

WHY I AM NO LONGER TEACHING WORKSHOPS

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Since I made the announcement earlier this year that I won't be teaching workshops after 2013 I have received a number of inquiries as to why.

The short answer is that, after 33 years of doing so, I am worn out. The long answer is that I am worn out; it just uses more words.

For much of my life I have wanted to only do two things: write and teach. They were, you might say, the things I loved the most to do as work; the only things I wanted to *do* as work. Like nearly everyone else with a dream however I had to do a lot of other things along the way to make enough money to survive: donut maker/baker, construction laborer, woodworking, mansion restoration, furniture making, rare book seller, psychotherapist, herbalist, and so on. Other than the donut maker and construction laborer I enjoyed most of them to varying extents, some very much indeed. But my deeper love was always writing and teaching. As with all dreams though, the reality, I found, had only a partial relationship to my fantasies/pictures of what writing and teaching would be. For one thing, teaching the way I wanted to do it (workshops and lectures) involved "the road."

"The road" is a strange place and a strange way of life; I am unable to conceive of how musicians and comedians survive the 200-280 days they travel each year . . . year after year after year. I never had the stamina for that. At my peak, I wrote for six months (over the winter) and then spent six months on the road teaching. And during those road months, I was home a lot. I taught two weekends a month, flying out on a Wednesday or Thursday and back again on a Monday. Flying then, by the way, as everyone knew, was the only experience identical to wearing underwear three sizes too small for 6-14 hours straight while having to smile and nod companionably the entire time. A bad restaurant at 30,000 feet with the worst waitresses on the planet. Still, before 9/11, it was almost tolerable. Now the experience is akin to a proctology exam conducted in public at a Walmart in a checkout line where the cashier has just informed you that none of your items possess barcodes *or* price tags so if you will just wait a moment someone will go to the requisite aisles and correct the problem. *Then* you replace the three-sizes-too-small underwear and smile for the next 6-14 hours.

The first year I did this full time I made \$3,500 from writing and another \$1,500 from teaching. From this, some of my expenses had to be paid. Like many people who choose this way of life, I never did it for the money. It was about the work and the love of it; it was 25 years before I actually made a living at it.

In the early days, to save on costs, the workshop host/promoter usually put me up with someone, an attendee or friend, who was also supposed to feed me. It is how I learned to love motels . . . and to never leave home without emergency rations.

I still remember staying in the (badly) converted chicken coop with no food or water for three days. And all the hot dogs, candy bars, and soda I ate and drank at the minimart once I had escaped. And all the stomach . . . and bowel trouble afterwards.

I still remember the fifteenth-century sheep herder's cottage in Ireland with no heating. In February. With continual rain. And one hundred percent humidity. The temperature never quite dropped to freezing, though it flirted with it . . . every day. Even after living at 9000 feet in the Colorado Rockies for ten years with six months of winter and 32 feet of snow I had never been so cold. I spent the entire time curled around a hot water bottle, crying. (On the inside, of course, a real karate man doesn't show his weaknesses.)

And, unfortunately, I still remember the house in San Diego with wall-to-wall white carpet. A carpet the owner had not cleaned in twenty years. A carpet that had all too much resemblance to a dalmation in its coloration. . . though I have found the dogs to be not nearly so sticky to the hand.

I was given a two-inch foam mattress, on the floor, with no sheets or blankets. The bathroom toilet had cracked and its contents had spilled onto the floor . . . and dried there. One had to step carefully to use the shower. The functioning toilet was in the other bathroom but the sheet rock over the shower had molded so badly that it had decayed and was falling into the stall. It was covered with spider webs and the mold was beginning to creep into the rest of the room. Black, thready tendrils reaching out, conquering new territory, seeking new victims, new food sources. (I feared the night.) The host/promoter of the workshop, whose house this was, had rented the room adjoining mine to increase his income flow. Unfortunately his renter was a tremendously overweight man who had bought his bathrobe in thinner days. The belt could only meet at the last few inches near the tips which he tied firmly into a knot to prevent wardrobe malfunctions. Still, the coverage was incomplete; I wished, the entire time, that he would wear underwear.

Apparently he had something wrong with his bowels. He spent much of every night noisily expressing the most audible flatulence in my experience. (Remember, I worked construction . . . such is usually, but was not this time, a bonding experience and source of much good humor among men.) After each release a great groan would emerge followed by the words, "Oh, god!" I spent much of the night in silent expectation of the next eruption, trying not to listen for it. Failing miserably.

The only food for the weekend was a horribly overcooked acorn squash, to be eaten on a table missing a leg. (It was held up by packing boxes.) Unfortunately, there was no silverware and while I enjoy eating with my fingers, this revealed to me the limits of the practice. Luckily, I had, by now, learned to keep emergency rations in my carry on. This workshop, by the way, occurred *after* I began using a contract spelling out accommodation, food, travel, and financial agreements. I suspect it was the universe's way of explaining to me that if a person's word is no good, a signed contract is not likely to be either. I abandoned the practice immediately thereafter.

