

KIRK A. JOHNSON

ROASTING KARMA



Awaken From Illusion, Take Responsibility for Your
Past Actions, and Create a Life That Is Truly Free

PRAISE

In his readable book, *Roasting Karma*, Kirk Johnson vividly and with disarming candour, shares his seemingly unending health challenges and painful life experiences with readers who may rightly wonder how one man can survive them all.

—Professor Kofi Asare Opoku, Chairman, Kwabena Nketia Centre for Africana Studies, African University College of Communications, Accra, Ghana

As a spiritual man, I can relate to *Roasting Karma*. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. When we don't follow that philosophy, there's a price to pay. Kirk paid his dues!

—Tiger Jeet Singh Jr., WWE Wrestling Champion,
President, Tiger Jeet Singh Foundation

Roasting Karma takes you deep into the mind of the author as he searches for truth. Join Kirk on his journey to self-realization and you may find yourself arriving there, too!

—Dorothy McLeod, Founder/Director; Jamaica
Cultural Alliance

In *Roasting Karma*, Kirk demonstrates the steps to WAKE UP from this illusory life, same old patterns, and begin seeing things the way they truly are. This timely story of self-transformation helps us to battle onward during the days of uncertainty. It is wonderful to read a story of awakening when so many are still asleep. Your soul will light up with each turn of the page.

—April Tribe Giauque, author of *Pinpoints of
Light & Out of Darkness*

In these difficult times, we are all looking for examples to help us. This is a compelling story of how one man copes with all that karma throws his way. *Roasting Karma* is truly a story for our time.

—Robert C. Paehlke, Emeritus Professor of Environmental and Resource Studies and Political Science, Trent University

Stop repeating the same old patterns! Kirk shows us the steps to wake up from this illusory life and begin seeing things the way they truly are. The time is now!

—Fay Thompson, author of *So Help Me God*

This book provides life lessons on how to conquer past hurts and move into a place of peace.

—Kary Oberbrunner, author of *Your Secret Name* and
Elixir Project

I've known Kirk for many years. He has been a friend, business partner, mentor, and healer to me. Especially through my difficult journey with the loss of my wife, Janis, to a rare cancer. No matter what is happening, he always manages to stay calm. I refer to him fondly as “Morpheus” from *The Matrix* movie series. That's the wisdom and peace of meditation shining through. He clearly sees the matrix for what it is, and he's always *Roasting Karma*.

— Dr. Doug Lukinuk, BSc DC, CEO PTBO Chiro Inc.,
CEO Arc of Life Inc.

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AWAKEN FROM ILLUSION, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR
YOUR PAST ACTIONS, AND CREATE A LIFE THAT IS
TRULY FREE

BY: KIRK A. JOHNSON



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Some names and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

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DEDICATION

Roasting Karma is dedicated to the anonymous souls who lost their lives, who allowed me to live. Two hearts and a kidney—three angels forever watching over me.
Namasté

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INTRODUCTION

This book is my gift to you, the reader. After becoming very ill, I lay in a hospital bed wondering, “What service could I perform for mankind that would cause God to keep me around?” He answered. God told me that if I could use my life of suffering and keys to survival as an example for others to follow, a life like that would be worth saving. That was our pact, and the contents of this book is the product of our collaboration.

I don’t consider myself a religious man—more SBNR (spiritual but not religious). When I was young, however, my parents took me to a Baptist Church. While they went into the big hall, my sisters and I went with a Sunday-school teacher, to Bible study. I enjoyed the morally-minded stories: Daniel in the Lion’s Den, Joseph and the Coat of Many Colors, Samson and Delilah, and more. I could even rattle off, by rote, the books of the Bible, both the Old and the New Testament. Every Christmas, I loved watching the Ten Commandments: the original one with Yul Brynner and Charlton Heston. I was always a bit shaken when Moses went up into the mountains and God spoke to him through a burning bush, or when God scorched the commandments into stone—with fire. Later in life, I realized it wasn’t fear I sensed about the burning bush, but a powerful reverence for God. However, as my parents fell away from the weekly Sunday church ritual, so did I. Still craving that reverence for God, yet finding no solutions in any church, I let go of my search. I struggled to believe that the only way I could have a relationship with God was having to first pass through a preacher or priest; neither of which was I

certain had their own true relationship with God. Tantamount to the blind leading the blind. I could no longer suffer religion.

Once I hit my thirties, I had all but forgotten about my search for Spirit. In fact, I was pretty sure I could do without it. Unfortunately, spirituality is something we need to balance out the mental and physical aspects of ourselves. It's around this period of life (thirties and onward) that we are either drawn to it, or we get the good ole shove in the back. At 32 years of age, I got my shove and it changed my life forever. Join me, as I take you on my roller-coaster journey to bring my life back into balance. Maybe you'll see yourself in some of the pages, and if you do, hopefully you'll find your way to some of the same solutions as I did.

Why call the book *Roasting Karma*? After becoming ill, my life changed completely. The seriousness of the illnesses precluded me from returning to the life I had enjoyed until then. I went from an intelligent, athletic, and decent-looking guy—with swagger—to a weak, fearful, and at times, frail individual. I came to understand that spirituality was the missing key in my life. Once I began to study and understand spirituality, I realized what was happening to me was payback for things I had done, and choices I had made in the past. I came to understand that this payback was known as the *Universal Law of Karma*.

Karma is the law of action or cosmic justice, based upon cause and effect. Your every act, good or bad, has a specific effect on your life. The effects of actions in this life remain lodged in the subconsciousness; those brought over from past existences are hidden in the superconsciousnessⁱ, ready like seeds to germinate under the influence of a suitable environment. Karma decrees that as one sows, so must he inevitably reap.ⁱⁱ

At first this worried me, especially knowing I hadn't always done good deeds in this life; not to mention deeds I had done in previous lives that I no longer remembered. Typically, in life, whenever there is a problem, human beings are quick to find someone else to blame. The *blame game* is a fruitless undertaking and only leads to sadness, anger, or guilt, for all parties involved—a

lose-lose situation. Conversely, when we take responsibility for our actions, and then forgive ourselves, we cauterize those negative emotions and reveal a path through which happiness can flourish—win-win!

Understanding that blaming someone else for my karmic debts caused negative emotions, whereas accepting my karmic debts could produce happiness, I wondered what would happen if I called for *all of my karma* to come at once? Further study indicated that it is our unpaid karma that keeps us tied to the wheel of rebirth: reincarnation or *samsara*. We must be born, live, die, and then be reborn again and again—sometimes millions of incarnations—until we repay our karmic debt. Once we repay our karmic debt, we free ourselves from the wheel of rebirth and are free to remain alongside God; be one with him and know him. “He who overcomes, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go out no more.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That’s what I wanted. This life seemed all too familiar to me, like I had been here many times before. I was done. I needed a legitimate way out. I prayed for all my karma to be given to me... and it was. Of course, I was totally unaware of the measure of the bill I still had to pay. In searching for a way to ease the debt, I came across a yogic meditation practice taught by Paramahansa Yogananda called Kriya yoga. Yogananda stated that, “Since all effects or seeds of our past actions, our karma, can be destroyed by *roasting* them in the fire of meditation, concentration, the light of superconsciousness, and right actions, there is no such thing as fate. You make your own destiny. God has given you independence, and you are free to shut out his power or let it in.”

Not only did Yogananda teach me how to roast karma through meditation, alignment with him, a guru-avatar, takes away a portion of the karma I would have suffered all on my own. I take 25% of my karma, the guru takes 25%, and 50% is the grace of God. That’s a portion I can handle and that is why I make the supreme effort, day and night, to keep on *Roasting Karma!*

PART I

AWAKENING

1997 - 1999

1

WALK-IN, BUT YOU CAN'T WALK OUT!

*When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are
challenged to change ourselves.*

- Viktor Frankl

I stood there transfixed, my hand on the doorknob. Why couldn't I pass through the door I had entered a mere twenty minutes ago? Perhaps it was the news I had just received from the doctor. He was still sitting behind me, watching me pause before I walked out the door. The news he gave me was just words, yet somehow those words paralyzed me. I felt a cold chill moving from the top of my head down to my feet. The words played again and again in my head, deafening me to all other noise. How did it ever come to this?

I had woken up that day in Toronto at my mother's house. The evening before, I'd made the long two-and-a-half-hour drive from my home in Peterborough, Ontario, to pick up my son Travis in Kitchener. Then, we made the hour-and-fifteen-minute drive to my mother's place. Toronto was a convenient halfway point on the backend of those five-hour round trips from Peterborough

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to Kitchener and back. On this particular June weekend in 1997, there was an added benefit: it was Travis's eighth birthday, and I was taking him to Sega City in Mississauga, just outside Toronto. Travis loved video games, and Sega City had them all—even the interactive ones that you could ride, climb on, and fly in. I wanted to do something special for him, especially since we didn't see each other that often. (Due to the distance between us, I only saw him every three weeks.) We had breakfast at my mom's place and headed out for the day.

As we drove, I could notice my body swaying with every heartbeat—back and forth, like a pendulum. This was the norm now, as I had noticed it about three months ago. I'm not sure why I chose that day, but on the way back from Sega City, I asked Travis if he'd mind stopping at the walk-in clinic in the mall down the street from my mother's apartment. Having spent the last three hours playing every interactive video game imaginable, as well as a round of mini golf, he was cool with it—so in we went.

