

Ann Matranga: Drawing Strength from Community, Knowing Who You Are

Ann Matranga lives on a houseboat at the foot of the Golden Gate Bridge in Sausalito, California. Born in Long Island, N.Y., she is the mother of two children, Jonah and Kaela, and the grand-mother of Hanah, Atlas and Anika. We met Ann in the parking garage of the theater in San Francisco playing host to the Native American Film Festival. She gave us directions to the Festival and invited us to her houseboat in Sausalito the next day, where we learned much more about how to get where we really want to go.



Ann Matranga believes there are two kinds of difficult experiences. “One is the short brief, scary one. The other is the long marathon-like one.” When it comes to the long ones, Ann cites her job as a single parent her most difficult and most rewarding experience.

“The hardest thing I ever did that I did well was being a single parent from the time my children were age five and six on. I was a full-on single parent, plus making the money. I was not the most mature young person in the world and made many mistakes, but I gradually moved into the role of being a good parent. By the time they were teenagers I was on the job. I was blessed with a community of friends and we did things together. When I look back now and I watch my daughter with her little children, I think, ‘How in the world did I do it?’ When I think of all the things I have done in my life, I am sure there is nothing more important than raising my kids and having things turn out OK.”

Ann says it was her friends who gave her the strength to overcome all life’s hardships. “For me, I hate to say it - I never did like romance very well at all. I have always messed up my romances, so far - but friendship I have always done well. I have had long friendships. There is some song that says, ‘I could never stand without my friends.’ That is how I raised my kids. That is how I did anything and still to this day it is about community.”

“When my son was in high school we had a lot of problems with drugs. And what we did was get together a group of the families the other young people who were also having trouble. We called ourselves a family group and what we did is we kind of circled the wagons around them. We would have a meal together once every month. That went on for two years and we would talk about our lives. We all brought food. We would sit in a circle and go around that circle every month. Each person, parents and children, we would talk about what happened in the month past and what we were going to do with our lives.”

“We evolved a way of doing things. The children would always say they didn’t want to come; but they would come and we would talk about what happened and what we were going to do. And by the time those young people graduated, everyone was clean and sober. Our conversations had evolved from talking about their problems to talking about our own lives. ... So I think the biggest thing that came from that experience wasn’t getting over the alcohol and drugs, but it was the understanding that at a time of crisis, if you can get together with people who have the same concerns and the same values, and you can make a difference.”

“I adopted my daughter when she was four days old and when she was in her 20s she was having a really hard time. And she and I read a book that was called *The Primal Wound* about the problems of adopted children who had been separated from their birth mother even at birth. She was four days old and I nursed her. I was nursing my biological son at the time. He was only nine months old and I said, ‘What difference does it make?’ But it made a huge difference.”

“Because of that, we set out to find her birth family and we did. We found her dad first. It was a research project because the records are sealed. But we got enough information to find him. By the way, it was thanks to the Baha’i Faith that we found him. It was one of the clues in the records. I knew he was a musician. They would give you an abstract that would give you only a few facts, but I am really good at talking so I could get the people in the agencies to give me a little bit more. I knew his name, his religion and that he was African American. So I wrote to the Baha’i web site and asked ‘Does anyone remember this person?’ They did and I got two emails in a day and was able to get in touch with him immediately.”

“It took me another year to track down Kaela’s birth mother. Her dad told me she died when she was only 33, so I thought maybe that’s good enough. We found Phil so maybe we should just let it go. But Kaela said no, she wanted to find her birth mother’s family. And I realized how important it was to her to know where she came from, who she looked like, what was the story, who wanted her, who didn’t. Even though she was loved and our family was intact.”

“We found her birth mother’s mother, who we now think of as Grandma Jean. I thought I better call her first. Now, this was the white side of the family and I don’t know what she knows. We knew that her daughter had died. It could be just grief provoking. But I called and her husband answered the phone. He is this fantastic old southerner named CB. They live in Florida, and he answered the phone.”

“And I had made up this whole script of what I was going to say, because I was really nervous. And I said, ‘I have some memorabilia from Denise, Kaela’s birth mother, from Boston in 1970 and I want to give that to her grandmother, to Jean.’ And immediately he was so warm and welcoming. ‘She can’t wait to talk to you, but she is out, I’ll have her call you right away.’”

