



The Seeker

*Transformation.
Change.
Move in a different direction.
Go in search of things.*

By Sue Mayfield Geiger

Transformation. Change. Move in a different direction. Go in search of things. All of these projections are things we think about at some point during our lives. With the beginning of a new year, perhaps there are those of you who intend to take a road less traveled in the months to come or explore options that will change your life entirely. Transformation comes in many varieties, depending on how big of a risk taker you are. You can approach it like a slow moving train or you can jump in head first with gusto. Whatever the case may be, making the move takes courage, commitment and most of all passion. Belief is a powerful word; if you believe, it will happen.

There are thousands of transformation stories to be told, and you no doubt have friends who have lived them; maybe even yourself. This is the story of a young man who grew up in a devout Catholic home in the Upper Midwest, attended parochial schools, including a Catholic college in Texas where he was a wild and crazy guy. He had a serious relationship with his college sweetheart, but broke it off after graduation and a move to Los Angeles where he spent the next decade living the Hollywood life as a screenwriter/story editor. He dated glamorous women, dined at trendy restaurants, partied, experimented mildly with drugs, made money, and life was good. Or was it?

Something would happen to turn his focus inward. To search his soul and take a journey that would lead him far beyond anything he ever knew existed. Today Steve Krieger (now called Gento) is a Buddhist

monk and lives in a Zen Buddhist monastery (Mount Baldy) in the California hills far above the bright lights of Tinseltown. He has no worldly possessions, resides in modest quarters and his curly dark locks are gone. As a Buddhist monk, his head is shaved.

The boyish good looks and eager grin portray exactly who he is – a likeable and friendly guy. That part, he says, never changed. But what did change was, well, just about everything else.

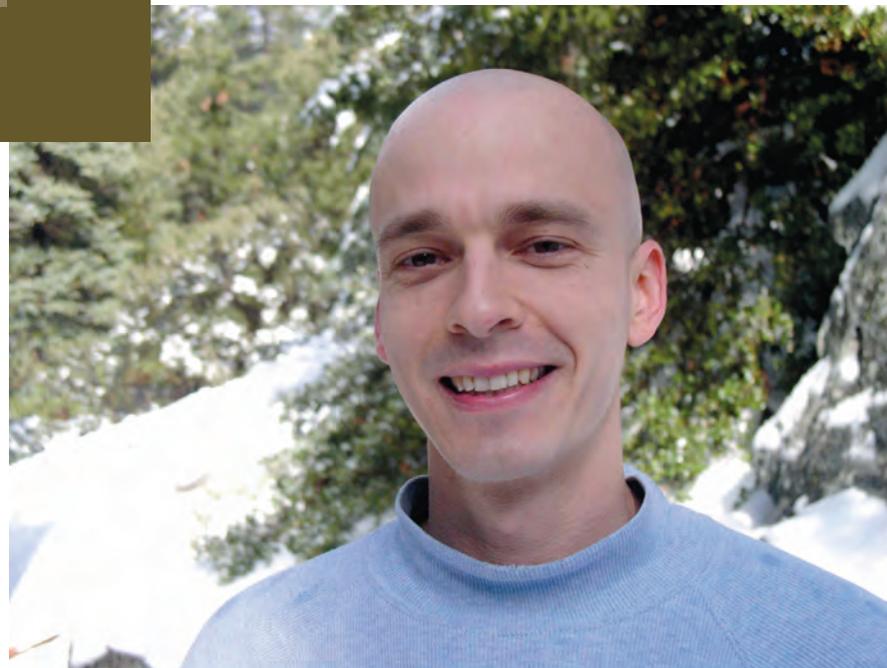
Tell me about your growing up years.

I was born and raised in the suburbs of Brookfield, Wisconsin, and then out in the farmlands of Hartford with my two brothers and three sisters. My father owns Krieger Barrels, a gun barrel factory in Germantown. I've recently been told by a non-Buddhist friend that this latter fact alone is enough to drive a man to the monastery.

Were you a true believer of Catholicism when you were growing up?

I was raised a strong Catholic. It was all I had and all I knew, and I was very fond of much of the custom, philosophy and practices of this faith. Where we use the word religion, in the East many traditions use the Sanskrit word *upaya*, which approximately means “skillful means” or “expedient.” Catholicism was the *upaya* or tool I had to work with, so I used it the best I could to try and figure out how to be happy and live an authentic life.

