

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

Q: So, Mary Ann Flood, Libre, November 4th, 2006. So I guess the basic question is how did you get connected with Libre?

A: Well, we talked earlier a little bit about my early connection with Buddhism. And just down the road from Libre about half a mile, is a small retreat center for solitary meditation retreats known as Dorje Khyung Dzong or DKD, which is easier. I would come down when I was director of the meditation center started by Trungpa Rinpoche that used to be called The Rocky Mountain Dharma Center and is now Shambhala Mountain Center. I would come down to visit some dear friends who were the caretakers of DKD. So I began to get to know some of the people in the valley. I was director of RMDC over the period where Trungpa Rinpoche died and then his successor took over and he died and the beginning tenure of Trungpa's oldest son taking over the organization. When I left the retreat center after that whole troubled phase I was flapping around the North American continent trying to figure out "What do I want to do?" and I kept coming through the valley as I ricocheted from the East Coast to the West Coast. One day I just realized that "Oh, I could live here." Sesame happened to be at the retreat, Sesame Fowler, and I said "Gee, do you know a place where I could find that's cheap to rent?" and she said "Well, there's this kind of abandoned house, Libre, and you may not want to stay in there it's really a wreck, but we'll go look at it." So she brought me over here (Libre) and we looked at the house and it was...un...yea it was a mess. It had just been abandoned for a couple years there. It was filled with rodents and just neglected. There was a ... community meeting that evening. We called Ken and said, "Would you mind having a tenant?" and he said, "No, that would be wonderful I want somebody to live in the house." That evening was a Libre meeting so I asked if I could stay in that house and it would be in the capacity of being a guest where you pay guest dues. Ken was always planning to come back to retire. So nobody knew me really and they said, "Oh, well I guess that's ok." And so what was going to be just a little base to figure out where I was move and could I make it here in the valley, 3 months went to 6 months went to several years and now I've been here 13 years. So I'm the first new member in 13 years.

Q: I think someone told me you're the President of Libre

A: Yes, now I'm the president (laughs).

Q: So let's see 13 years that's '93

A: Mhmm

Q: So you weren't here for the really crazy hippie days?

A: No.

Q: What was it like when you came here? Its peak population was around 35 or 40 so must have been down from that.

A: Right, it's pretty much who's here now so it was really only about 9 inhabited houses and there's still a couple of the kids here. Betsy's son Cole was still at home. The Fowlers, John and Star the two youngest were still at home. Pretty much it's the way it is now. You know the kids have gone off and are living their lives. It was really just a matter of beginning to connect with the community. We have some

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

very nice parties and there are couple Libre 30th's and 35th's that I was here for with three day parties that were memorable. Another thing that's so great is, because of people like Dean and Sybil with all their connections to the artists, there are so many cultural things that happen two or three times a year. Maybe a poetry reading or a jazz ensemble or a one act play things like that. Which I've always thought have been fabulous.

Q: So you've just now been fixing up the house, but you must have been working on it all along?

A: Yes, and the difference is my father passed away and I got a little inheritance. So the house over the years has spun wildly out of control. I could do a whole sitcom like "This Old House: The Hippie Parish." There was a week where a skunk was moving under the bathtub. Part of the floor boards had just fallen and it made a perfect little ramp. So there I was with a skunk in the house trying to figure out how to get it out without firing off. I would take my showers with the skunk under the bathtub. Finally what I did is I realized it would come out at night, you would hear it scratching around with its claws trying to go after the cat food. So I fixed where the hole was, I opened the door at night, I tied a string to the door knob, made a trail from the bathtub back out side and then sat there in the dark with my little sting on the door knob. When I finally hear munching out on the porch I pulled the door shut. I won I never got sprayed.

Q: That's good!

A: Yes! It was good I was very pleased! One time I had a bear in the house while I was in the house.

Q: A bear? In the house?

