

## **Who I Am, Before Birth, Eternally** by Tess Hughes

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I first went to West Virginia to attend the TAT Foundation's September meeting in 2005. At the time, I was so unsure of what TAT was all about that a friend came with me, just to make sure the participants weren't all a bunch of crazies. What I found was a level of integrity that I hadn't experienced before. I recognised this quality as being the thing I wanted in my life.

I stumbled upon the TAT website a couple of years prior to this visit, when checking up on my old boyfriend, whose name is Richard Rose. I recognised something in the site, which I'll call Truth or integrity, and so I spent several years visiting the site and related websites.

At that time, I felt myself to be a complete beginner as a spiritual seeker. In fact, I didn't know there *were* spiritual seekers and was amazed to find there were numerous people seeking something. I didn't understand phrases like "becoming a reverse vector," "backing away from untruth," "jacob's ladder," and so on. It all seemed quite foreign to me, but I latched on to the idea of self inquiry.

I particularly decided to look at past memories that came up, especially any that held much suffering, such as feelings of embarrassment, or having made an idiot of myself, or having been taken advantage of. I came to recognise the phrase "afflictions to the ego" as a great catch-all for these thoughts. I also became aware of current time afflictions to the ego and became able to look at them rather than getting lost in them. This usually happened after the incident rather than while it was taking place. I would say this was my only real practice at that time, as I had never been a good meditator.

I also spent two days in solitary retreat at the farm following the 2005 visit. I had spent plenty of time alone before this but had always filled the time with distractions. This time, I came to recognise the value of time spent alone, totally dedicated to spiritual work. Some deeply hidden memories and profound insights into their meaning came to me. It was painful, but it was a start, and I knew it.

Some time later, I realised that in fact I wasn't new to self inquiry, that I had been doing it for years, but in an ad hoc way. I can trace the beginnings of it back to my teenage years, when I had heard the Shakespeare phrase, "To thine own self be true." This phrase became the "koan" of my life.

The other thing that happened in 2005 was that a women's online confrontation group started, coordinated by Anima. This had a tremendous effect on me. The weekly contact kept me in a state of questioning and motivation. Anima never went off track—she always said something that brought me back to the main point. She couldn't be fooled. I also developed a great affection for the other participants.

In the confrontation group, for the first time I heard the names of teachers and authors such as Nisargadatta, Maharshi, Eckhart Tolle, William Samuel, Douglas Harding, and so on. This is a significant step, as it saved me time in reading less focussed material. Of course, I initially didn't get most of it, but gradually some understanding began to take hold.

In the summer of 2007, I went to Salisbury for a Douglas Harding workshop. I left there “Seeing.” From that time on I could “See” any time I remembered to do it. I could feel the subtle change that happened.

In September 2007, I made my second trip to West Virginia. The TAT meeting was followed by a women’s retreat led by Anima. It was wonderful to finally meet all the women I had been corresponding with online. This trip had a huge effect on me. The confrontation sessions, in particular, dug into the hidden underlying beliefs. I was rattled to the core by it. Every assumption I held was brought to light and subject to question.

Shortly after my return to Ireland, strange things began to happen. An insight came to me. It was that everyone is on a spiritual path. There is no other option. Everything and everyone is spiritual. Some people know it and some do not. This insight was felt to my core and changed how I viewed everyone.

Soon thereafter, I became ill. For about nine months, it was just one thing after another. Eventually, my doctor put it all down to menopause, but I have my doubts. Of course, the common name for menopause is “The Change,” so maybe the women of the world knew something the rest of us didn’t know.

Over the following eighteen months, I had the opportunity to go on solitary retreat three or four times for two or three days at a time. I became more adept at introspection and less bothered by what was coming up.

Then, early in 2008, my husband became ill and was diagnosed with leukaemia. My life fell apart. I didn’t even think of spiritual work for over a year, but I made the intention right from the start to surrender to whatever happened and to do my best every day. I did wonder at the time if this wasn’t just a strategy to avoid banging my head on a brick wall. Regardless, I just accepted that it was the best I could come up with at the time. I became acutely aware that I had no control over what happened with my husband or indeed with anything else.

About eighteen months into his illness, just as he was improving, I sat one day to meditate. I went into deep meditation immediately, in a way that had never happened before. I was surprised and even wondered if I wasn’t just deeply exhausted.

