

The Maharshi



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Whatever Became of Frank H. Humphreys?

The First Westerner to Visit the Maharshi

Part II

Frank Humphreys was employed as a British police officer in India for 2 ½ years before returning to England at the age of 22. For the next 14 years he undertook military, agricultural, educational and various other occupations until ultimately taking the religious vows of the Dominican Order.

In 1960, when Francis was 70 years old, his superior requested him to write his autobiography. Not inclined to write about himself but bound by the vow of obedience he wrote a small book titled, A Trivial Tale. In awe of his life's experiences and saintliness, Humphreys' colleagues used the contents of this small book and anecdotes gathered from associates to compile his biography, titled Not So Trivial a Tale. As the former booklet is inaccessible, it is the latter book along with Sri Ramanasramam's publication, Glimpses of the Life and Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, a compilation of writings by Humphreys, that served as sources for this article, researched by John Imes, a devotee from Mississippi, and written by Sister Kathleen, a Dominican nun.

Throughout his long life Humphrey's health was assailed by numerous injuries and infections, resulting in years of convalescence. We take up Part II of his life when Frank is recovering from a fighter plane crash which happened while he was training a student.

A fellow hospital patient mentioned to Frank about an enterprise for growing oranges in South Africa. After Humphreys demobilized from the Royal Air Force, he sailed for South Africa in July, 1919. He was 29 years old.

Farming with the Richards family in South Africa soon concluded with a drought and loss of crops. Subsequently, he took up a job as a storekeeper for a short time, but eventually returned to England – this time to settle his engagement to a girl he had met before going to South Africa. Though the engagement was not finalized, the girl's Jesuit uncle had a profound influence on him. Reading one of the

books that he recommended, Francis had a revelation: "By Grace I had suddenly seen the Church," he later wrote.

A proverbially perilous journey back to South Africa in 1920 brought another brush with death. Upon his return, he received a cable from the mother of his fiancée offering him a job in Italy. To prepare, he moved in with an Italian family in Cape Town where he took formal instructions in the Catholic faith. His fiancée and her parents arrived three weeks later for Francis's baptism. "I remember well my one thought: I have come home at last," Frank writes in his autobiography.

Francis got a job as a letter-sorter at the Post Office, but his marriage plans were thwarted by his fiancée's father.

A week after he started at the Post Office he came home to find that the family, fiancée and all had departed.

Soon after this he began to study the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas (a Dominican), the *Confessions* of St. Augustine (very Upanishadic), and the life of St. Ignatius of Loyola (a Jesuit). While still working at the Post Office he made a 30-day Jesuit retreat, undertaking Ignatian “Exercises” five hours a day in his spare time.

A priest told him that Catholicism “is founded on the nature of the human heart as it really is.” “That was the whole point,” Francis commented, “that was why occultism and Vedanta had led me astray.” He seemed to feel that he had “stultified reason for the benefit of whatever malign guidance might reach me from elsewhere...” Here he appears in this sentence to have put occultism and Vedanta together as being against reason and objective consideration.

His Post Office job lasted three months. At someone’s suggestion he applied for a teaching position and was accepted in Natal, South Africa, at a government school for the children of farmers. A colleague suggested he study for the priesthood, but he vacillated between accepting that his beloved fiancée was gone for good and hoping to reconcile with her. He was “very confused and divided”. Through diligent study, Francis completed four years’ work in nine months, and obtained a Temporary Teaching Certificate. Another two years brought a full Certificate. He was already ill with TB which would last for three years.

When Francis found out that his fiancée was soon to be married he told a priest friend that he was now free and would like to join the Jesuits. The priest advised him to visit the Dominicans nearby. The Dominican friar he met recommended him to the Provincial (religious leader) in England, Rev. Bede Jarrett, a well-known and wise friar, who wrote to Francis. Rev. Jarrett must have seen something promising in Francis. He told him (in 1923) to wait a year and save money for his expenses as a novice. Francis was received into the Third Order of St. Dominic (as a “lay” Dominican).

