Stumbling Into Infinity

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An Ordinary Man in the Sphere of Enlightenment

Michael Fischman

New York

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If you do not change direction,
you may end up where you are heading.

— LAOZI (LAO-TZU)

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Prologue

"You're a very lucky man, Mr. Fischman," said the short, stocky ticketing agent as he squinted at his computer screen. "You must know someone who can work miracles." He typed rapidly on his keyboard. "For no apparent reason," he declared, "you've been upgraded to first class!"

He looked up with a big grin. Removing his reading glasses, he extended his arm and gave me my ticket. I smiled back and nodded my head, acknowledging that I knew I was lucky. But there was no time to explain. I needed to get to the plane.

In a few days, I would find myself in a giant dusty field in Bangalore, India. But I wouldn't be alone. Looking out at more than 2.5 million people over three days, I would be sitting on a stage with kings, presidents, movie stars, religious leaders from several faiths, and more than a thousand musicians (who had barely rehearsed). They would all be there for the Art of Living Foundation's twenty-fifth anniversary and the fiftieth birthday of its founder, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. It was nothing I could have imagined when I first met Sri Sri on that wintery day in 1979, when only a handful of people had even heard of him.

Now, I had boarded the plane, and could finally close my eyes. I was exhausted. I drifted into a sort of half-sleep, thinking about the long and unlikely journey that had brought me to this moment.

But my reverie didn't last long.

An attractive, middle-aged woman suddenly plopped herself in the seat next to me, banging my knee with her purse. Her perfume was sweet, and a bit overpowering.

"Do you fly often?" she asked, as she adjusted her skirt and made herself comfortable.

I am usually eager to meet new people, but that night I simply needed to keep my eyes closed. A flight attendant joined the conspiracy and interrupted my brief silence by reminding me to buckle up, and offering some warm roasted cashews and something to drink. My seatmate saw my open eyes as an opportunity.

"I have a real fear of flying," she explained, removing a pill bottle from her purse. "Well, it's not the flying itself," she said, clarifying her phobia, "it's taking off that really terrifies me."

She placed some pills on her tongue and washed them down with red wine. "I usually take Valium to help me relax when I fly," she explained. Speaking nervously, she asked, "What do you do for a living?"

"I help people relax and get rid of stress," I said, aware of the irony. But my answer felt incomplete. In any case, she was no longer listening.

She squeezed her eyes closed and sighed heavily, as the plane started rolling down the runway. Grabbing my arm, she moved closer. "I'm sorry," she said meekly. "I can't help myself. I don't want to die."

"Don't worry, we're safe," I assured her. And in a few minutes she fell asleep, clutching my arm.

I have often wanted to explain the life I lead more fully. But, in some ways, it is a life I barely comprehend myself, and certainly one I would never have predicted or even imagined for myself.

In fact, if you had told me when I was growing up that someday I'd write a book about the grace of an enlightened teacher, I wouldn't have believed you. For one thing, school was such a struggle that writing a book would have seemed impossible. But mostly, the idea of an enlightened teacher or guru was completely foreign to my Western upbringing.

Like many New Yorkers who identified themselves as belonging to the tribe of people known as the Jewish Middle Class, I grew up knowing the kind of future that would make my parents proud. I would have

a successful career as a lawyer or doctor, a home in the suburbs with a tree-dotted backyard, and maybe a swimming pool to relax in during the hot summer months. I'd have a beautiful wife who would shop at upscale malls, and two adorable children, each one the brightest and most popular in their class. Yet, over time, this destiny became increasingly less attractive.

Perhaps you could blame it on my generation. As a baby boomer growing up in the sixties and seventies, idealistic, revolutionary, and counter-cultural ideologies filled my head with hopes of a better world. After reading such popular books as *Autobiography of a Yogi,* by the Indian mystic, Paramahansa Yogananda, and *Be Here Now,* by psychologist and former Harvard professor Dr. Richard Alpert (better known as Ram Dass), I was more interested in attaining a state of nirvana and enlightenment than in studying for my chemistry finals and graduating from college.