After checking in with the receptionist, we sat in the waiting area. An older black lady seated beside me leaned over and gave me a little pamphlet to read. It was entitled *The Daily Word*. From the outside looking in, this may not have seemed like anything unusual. What *was* unusual was that I had seen these little pamphlets for years. My mother would give them to me, and each time she did, I'd tell her, "Mom, stop giving me this crap—I'm not into it!" But this time, I read the pamphlet from cover to cover. The gist of the message was to contact your inner power as a guide to living your daily life... whatever that meant.

Not long after I read the pamphlet, my name was called. I made my way past the reception desk and into an examination room. A doctor came in and asked me why I was there. I explained the rocking, and that I'd also been having quite a few headaches lately. The doctor did his stethoscope thing and listened to my chest, in front and in the back. Then he wrapped an inflatable cuff around my upper arm, pumped it up, and slowly let the air out. He watched the pressure gauge while listening with his stethoscope, its head placed at the inside of my elbow. Then, as

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if he wasn't sure of the result the first time, he repeated the process. He then asked me to remove my shirt: he was requesting an electrocardiogram (or ECG). Shortly thereafter, a technician came in and applied a bunch of sticky, two-inch, round, spongy paper circles with little metal nipples to my chest, then attached alligator clips to the metal nipples with long colored wire leads that fed back to a machine. "Don't move please," he said. The technician ran the machine for a few seconds, and then it made a printout. He said, "Thank you," and left the room.

The doctor returned with a concerned look on his face and began asking questions about my life: "What type of work do you do?" "Are you in a relationship?" "What do you do in your spare time?" and "How long have you been experiencing these conditions?" I gave him a brief rundown of my life and told him that I'd been experiencing these symptoms for about three months. It was then that he looked me square in the eye and said those dreaded words, prefaced by the ever-respectful *Mr. Johnson*: "Your blood pressure is dangerously high: 190/140. You need to go to the hospital in an ambulance immediately. With a blood pressure like that, it would be malpractice to let you walk out of here."

My first response was amazement and shock, mixed with a hint of anger. I immediately retorted, "There is no way I'm leaving here in an ambulance. It's my son's birthday and there's no way I'm going to let him see me go out like that. I'm perfectly fine. I can drop my son off at my mom's place, then head over to the hospital to get fully checked out."

The doctor was silent for a moment, then capitulated and submitted, "While it is not my preference, I suppose that since you have been experiencing these symptoms for three months now, another few hours won't make that much of a difference."

Disregarding the severity of the moment yet filled with pride to have won that little battle, I stood up, turned on my heels, and headed for the door. That's when it hit me. A little voice inside was telling me, "You don't know what's on the other side of that door." Of course, that was silly. I knew exactly what was on the other side of that door—the reception area, a pile

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of people, and my son. The little voice wasn't speaking literally, but metaphorically, and what was on the other side of that door was *a big unknown*. For months now, I'd been walking around with a life-threatening physical problem and didn't know it. Yes, there were little signs here and there, but individually they meant nothing. Now, that I knew what those little signs added up to, it meant everything. Panic hit, and thoughts of something bad happening while I was driving with my son made it all seem a little too real. All this foreboding was enough for me to change my mind and listen to the advice of the doctor. Except for that stupid pride, that was the last hurdle. Finally, measuring the preponderance of fear against the stupid, ego-driven pride, I turned away from the door and sat back down with the doctor.

A rush of emotion came over me. I wasn't sure if it was about finding out that I was ill, the safety of my son, an unknown future, or having to back down from a fight. Maybe it was a mixture of it all? Perhaps there was a middle-ground solution? I had another idea and laid it out before the doctor: "How about if I call my mother and explain the situation to her. She lives close by and could quickly come and pick up my son. Then, I could make my way over to the hospital, without endangering the life of my boy." He agreed. I called my mother and she was on her way.

My mother, Joy, as she was commonly known amongst friends and family, was very good under pressure. I suppose all mothers are when it comes to their children, but Joy was especially good in *triage* situations. She showed up with a couple of her friends in tow, Patience and Darlene. They would take Travis home to their place and my mother would drive me to the emergency department at the nearest hospital. This seemed like a plan and was satisfactory to the doctor. Time to execute!

My mother drove me to East York General Hospital and, on advice from the clinic doctor, I was quickly rushed through processing and was now before the emergency doctor. He asked me all the same questions, so I replied in kind: "I'm a business tax auditor with Revenue Canada. I'm also enrolled in the Certified General Accountants of Ontario (CGA) program working towards

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my accounting designation while, at the same time, completing a business degree through distance education. I have to do it together because I'm also applying for a position as a *corporate* tax auditor and need the credentials in order to be considered. The tax department has allowed me to write the competition even though I haven't achieved those credentials and if I'm successful in the position, I could keep it—if I achieve the credentials by the time the competition outcome gets posted. (Just a little pressure!) I'm also the president of our tax union local and was elected to the National Bargaining Committee that is currently in sessions with the Treasury Board of Canada. Since the bargaining sessions are in Ottawa, I had to schedule to write some of my CGA exams in Ottawa, in the middle of the bargaining process.” (Just a little more pressure!)

The emergency room (ER) doctor looked at me with raised eyebrows and made the obvious comment, “You are under a lot of stress for a guy that's only thirty-two. Let's see if we can't bring that blood pressure down.” I removed my shirt and put on one of those customary, light blue, tie-in-the-back gowns and lay down on a stretcher. Working with the doctor was a young assistant, and he came over to apply those round stickers again, except this time they were attached to a monitor to keep track of my vital signs. He also inserted an intravenous needle, with a line that was attached to a bag of fluid.

What happened next, I will never forget for the rest of my life. As I lay on my back, faceup on the table, (I was holding my mother's hand as she looked down upon me, consoling me, telling me everything would be okay) I noticed the young assistant injecting something into the intravenous line. A warm feeling began emanating from my solar plexus. At first this feeling was very mild, but then it began to get stronger—and stronger. If I were a lake, it would be as if someone dropped a stone in the center of me and the circular ripples began moving outward to encompass my entire body of water. Immediately, I knew something was wrong. It's as if my life force were preparing to leave my body; and while I had never experienced that sensation

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before, that's exactly what I imagined it would feel like. Now the warmth was turning into fear, and someone was turning the thermostat way up. At that point, I squeezed my mother's hand and told her, "Something is wrong! Something is really wrong!"

Right then, *Triage Joy* went into action. She shouted to the doctor, "There is a problem here! I AM A NURSE! My son is in trouble!" In truth, my mother is not a nurse, but she definitely knows how to get some attention. The emergency doctor quickly made his way across the room, and upon seeing what was happening, pushed the assistant out of the way and took control of the situation. Within a few moments, I could feel the warmth subsiding and my body returning to normal. At that time, nothing more was said about what happened, or why; but I had a gut feeling I'd dodged a bullet—big time! I was later stabilized, officially admitted to the hospital, and left the emergency room.

I'd never been sick as an adult, and so this experience was all new to me. As a child, I had acute appendicitis resulting in my appendix being removed, and later, a severe bout of gastroenteritis. I couldn't help but notice, though, that both of those childhood maladies had been pushed to the extreme before being attended to. Now here I was again, with very high blood pressure that needed to be addressed and controlled quickly. As a kid, you leave everything up to your parents and the doctors, and the whole experience is resolved with very little question. However, as an adult, you take a little more interest in what's going on: the various tests, procedures and examinations, what they are for, and why you need them. We were going through a process of elimination. First off, I recalled hearing ramblings about *ischemic changes* in my heart that were noticed on the ECGs. The result of those ramblings was a Nitro patch. My *Spidey sense* was telling me they were barking up the wrong tree. It was explained to me that the Nitro patch was used to open the blood pathways and prevent another heart attack. "Another heart attack!" I mused, "I've never experienced a heart attack?" but apparently the test results indicated that I may have had an angina attack that went unnoticed. "Hmmm... unnoticed angina

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attack eh?” I thought, “Not bloody likely!” All I knew was that the Nitro patch was giving me a splitting headache. I’m calling that elimination number one!

Finally, they realized there had been no heart attack and I, thankfully, got off the nitroglycerin. Next, they informed me that the kidneys did many jobs: like balancing minerals and fluids in the body; they also create an enzyme called renin that can affect blood pressure throughout the body. If there is some problem with the kidneys, it could affect the renin production and, ultimately, the blood pressure. They were asking me if I would submit to an open biopsy of my kidney. Of course, I said “Yes.” In hindsight though, I now know that a biopsy of the kidney can be done laparoscopically, in which three to five small incisions are made, and a magnifying telescope is used along with long, thin surgical instruments that could have biopsied the kidney with very little trauma. The open biopsy is about a five-inch incision just below and along the side of the ribcage, and the rehab is very painful. If I recall correctly, the story was that I’d been given blood thinners, which made laparoscopic surgery much riskier for bleeding complications; the open biopsy was the only way to go. My mom still asserts that the reason for the open biopsy was to *harvest one of my kidneys*. We all still laugh about that one. She was always leery about the medical profession.

