

CC and Michael

Michael Radford was born and has lived most of his life in Northern California and now resides in the Denver area with his wife, CC Leigh. He majored in psychology as an undergraduate, later earned an MBA, and currently develops wind energy projects in the Western United States. Michael credits the Waking Down teachers and community with catalyzing the self-realization he'd sought for 30+ years. The result has been an ever-deepening peace and joy, right in the midst of the messy, mysterious paradox of divine human life.

CC grew up in Massachusetts but found her true home in the West where she has lived for the past 25 years, both in California and in Colorado where she currently resides with her husband Michael and their two cats, Gracie and Bodhi. Her first spiritual teachers were her many dogs, who taught her to be present in her body, to seize the moment, and most of all, to keep her heart open. She credits her years spent as a dog breeder/trainer/animal behaviorist with honing her ability to observe well, listen deeply, and understand beyond words, skills she now uses in her work as a senior teacher of Waking Down in Mutuality. In addition to providing guidance and support to individuals and groups, she has rekindled her love of gardening and hiking in the Rockies, while continuing to explore the unique qualities of awakened human life.

A WAKING DOWN LOVE STORY.

(CC's story is in regular type; Michael's is in italics.)

“Dancing in the fire” pretty well describes our journey together. It all started in 2004 at the Transfiguration Retreat in Estes Park. Michael was a participant in a small group I led, one of those uniquely synergistic groups where everyone seems to really serve one another's process and the heart connections quickly deepen. I could not help noticing Michael: a beautiful but very broken-hearted man, who came to each

group meeting resolved to reveal yet another of his (in his opinion) most shameful aspects. Every day he arrived tense and hurting, and by the end of group left more relaxed, growing ever-more radiant as the week progressed.

By the time I arrived at Estes Park in May, 2004, I was falling helplessly, at an ever-accelerating pace, into the depths and heart of my flaws and brokenness. I'd been participating in the Waking Down work for about eight months. The deep holding and greenlighting of the WD teachers and community had gradually produced a profound relaxation in me around all of the traits and qualities of my personality that I had previously spent my entire adult life striving mightily to fix, change, improve, or even annihilate. The man (me) that CC sat with in our small group somehow knew, with quiet certainty, that when he'd spoken every last terrible truth about what was in his mind and heart, he would be free.

As a single-woman Waking Down teacher, doing an intensive event like this had its own special “burn,” since I longed to be met by a worthy partner but was constrained by our ethical policies from acting on any impulses I might feel toward any of the participants. But Michael got my attention. His daily confession of his “sins” wasn’t your typical courtship behavior, but it was like catnip to a kitten as far as I was concerned. I could not help but admire his great courage in so freely revealing so much about himself.

At the end of the week, Michael approached me and asked if I might be interested in spending some time together after the retreat, to see what potential there might be for us romantically. My heart leapt at the idea, but I had to be very cautious about moving forward. Since we were both single and unencumbered, my main concern was that Michael be well-supported and not under undue influence from any power differential between us. We consulted with our support teams, including Michael’s teacher, my teacher-peers, and Saniel, and found that there was a consensus that Michael was strong in himself and ready to enter into relationship if that was his wish.

The events that precipitated dropping into my “rot” to a most profound and irrevocable degree had resulted from the break-up of my marriage in May, 2002. For the first time since my teens, I spent the next two years alone, without even a hint of a romantic relationship in my life. The first year or so was the most lonely and painful I’d ever experienced. But there came a moment, sitting in the desert one evening at sunset, where I somehow embraced

solitude and became, myself, the only companion I needed. So, when I met CC, while there was some subtle interest in her as a woman, the old, familiar feelings of being smitten and totally absorbed in her as the be-all and end-all of my existence were strangely absent.

