

This Time, It's [Even More] Personal

The Diaries

Isherwood's work as a diarist is of utmost interest. Several of his readers consider his journals his finest writing. He began when he was very young, at the age of 4 dictating diary entries to his mother, Kathleen, herself a devoted diarist. The journal was to become his stockpot; but just as importantly, it was the arena for analyzing his thoughts and feelings, the place where he would, as he put it, "discuss with myself." He sought to be assiduously honest, meticulously peeling the onion while we watch.

Sometimes in the course of the diaries, he criticizes others for traits he himself has demonstrated but generally will immediately recognize the hypocrisy. Rather than cancelling the entire comment, as though the recognition has leveled out the criticism, he leaves the whole process exposed for it's the self-revelation that's important. He incisively lays out the purpose and process of his diary writing in *A Meeting by the River*, where the fictional character Oliver writes:

At this point, I suddenly stopped. I felt, with a strange kind of panic, that I mustn't write another word. At first this feeling seemed justified and right and proper. I took it for the voice of conscience. I said to myself, keeping this diary has helped me so much, through the months I've been out here. It has got me over all kinds of negative moods and aversions. But never before today have I used it as an outlet for personal resentment. Isn't this terribly wrong and dangerous? But then it gradually dawned on me why it really was I was afraid to go on writing. I...wasn't getting down to the truth. The truth is that I'm unspeakably humiliated and shocked to discover that I, who am supposed to be spiritually advanced to the level at which I can take sannyas, still feel these spasms of sheer hatred toward my own brother! That stabs my ego in the very heart of its vanity. It was already beginning to pose in its swami's robes and admire itself as a budding saint. Now it gets glimpses of its unchanged unregenerate vicious monkey-face, and it's shocked....It tries desperately not to look.

The monkey must be made to face its ugliness again and again. That's why I should keep on with this diary and even write it in more detail than usual...being as frank as I can. It's absolutely necessary to bring everything out in the open at last...[6]

In the diary entries he presents in *My Guru and His Disciple*, he had two primary antagonists. The first was his stubborn inner Puritan (surprise!), who in turn became the enemy of a lesser enemy: a self-confessed propensity for sloth. But his major nemesis was the ego. However, in doing battle with the ego, he was armed with more than his discipline of introspection. He had his guru.

As an example of combatting the ego through introspection, he wrote:

I think, however, that Swami was perhaps saying this to me as a gentle rebuke to my overindulgence in humility, in my relationship with him. He is fond of telling other people how humble I am about my literary reputation. But he must know perfectly well what my humility really is—the other half of my vanity.¹

Regarding Chris' humility, while he recognizes and freely confesses to humility as a conscious "act," in the theatrical sense of the word, many who knew him or simply ran into him around town found this behavior so consistent and spontaneous as to indicate a genuine rather than assumed attitude. I offer a personal story as an example of this spontaneous egalitarianism. One of the last times I saw Chris, a friend and I were passing through Santa Monica on our way to the funeral of a devotee who had died unexpectedly. We were stopped in traffic at a corner. I looked up, and there was Chris, standing on the curb, waiting for the light to change. Rather clownishly, I popped out of the passenger seat of the VW bug and told him that X had died and that we were on our way to the funeral (my thinking was that you never know, he may have wanted to hop in and come along); he was saying that yes he had heard of the death. But I noticed that as we were speaking for those few seconds, he had stepped down from his superior position on the curb and onto the street level, literally into the gutter, with me. It struck me as a genuine gesture of modesty, particularly considering that the element of surprise and absurdity would have trumped the possibility of a deliberate pose, unnecessary toward one so much his junior in every respect, on his part. The lights changed. I jumped back into the car—And scene.

Moreover, in reading his diaries, one rarely gets a sense of his status, either financial or professional, unless he's having difficulties, as though his successes don't seem to figure in his self-image. For example, at the conclusion of his Quaker work in Pennsylvania during World War II, where he lived modestly in a spare bedroom of a suburban Quaker family and exhibited no grandness at any level, including his work assignments, he mentions that a friend concerned about his lack of literary output prodded him into writing something...anything. So Isherwood wrote a story and got it published in *The New Yorker*. For most writers, this would be a crowning achievement; but for Isherwood, it was easy pickings.

