

**FINDING
GOD IN
VEGAS**

FINDING GOD IN VEGAS

A GEN X SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

Donald Harold Young



Finding God in Vega

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Soli Deo gloria

With Love,
Mom and Dad
and Pete

Everlasting Gratitude,
Suzanne Kempton

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Acknowledgments

I have been blessed to have encountered many gracious and good people throughout my life who have contributed to my life's stories. Like any storyteller, I needed to make decisions about what to include and what not to include as I crafted my memoir. My sincere apologies in advance to the many, many people whose names and contributions to my life's journey are absent from these particular pages. Thank you for being part of my story.

Family

Like for all children, my relationship with my parents has been complex, especially as I tried to figure out my persona, my purpose, and my place in the world. I know deep in my heart that these two people have loved me unconditionally beginning with our first moment of meeting. I've truly been blessed to have been raised by loving parents who did everything to provide me and my siblings with a loving, safe, and comfortable home. We lacked for nothing because they gave us everything, and it had nothing to do with stuff but everything to do with love.

As I grew older, I began to understand and honor them as humans and not only as my parents. I learned about their struggles and suffering, their dreams and desires, and we became closer. They will always be my parents, but in sharing our adult vulnerabilities, we shared our connection as children of God.

While all glory is to God alone, God's glory is eternally demonstrated by our love for one another. Exhibiting God's glory through the lives they lead, my parents have consistently been righteous role models to emulate. Thank you, Mom and Dad.

Similar to my parents, my sister and brother have been influential in shaping who I am. While the three of us are very different people—a tribute to my parents—we speak a shared language and have a shared history as Pat and Don's children. My parents instilled in us a respect for God and neighbor, even though at times we have fallen short.

My sister and brother—now both loving parents themselves—have always been there for my parents, which is something I cannot claim. They are both humorous people, and I always look forward to spending time with them and their families. I am grateful to have my sister and brother in my life. Thank you, Deb and Kevin.

Other family members across generations have touched my heart deeply because of their love and kindness toward me, even when my heart remained closed to the world. Stories from my grandfather Young, my Aunt Linda, and my niece Tara are included here, representing three generations within my family.

Stories of love about my other grandparents, my aunts and uncles and cousins, are forever in my heart but not

included in this book—a reality of editing as opposed to the reality of life. Thank you to all my grandparents, aunts and uncles, nephews and nieces and cousins.

Roger, Roger

In addition to my father, and my grandfather Young, there were two other men in my young life who were instrumental in helping this boy become a man: A man whose life was profoundly influenced because of their mentorship and guidance and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude.

Reverend Roger LaWarre, an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ, patiently nurtured and encouraged my young faith and understanding of God. He helped me build a foundation that would serve me well, even as I struggled with understanding God's unconditional love and unrequited grace. Because of Roger, there's only one vocation that ever gave me a sense of purpose: youth ministry. Thank you, Roger.

Mr. Roger Skinner was my (Boy) Scoutmaster. The primary reason why Scouts became so important was because of Mr. Skinner. There were many leaders in scouting that made me a better person, but I wouldn't have met them had it not been for Mr. Skinner. He and his wife had already raised their own children, and even as Mr. Skinner was nearing retirement, he unselfishly gave his time and experience to help young men like me find our way and our voices in this world. Thank you, Mr. Skinner.

The world needs more good men like Roger and Roger, thoughtful and kind men who never talked over, screamed, or yelled at other people. They earned my (and others')

respect through their words and actions, talking the talk and walking the walk. They fit the Biblical definition of real men, and were exceptional human beings.

The Teachers

I am indebted to the remarkable people I had as teachers, instructors who made me and the world better by helping me develop critical thinking and thoughtful criticism. Commencing with my Bachelor of Rhymes and continuing with my Master of Arts, I had teachers who emulated Mr. Holland but whose real names were Mrs. Nevills, Mrs. Marshall, Mrs. Knowles, and Mrs. Amstadter, and professors who emulated Mr. Keating but whose real names were Dr. Ulrich, Dr. Leach, Dr. Cedar, Rev. Lauer, Dr. Bednarowski, and Dr. White.

Some of these names are associated with specific stories in this memoir. Some names I only mention here, but every teacher I had growing up did right by me and encouraged me to ask, “Why?” even if doing so was unpopular. Their teaching was fundamentally about developing free thinkers and intelligent individuals who don’t live in fear of tyrannical groupthink and totalitarian leaders, a focus I’m deeply concerned has been lost across classrooms today. Thank you to all my classroom teachers: Every one of you prepared me for life outside of the classroom.

