

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

Q: Stephen, could you tell me about your background, where you're from, and what led up to your involvement with the Hari Krishnas?

A: I came of age, was a teenager in the late '60's, identified strongly with the counter culture. I was [unintelligible] ... in high school, very strongly influenced by the whole atmosphere at the time.

Q: Where were you living?

A: Long Island, suburban New York. Well-to-do, [unintelligible] Jewish family. And I, from age 15 or whatever, I was drawn to in [unintelligible] forms of consciousness, a little psychedelic thing I got into in high school. There was a very strong tie-in between the counter culture and Eastern religions. One of those links, strongly, for me, was when the Beatles started using, George Harrison, in particular, using the scyntar in some of their music. I was magically drawn to that sound, which I found is [unintelligible] ... instrument used in [unintelligible] ... strong exposure to the [unintelligible] ... music of [unintelligible] ... and in general, there were very strong intellectual and cultural tie-ins between the whole notion of higher consciousness and higher states of being, [unintelligible] ... and Hinduism and Buddhism, and other Eastern [unintelligible]... getting back from India [unintelligible] ... guru, and giving lectures. He gave one titled "Beyond Acid." I was a freshman at Washington University, St. Louis, saw a poster for that. I went to hear him. So you had someone who had been a luminary in the psychedelic movement, now being a luminary, an American spokesman in mysticism. So through that and various other bridges, I developed a strong curiosity about Eastern things. During my freshman year, I met a married couple from the Hari Krishna movement who had just recently come to St. Louis to open an ashram. I went to the ashram once or twice. And I kind of liked them, I wasn't overwhelmed, but I thought they were nice people, seemed very together, very focused, very directed. This was a time in my life, senior year in high school, freshman year in college, where I was very strongly -- I was a seeker and very serious about it not in the sense of deep discipline, but in the sense of it being a very compelling issue for me. Like how to be happy, and how to be wise, and how -- I think on the one side, I was very interested -- I was reading more about abnormal psychology, I was reading anthologies of writings by psychotics and that sort of thing. I was very intrigued by all these various realms of experience, and I was using psychedelics as a means as, as a serious practitioner of the use of psychedelics of freeing yourself from societal conditioning. I was kind of unraveling myself, and trying to get to some real existential inner core. I think all that contributed to becoming a little bit unstable, being increasingly convinced that the world was pretty mad, and that this was a place I didn't want to fit into. And I may very well have gone off and joined a commune -- I really wanted out of the conventional world. I didn't quite how to do it and where to go.

Q: About what year was this?

A: Sixty-nine to '70.

Q: Was there much of a hippie scene going on in St. Louis?

A: Well, I was on campus -- I was there just the one year, and rarely left campus. There was, and there were lot of long hairs, it was definitely the real height of the counter culture thing. It sort of peaked a year or two later [unintelligible] ... but yeah, there were, there were a lot of long hairs around. People growing their hair long for the first time, guys. I started not going to class, really dropping out . The

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

search for deep and profound meaning sort of overwhelmed everything else, and I couldn't just sit through a sociology or philosophy class, it all seemed so incredibly dull. Here on the weekends, and at some point during the week, I was having these fantastic visions, and deep, profound, poignant spiritual experiences, aided by LSD, and then class Monday would be no comparison, would be just insufferably dull. So I started not going to class, getting stoned with my friends, becoming a drop-out. My parents are pretty straight, politically liberal, but a different generation, couldn't relate to any of this, having increasing generational conflict my last couple of years at home. Anyway, at the end of the year, that spring, that was the year of Kent State, and where I was, Washington University, was having a very big student movement to get ROTC off campus. Pretty much the whole spring semester was shut down, because students were boycotting classes, lot of demonstrations on campus. I was subpoenaed to appear before the grand jury. A number of people had burned down the ROTC building. So the attorney general [unintelligible] ... mutual appointment of the federal grand jury to investigate the destruction of the property, they subpoenaed a lot of people, including [unintelligible] ... But it was a pretty hairy time. There was a lot of paranoia among the student movement about the cops and the feds. [unintelligible] secure world of childhood, and trusting in the American system, was unraveling rather graphically. So I finished off the year, and then went home back to New York. After some weeks home I thought [unintelligible] hitch hike out back to St. Louis, where I'd spend the summer. I was in crisis at that point, psychological crisis. I was really not settled. Not on the verge of going mad, but I had so deeply rejected not just American culture, but earth culture. I had really become increasingly really a mystic, in a way, reading religions that I [unintelligible] ... hard to relate to the world and to generate any enthusiasm for creating a life here. So I was pretty confused -- I didn't know whether I wanted to go back to school, or join a commune. The idea I had in my head was, "I'll go join a commune," when you drop out, you don't live in the street, and you don't live with mom and dad -- you join other people who don't know what they're doing. But I decided to spend the summer in St. Louis, do yoga, meditate, try to get my head together, and decide whether to continue in school or do something else. So on a New Jersey turnpike heading west, I got picked up by a young guy who I knew vaguely from college, and he said, "We're going out to California, why don't you come out with us?" And I said, "Well, okay." So I got on the bus, we went through St. Louis, I decided not to get off the bus there, and to go out West. So at that point I was sort of on a bus, and I was with young people, [unintelligible] ... had a number of books with me [unintelligible] ... Alan Watts, things that were out then about Eastern religions. I had one or two books from the Hari Krishna's, which I had got in St. Louis from the couple that had established the temple there. So I was in the bus reading, smoking marijuana, feeling pretty anxious, in general [unintelligible] ... and we ended up in Boulder, Colorado at one point. We drove up into the mountains, and I got out, folks were camping out there. They were long hairs up in the hills, hanging out. [unintelligible] ... large sheet of plastic was hanging [unintelligible] ... my protection from the elements. I set up this little home made tent. I ended up spending a week there. The bus left one day while I was napping. I spent about a week up there, [unintelligible] ... I had it in my head that I needed some kind of discipline, I needed some kind of yoga. I had these higher visions, I knew that Eastern practices lead there, and I was also in a lot of mental distress, psychological stress. My sense of self was very fluid, because I had really rejected conventional notions of self, and who I was, and opened myself widely to whatever else there is. I felt unraveled without having the security of a secure self-concept. So I remember [unintelligible] ... meditate [unintelligible] ... well that didn't happen. So I said, "Well, [unintelligible] ... " in Boulder,

