

Lucerne Valley Revisited

~ Osha Reader

On April 27, 1996, I'd just completed a ten-day meditation retreat in Joshua Tree, CA, and decided to drive home by way of Lucerne Valley and look for the old Institute of Ability property. I'd first arrived there as a new student in September, 1969, a couple of months after taking my first Enlightenment Intensive. I'd seen the property for the last time in March, 1971. It was hard to believe that twenty-five years had passed!

Things looked different as I drove up from the south on Hwy 247. A lot of roads headed into the mountains. How to find the right one? I pulled into the center of Lucerne Valley, turned left on Crystal Creek Road and headed up towards the granite factory. It was Saturday, a little after noon. The factory seemed deserted and everything was covered with white dust. I'd seen no signs of life since leaving the main road about seven miles back. I was sure I'd taken a wrong turn and decided I'd better turn around, but said to myself, "Just a little bit farther!"

The pavement ended just past the factory and I thought, "Now my car's going to fill up with dust! It could have been any of these roads. Forget this!" I continued on anyway. About half a mile past the factory, a driveway turned off to the right. There was a padlocked gate with boards nailed across and a sign that said, "For sale by Thomson Brothers." Another one said, "Private Property! Mine traffic only." The main road continued up the mountain, making deep criss-cross cuts that could be seen for miles away. I pulled off, parked my car and, slipping past the gate, stood inside the property.

After ten days of meditation, I was feeling quite awake. Combined with the excitement of trespassing and the prospect of encountering who knows what kind of scary person, all my senses were on full alert. There were large cacti everywhere and I saw the peak of a house that was almost surely the old seminary building. The roof was missing shingles. There was a broken window upstairs and the remains of a porch below. I looked for Charles and Ava's house, but remembered it had burned down.

I continued up the road and around to the left, where the outhouse had been. There were some old pieces of boards lying in the dirt. Everything was quite still in the midday sun, not a breath of wind, not even an ant! I turned and saw the hill we used to run up for breathing exercises with Charles at dawn. I started slowly back down the drive, passing a building with decks around it on the left. I took the road to the foundation of Charles and Ava's old house. There was a smaller house a little past where theirs had been, and that incredible view of the valley.

Finally, I approached the seminary building. It seemed completely deserted. I walked up to the front door, which was looking quite weathered. There was a decal in the window to the left that said, "I got my piece at the Powder Horn Gun Shop." The door was locked. There was a large, dark snake coiled in the sun between the

front door and the porch. It didn't move at all and I was concerned it might be dead, but it looked beautiful and fat, like it had maybe just had lunch. I stepped respectfully around the snake, walked up the two shaky porch steps and opened the sliding door.

The house was abandoned and in disrepair, as if nothing had been done to it for twenty-five years. It looked smaller than I'd remembered it. The appliances and furniture were gone. As I walked down the hall toward the back bedrooms, memories flooded through my mind. There was the community bathroom and the bathtub where Jeff gave himself an enema with people wandering in and out. And, oh, to be in our twenties!, the couples' room where I had seventeen orgasms while fasting on avocados. Across the hall was the front bedroom where we did clearing sessions. In the small living room off the kitchen, visions of Sandra complaining that she'd lost her beauty, Trudi and I doing clearing exercises on the sofa under the window, the door where Ken got enlightened after promising to throw himself in the snow if he didn't... There's where the old stove was, which we'd stuffed with enough potatoes and zucchini to feed an army, and the kitchen sink that offered only drops of water. I remembered Ava, radiantly beautiful as she administered the vitamins.

In a state of wonder, I climbed the narrow stairway to the main room and was amazed to see the same bright blue carpet that was installed shortly after I arrived in '69. I looked through the windows out over the valley and at the cubby holes where we stored our sleeping bags, clothes, and bottles of vitamins and alfalfa tablets. On the two center posts, which hold up the ridge beam, were the thumb tack holes where we posted our no-no lists, confessing our misbehaviors of the weekends, and the place where David used to sit in his chair by a small table, munching vitamins for what seemed like hours after the rest of us were in our sleeping bags.

Near the other post was the spot where Edrid used to run the big copy machine. There were memories of Stu and Martie, Francine and Lila, Susan and Betty, Jim and Suzie, Krishna, Gary, Elyse, Yvonne and Richard, Susan and David, Rich and Jo, Forest, Mark, Bruce, Dennis, William, Sherry, Shelley and the three wonderful Jeffs, Yon and Shirley... I felt grateful for the many friendships that have lasted through the years. I thought of Charles's iridology readings...his teachings, courses on the mind, the body, life and relationships, the clay models, the drills and the tapes. I remembered the big Intensive in the winter of 1970-71, working with Peter Max, how nice he was; Rich, rolling his eyes and going into states I'd never even dreamed of, Jeff saying Rich was the farthest-out man on the planet; contemplating what consciousness is, what understanding is, the purpose of life, how life is fulfilled and best fulfilled; all we experienced there...our spiritual beginnings...Yogi Bhanan, Swami Satchidananda, and the different people who came through; yoga on the rug facing the windows, no forcing, no giving up, persistent gentle pressure...we all get there. I sat on a stool at the end of the room, where Charles gave his evening talks, where I sat for my student intensive. How natural it felt!

I tried to meditate, but there was too much energy in me. I took a last look around the room then walked down the stairs. I recalled Charles, near the bottom step during my student Intensive, asking if I remembered doing this work before. I just said no. I thought most of that past life stuff was made up.

I looked out the front window...visions of the children, Kon, Cheryl (the reincarnated Marilyn Monroe?), and Theo, and the grovelly little dog, Charlie Brown.

As I made my way out the sliding door and down the porch steps, I noticed that the snake, still motionless, had an amber-colored rattle at the end of its tail. I felt no fear of this shy desert creature as I stepped to the side of it and looked around. There was the place where Jeff and I parked the green trailer I gave clearing sessions in. I was feeling as though I'd entered a time warp and was revisiting a former lifetime. There was no sound and no life, except for the snake, the cacti and flowers, and me.

I thought I should gather a few rocks, just to remember I hadn't dreamed all this. I found a small white one, surely from the quarry, and a few brown ones that must have been there when we were. I saw the spot beside the road where Jeff and I used to hide our pot before coming back onto the property after weekends.

Near the end of the driveway, I spotted a large white rock that sparkled in the sun. I picked it up, but in case it had been someone's special rock, put three other nice ones in its place, along with a banana Power Bar. Feeling a little like a pack rat, I got in the car with my rocks and began the long journey home.

Ninety miles up Hwy 395, I could still see the criss-cross pattern on the hills above the property. At 150 miles, the mountain range finally disappeared from view.