I knew vaguely that in India and in many Eastern traditions the spiritual guru is a normal feature of family life. But, like many Westerners, I was generally independent-minded, and assumed that, in spiritual matters, most people found their own way. Certainly, there was nothing to suggest that I would someday become a friend to a great spiritual leader, much less the head of his U.S. organization.

I started writing this book as a way to answer the many questions I've been asked about the early days around His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. As someone who had an intimate seat at the beginning of a great spiritual movement, I wanted to convey some of the magic and mystery of those early years — little-known stories, private moments with Sri Sri (*Shree Shree*), and the extraordinary combination of wisdom and innocence I saw in him.

But looking back on the events that led me to Sri Sri, I began to see my life in a new light. The challenges and experiences were like puzzle pieces that started to fit together, and a picture emerged that I hadn't seen before. I had been a seeker of knowledge throughout my childhood and early adult life, believing, or hoping, that some truth existed that would melt away life's confusions and traumas. But on meeting

Sri Sri, my life turned upside-down. Eventually, I would come to the realization that, for me, love — unconditional love — was more fulfilling and transforming than finding truth.

As Sri Sri once said, "The great souls make you drink the water you are already carrying with you." It was life-changing to discover, during meditation, that joy and transcendence was actually something that was available inside me. Finding that it could be experienced outside of meditation was a revolution.

In writing this story, different eras and their flavors came to life again — the world of Orthodox Jews I grew up in; twenty years of teaching meditation and breathing to people around the world; the traumas and triumphs of self-discovery in the Caribbean and Jerusalem; the spiritual traditions of India that became so meaningful to me; and the remarkable atmosphere around the enlightened master I fell in love with.

As I write this, I am president of Sri Sri's Art of Living Foundation in the U.S. However, this is my personal story.

I have done my best to stay true to the events as I remember them. It is possible that some details have been distorted by memory. A couple of names and event details were changed to protect the privacy of certain individuals, and the time between some events has been compressed.

As you will see, for me, the spiritual journey has not always been easy. Being on this path has brought out both my finest and my worst qualities. However, throughout this journey there has been an underlying sense of grace and many mysteries I can't explain.

I offer this book in gratitude, with the hope that it will inspire others to explore a life of greater fulfillment and unconditional love.

Michael Fischman
Boca Raton, Florida, 2010

Part One

Chapter One

The Disappearance of Faith

One night, when I was about three years old, while my parents and sister were asleep in our cramped, one-bedroom apartment in the South Bronx, I awoke before dawn and saw Grandpa. Transparent as a mist of smoke, he stood still in our bedroom doorway. With his white hair, crystal-blue eyes, pencil-thin mustache, and his double-breasted pinstripe suit, he looked as though he wanted to say something to me, but he couldn't speak.

I didn't know why he was there, and his appearance frightened me. I was so scared that I screamed. I remember my sister, Sharyn, sitting up in bed, and pointing at the doorway, howling. The sound of her screaming terrified me even more.

All this noise woke my parents, but they didn't seem to see Grandpa, and they didn't understand what was wrong. Incapable of explaining, we continued to cry and scream. It took some time to calm us down, but finally, after some warm milk and cookies, we were able to go back to sleep.

Maybe it was because our parents wanted to protect our innocence that they kept Grandpa's death a secret. It was a long time before I understood why he was no longer around. And it was many years before I realized that Grandpa's death had coincided with the time of his mysterious visit.

I was born on September 11, 1954, in the middle of a hurricane. New Yorkers had been glued to their radios and newspapers for several days, with the New York Weather Bureau predicting the worst storm in the region's recorded history. Thousands of people along the Eastern Seaboard were evacuated, and the Navy abandoned hundreds of aircraft and warships.

My mother would often remind me that I was born in a double-eyed hurricane, as if this added uncertainty explained my nature.

