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ON THE DOWNBEAT,  
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by  
MICHAEL J. KOENIGSKNECHT

THE CHICAGO  
LITERARY CLUB  
2020



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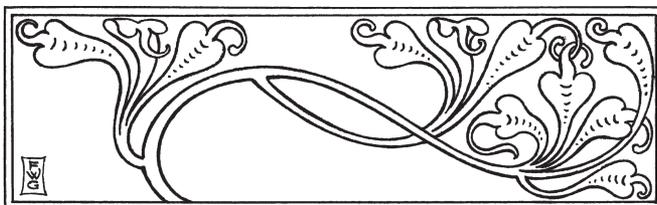
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THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB

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The music, the magic, the excitement: imagine being onstage at the opera with the principal singers and chorus. Could I? Should I? Would I?

The *Chicago Tribune* had a small notice that the Lyric Opera was holding open auditions for supernumeraries in several productions that season, beginning in the late summer of 2011.

First, I had to look up “supernumerary” in the dictionary. It is derived from the Latin *supernumerarius*, and in the context of opera it refers to persons paid to appear onstage in smaller, non-singing roles. Among the qualities supernumeraries must possess are: acting ability; an ability to recognize musical cues and move onstage in time to music; stage presence; an ability to take direction; and, availability to work evenings, weekends, and holidays. Well, I certainly met the last requirement. I recently had retired from the practice of law and was basking in the glory of my time being completely my own. I had been a subscriber at the Lyric for many years, loved opera, and was sufficiently full of myself to think it was worth the effort of auditioning. That season they would need sixty-four supers for *Aida* and thirty-two for *The Magic Flute*. But the first audition, in just forty-eight hours, was for *Lucia di Lammermoor*, where they were to cast six supers. Since I had never auditioned for anything before, I decided to

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attend the *Lucia* audition as reconnaissance, so I would be better prepared to try for *Aida* or *Flute*, when they would need larger numbers of supers.

So that Saturday afternoon at 2:00 p.m., I entered the stage door at 20 N. Wacker. I knew where it was. On nights I had attended performances I had seen musicians and singers using the entrance; once I had seen Samuel Ramey sweep through that portal after a performance, trailing a cloud of stardust. Just entering the stage door myself was exciting. But then the security guard at an inner door wanted identification to check me against “the list.” What list? The *Tribune* had said nothing about a list or registering in advance! Excitement plunged into anxiety: Had I already made a mistake? Had my reconnaissance mission failed before it had started? The security guard took pity on me; he wrote my name on the list. After checking in, I was shown to a room with about sixty men milling around, all of them with an air that said they knew what they were doing. The room was huge—about ninety feet long, fifty feet wide, with a forty-foot ceiling. A mockup of the Lyric stage was traced on the floor with colored tape. The men were all ages, body types, and personalities. I had not expected so many men, or so much evident confidence.

In swept an entourage of about twelve people who lined up behind a very long table. Catherine Malfitano introduced herself as the director. Before retiring from the stage, she had sung many memorable roles at the Lyric and other opera houses around the world. I had seen and heard her perform many times. The *Tribune* had not mentioned, and I had not considered, that there might be a famous diva as the director. Ms. Malfitano introduced her various assistants and specialists, along with her husband, Steve, who remained a silent presence. After giving an overview of this production of Donizetti’s bel canto opera, Ms. Malfitano divided the sixty men into two groups by height, explaining that in one scene the six selected would have to carry the soprano on a bier. Having the six of a similar height would reduce the risk of rolling the soprano off the bier and into the orchestra pit. The largest group by far was my group,

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those of about six feet. All those men well over or well under six feet were dismissed with thanks for coming.

