



Swimming  
with  
Elephants

My Unexpected Pilgrimage from Physician to Healer

SARAH BAMFORD SEIDELMANN

"A fascinating, amusing, and wise account of how someone finds her way back to her true self."

—**MARTHA BECK**, *New York Times* bestselling author of *Expecting Adam*

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# Introduction

*Safety is all well and good; I prefer freedom.*

E. B. White, *The Trumpet of the Swan*

I was gently eased into chaos by a sneaking sensation that I was no longer doing the work I was meant to do. My career in medicine, which had formerly thrilled me, began to feel like a prison. As it turned out, the door to my metaphorical jail cell had always been ajar, waiting for me to leave it and explore. Instead of wandering out, I could have chosen to re-upholster my office chair in an adorable European chintz with a pattern of dancing pugs—pugs, after all, are incredibly whimsical. Through my lifelong enthusiasm for interior design, I knew that changing a room could change your life. At some point, however, I realized that it would be dangerous for me to stay. Material shifts are useful; but only changes at the level of spirit endure.

What my soul truly craved was freedom.

I was dying—at least, the externally driven, Board-certified part of me was dying. I felt called to do something else. Precisely what that something else was, however, eluded me. I knew something was wrong, and I was filled with self-doubt.

Eventually, I left medicine to pursue a radically different path. What did I do to arrive at that path? A better question might be, what didn't I do?

I danced with sacred stones, meditated with mantras, faced my shadow, spent dozens of hours traveling to sacred realms via drumbeat to meet helpful spirits, tramped on trails while communicating with the wild, embraced a rescued mustang, lay on a tarp in the desert examined by twelve strangers, sold half of our possessions in a public sale, and had bones thrown for me by African shamans.

All of these strange activities played an important part in the messy process of finding my connection to the Divine and learning to trust its guidance. Most people, my friend Suzi teases me, would never have taken these extreme measures. Others may not long to cavort with a gazillion Hindu pilgrims on the banks of the Ganges River, but my hope is that my story inspires you, dear reader, to find your own path to freedom.

With hindsight, I recognize that my distress with others' suffering was my call to the Hero's journey. Faced with the enormity of my discomfort, I refused at first. It took me years to understand how to change my answer from "no" to "yes."

If you decide to say "yes" to your own soul's calling, I've got one question for you:

How good are you willing to let it get?





PART ONE

# Angry Bears

*All doors are hard to unlock  
until you have the key.*

Robert C. O'Brien, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*

## CHAPTER 3

# Realization and Refusal

*For the hero who refuses the call to adventure, all he can do is create new problems for himself and await the gradual approach of his disintegration.*

Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*

A few months after our honeymoon, I found myself on the hospital ward with Dean, a second-year resident in internal medicine. I was a third-year medical student and this particular hospital rotation was pushing me to my limits intellectually, physically, and spiritually.

In order to finish rounds on my patients before Dean arrived, I left our apartment at 4:30 in the morning, arriving in the Intensive Care Unit around 5:00. I did a physical exam on our first patient and then sat at the desk poring over the chart, which was three inches thick, trying to decipher the cryptic notes left by specialists, following up on labs and culture results, noting all recorded vital signs, and making sure that I hadn't missed anything before I wrote up my assessment and plan, which would be reviewed by my resident and the attending physician.

But these routine aspects of medicine weren't what was most difficult for me. What stopped me in my tracks was something for which I'd received no formal training.

One morning, I was faced with a patient—a recently divorced twenty-nine-year-old mother of three—who was on an experimental bone-marrow transplant protocol for Stage IV breast cancer. We'd flooded her body with incredibly toxic chemotherapy to obliterate her tumor, but the destruction was non-selective. For the treatment to succeed, her native bone-marrow elements had to regenerate in order for her to survive. But her platelets (the tiny cell fragments that help blood to clot) had dropped to almost nil and were refusing to recover.

Dean and I stood by her bed and stared at her frail frame covered in heavy blankets. We were fairly close as we spoke with her, maybe three feet away, but I felt as if we might just as well have been talking to her from behind a thick glass wall. "Your platelets remain low," Dean said. "But we're hoping to get a bigger bump with today's transfusion." I had no words, so I just smiled weakly. I felt so separate, as if I couldn't really touch the problems she was facing. Or was it that she was feeling the distance that separated us? Had she already given up?

