

Cumulonimbus, or The Cloud of All Things Unattainable

by [Peter Lopatin](#) (October 2019)



From the North Shore, Lawren Harris, 1927

Linda was agitated as she drove, gripping the steering wheel tightly, her knuckles nearly white. She was late for her weekly meditation class and was angry at herself for her tardiness, angry for impeding her own progress on the path toward that state where anger no longer exists.

When she arrived, the class had been in session

for ten minutes, and Kaylani—the beautiful, svelte, young Yogini who signed people in—told her, with calm, dispassionate, non-judgmental firmness, that she couldn't let her in.

“It wouldn't be fair to the others. It would disturb their meditation.” Then, in a voice conspicuous with compassion, she added, “I'm really sorry, but we have to keep a strict rule about this, for everyone's benefit.” Linda closed her eyes and heaved a frustrated sigh.

“I'm really sorry,” Kaylani repeated.

“That's okay. I understand,” Linda answered. And, after a short pause, she added: “Oh well, I guess I'll just make sure to be on time next week.” Kaylani smiled with the full-blown compassion of an aspiring Bodhisattva, and repeated, “I'm really sorry.” Linda offered a stiff-lipped smile in return. She turned and walked to the door, trailing karma from her astral body like oil from a leaky crankcase. And she knew it.



Linda thought a great deal about both her astral—or “subtle”—body and her not-so-subtle physical body. She had come to believe that the generally dilapidated condition of the latter was an outward manifestation of the debased state of the former and, believing this, she was led to the practice of yoga in order to elevate both of her bodies to a state of “harmony” and “oneness.”

She understood from her reading and lessons that *spiritual* perfection was not to be had. She required no instruction—other than that of experience—to know that

physical perfection was also not in the cards. Her goal, rather, was incremental self-improvement in the realm of the spirit, and deceleration of the rate of decay in the realm of the body. Her approach was both systematic and practical: she would meditate regularly and learn the art of “simply sitting.” She would do yoga exercises to maintain the suppleness of her body and eat a less “toxic” diet to purify it. She would cultivate an attitude of “acceptance,” both toward herself—with all her faults—and toward others. And, as is the case with any investor—whether financial or spiritual—she anticipated a return. She was not a high-risk investor though, and she was not out for a killing: no Nirvana, no absolute liberation from all illusion, no freedom from the endless cycle of birth and death. Rather, she expected more modest gains in the form of greater calmness, contentment, and physical vitality. When she thought of the years she had “wasted” by not meditating, not eating right, not accepting herself as she was—and she did this often—her resolve to change became ever more firm, hardened into a sort of spiritual heavy metal. (Just as the irony of her anger in the car did not occur to her, the irony of this condition—the desire to change in order to be able to accept oneself—also did not occur to her.)

Linda’s husband, Mel, treated her meditation and yoga practice with outward, “whatever-works-for-you” tolerance. But he could not help but think—though he would dare not say—that it was odd to pay good money to gather with a roomful of strangers and be told how to breathe and how to sit silently, attentively, and calmly. To Mel, Linda seemed no calmer than when they had first met, no calmer than when they had married, no calmer than when they had separated and then reconciled. In fact, Mel felt that Linda’s quest for “wholeness” was turning her into something of a nag, and one with a bitter edge. But he believed that his best strategy was just to wait it out until the ill wind moving through his wife had passed. He was confident that it would pass, though had he

demanded of himself—which he did not—some justification of his confidence, he would not have been able to provide it. It can be said of Mel that, at least where Linda was concerned, he was a man of faith.

“You know,” Linda told him over dinner that same evening, “I think some meditation might be good for you, too.” Then, with a swell of cautious enthusiasm, she said: “It would be something that we could work on together.”

‘Together’, at least as Linda uttered the word, was, to Mel, if not a pathogen, then certainly an allergen with a coercive quality that tended to provoke in him an acute inflammatory reaction.

