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# SHAMBHALA SUN

BUDDHISM CULTURE MEDITATION LIFE

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*“You can connect with the mind of nowness at any moment”*

**Pema Chödrön’s 4 Keys to**

# Waking Up



**Rise Up!**

bell hooks & Eve Ensler



**GPS for the Mind**

Sylvia Boorstein



**Thanks to Yoko**

Lisa Carver



# Under the Volcano

While vacationing on Hawaii's Big Island, JUDY PANKO REIS suffered an unspeakable crime. Decades later, she sees that out of even the darkest violence a new life of service and transformation can emerge.

## Waking Up Inside the Tent (1980)

Under the gleam of a half-sliced moon, Phil noses our Mazda rental past fields of wild orchids into MacKenzie State Park. A hidden Hawaiian gem mounted on the cliffs of the Pacific, the park is tucked away outside the forested perimeter of the volcano Kilauea, the legendary home of Pelé, the fire goddess. The mixed fragrances of pine and brine welcome us to a night of camping on the Big Island.

I am focused on my sketches of Pelé—her purple crater and golden veins—as she is depicted in the travel journal spread across my knees. I decide my gushing words and bold images capture the aura of the volcano and my awe of Pelé, the legend of Hawaiian folklore.

PAINTINGS BY  
TONY MATTHEWS



Traditionally, islanders consider her a transformative figure who wields the dual powers of creation (island building) and destruction (home and landscape demolition). She hurls fire into water, spewing love and jealous anger in protection of her sacred land. For me, Pelé exemplifies a radiant female force of nature that blends polarities. I seek her guidance in my quest to reconcile the lighter aspects of the world with its darker shadow elements.

My excitement grows. I squeeze Phil's sinewy fingers and run my hand through his curly hair. "It's incredible here, isn't it?" I whisper. "I can't wait to get to Volcano House." In Volcanoes National Park, I plan to study Pelé's handiwork and temperament, to harness her creativity so I can awaken more enlightened parts of myself in the coming year. Phil grins, crinkling his eyes. "Tomorrow night at Volcano House will be awesome."

As darkness descends over the dozens of scattered tents and vehicles dotting the campsite, we discuss our upcoming wedding and Philip's future medical-career possibilities on the Big Island. He unzips the entry flap of the nylon tent, nodding hello to other campers. We crawl inside and pull off our shoes, emptying streams of sand onto the floor. In no time, our thoughts about Pelé's transformative powers tumble out. We discuss how her firestorms decimated vegetation and then midwived the birth of brilliant new spectrums of scarlet, yellow, and purple species of plant and animal life. How her explosions sculpted lush islands and reshaped the park's jagged coastline.

Slipping into our sleeping bags, we celebrate the thought that our presence on the island draws us into Pelé's self-perpetuating cycle of physical and spiritual regeneration. She is the progenitor of this splendor that regales all living creatures in her court—including a pair of lovers on this Wednesday night, the twenty-third of April, 1980.

Outside our tent, a restless wind roars through the giant ironwood trees. Sounds of thunderous waves hammer the rocks.

Before closing my eyes, I whisper to Phil that I feel Pelé has beckoned me here and I'm counting the minutes until we reach Volcano House the next day. He kisses me goodnight. In blissful fatigue, we surrender our awe to the night.

In the distance, Pelé sleeps.

**Approaching the hospital bed, my parents wear worried eyes and crumpled clothes. I vaguely hear a nurse explain my physical losses. My father's voice quivers in response: "Are they permanent?"**

TRAPPED IN A LUMINOUS orange cave, I rouse from slumber. Threads of orange daylight filter into my mucus-filled eyes. I feel pudding-thick blood clots slither down my cheeks into my mouth. The saline taste forces a gag. I choke down the stench of erupting vomit. Instantaneously, the contents of my bowels and bladder surge onto the floor of the cave. I heave torrents. Animal sounds of my retching echo through the cave. The avalanche of vomit mixes in a sea of body fluids that gush around me. *Where am I?*

In a haze, I recall pitching the tent with Philip the day before. Or was it two days ago? A lucid part of me takes control. *I am... in a tent camping on the Big Island of Hawaii.* My head explodes with pain that radiates through every nerve of my body. My heart pounding, I reach for my head to soothe the agony. Withdrawing my fingers, I see they are bathed in the crimson of fresh blood.

I turn to awaken Philip. He is still beside me in his sleeping bag. I urgently need his physician's skills. I lunge toward him desperately and cry, "Philip, wake up, wake up, I'm hurt, I'm bleeding, I'm sick." I heave, tears leak from my eyes. "Phil... wake up." I grope through the orange folds of the collapsed tent that entombs us. "Give me your hand, Phil." I extend a bloody hand to reach the flesh of his palm. He is inert.

A prism of light pours into the tent as I hear what I think is Phil's voice. I say, "Phil, I'm thirsty, please help me." Instead I hear, "What's your name... phone number for a family member... who did this to you?" I rattle off my name and my parents' phone number in Illinois. "Judy, try to stay awake—rescue is here," says a male voice.