Ms. Malfitano had each of us individually walk and run the length of the room with various attitudes: “run like you are late catching a train,” “walk like you are a thug going to a fight,” “run like your life depends on it,” “walk like a dandy entering a fancy dress ball,” etc., etc. I closely observed a few other men run through these drills before I was called. When I was up, I simply tried to imagine myself as a dandy, a thug, etc. It was very confusing, and exhausting. I had no idea what I was doing, but approximated as best I could the visages and gaits she was requesting, and tried to manage my breathing between the runs. I was sure I was failing whatever these exercises were measuring. Throughout the process, the entourage behind the big table would caucus in excited whispers and then one of Ms. Malfitano’s assistants would call out individuals and groups whose presence was no longer required; they were excused with thanks.

Eventually, Ms. Malfitano had it down to twelve men. Now, in groups of six, we had to hoist a long platform with a woman lying on top of it, to shoulder height, and carry it around the room. For this it was important to keep in step so as to avoid tilting and jerking the platform. Ms. Malfitano rotated us through several combinations of six. While I had come to the audition without expecting anything, when the group had been winnowed down to twelve, my competitive juices were flowing. I wanted to get a part.

When we were down to eight men, Ms. Malfitano asked us to roll our pants up over the knee. Kilts were involved, and she wanted a good look at our calves. In the end, I was selected. The audition had gone on for hours and I had run more that afternoon than I had in years. But standing in the midst of a now purposely bustling opera staff in the aftermath of the audition, I felt elation. I had been tested in unexpected ways. I had been examined and judged. And, an honest-to-goodness opera star, a diva, had chosen me to be in her production. It felt so good, so satisfying.

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We six were sent directly to Wardrobe for measuring. Our costumes would be made to our exact measurements—and there were lots of measurements. For instance, they did not just measure the circumference of my head for a hat size; they also measured from nose to nape of neck and from ear to ear over the top. The measurements were similarly detailed for every part of my body. Three ladies with tape measures, pins, chalk, and charts hovered around me. I was impressed. Next I was photographed from various angles. I was not told the purpose; but there were many more photos than would be required for an ID badge or for making the costumes. Fantasy ran rampant. Perhaps publicity photos were required. Was the Lyric Opera looking for a new face for their posters, and newspaper and magazine ads? I imagined my face on banners hanging from the Wacker Drive streetlights. Cleary, “winning” the audition had fully engaged my ego.

Rehearsals began the following Monday. We rehearsed five days a week, generally from 10:00 or 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 or 7:00 p.m., with a break in the middle. Initially, we rehearsed in the same room where the auditions had occurred; but now there are some pieces of the set in place. Random objects are distributed around the masking-taped mock stage. A coat rack stands in for a castle wall; cardboard boxes mark where columns will stand; folding chairs represent pieces of scenery that will be obstacles to movement. Racks holding swords and other props are off to one side. A piano and music stands are on the other side of the room and there are small models of the set with curtains and backdrops near the table where the director and her assistants sit. At the appointed hour people begin arriving: Ms. Malfitano and her assistant directors and stage managers; the pianist, stagehands, and the five other supers. Our conductor, Massimo Zanetti, enters. He is boyishly handsome in that Bobby Kennedy way. I can almost hear a sigh from all the women in the room. Finally, the principal singers enter; they are all very young. We sit on folding chairs in a circle and Ms. Malfitano explains how she will direct the show. But, first, a

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summary of the story, which is set in Scotland but sung in Italian. Lucia of Lammermoor loves Edgardo of Ravenswood. But their clans are enemies. Lucia's brother, Enrico, Lord of Lammermoor, deceives her and forces her to marry a rich English dandy, Arturo, for the money and connections he will bring to the family. This forced marriage and betrayal of her love for Edgardo drives Lucia insane. She murders Arturo immediately after their wedding, in their matrimonial bed. Suicides and funerals follow. Lucia's coloratura "mad" scene is a highlight, but from soulful love duets to stirring sextets and soaring choral pieces, the music in this tragic love story is beautiful from start to finish.

Ms. Malfitano talks us through her vision of a scene, walking from point to point on the mock stage. We listen intently as she describes the flow of the action and the emotional content, trying to see what she sees in this large, mostly empty room.

