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Notes from editor (not for publication):

I tweaked the wording a bit to make it absolutely clear that it was nonfiction. “Short stories” imply otherwise.
For his first reference, I used his full name as published.

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

A peripatetic ride, both geographic and psychic

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

Peter Thurrell of East Dummerston releases a memoir of a
life of joy and wonder, pain and awakening

####END SUBHED####

TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

PETER WESTGATE THURRELL has penned *Badji's Tales: Living with Faith in the Invisible* (Green Writers Press), a series of 72 short vignettes. In turn poignant, teeth-clenching, daring, loving, elucidating, and inspiring, the memoir is like a travelogue of a long journey to self-awareness and spiritual awakening.

10 Of the title, Thurrell explains, “Badji” is what his 2-year-
11 old grandson had dubbed him, with “ji” a commonly used suffix
12 in India which indicates respect.

13 Thurrell, now of East Dummerston, moved to Vermont in
14 1982 after marrying his first wife in California.

15 “I had this great idea that we would get to know each
16 other better if we went somewhere where none of us knew
17 anybody,” he tells *The Commons*. “So I got a pickup truck and a
18 camper cab, and we spent six months traveling around Mexico
19 together” with his wife’s three children on board. “It was an
20 amazing adventure.”

21 The new family then wended across the U.S. Driving up
22 the East Coast in the summer, they felt the need to settle and find
23 schools.

24 A friend had highly recommended Putney as a place to
25 live, “so we came up to Putney,” he says, first landing outside the
26 Putney School and “had a first moment of really loving it here.”

27 The family never ended up living in Putney — instead,
28 Thurrell bought a fixer-upper in Brattleboro.

29 “It was trash, but I knew how to do all the work to fix it
30 up,” he said, and so he did, when he wasn’t working days as an
31 independent carpenter. “I’d designed and built several award-
32 winning solar houses in California in the ’70s,” he explains, so
33 the task wasn’t daunting.

34 Thurrell’s stories span a range from sublime experiences
35 to nuts-and-bolts situations; they document a peripatetic ride
36 with zany adventures — both geographic and psychic.
37 Throughout, one finds threads of seeking self-esteem, navigating
38 tough relationships, taking on the mantle of parenthood, and
39 more.

40 Elaborating on the impetus to write the book, Thurrell
41 recalls childhood summers spent at a family camp on Lake
42 Winnepesaukee.

43 On a closet shelf in a cabin where his grandmother lived
44 was a box with a “thick stack of stories my grandfather had

45 written when he was in Alaska, in the Alaskan War [the Aleutian
46 Islands campaign of World War II in 1942–1943],” he says. Over
47 time, that box disappeared.

48 Thurrell says he has “had a bunch of pretty amazing
49 things happen in the course of this life,” so he didn’t want his
50 own stories to see the same fate as his grandfather’s. He wanted
51 to share them with next generations.

52 * * *

53 SOME OF Thurrell’s tales draw on his direct experience
54 from suffering abuse as a child with an alcoholic, polio-stricken
55 mother and an overbearing, often-cruel father (a petroleum
56 engineer who moved his family back and forth between
57 Washington, D.C. and Colorado, sometimes elsewhere).

58 Some tales come from his three “horrible” years at Exeter
59 Academy, others from 12 years spent at Auroville, an
60 experimental township in India. Some find him hitchhiking
61 across the country to California and up to Washington, others at a
62 Buddhist center in England or at a Sufi center.

63 Some are backgrounded by his majoring in biology at
64 Oberlin College; by earning a master’s in environmental studies
65 at Antioch/New England; by his founding of Soveren, a
66 community solar energy enterprise.

67 And they’re all interwoven with you-can’t-make-this-
68 stuff-up type accounts of rock-climbing, car fixing, whitewater
69 rafting, playing music, conjuring forces, traveling to the
70 unknown. From trauma-inducing leaps into a quarry from 75-feet
71 to delivering his daughter, Maria, it’s a string of close calls and
72 serendipity, replete with miracles and wonders, mistakes,
73 revelation, regret, and perpetual learning.

