

# Be My Light

If we really do become more like the people around us,  
we should all hang out with saints.

by Skye Moody

Novelist, essayist, photographer and world traveler

*“We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean.  
But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.”*

— Mother Teresa



The train from Calcutta to Darjeeling climbs high into the Himalayan foothills where bright-green tea plantations and Buddhist stupas mark the scenery, piercing lofty clouds just 150 kilometers distant from Bhutan, the country of the “Gross National Happiness” index.

On September 10, 1946, a slight, fragile figure was riding this train from Calcutta (“Kolkata”) to Darjeeling, when the “call” came to her. Albanian by birth and a school-teaching nun from a convent in Calcutta, she didn’t question the call’s mystical origin nor consult anyone for an opinion, because the call came from the highest authority she knew.

Upon returning to Calcutta, Mother Teresa informed her superiors of her intentions, took up a nursing course, and from cloth of white cotton bordered with three blue stripes she fashioned a simple Bengali sari, the uniform she would wear for the remainder of her life. At age 44, the tiny woman with the enormous call quit the security of her convent and ventured out alone into Calcutta’s appalling slums, where the Dalit, the Untouchables, the “outcastes” live and die in appalling poverty. Teresa’s single purpose in life would be hands-on caring for these lowly victims of a caste system that today still numbers some 300 million Untouchables, despite India’s constitutional laws banning the caste system.

Unprotected, she witnessed horrific conditions but never hesitated to reach out to the sick, diseased and dying masses. Guided by that mystical voice, Mother Teresa would never turn back.

### The Call Becomes a Movement

When word reached other nuns of Mother Teresa’s courage and compassion, one by one sisters followed her into the slums. Mother Teresa soon founded the Order of the Missionaries of Charity. The sisters adopted the humble white sari, but the distinctive three blue stripes had to be earned over time, laboring in the hospices Mother Teresa opened, serving the poorest of the poor.

As her reputation spread and the numbers of her followers grew, an onslaught of scoffing and derision fell upon Mother Teresa from her worldly critics, led mainly by the widely read author Christopher Hitchens (now deceased), a popular professed atheist, who asserted the little nun simply wanted to become famous, that she was only trying to convert her patients to Christianity, even charging that she was hoarding charitable donations sent to aid her work. Teresa uttered no response to the criticisms — not even to explain that those early donations financed the order’s first charity hospices.

In the 1960s, Mother Teresa sent her nuns throughout India to open more hospices. Soon after, she opened hospices in Venezuela, then Rome, then Tanzania. Before long, the Missionaries of Charity were seen laboring in the world’s slums, including in communist countries like USSR, Albania and Cuba, under the secular mantle of the “Co-Workers of the Sick and Suffering.”

Teresa’s followers included agnostics and humanitarian-minded people who went to work on every continent. She founded orders of multi-religious, agnostic humanitarians, instructing them to “live in simplicity, sacrifice, prayer, and humble works of love.”

In 1975, Mother Teresa was awarded the Albert Schweitzer International Prize.

In 1979, Norway awarded her the Nobel Peace Prize.

By the time of her death in 1997, she had received more than 100 major awards, including the United States Presidential Medal of Honor in 1985.

In 2016, she was canonized by Pope Francis as Saint Teresa of Calcutta.

### A World Health Crisis

In the early 1980s, the world was reeling in panic as a new, unknown and deadly malady called AIDS spread globally. Families, fearing contagion, deserted loved ones who contracted the disease, abandoning bewildered victims whose own physicians could say nothing more by way of explanation than: “This is going to kill you.”

In places like New York City, the AIDS population mushroomed, and borderline hysteria filled hospitals and physicians’ clinics.

In 1985, Mother Teresa stepped in, opening New York City’s first AIDS hospice in Greenwich Village, the epicenter of New York’s AIDS crisis. Governor Mario Cuomo even freed prison inmates with AIDS so they could be cared for in Mother Teresa’s hospice.

An admiring Princess Diana visited Mother Teresa on several occasions, in Calcutta, again in Rome, and in the United States. The two women, who shared little in terms of physical appearance or lifestyle, shared the virtues of compassion and charity; they soon formed a close friendship. Yet they shared more than good works; though the public was largely unaware, both Princess Diana and Mother Teresa suffered serious interior crises of the spirit.

