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A Woman's Guide to Wholeness

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As for me, I came to this interview thinking that I had no preconceived notions about women in boxing. After all, I'd only read about it briefly once, about a year and a half ago. Even discovering that this particular boxer brought to the table the distinction of having been involved in the sole bout in the history of modern women's boxing where a woman was seriously injured in the ring didn't throw a pall over my quest to understand what kind of women are choosing to fight and why they are doing it. But I was wrong. When Sumya (pronounced Suh-MY-ah) walked into the cafe for our appointment she had a child in tow. Her seven-year-old son, Matthew. Immediately I felt my perspective shift, and I knew this was going to be a very interesting chat.

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WOMEN'S BOXING:

A Feminine Perspective

by Crystal Wilk

Sumya Anani lives in the NOW. She lives messily, but also sumptuously. She thinks about the past at times, but many of the issues I addressed in our interview she'd never considered; she considers the future to be an unfolding process that should be reflected on, but never sets goals for herself that can't be modified as needed. She never contemplated the fact that one day she might be preparing for a World Championship Title fight in women's boxing.

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We ended up in her high-rise apartment, which looks no different than any other home with small children. The only telltale sign that there's a professional athlete in residence are the single pair of red boxing gloves hanging from a wall hook on the kitchen entryway. Sumya introduced me to Lovey, a tame white dove her trainer Barry Becker had come across in the wild a few days earlier and which hadn't yet been claimed by an owner. Lovey settled down for a while on Matthew's head, and Sumya commented that she'd looked up the word 'dove' in the dictionary, and was surprised and pleased to discover that besides describing a type of pigeon, the word dove is also applied to a person who promotes peace. "I like that. In a way I think it applies to me, because I like trying to help people understand that the same hands that can hurt, can also heal. I think that's promoting peace." That intrigued me coming from someone with a professional boxing record of eleven wins with seven knock-outs and no losses. We settled down on her couch while Matthew wrapped a white cloth around his forehead and played commando with his nerf gun.

EW - You've said that boxing was your way of telling people about the power of touch healing. Why?

Sumya - I think the question is more why

would I even choose boxing as a means of getting attention for my other interests. It wasn't like I intentionally said 'Ok, I'm gonna box so that I can tell people about healing touch.' It just happened.

I'd kept a journal for years and looking back over those years, way before I started boxing, I felt even then that there was something urging me to talk about all these kinds of healing that are now more commonplace. To a lot of people now it's nothing new. But there's so many people out there who are 50 years old and older who've never had a massage. Or they don't know what aromatherapy is. Within the (alternative healing) community we all know about these things, but there are so many others who don't, and I would say to myself 'Whoa! We're moving into a whole new age. Why wait on them to catch up?'

EW - But once you were in boxing you did realize that there was potential to use it to promote other purposes?

Sumya - I realized it more when I got into yoga, but saw I could apply it to boxing. Yoga is about balance. What goes up must come down. And where there's hurting there's also healing. If people know there's hurting going on why can't they also know that there's healing? That there is such a thing as healing and you can be an instrument of healing? I study massage therapy at MTTI. I studied Therapeutic Touch. Eventually I want to open some kind of healing center with yoga classes and various other things, or go in with somebody else. I'd love to study acupuncture. But right now I'm not able to focus on this part of my life because of the boxing.

EW - So let's talk about boxing. Why did you get into women's boxing? What drew you?

Sumya - It was my trainer, really. He told me for a year and a half 'you should do something with those muscles'. He finally convinced me when we were down in Jamaica and he showed me the *Sports Illustrated* article with Christie Martin and Deirdre Gogarty. It's been his dream for a long time to train a champion. He should have been a pro. He had the skill to do it, he just didn't have the time. And then he saw something in me and convinced me to try it.

EW - What's your training regimen like?

Sumya - I swim a couple times a week. I work out with weights six days a week. I hit the bag, but if I spar on a day I won't hit the bag. Three minute rounds, just like the guys, so I've got the wind. I run stairs. I don't run on the streets, but I run

sprints for wind. And there's yoga.

EW - What's the difference between men's and women's rounds?

Sumya - Women's rounds are two minutes long and men's rounds are three minutes long. But I train a three minute round because it gives me more wind and confidence.

EW - What was the difference between how you were trained and how some other women are being trained?

Sumya - Barry taught me to keep my head down and my hands up; defense is his big thing. To keep my chin down. He'd say I didn't need to look at her face, just look at the top of her shoulders and then I'd know where her head was. Because a lot of women are coming into boxing from karate and kick boxing where they hold their head and hands differently. I was fortunate not to have any of that prior experience coming in.

EW - The growing popularity of women's boxing still surprises a lot of people. Why do you think people don't expect a woman to be willing to get in the ring?

Sumya - I guess it's because it's not traditional. It's not something we're used to seeing. And anything new draws a little more attention.

EW - Have you considered the risk of injury?