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Steve Krieger, now called Gento.

What was school like?

My parents started a Catholic school, Our Lady of the Rosary, and I went there from kindergarten through seventh grade, at which point I was home-schooled for a year, and then went to a predominantly Christian college-prep high school, followed by University of Dallas, the Crown Jewel of my Catholic education, you could say.

What was your major?

Philosophy. To paraphrase Steve Martin, I took just enough philosophy in college to screw me up for life.

Would you describe yourself as a typical college student who partied, drank, dated, the whole nine yards? Tell me about your college life in general.

I was a fairly typical college student in that I considered myself highly unique and spectacular, despite evidence to the contrary. I drank for the first time in college, often, usually quite successfully, if by successful you mean in excess. I experimented with pot a little. I was out to prove to myself and the world that I had something to say, that I was on to something, that I was one to watch out for. So I did a lot of wild things. Streaking naked, stealing dump trucks and driving them around campus, walking across the crowded campus mall in my underwear, swallowing thirty goldfish in less than half as many minutes etc., etc. (Ed. Note: See second paragraph of this story about wild and crazy guy. I think this answer sums it up.)

Did you go to Mass while in college?

I stopped going my sophomore year. I stayed up all night reading Nietzsche's *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*. The next morning was Sunday Mass, which I skipped for the first time in my life. There's no going back once Nietzsche takes hold.

What happened to your college girlfriend?

She moved out to L.A. with me and we dated for about a year, but our relationship was pretty much doomed once we left the hermetically sealed environment that was UD (University of Dallas). Ultimately she wanted to get married, have children and live in Texas, and I wasn't ready for that yet – least of all, the living in Texas part.

It's not all that bad, Gento! Why did you decide to move to L.A.?

I spent four years studying Western philosophy in college and came to the conclusion that comedy was a much more noble, veracious and honest pursuit. One night about three weeks before graduation, I was lying in bed thinking, *What do I want to do before I die?* And the answer was, *Give entertainment a shot*. So I decided to head to L.A. to become a comic/screenwriter.

What was that like? Tell me about your life in L.A. and how long were you there?

I lived in L.A. for nine years. Moving there from the bubble that was University of Dallas was quite shocking, and just what I needed, or at least what I thought I needed. I was completely lost and alone in that city for most of my nine years there. I had no clear path for my life. It was an incredible adventure. You can spend decades in L.A. and whole sections of the city will still remain a mystery to you. You can reinvent yourself again and again and again in that town. It's huge, sprawling, and undefined. I spent a year and a half on the standup comedy circuit, where I exorcised a lot of demons and garnered a minimum of laughs in the process. I dated some very interesting and strange women, one of whom started a magazine devoted entirely to human defecation, and one of whom broke into my apartment after we broke up and brought the police crashing through my door. Other adventures included

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WHAT WE DO IN A MONASTERY:

We train really hard half the year (Seichu) winter and summer. Spring and fall (Seikan) are less formal. During Seikan we host workshops for outside groups, work around camp, and we even get part of Tuesday off. The intense retreats happen mostly during Seichu, the first week of every month. The rest of the time we chop a lot of wood and carry a lot of water. Although, now that it's winter, it's more like chopping water and carrying wood. I spent today dangling precariously from tree branches with a chainsaw trying to prune back our wonderful but overgrown ferns, maples, oaks, etc. We call this *Samu*, or moving/working meditation. One false move and...

TYPICAL RETREAT DAY DURING TRAINING SEASON:

Up at 3 a.m., fifteen minutes to be in the Zendo meditation hall for tea; next we march down to the sutra hall for chanting in Japanese. Then back up to the Zendo for an hour and a half to two hours of sitting, wherein we meet with our teacher for a private meeting. Next, formal breakfast, a highly ritualized affair with chanting and servers (*handaikans*) and it's back to the Zendo for a serving of tea, a fifteen minute break, back to the Zendo for more sitting, then down to the sutra hall for a talk from our teacher, which lasts about an hour. Every aspect of the schedule, twenty-hours each day, is accounted for. We all practice together as one unit, so the form or rules are very clear and precise. There is little to no room for individual choice or preference. That's just not what a Dai-Sesshin retreat is about. It's about getting out of your comfort zone and moving into a more universal or impersonal or sacred space.

