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GUEST COLUMN: My night with Ram Dass

Emily Leinfuss

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I was 29 years old and back in New York City after traveling Australia and Southeast Asia for 18 months. I hadn't found myself, but I wasn't freebasing cocaine anymore either — a big improvement from when I left.



Emily Leinfuss Sarasota Herald-Tribune

I happened on a flyer: a series of lectures by Ram Dass at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. His book, "Grist for the Mill" had just jumped out at me from the shelves of The Strand bookstore. Coincidence? I didn't think so. I signed up for "Compassion In Action: Keeping Your Heart Open in Hell."

The course was on helping the homeless of New York's 1990s. Part of it involved doing community service, but the teaching was on how to stay present in the face of suffering and to allow that suffering to awaken one's compassion. Ram Dass showed everyone in that century-old church to look into, not past, the eyes of the less fortunate and realize, "there but by the grace ... go I."

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There was no way I understood that then. I was sold on the style, or the cachet of spirituality. I was enamored with the idea of Ram Dass as a beatnik-guru who had sprung from a Jewish background similar to mine.

During this time, one New York winter night, three messages blinked up from my answering machine. One hang-up. One friend. One "Emily, this is Ram Dass. I will be joining you on the night of Christmas Day. You can call me, or I'll see you there." I jumped and laughed and ran around my tiny studio apartment. I had volunteered to help by staying at a homeless shelter the night of Christmas Day and it must mean something that Ram Dass would also be there. Coincidence ...?

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The Lower East Side basement that housed the shelter was bleak. There was a table in the hall full of leftover ham and potatoes, but not a crumb of cheer. I said hello to Ram Dass. We exchanged small talk. I felt my first stab of disappointment. The night progressed.

Lights out was a bleak room with full fluorescents blazing and two army cots. Ram Dass wrapped a scarf around his head to block the light and went to sleep. I stayed awake, upset that nothing had happened. When I awoke, he was gone. I got up and took the subway back home.

It seems like a non-story, but that's the trick to Ram Dass. The meaning came years later. He wasn't the point. If I'd been present with the people in the shelter I might've learned something about what I feared (cold, alone and living under a bridge), what I felt guilty about (status as a white, educated woman) and how I felt powerless to help others, or myself, back then. In 1995, in Sarasota, I got clean and could absorb and process more of his teachings, including self-compassion — the hardest lesson of all.

I woke up on Monday, 29 years later, to learn of Ram Dass' death. He taught me, and millions of us, how to practice compassion and to stay present to our own and others' suffering. Something which, dare I say it; our city and our nation are in desperate need of right now. He lives on in that spirit.

Emily Leinfuss is a freelance writer and editor. She's also the editor for the Herald-Tribune's Style Magazine. Find her at emilyleinfuss.com and emilyland.com.