As far back as I can remember, I was preoccupied with death; aware that I wasn't going to live forever. I would lie in bed buried beneath my covers, hold my breath, and imagine what it would be like to be dead. Would I live under the earth in a coffin for the rest of eternity? Was there really a heaven? More frightening than the loss of my body was the prospect of losing my mind. Who would I be if I didn't have my thoughts, memories, or feelings?

Whenever these terrifying thoughts arose, I panicked. I prayed to God, hoping that if I never fought with my sister again and listened to my mother when she told me to turn off the TV, maybe then I wouldn't have to die.

My mental storms calmed on our yearly vacations at the Shady Nook bungalow colony in upstate New York, even my thoughts about death. But once we were back among the tall buildings, crowded streets, and the rumbling of the elevated subway cars, my fear of death would return. After only a few days, our vacation seemed like a far-away dream. And I knew that, just like our summer vacation, my life would someday be over. I was desperate to understand why we had to go through life at all if someday it had to end.

I couldn't speak to my parents about my fear of death. When I tried, they didn't know how to respond. My mother, a heavyset woman with blue eyes and a protruding chin, did not want to talk about such things. She would hold me close, pull my head to rest against her cushy breasts, and stroke my forehead. *"Shush!"* she would say, looking into my eyes. "You are just a child. Why do you worry about such things?"

My mother thought it was unnatural for a young boy to be obsessed with such gloomy thoughts. To change the subject, she would turn on the TV and encourage me to watch a show with her.

My father, Sol Fischman, liked to lounge around in pajamas while he listened to the radio or read the Yiddish daily newspaper, *The Forward.* A Holocaust survivor who had emigrated to the United States in his late thirties, he simply kept quiet when I mentioned my fear of death. He spoke often about his past and told stories about the war, but there was a dark cloud around him when the topic of death came up.

Over time, I became increasingly determined to understand the meaning of life and death. I longed to find truth, to find God.

When I was six, my father sent Sharyn and me to an Orthodox Jewish school called Yeshiva Torah Ve-Emunah to learn about our heritage, laws, and traditions.

Riding to school on a dilapidated yellow school bus that smelled of leaking gasoline and our driver's cigarette smoke, I usually entered the *yeshiva* (school) feeling nauseous and wanting to go home. My queasiness continued throughout the day. The gloomy décor didn't help. The classroom walls were a pale lime-yellow, and the rooms were dimly lit by low-hanging, exposed, incandescent light bulbs. Accumulated layers of paint sealed most of the windows, so fresh air was a rare commodity. The only thing modern about our school was the frosted windows that prevented outsiders from looking in — and kept us from looking out.

We began our day with prayers and lessons on the *Chumash* — the five books of Moses (the Bible). My favorite story was about Abraham, the father of monotheism, partly because, unlike me, he was able to stand up to his father. According to Jewish tradition, Abraham was born in Babylonia, the son of Terach, an idol merchant. From his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single God and began to teach this belief to others. Abraham tried to convince his father of the folly of idol worship.

One day, when Abraham was left alone to mind the store, he took a hammer and smashed all of the idols except the largest one.

He then placed the hammer in the hand of the largest idol. When his father returned and asked what happened, Abraham said, "The idols got into a fight, and the big one smashed all the other ones." His father said, "Don't be ridiculous. These idols have no life or power. They can't do anything." Abraham replied, "Then why do you worship them?"

I remember the rabbi telling our class that all of the Jewish souls from all times were actually present on Mount Sinai and heard the voice of God when the law was given to Moses. The rabbi told our class that, in biblical times, God chose the most worthy of all people, the Jews, to receive his law, the Ten Commandments. He explained that somehow our ancient souls, which contain this memory, bind our people together as a nation, keeping us close to God.

As an adult, I became aware that questioning is an honored part of the Jewish tradition. But as a small boy, I was met with stern looks from the rabbis when I questioned the stories of my religion. "Rabbi, was Moses really a prophet of God, or did he mess up somehow?" I asked. "If Moses was such an extraordinary person who could receive direct communication from Almighty God in the form of a burning bush and the Ten Commandments, how was it that he could lead his people into the Promised Land but not enter the Promised Land himself?" My teachers would usually greet such questions with a forced smile, followed by a frown.

