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Meeting a Philosopher

Joscelyn Godwin

This memoir was sketched in 1988 in order to capture the memory of a crucial encounter, and shared with a handful of others who had been present at the same events. Lightly edited and framed, its present purpose is to show that initiation can take forms that owe nothing to institutions, traditions, religions, or orders.

In the Fall of 1968, a year that had already made political and cultural history, I first walked into the American Brahman Bookstore on State Street in Ithaca, New York. It was a shabby store, looking more as if someone was moving out, with a few shelves against the walls filled with books on yoga, mysticism, Zen Buddhism, and other subjects then coming into vogue. At a table two men sat hunched over what appeared to be a horoscope. One of them looked up as I came in: a striking Mediterranean type in his late forties, with a very dark and beady pair of eyes which he fixed on me as he invited me to look around. I found little there to satisfy my unformed appetite for literary odds and ends, but when his companion left, I could not resist asking the proprietor whether he actually believed in astrology. In a strong Brooklyn accent, he informed me that it wasn't a case of believing, but of knowing what astrology was and what it wasn't. I left the store with two books: P. D. Ouspensky's *In Search of the Miraculous*, which looked intriguing, and Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*, which I remembered having read some years ago, and which the proprietor said I would enjoy.

It was a painter friend who had told me about this new bookstore, and I was eager to share her impressions of the astrologer, who called himself Tony.¹ Sitting among the canvases in her Cornell University studio, we agreed that he was someone quite out of the ordinary, and worth seeing more of. Apparently he was holding evening classes in the bookstore; so there we went. Before two weeks had passed, I believed in astrology myself, and in much more. Things that I had dabbled with in my teens, like Theosophy, the idea of reincarnation, and C. G. Jung on flying saucers, came flooding back with a new meaning. The Oriental art I had loved from childhood began to reveal its spiritual roots. Most of all, I realized that Tony Damiani was a teacher such as my privileged education had never provided.

Tony remembered this first meeting, too. He indiscreetly told one of my fellow students that when I appeared in the bookstore he said to himself: "Here he is again"—the implication being a link from the past, and not without a certain ambivalence.

I spent January 1969 working on my dissertation in New York City, with Paul Brunton's *The Wisdom of the Overself* for company.² This book was regarded with holy awe by the coterie that had formed around Tony's classes, and I was not sure that I should be reading something so advanced, so soon. Actually, it was so consonant with my own needs and convictions that I absorbed it like a sponge and formed a lifelong attachment to its author and his philosophy. I liked the photograph of Brunton that hung in the bookstore: such a handsome and aristocratic profile, with a slightly Indian cast to the features that was entirely appropriate. Later I learned that I had been admiring a photograph of Krishnamurti, and that Brunton was the bald man with the *impériale* beard and the lopsided smile who hung next to him. I forthwith grew a small beard and moustache.

As the winter wore on, I discovered more about Tony. When the evening classes came to an end, he would put on a gray uniform and leave to work fifty miles away on the New York State Thruway, taking tickets on the night shift at the Waterloo exit. With him he would take a box of books, in which I remember seeing the original folio volumes of Thomas Taylor's translations: *The Works of Plato* (1810) and *The Six Books of Proclus, the Platonic Successor, on the Theology of Plato* (1816).

Tony's home was an old farmhouse on Seneca Lake, to which he kindly invited me and my painter friend. There we met his wife, Ella May Damiani, and five of his six sons. The family was all vegetarian. They had lived in Brooklyn until quite recently; Tony had managed a large "occult" bookstore in Manhattan that I was later to know well as Weiser's. Some of the books in the Ithaca bookstore were, in fact, sacrificed from the rich esoteric library that Tony had collected during that period. I wish I had had the sense to buy more of them, although even today Proclus is beyond me.

Tony was a memorable raconteur, and we heard of other things in his past that became the stuff of legend. For some years he had been a longshoreman "to teach my body who's boss." During the same period he had shaved off all his luxurious black hair, having decided that he was too attached to his appearance. He had worked on the New York subway, taking tickets at night—not many of them, for his station was next to a graveyard—and using the time for study and meditation. "I knew I was deeply in when I didn't hear the trains go by," he said. Once he was held up at gunpoint, and had quietly handed over the cash before his consciousness registered what had happened. One winter's day, he sat down on a bench in Central Park and began to meditate; hours later, he found himself under six inches of snow.

These were the kind of stories he would tell to us neophytes; but he told them as if they were of another person, far away and aeons ago. What Tony's inner life had been like, I could not begin to imagine, and I still can't.