England – Leysin – Rome – England 1924 – 1926

Francis’ doctor in Natal allowed him to leave the hospital for a 19-day excursion to England. The Pensions Office there sent him to Switzerland for heliotherapy and yet another surgery. While there, he interpreted for the

doctor in French, German and English, tutored the sons of three American millionaires, attended daily Mass, climbed mountains, skied, and gave instructions in the Catholic faith to a Russian lady. He also very nearly became engaged to a Portuguese girl, but knew he had promised his life to the Lord. He also discovered the works of Catholic mystics St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila; “...those books contain...just what was able to destroy the last of the false Mysticism in which I had been brought up.”

He was discharged from Leysin, Switzerland in 1925 and decided to visit Rome. He is described as “despairing of ever being healthy enough to become a Dominican in England...” After a bout with pneumonia, he was well enough to attend the canonization ceremony of St. Therese of Lisieux in Rome in May. On his way back to Switzerland he fell ill with typhoid and went to England instead, to a Convalescent Home in Brighton.

At Brighton his propensity for carpentry enabled him to develop a small factory for making pamphlet racks. He also did “street preaching” for the Catholic Evidence Guild. Ever “keeping options open”, he made a retreat at a Carthusian monastery (enclosed, silent monks who pray the Divine Office Psalms several times a day), and asked to enter the Carthusians but was told he had to be a Catholic for ten years before applying. A friend advised him to see Rev. Vincent McNabb, O.P., another well-known and wise Dominican friar, who said, “You were never refused [entrance], were you?” Francis’ hope was renewed. He again met with Bede Jarrett, the Provincial, and asked to be allowed to enter the novitiate at Woodchester. In spite of age (36 years) and numerous illnesses, he entered the Dominican Novitiate on January 2, 1927, the birthday of St. Therese of Lisieux. He wrote, “I was at home at last, and through the kindness of the Order [Order of Preachers] have been at home ever since.” He took “Nicholas” as his name in religious life.

Dominican 1927 – 1975

The confinement, sparse diet and community life of the novitiate year, among much younger men, was difficult, but Br. Nicholas made first profession of vows at Hawksyard in January of 1928 – “like coming out of a long, dark tunnel into light,” he wrote. He was soon back at his carpentry, and immensely happy.

However, back trouble and a recurrence of TB put an end to his formal theology and philosophy studies for

the priesthood; from here on they were done privately. At Hawksyard he felt he experienced a very close sense of the presence of God, and records several possibly mystical graces that he received. His “assiduous study” continued in spite of ill health. In January, 1931 he was taken by car to Woodchester for his Solemn Profession [perpetual vow ceremony; in actuality, the only vow Dominicans make is the vow of obedience, although poverty and chastity are also implied. Obedience is promised “even unto death”.] He was 40 years old. He returned to Cape Town, South Africa in October, and was ordained to the priesthood in 1942. Br. Nicholas lived the rest of his life in South Africa.

His remaining years as a Dominican priest on various mission assignments were a whirlwind of activities, interspersed with further illnesses, accidents, and surgeries. He did carpentry, studied, gave instructions in the faith, did parish work, gave retreats, and was pastor at an outlying parish with a small school of 100 African children taught by two Sisters. He wrote, “What would Mission life be without the Sisters, I don’t really know, not having tried it, but shudder to think.” He taught in the school and expanded the parish work – three Masses on Sunday, with confessions, baptisms, marriages, funerals. A Sister wrote that he was very kind-hearted and charitable - a zealous and hard-working priest, grateful for the smallest kindness, very humble. Everyone respected and loved him; he helped and encouraged everyone. Often he would say, “Marry your circumstances; make the best of it wherever you are or whatever you do.” He also said one should not be just “resigned” to God’s will, but “give with pleasure and joy to God what he asks from you.” He helped the needy and was especially kind to the sick and suffering. He duplicated hymnbooks, wrote newspaper articles, and studied Zulu and other languages in his spare time. He visited people in their homes, however poor.

A friend wrote that Br. Nicholas said, “‘I see Christ in every man, and Mary in every woman...’ he lived for Jesus, he spoke with Jesus, and his love was God and his neighbor.” He showed films, held dances, taught boys to make coffins. He had a great interest in Scouting, and facilitated a Scoutmasters’ Course in which white Boy Scouts learned to appreciate their black brothers.

