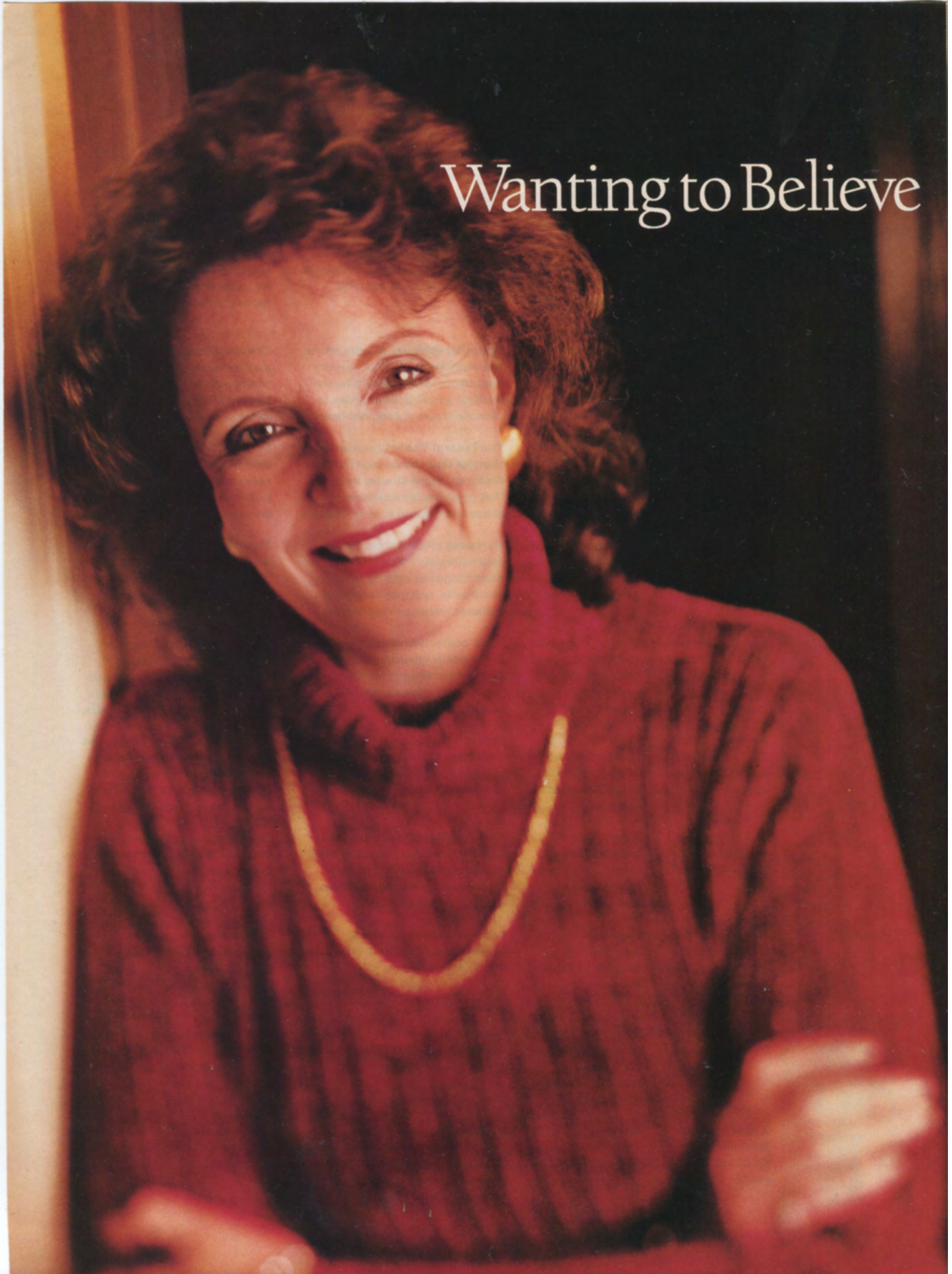


Wanting to Believe



Rosemary Altea

Just what is the powerful appeal of this popular, bestselling psychic? Our author, threading his way among believers and skeptics, comes to his own conclusions, sort of. *by John Sedgwick photos: Russel Kaye*

