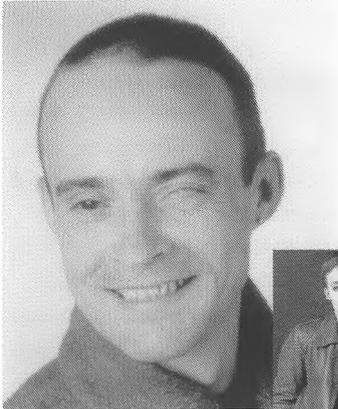


THOMAS BRASS

We're Not Playing Around Here

By Carol Johnstone



Two manifestations of Thomas Brass.



THOMAS BRASS came to the dharma though desire. It was 1983 and he was working in his photo studio in Saarbrücken, Germany, following in the footsteps of his industrial photographer

father and grandfather, when lovely Elke Muller (later to become Puts) walked in. Thomas took her to dinner and said he decided he “would like to make love with

her, but she gave me a book called *The Myth of Freedom* and sent me home. Very clever.” Elke told him about the local dharma study group and the first three or four times he went, he went to meet her, still hoping. But then he said, “I actually fell in love with our lineage.”

The next year the Vajra Regent Osel Tendzin came to Europe and Thomas took refuge. By the way that he taught, the Regent touched Thomas directly through his heart and mind. Then, in 1985, Thomas met and married his wife, Caroline.

On March 9, 1987, Thomas had an eye operation. He is one of 2% of those who have glaucoma for whom no therapy or operation will work. When he realized he was going to become gradually and irreparably blind, he called the Regent from the hospital. The Regent said, “Mind is never blind.” For Thomas, “That was really helping. The Regent’s penetrating teaching that ‘pain really exists and it’s not a joke and we are not playing around here; we are doing real things’—that was one thing I really remember.” Thomas says of his going blind, “It was actually a very painful process. It’s not actually something which happens immediately, like a shock. It was very, very slow going from ’87 to ’91 ..slowing, slowing, going down, down, down.”

In 1988, Thomas went to the seminary taught by the Regent, at RMSC. Thomas paused a long time before he could characterize that experience. “Happy and sad,” he said finally. “I was so afraid to get mad, crazy. With seminary you’ve got the right tools to work it out. From that point on, my whole process with getting blind had more the feeling of something natural and not the case of ‘I’m the poor guy who now has this heavy, heavy kismet.’ You are not guilty; you are not a bad guy and some kind of God is doing something bad to you because you behaved not well in the past. It was, ‘shit happens.’ Usually we think shit happens to other people, but if it then really comes to you... then you need the basic shamatha meditation to learn how to let go of that kind of idea or thoughts about you and your karma... (It) was good to

be at seminary. In that moment. The perfect time to do it.”

Seminary had some light moments. Thomas was the kasung gunner. He laughed and remembered Jim Gimian saying, “He’s blind. Would you like to make him deaf, too?” Says Thomas, “That was really great in the morning, with the color party. Then you could make this big noise. My basic nature is to make noise. Together with David Cook, we had a lot of fun.”

When he came back from seminary, he says he did “the usual Shambhala path, became a meditation instructor, worked with the dharma study group, led classes, and so on. But at the same time, karma went on.” In 1991 Caroline became pregnant and they lost the baby, something that is still too painful to talk about.

In 1994, Thomas went to Kalapa Assembly, a major dharmic event in his life. He said it was like “coming home.” A year later, when David Schneider became Director in Europe, he asked Caroline and Thomas to head up Shambhala Training in Europe. “It was fun,” Thomas recalls. “I loved it a lot. But I think you can only do such jobs for a certain time.” It was during this time that a deep friendship grew between he and David Schneider, who was very supportive when Thomas separated from and then divorced his wife last year.

After he stopped working as Shambhala Training Director in 1998, Thomas accepted Marty Janowitz’s invitation to join the Council of Warriors. Thomas says he’s very proud to be a member and his Shambhala practice is the juice in the battery that allows him to go on and help create “a good human society, beyond religion and social ideas.”

Thomas doesn’t share the idea that there’s a gap felt between the North American and European sanghas. He says, “I think at a certain point you are not any more American, or Canadian, or French, or German, or Austrian, or Turkish. At some point you have to really deeply understand in your heart that you’re a Shambhalian.” He says dwelling on national neurosis is “the deepest bullshit. I think we are agreed that we would like to create something really unique” and “there is enough to do so we don’t have time to think of all the neurosis from this or that, or here or there.... We are Shambhalians and that’s it. There is no difference between Americans or Germans, or Europeans or French. I think that’s a long time ago. Gone.”

He says, “One of my deep dreams is to move to Nova Scotia, but I’m afraid to do this step. It’s a real big step... I have to give up my language, my culture... We will see. I’m a lazy guy too. And, I like my little patterns a lot.” Thomas has moved back to Saarbrücken and is planning to attend this year’s Kalapa Assembly in June. *

Carol Johnstone is a freelance journalist and president of Windword Writing and Graphics in Halifax, Nova Scotia.