We spent a magical week together driving and exploring the Colorado Rockies in the springtime. Only later would we establish that Michael had had his Second Birth during that pivotal retreat, gaining a reprieve from his habitual way of being and opening his heart to himself, to life, and to another human being. I suppose our relationship got a boost from that, with the temporary ego-displacement that often accompanies the Second Birth leaving Michael susceptible to an infatuation that might not have a basis in reality. But given where we are today, I can safely say we had what it takes to build a real and lasting relationship.

It was, indeed, magical. In retrospect, I recognized that, during this time, I was literally being the peace and bliss which I had sought for over thirty years. My mind was quiet, and my heart was so open and full that it often ached in the most deliciously painful way. Brief encounters with a waiter or check-out clerk were profoundly moving. There was no fear, no pain, no future...just this, in this moment. The glorious Rockies and the lovely, enlightened lady I was sharing them with were an ongoing delight. I was moved to tender, joyful tears more times than I could count.

Yet the road from there to here has not been an easy one.

By the end of that week we decided to take a bold step: Michael would leave California and we would get a place together in Colorado. Before I knew it, we were setting up house in a sweet apartment at the western edge of Ft. Collins, looking out to the foothills of the Rockies. At the age of fifty, after being divorced for sixteen years, I was in love with a man I truly admired and respected, to whom I wanted to be committed for the rest of my life.

Within weeks Michael's conditioned self began showing up as it got triggered by any number of things I did or said. And (to be fair) I, too, was triggered by Michael at fairly regular intervals. We did our best to ride those upheavals, stay in communication, and keep finding one another. Through it all I was aware of a deep bodily "yes" toward Michael that persisted no matter what was happening on the more obvious levels of our interacting. I simply felt better with him than without him. I'm not so sure what Michael was feeling: I think he found me frustrating and disappointing and wished I would just get over those things that made me sad or unhappy, so he didn't have to experience those feelings himself.

The transcendent “vacation” in the wake of my Second Birth gradually drew to a close. My mind became more and more active (although, in the interests of accuracy, it’s never returned to anything like its old, dominant role in my awareness). Living with a woman again was perfect, in terms of launching me expeditiously and deeply into my version of the infamous “Wakedown Shakedown.” One powerfully conditioned element that came up within a couple of months was my profound fear of losing love. CC traveled to Seattle to teach a workshop, and I went through several days of personal hell, filled with jealousy and fear. That passage lasted 4-5 days and totally sucked while I was in it, but it then vanished and hasn’t reappeared since. Less powerfully felt, but more intractable, were the feelings CC triggered in me of being thwarted in my attempts to please her, to make her happy. I also responded to what I perceived to be her perfectionism by often interpreting it as invalidating my fundamental competence.

Although I was basically delighted with our new relationship, and welcoming of the opportunity to learn and grow together, I continued to feel unhappy at times, or sad, or dissatisfied with some aspect of my life—including Michael sometimes. I didn’t mind these feelings, particularly, having learned that they are just some of the ways I experience my life. But I felt Michael’s frustration with my discomfort and felt increasingly pressured to “take control of my life” as if I ought to be able to be more positive or happy. On one hand I figured he was trying to be supportive of my wellbeing, but it felt more to me like I was being told to not feel what I was feeling. It was as if the more he pushed me to “be happy” the more some aspect of me insisted on being the opposite. I didn’t want to be controlled or made to deny any part of myself. In truth, I didn’t really expect Michael, or anyone, to “make me happy.”

My mom was a young mother, giving birth to me when she was only nineteen and winding up with four children by the time she was twenty-four. She was probably over her head with so much to handle, and her frustrations came out as controlling anger, which was really scary to the sensitive kid I was. My survival strategy in the face of her anger was to do whatever it took to make her happy. I became incredibly attentive to her emotional state, and at the first hint that she was displeased, I’d launch into my repertoire of “make Mommy happy” behaviors. This way of being and operating carried over into my adult life and every one of my romantic relationships. “Who I was” was the man who could make any woman happy if I set my mind to it. At the time CC and

I met, that deeply-conditioned self-identity was still present, and my inability to produce that result consistently with CC caused me considerable pain and was the source of recurring upsets for me in our relationship.

