

Finding Strength to Make Sunshine

My search for Ganesha

I was given my first Ganesha in 1998. I was in a women's prayer group in Indianapolis. I was moving to Bellingham, Washington, and the group gave me a small bronze Ganesha at the final meeting before I left. The small statue had a card attached that explained, "Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, was born to earth as the son of Shiva and Parvati. He is the remover of obstacles from our spiritual paths. He blesses our beginnings. Seeking his guidance, his devotees meditate upon the image of Lord Ganesha before starting any new venture." I had never seen Ganesha before receiving my gift. They gave it to me to bless my journey. I have carried that small statue with me as I have moved, achieved, failed, started, stopped, climbed, crawled, crashed, and flown.

In 2013, I went to a yoga retreat in Bali. (I had earned just enough money publishing an essay to afford the trip. I am proud of the *Eat, Pray, Love* of the moment.) I knew searching for Ganesha would be a part of my Bali experience. He was everywhere. I was amazed when I saw Ganesha as I walked into the space where my yoga retreat was being held. A giant stone statue stood before me at the side of the stairs leading to the compound's dining area. My heart danced when Ganesha greeted me. Outside of temples. Inside shops. With street vendors. Sometimes he danced. Sometimes he was reclined. Sometimes he was carrying an axe. Sometimes he had many arms. Sometimes he rode a mouse. My search was fueled by my intense desire to remove obstacles, or at least understand them. I was beginning something – change was happening. Ganesha held a key.

I found Ganesha in the monkey forest. Amidst cheeky monkey families trying to steal food from my small purse. "The grandpa of the monkey forest" sold me a small, delicate watercolor Ganesha that he had painted. He told me his personal story, the story of Ganesha, and the stories of the monkeys that interjected themselves into our conversation. This Ganesha was joyfully rotund and also tiny and precise. He possessed a certain amount of cunning. Some scholars point to Ganesha as both remover and creator of obstacles. A block can be both a crisis and an opportunity. I thought about the connection between my ego and obstacles. What does it mean that an obstacle is removed? Perhaps removing obstacles is simply a question of perspective and letting go? Maybe we can just ask to see obstacles differently, and a new understanding will come?

I kept searching and found Ganesha in an artsy boutique. There were statues of Balinese dancers in intricate poses. There were elegant wooden eggs. There were tin boxes with festive tassels. There were also statues of Ganesha. I gravitated to the beautiful wooden statue of Ganesha, sitting powerfully on the petals of a lotus. Brilliantly colored in regal shades and brushed in gold. His fist held an axe with certainty. His grip, forceful enough to cut through the densest jungle. I saw a connection between beauty and strength. I found hope that no obstacle was too great. I learned that maybe even obstacles can be beautiful.

Ganesha then arrived along our hike through the rice terraces outside of Ubud. We walked through a sea of green rice waves crashing along the gravel path shore. The hot air was filled

with a richness that I had never tasted. The blue sky. The sunshine. The gentle sound of the water in small streams. I was keenly aware of the season. This walk would be different after the rice was harvested and the rains came. Beautiful, but different. Now, this walk was heaven. Artists sold their work along the path in small huts. The art reflected local stories and traditions. Texture. Color. Materials. The artists seemed to breathe in Bali and exhale its sweetness to the world. Ganesha found me on this walk. I saw him and knew. Framed in traditional Balinese wood, this Ganesha beckoned. This moment was perfect. Ganesha said you can carry the sunshine along your path through all your beginnings and obstacles. He said this does not have to end here. He said I will honor and protect your sunshine. He said I will bring you more sunshine than your imagination can ever know. He moved me deeply. I spoke briefly with the artist's wife and bought the picture.

Many years later, I am still surrounded in Ganesha's loving embrace. Just as he was quietly present in the Balinese landscape, he is all around me now. The program from my wedding ceremony. Pictures on my walls. Figures on my bookshelf. A necklace in a small velvet purse that held my grandmother's pearls. Removing obstacles. Blessing beginnings. Helping me find the strength to make sunshine.