

## **Cochin: Dialogue with a dying drifter (2/29/2008-3/2/2008)**

### **Prologue:**

I once met someone who said they'd like to write a travel book only about the other travelers they met while on the road. The places would be irrelevant to the story of the people. As I write about my visit to Cochin thinking about what I will remember from the visit, it's not the standard tourist sights some of whose pictures are included here. I saw the sun set over the Chinese fishing nets at the tip of Fort Cochin, the synagogue used by the Jews who fled to India in the first century, the first European Church built by the Portuguese, a performance of the traditional kathakali dance, and the impressive murals in the "Dutch Palace." What I'll remember is the 59 year old man who stayed in the room across from me at the Basoto Lodge in Ernakulum, the mainland city nearest the island of Fort Cochin.

### **The Dialogue:**

The figure in front of me was worn beyond his 59 years. He sat cross-legged, bending slightly at the waste and leaning on one arm of the crude wooden chair that propped up his s-curved posture. The mid morning light from the window behind him silhouetted his weathered features while highlighting the hairs that rose from his balding head. It was hard to say which shown more years of use his tired face or the paint peeling walls of the simple room in which we now sat. A pack of cigarettes and the requisite lighter sat on a desk beside him within easy reach should the smoldering cigarette in his hand need a replacement. His speech was slow, calm, and deliberate, fitting the man from which it was emanating. As I sat across from him, I couldn't image another set of circumstances that would have brought the two of us together in this conversation. When I had accepted the invitation to talk with the older man staying opposite my room in one of Ernakulum's budget lodges, I certainly could not have realized the depth of the conversation I was about to be dragged into. Still I knew when someone specifically asks to talk rather than letting a conversation rise organically they have something they need to say.

"I lived too long in the moment," he began as he lit another cigarette adding, "this won't bother you will it?" I said it was fine; after all there are far worse smells in India. "I've been smoking since I was 4 years old, no kidding, my father thought it was cute for a small kid to smoke," he continued. "What was your name again?" I answered and he introduced himself as Michael. It was the beginning of the first of three conversations I had with Michael over the next two days, conversations that were usually ended by Michael's regimental meal schedule, part of his attempt at the consistency he craves after a life of drifting. "I just want things to be constant," was a repeated refrain. The constant state of death appealed to him. "I've thought about suicide a lot in the last three months, even tried to once," he told me. He had seen a story in the newspaper about a girl who had almost killed herself by taking too many Tylenol so he took 55 one night before going to sleep, not expecting to wake up. "I was disoriented and disappointed when I woke up," he said. What has deterred him thus far from trying again was both the possibility of a repeated failure and, as an adherent to Eastern religion philosophy, the fear that he would be reincarnated into another life. His life experiences have certainly reinforced the Eastern idea that all life is suffering, while all happiness is merely transient only leading to greater suffering in the end, making the prospect of another such life for him a fate worse than death.

I've never studied psychology, nor had much interest in it for that matter, but I found myself thrust into the role of psychiatrist during the conversations I had with Michael over the course of two days in Cochin. I knew enough to know what I mainly needed to do was listen. Raised in rural Pennsylvania, Michael was much younger than his siblings; his mother had died of cancer 2 years after he was born. His much older siblings and father blamed him for his mother's death and he suffered abuse from all of them. His life post high school, the highest education he received, was that of a hippie never turned yuppie. He hung around northern California for a while living out a van and crashing on couches through the late 60s and 70s. Until three years ago, he claimed to have smoked weed every day of his

adult life, a cessation which appeared to be more financial than any concern about health or legality. He made his first trip to India in the 1970s as part of an around the world airline ticket but ended up spending most of his time in India hooking up with like minded hippies who were exploring India at that time. He bounced around a bit, his longest stretch of employment lasted for 10 years with the state of Pennsylvania helping with welfare claims which eventually quite due to conflicts with coworkers, a pattern that would repeat itself in a later job at a call center. Despite the remedial nature of the work he actually said he enjoyed the jobs and worked hard at them. He had gone back to India in 2001 with the intention of staying, living in a guesthouse in Thrissur, but due to some mistakes the precise details of which he remained vague he returned to the U.S. Shunned by his family (brothers and sister) he eventually wound up moving through couple homeless shelters. One of which's prime interest was conversion, mandating that everyone in the shelter go to chapel three times a day, and another in which he witnessed the staff chastised a man dieing of Parkinson's for being messy, when he wasn't able to even cloth or feed himself. His voice and mannerism showed a clear distain at the people who were running these so called charitable institutions, which in his experienced seemed more interested in getting government money than helping the homeless. He had come back to India for the third time 3 months ago after coming across a cheap airline ticket. But he realized that with the rising costs in India and the falling dollar, his situation depending on a meager pension from the state of Pennsylvania was not sustainable, despite is basic existence on around \$3 a day. He now faces the prospect of heading to a homeless shelter somewhere in the States, a prospect that has lead to further depression.