Despite the thousands of memorized medical facts and concepts that swam through my brain, the skills of my admirable resident, and the collective wisdom of modern medicine, it seemed to me that we were *missing the point*. She could very well be dying. How could we help her with that?

This patient haunted me all the way home that night and I began to question everything, including what I was doing and what modern medicine dictated we do. I found myself wondering what it would be like if it were my job to talk with this patient about death. What would I say to her?

I was reassured by the way Dean had spoken to her in a soft, measured voice. I loved him for that. He had a quiet stillness. His bustling-physician self seemed to recede and he was able to line up with the

patient perfectly, the way a lake merges with its shore. Though we didn't talk about it, I could feel that he sensed a need to treat her with all the tenderness he could muster. I wanted to ask him about what he was feeling about her, but we were so busy that the time never came.

Days later, while Dean and I were sprinting toward a new consultation through an echo-filled stairwell that reeked of linoleum and fresh paint, we received a voice page from the ward. Our frail patient had bled to death early that morning. Though her recovery had been very uncertain, it still caught us off guard. We paused for a moment, sitting down on the rubbery stairs, and allowed our tears to come. For this, I was grateful. I later learned that this was rare. Most institutions, and most residents, didn't allow you to stop for a moment of humanity like this.

Months later, at the University of Minnesota, a six-week hematology/oncology rotation left me emotionally shattered. During my exit interview, the attending physician, whom I'd barely met, asked me for feedback. As he waited for my response, his eyes looked searchingly at me and then down at the form he needed to fill out. I couldn't get the words to come out. I unexpectedly took in a sharp breath and the dam inside me broke. I began to sob, seized by a sorrow so deep and painful that I was overcome by it.

Remembered scenes flashed through my mind: the liver-transplant patient who seemed more dead than alive, the families wiped out by grief, the way patients were callously treated by the angry and dismissive resident with whom I had been paired. Each room we walked into had felt so heavy. The suffering had felt unbearable to me. It had taken everything I had just to stand there and look these patients in the eye. Our visits seemed to provide no apparent relief.

After a few minutes of uncontrolled weeping and shuddering, the baffled attending physician handed me a box of tissues. Though I was



trying desperately to control my emotions so I could tell him what I'd experienced, I just couldn't stop. I gestured helplessly toward the door, grabbed my bag, and escaped to keen in the privacy of a bathroom stall down the hall. I waited until it was quiet in the hallway, and, with my tears subsided, I slipped out of the building.

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Our internships took a new and deeper toll on Mark and placed an intense pressure to perform on me. One Saturday at home, we got into an argument and I became furious with him. The only thing I could think of to exact revenge was to take his beloved houseplant and drop it unceremoniously into the sink with a crash. Plant violence was, apparently, the best I could come up with. He was understandably angry. But I was extremely surprised when he charged toward me. Instinctively, I began to run, but he tackled me as I tried to escape up the carpeted stairs. I was shocked and scared. Mark was one of the kindest and calmest people I knew. What was happening to us? Later, I told him that, if he ever grabbed me like that or tackled me again, I would leave him.

After that, Mark became even more distant and unavailable, and seemed to undergo a complete change in personality. I knew that working 100 hours a week could do that to a person, but I became truly worried. I talked Mark into seeing a couples' therapist on one of our rare days off. After thirty minutes of listening to us, the therapist said: "I see a lot of couples and I can tell that you two love each other very much. You're going to be just fine." I drove away feeling slightly better, but wondered how she could be so sure.

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After the death of my bone-marrow-transplant patient and my own disturbing discovery that I was ill-prepared to serve patients at the level I sensed they needed, I decided to sidestep the whole troublesome aspect of caring for patients personally and chose pathology as a specialty.

By choosing pathology, I committed to mastering something tangible and dodged the most painful and confusing aspect of medicine—addressing the patient’s emotional and spiritual needs. As a pathologist, I only had to look at slivers and bits under a microscope and occasionally do a few autopsies.