My Friends

I’ve been blessed to have had many friends throughout my life. Like my family and adult mentors, my friends have

helped shape who I am. I've included some of our stories in my memoir. Those I omitted are very much included in my heart. My apologies to those whose names I've forgotten after numerous years of a less-than-ideal lifestyle.

Thank you to Ronald, my best pal from childhood. Thank you to my scouting colleagues whose names are too numerous to mention but who are very much present in my story. Like scouting, thank you to all my church youth group colleagues, including my friend Mike. Mike is one of those special people I met in my life because I believe God knew that we needed each other to grow into who we are now. Thank you, Mike.

College will always be a bittersweet memory for me, not because of my friends, but because I wasn't ready to fully open my heart to them. Thank you to Chris, my roommate whose full-life potential was cut short; to Craig, Allen, Jim, Lisa, Mike, Barb, Kevin, Tammy, and Keith, thank you. A special thank you to Joe. You were in many ways my closest friend in college, and I am forever grateful we met. Thank you, Joe.

Deep gratitude to Ed and everyone I played softball with while living in Minneapolis, some of whom are specifically in my reflections. Thank you to my "non-sport" friends Dale, Jim, Kent, Brian, Kathleen, David, Mike, John, and of course, my precious Paul.

Thank you to those friends who came into my life before and after Minneapolis, including my Imago Dei colleagues which are included in that eponymous chapter herein. Thank you to Juvy for being a part of my life. Rest in peace my dear and gentle friend. Thank you to Anthony, Jonathan, Henry (Hank), Antonio, Jack, Paul, and of course, Molly.

The Don story wouldn't exist without Molly—she's been that important to my life. Having known Molly for over twenty-five years, our friendship has seen highs and lows, but has endured. I have respect for Molly as a mother, a spouse, and a professional. I have tremendous respect for her as a person of faith, trying to live her life by leading with love. Thank you to all my friends, and a special thanks to Molly.

I know I may have hurt some of you as I've struggled with my faith. I'm sorry. To those who feel they may have hurt me, it's all good. My heart is filled with love. There's no room for anger, animosity, or antipathy. I have no enemies.

Pete

Just as this Don story doesn't exist without my family or Molly, my story would read very differently without Pete in my life. He is the only person I've ever called the love of my life. There would still be a Don story, but I'm absolutely certain it wouldn't be the story that has made its way to these pages. Pete has been my companion for over fifteen years, and we've experienced life's ups and downs together. Like all love stories, our love story is imperfect. All human love is imperfect, but it's still love. Thank you, Pete.

Cats

If you think it's strange or ridiculous that I would include a shout-out to cats or any pets, you should know I would have felt the same way twenty years ago. If you think it makes perfect sense to acknowledge other living creatures who add love to our world, that's me now. There would be no cats in

my life without Pete, and there would probably be no story about opening my heart to God without cats. A pet's unconditional love is evidence of God's awesome love for us. Thank you, Oliver, Mozzer, and Harry.

Book Specific People

As it relates to this book, there are other people in my life besides my family, spouse, and best friend who have encouraged, supported, and given me feedback as I wrote my story of faith. The presence of these people in my life has been a message from God to follow through on this endeavor, this path leading me to my tomorrow while living in peace with the present.

My appreciation to Carol and Cindy, business consultants from my past life who started writing their own book. Aware I was writing a book, albeit on a different topic, they reached out to ask me if I was interested in joining their writing group. Their feedback has been immensely helpful and their support invaluable in helping me to understand that what I'm writing is inspirational. Thank you, Carol and Cindy.

Thank you to my past colleagues and present friends Lawrence and Kelly for your feedback and support. I appreciate you taking the time to read and review my manuscript before I was ready to share it with the rest of the world. Both of you inspire me.

Thank you to Mark Malatesta at Bestselling Author, LLC. You not only made my writing better, but you helped me understand the challenges and dynamics of traditional book publishing. Our work together helped me lay the groundwork to market and promote my book.

Thank you to the team at Launch My Book, Inc. I could not have done this without your expertise. Thank you to Joel for helping to manage my anxiety with bringing my first book to market. Sayde, I appreciate all your work managing this project from start to finish. A special thank you to Laura for your copyediting efforts. You were helpful and respectful in making my words tell a better story—thank you.

Then there's Jess. My hairstylist who makes miracles with what's left of my hair and embodies the Golden Rule. She is the salt of the earth. Lacking pretentiousness, her humility is an outcome of her kindness toward all people. Jess was one of the first people I spoke to about writing this book, and she's encouraged me during every monthly haircut since that initial conversation. She asks how my writing is progressing every time I see her. Next time, I'm excited to let her know I'm done and published. Thank you, Jess.

