

Trust the Driver

by Rev. Connie L. Habash

It was after 11 pm, India time, when we finally got through customs and out onto the arrival area of the airport at Trivandrum, Kerala. I was on a pilgrimage – a journey to my spiritual teacher’s ashram between the coast and the backwaters of this southernmost state. My travel companion,

Vaidehi, ~~had~~ arranged in advance for a taxi to our hotel downtown. I was relieved. Seeing the ~~line of drivers outside the airport~~, staring at all of us ~~ragged~~ and tired ~~W~~esterners, I would not have known ~~which one~~ to trust.

Our young driver's name was Gananath, one of the names of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god who removes obstacles and is ~~worshipped first~~ in Hindu rituals. I considered this an auspicious beginning to our excursion, and felt at ease as he loaded our suitcases into the trunk of the ~~classic~~ ~~white Ambassador~~.

~~I'd~~ heard that ~~Indians~~ drove haphazardly and didn't know what to expect. Back at home, I had enough anxiety in the passenger seat of ~~anyone's~~ car. ~~And~~ now, with a stranger in a foreign country?

~~At that~~ late ~~hour~~, we scarcely encountered ~~a single~~ car in our ~~fifteen~~-minute trip to the South Park hotel. Still, I was surprised at the many dogs running loose on the streets, and ~~that our~~ driver didn't slow down for them. ~~The~~ dogs ~~seemed to~~ know to get out of the way. Each time I feared

Comment [1]: The subheadings break up the story and are not necessary in a story of this length.

Deleted: A personal pilgrimage to India teaches me to trust the Driver of my life.

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Comment [2]: Is “ragged” the best word here?

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Comment [3]: What does “worshipped first” mean: Highest in the hierarchy of gods? Name is always spoken first?

Comment [4]: Say more; readers won't know what kind of car this is.

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we would hit one, we'd miss. It was my first taste of learning to trust what would happen in this different culture.

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Gananath eased my nervousness on the streets that night. The following day, he took us on a tour of the largest city in the state of Kerala. I sensed he understood the trepidation Westerners feel about Indian driving.

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Gananath had an aura of competence and patience about him that was in contrast to the chaotic, almost manic flow of traffic. Everyone seemed to be out to pass everyone else. There were no lines painted on the road, nor any apparent rules except to honk if you're overtaking (their word for passing). Indians seemed ed to have great faith in the whole process, whereas Americans need driving to be regulated, defined, and orderly.

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Comment [5]: Or: need prescribed rules and laws for driving our streets.

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As we departed for the beach town of Varkala, our next destination on the tour, I dared to look ahead at the highway in front of us. It seemed crazy. Buses and trucks passing taxis, passing auto-rickshaws, passing bicycles, and avoiding pedestrians all at the same time made me gasp and clench the seat again and again. I tried to hide my anxiety and took some deep breaths. Often we were passing a bus when another bus came right at us! Somehow, everyone made room and it all worked ed out.

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To add to the dilemma, there were no seat belts. Just Vaidehi and me in the back seat, bouncing on every bump. I tried not to think about what would happen if the driver needed to hit the

Comment [6]: Is "dilemma" the best word here?

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brakes. Luckily, I ~~wouldn't~~ hear about gory Indian highway accidents until much later in my trip.

So rather than continue to watch the road, I practiced trust. ~~Worry, I knew, did me no good.~~

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Out the side windows I ~~watched~~ the endless parade of ~~fascinating~~ shops, produce stands, people carrying pots on their heads, children in school uniforms, and women in beautiful saris ~~walking~~ along the roads. ~~The~~ sights, sounds, and smells ~~distracted~~ me from my fears. ~~When~~ I focused on looking out the window, I relaxed into the experience. I ~~trusted~~ the man at the wheel.

Comment [8]: Vague. Be more descriptive.

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Deleted: Most of the men had mustaches, and the women wore their dark hair back in a braid or long ponytail. There were plenty of

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Comment [9]: Deleted "whine"; you've not been whining in this story.

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Comment [10]: Why were you assigned to a driver? Just say "We had a different driver."

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Which ~~made me ask myself~~: ~~Who~~ was at the wheel of my life? I mean, was it really the driver?

He ~~had no~~ control over the other cars. And I had ~~less control~~ ~~than he did!~~ ~~It seemed increasingly~~ clear that on this trip, and in my life, some ~~greater~~ ~~force~~ was in the driver's seat. I ~~was~~ in the hands of the Divine Driver. I ~~could~~ ~~worry~~ about ~~the circumstances~~, or ~~sit~~ back, enjoy the scenery, and learn from the experience.

The next day we traveled on to the ashram. Vaidehi and I were ~~assigned another driver~~ ~~who~~ spoke only a handful of words in English. Our curious questions wouldn't be satisfied, and we had to believe in his ability to get us to our destination.