74 * * *

75 “I REALIZED THAT two arcs to my life are reflected in the
76 book,” Thurrell says.

77 One is that his work with psychedelic spirituality —
78 journeys, both coached and free-wheeling, that woke him up —
79 lifted his awareness.

80 “As I followed a psychedelic awakening over years, it
81 became clear that there was trauma,” he says. “I didn’t know
82 what to do. I just knew that I couldn’t live in harmony with what
83 I’d seen.”

84 Thus, the second arc of the book is the healing of
85 trauma.

86 “I found that I was — and maybe everybody else is —
87 suffering from a nervous system that’d been constrained by a
88 need to handle overwhelming intensity,” Thurrell says. “In my
89 case, that started with a traumatic birth and inability to bond with
90 my mother, then continued through my formative teenage years.”

91 Thurrell’s spiritual practice has taken him into Sufism and
92 Buddhism, through psychedelic therapy, into rituals with
93 ayahuasca, a South American psychedelic plant-based brew that
94 is part of Indigenous cultures’ traditional medicine and spiritual
95 practices.

96 “Definitely the psychedelics combined with therapy
97 helped a lot,” Thurrell says. “A couple of stories in the book are of
98 specific psychedelic experiences I had where I went back and
99 relived my birth and I relived a traumatic event with my father.”

100 Early on, Thurrell notes, post-traumatic stress disorder
101 (PTSD) was “all talking about veterans in wars having had
102 specific, horrible, overwhelming encounters.”

103 “But I realized that I could see the symptoms of PTSD in
104 my own life,” he says. “And then I began to see them in the lives
105 of the people around me.”

106 In 1988 the term “complex PTSD” was coined to name
107 “the PTSD that didn’t happen from a single event or a series of
108 short events, but from a kind of continuously inappropriate
109 environment in early childhood,” Thurrell says. “I was tracking
110 that [...] trying to get informed about how our nervous system
111 works in the face of overwhelming intensity.

112 “In the beginning, it wasn’t really a search for healing. It
113 was a search for awakening,” he says.

114 And that is what he experienced when using LSD for the
115 first time his senior year in college.

116 “There was the sense of having tasted awakening in the
117 psychedelic experience [...], the real possibility of awakening
118 from the sleepwalking we’re all doing,” Thurrell recalls.

119 Summing up the ride, he adds, “The tagline for my life
120 was, ‘Make a sail of your soul and unfurl it in the winds of the
121 divine.’”

122 * * *

123 THURRELL, NOW IN his mid-70s, still meditates, works
124 with psychedelic medicine, and guides sessions. “But my practice
125 has really become a practice of simply showing up in the present
126 moment — being here and being delighted with the joy and the
127 wonder of life,” he says.

128 So many of Thurrell’s happy endings seem nothing short
129 of miraculous.

130 “I’ve had miracles happen over and over again,” he says,
131 noting the quote attributed to Albert Einstein that he includes as a
132 chapter epigraph: “You can live as if nothing’s a miracle or
133 everything is.” He believes the latter.

134 “I lived the life that I chose to live from my own soul’s
135 perspective,” he says. “I didn’t live somebody else’s life. I never
136 bought into the notion that the purpose of life is to get a job to
137 have money to buy things.”

138 He believes that “if the book could inspire anybody else
139 to live their own life, to find out what their spark is inside and to
140 go with it, I would say miracles can happen. I’m nothing special.”

141 “Everybody has stories,” he adds. “If the book inspires
142 some people to write down their stories and make them available
143 for other people, that would be great.

144 “Especially with all the AI coming — there aren’t going
145 to be a whole lot of true stories left out there,” he says.

146 * * *

147 *Peter Thurrell will read from Badji’s Tales on Tuesday,*
148 *Oct. 28 at 7 p.m. at the Brooks Memorial Library, 224 Main St.,*

149 *Brattleboro. The book is available from bookstores or directly*
150 *from the publisher, [Green Writers Press](#).*

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

151 **ANNIE LANDENBERGER** is an arts writer and columnist
152 for *The Commons*. She also is one half of the musical duo Bard
153 Owl, with partner T. Breeze Verdant.

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

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