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

Colorado at the time, [unintelligible] center of spiritual practice there [unintelligible] ... lot of that going around. I got a ride back into town, and I really had no place to go. I had my bag with me. And I was [unintelligible] see what happened. Just kind of hung out. Lot of people had gone to [unintelligible] ... kind of interesting place to hang out. There are a lot of hippies on the road hitching out toward Boulder out to points West. So, and it's a bit of a street scene. And after a few days, I saw a Hari Krishna guy chanting alone on a street corner. [unintelligible] ... Hari Krishna mantra. And I had had previous contact with the couple of Hari Krishna's, and I'd seen them a few times elsewhere, at New York at various anti-war marches in the late '60's, against the Vietnam War. The Krishna's would be out there doing their thing. They were part of the counter cultural landscape, kind of a quirky exotic interesting side. [unintelligible] ... Eastern religion, [unintelligible] ... vaguely [unintelligible] ... very cool. So I approached the guy on the street, and asked him where the local temple was. He gave me the address for that, and I went there. [unintelligible] ... I went there tripping on mescaline. There were a lot of drugs there. I was mildly tripping, and I still have this notion that [unintelligible] ... like throwing some switch in your mind. So I attended an evening service there, and everyone in the ashram except for him, at the time, were [unintelligible] ... so even though [unintelligible] ... it was part of [unintelligible] ... alone there. He said I could stay the night. Back then, the Krishna's [unintelligible] ... was operating [unintelligible] ... environments. Almost all of the recruits were very counter cultural people. Only later were we made to see that people [unintelligible] ... a common thing, me wanting to spend the night. He was going to sleep, and I asked if I could stay for awhile in the temple and chant, because I had the notion that I would chant Hari Krishna's with the cymbals all night, until they take them away from me. So I chanted for a bit, [unintelligible] ... went upstairs and went to sleep. For the next week or so, I would come and go from the ashram. The president there was sort of taking care of me, because he saw me as a potential recruit, and I was a bright young kid, obviously curious about the whole Krishna thing. And so he let me come and go. And he began teaching me about Krishna consciousness. He let me read from the book of [unintelligible] ... and I [unintelligible] ... it had a certain [unintelligible] about the place I liked. The Krishna's talked about this higher realm [unintelligible] ... spiritual world, and it seemed very parapsychical, had this idealized paradise, and that sounded good to me. I was looking for some kind of eternally ecstatic higher state of being. And they quite explicitly promoted this particular vision, which happened to be a [unintelligible] vision of higher [unintelligible], permanently. They had a phrase, "Stay high forever, never come down." They very much geared their message to the young folk at that time. So it was like, you don't need drugs to get high, you can stay high forever if you chant this mantra, launch off into this state of higher consciousness. Sounded pretty good to me. Then, after I'd been there for a week or so, the rest of the members of the ashram were [unintelligible] ... festival [unintelligible] ... had all these people around me and more structure, because they were all back now and went back to the temple schedule, which was a very rigid, mental monastic kind of thing. Got up in 4 in the morning, shower, going in down the stairs to the temple, prayer, class, [unintelligible] ... So I was still staying there, I was the new boy in the ashram. I hadn't made [unintelligible] ... I was checking it out. And I began to find it a little hard getting up at 4 in the morning. In retrospect, I think probably I was pretty depressed at the time, and that's why I wanted to sleep a lot longer than they were, they would sleep six hours a night, which was short anyway, and I was wanting to sleep ten. I began to feel a little squeezed by the excessive structure [unintelligible] ... the ashram is a serious spiritual place where people really have their days scheduled. Very [unintelligible] ... place. I found it a little hard. I liked the chanting, I liked

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

the [unintelligible] ... I liked the [unintelligible] ... but I wanted a free form life without so much discipline. Then I found it hard and had some struggle about that. One day I decided to leave [unintelligible] ... someone tried to talk me out of it. Not putting any pressure on me, but just urging me to keep at it. So I did, I stayed. I was convinced that if I could stick it out, I'd really get something out of it, that it would be hard, there would be the initial adjustment. [unintelligible] ... thinking about leaving, although I really liked it there, but I stayed. [unintelligible] ... Then after weeks -- actually, the moment I actually decided to stay, we would go out and chant at night in Denver, [unintelligible] ... part of Denver and just chant all day in the streets. This was before the Krishna's got into book distribution in airports. We'd go out and chant, and give out copies of our magazine. I think I probably joined years later, [unintelligible] ... selling books, selling candy. I never liked that anyway. I think if I, three or four years later, I very well may not have stayed, because I would've really hated to have to be on the street and try and sell something. So it was very low-key. Just sort of walk up and down the streets of Denver chanting "Hari Krishna." But one night we were chanting as a group, in downtown Denver, and I had [unintelligible] ... spirit, [unintelligible] ... swept up in [unintelligible] ... community spiritual feeling. And it was strong enough [unintelligible] in the van ride up to Boulder, I decided, "I want this." [unintelligible] Krishna consciousness will bring me to a point eventually where I feel this good all the time. This is worth it. It wasn't just the pleasure of tasting a higher state, it was the pleasure of getting some relief from a probably pretty intense anxiety stage I was in. [unintelligible] ... So I was really on the edge. I just felt that lift for several days. That real burning from my heart. So that was like a conversion experience, at any one moment, very early-on, when I felt, "Yes, this is it." [unintelligible] ... So on the way back to Boulder, I decided, "I'm staying, I'm going to stick it out. I think this can be good." So I stayed. That's how I joined.

