

Shiner

MEET

Erin Keeley, Boulder, CO

Photos by:
Ben Duke
dukemediasolutions.com

When I opened my eyes, I was laying on the right side of my face on the cement outside my hotel room somewhere in deep South India, Tamil Nadu.

I remember the slow motion fall. I remember tunnel vision coming on. I remember how freeing that camel pose felt after sitting on airplanes and riding on a bus for days on end.

And then there was the day just before: darshan at the Tillai Kali temple in Chidambaram. Chidambaram is the big, badass Nataraja home temple. Kali holds space for the dancer Nataraja at the boundary of town. It was not the first time I had visited this place; this time I was floored by feeling Her and her big black eyes staring at me, seeing me, holding me. Her temple is backwards, inside out and a bit rebellious. When we walked through, instead of the typical pradakshina—which means to walk left in order to keep the deity to your right—we walked right.

Here she does not look like the Kali you might know in popular images. She doesn't have her tongue sticking out. She isn't trying to blatantly scare you. Instead she's wearing a white sari, head tilted to the side, as a loving mother might gaze at you. Her face, when it's not covered up, is benign. But she wears her blood on the outside. Her white sari is covered in red kum kum, looking like she's drenched in blood. Her beautiful face is caked in red and her eyes are covered in black. She's literally wearing her insides on the outside and just sitting there, owning it, fine with it. She's a reflection of this aspect of me, because that's just what the deities do. She told me that I am okay. I felt grounded freedom in my body as I witnessed her unapologetically revealing her gory imperfections with courage and love. These, of course, being my own gory imperfections.

I remember the next morning being totally overwhelmed. I had gotten on the plane to India with some heavy baggage: a heavy heart, shock of facing and having to swallow truths, and the impending doom of having to make decisions I did not want to make. I'd been keeping it in for quite some time. Long story short, I was in the middle of a divorce, a career shift, a shift of community, a figuring out of who I really was and finally, facing a complete shift in perspective of spirituality and understanding of life. I was worried about everything and everyone and I was ashamed of myself.

I got up early to do some asana. I recall waking up, feeling confused, not sure of what was bubbling up in me, waiting to be seen. I remember doing a camel pose and thinking, "I always get a head rush when I do this. Just stay in the pose, Erin, you're fine. Breathe. Get over yourself. The uncomfortable place is the sweet spot. Stay with it." And then . . . on the ground with a stabbing pain above my right eye that was rapidly swelling. And then the tears were given permission to roll.

Why did I talk myself into staying in a yoga pose all while I knew I was blacking out? Well, that's a good question. Why have I talked myself into staying in painful situations that I did not belong, into being someone I was not, pretty much for most of my life? All while showing up with fake smiles.

A few years ago I received feedback from a student in the



teacher training I was running: “You’re just too perfect!” I remember the desire to laugh and cry at the same time. Wow, doesn’t she know? My life feels like a complete mess! If only I could teach from a place of sharing my real life, my real fears, my real me . . . this is how I’d rather show up as a teacher. My desire was to be honest with her and to authentically connect with her; to let her know that her own imperfections were ok. And I realized none of that could happen until I could find a way to share my shadows, up front and center, without collapsing into a puddle of shame.



So there it was: A huge shiner that decided to walk all over the right side of my face on day three of a two week temple pilgrimage in South India with Dr. Douglas Brooks. It was my first ever shiner. The contrast was ridiculous. Jasmine flowers in my braided hair, gold jewelry, make-up, silk saris, laced-up temple behavior. Coming as my best dressed self to see the gods and let them see me, to receive darshan . . . to receive myself. I showed up with a big black eye. Half my face refined, half primal. Half light, half dark. Half sweet, half pain-in-the-ass. Half Erin . . . and half Erin.

When I stood in the first darshan line, I expected to be stared at. Or worse, that people would not look me in the eye out of horror. I expected the Tamils to look at me and wonder, “Who is beating her and why isn’t she too ashamed to show up here?” I wondered if I’d get denied access to some of the inner sanctums. I wondered if the pictures would end up on Facebook and, god forbid, my community would see how ugly and imperfect I really was. I wondered if they’d see that I’m not worthy to be teaching or to be a mother or, or, or . . . I wondered all of this.

But I stood up in that line. And nothing happened.

No one looked at me strangely. No one kicked me out. On the contrary, the Tamils welcomed me in, the divine welcomed me in, my friends stood by my side. I welcomed me in.

A few days into a very purple eye, it dawned on me: I didn’t need to cover up the shiner with makeup. I didn’t need to look away from people’s eyes. In fact, I didn’t need to do anything but show up. I could walk right in to see the divine, to see myself, to see others, all while my darkest self was written across half my face. It was an enormous relief just to wear it around. I had spent my whole life making myself awkward by trying to pretend that my shadows weren’t there and hoping no one would see them. Now, I could laugh at myself and others could relax with me and open up to me.

I wore that wound on my face and stood tall for two weeks. I made some of the best friends of my life. I went home brave and full, and followed through with some major changes in my life that required my walking through harsh judgments and doing what I needed to do anyway. No more hiding. No more talking myself into staying in boxes in which I could not fit all while my body gave way into pain.

If I’m going to be completely transparent, I actually missed that shiner by the time it was healed. It made it really easy to reveal my uglies. Now I have to do this on my own.

These days, even though it’s a work in progress, I love being able to look others in the eye, beyond the shame, blame, and guilt, long enough to feel something much, much sweeter. I know I have it in me to be able to deeply connect with others, which is all I’ve ever wanted to do anyway. If I look really closely, I see beyond the pain, below the wound, through the smoke of the sadness, through the light of the laughter, and into the fire of heart. There’s no doubt that our eyes reveal who we are. The question is: are we willing to see and be seen?