I tried to convey to Michael that I didn't hold him responsible for how I was feeling and that I was fundamentally okay no matter what the current mood state was, but that didn't seem to be sufficient. As our romantic relationship failed to bring the fabled happiness we both subconsciously wished for, it felt to me as if Michael entered a slow-motion sulk that wouldn't quit. He became unavailable in every way, uninterested in being helped by anyone, no energy for trying any techniques or anti-depressants, and unavailable to process anything that turned up in our relationship. Weeks turned into months. I felt totally helpless.

This period that CC speaks of occurred concurrently with my giving up my lifelong smoking. Nicotine had always served as a buffer from feeling, and with that gone, I dropped rather precipitously into a deeply gray, sometimes black place. Nothing mattered. Life held no attraction, including, sadly, my relationship with CC. I was clear, in the midst of this, that my state of being had nothing whatsoever to do with her or our relationship. It was, I recognized even then, simply a stark, inescapable encounter with the part of myself that I had most feared—and always stridently resisted—the simple recognition that life has no intrinsic meaning or purpose. As I dropped ever further into that encounter, I became, in my own experience, pretty much unavailable on most every level. I increasingly saw myself as unfit to be in an intimate relationship.

The teacher in me did her best to simply hold Michael with patience and understanding. But the woman in me had other ideas, and she grew restless and dissatisfied and about ready to bite his head off (if you know what I mean). She (I) felt impelled to call him out, challenge him, get a response of some kind. She wasn't interested in being a saint. She wanted a partner who would engage with her and be real with her, who was in his body, not languishing in a spiritual malaise. Michael and I had agreed when we started our relationship that we would be equal partners, not teacher/student. He said he wasn't looking for a teacher but for a real woman and mate. So the woman in me had to speak her truth, as risky as it was.

It was risky because there was no way to know what would happen, how Michael would respond. To my horror, my request for Michael to show up more in relationship precipitated his decision to leave the

relationship and return to California.

Leaving CC was difficult in the sense that it violated the deeply conditioned part of me that believed I should always put the needs of others ahead of my own, and that I should avoid causing pain at all costs. But I was clear that my presence, given my condition, was a constant and growing source of pain for CC. I really could foresee no end to my profound malaise, and although I knew CC wasn't ready to give up on us, I just wanted to be alone.

I couldn't believe it. I was shocked to the roots of my being. I knew we had problems, but I was convinced we could make our way through the Core Wound of our relationship to the other side, to the birth of something real, deep, profound. I was still in touch with the "yes" I felt toward Michael, and my heart had so enfolded him that now I felt as if I was ripped asunder, kicked by a mule, mortally wounded. Within less than a week, he had packed his things and left, and I walked around for days, then weeks, in a fog of pain. It was the Christmas season, and everywhere I turned there were sentimental touches that sent shards of hurt through me. I was in danger of bursting into tears whenever I passed a rack of greeting cards in a store. I was a wreck.

He seemed to do it so easily, saying "no" to what we had and walking away. From California he phoned every few days to check in on the poor wounded one, as if he was totally fine (the smug bastard!) and I was the only one with problems. That confused me: If he was done with this relationship, why did he keep calling? I double-checked with him: Is it over? Do you not love me anymore? He said, no, he didn't love me. I said we had to stop talking, because it was causing me even more pain. So we took a break for a while, but then I found that I couldn't put it down. I had too much backed up anger which finally came to the surface and demanded to be heard. He said he wanted us to remain "friends," but in my book friends take responsibility for the pain they've caused, and I hadn't heard any of that from Michael. If he wanted my friendship, he was going to have to hear me and feel me and get me, even if it was only to bring a full and final end to our romance. So we got on the phone again, and I told him what it was like to be abandoned and betrayed, to have the one person I most trusted to be in mutuality with me bail out and leave me hanging, alone and unmet. His leaving also brought on a re-experiencing of my father's betrayal when he abandoned our family early in my childhood, compounding the devastation of Michael's present-time walk-out. I let him see how shattered I was and spared him no feelings.