Sumya - I've never thought about it a lot. Sometimes I think I can't be beaten just because I'm so scared when I get in there. I'm fighting for my life. That other woman could hurt me. If I were training in any other competitive sport, like swimming, maybe I wouldn't be as dedicated to my training. Maybe I'd blow it off sometimes. Because there's no fear in swimming. If you lose there's no fear of injury. But if you lose in boxing, my God. When I saw what happened with Katie Dallam I thought, 'Jeez. Something really could happen to me.'

EW - What is it like to be in the ring?

Sumya - Being in the ring is a walking meditation. I take it moment by moment. I'm very much in my head, so boxing and yoga are good for me. They help train my mind to focus. I say to myself 'This is a ten round fight. I need to be focused on



Sumya Anani vs. Stacey Prestage, September 1997

what my opponent's doing.'

EW - What are your emotions during a bout?

Sumya - I am scared to death. I really am. Sometimes I think 'God, what am I doing here?' I remember one of my first really tough fights, with an ex-world champion. I was sitting in my corner between rounds and I looked past my trainer and saw an exit sign over a door on the far side of the room, and for a split second I thought about how much I'd love to hit that door and leave. Why was I doing this? I question myself still. But it's like Eleanor Roosevelt said, 'You must face what you fear.' That's how you grow strong. For me to do this — and I know I'm not going to do it forever — it's knowing that if I can face this fear I can face any fear. I can do it. I did it.

EW - People often see Western sports as an outlet for male aggression. Now that women are entering these sports some people believe it's also an outlet for female aggression. Do you agree?

Sumya - No. I see it as an outlet for expression. It's an outlet for me to be active and stay in shape and defend myself. It's a good way for women to learn how to defend themselves. And that's probably what originally got me interested in it. People who study martial arts nurture the spiritual aspect of the physical ability, not simply focusing on the physical alone as we do here in the West. That's why you find Western athletes getting into trouble in bars, and abusing their wives. I heard a story once about a man in China who was some great martial arts master

and trained world champions. No one in his village ever knew how potentially deadly this man was because he never felt the need to use it. He didn't feel like he needed people to see his strength and fear him as a strong person. He was a peaceful man.

EW - Tell me about fighter's etiquette. What would you do if you really outclassed another fighter? Is there anything you can do? Looking back was there anything you could have done differently in the Katie Dallam bout?

Sumya - I never thought for one second that I was better Katie. She kept coming at me. If I'd knocked her down five or six times, then maybe I'd have thought differently. Now that I have more experience, when I get in the ring with someone I'm able to tell if I'm better than they are, and it would become a sparring round for me like I do in practice. But that's never happened. I haven't really had any fights where I've been better. If you know you're better you don't go for the knockout, you just keep them off you. If it's somebody who's not very good, they could still get lucky, so you just jab her and keep her away, or circle her. You wouldn't go off on her. I'd be really upset with everybody involved if such a fight was set up for me. At this point there's enough women in boxing that you can make a competitive fight.

EW - In late 1996 you fought a woman named Katie Dallam in a four round match. Katie ended up in the hospital with a brain hemorrhage and the story got national attention because she became the first woman in modern boxing to suffer such a severe injury. Let's talk a bit now about that fight and the events surrounding it. Katie Dallam had only trained about six weeks before her first fight. Was that abnormal?

Sumya - No, not at all at that time. For my first fight I trained three weeks. It's not like women would train consistently back then. They'd say 'Oh, I've got a fight. Let me train for 3 or 4 weeks', and then they'd take the fight.

EW - Many people don't know or don't remember that Katie was very physically fit. She'd been a kick boxer. She did a four year tour of duty in the Air Force. She ran half-marathons. She once entered the women's division of a Tough Man contest. She wasn't simply a rag doll that was thrown into the ring to be beaten senseless. She made a choice. Would you like to speak on this thought?

Sumya - This situation upset me because the whole story wasn't written up in the newspaper. When people came to ask me questions they had distorted views of the event, and I wanted people to know the whole story. There were a lot of things involved in the fight and prior to it, such as the car accident she was in. Yes, everything they reported was true, but it was only half of the story.

EW - Let's look at some of those discrepan-

cies. Katie was reported to be 26 when she was actually 37. She outweighed you by 35 pounds. The day before the fight she was involved in a car accident that put her trainer in the hospital. Yet you didn't find out about any of this until the day of the fight, during the official weighing in. What went through your mind?

Sumya - It really upset me when I found out. I mean, how simple can it be? How much does she actually weigh? It seemed like there was no reason for these discrepancies to happen. It seemed like a lot of politics. Instead of it simply being a matter of two athletes who wanted to compete it was made out, as her sister commented, to be a gladiatorial combat.

EW - Do you think these things may have happened to ensure that the fight went ahead?

Sumya - I don't know. I really can't answer that. It's possible, but you'd have to talk to the other people involved, like her trainer. They called my gym asking for a girl. They originally asked for somebody heavier than me. At the time there were a couple other girls there who were training, in the 155 to 160 pound class, but I was the only one who was ready because I'd been the only who was training consistently. So, it was me.

It's not even an issue of women's boxing, it's a women's issue with boxing. Whoever it is in the ring there's the possibility of getting hurt. That's what boxing is.