Q: And what does it mean to join?

A: Moving into the ashram, dedicating yourself to the practice. Living there, and living by the rules.

Q: Do they have any formal membership procedures?

A: Not at that level. But of course, there's an initiation, where you formally accept [unintelligible] ... That came a year later. [unintelligible] ... six months. I waited a year because I knew that the founder of the movement who was [unintelligible] ... while he was arrived, and I think when he joined, he became his disciple, he would be back in the country in the summer, and then I could be initiated with him present. Because other people who got initiation not with the [unintelligible] present. The temple president would write a letter to Provopot [?], the founder of the [unintelligible], "We have three new devotees, Michael, Barbara, and Jim." The procedure for [unintelligible] ... the brahma [?] would chant Hari Krishna on their beads, send them back, and [unintelligible] ... the group itself had chanted [unintelligible] and give you a Sanskrit name. But if he happened to be around, you were somewhere where he was, you had the opportunity to be initiated in his presence. So I decided to wait another six months and got initiated in June. So membership in this commune started the day you moved in. [unintelligible] ... formal spiritual commitment, as such.

Q: To be a Hari Krishna, did you have to live in the ashram, or could you live [unintelligible]?

A: Well, it changed over the years. Initially, back then, Krishna living was exclusively monastic. If you

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

were a devotee, you moved in. The clientele for the movement were young people without worldly attachments. There was the rare case of somebody who kept their job on the outside, or maybe was a little older, well into their 20's rather than being 18 or 20 or 22. Or married or whatever, established out there. And that would be tolerated. But they were never part of the real, core, serious, surrender everything [unintelligible]... But as the years went on, that gradually changed, and there was more of a tolerance for those who didn't commit 24 hours a day. So in theory, in terms of the [unintelligible] in India, yeah, it's not an exclusively monastic church by any means. You have a balance between households and married people, and the *sinyasis* [?], who are those who have no families and no familial connections, live in an ashram. But in the earlier years of the movement, there was a big emphasis on the aesthetical style. [unintelligible] ... at the ashram. But that began changing as the '70's wore on [unintelligible] ... to the point where [unintelligible] ... wasn't all a matter of the movement becoming more liberal, it was the fact that a lot of people just didn't want to live in the temple, and [unintelligible] ... accommodating people, otherwise they wouldn't have anyone at all. [unintelligible] ... in the ashram. But in the early days, and when I joined in the early days, four years after the movement in America started, you were encouraged to drop out of school, leave home, and come to the ashram. Even now, there's still the attitude that the really serious devotee will [unintelligible] ... they've taken a much more [unintelligible] ... community model or a [unintelligible] model of membership. [unintelligible] ...

Q: Was the ashram celibate?

A: Yeah. The rule was, not married, no sex. If you were married, sex only to have children, and then only once a month, you tried to have children. So even for married people, they were virtually celibate. So from 1970 to 1980, when I got married, I was celibate. And even after marriage, the rule of marriage, as I said, sex is only for making babies, and once a month -- it was common knowledge that not every married couple followed that, and my wife and I, our first year of marriage, we kind of didn't follow it. But then we decided, at the time of our formal [unintelligible] ... we decided to [unintelligible] ... again at that point, and from then on, for a very short period, we were trying to [unintelligible] . . and of course, it's common knowledge in the movement that not everybody keeps the standard. [unintelligible] ... so called "falling down," that you fell away from the principle [unintelligible] ... visiting your parents and ran into an old girlfriend and [unintelligible] ... very ashamed, and sorrow or whatever. So there were very high rules, and for the most part, people followed them. Not everyone did all the time. But they were very necessary and compelling basic requirements.

Q: Can you describe how you dressed?

A: The ten years I was a brahmachari [?] I wore orange robes. You've seen those. And had a shaved head.

Q: What does it mean to be a brahmachari?

A: Brahmachari is a traditional holy word for -- it refers to student life. And basically, that's what it meant, that you were Hari Krishna, and you weren't married. You were single, male, and [unintelligible] ... you wore saffron. In the early years, brahmachari [unintelligible] ... saffron sarays [?], [unintelligible] ... but later on they were allowed to wear colored sarays. Married women would wear a red dot [unintelligible] ... know whether they were married or not.

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

Q: Were you vegetarian?

A: Yes.

Q: Would you eat any dairy products?

A: Yes. We were lacto-vegetarians. Dairy was fine, but no meat, fish, or eggs.

Q: Was your ashram income-sharing? So all your money was pooled?

A: Yeah. There was a treasurer, and all the money would go to the treasurer. There were fund raising activities, and the money you made out on the street or whatever would go to the treasurer, whoever did the treasury.

