



# Omm

## Away From Home

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How often do you take inventory of your life? If you started writing down every item (ingredients lets call them), how long would the list be? How many things are fighting for your attention? I can make a long list very quickly. The list might be considered impressive. I think it's embarrassing. It shows little or no resemblance to the list I would have composed during my formative years. It has precious little in common with my life from five years ago. My life is getting busier. I wondered if it was getting better...

Kids, girlfriend, magazine, Brother, Mom, Dad, TV, sports,

new magazine, Facebook, Instagram, website, sales (always selling), eating, emails (mountains of them), drinking, networking, taking pictures, writing stories, grocery shopping, house cleaning, future planning...

I write this list, and then set the computer (one of six wi-fi connected devices in my home) aside to revisit it once I had time to consider my precious list of life ingredients. It takes that half hour of pondering (while watching a Laker's game and checking Facebook, Instagram and email) to realize some glaring omissions: Me. Where was I on this list? I didn't exist. I hadn't mentioned health. I hadn't mentioned exercise. I hadn't mentioned grooming. Where had reading disappeared to? I had precious little hobbies. My hobby was checking on everything else. At some point in the last few

years, I had accepted a position as the middle manager of my own life. I was a highly paid assistant fetching food, weeding through information and making appointments for me.

I needed a change. I needed a break. I needed to reduce the amount of ingredients. I needed to take control of the chatter, trim the fat and clear way through the fog.

My friend Kristi had mentioned her Godmother Katresha's retreat in Laguna to me for months. "A yoga retreat?" I would ask her sarcastically. "That's not for me," I would tell her. No phones and no TV for a week? No way. Throw in hikes, yoga, a weeklong food cleanse? I had already tried this. Twenty years ago. It was called basic training.

After finishing my inventory review and replaying my own thoughts (no phone, no TV, meditation, hikes, a week away, *really away*), I realized it was a blessing that she had told me about this. It was exactly what I

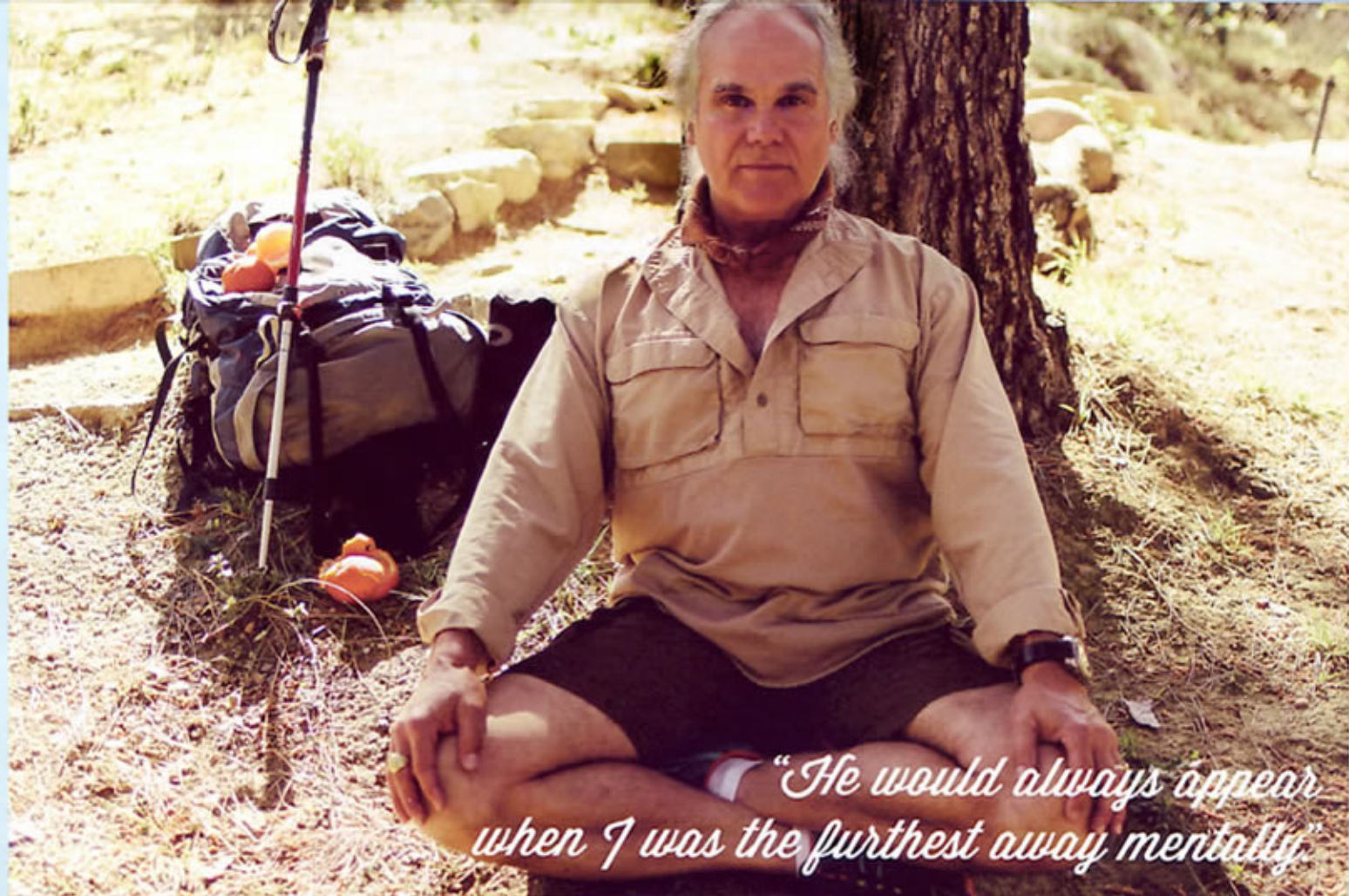
needed. I picked up the phone and called Katresha.