But I discovered that I enjoyed pathology immensely. The doctors were brilliant and collaborative. It was also, at times, very exciting . . . During one typical intraoperative neurosurgery consultation, I heard:

“Mary, get the down here to the multi-headed scope! We’ve got a doozy of a brain biopsy and I need you *now!*”

Mary skidded into the room moments later, threw down her glasses, slid into a chair, put her eyes up to the scope, and demanded clarification: “What are we looking at here?”

“Twenty-seven-year-old frontal lobe mass with necrosis,” the other pathologist replied.

Mary immediately began directing the examination like a boot-camp drill sergeant: “Okay, okay, move to the right. . . no, left. . . okay, *there*. . . go down on that cell. . . I need to see it closer, Bob!” It fascinated me to watch these brilliant people wrestle with significant diagnostic problems and collaborate to provide the very best answer for the patient.

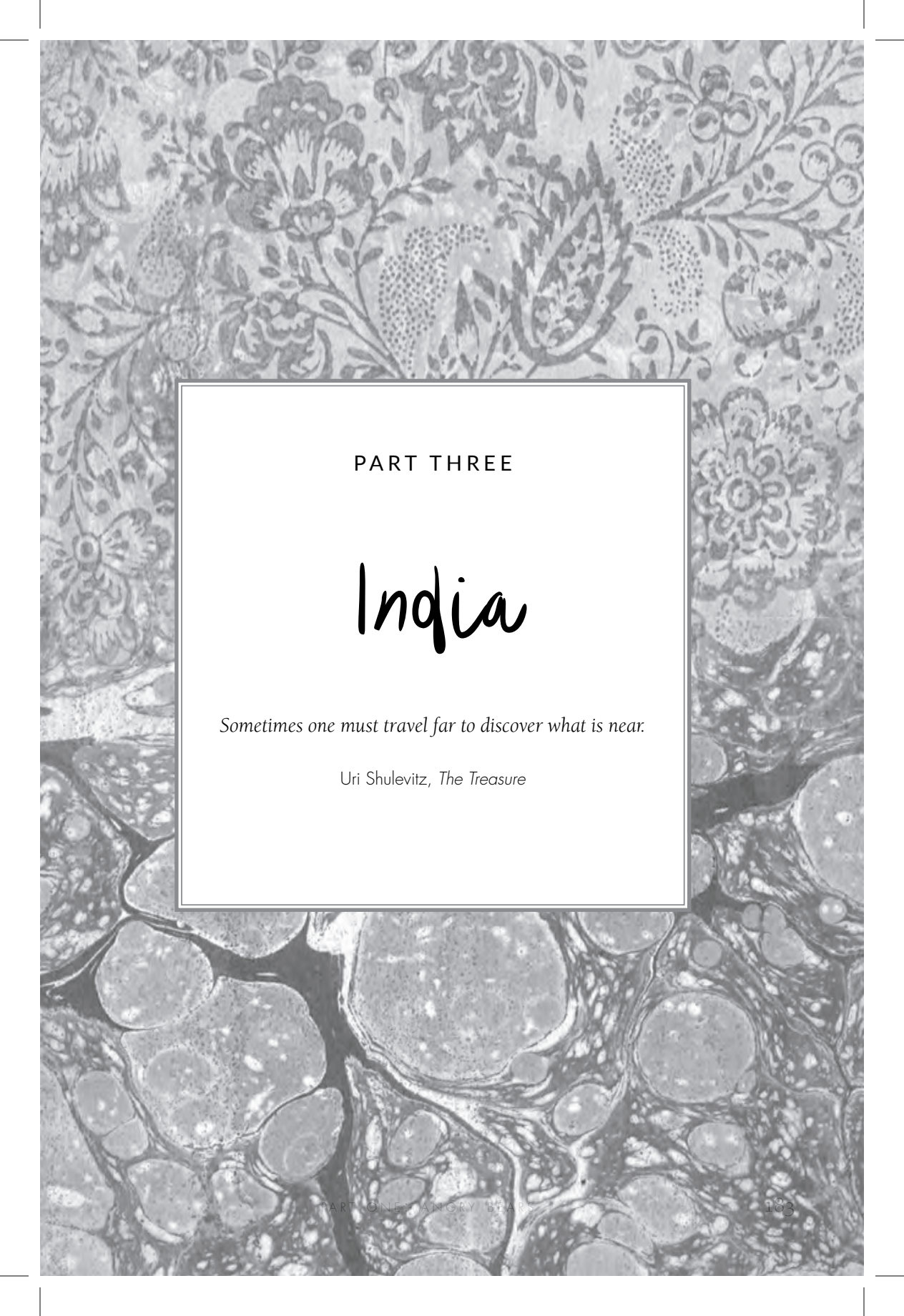
Another instructor from medical school was very influential in my decision to become a pathologist. Most medical school professors I had met were introverted types who enjoyed the symphony, a good Sudoku, and quiet nights at home. But this physically imposing guy

