

## *INTRODUCTION*

I met Guha for the first time in 1995 at a gathering in Julie's apartment on Central Park West. A mix of people had come to see U.G. who was staying for a time in New York as her guest. Although she offered him much more spacious accommodations, he always chose to occupy the tiny room that had been originally designed as a "maid's room." U.G. preferred small places to big ones. He was the most unpretentious, brilliant, unorthodox, mysterious person I had ever met. I was afraid of him. I think most people who met him were afraid of him because he was not like anyone else -- a man who asked for nothing from anyone and gave his all. On that late afternoon sixteen years ago, I observed a youngish Indian fellow sitting next to U.G. on the couch, laughing with delight at U.G.'s remarks. I had never seen him before, but he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying U.G.'s company. From then on, every time I came to see U.G., he was always there too, sitting in front of him and laughing incessantly. For some reason he struck me as being some sort of clown, showing off, being silly with the great man. Since I knew that U.G. didn't countenance fools gladly, I wondered what was going on. Guha, the laughing man, turned out to be a physicist, and was eventually to become my best friend! As time went by, and I got to know him, I was afraid of him too, but not as much. I was afraid they both could see right through me, see the confusion, the weakness, the contradictions, the vagueness that seemed to constitute Luna. I felt and still feel a stranger to myself. Is that natural? Is it really possible to "know" oneself? Is it even desirable? My head begins to whirl.

After a bitter estrangement that lasted twenty-two years, I unexpectedly saw my son, a guru, for the first time a few days ago. (I had been a follower of his for a couple of years when he began his career as a spiritual teacher and had left him abruptly after meeting U.G.) We met in New York, where I now live. It was in a coffee shop. He had telephoned and, as if it was the most normal thing in the world, invited me to have breakfast with him. I realized that I was glad. And I was amazed that I was glad. But my glad was a mixed glad. I had my suspicions. What had motivated him to see me again? He danced around the question when I put

it to him. He said he had gone to a “psychic” and she had advised: “Call your mother!”

My son looked older of course, but not too much older. He looked healthy and happy. He said he had changed. I didn’t ask him how. For the moment I wanted to avoid any possible confrontation. I said I would try to not to speak of past grievances but there was one thing: “I don’t want to see your wife ever again,” I said, and added “just now thinking about her jealousy makes me feel sick to my stomach.” It was harsh. I regretted it immediately. I was blaming his wife for everything.

“She’s changed,” he said.

“I don’t want to see her,” I repeated.

When I saw Guha a few days later I asked him about hatred, a hatred for someone who had been abusive many years ago and could not be forgotten or forgiven. I did not mention who it was I hated. Guha’s answer was brief:

“The important thing is not what someone was,” he said, “but how that someone is now. That’s the only thing that counts.”

Simple words. Almost too simple. But his words suddenly met no resistance. An anger that had burned in me for decades was suddenly quenched. I was stunned. I realized that the years of conversations with Guha had, almost without my conscious knowledge, changed me. It was as though I had been invaded, slowly, very slowly by some kind of grand common sense without understanding most of what he’d said. No, that’s not quite true. I thought I really did understand him up to a point intellectually, for a few moments, and then I would forget what I thought I understood. Guha himself, when asked if he could remember what he had said, always surprised me by saying he couldn’t remember a word, because there was “no after effect of any conversation.” And Julie, who was with us much of the time, said it was the same for her. She forgot everything too. So we all laughed and let it go.

I saw Guha from time to time when U.G. was in town, and even when he wasn’t; we would meet occasionally as U.G. friends often do. In his house in New Jersey, Lakshmi would cook wonderful Indian food with genuine Indian hospitality.

In 2000 he walked me home one night from a meeting at U.G.’s hotel room at the Southgate in New York. I said I wanted to talk some more

because the conversation we were having was really moving me, something was suddenly making sense, things I hadn't considered before. He said, "Any time, Lunaji."

So it began that way, we would meet from time to time, at my home, or his. How many years has it been, actually? Ten! I hadn't realized. I am astounded. Every time I talked with him, I had the same feeling, something was making deeper sense, my view of things was changing. I told him he was affecting me, but he said "No, it is just a continuation of the effect that U.G. had on you." We would argue about this, and one time he said, "Perhaps you are the first person I have talked to who is expressing this way to me."

Often when I met him, I would think about how to write about him, how I could write a book about him, and this desire was reinforced each time we talked. I kept postponing the writing, that's just the way it was. But recently, Julie bought a tape recorder and began recording some of our conversations, and they were transcribed by our good friend, Ellen. And what can I say, "Hallelujah!" A great gift! Now Guha's words are in print and available to me once more. At first I thought I would read the transcriptions and then write a memoir of what had happened to me as a result of our interaction. But then it dawned on me that the unvarnished unselfconscious talks, just as they were, said much more about both of us than I could have done at my best. They were the real thing.

