



**COURAGEOUS CREATIVITY**

JANUARY 2012



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## **EDITOR'S NOTE**

**SHIRIN SUBHANI**

Shirin Subhani and Shahana Dattagupta were inspired to become “curators” of stories of courageous creativity after experiencing firsthand, the transformative power of creative thinking and expression that involve emotional risk and personal vulnerability. For more about Shirin and Shahana, please visit the “About Us” page on Flying Chickadee’s Web site: [www.flyingchickadee.com/about.html](http://www.flyingchickadee.com/about.html)

# EDITOR'S NOTE

A couple months ago we heard of the Unreasonable Institute. Immediately intrigued, we discovered that they believe in unreasonable people, in those who are just crazy enough to ignore the skeptics, who remain undeterred by persistent failure, and who, above all, are convinced they can change the world. Inspired by this message and vision, we chose to kick-off the New Year, which brings “resolutions” and “goals” for many, by exploring the idea that being truly courageous, innovative and creative requires stepping out of reason and rationalized thinking into the unreasonable – to make a leap of faith into the realm of all possibility.

So, 2012's first issue presents to you contributors who have been on this, always challenging, journey of being unreasonable, and discovered their truths in the process. Amy Benson, a documentary filmmaker, shares her touching story of Unreasonable Commitment, taking us to Nepal, where she chanced upon a story about a little girl that changed her forever. In Why YaliniDream(s), performance artist YaliniDream reveals how unreasonable her family found her path given their background and resources. In The Sound (Guidance) of Music, creative vocalist Devika Thakkar shares key insights about life revealed to her after she willingly leaped off a lucrative corporate career at the outset of the financial crisis, to practice Indian classical music. Poet Pallavi Garg explores Unreasonable Love, and artist Pallavi Sharma discloses her inner conflicts by entering a forbidden world through her video installation, 'Embedded.' In an interview with us, filmmaker Jason DaSilva tells us how, against all odds, he has creatively merged his progressively debilitating illness with his passion for relevant and meaningful filmmaking. As always, six-year-old budding writer Galen C. Baird's perspective returns us to our childlike natures, reminding us that we don't need reasons to like the things we do, but can do so 'Just Because'!

And, in a special editorial on Astitva: A Tale of Two Queens, premiering in the Seattle area on January 14, Shahana offers personal reflections on how the unreasonable paths of legendary queens Meerabai and Laxmibai of the Indian subcontinent might have modern day resonance.

Best wishes for the New Year; go forth and be unreasonable!

Shirin.

**“...BEING TRULY COURAGEOUS, INNOVATIVE AND CREATIVE REQUIRES ONE TO STEP OUT OF REASON AND RATIONALIZED THINKING INTO THE UNREASONABLE – TO MAKE A LEAP OF FAITH INTO THE REALM OF ALL POSSIBILITY.”**



**“HUMAN REASON IS A PIN DANCING ON THE HEAD OF AN ANGEL, SO SMALL IS IT IN COMPARISON TO THE DIVINE VASTNESS THAT ENCIRCLES US.”**

- Margaret Atwood

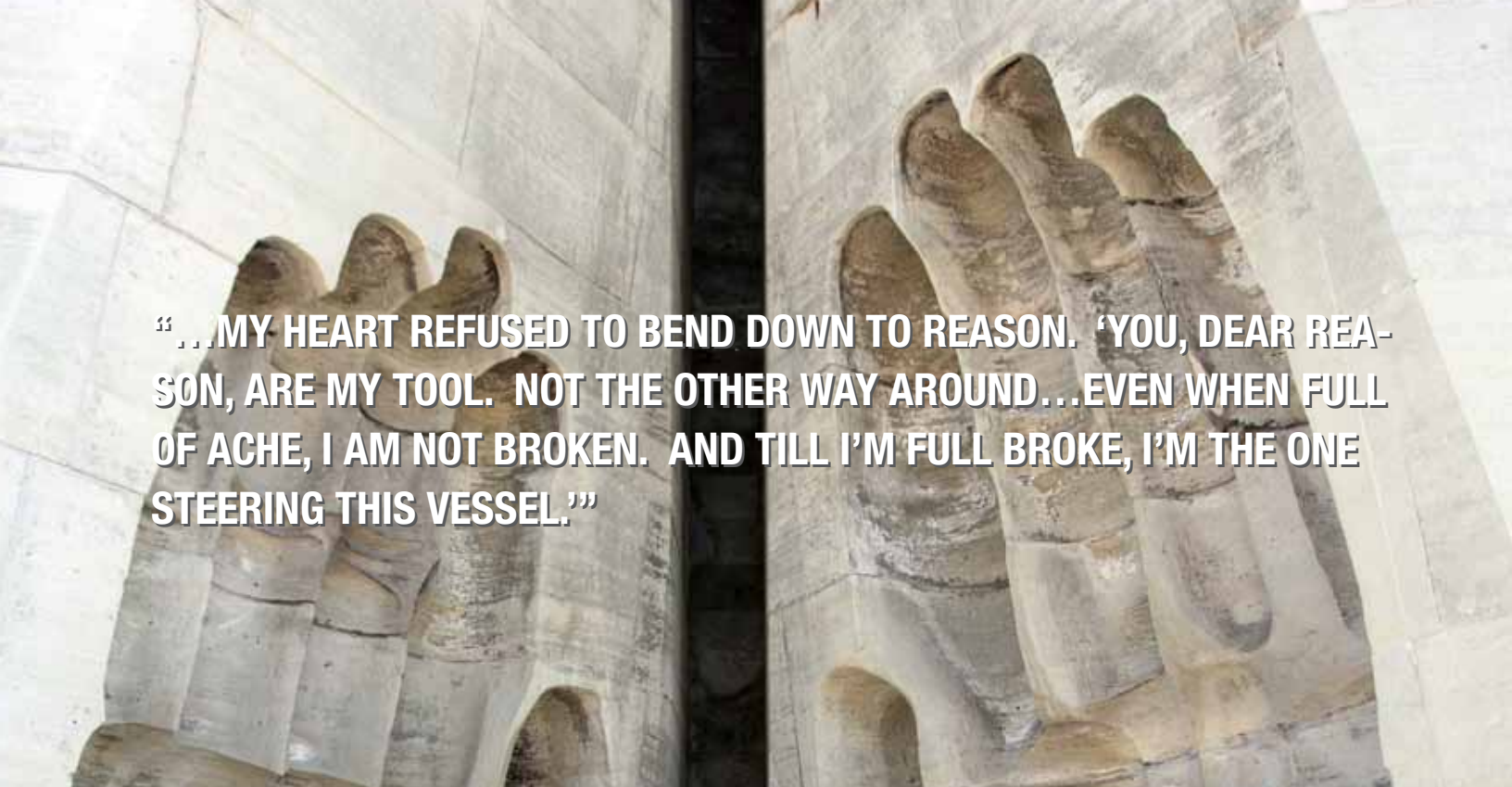
**“HERE’S TO THE CRAZY ONES, THE MISFITS, THE REBELS, THE TROUBLEMAKERS, THE ROUND PEGS IN THE SQUARE HOLES... THE ONES WHO SEE THINGS DIFFERENTLY...WHILE SOME MAY SEE THEM AS THE CRAZY ONES, WE SEE GENIUS. BECAUSE THE ONES WHO ARE CRAZY ENOUGH TO THINK THAT THEY CAN CHANGE THE WORLD, ARE THE ONES WHO DO.”**

