

APPROACHING THE EVENT HORIZON

“To love is to know me.” Bhagavad Gita 18:55

As Swami's health declined, Chris continued to support Prabhavananda's work. One of his longtime regular Vedanta assignments was to play sidekick to Swami at the Wednesday night members-only Gospel readings. First Chris read from the Gospel for half of the hour. The last half was a Q&A with Swami, first written questions, which Chris read, sometimes paraphrasing (sometimes missing the point in his paraphrase), and then congregants asked questions from the floor. In the last few years of Swami's life, his health became too delicate to continue the Gospel sessions; but Chris continued to support the event, reading for Swami Chetanananda, the then-assistant Swami. He also made a sound recording of readings from the Upanishads which was released on vinyl, and also sometimes filled the Sunday morning lecture slot in Swami Prabhavananda's absence, particularly in Santa Barbara, generally doing readings of Swami Vivekananda in keeping with the resolve he had made in India to no longer presume to lecture on God. However, there was a notable exception. He did deliver an original lecture on Girish Ghosh,¹ whom he admired and whose story he identified with. Ghosh was an acclaimed poet, playwright and impresario, as well as an unabashed libertine, who became an outstanding devotee of Sri Ramakrishna without first either reforming his ways or even pretending to.

He enjoyed an exceptional status. Near the end of his life, Sri Ramakrishna was presented with a dozen rosaries and guerua cloths, the uniform of renunciation, which he distributed to his young monastically-destined disciples, launching them on the path to renunciation. He also had a set put aside for Girish. One could say that Isherwood and Prabhavananda were playing out a parallel dynamic, the love of the unflappable guru for the unrepentant sensualist disciple, in part to demonstrate what religion is not. As Isherwood wrote of the play between Sri Ramakrishna and Girish:

...what Ramakrishna profoundly understood and taught to us was that our so-called vices are, in fact, frustrated attempts to find the truth, or to find peace, or to find release from something...

...Ramakrishna broke down the conventional Puritanism, the outside layer, and thus broke down the standard of mere respectability and its opposite, which we impose on everything...

The whole point of the life of Girish is that he came right through this [his vices]. It was not so much to some kind of improvement in behavior, although that followed, nor to becoming a good boy, or anything of that sort. But he developed a deep devotion to Sri Ramakrishna, about which Swami Vivekananda said, “Nobody has devoted himself or abandoned his will so absolutely to that of the Master as has Girish.”²

During this time, the early to mid-1970s, Isherwood also supported Swami Chetanananda's early English-language literary efforts. After Swami's death on July 4, 1976, Chris came to the Temple much less frequently but continued to fill in occasionally on lecture days, and later recorded readings from *The Bhagavad Gita*, which was released on cassette tape,³ and would sometimes visit the Trabuco Monastery. However, it seems from his diary entries from the 1970s onward that despite his love for Swami Prabhavananda, he never overcame his resentment toward

¹ Christopher Isherwood, *Girish Ghosh*, Vedanta Press, Audio CD, 1975.

² Christopher Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree*, On Girish Ghosh, Ed. Robert Adjemian, Harper & Row 1986, pp. 149-151.

³ Later released as a CD and online download.

religious organizations, which also may have played a large part in his difficulties in India as well as the spiritual isolation that was before him.

After Many a Summer, the Winter of His Discontent

He dragged himself to a sun couch and, with great preparations and groans, awkwardly laid down on his back facing me. Coldly, perfunctory, I asked him: "How do you feel?" He moaned and shook his head, vaguely indicating a few centers of pain. I told him, half-wanting to provoke him, what a deplorable character he had made of Gerald Heard in his journal, and that now I could never like Gerald again. "What does it really matter 'liking' people?" said Chris. "It's a matter of pure subjectivity." After a moment he continued: "When I was young I was famous for liking people and being liked, but it was only because I took trouble to flatter them—that was all." ...This irritated me, and as I sat looking down on Chris, I was revolted. He looked so old and felt so bad and talked so cynically that I hated him for a moment.