“Look, sweetie, if you want to meditate and you think that it helps you in some way, that’s fine. I think it’s great.” (In fact, he thought no such thing.) “But why do I have to do it too? I’m not the meditative type. Maybe I’m just not wired that way. Know what I mean?”

Linda looked for the right path through this thicket, needing to make her point, to persuade him, to lead him, but without antagonizing him.

“But honey, the thing about meditation is that it rewires you. It channels your energy into a different path.”

“Sweetheart,” he began, uttering the word with that ‘hi-lo’, soft-hard intonation that converted the term of endearment into a warrior’s tempered spear, “what if I don’t want my energy re-channeled? Suppose I’m satisfied with the channels I have? Why should I try to carve out new ones? I mean, do you have some problem with the way I channel my energy? If you do, maybe you should just tell me and we can talk about it.”

This exchange effectively ended the discussion. Linda did respond, treading lightly, prodding gently,

retreating, advancing, and ultimately retreating again. She allowed her resentment of Mel's complacency to show itself, then apologized diplomatically, assuring Mel that she wasn't trying to change "*who you are*", only to help him to "*be more truly yourself.*" The sticking point was that Mel didn't wish to be more truly himself than he already was. If he had been a man of a more ironic temperament and of greater expressive capacity, he might have said that if he tried to be more truly himself, he would no longer be who he is. This, of course, was the unuttered heart of the matter: Linda didn't want Mel to be more truly himself, any more than *she* wanted to be more truly *herself*; she wanted both of them to be other than who they were. What she took to be a journey toward loving acceptance was in fact a war she was waging against herself, a war which, by its very nature, could not be won.



The following week, Linda arrived at her meditation class fifteen minutes early, giving her plenty of time to change into comfortable, loose-fitting clothing. As usual, Kaylani was manning the front desk.

"Well, I'm not late this time!" Linda said cheerfully. Kaylani looked perplexed, and Linda realized that Kaylani did not recall what had happened last week. This embarrassed and annoyed Linda, although her awareness of her annoyance was inchoate, in contrast to her awareness of her embarrassment, which was acute.

Kaylani offered back her calm, benign, transcendently indifferent smile. Linda drew the corners of her mouth apart into an expression roughly resembling a smile, then walked in to the meditation room.

She was the first student to arrive. She chose a spot on the floor that seemed to be in the exact center of the room, put down her yoga mat and meditation cushion, assumed a modified Lotus pose, and attempted to let go of her inner narration. The other students filtered in to the room, exchanging quiet greetings and brief chat. Linda's meditation instructor, Dan-Kaylani's husband—was a tall, strikingly handsome man in his mid-30s. He explained to the class, as he had many times before, that when we meditate, we must not try to empty our minds, because to do so is merely to substitute one mental activity for another. Rather, he explained that in meditation we must allow our thoughts to pass before us, as if across an inner movie screen, noting them, accepting them, and allowing them to pass on, focusing instead on the empty screen. An alternative image was that of a clear, blue sky, across which clouds sometimes pass, but which is always there, even when it is obscured by the clouds. He said: "The images—or clouds—are just stories we constantly tell ourselves, and if you allow the stories to be told, without dwelling on them, they will pass into silence and you will find an unobscured vision of your truest self." This is what Linda was aiming for.

The trouble for Linda was that neither the clouds nor the inner monologue accompanying them ever stopped. As she sat, the cloud cluster—not flocculent cumulous, not wispy cirrus, but the darker cumulonimbus of unwelcome memories, unfulfilled desires, dark resentments, and persistent anxieties—overspread her sky. One cluster—newly formed—was of her recent exchange with Mel about her wanting him to join her in meditation practice. Another was the darker streak that was her resentment of Kaylani for her beauty, her youth, and especially for her handsome husband—himself another brighter, more radiant, but more distant cloud—and, finally, for her equanimity and satisfaction.