As time went on, more people were lured by the astrology classes at the bookstore. Tony was a master astrologer, his intuition being at its height when interpreting planetary aspects and the Sabian Symbols. Once he used my horoscope as the example for a class. That analysis has stuck with me ever since as a guide to objective self-knowledge. Yet astrology of this personal type was only a lure, for what Tony wanted us to learn was Philosophy, the "love of wisdom." For that there were classes on Brunton's works, which would branch off into Tony's favorite studies of Neoplatonism, Vedanta, Buddhism, and Jungian psychology. At first I fumbled for reference points in my own discarded Christianity, but mention of that tradition was usually squashed. Many of the classes would end with silent meditation, following a few directives on the unfamiliar task of watching one's own thoughts as they arise. For further instruction we were referred to Paul Brunton's works, especially *The Secret Path* and *The Quest of the Overself*.

Some of us could not get enough of Tony's mind and presence. Not content with dropping into the bookstore most afternoons and sitting in class several evenings a week, we started to go out to his house on Sundays. Ella May would make a lunch that encouraged us to persist in our new vegetarian diet, then everyone would sit around and listen to Tony, until the sun began to set through the big window overlooking Seneca Lake. Not many people helped with the dishwashing, though those who did would discover that Ella May was herself a mystical philosopher, though her life had left her no time, and perhaps no need, for the intellectual path that had seized our imaginations. Many of us were attached to Cornell University or Ithaca College as graduate students, young faculty or staff, but our new teacher spared us none of his disdain for universities, scholarship, academic philosophy, and anyone with a Ph.D. I duly

inscribed at the end of my dissertation the Latin words DISSERTATIONE CONFECTA INCIPIT PHILOSOPHIA VERA (“Dissertation finished, true Philosophy begins”), confident that no one would read it carefully enough to query them.³

Tony’s own higher education—and again, I relate anecdotes, not biography—had begun and ended in the space of a few weeks. While other teenagers were worrying about sports and dating, the young Damiani was tormented by the question: “How do I perceive a world?” Where would one go for an answer to this burning question? A university, naturally, where all wisdom is kept, and in particular to the Department of Philosophy. So Tony enrolled in Freshman Philosophy, I believe at Columbia. After a few lectures, as his problem was no closer to being solved, he went up to the professor and enquired when the class would be taught how we perceive a world. “That’s epistemology—not until the third term,” muttered the dignitary; and that was enough for Tony. He would find out for himself.

Not long after, Tony saw a display in a bookstore window of Paul Brunton’s works, and, curiously attracted, tried reading them. Immediately he found his question being answered, as academic philosophy had never been able to answer it. More than that, he found the epistemological explanation connected to a whole way of life, a whole reason for living. In gratitude to this author, Tony wrote to him in care of the publisher, hoping that his letter might reach Brunton in some Himalayan or jungle retreat. But Brunton happened, just then in 1946, to be in New York City, and there Tony met him. He had found his master, though one who never claimed such a role, describing himself as no guru but “just a student of these matters.”⁴

Tony’s teaching was a carefully calculated blend of positive and negative touches. I remember going at sunset to find seclusion by an attic window, and imagining his great love for me and for all those he was helping streaming across Cayuga Lake. But the love which enabled him to put up with us was for our Overselves, not for our childish egos. Since my ego was currently vested in the music and art of the avant-garde, I found Tony’s taste for loud romantic music rather passé, while as far as I could tell, he had no taste at all in art. I wanted to have my own connoisseurship appreciated, but he was certainly not going to play along with that; nor, to my disappointment, was he the slightest bit interested in my own history and personality. Later I understood that a teacher of his kind cannot possibly get involved with the ego-problems of his students, least of all when his teaching has to do precisely with liberation from the ego. As he wrote to me when I was beginning to appreciate his method, “You may have seen that the stance I subscribe to, is to regard the I-bound soul objectively, concretely and not to experience it subjectively. This comes from growth; not books...”⁵

Deep philosophy has seldom worn such casual clothing. Tony’s conversation was so familiar and colloquial in style as sometimes to seem crude. His words, easy to understand, were often hard to accept, for they aimed at our pet delusions and felt out every chink in our psychological armor. He was one of those who have taken heaven by storm and wrested the truth from the wreckage of the ego. By no means all of his students, especially the women among them, were moved to emulate him. Everyone tried, or pretended, to read Plotinus or Malkani’s *Philosophy of the Self*,⁶ but few could keep at it all night. Obviously there was another side to Tony, or he would have repelled all but the hardy few.

