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His own order: A self-appointed monk escapes a violent past and finds stability and healing in the Valley

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It is 5:45 a.m. in the city of Northampton. For all intents and purposes it is still night. The street lamps on Conz Street are still beaming down; the headlights of a lone car flicker in the distant chill.

This is mid-morning, however, for Samana, a 51-year-old self-described monk living in public housing. He has been up since 4. Samana has been sleeping the 9 p.m. to 4 a.m. shift for some time now, soundly, in fact. It's a serene departure from a former life invaded by night terrors, insomnia and pervasive images of the violence he grew up with on the streets and in the dark bedrooms of Jersey City.

Northampton is his home now, and will be for the rest of his days - literally. In July, Samana took a "vow of stability," along with his attendant, Sacredlittle, 23. They intend to never set foot on plane, train, boat or automobile. They will never travel or go on vacation, and will not leave the city's borders, ever, unless it's by foot to a neighboring town.

The vow is a reaction to an overly mechanized society that accelerates stress and poisons the soul, Samana says.

"I will live and die here," he says, and he is not one to be doubted. Samana is tall, about 6 feet 2 inches, lean as a Louisville Slugger, with long, wavy blond hair. He still speaks in the insistent Scorsese-like cadence of his Jersey City beginnings, a place he describes as "thousands pressed together in a 10-mile zone of poverty."

Poverty is foremost on the mind of this monk, flutist, poet and artist. He has dedicated his life to relieving it. In warmer months, he and his followers, numbering six or seven and known simply as the Northampton Group, haul four shopping carts full of leftover produce from farmers markets to a table set up at the McDonald House, where he lives, and distribute it free to residents there. Up to 150 people have shown up at one time to receive food and even some tips on how to prepare it. He and Sacredlittle put up fliers all over town asking for secondhand furniture, clothing, etc., which they then give to those who ask.

"It's not building community; it's being neighbors," he says, talking often about the "religion of us."

Samana grew up as Eddie Baratta, the eighth in a family of nine kids, slapped around, he says, by an eternally angry father who was also a cop.

"He didn't like children and he had nine!" says Samana of his father. He counts denial of access to food and the bathroom, as well as a brother handcuffed to a bed among his memories. "As one of the younger ones, I could see the other kids' mistakes and what would get them hit on the head, but then you'd spill your milk and BAM!"

At age 13, Samana bought an old nickel flute from a guy in an alley for five bucks. He taught himself how to play it in the wild style of Rahsaan Roland Kirk, and his father, he says, slammed him against a wall for "playing that black crap."

But the memory that haunts him most and has informed the rest of his life is the 1984 murder of John, his best friend and brother. John lived a fast, hard life and met his end when two toughs threw him down an elevator shaft at the age of 27.

"He had an athlete's body, the best jump shot in Jersey City, but he lived on the street," Samana says.

In his "Book For John," published by MotherJill Press, Baratta writes: "I wanted to come back, Brother, and visit your grave. They should have buried you in the park where, one dark night, you mugged an old man and wore his Yankee cap until morning, when, beneath a tree, police arrested your nearly frozen, stoned-out body. Saved by the very men who beat you."

Baratta quit drinking and drugging immediately after his brother's death, and worked with the down and out in New York's Bowery and in Boston's Combat Zone for the next 10 years. He worked with people like himself, like his brother, who he thought he could save.

"We have a system that keeps so many people in so many places," he says. "In no time, you can go from renting a place to renting a lousy place to sleeping under the bridge.

"I worked with a lot of people that had been cast aside; more men than I can count I held in my hands - one guy died behind the L Street Bath House," he says.

Samana earned a master's degree in English from the University of Massachusetts Amherst, so he had some familiarity with the Valley, but he did not pick Northampton because of its Paradise-on-Earth reputation; it just happened to be the place he was when he decided to dedicate his life to stability. Samana landed here, pretty much involuntarily, in 1997, at the lowest point in his life, at the tail end of a failed marriage, unresolved issues of violence and rage clinging to his every pore. He sought help, received services, and, as he puts it, "broke down and broke through."

Then he set about changing his life. By 2003 he had taken his last ride in a car.

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Baratta's journey toward monkhood began soon after. Basing his beliefs not on any one order, but an amalgam of Hindu, Buddhist, Trappist and Cistercian influences, Samana is bent on establishing a new religion in his adopted hometown.