In Chris's case, correction by Prabhavananda usually spanned "gentle rebuke" to surgical intervention—Swami's technique of subtle, often humorous, yet lethal ego puncture. Isherwood records:

Once fishing for a compliment, I asked Swami why he so seldom scolded me. He answered, "I don't scold for the big faults." He gave no sign of awareness that this statement had crushing implications.

I was so taken aback by it that I didn't question him further, either then or at any later time.²

¹ Isherwood, *My Guru*, 328.

² *Ibid* 164.

But then there's the nuclear option: The Scolding. It is important that this discipline is understood. Swami Prabhavananda, who frequently participated in all aspects of this procedure—getting, giving, and witnessing (remarkably difficult, even when it's not directed at you)—explains the phenomenon in *The Eternal Companion*, Swami Prabhavananda's biography of his guru, Swami Brahmananda:

Sri Ramakrishna himself often rebuked his most intimate disciples, and Maharaj [Swami Brahmananda] also used this method to train those who were near and dear to him. The chastening of a disciple never began, however, until after he had enjoyed several years of love and kind words. These experiences were painful at the time, but they were later treasured among the disciple's sweetest memories. It often happened that even while the disciple was being reproached by Maharaj, he would feel a strange undercurrent of joy. The indifference of Maharaj was the only thing we could not have borne; but Maharaj was never indifferent. The harsher his words, the more intensely we felt his interest in our welfare. The very fact that he could speak to us in this way proved that we were his children, his own. Sometimes, a disciple would be reprovved for quite insignificant reasons, or on grounds that seemed to him utterly unjust. But, as time passed, he would realize that there had been certain tendencies and karmas stored in his subconscious mind, and that Maharaj had seen them and was working to annihilate them before they could appear and become harmful. Thus, at the cost of a little unpleasantness, the disciple would be spared years of painful struggle and self-discipline.

...When Maharaj disciplined us, he gave us the power to bear it. We never reacted with resentment. We knew that whatever he did was for our own good.

...[Maharaj said] "The Mother holds the child on her lap and spans him; and the child cries: 'Mother, mother!'" Never before had I been so deeply aware of his love and protection...His words soothed my burning heart. Then he said: "Our love is so deep that we do not let you know how much we love you."³

Chris writes about the only time he was "bawled out" by Swami. However, as well as a first-hand description of a scolding, the entry also offers up a heaping helping of Isherwood's feelings of persecution at the hands of the nuns and the tragically "respectable" devotees. The incident began on June 16, 1974 at a Father's Day celebration, a grand affair attended by hundreds of Swami's disciples and devotees. As usual, Chris was seated at Swami's side. Chris had misunderstood a story Swami was telling. Chris then asked what Swami considered an inappropriate question and another ridiculous one. Swami took umbrage on the spot. According to Chris, Swami called him on the phone the next morning to continue an intensified tirade. Chris records of the phone call in *My Guru*:

³ Swami Prabhavananda, *The Eternal Companion: BRAHMANANDA His Life and Teachings*, Vedanta Press, Third Edition, 1970, pp. 70-72.

I asked him [Swami] to forgive me, and he laughed and said, "How should I not forgive you? You are my disciple and my child." "A very silly child," I said. "Oh, no, Chris, you are the most intelligent of all my children."⁴

Right after our conversation was over, I felt that his scolding had truly been a blessing. But already, such is egotism, I am beginning to indulge in resentment, because I am certain that someone at the Center must have commented on my mistakes to Swami and thus put the idea of scolding me into his head...

While in *My Guru* he accuses "someone at the center" of manipulating Swami into taking offence, in Volume 3, he says he suspects "one of the nuns"⁵ of putting the idea into Swami's head. It should be pointed out that during his time as a monk, Chris spoke highly of many of the convent members and enjoyed their company. It is curious that after describing the same reactions that Swami Prabhavananda had described in *The Eternal Companion*, e.g. "I felt that his scolding had truly been a blessing," Isherwood immediately reverses himself, "I am beginning to indulge in resentment," using the very same word Swami had used in his statement, "We never reacted with resentment" but in contradiction. Had he confessed his thought process but then plunged deeper, this would have been in keeping with Isherwood's practice of revealing the entire thought process; but in this case, he is unfortunately arrested at the resentment stage.

