

SUNDAY

CIRCLE

MARCH 1997

THE VICE KINGS

Maltese in
Soho in
the 1950s

THE VOLUNTARY EXPERIENCE

With Mother
Teresa in India

Adopting a
New Home



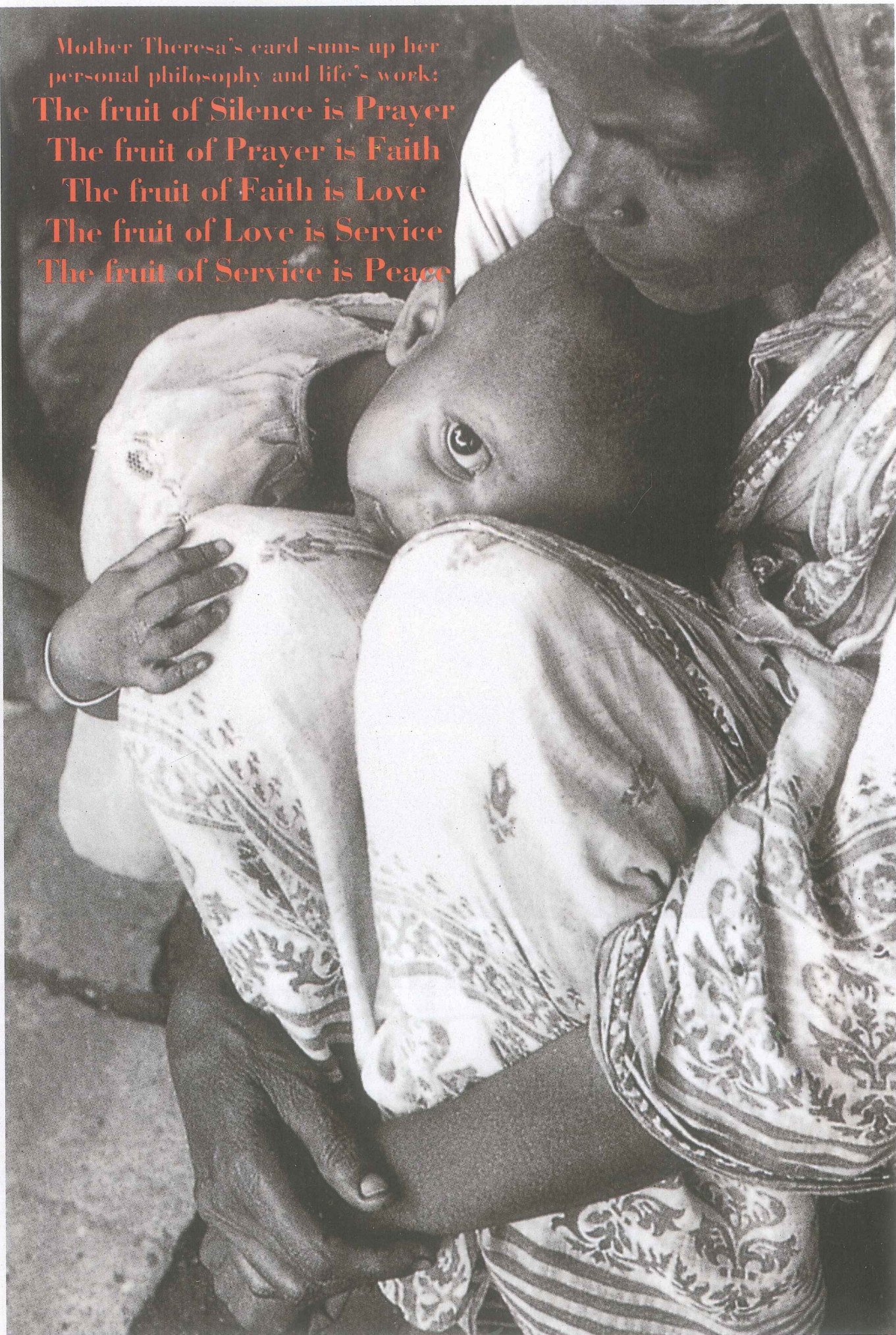
The Voluntary **EXPERIENCE**

Warren Bugeja in India in spiritual pursuit of soul and truth comes face to face with faith

An old woman hobbles towards me, barefoot. She is frail and bent, dressed simply in a white cotton sari bordered by three bands of blue. She reaches us and suddenly her movements become lightning and quick, or maybe it is merely an imprint of time condensed. A

hand is outstretched towards me, the fingers of which are gnarled and withered with caring. She holds an offering in her palm. My business card she explains and she laughs an enormous smile that eclipses her diminutive frame and fills up the entire room. Mother Theresa blesses us and disappears, she

Mother Theresa's card sums up her
personal philosophy and life's work:
The fruit of Silence is Prayer
The fruit of Prayer is Faith
The fruit of Faith is Love
The fruit of Love is Service
The fruit of Service is Peace



has a lot of correspondence to reply to before the evening rosary. I stare down at the card but all I see are two twinkling eyes, deeply set in a face furrowed with compassion.