After leaving the emergency ward, I was bounced all over the hospital running tests. The only constant was that there were chicks aplenty! Hot nurses and doctors were around every corner. You’d think with what I was going through, my focus would be on my health. Don’t get me wrong, it was, but I’m not a blind man and was conscious of the new terrain. I suppose since I was in the hospital, I should deal with *all* my afflictions. My lifelong preoccupation with members of the opposite sex could be considered an ailment—and those who knew me might say it was a full-blown disease. At thirty-two, I still had it goin’ on, so to speak—and so the hunt continued. Got to address that soon.

One of the days of my stay, the ER doctor came to see me. He shared his thoughts that, “I was just the emergency doctor on

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call that day, and I don't usually come to visit patients who pass through the emergency ward, but for some reason I just had to come and see you. You're such a young guy, and you have so much on your plate. You know... We almost lost you in the ER that day." He may have said something else, but after his last sentence it was as if he wasn't even there anymore. My mind dwelled on those words, "We almost lost you in the ER that day." The words echoed through me for some time. I knew something was wrong, but having never experienced anything like that before, I wasn't sure. Now, I was! My mind ran to *death*—and how quickly it could come. One moment you're there, feel a little warmth in the chest, and the next minute you're gone. Wham! Bam! Thank you, ma'am! Life is fleeting. Thank God my mother was there with me. She may have saved my life.

2

HOODOO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

The soul that is without suffering does not feel the need of knowing the ultimate cause of knowing the universe. Sickness, grief, hardships, etc., are all indispensable elements in the spiritual ascent.

- Sri Anandamayi Ma

The hospital was a busy place. There was always a lot of hustle and bustle. As I lay on the bed in the single-occupant room I'd been given, I listened to the omnipresent buzz of the hallways. I overheard a man who seemed irate that he was being asked to leave the hospital. I heard the nurses at the station telling him that he was better now and there was no reason for him to stay. I'm not sure how I knew, but I could tell he was homeless and did not want to go back out onto the street after whatever treatment he had received. He begged to stay but the nurses' hands were tied. All I could think was, "I hope I'm not in the room he just got booted out of! I'm not in any kind of shape for a donnybrook." In the end, they had to call security, as well as the police, to take care of him. I myself couldn't wait to get out of the hospital—just not that way! It's funny how life shuffles the deck: the only hand you get is the one you are dealt. While

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you can trade in a few cards, sometimes your hand improves, sometimes it just makes things worse.

When one thinks of the hospital staff, the first people who come to mind are often the nurses and doctors, but there are a whole host of people necessary to run the day-to-day operations. My favorites were always the orderlies and assistants. Why? To me, they were always more genuine and authentic—probably because they had nothing to prove. There was a black woman of Caribbean descent that came in to check my room, sweep, and empty the trash. She looked around as she came near, leaned in, and whispered to me, “You shouldn’t be here!”

“Okay?” I thought. “If what had been happening the last few days wasn’t enough to make my hair stand on end, this was it.” “What do you mean I shouldn’t be here?” I asked.

She just shook her head and repeated the same words “You shouldn’t be here.” She looked around again. I’m not sure what she was looking for, but I imagine she was just making sure there were no doctors or nurses listening. She whispered again, “I’m going to bring you the number of a woman to call. She knows things. She will explain everything.” Then she left the room.

I was puzzled by this interaction and wondered what the woman meant. While I wasn’t a religious man, I had seen enough movies about voodoo, hoodoo, psychics, and rituals to venture a guess about what this woman was suggesting, and I must say it intrigued me. I couldn’t wait for her to come back. She returned a short while later with a phone number on a card and a plug-in phone for me to use. She instructed me on what time I should call, which would be later that evening, and then she left again. At the prearranged time, I made the call. The whole event seemed so strange and macabre, and the conversation with this woman was no different. When I dialed the number, it rang and an elderly, confident, yet mysterious, voice answered the phone. I gave my name and she seemed to know why I was calling. I mentioned that, “The lady in the hospital told me I wasn’t supposed to be

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here and gave me your number. Can you tell me what she is talking about?”

The mysterious voice replied, “Yes, but first I need to find you.”

“Find me? What the heck does that mean?” I wondered. I waited for her to continue.

The voice returned a few moments later and mused, “This is strange, I cannot find you. This is very strange. It’s like you are no longer with us. It looks like you are going to have to moan it out. Yes, you are going to have to moan it out. That is all I can tell you. You are going to have to moan it out!”

As this was a strange occurrence, and my comfort level was not at its highest during this conversation, I accepted the fact that it was all she could tell me. “Thank you, goodbye,” I said. A few moments later my head came out of the clouds. I wondered why I didn’t ask her what, “you’re going to have to moan it out,” meant. As fate would have it, I would soon find out.

PAIN! After the open kidney biopsy, that’s all I can remember—pain! Now I’m a pretty tough guy. I played American football in high school and university and suffered torn up knuckles, stitches in multiple places, severe bruising, charley horses, and I had my bell rung a few times, but this was another animal altogether. They went in on my right side, just below the rib line, and made an incision about six inches long. It was all bandaged up, but when the nurses came to change the dressing, I could see they used staples to close the wound. I had heard about such things but had never experienced it myself. It wasn’t the incision or the staples that were giving me discomfort, it was the fact that they had cut through the lateral muscle groupings. From the pain I was feeling, these muscles were involved in every movement I made. It wasn’t comfortable to lay on my back nor on my right side, obviously. All that was left was to lay on my left side. Sure, they gave me drugs to numb the pain, but it wasn’t touching it, as far as I was concerned. All I could do was lay there on my side; I pulled my knees up toward my chest and assumed the fetal position. For a grown man, it truly felt like I was reverting back to an infant—and the only comfort I could engender was to moan.

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I moaned so much it became just like breathing. Somehow that low-pitched, murmuring buzz was soothing—and I'm not sure whether it was soothing to the wound itself, or to my body and mind as a whole. Was I feeling sorry for myself? Yes, absolutely! And I didn't care what anybody thought about it. Was I *moaning it out*? Maybe I was, but there was no instruction manual; no way of knowing whether I was doing the hoodoo lady's version of moaning at all. Only time would tell.

As I lay in the fetal posture, with my back to the door facing the window, I looked out at the blue sky and began to wonder why this was all happening to me. I didn't think I was that bad of a person; I never killed anyone, I wasn't a bank robber, and I earned my living honestly. A tear rolled down the bridge of my nose and onto the pillow. Just then, I felt a hand touch my shoulder. Immersed in self-pity, I didn't hear anyone enter the room. I immediately rolled over, albeit gingerly, to see who had come in behind me, and to my surprise no one was there. "Whoa! What the...?"

"So what?" I thought. "On top of everything I'm going through, I'm also going nuts?" I definitely felt a hand on my shoulder. There was no doubt in my mind. "What, or who, could it have been?" I searched my mind for all plausible explanations and could come up with none—save one: "Was it...an Angel?" I had heard about such things, and probably watched similar events happen on television, and in movies, but I never really gave it much thought. "Was it possible?" I wondered "Could something like this actually be happening to me? Why not?" The thought of it all was quite comforting. "Touched on the shoulder by an Angel." Pretty cliché if you ask me, but hey... I can roll with it! I closed my eyes and went to sleep.

The next day, the surgeon came to give me his findings. I was hoping for some resolution to this mess, so I listened intently to the report. He stated, "When we biopsied the kidney, the glomeruli, which are the parts of the kidney that filter waste and fluids from the body, were damaged. It looked as though they had been eaten away by something. In fact, it looked very similar to

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tissue under an immune attack. As a result, we're ordering an HIV test." He went on to say some other things, including the fact that I was getting discharged. He continued with instructions on when to return to have the staples removed, but once again my ears were deaf to his words, given the news I had just received.

"Fuuuck! Did not see that coming!" I thought to myself. "As if I didn't have enough to worry about." Historically, right around this time, HIV and AIDS were making news worldwide. People were dying from it left, right, and center. I was pretty sure that I was not HIV positive, but pretty sure wasn't enough to stop me from worrying. You must remember that I grew up in the age before condoms were invented. Okay, you got me there. Yes, they had been invented but very few people used them, and I was not one of the very few. When I was in my teens, and began sowing my oats, there was no big fear of HIV—just old-fashioned STDs—nothing a little tetracycline couldn't fix. And besides, I had been tested once or twice before and the results were always negative. Still...I had been a bit of a hound, and back then, you never knew what surprise you'd find inside the Cracker Jack box! I'd rolled the dice way too many times, and now it was coming back to haunt me.

Arrangements were made to get Travis back home to Kitchener, and I was heading to my mother's apartment for convalescence. "So many things to do!" I worried to myself. I needed to contact work to let them know that I wouldn't be coming in for a while and give them a bit of an update as to what was going on. I also needed to contact a girl I had just met, Lorie Masterson. We were supposed to be getting together, and I didn't want her to think that I was no longer interested. Priorities, priorities! Yet, those checklist items seemed small in comparison to the worry and fear that I was experiencing. In the back of my mind, I was also a little concerned about my present accommodations. Don't get me wrong, I loved my mother, but from time to time she could be somewhat volatile in certain situations. A little bit of an *itchy trigger finger* you could say—you just never knew when it could go off!