Nevertheless, before signing off, I wish to say something further about this great man, whom I have learned to respect, to honor, more than any other, Sabyasachi Guha.

About a year ago, I suddenly had an intense desire to go to India and see the situation there for myself. I said to Guha this is the only way I can really do this, write about you, please let me come! I don't care if the trip kills me, I have to do it! Julie and Guha were concerned about my going, worrying about my health and the strains of traveling in India at this point in my life. But, they agreed, finally, my sheer insistence and the depth of my desire to go convincing them that they should make it possible for me. Lakshmi, Guha's wife, was already in India and was to meet us in Calcutta, and Golda, an Australian friend, was there too, waiting to join us.

Guha had taken care of all the arrangements for the trip in the quiet, efficient way he takes care of everything. A couple of days after our arrival,

he rented a car and took us on an evening sightseeing trip to downtown Calcutta. I saw advertisements lit up on every building for the theatre, for restaurants, for clubs, hotels. I had never seen the likes of it on my former trips to India when I was taken almost exclusively to ancient small towns and villages where famous teachers or gurus held court. On the way home, there appeared beside us, in the thick of the traffic, two small skinny horses struggling to pull a huge wagon full of wood planks. We saw their eyes bulging, we saw the whites of their eyes as the driver slashed his whip, we saw them arching themselves into the air in a desperate effort to keep moving.

“I always feel sorry for them,” Guha said.

“It breaks my heart,” I said.

“Me too,” Guha said.

That “me too” brought tears to my eyes. I felt pierced for a moment by his tenderness, his simplicity, his childlike transparency.

The next morning, still jet-lagged, I went to Guha’s room for coffee. I came in saying, “Sorry I’m late.” He looked up from his computer. “You’re never late,” he said. “It’s just that you’re not ready. Don’t let yourself be pushed all the time by something outside you to do this and that. Don’t be pressed by desire.” This response stopped me in my tracks. Whatever it really meant I knew there was truth in it.

Later some of his friends came by. They arrived in a group from his native town in rented cars. Guha had warned me that some of them wanted to talk to me. The first one came over and introduced himself and asked bluntly, “Why are you writing about Guha?” He was a tall dark-skinned fellow who looked like what I imagined Edgar Allen Poe to look like. I had not started writing about Guha yet but it was my intention to do so soon. I had been told that this man wanted to write about Guha too. I couldn’t think of a word to say, then blurted out, “I love him.” There was a silence. Then I said, “I feel he’s not appreciated. Why do *you* want to write about him?”

He stared at me for a few moments, then answered in a booming voice, “Because he is a great destroyer!”

I was impressed by his intensity and moved by his words. I felt something shake inside me. It was not the first time I’d heard these words but it was perhaps the first time I felt afraid. The others gathered around us.

At some point I heard myself saying, “It isn’t what Guha says, it’s his presence that means everything.”

He nodded. “And how does that make you feel?”

Again, I didn’t know what to say. So many feelings rose up, the most tantalizing being the consciousness of having been overcome by something that is still impossible to describe. I remembered that on some nights going back to New York, in the half-lit noisy dirty train, after spending a few hours with Guha in New Jersey, I’d had the sensation that the old Luna had died, and had left behind a soft pliant creature who sat quietly looking out into the darkness, feeling somehow perfect and wanting nothing.

When I managed to speak I said, “I feel a great calm come over me, all the agitation of my life temporarily disappears.”

One day we were taken to Guha’s hometown. A crowd of people came to see us. The men brought their wives looking brilliant in their saris. Almost all of them spoke only Bengali. After a short time three men appeared before me. One asked, “How was U.G. different from Guha?” I answered, “He was harsher, more remote than Guha. I was somewhat intimidated by him. I connected with Guha and never really with U.G., even though I knew from the first that he was a great being and maybe the only man in the world who knew what he knew.”

They listened with avid attention. There were other questions, but I didn’t have much more to say on this subject -- except I suddenly realized that U.G. had enthralled me but Guha had stunned me.

The highlight of this day was when, in the late afternoon, Guha’s friends came to wish us good-bye. I cornered a fellow just outside Guha’s room. He was sitting on a sofa in the hallway with two other visitors. I had noticed him before. He looked to be a sensitive, refined man and I’d had an urge to talk to him. Guha had told me that his name was Ramakrishna, named after the great Bengali Saint, Sri Ramakrishna and that he lived in his father’s house as a *brahmachari*. When I’d mentioned that he seemed to me the most serious of his friends, Guha had said, “I come to India to see *him!*”

I sat down on the sofa and without any ado asked Ramakrishna how he had met Guha. He answered that they had been close friends since childhood. “He has changed my life,” he said.