Linda did as she thought she was supposed to: she

told herself (thereby creating yet more clouds) not to dwell on these images, but to let them pass. Sometimes, they did, briefly, allowing her a momentary vision of nearly unobstructed sky and a background of white noise, with voices occasionally distinguishable as those of some particular individual. But distinguishable or not, voices were always present, albeit muted or fleetingly blended together. There was Mel's voice—dismissive, perhaps mocking; there was her mother's voice: "Linda, you had such enormous potential." There was the voice of her 16-year-old daughter, Melanie, complaining: "You are, like, so totally *wrong* about Jim; he's interested in *me* for who I *am*. It's not just sex." Linda's meditation was akin to the wanderings of a fatigued knight-errant who wants nothing more than to retire from battle and unburden himself of his armor, his sword, and his mace, but who finds himself perennially drawn back into one contest or another, ever the unwilling champion of unsought, unwinnable, dispiriting causes.

When her meditation class had ended and the final *Aum* had been chanted, Linda asked Dan for his advice concerning the difficulty she was having in seeing beyond the clouds and "opening" herself to the silence. Listening to her attentively as she spoke, Dan smiled with his characteristic warmth and nodded sympathetically as she described her problem to him.

"You have to be patient and gentle with yourself," he explained. "Don't try so hard. Stillness will come upon you gradually, if you let it."

Linda found it so easy to listen to Dan. His voice was confident, deep and full, but always gentle. His eyes sparkled. They walked out of the meditation room together. She noticed—not for the first time—the combination of grace and power in his gait, the suppleness and strength of his limbs, the absence of any suggestion of tension in his demeanor. She imagined that if she could apprentice herself to him, she

would progress in her meditation practice. She imagined his voice gently clearing the clouds from her inward sky and quieting the other voices that disturbed and distracted her. This fantasy, of course, was itself a voice, a story, and yet another cloud in her firmament. A single, unitary and endlessly appealing cloud, but a cloud nevertheless, and one always accompanied by the cloud of all things unattainable.



Linda's fiftieth birthday was approaching and Mel set about planning a surprise party for her with the attention to detail characteristic both of his personality and his profession. As a civil engineer, he knew well the importance of mapping things out, fitting the parts together, and not leaving anything to chance. He sent the email invitations from his office computer, safe from Linda's prying eyes. He recruited her women friends to do the cooking and prepare the decorations. He gave Melanie just enough responsibility so that she felt some stake in making the party successful and keeping it a secret from her mother, but not so much that she would feel put upon. He made sure to have all the guests park far from the house so that Linda would not suspect anything when she returned home.

Mel even managed to cajole Linda's sister, Ramona, into coming. Ramona and Linda did not get along well. As the older sister—now 53, to Linda's 50—Ramona had always presumed to know what was best for Linda, though in fact she did not. Linda admired Ramona's freewheeling spirit and perennial rebelliousness. Ramona didn't know this and thought that Linda disapproved of her. Ramona envied Linda for her evidently happy marriage and for having had a child, though she disapproved of Linda's child-rearing practices and let Linda

know it. Linda had no idea that Ramona felt envious of her and misinterpreted her sister's criticisms as an expression of hostility for some wrong Linda was sure she had committed, though she didn't know what it could have been. Neither sister knew the depth of love that the other felt for her.

When Linda entered her house, which she had lately come to find confining, and heard the cries of "Surprise!" and saw her friends gathered together, she was stunned and moved to tears.

"Oh, my God, I had no idea!" she exclaimed. "Oh, my God! Mel! Did you do this?"

"We all did it, honey. Happy Birthday!"

Linda put her arms around Mel and hugged him powerfully, planting so many kisses on his face and mouth that he began to blush. Linda kissed Melanie and then greeted her friends gratefully, wiping away her tears as she moved from one to the other. She was surprised to see Ramona, standing toward the back of the crowd with their mother, Ruthie, who remained seated, guarding her bad hip.