We will see how invaluable the diaries were in the creation of *My Guru & His Disciple*.

My Guru & His Disciple

"I don't know what I think of *My Guru*. I can imagine really savage attacks on it and yet in a way I think it is the most worthwhile book I have written and probably one of the best modern books of its kind."⁶

Isherwood began the book just a few months after Swami's death on July 4, 1976. He describes the process in his diaries:

September 22 [1976], I had meant to begin my memoir of Swami today, but that would be a compulsive gesture. What I will do, until I do actually begin, is to discuss the project with myself, here [the diary].

For example: I originally thought I would start with getting the news of Swami's death by phone from Jim Gates at Gavin's house in Tangier...but I feel that this approach would have a certain vulgarity. Because it would

⁴ The above is quoted from *My Guru*, pp 322-323, but the original diary entry (Vol. 3, p. 440) reads "you are the most intelligent of all my disciples."

⁵ Isherwood's description of a nun in *A Single Man* (pp 58-59), while good-natured and set in a laugh out loud funny scene, the English class discussing Huxley's *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, sheds some light on his mindset regarding nuns: "...we, most of us, lose our sense of proportion in the presence of a nun; and George, thus exposed at short range to this bride of Christ in her uncompromising Medieval habit, finds himself becoming flustered, defensive. An unwilling conscript in Hell's legions, he faces the soldier of Heaven across the front line of an exceedingly polite cold war."

⁶ Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 3, *Liberation*, ed. Katherine Bucknell, Chatto & Windus, 2012, 627.

necessarily hit a note of drama... No, I should begin at the very beginning, quite undramatically. I should have to begin with Gerald Heard, and in fact, follow the line of my diary. I must be shown to have met Swami through Gerald—not merely in the sense that Gerald introduced me to him, but in the sense that Gerald presented him, Gerald's image of him, to me. At first, I certainly saw Swami through Gerald's eyes.

Another thing I realized is that I must read right through my diaries—all of them, down to the present day, in order to get an overview. By an overview, I mean a sense of how the relationship between these two people, Swami and me, developed and changed. In this way, I shall probably find out a great deal which I don't know, am not aware of, yet. OK, good, that's how I will begin.⁷

My Guru is more than an excerpted condensation of the diaries. In some cases, it supplies information not mentioned in the diaries. For example, the Diaries, Volume 1 version of Chris's first appointment with Swami surprisingly does not include Chris "coming out" to Swami. In response to an enquiry about this as well as the general primness of Volume I, Katherine Bucknell, Isherwood scholar and the Diaries' editor, replied, "He was well tuned in to the risks of putting on paper anything he wasn't comfortable to have in the public realm." In later entries he continues:

Feb 1 [1977], I have just finished reading right through my diaries, from the beginning of 1939. There is still one gap I want to fill—never mind how inadequately; from Jan 1st 1976, until the next entry, on Aug 1st...

What is fatally missing from the diary as a result of this gap are any entries about our last few meetings with Swami. I shall also have to describe the two memorial services for him which I did attend⁸...I hope Don will have some detail in his diary about this period.

Feb 18th [1977], On Feb 12th, the day after our return [from the "frozen North"], I formally made a start on my Swami memoir. (I tried doing the opening draft in pencil on Gerald Heard's old writing board, and again it seemed to give forth some power—at least, I scribbled several pages.)...Perhaps the best thing about it [the book] will be its final passage, a description of me in old age and of what Swami means to me now that he is dead and of how I view my approaching death and of the phenomenon of happiness near the end of life.⁹

Who was his audience? Certainly his own mind. We've seen repeatedly that writing was the way he processed things intellectually and psychologically. A friend and fellow devotee told Chris how very much she enjoyed *My Guru*, how inspiring it was. He thanked her and then told her that he had not written it for devotees but for the gay community, so that they would know that there was a religion, a place to go where

⁷ Ibid. 524-525.

⁸ They do not appear in *My Guru*. Isherwood not only attended, but also spoke at the Memorials.