No talking is allowed. At the slightest murmur, Ms. Malfitano shoots a glance at the stage manager, who shouts: "Quiet, please." Ms. Malfitano then continues with her creative vision. Next, the principal singers, another super, and I do a walk-through. The conductor raises his arms; the pianist settles on his bench; an air of expectancy reigns. And we begin. The music flows. Ms. Malfitano, clapping time, gives cues and directions as the complicated clockwork movements commence. But we are soon interrupted. The music stops for corrections and amendments to our movements. When we are ready to take up where we left off, I hear for the first time, in Mr. Zanetti's lovely Italian accent, "On the downbeat, please." It sounds so simple and definitive. Everyone nods their head. But what does it mean? I have no idea, though I nod my head and fake it by watching the others. I hope someone will explain it in passing, but no. I was to hear variations on this direction all that first day. Once, staring directly at me, it was, "Try to remember: on the downbeat, please."

I am amazed at how many things I am required to do. It is very complicated and difficult to remember all the different movements

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to exact points on the stage, as well as the gestures, changes in facial expression, and body posture. It is all done to musical cues and the timing is all-important. Ms. Malfitano demands exact timing to present her vision to the audience and to avoid collisions when sixty people are all moving in different directions on the stage. On the first day of rehearsal the seven principal singers, another super, and I rehearse two scenes for six hours with a piano only. In the next rehearsal we do the same two scenes but now with the forty-eight members of the chorus also singing and moving in the same space. I had thought I was getting the hang of my cues and movements, but now with the chorus onstage, obstructing sight lines, adding levels of complexity to the music, and obscuring my cues, I am totally bewildered and confused. It is exhausting.

The rehearsal schedule continues for two and a half weeks, with one or two scenes each day. It is an intense and exhausting schedule. However, I really enjoy spending so much time with the principal singers. After decades of working long hours in offices and courtrooms among other lawyers, businessmen, and judges, I am now spending my days with genuine artists and participating in the making of an artistic creation. It is thrilling beyond words.

Upon entering the stage door, I am transformed. As a super, a lawyer becomes a medieval knight, a schoolteacher becomes a courtesan, a software engineer, a pillaging Hun. We step from everyday life into a world filled with music, and become another person for a few hours. It is magical and sublime. The other side of the coin is that a super is a silent participant. Supers are at the bottom of the onstage performer food chain. No one wants to hear a super's opinion on anything operatic. To the extent that in our other lives we had position, power, or authority; that has to be left outside the stage door. We are but humble servants of the opera.

Of the six supers in *Lucia*, two are English dandies in the retinue of Arturo, the foppish, doomed bridegroom; two are townsmen; and, finally, two are henchmen of Enrico, the Lord of Lammermoor. I am designated

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as henchman #1. This means that I will always be downstage of Jeffrey, who is henchman #2. As a henchman, I have three costumes: first, there is my courtly suit of clothes for wearing around the castle when there is no imminent fighting; second, there is my kilt and short jacket ensemble which always includes my sword and means that fighting or the threat of fighting is about to occur; and, finally, there is my funeral suit. It is dark, includes a shawl-type head covering, and is worn toward the end of the opera for carrying Lucia's bier and during the related killings and suicides leading to the finale. All my costumes are made of the finest materials and include an incredible amount of detail, which most members of the audience will never notice. I have a "dresser" in the fifth-floor men's super dressing room who puts on and takes off every piece of costume and gives me a thorough inspection before I go onstage. We are not allowed to dress ourselves, for fear we will forget something or not wear it exactly right. The dressers are in charge of all the discarded costumes: they account for all the pieces, and clean and rehang them for the next performance.

It turns out that handling a sword is a lot more complicated than one might expect, especially on a crowded stage with several other men drawing their swords and pointing them at the same time in the midst of a flurry of other performers moving around and singing. These are not plastic swords. They are beautiful, authentic swords that are quite heavy, though the razor edges have been sanded down. For these scenes the Lyric provides a sword-fighting choreographer, Nick. Nick is from the north of England and has years of experience choreographing stage fighting of various sorts. He takes the principal men singers, Jeffrey, and me under his wing and we have several sessions with Nick to work on all the sword-fighting scenes. He begins with footwork. Precise footwork supports the proper fighting positions. He drills us on the footwork and then teaches us the correct upper body positions. This is important in controlling the weapon, but is even more important when the action freezes and one has to hold out a very heavy sword motionless while an entire aria is sung.