I had come, along with a few other volunteers to pay my respects to Mother Theresa, the long awaited 'audience' as they called. I was a teeny-wee bit anxious. This would not be my first encounter with Mother Theresa. Not by nature a recluse or surrounded by a team of bodyguards as one would expect a personage of her profile to be, she attended mass regularly each morning. Yet this was different, what could I say to her with my soft sheltered upbringing... thank you perhaps? I needn't have worried, nothing could have felt more natural, there were no need for words on our part.

This was to be my first trip to the mystic east, a dream I had nurtured for six years. The missionary zeal had always held a certain fascination, intriguing and repelling me in equal measure. For some time I had toyed with the idea of helping out in some Third World country, but had problems with attaching myself to an evangelical institution.

Eventually I settled upon the term 'volunteer'... with no strings attached. In that capacity I strapped my backpack on, and armed with the address of the Missionaries of Charity's Mother House on 54a Lower Circular Road, Calcutta, I set off to exorcise my Catholic guilt amongst the 'poorest of the poor'.

The Missionaries of Charity's utter complete faith in the dictum 'God will provide' makes for a non-regimental, easy-going set-up, that allows for anyone to turn up on their doorstep unannounced. Taking advantage of this knowledge, I proceed from the airport to Mother House.

Upon arrival I am immediately greeted by Sr. Bethany a soft-spoken English nun who gives me advice as to the whereabouts of budget accommodation and instructs me to return later on during the afternoon, when I shall sign on as an official volunteer.

At 5, I am promptly asked by Sr. Priscilla, head of volunteers, where I would like to work. There is a choice of three shelters run by the sisters in Calcutta: Shishu Bhawan, a children's home where males may visit but not work, Premdan a centre for the physically and mentally impaired and Nirmal Hriday, home for the dying and the destitute. Alternatively one may contribute towards the education of the street children by teaching at Gandhi school, a day care centre set-up by the M.C. sisters, in the heart of the city. Thursday is the volunteer's day holiday and every other week, tours are conducted to Titagarh, a leprosy centre in an industrial suburb of Calcutta.

A typical day in the life of a volunteer begins with a non-obligatory six o'clock mass at Mother House. Following mass we all traipse to the courtyard downstairs, where the nuns hand out bananas, bread and piping hot tea sweetened Bengali style for breakfast. Come 7.30 and everyone makes their own way individually or in small clusters to their separate destinations. I tag along behind one such assorted group, destination Premdan.

The journey there is certainly colourful. On the way we pass the slums, the film *City of Joy* made infamous, though the slums in the film were built on a sound stage and this is the real thing.

I have never seen such squalid filth, I see women fighting over some scrap they have scavenged from a rubbish heap. There is little to distinguish them from a group of bickering

dogs nearby doing the same. However this is Calcutta, I have prepared myself for sights such as these and I take it in my stride. Upon arrival, we don gingham aprons grubby with yesterday's toil. Work at Premdan is grueling and never ending, however my job description is pretty elementary and it doesn't take long to learn the ropes.

We begin by feeding the patients breakfast and rinsing their plates up. From then on it's more washing. One by one the patients are bathed, towed dry and dressed. Meanwhile another group of volunteers take it upon themselves to scrub the floors clean which they do with switches of straw and bamboo girded together to make a broom, the kind witches hang onto during Halloween.

Medication is handed out by the visiting doctor. If there are a few extra volunteers on hand then male patients get treated to a custom shave, female patients get their hair braided and both are asked if they would like a massage or their fingers and toenails cut. Interaction between inmate and volunteer is to a certain extent hampered because of the limitations imposed by language, so it's out with the dictionaries and on with a homemade variation of sign language!

In the interim, the beds get made, and down at the concrete water vats it's big-time laundry, with a few singalongs, to break the monotony of squeezing, squelching and wringing. Tea break at 10.30 am and a few water biscuits to keep us going up till 12.30 when we break off for lunch, often heading out to the Blue Sky Cafe on Sudder Street for a refreshing mango *lassee* (yoghurt drink) and vegetable *pakora* (fritters).

Having experienced Premdan I was keen to visit Nirmal Hriday. In a coup-de-grace of ecumenical irony the Catholic home is situated adjacent to the shrine of Kali, protectress of Calcutta, Goddess of death and destruction. Every day a steady stream of goats, sheep, pigs and fowl make their way up to Kali's altar to be slaughtered and offered up

to the goddess as blood sacrifices.

But then death is not a concept alien to Calcutta. The 'City of Joy' is full of it, on the pavements, in the slums, at Kalighat, yet it is accepted, something to be rejoiced not something hidden away, denied, negated as it is in the west. As surely as we are born we must die, it is part of the natural cycle of life. For many of the teeming Hindu masses fighting to survive on the streets, death might bring with it the possibility of a higher caste rebirth.