"Every morning I wake up from my dream state disorientated, and I freak out that I'm still in this situation, mornings are tough for me," he said. I noticed the bottle of vitamins on his desk, the irony of a suicidal man taking vitamins was not lost on him and he raised the subject himself calling it "the ego's attempt at self preservation I suppose." Much of our conversations drifted along the lines of eastern philosophy which he was well versed in and which I was familiar and much more comfortable discussing than his other interest of Astrology. A subject when it arose I would try to steer the conversation away from, in order to hide my skepticism. He was struggling to find meaning or purpose to the painful life he had led. He felt in his life he had gained intellectual understanding at the expense of financial stability and he struggled with the meaning of it all, "I want to know," he said, "What is the program?" A word he often used interchangeable with purpose.

I offered my thoughts on the subject, "If you look at all religions at their core they are about deconstructing the self, selfishness is wrong, and compassion/love towards others is virtuous. Its really the details which separate them and cause all the problems. There are two ways to look at this: First, the Darwinist approach that religion is mere social construct developed by society to suppress selfish tendencies and allow the group to survive, the commonality merely arises from the solving of the same problem by many different societies and cultures. Second, that all of these different religions have these same principles at there core because there is some universal truth and purpose that inevitably leads people to these conclusions. With these two equally likely and plausible explanations and no way to prove one over the other, since the first offers only the unfulfilling prospect of existence for the stake of existence, I chose to believe the latter. In such a case, living as if something is the truth is no different from knowing that it is truth. So does it really matter if you can never know?" The conversation drifted into the nature of that entity people call God, nirvana, or "collective unconscious" were the words Michael chose to use, as well as the age old question of why bad things happen to good people.

"Why does this collective consciousness, connection, God, the language is irrelevant, have to be completed, already perfect?" I suggested, "Maybe that is part of the point, that these entities we regard as selves are imperfections in the collective entity and our goal is to realize the connection deconstruct the self though compassion and move the whole towards its end state of perfection, monism. A sort of reverse big bang in which seemingly separate entities merge into one." Of course this is blind speculation, but the symmetry of an expanding physical universe and condensing consciousness appeals to me. I enjoy speculating on the nature of reality although unlike Michael I'm comfortable with the

fact I won't know for sure, and I don't really think it matters if I know. It was probably one of the reasons I enjoyed the conversations despite the overtone of an impending suicide. While I think it is only human to contemplate such questions it's not the type of topic that often arises in typical small talk. "So where are you from? By the way what do you think about the nature of reality and the meaning of life?" such a line would likely start and end a conversation, probably with the addressee assuming addresser had escaped from a mental hospital.

But then I was confronted with a much more practical and difficult question: "What would you do if you were me?" he asked. Adding that he recognized this was a difficult question and that I was free to not answer. It certainly was, and I pondered silently how to answer such a question. I empathized with his situation and saw that there were no easy ways out of the situation, yet I felt I had to come up with some type of positive path. In the silence of my contemplation the conversation drifted off to another topic. But I only half listened still thinking about the task I had been so casually charged with, and feeling an obligation to come up with an answer. I interrupted, returning to the subject, "Perhaps you could work up from within a shelter," I suggested. "You enjoyed helping people in your other jobs, and you saw that there is a need for good people in your previous experience. Of course you would need to find the right situation, and it will take time for people to recognize you assets. At first you probably need to just volunteer and help out, but eventually that could lead to some sort of paid position, that would be both fulfilling and could begin to get you some financial stability. Of course you're always going to have to work for, or with, some people who you don't agree with," I added remembering what had led to his present lack of employment.

He reacted favorably to the suggestion. But then added, "So I go through all this, and maybe I get to a place where things are constant and I have some financial stability and then I die. It just doesn't seem worth it."

"You have to find satisfaction in the journey the same way you found pleasure in the mundane jobs you were working, life is short enough." A statement he took issue with. Life was not short enough to him. Still I said, "You've made it this far, find out where it goes."

### **Postlogue:**

I left Cochin feeling like I had merely put a Band-Aid on a massive head wound, not confident but hopeful Michael would turn his life around without resorting to suicide. The day before I left I met another 59 year old American traveling with his wife. The contrast between the two 59 year-olds could not be greater. He was one of the world's top experts on jewelry. For a while he worked for Sotheby's as their North American representative, before going into business for himself and making millions over 7 years retiring at the age of 39, and has been traveling ever since. It was strange to meet these two men of the same age in such vastly different financial situations in the same city. While money may not necessarily lead to happiness it certainly gives opportunity and freedom to pursue it.

**Photos from Cochin:**



**Sunset and Chinese fishing nets,  
Fort Cochin.**



**Market, Ernakulam.**



**Market, Ernakulam.**



**Market, Ernakulam.**



**Market, Ernakulam.**



**Makeup application before  
Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Kathakali performance, Cochin.**



**Sunset and Chinese fishing nets, Fort Cochin.**