with a huge bald head frequently said outrageous and shocking things. In fact, sometimes I wonder whether he was, in fact, the only reason I was initially drawn into pathology. I remember one occasion on which he invited unsuspecting students to look at photographs he had taken under his microscope, challenging them to determine how the patient had contracted the infection. Baffled, the students peered with great intellectual interest at the clumped patterns of bacteria, each wanting to come up with the correct answer. It took a while for most to realize that he had used patterns of a bacteria known to be transmitted sexually to spell out “fucking.”

Pathologists are “the doctors’ doctors.” They consult with all other physicians, providing diagnostic clarity where possible and diagnostic possibilities where it is not. As I watched pathologists interact with surgeons and oncologists, I saw how important their role was and thought that, perhaps if I worked hard, I could be helpful as well.

At its most essential, pathology is good pattern-recognition. During my student rotation, I got feedback that I was showing promise as a diagnostician, and it encouraged me. As a pathologist, I thought, I could avoid the discomfort of witnessing human suffering, be a mother who gets to see her children (at twenty-six, these children were still notional, but pathologists were purported to have fairly regular hours), and I could be myself and swear like a sailor.

For that first year, I lived, breathed, ate, and slept the study of disease and how to make a solid diagnosis. It was like learning a whole new language in which I needed to become fluent—fast. I loved staring for hours at each week’s ten “unknown” cases, trying to make the most accurate diagnosis. It was a little like trying to remember the name of a specific wallpaper pattern. Each time, the details are similar, but not identical, to patterns you’ve seen before.



PART THREE

# India

*Sometimes one must travel far to discover what is near.*

Uri Shulevitz, *The Treasure*

## Mela-Mobile

*India is not, as people keep calling it, an underdeveloped country, but rather, in the context of its history and cultural heritage, a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.*

*Shashi Tharoor, World Policy Journal*

One Sudoku-inclined pilgrim calculates our Total Pilgrimage Bus Hours (TPBH) as roughly forty hours. Some things are best left out of the brochures. The first buses we board appear quite modern from the outside. Inside there's a groovy, cosmic paisley theme accented with granny-inspired silky lingerie-like curtains.

As we ride in our far-out Mela-mobile, time passes strangely. No *ayahuasca*, DMT, drumming, or vision-inducing anything is needed to put us into an altered state. I trade off between staring out the window at India and striking up conversations with the people around me. A lot of the travelers seem to have a common bond as devotees of the organization sponsoring our trip. The crowd is predominantly over forty, with a few teens in tow with parents and a smaller contingent of twenty- and thirty-somethings.



Traveling days begin with a vague prediction of a four- to five-hour journey, which typically balloons into seven to ten hours. We bump along, accepting our fate. We watch pastoral India whiz by the windows, interrupted by the small, crowded cities we occasionally pass through.

Every few hours, the bus stops for a bathroom break. One hotel generously allows 150 of us to use their three (not all functioning) toilets. I cringe at the wreckage we leave in our wake. I begin to appreciate the charm of the more rustic roadside breaks where all 150 of us leap off to pee in the wild. The Sufi poet Rumi might have been talking about more than our infinite possibilities when he wrote: “Out beyond the world of ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.”