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This is only possible if one has the correct body alignment from the feet up. Just holding a position motionless for several minutes is surprisingly difficult. If one freezes holding a heavy object, it becomes excruciating very quickly. Proper body alignment lessens the pain and allows one to hold the pose.

Very specific postures with the sword signal to the audience a subtext to the action. Each position has a specific meaning: relaxed, alert, hostile, attack, defend. Once Nick has taken us through the basics, we work with the director and Nick on the specific blocking for each scene involving swords. The director is always concerned with the balance of the tableau that the audience will see and how it supports the story line. Nick is concerned with correct swordsmen postures and the safety of all the performers. Between them they work out the blocking that satisfies them both. Of course, throughout, the principal singers throw in their preferences. When the singers speak everyone listens. No one wants unhappy principal singers. The rehearsals build layers of complexity until we find ourselves performing complete acts onstage with the chorus and orchestra.

After three weeks of intense work, it is opening night. Onstage rehearsals with a full orchestra had been exciting, but now there are 3,500 people in the seats, primed for a first look at a new production of *Lucia*. The air crackles with anticipation. The music swells and seems louder. On my first entrance, I am alone on stage and walk down to the footlights, looking out to the vast audience, before turning to await the entrance of Enrico, Lord of Lammermoor. The house is huge when viewed from the stage. It is intimidating. Fortunately, the music and all the rehearsing carry me through the initial panic. Onstage, I am just above the orchestra and among the principal singers and chorus. The sound is a physical force. The air vibrates with the power of the orchestra, soloists, and chorus. It requires an act of will to stay focused on the details of my tasks, and to not allow myself to be swept away by the beauty and

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power of the music. I move on cue, hit my marks, don't drop anything, and perform all my functions on the correct notes. When the curtain drops, my immediate reaction is relief, grateful that I did not make any obvious mistakes. But then there is the applause. Loud applause, shouts of "Bravo" and "Brava." Foot-stomping, curtain-call applause. I know the audience is responding to the soloists, the orchestra, the chorus—not to me. But I am facing the audience too, taking bows. The applause is like waves of warm water washing over me. It is intoxicating, and a very emotional release after the tension of performing.

Ms. Malfitano is a petite woman with waist-length, glossy black hair. She is very dignified and conscious of her diva status. She is comfortable demanding a limousine in a taxicab world. She maintains a professional distance from all who approach her. At the same time she is very responsive to performers' concerns and courteous to even the lowliest members of the cast, the supers. Ms. Malfitano has us supers take separate bows at the footlights after the curtain. This is unusual; often the supers are relegated to the back of the crowd for the full company bows. On opening night, after the individual bows, company bows, and curtain calls to sustained ovations, the fire curtain descends and I can hear the audience leaving the theater. The cast is celebrating and congratulating each other onstage. I run to Ms. Malfitano center stage, still holding her bouquet amid the jubilant cast. I sweep her up in my arms and spin us around, thanking her for giving me this opportunity. When I set her back on her feet I see that she appears shocked and does not seem to share my exuberance. She does not beat me with her long-stemmed bouquet but it is clear that my coltish behavior is unwelcome—at least on the surface.

After each performance, starting with the dress rehearsal, "Notes" are posted. All stage performers review the Notes upon next entering the opera house. The Notes contain criticism, corrections, and changes for the stage performers. The level of detail observed from the house is

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unbelievable. Examples of my notes include: “Michael, in A2, S3, the garter on your left sock was not properly aligned.” “Michael, in A3, S1, you did not hit your mark before drawing your sword.” Mind you, in this scene more than sixty people are moving simultaneously onstage and I had to pass through them from far stage left to stage right, hit my mark, turn, and draw my sword on a particular note in the music. In that performance, I had realized that I was a beat late in clearing the crowd and could not reach the mark on time; I chose to stop a stride short of my mark to turn and draw in time to the music. This happened once in nine performances, but one of the assistants caught it and wrote me up. The attention to detail is extraordinary.