Katresha's voice on the other end of the line was like honey. It was sweet, soothing and seemed to possess precious few "ingredients." I made a reservation for a month later for my girlfriend and I (it was the only opening they had in the next 2-month period) and began trying to imagine what I had just gotten myself into.

My girlfriend and I spent the weekend prior to our check-in by checking off the items on the packing list Katresha had emailed us: comfortable clothes for two days (they provide onsite laundry), walking shoes and a CamelBak? The required CamelBak is a small backpack with an internal bladder to hold water and a long hose that allows you to hydrate while you hike. This item, we simply skipped. We had been hiking the week before in Laguna Canyon and could not imagine the need for carrying a gallon of water around while on a simple hike. We were obviously having a hard time reconciling the words "yoga" and "retreat" with strenuous hiking and the need for a carry-along water source. We arrived on Sunday (stressed from the drive and the

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preparation that always goes into leaving home for a week), and the first thing we did was go on a hike. Luckily for us, they had extra CamelBaks. Lucky us.

Our first hike only gave us a glimpse of what was to come. It was easy for a few reasons. We had full bellies from a big brunch at Crow Bar that morning (tell me that I will be on a cleanse for a week and my natural reaction is to eat as much as possible before it starts), we had arrived a little late and had missed the biggest part of the hike, and lastly, we were full of adrenaline as we had been looking forward to this life-changing week. The six-mile hike was still harder than our typical weekend pre or post brunch outing. About half way through the hike, while trekking straight uphill, we caught up to our group. We walked past them unknowingly (we had not been introduced yet), and for the first of what turned out to be many times, our instructor Geo Moskios appeared at the top of the hill, walking toward us as if

transported here just to meet us. He greeted us with a smile that rested easily on his tanned face. His hair was a mop of grey and curly, shooting off in every direction. He was happy to see us. No mention of our lateness. We turned together and started down the mountain.

Geo and Katresha Moskios are married and manage every aspect of the program. Katresha is the comforting, health-food making, well wishing Mother. Her every action is to make you more comfortable. Geo is the stern yet kind father that nudges and pushes you to achieve more than you believe is possible.