As far as I know, his only relaxation was music, in which his preference was for deep, melancholy, meditative pieces (Bach’s and Beethoven’s slow movements, Chopin’s Nocturnes) or for the exultant monuments of later Romanticism (Wagner, Mahler, Scriabin). He had no enthusiasm for the more objective music of earlier and later periods. In full-blooded Romanticism, perhaps he experienced in pure form the emotional energies that enabled him to

keep going, against all obstacles, first as a student and later as a teacher. There was behind his intensity—and it can easily be sensed in his recorded conversations—a reservoir of impersonal compassion for human ignorance such as fuels the efforts of every genuine spiritual teacher. There was never any doubt in our minds that we had known him before, and that, if we did not abandon the Quest, we would meet him again.

It was concern for Tony's family, suffering the continual invasion of their home and feeding dozens every weekend, that gave some of the "questers" the idea of building a separate center for meditation and philosophic study. They put up a large log cabin on part of his land, which was henceforth known as "Wisdom's Goldenrod Limited," or "The Center." The "Limited" was a discreet statement that the core of students had now formed, and that, while others would be welcomed if they wished to take the initiative, no further outreach would be made, no 100-level courses offered, as it were. Several people bought or built houses near to the Center, so that a close community formed. One or two "monks" lived in small rooms in the meditation building, and took care of the property which was beautifully landscaped and maintained. A venerable Swedish lady took up residence in her own cabin on the Wisdom's Goldenrod land. It was she who decided that it was inappropriate to call our teacher by a familiar name; Tony found himself promoted to "Anthony," and so he has remained.

The locals on Seneca Lake regarded the Center with some suspicion, and had to be reassured that it was not a cult, with all that that implied. Public recognition of a spectacular kind came in 1979. By then, some of Anthony's early students had gravitated to Tibetan Buddhist circles and visited the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. The exiled leader accepted the invitation to visit Wisdom's Goldenrod during his coming American tour, and to open the new library that had just been built. While it came as no surprise to those who already recognized Anthony's worth, the Dalai Lama's three-day visit did put a stamp of approval on his teaching which few could gainsay.⁷ It was also the beginning of Ithaca's development as a center for Tibetan Buddhism: the city now houses the Dalai Lama's official North American Seat.⁸

By the time the Wisdom's Goldenrod Center was built I had left Ithaca and felt little part in that increasingly focused community. Nor—and not for want of trying—could I understand "Astronoesis," the system-of-all-systems that occupied Anthony's mind and those of his closest pupils.⁹ My only attraction to Tibetan traditions came through an encounter, in the winter of 1978-79, with the non-institutional Dzogchen. Most of all, I was set on building bridges between the academic and esoteric realms, convinced that each could benefit from the better parts of the other. The academy needed to break through the restrictions of the scientific mentality, formed in reaction to religious dogma; the New Age that was then appearing as the public face of esotericism needed more rigorous and self-critical methods. (Some hope, I can hear Anthony saying!) Encounters with Brunton himself had already confirmed that I must go my own way, as did Anthony's last "fraternal" communications.

The last time I saw Anthony was in 1984. I had been asked to come and talk to the students about the Traditionalist philosopher René Guénon. My translation of his *Multiple States of Being*¹⁰ had just come out, and they wanted to know about the untranslated works, especially *The Great Triad*.¹¹ After my presentation, Anthony made some remarks about Guénon's incredible arrogance and that of all the Traditionalists (no matter that my discovery of them had come through him¹²). Talk turned to the future. Anthony's view was very bleak. "Just so long as President Reagan keeps those missiles pointed against Russia" were his words. This was election year, and everyone else I knew was against Reagan and his aggressive policies. I went cold. But then I didn't know that Anthony was already suffering from lung cancer, nor how the 1980s

would turn out. He died in October 1984, leaving Wisdom's Goldenrod without anyone remotely resembling a successor. Thus the institution was spared the indignities and rivalries that so often follow the founder's demise.¹³

In the previous year, 1983, Anthony had given a series of talks, or rather conversations, to a circle of students in Sweden. These were gathered, after his death, into a book called *Looking into Mind*.¹⁴ The dialogue form recalls what survives of Socrates' teachings; and the comparison is not a casual one, for the Athenian stonemason and the New York toll-collector had many things in common. Both came of humble backgrounds and began to teach, neglecting their families, because of a sacred sign that left them no alternative. (In Anthony's case, it was a revelation following a heart-attack in 1967.) Both were spellbinding talkers, but neither could or would write his philosophy down. Socrates' discourse was captured by Plato, or so the latter would persuade us; a fragment of Anthony's was recorded, more reliably, on tape. Both had conservative political opinions that disconcerted some of their listeners. Neither was a feminist in the slightest degree. But that is irrelevant to the theme of *Looking into Mind*, which begins with the question of Anthony's boyhood obsession—"how do I perceive a world?"—and ends with the dissolution of that world in the One which is, paradoxically, the only true reality.