My second day at Nirmal Hriday and I find myself lifting a dead corpse into a rough and ready wooden coffin. The body still feels warm, I remember having tended to its vacant personality only a few hours ago. We carry the coffin into the morgue, nearby a group of volunteers sit hunched scraping the metal dishes clean of slops of curried rice and potatoes. Instead of detergent they use a concoction of ashes and mud. Dust to dust no one blinks an eyelid, the volunteers continue chattering and I wish I could be shocked into feeling a sensation suitable to the task underway. Yet I do not feel anything, no dramatic culture shock. That, I undergo on my return home.

Outside the morgue, printed on the wall is a saying of Mother Theresa's 'let every action of mine be something beautiful for God'. A directive the Sisters take close to heart, evident in every little gesture of theirs, such as the way they would noiselessly flit into morning mass, over 100 of them "like angels settling on



Warren (left) and his fellow volunteers.

a cloud of white" as one helper put it.

The Home for the Dying, is a magical place, very much alive in spirit yet dark and gloomy inside, like something out of a Dickensian novel, in contrast with the exuberance outside. Conceived as a resting place where the sick and aged of Calcutta may at least receive a dignified death, Nirmal Hriday is less a hospital than a home.

To help me escape the sense stimuli of the streets outside and evaluate the emotional and confrontational aspects of the days events; to help me to do this I had the good fortune of encountering some wonderful characters, fellow residents from all around the globe, the kind of friends you make for life.

At night we gather round the heavy mahogany table, big mama style, for dinner. This is communal time where we thrash out the day's experiences and our recent bowel movements together. Subjects include; being white in tourist India, a big ego boost, where thanks to the effects of colonialism you are only ever

Buffalo

Buffalo



Introducing a revolutionary upholstery fabric. Quick to clean has a soft suede effect with leather-look grain texture. Grubby marks, ball point pens, chewing gum, coffee and tea stains all can easily be removed and even be washed.

Available exclusively from:



DUNLOPILLO SHOWROOM

MSIDA VALLEY ROAD MSIDA TEL: 446000

regarded as a potential transaction – a walking wallet, the constant haranguing over bargaining, the stifling heat, the frustrations of wanting to get something done on time, and of course the begging.

To give or not to give, the angst ridden dilemma of deciding whose case is genuine and whose is not. Begging is a serious ice-breaker, the spring-board for many a heated debate on our dinner table. After a while I cease to play pied-piper with the milling street urchins: it's a Mafia and I don't want to encourage them to grow up with a palm turned upwards forever in mid air. Then my conscience tickles me with the guilt trip, am I being patronising?

Likewise I refuse to buy tins of skimmed milk powder for the women with decoy baby in arms, as I have discovered at the expense of my rapidly shrinking bum bag, that they only resell it a few alleyways later.

I decide to strike a balance between going the other way, not donating at all, and walking around with a bleeding heart. I resolve to give only to the aged, sickly and disabled. Even then, I'm an easy target for the con-men tales of woe featuring dying mothers and whole families afflicted with leukaemia. The trick is to rely on your intuition, in time sussing out the dodgy from the deserving, becomes an acquired skill you pick up along the road.

But the passivity irritates me, I know that the implicit belief in reincarnation does not encourage for upward social mobility. Very cozy for the status quo to have the masses believe that this life is a punishment for their past misdeeds, karma they call it. That way the rich get richer and the poor, well they get poorer. The paradox with India is not that it's a poor country as I'm repeatedly told by its inhabitants. I get angry when they tell me that. India is a country abundantly rich in natural resources, highly technologically advanced. The problem lies with the distribution of wealth. In a country where the concept of 'baksheesh' - ranging from an innocent tip to an outright bribe - is a social institution, corruption is rife. Yet mine is a superficial reading of a very complex culture and after six months in India I only begin to feel that I have skimmed the surface of a bottomless pit.

On Sundays I usually invest in a bar of soap or a bottle of shampoo and make the weekly pilgrimage over to Howrah on the other bank of the Hooghly river. Here the Missionary Brothers of Charity, an offshoot of the Sisters branch, have set up a special home for homeless and handicapped boys, with the hopeful name of Nabo Jeevan (meaning new life). Once a week on Sunday mornings the brothers open their doors to the street children of Howrah who are fed the only proper nourishing meal they will probably eat the entire week. The children are mischievous imps who we are told need love and affection. They run up and jump on you until they almost bowl you over with their enthusiasm. Its easy to go doe-eyed over the proceedings but more likely than not while you may think they're fighting over your attention, one or two of them have got their hands down your trouser pockets. Still you hardly blame them, it's a fight for survival out there, and these kids could teach me a few lessons.

Mother Theresa often describes her contribution towards the pain and poverty of the poorest of the poor as 'tiny drops of love and compassion in an ocean of suffering'.

My experience among the poorest of the poor was an exercise in humility. Not the people I served, but me, the one enriched, receiving far more in gratitude in a simple smile, in a little teaching, than my minuscule drop in the bucket.

Amidst the misery and deprivation of Calcutta, I rediscovered a faith I had relegated to the grave. ☺