- Steve Jobs

**“REASONABLE PEOPLE ADAPT THEMSELVES TO THE WORLD. UNREASONABLE PEOPLE ATTEMPT TO ADAPT THE WORLD TO THEMSELVES. ALL PROGRESS, THEREFORE, DEPENDS ON UNREASONABLE PEOPLE.”**

- George Bernard Shaw

**ON COURAGEOUS CREATIVITY...**



**“...MY HEART REFUSED TO BEND DOWN TO REASON. ‘YOU, DEAR REASON, ARE MY TOOL. NOT THE OTHER WAY AROUND...EVEN WHEN FULL OF ACHE, I AM NOT BROKEN. AND TILL I’M FULL BROKE, I’M THE ONE STEERING THIS VESSEL.’”**

## **WHY YALINIDREAM(S)**

### **YALINIDREAM**

Lankan Tamil Blood, Manchester Born, Texas bred and Brooklyn steeped, YaliniDream conjures spirit through her unique blend of poetry, theater, song, and dance - reshaping reality and seeking peace through justice in the lands of earth, psyche, soul, and dream. Her work has been performed at venues such as NYC's Lincoln Center and New York Live Arts, Chicago's Vittum Theater, Manchester's Contact Theater, and universities such as Yale (USA), University of Manchester (UK), Loyola College (India), and University of Peradeniya (Sri Lanka). Her work has been featured in print in the The New Indian Express, online in the Huffington Post, and on air on the Brian Lehrer Show.



# WHY YALINIDREAM(S)

Almost twenty years ago I had a realization. At fifteen years old, I discovered and understood true passion. The passion for theater and dance. I knew enough about the world to know that to feel truly passionate about a vocation was special and unique. That many people went their entire lives without this experience. And for that alone, it was worth pursuing.

I was not the best writer, dancer, or actress amongst my peers at school, the dance studio or the community theater I participated in. I was good, but not the best. However, I knew that I loved each discipline enough that I could spend every day of the rest of my life becoming the best that I could be.

I discovered a deep sense of ambition—  
Not ambition based in competitiveness or the want for attention.  
Not ambition beholden to expectation or driven by fear.  
Not ambition motivated by materialism.  
Rather, ambition fueled by passion.

Ambition rooted in dream  
rather than greed.

Despite my fragile self-image generated by being a dark brown teenage girl in a not so dark brown world — this ambition was enough to keep discouragement at bay.

My family, however, felt—differently. I was one of the eldest of my generation on both sides of the family and amongst the first in our Sri Lankan Tamil community to be raised in the west. I was school smart and had much more access, privilege and resources than most of our family. I had what I needed to ensure financial security, garner respect, and serve as a vital resource for the rest of my community.

**“I DISCOVERED A DEEP SENSE OF AMBITION...NOT AMBITION  
BASED IN COMPETITIVENESS...WANT FOR ATTENTION...EXPEC-  
TATION...FEAR...MATERIALISM. RATHER, AMBITION FUELED BY  
PASSION...ROOTED IN DREAM RATHER THAN GREED.”**

# WHY YALINIDREAM(S)

How then could I be so utterly selfish—when so many of our people were in need and I had so much?

My earliest childhood memories as a three-year-old were of Jaffna (Yalpannam), Sri Lanka—the place after which I was named. My bedtime stories were of the struggle of our people. Of gatherings tear-gassed. Of riots. And of my parents, along with the rest of our community, standing up for our rights. At three years old, I would visit my parents' home—meet my grandparents, aunts, uncles, maamis and mamas. I would pound flour, grind coconut, ride on the backs of bicycles, bathe in buckets, fight with crows and goats. I was taught that this was my home, these are my people, this is where I am from. I had no understanding that after I left, it would take me thirty years to return. And when I did, the place where I had played would be scarred by bullet holes and shell markings.

Over the years, dreams of liberation became marred by suicide bombs, assassinations, and the silencing of dissent. Phone calls came in the middle of the night informing of the loss of another relative or friend. Arguments over politics tainted community gatherings. Eventually, bedtime stories faded into thick emotions that hung in the air. Unable to be grasped or seen. Only experienced, like an inexplicable suffocating heat that quickly turned spark into fire. Tamil liberation in Sri Lanka, indeed, became a distant, dizzying mirage— taunting anyone naïve enough to maintain a thirst for it.

Thus my parents focused attention to life and success in America. They ran from the past; swallowed their own pain, desires and dreams; did all they could to manage the present and kept their eyes away from the mirage and on the future. A future that would ensure security and dignity for their children.

My desire to become an artist seemed to unravel that future and dismiss all that my family had sacrificed for my opportunity. My seemingly frivolous aspirations seemed to pour salt on the wounds left by my parents' crumbled dreams. Looking back on the enormous fights my parents and I had as they tried to curtail my artistic ambitions, I recognize how right and reasonable they were.

**“MY DESIRE TO BECOME AN ARTIST SEEMED TO UNRAVEL THAT FUTURE AND DISMISS ALL THAT MY FAMILY HAD SACRIFICED FOR MY OPPORTUNITY. MY...ASPIRATIONS SEEMED TO POUR SALT ON THE WOUNDS LEFT BY MY PARENTS' CRUMBLD DREAMS. ”**



# WHY YALINIDREAM(S)

In 1993, few viable paths existed for a darker skinned woman of color in television, film or the performing arts. Garnering respect as an artist can be precarious as it shifts depending on your circles and people's familiarity with your work. Then and now, little financial security can be guaranteed for an independent artist whose income is project-based. I was unclear about what my path would hold for me and admittedly, I was quite naïve about the degree of uncompensated work and determination that is necessary to maintain creativity and survive as a working artist.