Don Bachardy, *A Life Open to Art*⁴

Don has expressed what many have felt upon encountering the latter stages of Volume 3 of *The Diaries*. The warm, diplomatic, gregarious Chris of the early Diaries, so open of heart and mind,



who prayed to "extend toward all living beings that fascinated, unsentimental, loving and all-pardoning interest..." has been replaced by a frankly hateful and bigoted Chris in Volume 3, which covers the 1970s, ending in 1983. However, there have also been earlier periods of his life when his inner-workings have been unpleasant to watch. In 1963 Isherwood visited Huxley shortly before Huxley's death and wrote "He seemed most interested when I told him that my character has gotten worse as I get older. He was amused."⁵ And the above exchange with Don took place earlier still, in 1956.⁶

However, a preponderance of the time covered in the latter part of Volume 3 was an extended period of soaking in a vitriolic funk. We have not quoted examples because to give the full flavor of them would result in perpetuating blind cruelty. *The Financial Times* nailed it when they wrote of Isherwood: "...assured and neurotic, fearless and fretful, generous and small-minded, forgiving and remorsefully judgmental."

On a personal note, after being entirely charmed by the Chris of *My Guru* and the gentlemanly, chivalrous Chris at Swami's side during so many Vedanta festivities in the 1970s, I was whacked upside the head by the anti-Semitic, misogynist, devotee-averse creature that revealed himself in the published Diaries. None of these prejudices were evident earlier in his work or life. As mentioned, he had had many Jewish friends and associates and had done Wartime service helping immigrants adjust in America; his many friendships with women dissolved to the point that the women in Volume 3 tended to be "plus ones" rather than friendships in their own right, and he had got along as part of the devotee community. Suffice it to say that simultaneously with viciously trashing long-standing disciples of Prabhavanada, i.e. The Devotees, not seeing anything worthwhile in a group of apparently conventional mid-century American solid citizens

⁴ Ed. James J. Berg & Chris Freeman, *The Isherwood Century*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2000, p. 95.

⁵ Diaries Volume 2, p. 294

⁶ Although the entry is dated 13 May 1956 and an editorial note says that Isherwood's version of these events can be read in Diaries Vol. 1, pp 618-25, we found no mention of the scene there. However, if the timing is correct, Chris ended up in the hospital for an extended stay a day or two later with hepatitis.

who defied, bewildered and/or alienated family and friends to become Prabhavananda's disciples, he was positively gushing over his friendship with the ever-so-interesting David Bowie, which ultimately landed Chris saddled with the rumor that he had influenced Bowie to admire Hitler and fascism (As the coke-soaked superstar wasn't considered bright enough to come up with that himself?). Was I aiding and abetting the enemy? I was stuck.

[Strong Language Alert ending this paragraph] A few years later, in 2015, the Huntington Library held an event in his honor. It was launched with a talk by Amistad Maupin, *My Logical Grandfather*. Maupin was one of many young writers Isherwood had mentored. His tales included an event at a Hollywood party. Eddie Murphy had come under fire in public opinion and Isherwood was defending him, how very funny and talented he was, etc. Rae Dawn Chong interjected, asking if he hadn't known that Murphy had made vicious homophobic statements. Now Isherwood was stuck. I thought: amazing, I'm going to get my answer from Isherwood himself from beyond the grave. I could hear the background music of my mental movie swell for the divinely synchronistic revelation. Back on Earth, Maupin went on: so Chris shouts "Well, fuck him! Fuck him! Just fuck him!"

Obviously, I marshaled on, not seeing a clear principle; but, briefly it's ultimately come down to two explanations, one spiritual, the other quite worldly: we live in an "imperfect" world or possibly a world perfect in its imperfection. As grown-ups, we have to let go of hero worship and learn to live as humans among humans. And as already mentioned, the process of meditation and ultimate spiritual unfoldment stirs up lots of mental sediment that had lain undisturbed through lifetimes. Isherwood shared this upheaval with us. What shameful thoughts do we leave diplomatically unexpressed to others or even buried from ourselves?

While he expressed a desire to free himself of this pettiness, which he described as "face-making," facial expressions telegraphing either hatred or gloating, he doesn't examine or attempt to eradicate the biases themselves, which encompassed not just individuals but whole groups of people, thereby entrenching those prejudices. Instead he merely attempts to sidestep the destructive emotions they evoke. "As long as I don't relapse into face making, I can fill much of my time with japam—with the result that I feel calm, loving, nervously relaxed. My mind is far clearer than before, because it's no longer dulled by the toxins of hatred. You might say, in fact, that 'face-making' is kind of anti-japam."⁷

The diary entries of this time period are skimpy from a spiritual standpoint. It is during this time that he is writing *My Guru and His Disciple*, but doesn't refer to it all that often, nor does he expose the toil of his mental probing, as he had in earlier diaries.