“He must have gone out to find her and she called up and I was still real hesitant. I was sort of beating around the bush. And finally Jean said to me, ‘I think you better get to the point.’ And I thought, OK. So I said, ‘Well, I’m your daughter’s birth child’s adoptive mother.’ And she started to cry. She was such an amazing woman, and she said, ‘I don’t want you to think that these are unhappy tears. This is the happiest day of my life.’”

“We couldn’t have been more blessed, because these are people – every one of them, on both the mother’s and the father’s side - that we would have liked to meet for any reason, anywhere anytime. But we all met, we had a family reunion.”

“Kaela is her birth father’s only child. He was absolutely devastated when her birth mother passed away. They had been parted by then, but all his life he had worried about her. Likewise, her grandmother. She’s the only grandchild and it’s like, ‘Kaela rules! Kaela’s a princess,’ which she had always believed herself to be. Now her dreams came true. They came to her wedding. Her birth father walked her down the aisle with me. It’s just like a miracle. That’s a happy story.”

“I am very lucky. You know my dad said he was always lucky. My son is a rock musician by the way, and when my dad died on that very day Jonah wrote a song in his honor and it said, ‘Oh I am so lucky, there is no one as lucky as me,’ And he sang it and now several schools have taken it.”

“My father was big on luck. I have this ring. He came from a very poor family. His father had emigrated from Poland. He was a Polish Jew. He came here leaving a wife and several children in Warsaw; they came later. And when they came my father was the first born in this country. His mother died when he was three months old and all the children went to orphanages. My father went to an Irish Catholic foster home and that is where he got to be Catholic. And when he was six his father took him back into his family. He had a very difficult growing up, but when he was

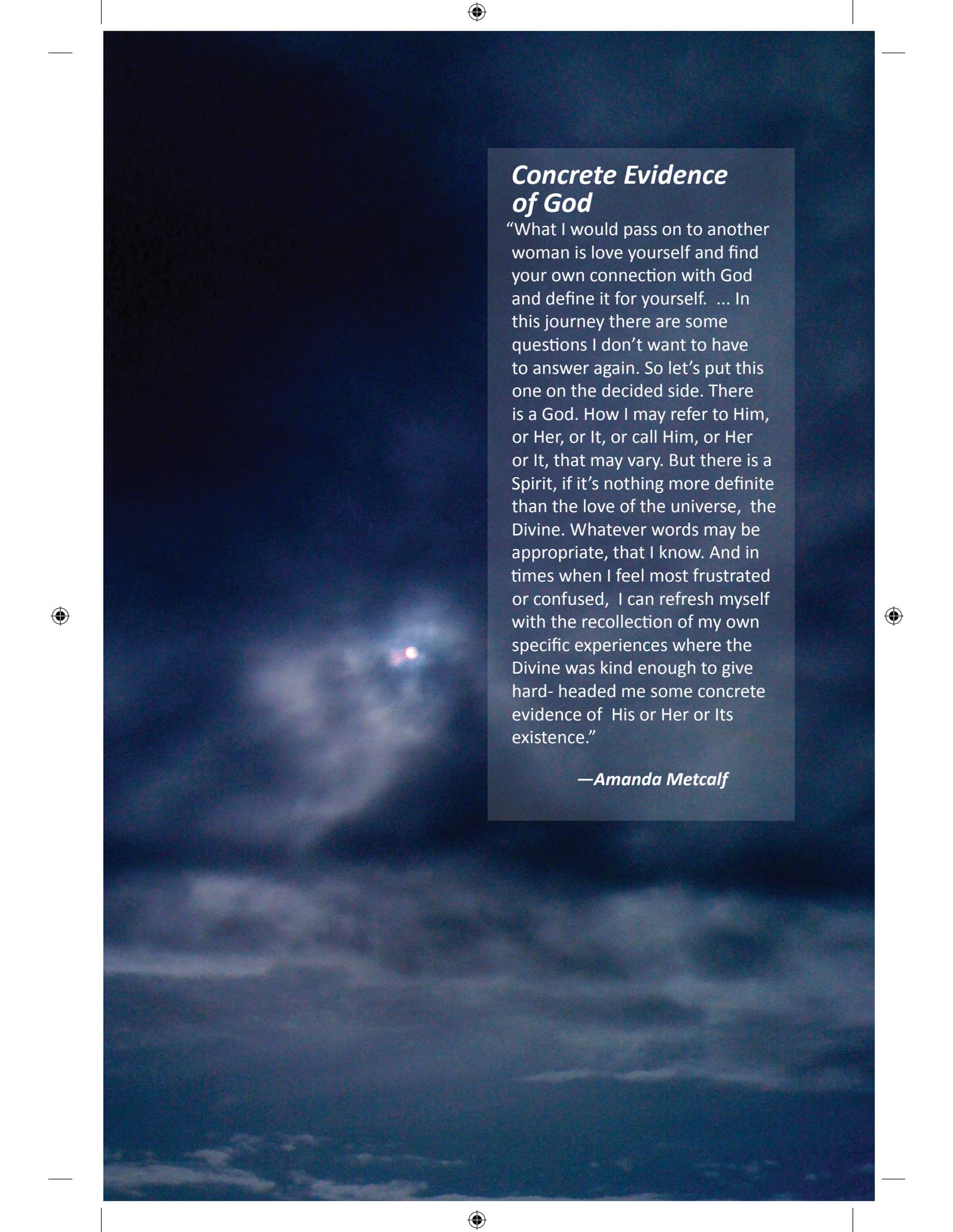
around 18 he went to a pawn shop and he saw a ring like this only it was silver and he got it. He thought it brought him luck.”