One of his Dominican brothers wrote, “Nick could be an endless source of joy with his restless energy and his ‘gadgets’. In his confessional, stands for books and typewriter dropped from the doors and walls. I saw the

system by which he ran the bioscope (film projector), guided the audience, took the cash (entrance fee) and said his breviary (daily psalms and prayers mandatory for every priest) all at the same time.” He brought pregnant women to hospitals from all over the district. “He was an interesting mixture of calm and drive. He spoke slowly and thoughtfully, but was always in some sort of restrained hurry. His work had to be done...He was literally supercharged...I used to wonder if some of the energy came from Yoga about which he used to talk with more tolerance than about theosophy...”.

Br. Nicholas left this Mission in 1948, having expanded it to 19 outstations and 11 schools; the base school had grown from 100 children to 1,200. After a temporary assignment (full of activity), he took a six-month “holiday”, during which he gave a retreat to some Sisters. They said it was a “strange sort of retreat – nothing about Hell or mortal sin!” He explained, “I had tried to bring out the Christian life as lived by our Lord, and that is a quieter method than sermons on...Hell and mortal sin.” During his “holiday”, he traveled 9,000 miles, gave six ten-day retreats and two weekend ones, and had two operations. While in hospital he rearranged the system of bells and water tanks!

1950 brought two months of parish work, then two more illnesses and a surgical operation. He then became chaplain at a Dominican Convent/Boarding School for wealthy children – very different from his other Mission experiences. He remained there for seven years. As their handyman, he repaired 110 windows, built cubicles, put up handrails, installed burglarproofing, etc. At the request of his Superior he wrote a book on Mission life for young priests – in eight days! He served the men at the Central Prison. After 1954 he was in charge of promoting in South Africa the “Cause” (movement) for canonization of Blessed Martin de Porres, a humble black Peruvian Dominican lay brother from the 17th century. At Stellenbosch he eventually established a Martin de Porres Center, an apostolate of prayer, counsel and material help, which was very successful, and continued even after his death. Normally “Causes” drag on for decades or even centuries; in 1962 Br. Nicholas had the joy of going to Rome for the canonization of Saint Martin for whom he had worked so long.

In January of 1958, Br. Nicholas became spiritual adviser and teacher for African students preparing for the

secular (diocesan, not religious Order) priesthood at the St. Peter's Seminary in Natal. At this point he wrote, "I am very grateful to find that what I find is a confirmation and filling out of what I have tried to follow and teach for the last twenty-five years, and that *even Vedanta had given me a certain preparation for it*, though the ultimate aim of Vedanta is something utterly different. It taught me that man must use his freedom to subject himself to an ultimate law. Maybe my upbringing in a Christian home, and the life in France with the Lombardon family and the visit to Lourdes had developed a certain Christian formation of mind, however weak and confused, that prevented me from being completely absorbed into Vedanta, wherein a man subjects himself to a law which is wholly subjective and not objective as in Christianity. I cannot say. Suffice it is to say that Almighty God is good and I am finding that every effort I made after Him has borne fruit... His protection has been truly... continual."

In 1961 the seminary changed its location and he was assigned to St. Nicholas Priory at Stellenbosch, where his Dominican life in South Africa had begun. In 1967, even during three months in hospital with TB, Friar Nicholas was very busy with visitors, Masses, and writing articles. In 1969 he wrote about the neglect of the welfare of African children.

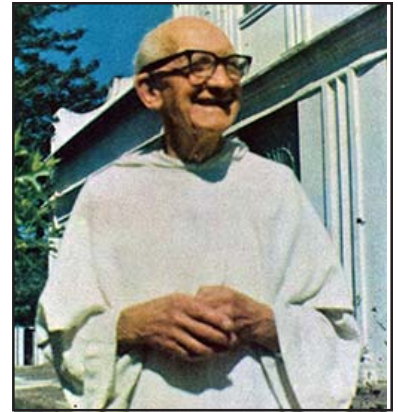
In 1972 he was knocked down by an automobile and both hips were broken. A later fall re-fractured one of the hips again. When he returned to Stellenbosch he was confined to his room but conducted business as usual.

