

NEW BEGINNINGS

David H. Albert

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Shiva and Parvati lived together in a house off in a far off corner of the world that only the gods could inhabit. All would have been well, perhaps, except Shiva would often go off for eons at a time to dance his destruction of the world – from whence all creation springs – leaving poor Parvati alone in the house.

Parvati was very lonely. Then she came up with an idea to deal with her loneliness. She took a ball of mud, combined it with dirt from her own body, and with her own hands fashioned the loveliest little boy to keep her company. And he did – laughing and playing ball, and doing all the little things that mothers adore about their little boys.

One day, Parvati decided to take a bath. She asked the little boy to stand guard while she was bathing. Suddenly, Shiva came home, having danced himself out for a while, and barged in through the door. Seeing the boy angered him and, in a jealous rage, he cut the boy's head off.

“What have you done?” cried Parvati, still shaking. “This boy you have killed is your son!”

Shiva, now calming down, and seeing what he had wrought, said to Parvati, “I will make amends. I will take the head of the next person who comes along, and fashion it to the body of the boy and he'll be as good as new.”

Just then they looked out the window. And lo and behold, the first person who came along was an elephant.

And that is why Lord Ganesh – the firstborn of Shiva and Parvati his consort – the Bringer of Boons and Destroyer of Obstacles – has the head of an elephant, and the body of a boy. And, I am told, like an elephant, Ganesh never forgets.

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At the beginning of any new venture, or of a long journey, or at the birth of child, Hindus offer a prayer to Lord Ganesha, the god of new beginnings and of second chances. Ganesha, in his strange, hyphenated body, is also seen as the deity who is connector between the world of the divine – symbolized by the head – and that of phenomenal existence -- the body of the little boy.

As lord of wisdom, learning, and, most of all, memory, Ganesha is the god of storytelling. For every story is a new beginning, a bringing forth of memory – whether by a telling gesture that gathers with a sweep of the hand the pebbles of an almost forgotten past, or a turn of phrase that brings forth the bittersweet of a childhood long gone, or a narrative that stings the locus of love and loss and brings with it renewal.

Every well-turned story, or so it can be said, is a hymn of praise to Ganesha. For in the remembrance of things past, real or imagined, is the promise of a second chance. Ganesha is the lord of linkages, and the guardian of entrances. As I look through the stories contained in the two volumes of the *The Healing Heart*, each provides a linking of the exigencies of the phenomenal world – whether in physical injury, chronic conditions, sickness, and even death -- or in the emotional pain born of domestic violence, alcohol or other drug addiction, homelessness, child abuse, environmental degradation, the disappearance of cultures, and community disintegration -- with an entrance into a new or perhaps *re-membered* awareness, born of grace, the new, wiser head grafted to the older body. Stories are the *re-collection* of parts of ourselves in the process of becoming who we are, or were truly meant to be. The knight sets forth on his journey, discovers himself in a barren wasteland, is confronted by his personal dragons, and makes his way to the other side, having rescued his damsel in distress, unearthed the golden chalice (itself a metaphor for the heart of humankind), or simply stumbled his way, bloodied and bedraggled, perhaps, but newly made whole, back to his own bed. But Ganesha is also the Lord of Categories and of Multitudes – each of our journeys, and our stories, is our own, but the re-collection and re-membrance of them collectively is the multitudinous storehouse of culture and community, the fruits and sugared rice and sesame cakes Ganesha holds in his four hands.

Ganesha is always depicted with a large belly, an emblem of the fact that we can learn to consume and digest whatever experiences life throws in our path. (This book is certainly large enough, and filled with enough morsels of experience, to warrant a lengthy digestion!) One foot touches the ground, and the other is tucked up under him, providing a balance between the grounding of our experience and our imaginative selves. And he rides around on the back of a rat – I guess one could call that a commitment to basic transportation. It would be interesting to do a survey of the make, model, and especially the year of automobiles that storytellers included in *The Healing Heart* use these days, but we haven't availed ourselves of the opportunity!

Hindus look upon the image of Ganesha as timeless. He doesn't exist in history, and doesn't make demands upon us other than to be aware of his presence. In Western traditions, in contrast, God intervenes in human history. But the idea of the new beginning is equally embodied, not only in the New Testament Jesus, but in one of the most miraculous stories of the Old, the declaration of Jubilee.

Every 50th year, or so it says in Leviticus, the soil of the land is to be allowed to lie fallow. All landed property, outside the walls of towns, reverts to its original owner, who may have been driven by poverty to sell it. And Israelites, reduced to slavery for similar reasons, are to go free.

I call Jubilee a *story*, although none is attached to it in the Old Testament, because no one knows for sure if it was ever observed. It has all the makings:

For in the year before Jubilee,

- **Interest rates soared, for no one would take property as surety on loans;**
- **The price of food rose steeply, for there wouldn't be a harvest, and the speculators had a field day, for no one could predict what would happen to the food supply;**
- **Slaves began to disobey their masters, knowing that their days of servitude were numbers;**
- **Birthrates skyrocketed, as farmers had nothing to do;**
- **The number of marriages fell, for who could afford a dowry? With it went the market for wedding garments and good wine;**
- **The value of land dropped precipitously;**
- **Real estate developers worked feverishly to convince town authorities to annex outlying areas;**
- **Banks foundered; and gold rose in the international currency exchanges;**
- **The cities overflowed, and the poor went begging for work and for food, for no one would take them in servitude;**
- **The slave market for Israelites dried up;**
- **Moving and storage companies had all the business they could handle, and yard sales were outstanding!**

And then on the first day of Jubilee, the ram's horn sounding its utter astonishment, the Lord God Almighty, Fashioner of All Things Great and Especially Small, stroking His beard and wiping His perspiring hands upon His workingman's smock, looked down from His workshop in heaven and saw that it was indeed all worth it. For He saw, if but for a moment, that the earth was at peace, and, even in the midst of a world scarlet-draped in greed, cunning, and just plain indifference, the poorest of the poor, their debts forgiven, would, if just once in 50 years, be provided a second chance.

In the world of storytelling – as I hope you will find in *The Healing Heart* - there is a little touch of Jubilee all year round.