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My mother had a two-bedroom apartment on the 14th floor of a building in the Thorncliffe Park, East York area of Toronto. I had the bedroom closest to the kitchen, the guest room. The simple act of walking was exhausting; I lay down on the bed in the guest room. The pain from the surgery was no longer as intense as it had been in the hospital. The oxycodone seemed to be doing its job, but it wasn't pain I was concerned with. My mind was stuck on the HIV threat. Forget about high blood pressure, the possibilities of angina attacks, kidney problems; they all paled in comparison with full-blown HIV and AIDS—those babies were killers. “Why had I been so foolish in the past. I should have taken better precautions,” I chastised. All the excuses for not wearing a condom—reduced sensation, coitus interruptus, remembering to always have one, the embarrassment of the purchase process, as well as the cost, and on—seemed insignificant compared to what I now faced. I was possessed by worry and fear.

Then something bizarre happened—like an episode right out of *The Twilight Zone*! As I lay in bed, bemoaning my situation, I soon tired and closed my eyes to get some rest. To my astonishment, I beheld a magnificent entity standing before me! How was this possible? When I say the entity was standing before me, in all actuality it was really standing in front of my closed eyelids. My first reaction was fright! I quickly popped my eyes open and thought “What the heck is going on? Did I really see what I thought I saw? Maybe it was just a hallucination. After all, I just had some serious surgery and was still taking painkillers.” I had to check. I closed my eyes again, and there it was, larger-than-life, in bright effulgent colors: it was a very tall being, wearing a full-length, hooded, gown-like robe, much like something a monk would wear. Its arms were crossed in front of its chest and in one hand was a scythe and in the other a scepter with a tassel on the end.

“What did this all mean?” I thought. “Why was it here?” I looked for signs of whether this was a beneficent or malevolent being. My eyes were drawn to the head area, which remained hooded, such that the face was in shadow. The fear in me, coupled

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with the fact that I had never encountered anything like this before, caused me to interpret the hooded visage as belonging to something malevolent, and so I open my eyes quickly, once again. I looked up as if in prayer and said silently, “I’m not ready for this.” I closed my eyes once again, and it was gone.

I lay there contemplating what had just happened and surmised that it was either the Angel of Mercy, or the Angel of Death. I suppose, if it was the Angel of Mercy, I should have tried to communicate with it in some way. All things considered, and not being much of a gambling man, if it was the Angel of Death, there was no way I wanted to delay. I hedged my bet; I asked for it to go away. My mind vacillated as to whether I had done the right thing. There were pros and cons for each side of the equation. Given the past weekend’s events, the high blood pressure, almost losing my life, the open biopsy, and the HIV scare, there were more than enough reasons for it to be the Angel of Death. The scythe—essentially a sharp sword shaped like a hook—didn’t help any. Then my mind wandered back to the touch on the shoulder I received while lying in the hospital bed. That touch was not frightening at all, to the contrary, it was very comforting. “Perhaps it was that same angel coming to tell me that everything would be okay. I’ll try to hang onto that.”

I got up and wandered around my mother’s apartment for a while, and then it happened. Remember that itchy trigger finger I told you about? Well, it flinched! We were discussing something about our family history that might have been germane to the doctors, but when the doctor had asked about our history, my mother held it back. This really irritated me and so we got right into it. Normally, I enjoy a good debate, but I was damaged and exhausted, and I knew how these things always went. My mother would never back down even if she was wrong and neither would I, but today I just didn’t have the energy to fight a battle, the outcome of which would be meaningless.

It could’ve been the fact that my mother was raised alongside five brothers that made her fight so fiercely, but I knew it wasn’t that. My mother married my father, Welsey Johnson (Well-zee),

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when she was very young. She was also the daughter of a police inspector in Jamaica and lived under heavy rules in her childhood household. There seemed to be a transference of that authority from her father to her husband, and as with many relationships back in those days, obedience of the wife was paramount. Further to that, my father was a very shrewd businessman and had some manipulative tendencies that carried over into the relationship. He called the shots, and my mother followed. From what I recalled, everything was hunky-dory for many years until my father overleveraged himself with land, properties, and businesses. He needed my mother to sign off on various paperwork, sight unseen. One day, she simply had enough and refused. War ensued, and shortly after that my mother became tired and depressed. Seeing his opportunity, my father tried to have my mother committed in order to take control of the family finances. But having someone committed is no easy task. The person you're trying to commit must exhibit real psychological dysfunction, which my mother simply did not. The doctors knew she didn't need to be there and called my dad to come and pick her up. He wouldn't. That was the last straw. My mother opened her eyes for the first time, as an adult! Ever since then, right or wrong, she's never backed down from anything.

So, now you know what I faced that night. Sometimes, these altercations would ramp themselves up to a point where things were said that should never be said. It seemed like she was still fighting my father, although they'd been divorced for 20 years. She'd get that look in her eyes that she had with him near the end. I knew where this was all heading, and I just couldn't go there. By now, I was getting emotional. Way too many things had recently happened to me in a very short period. I may not have had very long to live, so I decided to leave; but before I did, I was going to get a few things off my chest.

"Mom, I gotta get out of here. I can't stay here with you," I said. "Sometimes you act crazy, and I just can't tell if it's an act or if you really are crazy!" I went on to rehash the events of a weekend my sisters and I spent at my mother's place, recently.

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She lost it then, too. It was so important for her to be right, or to have her own way, that she didn't care who got trampled in the process. I didn't even know where I was going to go, but I had credit cards and plenty of room for purchases. I was in no shape to be wandering the streets looking for hotels, but I just couldn't handle the stress of events; I had no choice.

I went to my room to grab my things and headed for the door. As I was moving toward the door, I heard something unexpected: a sweet, soft voice called out to me and said "son, I don't want you to go." The voice stopped me dead in my tracks. I don't know if my mother had ever addressed me in that voice before, and it immediately disarmed me. My mother came toward me, put her arms around me, and directed me back to the couch in the living room. We both sat down, she held my head in her lap, and I began to cry. Tears flowed like the river Ganges and continued for some time. My mother and I had a real heart-to-heart talk. Seems no one ever told her that she came across as being crazy. Maybe it was that, or maybe it was just the thought of losing her son that broke the protective barrier she had put up since leaving my father. Who knows? Something happened between my mom and I that night. Something very special. Something I will never forget. Ever since then, my mother and I have had an open, truthful, and loving relationship. We also mutually agreed to call a spade a spade, moving forward.

3

BOOKS IN-STORE

Life will give you whatever experience is most helpful for the evolution of your consciousness. How do you know this is the experience you need? Because this is the experience you are having at the moment.

- Eckhart Tolle

Kofi Annan said, “Literacy is a bridge from misery to hope,” and I hoped to learn all I could about my misery. The next day, I realized I was in the right place; the personal issues were out of the way. My mother had been dabbling in metaphysics for many years. Metaphysics is the study of why we’re here—how we got here, and what is the purpose of being here. She might have been well advanced in metaphysics if it weren’t for a bad experience she had with my dad’s brother, Rupert Hayle, who was highly advanced in the field. She wasn’t ready for what he was trying to show her, and she became frightened and backed away from those studies. Now, she was involved with the Unity Church, a quasi-Christian-based nondenominational church more focused on spiritual concepts than religious dogmas; the same folks that produced the *Daily Word*.

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Given the strange occurrences I had recently experienced, my mother was the perfect person to talk to about it. I relayed the story about the mysterious psychic woman and her advice to, “moan it out,” and the touch on the shoulder while in the hospital bed, but I held my tongue when it came to the hooded, angelic apparition. Something told me I should keep that one to myself. Over time, my mother had accumulated a small library on spiritual topics such as meditation, channeling, ESP, personal growth, and spiritual growth. This was a great place to start. Something had changed inside me and opened a part of me that I had either avoided, or suppressed, for 32 years. My life was on the edge, and I needed to try to understand why. If I could understand how this life worked, I could do a much better job of surviving it. Game on!

The first book I read was the *Art of Meditation* by Joel Goldsmith. This copy was a small, dark blue, hardcover edition of 160 pages, which I burned through in a day. For most people, that wouldn't be much of an achievement, but I, historically, was not a big reader. I rarely read for enjoyment, mostly to learn something; this stuff fell into that category. Like a sponge, I began soaking up all the spiritual and metaphysical literature I could find. I also noticed, however, that it was important to put into practice what you are reading as the personal growth would not come simply by reading alone. As a result, I put Goldsmith's techniques to the test and began a simple meditation regimen to see what results I would get. At first, it was difficult trying to get all the thoughts that were running through my head to slow down, even for a few minutes. “This is going to take time,” I thought, so I focused my readings on things I could do. There was a book on ESP (extrasensory perception) that taught you how to call out to a person in the distance who was turned in the opposite direction. You would focus your mind on their medulla oblongata—the point at the back of the skull where it meets the spine—and call out their name, mutely, in your mind. If you did that strongly enough, they would turn around to look to see who was calling them. I spent hours standing on my mother's

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14th-floor balcony looking down at people on the ground, trying to make them look up at me. It did work, occasionally. I also created a radionics device out of a shoebox, a tin can, some potentiometers—radio tuners—and some wires I picked up from RadioShack. You could put a picture of someone in the can and tune in to their frequency to send them good health or other benefits. This was a whole new world to explore, and I was excited to explore it.

