

The Gohonzon



When I was 16 and in high school -- 1967 -- it was obvious we were in for a cultural pounding from oriental religions. I was reading books by Allen Watts and D. T. Suzuki, and books of haiku were popping up in ordinary people's bathrooms.

When I graduated from high school, my mom gave me a Japanese kimono and a hookah. I don't know why, but there it was.

I had a summer job at Cedar Point amusement park, and I lived in the employee dorms there. Most the of the other kids were pretty rich, and all were older than 17 -- I had a fake ID and got in to places I didn't belong.

I took pains to appear outside my dorm room as often as possible wearing my kimono, as if it were a smoking jacket. I lit incense and let the smoke filter down the hall, hoping people would either think I was meditating or getting stoned. The music that summer was Sgt. Pepper and the Velvets' pink banana album. Everyone was doing things that a year before would have seemed frighteningly standoutish. Looking weird -- what everyone had dreaded all through high school -- was suddenly cool.

At Wooster I studied comparative religions, and hung mail order posters advertised in Ramparts magazine, of Meher Baba and Fritz Perls, and Laurel and Hardy in Arabia. Occasionally some swami would come to campus and tell everyone about the life

within -- we were all eager about it, in a midwestern way. It was a "dress like a cowboy, be a cowboy" mentality, and I cast myself as externally peaceful and mystically languid, and hoped to become that way inside.

Everybody smoked pot. Friends talked about quitting school and starting a "freak farm" commune where everyone could just groove, and we could get by eating lettuce and berries, and strumming guitars, and smiling impossibly broad smiles. We believed we really loved one another, and who knows, maybe we did.

I worried about the draft, but I saw it as a trap. I believed that somehow, the draft was an illusion of fear, like a wall of flame, that if one got super mellow one could just walk through unsinged. If I truly has cosmic consciousness, that would continue in Vietnam. Maybe it would even end the war, if enough soldiers were like me, spaced out and ego-dead. Maybe.

By January I was in a strange state, reading poems on the quad where I would just scream at people -- angry stuff laced with death and retribution , which should have been a tipoff that all was not nirvana in my head. The dean of men called me in and read me the riot act about my escapades with the Delta Delta Deltas. He said there was something wrong with me, that in his capacity as a professor of psychology and from his 25 years of experience as an officer in the Marine Corps, before his leg got cancer and had to be cut off, that I was all messed up. He said I was a masochist, that I needed help, and maybe then I wouldn't act so goddamn cocky.

That unnerved me. I didn't want for there to be anything wrong with me. I wanted to be free and beautiful, undamaged goods, unmarked and indifferent. That was what the wisdom of the east was all about, transcending the physical plain to get to a plain where nothing could get you. That's what pot was about, too. Sanctuary.

So a week or so later, my roommate Robert and I lit out. We packed our duffles and stole away. We hitchhiked all night in the direction of Cleveland, walking through the Amish country with

William Blake stars careening above us, and the pigs and cows grunting and lowing from the pitched shadows of barns.

In Cleveland we crashed in an RTC shelter, then walked the remaining miles to my half-step-grandmother's house. (She was my stepfather's stepmother, and he had a half-brother, so I always called Elsie, a downy-haired happy woman who doted on me, my half-step-grand.)

She took us in, and this would later cause her terrible problems with my mom, who never forgave her for helping me run away. Because of this, she wouldn't ever speak to my stepdad again – my fault. But Robert and I were ebullient -- we slept that night in the downstairs bedroom, the one Elsie's husband Frank had stayed in the last weeks of his life, wheezing with congestive heart failure.

In the night, Robert and I both awoke to feel as if a presence were in the room. We couldn't see anything, but we sensed a weight moving on the floorboards -- a heavy weight. It seemed to be standing next to my side of the bed, and I felt hands smoothing the covers over me in the dark. I realized later it was probably Frank Konieczkowski -- letting me know he didn't approve of his half-step-grandchild using his home as a launching pad to the mystic east -- and then tucking me in to sleep.

In the morning Robert and I contracted to deliver a driveaway car from a ramp in Cleveland, where it had sat after falling into Lake Erie during some undisclosed incident, to an apartment building in Santa Monica, 2395 miles away. The sparkling waters of Lake Erie had clearly taken their toll on the Mustang's functionality. I figure the car was worth \$16,500 before it entered Lake Erie, and maybe \$250 when it emerged again, whether that was one minute or two weeks later. After Robert and I drove it to Los Angeles, incurring over \$600 in repair costs along the way, even using used parts at every opportunity, I began to wonder about the intelligence of its owner, who otherwise was a brain surgeon.