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working as a gopher for a film production company, a job that required me to do my boss's laundry and drug transactions (he was a huge pothead). I eventually became a freelance story editor for several film production companies. I would wake up at ten, read two scripts and write synopses and comments; then discuss them with producers as potential projects. Sometimes I would make notes and help with rewriting, which took about six hours. Then I'd work on my own script for another six, watch a movie, read, and go to bed about three a.m.

When did Buddhism pique your interest and why? Was there some sort of major epiphany that you experienced?

I spent a lot of time driving around at night

in Hollywood, trying to clear my head and/or find a hotdog stand. KPFFK, an underground radio station, plays lectures from an old hippie sage from the '60s named Alan Watts. He'd studied Zen Buddhism, and his soft, witty, perspicacious presentation of this deep, strange practice captivated me.

Had you stopped going to Mass altogether at this point?

More or less. Every now and again I would return to Mass, but for the most part I had evolved out of the Catholic phase in my life, but with nothing to replace it. I was like a soft, slimy little slug with no shell.

Were you searching for something that was missing in your life?

Very much so. I hit 30 and I thought, OK, this has been fun, but you know what? I do not want to grow old in Hollywood. That was a turning point. I realized that even if I did hit it big as a screenwriter I would still be living in a town I don't particularly love, sitting behind my desk all day, cranking out *Toy Story 7* or *Borat 2*. I don't want to be 50 and trying to think up the latest sex comedy to appeal to the oh-so-crucial 14-25 age demographic. You don't grow old and wise in Hollywood nearly so much as you grow old and desperate. I wanted to be an independent filmmaker a la Paul Thomas Anderson or Woody Allen, but even then, I knew I didn't really have anything to say. I was just like every other schmoe at Starbucks pounding away on his or her laptop, hoping to hit it big, charmed by his or her own talents and largely unworried about what else was going on in the world.

Tell me about the early months in the monastery; why you chose the particular one you went to.

I never imagined I'd wind up at a Zen Buddhist monastery. It was basically a total fluke or accident or providence that I wound up here.

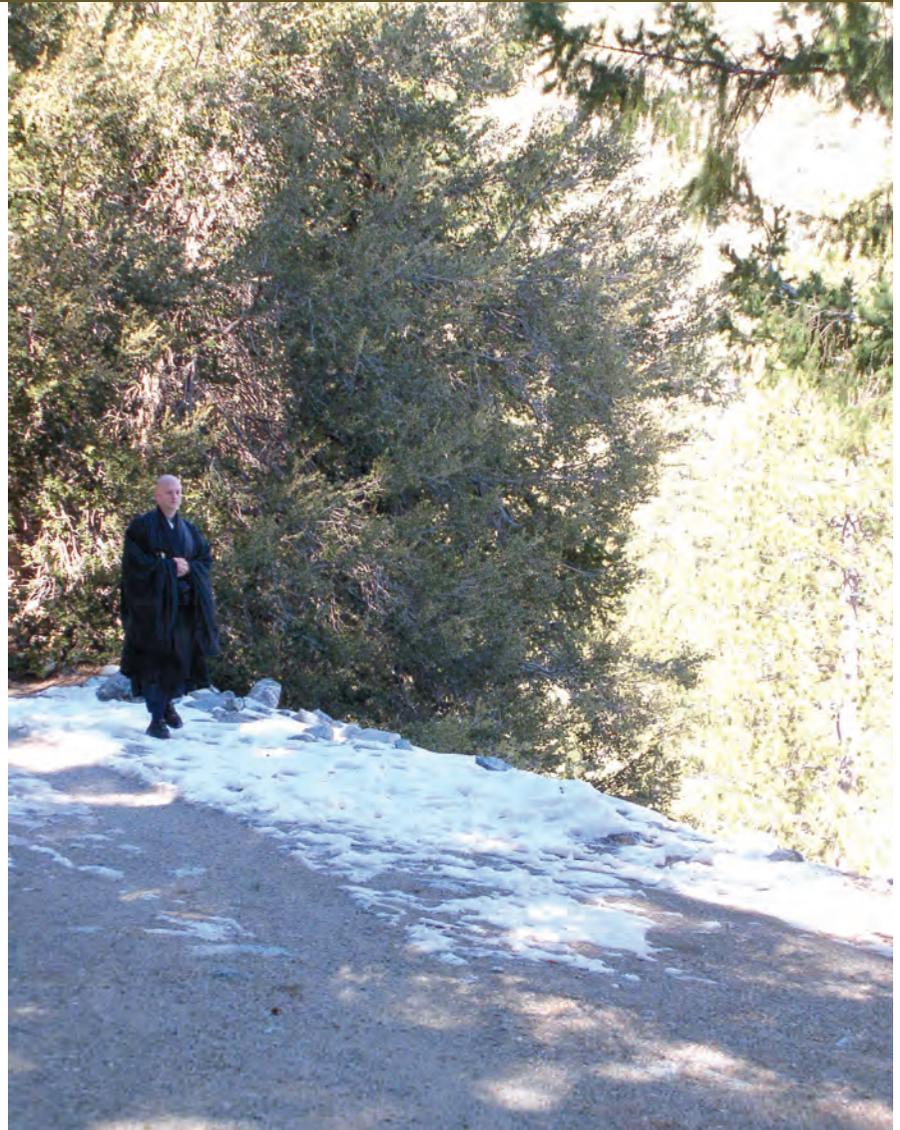
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A monk enjoying the peaceful surroundings at Mount Baldy.