The day came for me to return to the hospital to receive the results of the HIV test. I met with the same doctor who ordered both the open biopsy and the HIV test. Fortunately for me, the HIV test was negative. “Wahoo!” I thought. However, before I could wipe the sweat off my brow and celebrate, the doctor had further news. Since it wasn’t HIV that was wiping out my kidneys, it was some other type of autoimmune attack. He was unsure exactly what the cause was, but the effect was I had very little kidney function remaining: end stage renal failure, he called it—my kidneys were failing.

Talk about a downer! “Kidney failure; what does that really mean?” I pondered. My mind wandered back to work, to the guy who sat in the cubicle beside me, Morgan Craig; he had kidney disease. The poor fellow. Quite often I would peak around the separating wall to see him sleeping on his desk. He looked tired and exhausted most of the time, he was very thin, and his skin color had a slight graying to it. “Is this where I’m heading? There must be some mistake,” I thought. No mistake. The doctor was making a referral for me to see a nephrologist, Dr. Stephen Chow, who had an office on Coxwell Avenue, and told me he would be able to answer more of my questions.

Out of the pan and into the fire! This whole thing wasn’t going to get better anytime soon. Strangely enough, I wasn’t all that worried about it. Perhaps that little bit of meditation I had already done had shifted something in me. Normally, I’d be freaked out and worried every second of the day about what was next, but this time I didn’t go there. In the material I was reading, there was stuff about healing and miracles that happened all the

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time. I needed to know more about that. That was the ticket out of this mess. I had chewed through the best portion of my mother's books; I needed a new source. On the way home, we stopped at a New Age bookstore that offered psychic readings in the office above.

Inside the bookstore, we were greeted by a fortysomething, eccentric-looking woman, whom I surmised was the psychic herself. She asked if I needed some help. I responded that, "I'm just getting into this stuff and I can't seem to get enough of it."

In response, she told me, as she attended to a bookshelf and without facing me, "It doesn't really mean much, unless you can apply it to your daily life."

"Talk about taking the wind out of my sails," I thought to myself. "Here I thought I was rolling right along on a path to be highly spiritual in no time, and now I hear I have to apply it to my life...And how does one do that anyhow?"

Next thing I knew, the woman startlingly half-jumped to face me, and cried out, "Did you feel that?"

Since she caught me off guard, I immediately froze. As I did, I felt a warm tingling sensation—a shiver—run down my spine, then answered "feel what?" as if I hadn't felt anything.

"Fear!" she replied, pausing briefly and walking away.

"Whoa! What was that all about?" I couldn't help but think she was talking about me. I replayed the last few moments repeatedly, in my mind, trying to figure out whether the warm tingling sensation I felt happened before she cried out, or in response to her crying out. If it had happened before, perhaps she was picking up on something in me. She was psychic, after all. If it was me, what was I supposed to be fearful about? In retrospect, I guess there was a lot I had to be fearful about...Just not at that moment. I had to admit, I was beginning to have those warm tingles from time to time. I never saw them as something negative, as they usually occurred when something special was happening; but in this case, they came as a response to a fright. Maybe it wasn't the same tingles? This is all too new to me. A

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puzzling encounter, to say the least. To this day, I have not been able to figure that one out.

I stayed with my mother for another two weeks, walking daily, back and forth, to the local shopping mall. I realized I could cut through the buildings across the street, to a path that traveled parallel to the street, directly to the mall. As I walked on that path, I had time to reflect about my life, as well as notice the people around me. It's as though I never really noticed them before. Yes, I noticed that there were always people: doing things, living their lives all around me, but I never really *took notice* of them. It's like time was slowing down, almost standing still now and then. I was beginning to notice the joy on the faces of parents as they played with their children in the park. I saw the pride on the face of the man selling fruit from the back of his truck (albeit illegally), and the pleasure his customers received, knowing they were buying fresh fruit from an authentic source. There was also screams of laughter from children as they swung high on the swing sets and slid joyfully down the slide. This was all there before; why didn't I notice? I was noticing now!

Once I got my staples removed, and my incision was starting to heal with all the walking, I was given the green light to drive again. There was a jazz festival taking place down on Queen Street. My two older sisters, Donna Johnson-Huggins and Paula Johnson, were going and invited me to join them. Donna lived on Jarvis Street at the time, so I drove over there, met them, and we began walking down Jarvis Street. As we approached Carlton Street going south, we hustled across to catch the tail end of the green light. Approaching the other side of the street, there were people pausing before crossing east to west across Jarvis Street. Just then, a woman who was waiting to cross Jarvis Street turned around, handed me a pamphlet. "Here, take this!" she said before crossing the street with the rest of the pedestrians. At the time, I didn't think anything of it until I looked down at the pamphlet and saw that it was about a spiritual event taking place in Toronto. Coincidence?

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When we got down to the jazz festival celebrations, it was pandemonium! People were everywhere enjoying themselves with friends and family. That was the first time since my surgery I had walked such a long distance, and it was taking its toll. We decided to stop at a small bistro to rest and grab a bite to eat. The table we were sitting at was right at the front of the building, and the windows were open; we were face-to-face with the passersby.

Just then a young man ran up to the window, looked at me excitedly and said, “We’re having an event at my church this evening. You should come!” I thought this was odd, because, let me clarify: I was sitting there with my two sisters, the three of us at a table waiting to eat, and this man approached and spoke only to me, as if they were not even there. “Hang on a second!” he continued, and then ran off and returned a few moments later with a flyer for his event. I smiled, and nodded in appreciation, and off he went. I wasn’t sure what was going on, but stuff like that began happening all the time. Flyers, events, books, psychics, everything spiritual was coming my way, and in like fashion, I was taking it all in—couldn’t get enough of it! My life was changing.

It was getting close to the time for me to return home, back to Peterborough, back to my life as I’d left it. After everything that happened over the past month, and everything I was now learning about life, how was I going to cope? Could I simply go back to the way things were? I lay on the bed, in my mother’s guest room, contemplating how my life *used to be*. I focused in on what was happening just before I left, and I could see it all like in a dream...I was the observer, *watching myself*...The way I was...The way things used to be...

4

RUN DMC AND HEAVY D

*You're under no obligation to be the same person
you were 5 minutes ago.*

- Alan Watts

“**Y**our creatinine is 1,900! Get yourself some help!” I sat dumbfounded—or was it depressed—across from Dr. F. Coleman, the transplant nephrologist I was referred to by Dr. Chow. Maybe it was because I was a little pissy, or maybe it was because the good doctor didn’t like the fact that I wanted to heal my kidneys naturally, but I found this guy to be a bit of an arrogant ass. By “Get yourself some help,” he meant that I should start getting dialysis treatments to deal with the toxins that were now building up, heavily, within my body. Normal creatinine should be about 150 μmol per liter, and mine was 1,900 μmol per liter (a little excessive wouldn’t you say?). I was starting to feel the effects of the toxicity in my body. Creatinine is a waste product of muscle metabolism and is usually filtered out of the blood by the kidneys and then passed out of the body in urine. Since my kidneys were failing, I had excess creatinine floating around my system twenty-four seven! I constantly felt lethargic and nauseous. I had a bad metallic taste

in my mouth all the time and an overall sick feeling throughout my body. He was right; I just didn't want to admit it.

I got ratcheted-up to Dr. Coleman after multiple trips from Peterborough, back to Toronto, to see Dr. Chow for follow-up checkups. His solution was to manage the high blood pressure with hypertension meds and then load-up on prednisone to see if that would restore kidney function. That's when I was first introduced to *prednisone*; one of my favorites—NOT! It's a corticosteroid with immunosuppressive properties. When patients with my type of renal failure (which was finally diagnosed as FSG, focal-segmental glomerulonephritis) are given prednisone in large doses, it's supposed to slow the immune system from hammering on the kidneys and relieve the inflammation so the kidneys can function normally—in theory! It is a nasty drug, with plenty of side effects. The one I hated most, though, was when it puffed up my face, so I looked like a chipmunk with nuts in my cheeks. Not a very attractive look, and one that screamed, "I'm sick, and on drugs!"

When I thought about the final diagnosis of FSG, I wondered what started it all. To me it was explained like this: I had a bad virus or infection at some point, I might even have been treated for it and thought it was gone, but it managed to find a place to hide—in the fine workings of my kidneys, the glomeruli, where wastes and water are filtered from the blood. My immune system, in finding the virus hidden among the fine glomeruli, had difficulty distinguishing between the virus and the glomeruli cells. So it killed them both, in the process of trying to rid the body of the invader. I tried to think of a time when I had been really sick with a cold or the flu, but there were too many occasions to consider. Since I was a child, almost every other cold I got turned into bronchitis or pneumonia. In trying to narrow down the timeframe, I recalled having severe pain in my lower back when I would sit in the car on long drives. That seemed to happen in my university days and shortly thereafter. "Could it have been going on that long?" I wondered. They say the disease can remain chronic in the body for many years, with next to no signs, just

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waiting for the last grain of sand to topple the pillar. I had just come back from a trip to the Dominican Republic where I was sick as a dog for an entire day, throwing up and having the chills the whole time. Maybe it was that virus? Who knew? And what did it matter, really? It was here now, and I had to deal with it.

