

Carmen Farmer (previously Jackie Farmer), a disciple of Swami Aseshananda since 1979, resided in the Portland center's women residences for nearly a decade. She works for the National Indian Child Welfare Association in Portland, OR.

Interviewed in Portland.

I was living in San Francisco and knew that Swami Aseshananda was a disciple of Holy Mother. So in 1979, a friend and I took a bus trip to Portland to see him. I felt from the beginning that Swami knew what he was talking about from his own experience. I was brand new to Vedanta, maybe six months into it, and had met some of the other Ramakrishna swamis. I really felt Swami Aseshananda's words inside me, and I felt he was speaking from personal experience as opposed to something someone had told him or something he had read in a book.

My friend and I came up for a few visits, and within a year or two, I felt strongly that I should move up here and spend some time with him. I thought I was going to join the Hollywood convent—that was *my* idea—prior to meeting him. After Swami initiated me, I decided I should spend six months or so with him before I joined the convent. I talked to Swami about joining and all he said was, “Well, you know, when you join the convent, you don't leave your problems on the doorstep.” He didn't say no, and he didn't say yes. And then I moved up here and was quite content to be here for a long time.

In order to move to Portland, “First you have to find a job,” he said. So I found a job. We didn't talk about moving into one of the center's houses for women. I planned to get an apartment and was staying at Sarada House temporarily. One day he called at work and said, “Well you know, you can live in the house you are in.” I said, “But I was going to get an apartment.” My heart was pounding. He said, “Well, I've lived in apartments and I know what it is like. It's distracting. These houses are like spiritual oases.” I asked, “Well, can we talk about it?” “No, you decide and let me know.” *Click* and he hung up. I really did not want to move into that house *at all!*

EW: You wanted your independence?

CF: Yes! After that click of the phone, I had an incredible internal struggle sitting there. I kept thinking, “I don't want to live there. But he's saying he thinks it would be a really good idea. But I really don't want to. But I want to be close to him. But I really don't want to.” Finally I thought, “But I could always move out.” Little did I know how hard *that* would be! There was a kind of internal tearing sensation and then I decided, “OK, I'll move in. OK, fine.” There were four of us: Joan, Alice, Bessie, and myself, plus many guests, of course. Colleen, Catherine, Magda, Vera, and Jan lived Holy Mother's House.

EW: How did you come to be initiated by Swami?

CF: [chuckling] After my friend and I visited Portland the first time, we were sharing an apartment and had become somewhat devotional. I felt I'd gone as far as I could without a teacher. We both agreed to write Swami and ask for initiation. Holy Mother's birthday was coming up in a few months and I thought, "*That* would be the day to be initiated by him!" Not knowing about protocol or being humble, I wrote to him and said, "I think I really need a teacher, and I would like you to be my teacher and I'd like to be initiated on Holy Mother's birthday." I got a note back in handwriting that I could barely read saying, "Call me when you get this letter." So I called him, but by then I had gotten cold feet. I said, "Swami, I think this was a little premature on my part." He answered, "That's OK, you and R--- come to Portland for Holy Mother's birthday and we'll talk about it."

When I arrived, we had our interview and I thought we'd just talk about the meaning of initiation. Swami closed his eyes for a few minutes, and I thought "Oh, he's fallen asleep." But I guess he was just checking in. He said, "OK, tomorrow." "Tomorrow what, Swami?" I asked. "Initiation." And I just trusted in that moment that he knew what he was talking about. I was really kind of scared, but not in that moment. That night I felt I was going to step off a hundred-foot cliff. As that fear came up, the words "Everything will be OK" were in my head.

EW: What were you afraid of in particular?

CF: I heard I had to do what he said. The teacher is responsible for the student's spiritual welfare, and the student is responsible for doing what he says. I had been living independently for a long time. I had never really felt much about Holy Mother at that point. I was a feminist and I couldn't connect with her as a motherly prototype. But in that moment, I felt a little presence that I identified with her. And that was really the beginning of my relationship with Holy Mother. My friend and I were both initiated the next day and returned to San Francisco. A few months later, I had a big magnetic pull to move to Portland. I moved here in May of 1982 and stayed in the house until January of 1991.

EW: How would you describe the essence of Swami's impact on your life?

CF: When I first moved to Portland, I felt closer to him than I did later. He had made the connection with Holy Mother possible. Philosophically I felt both of us were non-dualists although he talked a lot about devotion. I think he really made it possible for me to open my heart to the Divine Mother, which I'm not sure I would have without him. Someone once said he had his finger on that pulse which was so alive for him.

EW: How did he do that for you?

CF: He did it by just being her disciple and being so devoted to her. It was a part of who he was and not anything he said. I always used to make fun of people who talked about energy. I would roll my eyes, but I think there was some energetic connection that he still had with her. She was *alive* to him and divine.