For a while there, I truly believed. I *did*, so help me God. I believed that the spirit of my long-dead father was still with me, right by my shoulder. I could nearly see him, in his favorite double-breasted blazer, smiling at me, proud as only a father can be. What's more, I believed that everyone is visited, from time to time, by departed loved ones. I believed that the dead have merely "passed over" to a spirit world that's all around us; that they maintain their bodily form, only invisibly; and that they watch over us. I believed that the dead know our futures and could tell us about them in detail, if only we would listen. I believed that the most powerful spirits do leave signs, visible ones that I myself began to look for.

While I believed these things, and more, the world became a paradise, for it did not have death in it. I felt happy, but also unsettled, since my new beliefs contradicted so much of what I had always thought to be true. Still, I believed, because I believed her. That is, I believed Rosemary Altea, the 50-year-old British medium who is so forcefully transcendent I almost thought she should have no name at all. I believed everything about her—that she herself was guided by a long-

dead Apache shaman named Grey Eagle; that she was uniquely empowered to see the otherwise invisible spirits; and that, through them, she could know things that others could not know, such as what the stock market would do, or who killed JFK, or what happened aboard TWA flight 800 that exploded so mysteriously over Long Island.

Looking back on it, I am not quite sure why I did believe. I had always scrupulously kept my distance from most things occult, succumbing only to a few rather spooky sessions on the Ouija board when I was young and, more recently, to a (very favorable) reading of my tarot cards. It helped that Altea herself didn't seem the paranormal type, either. Far from the beshrouded gypsy of psychic cliché, she is actually an extremely well dressed and leggy brunette with a severe weakness for Louis Vuitton luggage. She is delightfully good-humored, almost gay, and yet capable of penetrating directness. When she told me, for example, that the word my dead father was telling me, over and over, was *strength*, her message carried directly into my soul. Yet, instead of being somehow oracular, Altea seemed real in the way my friends seem real. I got the impression that if her own extrasensory powers weren't so

overwhelming, she wouldn't believe in such stuff either. This was a medium I could bring home to my mother.

Others must feel the same, for, since coming to America in 1994, Altea has taken the country, if not the world, by storm. Her first book, *The Eagle and the Rose*, recounting her discovery of her calling, became an international bestseller. She wowed Oprah, who does not normally go for psychics. On CNN, she reduced the voluble Larry King to enraptured silence when she summoned his mother from the dead. (She told him not to push himself so hard.)

Another believer is Joni Evans, the nonsense New York City literary agent who now represents Altea. Evans has fallen so hard for Altea that, although she had previously pronounced herself "sickened" by the very idea of psychics, she now proudly displays in her office a collection of gray eagle feathers that were left for her in her bedroom by, she is convinced, Grey Eagle himself. "To know Rosemary makes the world wonderful for me," she says. "We are spiritual beings with human experiences, not the other way around. I really believe that. I'm not going to die. I'm going to see Dad

again. That is so comforting, so thrilling. I feel blessed, chosen, gifted, special. Everything has changed since I met Rosemary. Every morning, I wake up happy."

When I watched Altea make an appearance on the ABC morning show *The View*, all three of Barbara Walters' co-hosts were deeply moved when Altea

the Green Mountains rising up behind, when she took my notepad and sketched a vision of the place that, she said, had come to her from Grey Eagle, alerting her that she would eventually move into just such a property. Then, while she was at it, she flipped the page and sketched out my own "path," as she called it. This was

child, Josie, is a model for one of the characters in the book. Then she added the word *dentist*, noting that one of my children seemed to have dental problems. Indeed, poor Josie had recently been traumatized by the discovery of five cavities. Finally, Altea sketched in a house, since she'd sensed we might be moving.