Interest in the spiritual search arose again, along with a longing for spiritual friends or a teacher in Galway. I prayed that someone would come to Galway to inspire or guide or support me. Within a week, I heard of Jackie O’Keeffe, an Irish woman who started giving satsang a couple of years ago. She was coming to Galway the following week. I was stunned by how my prayer was answered so quickly. I had no doubt that my prayer was being answered. I thought of the words of Jesus, “Ask and you shall receive.”

I went to Jackie’s satsang and one week later went to satsang with Stuart Schwartz. I had never been to satsang before and didn’t even know what it was. During the session with Stuart, a fire started in my chest and burned for about an hour. It was a strange sensation, like nothing I had ever experienced before.

I went on solitary retreat for a week following these satsangs. Towards the end of the week, I had an experience, which Art Ticknor later identified as a satori. He told me this was not the

final experience, but that it was a significant milestone. This information fit perfectly with my own notion of it.

Following this experience, I sat stunned for four or five months. I saw no point in anything. I did the minimum of housework. I couldn't read, listen to music, or anything. But, I did not feel depressed. I found this strange but didn't care much.

I realised that I lived in the now mostly. I noticed that memory was barely there, except when conversations with others brought it up. I tried to understand what had happened but couldn't identify what had changed. I longed for the opportunity to be alone. I just wanted to be undisturbed, and I did actually get plenty of time alone in the home situation. I slept a lot less than before the experience.

Art corresponded with me regularly and kept me in the loop. This was like a lifeline to me, even though I wasn't able to discuss what was happening. It was more a non-happening.

Then nine months after the satori, I had the opportunity to go on a solitary retreat again for a week. At the end of this week, there was another experience in which my True Nature was revealed, without a shadow of a doubt. It was a self remembering, of who I am, before birth, eternally. I felt a great sense of recognition and relief, but otherwise very ordinary. It is as if nothing changed—but in a way, everything has changed.

The change I am most aware of is the sense of security, the end of fear. I still feel there are changes afoot in relation to how this will play out in daily life. I feel no desire to talk about this, except to people who are into spiritual seeking. I truly feel that if this can happen to me, it can happen to anyone. In fact it *will* happen to everyone.

I think that without the things I learned in TAT, I would really have felt I was having a breakdown. And I also think that the things I learned at TAT led to this happening in a more speedy fashion than would have happened naturally. I am grateful beyond words for this help.

So now, I know some of you are wondering about my strategy. In a word, it was *sincerity*. I took seriously everything I heard and read. I didn't understand most of it and never got an intellectual understanding of what being advised. I operate much more on a feeling level than an intellectual level, so I would try to feel what was being said.

It would take too long to list all the things I tried, but here are a few key things. I thought of them as experiments—feeling/mental experiments—and they changed over time. I was very trusting and confident that the things that were being said in TAT teachings were deliberate and meaningful.

Once Art Ticknor said, “Awareness in not in you, you are in it.” This was quite a turnaround. I tried to feel the truth of this. Another time he said, “It is a matter of mistaken identity, you are not who you think you are.” This was baffling, but I tried to feel it. This happened shortly after learning to “See,” Harding style, so I somehow connected these and tried to feel something in it.

I heard Mike Connors speak of effortless effort. I did little experiments to try to get a feel for this. I never felt I was getting it with any of these attempts, so they would change every few days or weeks.

I printed Bart Marshall's "strategies for awakening" [*Strategies*, TAT Forum, October 2005] and would go back to them every few months to see if I could do better with any of them. I was always extremely bothered by the strategy "Stop Knowing." I couldn't figure out what he was getting at with this one. After a few years, I decided I would try dropping opinions about things like politics or education or people.

Anima said that awareness of awareness was the thing to do. I tried this.

Through this time, I was also coming upon plenty of conundrums from Nisargadatta, Maharshi, and so on.

I knew that Richard Rose had recommended ladder work but couldn't think of anything I could do to help others. I had just started doing ladder work in the TAT Europe effort, about a month before the final experience.

In summary, I would say that the three things that helped most were: solitary retreats, reading good books, and doing these feeling/mental experiments for myself. The connection with Art was like an anchor that kept my little boat from drifting too far from shore.

I have written this as a way of sharing the effectiveness of the TAT message and method, as it worked for me.