The pandemonium of India’s traffic, all the careening buses, overloaded trucks and semis, dogs, ox carts, pedestrians, and wandering cattle reminds me of microscopic video footage of human red blood cells moving within a small blood vessel: flow occurs, but not in a linear, logical way. It’s as if each blood cell is in simultaneous, divine communication with the others. Some cells tumble forward at breakneck speed; others hold back and wait; still others creep along the edges for a while, only to burst forth when space opens up.

Traffic movement is similarly organic, as if India is one large organism, with the highways as her arteries and the rural roads as her capillaries. Witnessing the sights around me in this way, through a lens of blood-flow patterns, deepens my trust that there’s a divine current running through everything that’s orderly and peaceful. Our safe passage wouldn’t even be plausible if there weren’t.

When the sight out the front window is too much, I stare out the side windows at the world whizzing by. We’re driving through rural

Uttar Pradesh, a part of India that seems to have been forgotten. Some smaller towns look war-torn; so many ancient buildings appear to be bombed out and crumbling, but no clean-up crew has come to fix them. Some regions resemble the depleted, post-apocalyptic world that Dr. Seuss portrays in his book *The Lorax*, after all the truffula trees have been chopped down. Every square inch of non-farmed land here is covered by some combination of drying clothes, dung piles, wandering animals, and people.

We pass through farmland, mustard fields of electric green and yellow that offer visual relief. I see many large, grand trees—many more *ancient* trees than you ever see in rural Iowa or on Wisconsin farmland. They're enormous and beautiful. It seems a wonder that these trees haven't been cut down out of desperation, to make fires or to build things to sell.

Some trees have colorful flags posted nearby, in the same way that flags are posted at temples and other sacred places. When I ask a veteran pilgrim about this, she informs me that all trees are considered sacred here, and that certain trees are prayed to for certain things. In Hinduism, each kind of tree has particular qualities and gifts it can bestow upon you if you ask—qualities like fertility, good luck, and health. *Everything that is, is alive.*

I begin to notice a peculiar pattern. Newer buildings have sprung up here and there that seem to have a modicum of hope built into them. These are single-story structures with towering projections of rebar protruding from their flat roofs toward the sky, ready to accept the bricks and mortar of a second (or even third) story, as if to say: I am only a beginning; we are not finished yet. A second story, maybe more, is on the way—maybe in the spring. Then again, maybe not. These buildings seem symbolic of the spirit that appears to infuse India's people. Despite

the utter disarray and the cacophony of people and animals, there's no shortage of optimism. You can see this same anticipation in the smiles of the children; possibility is everywhere.

We observe as we go; but we are also being observed. Our bus is a spectacle in the tiny towns along the Uttar Pradesh highway. Children rush toward our windows shouting gleefully, like girls I've seen running alongside a Taylor Swift tour bus. I'm perplexed; I've been to a lot of far-away places and have never been received like this. According to our in-country hosts, this section of bus-friendly highway was new this spring. Many local people have never seen a new bus like ours loaded with so many foreigners.

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After seven hours or more, time passes excruciatingly slowly. It's late afternoon when one of our fellow pilgrims (definitely a front-of-the-bus person) begins to lead us enthusiastically in chanting aloud one of our *extremely long* assigned mantras. I recognize this irrepressible person because I, too, have been one. But now, I'm enjoying my moody Cold-play-induced trance state, watching the countryside out my window.

Mantras are syllables, words, or groups of words (often in Sanskrit) that, when repeated, have the effect of causing transformation. Pilgrims on both sides of the bus join our chanting leader, though it seems to me as if they do it more out of duty than out of passion. I remove my earbuds and, like a good pilgrim, try to chant the vaguely familiar words, but discover that I'm feeling annoyed.

I fear this is the beginning of a larger problem for me. Here I am, non-compliant student, on a sacred journey with a gang of seemingly devoted, mantra-chanting yoginis. What have I gotten myself into? Will

they chant these unfamiliar Sanskrit phrases incessantly for the rest of the pilgrimage? Will I feel like a total spiritual heel, wishing I'd never signed up? Am I the only one?

Glancing around furtively between the seat backs, I notice other pilgrims half-heartedly phoning in their chanting or already returning to whispered conversation. The chanting quickly peters out. I'm relieved. I return to staring out the window peacefully and happily at rural India. I enjoy the pure solitude.