The rabbis at my yeshiva were strict and harsh. If we were slow learners or misbehaved, they thought it was amusing to pull our ears or pinch our cheeks until we screamed. For more serious crimes, they struck us with rulers, sometimes using a special double-thick ruler. Since I couldn't learn at the same pace as the other students (due to what I later learned was dyslexia), I was punished often.

Nevertheless, I still loved learning about my heritage.

Unlike most boys, who thrived on sports trivia about Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris, I was attracted to stories about the rabbis who were considered *tzaddiks,* men of God. They were leaders, learned in Jewish law, loving toward family and community, at peace with themselves,

and one with the Divine. More than anything, I wanted to be like them, inspiring people and living fearlessly in communion with the Divine, beyond mundane existence. This goal of Jewish life was, for me, the only thing worth striving for.

I began to love God, feeling His presence with me always. I was certain I'd become a rabbi, a man of God, and follow in the footsteps of such tzaddiks as King Solomon, Rabbi Akiva, or the Bal Shem Tov, the father of the *Chassidic* sect of Judaism.

This love affair with God lasted until I was eight, ending with the death of my maternal grandmother.

By her standards, Grandma was successful. She had brought five children into the world, and I was one of more than a dozen grandchildren.

Grandma had come to live with us when I was seven, four years after Grandpa died. As a young woman, she and my grandfather were among the lucky ones who had been able to travel to America and escape the Russian pogroms — the massacres and riots against Jews that were instigated by Russia's czarist government. The pogroms brought destruction to personal property and murder to the lives of many Jews. Grandma would weep as she told me horrible stories about the soldiers and policemen who had terrorized her family.

She was my closest friend and companion; the one who'd perfected the art of matzo ball soup and stuffed cabbage, and who sometimes protected me from my dad. Sometimes when we sat together watching the evening news, she would praise me during the commercials. "You know you're a very sweet boy, *Michaela,"* she'd say in her thick accent, stroking my face with her coarse, wrinkled fingers. "You're different than the other grandchildren. When you grow up you're going to do something important. You'll be able to help people and make them happy." I'd nod my head, not fully sure what she meant or what she was seeing in me.

But as time passed, Grandma played with me less and less. She became frail and bedridden, and eventually needed constant nursing care

and attention. I would sit beside her and hold her hand, but her blank expression was nothing like the loving Grandma I knew.

One day, after Grandma's nurse left her room, I sat in the chair by her bed, held her limp hand, and searched her impassive face for signs that she remembered me. Even though it was summer in New York, she wore a pink flannel nightgown and had a hot water bottle near her feet. A white porcelain bedpan and a roll of toilet paper sat close to her bed, and the smell of rubbing alcohol permeated her room.

Then, without warning, her breath stopped. I ran to tell the nurse and my mother what had happened, hoping they could do something to revive her. But I knew that Grandma was gone. I stood shaking, as though I'd been dipped in ice water. I'd seen death.

The burning, gnawing pain in the center of my gut was unbearable. I cried so much that I couldn't breathe. It no longer felt safe to love anyone, not even God.

I sought hope by asking the head rabbi at our school if there was anyone — a pious or learned man, a tzaddik, or even a rich king — who had learned the secret of living forever. The rabbi scowled as if I was sacrilegious, telling me to go back to class and stop being so foolish.

During third grade, my family moved to Mosholu Parkway, a more affluent Jewish neighborhood in the Bronx. It was too far to travel to the yeshiva, so we were enrolled in the public school and continued our Jewish education by attending Hebrew school in the late afternoons.

After the loss of my grandmother, life held less and less meaning, and school became harder. I had problems adjusting to the ethnic diversity of the new school and felt like an outsider. Like others, I was afraid of the gang members. Being short, Jewish, and, at the time, overweight, I was often picked on and beaten up after school, and once, even threatened with death. A poor reader and an atrocious speller, I also found it difficult to keep up with the class. Yet I excelled in verbal skills and was always chosen as the lead in class plays.

