

Reflections on Rejoining Subud

by Margaret Pevec

I have recently resumed the latihan after a twenty-year hiatus, and the fortieth anniversary of my opening will occur next month. What I've written here is a personal reflection based on my reading of Priestley's article, 'How Not to Be a Cult', which is the only thing about Subud I've read in twenty years.

There were several reasons for me stepping back from Subud. What Priestley described was one of them. It nagged at me that we were supposed to 'follow our own guidance', yet most Subud members I knew prefaced their comments with, 'Bapak said....' It was common for helpers to tell potential new members, 'Subud has no dogma,' but wasn't it dogma to be required to wear a skirt to latihan, exercise separately from the men, treat Bapak like a guru, and consider any of his utterances as directives for our behavior and purpose in the world?

In November last year I resumed the latihan and am finding it helpful in my daily life. Since I haven't been to any gatherings larger than our local group, I haven't encountered many of the cult aspects. But when they have happened, they stand out. For example, someone made a comment about purification to me recently. I had completely forgotten that the latihan was considered a way of purifying oneself, and after twenty years away, I found that idea bizarre. What it feels like I'm doing when I do the latihan is connecting with 'all that is', and that connection feels calming and ineffable.

When I discovered the latihan and Subud at eighteen (thanks to brother Lawrence, who had already been a member for a year), I was looking for a 'home' that was different from the culture of my family of origin. Though we had a loving mother, our extended family was far from supportive. I can see now that I wanted an accepting community and a way to feel myself as special and important. The Subud community was creative, energetic, and on the fringe. It included young and old, some racial diversity, and a lot of highly non-traditional individuals. Subud was, in a word, exotic.

One of the mysteries of my personal journey is how a farm girl from Ohio was so easily and completely absorbed into this strange Subud world, which didn't feel strange to me. I happily immersed myself, and Subud became my life, starting in Columbus (and Cincinnati where I was opened), then Cilandak, Chicago, Palo Alto, CA, Arlington, VA, and back to Palo Alto. I was opened in April 1970, and within days of that event, I got pregnant (and learned, viscerally, that the latihan was *not* about saving one from life's struggles). I gave up my firstborn for adoption, went to Cilandak for the world congress, met my husband, moved to Chicago, married at twenty-one, had four children, then, after fifteen years, slogged through divorce and the struggle of single-motherhood, at which point I stepped out of the organization and the latihan.

In my first fifteen years as a member, I counted my Subud brothers and sisters as my first family. I embraced Islam, changed my name three times, used the word 'Allah' in latihan, fasted for Ramadan, wore head scarves. Through this time the contradiction between 'it's all about your personal experience in the latihan' and 'Bapak says' continued to bother me, but I was too busy with four children, low self-esteem and little

money to pay much attention. I did the latihan religiously (pun intended), despite the challenges. I can see, as I look back, that the latihan was something I took for granted.

I remember the night in 1972 when my soon-to-be husband came home from Subud and threw away my birth control pills. He was the youngest helper in Chicago, and tested about it because *Bapak said* we should leave procreation to God. How completely acquiescent I was! It never occurred to me to protest. I felt we were fulfilling a higher purpose. In those years we were always getting messages from Bapak about the importance of enterprises. Even through years of poverty, I felt guilty if we weren't contributing to the latest Subud enterprise. There was a sense that we were special, more important, that we would change the world...and that we weren't doing enough. As Priestley said, Bapak never talked about the large issues impacting humankind and I never questioned that fact.

I happen to be a member of a Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregation. Interestingly, the UUs are having a similar discussion: not labeling themselves a cult, but recognizing that their inherent culture (white, middle class, liberal) is a detriment to attracting people of color. The focus of the last issue of their national magazine was about this topic. Several writers suggested that the UU culture (as all cultures) is so instinctive and ingrained that it has become invisible to the membership, who may not realize how off-putting it might be to those who are not white or middle class.

UUs are similar to Subudites in that all personal belief systems are accepted. One can be part of a congregation for any number of reasons, including the desire to hang out with interesting, open-minded people; join with others to create change in the world; or, very specifically, to teach their comprehensive human sexuality curriculum to teenagers (which is what drew me to this denomination, as it provided a way to help others avoid that particular anguish). It moves me to realize that each Sunday we come together to create a service, all from our own free will and good intentions. It is astounding to think about. Other denominations might motivate their congregants by the fear of burning in hell, or getting stuck in purgatory if they don't follow the program. We are simply people with enough common thoughts and desires to make something happen as a group within a spiritual context. The same is true in Subud. We organize latihan space, organize and attend congresses, socialize together, create charitable projects. I'm sure plenty of members come only for the latihan, then leave. Others want more.

I'm not really interested in whether Subud grows in members or not, which it seemingly hasn't in all the years I've been away. I'm fine with people finding us, or not; doing the latihan, or not. I don't necessarily believe that bigger is better. I believe that each individual has their own unique path, guided by spirit. I believe that if the latihan is an important factor of someone's spiritual growth, they will find it. I propose that anything we say about the latihan, while engaging, is irrelevant (including this article), and that goes for what Bapak has said. First, these are only words, which we individually construct anyway, based on our own experiences and assumptions. Second, the latihan is not about what we imagine. It is (maybe, I hope) something that is different from or deeper than the words we say about it.

Do we need to talk about God to new members? Isn't the latihan about getting in touch with the inherently alive part of ourselves? That said, I love talking about spiritual experience, most of which comes, for me, in the form of insight and inspiration. I'm exploring the latihan in new ways, on my own, and feel it as a missing piece of my

spiritual repertoire.

The latihan helped me develop a stronger sense of self, and ironically, that led me to leave for twenty years. During that time I explored a number of different practices, (most notably: Re-evaluation Counseling or RC, Abraham-Hicks, EFT, EMDR, Non-violent Communication, Carolyn Myss), all of which continued my spiritual development, and made me stronger in the world. I actually never felt that I had disconnected from the latihan. And, when I returned, the latihan felt natural, as if I'd never left. What I didn't get from the latihan was a way to deal with the emotional and psychological wounds of my childhood. When another Subud member turned me on to RC, I knew that this highly structured and inexpensive method of peer counseling was exactly what I needed to truly grow. I practiced RC intensively for about nine years, and finally made the progress I had hoped for when I was only doing the latihan.

I recently gave a talk to Sixth Graders at my UU congregation about Subud, and found it challenging to explain Subud to an audience who had no preconceived notions. Reynold Feldman helped me prepare, and gave me some great ideas about comparing it to other human experiences, such as intuition, insight, inspiration, and enthusiasm. I don't think I talked about God, except as that concept related to 'all that is' or 'the life force'. Perhaps we might imagine ourselves explaining Subud to school children, and through that, discover the words that would normalize it for a wider audience. But perhaps we don't want to normalize it? Perhaps it still makes us feel special, set apart, important?

Subud and the latihan have changed my life in ways that would not have been possible without them. Going to Cilandak at twenty opened my eyes to a world that my upbringing had not. It was not only my first trip on an airplane, but my first opportunity to experience a different culture and interact with individuals from other countries. Fasting for Ramadan, learning the Islamic prayers, going to my first Jewish Seder...these were things I probably wouldn't have experienced had it not been for Subud. What an amazing journey it's been, and I'm excited about continuing. I didn't know about Subud Vision when I decided to return. But now that I do, I stand firmly with the group who are willing to open their thinking about the organization and the latihan; what it is and what it can be.