⁹ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 3, 536-538.

one's sexual orientation simply didn't matter. Although consideration for the gay community was almost certainly always close to his heart, he makes no mention of it as a motivation in the Diaries while he's composing the book. Likely, when responding to the fan, he was in part indulging in one of his favorite past-times, playing "shock the square," extra points if the square is also a devotee. And by now he had such antipathy for the devotees that it's not surprising that their appreciation played no part in his effort. An incident related in Volume 3 from December of 1975¹⁰ may explain his pique. In response to an article about him in *The Advocate* in which he mentioned Swami and Vedanta, he had heard that Abhaya (not a convent member as implied by the diary entry but an intimate part of the community) "was terribly shocked...she was afraid that all the queers would start coming to the temple." But after *My Guru* was published, in response to a harsh criticism of the book, Isherwood despaired that perhaps it was only the gay community that would understand it.

Toward the end of the project, Isherwood writes, "I fear...he [Swami] will have slipped out of my net."¹¹ In the beginning of the writing process, he wrote that he couldn't imagine two more dissimilar men than Swami and himself. However, as often happens with biographies, the character of Swami he did catch had a striking similarity to himself. Both were literary; both enjoyed people and were broad-minded in their appreciation of character; both had a sophisticated understanding of how people and the world worked; both were adventurous; both had a sharp sense of humor; both had a flair for the dramatic; both were teachers, mentors, and father figures.¹² But most importantly, both had tremendous guru bhakti. John Yale wrote: "Swami often spoke of Chris's faith in his guru — Prabhavananda himself — as so utter that he himself envied faith of that magnitude."

John Yale writes of *My Guru and His Disciple*:

Who but Chris would have been capable of revealing to a large public the intimate life of a mystic, rendering spiritual attainment convincing and beautiful? Who else but he, among all those who knew Swami Prabhavananda, took the pains to record, year in and year out, those revelations he heard from his guru which would show us, after he had departed, what was going on inside a man of God? ... Chris's memorial to Prabhavananda is a scientifically valid account of the religious impulse, the spiritual preference. And at the same time, so artistically done, in the tradition of great devotional literature. One critic called it the best book of devotion of this [the 20th] century.

What did Isherwood finally think of the book? James P. White, a young writer whom Isherwood mentored and befriended recalls "Once, when he was speaking

¹⁰ Ibid 489.

¹¹ Ibid 600.

¹² Sound Clip, Swami Prabhavananda's entire closing remarks to Chris' Hollywood Temple lecture The Writer & Vedanta, sound clip link here: <http://www.mondaymedia.org/SPF.mp3>

enthusiastically about *My Guru*, he said to me, 'Jim, I never should have written a novel.'"¹³

My Guru, Too—Begging to Differ

As an enthusiastic fan of *My Guru*, I find every reading more rewarding than the last. However, when first reading it in 1980, the year it was published, I was surprised to find that some incidents Isherwood describes differ from my own first-hand rather fresh recollections and those of other eye witnesses. In some cases, Isherwood was not himself present, as he acknowledges about certain events in the latter stages of *My Guru* itself. Additionally, he had not kept up his journal entries for that period.

The first incident in question is on page 323. On June 23, 1974¹⁴, Isherwood attended a Swami Prabhavananda Sunday morning lecture in Santa Barbara, which, at this stage in his life, was unusual for Chris. We find in the journals that Isherwood had a commitment in the area later that afternoon which explained his presence. Swami was going through a period of deteriorating health that made him more delicate in general. Isherwood reports that Swami was particularly unwell that day. He wore Western dress rather than his customary ochre robes because he was in danger of tripping on them. Isherwood writes about the event in question:

At the end [of the lecture], he blessed us all. Then he made a gesture toward the shrine—as if of acknowledgement—and said, "Who spoke through me." It seemed perfectly obvious that he meant, "It was He who spoke through me." But several people who talked to me later were puzzled. They had taken swami's statement as a question, "Who spoke through me?"

Being present at the lecture, I was surprised by Isherwood's re-creation. What I saw and heard was an exhausted and beleaguered Swami whose boundaries between planes had been systematically dissolving. It was a gray event. After the lecture, he got up from his chair and was starting to exit to the side room when he abruptly turned toward the shrine, pointing his finger at it, and said, "Who spoke to [not through] me?" It was a question, but also an accusation; the longtime Swami-in-charge was being in charge. He reacted as though he thought someone had spoken out of turn and needed to be corrected. He paused for a moment, collected himself, and exited the temple.