"Ramona! It's so good to see you. How have you been?" Ramona's reply, characteristically, was preceded by a sideways tilt of the head, arch of the eyebrows, and labored sigh. This gestural ensemble was what professors of semiotics might call a *trope*, whose three aspects—head, eyes, and chest—expressed Ramona's resignation as a structure consisting of, respectively, mind, vision, and emotion. Though Linda had not analyzed it in this way, she had come to know it and to be saddened by it.

"Oh, you know, same old same old," Ramona said, giving her sister a hug. Then Linda moved on to her mother.

"Mom, thanks so much for coming. It's so good to see you." (It was not good to see her, but Linda did not

acknowledge this to herself.)

“What do you mean ‘Thanks?’ You don’t think I’d miss my baby’s fiftieth birthday party, do you? I mean, fifty is a big one, now isn’t it?” Ruthie cheerfully reminded her daughter.

Mel summoned everyone to the dining room table, where he had set place cards for each guest. He sat to Linda’s right, Ruthie to her left, and Ramona to her mother’s left.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Linda, that we can all be here celebrating like this, in spite of all the water over the dam?” Ruthie interjected with infernal good cheer. *So much water*, Linda thought, seeing it built up behind the dam, overflowing, cascading to the rocks below. She responded to her mother’s remark in a way that was the precise opposite of a complete yoga breath: her shoulders drooped slightly; as she inhaled, her abdomen drew spasmodically inward while her lungs—fighting the upward motion of her diaphragm—sucked in and expanded within the tight limits now imposed on them. She wanted to inhale fully the breath of life, but she also wanted to expel from herself the acrid spirit of her mother’s remark. Her body could not do both at once, and so, did neither. The two contrary motions collided in her solar plexus, where, as Dan had once explained, the third chakra—*Manipura*—the “lustrous gem,” the center of action, the source of self-esteem and warrior power—is found. But as a woman gifted with the necessary social graces, Linda maintained her outward poise, like a skilled figure skater who nearly hits the ice after an off-balance jump but manages to recover and skate on.

“Yes, Mom, it’s so wonderful that you were able to make it today. I’m so surprised to see you here. I mean because of your hip.”

“My hip...well, yes, it’s been bad lately, dear. Very bad, in fact. But I don’t like to complain. You know that

I'm not a complainer."

"Yes, I know that, Mom. I know you're not a complainer."

"And I don't want you to worry yourself about my infirmities, Linda. You've got plenty on your plate to think about, I'm sure."

"Well, actually, Mom, things are fine with me just now. You know, just fine."

"And your Mel here was so nice to arrange for the car service to come pick me up." Ruthie reached around Linda's chair to give Mel a pat on the back.

"You're taking good care of him, now aren't you, dear? You know, Linda, women today don't appreciate their men, and your Mel is such a sweet man."

It occurred to Linda that Mel was indeed a sweet man, even if he didn't understand her spiritual quest. It usually bothered her that he seemed to have no desire to change—or, in her spiritual terms, to "evolve." Her default position was to regard his constancy (or anyone's constancy) as an unattractive inertness, a negative state, a privation in the sense that darkness is the absence of light or coldness the absence of heat. But at this moment, when her mother's dig at Linda's lack of appreciation of her husband might have underscored such feelings about Mel, she felt instead a curious warmth toward him. She felt strangely reassured by the fact that Mel did *not* change and was not going to change, that his evolution had ended. Carrying the metaphor further, she sensed—though this remained an unarticulated intuition—that he was, in fact, as highly evolved as he would become. By the extended metaphorical standards of evolutionary theory, Mel was perfectly adapted to his environment and had achieved—without ever being aware of it, much less having sought it—a kind of circumscribed spiritual perfection.

Oneness.

After they had enjoyed their meal, Mel suggested to everyone that they sit outside. "It's spring, after all." There was general agreement that that was a good idea.

