My Journey (a spiritual case history) …

My mother was born on January 28th 1918, 78 days after the end of World War I. I do not know what role her father, my maternal grandfather, played in that war. She never spoke of it.

My grandmother was said to have been a difficult, temperamental woman. Shortly before my mother's birth, my grandmother would have endured not only the traumas of World War I, which killed 20 million people and wounded another 21 million, but also the Great Flu "Purple Death" pandemic of 1918 which killed 21 million more.

My mother was born cross-eyed, and as she herself told the story, her mother believed giving birth to a cross-eyed child was the sign of a curse from God. Throughout my childhood and long into my adult life my mother recounted the tales of physical and psychological abuse her mother inflicted on her. She repeated the stories so many times, I could have recited all of them back to her word for word. I still remember every detail even now in my seventies.

My mother's father was a banker during the 1920s and 30s, and my maternal grandparents occupied the top rung of the social ladder in their little Midwestern town. The social climate was ruthlessly competitive and it is likely my grandmother felt shamed and her social status diminished for having given birth to a "defective" child.

My father had a happier start in life, but his world was shattered at the age of 17, on May 22, 1935 when his father, my paternal grandfather, was murdered, thrown off a bridge in Rockford, Illinois for the offense of being a Jew planning to open a business.

My parents found each other during the lead-up to World War II, my mother drawn to my father not only because he was handsome and enterprising, but also because marrying a Jew was an act of open rebellion against her parents' social order.

They had a complicated relationship, which eventually ended in divorce when I was twelve years old.

I was born on November 5, 1952, the day after Dwight Eisenhower was elected President. My father had gone through the effort of getting an absentee ballot for my mother, but she "didn't trust" the absentee ballot and went to the polling place in person.

As she told the story, she was in labor with me for 20 hours, already starting to have contractions while she stood in line at the polling station. Every time she let out a moan, people ahead of her in the long line would beckon her to move forward until she finally reached the front and cast her vote for Adlai Stevenson.

My father voted for General Eisenhower, to whom he felt he owed his enduring allegiance after serving under Eisenhower's command during World War II.

In other words, after all that hullabaloo, they cancelled each other's votes. That episode was a microcosm of the dynamic that persisted throughout their relationship; they sabotaged and cancelled each other any way they could devise, manufacturing unending drama in the process.

My sister Margaret was born four years before me. By the time she was two or three it was clear something was wrong, but that was before clinicians had developed an understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

My parents took her to the Menninger Clinic in Topeka Kansas, considered one of the outstanding centers for the diagnosis and care of "retarded" children.

The theory of the day was that the symptoms we now identify as autism were caused by "refrigerator moms," who failed to provide the nurturing necessary for a child to develop and thrive. My parents told

me about the meeting when a panel of Menninger clinicians interrogated my mother accusingly, signaling that they blamed her for my sister's affliction. That would have been around 1953, when we lived in Omaha, Nebraska.

I remember the day, when I was five years old, that I walked into an unlit room where my mother was sitting silently, and I saw tears streaming down her face. More tears than I had ever seen anyone cry before or since. Copious, unbroken streams extending all the way into her lap.

Unable to comprehend what was happening or to offer any consolation, I felt alarmed and disoriented, afraid I might have done something that upset her, and as always, I felt alone. As I write this, it occurs to me, simply showing my face to her in that moment when she was wracked with grief over her first child, having her "normal" second child (me) appear before her would have reassured and consoled her more than anything else possibly could. But I had no way of knowing that as a five-year-old and she was in no condition to offer any reassurance back to me.

That was when my parents had decided they could no longer take care of Margy and had arranged to give her up to Muscatatuck State School for Retarded Children in Butlerville, Indiana (we had moved to Evansville, Indiana by then; the facility was eventually renamed Muscatatuck State Developmental Center until it was finally shut down in 2005 after losing its Medicaid certification and funding amid a cloud of accusations of patient abuse). Margy died there at the age of 28, of pneumonia, according to the record.

After that tearful episode and throughout most of my life, my mother clung to me like I was her last hope and only refuge in the world.

She regaled me with stories of her victimhood and the utter untrustworthiness of every relationship. She recruited and indoctrinated me to be her unfailing rescuer and defender against the inevitable treachery of every person in the world, but no matter how hard I tried to rescue, save and heal her, none of her troubles ever resolved.

Finally, well into my 40s I came to understand, the game was not designed for anything ever to be solved. Her troubles, her victimhood, her martyrdom were her tools, her weapons, with which she could wield power over any and all who might feel sympathy and try to help.

In this way, through her entire life she kept herself, in her role as victim and martyr, at the center of attention. The drama was never-ending as she constantly created situations to recruit rescuers and then play people against each other, portraying one and then another and then yet another as her oppressor in an endless, tumultuous "let's you and him fight" pattern of social manipulation.

Why did she do this?

She did it because she felt isolated and alone in the world. My grandmother was unable to provide my mother a secure maternal connection, and my mother never learned how to create healthy connections for herself, so she resorted to the only means she knew that would draw attention, even if those means were ultimately antithetical to true connection.