You, the Reader

Thank you for sharing your time with me, time being one of our most valuable gifts in this life. I hope my words will impact your heart and that you will be at a loss for words in your reaction. Then I'll know I was an engaging writer and a vulnerable human. I hope in reading my story of faith, you'll come to better understand your story of faith. I hope you find the peace I have found: The peace that passes all understanding. God is love and God loves you. Peace.

Introduction

This book isn't about religion, but about love: self-love, love for others, and God's love for you. It's about understanding it, finding it (in unexpected places), embracing it, and sharing it—even if you don't think you deserve it—*especially* if you don't think you deserve it.

Five years ago, I would have been rolling my eyes at the statement, “God is Love,” or “God loves you unconditionally.” I would have said something snarky, since I was sophisticated and superior. At least I thought I was. If you're doing the same, this book is for you. If you agree that God is Love, this book is for you.

Why am I certain this book will change your life? I'm not. Only you can decide what fills your heart. I am certain, however, that we only have two choices on how we live our life. One way to live is centered around love, and the other is centered around that which makes us *loveless*.

I'm not a preacher, prophet, or professor of theology. I'm simply someone who, like countless other people, grew up conflating my unseen faith in God with my seen failings of institutional religion. I've also seen and experienced the limits of what materialism has to offer. More is not always better.

It's easy to believe that treating others as you would want to be treated is a nice concept, but impractical in the "real world." It's easy to think God is dead, or at least that He's left the building. We see the brittleness of religion, wars, and culture wars dominating the media. We see staggering mental health statistics and the hardened hearts of leaders and institutions dividing us as they enrich themselves.



Six Lies of the Modern World

You don't matter; you are random cosmic dust. Our lives matter. Our mere existence, no matter how brief, will change the world. Like a pebble rippling across the surface of space and time, the cosmos is forever changed because of you. We all leave our footprints on life's beaches, even if time will wash them away. The starry shore eternally changed because your feet were imprinted in the sands of time.

There is nothing unique about you. I am a unique creation of God. I am known through God and my relationships with other creatures in God's good world, and there is no one like me. There is only one unique you who will ever exist throughout all of human history. There is only one unique you who will ever be conceived among the generations of people who have lived and who have not yet lived. There is only one unique you among the billions of humans who share this planet now and forever.

There is more that divides us than unites us. We are all connected with one another and the cosmos. Our blood is filled with iron, iron that was produced when stars collided

with one another and whose remnants fell upon this planet. What we create and bring into the world will forever change the world because everyone is connected to those who helped create the world. We each have inherited this world, and everyone is connected to those who follow us, as we bequeath the world to them. Everyone shares an eternal bond of life that unites past, present, and future generations.

Nothing you do really matters. Our lives are our legacy. Our words and actions might be remembered by people near us and sometimes by people far from us, at least for a short amount of time. Raising children or creating art are tangible examples of legacies forever changing the world, but everything we do changes the world. Everything you do matters. Every action and inaction has a reaction, no matter how small or trivial it may seem.

Only you can truly know yourself. In truth, you only know yourself in relationship to the world. Who we are—our identities and our egos—is always defined in relationship: to people and animals, to culture and art, to earth and God. Often those who shape our identities are family and friends, or colleagues and mentors. Other times our lives are impacted by well-known or historical figures. Our lives are shaped and affected by the actions or inactions of others. We're interconnected; no person is an island known only to themselves.

God is dead or doesn't exist. I owe a debt of gratitude to many people: To people who believe all living things should be honored and respected because they honor our shared Creator. To people who believe we are interconnected with all life; seen and unseen, past and future, known and unknown. To people who believe we sing God's praise by living a life of genuine kindness, thoughtful humility, and unselfish

generosity toward those we know and love, and toward those we don't know and who may not love us but who nevertheless reflect the image of God. The truth of our true nature is this: God lives in everyone. God unconditionally loves everyone. God is Love.



The Story Behind the Book

As a child growing up in the 1970s, I was deeply involved with my church, community, and country. I was raised by loving parents, grew up in a loving family, and felt only love by everyone who surrounded my young life. I was academically successful and earned a master's degree. But I struggled in shame with who God created, and I hid my heart. By my early twenties, I gave up believing in God and taking care of my spiritual health.