Yet as I pushed past my family's reservations and discovered the grim realities of bigotry and capitalism, my heart refused to bend down to reason. "You, dear reason, are my tool. Not the other way around," spoke my heart, "Even when full of ache, I am not broken. And till I'm full broke, I'm the one steering this vessel."

I realized that my path as an artist has far more significance to me than simply a career choice. It was and is a spiritual calling. Like love, spirit has ways of defying the logic of capitalism, providing unexpected solutions to persistent dilemmas, and leading us to extraordinary places.

After thirty years, I would return on my own as an artist to Jaffna, the place I had once understood as home. It would be an award in literature that carried me there. My artistic journeys would prove to make me far more practically relevant to my community than I could have ever imagined. While I may sometimes be limited in monetary offerings, I am rich in love, wisdom, sincerity, and creativity—giving generously to those around me.

My path has led me to believe that our souls are deeply connected to each other, the earth, and the universe. Thus to listen and act upon our souls' seemingly selfish desires is also to serve each other, the earth and the universe. I believe that greed is the product of broken hearts and kidnapped dreams. And greed is the root of exploitation.

**"...MY PATH AS AN ARTIST...WAS AND IS A SPIRITUAL CALLING. LIKE LOVE, SPIRIT HAS WAYS OF DEFYING THE LOGIC OF CAPITALISM, PROVIDING UNEXPECTED SOLUTIONS TO PERSISTENT DILEMMAS, AND LEADING US TO EXTRAORDINARY PLACES."**

# WHY YALINIDREAM(S)

Simultaneously it has been extremely frightening at times to follow my dreams and walk a path guided by spirit. My fears and the discouragement of peers and family have often been based in valid realities and genuine possible consequences. I have learned that to live fearlessly actually means to face fear and consequence rather than ignore it.

I learned that to live with an open heart means that heartache is inevitable. Thus what I must develop is a healthy relationship with sorrow and fear. I must use each moment of struggle as an opportunity to open my eyes wider and grow spiritually deeper. Finally, as difficult as it can feel sometimes, I must draw inspiration from my courageous fifteen-year-old self and continue to dream. For reality partnered with dream will shape a world far more beautiful than one partnered with greed.

Next to the Divine

*Perhaps if every raised hand was a tender call  
each roar from the sky a pending storm  
each flash of light in the dark a firefly*

*And each body pressed against another  
was actually meant to comfort and warm. . .*

*If the world was absent of violence and war*

*Perhaps  
we'd think of fear as a delicious thing  
that tickles the breast bones from within.*

*Like the flutter that comes  
before breath turns to song  
Or the quickening beats of a  
heart slowly falling in love.*

*Fear would be skin prickling  
at the sound of truth confessed  
the shivers from thunder  
so enormous it cracks in your chest.*

*If each flash in the night was a firefly  
Perhaps fear would simply be  
the feeling  
that sits  
next to the divine.*



**“...HOW UNREASONABLE LOVE  
IS THE ONLY REASON FOR IT ALL.”**

## **LOVE UNREASONABLE**

### **PALLAVI GARG**

Pallavi fell in love with the wondrous beauty of the Pacific Northwest the moment she set foot in Seattle, and finds it a blessing to call it 'home.' She spends most of her free time taking magical journeys into the amazing world of 'art' in all its forms like poetry, theater, music, dance, pottery, and glass-work. Pallavi passionately believes in the transformative power of art. She would like to spend the rest of her life connecting people with the artist inside them, because life becomes more fulfilling that way.



# LOVE UNREASONABLE

*Love  
Doesn't seek reasons*

*Like a vortex  
It sucks me in  
Engulfing with such force  
There is not a chance to think*

*To try to stop love in its tracks  
Is futile  
Ever tried reasoning with it  
To answer the 'why' and the 'how'?*

*Love simply goes into hiding  
Leaving me in agony*

*A long, long time  
Of misery  
Of pain  
And then I'm compelled to surrender*

*To wake up  
To lay reason to rest  
To let those questions die  
Their natural death*

*To go with the flow  
Whether or not it makes sense  
To take chances  
To see what unfolds*

*And love surfaces again  
For no apparent reason  
Hiding though it was,  
It hadn't really left*

*A mirror is all it takes  
To kindle that fire again*

*And look where I am now!*

*Surrounded by  
Unreasonable mirrors.  
Unspeaking mirrors  
That bear witness to my being  
Standing by me  
No matter what*

*They don't justify  
They don't let me justify  
They just know how to transform me  
...and that speaks volumes*

*Mirrors that help me see -  
Fear  
Is what looks for reasons  
But  
Fear is just  
Love standing upside-down!*

*Courage  
Is what looks past reasons  
Patience  
Is it's gift in return  
And together,  
They're the pillars on which love can stand.*

*I see now  
How my steps have changed  
And how I want my world to change  
To move past my fears  
The over-thinking  
The over-reasoning*

# LOVE UNREASONABLE

*To move with courage  
With patience  
To trust  
And to see how Grace  
Flows effortlessly  
To me  
Through me*


*For one 'reason' alone  
Because  
I am.*

*I now have  
Freedom*

*To flow  
To glow  
And let my inner spark  
Light my whole world up  
In ways I can't even imagine*

*The choice  
To love  
Myself  
And each being  
Unconditionally  
Without reason*

*In the end,  
I can see clearly how  
Being unreasonable  
Is its own loving reward.  
How unreasonable love  
Is the only reason for it all.*

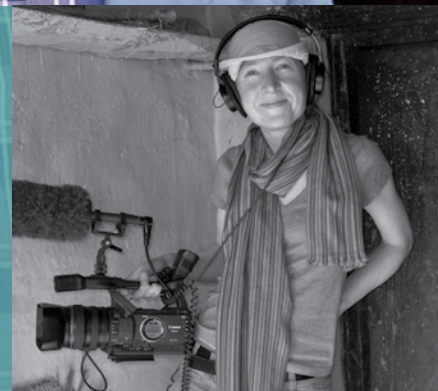


**“WHY AM I SPENDING THE TIME THAT I COULD BE WITH MY SON TO MAKE A FILM ABOUT A GIRL WHO IS THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY, WHO SPEAKS A LANGUAGE I DON’T UNDERSTAND—AND WHO IS NO LONGER ALIVE?”**

## **UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT**

### **AMY BENSON**

Amy Benson left teaching when she fell even more in love with documentary film and its potential to do capital-G GOOD for the world. In 2005, she and her husband, Scott Squire, jumped head-first into filmmaking with their own production company, Nonfiction Media. They trained in the art of video by doing promotional videos for nonprofits and their own documentary shorts, which have shown in film festivals across the country. Most recently, their film about girls’ education in Nepal, *Three*, headlined the National Committee for Women film festival in Singapore. Their first feature length documentary, *Opportunity Costs*, about the life and death of an untouchable, teen girl will be released in October, 2012.



# UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT

I am living on too little sleep most of the time.

The story of Shanta keeps me up at night, and my two-year-old son wakes me up early in the morning.

It has been this way since 2008. That was the year I met Shanta and the year I became pregnant. The two most transformative events of my life happened just months apart. And they both have put me on a thrilling, unkempt, angst-filled track that I can't get off. My only option is to make another pot of coffee and keep doing what I am doing.

The story of Shanta and the raising of my boy, Hale, keep me on a perpetual roller coaster—if one has me slowly ascending with sweet anticipation, the other has me begging to get off the ride. They both bring me immense, unexplainable joy and they bring me dark waves of deep frustration and regret, if I allow myself to feel that.

The days that the documentary makes progress—maybe a grant is awarded—are the days that Hale decides to spend refusing to get dressed and I am in my pajamas till 2:00pm. After a day of snuggles and childrearing milestones, I feel the Nepal project is too huge—impossible.

What am I doing? Will it ever get done? This is stupid—unreasonable even. I gave up a well-paying, extremely rewarding job as a teacher to be in the unpredictable, no paycheck world of documentary. Everything we do feels piecemeal and a little desperate.

Why am I spending the time that I could be with my son to make a film about a girl who is thousands of miles away, who speaks a language I don't understand—and *who is no longer alive*? Why am I spending time prepping snack for preschool when I could be working on the answer to the question the whole world needs to know—why did Shanta take her own life?

**“2008...WAS THE YEAR I MET SHANTA AND THE YEAR I BECAME PREGNANT...THE TWO MOST TRANSFORMATIVE EVENTS OF MY LIFE...AND THEY BOTH HAVE PUT ME ON A THRILLING, UNKEMPT, ANGST-FILLED TRACK THAT I CAN'T GET OFF.”**

# UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT

In 2008, my husband, Scott, and I traveled to Nepal to film a promotional piece for an NGO that provides scholarships for poor girls to go to school. Shanta was a stellar example of why educating girls is the best thing we can do for the world. She had moved from her tiny, remote village to live with her brother in Kathmandu and attend one of the best schools in the country. When we met her, she had been in the city for a year. She had learned to read and write. She had some English. She was at the top of her class.

She told us she was going to become a doctor. She told us she was going to return to her village to teach the women there about contraception. She was angry that her mom had so many babies—that she was just one of many.

Shanta was angry about a lot of things. She was routinely pushed out of line at the local fountain because of her *Dalit* (untouchable) caste. Her sister-in-law, a mother of two who had never spent a day in school, harassed her for being yet another mouth to feed. The apartment was too small, dark and crowded for studying. She missed the village, but was not the same person from when she left.

During the weeks in which we filmed her, I knew how frustrated she was. In many ways, she was like many teenagers I knew back when I was a middle school teacher. She was proud, cocky even, emotional, silly and full of big dreams. The difference was her extreme vulnerability.

And the thing is... I knew this. I knew how vulnerable she was.

This is the moment that still causes me pain in my stomach every time I think of it. I don't even know if I want to write it down.

**“SHANTA WAS A STELLAR EXAMPLE OF WHY EDUCATING GIRLS IS THE BEST THING WE CAN DO FOR THE WORLD. SHE HAD MOVED FROM HER TINY, REMOTE VILLAGE TO LIVE WITH HER BROTHER IN KATHMANDU AND ATTEND ONE OF THE BEST SCHOOLS IN THE COUNTRY.”**



# UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT

The last time I spoke with her was the night before we left Nepal that first time. It was over the phone from our hotel lobby. We had only so much common language we could use, so Shanta and I repeated the same phrases over and over.

'I will miss you'; 'so happy to know you' . . .

Then we just sat on the line for a while in silence. She said things in Nepali I could not understand.

And then I said, 'I will come back.'

'Come back,' Shanta repeated.

I *was* going to come back.

Scott and I spent the plane trip home writing the script for our documentary that would prove that *girls' education is the best thing we can do in the world*. It would be the film that would be the tipping point for women's empowerment in the developing world. Shanta was to be our main character—our hero.

It wasn't until the summer of 2010 that we had raised enough funds for our return trip. It was at this same time that we got the news of her death. Hale was napping and he woke up when he heard my sobs. Shanta had hanged herself.

I was sure it was my fault. I felt I had failed. I was so, so sad she was gone. For over a month I didn't know if I would laugh again. It might sound dramatic, but it's true. Nothing felt light. I saw the world through a scrim of Nepal. It made me feel ill each time I scraped Hale's uneaten food into the compost or imagined how many gallons of water he was using in his bath.

**"...THE SUMMER OF 2010...WE HAD RAISED ENOUGH FUNDS FOR OUR RETURN TRIP. IT WAS AT THIS SAME TIME THAT WE GOT THE NEWS OF HER DEATH. HALE WAS NAPPING AND HE WOKE UP WHEN HE HEARD MY SOBS. SHANTA HAD HANGED HERSELF."**

# UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT

And then I felt self-conscious for being so devastated. I only knew her a few weeks. How self-centered am I to think it was *my* fault? *Doesn't that make it all about me?*

How must her mother feel?

I knew how vulnerable Shanta was, and the way I decided to help was to make an independent documentary about her. What a slow, self-serving way to help someone.

If only I had just gotten there sooner . . .

Seven weeks after Shanta died, I flew back to Nepal, leaving Hale, whom I was still breastfeeding, for two weeks. I had to know what happened. I carried my heavy backpack of film equipment all over Kathmandu and never got it out even once.

We will never know why exactly she took her own life. The reasons are big and many and at the heart of it -so simple. She was super smart, stubborn and severely stifled. She knew what she was capable of in the world and knew she could not become it.

I don't blame myself as much anymore, not in a direct way anyhow. The whole thing is so complicated. But I did give her hope and then came home and had a baby and bought a new video camera and carried on with my life while she continued suffering. It is not my fault, exactly, but damn, why didn't I do anything more concrete?

Because, you see, I could have. Next to her, I have so much wealth. So much privilege. I could have, should have saved her.