### The Darkness

What few knew, including many helped by her works, is that Mother Teresa frequently suffered from what she called “the darkness,” the “painful night of the soul.” At times she was convinced her God had rejected her, constantly battling against a feeling of separation from His grace. Yet she didn’t allow this interior agony to affect her work, and she never spoke of it. She recalls how the voice often whispered to her, “Come, be my Light. I need you to help me. I cannot go alone.” He couldn’t work His good deeds except through human intervention, the kind that Mother Teresa and her followers practiced. Eventually, she came to understand that her suffering derived from “sharing ... the interior desolation of the poor.” (Kolodiejchuk, 2007)

The world knows of Princess Diana’s public humiliation, and something of her dismal interior crises, but no one understood Diana’s suffering more than Mother Teresa. Their bond would last until their deaths. Mother Teresa and Princess Diana passed away within six days of each other; Diana on August 31, 1997, and Mother Teresa on September 5.

### Each Call Is Unique

Dragging a hospital bed up a flight of stairs one day in Calcutta, Mother Teresa noticed a young woman who seemed to appear from nowhere, a Caucasian, definitely not a nun, her brown hair fashioned into long dreadlocks surrounding a youthful face, her clothing that of a nomad. What the nun first noticed was the woman’s beautiful smile. And then her strong arms.

“Help me pull this bed upstairs,” said Mother Teresa.

Together, the two struggled with the bed and finally reached the upper floor. The stranger stayed on for a short time, helping around the hospice. Then one day, she was gone, vanished as suddenly as she had appeared.

Many years later in 1985, when Mother Teresa was opening the AIDS hospice in Greenwich Village, a busload of nuns from the Missionary of the Poor was moving down a street in New York City. On a sidewalk among the crowds watching the nuns’ arrival to the AIDS hospice stood a Caucasian woman with long brown dreadlocks. As the bus came parallel with the woman in dreadlocks, Mother Teresa’s face appeared in a bus window, looking out at the crowd, fixing her eyes directly on the woman in dreadlocks, whom she immediately recognized as the nomad who once helped





her carry a bed upstairs in Calcutta. As they made eye contact, Mother Teresa reached up a hand and with her fingers made a scissors gesture. Her message was clear: “Cut off your hair and come work with me.”

#### The Legacy of Love

The woman, whose name is BB St. Roman, today lives in New Orleans’ French Quarter ... and she still has dreadlocks. Her constant companion Iko, a white cockatoo, rides her shoulder. Iko often mimics BB’s gentle yet powerful voice, and through the years of financial and personal hardship BB’s only expression is the wide, engaging smile Mother Teresa so admired.

BB St. Roman performed good works for anyone and everyone in need. She often drove Miss Inez, a crotchety nonagenarian, on shopping forays; it was a sight to see, the diminutive Southern belle in her proper hat and white cotton gloves riding beside BB in her stripped-down, open-air Jeep. If it wasn’t Miss Inez in the passenger seat, it might be an ill or hungry or homeless person BB rescued from Jackson Square in front of St. Louis Basilica-Cathedral, where they slept on iron benches or on the ground, sheltered only by plantain leaves. She’d appear in the night, talking the homeless off the benches, driving them to food and shelter.

Everyone in New Orleans recognizes BB, the “night angel,” now a beloved spirit of the “City That Trouble Forgot.”

For decades, St. Roman has been venturing out at night into the often-dangerous streets of New Orleans, delivering aid and compassion to the poor, the homeless, the dying. (Bynum, 2015) With little resources, she does everything from finding them housing and food, to signing them up for public aide, to treating wounds resulting from knife fights or bullets. Her work has become so important to the city that the New Orleans police department finally gave her a title (director of the NOPD Homeless Initiatives), a uniform (sans weapon), and a tiny salary that barely covers the gas for her decrepit Jeep.

I don’t know exactly when or where BB St Roman received the call. I am awed, though, by how much her acts of compassion, her loving embrace of her own city’s “untouchables,” remind me of Mother Teresa. And I wonder if perhaps there’s a trickledown effect when one saint meets another. ♦

#### Read more:

Kolodiejchuk, Brian. (2007). *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. New York: Random House.

Bynum, Chris. (2015). “In New Orleans’ French Quarter, a Cockatoo Named Iko Holds Court.” *The New Orleans Advocate*. Retrieved on June 14, 2019, from [www.theadvocate.com](http://www.theadvocate.com).



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