

MOUNTAIN FIRE MOMMA

*One Woman's Story of Wildfire,
Family and the Zen of Survival*

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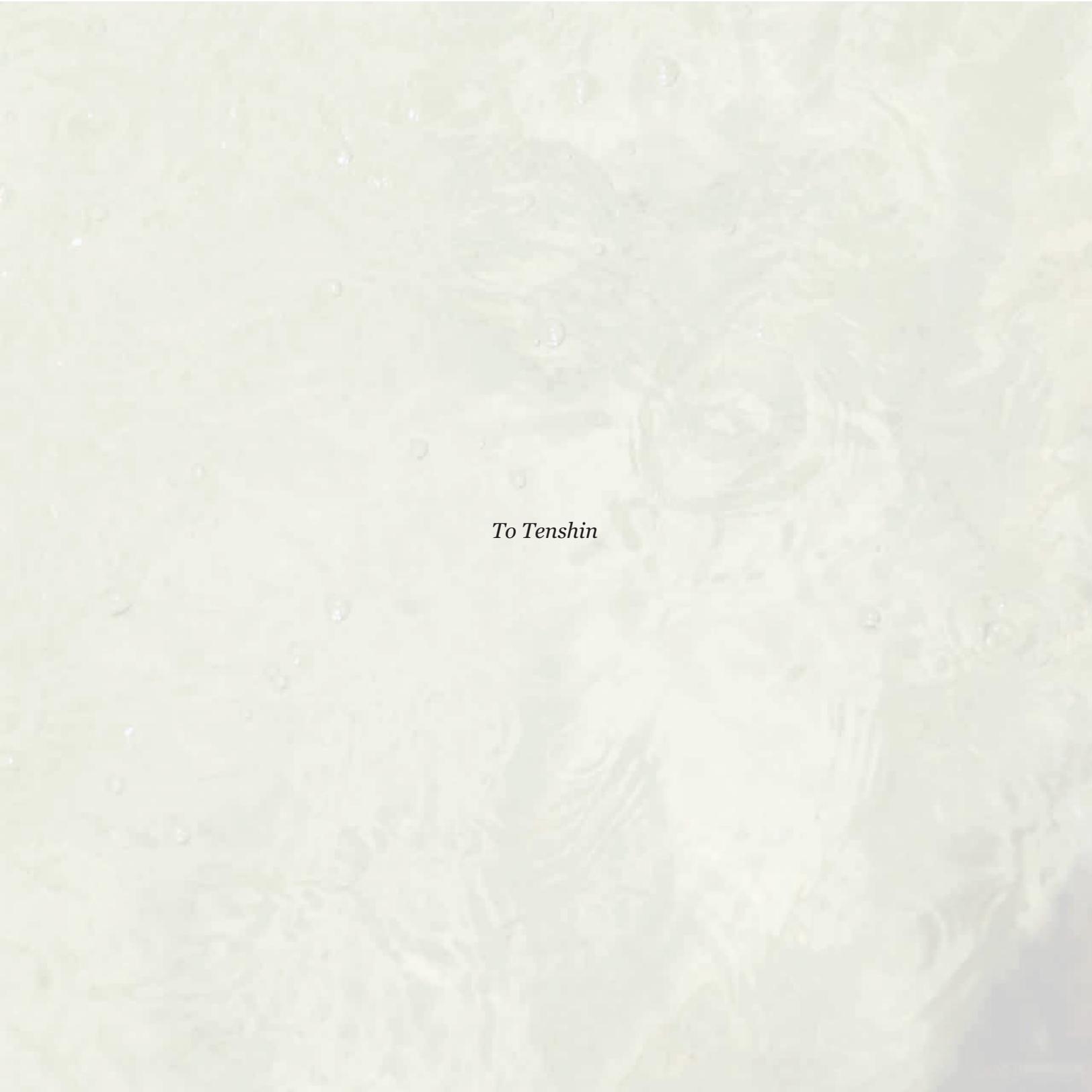
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To Tenshin

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"EVERYONE WANTS TO BE AT HOME! AT HOME IN THEIR OWN SKINS...
AT HOME IN THEIR OWN LIVES." -CHARLES TENSHIN FLETCHER, ROSHI



IS OUR HOME GOING TO BURN? WILL ANYTHING BE LEFT OF THE FOREST SURROUNDING OUR HOME? Will the World Buddhist Training Center still stand for future generations? Will the two cedar pines with the Buddha head between them last for three hundred more years? I am a mother in this Buddhist Place. I am a woman in this place. I am a lover in this place. I am a worker in this place. I am a meditator in this place. I am. I want to be here for a lifetime. This is my favorite place in the whole world! Home! The flames flow forward and then the floods flow as freely as fate.