**“I AM TAKING THIS ON—THE TELLING OF SHANTA’S STORY— TO THE BEST OF MY ABILITY, NOT AS A WESTERNER, NOT EVEN AS A FILMMAKER, BUT AS A GIRL, A WOMAN, AND MOST OF ALL AS A MOM.”**



# UNREASONABLE COMMITMENT

But how? In what way? Bring her home with us? Make her American?

Currently, suicide is the leading cause of death among women aged 14-49 in Nepal.

I know. It is shocking. Suicide surpasses deaths related to childbirth and disease.

Despite this statistic it was far from an obvious choice to continue to tell Shanta's story. Scott and I wrestled with it for a long time, but ultimately I knew we didn't really have a choice.

For as unreasonable as it is to think that I, this white western woman, can tell Shanta's story for the good of the world, it is even more unreasonable to think I mustn't or shouldn't.

I must have met her for a reason, right?

I am taking this on—the telling of Shanta's story—to the best of my ability, not as a westerner, not even as a filmmaker, but as a girl, a woman and most of all as a mom.

This is the realm in which I know I belong in Nepal, under the low ceilings of Shanta's mom's mud house with my fancy camera. Our worlds are so different I can hardly believe they exist at the same time. Our lives are not comparable. But we do have this in common—the special power of motherhood—and I think this is enough.

Click on <http://vimeo.com/29859740> to see a part of “Opportunity Costs: The Brief Life of Shanta D,” the documentary that Amy Benson is working on. Funds are still being raised to complete this film. If you'd like to donate, please do so at <http://girlworldproject.org/support.html>

A man wearing a large, realistic chicken head mask with a red comb and wattle, a yellow beak, and white feathers. He is wearing a yellow long-sleeved shirt with the number '428' on the chest and blue athletic shorts. He is running a race, as evidenced by the blurred background of spectators and cars.

# JUST BECAUSE!

## GALEN C. BAIRD

Galen C. Baird is a six-year-old Seattle native who likes to draw comics, wants a journal for the holidays, tells detailed stories, and doesn't like age suggestions on his books or toys. He would also like an iPhone, but his parents think that's unreasonable.



# JUST BECAUSE!

i like to draw

i like math to

my favroite place is scool

my techer is ms. hewson

my favroite food is corna asada

my favroite animal is meerkats.

My favroite movie is star wars.

and my favroite book is spiderwick chronicles.

the series.

**“...TO VISUALLY REPRESENT MY LIFE TODAY, I WOULD PAINT A FLOWER GARDEN – A LUSH GREEN LAWN SPRINKLED WITH MANY YOUNG PLANTS BEARING COLORFUL FLOWERS. EACH PLANT WOULD SIGNIFY ONE ACTIVITY IN MY LIFE... WHAT THIS GARDEN WILL LOOK LIKE IN THE YEARS TO COME, I DO NOT KNOW; I WILL ALLOW THE MASTER PLAN TO REVEAL ITSELF...”**

## **THE SOUND (GUIDANCE) OF MUSIC**

### **DEVIKA THAKKAR**

Devika is a software engineer by education and a creative vocalist by choice. She is a member of the faculty at the Pandit Jasraj Institute of Music in New York and New Jersey. Devika believes in the potential of the classical arts to spark self-discovery and create harmony within oneself, with everyone around, and in the world. She loves New York City and is grateful for the opportunity to pursue her passion in the city of her dreams.



# THE SOUND (GUIDANCE) OF MUSIC

I was working at Microsoft in Manhattan as a Program Manager on the Automated Service Agents team. I really enjoyed the multifaceted role and the opportunity it presented, to employ my knowledge and skills in technology, product planning, business development, project management and client communication, to build an exciting artificial intelligence-based product. Life was good!

Then, in 2008, I met Pandita Tripti Mukherjee, an illustrious classical vocalist, and my life was changed forever!

Music has always been my passion and love. I had learned vocal classical music, in Mumbai, since I was a little girl, and had also performed in concerts, made a couple of appearances on national TV, won awards at competitions, and so on. Growing up in a world of expectation and achievement, however, my childhood mantra of simply doing what I love was clouded. I found myself wanting to 'make it big.' In fact, I remember being unsure of what I wanted to do, but wanting to become 'someone important.'

When I heard Pandita Tripti Mukherjee's soulful music, something stirred in the heart of my heart. Her energy was befitting that of a Goddess! I was deeply touched by her dedication to her Guru, the living legend Sangeet Martand Pandit Jasraj, in whose name she has founded the prestigious Pandit Jasraj Institute for Music Research, Artistry and Appreciation in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. I took her as my Guru – in music and life. Within three months of meeting her, I could tell that something big was overcoming me, an urge to quit whatever I was doing and devote myself to my musical journey.

However strange it may have seemed for a person with a Masters degree in Computer Science to quit her lucrative, fulltime job, so early in her career, without worrying about future career prospects or financial security, especially at the beginning of the economic recession, to me, this felt like a natural next step in my life. By most standards I was being unreasonable, but in essence, my childhood ability to make 'heart-felt' choices, things that I did simply because they felt right in my heart, was resurrected. Sure, I did go through my share of

**“...IN A WORLD OF EXPECTATION AND ACHIEVEMENT...MY CHILDHOOD MANTRA OF SIMPLY DOING WHAT I LOVE WAS CLOUDED. I FOUND MYSELF WANTING TO ‘MAKE IT BIG’... WANTING TO BECOME ‘SOMEONE IMPORTANT.’”**

# THE SOUND (GUIDANCE) OF MUSIC

sleepless nights while taking this leap of faith, with no goal in mind other than to do something I love! It helped that I was able to have supportive discussions with my parents and sister, and that I had unconditional and unquestioning support from Ashish, my guiding light and loving husband.

My deep love for and intention to do music have brought me to this 'heaven,' a place I could have neither imagined nor planned for myself. I have not just survived the transition, but I am more vibrant, productive and creative than I have ever been! In taking this leap of faith, several insights have been revealed to me, which I share below.

First and foremost, I have realized that I am walking through this life alone. My Gurus, family, friends and guardian angels have come into my life to guide and support me, but I am essentially alone, and solely accountable for my singular purpose.

Music has taught me to slow down, become still and connect with myself. Stillness does not imply inaction. It is also an active stance, an active listening for one's higher guidance. I can feel the presence of a higher power that can get channeled through me, if I let it. Sometimes, by taking control and over-planning our life, we can actually limit ourselves! If we venture out of our comfort zone and let the higher power guide us, things that were completely out of the realms of our imagination become possible. In stillness we can hear the inner voice, which tells us what to do. Once that has been revealed, we can take required action to execute the intuitive call, for which planning, organizing and goal-setting become useful.