I eventually started to believe God was a myth, hocus pocus, a past nostalgia offering no actual contribution to my life. The only truth was in what my senses could discern. But senses can deceive—they perceive a stationary world when just the opposite is true. Everything in the universe is in a state of flux, vibrating and forever in motion.

Like heroes in the ancient stories, I ultimately rediscovered my spirituality in the desert. There, I finally understood the most important relationship in my life: God. The same God who has known me since before this world, the same God who I will return to when my spirit leaves this world. The same God who sustains all life, time, and energy.

But before that return to God, I was confused and unhappy. I worked for a global corporation in the 1990s and 2000s, and my life embodied nothing but success. But I had closed off my heart. It seemed like the more I pursued my own happiness and peace—with the stars and the moon centered around me—the more I became lost in space.

The rejection of spirituality—which I define as a truth we cannot physically verify—is a recent phenomenon in human history at odds with our human ancestors and every past civilization regardless of their location or time in history. Talk of spirituality, or of faith in a power beyond our comprehension, is ridiculed, dismissed, and mocked by our culture and its institutional leaders.

Many people have become arrogant, believing they know more about the human condition than our ancestors did. The norm in Western culture is that the individual trusts their own unique thoughts and beliefs above all that has come before, ignoring billions of stories and thousands of years of lived human experience and the lessons humanity has learned over the ages. I was one of these arrogant people, a business leader with a highpaying job, a loving spouse, and a loving family. My life epitomized the American Dream.

I should have been happy, but I was filled with anxiety.

I was spiritually dead.

As I started writing this book, I realized I was dealing with universal themes about our shared human experience. Here are just a few: The antilife energy of shame that distorts our sense of self-worth and our inherent value as children of God; the destructiveness of fear that disconnects us from both the love of God and love from (and for)

other people; the ever-lingering sadness and unhappiness we experience when getting stuff is our primary purpose; and the deep indifference about the entirety of Creation, including ourselves.

There is nothing unusually unique about my experience in these shared themes of what it means to be human, but it is unequivocally unique. My story, like yours, will never happen again. Your story exists only in you, in this space and this place, in this time and to your own rhyme.

No matter where you are in your life's journey, *I welcome everyone* because that is the nature of Love. We are all called to be children of God, irrespective of your spiritual beliefs or nonbeliefs or whatever label you use to describe them. And while labels can help us make sense of the world, too often our belief systems separate us from one another, and consequently from Love, as opposed to helping us recognize our shared humanity. Evil is especially good at sowing fear and discord among people.

My hope is no matter where you are in your life's journey, you'll see yourself in mine, and together we can create more love in our lives and in this world. Whether or not you are aware of your immeasurable value, please know that I am aware of it and will hold that for you. You are distinct and unique and only you. You are an individual reflecting the image of God. You are a blessing to and from God. You are unconditionally and eternally loved by God.

The love in this book is for you.



Context and Content

I started my memoir in June 2022, and completed the first draft in March 2023. As I reviewed and edited my manuscript prior to publication, I made the decision not to update or change what I had written based on external factors (political changes, new information) or internal changes in my thinking (prayer, dialogue, reflection, new learnings, and so forth). This book is like all art: It represents where the artist (me, blush emoji) was in a particular place both physically and spiritually as they created. Wanting to honor that sentiment, that reality, I made no new edits beyond those that will help give you, the reader, a better experience.

All content is one hundred percent human created and Divinely inspired.

Names and Events

The events I write about are real, or at least real enough in my memory that they have become my story. That being said, with very few exceptions, I have changed the names of my contributors to honor their privacy and their stories.



Language

When I write about God, I use masculine and non-masculine language. Not every reader will share my choice in language, and that's okay. I encourage you to use whatever language resonates with you in describing God and your relationship

with God. God is greater than any language, which is why writers throughout the centuries have used a variety of language, similes, metaphors, or analogies to describe God.

There are a few words that require clarity given their different connotations by different people throughout history. This is what I mean:

- God is Love.
- Love is words *and* actions that only seek the well-being of *all* people and expects no reciprocity even in the most hostile of situations.
- Sin is words and actions in rebellion of Love.
- Evil is an expression of anything other than Love.



How to Read this Book

Like people and places, my life has been influenced by the culture I was born into and the culture that I choose to engage, both the silly and the scholarly. I believe that art can impact our spiritual well-being in ways that can both inspire and debase the soul, depending on our choices. Throughout my story I have used language, cultural references, imagery, and stylistic patterns to help give context to what I was experiencing. Little winks to you, the reader, that I hope will add to your experience.

Lastly, please read about my journey with the same degree of humility you would expect of other people if this was your narrative. Only God fully knows my heart and I would do the same with your life story.