The Mountain Fire rages behind Tahquitz Peak (Photo by Gina Genis)

Thousands Evacuated as Calif. Mountain Fire Rages

*...Evacuation orders remain in effect for the
22,800 acre fire that has burned since Monday*

A wildfire in the scenic San Jacinto Mountains spread to within two miles of the Southern California resort destination of Palm Springs Thursday, covering more than 35 square miles and prompting more evacuations.

By its fourth day, the Mountain Fire had scorched 22,800 acres and destroyed 23 structures, including seven homes. Some 6,000 people have been ordered evacuated from the blaze, burning about 100 miles east of Los Angeles.

Area residents, meanwhile, dealt with the fear of losing their homes. The nearby town of Idyllwild looked like a ghost town after it was evacuated Wednesday night.

“It’s grown into a monster that we haven’t seen before,” said San Jacinto Valley resident Ralph Savory, who was packed up and ready to go if deputies ordered him to evacuate. “We’re waiting for the word. Got our cars packed. All we got left is us and our dogs.”

—NBC4 News, Los Angeles, July 2013



CHAPTER ONE

Who Am I?

THIS IS MY FAVORITE PLACE IN THE WHOLE WORLD!” Each child has said this to me, one by one, at different times, and I agree with them. Yokoji (in English, “Bright Sunlight Temple”) Zen Mountain Center is where I live raising my family in a Buddhist temple, or training center, where people come from all over the world to study with Tenshin. He came over from the north of England to Los Angeles in his early twenties to study Zen Buddhism with a Japanese teacher named Maezumi Roshi. (Some have said that Yoda from the “Star Wars” movies is really a combined characterization of this Zen teacher and his contemporaries.) Young Tenshin became an apprentice to Maezumi Roshi and studied the Buddhist way with him, until, he himself, mastered it. Now, he is also called a Zen Master or Teacher.

While a student, he was the main builder of all the structures within the Temple grounds, and then became a teacher, serving the people within the spaces he created with hardworking hands as he continued building up the people around him with his hardworking teacher’s heart. Tenshin

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carries on the Buddhist teaching with sincere students who study at Yokoji in an apprenticeship-style training; training in ethics, free functioning, taking responsibility for ones words and actions, leadership training, training on refining one's insight, instinct and intuition, then providing opportunities to apply these learned skills in words and actions; and consistently carrying on the teaching he received from Maezumi Roshi. It is intense and thorough.

Something is “miraculous” and “magical” about just sitting still. Something of “this” is in Tenshin who has been sitting still (more often than most of us) for the last forty years. He carries this stillness or spaciousness into the myriad of activities in everyday life, and into his relationships with others. He also carries the ability to roar like a lion or purr like a kitten, whichever is appropriate for the situation, time, or person in front of him. A certain energy of being surrounds him. Yet, for me, it is simple: I like his jokes. I like him.

He has been my life-soul-partner for the last four years. Tenshin means (Ten) Heaven or Sky (Shin) Heart-Mind, but my daughter, Octavia, calls him Tenshi (Heavenly Person) without knowing its meaning in Japanese. She skips over to the bed and gives him a hug before going to bed, sweetly calling him by her pet name, “Tenshi!”

We have a large-blended-beautiful family together: Octavia (Tavi), who is eight years old; another daughter, two years older, named Amma; Tenshin's son, Nickolas, who is also eight years old and looks like Tavi's fraternal twin; and Tenshin's mom, “Grandma,” who comes to our house every Thursday through Monday. Half of the year we have an added child, Dylan, that the children call “cousin,” who lives at Zen Mountain Center with his dad. We also have the Sangha (forest), which is the community of Buddhists, and many of them, especially the monks and lay people that reside here for years, months, or weeks, become our extended family.