~~As he drove us through the city~~, I noticed that ~~despite~~ the recklessness and chaos, pedestrians appeared unconcerned about crossing the street. They slowly, gracefully, strode across, sometimes without a glance at ~~oncoming~~ cars—~~with~~ faith that everyone's timing ~~would~~ work,

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out. I would have sprinted through the traffic, frantically scanning back and forth!

I rarely saw a driver lose his temper. None of them seemed bothered when someone passed them, or they had a near miss. Yet in the US, people are infuriated over mild annoyances. It's a battle of the egos on California freeways, but in India, not a hint of personal reaction. Indians' trust and acceptance of circumstance was contagious, and I found myself relaxed into a comfortable cross-legged position in the back seat.

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Nine days into my stay at the ashram, I had my initiatory experience of riding in an Indian bus.

Twenty-five of us westerners piled into an old bus chartered for the ninety-minute trip to visit a local orphanage.

Deleted: Riding buses .

The week before, a woman I'd met on the flight to India recounted her bus ride to a charitable, state-of-the-art hospital. On the return trip, she held the bars that went across the open-air windows with one hand, and a piece of metal from a truck traveling in the opposite direction scraped the skin off her knuckles! Although the heat of the day was intense, I avoided the windows and sat on the aisle. We returned without incident, but I wondered what a regular, unchartered bus ride would be like.

Comment [11]: Or "charity-run"?

Deleted: Trivandrum

My opportunity came a week later, while enrolled at a cultural arts center in Aranmula. I was low on rupees and needed to make a trip to a bank – into a town twenty kilometers outside our

Comment [12]: Studying at? Confusing since you were at the ashram until now.

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village. It was time for the adventure of taking a bus by myself.

The staff at the arts school was kind enough to write down the destination and the return trip **directions** in Malayalam (the local language) to show the fee-taker. I took a seat and settled in for the ride. Relax – trust the Driver, I **told** myself.

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Arriving safely in Chengannur, I went about my business and then sought out the large bus depot for my return. About **seven bus** lines **were** coming and going **through the depot**, with their destinations written in Malayalam. **How** would I decipher which one to take?

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Trust the Driver, **I repeated**; somehow, I'll be taken care of. After asking around if anyone spoke English, I was **connected with** a kind, middle-aged businessman **headed** for the same bus. He **promised to** let me know when it arrived.

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Comment [13]: Introduced to?

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Thirty minutes went by. **When** would it arrive? I had a music lesson in **thirty** minutes! But impatience does no good in India – **you must** trust and wait. Finally, the man signaled and we scurried over and boarded. Many people **looked after me**, assuring I got off at the right stop. Yes, someone else was the Driver of this journey, and I could trust that all was in order.

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Comment [14]: After the man got off? Or through the whole trip?

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Comment [15]: You were back at home in this paragraph, then in the final paragraph of the story, you were back in India. It was confusing.

I revised as though you are in India here, thinking about these things as you ride the bus back to the arts center.

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Riding the bus back to the arts center, I had thought more about **how** my life is guided by some Divine travel engineer. Would I **prefer** to see everything **coming up ahead on the road**? **When** my father had heart failure, when my tires blew out on the freeway, or when I passed my **licensure**

Comment [16]: Or: “know the outcome of life events in advance?”

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exam? Would advance knowledge of the outcome make me, more or less anxious, or bring about a different outcome? If I hadn't been a little nervous for my exams, would I have been too

cavalier and failed the test? I didn't know the answers to these questions, but I did know that

when I released d the need to control my destiny and circumstance, I felt relief. Peace enveloped d,

me. I became present and better able to respond to whatever arose e.

So I sat back, rolled down the window, and let the wind blow through my hair. I watched d the

beggars on the street, the temple elephants parading, and took it all in. My life is in each of those

moments s. The Divine Driver knows v the next destination.

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Comment [18]: If you're still on the bus here, you're probably not rolling down the window, right? Consider changing to: For the rest of my stay in India, whenever I rode in the back seat of a car, I rolled down the window and let the wind...

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OVERALL COMMENTS

Connie, I like that you chose to write about one of life's big questions: who's really in charge?

And about one of life's big lessons: letting go of control.

Your story is focused on a single travel setting, though you used multiple short scenes to build up experiences until the lesson is fully learned. You did a great job of placing the reader on the chaotic streets of India and giving the reader a touch of your Westerner's anxiety.

I like the imagery in the ending scene—the reader can feel the wind in their hair!

Watch your verb tenses—you jumped at times between past and present. And in the last few paragraphs I wasn't sure what was happening when, and I don't know if my revisions convey what you intended.

I tightened the writing in quite a few places, and you can reduce verbiage even further. If you want to give yourself a writing challenge, try revising the story so it's 1000 words or less. Just an idea, for practice.

I commend you for choosing to write this memoir piece, entering the literary contest, and braving the risk of a critique. Thank you for this opportunity to read and comment on your story. I enjoyed your story and your subtle humor!

All the best in your continued writing!

Darlene Frank

<http://www.darlenefrankwriting.com/>