Peace. God loves you.

*For what shall it profit a man, if he shall
gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*

Mark 8:36

B O O K I

Me and My Ego

YEARS 2014 - 2019

CHAPTER 1

Stars and the Moon

It was February 2014. My life of the moderately rich and unfamous epitomized the American Dream, just as the first Black president of the United States began his second term. My childhood world of the 1970s, and my teenage world of the 1980s, seemed like polaroid pictures, ancient celluloid memories captured on VHS or—even more prehistoric—8mm film, silent movies whose words and music left me long ago. Despite being now an adult, these characters still roamed my mind’s stage—ghosts haunting me whenever the noise and distractions of my life were muted, when I only heard sounds of silence.

My head and heart had long ago disconnected from one another, a skill that had become second nature while living my young life in the closet. I was adept at quickly compartmentalizing what I did not understand, or wasn’t ready to understand.

I was living in downtown Chicago in a newly built luxury high-rise, earning a salary of well over three hundred thousand dollars a year, plus a bonus and stock options. This allowed me to buy what was behind door number one, two, and three. Theater tickets front and center. First class

vacations at the Ritz or Four Seasons. High-end shopping, and countless bottles of champagne, never again drinking wine that sparkles, because nothing sparkles like a Krug Grande Cuvée Brut and, of course, we deserved this.

Eating out several times a week, my kitchen was clean and immaculate. I'd drop a hundred dollars on this meal, sixty dollars on another meal, and three hundred dollars on steaks and martinis. Sometimes I would invite "friends" to join me, bringing the bill to well over five hundred dollars. These meals and friends have long since moved on, literally and figuratively.

I continued to gain weight in my late forties. I believed my belly displayed the good life and boasted that having a heart attack was a sign of success. Wealth was health, certainly not a sickness or something to avoid.

As an executive at a pharmaceutical marketing agency, I understood how healthcare works in the United States. Disease—self-inflicted or otherwise—would reap financial rewards for my pharmaceutical clients, and I, by extension, would benefit. Healthy people don't generate profit. The pharmaceutical industry doesn't earn money selling an apple a day. But there is plenty to be earned selling a once-a-day pill, or pills for life. Even better if we can hook customers while they're young, ensuring a lifetime of profits.

In exchange for these success symbols of my worldly status, I was working fifty to sixty hours a week, rarely taking time off. On a plane and alone in a hotel room every week, I was often eating meals by myself while missing day-to-day moments with my family and our little cat Mozzer—my one consistent and constant joy. Believing my work was purposeful, even if my life felt purposeless, I was chasing one shiny

object after another in my attempt to anesthetize my painful unhappiness.



My sense of humility—a gift from my parents, who instilled this value in me—was under assault from my high-paying career. My mother occasionally reminded me I wasn't the center of the universe, no matter what I believed or what the world told me. A self-evident truth, looking up at a star-filled night sky, where existence is measured in millions. A million little suns sending their illumination over millions of years, over millions of miles. I just wasn't looking up anymore. Instead, I was taking success selfies.

My world told me again and again how special I was based on my income and consumption of stuff. My membership status with American Airlines as a Concierge Key (CK) member epitomized this. I'd achieved an exclusive elite membership status previously unknown to me, even after traveling with American for several years and having already earned their top flyer status. *What more could there be?* As I would discover, there's always more. Why be content with good as opposed to plenty?

With my newly bequeathed flyer status, lines were for other people, including my once-fellow premium travelers. Whether for business or pleasure, my travel routine began with a private car service to the airport. I'd be dropped off at the first-class entrance, of course, where I entered a private room to check my bags with the agent. Gone were the days of waiting. Next, I'd go through another door to the front of the security line. Unlike at school, cuts were allowed for me.

Finishing security, I would go to the Flagship lounge. This invite-only lounge was not accessible to my past club colleagues. Its amenities included an abundance of freshly prepared high-end foods, top-shelf liquor, and a personal agent to escort me to my first-class seat before first class boarded. Everything *complimentary*, the physical display of money vulgar, unlike my past *premium* club.

If I went directly to my gate, a CK agent was always waiting for me, ready to assist with my travel needs, and rebooking me immediately if there were any travel disruptions, often before anyone on the same flight was aware of those same travel disruptions. If I had connecting flights, there was a CK agent at my arrival gate to take me to the lounge or to transport me to my new gate. No need for me to walk when there's an electric golf cart, and I'm thinking, *American went to the trouble of bringing it, so I can't be rude, or I don't want to seem ungrateful*. It became very easy for me to justify what I didn't need.