Psychics bring us such good news. Altea's message is the stuff of world religions: Life is eternal; God has a plan for all of us.

contacted their dead loved ones, and then did the same for two stunned audience members. (Walters sought a private audience with Altea later.) General Colin Powell was the show's other guest, but it was Altea everyone went home talking about. After the show, two staffers rushed up to Altea and begged her to put them in touch with family members who had recently died. I couldn't hear what Altea said, but, in minutes, each of the staffers was sobbing in her arms.

I'd had my own private session with Altea last summer on the back porch of her country house in Vermont, and, I have to say, I came away from it deeply shaken. It wasn't so much what she said—although that left its impression—as the utter conviction with which she said it. We had been chatting about the unusual view of two circular ponds, with

when the world seemed to become very still. Working quickly, she drew a nicely widening pathway (a good sign, apparently), and added two rectangles above it to indicate that I had another writing project going besides my magazine work. "Is it another magazine?" she asked, looking up for the first time. "I see a lot of yourself in it. Are you writing a book?" I tried desperately to remain poker-faced, but all I could think of was the novel that I'd been working on for more than a year, one that was largely secret but for which I had high hopes. She thickened the lines of the second rectangle that represented the novel. "There's a lot of potential here," she said, gladdening my heart. "I'm looking at a book that could be a movie." Then she added stick figures of two children. "They seem to be involved in it." In truth, my younger

Right again: My wife and I had recently consulted a realtor, although, in the end, we decided to stay put.

Then, as casually as if she were pointing out a sparrow, Altea mentioned that there was a woman from the spirit world standing beside me. "She's ordinary-looking, short and a little on the plump side," she said. "She tells me she died of problems with her chest and heart. She's talking to you about this," Altea said, pointing to the rectangle that represented the novel. "She says you need a lot of patience with it." I couldn't imagine who she might be thinking of (although I came up with a possibility later), but I was absolutely transfixed all the same. I completely accepted the presence of this stranger from the hereafter. Later, when Altea told me that there was "a gentleman" standing beside me, I knew

My Mother, the Psychic

by Samantha Altea

Picture yourself back when you were 11 or 12 years old, pushing the limits of what you were told to do versus what you wanted to do. Although I was not a rebel—in fact, I consider myself to have been very close to angel status—I was human. Being human meant mischief and the occasional little white lie. Unfortunately for me, though, while I was growing up in this "normal" world of human imperfections, my life was very far from normal, and some would say further still from human. You see, my mum talks to dead people.

As a spiritual medium, she makes contact with loved ones who have passed on, and relays messages from them to those who find it impossible to see or hear them anymore. She chats one-on-one with the dead, telling us what

they say—a sort of radio receiver for the spirit world.

Can you imagine growing up with a mother before whom you were unable to tell the merest untruth? Faced with the all-too-familiar question "Bedtime, darling. Did you wash your face?", I would stare up at my mum with my practiced angelic look and reply, "Yes." Her eyes would glaze as she looked over my shoulder. "Mmm," she would say. "Your grandpa says you haven't." My grandfather had been dead for five years, and since he passed on, he'd turned into a bit of a snitch. Knowing that it was senseless to argue with your mother and your dead grandfather, I would dutifully go and wash my face. I was a very clean child.

It was sometimes hard being my mother's daughter as a teenager. Imagine that you're young and in love and your

for sure that it was my late father. In fact, I got the same uneasy feeling around him that I often had when he was living—and then felt guilty about it all over again. Later still, when Altea said that after Grey Eagle came into her life she started taking bubble baths out of modesty, I understood that, too. Out on her porch, the air seemed thick with the spirits of the dead.

However they are explained, her extrasensory talents have now brought her a small fortune. *The Eagle and the Rose* hit the bestseller list in 11 countries, and her new book, *Proud Spirit*, seems to be following close behind. The royalties have allowed her to quit the business of psychic consultation that, at \$200 an hour, had been her mainstay. Now, when she performs those services, she sometimes works for free. With such clairvoyance, though, one might wonder why she doesn't cash *Continued on page 198*

boyfriend, who lives three hours away, ends up in the intensive care unit. My mother did not want me to drive there to be by his side; she thought that something terrible would happen if I went. I had learned to listen to my mum because, quite simply, she was always right. In this case, however, my heart took over and I jumped into Buttercup, my bright yellow, slightly unreliable first car. Three hours later, I had to call my frantic mother to explain that while I was okay, I had crashed Buttercup into a ditch. My mother was right again.

