

FROM POLITICS TO LOVE

by Maxwell Reif

New Humanity Publications

From Politics To Love

my coming to Meher Baba

(told as an autobiographical short story)

by Maxwell Reif

New Humanity Publications

© 1985

FROM POLITICS TO LOVE

Maxwell Reif

I

John Boman had never learned anything about love. It was odd, he felt during the confused years of his coming of age, that love was the one thing you heard most about as a child and least about as an adult.

He had gone to the library once and looked up "love" in the card catalogue, and found only one book. True, the word was bandied about in the adult world, but always connoting something like the romance of Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton or some other supposedly scandalous affair of passion, or, less frequently, Christian Love, which seemed somehow emasculated the way most people described it.

Where the words spoken, read, treasured about love when he was a child had gone, he had no idea. He did not know how old he had been when people had stopped speaking seriously about the subject, or when he had realized that what adults taught to children they usually didn't fully believe or practice themselves. These awarenesses had dawned slowly, as he came out of his high school years like an animal or a primitive man coming from total darkness to a dawn, at least, of seeing his surroundings for what they were.

Fairy tales and what they had stood for, the early world half immersed in dream and myth, still lived, but were obviously regarded by the adult world as mere sentiment and fancy. No one ever spoke of such things seriously, but in the most ungarded momentss and then poorly, as though trying, without success, to connect up with ~~his~~ original thoughts.

Many were the times when John himself had stayed up late with friends, until the hour when the tongue is said to loosen and conversation

to flow more easily from the heart, only to find in himself nothing but a great blank which he would try to cover over with facial expressions that gave others a sense of his understanding something.

In college, his sense of comfort in the adult world began to change. He began to feel an emptiness where before he had been aware of fullness. Before he had been somewhat satisfied with the world he was entering. He had felt nothing lacking. Now, suddenly, it was as though somebody had drained the cup of his life's meaning while he was not looking.

The beginning of his feeling of emptiness was the beginning of his craving for love, his quest to find what he had always assumed surrounded him, but now was so conscious of lacking that he had to begin looking for it anew, like a cripple learning to walk.

The nadir of his growing despair was his physical abuse by officials of his own university for the "crime" of trying to get into a school function after having forgotten his ID card. This had shocked him greatly, opening up a vein in his being that had been searching for expression, a vein of negativity. He moved into a life of protest against the Vietnam War, political and social conditions the world over, and racism, things that he actually knew very little about but pretended an instant education on. The vein of hate that seethed within him seemed to almost magically create its own environment of expression, so naturally did it flow into all that was developing in the world around him at that time.

There followed a year in blue jeans and work shirts, standing near the young men with

bullhorns at political demonstrations and feeling his heart cheered by the large numbers of people who would congregate at this or that anti-authoritarian rally.

In the spring of that year, Martin Luther King and later Robert Kennedy were assassinated. It was a field day for the bile in him that masqueraded as social concern. Inwardly, he felt glee when the news reported "roving bands of Negroes" walking the streets of every large American city, supposedly destroying everything in their paths. The foreshadowing of apocalypse mirrored the yearning in his heart that the whole world, erected upon foundations of falsehood and fear, might meet with destruction, that glass-walled buildings might go flying into one another, that conflagration might devour city and suburb, that prolonged famine might do some good, wiping out populations that did not really deserve to live.

Yet, even his indulgence in this hatred did not make him happy. In the midst of his activities, his frantic banding together with others against still others, a terrible loneliness often still possessed him. For this loneliness he could find no cure in politics or rebellion, just as he had no longer been able to assuage it through blind conformity. One night during the seeming halcyon days of "The Movement," he went down to a great square in the city where a huge metal sculpture by Pablo Picasso had just been dedicated. Across the square on the other side of the great piece of bronze sat a young woman, alone. He wished to approach her, but could summon neither courage nor words, and so went home, masking his despair to himself as well as he could.

Spring, and the new energy it brought to his world, was the end of the rope. His involvement in "the revolution" could not save him. Retreating for months to his bed after the break-up of the first real love affair of his life, he fantasized away the days and nights in a web of self-pitying sentimentality. Daydreaming feverishly and comfortably in the womb he had created, he hated himself, his apartment, the very town where he had spent the last two years having his life bled away from him by the university. When June came, he left, vowing never to return.