“In what way?” I asked.

“I believed in God until Guha came and spoke to us after his transformation.” He hesitated. “There were more subtle things,” he added.

“What were they?”

“I have to think about it,” he said.

I said, since I thought I might not see him again, “Will you mail me what conclusion you come to?”

“I will mail it to Guha,” he said. “One more thing I can tell you now,” he added, “He stopped smoking, he stopped drinking, and he eats very little.”

Another day, Guha’s older sister invited us for lunch. On the way to his town Guha took us through Howrah, an immense ghetto of the poor. It seemed to go on forever, miles and miles, thrown together from bits and pieces, scavenged constructions, scavenged everything, old tires, broken furniture, there were cubbyholes in an enormous ancient edifice where it seemed numberless people lived. Signs appeared on it advertising hotels. Were there really hotels squeezed into that monstrous, congested single structure? It was a mind-blowing scene, full of movement and energy. Amazingly, not at all depressing.

After lunch Guha took us back to Calcutta to show us his alma mater, the Presidency College. He told us it was the “classiest” college in Calcutta, built by the British. The architecture was gorgeous, grand, airy and spacious. The streets, by contrast, were thick with people and traffic. Guha pointed out the sidewalk bookstores surrounding the university stretching as far as the eye could see. A loudspeaker pounded into the crowds. Guha explained it was a student proclaiming something for his party. He seemed energized by this scene, so full of intensity. It was somehow very pleasing to think of Guha as a student here.

“How does this make you feel?” I asked.

“I feel nothing,” he said.

Was he saying he was not attached to anything, fond memories, nothing? I envied him.

We went to Kashipur Udyan Bati, Sri Ramakrishna’s last home where it is said he went to die. A serene, beautiful place. In one of the rooms, facing a portrait of the saint, a man sat on the floor, praying. Beside him sat a little girl about three years old. He stopped praying and crossed her tiny legs yoga style, and pulled her skirt over her legs. Then he put his palms

together under his chin and continued to pray. The girl looked at her father and then lifted her tiny hands and clasped them together under her chin. It was adorable and touching. I thought: this is the way we learn to believe what our parents believe.

We continued on to Guha's hometown, and again many friends came and listened to him with the usual intense attention. Guha spoke in Bengali almost exclusively, talking with great energy, welcoming, charming, as always. I was dying to understand what he was saying. Couldn't of course.

Varanasi! Totally congested streets. Bicycles galore. Ramshackle. A woman riding a bike in a beautiful pink sari, her face covered with a black mask, only the eyes visible. A Muslim woman? Then the river and the ghats, teeming with people bathing and praying and gesticulating to their invisible gods or goddesses. And here and there glimpses of dead bodies under covers, being prepared for the fire. Energy in everything, movement – movement – and puja everywhere. Such faith! Guha told me his reflections on life, during his period as a fugitive, really began here, in this very place.

We visited a sari store. Literally a hole in the wall of one of the very narrow streets of the town. Julie and I bought a few shawls. Lakshmi bought saris. All pure silk. We had fun sitting on rugs on the floor. Guha sat patiently, giving his opinions, part of the group. He participates in everything. A most endearing person in that regard. A man as no other. Someone had said somewhere: "Judge a spiritual man by the way he lives, not by what he says." Guha seems flawless.

In the evening after a boat ride on the Ganges I told Guha I loved him. He seemed to wince.

"It means nothing to me," he said. "Love? It could easily turn to hate if you are suddenly displeased by something I say or do."

"I suppose that's true," I said sadly.

For a moment I had felt a kind of abrupt relaxation, a sort of inner glow he sometimes brings out in me. I was silenced. Then he spoke again.

"You don't know anything about the parallel world, Lunaji. You are always saying the same thing in a different way. It is all the same. You might say you are talking to yourself."

"That's true," I repeated.