Through the practice of music I have experienced a big paradigm shift from reproduction to improvisation and creation. Although I'd been singing since I was little and could pick up any composition, I always tried to sing like someone else – my idols or heroes. Now, I have realized that I must create my own music (that is, live my own life) and improvise based on my inner stirrings. My music is my creative expression and interpretation of my life experiences; I cannot copy anyone. So also in life, I don't have to live life like my mother, mother-in-law, my Gurus or my friends; I have to live life in integrity with my own inner spirit.

**“BY TAKING CONTROL AND OVER-PLANNING...WE CAN ACTUALLY  
LIMIT OURSELVES! ...LET THE HIGHER POWER GUIDE US, THINGS  
...OUT OF THE REALMS OF OUR IMAGINATION BECOME POSSIBLE.”**



# THE SOUND (GUIDANCE) OF MUSIC

While music is my creative expression, I cannot claim credit for the creativity that channels through me. In fact, I feel that by taking credit, I will disturb the energy flowing through me!

The journey I have embarked upon is also a process of cleansing, so that the inner light may shine through in all my actions. Cleansing involves freedom from all negativity which takes the forms of fear and worry (overcome by surrendering to the higher intelligence), possessiveness and hatred (overcome by unconditional love), jealousy (overcome by recognizing one's uniqueness and allowing oneself to flower into the best person one can be), dissatisfaction (overcome by being grateful for all that one has) and ego (overcome by cultivating awareness). While for me, this understanding has been sparked by pursuing my chosen form of art and raising my two-year old son, Aadi, I see that any time one does whatever one is doing with complete awareness and true love, such cleansing is bound to occur.

Through continued practice, I sense that there are unlimited resources in this Universe. Whether I work at Microsoft or at a nonprofit organization, the resources that are to come my way will definitely find a way of doing so. Also, every time Ashish and I support positive and creative initiatives, lovingly and unconditionally, not only do we get cleansed further, but always, more resources than we put in come back to us!

Finally, while I now know what to do, I do not know where I will get. I am enjoying life's journey. Doing what I love, with love, is very fulfilling. If someone asked me to visually represent my life today, I would paint a flower garden – a lush green lawn sprinkled with many young plants bearing colorful flowers. Each plant would signify one activity in my life – performing, recording, learning, teaching and documenting music, organizing concerts, promoting artistes & creative initiatives, web & graphic designing and making things happen by simply connecting the dots. Each of these plants has the potential of growing into a full blown tree. I am committed to following my intuitive guidance so I can give time and attention to the required plant. What this garden will look like in the years to come, I do not know; I will allow the master plan to reveal itself in its own time.

**“I HAVE REALIZED THAT I MUST CREATE MY OWN MUSIC (THAT IS, LIVE MY OWN LIFE) AND IMPROVISE BASED ON MY INNER STIRRINGS. MY MUSIC IS MY CREATIVE EXPRESSION AND INTERPRETATION OF MY LIFE EXPERIENCES; I CANNOT COPY ANYONE.”**

**“...IN CHAOTIC SITUATIONS SOMETHING FROM INSIDE OUR BODY TAPS TO REMIND US, ‘WE CAME HERE WITH NOTHING AND WILL BE GOING EMPTY HANDED, SO WHY NOT LIVE WITH FREEDOM AND JOY?’”**

## **EMBEDDED PALLAVI SHARMA**

Pallavi was born and raised in India and immigrated to United States in 1997. She received her BFA and MFA from the Faculty of Fine Arts, Baroda, India, and her Ph.D. in Art History from India's National Museum Institute of History of Art and Conservation. Pallavi has had recent art shows in NY, CA and HI. At present, she is a board member of Asian American Women Artist Association (AAWAA) and Director of 'Inner Eye Art' an Art Consulting Firm specializing in South Asian Art. Learn more about Inner Eye Art at <http://www.innereyearts.com/> and more about her works at <http://www.pallaviinnereyeart.com/>



# EMBEDDED



**'Embedded,' Mixed media Video Installation, 2011**

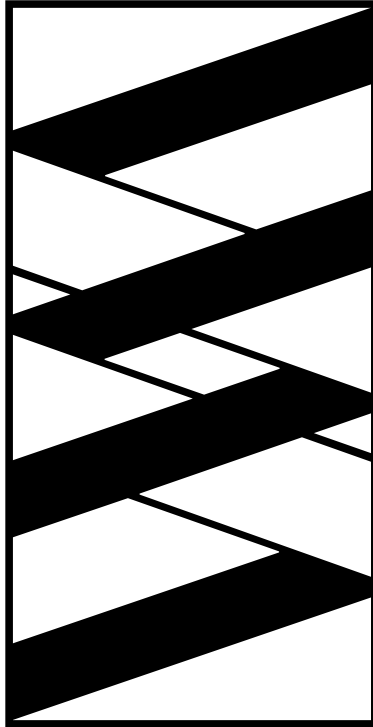
# EMBEDDED

The Video installation “Embedded” was done for a show titled “A Place of her Own” in April 2011 at SomArts Center, San Francisco, CA. In this work, I constructed a bed of green barley grass and pillows embedded with two DVD players simultaneously projecting two different video images of the same person on the same bed, and in the same time frame. The two-minute video image symbolically speaks of my inner conflicts, and of the bed as breeding ground for my personal desires and creative energy.

In this particular work, I enter a world that is forbidden to me due to my gender and culturally constructed status. I attempt to reclaim the female subjectivity, the unseen desire that is traditionally suppressed or ignored.

I believe we all leave our mother’s womb for a reason. Unfortunately, throughout our life, we keep looking for validations, and live life on predetermined terms and conditions! Ironic as it is, in chaotic situations something from inside our body taps to remind us, “We came here with nothing and will be returning empty-handed, so why not live with freedom and joy?”

# WHEN I WALK INC



When I Walk Inc. ([www.wheniwalkinc.org](http://www.wheniwalkinc.org)) is a U.S. registered non-profit with a mandate to empower the disability community through media arts and technology. When I Walk Inc. is particularly interested in using new media strategies to strengthen the disability community. We believe that with the tools and the guidance provided, young people from these communities will become the next creators and educators to informing the general public..

