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At some point during the late spring of 1983, Richard Baker realized he was in a pickle. He wasn't alone. Hundreds of people were stewing in the same juice. But Richard was an enlightened Zen master. He was the chief priest of the San Francisco Zen Center, the most influential Buddhist training and teaching center in the country. He was Abbot of the first Buddhist monastery established outside of Asia in the history of the world. Even people who didn't particularly like him or his flamboyant style conceded that he was an intuitive genius, reliably able to anticipate cultural trends and to dream up events and enterprises to exploit them. So it surprised a lot of people in and around Zen Center that Richard hadn't smelled trouble sooner.

"I was at Tassajara during the Peace Conference," says John Bailes, who was Richard's student for more than a decade. "And you had to wonder, Is this guy stupid?"

It had been going on for years, says Paul Discoe, a carpenter and ordained priest, but "most people didn't want to see anything."

One of Richard's personal attendants remembers how he told himself the story of his teacher's behavior until that weekend. "I thought, I wish I could say to [Richard] Baker-roshi, 'I know that nothing is wrong, that it is all aboveboard, but you should be careful of appearances as well.'" He shrugs. "I didn't know his history."

He was not alone. After Richard was installed as Abbot in 1971, dozens of Zen students rotated through his three residences, earning their room and board and tiny monthly stipends as household staff. Most of them saw nothing that unsettled their

faith in their teacher; within the year, most Zen Center students – the largest and most seasoned community of Buddhist practitioners in America – terminated their relationships with Richard in the aftermath of the revelations, accusations, and hijinks referred to by Abbess Linda Cutts as “the Apocalypse.”

This apocalypse was not occasioned by a sudden, eye-opening moment of *satori*, the instantaneous enlightenment that incited so many Americans in the fifties and sixties to explore Buddhism and other yogic cultural practices. Whether they were busy contemplating their navels or trying to come up with a passably irrational response to a question about the sound of one hand clapping, those early enlightenment groupies wanted to be splashed with the cold, clear waters of awakening.

The San Francisco Zen Center Buddhists are descended from the Japanese Soto Zen tradition. They like to wake up to their Buddha nature softly, gradually, slowly; they’re sleepers who are reluctant to get out of bed, just like the rest of us. This may explain why so many of them didn’t respond to the many alarms they heard in the years before 1983. Who hasn’t hit the snooze button a few times?

So, it was not an insight into the nature of all things that attracted their attention one sunny weekend in March of 1983. It was a dusty pair of women’s slip-on shoes. The shoes were spotted several different times outside the door of Richard’s cabin at Tassajara, an old hot springs resort 150 miles south of San Francisco.

Richard was in one of the little wooden cabins. He had first visited the resort in the early 1960s with his wife, Virginia, and even then “I thought it was great,” he remembers, though “it looked pretty run down – the kind of place you bring your girlfriend or boyfriend, to be away from your spouse or job or something. It was pretty tacky, but beautiful.” By 1983, when

Richard invited his friend Anna and her children to join him there for a long weekend, the buildings and landscape at Tassajara had been subtly and thoroughly transformed. A pearl had been polished.

The Esselen people and other Native Americans visited the Tassajara hot springs for centuries before the first white settlers arrived in the 1860s. These settlers named the place Tassajara, a coinage that probably derives from the Esselen phrase denoting “the place where dried meat is hung.” Tassajara acquired its basic shape as a rustic resort in the early years of the twentieth century, long after the anonymous Chinese laborers cleared and dug the road, and long before one of Joan Crawford’s husbands bought it and, like almost every other owner, could not manage to make it pay. It’s not a gold mine. Even today, after thirty years of extensive renovation by the current owners, including a few new residential buildings and some low-cost improvements to a couple of saggy old barns (where they stick the kitchen and cleanup crews during the summer guest season), Tassajara can only accommodate about seventy overnight guests.