Something happened then. As if the dry, dead husk of the old conditioned Michael finally tore open and began to bleed. All the uncried tears began to seep out of the cracks, and Michael “got” the real, raw pain of his betrayal, letting it in where it could touch his shriveled soul and begin the healing process. At least that’s how it seemed to me. I felt how truly sorry he was for the way he hurt me, and I got how his apparent smugness was his way of trying to defend himself from crushing guilt at not being able to be there for me.

I can’t really say when or how things began to shift after my return to California. Although I was free of the ever present reminder of my failure to meet CC and show up in our relationship that her physical presence was, I couldn’t bring myself to totally cut off communication. The occasional phone calls were the best I could muster, and as down and dead as I still felt, I wanted to make myself available in that small way for there to still be some relationship. When she was finally able to fully express her anger and sadness and pain at my leaving, it did, somehow, cut through the cloud of indifference that had surrounded me for many months. It landed, and perhaps that was the beginning of the end of that dark passage in my Second Life.

In that moment, I became willing to consider trusting him again. It’s not that I trusted him, I didn’t. No way could I trust him. In fact, I now knew beyond a doubt that he was capable of hurting me in the most devastating way a man can hurt a woman. But if I was really honest, I knew that any man at any point could do something similar. Sure, some would stick it out longer than Michael did, but the betrayal wasn’t only about Michael leaving me, it was about the betrayal of trust and honesty and intimacy, a betrayal that we are all capable of, and that we all do whenever we aren’t able to face what we don’t want to see about ourselves. Michael was a flawed person, rendered impotent in the face of a wholesale Shakedown that was reducing him to ashes of his former self. While I could not admire him for leaving me, I could respect that he had to honor the imperative of his soul to allow himself to be stripped down to essence, a process he could not compromise on to shield me from excruciating pain and loss.

Michael’s willingness to really let in my experience paved the way for me to let in his: the impossible situation he had faced as he found himself unable to show up in relationship. He could continue living with me in Colorado, where I would continue to feel rejected by him because he couldn’t pony up any juice for relating, or he could leave in the hopes that a clean break would be less painful in the long run. A real no-win situation.

I grieved deeply for the early sweetness that had been lost, and for the loss of the naïve trust that I had extended to Michael at the beginning of our relationship that I would never be able to feel again. I was sobered by how bloody difficult it is to simply love another, even when both are in their Second Life and supposedly conscious and awake. I felt wounded, weary, and afraid to open up again.

By the time CC and I met, I had already confronted the ugliest and most powerful of my broken zones. I had been them, acted on them, ruined my marriage, destroyed trust and any vestiges of self-respect or self-worth I had. I had met the dark beast, and he was me. I had recognized, on the other side of my profound self-disillusionment, that I was incapable of being other than I was being. So, I didn't stay with CC because, fundamentally, I didn't want to be there then. And I didn't begin to rekindle our relationship, for my part, because of anything CC wanted or didn't want. I did a damn fine job, in my view, of being utterly self-attentive and self-centered. I was literally incapable of doing otherwise.

The reawakening of our relationship, this time on a sobered, realistic—and sustainable—basis, remains something of a mystery to me. We just kept communicating, speaking our respective truths. Neither I, nor, I think, CC, were trying to “get back together.” We were simply honoring our human selves and the “other.” Somehow, affinity and affection deepened, and our connection strengthened in a most natural, if, at times, improbable way. Friendship and emotional intimacy developed organically, often in the midst of raw candor.