I was studying Tibetan Buddhism with a Shambhala center in L.A. After about five years I came to the conclusion that their practices weren't for me. There was too much incense on the altar, and too much intellectual discourse going on in the meditation hall. I needed something I could sink my teeth into. I needed a practice, a *shugyo* in Japanese. I met a Zen Osho or priest (i.e. an advanced monk) who ran a sitting group in a dirty little parking garage on Sunset Blvd. I remember walking into the room and seeing several black cushions all lined up in a row, along with a single flower in a clear glass vase. He had transformed this ugly, dank space into something quite elegant. We became best friends. I never sat with his meditation group. I would always show up afterwards and we would go get a drink. I must say, he felt like the first true human being I had ever met, making me realize how most of us are just human animals. He had humor, grace, composure, and an utter ferocity that allowed him to do and say all the things that traditional religions scoff at. He is both an utterly religious or spiritual man and, by many religious standards, a complete degenerate. He holds these two sides of himself in balance and has made me realize what we mean in Buddhism by the Middle Way.

When did you know that Buddhism would be the path you would follow – right away or did it take awhile?

I had no intention of ever getting involved in Buddhism in any official capacity. I became best friends with Kigen, the monk I was telling you about, and we were going to write a book together. One day I was at our L.A. Zen center (Rinzai-Ji) when Kigen was talking to another monk about the Mount Baldy Zen Center, where he/Kigen had done most of his formal training. There was an upcoming retreat at Mt. Baldy, and it was under-attended, so I said I'd go. I knew right then and there, out of nowhere, that I would go to Mt. Baldy, get ordained and become a full-time monk.



Can you give us a recap of the last two years and what it has been like? Particularly, describe a typical day. (See sidebar p. 14)

Our teacher, Joshu Sasaki Roshi, is several months away from his 100th birthday. He is the last of a generation of fierce, old-school Rinzai Zen teachers, Rinzai being Samurai Zen. At Mt. Baldy he has created an uncompromising, highly-disciplined environment modeled after his Zen upbringing in the Kyoto Mountains of Japan, where he became a monk at the age of 14. Leonard Cohen, the singer/songwriter, spent some time here, and he has called this place “spiritual boot camp.” The word Zen comes from the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which could be translated as single-pointed concentration. Every aspect of life at Mt. Baldy is designed to cultivate this single-pointed concentration

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Steve Krieger's UD freshman yearbook photo.

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wherein your focus becomes so deep and so strong that you sort of come out on the other side of yourself, turn yourself inside out – lose yourself in your surroundings completely, you become one with them, in the same way that a mother is completely one with the child she is breastfeeding, and vice versa, or a fish is one with pond water.

When you took your vows, what was the ceremony like?

It was an intense, beautiful ceremony. My parents were there, and at one point in the ceremony, I had to bow to them. My mother cried.

What are your future plans?

A freshly ordained monk, I'm what's called an *Unsui*, which translates into cloud/water, so I can duck this question by saying that my job for now is just to float and flow.

Do you ever miss your old life and the old Steve?

Not particularly. You can't undo spiritual puberty any more than you can undo physical puberty.