When a flight from Philly to Chicago had a gate change, instead of walking or riding in a golf cart to the new gate, the CK agent requested a Cadillac Escalade SUV. Walking down the gate ramp stairs onto the airport tarmac and into a waiting vehicle, I was driven to our new departure gate. Ascending the ramp stairs, I was escorted to my first-class seat while my luggage was placed in the overhead bin.

My fellow first-class travelers who walked from the other side of the airport looked at me with a strange mixture of surprise and contempt as I joined them, something I easily ignored. When asked by the flight attendant, "Mr. Young, can I get you a drink before takeoff?" My reply was always, "Of course you can."

When traveling with work colleagues, I would share the wealth. Traveling home from Paris, I shared a ride to the airport with a colleague. Instead of letting her fend for herself in the business class lines—*sacré bleu*—I brought her with me to meet a CK agent who personally escorted us through security and customs, bringing us to the front of both lines. *Pardon, how do you say “cuts” in French?* We got those same facial expressions from premium class travelers that I’d received in Philly with my Escalade arrival, looks which seemed scornful to me as an American with a French employer. *C’est la vie.*

During a trip my spouse and I made with Mozzer, my privileges extended to my family, including premium bottled water and sushi-grade tuna for Mozzer in the lounge and a ride in a golf cart to our gate, what would have been a ten-minute walk. Picture this: Two able-bodied adult men with their hairless cat arriving at the gate and escorted to their first-class seats before any other passengers board, even if everyone will be arriving to our destination at the same time. Not an ideal way to make friends and influence others, but I didn’t care how many green eyes I saw.

Humility is easy to forget when you’re treated like the king of the world, or a sixty-second VIP. The rest of the world was on the other side of velvet ropes, at least when I traveled with American Airlines. Money gave me access to the best of everything man-made in this world—whatever my heart desired. Desire, like lust, often has nothing to do with sex.

I began to see beauty only in things humans created. I was no longer connected to the natural world that I had loved when I was younger. When I occasionally stopped my chase and looked at the magnificent beauty of the setting sun as it said good night to the west and good morning to the east, it

was from a room at a five-star resort. Never once thinking about how that same sunset was freely available to anyone who stopped to appreciate this one-of-a-kind gift from the universe, a gift of love never to be repeated again.

God's gifts of natural beauty are complimentary and generously available to all people. Money is never required to stop and smell the roses or view the setting sun. But it is required if you want to own what is already a gift, and I wanted to own everything I thought would bring me and my family happiness.

CHAPTER 2

The Grand Inquisitor

My professional career, and the swelling bank accounts and rising worldly status it brought with it, amplified my sense of self-importance. Deep peace was elusive and mysterious, while real joy barely evaded extinction. But finally, after twenty years, the Devil got his due.

I joined my best friend Molly for our monthly steak-house dinner. As we caught up with each other and I caught up with the dirty martini in front of me, we began discussing the existence of God. Molly knew I had a master's degree in theology. My response to her beliefs about God surprised her, but sadly, not me.

Unlike many people who believe in God, she regularly attended church. Her faith was evident in words and alive in her actions. She shared with me her belief that God is love and that our lives have a purpose and meaning because we are unconditionally loved by God.

With my foolish and arrogant response I wasn't even agnostic, but had become a full-fledged atheist. I denied there was any purpose to life. I told her I believed life is random and without meaning; there is no cosmic destiny. Modifying an off-color colloquialism, I declared, "Shit happens."

By holding life had no purpose, I was denying individuals having any purpose. *All that is certain is birth and death, not even taxes. We live and we die, end of story.* Finally, I had come to the place in myself where I was denying the existence of God.

I had come to believe there was no proof of an energy that sustains us, let alone a Divine presence who loves us unconditionally, who seeks to be united with all life, including us. Molly and I hadn't even retired for the evening and the rooster had already crowed as the sun set.

Molly was somewhat shocked by my response. How could I believe, as someone who had once wanted to be a youth minister, that the world was meaningless? That our lives have no purpose, and there is no God? God wasn't dead for me; God was no longer alive for me.

Materialism had become my faith even if I professed no faith. My spouse, Joaquim, at times told me that "the universe will take care of us," while in my head, I'd think, *No, I take care of us. I'm the reason we have everything we have, not the universe.* I alone provided bread.

When Joaquim expressed his faith in the universe, it made me angry. I thought he was foolish to believe such nonsense. I know now that I was the foolish one and that he was speaking truth. But at the time, I didn't understand his language.