Partly as a reaction to living with a family of immigrant refugees, I developed the skill of speaking clearly. I had an innate ability to engage people and make them laugh when I told stories. As a teenager, I had

thoughts of becoming a radio announcer or TV host, but had no real idea of where my abilities would lead.

Although I disliked school, there was one teacher who inspired me. It was 1964, and my whole fourth-grade class was enamored with Mr. Schwartz, our young social studies teacher. He had a goatee and dressed in a soft corduroy jacket, knitted tie, and Hush Puppies. His light-brown hair hung below his ears and made him appear a bit shabby. Everyone thought he must be a beatnik, but I thought he was cool.

One day during a lesson on Asian history, he spoke to the class about karma and reincarnation.

"This is the wheel of birth and death," he said, drawing a circle on the blackboard. "Hindus and Buddhists believe in the law of *karma,* the law of action and its results. Whatever you do binds you to this wheel of life and death again and again. The only way to get off this wheel is to have a centered mind and live an earthly life of good deeds, devotion, and prayer to God. Otherwise you have to keep coming back, lifetime after lifetime."

This was the missing link, the knowledge I had been looking for. I wanted to shout and shake everyone in the class and tell them, "Can't you see? This is it! We don't really die. We just leave the body for a little while. Then we come back to learn more lessons, one day — hopefully — finally getting it." I felt so relieved and wanted to learn more.

I didn't realize then how significant this realization would turn out to be, planting a seed that would blossom in years to come.

My thoughts about death, and now karma and reincarnation, were nearly impossible to share with my family, especially with my father, who was very Old World and conservative.

I was also frightened of my dad and shied away from telling him anything that he could react against or might upset him. He was easily angered, and I never knew how he might take something I said or did. I was terrified when my father became enraged, since it would only be a matter of time before his stinging hand would meet my face.

My father would hit me for little things, like snipping off my bangs, getting dirty while playing, or frightening my sister. Sharyn and I were trained to be on our best behavior when he was home.

One time, when my father saw the poor grades on my report card, his face turned red with rage. He went mad, unbuckled his belt, and growled at me to lie down on my bed. He had done this before. I buried my face in a pillow. I could hear his heavy breathing and the sound of the belt slipping out of his pants. I wished someone would save me, but no one could stop my dad when he got like this. Not even my mother. Then came his command to pull down my pants. I guess his intention was to whip my bared behind, but he was indiscriminate as he beat me, and I screamed into the pillow.

Sometimes I bled. Most of the time my skin would burn like fire from the blisters and bruises. My mother would comfort me and tend to my wounds. She prevented me from going to school until the bruises healed, embarrassed and afraid to let the teachers and other children see. I was ashamed too. I swore that if I had kids I would never do this to them.

When he wasn't losing his temper or reprimanding me, he would cuddle up on the couch and tickle me with his unshaved whiskers, and I knew he loved me. But when he turned his rage on me, I would search his eyes for that love and wonder why it wasn't there.

When I was eleven, I did something wrong in school, and in the evening my dad found out. He grabbed me by the ear and dragged me into my room. He pulled out his belt and terror came over me. But instead of beating me, he simply said, "You're too big for this now."

And with that, it was over.

Maybe someone had intervened, the school principal, or perhaps a teacher.

A psychologist might look back on his abusive behavior as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder from the war. But for me, the trauma was long lasting, making me afraid to take risks, and affecting my self-esteem and relationships for many years.

I rarely spoke about these events with my father, even as an adult. Once, when I was about twenty years old, while out to dinner, he brought up how he had treated me, and expressed how awful he felt. He looked down at the table and fidgeted with the saltshaker. There was sadness in his eyes and heaviness in his breath. I soon moved the conversation to another subject. I didn't have the heart to make him feel worse. It was clear that he had also been a victim.