We left at night, driving down through Columbus and cutting across toward Indianapolis. In Indiana it began to rain. Somehow, at Indianapolis, we made the wrong freeway turn and wound up

on the outerbelt. Robert fell asleep and I drove on, on a blue highway, as we headed down toward southern Illinois. Wipers slashing, bright lights glaring into my eyes, the excitement of our escape all impressed themselves into my consciousness, until, driving at about 70 miles per hour about thirty miles outside East St. Louis, I fell asleep.

I reckon that we traveled about a quarter of a mile with Robert asleep on my shoulder in the passenger seat, and me equally asleep in the driver's seat, before we skidded into the ditch and did the two-second turnaround, narrowly missing being squashed by a huge semitrailer truck that said P.I.E. on its side.

We both stumbled out of the car. I knew I had fallen asleep, but I was too abashed to say so, so I told Robert I just lost control of the wheel for a second. We coaxed the car back on the road, and noticed the muffler and tailpipe was still back in the ditch. Robert dragged the torn muffler a hundred yards and somehow reattached it below with a leather boot lace. We started the car and headed out again. It was rush hour as we passed through St. Louis.

The next two days are a blur for me. The rubber on the corroded tires began to flap hideously. Driving along at 70 mph -- the only speed anyone drove in those days -- I felt I was on a bike with a baseball card in the spokes, making those bad-ass glass-pack -muffler sounds. I also remember feeling there was something mystical about a sign we saw at one point:

Buffalo

89

Springfield

71

Our car was shredding. We lost our first tire around Joplin, and another in Oklahoma. We got off the road for repairs, holed up outside a little shop for the better part of a day while the owner scrounged up a suitable replacement -- only an inch smaller in circumference than the others -- and we were on our way again, lost -- driving down the dirt roads of a Cherokee Indian reservation. We felt halfway to the mystic east when, traveling southwest, we ran out of gas at the foot of a monstrous clay totem

pole.

We drove the immense distance in to Los Angeles, marveling at the palm trees and freeway bridges greeting us with hosannahs. My dad lived somewhere in the Vermont Avenue area, which we decided to avoid, so we drove straight to Hollywood, drove up and down the Sunset Strip, with all the billboards flashing the latest promo. I remember I saw billboards for Van Morrison, Lee Michaels, Van Dyke Parks, and Engelbert Humperdinck. We got out of the car at a place called the Psychedelic Supermarket, and poked around. Immediately, a convoy of marijuana dealers converged on us. We must have looked like Midwestern Manna in our plain blue jeans and T-shirts. What had been our hippie uniform in Ohio looked made us look like Mennonites on the Strip, where even the poorest hooker and spare-change procurer wore enormous flared pants made of some glitzy kind of upholstery material with metallic thread.

We had a smoke, and got into a conversation with an amiable fellow whose car had had its roof sawn off. He asked if we were interested in the wisdom of the east, and we looked at each other and brightened. You're damn straight we are, we told him. We hopped into his topless automobile and drove to an apartment building in Beverly Hills -- the poor part of town. Robert and I looked at each and unbrightened.

Inside, it was totally suburban. Everything was painted antique cream, with gold-plated doorknobs and those slatted French doors swinging into the kitchen. About twenty people were sitting on big pillows in the living room, set apart from the rest of the house by strings of beads dangling from the archway. Set before the double sliding doors of the balcony was a little, enameled black box, with odd things set on and in it -- a tomato, a ten dollar bill, a book of poems by Hugh Prather, and something that looked like a part of a dead animal, a tail maybe, and some costume jewelry and teacups.

Suddenly, everyone started chanting. *Na myoho rengue kyoh*, was the chant. The fellow in the car had told us that chanting was how people focused their karma and shaped their lives they wanted to

go. People had wooden beads that they fingered, and they kept intoning the phrase in a droney sort of way. Robert and I looked at each other, alarmed, and slowly sunk to the floor and started making lip movements, but no sound.

I wasn't sure what was happening, whether this was bogus or not. I did so much want not to get caught up in anything cultlike or insulting to my individuality. The people here were talking about the little medicine cabinet, called a *gohonzon*, as if it were the repository of all their dreams.

One woman said she had chanted to relieve her aching joints, and it worked. Other testimonials followed. One man said he had chanted to get a girl to go to bed with him -- and it worked! Another was chanting for a better job -- and things were definitely looking up, he said. Another chanted to inflict terrible pain on his ex-wife and avoid alimony payments -- and she came down with a pretty bad bladder infection!

Finally, the guy we came with said that he had been chanting for a great new car, and that day, driving by a showroom, he had seen it -- a Buick LeSabre, 1967, cream colored, a real beauty.

That was Robert's and my cue to get up and leave. We smiled, bowed, and headed backwards toward the door.

We were startled by the materialism and the venality of the chanters. It was all about getting stuff, no different from Ohio. We had headed west to find east, and found ourselves right back where we started,