Tassajara is far from anywhere. On a map, it is about ten sky miles east of Big Sur. When you look inland from California’s central coast, you see the outskirts of the two-million-acre Los Padres National Forest. Near its center is the Ventana Wilderness—200,000 acres of rugged and profound sanctuary. It is ringed by a snaggle-toothed grin of granite peaks more than a mile high; inside, the sloping land is dense with stands of conifer that give way to sudden, almost purely vertical ridges. A single dirt road winds slowly upward for more than ten miles and plunges down the last four toward Tassajara Creek in a series of switchbacks that sometimes will spare a car’s transmission (if a

recent rain hasn't washed a lot of trees and rock into the road) though often at the cost of the brakes, which go mushy and can melt under constant pressure in summertime temperatures of 110 degrees.

The road ends—it just ends. You're almost there. It's a short walk down a soft hill to the valley floor, where the little village spreads out along the creek. A central stand of long, low buildings houses the kitchen and dining room, a large deck overlooking the creek, and an administrative office. There is one telephone (sometimes), and four giant propane tanks provide fuel for cooking and hot water for cleaning up, but the guest rooms are not electrified, and every night the paths and cabins are lit by kerosene lamps. This keeps the nightly fire-watch crew alert, as wildfires have more than once nearly burned Tassajara out of existence.

Follow the dusty footpath to the right, and you pass a short string of pine and stone rooms set along the banks of the creek. Only one building project—a large concrete bathhouse—was ever completed across the creek, where a steep piece of ridge intrudes almost into the water. It is now in ruins. Erosion has turned the big old bunker into a temporary retaining wall. It'll be gone soon. The path winds through the narrow valley floor—you're at the bottom of an ancient gorge, and the land rises so precipitously from the creek basin that sunlight slips inside for only a couple of hours every day, even in the summer. A few hundred yards further on, you pass the new Japanese-style wood-and-tile hot-bath complex, and then you head into deeper woods, where land begins to rise toward the ridge and the path dwindles away and you are hiking out of the gorge on a narrow trail.

If you head left from the central courtyard and dining room along the footpath, you pass painted wooden huts clinging to the creek's edge, and then the men's and women's "dormitories" —

two little rustic motels for solo travelers willing to share one of the five twin-bedded rooms with a stranger. The valley floor is a little more generous over here. There is room enough for a few big public buildings, a neighborly cluster of eight-by-ten cold-water cabins, a flower and vegetable garden, one strange cylindrical cabin with a deck that is bigger and much less charming than anything else on the property, a couple of refitted barns where students live, and a swimming pool filled with a temperate and blend of creek and hot-spring waters.

Every night there is nothing but the unsteady amber glow of glass lanterns lined up like jarred fireflies along the path, an embarrassment of stars overhead, and the creek water smooth-talking its way around a lot of rocks.

Richard's wife Virginia and their two children had decided not to join him at Tassajara that weekend in March of 1983. Anna and her kids had their own cabin, but the neighbors—most of them not more than ten feet away—figured those dusty shoes outside Richard's door were Anna's. "They were," Richard says, years later, nodding. Several people also remember Richard and Anna holding hands as they walked along the path toward a trail into the woods. When he hears this, he looks genuinely confused. "Could've been," he says, and then he smiles briefly, as if he wishes he had held Anna's hand. "I actually don't think so, but it could've looked like it. It was impossible to hide what we were feeling."

Hiding? Who said anything about hiding?

No one in this story supposed that Richard and Anna had traveled to Tassajara for a clandestine rendezvous. Just for starters, Richard is six-foot-two, with dark eyes, a big Roman nose, and he shaves his head. He attracts attention. Anna was lithe, blonde, and "so beautiful"—according to a young female

Zen student who remembers the first time she saw Anna on Zen Center property-- "so beautiful that I didn't ask her if she needed help, even though she looked lost. I immediately thought, She must be here visiting [Richard] Baker-roshi. No way he doesn't know this woman."

