

Cultural Daily

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Memories of Hippie Era Awakened by 'The Source Family'

Claudia Gold · Wednesday, May 29th, 2013

*There are heroes in the seaweed
There are children in the morning
They are leaning out for love
And they will lean that way forever...*
— “Suzanne” by Leonard Cohen

Some documentaries bring you forward—others take you back. *The Source Family*, now playing in various US cities, takes me back to the commune founded by Jim Baker, “a man who saw himself first as a guru, then as God, and, finally, as a very flawed man.”

In 1974, I’d met members of the commune while eating at their restaurant on Sunset. In that period, my stained, yoga clothes may have made me vulnerable to being invited in by “a family” like The Source.

When I went to their home, several women took me to a bathroom, ran a bath for me, and gave me an off-white robe to wear. The next morning, early, we rose for spiritual exercises, and, towards the end, Father gave me my new name, “Luna.”

Though I was a student of the charismatic Yogi Bhajan, and had lived in ashrams in Berkeley and Phoenix, I was rebellious, with a father who was the rabbi of Las Vegas. A couple of the Yogi’s teachings, such as about carrying the symbolic kirpan sword, and men always being right, pushed my buttons. In the atmosphere of Jim Baker’s home, there was intrigue and spirituality. I snuck away to phone Yogi Bhajan, who had also been one of Jim Baker’s teachers, to try to find out from him if “The Family” was kosher enough for me to join. I was granted an interview.

The powerful yogi and white tantric master was dressed in all unstained white, his kirpan at the center of his turban, indicative of his status as the head of the Sikh order for the Western hemisphere. He was reading “The Los Angeles Times”, and there was no one else in the room. He explained that he read the newspaper every morning, as his “meditation on the world.”

When I nervously broached the subject of Father and The Source family, he left the decision to me. To give you a sense of my mental state at the time, I was young, not by age, but by chaotic and unplanned events of young adulthood. I don’t think my father intended, when sending me to USC, that I’d be chanting OM to the sitar one day. But reversals happen to everyone. One day my father came to see me. The principal of the synagogue school was found dead, killed execution style in the desert, he could no longer support me, and my parents were divorcing.

Within six months I was going to free meals and, briefly, panhandling on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley. It was there I met “Shanti” who led me Yogi Bhajan’s ashram. And from there, I ended up at The Source.

On the night I arrived, as I handed the sisters the bag of my clothes, and they selected a robe for me, the sense of giving myself up to a Higher Force (or at least a cleaner one) was suggested, as

was lifting into a community. Morning meditation sinks into my memory in hues of sepia: a large crowded room of devotees barely seen through shadows, Father Yod leading yoga postures, and an incantation. Then Father himself bestowing on me my new name, engathering me from the many young strangers into the family. On departing the home, after only one night, as I recall, I was entrusted to hold what I experienced there a secret.

While I was attracted by the tantalizing spirituality and welcome to belong at The Source Family, the meeting I subsequently had with Yogi Bhajan placed on me the responsibility to choose whether to return to it. Yes, I was seeking: A pure spiritual path. A teacher without ego. And a spirituality congruent with me. In this, my path led me elsewhere, and I did not return to The Source. I was shocked to learn when the documentary was released last month, 38 years after I stayed in their Hollywood Hills home, that Father Yod had had 14 wives. I wonder now if some of the sisters had felt ambivalent about helping prepare me for joining the family.

Now I am an ordinary visionary, back to my given name Claudia, a social worker, a widow, and a Baha'i branded with the wisdom of all of humanity being one from so many signs along the spiritual journey. Perhaps my 19-year-old daughter Carmel will read this piece and think it's "cool" – a glimpse into the hippie era of long, long ago. I live hoping she goes a straighter, safer, more orderly path and not learn stubbornly, for years, what home and love is – this eternal dance, whose steps I am still learning, in my present-day, single-family home.

Image from The Source Family documentary.

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