He often refers to depression, but we don't know if it's clinical or if he just means a bored sadness. The diary entries quickly become tedious. His usual pattern consists of complaining about "having" to go to some social engagement, going grudgingly, disliking the guests, being bored therefore drinking too much, waking up depressed and hung over—only to do it all again. Both the introspection and precisely observed character studies that enliven earlier volumes of *The Diaries* are absent. We merely find out he dislikes someone famous. He has become, to use one of his favorite words, tiresome.

Ironically, his description of Gerald Heard in 1941 now fits Isherwood himself: "...a great deal of Gerald's dislike of the atmosphere of the Vedanta center was an expression of his own very different temperament. He recoiled from the women...because they were lively and vital and he was a life-hater. Although he could justify his attitude philosophically...there was an extra sourness to his remarks that seemed merely dyspeptic."⁸ He's proved Prabhavananda's warning

⁷ Isherwood, *Diaries*, Vol. 3, p. 646.

⁸ Isherwood, *My Guru*, p. 76. This has a double irony, not only was the scene described by Don at the opening of this section triggered by Chris's appraisal of Heard at exactly this time period.

against criticizing others: the fault you point out either was or would become your own. It also becomes obvious that Isherwood's circle of associates is dwindling through infirmity and death.

Obviously feeling it necessary, writer and friend, Edmund White, in his introduction to *Diaries Volume 3, Liberation* opens with an apologia. Its first lines are:

Readers of novels often fall into the bad habit of being overly exacting about the characters' moral flaws. They apply to these fictional beings standards that no one they know in real life could possibly meet—nor could they themselves...

I mention all this because reading...Isherwood's complete journals is an instructive corrective to the prissiness of reading fiction. Isherwood, whom most of us would consider saintly if we knew him personally, had faults that were unforgivable in a novel (he was careful to distance himself from these very faults in his autobiographical fiction)...

Oh, yes, he's full of faults and yet I think any fair-minded reader...will have to admit that he or she has seldom spent so much time with someone so generally admirable. To say so in no way mitigates the obnoxiousness of his real faults. But we should forgive him with the same liberality we apply to ourselves and our friends.

Isherwood clings to his work, always involved in one or two projects at a time with more on the back burner and several declarations of commitment to getting back to diary writing, which he also considered an important part of his discipline, particularly since objectively he appreciates that he is going through the most interesting period of his life: old age approaching death. His aches and pains and medications increasingly figure into the narrative. He also writes very occasionally about his spiritual efforts. He adds midday japam to the morning and evening routine prescribed by Swami Prabhavananda. "I keep trying to get some contact with what is within the mantra—my only resource and safety. Consciously, I very seldom do get it, but I guess the effort is a sign of contact anyway. And then, occasionally, these sudden tears of joy."⁹ In addition to his diary, he kept a Commonplace Book in which he wrote by hand excerpts of things he was reading, primarily spiritual or philosophical, but also song lyrics, writings on psychology, and even newspaper entries.

Knowing his diaries would almost certainly be read one day, did Isherwood overshare? He took care that they not be read until some of the people mentioned in them had died. An incident from 1978 illustrates the dilemma of leaving a physical record that is written with the brutal candor necessary to make the journals an effective tool of introspection. He and Don had an argument because Chris was upset to find Don reading from a diary Chris had left sitting open on his desk while working on My Guru. Don took exception to Chris's tone. Chris writes:

I carefully explained to him what is the truth, that I was afraid he might find some slighting reference to himself—there are several in all those early diaries—and not be able to forget it. And I reminded him of that travel diary of his...which he let me see...it contained a most wounding outburst against the misery of our relationship...and his longing to be free of it. I have never forgotten how much I minded, when I read it—even though I realized that he had written it in a violent, black, hysterical mood, and that I was capable of writing something similar...I had said I didn't want him to read my diaries until after my death. But I amended this, saying that he could read them any time provided he would read right through, not just dip into them and thus take statements out of context.¹⁰

⁹ Isherwood, *Diaries Volume 3*, p. 673

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 600

As for this candor, two forces converged in Isherwood's life that demanded scrupulous honesty. The first is the artistic process itself, a work of art's power emanating from its truthfulness; the second and later input is Swami's instruction:

