

A Love Letter to My Readers

Initially written as letters to my teacher in the privacy of my own journals, *A Lotus on Fire* has gone through many different edits and formats since I began the long process of writing my spiritual memoir. The original working title was “Love Letters To My Teacher,” and it began with “A Love Letter to My Readers,” until my first editor wisely suggested I just start with the moment of awakening that sparked the whole book.

Sadly, “A Love Letter to My Readers” ended up on the editing room floor. Still, I have been thinking of you, my reader, with every word, and every stroke of my pen. I have resurrected the letter from my “editing room floor” file, and share it now in the hopes it may entice you to read my book.

My Dear Reader,

Through the years, I have written many love letters to Thay. I have filled pages and pages of journals that have slowly taken shape in this book, revealing a love that cannot be contained in one body, one teacher, or any one relationship. As the words flowed through my pen onto the page, it began to dawn on me that these love letters are really love letters to myself, from the secret space of love in my soul.

Somehow it seems fitting to begin my story by writing a love letter to you, from my heart to yours, yet held in the great heart that holds us all. Perhaps somehow this letter will bridge the gap between the words on the page and the feeling of love being awakened in our collective hearts.

Love letters are meant to be read slowly, and savoured, to soak slowly into our minds and hearts so the sweetness can be fully tasted. Love letters should be treasured, perhaps tucked away in a secret place so they can be brought out and reread at those times when we most need to be reminded of the love that we already are.

If you can, I invite you to find a moment of quiet in the midst of your busy life. Perhaps make yourself a cup of tea or coffee. Close the door of your room or office, or find a quiet place outside in your backyard or a park. Turn off your cell phone and any other intrusions. Feel your body sinking gratefully into the surface of the chair or whatever you’re sitting on. Listen to the sounds around you. Feel the aliveness of your breath, in touch with the aliveness of this shared moment between us.

As the words from my journals have slowly been making their way onto the pages of this book, I have been thinking about you, my reader. I have found myself wondering who could possibly be interested in the stories of my life? I am a woman who plays many roles: a wife, a mother, a yoga teacher, a minister, a spiritual companion, a seeker and sharer of love. Who would want to read the intimate love letters I've written to the "teacher of my heart", full of my own struggles and insecurities, but pointing towards a love that somehow connects us all.

My story seems so much larger than just my own story. Thay, my teacher, would say our stories "inter-are." They cannot exist without each other. So this is a collective story of an awakening to an ever present, yet ancient formless love, that can slowly heal the sense of separation we feel from ourselves, from each other, and from our dear ailing planet. It is a simple yet intimate kind of love, the kind you feel when walking through a forest of trees quietly breathing together. It is also a sensual and passionate love, the kind you feel when your heart skips a beat as you look into the eyes of your lover. It is the love that surrounds and enfolds us in every moment, if we only have eyes to see and ears to listen.

In truth, I feel like I've caught glimpses of you, my dear reader, through the many moments and encounters of my own life. I've met you on the path meandering by the river as we both walk our dogs, our eyes connecting briefly as we silently acknowledge the love of our four legged friends. I've seen you arrive rushed and breathless to one of my yoga classes, gratefully settling onto your mat. I've watched as your breath slowed down, your face softened, until finally by the end of class that sparkle had come back to your eyes. I've seen the worried face you bravely show to the world, and wondered what lies beneath. I've seen the longing in your eyes for something none of us can quite define.

I've seen you in the faces of those who have left the church or temple or mosque you grew up in because it does not speak to the knowing felt deep in your bones. You know the power and mystery of a Love that cannot be contained in the brick and mortar of buildings and tradition. Perhaps you've had a direct awakening to God or Universal Spirit, or Suchness, or Love, and you no longer need or believe in the hierarchical structure that places churches and priests as intermediaries between you and the Source of Love and Life Itself.

I've seen you in the faces of those who have chosen to stay, yet still feel a sense of longing for something more. You've chosen to stay faithful despite the mass exodus of a whole generation no longer interested in the social programs or politics of church, and the seemingly empty words and rituals that do not speak to the

reality of your modern life. I've felt the restlessness in you that intuits where Spirit is leading, yet feels that your voice is not heard by those in authority who fear and resist change. I've watched in sadness with you as your aging palliative congregation dwindled until it was time to turn off the lights and lock the doors one last time. Yet something in your grieving heart knows that this is not the end, that the death of these man made structures is simply a transition to a new way of seeing and being. I've felt the loneliness of those who no longer have a church or spiritual community and have resigned themselves to their own solitary spiritual journey. I've felt your heart's longing for the company of others on the path, for sangha, for spiritual friends, and community.

I've seen the wounded look in your eyes because you've been hurt, abused or exiled by the rigid belief and structure of a church or spiritual community you entrusted with your heart. I've felt the weight of a patriarchal system that imposed its rules and beliefs without love or compassion. I feel the ache of your tender young heart betrayed by love, yet still longing for healing and belonging, and the innocent faith of your childhood. I've seen the "hungry ghost" look in your eyes as you continue to search endlessly for the perfect "spiritual community", partaking of the endless buffet of spirituality now available online, yet always feeling some spiritual indigestion from consuming too much, and not really tasting the truth. I've seen the faces of those who have given up on religion or God (whatever your concept of God), or feel like God or Love has given up on them.