Being back in Peterborough was a real challenge. My life was no longer the same. The whole paradigm of my reality had shifted, and I wasn't sure how my old life fit into what I was learning spiritually. My job was the biggest challenge. As a tax auditor, I was required to *cold call* taxpayers to set up appointments to review their books and records. As you can imagine, people were not pleased to hear who was on the other end of the telephone. It was the proverbial *taxman* calling! While the job was a necessary evil, it nevertheless made you feel like you were the bad guy doing something everybody hated. Now that my heart and mind were both beginning to expand, I had a hard time constantly being the bearer of bad news. Perfect strangers hated you before they even got to know you. Talk about bad energy, swirling around you and pointed in your direction every day. At least, I still had the union stuff; there, at least I felt like I was helping people. As a result, I adjusted my daily schedules to focus more on my union duties, while doing the bare minimum tax auditing duties—just enough to have acceptable stats. Oh, the games we play!

My cubicle neighbor, Morgan Craig, and I were now a real pair. I was beginning to understand him a lot more; why he was so tired and lethargic all the time. After my appointment with Dr. Coleman, I made another revelation about Morgan. Dr. Coleman talked about the different types of dialysis: *peritoneal* and *hemodialysis*. In hemodialysis, you are hooked up to a machine that filters your blood: one line out of your body that transfers the *dirty* blood into the machine which cleans it, and one line in, that brings the *clean*, filtered blood back into your body. In peritoneal dialysis, bags of fluid (called dialysate) are run through a catheter into your stomach where the fluid remains for a few hours. During that time, the peritoneal membrane of your stomach acts as a filter and allows the wastes in your blood, and

extra fluid, to pass into the dialysate. At the end of the waiting time, you release the dialysate, extra body fluid, and waste, into another bag, or into the toilet to be flushed away. That's when it clicked about Morgan. A couple of times I had gone into the bathroom when he was in there. Although he was behind the stall enclosure, I could hear him peeing for many minutes at a time—almost the whole time I was in the bathroom: did my thing, washed my hands and left...still going! I quite often wondered about that, but now I knew what was really going on. He was doing peritoneal dialysis throughout the day, while at work—what a warrior—and the peeing sound was really him emptying the dialysate from his stomach catheter into the toilet. “Wow, what a trip!” I couldn't imagine...Well...I could...now. Unwittingly, Morgan helped me to make up my mind about which type of dialysis I wanted to do when the time came—not that one! Fortunately, Dr. Coleman told me that, because of my size and build, peritoneal dialysis would probably not be an option. Thank my lucky stars!

At least there was one bright side to being back, I was able to pick up where I left off with Lorie. Funny how we met—and talk about manifesting your own destiny—I had just gotten out of a bad relationship about a year before, and at 32, while you're not over the hill, it's not the easiest thing to meet new people. You're too old for the bar crowd, and since I wasn't into the church group thing, or picking up women at the grocery store, there weren't too many options left. Anyhow, I was tired of the bar scene, and wasn't interested in anyone from that realm. From experience, people there were all caught up in outward appearances—the makeup and the muscle—and those relationships didn't tend to last much longer than the next morning, if you know what I mean. I was looking for somebody I could have a conversation with. I was trying to change. A couple of times in the bar, I would find a nice girl to talk to, only to see her walking out, tipsy, at the end of the night, hand-in-hand with one of the regular sharks. I could hardly blame her, or him for that matter, having seen a lot of myself in that same situation. Except now,

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the shoe was on the other foot. I was renting the basement space of a co-worker, Lysa Borland. I couldn't help but notice a picture she had on her home-office desk, as I walked by daily. When I asked her about it, she told me it was her brother and his wife, Lorie, on their wedding day. I quite often looked at that girl in the picture, and said to myself, "Why can't I meet a girl like that?" Something about her face was kind and compassionate—almost angelic—and although I didn't know her, she seemed to be very down-to-earth. Of course, there were the obvious requirements, for me at least, that she was pretty and looked like she took care of her body. Well as fate would have it, Lorie started to show up at Lysa's place for girls' night out. Through conversation with Lysa, I found out that Lysa's brother had split up with Lorie around Christmas. The whole separation thing came as a surprise—Lorie hadn't seen it coming. As a result, part of the girls' night out soirées was to buoy Lorie's spirits and help her get back into the swing of things. I met her once or twice at the house, as the girls would gather there before going out. Shortly after, I asked her out.

We hit it off and began to spend every spare moment together. Bless her heart, Lorie did not look upon my health challenges as a physical or emotional detraction from our new relationship. She was supportive and helped in any way that she could, with my newfound troubles. This was a huge benefit, as things were about to get REAL!

Real it was, as I sat in my dialysis chair for the first time. Dr. Coleman got me hooked up—literally—with dialysis in Oshawa, about a 45-minute drive from Peterborough. "No room at the Inn," was the word I got from the local DMC (Dialysis Management Clinics) which was the only shop in town; the Peterborough hospital did not yet have dialysis clinics. I looked up and gazed around the room. The pain and suffering I saw was almost unbearable. Some patients had walked in, as I had, but some were wheeled in on stretchers from the adjoining hospital. Expressions of anger, despair, denial, and fear were all around me...But there was acceptance too, on the faces of some who

had come to grips with their new fate. “What am I doing here?” I thought. “I don’t belong here. These cannot be my new peers in life. They can’t be! I’m the guy. You know? The man! Not this. Noooo!” I was the one in denial, or shock for that matter. How did I end up here?

To me, dialysis was a cruel beast. Sure, I got the concept that it was a life-saving technology that could effectively keep me alive when my kidneys had gone down in flames in end-stage renal failure; but it had an uncanny way of creeping, unwantedly, into my daily life. First, was the fact that I had to have it three times a week and sit in a chair for three hours at a time—which seemed like forever! Secondly, on the first run, I had to have a neck catheter inserted into my right jugular vein: this is kind of like a big intravenous line that travels down inside your body toward your heart, and had two lumens—a line in, and a line out—and each of these lines had a red or a blue twist-off access lid. This is where the nurses connected you to the dialysis machine. All good...For dialysis...But was a huge eyesore as it remained connected to you twenty-four seven; you had to wear it around town, every day, even when not having dialysis. Not to mention, while they put some lidocaine on your skin before, virtually, ramming it in, it still hurt like hell! Of course, once I was hooked up and going, it wasn’t so bad...Except for feeling sorry for myself. I had to get used to this new way of living.

Before long, an opening became available at the DMC in Peterborough; I grabbed it up! This is where most of my dialysis life took place, and where I came to experience all the joys of the process (cue sarcasm). This was also where I got my first taste of rotating doctors and nurses. Just when you thought you were getting used to one doctor, you got exposed to another—along with the concomitant need for each to do things in his or her own way or change protocols as they saw fit. Somewhere along the line-up, it was deemed that my neck catheter did not allow sufficient blood flow through the dialysis machine, enough to clean my six-foot-three frame, effectively. I moved from the neck catheter, to a chest catheter, and finally to a fistula—an abnormal

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connection between two blood vessels. In a separate procedure for my forearm fistula, a surgeon disconnected a vein (from the top of my wrist, which returned blood from my hand) and reconnected it to my artery (near the underside of my wrist)—all hidden below the surface, under the skin—creating a loop through which blood was pumped directly from my heart, down my arm, and back up again. As the blood flowed strongly through this loop, to touch the fistula you could feel a vibration, like a little engine was purring underneath, which was called *the thrill*. The only problem was the fistula didn't have those wonderful little red and blue caps to connect to. Each time you arrived for your dialysis treatment; the nurses were required to *cannulate* the fistula. To cannulate, the nurses used a large needle, about the size of the tube inside a pen, which they inserted into the engorged fistula vein to draw blood into the dialysis machine. A second needle was inserted above the first, a few inches away, in order to return the blood into the body. The fistula allowed for the hemodialysis to clean the toxins from my blood, as well as two days' worth of fluid buildup. This process was more complete, but also much more painful. Quite often, as the nurses jammed those big needles into your fistula vein, they pushed in a little too deep. "Ouch, you've gone too deep!" I'd admonish.

"No, look," the nurse would respond as she flagged the needle back to show that blood was flowing. "It's not too deep. I know what I'm doing!" All I could do was to roll my eyes and shake my head, knowing that once I got home after the treatment, the black and blue bruising would begin to encircle the area that was dug too deep.

"Oh, the battle scars one has to endure," and bite your tongue, because you're lucky to be able to receive such treatments...And kids are starving in Africa...