Born in 1914, in Czestochowa, Poland, to a middle-class Jewish family, my dad stood only five-foot four inches, with a bald head, barrel chest, and a well-defined *Ashkenazi* (Central/East European Jewish) nose. He and his younger brother, my Uncle Terry, survived the Second World War together and were very close. The last time they saw their parents and sister alive was the night after *Yom Kippur* (the Day of Atonement), the most solemn of the Jewish holidays. His parents hid in their apartment as my father and his brother got in the selection line for the Nazi work camps.

The Nazis would not allow any Jew with a deformity or handicap to work, so my father cleverly hid his younger brother's clubfoot from the Nazis by forging his brother's work documents and surrounding him with a cluster of friends who looked hardy and robust. This worked, and probably saved my uncle's life.

During the first few years of the war, my father and his brother lived in a Jewish ghetto, but they were later transferred to a concentration camp that manufactured ammunition. Dad and Uncle Terry escaped from the camp one night while walking to an adjacent factory for work detail. In the dark, they hid themselves by lying in an abandoned field, waiting nervously for the armed guards and their work team to disappear into the factory. When it seemed safe, they walked into the city and made their way to the train station, only to find that it was more dangerous to be Jews on the streets of Poland than to be in the camps. They managed to sneak back into the camp, where they remained until liberated at the end of the war.

Often, when I was alone with my dad, he would tell me the story of his final hours in the camp, and his eyes would project a sense of pride. "We could all see that the war was coming to an end. Most of the Nazi officers and guards had left the factory where we worked. Many of the Jewish boys ran for their guns, but I was more practical. I went for the commandant's clothes. I put layer upon layer of suits and coats on my body. It was so heavy, I could barely walk. I almost got myself shot when the Jewish boys saw me walking around wearing the commandant's fine Italian Borsalino hat and coat. They thought I was him!"

He told the same stories over and over. But each time I would listen intently, in fascination, knowing that these stories were important to him. It was our way of being close, of bonding.

There was sadness when he spoke about his parents. He always impressed upon me how much he loved and honored them, and I felt, by comparison, that my love for him and my mom was mediocre and never enough.

My father had focused much of his life on survival. He faced economic challenges with his business and frustrations and disappointments with his family.

When he spoke about the atrocities of the war, most of the stories emphasized his cleverness and practicality in the face of adversity, rather than the degradations he and other Jews had endured. He tried his best to teach me what he learned about survival, and, like many Jews of his generation, he hid his emotional scars. To my father, know-how, *chutzpah,* and money — not faith — were crucial to survival in any situation, especially during war. When I was a child, it seemed odd that he attributed his survival to his wit and resources rather than to God. As I grew older, I felt burdened by his emphasis on the importance of money, and I knew that the focus of my life would be different.

Unlike my father, my mother never told me much about her life and rarely shared personal thoughts. But she was much more modern and easygoing than my dad.

My parents had different views on child rearing, which was often the source of their disagreements. But whenever there was an argument,

my mother was the first to drop it. "Don't hold on to a grudge," she told me. "If you do, you will be the loser."

While walking with her on the streets of New York, she would lock her arm in mine as though I were escorting her. She encouraged me to walk on the curb side, telling me that was the right thing to do when I was with a woman. "Always respect women," she'd say. "Then people will respect you."

When I was a boy, she would take me to movie matinees, where we almost always shared a large box of chocolate bonbons. Although Mom kept a strictly kosher home, she would be flexible with rabbinical law on our days out, treating my sister and me to Chinese food almost every Sunday.

Mom was born in Chicago, in 1911. To help her avoid anti-Semitic prejudices and assimilate more easily into American culture, her parents legally changed her Yiddish name, Chana, to Claire.

My father met my mother not long after he and his brother arrived from Europe in 1950. Soon after, the Fischman brothers became the successful owner-operators of a kosher delicatessen and restaurant in the Bronx, and later in Queens.

