lotus blossom

KNOWN TO GROW IN THE MOST UNLIKELY PLACES, THE BLOOM HAS COME TO SYMBOLIZE THE ABILITY TO RISE ABOVE. MARIELLEN WARD DOES JUST THAT

Nothing in India ever works out quite the way you planned. There are too many unknown factors. Take, for example, the altitude and almost constant cloud cover in Darjeeling. I knew I would be in India when I turned 50, and out of all the possible "Incredible India" experiences I could have while there, I decided I wanted to go up to Tiger Hill and see what was reputed to be one of the world's most awe-inspiring sights: the multi-hued sunrise reflecting off the vast white range of the Himalayas.

The day before my birthday, I travelled from the muggy lowlands of Kolkata (Calcutta) to the mist-clad aerie of Darjeeling. As we drove, we climbed thousands of feet up a steep and rattling road, past tea plantations unfurling like lush, green carpets, past a tin-blue train puffing slowly along and past the bright filigreed monasteries that dotted the verdant hillsides until we reached the charming Raj-era Windamere Hotel.

I arrived to find a cozy coal fire in my large English cottage-inspired room. After dinner and a hot bath, I climbed into a heavenly bed and closed my eyes on my 40s, waking a few hours later, feeling strange and unwell, and wondering if my dizziness, headache and shortness of breath was altitude sickness. Damn.

I decided I wasn't going to let it scuttle my plans, so, utilizing the technique that the ancient Indian *rishis* (sages) used to discover the secrets of yoga, I turned my attention inward, deduced that my uneasiness was caused by a lack of oxygen and launched into some serious yogic breathing. After forcing myself to breathe deeply, I eventually fell asleep. I woke up feeling absolutely well and was ready to go before my guide arrived to pick me up at 4:15 a.m.

We drove through the dark to be in position on Tiger Hill before sunrise. I stood in the cold, waiting with hope, feeling positive I would not be disappointed.

I wasn't. The morning was crystal clear, not a cloud in the sky, and the sunrise was spectacular. I felt quiet elation as the sun appeared on the horizon, turning the mountain range various shades of mauve, pink and gold. The mighty five-peaked Kanchenjunga — the world's third-highest mountain — dominated the view, but the tip of Mount Everest also made an appearance. I felt blessed to see such a magnificent natural phenomenon on my milestone birthday, especially since clouds often obscure the sight.

I had originally come to India four years before, following a devastating period of my life that included my mother's sudden death from heart failure, my father's death from cancer and my fiance's abrupt departure.

My faith had been badly shaken; I felt knocked down by loss but I threw myself into yoga, hoping it would help me recover from my depression. Yoga classes were the only bright spots in my week and, after I started feeling better, I decided to follow a dream and become a yoga teacher. During yoga teacher training, I resolved to pursue another dream and go to India.

I was counting on my trip to India to restore my enthusiasm for life and my faith, and it worked. That morning on Tiger Hill, I felt completely in awe of the power and beauty of the divine, the force that creates and sustains everything and I felt elevated to a small but essential part of the divine whole. In that perfect moment, I felt completely in harmony with the flow of life.

People don't go to India to experience India; they go to experience themselves in India. They go to pit themselves against the crowds, chaos and poverty. They go to experience the open and unabashed spirituality. They go to test their egos, which India alternately builds up and smashes apart in the blink of a street child's eye. People go to India knowing they will be forever changed — and not knowing how. But India is a master, a guru, who takes people where they need to go and teaches them what they need to learn.

Five weeks after turning 50, I woke up before dawn at Aurovalley Ashram in northern India. While it was still dark, I joined my yoga teacher Swami Brahmdev (Swamiji) and about 10 other ashramites and began walking the 12 kilometres along the Ganges River toward the city of Haridwar and the Kumbh Mela, the largest religious gathering on earth.

The Kumbh Mela is a sacred Hindu festival based on a creation myth about a fight between gods and demons over a kumbh (jug) of amrit — the nectar of immortality. One of the four drops that fell on earth landed in Haridwar, at a sacred place called Har-ki-pauri. Every 12 years, when the stars and planets are in particular alignment, this place becomes sacred, and devotees bathe there to purify body, mind and soul and wash away their sins.

On the morning of April 14, 2010, as I walked with my fellow ashramites, I felt just as humbled to be one of millions walking in to Haridwar — the city was completely closed to vehicular traffic — as I did by the sight of the sunrise on the Himalayas. I kept my eye firmly fixed on Swamiji as I was terrified to be alone in that crowd.

But after bathing in the river and filling an empty 7-Up bottle with the sacred water, I separated from my group to join some journalists I knew on a media platform in the middle of the action to await the • Continued on page 120

LOTUS BLOSSOM

▶ Continued from page 69

procession of sadhus (holy men). I made my way through massive crowds only to be told by several khaki-clad Indian policemen that the platform was full and there was no way I was getting up there.

This was my maha (great) moment. I was facing my worst fear: being alone in a foreign country in the midst of the largest crowd on earth. The sun was climbing in the sky (the day before, the temperature had reached 44 C). I didn't know the route back, I didn't know the local language and I didn't think there was anyone who could help me — except myself.

Just like the eve of my birthday, I gathered my strength and willpower and, after asking for divine guidance, started walking. I somehow found the winding route back along the river, more than a dozen kilometres and through millions of people. With blisters forming on the bottoms of my feet, I made it back to the ashram before lunchtime.

Several weeks later, when I was packing to come home, I couldn't easily fit the 7-Up bottle of Ganga water in my suitcase. This water was my trophy for having braved the gathering. At the last minute I realized: it's not about the water. It's not about the goal or the end result. I decided to pour the water over myself as I showered — a blessing.

After, I felt very content. It was not a contentment that sprang from a fleeting accomplishment or a feeling of conditional self-worth based on achievement. It was a contentment that flowed from feeling connected to the divine plan and understanding that spirituality means loving who you are and what you have.

On that hot day in north India, I experienced the power and significance of ritual and came back a changed person. My faith in my own capacities and the divine grew, and my understanding of spirituality transformed. I feel much less alone in the world and much more capable of overcoming challenges and achieving my dreams.

Which seems a good way to start the second half of life. ■