The last two years of his life were spent in Cape Town; his final illness was dementia and weakening of memory, and he often failed to recognize visitors. He had ended his autobiography, written in the late fifties, with these words: "And so the long struggle upwards from a deficient Christianity... through being a quasi-prophet of non-Christianity, to the Home I have been given in the Order, has brought me to the point where I have been asked to teach and explain the personal dealings with the soul of the *One whose ways I have been watching and struggling to learn during the whole of my life.*"

Friar Nicholas – "Nick" – died in Cape Town on September 20, 1975, and was buried at Stellenbosch.

Certain clues in Friar Nicholas' later writings call to mind his earlier recorded impressions of being in Bhagavan's presence and of His teachings – "God is everything and everything is God; total surrender of all that is I and me and mine."

A remark by a Carthusian monk had remained with him: "Pray for the Gifts of the Holy Spirit and study them. They work, as it were, like instincts." Could it be that these words of the priest brought Br. Nicholas back into the presence of Sri Ramana



and to his impression at the time that "the body is the Temple of the Holy Ghost," that "His body was not the man, it was the instrument of God, merely a sitting motionless corpse from which God was radiating terrifically." A good part of Humphreys account given in *Glimpses* deals with coming to see that "these bodies and minds are only the tools of the one 'I', the Illimitable Spirit." He learns from Sri Ramana that Jesus must have been "utterly unconscious" when He worked miracles and taught. Perhaps Br. Nicholas states it most clearly in that one can best serve God by "giving up your whole *self* to Him, and showing that every thought, every action, is only a working of that One Life (GOD) – *more or less perfect according as it is unconscious or conscious.*" Perhaps this desire to be an instrument of God is a current that flows from his early visits to Sri Ramana and on through all his years as a Dominican. Br. Nicholas said that had been the main theme of all the retreats he gave and the key point of all his spiritual life. The seven gifts – "wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, fear of the Lord – as instincts? "Effort is needed in the beginning until awareness becomes continual, like the flow of a river toward the ocean... abide in the Heart." He found now that the stock of notes he had taken over the years was a good standby in place of the formal studies which he had missed. His study of Vedanta philosophy also helped with its concentration on an ultimate goal.

Note: *Also, it is interesting that "instinct," "automatic," "being used as an instrument," etc., are a major theme of the Glimpses document. And it is curious that an interest in a kind of sacred instinct remained with him. Humphreys' comments in Glimpses are often concerned with instinct, or being used as an instrument of God, etc.* – John Imes

This account gives only an inkling of “Whatever Became of Frank H. Humphreys” – a dynamo, a doer, a builder, an organizer, a multi-tasker, a social activist, deeply concerned with the relationship between blacks and whites and overcoming the master-servant dynamic that had remained since colonial days in South Africa. Yet he remained a deeply spiritual seeker of “the One”, being the one who saw the good in everyone, who preached not mortal sin but life as lived by Jesus.

Dominicans have an ancient motto: “To contemplate and to share the fruits of contemplation.” Brother Nicholas offered and shared the quiet gifts of the Holy Spirit as the “fruits of his contemplation”. He seemed to take his almost constant ill health in stride, and must have offered it “with pleasure and joy”. He explored many options and ways of total surrender. His destiny was to be a Catholic Dominican friar, and he was well-suited for this active life. He seemed happy and fulfilled and grateful for his Dominican life and never regretted it. He chose it – or God or Jesus or Bhagavan chose it for him – as a life to which he could give himself one-hundred percent. Br. Francis would *not* have been happy as a Carthusian, and God saved him from that. Some may conclude that Vedanta had a large or small or no influence on his spirituality; it is my personal opinion that he could never have forgotten what those moments in Bhagavan’s presence were like: “I felt lifted out of myself.” Whether or not he recognized Bhagavan as Bhagavan, he certainly recognized him as a “Master” and a sage, and felt a peace and fearlessness in his presence. Possibly, being in a Western Roman Catholic milieu as he was, he chose not to draw attention to Vedanta’s import. Possibly it was a matter of “those who know do not speak”. Possibly his experience of Christ was so profound, and so much what he needed as an outlet for his energy, that Vedanta was not so much rejected as faded in importance.