Please help our mission - donate at [www.wheniwalkinc.org](http://www.wheniwalkinc.org)

**“THE MISSION GOAL OF WHEN I WALK INC. IS TO EMPOWER THE MS AND DISABILITY COMMUNITY THROUGH THE ARTS, MEDIA AND TECHNOLOGY.”**

## **IN DIALOGUE WITH JASON DASILVA**

Jason DaSilva lives in the East Village in New York. He is thirty years old and has Multiple Sclerosis. After working as a filmmaker for ten years, showing at Sundance, on PBS, HBO, and nearly receiving an Academy Award nomination, Jason is currently making a new type of documentary film, When I Walk (<http://www.wheniwalk.com/>)



# IN DIALOGUE WITH JASON DASILVA

**SS** – Hi Jason, Thanks for talking with Courageous Creativity! Tell us a little bit about your film, ‘When I Walk.’

**JD** – ‘When I Walk’ is a point-of-view feature-length documentary about my changed world once I was diagnosed at twenty-five years old with Multiple Sclerosis. In this film, I explore the societal and medical aspects to having a new disability. It paints a picture of what it is like to live with MS – the ins and outs of the symptoms and the day-to-day challenges faced.

The name ‘When I Walk’ is about two things – one, about how I am losing the ability to walk and two, how I am using it as a metaphor for my life journey. While I am making this film for myself – to come to terms with and process and understand everything that I am going through – my hope is that this film will empower those with disability in society and help lobby for social change. I’ve been working on it for five years now and I think it needs one more year to be completed.

**SS** – Is that when you were diagnosed with MS, five years back?

**JD** – I was diagnosed in 2005. I didn’t start making the film then because I thought I could just continue on with my career at the time with no changes. My mentality at the time was to not let the physical troubles that I was having take precedence over the social issues that were important to me.

But then I realized in two years that my medical appointments were taking longer than expected, and so, the best way to continue with my film career was to bring a camera along to all my appointments! I decided I did not need to choose but instead I could creatively merge the two things. Initially, the idea was to start documenting all the medical stuff I was going through; I took my camera everywhere I went. After six months of documenting, I realized that people were giving me a lot of really good feedback about my idea and about the film, so that kind of just fueled my fire and I continued on with the film.

**“...WHEN I WALK’ IS ABOUT TWO THINGS – ONE, ABOUT HOW I AM LOSING THE ABILITY TO WALK AND TWO, HOW I AM USING IT AS A METAPHOR FOR MY LIFE JOURNEY.”**

# IN DIALOGUE WITH JASON DASILVA

**SS** – After you were diagnosed with MS and the way you viewed your life changed, how has the definition of ‘being reasonable’ changed for you?

**JD** – That’s a good question. It has definitely changed. One of the big challenges has been that everything I thought I was as a filmmaker before I got MS has been completely thrown to the wayside. Everything is completely different now. I was this director who was behind the camera; I shot my scenes; I constructed my shots. And now I am the one on camera and have other people taking the shots. Having to deal with the emotion and the psychology, having to watch myself on screen, and having to edit the film has been a unique process; totally unreasonable. At the same time, if it’s giving more power to people, with their own struggles, medical or otherwise, I think it adds a lot of value to it.

**SS** – The video you have on your blog about the day you got your diagnosis and how it changed your life is very powerful. It made me immediately think of my son’s autism diagnosis, and how that day changed my life. Do you view your life in two parts sometimes...before and after diagnosis?

**JD** – Yes, yes totally. Every once in a while, I look back to my life before diagnosis and I think that everything is the same. It especially happens in my sleep I think. And then I wake up and realize it’s not the same. For me, that’s the hardest part of the day, waking up after a whole night of dreams where I can walk and dance with friends and all of that. I did not know anything about MS before my diagnosis. I mean I had heard of it, but it was only a term. But now, all of a sudden everything I do has to do with this diagnosis.

**SS** – Where are you from and what got you started with making films?

**JD** – I was born in Ohio and my parents are from East Africa. My family comes from Goa in India. I began my filmmaking career documenting the contemporary intergenerational South Asian immigrant experience through

**“FOR ME, THAT’S THE HARDEST PART OF THE DAY - WAKING UP  
AFTER A WHOLE NIGHT OF DREAMS WHERE I CAN WALK AND  
DANCE WITH FRIENDS AND ALL OF THAT.”**

# IN DIALOGUE WITH JASON DASILVA

interview and observation, with my Sundance Film Festival nominated (2003) and Academy Award qualifying (2004) short 'Olivia's Puzzle.' The film looks at a second generation girl of Goan heritage, born and raised in North America. It cinematically compares her daily life to another girl her same age and nationality – but in the homeland of Goa.

While first-person perspectives of social issues affecting immigrants have been documented in sociological and anthropological text, I believe they have never been given their proper place in film. I have consistently seen the void of media makers from underprivileged immigrant communities and have strived to give voice to those on the periphery.

Over the past ten years, working as an independent documentary filmmaker, qualitative research has informed my work with various immigrant communities. Throughout the process of filming 'Lest We Forget' (<http://www.lestweforgetmovie.com>), I worked with various South Asian, Arab, and Muslim service agencies to convey the stories of those individuals targeted after 9/11, profound incidents that would otherwise remain untold.

**SS** – Among the films you made, do you have one that's your favorite?

**JD** – Yes, it's called 'Twins Of Mankala' (<http://www.twinsofmankala.com>) and it's short film with the first person perspective of children. It allowed me to work with the UN Millennium Project to develop a qualitative research campaign on sustainable development in Africa.

**SS** – You also started a non-profit organization called 'When I Walk Inc;,' can you tell us about that?

**JD** – Yes, I decided to further my dedication and determination in advocacy for those with disability in 2008, by founding a nonprofit called 'When I Walk Inc.' The mission goal of 'When I Walk Inc.' is to empower the MS and disability community through the arts, media and technology. The next major project for 'When I Walk Inc.' is called AXSmap (pronounced 'access map'), a suite of tools designed to empower the disability community, providing mapping software so that users can see locations that are wheelchair accessible.

**SS** – That sounds great Jason; Good Luck with all of the amazing and inspiring things you are working on!

“WERE THESE TWO AMAZING QUEENS, RATIONALLY INCONCEIVABLE IN THEIR SPOTS IN HISTORY, SEEKING TO CONSTRUCT SINGULAR IDENTITIES? OR DID THEIR EXISTENCE AND ‘BEING-NESS’ TRANSCEND IDENTITY, WHICH IS WHY THEIR COURAGE, DEVOTION, WISDOM AND ENDURING POWER CONTINUE TO INSPIRE WOMEN OF CURRENT TIME?”