Sacredlittle, then known as Sarah Albert, who grew up in Pennsylvania and went to Smith College, met Baratta at an exhibit of his artwork in Northampton.

"I was raised on Cheerios and Catholicism, and a lot of aggression," she says. She experienced violence at home, too, she says, and, like Samana, is estranged from most of her family.

Describing herself as a mendicant, she sleeps in several apartments in the city. Sacredlittle lived in India for seven months, but couldn't find a teacher at the level she needed.

"I felt such a disconnect," she says. "When I met Samana I really found what I needed. He teaches me in every aspect of my life. He teaches me how to understand the language of the people I came from. I feel so called to have this relationship."

Celibacy is part of the vow each has taken. "I need to have a deeper role with this body," Sacredlittle says, calling her relationship with Samana "a profundity of intimacy; nonsexual, involving all aspects."

She calls him "the great balancer."

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Samana spends most of his highly structured days in "the sanctuary." It's a two-room McDonald House apartment filled with his original sculptures, which include an array of flasks holding plants in water while bursting through solid wood tables. There is also "takeaway art" from the nearby Mill River, a spiritual forest of free-standing limbs throughout his home, from the living room to the "cell" where he sleeps to the bathtub. It took three friends to help him haul one of the limbs to the sanctuary, where they shook glass and toads from it.

A river, which he calls the Capawonk, once ran where the McDonald House now stands. "I literally sleep

where the river flowed," he says. "Things hold, things talk to us."

The people he counsels, either his followers or just fellow tenants, drop whatever they can part with in a box by the door. That money is re-distributed to those who ask for it, such as a tenant who needed a suit to attend his mother's funeral. Samana also tries to channel their most painful experiences.

"People tell you, 'Oh, that happened? Get over it, put it in your back pocket.' Why? So it can explode in public at a meeting? The idea is not to suppress these memories - the idea is to learn to live with them, deeply relating to what exists. I want a relationship with what is, " Samana says.

The sanctuary is home to an enormous variety of herbs and roots, many harvested from nearby riverbeds. "I build teas all day long," he says.

He hangs out his laundry first thing every morning. With the quarters he saved from the laundromat he bought a silver flute to replace his old beat-up one, and plays it now with abandon.

Two large mirrors on the porch reflect sun into the sanctuary; the effect is stunning, as dawn's first rays flicker off walls, plants and sculptures like an awakening canyon.

"It makes things holy," says Samana, who legally changed his name last spring.

He has written poetry over half his life, some 30 years' worth. More than 200 of his poems have been published, appearing in Ploughshares, the Harvard Review, the Denver Quarterly and dozens of other journals. His poetry "readings" are nothing of the sort. He recites, or rather, performs his poems from memory, animated and wrenching, as he relives the often violent imagery. The effect is visceral.

His new book of poems, "Hand of Antiquity on a Modern Face," published by Firewall Publications, is due out this month.

He will do a service ritual, featuring his poetry and flute solos, at the Friends Meetinghouse in Northampton on Jan. 15. He was there last week practicing his flute. From a wistful composition called "Dorchester" to a fiery homage to his old neighborhood, "Sparrow Hill," the monk channels emotions from his earliest years. As he plowed through his emotional repertoire, Sacredlittle, sitting at his feet, said, "I'm just in it, just feeling such a dialogue, being a listener to such stories, such narratives."

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Although he has dedicated himself to a peaceful existence, Samana does get confrontational at times.

He has locked horns with the Northampton Housing Authority, mostly over issues relating to respect. Complaints from public housing residents of no hot water and a faulty garbage disposal last year led to alleged repeated incidents of harassment and discrimination, he says, and sarcastic asides from staff like "I'd like to stay and talk but some of us have to work for a living."

"They're not used to people speaking up; they have their own political notions of what public housing should be," says Samana, who has bombarded the authority with letters and phone calls requesting a hearing, which he got. He strongly suggested the staff take human relations training.

In a Gazette column shortly after this January hearing, former City Council President Michael Bardsley

called Baratta "one of the most self-actualized beings on the planet."

Samana takes advocacy for his fellow tenants as part and parcel of his vows. "The lack of education and health care is appalling. We need more public housing," he says. "I always get a kick around election time when the mayor comes over here with pizza. So many people here with diabetes and bad nutrition and they get pizza," he says with a laugh.

But if you need help, Samana is easy to find. Don't look for any websites or Facebook accounts, though. Just dial 584-8187. He'll get back to you.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said.

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