Q: And was all your money made on the street, selling things?

A: Over the years, there were different money-making schemes. From just having a bucket asking for donations, selling [unintelligible], selling books. Later years, they really started enterprising and produced various things. At one point, it was like [unintelligible] candles and incense. [unintelligible] and incense business this year, the biggest incense business in the country, which later was sold off. Spiritual Sky Incense actually supported the temple for awhile in the earliest years. But in the first two years of the movement, there would be one or two devotees whose job it was to go out and sell the incense to head shops and book shops and whatever. And it was somewhat successful. In most years after that, selling books became the main source of income. For most of the time I was there, it would be some combination of book selling, art, [unintelligible] ... with Provopot's commentary and or various [unintelligible] ... enterprises, all kinds of fund raisers. Many of the temples opened vegetarian restaurants, sometimes [unintelligible]... generally through the years, [unintelligible] ... seekers and Indians. [unintelligible] ... and the more [unintelligible] ... a place that Indians immigrated from India [unintelligible] ... worship. Some other ways these [unintelligible] ... young Western converts, kind of fanatical, this and that, but at least there was a temple, an altar and statues, various [unintelligible] ... so Indians would make donations over the years. Most temples would have just one person who would just deal with the [unintelligible] ... cultivating [unintelligible] ... So, on occasion somebody joined [unintelligible] ... but most came from the friends of people [unintelligible] ... small [unintelligible] ...

Q: Can you describe some what daily life was like, maybe at the beginning, and how that changed over the years?

A: Well, we would have the early morning program, which was the [unintelligible] ... of spiritual practices, which ended in breakfast, we prayed until 4:30 AM until breakfast. And then the rest of the day, we would do whatever [unintelligible] ... a work day within [unintelligible] ... time be optional.

Q: Were you assigned work, or did you choose?

A: One or the other, or a combination. Generally, if you were new and had no status -- there would be, depending on the sensitivity of the temple leadership. They may try to figure out what this young member can do, what interests him at the same time. In many cases, [unintelligible] ... money was, there was always such a need enough money to keep the temple going. Very often, people were [unintelligible] ... organized to be put on the street to fund raise, selling books or magazines or some

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

product, often with little sensitivity to the person's interests. So the quality of management, the sensitivity of leadership in different ashrams varied quite a lot from place to place. You had some presidents who were very, not very business oriented, not very sensitive, [unintelligible] ... get the work done in the ashram, and someone was [unintelligible] ... and someone was raising money, just sort of the authoritarian, and there were others who were nicer people, more accepting of individual [unintelligible] ... manager style. In my case, [unintelligible] ... I showed promise early-on in some [unintelligible] ... which is the word for verbally presenting [unintelligible] ... My first year or so, I sold incense and [unintelligible] ... but I hated it. But I kind of found my own service, which was after a year in the movement, I'd go to professors at the university, and sell them our books. Very early on, I ended up being the kind of person who would go out and talk to the academic [unintelligible] ... So in my case, I was sort of a young [unintelligible] ... promise, who was excused from fund raising because I had other specialized talents. So that happened with people, if you show promise in an area, [unintelligible] ... overtime [unintelligible] ... could cook in the kitchen, or she's a good this, he's a good that. [unintelligible] ... having different skills [unintelligible] ... going out and made money. So you work on a sign, often it was [unintelligible] ... such and such. And again, depending on who the leader was, they may or may not accommodate that. [unintelligible] ... surrender, whatever you're told, [unintelligible] ... should or shouldn't do, you should be willing to do anything [unintelligible] ... constant surrender of controlling ideas. But often abused to get people to do things they didn't want to do by appealing to their desires to advance spiritually. [unintelligible] ... There was always a dynamic between individuals [unintelligible] ... the ashram, range of sensitivity [unintelligible] ... There was generally some [unintelligible] ... just one [unintelligible] ... not being able to [unintelligible] ... someone else who could cook right now [unintelligible] ... in the kitchen. That happened to me once. I really wanted out of the kitchen. I'd chop vegetables in [unintelligible] ... or whatever, and [unintelligible] ... alright.

Q: So did you stay in Boulder all the time you were a brahmachari?

A: No, I traveled all over the place.

Q: Did you have a home base?

A: No. I just -- some people would end up being at one place forever, others for various reasons would travel a lot. I ended up moving around quite a bit. In Boulder, we were part of the Western U.S. region. When I joined, the movement was growing very quickly. Some people would always be pressing to open a temple here, open a temple there. [unintelligible] ... people opened a temple in Dallas, and they needed a married couple and a couple of brahmacharis [unintelligible] ... so I was considered a brahmachari of some promise, so I was summoned with one of the other men of the Boulder temple, to come to L.A. [unintelligible] ... on the way to Dallas [unintelligible] ... to start the ashram in Dallas. So I was in Dallas for about 4 months, and I left on my own eventually [unintelligible] ... I had some romantic notion. Actually, they'd had this festival in Dallas, and there was this devotee, very charismatic at the time, and brahmacharis just wanted to leave their temples and follow this horribly charismatic [unintelligible] ... devotee. [unintelligible] ... very exceptional, [unintelligible] ... charisma [tape ends] ... so I wanted to go where he was. I didn't ask permission, because I knew my temple president wouldn't let me. [unintelligible] ... so I just [unintelligible] ... I had my bag packed, and I hitch hiked up to St. Louis, where I thought he was -- no wait, I was in Dallas, why would I go to St. Louis. But anyway, to make a

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

long story short, there was a lot of different ashrams, and except for one case, where I [unintelligible] ... on my own, generally there was a lot of shifting around in those days, opening temples, or such and such a temple needed somebody to do such and such, and they'd call around and say, "Do you have someone to do such and such?" So I spent a few months, and then some months in St. Louis, and then I went off to be with the charismatic [unintelligible] ... After I was initiated, I went to New York. Visited the New York temple, and liked it there. I called the office, said I wanted to stay there. It happened, [unintelligible] ... I guess I was pretty [unintelligible] ... I was very serious about the practice, but I also had a certain restlessness, a certain [unintelligible] ... I was conscientious [unintelligible] ...