A: A bear in the house. That one year we had a tremendous problem with bears. I think what they were doing was capturing troubled bears in the city and dropping them off in the wilderness. So they were all used to compost piles and scavenging. So it was the middle of the day and someone had given me some New Yorker magazines, which I almost never have. So I was kicking back and laying on the sofa reading an article on, and this is true, Paranoia and I'm hearing a scratching in the house and I thought, "Oh my cat has brought something not quite dead inside." So then I look over the edge of the couch and there's the young yearling bear 6 feet away. I just rolled up the New Yorker and started pounding the coffee table and I realized I was treating it like a stray cat yelling "Get out! Get out! You're not supposed to be here!" while banging the magazine on the table. It just kind of looked at me it wasn't afraid of me at all. And then it slowly turned around it kind of ambled out towards the deck and while was just standing there I made my way to the door and shut it. My house has no opening windows and the only way to get air is to have the doors open. I went up to the door and I had bunch of shoes there and I just started throwing shoes at the bear. I hit him in the butt and he raced up the hill. Then about two days later he got into Sabilla's (?) garbage one of her famous dinner parties and then went up to Betsy's (?) and went through the screen door and threw up in her house (laughs) that was the bear story. Anyway! I got off track a bit because I had this money (inheritance) I have been doing some very badly needed repairs because it really hasn't had much substantial care going into the house and then. Pretty much everything in those early days was built with scavenged materials so the house is famous for being made

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

from 1 inch lumber and various scavenged things. So in terms with trying to deal with leaking roofs and new siding there's nothing to nail into. It's presented a lot of challenges and it had never been skirted in underneath so it made it very very very cold it can go down to 30 below. One of my first winters I had canned goods exploding because the electricity went out and a little wooden stove just didn't do it.

Q: And it's a pretty good sized house too.

A: Yes, it's huge. Two story and for instance the North side of house had never been insulated so I go that accomplished this year. It's been rugged and it's got an outhouse which is creatively designed.

Q: Open air right? I've seen it.

A: Open air, yep, it's sort of a triangle or pyramid thing. I call it the shit temple (laughs).

Q: When I first came to Libre I was astounded that people lived through the winter here with that thing. (laughs)

A: Yea well that's my...

Q: Your shit temple.

A: My shit temple (laughs). So this is the year that I've really been able to work on the house and the bathroom was detaching from the main house it had been put on much later and just never had a foundation. It had a very alarming tilt to it. There were major things that I managed to take care of. Now it's, I wouldn't say snug, but it's much better.

Q: I think I was in it early in your guest days.

A: I think you did come by yes.

Q: I think so because I don't think you were there even because Dean showed me around and I remember the little alter room for meditation and there were some Tibetan Buddhist things up. One thing I was struck by was this there where you could slide the bed out is that still there?

A: Well, some of those things I had to take out just for survival. You would have to talk to Sabilla about that. It was designed so that the bed would slide out onto the upper deck underneath that big oval window so you could sleep outside in the summer. It was also designed so that the very top of the roof it had two panels of plywood that would slide down the roof so that you open the roof. That was one of the areas in terms of leakage and the 4 by 8 portion of the roof that came off at one point. When I was like, "What am I doing here?!"

Q: You're still a pretty active Buddhist practitioner right?

A: Yea, I'm not since Trumpa died, like a lot of his original students we've tried to connect with other teachers and done a little bit, but nothing seems to take his place. Mostly what I do now is I try and every winter in the house a strict month long solitary retreat which I've managed to do many winters. That's what I've been trying to do with my life style why I wanted to be here. Because of the Libre it's

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

like well you are free to do what you want and I wanted to live more simply and lightly on the planet. I had lived so many years in this community that pretty much nothing phased me so it just kept working out for the kind of contemplate of lifestyle I've actually been trying to do. I've found that by simplifying my life more and more it's almost like I feel wealthier. I've done all kinds of funny little odd jobs while I was here everything from waitressing in the Mandela to working in the little station the little store, substitute teaching, housecleaning, and construction. Now the main things I've done are I collect native wildflower seeds. I spend most of my summers looking for the wildflower stands and then in the autumn I'm up in the mountains collecting. That's a major income source and in the last couple years a friend of mine who lives in Crestone we were part of an ecumenical health food community in Athens, Ohio. She had heard of a Mala making business for sale. Mala's are the prayer beads used in the Buddhist practice 108 beads. We've been doing that now for three years and that looks like it's going to create a nice little cottage industry as I get older before too long I'll be too old do the seed picking because, though it's wonderful, it's very vigorous you're bending and twisting for hours at a time and lugging big bags of plant matter around with you in a field.

Q: Would it be easy to use a two-wheeled cart to push up there?

A: Uhhhh no, you have to keep both hands going and there's a whole way of seeing so you'd want to keep it as simple as possible and just bring a couple of bags with you and you have to take them back to the truck and get fresh bags. It's rigorous but so in touch with the environment and the plants and the Greenhorns are the most beautiful mountains. So I spend a lot of time seed collecting and this year we had a mushroom growing that only grows under conditions that are only right once 5 or 6 years and just lots of big beautiful Belitus (?) and other some other kinds of wild mushrooms. So yea that's my lifestyle and it's very connected to nature and the contemplate of life, it's pretty solitary but I have the community of people here.