Usually, when I have a verbal exchange with Guha I feel I can't express myself clearly. I feel nervous. I feel pretentious. Even silly. I feel

obtuse. His words swirl about me and I stare back at him. Lord, what is he saying! He's too quick for me. What is he saying? Yet something seems to penetrate that stone at my core. I don't know what it is. A warming? A relaxation? A sense of safety nearby? The thing is, I realize I am still devastated that my world has been vanquished by this man. Even though the culture I grew up in bores me and I no longer respect it, it still circles around me. I look into myself. I see that I go on hoping against hope, hoping for change, for peace, for happiness, for solutions, but only experience continuing frustration and disappointment. Round and round I go. Although great art exists and great science discovers astonishing truths, I know by now that none of that can help me. I am trapped inside the prison of society's heavy imprint. Guha says I don't "believe" him. I was shocked the first time he said that. But now I know what he is really saying is that to believe him is to die to what I am. And I appreciate him all the more for pointing that hard fact out to me again and again. Even though it leaves me feeling nonplussed and helpless every time.

When we returned to Calcutta some of Guha's friends were waiting for him at the airport. One of them, Swapan, the tall dark fellow who had reminded me of Edgar Allen Poe greeted me warmly and asked how I liked Varanasi.

"It was beautiful," I said, "but the important thing was being with 'him' every day."

He smiled and said, "Yes, that is first and foremost."

I was surprised at him using the expression "first and foremost" and then remembered he was an English teacher. Most of Guha's friends were university educated but spoke English with difficulty although they understood it and had been taught a wide vocabulary.

We flew to Bangalore where we were welcomed by Chandrasekhar and his wife, Suguna. Chandrasekhar had been a great friend of U.G.'s and U.G. always stayed at this man's home when he was in town. We met a lot of U.G.'s friends at Chandrasekhar's and I soon realized that Bangalore had been a center for U.G.'s people. I listened to a conversation between Guha and Chandrasekhar and remember Guha saying that we have many wants and if we can reduce these many wants to one single want maybe something can happen. I was fascinated.



Chandrasekhar kept a small room in his house dedicated to U.G. It was where UG always stayed. A glass cabinet contained mementos of U.G. -- strands of his hair, photos, a few documents. Pitifully little. U.G. would have wanted absolutely nothing of his saved for posterity. I was told that before he died he threw all the papers, newspaper clippings and articles he had with him in Italy into a fire. He knew he was dying and wanted to slip away as unnoticed as possible. After U.G.'s death, Guha slept on the floor of this room and he said he had the best sleep of his life.

During my stay in Calcutta, the subject of death came up. Guha was saying that you have to go through something big not to fear death. "In my case something ended inside me," he said. "The future stopped existing. Something stopped. It was as if an immense system inside me had come to a halt." He paused. "U.G. didn't 'teach' me anything. He created a feeling inside me. My physical body responded to him. I can't explain it."

I asked him if now he felt free.

"No," he said, "now I am a complete slave of nature. But I'm never bored or lonely. There is always something throbbing inside. Alive!"

I stared at him mute, uncomprehending. But thrilled to the core. That's how it is with this incredible man. I believe him but understand nothing. On the other hand he has said there is nothing to understand. He has said that after all his studies, his frantic pursuit of knowledge, his imperative drive to know everything, he's given up on trying to understand.

"It's impossible to penetrate the mystery of existence. Just be who you are."

Outside the open window a large black crow was sitting on a tree branch observing us warily. Golda and I had been feeding the crows small pieces of leftover breakfast toast. As I stood up to put a few more crusts on the windowsill the crow spread its wings and began to fly away. I had moved too quickly. We all watched it disappear, a gift of nature, beautiful and shiny and perfect.

The last morning in Calcutta as I sat up in bed I felt my eyes drawn to my shoes on the floor and I had the impression for a moment that I was looking down at the dusty worn sandals of poor dead Luna. What did that signify? Nothing. Just Luna's mind endlessly weaving something out of nothing. Imagination never stops.

It's difficult to sum up the effects and feelings that generate from interaction with a person like Guha, but perhaps I can give you a glimpse. Sometimes when I am alone in my apartment doing this or that, I find myself suddenly thinking of Guha and feeling deeply moved anew at who he is, who that amazing man really is, and the huge difference he has made in my life, and I have an impulse to tell him about it, in a sense, to thank him again. The impulse is so strong that I can't wait, I must tell him immediately. So I sit down at the computer and send him a note via e-mail. A couple of years ago I sent him the note below.

*Dearest Guha: Just to tell you that I had a wonderful weekend. Your presence creates an atmosphere of transparency and freedom and unexpectedly—fun! What could be better? Hard to believe it's all real because the society that made me, taught me, "loved" me, etc., made it its business to blind me to reality. Still am blind. Will probably die blind. But a little snake of something or other is always sneaking around inside my body, a subversive untamed something that knows it's all shit. I thank you for encouraging my little snake. I'm lucky to have been in the right place at the right time. First I met U.G. Then I met you. Lucky Luna!*

*Luna Tarlo*