EW - Even though Katie said later that she doesn't blame you for what happened, and you both signed disclaimers, do you deal with other people who think you were deliberately trying to hurt her?

Sumya - I don't think any organization in boxing would think that at all. Because they understand what the sport is. You're getting in a ring with somebody who's going to be hitting you and you're going to be hitting them. I do think Katie's family was concerned by that aspect. If she'd been okay after the fight, I think nothing would have been said. If she'd only had a bloody or broken nose I don't think the gladiator angle would have appeared. There was a lot of anger over what took place, and I would have been angry too if my sister was a boxer and this had happened. But if my sister made the choice to do it I wouldn't feel like it was anything that I'd have been able to stop.

EW - Do you think this event came under scrutiny because people aren't as well-educated about women's boxing as they are about men's?

Sumya - It's not even an issue of women's boxing, it's a women's issue with boxing. Whoever it is in the ring there's the possibility of getting hurt. That's what boxing is. This is being set up as a

women's issue and I don't think there's a place for that. There've been men who've died in the ring. They get one little article and then it's history. But because this was the very first woman's injury it's probably charting the same course as men's boxing did when the very first man died. It was news. But now, people understand that this can happen.

EW - How has the bout with Katie Dallam affected you on a personal level?

Sumya - I think it's drawn me closer to the healing that I can do. And to the awareness of the possibility of injury on my part, being in the ring. It makes me think more, perhaps fires my fear a bit more than it would be otherwise. And it's given me compassion for not only Katie, but people in her situation, people like Christopher Reeve. Situations where you ask 'why?' and have no way of understanding. I don't have any right or any say in what the unfolding of Katie's life is to be, but I sometimes see her as a healer. I close my eyes and see her working in the field of healing. She's a healer right now. She's a counselor working with drug and alcohol patients who have head injuries. A friend of mine said she's making astronomical progress. I'm amazed.

EW - You considered quitting when you

found out what happened to Katie.

Sumya - When I first heard I thought 'Oh, my God.' I went to the hospital that Friday morning. I had candles, and I was questioning my part in what happened. I wrote a letter to her, probably ten or fifteen pages. I remember telling her even then that I felt she was being called into the healing arena. It's like I was trying to tell her not to take this situation for granted, however kooky that may have sounded at the time. I gave the letter to the family. I don't know if Katie's ever seen it.

EW - With all that's happened, why do you stay in boxing?

Sumya - When I go back and consider the way my whole present life came about, how Barry came into my life, how I got into boxing, despite what happened to Katie, I feel that the synchronicities that brought me into this sport are too real to walk away from. It was like hearing in my head, 'Okay. You have this skill. Why not see what you can do with it.' And I still can't say to myself that Katie's situation shouldn't have happened. Who am I to decide or to know what's best? I have talent in boxing, and if you have a talent I feel you need to use it. If you're a writer you need to write. If you're an artist you should create art. My trainer says I'm a natural. Why not see if

I can be champion of the world? Why turn away? Why look back five years from now and say 'Hey, I wonder if I could've been a champion?'

For me it's always been about insecurity. I always felt insecure. I always felt second best. I always felt like I couldn't do anything. For me to turn my back on boxing would be for me to continue doing what I've always done in the past. And I do not want to spend the rest of my life being insecure and wondering whether or not I could do it. I'm very drawn to teenagers. And sometimes I think that I should go back into the high schools and tell the teenagers 'I felt just like you feel now.' There's so much insecurity in high school teenagers, and especially in the girls. I don't think I could ever go back and live that part of my life again. And I don't want other people to feel like I felt. But this for me is not about proving anything to anyone else. I simply want to see what I can do. It's about proving it to me.

EW - You're about to face Christie Martin, the current world women's boxing champion, in a ten-round title match. Is this the culmination of what you set out to do when you entered the world of boxing?

Sumya - I've always taken it moment by moment, fight by fight. Now this moment is here, and I could come home a world champion. But for me this is only one more step to my goal. I fight this fight and then I jump back into training. I stay focused. Boxing is healing my self-esteem, healing my life of wondering about what I could have or might have done. Boxing helps me believe in myself. Helps me know that I'm the little engine that can, rather than being the little engine that couldn't. When I started boxing I had no idea that I had a chance to be a world champion. But here I am. And it's my wish that all women be the best that they can be, and never doubt themselves. Believe in yourself even if no one's ever believed in you. There are possibilities out there that you've never dreamed of. It's only a matter of how you see it. See what can be, not what's past. Don't limit yourself.

The interview was drawing to a close. In a few days, on November 13th, Sumya Anani was set to meet Christie Martin in a nationally-televised match in Las Vegas that was being promoted by Don King. As I left I wished her luck, made arrangements to speak with her about the outcome of the match when she returned, and went home to think about some of the things she'd said.

Postscript: The match between Sumya Anani and Christie Martin was called off by Martin only four hours before ring time due to illness. Sumya returned to Kansas City and continues to train, and her trainer Barry Becker is seeking to schedule Sumya as Martin's next bout. **EW**

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