Q: What was it like to see to your parents, and what did they think about what you'd done?

A: They thought I'd gone mad. They could not relate to it at all. They were not religiously inclined in any way. So, religion itself is [unintelligible] ... exotic Eastern religion. [unintelligible] ... heartbreak [unintelligible] ... There were times that'd I'd just [unintelligible] ... In a way, there was probably some truth in that, but I wasn't crazy. I was a fanatic, maybe, and I was very single-minded in my personal and spiritual goals, rather than rejecting [unintelligible] ... I wasn't that. But to them, this was mad. To them, leaving college, and leaving conventional [unintelligible] ... they didn't quite know how to relate to me. [unintelligible] ... they made appeals that I leave [unintelligible] ... so it was very awkward. Each of my parents separately told me how it was breaking the other parent's heart, and why don't I come home. But I was utterly committed to the path. I tried to explain what was going on. But I really had rather changed. I was a convert. I went through a radical conversion, and I was in an entirely different cognitive universe than they were. [unintelligible] ... there was very little connection. We still spoke English together, but [unintelligible] ... to making a connection. So during those early brahmachari years, I moved around quite a bit, and I developed a reputation for being good at talking to educated people, dealing with the scholars. So that gave me opportunities to travel. I developed my own expertise, which gave me a lot more freedom than most members had to move around. After only a few years in the movement, I really had a lot of independence. So in many ways, I'm not typical of devotees who maybe belonged to one temple and stuck it out [unintelligible] ... because my work became more on a national level, dealing with scholars [unintelligible] ... That kind of really [unintelligible] ... into me. Later, I got an invitation to go to England at one point, Australia at another point. So I had a sort of comparatively glamorous lifestyle, having certain skills that were valued in far-flung places, and I [unintelligible] ... to travel.

Q: Did you do those international trips? Did you go to England and Australia?

A: Yeah.

Q: That must've been interesting. How were you received in different countries? For example, when you went to England?

A: Received?

Q: What did people think of Hari Krishnas there, or in general.

A: People always thought we were strange. We looked strange, we'd chant strange words. Anyone in the world on varying degrees would be [unintelligible] ... at strange people. People don't usually make

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

much of a [unintelligible] ... to what's foreign.

Q: Was there any country that you went to where you felt like you were more understood or received more warmly?

A: Well, of course, India. And it was always a great experience for Krishna people to go to India, because there [unintelligible] ... definitely that all Indian culture embraced. A lot of Indians thought that we were Westerners making believe that we were Hindu. So there were always Indians that were flattered that we were being Hindu, but that were skeptical. I think there were a lot of Indians that thought this was wonderful, many Indians would say, "You are a better devotee than we are, you have more faith in Hindu religion. I see Westerners can love Krishna." But there was kind of a -- so in India, you would generally get a pretty popular reception, because [unintelligible] ... they knew [unintelligible] ... robes and shaved heads and chanting Hari Krishna was not a foreign thing. They weren't appalled by it. On the other hand, opinions ranged from wildly enthusiastic and welcoming, to kind of skeptical and deriding. In Muslim countries, forget it. [unintelligible] ... because the nature of [unintelligible] ... But generally Western countries [unintelligible] ... curiosity.

Q: Would you evangelize when you went to these different countries? Were you trying to attract new members?

A: Me, personally?

Q: I guess, yeah.

A: Well, for the movement, generally, of course. The idea was to spread Krishna consciousness around the world. My work was more winning [unintelligible] ... and [unintelligible] ... people within the academic, interfaith community. I did a lot of writing [unintelligible] ... kind of house writer for our publishing house. I wrote an introduction to [unintelligible] ... But I was very good at going out -- I had some intellectual background. I picked up a lot of academic stuff just by hanging out with scholars, going to conferences, reading books. I became in my role, [unintelligible] ... was the Hari Krishna who followed academic study of us, was up on what sociologists of religion or historians of religion were studying in terms of Asian religion in America. I read that literature, and it was all initiated on my own. I just decided that [unintelligible] ... to talk to these people, to facilitate their research. So many times I would -- somebody would be doing research on us, historical or anthropological or whatever, I'd be the one who'd distribute questionnaires and bring people for somebody to interview. I would coordinate as the insider. I'd be the insider -- just for that period. If anybody wanted a study in academics, the word was, "Talk to Shubhananda [?]. He's the Hari Krishna to talk to, he'll give you the straight dope, and he'll facilitate research." During a three week period, I traveled with Larry [unintelligible] around the country, working on a book on the movement. Me and my wife traveled with him from ashram to ashram. I would go there and coordinate the [unintelligible] ... and whatever. So that was a big part of my main work, a liaison between the movement and the academic community. It had a PR function, but on the other hand, I took academic research seriously. I wasn't thinking just to put our message forward. I genuinely thought that there was a value independent of our own missionary value, a value in serious intellectual study of the Krishna movement. So I, from the mid-seventies to the mid-eighties, I did a lot in that area. I became [unintelligible] ... for scholars. On the other side, I was trying to educate people in