My heart had become so hardened that even the love of God planted deep within me was struggling to live in the darkness and enmity that pervaded. Finishing our steaks and drinks, Molly and I said good night. We never again talked about God; back to business as usual.

CHAPTER 3

The Obsolete Man

A year after my fiftieth birthday, the leadership structure where I worked underwent some significant changes. When change happens at the very top, the rest only rolls one way, demonstrating the laws of gravity. I was right in the middle of that way. After spending my entire adult life working to climb that particular corporate ladder, I was on my way down, passing Sisyphus as he futilely made his way up a hill he would never reach, neither of us really happy.

The president of my division was changing roles, and someone new would be steering the infamous corporate ship. I had minimal history with his replacement. While I was very effective at managing both up and down, demonstrated by my increasing responsibilities as I outlasted four managers with very different styles over sixteen years, I wasn't prepared to manage my blindside.

Just before all this happened, my manager had "exited" the organization. I'd been in that world long enough to know that when the captain abandons ship or is forced to walk the plank, things don't end well for the crew. My gut was telling me my time at Avidité Health was coming to an end. It was.

Alexa, the incoming president, had joined our division from a past triennial reorganization orchestrated by our Parisian custodians. During our annual leadership meeting, leaders unaffected by upcoming changes announced with much excitement our next triennial reorganization, including merging the healthcare marketing agency I led with another agency.

In one of my first interactions with Alexa, I was struggling with the performance of a new senior employee, and I asked for her advice on how to approach the situation. She conveyed to me her disappointment with his performance, especially since “he has the look.” I thought to myself, *He has the look? Is this some 1980s musical reference?* Personally, I would have preferred a little respect.

Those four words, “he has the look,” came galloping at me like the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow, bringing dread and death. Not only the death of my career at Avidité Health, but the annihilation of my false faith in meritocracy. Murdered, guillotined by the French.

Throughout my entire professional career of thirty-some years, I falsely believed my success was the result of a little luck and enormous pluck, a belief that began with school and Scouts. Suddenly, my outward appearance cast a dark shadow on my past accomplishments. Starting a division, turning around broken businesses, and successfully merging agencies without client attrition were all negated because I didn’t have “the look.” So much for liberty, fraternity, equality.

Until that point, I believed that success was determined solely by the results of an individual’s effort, not by one’s appearance even while working in the world of marketing, promotion, and spin. Selling “health” meant selling a false

reality conveyed through commercials and advertisements. I completely misjudged the power of pictures while leading a creative healthcare agency.



The agency merger felt like a shotgun marriage, the consummation already complete with a baby on the way. I was familiar with the other agency leader: Ed had “the look” Alexa favored. I was the Costello to his Abbott, the Luigi to his Mario, the Jan to his Marcia. He had been with Avidité Health for two years. Prior to this merger, his agency had significantly underperformed, resulting in two recent rounds of layoffs. This is why I, along with my leadership and agency team, were shocked when Alexa announced Ed would be leading this new combo agency. She must have assumed employees would ignore the recent rounds of layoffs and pay no attention to the mess behind the curtain.

I was named COO, but I was certain that once the merger was complete, Alexa would expect Ed to eliminate my position. On a chilly, Manhattan March day, minutes before catching my flight to go back home on a jet plane, Ed hurried me into a little room. He shut the door and delivered the redundancy rationale for my layoff. End scene.

Several months later, Ed would experience the same laws of gravity. Only the locale, rationale, and messenger would be different, but death would come as it does for all. In our pursuit of money, there is no grace. As Forrest Gump said, “that’s all I have to say about that.”

The elimination of my position was a bitter pill for this pharmaceutical marketing executive to swallow. I learned

that no matter my beliefs or actions, the sun will rise, and the rain will fall on all. There is nothing I can do to change the weather; I can only go through its storms.

My words to Joaquim, “I alone provide bread,” came roaring back. These words now devoured my sense of self-importance just like those colorful blue-eyed ghosts swarming in to destroy Pac-Man. My ego and sense of self had become so interwoven with my career that I could no longer consider myself successful by any measure. I was no longer “in charge” of anything or anyone. My life lacked any purpose; I was a man without meaning.

My myth of Don was built around my veneration of myself as a successful, highly compensated business executive—an establishment leader. I couldn’t reconcile what was happening. The money, status, and perks assuring me of my own self-worth were gone: dust in the wind.