We returned to the Pearl that evening in a 15-passenger van with the seven women that would be our partners in this weeklong program. The Pearl is

tucked away in Laguna Canyon up a steep, switch-backed driveway, pushed against the mountain among towering trees. The 10 bedroom, wood-sided retreat is surrounded by meticulous gardens, running fountains and stonework on the exterior. The interior is more of the same - wood, stone, clean lines and fine linens. Geo and Katresha have done a fine job of transforming this once Hells Angels clubhouse into a place quite suitable for our escape.

We were shown to our private bungalow with its own massive deck and pool view. It was perfect. After being weighed and measured (yikes, was that really my waist size?) we went to

bed early. This was going to be a big week, and we would most likely need our rest.

I could spend time telling you about the minute differences that each day held in our weeklong adventure, but I believe that I could give you more insight into the week if I focused on the routine. The daily routine is key to the success of the Pearl's program. The routine lets you know what to expect. When you are hungry, the schedule lets you know that a meal is soon. When you are tired and sore, it lets you know that an hour of massage is just

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around the corner. The routine allows you to stop thinking, stop worrying and stop wondering. It allows you to turn over what is going to happen to someone else. It is a relief.

#### LEMON WATER:

You are awakened every morning at 6:30 am with a knock on the door. We rouse easily and head downstairs for our morning lemon water. We pour hot water out of a kettle and had a half lemon freshly squeezed. We are told that the drinks will kick-start our digestive system and help to regulate our acidity. Much of our nutrition is based on the idea that our bodies need to have our acidity vs. alkalinity regulated. The lemon water was one of our favorite things about our stay. It is now months later, and we still have lemon and hot water nearly every morning.

#### GEO'S POWER YOGA:

The Pearl is massive in size. A converted living room serves as our yoga studio. It is always warm with the fire burning in the massive fireplace at the front of the class. Beautiful woven rugs mark out nine evenly spaced places for us to choose from. Geo is waiting for us. I have precious little yoga experience – a total of three Bikram yoga classes nearly three years ago. Erin, my girlfriend, is participating in her very first class. Each class always begins with our very favorite exercise: the "windmill," which I call the helicopter. You stand comfortably, feet shoulder-width apart, extend your arms away from your side and start to rotate your hips. This motion swings

your arms around your body in unison and loosens your back, shoulders, hips, arms and legs in one simple stretch. I love the helicopter. We proceed through a series of stretches, push-ups, movements and poses. Geo is very patient. He takes his time with each of us. He gives encouragement to me, adjusts Erin and works his way around the class helping everyone. Slowly, surely, throughout the week, we learn to reach a little further, to stretch farther than we think we can. My back pain disappears on Day Three; Erin completes a back bend maneuver called a bridge on Day Four. Geo's "Power Yoga" uses his own signature series of postures. According to Geo, these postures are meant to "wake you up, increase your mobility and energize your day." Our week of classes made us both want to pursue his "Power Yoga" as part of our workout routine.

#### BREAKFAST:

As yoga winds down, Erin and I look at each other. We love breakfast. We are both secretly hoping for a big bowl of oatmeal or a super-sized smoothie. Even though the rules for the breakfast meal allow us to eat when we are ready, I find that I am racing the other nine participants, including my girlfriend, to the breakfast table. The breakfast is surprisingly small. The meals at breakfast are consistent in size, differ daily in exact contents but usually entail some mixture of poached fruit, goat milk yogurt and almond crumbles. The plates are beautifully

displayed and the food tastes amazing. All of our meals this week are a combination of fresh fruits, vegetables and organic wholesome foods. Much of the produce is grown in a garden only hundreds of yards from our table. The challenge asked of us is to adapt to the smaller portions; to function until lunch on merely several hundred calories. The taste and presentation of the meals made it easier to adapt. The lack of ingredients does not go unnoticed either.