There was something else this time that was different from past breakups. This time, I had no illusions that I could replace Michael with a “better someone.” I didn't see our problems as personal so much as due to the human predicament and how all the garbage of a lifetime comes up and gets in the way of being intimate. I couldn't wipe away my conditioning no matter how much I wanted to, and I knew Michael couldn't either. I couldn't guarantee I wouldn't cause him pain. And that sucks.

What we could do, we did. We kept talking, kept revealing to one another what it was like in our reality. We both acknowledged that when all was said and done, there was still this inner “yes” based on nothing much—even though it didn't, perhaps, make sense to anyone looking from outside at the wreckage of our relationship. Nevertheless, it felt like enough. Michael seemed more available and willing to show up and participate in the dance of relating, and in response I rekindled my willingness to take on the risk of loving, knowing full well that I could get

hurt again. The alternative was to stay safely out of relationship where I would not be challenged, would not have my faults exposed, and where I would only have half a life. That's a trade-off I'm not willing to make.

I don't think I know much about man-woman relationship. I think I have a few insights about what makes women tick and what might work to facilitate a nurturing relationship, but whether I act on that little bit of learned information seems largely not under my control. In the end, as in virtually every other area of my life these days, I just try to navigate down the river of Michael's life with some candor and compassion, and a little bit of grace. On one level, I truly don't need a relationship with a woman (or maybe even want one). But I seem to keep choosing CC as my partner and the center of my life. If she were gone, I'm convinced you'd find me in a small stone hut deep in the desert of Southeastern Utah...alone, in solitude.

Have I said I love this man? God, how I love him with every fiber of my Being! He is my true and worthy partner, and I am forever grateful that I found someone who can and does meet me in the places that count—in being real, authentic, honest, and available—and in profound, passionate intimacy.

We spent a year in a long-distance relationship, commuting between Colorado and California, rediscovering our ability to play together and our comfort in one another's presence. Michael found work in California, and began suggesting I might want to join him there, but I confess I was reluctant to leave Colorado and the wonderful mountains I love. While not quite back together, living-wise, we were quite "together" in our hearts. I was looking forward to some happy-ever-after time, time I felt was well-earned after weathering the difficulties we had gone through.

Fate had a different plan, however. On March 1st, 2007, Michael phoned me from his doctor's office barely able to speak as he told me through fearful tears that he had just been informed that he had cancer and his liver was "riddled with tumors, too many to count." In a flash, my happy-ever-after dreams were wiped off the slate.

Moving faster than I had ever moved before, I booked the next flight out to California and got there by evening, to hold my beloved in my arms while the tears streamed from our eyes. How could this be happening? Hadn't we already paid enough dues? This time it felt like a betrayal by God, by Being, by life maybe. Who knows? It just hurt like hell. The more I let myself love Michael, the more this hurt. Every bit of him was precious to me: his voice, his hands, his strong muscles, and those eyes, those beautiful eyes. How they would bore into my soul so

deeply, so brightly, so tenderly! How could I ever see them again without this horrible overlay, this refrain that says he's going to leave me again, and soon? No matter how long he lives, he's going to leave me too soon and I'm going to be cursed to live without the one person whose very existence is life to me. How can I walk this next phase with him? And, Oh God, how will I ever walk through life without him? It's too soon to be facing this end game. I want my happy ever after!

The preliminary diagnosis was adenocarcinoma—the “bad,” usual kind of pancreatic cancer—and the associated prognosis was that I had 90 days to live. I was graced within hours of the news with a profound serenity and acceptance. There was no fear of dying, no regret, and no sadness for myself. Life became incredibly simple and focused. What I was solely focused on was the grief and fear of all the people who loved me. It was going to be easy for me. Once the pain cranked in, so would the opiates, and I'd make it through to the other side without too much discomfort, I hoped. But I'd be leaving CC behind, and my parents and sisters and extended family and many friends and Waking Down brothers and sisters. My heart opened profoundly, and embraced and held those who courageously started bringing their pain and grief to share with me.