When I received news of my layoff, my ego and belief system were broken, but my body began to heal. Although I had been amply rewarded financially, the years of weekly travel, fifty-plus-hour weeks, and managing every conceivable crazy agency issue had extracted a terrible toll. Now that I wasn’t focused exclusively on the endless external demands, I became aware of the impact of those years of burning the candle at both ends personally and professionally, compounded by my excessive drinking, poor diet, and lack of exercise.

CHAPTER 4

Go West

With my layoff from Avidité Health *fini*, I confronted my greatest existential crisis. Unemployed in my early fifties and looking for a new job, with an identity deeply intertwined with work and its worldly benefits, my ego was traumatized. What happens when Monday morning arrives and I have no place to go, nothing to command? It's not like my cat, Mozzer, was going to listen to what I asked of him.

Joaquim was emphatic. He wasn't employed either, although he was working on his master's degree in education. My severance package was generous, but so was our lifestyle. We had just taken on a new mortgage, and had emptied our savings to renovate our recently purchased apartment. Sizable balances on our credit cards reflected our lifestyle—debt incurred in my empty attempts to buy happiness—had been manageable on a several-hundred-thousand-dollar annual salary, but were less manageable on zero.

In addition to our mortgage, our monthly condo assessments were several hundred dollars, and our annual property taxes were thousands of dollars. Then there were a multitude

of local and state taxes we had to pay for the privilege of living in Illinois. We quickly realized we would be returning to the middle class—Chicago was becoming a city of the wealthy few and the many poor. Its middle-class backbone, like most major US cities, was devastated by economic scoli-osis, eroding further with each passing year. We were in the new Gilded Age in the Digital Age.

I needed to make a change—a big change. It was time to roll the dice and gamble on something new. I made the decision that this Young man would go west.

During my many years in Chicago, I was never able to find happiness. My yellow brick road dead-ended, paved over by life. My dreams were like a hot air balloon floating away without its intended passenger, and his little cat too.

It was time to leave my familiar world to find someplace new. I needed to escape Chicago and twenty-two years' worth of elusive happiness. Joaquim trusted in our journey: trading concrete mountains for mountains majesty; swapping hazy grey skies for sunny blue skies; exchanging cramped spaces for wide open spaces.

Our intention to live in our new Chicago condo for many years became the impossible dream. Awakened by the new reality of our circumstances, we were no longer tied to any location because of work; anywhere could be called home. We based our criteria solely on what type of life we wanted, a very liberating experience considering that historically we had always been required to live someplace because of a job.

After meeting Joaquim eleven years before, I had made a point of traveling with him to many cities and states around the US solely for pleasure. This proved helpful compiling our pro and con list of places based on climate and cost. Quickly

eliminating many cities and states, we chose the sauna over the steam room.

We momentarily considered California, but this would require our own personal gold rush. Instead of the Golden State, we chose the Silver State, Nevada. Las Vegas easily became number one on our list. This naughty city seemed nice for us, based on our frugal, sun-centric criteria.

Our recently renovated condo sold quickly, and then we had to find a place to live in Vegas. I was done with high-rise living and its eternal assessment fees: Time to ground myself and live on the earth, not look down on it and other people. An accurate and appropriate metaphor.

We purchased an “older home” in the central Vegas Valley where ninety percent of Vegas tourists don’t visit. (Older in Vegas means mid-1980s, unlike Chicago where older homes are from the mid-1880s.) The owner was a widow in her nineties and a former show girl who looked marvelous, absolutely marvelous. She wanted to move to Florida to be closer with her family, ready to trade dry heat for wet heat. We were anxious to help her with our residence under contract, the Wrigley Tower clock outside our condo windows silently counting down the time we had remaining in Chicago.

With our current and future homes under contract and the logistics of moving us and our stuff 1,800 hundred miles complete, it was time to say our goodbyes. But first, I needed to make things right with my parents. As a result of my most recent stubborn and prideful tantrum, they were unaware of my job loss and our decision to leave Chicago. Unlike my past moves to Pittsburgh and Minneapolis, I knew I would never again return to Chicago, a place that I’ve always considered home, even if I grew up in its suburbs.

Moving to Sin City was the latest example of my ongoing marathon to run from God, to resist Love. Disconnecting my mind from my heart as I hid from God and the world, my behavior was predicated on fear from my teenage years when I didn't trust in God's love or in those who loved me. As an adult I was beholden to a false faith, one in which I no longer believed in God's love.

Like for you, God has a purpose for my life, a purpose sometimes in conflict with what I want or desire. Although I may have ignored that purpose, it is always present. It is a purpose that began with my arrival into this world, and at this time of transition, I realized I could no longer ignore it. Perhaps it was because I began to realize my inevitable departure from this world.