#### NATURE HIKE:

Every hike began precisely at 9 am. We would pile into the 15-passenger van and drive a few miles to our trail for the day. It was awe inspiring to someone that has lived in the area for so long to see how much open ground exists inside of Laguna Canyon. Every one of our hikes began with a massive ascent. Every hike began, without exception, on the ground floor of the canyon. Every trail seemed steeper than the last. Our initial climbs would take us from 800 feet to 1200 feet in elevation within the first 30 minutes to hours of our hike. Erin and I took up a position at the back of the group. We hiked, then rested, then hiked, and then rested. We found ourselves talking less and hiking more. We found ourselves resting more and hiking less. I looked down to realize my hands were acting as pistons pulling my legs up and pushing the alternate one down with each stride. We were really climbing. At some point, there would be a time when we would reach the

summit of our hike. We would then continue along the ridge, dipping down and trudging up for mile after mile, stopping only to take in the views and suck in oxygen. The hikes were beautiful. Spring flowers over sweeping vistas with far off views of the ocean in one direction, flowering cactus, hundred-year-old oaks and towering mountains in the other. The hikes were designed to be a length and of a nature to be difficult enough to stop you from thinking about your daily chores. These hikes ranged between eight and 12 miles, covered thousands of total feet in elevation and lasted between three and four hours. I found that they were difficult enough to make me not only forget about my Instagram, Facebook and email; I also forgot that we were in Laguna. The art of not thinking of anything has always been unfamiliar to me. Always. This week I experienced perfect quietness of mind on several occasions. All of these occasions occurred on our hikes. Geo appeared twice to us during our week of hiking. He would always appear when I was the furthest away mentally. I would be concentrating heavily on our ascent, the heat, my hunger or even nothing at all and turn a corner to find Geo sitting on a rock handing out orange slices and encouragement or Geo at the top of a hill as we crested, holding the leash of his bear of a malamute, Oso, handing out figs. It was an explanation. He was letting us know he understood. He seemed to know we needed nourishment, both literally and



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## TEA GARDEN

figuratively. Geo was teaching us.

### FRESH JUICE:

We are greeted every day upon returning from our hike by a smiling employee of The Pearl, holding a tray full of glasses containing freshly squeezed juice or freshly flavored water. The juices are meant to raise our sugar levels, which have dipped on our long hikes. They are refreshing concoctions that included watermelon juice, apple juice and freshly squeezed orange water throughout the week. Once again, the refreshment relies on precious few ingredients.

### WEIGHT TRAINING:

The last thing you want to do after returning from a three-hour hike is lift weights. But as with everything else at The Pearl, there is calculated logic behind each part of our program. The weight room program focused mostly on our upper body. The idea was to get the blood moving from our large muscle groups that had been used during all of the hiking (our legs) into our upper body. The instructors made the workouts fun, even allowing us to workout in the pool on one exceptionally hot day.

### LUNCH:

Our lunch - not much different than breakfast - possessed few ingredients and mouthfuls of taste. Erin and I were always ravenous. We finish our plates. Finish our tea. Then, we spend the time until our massage, plotting how to steal food. We do not follow through, but it was fun to plot.

### RELAXING MASSAGE:

I have never been much on massages. Erin, however, could not wait to have her massage everyday. I actually found myself dreading the possibility of having someone massage me everyday. I can tell you that the hiking changed my tune. I had not hiked 50 miles in one week since bootcamp, which was over 20 years ago. My lower back was screaming at me, my hamstrings were on fire, and there was a knot in my hip. I was begging for my massage and hoping mine came first as the days went on. Katresha had me figured out perfectly. Day One: a massage that gently massaged and stretched me. Day Two's massage put me to sleep. By the time I was feeling better on Day Three, she assigned me to Molly. Molly was the tiniest masseuse I have ever seen. She could not have weighed more than 100 pounds and her hands were small enough that I thought I needed to be careful when we shook hands in greeting. I should not have prejudged Molly. Molly is a Laguna local whose sole profession is massage. I could not have fallen asleep during this hour session if I had been drugged. She dug deep into my back, hamstrings and neck. She stretched out my arms and pushed on my IT bands until I was ready to scream. It was exactly what I needed. I laid down on my yoga mat that night pain free in my middle back for the first time all week. That massage allowed me uninterrupted, pain-free sleep for the first time in months.