The stage manager is an imperious and intimidating Englishwoman. She sits in a booth stage right filled with video monitors, dials, and gauges. During performances, her job is similar to an air traffic controller. She can speak to everyone via an intercom system and a multichannel radio. The assistant stage managers and crew have earpieces. The dressing rooms of the principal singers, chorus, and supers have speakers, so the stage manager can speak to each person or group. She gives all stage performers their five-minute call to leave the dressing room and await their entrance onstage. She calls the soloists by surname. The chorus is called by vocal group or function. Supers are called generically. Since we were two henchmen, two dandies, and two townsmen, each separately onstage many different times, it was somewhat confusing. Early in the run I approached the stage manager in her booth and explained the problem. I suggested that she call us supers by name to avoid confusion. When I returned to my fifth-floor dressing room and told the other supers and our dressers what I had done, there was a collective gasp. They all agreed that because I had dared to correct the stage manager I would never work at the Lyric Opera again. I was beginning to regret my foolhardy boldness when we heard over the intercom, “Michael and Jeffrey, five minutes, please, stage right.” I left the dressing room walking tall.

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We were required to be in the dressing room one hour before the curtain of each performance. The protocol was to get into the first costume before going to wigs and makeup, where there was usually a line. Once through wigs and makeup, which included facial hair for men, it was back to the dressing room to wait for the five-minute call to go onstage. Because there are so many people involved in an opera, stage performers are not permitted to hang around backstage until called. It can get very congested with so many performers coming and going; stagehands maneuvering sets, scenery, and props; and the assistant directors and managers hovering in the wings. As a result, during a three- or four-hour opera there are stretches of time spent in costume, waiting in the dressing room.

Of course, during the downtime we talked. My dresser, Chris, had been a professional dresser for decades: at the Lyric, for Broadway shows, for touring companies, and for concerts. In the dressing room, between my scenes, he held forth with funny stories about his interactions with famous, infamous, and outrageous performers. For instance, I heard the story about when Maria Callas was served with legal papers backstage. The dramatic rendition could not fully prepare me for the photograph memorializing that moment. When I was finally able to see the photo in a male chorister's dressing room cubicle, I was amazed. Taken in 1956 at the Lyric, it shows a portly man in an overcoat and brimmed hat with a smug, self-satisfied smile being sandblasted at close range by an enraged Maria Callas. In full stage makeup, she resembles an eagle about to tear apart prey. Her eyes shooting fire, nostrils flared, and hands waving papers, she rages at him. All the insider backstage stories were titillating; some humorous, some sad, and some slightly scandalous.

Molière said that of all the noises known to man, opera is the most expensive. Now I have some insight on why this is so. Attending an opera, one is treated to an orchestra, singers, actors, a chorus, dancers, lavish sets and lighting, sumptuous costumes, and, sometimes, live animals,

tumblers, and gymnasts. And it is all set in motion to music that has stood the test of time, in a beautifully appointed theater. It takes an army of highly trained, skilled professionals who never set foot on the stage to support those fortunate few who do perform onstage. The 3,500 people in the seats at the Lyric see only the polished, final product. As a super, I came to appreciate the years of individual training and months of working together as a team that go into producing a single opera.

As we worked through the weeks of rehearsals and performances, I got to know my fellow supers. Of the six of us, I was by far the oldest. I was also the fat one. Three were in their twenties, and two were in their late thirties, all very fit. One had been a professional tennis player and was now pursuing a career in musical theater. Three had day jobs but were pursuing acting careers. Finally, there was a part-time practicing lawyer who'd been in several previous Lyric productions. I came to find out that these five had ceaselessly speculated on why Ms. Malfitano had cast me; they just didn't think I fit in. Finally, they decided that I was cast simply because I resembled Ms. Malfitano's husband, Steve. I took this as a compliment, since Steve was a quiet, handsome man who had been a senior executive with the New York City Opera. But my fellow supers did not mean it as a compliment; they considered me too old, too fat, and of insufficient talent to be in the opera.