When Swami used to teach me that purity is telling the truth I used to think that this was, if anything, a rather convenient belief for me to have, because it meant that I didn't have to be pure but only to refrain from lying about my impurity. Well, that's the minimum or negative interpretation. But, thinking about it in relation to Ramakrishna, I saw this: that the greatness of Ramakrishna is not expressed by the fact that he was under all circumstances "pure." No. And even if he was pure, that didn't mean he wasn't capable of anything. You always feel that about him—there was nothing that he might not have done—except one thing—tell a lie.¹¹

We see in the above statement two important themes, first, the definition of purity. There's an intriguing incongruity in Isherwood's statement which, being as sensitive to words as he was, Isherwood must have been aware of. He first introduces Swami's definition of "purity" as truth-telling but then immediately reverts to talk about "purity" in the sense of his previous Puritanical understanding. He writes about a parallel situation in his essay On Girish Ghosh "The danger of not being respectable is that you have to boast about it...This was all very well, but it didn't prove anything except that he had accepted the miserable puritanical standards instead of looking at them the way Ramakrishna did, and as he gradually learned to."¹²

The second theme is the irreducible sanctity of truth. Sri Ramakrishna himself encapsulates both issues in one famous prayer. Sri Ramakrishna is speaking:

It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the Kaliyuga [present age]. If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God...After my vision of the Divine Mother, I prayed to Her, taking a flower in my hands: "Mother, here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me only pure love."¹³ I mentioned all these, but I could not say: "Mother, here is Thy truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both." I gave up everything at Her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth.¹⁴

The End

Then suddenly, toward the end of this dark slog, the poetry is back. Isherwood writes movingly, yet with the objectivity characteristic of the Chris of earlier diaries:

August 2, 1981 "Being sick, in the way I've been for the past few weeks, means that you experience the life journey as conscious effort. Instead of spinning along the road almost without effort, as if on a bicycle, you feel like a character from *The Grapes of Wrath*,

¹¹ Isherwood, *Diaries Vol. 2*, p. 231. This passage is pointed out by Christopher Hitchens in his preface to Volume 2. The context for the statement is very interesting, worth a read.

¹² Isherwood, *The Wishing Tree*, On Girish Ghosh, p. 151.

¹³ For purposes of complete context, we quote from M's Gospel, translated by Swami Nikhilananda; but the version Chris would have been more familiar with is Swami Prabhavananda's translation of this passage: "O Mother, here is sin and here is virtue; take them both and grant me pure love for thee. Here is knowledge and here is ignorance; I lay them at thy feet. Grant me pure love for thee. Here is purity and here is impurity; take them both and grant me pure love for thee. Here are good works and here are evil works; I lay them at thy feet. Grant me pure love for thee."

¹⁴ M, *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Translation by Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, New York, 1969, p. 312.

coaxing your broken-down, rattling, over-heated Ford to keep going, mile after mile—hardly even expecting to reach ‘California’ ever.

This is old age. And I must say I’m well aware that—despite all my complaints—I know I’m traveling deluxe. There is more love in this house now than there ever has been before. And, in a strange way, I feel Don’s love and Swami’s love as two combined forces, not always distinct from each other. I’m not expressing this properly, but my sense of it is powerful. Thinking about this love as I was walking in the park before breakfast today, my eyes streamed with tears of joy. And, oh, the beauty of the breakers on the shore! My lifelong urge has been to plunge into them, but I don’t really care if I never do it again, because the weakness of the body is a merciful self-adjustment.”¹⁵

The failure to diagnose and treat Isherwood’s prostate cancer is appalling in light of 21st century medicine. With only one intervening diary entry from the August 2, 1981 entry just quoted, Isherwood writes:

October 16, 1981, Well, the moment has come when I must recognize and discuss the situation with myself, which means, as usual, writing it down and looking at it in black and white. I have got some sort of malignancy, a tumor, and that’s what’s behind all this pain...we shall enter the cancer-recognition phase and its gradual retreat to the terminal. I shall get used to the idea, subject to fits of blind panic...before all, there will be the need to accept what is going to happen. My goodness—at my age, should that be so difficult? No, it shouldn’t be. Yes, but it will be.

Don is heroic, heartbreaking in his devotion. He keeps me off the pain pills as much as possible...But this isn’t a problem of how to bear the pain...What I have to face is dying.

...I pray and pray to Swami—to show himself to me—no matter how.

