

Fontaine Epler (Santi), a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda, spent five weeks at Belur Math during the presidency of His Holiness Shrimat Swami Vireswaranandaji, lived and worked at the Ganges monastery for two and one-half years during the lifetime of Swami Bhashyananda, and is an Associate of the Episcopal Order of St. Anne.

After Swami Pavitrananda died, and before Jean MacPhail [later “Gayatriprana] left NYC for San Francisco, she came to the Sarada Ashrama in Marshfield, Mass., for a retreat with my guru, Swami Sarvagatananda (head of both the Boston and Providence centers). There she told me about how inspiring Swami A[seshananda] was at Swami P[avitrananda]’s memorial service [see Gayatriprana’s reminiscence], creating a strong desire on my part to have his darshan, which was arranged with him for Easter week in 1980.

Before I left, a gentleman asked me to deliver a letter to a gentleman who attended the Portland Center. As soon as I go there, I approached a bramachari, to give it to the addressee; but he backed away from it/me in obvious alarm. Very shortly Swami A approached me and demanded to know why I’d spoken to the bramachari; and I told him about the letter. He said, “Give it to Mr. Bush. He will do the needful.” (I loved his Britishisms so much!) And I had no preparation for the fact that bramacharis were off limits, because the bramacharis at the Boston Center were the very ones to “do the needful” there.

At the first vesper worship I attended in the shrine, it seemed odd to hear someone mowing the lawn just outside while we were to be meditating. And even odder that someone came into the darkened room wearing a khaki-colored *chaddar*, whose shape made me think of “the hunchback of Notre Dame,” approached the altar, and performed worship on his knees—crawling on his knees—while his *chaddar* dragged 6 feet (it seemed) behind him on the floor, as he moved back and forth before the altar in this grotesque fashion.

I could hear the flowers on the altar plop, plop, as he swept them onto the floor; and then he threw fresh flowers at the images on the altar. When he finished everything and left the room, what I saw took my breath away: the flowers were set beautifully in perfect order, and there was a luminous glow from the scene which had nothing to do with lit candles. Only then did I know that that was Swami A. The only other pujari who created such an atmosphere that I could actually see the light created, by the end of a puja, was Revered Swami Sarvagatanandaji Maharaj. (And I have seen at least a half a dozen).¹ After I went home, I went to a fabric store and bought a length of khaki fabric to use for a *chaddar*, which I used for many years.

“Holy Mother’s Cat” was in residence when I was there. Swami A formally introduced me to it as “a very fine cat.” When we met for class Swami would tell someone to get the cat and bring it into the room before he would start the class. Now this cat looked like a beat-up alley cat to me, and I asked Vera Edwards [a devotee] (during the time it took to locate the cat and bring it into the room), “What are the merits of that cat?” And she said, “Oh, it’s not by our merits we are here; it’s that Swami has given us his protection.”²

When we were getting ready for the Easter puja, several women and I were told on Saturday to make a garland, each, for one of the shrine pictures he planned to set up for the puja. I was assigned to the picture of Jesus, which was small (maybe 8" x 11"?), while that of Ramakrishna was quite large (18" x 24"?). I chose Magnolia blossoms for the yard for mine, and strung them on a string to approximate the size of that picture.

On Easter, the garlands were all placed each in a heap, separately, on a tray, for Swami to dress each picture during the worship. But he took mine and put it on Ramakrishna's picture! It was like a necklace! The long daisy chain the woman made for Ramakrishna he put on Jesus in such a way that its surplus was bunched up at the bottom of that image. I was so happy! You see, I had been thinking of Ramakrishna the whole time I made my garland.

I never asked Swami a single question, or requested an interview; but before the week was up, he told me to join him privately once. There was very little talk. He asked me a question or two, I think; but then he sat in silence, after which he said, "I will give you the dust of Holy Mother's feet," and led me into the shrine pantry. I knelt down and he touched my head with the picture he had there. I didn't feel any other sensation; but I was deeply moved and honored, because I'd come to believe that picture to be the powerhouse of the entire center, as I'd seen that Swami kept his wallet and keys in front of it, and was told that he always left them there when he was in the Center.

I was carrying in my heart a problem at the time. I had a teenage daughter (Esther)³ and I was worried that I was not "a good mother" to her. I was divorced, and we were living together. I didn't visit Swami A to deal with that worry, and it didn't occur to me to mention it to him, but on the flight home (to Portland, Maine) I had the conviction that I was a "good mother," a conviction that has never left me from that moment to this. And I knew it was Swami's gift to me.

¹ more than a dozen pujaris.

² "his protection" I'm not sure she used exactly those two words; but that was the idea.

³ also a disciple of Swami Sarvagatananda who gave her the name Sumana.