Eventually, the whole family slaved away in the deli — my father, uncle, mother, aunt, cousins, sister, and me. From the time I was twelve until I went to college, I spent most of my weekends working in "the store," wearing a white apron and selling frankfurters with mustard and sauerkraut. No matter how hard I tried to get rid of the lingering odor, my friends would constantly tease me, saying that I needed to find a new deodorant and that I smelled like pastrami. Many times on my way home from work, stray dogs would run after me, as though they'd found a juicy bone or a fresh piece of meat.

My family responsibilities in the store meant that I missed many opportunities to be with my friends. But I did not have to work during the summer, when my parents would send me to a "sleep-away" camp that was nestled in the Catskill Mountains near Monticello, New York. Camp was eight weeks of fun and fresh air. Although I was not very good at sports, I was the ringleader of mischief and practical jokes.

In high school, I received several art awards, won prestigious contests, and was encouraged by my teachers to study art as a career. And, in 1972, I received a partial scholarship to study art at the State University of New York's Purchase College.

Dorm life at college turned out to be a lot like going to camp, and being an art major provided a lot of time to socialize and investigate the world of recreational drugs. Being a counter-culture hippie, I considered psychedelics and marijuana ways to expand consciousness, and I quickly made them part of my life.

But I felt lost. I questioned my purpose in life and the reason I was going to school. The academic classes I took were hard for me and I was too embarrassed to seek help for my learning problems. I cut classes and hiked alone in the woods that surrounded the campus. Nature brought me peace. The stillness of the trees and the colors of autumn leaves consoled me. I prayed to God to make me a better person and to give me a clear direction.

Then, in the middle of my freshman year, on a cold and dreary December day, I found out that my mother, at age sixty-four, had suffered a heart attack. By the time I arrived at the hospital, the doctor had already pronounced her dead. I was met by my grieving aunts and uncles, who told me the news. "Mommy's dead. She died ten minutes ago."

I wanted to cry but I couldn't. I felt cold and hot at the same time and thought I would faint. Breath would not exit or enter my lungs.

I never expected my mom to die so early in life, and I couldn't comprehend that I would never see her again. I felt as though I had a massive stone inside me. The entire universe was collapsing into my stomach. Life was again showing me that it wasn't safe to be loved or to love someone. If I did, God would only take that person away.

I missed my mother immediately, weeping for hours at a time. I thought of her ironing the family's clothes late at night while speaking on the phone to her sister, who lived only three blocks away. They spoke about everything — all the time. I never understood why they needed to speak for such long periods when they had just visited a few hours earlier. But Aunt Ruthy was more than a sister, she was my mom's

best friend and confidante. After Mom passed away, Aunt Ruthy was there for me too, my emotional support.

I was devastated that I never got the chance to see my mom or say good-bye before she died. Confused and depressed, I dropped out of college to stay home with my grieving father. At school, staying out late and partying with friends had been a way to have fun and rebel. Now I did those things to suppress the pain of my mother's death.

I had no tools or guidance to help me through it. Sharyn and Dad were tight as clams, totally mute on their feelings about Mom's death. I didn't know where to turn. It would be many years before I had an opportunity to release my grief.

Dad wanted me to participate in the traditional Jewish bereavement period. I was expected to recite the Mourner's *Kaddish,* the prayer for the dead, at the temple for a year. Sitting next to my father in the early morning hours, hung over from the night before, I questioned the purpose of this mourner's ritual. My eyes would wander around the dimly lit *schul* (synagogue), watching the congregation of mostly older men *daven* (pray), their lips moving rapidly, whispering, almost silently, the Hebrew words they knew by heart. There was no need to open the prayer books they cradled close to their chests.

The traditional mourner's prayer simply praised the sanctity and glory of God, and seemed to have nothing to do with my mother's death. Maybe the ritual was intended to help feel communion with God or the community at a time when a person's faith might be low, but the words and repetition did not console me or help me understand what had happened, and hardly anyone seemed to empathize with my pain. I felt resentful and separate from the congregation.

I asked our rabbi about the deeper meaning of this prayer, but his explanation was vague and confusing. Or maybe nothing would have gotten through to me at that time. Still, I hoped that if I repeated the prayer long enough, my grief would be relieved or I would feel the presence of God, but nothing happened.