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

the movement to have some appreciation for serious, conscientious scholarship. There is a movement for being conservative, intellectually rather narrow, national [unintelligible] against intellectuality per se. Being seen as the lower order [unintelligible] ... spiritual, but I had a respect for the intellectual academic world, and through various efforts I tried to educate people in the movement that these researchers and scholarly studies [unintelligible] ... scholars who knew a lot about the Krishna movement, [unintelligible] ... Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna [unintelligible] ... scholar [unintelligible] ... And part of that was to educate outsiders, the public, that we're not just a fly-by-night cult, we are really normal Hindus. And it was also meant to help devotees understand that there was a [unintelligible] to the Krishna movement, educated researchers. So it was a real bridge building kind of project.

Q: What did you say your Sanskrit name was?

A: Shubhananda.

Q: Can you describe how you met your wife and got married?

A: In '79, the devotee who was in charge of Australia, and the [unintelligible] ... who was there invited me to come down for some weeks [unintelligible] ... the [unintelligible] ... movement in that country. That's what I did, tried to help defend his [unintelligible] ... took off [unintelligible] ... so I had done a lot of work here, so the president there said "There's a growing anti-cult movement in Australia, can you come down here and help us get some literature together to defend us from those accusations of brainwashing and all that. Make friends for the movement within the academic and the religious community in Australia." So that's what I loved to do, so I went down there and did that work. I had to get back to America for an AAO meeting, and we decided that I'd come back for a longer period, like 4 months, in the spring of '80. So I came back, and while I was there during that period, from January to April or May, in Australia, I met my wife. She was actually married at the time, but living separately from her husband. He had become like a brahmachari. Although married, he ended up being a gung-ho, ascetical devotee, so they weren't even really living as husband and wife. We met, and this romance grew up. We carried this totally clandestine, illicit courtship. We knew if anybody found out, we'd be in big trouble. We met at secret times, in odd places. We decided that we wanted to be together. It was a bit of an ordeal, because we had to be very secretive, because there was tremendous social pressure against us. Divorce was very much discouraged. Plus, although I was a disciple of Provopot, because he died in '77, she was a disciple of one of his young American disciples. We didn't think she would be able to get permission to leave the country. She was one of the two biggest fund raisers in the country. Temples and countries were very reluctant to give up cash cows, and she was a cash cow for Australia. So we decided, "Well, we're going to do this." At one point, we actually did ask her guru. We told him what was going on. He actually wasn't strongly opposed, but he said it would be up to the administrative head of the country, who we knew was very conservative. He said absolutely no. So I accepted it, and I thought she did, but she didn't really. We ended up going ahead. Although I had given up the idea, I guess I was more surrendered than she, she kind of got it going again, and we decided, "We'll just do this on our own." I eventually left the country as scheduled, and three months later, she eloped with herself out of Australia. She snuck out of the middle of the night, went to England to visit family there, then flew to the U.S.

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

Q: Is she English originally?

A: Yeah, Anglo-Irish. Her parents were Irish, she was raised half in Ireland, in Belfast. Born in Belfast, raised there, and then later [unintelligible] ... So we got married in 1980. Her father arranged for a judge there. [unintelligible] ... and we got married.

Q: How did that change her relationship with being a Krishna?

A: It didn't at all. We had to put up with a little of grief, having gone behind everyone's back. People were angry, but eventually it abated.

Q: So did you live together in the temple in New York?

A: In various temples. We lived in Washington for awhile, Denver for awhile. And then, we ended up in Philadelphia for 5 years, until we moved here in '87.

Q: And that's when you left?

A: Yes.

Q: Can you describe what led up to you deciding to leave?

A: Long story. But the shortest version of it, is that after the founder died in '77, things started going downhill. The organizations [unintelligible] ... groups the founder dies, and then you have all sorts of succession problems. Without one strong leader in the middle [unintelligible] ... So it was going through very tortuous years, especially in the early '80's, through the mid-eighties. It kind of peaked. There was abuse of authority, there were scandals, all kinds. Provopot had a parent [unintelligible] ... the whole idea had been controversial and questioned later, appointed [unintelligible] ... successors, young male American gurus. And eventually, more than half of them ended up being exposed in various scandals. Corruption, sex, drugs. And so there was very wide-spread disillusionment, seeing these American gurus who had been worshiped as gurus -- people who joined the movement after Provopot died had become their disciples. So these people were [unintelligible] ... and here they were crashing down and burning. So that caused a lot of disillusionment in many people's minds. There was a lot of outflux of senior devotees from the movement through the '80's. A large percentage of the early devotees in the movement, those who were disciples of Provopot, left the movement. People always come and go, but [unintelligible] ... the movement was sort of [unintelligible] ... a lot of people leaving, especially through the '80's. And with the disillusionment, the general pure idealistic, spiritual flavor of the movement got overwhelmed by political in-fighting, debate, scandal, accusations and denials, investigations. I was aware that I was part of the reform movement that took shape in the early '80's. And we all hoped we could get things back on track. There were reforms. The reform movement succeeded in getting its platform in. But many felt it was too little too late, and so the '80's was a very contentious and troubled time for the movement. During that time it lost a lot of its best people, a lot of the senior people in the movement [unintelligible] ... So I was seeing all this going on, becoming increasingly disturbed by it. I, along with many others, became disillusioned and cynical about the organization per se. And is often is the case, in the certain faith in the spiritual tradition that the movement represented organizationally. People started leaving in droves, and I hung out, thinking, "Out of loyalty to Provopot, I'll stay and try to make things better." But people dropped out at various points, and I was -- it wasn't being as fun being

