

# sacred journey

After a devastating loss, **Mariellen Ward's** quest for peace led her to India, the sacred Ganges River and a place of unexpected transformation.

At dusk, the lilting waters of the jewel-green Ganges River take on a more hushed tone as they flow through the holy city of Rishikesh in northern India. Hindus lovingly refer to this sacred river as *Ganga Mata Ji*, the mother river. Ganga reaches Rishikesh shortly after tumbling out of the high Himalayas, and flows through a peaceful valley that has been luring sages since before recorded time. I went in the spring of 2006 to be and to heal.

As darkness descended one evening, I joined pilgrims, tourists and town residents who were making their way to an *aarti* (a ceremony to honour the sacred river), which is held each evening on the banks of Ganga under an enormous white statue of the god Shiva.

After taking off my shoes (a necessity for any sacred Hindu ritual), I decided to dive into the crowd that was gathering on the platform at the river's edge – though I noticed the other foreigners were standing way up on the steps, away from the action. Immediately, a smiling Indian family surrounded me. Three generations of women encouraged me to chant, clap and sway along to the uplifting rhythms of the devotional music. They paid as much attention to me as they did to the *aarti*, making sure that I felt included and knew how to follow along with the unfolding ritual.

Toward the end of the ceremony, the women encouraged me to buy a *diya* – a little boat made of leaves and filled with flowers, incense and a candle. The *diya* signifies divine energy, spiritual truth and the imperishable nature of the soul.

While the festival atmosphere swirled around me, I imbued my *diya* with hope for personal transformation. I had come to India because a river of loss had been running through my life; I had struggled with grief, despair and depression for eight years. I felt I was clinging to the bank, but the effort was wearing me out. Deciding to leave my life and go to India was like letting go of the river bank and moving with the flow of the water. I had no idea where letting go would lead me, what I would learn or how I would change. I only knew that it was going to be big.

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Eight years before, on a crisp January morning in Toronto, I had driven with my sister, Victoria, to my mother's small apartment. Mother had been bedridden for a week with a terrible chest cold, but did not want to see a doctor. The minute I opened the unlocked door, I knew that something was terribly wrong. >

"A human life is like a candle.... Sometimes it has to struggle for brightness."

– Eleanor Roosevelt

I couldn't feel my mother's presence. I spread out my arms in a spontaneous gesture of protection – my little sister was behind me – as I realized my mother was lying in bed, dead.

In that moment, a powerful force hit my stomach, chest and throat. My back muscles locked up. I felt hit so hard that it was almost like being cleaved in two. I knew that my mother was not in that room. I didn't know where she went, but I knew she wasn't there.

We learned later that she had died of heart failure in the night. She was 67 years old.

My heart failed too, in a way. It felt as though Mother's love had suddenly been turned off, dammed up. I felt parched and joyless, afraid of being alone on the planet without her. And her death ushered in a period of terrible loss. My fiancé left me (with an expensive wedding dress hanging in the closet). My father was diagnosed with cancer and died three months later. I rarely went out, I saw few friends, I cried myself to sleep most nights. In despair, I wondered what I had done to deserve this series of devastating blows. Would I be able to live through them?

I had been going to yoga classes on and off. Aware of the healing power of this ancient science, I made a decision: No matter how I felt or what happened, I would go to class three times per week.

After a while, I started to feel better. I still couldn't do downward dog – there was way too much tension around my broken heart – but I was starting to move and breathe again. It was like early spring. One of the teachers had recently returned from two years of yoga study in India. He ignited in me a compulsion to live one of my dreams: I put my things in storage, gave away my apartment, left my cat with a friend and went to India for six months.



Near the end of my trip, a friend suggested I visit the Aurovalley Ashram, a yoga centre not far from Rishikesh. At the peaceful ashram near Ganga, I meditated, walked by the river and listened to the founder, Swami Brahmdev, teach under a mango tree in the garden.

This reflective time was heaven-sent. I realized that travelling in India had taught me

how to surrender, relax and go with the flow. It had reinvigorated my enthusiasm for life.

"All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveller is unaware," said philosopher Martin Buber, and mine brought me one day into Rishikesh and the evening aarti.

As I lit the diya, I thought of my mother. I poured my love for her and my feelings of intractable loss into the little boat. With tears in my eyes, I sent the diya out into the current, watching as it skimmed lightly along the glossy black surface of Ganga, a tiny retreating light swept along by the mighty river.

And as I watched, I allowed the magic of the ritual to transform me. I thought of the millions of people, over thousands of years, who had stood by this long, life-giving river, invoking the mother's love it symbolizes.

I felt connected to my mother, to Mother Earth and to the unending cycle of life, death and rebirth that runs through the lives of every creature on this planet – like a river. A sense of calm washed over me as I realized that my mother's sudden death was not a tragedy, not a cause for suffering or grief, not something terrible that had "happened to me." It was part of the natural pattern of life.

I felt reminded of something I had always known, but had forgotten. We are not apart, my mother and I. In that moment, I felt the truth of eternity open up within me. I knew that beyond the apparent reality of the everyday, something much bigger runs through and unites all of life. Death is an illusion.

I breathed in the timeless scene. I could feel the breath fill my lungs and life course through me. I felt a complete sense of contentment and the warmth of quiet joy descend upon me, like the mist that drapes the distant foothills of the Himalayas. I felt love.

During the rest of my time in India, I gradually and gladly embraced this shift in perception and awareness. India's gift to the world is an ancient and abiding wisdom built on the realization that reality is shaped in the mind and that the only lasting path to happiness is internal. From seeing my mother's death as the worst thing that ever happened to me, I began seeing it as the catalyst for my spiritual growth and understanding. "Suffering is a gift," Swami Brahmdev said. I understood. **hm**