I still remember the feminists I stayed with who thought men were the reason there were problems in the world (and shared that news with me every day). The vegans who thought meat eaters (yes, I do) were destroying the planet (and shared that news with me every day). The African-American woman who thought there was hidden racism everywhere (and dissected my every statement to prove it . . . every day).

And these were only the *places* I stayed. The events themselves often had their own problems.

I remember the event in Maine, held mostly outdoors, where it was accompanied, of course, by a very cold, horizontal rain. There were no bathrooms just port-o-potties which had not been emptied from the previous year – nor had anyone replaced the empty toilet paper rolls. Those of us still able to articulate our joints in the freezing rain found the only amusement the weekend offered was observing people as they first made a hasty run for the potties and the expression on their faces when they emerged. (We had already gone through the experience ourselves.)

The sewage in the port-o-potty tank lapped the edges of the upper rim, just under the toilet seat. Women were often able to survive the experience intact. Men, however, had to be extremely careful to avoid genital dunking. The lack of toilet paper exacerbated the experience considerably. It was with great horror, after our first sojourn, that all of us later felt the first trembling of our bladder, or even worse, our bowels, signaling that another journey would soon be inevitable. And to be clear, notebook paper is not a decent substitute for toilet tissue.

I remember, too, the woman in Colorado who neglected to let me read the flyer copy for the Sacred Plant Medicine workshop before she printed and mailed the flyers. One thousand of them announced to the world an upcoming Scared Plant Medicine workshop. No one enrolled. Too frightened I imagine.

And I will never forget the time a woman in Chicago rented space at a deactivated nuclear power plant for a sacred plant medicine workshop. Unfortunately, the hotel at that location (why was it located there? Some questions have no answers) had been contacted by the University of Chicago. They wanted to rent the entire place for a conference . . . but only if they could get every conference room. So, without much concern, the hotel rented every room, including the one we were to use. They neglected to inform the woman promoting/hosting the event that they had done so. The only space still available was in the basement, near and under the primary heating and water pipes, which were being worked on at the time; there was no finished ceiling in place. The floor sloped into a central drain set in cement, around which were arranged our chairs. In a circle, edge to edge, so we could easily see the expressions on each others' faces as the reality of the room sunk deeper and deeper into our senses. Luckily, having encountered similar experiences previously, I had a habit then of flying in early to make sure there were no unexpected problems. Which there of course were this time.

We discovered that some of the conference rooms only had 4 or 5 people in them (rooms designed to hold 100) so we asked if the conference presenters would let us use one of them since some of the remaining rooms could be divided into two. The short answer was no, so was the long one.

So . . . in desperation, we had the hotel clear one of the suites of its furniture. And then we sat on the floor, all thirty of us, straggling around the edges of the room while I tried, not very successfully, to make the event as positive as possible for them. . . these people who had paid that woman so much money and, for some of them, come so far. Still, I thought, we can spend as

much time as possible outside. That will get us out of the cramped room, help make the weekend better.

Regrettably, the U of C conference attendees were students. They, we unfortunately discovered, viewed the weekend as a free-for-all party once their daily meetings were finished. During the plant walks we found, to our dismay, scores of used condoms, draped over the bushes, lying shrunken and forlorn on the ground, abandoned behind every tree, rock, and building. There was literally no place to sit and meditate with the plants without encountering the remains of their spent passion. And, of course, to make the experience even worse, we were at a deactivated nuclear power plant. The attendees, after their meditations, would report the most distressing intuitive readings on the plants and landscape. I still feel deep regret for what the attendees suffered that weekend.

Some weekends, I found, were just not salvageable.

Rarely, but sometimes, there were also the promoters/hosts who (I inadvertently discovered, unfortunately sometimes not until the workshop began) seemed to think that a weekend workshop should provide them money for several years income and charged attendees anywhere from \$800 to \$1000 per person for a two or three day workshop. And there were the promoters who didn't pay afterwards (even after months and months of calls and emails) or else renege on the agreed upon payment and tried to get me to accept a great deal less. And I still remember all the conflicts that caused, the angry feelings, the arguments. (No humorous anecdotes here, just painful learnings.)

All these problems had to be solved, of course, usually in the moment, on the fly, often with little support. Sometimes, if the problems were severe enough, I would cancel the workshop . . . if I found out in time. Generally, like most workshop teachers, I just struggled through as best I could, sometimes elegantly, sometimes not. But always trying to make it as good an experience for the attendees as possible under the circumstances. Some of the attendees, I am sure, regret tremendously that they ever attended.