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

in the Hari Krishna's as it used to be. Because I dealt with scholars a lot, because there was so much problems in the movement, I found myself just all too often having to explain how bad things are. I didn't like having to do PR. Things were going badly, souring. And so I had told my parents that things were going down. And by that time our relationship had improved somewhat. I'd gotten over my early fanaticism and was more grounded and down to earth. Especially after I got married, that was the first normal thing I'd done in many years. They were quite pleased that I got married, and they liked my wife. I let them know that things weren't well, and that I was dissatisfied. In early years I'd be defensive about anything. I kind of grew up. One day my father called me in Philadelphia, and offered to pay to send me back to school. I thought about it for a day and called him back and said, "Yes." That essentially was our decision to get out. We didn't announce to anyone that we were leaving. But under the guise of the actuality of moving up here to go to Harvard Divinity School, we left Philadelphia. And for the first time in all these years, was not living in or next door to the ashram. And my wife and I, in our understanding, we were consensually leaving [unintelligible] ... Although for a short while after we lived here, she in particular kept chanting. There was still some residual practice. But I gave it up before her, and she faded out of it too. After awhile we saw ourselves as ex-devotees.

Q: Do you have any kids?

A: Well, we divorced. A couple of years after we moved here, we separated, and then divorced. The relationship just didn't survive out of the place where we had come together. There were more complexities in that, the fact that we hadn't been physically close in all those years. We ended up having this platonic relationship. And heart changed, and although we ourselves were on the liberal extreme end of the movement, and didn't like the unapologetic rampant sexism in the Krishna movement, in fact since I was much senior to her in terms of years in the movement and status, there was a certain unescapable imbalance in power between us. And although we were consciously trying not to be affected by this sexist attitude, in fact we realized that our relationship was tainted by that. She was particularly aware of that, and made more aware of that. Just we couldn't relate to each other in a normal way, our relationship was too much constructed by -- we just couldn't get a relationship together after that. We realized that we were quite different. I was in the academic crowd, and that wasn't her thing. Later she went to school and got a masters, stayed on for a doctorate, she ended up being in the academic world. But I got involved in somebody, because we had no physical relationship. So that fell apart, and we left sadly, but with mutual respect. No bitter feelings.

Q: Did she go back?

A: No, not at all. I don't think she ever went back to a temple. A year since, I've taken -- maybe every couple of months I'll go into a local temple whatever. But she didn't want to see another devotee in her life. She'd had a particularly bitter experience in that her guru was one of the ones who fell away. She had worshiped him like he was a god, and then it turned out he was much less than that. Lots of scandals. So it broke her heart. Her spiritual faith was broken. There was a stronger bitterness in her, because of a feeling of being personally violated, in a sense. Not personally by him, but just having the core of her spiritual faith shattered. So I think she at some point didn't want to go back at all. And where I was, I would keep in contact a little bit with certain [unintelligible] ... She wanted nothing to do with anybody. And she eventually met somebody, and is in a long term relationship. They just recently moved

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

from the general area out to the West Coast. And we'd communicate every once in a while.

Q: So you went to Harvard Divinity School?

A: Yeah.

Q: What sort of degree did you get there?

A: An MTS.: masters in theological studies. The other M.A. level degree they give is the M.Div., which is a more theological, church oriented, Christian degree for people either going into ministry or church work, or some more general mainline Christian. The MTS. is an academic masters degree. And for me, my three years at Harvard Divinity was a great buffer between the Krishna movement and the real world, because it would've been a very harsh and hard experience just to immediately be dumped into the world and have to go find a job. And I'd been involved as a Krishna devotee with academic things for years, so it was an environment that I was already adapted to.

Q: So are you teaching now?

A: No. I graduated [unintelligible] ... while I was there, I was thinking of going for a doctorate and basically be a scholar in voodooism [?]. Decided not to do that. [unintelligible] ... the academic world wasn't quite what I wanted to do. I could do it. Those years, academically, went very well. I got good grades, I enjoyed it, I realized it's something I can do. But I realized that -- what happened is I took -- I fell out of writing. While I was in the div. school, I did a few writing workshops. And I realized that I had talent for creative writing. I had cross-registered over to B.U., done a few courses with Ellie Mezzel [?]. And shown him -- I had begun working on a book based on a journal I kept the last time I had gone to India, in '86. And I had started writing, working on a book based on the journal, and showed him some of it, and he liked it, and was very encouraging that I finish it. He spoke very positively about my writing, and that I should [unintelligible] ... become a writer. So he gave me the idea that I'd rather do creative writing in a personal voice, rather than academic-type writing, which was this objective oratorical tone. I realized that I had more personal satisfaction in writing autobiographically and personally than academically. [unintelligible] ... apparently [unintelligible] ... objectively [unintelligible] ... report on and interpret phenomenon. So I decided that I didn't want to be an academic, I wanted to be a writer. So in the school I finished the book, *India in a Mind's Eye*. And Mezzel got me an agent, who ended up being [unintelligible] ... but so [unintelligible] ... thinking, "I want to be a writer!" Because I could write fairly well, and I thought this was something I can develop, this is something I should dedicate myself to. This is what I do best, so do it. And the book wasn't published, and eventually I had to get a job and start making money. My parents had supported me while I was up at div. school. I had a mutual distaste for the whole work a day world. In all the years I've [unintelligible] ... I've worked very hard, it wasn't for a boss. And although I was in the movement and working for the cause and the organization, I was very independent. So it was a very hard adjustment, one I could not have made, to just start living somewhere and getting a job. So I ended up being an independent writer. An artist. But I did have to get a job, and I worked in, I did some paralegal work. The guy, a lawyer, my father said I should have a lawyer and do our divorce. He told me a year or two later, "Can you come help out in the office?" I think I had mentioned to him that I needed to get a job. So I ended up working as a paralegal, legal secretary for a couple of years. It was okay, I didn't like it, but it was tolerable. And then I started a two-year