Picture yourself in your early twenties; you are confident and independent. Now imagine yourself in a compromising position with a young man—one you really should not be in for reasons we won't go into right now. The phone rings. You're feeling a little jumpy, and this is an excuse to extract yourself from this complicated situation. You run to the phone, only to hear your mum tell you that she has a "strange" feeling about you and ask if everything is okay. You reassure her, putting down the phone to find your suitor looking at you oddly, perturbed that your psychic mother may have the hotline to his intentions. Determined not to let my mum interfere with my life, I assured the young man it was merely a coincidence that she had called at such an inopportune moment. At age 23 I still hadn't learned. Half an hour later, just as animal instincts overtook my young man's apprehensions, the phone rang again. Try as we did to ignore such an intrusion, it just wouldn't go away—the



Growing up, Samantha found an extended family in her mother's populous spiritual world.

phone continued to ring. He told me that if it was my mum, that was it, he was leaving. Of course it was, and he did. "Are you sure everything is okay?" my mum asked. "Because I really do have a strange feeling." Is it any wonder that the type of man I go for has to be persistent?

I know it appears that my childhood was bizarre. Quite frankly, it was. I cannot imagine, however, growing up with "normal" parents. I cannot imagine not being able to talk to the passersby who chat with my mum from "the other side." I cannot imagine not being able to turn for guidance to our extended family residing in the spiritual world. I cannot imagine not being able to ask advice of my mum and not being able to trust it.

My mum believes we learn by making mistakes, and she has the courage to let me do that. I blunder around in the dark, searching for answers. I wonder if I'll live happily ever after. I get frustrated that my mum very often knows but won't say. When my mum tells me that I'll be successful and that I need to write—she has been told by those in the spirit world that I have a golden pen—I have to take notice. What do you think? Is she right?

SAMANTHA ALTEA is a student at Hull University in England.

ROSEMARYALTEA

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in on Wall Street. "My gift is not about monetary gain," she says. "It's about spiritual growth and learning." Still, when her stockbroker boyfriend, Jim Bruno, has asked for tips, she has complied a few times. "I've had a little insight there," she says mischievously.

As she relates in her autobiography, it took her a while to recognize her abilities. Growing up in England's Midlands, one of six children of a career soldier and his overbearing wife, Altea had, she says, been visited by various specters beginning at an early age. Once, she felt an unseen power seize her body and crush her down into the sofa; another time she envisioned a faceless woman in gray calling out to her from the deck of a sinking battleship. But she had always feared that such sensations merely represented the kind of lunacy that had landed her maternal grandmother in a Dickensian madhouse called The Towers. It wasn't until she met a professional spiritualist named Mick McGuire, who spoke to the spirits of her dead father and sister while she looked on, transfixed, that she began to see that there might be commercial possibilities in offering herself as a vessel for spirits of the deceased. This was in the early Eighties, a difficult time for her. Her husband had suddenly taken off one morning after 14 years of a loveless marriage, leaving her no means of supporting herself and her young daughter. To cope, she started giving spiritual readings in local pubs for the equivalent of \$5 for a half hour, then got her name out by making appearances in spiritualist churches. At first, Altea had a spirit guide she dubbed "the dancing Scotsman" because of his bright costume. But he departed before long, to be replaced by a "tall and broad" Apache with "the most startling and beautiful eyes": Grey Eagle. Curiously, McGuire also had an Indian spirit guide, whom he named Red Feather. Under Grey Eagle's guidance, Altea soon hit the big time.