The fistula was, in fact, better than the chest catheter, and if not for any other reason, it couldn't get contaminated as easily as the chest catheter—or *permacath*, as it was also called. My mind ran back to a time when my chest catheter got infected. At first, I didn't know it had become contaminated, and went

back and forth from my dialysis treatments *stirring the pot*, so to speak. The chest catheter was much like the neck catheter, except that it was inserted in the middle of the right chest, upwards, so it could meet one of the large veins that emptied directly into the heart. Once contaminated, it would pump the infection throughout your entire body. I wondered why I would feel good for a day, then crappy after my dialysis treatment. Okay, crappy is an understatement. One night, during the infection period, I could barely eat my dinner. I went upstairs to bury my face in the pillow to *scream* as loudly as I could, “AAAAAH! WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON! WHY ARE YOU TORTURING ME LIKE THIS! AAAAAH!” The infection had taken over my body so powerfully, it felt like I was being electrocuted, unendingly. The fiasco ended up in a trip to the ER—in Oshawa—to have two large bottles of antibiotics pumped through my system. You live, and you learn!

Even though I was now being indoctrinated into the dialysis world, I was still highly focused on using natural means to heal my kidney. Most of my nephrologists thought I was nuts, because they were so certain that the kidneys could not repair themselves, no matter what holistic, or allopathic (medical), protocol was used. One of Lorie’s cousins was working with a reputable Naturopathic Doctor, Mikhael Adams, so I found myself regularly travelling from Peterborough, to Coburg, to see him. Before I got my forearm fistula, the doctors were planning a surgery to remove a vein in my leg to use in my forearm fistula; they didn’t feel that the veins in my forearm were big enough for sufficient flow. The first time I spoke with Dr. Adams about my condition, and whether his methods could heal my kidney, he said that they could. That’s all the assurance I needed to cancel that surgery. I felt it was a message from above, to save me from the grief of that procedure. Through Dr. Adams, I was taking several tinctures and tiny, globule pills to balance my body, push out any infection in the kidneys, and repair the damage within them. This went on for many months (and at significant cost), and while I felt better overall, I still needed weekly dialysis to

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do the job my kidneys weren't. In my final visit with Dr. Adams, he seemed perplexed as to why my kidneys had not recovered. He always used a strange technique: he waved a small reflective wand—that looked like a leather key fob—over my wrist, while he took my pulse with his other hand. This is how he queried the body as to what was wrong, what was missing, and what was needed to fix it. “Your body tells me that it is in balance,” he offered. “Your kidneys should have gotten better by now. There is nothing more I can do. It looks like the rest is up to you.” He was somehow implying that I was not mentally, or emotionally, prepared for a healing, and that the balance of work to allow this miracle to occur, was on me.

“The rest is up to me?” This statement played over, and over, and over, in my mind, like a broken record. “What haven't I done? What am I doing wrong? What do I need to do?” I felt that it was unfair to have this yoke laid on me in this way. In this new, magical world of holistic health, I believed this doctor should've had those answers for me: some advice, or some direction as to how I was supposed to make that happen. He was a doctor of herbs and tinctures; maybe what I needed was something more energetic. I continued searching for something more spiritual, or metaphysical, in nature. If it exists, I'll find it.

5

EN-LARGER THAN LIFE

When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

- Confucian proverb

“Hello?” I answered.
“Is this Kirk?” the other voice asked.
“Yes, it’s him,” I replied.

“Kirk, it’s Dr. Whatley. I just got the results back from your chest X-ray and I just had to call you right away. Has anyone ever told you your heart was enlarged?”

“No,” I countered, remembering Dr. Whatley had never called me at home before, and now that he had, his voice had the tone of the two a.m. police officer, bringing bad news to the parents of an accident victim.

“Well, it’s enlarged now, in fact, quite enlarged. You need to go see a heart specialist right away...”

“What the fuck!” I thought to myself. “What now?” I had been feeling a little bit under the weather, and was presenting with, what seemed like, just a regular cold. Unfortunately, with me, there were no regular colds; they always seemed to get down into my chest and I’d end up coughing like a bass drum, and hacking up brightly colored sputum, repeatedly. Although I was

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getting dialysis regularly, I was not my typical self—more of a weakened version that seemed to get sick much more often. This time, it seemed like the cold was lasting a little too long for my liking, and the thoughts of it turning into pneumonia was a little too painful to bear, so I'd made an appointment to go see my GP, Dr. Richard Whatley. After listening to my lungs, he sent me to the lab to get a chest X-ray; that's what precipitated the call.

Within a week, I was referred to a heart specialist in Peterborough, Dr. Robert Howes. I had, foolishly, mentioned to Dr. Whatley that I was trying to heal my kidneys naturally. Consequently, the word was getting around that I wasn't taking my plight seriously, was anti-medicine, and refused drugs. Dr. Howes thought it necessary to use scare tactics to get me to comply. He laid out a plan for more tests, and more drugs, announcing: "If you do not help yourself, you will die!" He belted this statement out, with his office door open to the fully packed waiting room nearby. I could feel my ire beginning to rise—no, not rise—boil! I was pissed!

"What a jackass!" I thought to myself. "Typical, small-town Peterborough." With this heart problem, on top of my already-problematic kidney situation, I needed to think bigger, smarter. I needed to go to Toronto! With my ire up, I brazenly asked Dr. Howes for a second opinion; a referral to a cardiologist in Toronto. He complied, and I was referred to Dr. Gary Newton at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto.

My first meeting with Dr. Newton was pleasant. He was a mild-mannered soul whose mannerisms and knowledge gave me the impression that he knew what he was talking about. Of course, now having my cardiologist out of town, I had to pile on an extra hour-and-a-half drive from Peterborough to Toronto in order to see him, but to me it was worth it. Not that there weren't more drugs to take, but his delivery of my new predicament, and what was needed to resolve it on a temporary basis, was somehow more palatable to me. "Why temporary?" I wondered. Temporary, because a new consideration was on the table—the possibility of a *heart transplant*! He explained that a

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normal heart should be like a closed fist, solid and strong, but mine was now enlarged, flabby, and weak. It was no longer strong enough to push the blood through my body efficiently, nor effectively; cardiomyopathy, he called it. “Whoa! That’s messed up,” I thought. “So now, on top of a kidney transplant—to get away from the dialysis nightmare—I might need a heart transplant as well? What...is...going... on?”

The burden of this new revelation, along with dialysis, end-stage renal failure, neck and chest catheters, fistulas, the list goes on and on...was getting to be too much. Add in the self-defeating failure to heal myself—or balance my body so that it could heal itself—and it would have been very easy to just lay down and die. But that wasn’t me: the new me that emerged from the realization that I had to welcome more spirituality into my life. I understood that one’s life can be represented by a triangle, and on each side of the triangle is an element of one’s life. On one side you have your physical attributes, on another mental or academic attributes, and on the last side soulful or spiritual attributes; all these attributes needed to be in balance. Prior to the walk-in clinic, my life was only focused on the physical and the mental sides of the triangle. Without the spiritual side, the triangle could collapse, and that’s essentially what was happening now. Still, something inside was telling me that if I worked hard to catch up with the spiritual side of myself, such that it was as strong as the other two sides, I could get on top of all of these problems happening in my life. This was a battle between me and me. But I was a stubborn S.O.B. Just tell me I can’t do something, and I’ll do anything in my power to prove you wrong. I was feeling that I’d failed myself and I couldn’t let that happen. Now I had to prove *myself* wrong.

The search was on for books, or any kind of material, that would support me in this task. While sitting in my dialysis chair for three hours at a time, I could simply watch TV and waste that time, or use that time wisely to learn ways to help balance my spiritual self. One afternoon, I made my way over to the *Inner Circle* bookstore to look for a book called the *Tibetan Book of*

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Living and Dying. I, inwardly, felt a draw to Eastern spirituality teachings, sensing that spirituality and religion were two separate creatures. Spirituality should be the foundation of religion, but from what I could see in history, as well as present day, that religion had taken on a life of its own. It seemed some religions were becoming bereft of spirituality in their dogmatic teachings. Religion cannot stand alone without spirituality, but spirituality can stand alone without religion. Why was I choosing this book? I'd heard many people talk about it, and besides that, the issue of *death*, and my understanding of it, was now of constant concern; I might as well dig in and get to know it a little better.

The Inner Circle bookstore was an eclectic collection of personal growth, self-help, spirituality, and metaphysical books and paraphernalia. The people working there were very grassroots-granola friendly, like beatniks and hippies right out of Woodstock. The store offered various metaphysical teachings in the back, and an incense-scented bookstore in the front. As I perused the shelves, there were so many titles to choose from. Walking the aisles, searching for the book I came to buy, I noticed a book with a long, black-haired woman in an orange gown on the front cover, staring at me. The book was entitled *Autobiography of a Yogi*, and I took it down from the shelf to see who this woman was. As it turned out, it wasn't a woman at all, but a somewhat feminine looking man whose gaze had connected with me in some strange way. I skimmed the book to surmise that this man, Paramahansa Yogananda, was born an *avatar*—a God realized soul who had reincarnated back on earth in order to bring spiritual teachings to those left behind. The purpose of his book was to tell of his struggles, and successes, in living as a human man, while still strongly connected to God and the etheric realms. I found the concept interesting, but then realized I came for a different book, so I moved along to find that publication. In short order, I found the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, and purchased it. After I drove home, I opened the bag to retrieve my new book and have a look at it. To my surprise, it wasn't the book I had set out to get, but in my hand, staring at me, was *Autobiography*

of a Yogi. “What the...?” I would later come to understand that it was all in Divine order.