I've seen you in the faces of those who feel like they live on the fringe of their church community. You don't quite fit in like the others who seem to fit like an old worn out glove. You cannot be labeled or stereotyped. Your soul cannot be contained in old forms and belief structures. I've felt your deep longing for silence amidst the noisy distraction of long sermons and classes, and endless discussions about nitpicky things that don't really matter. I've seen your face gazing longingly out the windows of your church, as the trees gently wave their branches at you, inviting you to a deeper wordless prayer. It is for you who claim the forest as sanctuary, the mountains as your cathedral, the earth as your home, that I share my story.

I've seen your face in those who have never attended church or been part of a spiritual community. Maybe you identify as "spiritual but not religious". Maybe you don't. I have seen you in the face of those with an "inter-spiritual" heart who cannot be confined to just one tradition. You sense the deeper truth that flows beneath the surface of all religions. Perhaps all of us are yearning for a simpler and more peaceful way of living, that doesn't make you wrong and me right.

I have seen your face in my yoga students, looking for an embodied spirituality that acknowledges and honors the wisdom of the body along with the inspiration of the mind. You long to feel the aliveness of each and every conscious breath as it invites you into a fuller participation in life. You want to feel the sacredness of the earth beneath your feet, the touch of spirit on your skin, the ancient knowing in every cell of your body. You sense the oneness with all creation, and at the same time you feel the cries and the last gasps of our precious planet deep in your soul.

I've seen you looking for a teacher or spiritual guide, someone who will take you by the hand and show you the way in our complex chaotic world. Are you ready for a spiritual companion who sees and accepts you exactly as you are with all your doubts and fears, yet lovingly challenges you to become who you were born to be? Perhaps this teacher will simply point you back to the love and wisdom in your own heart. Perhaps our teachers and spiritual companions come in many forms beyond the human form. Maybe if you simply slow down and take time to watch a cloud in the sky, or enjoy the fragrance of a flower, or really look into the eyes of a stranger, your true teacher might be revealed in the presence and gaze that perfectly mirrors the Love you already are.

Somehow we've forgotten that magical mystical Love of our childhood. We've lost our innocent eyes that help us see beyond the everyday. Maybe when you were a young child you felt a secret nameless longing that you never told anyone about. Maybe you still feel that longing. Maybe you don't. Maybe that secret longing has been repressed, or rationalized, medicated or even meditated away. Maybe the prayers and practices that used to have meaning have lost their shine. Maybe you've quit praying. Maybe you're not sure who or what you're praying to. Maybe you've never prayed. Maybe you're bored with a restlessness you can't explain. Maybe you're going through a "blah" night of the soul, or a dark night of the soul. Maybe you just don't care.

But maybe, just maybe, that longing is quietly bubbling away beneath the surface of your busy distracted life. It's still bubbling for a reason. Maybe you get occasional glimpses of it as you catch the colors of the evening sky, or come across a deer standing silently in the forest. It's a quiet intimate feeling, as if the colors of the sky were caressing your skin, the silence of the deer and the silence of the trees intermingling as one silence holding us all.

I've seen your longing reflected in so many faces including my own. I've seen you try to hide it and pretend it isn't there. I used to hide it too, distracted by all the things on my "to do" list, and never really giving myself time to explore this deep primal longing in my soul for something I couldn't even name. Then I met Thich Nhat Hanh. In one timeless moment, this peaceful Buddhist monk looked at me with eyes that seemed to see into the depths of my soul, sparking a fire of holy longing for the source of this love. This fire of longing has been both the energy for my practice and the practice itself. It's like a koan that can never be understood by my rational mind, but simply lived in a life surrendered to love.

I believe it's time to reclaim the power of longing and spiritual desire as a path to God, as a path to enlightenment, as a path of Love. It's time to honor the deep impulse woven into the depths of creation that reveals itself as the desire for union in the depths of the human heart. Perhaps as we share our stories and follow this longing, it will open the door to a deeper intimacy with everything and deeper understanding with everyone. Perhaps divine love is a wild and sensuous love that is way beyond our rational mind, and can only be felt when we let go of our ideas about each other, or who or what God is, and simply follow our longing back to its Source.

As you read my story intertwined with my intimate love letters to Thay, my heartfelt wish is that it will somehow ignite the spark of longing in your own heart for a more embodied kind of love that will transcend boundaries of culture, race, religion and politics. Perhaps this sensual spiritual kind of love is exactly what we need right now in our evolution. Maybe it's the only kind of love that can save our planet and humanity from its current path of fear and greed and nationalism.

I hope that you will feel the pure essence of love that Thay transmitted to me in one timeless gaze, trickling down through generations of both Buddhist masters and Christian saints and mystics. Although this book tells the story of a moment of spiritual awakening, it was really part of many moments of awakening and my secret sensuous love affair with Spirit. It began through a mystical relationship with Thay (Thich Nhat Hanh), but ultimately points us back to the vast web of loving relationships we all are. This secret love lives underneath the surface of life for most of us, until something or someone touches the spark within us that ignites the flame that awakens our heart. May this book be that spark for you!

Love & Light to all,

Vickie MacArthur