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Ten or eleven hours into the bus ride, we turn off the highway onto a side road and proceed through a series of hamlets so small that our bus nearly scrapes the rooftop overhangs of the buildings on either side. It's almost like that last push out the birth canal—we just barely squeeze through.

Around 9:00 that night, we finally arrive at the land where we will stay for the Kumbh Mela, emptied of conversation and in the grip of full-blown jet-lag. We receive a Downton Abbey–style welcome in the nearly pitch-black darkness from a team of smiling greeters standing all in a row sporting headlamps and waving at us exuberantly. Our safe arrival here is evidence enough of the sacred at work. Maybe it will be okay.

We step gingerly off the bus on stiff legs into the soft, cool darkness. Name badges are laid out on dimly lit card tables arranged in a grove of trees near the buses. We're instructed to go find our assigned huts, where we'll stay for the duration of the Kumbh Mela. Mine is number 39. In numerology, 39 reduces to 3 ( $3 + 9 = 12$ ;  $1 + 2 = 3$ ). Three, for me, is a divine number, as it's my life path in numerology.

So even my hut is auspicious. I've only recently discovered numerology, the belief that a number can have a divine relationship with a coinciding event. At its essence, numerology is simply the idea that numbers are not random.

I was skeptical of numerology initially. How was it any different from magazine astrology or simple fortune-telling? Despite my doubts, however, everything I read about my life-path number (3) resonated with me. It said I was born to be creative, to express myself, to be the life of the party (at least sometimes), and to inspire others.

I had a dream recently in which I heard the words: "The number three is very important." When I awoke, the glowing digital clock beside my bed read 3:33. The numbers seemed to be hinting at me what path to take. For me, numerology is a heart logic. I've decided that, if something helps me, then maybe I don't need to have "proof" that it's true. *I just need to have evidence that it helps.*

I wander alone along the dimly lit paths to arrive at hut 39. Home sweet home? I prop open the thatched door and peek into absolute blackness. I can't see a thing; my mind leaps around, imagining what I'll see once I have light. I suddenly remember the headlamp in my backpack, switch it on, and pop it onto my head.

Leaning my illuminated head over the threshold, I discover that it's not terrifying at all. It's cozy. Four neat cots beckon, with mosquito netting hung above. Strapped to the center support pole is a light switch and an outlet for phones and cameras. The floor is covered in fresh emerald-green felt, like a positively regal golf course. This is the country club of hay huts.

My shoulders drop and I exhale as I swing my duffel up onto my cot to fish out my sleeping bag. I inhale the sweet fragrance of the warm, dry straw. The whole Bethlehem nativity scene makes a lot more sense



to me now. I roll out my sleeping bag onto the cot and begin to organize my gear. This place is perfect for a new beginning.

Lights out. I lie in the soft embrace of my down sleeping bag and suddenly notice all the sounds of the Kumbh Mela. My cot is beneath our one, tiny hay-framed window, open now to bring in cool night air. I hear drumming and chanting alternating with what sounds like canned dance music pulsing in a muted throbbing, yet powerful, way. I toss and turn as I listen. How far away is it? I can't tell. Where's the river from here? Arriving here in utter darkness is similar to arriving in Agra under a blanket of white fog. Once again, we've arrived somewhere new, but I can't yet confirm it with my eyes.

I know there are more pilgrims just upriver from where I am and wonder how many more. I send loving kindness to all my fellow pilgrims who've come from far and wide. I pray that we all find what we came to discover, that we're freed from suffering—and not trampled to death. Amen.

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I love the pilgrimage schedule, because it mimics my own schedule at home—well, on good days, anyway. At 5:00 in the morning, I rise eagerly and get dressed by headlamp-light. I gather a few items in my backpack, bundle up for warmth, and walk to get a cup of chai in the main dining hut. Chai time is announced at 5:30 by a loud, clanging iron bell.

We were told at last night's brief orientation to honor silence until 8:30, unless there is a true emergency—in which case, whispering is permitted. I welcome this daily silence as a break from the near constant din of and interaction with the outer world.