I feel that I wish I could talk to Krishna [George], or someone from the center who was really close to Swami. But to do this is a huge psychological effort, and it might not be a success. I get fits of being very, very scared.

The love between me and Don has never been stronger, and it is heartbreakingly intimate. Every night he goes to sleep holding the old dying creature in his arms.¹⁶

I pray hard to swami, asking him to make me feel his presence, “now and in the hour of our death.” The response I get from this is surprisingly strong. I’m moved to tears of joy and love. I pray for Darling [Don] also, seeing the two of us kneeling together in his presence. Religion is about nothing but love.¹⁷

...my strength should be devoted to constant acts of recollection of Swami, his presence and his grace.¹⁸

This endgame is characterized by internal upheavals, episodic death-fears, and depressions; but also Chris and Don’s lives have settled in. They stay home more and more and their relationship is loving, caring, spiritually uplifting. The last diary entry is dated July 4, 1983. Isherwood begins the entry with “Yes, it’s that certain day.” He may have meant the anniversary of Swami Prabhavananda’s death (July 4, 1976). There is nothing to indicate that this will be his final entry. He would not die for another 2½ years. The dying process was laborious, painful, accompanied by an atrophying of both his physical and intellectual powers. Beside the inherent pain of the disease and the effects of medication, he suffered both chemotherapy and radiation treatment.

¹⁵ Isherwood, Diaries Vol. 3, p. 678.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p. 679-680.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 681.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 682.

From this point we have to look to accounts other than Isherwood's own for information. We find an anecdote from Jack Larsen:

"When Isherwood was dying," Larson told me, "he died in his own house. He had cancer of the prostate, which spread to his spine. He didn't want to be in the hospital. It was a long death, and very painful, but that's the way Christopher wanted it, without morphine."

Larsen recalled, "Sometimes Chris was awake, sometimes he was in a coma. Howard and Gore [Vidal] came to visit, and found him in this state. It was not a good sight. On seeing Chris like this, Gore said to him: 'Everything good and fine is disappearing from the earth, and leaving the planet to the lizards.'

"And it turned out Chris could hear, and he woke and opened his eyes and said: 'What's the matter with the lizards?'"¹⁹

Admittedly, the previous anecdote made the cut because there's so little available, but it suggests that when others thought he was comatose, he was, at least sometime, able to rise to the occasion at will. We also find the personal reminiscences of James P. White, a young writer whom Isherwood mentored.

We seldom spoke of philosophy or spirituality.

A few weeks before he died...we sat on the terrace overlooking the Pacific. We had a long conversation in which he spoke of his mother, Don, Auden, [E.M.] Forster, and others. Then I realized that he was about to cry. Chris was always strong, stoic...His tears were completely out of character. I got up out of my chair and went to him and awkwardly put my arms around his shoulders. "The people that I've known, they've touched me," he said, "They've touched me."

...he was in extreme pain. During the last few dinner parties he gave, he would unexpectedly scream at any point, then act as if nothing had happened.

I visited him later, but he was in a comalike state, not sure of what was going on around him. His face was shrunken and had an ethereal look...I went in to say goodbye although he would not know me. I... said, "Goodbye, Chris." He opened his eyes. "Hello," he said. "I'm leaving," I said. "I love you," he said and closed his eyes.²⁰

Christopher Isherwood died January 4, 1986 at the age of 81. Like Gerald Heard, he had donated his body to the UCLA Medical School.

As is customary, we leave the final word to Sri Ramakrishna. He is addressing Girish Ghosh:

Master: ... (To Girish) "You utter many abusive and vulgar words; but it doesn't matter. It is better for these things to come out. There are some people who fall ill on account of blood poisoning; the more the poisoned blood finds an outlet, the better it is for them. At the time when the uphadi²¹ of a man is being destroyed, it makes a loud noise, as it were. Wood crackles when it burns; there is no more noise when the burning is over.

¹⁹ Tim Teeman, Daily Beast, September 26, 2015, The Hollywood Life of Jack Larson, America's First Teen Heart-Throb

²⁰ 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, pp. 82-85.

²¹ Upadhi: A term of the Vedanta philosophy denoting the limitations imposed upon the Self through ignorance, by which one is bound to worldly life. Glossary from The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, trans. Swami Nikhilananda, Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, pp. 1046-47

“You will be purer day by day...People will marvel at you.”²²

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²² Ibid. p. 741.