Whether one believes that Jesus and Saint Martin de Porres welcomed Br. Francis into the joys of eternal heaven, or that he finally merged into the Self in the end, it makes remarkably little difference. Not so trivial a tale!

*He who dedicates his mind to Thee and, seeing Thee,
Always beholds the universe as Thy form, who at all times
Glorifies Thee and loves Thee as none other than the Self,
He is the Master without peer, being one with Thee,
O Arunachala! And lost in Thy bliss.*

– Arunachala Pancharatna, v. 5

Path to Perfection

By T. M. P. Mahadevan

THE choices offered to human life are either to go after pleasure and get debased, or to pursue the path to perfection and get exalted. Those humans who choose the former are fools, as the Katha Upanisad teaches, and those who prefer the latter are cast in the heroic mould.

One falsely imagines that sense pleasures augment life; the truth, on the contrary, is that they serve to depress life. The value of life is not to be measured by the degree of one’s prosperity or amount of possessions; life’s worth consists precisely in its progress towards the final goal which is release. If life is tied up with goods that perish, under their dead weight it has to descend; but if it stretches its arms towards perfection, it will be elevated and will be saved. Although the betterment of material conditions in life has its place and value in the common weal, that itself does not constitute a better life. A good life should not be confused with ‘having a good time’. Life is good to the extent in which it succeeds in moving towards the supreme Good. The road to prosperity is easy and inviting, while the ascent to perfection is difficult and forbidding. Yet, it is the duty of man to extricate himself from the former and strive to register success in the latter.

Of the three requisites for the fulfilment of this effort – humanness, longing for release, and resorting to the great teachers – he has the first by right of birth, but must cultivate the other two. Realising the futility of finite ends, he must fix his unswerving attention on the final end which is moksha. Rejecting the company of those who are low and of little heart, he must seek the guidance of those who are great and wise. Reminding us of a similar teaching of Sri Sankara’s, our Bhagavan Sri Ramana says in the Supplement to Forty Verses, “By association with the good, attachment to the world will go; when attachment goes, the modifications of the mind (with its cause, maya) will be destroyed; those free from mental modifications are one with the changeless Reality; they have attained release while living in the body. Cherish their company!” Clearly, this is the way to a Better Life.

My Stay at Arunachala Ashrama in Nova Scotia

By Shunya

I arrived in Nova Scotia on 3rd June 2017. HIS invitation to Nova Scotia is a blessing itself; it really is...

I get up 4:00 a.m. Early morning chilliness shakes the body. Dress up with warm clothes; walk to the Mandiram to attend Ashram morning programs. Sky full of diamonds of stars and Milky Way, displaying wondrous beauty in pure darkness. 6:00 a.m. sun is rising; darkness is disappearing slowly, slowly revealing incredible panoramic view outside. Miles of fields, tall grasses are waving with the wind like waves on the ocean. Then the eye catches the tender curving hills - not a mountain, but hills - extending miles in one line. When I turn my face left, then to the right, and then to left, there is another line of hills. The Ashram is located in the Annapolis Valley. There is absolutely nobody within sight. Only birds are singing on the trees, and the expansion of an enormous green field. Stillness!! Serenity!! Vastness!! I take a deep breath; the mind sinks into the unknown place. I fall into stillness, come back with happiness and joy, realising that nothing is needed to be happy.

I get up 4:00 a.m. every morning!! This has never happened in my life. Not even in my life at Sri Ramana Ashrama. Bhagavan never misses the opportunity to transform the quality of the sadhakas. After listening to morning Veda chanting, we all go to another room and leisurely sip a cup of hot coffee while listening to what Bhagavan says. This time we listen to *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*. It is the most precious time we could have in the day.

Many devotees come to the Ashram here for a 3-7 days retreat from America, Halifax, and other places. Everyone is very sincere seeker of the truth. On weekends the house is filled with devotees. All necessary activities



Ashram vegetable garden and rolling hills

are happening spontaneously. Cooking happening, dishwashing happening, cleaning happening, chatting happening, Satsang happening - everything happening spontaneously. HE is in charge!! So beautiful!! People are so wonderful that they have such a sense of humour of the worldly matters, so whatever we are talking about we finish with wholehearted laughter. It happens every day. Laughter stops the mind automatically. In that moment individuals cannot exist. We are just happy beings. Oneness of being is what we are experiencing here. Then inner voice comes, "Who is experiencing all of this? Who is the experiencer?" I chuckled to myself.