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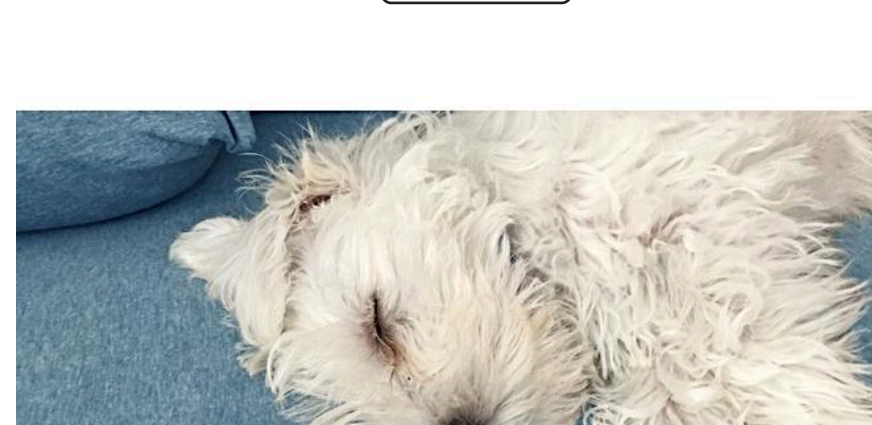
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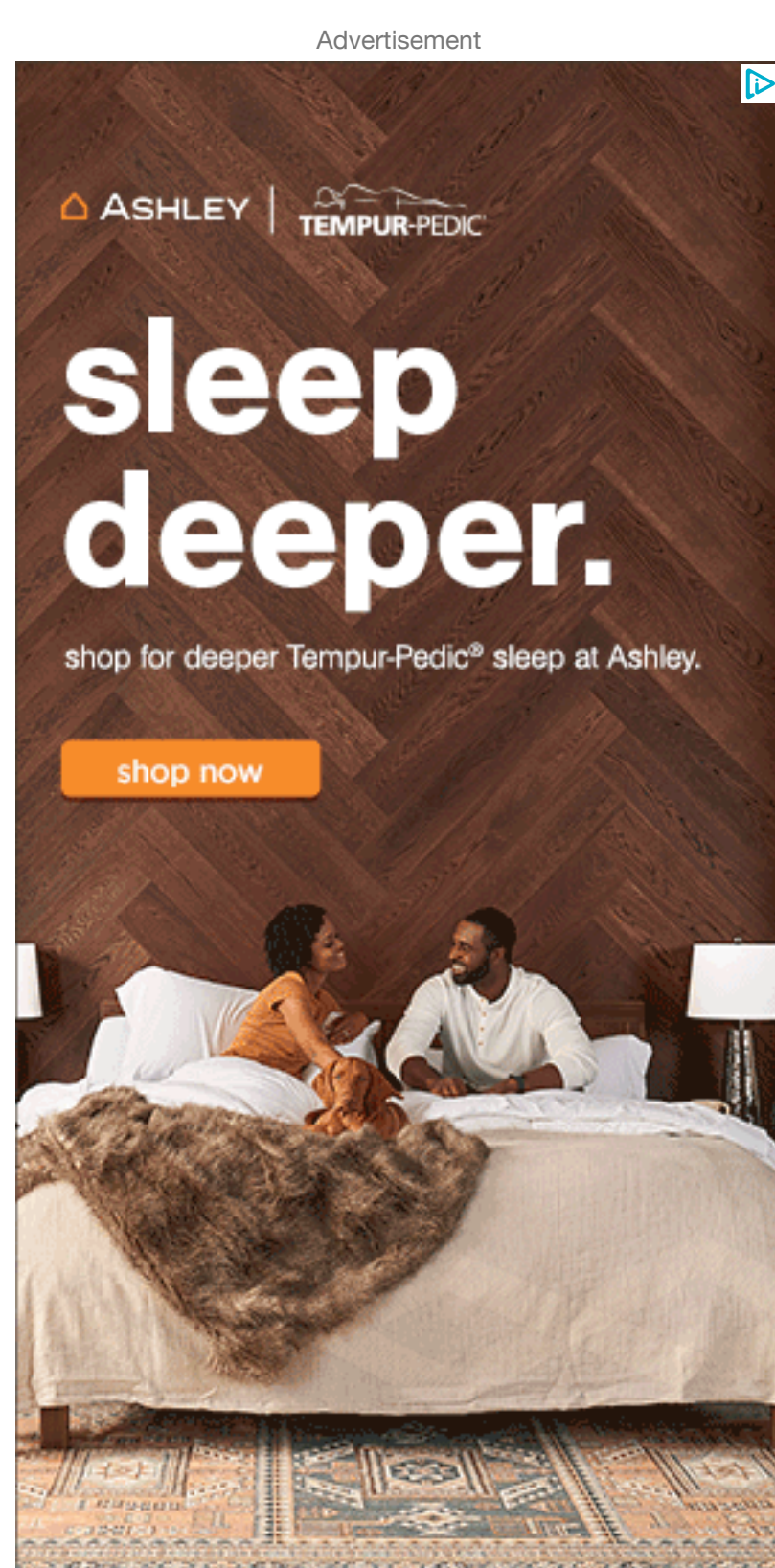


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