But somehow his ennui went with him. At the school to which he transferred in the fall it popped back up one day. It happened only a few weeks after his arrival on the new campus. He was standing outside the school bookstore one afternoon, about to enter, when another student, a young man named Paul whom he knew slightly, pulled up at the bookstore on his bicycle.

Instead of saying hello to Paul as he had intended, John suddenly felt an inexplicable fear, a wetness of the palms, and a nervous disorientation from his whole world-perspective.

From that day on he lived the re-creation of his earlier hell. This time there seemed to be no escaping.

In desperation he considered and rejected going to visit a counsellor. Instead, he bought some LSD one day, an easier choice, and soon afterward took it, hoping to open up his clogged mind.

The drug seemed to do that, but falling back into despair again after several days, he had no recourse but to buy some more, and

he took it again two weeks later. Before long, his desperate need to find a way out of himself had created for him a drug habit. It grew more and more difficult to get back any semblance of mental balance between psychedelic experiences. He felt a constant rush of energy for several days after each trip, but then it would fade and the "scales" return to his eyes.

One day a horrible realization went through him. It said, "All your energy is only because of LSD." He knew he had developed a psychological addiction to the drug, but the revelation was, like all the pills of truth he was being handed, too much for him to face. He continued his pattern and found himself expelled from school for disruptive behavior. A new rationalization hatched in his mind, that life would be better in the country, where there were no professors to bother him.

But on the farm which then materialized as a community, being started by a student whose family owned some land in upstate New York -- just as the world of political ferment had previously materialized around his inner negativity, all his actions almost immediately caught up with him. The energy that had been flowing within him ebbed away completely. He tried to recapture it again with drugs, but only found horror. An empty shell, a living dead man, he spent most of his time at the farm sitting alone in dark closets, avoiding the other residents.

Eventually, he returned to his parent's house and continued living his second childhood there for a year.

II

Shortly before he had left the Florida college he had been walking with a friend on a mist-shrouded

Saturday morning, on the way to breakfast at the school cafeteria. His friend was carrying a newspaper and read aloud as they walked a short article proclaiming that a man in India who said he was God had died the day before. The man's name was Meher Baba. He had been silent for over forty years, the article said, and had said that he would speak before leaving the earth.

"Did he speak?" John asked.

"It dosen't say he did," said the young man with the newspaper.

It had been intriguing to hear of a man in the modern world who said he was God. The man's silence made him even more intriguing. Momentarily, the little newspaper story had captured John's imagination.

An odd thing had begun to happen after that. On the farm, during John's death-deep depression, a traveller who had once visited the Florida school showed up one day. He had with him a poster of Meher Baba, a large yellow sheet of paper with a caption underneath that said "DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY!"

When John had seen what Meher Baba looked like, he had to laugh, even through his depression. In the picture, Meher Baba was about sixty or sixty-five years old, with greying hair and an enormous moustache like the film comedian Jerry Colonna. And he was smiling, beaming like nobody John had ever seen before. What could be so amusing to him, John wondered? It was as though there was a secret to all existence, a joke hidden somewhere, and this man had gotten the joke.

Not to be outdone, however, even by a man who said he was God, John innocently, but arrogantly covered up the words of Meher Baba underneath the poster with his own words. The

caption he made had Meher Baba now saying, "You laka some nice cheese?" and John had hung beside the poster a large provolone cheese that the father of one of the other farm residents had brought that day from the city.

John had been very pleased with himself, because to him, Meher Baba looked uncannily, not like God, but like the carefree proprietor of an Italian delicatessen.

Then John heard another strange thing. He heard that his friend Eldon Frank, who had informally headed the radical movement at his first university, had become a disciple of Meher Baba. He heard this on a short visit to his old school in the middle of his period of depression. It had happened in California, apparently.

The last thing John had heard directly from Eldon had been a postcard he and his roommate had received several weeks after Eldon had left their university world in disillusionment. The post-card, written on a beach in Mexico, had said "Truth is metaphysical, not political."