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

program in massage therapy. That came up out of nowhere. But I'd always had an interest in psychology, and in healing. I had never considered body work, I had always thought I'd go to school and do a two-year M.A. level program in some kind of counseling. That's something I do anyway in my life, so why not use that innate skill, get some sort of degree and do that. So for awhile I was exploring various options in counseling. I didn't want to go back and do a whole Ph.D. in psychology and be a teaching psychologist. I wouldn't mind a Ph.D., I just didn't want to do more academia. And so I was checking out various aspects of trans-personal psychology and human psychology, and then I found a place -- and I put a lot of research into what the degrees are, and what are the hoops. In the course of that, a friend asked me to come with her to an introductory talk at the Muscular Therapy Institute in Cambridge, here. And the idea of body work began to really appeal. Therapeutic work, based in an awareness of the body's role in who we are, and the expression of the subconscious through the body. So they had a two year program in massage therapy, with an interest in the wider psychological implications of it. And halfway through the program I developed a really bad tennis elbow. Which I still have. Which I couldn't shake, and the massage was aggravating it, so I had to drop it. So there was another failed project. Around that time I started getting into photography. Now it's what I do most of the time. I'm not doing it professionally, I'm doing it as an advanced amateur photographer. I've done almost nothing but photography in the last almost year. And there's my enlarger there. This is really become my life. I delve very deeply into the world of photography. I'm not doing it as a career, I didn't get into it thinking, "I'll make money doing this." I just love doing it. But the stuff I'm producing, people are liking, and it's getting pretty good. Eventually, it would be nice to start selling prints, or getting paid for portraits, whatnot. So that's where it is now. I've been with a woman for the last 4 years. The divorce went through in '91, and I've been in a stable relationship for 4 years. She lives with me, and at this point she's supporting us. She works at Human Resources at Massachusetts General Hospital. So she's a breadwinner, I do the laundry, -- I'm the househusband. And I pursue photography. It's more than just even an art, it's a spiritual thing, which has to do with ways of seeing and modes of awareness. So I have very strong creative urges, and I'm glad I didn't go on into academia. So this is the same life, it's all about finding some kind of truth and some kind of authenticity, and some kind of more intense way of living, a higher form of awareness, just evolved in strange ways.

Q: How do you view your time with the Hari Krishna's?

A: With a mix of emotions. There was a period where I kind of lamented the fact that I spent so many years there. From a certain point of view, it's wasted time. But I rarely look at it that harshly. I think that the movement is a failure at what it's out to do. It fell far short of its own stated criteria for success. In retrospect, I lament the fact that the path that I chose, the path of explicit spirituality that it chose, was one that is so socially conservative, anti-intellectual, anti-woman. I've a certain sadness that I put so many years and time and effort into a path that essentially I don't approve of now. And when I think of how I might have otherwise used those years, if we can all do the last 20 years of our lives over again, we all come up with new ideas. But at this point, I have little personal bitterness, because I was not done in by anybody. I had a lot of freedom, and I wanted to be there. Though my thinking about the movement now is pretty critical, people have to follow their own path and their own way. So it makes no point in getting all hot and bothered about why did I waste my time? Sure, if I could do it over again, I'd do it very differently, I wouldn't join at all. But at the time that I joined, I was desperate for

Interview with Stephen Gelberg

Interviewer: Deborah Altus

December 4, 1995

something like ...

Q: We can be winding things up.

A: So that's how I feel about it now, very mixed. I have positive, happy memories. I also have negative memories, because my last several years in the movement were ones of growing frustration and sadness in seeing in what a negative direction it was going. It was where I placed all of my youthful idealism. And actually, there's a wound there. But I don't -- it's been 8 years, I think I've pretty much healed from whatever I need to heal from. I didn't have any extreme personal trauma the way many people in various groups have had. People who really were abused in various ways. Nobody abused me. So I don't know. I kind of laugh at it now, I think it's -- when I see devotees on the street occasionally, I think how silly and ultimately pointless it all is, although I acknowledge that different people need different things at different stages of life. Some people need the Hari Krishna movement for awhile. Materially speaking, I gained certain skills in the movement, everything from writing to public speaking, to traveling and seeing the world, so it wasn't a total wash out. I did grow. I came into my adulthood in that environment, and did have many interesting experiences, because of the nature of my work in the movement, I met a lot of interesting and important people in various fields. I've had introduction to the academic study of religion, which I ended up doing a degree in. I met a wife who I was with for 9 years. So it's not an insignificant, negligible portion of my life, it's a very important part of my life. But it's something I think about less and less. It's become a past thing. My experience of ex-members, the longer you're out, the less you think about the movement, you really move on with your life. Nowadays my life has virtually nothing to do with the Krishna movement. Every now and then I'll hear from somebody who I haven't talked to in years. Catch up or say hi.