Books were one way of opening up to spirituality, but I felt like I needed some hands-on work, as well. I had heard of a healing modality called *reiki* and, from some of my own research, understood that it was a means of channeling higher levels of energy to damaged parts of the body, to allow them to heal more rapidly. I also read that it was something one could not obtain just by reading; a channel had to be opened up in you by a Reiki Master. That Master could attune you to Level I for personal use, or Level II to work on others as a practitioner or therapist. I searched the newspapers and the Yellow Pages for anyone offering Level I reiki classes and was repeatedly drawn back to a teacher named Bernard Morin.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh...” That was the long, drawn-out sound they asked me to make as I lay on a massage table and two strangers lightly laid their hands on me and *supposedly* channeled healing energy to me. I felt kind of silly, but at this point I was willing to try anything to get my heart and kidneys working properly again. Bernie, the Reiki Master, walked around from table to table overseeing the others who were on tables receiving a treatment much like myself. It was the last day of this four-day event and we had already received the teachings and our attunements to the *Universal Life Force Energy* of reiki. Then something happened. Something I didn’t expect. To my surprise, the Ahhhh...turned to Wahhhh...as I unearthed an ancient burial ground of emotion and began sobbing uncontrollably. Memories and feelings, I had thought long forgotten, were resurfacing for me to review. I heard the practitioner’s voice softly say, “You’re in a safe place now. It’s okay to look at what happened back then and feel what you couldn’t before—because it wasn’t safe. Just let it go.” And I did. Boy, did I ever! They gave me just the permission I needed to unleash those pent-up emotions. The relief I felt after the workshop was indescribable. I will always remember that experience; it was an awakening!

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What were these emotions and memories I was dredging up? I couldn't recall all of them, but two issues stuck out in my mind—*my father*, and *women*. My father was a strict man with one parenting credo: his way or the highway! When I was young, I was a bit of a badass, getting into trouble from time to time. He was so caught up in amassing his fortune, he forgot to buy us toys to play with. One evening, when I was eight years old, my family was shopping at *Woolco* department store, I slipped away from the rest and headed to the toy section. There, I filled my pockets with matchbox cars, toys, and other small items. Of course, on the way out we got stopped, and I had to give the stuff back. My father was incensed...or *embarrassed* that we had to be taken to a back security room and searched like common criminals. When we got home, he made me stand on the first landing of the staircase to the upper level. There, he took off his belt and beat me, repeatedly, while my mother and my three sisters watched. They all sobbed fearfully, as he continued, lash after lash. My mother later described to me that it looked like he was *getting off* and demanded that he stop. The badass part of the story was that, while he was beating me, I cried buckets full of tears, yet what worried me most was not that the beating wouldn't stop, it was the thought of what would happen if the stolen magnifying glass I held back, stashed in my sock, would have fallen out onto the floor. True gangsta! That was just one of the many times I received beatings from my father. My parents split up when I was thirteen and a part of me was glad he was gone. The reiki experience revealed that I still struggled to forgive him.

The second issue was women...or was it love? I wasn't sure, but let's look at it from the issue of women. From the time I was in junior high, and then onto high school, I was good at athletics. In almost any sport—football, basketball, soccer, track and field, badminton, archery, you name it—I excelled! Being good at sports naturally drew the attention of the opposite sex. Human nature at its best; I became popular with the girls. Also, given that my parents had split up and my sisters and I were now living in low-income housing with my mother, I began

to mix with a lot of kids that no longer went to school. In this environment, getting with girls was one of the favorite pastimes. Coincidentally, because I was six-foot-three at fifteen and able to grow a moustache, I could get into the liquor store, beer store and many of the clubs in my hometown of Kitchener. Even though I was still a kid at that time, I got together with women in their early 20s and beyond. However, the issue wasn't so much how I came to be with the ladies, but why. The answer to that was *love*. This revelation was only coming to me now. The reiki had woken this up somehow. Who knows? It helped me to understand why, when I met a great girl and she wanted to get together again (or maybe even begin a relationship), initially I'd say yes. Then as soon as one of my buddies called me up, and said "Hey, let's go out..." I'd cancel that follow-up engagement to go search for another *victim*.

Some may say, "That's what all guys do. They think with their dicks!" That didn't resonate with me, though. Was the sex so important? Not really, because as soon as it was over, you just wanted to leave. Then why? I realized, *I just wanted to be loved!* Foolishly, I thought sex was love, and I wanted to experience as many different types of love as possible. Why was I so bereft of love? My mother loved me, my sisters loved me, my friends loved me, even my dad loved me (though he had never verbalized it) in his own way. So what was this deep desire to be loved? In time, I would come to understand it, but for now it only seemed to haunt me. All these relationships—many, one-nighters—made me wonder who I had hurt. I'd decided, a while ago, that I'd done this enough and vowed to be loyal to one woman—Lorie. I was putting my foot down on this issue and was determined not to fail!

My Reiki Master, Bernie, also taught classes on shamanic journeying and healing. Another modality I was drawn to. In a class of about eight people, we were taught how to use steady drumming beats to connect to spirit-guide animals called *totems*, in a realm called *non-ordinary space*. This was a two-day event, and I can recall, after driving home from the workshop on the

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first day, seeing a fox race ahead of me as I drove. A small, grey fox was sprinting up the gravel shoulder, kicking up dust as it sped along ahead of me. Then it was gone, like the apparition you weren't meant to see. After that, I saw foxes everywhere. They were speaking to me in that unheard, unseen language called *shamanism*. After all, the fox was my totem and had been for many years. I just didn't know it. I found that out through a shamanic journey I had taken in the class. In shamanic journeying, you enter a dreamlike state while you are awake, and can interact with nature and animals that guide you in life—if you're willing to look for them. At first when I journeyed, a part of me thought, "this is just my imagination playing tricks on me." Later, when other animals brought messages to me, or when things that I saw while journeying began to ring true in my life, I could no longer deny their authenticity. I began to rely on these messages to guide me in my life, moving forward.

My life was definitely changing. Everything about it was different. I had taken long-term disability (LTD) from work, under the advice from my manager. Oh, and that corporate auditor job that I was competing for? I was successful, and placed second on the list! I had passed my CGA exam, which in turn validated my requirements for the position, and was waiting to be called. I did my best to stay at the job, after returning from the walk-in clinic *awakening* in Toronto, so I could bump up from the proprietorship auditor that I was, to the corporate auditor position I had competed for, but I just couldn't hang in there. I felt sickly and toxic every day, and even though it would've been worth the pay raise, I could no longer pretend to be working when I no longer had it in me—just for the money. My manager convinced me there was no shame in taking LTD. "You paid for it. You might as well use it!" he suggested. Right, he was. I left there and never looked back. As my new spiritual side was building, I could no longer tolerate the negative undertones associated with being *the taxman*—ever hated, always denigrated.

Changes were happening on the home front, too. Lorie and I were inseparable. We had moved in together, and as fate would

have it, we were blessed with a gift: Lorie was pregnant! This came as somewhat of a surprise since she and her previous husband could not conceive. They were both tested, but egotistically, he decreed that the problem was on her side; she thought she was infertile. As it turned out, she was not. A baby was on the way! We were not yet married, and neither of us savored the idea of having a child out of wedlock, so we made a plan... and executed it. Since she had been married before, and I was not at my best, we decided to drive to Niagara Falls and get married; we eloped! On July 18, 1998 we were married in Niagara Falls, New York, and Lorie Masterson became Lorie Johnson for the first time. All was good on the home front.

Nathaniel James Johnson was born on April 13, 1999. A happy, little bundle of joy. When he was young, he looked unmistakably like his mother; comparing his baby picture to Lorie's baby picture, they were almost identical. "Whatever happened to them Johnson genes?" I chuckled. "Maybe later!" We shared our newfound joy with my first son, Travis. Given my weakened state, Lorie graciously took up the mantle of the long drives to pick him up from Kitchener for visits. Even Travis's mother, Laurie Moxey (nee Smallwood), chipped in and met her half-way. I was grateful to both women, who took on some of my burdens to help me continue a relationship with my son. That was uber-important to me!

As a father of two sons, a husband, a son, a brother, a friend to many, and a man whose health had just come crashing down with no end in sight, I endlessly contemplated why this was happening to me, and how it all may end—soon. While I was reading about, and researching, death, I came across an organization called Hospice that offered teachings on how to deal with death. Hospice also gave insight into what the caregivers of end-of-life patients had to go through. This seemed like something I should learn and signed up for their courses. Classes were about topics surrounding grief and bereavement—what they were, and how to deal with them. Before long, I realized these classes were training for volunteers to be able to go into the homes of

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those who were near-death, to provide comfort to them, as well as their caregivers and families. “The perfect place to use my newfound reiki skills, and maybe there was the possibility the healing energy could help some of these poor souls get better,” I mused. Wrong! The administrators didn’t want anyone giving these folks *false hope*—as they called it. They felt reiki could be used to ease the pain of passing but did not want it to be used for anything else. Inside, I hoped that if I could use it for them, and be successful in healing them, that it could somehow work for me, too. Wishful thinking! In the end, the training was still very useful; not only for my own edification but also for events that were yet to come.