A strange peace had radiated from that card. And now this new piece of news about Eldon. There was definitely food for thought here, but he, John, did not know what to think.

One other incident had occurred in relation to Meher Baba. During the "winter of his discontent," before the spring when he had gone on a brief journey in spite of his depression, to his old school, a carload of comrades from the farm had come by his parents' house one afternoon. They were on a journey from the east coast to California. John's parents, coincidentally, were out of town.

One of the young men from the farm had with him a book of the discourses of Meher Baba. John asked to see it. He thought he might find something

about love, the subject he had sought education on unsuccessfully in the library catalogue years before, and which his heart now desperately craved. For the person who had brought Meher Baba's poster to the farm had said that Meher Baba's followers, called Baba Lovers, who were the most hospitable people to stay with when one was travelling, believed that Meher Baba knew everything there was to know about love.

John took the book of discourses and turned eagerly to the one entitled "Love." But he was disappointed. It was as though the meanings of the sentences were veiled from him, though they were all in plain and simple English. Looking at the page he got an immediate sensation of wanting to go to sleep, as though those words were driving him away.

The friends from the farm left, and John thought, "perhaps I'm not ready for Love." But since he could do nothing about this if it were true, it rolled in the ocean of his mind and was soon buried by waves of other things: rationalization, television and food, and the terrible feeling of being doomed.

III

During the year he spent at his parents' house, John found himself more or less "condemned" to see a psychiatrist. Had he had his own choice in the matter he probably would have simply chosen to hide. Inside himself he believed very deeply that drugs had seriously damaged his brain, probably for life, but he was constrained, living in his parents' house, to go along with their concept of the proper course of action. The visits to the psychiatrist were his "tickets" to living in their house without

demands. There was a certain luxury about living in the almost pre-natal ease of the environment, just when most people his age were pushing on to adulthood, that John admitted in moments of honesty to enjoying. Indeed, most might, probably would, prefer to remain s taken care of, had not demands of life forced them to grow up.

But in John's case, too, as in all human situations, something beyond the person himself was leading him to an everturning but indiscernibly slow spiral of change. Something was pushing him on, even as at the height of an ice age, deep within the glacial masses, the thaw is already beginning. That something was pushing him on because life, as it was for him, though comfortable in a way, was intolerable. Man is not permitted to return to the myth of his childhood, pleasant though that myth may have been, and there is always a string, a thread, leading him out of the morass or plateau or plain of his present situation.

The psychiatrist's name was Dr. Walters. He was a tall, harmless, even friendly-looking man of about forty, with a short crew cut that augmented the boyish atmosphere of harmlessness, and given to wearing dark blue suits. John saw him weekly in his office in the central city near to park. John talked about everything under the sun, although he had already decided inside that no amount of talking could help him. He waited for the doctor to find this out, hoping still against hope that he was wrong.

After several months at the city office, the doctor moved to a new location in a small shopping center's office building in the suburb where John's parents lived. On a pleasant spring afternoon on one of the first visits at this new office, the doctor took John into a cheerfully yellow-walled group conference room, rather than his regular

consulting room.

"I have some news for you," were the doctor's first words when they had gotten settled. The yellow sunlight streamed in. John deliberately restrained himself from sitting forward expectantly, and waited, leaning back against his chair.

"You do not have a problem that can be helped by talking therapy," the doctor said. "Your problem is a cyclical manic-depressive illness caused by a chemical imbalance in your brain."

John was relieved by this diagnosis, at the same time as he retained some mistrust.

"But I'm never manic," he said.

"Your illness is in a depressive phase," said Dr. Walters.

"Does it work that way?" John asked. He had never heard so, and was under the impression that what was called manic-depression involved rapid mood swings.

"Sometimes it works this way," said the doctor.

"What can we do?" John asked, feeling an almost overwhelming tendency to trust the sincere and simple appearance of the doctor as he spoke.

"Thanks to modern medical research," the doctor replied, "We have an excellent treatment. It is called an anti-depressant pill. They have only come out on the market in the last twenty years."