On April 25, 1980, Honolulu newspapers deliver these headlines: "Honolulu Doctor Slain," "Two Beaten at Park." The papers say the park had a history of thrill beatings, but no current suspects. A passerby walking his dog in the late afternoon had found us as I struggled, murmuring Phil's name, to free myself from the collapsed tent.

Later that week, Phil's corpse is slipped into a black nylon bag and shipped to his family in Queens, New York.

Because of the shortage of neurosurgeons on the Big

Island, I am helicoptered to Straub hospital on Oahu to repair what remains of the right hemisphere of my brain. It is the same hospital where Phil had been practicing as a first-year medical resident before we left on our trip to the Big Island.

Approaching my hospital bed, my parents wear worried eyes and crumpled clothes. I vaguely hear a nurse explain my physical losses.

My father's voice quivers in response: "Are they permanent?" "It's too soon to tell."

The room is abloom with garlands of leis, tropical bouquets, and cards from Hawaiian residents offering apologies for the crime.

When the neurosurgeon inspects the tracks of sutures in my head, he turns to my folks and says, "You can take her home now." Their collective gasp jolts the room.

Patricia, a social worker friend of Phil's, swoops into the room in a blaze of light that pierces our confusion and dread. Waving a file bulging with admission papers for a rehabilitation hospital in Chicago, she says, "If this place can't teach Judy how to sit up, read, dress, and feed herself, no one can. You're lucky they're in Chicago." With a compassionate smile, she strokes my face and then embraces my parents.

Hilo detectives, visiting before we depart, tell me that my travel journal helped them retrace our steps. But it ends with our visit to Kilauea the day of the assault. My musings and sketches of Pelé are remarkable, the big copper-skinned native Hawaiian sergeant says, but offer no clues to the crime. In denial of Phil's death and my multiple disabilities, I focus on the officer's compliment of my artwork. He glares at my crushed skull and says that Phil's murder and my assault are tearing him up.

In the distance, Pelé weeps.

## Waking Up Outside the Tent (2012)

Wheeling onto the hydraulic wheelchair lift to board the Metra commuter train that takes me from home to my job in downtown Chicago, I am greeted by a cheerful fellow traveler who climbs into a seat in front of my power scooter. "Wow, you've got to hand it to Metra for installing those lifts for you guys," he says. I hold my breath and compose myself before leaning forward and responding in a patient, quiet tone. "Metra resisted wheelchair lifts tooth and nail. We won these lifts with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act."

"Oh," he says sheepishly, "I didn't know. Is that what you do?" My face brightens as I say, "Yes, I'm an advocate for people with disabilities."

What I don't say is that I was slow to embrace the disability community. My ego and self-image as an able-bodied

businesswoman resisted identifying with a group I had perceived as inferior. My identity evolved when I married and began networking with other disabled women. Like me, they faced barriers in accessing public transportation to travel to work and get their children around. Once I accepted my many disabilities, a rainbow of possibilities evaporated my fears. Wider systems of interdependence with other disabled people began to emerge.

Recovering his fumble, my travel companion says, "Hey, that's a great scooter. Love the Harley-Davidson sticker on the back. Does it go backwards?" "Sure does!" I say. Emboldened, he asks, "Do you have MS? My wife's cousin has MS and uses a wheelchair." "No," I say, "I was hit on the head a long time ago." I hold my breath again, this time waiting for the usual onrush of inquiries: the who, what, when, and where. When moments of empty silence pass without interrogation, I release a silent sigh of relief: I'm off the hook.

During the train ride, I muse that this week marks the thirty-second anniversary of my injury. The bludgeoning that resulted in Phil's murder and my disabilities is too much to share. My eye



An adjunct instructor at the University of Illinois Chicago's College of Nursing, JUDY PANKO REIS lectures and writes on women's health, violence, and disability. More than a decade ago, she was introduced to Buddhist meditation.

PHOTO BY SHELDON REIS

catches the headline of the newspaper my travel companion is perusing: “Three Killed in Shooting.” I pause and reflect upon Chicago’s growing homicide rate.

I close my eyes to begin meditating. It’s a practice I turn to when assailed by news of violence that claims the lives and well-being of others. It’s a meditation I’ve cultivated based on the work of Buddhist monk Matthieu Ricard and my retreats at The Insight Center, an oasis of urban tranquility in Chicago.

To awaken my compassion for other victims of violence, I start with the love I feel for Philip and reimagine the horror in the tent. Then I picture a crowd of humans worldwide who are suffering from the effects of violence, their pain and terror similar to what Phil, our families, and I felt. I extend the love and compassion I feel for Phil to the crowd of others. I visualize that the dark mass of their pain is dispelled by a vibrant rainbow radiating peace and good fortune into the lives of my fellow victims of violence.

The conductor enters our car to announce, “Approaching downtown Chicago.” As we alight from the train, a loud metric beeping fills the air, signaling the start of the wheelchair lift. My companion waits for me to descend on the lift, walks alongside me, hesitates, and says, “Well, I’m sure you’ve been through a lot, but it looks like you’re doing just great.” “Thanks,” I say. “I think so.”