The children make up names for some of them too, and sometimes I cringe to hear them. One easy-going monk has been called “Mister Stinky Pants.” But Buddhists seem to be playful and to have a sense of humor with themselves, with others, and with life itself. Tenshin's title of Roshi, for example,

means “Old and Useless.” I think roshis are supposed to have the “Seal of Enlightenment,” but I do not know for sure. I have not asked him about such things, and he certainly does not talk about such things. Tenshin lets his life do the talking. I think it is best this way. Let your life do any “promotion” of self, or “talking” of self, unspoken and unwritten. Can you imagine trying to have an argument with your “spouse” who has the “Seal of Enlightenment” from a long lineage of Buddhist Zen Masters? So, I do not talk about this with him, but just get on with the “livin’ and the lovin.” And the occasional arguing!

The kind of training that goes on here at the Zen Center, makes the people seem a bit like superheroes at times to me. Some of them try so hard, till eventually it seems effortless, and then, with “right” thoughts and actions, they do the work of two or three people in one. Tenshin works like a “three-in-one” right along with them! Nothing lazy about living here. Sometimes I call it, “Life Boot Camp!” The most beneficial personal practice here for me is meditating in the early mornings with the community in the quiet Buddha Hall, before I get the children woken up, fed, and ready for school. But the rest of the day is spent working in Idyllwild and being with the children, or Grandma, or some elderly person. This is a little bit about my family and where I live, but, as for me...I do not want to write about Who I am, personally, but would like to reveal “me” in this story of my life, “this” a little part of my life.

This is my personal story. This is a fire story. This is a story of a Buddhist Zen Center in the United States. A Zen Center near a beautiful mountain village. This story of the mountain village of Idyllwild, California. This is a story of going through a fire and the floods that followed. It is a continuing experience of uncertainty, a collective uncertainty too, that brings up all that is stored in the soul that needs to still be looked at, maybe unseen before. In the collective soul too. As an individual, as a citizen of this nation, and as an inhabitant of this world, looking together at the same time into the unknown. Looking at ourselves and the legacy we leave our children and the world’s children with the life we live.

How do we live with the good that is the spark of the divine in us, and how do we live with the difficult or not-so-good? It is amazing how we see ourselves and one another like never before

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when going through a personal disaster. Everything is so different, so different that everything and everyone is new again. Seeing this life and how we live it, while experiencing fire, floods, loss of home or health, a death in the family or a divorce. Seeing you and seeing myself so much more clearly, now that the being is stripped raw to the bare bone, with survival being the prime need, seeing myself naked.

Surviving surpasses actualizing at times like these, and brings modern man and woman back home to a more primal being, stripped down from our ordinary existence into the extraordinary, like being born again naked and screaming. Vulnerable in an environment that is not safe from forces that are much more powerful than a person, and out of anyone's control. So much closer to those in the world who have this as an everyday experience...survival. We share this world together. So many still need so much to live a good life, actualizing their full potential instead of struggling for survival. Beauty comes from the effort put forward within our difficulties, on a personal level, and especially seeing our life with the whole life of humanity come together with a collective disaster on a more universal level, and our collective effort to aid others.

How does the world live with the spark of the divine within it, and the difficulties or not-so-good-parts? Human beings who have immense beauty amidst such devastating suffering. As if the dark in the night sky is our suffering, and the stars the beauty. Could we see the stars without the darkness, would we notice beauty without darkness, and if we did, would the beauty be as miraculous? Like the forest, now that the fire has made the view more clear than before, like the burned forest, is my soul in this story. Like the forest are my friends and family, and community and village in this story; supporting me and supporting one another. Beauty within darkness. A blade of green poking up through the ashes.

It is full of a burning, urgent desire that I write with all my heart for my own healing and any collective healing that may occur with an honest word from an open heart on a mountain in the West, what was once the Wild West, in a Zen Center, in a certain spot in the world. This is the story of one wild little life and where and how it lives, inspired to be told with one wild Mountain Fire.

A little flower held up for you.