My heart is so open that even with a stranger I never met before, whoever it is, in an instant of time we are merged in love. One day, Dennis and I are driving to the bigger town for shopping. Seeing the beautiful cloud formation on the canvas of the blue sky made me so joyful. I remembered one Zen story:

A monk living alone in the top of a hill was always laughing without any reason. There was no one to talk to, nothing to talk about. Villagers below thought he was mad. For the monk, just seeing a cloud or moon or anything caused him to laugh. One day a traveller passing through this village heard of the monk on the hill, decided to see this mad monk. All the villagers tried to stop him, but he ignored them. When he reached the top of the hill he saw a monk laughing uncontrollably. He came close

In the course of an informal conversation Sri Bhagavan pointed out that Self-Realisation is possible only for the fit. The *vasanas* must be eliminated before *jnana* dawns. One must be like Janaka for *jnana* to dawn. One must be ready to sacrifice everything for the Truth. Complete renunciation is the index of fitness.

—Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi, No. 320

to the monk to find out what was the cause of laughter. The monk saw him, his finger pointing to the cloud with laughter, "See! See!". When he saw the monk pointing at the cloud then he started laughing. They were just sitting together and laughing together uncontrollably. The villagers were e curious to find out what happened to the traveller. When they came to the top of the hill and saw them both laughing, they simply could not resist and joined in the laughter. Laughter is contagious. Eventually whole village was filled with laughter.

So, I was remembering this story with the same mood, the same happiness, the same joy, saying, "Dennis, Look! Look! Cloud! Cloud!" He looks at me and says "You don't have those clouds in Tiruvannamalai?" His response made me even more hilarious.

Dennis Hartel takes care of the Ashram and devotees. Whoever comes to the Ashram experiences his warm, deep concern and hospitality. He takes us to the seashore to watch the sunset and to lakes for swimming, canoeing or kayaking. If our eyes are opened to the beauty of Nova Scotia's unspoiled nature, it is because of him. On Saturday mornings he would take us to the Farmer's and Trader's Market for fun shopping. We walk in through the forest and feed fishes in the stream; we sometimes visit Pearl's in Paradise to have ice cream, etc. It feels like these simple

activities transform the stagnated mind into a vivid joy of living. I totally enjoyed these little outings.

One early morning at 6:00 a.m. I go for a long walk. The road separates the vast fields into two. Wild flowers are blossoming along the roadside. There is no person, no cars to encounter for a while. I am alone walking. I hear birds are singing. The Sun is rising slowly. Darkness and mist disappearing. In coolness of air, I cover myself with a shawl. In freshness of air, I take a deep breath. I am alone walking and singing, greeting cows and horses and birds. The whole world belongs to me. On the return way, I see the road sign "Messenger Road", I turn my face towards the arrow. There is an unpaved road straight down to Annapolis River and "Paradise".

One day the river will merge into Arunachala definitely. Till then I will flow, not swim, in the river of destiny that has brought me to Arunachala. All of these years, HE is continuously taking away the devotees' invisible burdens, bondages, and garbage without them knowing and doing. I definitely recognised this 'lightness of Being' after 17 years of stay at the holy feet of Arunachala. It is not a mystery. It is the manifestation of the power of Arunachala. While these thoughts are coming and going, I am standing here with contentment. It is time for breakfast. I force my steps towards the Ashram.

Advent at Arunachala

You, your family and friends are cordially invited to join us in celebrating

121st Anniversary of Sri Ramana Maharshi's Advent at Arunachala.

The programs will include parayanams, bhajans, talks, followed by prasad (lunch).

In Nova Scotia, Canada

Sunday 3 September – 11:00 AM

Arunachala Ashrama

1451 Clarence Road, Bridgetown,

Nova Scotia B0S 1C0 / Tel: 902-665-2090

In Queens, New York City

Saturday 9 September – 11:00 AM

Arunachala Ashrama

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New York 11432 / Tel: 718-560-3196

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