Staying silent seems challenging for many of my fellow pilgrims, however. I assumed a bunch of yoga instructors and devotees of a meditational branch of yoga would relish a few hours spent in silence. A small handful of rebellious pilgrims appear to disregard the rule of silence completely, however, and speak in normal tones during morning chai. Others whisper to each other constantly, as if emergencies are everywhere. This morning my “pain body,” as Eckhart Tolle refers to our hypercritical unconscious, has a hair trigger and is casting its fluorescent glare on everyone.

Hot chai is a welcome source of heat after the chilly night. I place my empty metal tumbler into the plastic dish bucket and head out into the darkness. Wide gravel trails lit by compact fluorescent lights help me find my way to the meditation grove, which is surrounded by a low wall. There are perhaps a dozen huge old Banyan trees covered in leaves that create soft rippling waves of sound when they rustle. A few pairs of pilgrims’ shoes wait at the entrance.

It’s not completely silent outside either. People from far and wide seem to be waking up and getting their holy microphones warmed up for a chanting competition in which, apparently, the one who chants at the highest decibel level wins. The most amplified chant so far this morning is: “Svaha. Svaha. Svaha. Ommmmmm.” (*Svaha* is pronounced “svahh-ha”). The sound of crackled chanting arrives in strange warped waves from upriver as well. Here in the grove, our relative silence feels sweet.

I take off my shoes, moving bulkily in my layers, like a Sasquatch. It’s around forty-five degrees Fahrenheit this morning. I’ve got on long underwear, a polar fleece jacket, a huge scarf, a wool hat, and a GoreTex parka. In my stocking feet, I enter the grove. The ground feels soft and almost bouncy, like cork. I learn later that it’s cushioned with packed

dung, an excellent and inexpensive insulator. We meditate on a bed of excrement. Put *that* in your metaphorical pipe and smoke it.

Like others before me, I pull a slightly scratchy wool blanket from the large metal trunk at the entrance of the meditation area and look around for a spot to sit. There's an elevated temple where some people are already sitting, but I don't feel drawn there, thinking it is intended only for advanced yoginis. Sitting near a tree seems like more fun.

Other pilgrims file in silently, claiming their spots. A few opt for the elevated, open-air temple housing the square *hoven* used for fire ceremonies. Others sit upright in plastic Walmart-esque chairs, wrapped in blankets.

The lights suddenly go out and we're thrown into total darkness as the official meditation begins. I hear a musical tone from our campus loudspeaker and a low, beautiful male baritone voice begins chanting: "Ommm. Ommm. Ommm Shahnthhhhhheeeee. Shanteee." It's incredibly soothing. I'll hear many beautiful chants in the weeks ahead, but this simple chant is the one I enjoy most. I try to see who's singing, but it's too dark to tell, so I close my eyes.

Other Sanskrit prayers are sung, but I don't recognize them. The singer finally returns to the original melodious chant—"Ommm. Ommm. Ommm Shahnthhhhhheeeee. Shanteee"—and then falls silent. With an effortlessness I only experience in bits and pieces when I'm alone, I quickly drop into an easy meditation—unfocused focus—and time passes unnoticed. Even my pain body seems to nap in the presence of this sweet lullabye. A deeper awareness awakens and seems to be listening.

Slowly, the dawn chorus begins. The distant hum of drums grows as well, and the millions of chanting pilgrims upriver join the birds' refrain. Wind blows through the trees, gently dancing the fat, stiff

leaves. I feel as if I'm listening to a muffled, underwater Wembley stadium full of prayers both beastly and human. Despite the clanging bells, rule-breaking pilgrims, and my irritable pain body, I have momentarily connected with the Om of it all. *This* is why I've come.



PART FOUR

# Return Home

*There is nothing sweeter in this sad world than the sound  
of someone you love calling your name.*

*Kate DiCamillo, *The Tale of Despereaux**



CHAPTER 38

## Back to the River

*Commit to believing you deserve to experience all the love and connection your heart desires. No earning or repenting or serving time is required. Elephants never forget this.*

Alice the Elephant, in *Born to Freak*

The deluge of rain that arrived earlier today has moved on. Post-downpour, the June peonies are standing tall, full to the brim with tight green buds ready to burst forth. A single bloom of elephant-tongue pink is just beginning to show its extravagance.