"It's kind of cool though," Linda said.

"Oh, come on Mom," Melanie said. "The sun is coming out. Besides, it's stuffy in here." Something in Melanie's tone seemed so mature to Linda. There was no trace of impatience, much less the usual exasperation. Melanie was simply telling her mother the way things were and encouraging her.

Everyone moved toward the doors that opened onto the backyard patio. Some carried drinks, others platters of pastries. Ruthie took Ramona's arm for support. Mel put his arm around Linda's waist and drew her to him. She leaned her head on his shoulder. He drew her closer, pressing the flesh of her side, letting his hand move up toward her breast as far as would not be unseemly in front of their daughter and friends. Melanie noticed the affection her parents showed each other and smiled and thought to herself how good it would feel if there were someone who would hold her the same way her father was holding her mother, but not her boyfriend Jim; someone else, someone who, when he held her, would be so overwhelmed by the fact that he was holding her that he would not have room in his mind for anything else.

Ramona opened the patio doors. The house was situated on a height of land that sloped gently downward and afforded a partial view of the southern sky. Someone watching from a distance—with a powerful telescope, say—would have seen about twenty men and women as they walked from a festively decorated room full-face into the warm breeze. The observer would have noticed as well that as the women emerged from the house, each drew aside locks of hair that the breeze had just

tossed in their faces, and that these women were smiling like children delighted by a sun shower. Then, this observer, if he were attentive enough, would see Ramona gently guiding her mother to a comfortable chair and taking a seat nearby. He would see Melanie sitting between her aunt and grandmother, holding each one's hand in hers, as the three generations chatted animatedly about something or other, one or another of them laughing with delight from time to time.

The clouds that had earlier covered the sky were breaking up and dispersing quickly. Mel, ever the scientist, said to Linda, with pedagogical precision, "You see how fast the clouds are moving? That's because the winds aloft are faster than the wind at the ground level." This surprised Linda.

"I didn't know that," she said, smiling. "It never occurred to me that there would be a different wind up there. I just figured the wind is the wind."

"Nope," said Mel, smiling back warmly, pleased with himself.

Linda found something sweet in Mel's attention to scientific detail. His remark made the sky seem closer to her, in a way that was at once new, yet familiar, as if she had been reminded of something that she knew but had forgotten. She leaned back on her chaise and took a slow, deep breath, watching as the clouds dispersed in the bright air. If she had been attentive to her breathing, she would have noticed that her abdomen expanded as she inhaled, that her diaphragm moved downward to allow her lungs to expand to their full capacity and that *Manipura* was suffused with power. But she didn't know this, nor did she need to.

The late afternoon sky was turning a deeper blue, almost palpable in its depth and clarity. She watched as the clouds moved by, dynamic yet silent. She studied each as it

passed, looking carefully, almost telescopically, at their contours and subtle details, which changed from moment to moment. The clouds continued to disperse. Linda turned her gaze from the sky to Mel, from Mel to Melanie, to Ramona, to her mother, to her friends, then back to the clearing sky. She liked the fact that there were still a few clouds. As she watched them, she found that they were a comfort to her. She heard in the background the voices of her friends and family as they mingled with one another, until they became a single, quiet voice, a voice that was nearly indistinguishable from the wind.

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Peter Lopatin was born and raised in New York where he earned his JD degree and practiced corporate law for thirty years. Along the way, he studied philosophy as a graduate student at the New School for Social Research. After retiring from his legal practice, he obtained a Certificate from the New School in teaching English as a Second Language and has been an ESL teacher since then. He has taught at the University of Connecticut/Stamford, Norwalk Community College, Manhattanville College and, most recently, at the Stamford English Language Academy. Peter's short stories and book reviews have appeared in *Commentary*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The New Atlantis*, and *New English Review*. His poetry has appeared in *New Millennium Writings* and *Poetry East*.

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