EW: Several people commented how he would pause in a conversation, begin stuttering, and listen to what she was telling him.

CF: I don't remember that, but when I told him I wanted to move out of Sarada House, he said he would pray to Holy Mother about it, and that is what he said about a lot of things. So he had that connection with her.

Later on, I developed more of an adversarial relationship, because the longer I was in the house, the shorter the leash became. I was OK with that at first, but eventually I began chafing about not being able to set my own schedule. Instead of being honest with him about what was going on, I had my own judgments about myself and felt everyone was much more spiritual than I because I didn't want to spend every night at the temple! Since I wasn't able to be completely honest, I started rebelling.

EW: Several others described similar experiences and also felt unable to articulate their need for more space.

CF: When I first moved here, there were no mandatory nights at the temple. Most of the women in the houses went to the temple most nights. If we didn't go, we weren't required to check in. One night, several of us weren't there, and then the law came down: you must ask permission not to come. That's when it became difficult for me.

EW: Your remarks were echoed by others who felt Swami had become stricter when the results he envisioned weren't forthcoming.

CF: I honestly don't know. There were many opinions about why Swami did what he did. I would love to be able to sit down with him today and have that conversation. I think I could do it as an adult without feeling like a "bad kid."

EW: So you moved out in 1991. Then what happened until Swami's passing in 1996?

CF: I maintained my duties in the temple which involved certain flower vases, cleaning on Saturdays, and arranging the cake to be offered on Sunday. For a while I still went to the Sunday lectures, but stopped. I got to know Swami Shantarupananda who communicated some things I wanted to share with Swami, who was upstairs and not accessible. Unfortunately, I was in Alaska when he passed away. I saw him before I left for Alaska. We were allowed to go up and be with him when the end appeared near. He would stop breathing and I thought that was it. It was an unreal moment, when I thought

he was gone. And then he started breathing again! [Editorial note: See Dr. Ferguson's remembrance.]

EW: Did you feel that Swami was powerful, as many people remarked?

CF: I never understood what people were talking about, from my own experience. I never felt particularly sensitive to that until very recently. The most I can say is that the relationship with Holy Mother was very real to me, very concrete. I prayed to her frequently and felt I received her guidance often.

EW: With your non-dualist bent, how was it to also have a dualistic relationship with her?

CF: Yes, I definitely had that relationship while at the same time still being philosophically a non-dualist.

EW: How did you reconcile your feminist background with the roles assigned to women at the center?

CF: I perceive that Swami had a cultural and generational perspective about woman. It was certainly true around the temple that there were definite gender roles. I got around the feminist issues owing to her love. Her love won me over to her: it was real, it was strong.

EW: How did you experience this?

CF: It must have happened so gradually that I didn't notice. At some point I was praying to her and it was like having a real relationship with a *mother* who was totally accepting, totally loving—whom I could ask for help.

EW: How did you get your answer? Did the solution materialize in your mind or did the solution come tangibly into your life?

CF: I would say different ways. Sometimes things would just happen and work out. I remember most clearly that solutions happened through feelings. It was a feeling of being held and it was love. It's so odd because I feel it right now—but it's not her love, but it's that love in me that I feel is being stimulated or generated right in this moment.

EW: What do you mean by "that love?"

CF: Love, *the big Love*. Love itself, with a capital L. She moved from an objective form of God to being inside. The word "God" now doesn't mean a whole lot to me.

EW: Before we get off onto a wonderful discussion of non-duality, may I ask whether you still experience Swami today in some way?

CF: Not really. I certainly think about him every now and again, especially when people talk about their teachers. I have been to many teachers subsequently, but I never thought about wanting another teacher. I had a teacher. Done deal. I don't need to have another teacher, although I enjoy going to other teachers. I do dream about him too, now and then. In my dreams, he's been more the loving swami than the tough swami. He could be brutal!

EW: I've heard that, but also that he was different with each person.

CF: He was nice to me and very loving, but he could take a layer of skin off with his scolding! One of the things I gained from Swami is that I don't take crap from anyone.

EW: Do you think that not taking guff is one of the lessons you were meant to learn from Swami?

CF: I don't know if that was a lesson I was *supposed* to get, but that has been a result.

EW: Some of the persons interviewed said that Swami stopped scolding them when they began to stop reacting to the scoldings.

CF: I never got to that point, because at some level I believed what he said, e.g., "You're worthless or stupid" or whatever. I'm certainly willing to take my share of the responsibility for how I felt around him and for our relationship not being closer.

Although I don't know how I survived almost nine years in the houses, I wouldn't change any of it. It's part of what made me who I am today, and I'm extremely grateful for my life right now. Frequently I say, "I'm the luckiest girl in the world!"

August 2009