Throughout my childhood, my mother suffered from nervous breakdowns and was hospitalized for several months at a time. She endured many years of major depression, during which she often slept all day.

That left me, as a child, stranded for hours every day with nothing to do and no one to engage with. I would pace the floors of our little house, looking through my mother's open doorway each time I walked past. (Before air conditioning, in the intense summer heat every door remained open). Seeing her there,

motionless on the bed except for her silent breathing, her back turned toward me for interminable hours, she was nearby physically but totally beyond reach emotionally.

That vignette tells the whole story. My mother was always out of reach, through no fault of her own. I was profoundly lonely and so unhappy, twice during my adolescence I tried to end my life.

My world was shaped, more than anything else, by the unrequited, primordial longing for connection with my mother, and by an all-pervading sense of maternal abandonment that left me stranded in a cold and hostile landscape. That was very much the same hostile world she inhabited, and it was the same, wounded and dysfunctional mother-child dynamic between her and my grandmother that shaped her life before it shaped mine.

Down to the core of my existence I felt alone, alienated and afraid. Looking back, I now can see I suffered from Social Anxiety Disorder, which persisted long into my adulthood. I was so terrified, I frequently ran and hid (literally and figuratively) from social human contacts, which only reinforced and perpetuated my isolation.

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My parents met at the University of Wisconsin, where my father graduated with a degree in journalism. My mother studied creative writing, but didn't finish. (In those days, often the main reason a young woman attended college was to find a husband.)

After my father received his journalism degree, he accepted the job of Great Plains Regional Bureau Chief with The United Press and they moved to Omaha. He left that job to enlist in WWII. Margi and I were born after he returned home, during which time he was managing editor of the South Omaha Sun weekly newspaper and then advertising copywriter at Bozell and Jacobs ad agency.

In 1955, when I was two and Margy was six, we moved to Evansville where he took a job at Keller Crescent advertising agency. During the time he was there, Keller Crescent rose to become one of the top 25 agencies in the United States. When he retired, he had dual responsibilities as Director of Marketing Communications Planning and Copy Chief in charge of all the writing throughout the agency.

Both my parents were brilliant writers and I was deeply interested in everything they did. My mother wrote fiction and tutored creative writing students at the local college. Every day, from the time I was very young, she would read aloud whatever writing she had been working on. I was caught up by the vividness of her images, captivated by her story plots and hypnotized by the beautiful style of her writing.

I knew my father wrote television commercials, and I developed a habit (which I still have) of watching the commercials with as much interest as the shows. From about age six, when I watched TV with my father, I would ask him about the commercials.

"Did you write that?" I would ask. Sometimes he did, but usually it was written by someone else. He would tell me which agency had created each ad campaign. As a child I learned about J. Walter Thompson, David Ogilvy, Rosser Reeves, Leo Burnett, Bill Bernbach, Claude Hopkins, Al Reis and Jack Trout.

He coached me even as a young child about what works and what doesn't work in a marketing piece. He taught me how to use Robert Gunning's Fog Index, the single best tool for writing clear, readable text I have ever encountered.

I continued this study on my own and found lifelong value in the classic manuals, *Ogilvy on Advertising*, by David Ogilvy; *On Writing Well*, by William Zinsser; *The Elements of Style* by E.B. White and William
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Strunk (“Omit needless words!”), *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* and *Marketing Warfare*, by Al Reis and Jack Trout; and in the wisdom of Mark Twain (“The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”).

In addition to his mentoring me about writing and marketing, my father shared a love of the outdoors, which he employed as a vehicle to convey life lessons to me and other boys he worked with as a volunteer. He instilled in me a self-reliance, a willingness and enthusiasm to surmount challenges and a creativity to forage and invent solutions with whatever resources may be at hand. That training has served me extremely well throughout my life.

From my mother I received four gifts. One was the love of writing. Another was a lifelong, insatiable quest for insight, which was motivated by her struggles with mental illness. This quality is so fundamental to me, it would be fair to say I received it “through my mother’s milk.”

Intensely creative, she also had a gift for color, decoration and design, some of which rubbed off on me, although more in the direction of craftsmanship than decor. After the divorce she worked as an interior designer and often took me to see her various projects. Her brother, whom we visited from time to time, was a carpenter and cabinetmaker (and in his own rebellion against his parents’ world, a lifelong member of the Communist Party). I worshipped my uncle and was inspired by seeing his basement workshop and all the beautiful furniture he made there to fill his home.

The fourth gift I received from my mother has demanded an unfailing commitment and determination, and it has taken an entire lifetime to bring forth. It is the gift of alchemy, the ability to turn “base metal” into “gold” by taking meaning and purpose from hardship and tragedy and finding the value in every particle of life, even if the path to that value is painful and difficult. (I wrote about this in the essay, “Suffering and Nectar,” which is included in this book.)