As I said, I believed everything about Rosemary Altea while I was with her. I had come prepared to ask her the hard questions that journalists are supposed to ask, but then she produced my father and divined my book (and spoke so glowingly about its future) and discussed my kids, and I felt...helpless. Plus, she had an extremely effective take-it-or-leave-it attitude. "I don't need

to prove to you that I can do what I say I can do," she told me. "It doesn't matter to me whether you believe. I just tell you what I see." After that, I was the one to assure her that doubts were the furthest thing from my mind.

And I heard amazing stories from others about Altea's ability to visualize the future. For example, Altea once prophesied that Evans would "wear a beautiful fabric" on her hair and sign a contract that she'd twice torn up. Evans took this Delphic remark to mean that, despite her two divorces and serious misgivings, she would marry again. Later on, however, she was wearing a scarf on her head when she got a phone call with the news that a book contract that she had indeed torn up twice had come through for well over \$1 million.

I also talked to a few of the grieving parents Altea works with, and they told heartrending stories of being reunited, through Altea, with their dead children. In Utah, Mark Oliver lost five-year-old Jordie, the grandson he had raised as his child, when the air bags on the family car released unexpectedly. After seeing Altea on television, Oliver got in touch with her. She said that Jordie told her about a barn he'd been fixing up with his great-grandfather and other details that Oliver couldn't imagine Altea would know. "I'm a very skeptical person," says Oliver, "but she's too accurate for it all to be coincidence." When he and his wife spent time with Altea, it was like being with Jordie again. "I can't tell you how comforting, how uplifting that was."

I know that feeling. Although I had never been truly close to my father, I was nonetheless heartened by the thought that he was still around. Or, at least, I didn't want to do anything that might dispel him. Such an act seemed almost like murder. So it was with some reluctance that I called Ray Hyman, Ph.D., a cognitive psychologist at the University of Oregon, who has made a specialty of debunking psychics. Hyman had watched Altea in action for a show that aired on 20/20. "There's nothing special about her at all," he said with a dismissiveness that stunned me. "It's straight cold reading." As he explained, a psychic such as Altea, rather than drawing truths from spirits, is actually receiving them from her living subjects. The "cold reading" is a feedback system by which the psychic suggests a number of broad possibilities based on statistical averages, plus a Sherlock Holmesian reading of appearances, and then relies on the subject to pick the

one that fits most closely—and forge it into a match, a process known as "retrofitting." The psychic, for example, might say that she is seeing a woman who died after a long illness—and the subject will immediately think of her Aunt Agatha, who wasted away from colon cancer, although the psychic has never said anything about her. Thus, the subject is actually the sole author of much of the psychic's reading. "This is why psychics have such an easy time," says Hyman. "The client is doing all the work."

When Hyman looked at the tapes of Altea's performance, he noted how often the subjects converted her open-ended remarks into specific "hits." In one case, a bereaved father was told by Altea that his dead son was talking about shoes. The father took this as a reference to his golf shoes, and he saw it as clear proof that the son was watching. But you might wonder—if the dead son had meant golf shoes, why didn't he say so? Hyman would say that the reason is that greater specificity heightens the possibility of error. The father might not play golf. He might, instead, do ballroom dancing, or play basketball. So "shoes" is a safe guess, while "golf shoes" is not.

For all her apparent assurance, Altea constantly elicits visual and verbal feedback to help her hone her pronouncements. When I went back to listen to the tape of my own experiences with Altea, I noticed something I had missed at the time: All the uncanny observations she had made about my circumstances were not reeled off as facts, but rather stated far more tentatively, as questions that would usually get me to shake or nod my head, no matter how hard I tried not to. If I ever failed to respond, she would occasionally ask me straight out, "Do you understand?" to force a yes or no reaction.