John thought for a moment about all he had heard in the last several moments.

"Are you telling me I'm not responsible for my problems?" he finally asked.

"Yes," said the doctor, simply. "You are not responsible. Manic-depression is a chemical illness, as I said."

John felt peace descend over him. This meant

there need be no more tortured worrying in the middle of the night about what he had done wrong, or where "reality" was when he talked with old friends and felt like he had no brain. He could just forget all of that until the pill worked, and then after that, too.

The doctor gave him instructions on how to take the little orange pill, which he now produced. He said that it had to build up in John's bloodstream, and it would be a week or two before it had any effect. John looked at the pill in the doctor's palm and wondered how something so small could be invested with such power. Then he remembered the LSD, and that put that question aside.

The two of them shook hands and the doctor smiled in a friendly way. John bought himself an ice cream cone without guilt in a store in the shopping center, and went out into the world's pure spring sunlight. He drove home in the sweet radiance of that light to share with his parents the news that he was not responsible for his problems.

The next six months were a vacation. John took the pills and enjoyed, most of the time, a pleasant oblivion from thought. He indulged in the sensory pleasures of his small world, accepting the verdict that he had nothing to do with his condition. The doctor tried one variety of anti-depressant pill after another when the first one failed to produce results, always reassuring John that it was just a matter of finding the right chemicals to counteract his form of the illness.

At last, one morning John found that one of the pills worked. It happened quite suddenly. Upon arising he found that instead of having no energy he had plenty of energy. Cautiously, he tried being around people, and found that now that was all right, too. He was no longer plagued

by the terrible sense of there being something wrong.

At his next visit to the doctor, his first words were, "Well, I'm fine now." They congratulated each other. John began to celebrate, spending time with old friends and new, talking until early morning and feeling that he could go all night, eating and playing music with people day after day.

Though he occasionally found himself concerned that he might have too much energy now, his enormous change gave him a sense of being "saved," of having had a kind of religious experience. Words from songs and scripture that he had never understood, such as "Once I was blind, but now I see," made sense to him. He felt he partook of their meaning. For the first time in his life he began to read books on mysticism, for the chemical models that explained what had happened in his brain had nothing at all to say about what had happened in his mind.

How odd it was that chemistry had led him to investigate for the first time in his life, the nature of God.

IV

When the pill worked it was Christmas time, exactly a year since he had come back. Many people he knew were visiting their families from out-of-town colleges, and he renewed many old acquaintances.

But after several weeks of this he began to feel as though his exuberance was so great it could not be contained by one city. When this longing reached its height, he took another trip back to Chicago, the location of his first university. It was January, 1971.

In Chicago, amid the continuation of his feasting, drinking, and merry-making, he crossed paths with Meher Baba again. But now it was not so willingly. Meher Baba's poster had said "DON'T WORRY -- BE HAPPY!" Fine! Now he was happy. And now this smiling man appeared as a threat who could ruin that happiness. He did not know why that was. Perhaps it had something to do with Eldon Frank. Friends said Frank was back living in town. They said he was still a disciple of Meher Baba and was working as an advertising writer. Some of them had books with that now-familiar name, Meher Baba, tucked away in their libraries, books that Frank had given them once.

John suddenly wanted nothing to do with either Master or disciple. Was it because Frank did not seem to make sense? What was the former radical doing working in an advertising agency? One girl said she had seen him on television selling laundry detergent. All of their old friends thought he was crazy. He wore suits every day and they hardly saw him. It had only been two years. What could it mean? How could he have changed so much? John heard people making fun of Frank, laughing at him, but always with an edge of nervous self-consciousness.

Because of the uncertainty he felt whenever Frank's name came up, Frank was the only one of his former acquaintances whom John did not call.

V

Everything remained jolly and fine in Chicago until one night when John came back to the apartment where he was staying after one of his late-lasting outings of laughter and entertainment. He was in love with life these last days. He

loved the apartment where he was staying and the two girls who lived there. He loved the narrow metal-frame bed they had loaned him, beside the silver radiator that sat under a cracked window-pane in the anteroom between the living room and the kitchen on which the ice outside made frosty and beautiful designs. On this night he looked quickly at the room, taking in the warm yellow glow of the light, then quickly switched it off, got in the snug bed and went to sleep.

