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I want to add my voice to the many you must have heard protesting at the reluctance of the American authorities to grant permanent residence to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh. I want also to explain something of what he has meant to me: but first my own background.

I am a 54-year-old Fleet Street journalist and have been handling foreign and political news most of my life. In my student days I won a scholarship to University College, Dublin, where I obtained an honour BA degree in 1950. I won college prizes and an Italian Government bursary which took me to Siena University. I was also lucky enough to be invited to the Salzburg Seminar of American Studies where I attended a winter course entitled, if I remember rightly, American literature and democratic way of life.

In 1952 I joined the Irish Press in Dublin as a reporter, later switching first to feature-writing, then leader-writing, then subediting. In 1956 I moved to London and worked successively on the News Chronicle, the Daily Herald (both now defunct), and the Sun before joining the foreign desk at The Times in 1970.

2 / I took up meditation in 1978 purely as a means of achieving better mental or physical health. Within a year I met some of Bhagwan's sannyasins and was deeply impressed by their openness, awareness and gusto for life - qualities so lacking in myself. When the opportunity came the following winter I went to India to see the Poona ashram. I had never been of a religious disposition and had no intention of becoming a sannyasin. But after joining in the meditations, hearing Bhagwan's discourses, being in his presence, I felt a door was open to me and I had no moral choice but to enter and become a disciple. I was fearful of how this step might affect my family and my work, and I half-hoped that some ~~the~~ reason I might not be accepted. But Bhagwan said yes.

Indeed it did have an enormous impact on my life. My wife has at times felt threatened by the venture, but now, three and half years later and after 31 years of marriage, she too has decided to ask for Bhagwan's mala. Work was not a problem. A new detachment enabled me to function better under pressure, to act more decisively. Some of my colleagues may well have regarded me as an eccentric, but my relations with them tended to become warmer as they have with people generally.

These last few years have been the richest, the fullest of my life. For me Bhagwan is a pointer to what I can become and a reminder of how far there is to go. He has given me a taste of freedom. Eighteen months ago I felt free enough to trust to life and leave The Times - a step that would have been inconceivable previously. After a break I am freelancing on the Observer, the now strike-bound Financial Times and the Guardian.

As I write, I think of those cold war days half a lifetime ago when young people from all over Europe and beyond were brought together in Salzburg to hear Harvard professors extol the virtues of the free American system. It is strange that that system should wish to exclude the religious leader from whom I have learnt what true freedom can be.

Donal O'Farrell