On the tape, I was astonished to discover that Altea had never said a word about the summoned male spirit being my father. She had simply called him a "gentleman." Although I would have sworn it was otherwise, I was the one to identify him as my father. I was sure she'd described him as tall at least. But no—she hadn't said what he looked like, either. In fact, she had said nothing specific about him whatsoever: not his name, his earthly residence, his occupation or any other distinctive details. As for the other hits, they were all educated guesses: People change houses frequently nowadays; two is the typical number of children; out of two children, one is al-

most certain to have dental problems; and most writers have a novel or screenplay in the drawer. When I couldn't identify the dead woman she summoned, the one who was described as "ordinary-looking" (as most people are), Altea never referred to her again.

The world seemed a little shabbier when I knew the truth about Altea, or thought I did. Psychics bring us such good news. Indeed, Altea's message is the stuff of enduring world religions: Life is eternal; love is universal; God has a plan for all of us. "It helps to be able to see past this life," Oliver, the grandfather of the dead Jordie, told me. "Rosemary has given me more proof of that than the Catholic Church ever did." The world may be cruel, but not Altea. In her readings, all paths widen propitiously. The dead are never bitter or vengeful. Instead, they shine their affection down upon us.

At the end of *The Eagle and the Rose*, Altea reveals that when she was growing up she had been abused by her father and scorned by her mother. With such a history, she must gain some satisfaction in being the means—the medium—by which families are reunited in the face of a far more severe breach. I remembered the television staffers from *The View* weeping in her arms as they took her to be the embodiment of the loved ones they'd lost, and I remembered the oddly pleased look I saw on her face. As a hard-bitten journalist, I should have pressed her about how she would address the Earth-bound suspicions of Hyman. I could never quite bring myself to pop the big question: Are you for real? To grill her in that way would be like asking God for photo ID. I have come to doubt Altea's mystical powers, but I am still moved by her. She may not be able to see our stars, but she can see our selves. While I was on her porch I was my essential self—writer, householder, family man and son to my father. Rarely have I ever felt so deeply me.

Who knows; perhaps there is something to her claims. An odd thing happened one night while I was writing this. I'd turned out the light and was preparing for sleep when I felt something brush across my forehead and down my temple. Although I tried not to let my thoughts run wild, I honestly thought it might be a feather, a gray eagle feather. And I was disappointed not to find one when I checked around my pillow in the morning. ♣

JOHN SEDGWICK is SELF's National Correspondent.

ASURGEON'SNOTES...

Continued from page 191

On my way home, I went to the glasses shop and ordered him a pair. How could I let this poor little old man go back to his village like that? No wonder he fell.

Friday, April 18 Today has been very emotional. I operated on a baby who died post-op, only because she wasn't awake enough from the anesthesia. All she needed was a little more time on the respirator, but there were so many patients with gunshots waiting. She didn't have to die. I feel I let her down.

After I told my old man about his new glasses, he wept.

The mother of my little family tried to give me her baby. She knows I love the child. I had told the mother yesterday that I would be leaving soon, but, not to worry, another doctor would be coming.

Today she had her baby all dressed up in a little pink dress. As usual, I held her. When I went to return the baby to her mother, she kept pressing her into my arms. The interpreter explained that she wanted me to take the baby back to America to give her a better life. If there were any way I could take that

little girl home with me, I would have her in my suitcase right now. I want to give her so much more than she will ever have here. I want to give them all so much more.

I feel emotionally drained but also privileged to have had this experience. I have given these people a short bit of my time, and they have given me so much more, just by letting me live among them, share their lives and care for them.

Saturday, April 19 Today I was thinking about the words that will forever come to my mind when I hear the name Sri Lanka.

War. Guns. Children. Palm trees. Smiles. Cows. Beach. Hot. Coconut. Saris. Challenge. Pineapples. Mosquito nets. Grenades. Tears. Geckos. Orphans. Burns. Checkpoints. Lagoon. Frustration. Fulfillment. ♣
MARGO ASWAD lives outside of Charlotte, North Carolina, and works at Lincoln Medical Center in Lincolnton. She plans to do another trip with Doctors Without Borders this summer, preferably to Africa.

For more information on Doctors Without Borders, or to make a contribution, contact: Doctors Without Borders, 6 E. 39th St., 8th fl., New York, NY 10016, or call 888-392-0392.



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