On the merits of their appearance and behavior alone, Richard and Anna might reasonably have expected to excite passing glances no matter where they were that weekend. And secrecy was not served by their selection of a resort with one public byway, a communal dining room, and sleeping arrangements only slightly more private than bunk beds. Also, Richard sort of owned the place.

Since 1967, the Tassajara hot springs resort has been owned and operated as a summer-season business by the San Francisco Zen Center, a nonprofit corporation sole at the time, with Richard as its legally designated Chief Priest. Tassajara is also Zen Center's monastery. Here, for the first time in the 2,500-year history of Buddhism, Zen priests and monks were trained and ordained in the West. And though the guest season was still a few months away and Tassajara typically is closed to all visitors from September until May for intense monastic practice periods, that spring weekend in 1983, Richard had invited the most eminent Buddhist teachers, scholars, and poets in the Western world to the first Buddhist Peace Conference. Thich Nhat Hanh, spiritual pioneer of the Buddhist Mindfulness communities was at Tassajara, along with poet Gary Snyder, American Zen master and founder of the Diamond Sangha Robert Aitken, Esalen cofounder Michael Murphy, former California governor Jerry Brown, and most of the senior priests of Zen Center. Richard was spending the weekend at the one place on earth where every sentient being he passed was bound to recognize him--and to miss him when he wasn't around. "He and Anna didn't make it

to most of Thich Nhat Hanh's talks," a former Zen Center Board member recalls. "Of course, by then, Paul was there."

Richard had invited Paul Hawken to the conference, too. Paul was Richard's friend. Paul was Anna's husband. Paul had recently turned over to Zen Center 200 shares of stock in his new business enterprise, the Smith and Hawken garden-tool catalog company. He and Anna had also made a recent donation—\$25,000 in cash and a \$20,000-dollar loan—to Zen Center in exchange for a home that had been built for them on the Zen Center farm and practice center in Marin County, twenty miles north of San Francisco, where Richard's wife and two children lived most of the year.

And yet, everyone who lived through the Apocalypse will tell you, as more than eighty of them have told me, it was not about sex.

Okay; but it was not *not* about sex.

"How could these people not have known there were other women in his life?" Frederique Botermans had spent several years at Tassajara and was on her way back from a stay in Japan when she heard the news. "I was shocked by the community more than Richard. Did they think he was perfect?"

By 1983, John was not looking for perfection. "I didn't care who Dick slept with," he says. "I did care that he cared who I slept with and told me who I could or couldn't. That he did." John had taken a leave of absence from college in 1972; it was not until February of 1984 that he left Zen Center and returned to Harvard to complete his undergraduate degree. Fifteen years later, John is a married investment advisor, and he is training to spend the year 2000 as a crew member ("one of seventeen in a seventy-two-foot boat," he says) in a sailing race around the world. "I like situations," John explains. "That's why I like Zen."

John remembers Richard, at his best, challenging and pressing people to exceed their own perceived limits, “and people rarely do that,” John says. “The relationship with Dick was always one of love, and it made me strong.” He smiles and takes his big hands through his curly brown hair. John is taller and more obviously muscular than Richard, but as a young Zen student, “I used to feel I had gone fifteen rounds with Muhammad Ali. As my practice matured,” says John, “well . . . I think it was difficult for [Richard] to acknowledge the growth of his students. He couldn’t do it.” After several years as Richard’s student, “there was always this confusion: Is this Zen practice of is this just a power trip?”

John attended a public lecture in San Francisco given by the Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh during his stay at Zen Center in early 1983. “I remember sitting in the back of the theater. [A lot of us] had worked to get Thich Nhat Hanh here. Dick introduced him. And I realized I was fed up,” says John. “I thought this had Nobel Peace Prize written across it—everything people imagine Harvard is about, not Zen.” John is one of several Zen students who were “shocked and not” in March of 1983. “Dick stated, before the Hawken affair—I heard him say—‘The shit is going to hit the fan.’ As far as Dick could make a plea, he was making a plea,” explains John. “But he couldn’t give anyone an opportunity to help him.”