“He went to New York and my father did have a very lucky life. When he met and married my mother, he had one made for her, only in gold. Now everyone has one. And it turns out – he didn’t know it - but every symbol on this ring is a symbol of long life and good fortune! It’s the crab, it’s the eternal robe, it’s the dolphin; it’s just like a magic ring. Not that my life has been so easy, but I do feel very lucky!”

Ann was raised Catholic and did not know until she was adult that her grandparents actually were Jewish. “It was a big lie,” she said. “And it was a very difficult and complicated matter to figure everything out once the truth was known. My parents had believed that was the best thing to do. I went to Catholic boarding school and I was almost 50 years old before I knew my father’s family came from Poland. He told us they came from Alsace-Lorraine. It was kind of a clever choice, because who knows anyone from Alsace-Lorraine?”

“It had a huge effect on me. Some friends in San Francisco invited me when I was about 46 to go to temple with them. When I walked in, the first thing I noticed was I looked like the people there. Growing up, I so wanted to look like the other kids. I was aware somehow that I looked different. I tried really hard to adjust my appearance in every way that I could. I tried to be more athletic, like the kids I grew up with. When I went into that temple, I remember thinking, ‘I look like these people!’ It’s kind of weird.”

“My spiritual connection is ridiculously important. I believe it is pretty easy to keep in touch with people you love and talk to them when they die. It’s almost like it’s just past a veil somewhere. And I ask them to send me messages. The last year of my dad’s life I had spent a great deal of time with him, because my mom was gone and he really needed my presence. After he died and I was pretty unhappy for a while. This little desk was in his room. I brought it back here with me and I had taken the contents of the desk out. One day I was feeling pretty low and I asked him as a spirit. I said, ‘Dad, I need to know that you are OK and I need you to send me a message and it cannot be subtle. I need to know!’ I had a box of stuff from this desk and maybe no more than 10 minutes later I picked it up and I flipped it into this desk and this card pad flipped over. I had asked him to tell me you’re OK and I flipped it over, and this is what it said - “Ann, call her, I’m OK.” I figured that was one of the best messages I ever got.” Some of my friends don’t believe this at all. I have friends who think when you’re dead, you’re gone and it’s over. I say to them, ‘If I die before you, I say keep a heads up. You’ll be hearing from me!’”



Concrete Evidence of God

“What I would pass on to another woman is love yourself and find your own connection with God and define it for yourself. ... In this journey there are some questions I don’t want to have to answer again. So let’s put this one on the decided side. There is a God. How I may refer to Him, or Her, or It, or call Him, or Her or It, that may vary. But there is a Spirit, if it’s nothing more definite than the love of the universe, the Divine. Whatever words may be appropriate, that I know. And in times when I feel most frustrated or confused, I can refresh myself with the recollection of my own specific experiences where the Divine was kind enough to give hard-headed me some concrete evidence of His or Her or Its existence.”

—***Amanda Metcalf***