In the middle of the night he had a dream which shattered the complacency he thought he had found in his life.

He was in the men's locker room of his high school, sitting on a bench in front of a row of lockers.

All of a sudden, all the members of the Athletic Letterman's society of his school, the Tribe, began snaking into the locker room in a "Dance Macabre." There must have been eighty to a hundred of them. The dance was as though to a Beat far below the surface of life, and the room was animated by a weird, fiery glow.

The Lettermen snaked into a ring around John, none of them saying a word or looking at him with any recognition, and for no reason that he understood, attacked him.

Their actions were eery, ritualistic, not human, and he had become their totem, their scapegoat. Their actions gathered aggressiveness as their sense of his helplessness grew. At last, their rain of punches left him in unconsciousness.

When he awoke, John was lying on the floor in the center of the locker room. He realized that at every point, his flesh contained an

intense pain.

Looking about the room, he found that a doorway at the ceter of one wall was open, and crawled, using all his strength, to that doorway.

The doorway opened to the outdoors. The sky was a beautiful blue, the birds sang, and the trees were alive with fresh, green leaves.

As he held himself up at the doorway, a friend of John's walked by, a tall, darkish fellow with glasses and a minor speech impediment. This friend was a member or the Letterman's organization, but walking by now he was merely a pleasant and good-humored fellow.

John opened his mouth to speak to his friend, to communicate the atrocity that had befallen him. But not a word would come out of his mouth.

Deep in the nightmare, which was of an intensity far more real than anything in ordinary waking life, John had wanted to escape. Through a superhuman effort, he had roused himself from the dream. He had sat up amid familiar objects, seen the radiator, the frosted window. And then he had been pulled down by a mighty Hand, back into a reclining position and back into sleep and the dream, which continued at exactly the same point where it had left off. There was nothing John could do to resist this Hand.

"LOOK!" a silent Voice seemed to be saying. "YOU MUST PAY HEED! THIS IS YOUR LIFE!"

He had witnessed the rest of the dream, and when it was over, the Hand let him up. He was awake, his face was sweating. He knew all was not as secure as it seemed in the house of his soul -- possibly in the world, as well, he thought. He stayed awake for awhile, now that the happy-go-lucky veneer of his life had been shattered, and he wondered what would happen next.

VI

On what was to be his last afternoon in Chicago, John was sitting in the living room of the apartment when the phone rang.

"Is this John?" asked a friendly voice.

"Yes, it is," said John. "Who is this?"

"Eldon Frank," said the voice.

"Eldon!" John said after an embarrassed silence, during which he hoped that Eldon hadn't found out that John was avoiding him.

But Eldon made no reference to that.

"I heard you were in town," he continued,

"And I'm very happy."

They talked briefly. John felt there was something unusual about Eldon's voice, but couldn't put his finger on it.

"Will you come down and visit me at my office tomorrow morning?" Eldon finally asked.

John saw no harm in it, even though he had told himself he would not do anything with Eldon. he simply made a new vow, to steer whatever conversation might develop, away from the subject of Meher Baba.

As he hung up the phone, John realized that what was unusual about Eldon's voice was that he was the first person John had ever talked to in his life who had really been listening one hundred per cent.

The next morning he took the El downtown and walked from the stop to the Prudential Building, where Eldon had said his office was on the twenty-third floor. He mused on what two people who hadn't seen each other for two years would have to say to each other, and on how to keep the conversation away from Meher Baba.

In the reception room of the large advertising

agency, John ate a large apple from a wooden bowl while waiting for Eldon. Then his friend appeared at the doorway that led into the suite of inner offices. Eldon's smile was as broad as when it had been his trademark on the college campus, sometimes seeming about to burst his face. In fact, the smile was exactly the same, but now it was surrounded by groomed features and a nice-looking suit.