I walk a few blocks through the neighborhood and then turn to enter the woods. I stop briefly to inhale the sweet perfume of a friendly and familiar clump of Queen Anne's lace.

I invite Alice along and we head down the muddy trail together. Alice, with her saggy pachydermal bottom, leads the way. My own spirit, ruffled today by endless problems to solve for the kids, dirty dishes, and a long morning of editing, is beginning to become more still. I'm soothed by the wet forest and the beautiful clear droplets of rain on leaves and iridescent buttercup blossoms leaning into the late

afternoon light. Mark's favorite thimbleberry bushes are already thigh-high and blossoming. I'm aware, summer isn't waiting.

Alice and I make it to my favorite rain-swollen river in no time. I realize this river is my Ganges—a place to pray and wash away karma. My thoughts wander back to a recent retreat I led in Thailand, a pachydermal pilgrimage of sorts on which I ended up having another extraordinary teaching from an elephant. This time, it wasn't Alice, but a living, breathing, 10,000-pound pachyderm who enlightened me.

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We were invited to ride the resident elephants to the river near the inn. They encouraged bareback riding which, we learned, is much more comfy for the elephants than the metal-framed saddles you often see. Knowing the violent history of the domestication of elephants, I was worried about whether riding them at all was a good thing. When I asked Alice, she assured me that *this* ride would be a blessing.

We clambered up onto a rooftop to await our turn to board. When my turn arrived, I noticed that my elephant had large heavy chains around her neck. At first, I didn't want to accept this. I wanted to be with an elephant who (at least) appeared free. But, I realized that it was my turn and I needed to climb on.

Riding so unsecured atop such a massive beast was terrifying at first. As I relaxed, she kindly tucked her massive ears back over my shins and held me lightly in place. I stretched out my hands and fingers over the bony prominences on her head to steady myself. She automatically began to head slowly toward the rest of our group. As we moved into the forest together toward the river, I could feel my

body begin to vibrate all over—a tremor that grew and grew. Then tears started to come. A massive overwhelming wave of love and gratitude was flowing through me. I have ridden on Alice hundreds of times in my journeys, but this was so overwhelmingly and joyfully *real*. My elephant was so gentle and so incredibly full of power, all at once. Her footsteps glided us along through the world; she was so quiet and sure.

Without formal invitation, all of my spirit helpers spontaneously surrounded me; Alice swam alongside us playfully. Their immense lightness enveloped me. They all seemed drawn there simply to witness my joy. “We are so glad you came and trusted!” they whispered in my ear. I have no earthly idea what the beautiful elephant beneath me was thinking; I only hoped she could sense my joy. After a good ten minutes of riding, crying, shaking, and being blissfully blown away by this experience, I noticed my elephant’s chains again. This time, however, they spoke directly to me.

These chains told me that they symbolized the heaviness, the burdens each of us carry. Yet, they assured me, each of us is on a journey moving toward more and more freedom. My mind opened gently and new thoughts flowed. We get to choose how we respond to our own perceived suffering. We can choose lightness. We can ask to be unburdened. Like the weighty elephant who swims effortlessly in the river, we too can become buoyant.

Using a few elliptical, curled leaves I found at the river’s edge, I made my prayers. For the first, I gathered everything that didn’t serve me and sent it into the leaf with a single breath. I blew my requests for strength and guidance into the next leaf. With the third, I asked that suffering be relieved for all. The surge of the rain-swollen river carried my prayers downstream.

Alice and I turned and climbed back up the bank. As we did, a beautiful slant of late-afternoon light guided us home on the trail, illuminating raindrops on lush green leaves and making the deep blue-purple stocks of lupine glow pink.

“Sarah Bamford Seidelmann has amassed heaps of wisdom in her courageous leap from the safe realm of medical science into the unknown—the world of spirit. In this incredibly honest and compassionate memoir, you feel as though you’re soaking in her courage and wisdom on every page.”

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**A**fter two decades in the study and practice of medicine, Sarah Seidelmann took a three-month sabbatical to search for a way to feel good again. Having witnessed human suffering early in her career and within her own family, she longed for a way to address more than just the physical needs of her patients and to live in a lighter, more conscious way.

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