And this was not the most brutal criticism I received. During rehearsals, the director and choreographer were very direct and clinical in their comments on how I moved and looked. It felt very personal and hurtful. They were focused on creating something beautiful; I was raw material to be shaped. Rule number one for supers: have a very thick skin. Other rules include: use the bathroom before getting into costume, sit as much as possible when offstage, and hydrate—the lights are bright and the costumes warm.

In any live performance unexpected things happen: a prop is dropped, a line is forgotten, a cue is missed, a piece of scenery or backdrop falls.

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In most instances, because of the number of rehearsals, the performers carry on without interrupting the flow. In the funeral scene in *Lucia* there were many men crisscrossing the stage rapidly to form a tableau framing the principal singers. We each had to move on cue to precise marks. In one performance, two men collided, and one dropped like a felled tree. Fortunately, it was one aria from the end of the scene; he lay where he fell amid the tableau until the curtain came down and he could be revived.

My most embarrassing moment came early in the run. In the wedding scene, Jeffrey and I stood among the chorus as wedding guests. The singing was sublime. After the performance, the super captain met with Jeffrey and me to say that members of the chorus were complaining that during the wedding scene “someone” was humming along. The super captain instructed us both that union rules forbid supers from vocalizing in any form and, therefore, humming is strictly forbidden. With the forty-eight members of the chorus and seven principal singers shaking the floorboards, if they could distinguish humming it had to be off-key and very loud. We all knew who the culprit was. Jeffrey has a fine voice and has performed secondary singing roles in operas. I am the one who can't carry a tune and whose humming would irritate any musical person. I was crimson to the roots of my hair. I had been so transported by the music that I had not been aware that I had been loudly humming along.

Even the most exciting activities become routine with repetition. By the final performance of *Lucia*, I considered not arriving at the theater more than an hour before curtain time as required. I was enjoying dinner with friends and knew that I did not need all that time to be prepared to go onstage. Fortunately, I decided to follow the rules. Upon passing through the stage door at the correct time, I was grabbed by a very relieved assistant director and hustled on to the stage. Our lead tenor was ill, so the second tenor would take that role and an understudy would sing Arturo, the second tenor role. Jeffrey and I had to rehearse several scenes with the new man. In one scene, Jeffrey and I lift Arturo onto a long banquet

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table so he can sing a wonderful aria as he strides the length of the table. We then lift him off the table. Aside from all the details of the musical cues and positioning, the new man was much larger and much heavier than the Arturo we had been lifting. This required some adjustments. We worked frantically on this and other scenes until just before curtain and then took the express lane through costumes, wigs, and makeup. The show actually seemed to go exceptionally well that night, with great energy on everybody's part. I got through the lifts without injury.

Being a supernumerary is similar to a baseball fan going to a baseball fantasy camp. But I got to play in actual games with today's star talent. Being next to an opera singer onstage is transformative. My body vibrated from vocal power that could fill the entire opera house. When duets, trios, sextets, and the chorus were singing, the floorboards seemed to vibrate.

What did I learn from being a super? First, I learned the meaning of "on the downbeat, please." Downbeat refers to the first beat of a measure of music. The lowest point on the first arc of the conductor's baton signals the first beat of a given measure. Hence, "downbeat." More importantly, I learned about humility. I was privileged to interact and socialize with people of immense talent. I had to see and accept that I was at the very bottom of the talent scale in that universe. I learned about being a small part of a very large team. I saw how large numbers of very talented people with very big egos could work together to create something beautiful. The rigid class system within opera actually made this possible. Everybody knew their role, their place, their value to the whole. There were no arguments, no challenges to the ordained order.

Finally, I learned to be prepared to give up who I am today, for who I could become tomorrow. Who I had thought I was, was quite narrow and confining. I had defined myself based on what I had been or done in my past life. By learning to let go of that self-image, I could set free parts of myself that I did not know and could not have imagined.

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