## SPECIAL EDITORIAL: TWO UNREASONABLE QUEENS

### SHAHANA DATTA GUPTA

*Astiva: A Tale of Two Queens* premieres on January 14, 2012 at the Kirkland Performance Center, featuring the stories of Meerabai, poetess and saint, and Rani Lakshmibai, warrior Queen of Jhansi, through classical music and dance, presented by Srivani Jade and Dr. Ratna Roy, respectively.

# Astiva

A tale of two Queens \*



# TWO (UNREASONABLE) QUEENS

Personally having transcended constructs of identity, whether professional, vocational, social, cultural, or personal, and living in 'creative being-ness,' it is poignant that an opportunity presented itself, to reflect on the *astitva* of two extraordinary queens of history from the Indian subcontinent – poetess and saint Meerabai, and warrior queen Laxmibai – and their relevance to modern day existence. In its most rudimentary form, *astitva* is often taken to mean 'identity.' But, in truth the word has complex meanings from its Sanskrit lineage, also connoting 'existence,' 'is-ness,' 'being-ness,' and so on.

Meerabai, the queen-turned-poet-saint who lived as long ago as the 16th century, broke social mores of both wifely and stately conduct to devote herself to the lifelong love and adoration of another man – Lord Krishna, and she continues to be upheld as the epitome of sainthood, wisdom, and divine love. Rani Laxmibai, who according to lore, died fighting the British on horseback in full armored splendor in 1858 at the mere age of twenty-two, made it to Time Magazine's list of Top Ten Bad-ass Wives in July 2011, alongside the likes of Michelle Obama, Sarah Palin and Melinda Gates! Were these two amazing queens, rationally inconceivable in their spots in history, seeking to construct singular identities? Or did their existence and 'being-ness' transcend identity, which is why their courage, devotion, wisdom and enduring power continue to inspire women of current time? What was behind their drive, and the practically unreasonable paths they chose for their day and age? And what resonance do they have with you and me today? Or to the women who will portray them through their music and dance – Srivani Jade and Dr. Ratna Roy?

On the surface it would appear that both Meerabai and Laxmibai broke through and transformed the extant definitions and expectations of womanhood – or feminine identity. And this idea has undoubtedly been central to the evolution of the feminist (and generally, human) ethos over modern times, in which we have fought to close the gaping chasm between men and women in terms of social status, role, identity, rights, power, and so on.

**“LOOK A BIT DEEPER AND YOU REALIZE THAT REALLY...IT WAS NOT THAT [MEERABAI AND LAXMIBAI] WERE BREAKING THE MOLD; THEY SIMPLY DIDN'T SEE THE MOLD IN THE FIRST PLACE!”**

# TWO (UNREASONABLE) QUEENS

But look a bit deeper and you realize that really, Meerabai's and Laxmibai's feminine bodily existence did not limit them from embodying both feminine and masculine principles of creative stillness and creative action. It was not that they were breaking the mold; they simply didn't see the mold in the first place! Their love, devotion, courage and conviction made them blind to such boxes, restrictions, boundaries and definitions, and they existed and acted purely out of the is-ness, the being-ness of their inner light. This, I believe is the universal and timeless appeal of women like Meerabai and Laxmibai, not just to womanhood but to humanity.

For me, thriving as a creative, vibrant and spiritually alive being has included balancing within, both the feminine and masculine principles. This begins with first owning and celebrating my femininity, which means transcending both the identity of the oppressed, victimized woman of time-immemorial, as well as the relatively recent identity of the progressive, "equal-to-man" feminist, valiantly fighting for fair rights and status. Further, balancing the feminine and masculine principles within is achieved by harnessing the creative power of both aspects (most literally seen in our *procreative* abilities).

Leveraging the feminine principle involves cultivating a creative stillness – the art of recognizing and receiving the Muse – and then, channeling it to pass through me into an act of creation. Leveraging the masculine principle, on the other hand, involves executing through creative action, that which has been revealed through creative stillness.

In my feminine aspect, I must act as a magnetic stillness, innately knowing visionary, a spark of inspiration, a catalyst for change, the sensor of subtlety, and the guardian of flow, order and life force for humankind's highest potential. In my masculine aspect, I must act as the passionate seeker, the discoverer, the leader by example, the creator of something greater than myself for the manifest expression of humankind's highest potential.

**“FOR ME, THRIVING AS A CREATIVE, VIBRANT AND SPIRITUALLY ALIVE BEING HAS INCLUDED...TRANSCENDING BOTH THE IDENTITY OF THE OPPRESSED, VICTIMIZED WOMAN OF TIME-IMMEMORIAL, AS WELL AS THE RELATIVELY RECENT...PROGRESSIVE, “EQUAL-TO-MAN” FEMINIST, VALIANTLY FIGHTING FOR FAIR RIGHTS...”**



# TWO (UNREASONABLE) QUEENS

With Lord Krishna as her Muse, Meerabai allowed herself to be transformed by divine love into a channel for creative expression with timeless resonance. This epitomized the feminine aspect of human existence, or astitva. At the same time, she set out as the seeker and discoverer, traversing long distances on foot to meet seers and philosophers, in search of Krishna and Truth. This was her masculine aspect in action. Rani Laxmibai, in the absence of both male companion and male heir (both her husband and son had died unexpectedly), summoned her leadership and passion to fight the British, in a valorous expression of the masculine principle. Yet, evident in her path was also the feminine stillness of surrender – knowing well that she would perish, she executed on an inner knowing and vision that she must allow the call of duty to flow through her.

Abstract as they may be, to me, these are the enduring inspirations to draw from the unusual paths of queens Meerabai and Laxmibai. As women and men of an evolved consciousness, it is time to look beyond the definitions of gender, status, role and identity, and to return home to our innate one-ness, our true astitva, as balanced, creative be-ings. In this, there is true love, courage, creativity and change.

**“AS WOMEN AND MEN OF AN EVOLVED CONSCIOUSNESS, IT IS TIME TO LOOK BEYOND THE DEFINITIONS OF GENDER, STATUS, ROLE AND IDENTITY, AND TO RETURN HOME TO OUR INNATE ONE-NESS, OUR TRUE ASTITVA, AS BALANCED, CREATIVE BE-INGS.”**

# Astitva

*A tale of two Queens*

Odissi Choreographer Dr. Ratna Roy  
and Hindustani vocalist Srivani Jade  
tell the true stories of two powerful  
and inspiring queens of India.



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