



C h e l l i s
G l e n d i n n i n g

Ralph Metzner: Bodhisattva

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Ralph Metzner was a Bodhisattva. He was ever dedicated to his life's mission-- up to his last days learning, teaching, and writing for the good of sentient beings. He was sharp of mind, as humble as a pebble, and a master of living in wide-eyed wonder.

But most relevant to the one quality I wish to highlight: he was generous beyond bounds.

Of course, I had heard of Ralph long before I met him. He was a card-carrying member of the Harvard Trio of consciousness travelers that in 1963 included Richard Alpert (later dubbed Ram Dass), Timothy Leary, and himself and found its ground for exploration in a farmhouse in upstate New York. All three were clinical psychologists and naturally shared a passion for discovering the nature of reality as well as the possibilities offered by LSD for exploring it.

I saw that white clapboard abode on a motor trip with W. H. "Ping" Ferry some 35 years later. It was far grander than it appeared from the road. It had 55 bedrooms and during its three-year High Holy Days was visited by such curious luminaries-of-the-times Allen Ginsburg, Charlie Mingus, Rosemary Woodruff, Alan Watts, Humphrey Osmond, and R.D. Laing.

Meanwhile, I was a University of California/Berkeley radical student of social sciences, both via books and via the streets. When the 1969 issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* came out, we all rushed to thumb through its diverse submissions and ponder living in a hand-crafted log cabin lit by a kerosene lamp. That year the catalog presented a review of Charles Tart's *Altered States of Consciousness*. Except for marijuana smoking, one acid trip, several hits of mescaline, and my naturally itinerant consciousness, I knew little on the subject. Tart's book looked enticing. I was drawn to learn more. Ergo: when Ralph began to share his insight into and experiences of altered states through books and classes, I took note.

We finally did meet at the 1994 gathering at England's Dartington Hall of our mass-technology-critiquing Jacques Ellul Society. There among the participants whose big-system conceptualizations brought sociological and political language to our analysis, Ralph's choice of words presented a softer, often humorous, yet adamantly resolute take on the topic. After that I ordered books and tapes from his Green Earth Foundation that, like diamonds, presented facets of mind-travel and shamanism.

But I didn't really know him, so how rare it was that we launched our friendship via letters, emails, and packages after I moved from my land of birth to Bolivia in 2010. I was sending out my Bolivia Letter to an ever-morphing group of friends and colleagues. The Letter is an entirely irregular endeavor that to this day goes out maybe three times a year, maybe once a year, or not at all. As if by a tap on the shoulder from the spirits, I had included Ralph on the receiver's list, and—lo and behold!--he mindfully wrote me back immediately after reading each one. I mean, within a half hour. Often he praised me for the compassion he saw in me. I was astonished... astonished that he perceived such a quality through mere words and that he cared enough to tell me.

Then one day I sent out a note asking if anyone would like to participate in an exchange I had concocted. You see, when I arrived in Bolivia, the country had not yet jumped headlong into the corporate global economy. I think we could all agree that such is a political/ecological quality worthy of admiration; the food in the market--sold by the grower/collector and purchased from a blanket on the ground--was local and available only in season. Ergo, there were few packaged natural-food products and certainly no tea from England! But after a few years the lack of choice began to wear on me. The entire stock of available black tea consisted to *té clásico* and *té clásico con canela*, in the case of the latter mixed with cinnamon, bundled and boxed by the local tea company Windsor.

But let's face the cold facts: if you're a fanatic of internationally-grown-and-marketed tea to the point of even devouring books on the history of the tea trade, after a spell you can get to longing for an old favorite--which in my case was Lapsong Souchon. I sent out a proposal to my friends: I offered to send quantities of what Bolivia Letter recipients in the U.S., Canada, and Europe did not have--lozenges made of the infamous mind-bending Bolivian *coca* leaf--and in exchange they would send me quantities of, you guessed it, Lapsong Souchon. The outpouring of desire for the sacred leaf exploded like a cascade of mountain water on the rocks below.

Needless to say, Ralph was the first to sign up. And so began the Great Tea for *Coca/Coca* for Tea Exchange that came to define our friendship. It went on and on and on, whereas for the other participants the trade occurred just once. There were deviations. Knowing I had collected enough Lapsong to last through three lifetimes, he sent me the most divine tin of organic Sencha, and in exchange I would dutifully pack off *coca* lozenges, *coca* candies, *mate de coca*, sometimes in a hand-woven bag for carrying, always placed in a snap-shut tin to stave off the growls of U.S. Customs' German Shepherds. But the bamboo tea strainer he sent was the telling gift. He wouldn't have mentioned the trouble he went to get it if I hadn't pried, but I learned that he went to several health-food stores and, having had no success at finding the desired strainer, actually ordered one online specifically for me.

(Note: the *coca* products I mailed to friends are more than legal in Bolivia; they are *de rigueur*. They are made of the *coca* leaf pure and simple. Cocaine—NOT! Through a chemical-drenched process of cocaine manufacture the leaf gains its "illegal" status because it is mixed with other substances to produce the extremely dangerous, extremely addictive—and extremely profitable drug that is rightfully feared.)

Through this ongoing exchange with Ralph, I enjoyed myself immensely, and I was well aware that he would go out of his way to find items I requested. He enjoyed sharing his delight in the articles I had sent too: he relished chewing a *coca* pastille when he was stressed because it invariably set him at ease. He also used it for travel to

his various lectures and investigative journeys to meet academics, shamans, and peers in the field of consciousness.

Then, as my 73rd birthday approached, I wrote in the Bolivia Letter that some 25 years earlier I had received startling information in a dream: I would die at age 73. Ralph responded immediately! His tone in this correspondence was a break from his usual gentle placidness. A sense of urgency had suddenly appeared. He started out with “Dear good friend Chellis” so I sensed immediately that some tough-love wisdom was to follow. He went on:

As for the guessing game of what age will it be that the grim reaper comes knocking at your door, we only know that indeed he will come (how do we know it’s a he, anyway?), but not when or what our exit ticket will be. For myself, I’ve put in a request that my train leaves for the other side when I’m sleeping. But as for coinciding with what you call “Collective Demise,” you’re all set, and so am I, and so are we all. The collective demise of human civilization on this planet is happening now and will continue.

Of course, there’ll be some humans left, scattered here and there around the planet, as it sheds half or more of the livable environments and 50% or more of its human populations.

And meanwhile, yes, indeed, “it’s a flaming royal gift to be alive.” So drink wine and snuff coca with friends and dance to the music.

He signed the note “Your pen pal Ralph.”

One aspect of the disappearance of each friend we have woven into our lives with loving threads is the startling realization that, even though the connection has been made without afternoons of sipping tea together, we have depended on that person’s very existence. This world without his presence is virtually unthinkable. Yet what a gift was his letter! What a Bodhisattva he was in every moment! In his straight-forward, caring way Ralph managed to soften the terror at turning the age I had long held as *my* exit ticket--and put a frame around our tapestry by preparing me for navigating the bewilderment and sorrow of his.

Chellis Glendinning is a retired psychologist whose specialty was recovery from traumatic experience. She is also the author of nine nonfiction books, two novels, a poetry chapbook, a bilingual opera, and hundreds of essays in newspapers and journals. Her latest are *In the Company of Rebels* (New York: New Village Press/NYU Press, 2019) and *Objetos* (La Paz, Bolivia: Editorial 3600, 2018). She lives in an antique house in Chuquisaca, Bolivia.