### FACIAL MASK:

The Pearl wants to help us concentrate on every aspect of our health. We are reminded that our skin is our largest organ. Erin and I made our way to the kitchen each day after our massage to locate our tiny bowl of freshly made face mask (by Day Three we are tempted to eat them). The masks are uniquely different everyday. We had masks made up of mangos, avocados and an oatmeal concoction that would have made a nice cookie (please don't laugh, but I know first hand, because I tasted that one). We both agreed that our faces felt better and looked better after six days of these natural masks.

### HEALING BROTH:

The broth was something we both began to long for. The span of hours between the end of lunch at 1:30 pm and the beginning of dinner at 7:30 pm caused our stomachs to growl and our attitudes to become a little aggravated. This mixture of reduced vegetables and herbs was healing to us. We were served one mug full of the healing tincture. Suffice it to say, I was hungry enough by the third day that I would turn the cup over my head, allowing every drop to leave the cup and hit my tongue.

### FIRESIDE CHAT:

Katresha gathered us around the giant stone fireplace like family each evening. She would share with us her amazing story of recovery. How she resurrected herself from a debilitating automobile crash that led to months of recovery. She would

share with us the benefits of her line of oils and creams that are sold as far away as England and as close by as A'marees in Newport Beach. She asked her staff to share recipes with us, to detail the benefits of berries and herbs, to teach. The purpose of the fireside chats was to take time out of our day for the expressed purpose of learning. It is hard to imagine that our culture mandates eight hours per day of schooling until we are 18, and then never mandates we spend even a single hour learning ever again.

### TAI CHI / FLOW YOGA:

The nighttime yoga was a sleep aid. Long, slow stretches set to ambient music, crackling fires, cozy incense and candlelight. The only thing I wanted to do at the conclusion of Flow yoga (and sometimes during) was fall fast asleep. We had an amazing change of pace on Day Three. Tai Chi master Vincent McCullough was that change of pace. A former football coach at Saddleback College, McCullough decided on a different life path. He has been teaching yoga since 1971 and Tai Chi since 1979. He showed up in our yoga room one night wearing a blue silk top and white flowing pants. He was full of life, comedy and commitment to his chosen path. He showed us an ancient art form gliding effortlessly across the floor with movements that belied his 82 years. He taught us to let go, to ignore the rules, to just be. It was a lesson that stuck with me more than the movements ever would.



**DINNER:**

Our dinner is not much different than breakfast or lunch. It is something we have a hard time waiting for. It is the part of the day we dream about most and lasts the least amount of time. It is fresh, healthy, creative, inventive, scrumptious and finger-licking (literally) good. The portion size, lack of food and lack of calories have also caused us to focus on other activities. Eating can no longer be seen as our primary activity. Exercise has taken that roll. Yoga has taken that position. By Day Three, I

could subside on so much less.

**EVENING TEA:**

Tea became my crutch. The tea was caffeine free, served in abundance before and after every meal. It was served hot and unsweetened. The ingredients were grown in a tea garden that you could see from the window outside our room. The evening tea was our favorite. It came after our meal, served as our dessert and was always pristinely presented to us. The exact ingredients of each evening tea, which included herbs like lemon grass,

chamomile, goldenseal and sage, were read to us before the tea was served. It was the perfect way to conclude each evening. It also made us both very sleepy.

In one week we were able to rid televisions, telephones, emails, sales, future planning, Instagram, Facebook, The world wide web, caffeine, sugar, processed foods, alcohol, wheat, gluten, meat, stress and pain from our lives. My process of reducing ingredients left me with Family, girlfriend, health and self. One week at the Pearl really can be life changing.



THE PEARL  
LEMON WA  
GEO'S POWER  
BREAKFAST  
NATURE HIKE  
FRESH JUICE  
WEIGHT TRAIN  
LUNCH  
RELAXING MA  
FACIAL MASK  
HEALING BRO  
FIRESIDE CHA  
TAI CHI  
FLOW YOGA  
DINNER  
EVENING TE