Much later I saw the whole enterprise in the context of the spiritual movements that have arisen in Upstate New York. Of these, the Shakers, Mormons, Spiritualists, Adventists, Oneida Perfectionists, and Jane Roberts' "Seth Material" (exactly contemporary with Anthony's work) are the best known among a host of others.¹⁵ But there is, to my mind, a great difference between their religious, social, or at best mystical goals and the independent, philosophical path into which Anthony initiated us.

While some may argue over how to define initiation, I know from this encounter that it can come without a ritual, a degree, or a title. It can seek you out, rather than being sought, but need not enroll you in its club or cult. Fifty years later I see it as a fundamental rearrangement of the soul that removes certain obstacles to its development. The technical details of how it is done are unknown to me, but the consequence is that a door opens, or even just a window, that can never be closed again. From then on, the path is open to solving the particular "equation" with which each of us is born, until all its factors are reduced to zero.¹⁶

- 1 The founder and proprietor of the American Brahman Bookstore was actually Tony's eldest son, Stephen Damiani. His memoir clarifies many circumstances that were unclear to me at the time:
<http://www.wisdomsgoldenrod.com/index.php/about/160-american-brahman-bookstore> (accessed Oct. 16, 2017).
- 2 Paul Brunton, *The Wisdom of the Overself* (New York: Dutton, 1943).
- 3 No one did: my dissertation on "The Music of Henry Cowell" (Cornell, 1969) was banned from publication until the composer's widow died in 1995. In retrospect, this also seems part of the initiatic process.
- 4 Letter to the author, May 12, 1970.
- 5 Letter to the author, circa 1975.
- 6 Ghanshamdas Rattanmal Malkani, *Philosophy of the Self, or A system of Idealism based upon Advait Vedanta* (Amalner: Indian Institute of Philosophy, 1939).
- 7 See Judith Horstman, "Wisdom's Goldenrod: Damiani's center for dialogue," *Ithaca Journal*, Nov. 3, 1979, p. 5.
- 8 See the website of Ithaca's Namgyal Monastery: <http://www.namgyal.org/>. Moreover, it is now announced that Paul Brunton's "entire archive will soon be housed and available to read at the Cornell University Kroch Library, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections." <https://www.goodreads.com/topic/show/18944847-paperback-version-needs-updating>. (Both websites accessed Oct. 16, 2017)
- 9 Published as Anthony J. Damiani, *Astronoesis: Philosophy's Empirical Context; Astrology's Transcendental Ground* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 2000).
- 10 René Guénon, *The Multiple States of Being*, tr. Joscelyn Godwin (Burdett: Larson Publications, 1984).
- 11 Guénon's collected works have since been published in English by Sophia Perennis in Hillsdale, NY.
- 12 Among his own specially bound copies which I bought in the bookstore were Julius Evola's *Rivolta contro il mondo moderno* (Milan: Bocca, 1951), *La tradizione ermetica* (Bari: Laterza, 1948), and René Guénon's *Initiation et réalisation spirituelle* (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1952) and *Aperçus sur l'initiation* (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1953).
- 13 See the Center's website for its history and current activities: <http://www.wisdomsgoldenrod.com/>; also the Paul Brunton Philosophic Foundation (<http://www.paulbrunton.org/>) which grew out of it. (Both accessed Oct. 16, 2017)
- 14 Anthony Damiani, *Looking into Mind: How to Recognize Who You Are and How You Know* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1990). A second book of dialogues followed: Anthony Damiani, *Standing in Your Own Way: Talks on the Nature of the Ego* (Burdett, NY: Larson Publications, 1993).
- 15 See Joscelyn Godwin, *Upstate Cauldron: Eccentric Spiritual Movements in Early New York State* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015), especially pp. 295-301.
- 16 An allusion to Julius Evola's mathematical metaphor: that each person enters life with a "personal equation"—symbolized in Damiani's system by the natal horoscope—that they are challenged to "solve."