we left Eagan, we more fully recognized the value of the solar panels we had noticed in Narrow Ridge during our first tour of the retreat. They are a small response to the mountain top removal/decapitation/execution. As we traveled back to our little oasis, many of us thought and talked about memory and the loss of memory that our culture is based upon. The key to the complete loss of this memory is tied to the disrupted way we learn or don't learn from one another. Without the generations coming together and sharing what's of value, what's of interest, all we have left is a flattened ecosystem both outside and inside of us.

For the youth in the group, the anxiety and questions of what to do with the gift of life in light of the enormity of the challenges before us, how to live in a world that feels out of sorts in its speed, focus, and ultimate goals were offered as the base of much of the conversations during the week. The elders and elders in training, who clearly did not have any specific answers to these heartfelt questions, but, who, because of the grace of sometimes living with some awareness, could point out sign posts that have kept them close to the narrow ridge. The opportunity to be in communion with these young people served as a balm for the achiness of spirit that too often plagues those who have awakened from the dominant culture's hypnotic spell to merely consume and forget. For me, and I suspect for the others above 40 in the group, coming together to enter into dialogue with young people offered the blessing of renewal, a reminder to remain vulnerable, open, and strong all at once.

Walking the narrow ridge in this regard has something to do with that blessed space that is described by many spiritual traditions as sensing the divine presence not in some far off place but in the midst of the current time with its mixture of beauty along with the oppression, hurt, and ugliness of a

human constructed system bent on domination of the many for the benefit of the few. Walking the narrow ridge is a movement from disconnection to communion and awareness.

When together we face the youthful not knowing, the pain of the current moment, and the elder's understanding of the inherent incompleteness of all of our efforts, we can sense, if there is honesty and grace in the container of sharing, that we offer one another what is needed. We bring ourselves with all of our limitations into a space of healthy interrogation of life's ambiguity.

Any uncertainty about the future becomes an entry point to the mystery that all we need is right before us, that we are the ones we have been looking for all along. In this meeting place, or narrow ridge, the now of this moment allows all of us, young and old, to be fully ourselves and stop the continuous effort to cover over our inherent qualities as *Homo sapiens*, a species among many, a species with a deep desire to reflect upon its own place in the family of life.

As I look back at my own teaching life, I realize that my development and growth as a teacher often takes off as I enter or create the kinds of diverse communities where the old and young come together in a spirit of listening and sacred sharing. These communities have never been committees. They have always involved effort in either joining or creating them. Sometimes they emerge suddenly and with great force. Their intensity brightens up the path for all who participate. They exist in the margins, in moments—lasting long enough to serve as reminders to all who are there to witness to wake up to possibility, empathy, and action.

Over the years, this practice of not just stepping outside of the classroom but outside of the philosophical underpinnings of a schooling system based on transaction and objectification, has served to bring me back to myself as a learner, a seeker, and one who wants to live with integrity. Interestingly, I have been able to experience this not only outside of the physical structure of schools such as a place like Narrow Ridge, but also even within the walls of my own institution, that I sometimes in frustration and playfulness call Rockland, the psychiatric hospital in Ginsberg's "Howl" (1956).

I point this out, because the magic of this time in Narrow Ridge had more to do with this community container than the actual place. The container can be created anywhere, even in the midst of systemic craziness. I believe that the narrow ridge Buber describes is any space where such gatherings of the young and the elder as well as peers can emerge with integrity; we need these to help us find our way and balance. I know I need these to find my heart and soul when both become opaque or clouded over.

I started this essay with a short poem inspired by an ancient chant to Shiva, the Hindu deity associated with creation and destruction. I did so honoring the pattern within me of creation and destruction. The poem is a reminder that all is not lost. When we find ourselves in the rubble and off the ridge, we have work to do. In this precious and precarious time, the need to connect old and young and form diverse communities of wisdom is not optional because these communities are the medium and the narrow ridges by which and in which all that is vulnerable and truthful can take root, emerge, reach for the sky, and create anew.

## References

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