In this way, I’ve been able to “flip the script” of my early life abandonment trauma and lifelong sense of isolation by reflecting on the fact that, although she wasn’t able to provide what I needed, my mother loved me intensely. That same love is universal. It is a fundamental feature of all life, everywhere, available from myriad sources in myriad ways if we only are able to discover it and open ourselves to receive it.

Working through and expanding beyond the residues of my early life, retooling old habits and expectations and reframing my relationship with the world has been a lifelong project that still continues to this day.

Connecting with previously unknown, unimagined sources of nourishment has required intensive “shadow work.” It has required the bringing to consciousness and unlearning of dysfunctional, self-defeating, self-isolating patterns of thinking and social behavior that I absorbed unconsciously from those close to me even before I was able to speak.

I am happy to say, that work has borne fruit for me in profound and deeply fulfilling ways.

Though my mother was unable to redeem that alchemical, transformational gift on her own behalf, her difficult and tumultuous life sowed the seeds for that redemption in my life. For that, she (and countless others with similar stories) made a great sacrifice. Perhaps that sacrifice will bear fruit in the lives of generations coming forward now. Perhaps through the transformations we and those coming after us may bring, a better world will emerge, a more benevolent world of connection and compassion, of shared concern and consideration, of mutual trust and true engagement with one another.

I think it is possible. I am 71 years old now, but nothing rules out the possibility that I might live another thirty or more years. I want to be here to see what is going to happen, and I want to do anything I can to help facilitate the transformation toward that better world.

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Traumatized and disillusioned by the chaos that poisoned my childhood, I angrily rejected the "white picket fence/domestic bliss" post-WWII ideal as an unattainable collective fantasy.

I joined the counterculture and grew my hair. I scoured the lyrics of psychedelic music for clues to the meaning of life. I followed the Beatles' journey into mind-altering drugs and then their pilgrimage to India to study transcendental meditation with Maharishi Mahesh Yogi.

I read Herman Hesse, Alan Watts, the Upanishads, *The Razor's Edge*. My futile attempts at meditation – staring at candles or trying to stop my thoughts – only deepened my frustration and intensified my interest in transcendental meditation and Maharishi Mahesh Yogi. There were no meditation teachers in my city and no one I asked could tell me how to meditate.

I took LSD the first time when I was sixteen. As happened with almost all of my dozen or so psychedelic trips, I was paralyzed with fear. It was a bad trip, but not bad enough to keep me from trying again. I was looking for something.

The theme that ran through most of my psychedelic trips was fear, intense fear, terror. But two of those trips, even after harrowing passages, opened to a reality beyond anything I'd experienced before. They gave me glimpses of unity consciousness, which I remember as if it were yesterday.

I thought, "This is it. I want to have this awareness all the time."

But I also sensed that mind-altering drugs could not be a path in themselves. They push the brain too hard and they are too destabilizing. (I have since concluded they can be valuable tools if used appropriately, but they are not suitable for everyone and can be dangerous for some. For those who might benefit, they need to be part of a carefully applied, individually tailored, multi-layered approach. Listening to presentations from the top researchers and clinicians working with psychedelics today, you keep hearing words like "guardrails," "risk assessment" and "we still don't know enough.")

I concluded that transcendental consciousness, unity consciousness must be within the brain's natural capabilities, even without drugs. I believed meditation would be the way to awaken such states permanently, but I'd been unable to meditate with any success. I assumed that was because I simply wasn't suited to meditation. Too lazy, or too distractible. I would have to find a method of meditation that would work for lazy, distractible people.

Eventually, after burning out on psychedelics and hauling myself back to a more or less sane, (though anxious and depressed) state of mind, I gave up the whole mind-expansion project and enrolled at Indiana University to study biology.

One night a few weeks into the semester, I came home to my dorm room, tired and angry about something. I stumped into the room just wanting to go to sleep, only to find that my roommate was entertaining a visitor who was sitting on my bed! I was annoyed, but the intruder, as it happened, was an appealing, very articulate, seemingly kind-natured person, so I could only be annoyed at the situation and not at the intruder himself.

At first I tried to ignore him, just waiting for him to leave so I could go to bed, but then I started to pick up what he was saying and I got interested. He was talking about transcendental meditation, which I had completely forgotten about by then.
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He was saying, the nature of the mind is to follow the “path of increasing charm,” to go spontaneously toward whatever accessible experience is most satisfying. To allow a process of effortless transcending based on the mind’s own nature, transcendental meditation uses a mantra, a mental sound or word, in a way that helps the mind effortlessly disengage from its active, outer focus and gravitate toward quieter levels within.

Without effort, it naturally settles down, and the more it settles, the more pleasing, the more satisfying the experience becomes, so the mind continues to transcend to subtler and subtler levels until eventually awareness arrives at “the source of thought,” and you experience unbounded, infinite pure consciousness.

I thought, “That’s what I want.” I had no sales resistance at all, which is remarkable because by then, I’d listened to so many pitches about techniques and systems and answers to life, all of which I had instantly rejected because they required discipline or faith or buying into an ideology, none of which I was capable of.

[Draft beginning of a much longer section. To be continued.]