

Healer with a vision
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He was instructed to go down into a meadow. Once in the meadow, he was told to pick a flower, count its petals, see its color, smell its fragrance. He was asked to feel the wind on his face, to hear the birds singing above. "Look into the center of the flower," he was directed, "do you wish to descend?" His answer was "yes."

After a plunge into the heart of the blossom - in this case, a daisy - he was told to return to his chair and open his eyes.

This was Dr. Gerald Epstein's first exercise in mental imagery, guided by the woman who was to become his teacher and mentor for the next 25 years, the renowned mystic, Colette Aboulker-Muscat.

Epstein, who holds a MD from New York Medical College, was a practicing psychoanalyst when he met Muscat in Jerusalem in the spring of 1974. Meeting Muscat, known to her students simply as "Colette," marked a dramatic shift in Epstein's life. Since then, he has been teaching and practicing integrative imaginal medicine in Muscat's tradition.

Integrative medicine views physical illness within the larger context of a person's life. It approaches disease as dis-ease; a reflection of an individual's entire life that unites physical, emotional, mental, social, moral and environmental dimensions. Within this framework, the image is understood to be the language of the mind.

"Revelatory knowledge comes in the language of image," explains Epstein. "Images are informative. They give us knowledge about ourselves that we can apply to our lives to overcome the reflexive habits that have paralyzed or enslaved us. A mental image is a way to find new possibilities."

In an effort to help people find those "new possibilities," Epstein has devoted his life to teaching what he calls, "the Western spiritual medicine of monotheistic tradition."

In addition to maintaining a private practice in Manhattan, he has written five books, numerous articles, conducted scientific research and lectured widely. He is the founder and director of two schools: The Academy for Integrative Medicine and Mental Imagery, which offers post-graduate training for doctors, nurses and other health professionals and the Blue Gate School, whose classes are open to the public.

The 63-year-old Epstein comes to Jerusalem "two or three times a year" to visit Muscat, who turned 90 earlier this year. Sitting in the lobby of a Jerusalem hotel wearing a shirt and shorts in matching shades of green, the silver-haired, silver-moustached Epstein looks more like a tourist here to see the sights than a spiritual disciple well-acquainted with the city's faces and streets.

Epstein speaks in a steady, uninterrupted flow. And although his speech is peppered with biblical and spiritual references, his tone is remarkably matter-of-fact as he describes both personal history and medical philosophy in such careful, vivid detail.

"My odyssey started when I was 19," he relates. "I was pre-med at the time. My college fraternity brother was in psychoanalysis and he gave me a book to read, *Man Against Himself*, by Karl Menninger. I decided at that point to be a psychoanalyst."

Epstein went on to medical school, choosing to do his residency at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. Having completed his residency, he and his first wife, writer Perle Besserman, visited Israel for the first time in 1972.

"When the Yom Kippur War broke out," shares Epstein, "I had an impulse to come back."

Eager to continue his work in Israel, Epstein applied - and was accepted - to participate in Hadassah Hospital's Psychiatry and Law Program. His wife, in the meantime, had been commissioned to write a story on Jewish women in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War.

At the time, Epstein and his wife were meditating every day at a Zen Center that had recently been dedicated on the Mount of Olives. There they befriended a young man who suggested that Besserman interview a woman from Algeria by the name of Colette.

The young man informed Epstein and his wife that he had been in psychoanalysis for three years in Paris. When he came to Israel, he went to see Colette and within four meetings, achieved the results that had eluded him.

"I was skeptical," recalls Epstein. "I had accompanied my wife on other interviews and they were boring, but a voice came to me and said 'go.' "

Epstein recounts entering through the blue gate that leads to Muscat's garden - the blue gate for which his school is now named.

"What I came to discover that afternoon is the ladder of freedom," Epstein explains, moving his hand along an invisible vertical axis. That ladder of freedom has inspired his newest book, entitled, *Climbing Jacob's Ladder: Finding Spiritual Freedom Through Stories of the Bible*.

During that meeting, "a light went off for me," says Epstein. The encounter sparked a nine-year apprenticeship during which Epstein returned frequently to Jerusalem for intensive study with Colette.

Epstein had charted a new spiritual path for himself, but the first steps were difficult. "I was a lone wolf," remembers Epstein. "I was ostracized from the psychoanalytic community. They thought I'd gone mad.

"I realized I was at a crossroads and couldn't practice two different ways at the same time because they were antagonistic to each other." Financially destitute, Epstein formally withdrew from the New York Psychoanalytic Institute in 1976.

His marriage was also in trouble.

"We went along for three decades on the path of spirit," says Epstein, but by the mid-80's, "our paths had diverged." While Epstein grew increasingly involved in the Western path, "discovering the tremendously deep roots of Judaism," Besserman took on an Eastern path, following the way of Zen Buddhism. "When ideologies don't match, the marriage doesn't work," maintains Epstein, "or, at least, it's very rocky."

Regaining his footing - on unfamiliar terrain - was a slow process. Epstein began teaching at the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, which he describes as "very open to people who don't practice in a conventional way.

"I slowly resurrected my practice," he says. He also began writing, publishing works such as *Healing Visualizations*, a reference book of healing imagery exercises for various physical and emotional imbalances, and *Healing Into Immortality*, the seminal guide to Western spiritual mindbody medicine.

Epstein remarried in 1989. Today, he and his wife, Rachel, an acupuncturist, make their home on New York's Upper East Side. They have a six-year-old daughter named Sara Colette and a 21-month-old son named Max.

"In the Bible, we are commanded to teach the story of Exodus to our children," notes Epstein, extending the message far beyond the confines of the Passover Seder. "We are commanded to teach our children how to be free."

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