Eyewitness accounts often differ. But I was seated very near the front of the right-hand side, where Swami had been seated and spoke, and had the luxury of unobstructed view and of listening with 28 year-old ears. Moreover, Isherwood's account doesn't really make sense. It is full of assumptions and interpretations, e.g., "he made a gesture toward the shrine—as if of acknowledgement"; and most egregious, "It seemed perfectly obvious that he meant, 'It was He who spoke through me.'" In short,

¹³ Ed. James J. Berg & Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century*, Write It Down or It's Lost, Isherwood as Mentor by James P. White, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p. 82.

¹⁴ There is a contemporaneous journal entry for this event. The conflict is in the interpretation and ability to see and hear clearly enough to be a reliable witness.

Isherwood's version relies on assumptions and a rephrasing of what he actually heard, literally putting words in Swami's mouth, to come to his dubious conclusion.

The atmosphere at the lecture was sad, not beatific. Moreover, Swami did not characteristically broadcast mystical events, especially at venues open to the general public as this lecture was. His growing inability to contain them without show was a sign of the end approaching. Isherwood describes Swami as feeling unwell both before and after the lecture. In fact, to Isherwood's disappointment, Swami wouldn't see him after the lecture, as was the norm, because he just wasn't up to it.¹⁵ And there is the fact as Isherwood writes, that others also thought it was a question rather than a statement.

The second such story is recorded on page 317. Chris was not present at the event but was told on October 11, 1973 by, among others, Swami Prabhavananda himself, about an event that took place at Durga Puja in the Santa Barbara Temple five days earlier, on October 6, 1973. The story, however, needs context. Swami Prabhavananda's health had become increasingly delicate as his spiritual sensitivity had become increasingly keen. His doctor told him that his heart couldn't withstand intense spiritual experiences, yet his soul was irresistibly drawn.

The way Isherwood describes the Durga Puja event, Swami was offering a flower at the shrine toward the end of the worship and "was suddenly overwhelmed with emotion, realizing how gracious Mother had been to him. He burst into tears. Chetanananda had to help him into the little office room..." When Chetanananda mentioned Mother's grace to swami, "Swami began to cry again and couldn't stop for some time. He begged Chetanananda not to mention Mother's name to him again. When he regained control of himself, he went back into the temple and blessed the congregation, so they wouldn't think he was sick."

I was present. This is a very vivid memory. The incident was quite dramatic and, for many of us, frankly frightening. I've spoken to some devotees who were present as well as to Swami Chetanananda, asking for their recollections. The Rashomon factor notwithstanding, here is what we experienced and have gleaned: Swami had been sitting in an armchair during the worship. After offering the flower, he was back in his chair. Swami suddenly groaned, and his head snapped back, lifeless. He had lost outer consciousness. To my eyes, Swami Chetanananda seemed agitated; he was firing orders at Krishnananda in Bengali, which signaled panic, as Krishna didn't speak Bengali. Swami Chetanananda helped Swami into the little side office. Swami was still in a mood and told Chetanananda not to mention Mother. Swami Chetanananda tells us that Narayan, a devotee and a doctor, came back there to check Swami. After a while, Swami left the temple through the side office and was taken to his room. No one we spoke to remembers Swami coming back into the temple. In fact, he clearly didn't as we were all in suspense not knowing if he was still alive. An hour or so later, the devotees were having lunch on the extensive grounds, and Swami Prabhavananda

¹⁵ He doesn't mention this last fact in My Guru, but does in Diaries, Volume 3, p. 442.

came out then, completely resurrected, and circulated among the devotees for quite some time, in part to show he was all right, looking very happy and well...glorious.

Actually, Isherwood's story more closely resembles something that happened during the Vivekananda Puja in Hollywood that last puja season. As we've said, Swami was discouraged from attending pujas for his health. Nevertheless, he determined to make brief appearances. Toward the end of the Vivekananda puja, Swami entered through the left side office on the shrine level of the platform in his everyday Western dress and bowed in front of the shrine, not from the waist but on his knees. He was immediately overwhelmed and lost outer consciousness and had to be lifted to his feet, supported under his arms, and helped out through that same side office. Chris was not there. As we've seen, he didn't attend pujas. It's conceivable these two events became conflated somewhere in the telling or recording. There were many such events in this final phase.