After a warm handshake he followed Eldon down the corridor. Three doorways down, his friend went into the office on the left. It was only a bit larger than a cubicle, John saw on entering himself, with a desk and a chair and another chair against the far wall. But what struck John's attention was a poster of Meher Baba on the wall behind the desk. The poster was on the same kind of yellow paper as the one at the farm had been, but instead of a smiling Italian delicatessen owner, Meher Baba presented the face of a twenty-five or thirty year-old man with long dark flowing hair, a wisp of beard under his moustache, and eyes that seemed to possess the sensitivity of a deer in the woods.

Under the photograph was a different caption. The caption's heading, in large capital letters, read "I AM THE ANCIENT ONE." In smaller letters below the heading were the worlds, "I was Rama, I was Krishna, I was this one, I was that one, and now I am Meher Baba."

John sat down in the chair opposite Eldon, who sat at the desk, and found himself face-to-face with Meher Baba.

There was nothing he could do to keep his vow to avoid the subject. "How does he get away with it?" he thought, wondering what the other people at the agency thought of Eldon's strange poster.

But out loud he said, simply, "Do you believe Meher Baba is God?"

At last all the rumor and suspicion would be

cleared away. Eldon sat before him to answer in his own words.

"Yes," he said simply. "Meher Baba is God in human form."

John thought he felt the atmosphere in the room deepen. From nowhere, it seemed, questions began coming into his mind.

"But what about Jesus?" he asked. "What about others? Weren't they God in human form? Why is he so special?"

Eldon replied again in simple words.

"Meher Baba says that everyone and everything is really God. But there are a few souls only who are consciously aware of this divinity. Of these souls, whom Baba calls "God-Realized," there is one who comes back to earth every seven hundred to fourteen hundred years to awaken the rest of humanity. This soul is called the Avatar, or Christ. That is who Meher Baba is."

So that was what the poster meant when it said, "I was Rama, I was Krishna."

"Who else was he besides Rama and Krishna?" John asked.

"Baba said that in our recorded history he has been Zoroaster, Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, and Mohammed."

"Every culture and tribe has the myth of the Avatar," Eldon continued softly. "These are just the ones we remember."

"So there is such a thing as reincarnation," John murmured.

"That's right," Eldon said. "Baba says the soul goes through evolution, reincarnation, and then 'involution,' which is the journey back to God."

One thing was becoming clear, at least. There was no craziness about Eldon. He was simply himself, and his words had a consistency

and wholeness that seemed not to have any gap about them.

"Why didn't Meher Baba speak before he died?" asked John, voicing a thought that had popped into his head.

"Different people believe that he meant different things when he spoke of his Word, his speaking," Eldon said. Many people believe that he has spoken, inwardly, and that is the reason for all the spiritual activity going on nowadays."

The words were strange, but John did not feel that they were necessarily untrue.

He paused to consider what happened thus far in this amazing conversation. He had not planned to ask anything, yet no matter how deep were the questions, Eldon had fielded an answer from Meher Baba. The words did not seem to be merely contrived or recited. John got the feeling that Eldon was not trying to persuade him or cajole him into anything, but merely to provide information that was asked for. Eldon never went any further than to answer precisely the question that was asked.

"Where is he now?" the worlds slipped out of John's mouth almost as an afterthought, without any effort. Eldon looked at him and smiled. Suddenly John felt something in the room. It was a presence. The presence began to grow. It grew and grew until it included everything.

John looked at Eldon. Eldon was still smiling at him.

Suddenly he understood. The presense was Meher Baba! The room had filled up with this Substance that now contained both himself and Eldon, and everything else in itself, and the Substance was Meher Baba! He did not have to be told! Suddenly he felt on intimate terms with the Substance, as though they had known one another since before the beginning

of Time. He had always been a part of It, and always would remain so.

But there was an intimacy that made this presence more than a Substance! It was delightful! He felt as though he was being cradled in the arms of his own grandpa! Meher Baba was like a grandfather and a grandmother, a father and mother and a brother and a friend and a lover all in one. Together the three of them -- could he say three? -- bathed in the warmth of their Oneness for what was certainly many eternities.

Meher Baba not only loved them but was them! For a long time, John and Eldon and that Love that he had always sought, Meher Baba, remained together in the room, merged in a single infinite Grin.