Q: Not to mention you have Libre plus the larger...

A: Yea, and it's a very interesting community Gardner and I really feel so fortunate that I worked in downtown Gardner because I learned everyone in the community I met all the Hispanic people as well not just the hippies. That has been very precious to me. It's a real community, my best friend Cathy, who I collect seeds with, her house burned down and the whole community... somebody found them a place to live, they had a coffee pot, people brought them plants, there was a carpenter, guys brought in tools and all within a week they had everything they ever needed and it tended to be better than what they had before. That's the kind of outpouring you can have in this community.

Q: You mentioned Crestone and I wondered about that, I know there are quite a few spiritual conclaves or whatever up there. Is that comparable to here?

A: Well it's something very unique going on over there. There's this wealthy couple, Maurice and Hannah Strong, and I believe his money was in oil. Somehow, I think she got involved in Tibetan Buddhism in someway. They wound up buying this huge grant of land.

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

Q: I thought she inherited that is that true?

A: Maybe she did that I'm not sure on. Anyway the wound up with this land which they developed and part of what they did, whether it's true altruism or just a brilliant sales technique, they gave 40 acre parcels to the teachers of the major traditions. There's Carmelite monastery, there's a Zen monastery, there's a Hindu temple, there are quite a few Tibetan centers there. They gave 40 acres to ...

Q: It that right ... is up there?

A: (indistinguishable)

Q: And Zoroastrians I think.

A: (indistinguishable). Yea, so now it's like all of the major wisdom teachers are regularly up in Crestone. There's not a lot in the way of facilities yet, but one of the Tibetan teachers has a whole center that they got built. A lot of the activities happen in this hotel that's sort of been turned into a conference center. There's three Stupas over there now. ... farmers over there which is now incorporated with the Zen setup. Tremendous amounts of spiritual activity. My first impression, when I went over there years ago, was that hopelessly flakey. Now the whole energy has completely changed because people are there to really pursue the spiritual ... and they're really dedicated. There are a lot of young people twentysomething's up there doing tremendous amounts retreat practice there's a lot of people up there in retreat cabins all through those mountains doing serious practice. You can feel it in the environment it's just really settled and has power coming from it.

Q: I guess that's pretty different from the Gardner area. I just remember there's a lot of spiritual activity.

A: There is but it's under the surface. I would say a great number of people in Gardner don't know I'm a Buddhist I don't make a big deal out of it, but you have the Native American tradition that's quite an active group. You got this little retreat center down the road that's been there for 30 years now and they have 8 retreat cabins and people are coming and going year round from all over the world, but they don't do programs it's solely a cabin with a kitchen and a couple to take care of you and that's it. Maggie next door has donated some of her land to a Tibetan teacher so that remains to be seen if that develops and you know people doing Tai Chi. I think that's a kind of a springboard from the 60's I think a lot of the people who end up in the mountains were looking for more of this spiritualistic lifestyle and then you had the people who were more politically active and tend to go more towards the cities. I think there's a lot of spiritual search and practice going on and I think part of that caring for one another, when you need it, like ... had cancer and people were there driving to his radiation and so when you need it. You can go for months and not see anyone, but when you need it people tend to really be here for you.

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

Q: Is it year round pretty much? I think of this as the latest in the year and the most wintery I've ever been here and this isn't bad, but I think 3 or 4 months out of the year people would leave.

A: I do notice that in the Winter, sometimes I'm the only person here. Maybe there is one other person, but people tend to go to Mexico or..(laughs) someplace warm. I tend to be here year round I don't leave much.

Q: In your own practice are you over at DKD a lot?

A: No, the way the organization has kind of morphed now, Trumpa's son is running it and it just never seemed terribly relevant I have contact there with some friends, but.

Q: You ever go up to Boulder?

A: Actually Crestone is where we go more, but I was in Boulder, for the first time in 8 years, a week ago. And I used to be there all the time, teachings and stuff, now it seems like it's a very much a solitary path that I'm doing. But I still find that what Trumpa talked about in terms of practice is so helpful. He's the only one who could really talk to westerners because I've had a lot of contact with Tibetan teachers who have come here and you ask them a question and you get an answer but it's not to what you asked. It just doesn't speak to you as an American and it's been very frustrating and it's been very lonely. On the other hand it's what really keeps sane by doing my retreat I worked my whole year around trying to do that and I do it February and there's nothing else going on. It's perfect and Sesame is usually my retreat master. I e-mail her if I need any food and she drops it off in the drive way so we have no contact and it works beautifully.