And, of course, there were sometimes troublesome students. I remember the one who would not let her picture be taken for the diagnosis class because it would be disrespectful (it was in the literature as a requirement for attendance), the one abused by aliens who felt we were enabling the destruction of the human species by our refusal to acknowledge the problem, the paranoid schizophrenic who accused everyone of staring at her for three days, the woman in the wheel chair who did not inform anyone of her condition before she arrived for the plant hike into the wilderness and the three male attendees who resolutely took turns carrying her on their backs for the weekend. I still remember the expression in their eyes as they were slowly worn down, hiking mile after mile after mile through that uneven landscape.

I still remember the attendees who felt quite strongly (and were quite vocal throughout) that the workshop was seriously deficient because it did not clearly make the point that (take your pick) science and only science, Wicca and only Wicca, veganism and only veganism, Jesus and only Jesus, destruction and only destruction of the patriarchy, permaculture and only permaculture, schooling and only schooling, women in congress and only women in congress, the end of animal testing and only the end of animal testing, the abolition of the second

amendment and only the abolition of the second amendment, solar electricity and only solar electricity (and scores more assertions of every stripe) was the way to save the planet. It was how I learned that fundamentalism is not only a problem of the right but exists as a shadow too among my liberal tribe. And I remember how much time it took in the workshops and how much was lost to the other attendees as a result. Regrettably, I have found, the majority of the problems I have had over the past 33 years occurred with the most New Age and love-and-light members of my tribe.

And then there was the food . . . the vegetarian meals, glumpy brown rice and undercooked carrots and eggplant without seasoning (so as not to offend anyone's taste) that we grimly chewed through time and time again, sitting around the bleak formica tables at numerous YMCA camps, because it was the only food available, food that was better for the planet (and cheaper) but managed to offend the aesthetic sense in the deepest possible manner. It felt, and in the memories still feels, as if the worst possible mother of all time were standing over us and insisting we eat our vegetables.

It all sounds rather bleak, doesn't it. It wasn't always like this though. These events, while continual over the years, only occurred every five workshops or so. Eighty percent of the time it was very different, much better, much more joyful.

There were many wonderful promoters/hosts like Kathleen Maier in Virginia, Richard Klein in Canada, Kate Gilday in New York, Shatoiya de la Tour in California. Many places that provided wonderful food. Many events where the rooms were wonderful, the people joyous, the teaching a magical experience. There were many times where the plant gods came and touched all of us with their grace and wisdom. Times when all the cosmic tumblers clicked into place and together we entered another world, more ancient than our own, and found there parts of ourselves we needed to become whole. It was these times I lived for, why I began the work so long ago. And for many years it was enough to get me through. Like jockeys I didn't think about the falls or the broken bones, I loved the work and the work was enough.

But I have found that all the years of woodworking and construction, all the years of typing all those books, the newer work with musical instruments has played havoc with my joints. (I can maintain them with herbs, I cannot make them new again; life leaves its traces in all of us, written in the lines of our faces, in the slow settling of our bodies. None of us will ever be young again.) It is harder to do what I once did with ease, harder to ignore the aches and pains.

And all the years of living full out, the road, the journeys into wilderness, the interior work, and the soul excavation necessary to hold space for the work have taken their toll. And the thirty-three years of holding workshop space, holding each and every attendee in my heart field, attending to every tiny fluctuation of energy and meaning in the group, shaping a weekend or week or year of apprenticeship into a coherent whole, a single performance piece filled with deep shifts of mind and cognition and information and love . . . has all taken its toll as well. The energy comes less easily now and is far harder to replace once used. By nearly all American standards I am very healthy . . . but the old pace is beyond me. I find I am worn out.

I am, as all of us are, biodegrading. And . . . we are supposed to biodegrade you know; it is core to Gaian functioning. We are given the gift of our life, and in time we must give it back

again. Each of us has our turn. And as our turn comes to an end, it is time for others to take our place. Time for others to come into their own, to take hold of the thing that was passed into us from our teachers. Time for them to carry it into the world, to shape it, not as we feel it should be shaped, but as they feel it should. Time when it must speak through those that follow us in new words for new generations. For all of us, sooner or later, the great relay race of the soul comes to an end.

There are still things set before me to do. Final books to be written, final words to be said, final discoveries to be made. The final things my teacher set before me to do all those long years ago. Part of that is the music, the plant and Earth song, the instruments made from plants that brought music to the human species, and work with synaesthesia and the ecstatic journey of the soul on the Earth path. But those things are things to be done outside workshops, in other forms and expressions.

Still, at this point in time, I find myself grateful. Grateful for the years and the work. Grateful for the students, for all of you who took the chance to study with me, who have bought my books and found in them some truth that helped you on your own journey. It has been a blessing, a life worth living, and I thank you for it.

Be well now, journey in health and wholeness, and maybe our paths will cross one day when we least expect it, out there, far out there, in the wildness of the world.

Stephen