Through some strange twists of fate, Michael's cancer turned out to be a fairly slow-growing kind. Because it has already metastasized, it can't be “cured,” but there are things the doctors can do to slow it down, keep it at bay as long as possible. Together Michael and I entered the strange world of being a cancer patient and partner, learning everything we could about cancer and how to treat it. I grieved long and hard for the lost potentials—for the carefree days I would never know again, for all the things we would now never do, for the forced shift in priorities, for the rude way we have been forced to confront our mortality, stripped of the comforting illusion of having plenty of time yet.

Still, this disease is also an ally. It forces me to stay in the present far more than I would otherwise, because I have no refuge in the future. My life is here, now, today, with my lover who is here now today. I do not know when I will hear the dread words, “It's growing again” or “Michael doesn't have long now,” but I know they're out there waiting for me to catch up with them, on some sunny day when life is doing its thing and I've maybe forgotten to be afraid for a moment...

So that's the paradox. Death stalks us and we know it. Right now we're alive, and in the strange way of life, we have to do all the many mundane things one does in order to live as if life were going to continue

for a long time. Which it might. Or might not. Some part of me wants to grab Michael and run away to fulfill our wildest imaginings, now, before we can't. But then I yield to the fact that we need to be "responsible" because, hey, he might live many years yet, and after all, we need a place to live and food and gas in the gas tank. Living this way is different than anything I have encountered before or expected to be facing. I don't know how to do this.

But death is stalking all of us anyway, so is it really all that different now? It's easier not to think about it, but none of us know when we're going to check out of this life. That's the gift here: Michael and I have to think about it and make our peace with it, because it isn't going away.

It's still easier for me than those who love me and really want me in their lives. CC took many months to begin to make some peace with the prospect of my "premature" death. For much of that time, I'm a bit ashamed to admit that I often wasn't very understanding. Having been told that I'd be dead in three months, and then learning that I might live for years, maybe even many years, life became a gift. Not, I need to say, in the classic, I'm-so-grateful-for-each-moment-of-life way, but simply that I've gotten a much better deal than the one I thought I'd paid for back then. Coupled with my long, profound encounter, and ultimately, relaxation into the truth of "life is empty and meaningless," the mysterious passage that ensued in the wake of being told I would be dead very soon has left me simply...here.

Right after I came to California that fateful March, Michael asked me to marry him and I said yes. We kid about it now: At that point he was given to think he might only have weeks to live, so it wasn't too much of a commitment on his part. Over the following months, we occasionally revisited the topic. It took me a long time to get to a place where I felt I might be able to hold both the thought of a happy wedding and the grief I felt about Michael's cancer at the same time without coming completely undone. But then I found it somehow, the resolve and the ability to be happy in spite of cancer, in spite of the new limits of our life together.

Again and again, I marvel that this can be so. That the terror of losing my beloved can recede and the appreciation for each day can rise to the foreground of my awareness. Little bursts of spontaneous appreciation crop up without warning. Delicious lovemaking leaves me sated and happy. My work engages me and my life feels meaningful, and lo and behold, Michael reports something similar for himself. Somehow his long slide into "empty and meaningless" sufficiently released that

pattern, allowing him now to explore what matters to him, and what he wants to do with the time he has.

On June 22, 2008, Michael and I had a delightful outdoor wedding in the Sierra foothills, surrounded by family and friends whose eyes were brimming a bit with tears of appreciation that they could share our joy and hold us close a little bit longer. There's nothing like a death scare to make life, Oh, so fervent and precious. Don't you think?

Many years ago, I recall reading Don Juan's admonishment to Carlos (Castaneda) to be aware of Death, floating behind and slightly off to one side, always. I've been blessed with that awareness. CC and I, quietly, day after day, abide frequently in: just this. She is my treasure, my partner, my lover, my friend. Frankly, I work at staying alive in large part because she wants me around. It seems a small thing to do for the one you love.