Q: I think Libre would be a pretty good place for that you can be about as private as you want to be.

A: Yes!

Q: What's your perception of , you've met quite a few of the second generation I mean Sabilla has one child right? What do you think their take on Libre is?

A: As far as I can tell they all just love it.

Q: They don't reject it as this stupid thing their parents did?

A: Well, you know I think there's some offspring that want some more comforts that they had here, but look at Dean's son Luce as just this fabulous creative young man and just Sesame's daughter was a high fashion model for a while and her son is totally into healing. The daughter who's now studying to become a doctor it's all quite astounding the kids all grew up together and they really look forward to seeing one another. My perception of the kids from that generation is that you think, "oh gosh considering what they saw wouldn't they be a mess?" They actually seem way saner and much more together and content with themselves as people than I was at their age. I think they're doing really great, but I haven't seen that much because the kids were pretty much gone and I would just catch them here and there. One of the things I loved was, I think it was our 30th birthday; it was a multi-generational art show. Which I thought was really fabulous. This is one of the things I really like, at the

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

Libre party you've got Saturday boogie which is just as good as it gets. You've got the art show and it's the kind of art you got here in the valley. Recently, I think in the last couple of years Linda Fleming has been selectively opening her house for people to come and do art retreats. Joan Anderson and Robert Spellman they were directors of DKB for many years and now they have bought 160 acres just down the road where they want to do an art retreat of some sort. They've both been at Linda's and Joan is coming last week the day after Sabilla's surgery and she's going to do another art retreat. You just see how valuable this is. You get a new view of precious all of this space and quiet and where you can totally get into, whether it's your meditation practice or your art or whatever, you have the support and the time and the undisturbed quiet to totally delve into your creativity or whatever. That's been just stunning, there have been several people who have done it there and talk about happy people. I kind of act as retreat master there, I make sure the house is sort of opened and the electricity is on and carefully check in, but not too often. "Do you need something; oh you're involved, later." That's been a real rich part of my involvement the past couple years. You get to be weighed in there on people's creative process. One thing we haven't asked is, you know we have evolved in our membership. We were kind of concerned about that because we were getting very conservative and nothing was changing for a long time. It just changed and what we have now is we've started including some of our kids as members. That was a problem because originally we said you couldn't be a member unless you lived here. Now we have many members who don't actually live here. People are all out there somewhere, but they come back. Anyway we started including kids who wanted to be members and the one thing that was most striking about them was that they were much more excited and devoted to the original premises of this place than the people who live here now. I like it because it's a check and balances thing if everything had to be 100% I knew these kids would ever vote for selling it off or dividing it up.

Q: I think having those members is really positive because I can tell you a couple horror stories. One of which I think you know they way Buffalo ended up inhabited by some real bad characters. And Rick was pretty creative and managed to kick them out and take it back over. Also, Earth people's park up in Vermont, you know wavy gravy's place up there 600 acres something like that got taken over by these bikers with guns who were just like "Open land? You're out of here."

A: Yea, that's the think with any kind of communal or even with the meditation centers. You get someone who's highly disturbed they can just rip the fabric of the community apart. It's just astounding.

Q: Yea, just dealing with one badly troubled person can just be devastating.

A: Our whole premise is that you can trust each other. Not to mess it up. Anyone could just tear it up. I had this friend and he was kidding in a way but he said, "This is stupid. This idea about consensus I'm never going to vote for anything." What we ended up doing was getting him really ripped, drunk or something during the meeting so he would vote so we could move on, but if he had been serious it would have been really hard. Because this is a member and he is saying no and if that's true then we have to accept that so we had to fake our way through it at times and that's not good either.

Interview with Mary Ann Flood

Interviewer: Tim Miller

November 4, 2006

Q: Tolstoy farms in Washington State they had that deal where it had to be consensus and there was one person who consistently interfered with the process. Eventually he found his few meager possessions on the highway.

A: And that's been the case here and there have been a few people who have been asked to...

Q: I would think so, you'd almost have to.

A: But what would get accommodated was pretty amazing. I mean you can deal with extreme situations and people will still just hang in there and sometimes it works out. Sometimes a person will fight and fight and fight. And it's just if that's their case then they shouldn't be here.