Zigzagging deftly through the crush of commuters, I congratulate myself for sparing my companion the agony of my story. Over the years, I have learned that people react to it badly. Horrified by the violence and shocked that it did not occur in a rough Chicago neighborhood, they often shriek in disbelief, “No—Hawaii? You’re kidding!” This reaction is so common that before revealing the full account of my injury, I find myself awkwardly defensive. I suppress the impulse to apologize for bearing news that may further shock or disillusion them.

My reverie is interrupted when I hear a building guard say, “I didn’t know Harley-Davidson makes scooters.” “Neither did I,” I reply with a smile as I glide into the lobby to wait for the paratransit ride that takes me to work.

Cautiously, I roll through the icy wind onto the ramp of the minivan. My chair is secured in place; the doors are closed. My driver shivers and proclaims that if she could find a cheap travel package to some place tropical such as the Bahamas or Hawaii, she would escape the deep freeze e-e-mmediately! The mention of Hawaii agitates me. It astonishes me that decades later—happily married, a mother—and just when I think enough psychotherapy and time have transpired for the trauma to vacate my system, there’s a lump in my throat that argues otherwise. It’s the size of a coconut.

As we cross the Chicago River I remain silent, absorbed by the offhand mention of Hawaii. Inevitably, everyday ref-

erences on the radio or in conversation to Hawaii as an island paradise or great escape overload me with a montage of competing emotions. This anniversary I finally resign myself to accept the depth of my post-traumatic grief: These are events that will *never* leave me. They lie in the murky depths of my soul to rise at the slightest provocation—the offhand remark or the taste of a sweet, ripe pineapple.

As I head up LaSalle Street, the sun breaks through the gray sky. A warm glow of memories surges through me. I relive the daylight hours before the attack: the beauty of the forested campground along the cliffs that bridle the roaring waves of the Pacific, the brilliant hues of the orchid patch outside the park, the double rainbows mirrored in the glassy sapphire sea, the sweet fragrance of gardenias. It was the day before the nightmares began, the day before the decades of rehab therapies. It was the last day Philip was alive, the last day we spoke and laughed. It was the day I felt Pelé, the volcano goddess, had summoned me to Hawaii. For those twenty-four hours, Hawaii was paradise.

I am reminded that in the aftermath of Pelé’s volcanic eruptions in 1983, the park must look very different today than it did in 1980.

Three years after I awakened to the horror in the tent, Pelé awoke from her own slumber. She exhaled mountain-high flames that splintered into showers of ruby-orange shards against a black-velvet sky. Rivers of fiery lava roared from her vents into the cool ocean waters as giant plumes of steam billowed from her midst.

Over the course of the next thirty years, Pelé surged magma that enlarged the Big Island. As she has done for centuries, Pelé transformed her rage into an array of exotic new landscapes. Her explosions added hundreds of acres to the southern shore of Kilauea that laces the outer border of MacKenzie Park where Phil and I met our dark fates thirty-two years ago.

For the first time post-injury, I am stunned with a realization: Pelé’s transformative energies have mirrored mine. Is it a coincidence that 1983 and the thirty years thereafter proved to be a period of creativity and deep transformation for me, as it did for Pelé? I married my husband, Shelly, in 1983 and began expanding my consciousness to live in the present. Like Pelé’s island-building, the years since 1983 were when I gave birth to our son, Lewis, and learned to transform the suffering that followed the violence. I awakened to the healing power of work to help improve the lives of others with disabilities.

In the distance, Pelé awakens.

*Opposite: While riding the train to work, Judy Panko Reis practices an adaptation of Thich Nhat Hanh’s smiling and walking meditation. That is, she practices smiling and rolling in her wheelchair.*

## Once I accepted my many disabilities, there was a rainbow of possibilities. Systems of interdependence with other disabled people emerged.

MY REFLECTIONS END as the minivan arrives at my workplace. After two decades of working at The Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago (RIC) as the director of the Women with Disabilities Center, I have moved on to work at the Center for Independent Living for People with Disabilities in Chicago.

The first time I passed through the doors of RIC, I was wheeled on a gurney, accompanied by overwrought friends and my harrowed family. We arrived from Honolulu via jet to O’Hare. My initiation to rehab was as a sun-bronzed patient, adorned in pastel leis that offset my shaved, crushed head, blackened eyes, and missing teeth.

I was not then a practitioner of mindful meditation or an advocate for victims of violence and people with disabilities. In May of 1980, I was simply one more patient on the brain-injury floor. That the darkness could eventually be transformed into light was

unfathomable to my family and me when we first entered RIC.

I see now that in situations like mine, most people need to become part of a larger “we” to remain vital. My involvement with the disability community, other victims of violence, and the Insight Center is a “we” that has done it for me. It is a truth that Pelé has known forever but has taken me decades to grasp: out of the darkness of violence and suffering emerges a new terrain—wider systems of interdependence, deeper levels of transformation.

When I leave the minivan, my driver bids me farewell. I wish her luck in finding a cheap travel package to Hawaii.

Before my scooter enters the sliding glass doors of the building, a shaft of sunlight halos the bold letters on the side of the building: “Access Living.” The doors open. I inhale a deep breath of gratitude and glide forward.

In the distance, Pelé smiles. ♦



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