Thinking about others in my family who had passed away, I was aware of the inevitable: eventually, I would die too. More than ever, I had a longing to know God and understand the meaning of life. And maybe that was the one of the purposes of the Kaddish.

As I sat on the hard wooden pews, I felt queasy from the smell of stale morning breath that permeated the room. Dad would sit in the synagogue with his eyes closed, holding his prayer book tightly. I assumed that he was remembering the good old days, when he would go to the temple where his father was a *hazzan* (the cantor, who leads the sung prayers). I knew that if he could read my mind, he'd be disappointed. I really only went to the temple with him to make him happy.

Despite my feelings, I stayed with my father, attending synagogue with him in the morning and partying with my friends at night. Instead of being a support and consolation for each other, Dad and I battled. I couldn't adjust to his stubborn, conservative nature, and he couldn't handle living with a rebellious hippie like me.

One day, he laid down the rules: "No more just hanging around and coming home all hours of the night. From now on, you have to be home at eleven on weeknights and twelve on weekends. And cut your hair! You look like a woman with your hair growing below your shoulders!"

Finally, he threatened to throw me out of the house. "You have to either get a job or go back to school!" he declared.

A few weeks later, I moved out and started a new job in New York City's garment center.

My cousin Leon was a highly accomplished designer in the fashion industry, and since I'd been an art student, he believed he could mold my talent and help me get a job as a textile designer. I apprenticed with my cousin for a little while, eventually landing a job at a small studio on Seventh Avenue, in the heart of the garment center. I enjoyed being creative, making designs that would eventually get printed on fabrics that appeared in the stores.

I shared my new apartment in Flushing, Queens, with two guys — a bartender and a professional musician who played bass in a jazz band.

I liked my new friends and my new freedom. Eventually, I bought a used car, went back to school at night, and started dating a beautiful girl. Everything appeared to be going well. Yet inside I was miserable. Life was becoming monotonous. I felt detached and uncomfortable with myself. I often found myself tuning out an unfulfilling world by sitting in front of the TV and watching reruns. Something was missing.

In a short time, everything fell apart. I was like a Hank Williams Country & Western song. My girlfriend broke my heart by having an affair with my best friend. Then the car I'd just purchased was stolen. I was a success as a textile designer, with promotions and pay increases. But what began as a promising and creative career, now just felt repetitive.

I was part of a generation that was more active than most in pursuing a meaningful life and a better world. That spirit, and an ever-increasing backlog of painful experiences, made me think that there might be a better way to live my life.

Hoping for some guidance, I entered psychotherapy. I chose a traditional Freudian analyst, but was quickly turned off by the oversimplified connections he was making between my childhood and my life as a young adult. I felt that there must be a better way to heal and grow and overcome my limitations, but I didn't know how to find it.

Strangely, it was curiosity about an old friend that finally propelled me into a life-changing sequence of events.

Chapter Two

The White Album

Perhaps it was my guardian angel, good karma, coincidence, or old-fashioned good luck that caused an ex-girlfriend to call with the news that she had run into my old buddy, Kevin. She gave me his phone number and insisted I call him. She explained that Kevin had recently returned from several months on a meditation retreat in Livingston Manor, New York, and had gone through a huge transformation.

Only a few days earlier, I'd been lying on my bed, staring at a poster on my bedroom wall, with a stream of thoughts about becoming a recluse, discovering peace of mind, and meditating in a cave. These thoughts were unusual for me, but, for some reason, they brought some comfort.

The poster had come with the Beatles' *White Album* and included some thumbnail pictures of the Beatles' time in India with spiritual master Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. I'd been a Beatles fan since they first appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show* in 1964, and I and had all their records. The Beatles had dabbled in Eastern mysticism. Maybe meditation was the answer I was searching for.

Still, I hesitated to call Kevin.

Kevin and I bonded instantly when we first met in our high-school gym class. We were fourteen years old. He was tall and scrawny, and I was short and plump. Ill-suited as athletes, we were two outcasts,