**SRMC Interview with Heather Sundberg**

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**Heather Sundberg** began teaching meditation in 1999, primarily to youth and families. Beginning her own meditation practice in her late teens, she has sat 1-3 months of retreat a year for over a decade. She has been Spirit Rock’s Family Program Teacher and Manager since 2001, and is a teacher for the weekly Women’s Class.

**Spirit Rock**: How did you first get to dharma practice?

**Heather Sundberg**: I started meditating when I was 17. I had no Buddhists or meditators in my family, but I grew up in Marin County, so I was sure to encounter meditation at some point or another! I started meditating because there was a tremendous amount of suffering in my life, particularly in my family situation, and then some of the ways that I coped with that suffering were totally unskillful and created even more suffering for me. Meditation was one of the most important things that saved my heart, and maybe saved my life actually, during those years.

It wasn’t until I was in my early 20’s that I started sitting retreats. One of the things that kept me coming back was that my mom got cancer. It took her a number of years to go through the process of dying. Spirit Rock was really important to me during that time. I could come here every week and find inner support, and also be in a room full of people who were caring and understanding. After she died, I went on my first retreat.

**SR:** Was that here at Spirit Rock?

**HS:** Yes, it was in 1999. I attended the New Year’s retreat. I’m a bit of an extremist, so I came out of that retreat knowing that I’d found gold, and I immediately signed up for the six-week retreat.

That was the first long retreat at Spirit Rock. At some point in the retreat I developed this yogi mind, and I was convinced that they had let me into the retreat by mistake, because I was so much younger than everybody else. I was 23, there was one 27-year-old, and then the next oldest person was probably 45. I honestly thought that they were going ask me to leave!

So that was my yogi mind. The retreat was an interesting experience because I fell so deeply in love with the practice— the forms, the teachings and the way they were being conveyed—and yet I was looking around thinking, “Where are my people?” And I’ve seen that ever since.

**SR:** That’s a good question. What are the faces of the next generation of the dharma?

**HS:** I really respect Jack (Kornfield) and others involved who understand that they need to take a risk with training those of us who are younger than anyone who has been trained before. There need to be people who are not just trained, but have experience under their belt when our senior teachers reach retirement. It’s exciting, and I think that it will bring both a different population and also a different expression of the dharma.

When Jack, Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg gotstarted, they were in their 20s and they all grew up in the dharma together. Now it’s time for another young generation of teachers to come in and bring up another generation of practitioners. There’s more sophistication in terms of being able to work with a diverse population of people. Then there’s also just our passion, our fire, which is totally natural in younger adults. I think what we’re offering is really balancing with
this more tempered wisdom and experience that the senior teachers offer, and that we need both.

**SR**: It seems like there is a different way of using language in the newer generation of teachers, even though the material being presented is basically the same. Do you feel that’s true?

**HS:** That goes back to the Buddha teaching in the vernacular of the people. If you’re sitting there with a group of 20-somethings, especially if they’re in a relaxed environment, you don’t have to use high-end language to get through to them! What I think impresses them is, “How real are you? How authentic are you? Can you get down in the muck with them?” It has a different face.