Viva Shiva!

By Colleen Morton Busch

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Shiva Rea was named by her father, an artist and surfer in Hermosa Beach, California, who was seriously into Indian art and Zen Buddhism. Rea teaches all over the world—her schedule this year includes stops in Chicago; Chapel Hill, North Carolina; London; and Kerala, India. "I definitely feel like a global citizen," she says. "I love crossing cultures and trying to reach a shared place." Known for her energetic and soulful approach to yoga as well as her adventure retreats and ecstatic trance dance classes, Rea lives in Pacific Palisades, California, with her seven-year-old son, Jai, and her husband, Ayurvedic physician James Bailey.

What was it like growing up with a name like Shiva? I've heard every mispronunciation under the sun. "Queen of Sheba" is very common. As a little girl I'd look Shiva up in the dictionary and see this image of Nataraj, Lord of Destruction, and just roll my eyes. After a while I started signing my schoolwork Fifi Veronica or Cleopatra Jones.

I've heard you allude to your southern roots. Were you born in the South? No, but my grandfather's family was from Mississippi and Memphis. My great-grandfather got W.C. Handy to serenade my great-grandmother when he was courting her. I've definitely got the blues in my bones.

What's your most vivid childhood memory? It's hard to pick out just one, but I remember being on Hermosa Beach watching my father surf and dipping Fritos in the sand because I liked the crunchy taste.

What was your favorite comfort food as a child? French fries. I know too much about Ayurveda now to eat them.

Were you athletic as a kid? Oh yeah. I ran the 440 relay. I played point guard and shortstop.

What would you be if you hadn't become a yoga teacher? There's definitely river guide in me.

What's the most surprising way that motherhood has influenced your yoga? Parenting makes you so creative. There are 101 games you can play with the

sugar packets at restaurants. In both teaching and parenting, you have to work with whatever situation you're given.

For example? The other day I was teaching and the fire alarm went off for 20 minutes. We just did lots of kriyas and rhythmic movement with sound. It was a great class. There's this Hawaiian term, *hopupu*, "becoming one with the waves," which I really relate to.

What kind of music do you listen to when you're driving? When I'm driving to do yoga and rock climbing in the desert, I always dig up the Doors. When we're driving to Esalen, I bring along those shaker eggs.

What did you think you were going to do when you grew up? When I was little, I wanted to be a dancer. My parents were so young they took me everywhere, so I was dancing at a lot of parties, even clubs. I got some tap lessons. But I didn't get formal [dance] training until later, in African dance. I was also a hardcore athlete for a while. I played volleyball, I was a shortstop. Then I went to Europe and started to travel. When I was 16, I spent the summer in Florence, Italy. When I was 17, I volunteered in Kenya, traveled through Europe, Greece, Egypt. Then I started to want to go into development work. After that, I got involved in dancing again. I discovered Dance Anthropology at UCLA and started doing research abroad. I went to the University of Ghana for a year and Dehli University for a year.

Has your life changed now that you're a kind of yoga celebrity? What keeps you humble? I'm actually on the opposite end. I have low self-esteem more than a puffed-up ego. I find plenty to stay humble about. I've lived in parts of the world, such as Bali and Ghana, where that's the baseline state of being. No one tolerates individual superiority. In a stage when my ego was forming, I got that foundation of humility.

What's the worst/best advice you ever got from a teacher? "Just do it" has its limitations. It gets a lot of us in trouble.

From the outside, most people think being a yoga teacher is a pretty cushy job. In truth, what's difficult about it? There are different stages. I've been teaching for 15 years. When I was first teaching, one of the challenges was balancing my life with my classes. Later, when yoga was all I taught, I had to teach so many classes just to pay the rent. My love of yoga was really challenged. I don't know that it's ideal to teach 20 classes a week. Thankfully, that didn't last too long. Now, what's difficult is that yoga is my path, but I'm following it in the 21st century. I have as much e-mail as anybody else, as many phone calls to return. Each one of those is sacred to me, but the challenge is that in order to teach, my primary rhythm needs to be a yogic rhythm. I'm a little slower than everybody else.

What do people say to you when, for example, they're sitting next to

you on an airplane and you tell them you're a yoga teacher? I can track yoga's acceptance into mainstream from those conversations. I remember getting the response, "Oh!" with the eyebrows raised, like it's a little weird. And the next question would be, "Isn't that that pretzel thing?" Now, almost universally, I get a very positive response, even a kind of excitement. It's almost like telling someone you're a doctor. I've taught impromptu yoga on hundreds of flights. I've taught airline attendants in the little room where the drinks are. The guy who sold me my Prius-I taught him in the middle of the Toyota dealership.

You get to travel a lot as part of your work. Where's the strangest place you've ever practiced asana? On a plane, I stick my feet straight up in the air to do a full-on Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend). No one has ever said anything. If you just look natural, people don't even notice. It's one way to become invisible.

How would you respond if Dick Cheney showed up in your yoga class? It would depend on how he came into the room. Is he open, is he closed? That's the beauty of the yoga space. It's where we leave our external identities at the door; he's just another human being. It doesn't work as a yoga teacher when we try to heal someone or relax them or open them. I'd put him into some hip openers for sure. Actually he has a heart issue, so he's a special case. I'd create a special vinyasa.

What's your definition of happiness? The inherent, all-permeating satisfaction that is always present. It's our birthright, independent of any external conditions. It needs to be nurtured and cultivated even though it's within us. I love that the Dalai Lama puts it out that happiness is what we're looking for. It's not intellectual and esoteric. It's not to be postponed-"I'll be happy when..."