

STUMBLING
INTO INFINITY



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An Ordinary Man in the
Sphere of Enlightenment

MICHAEL FISCHMAN



New York

STUMBLING INTO INFINITY
An Ordinary Man in the Sphere of Enlightenment

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

— LAOZI (LAO-TZU)

CONTENTS

Prologue 1

Part One

ONE: The Disappearance of Faith 7

TWO: The White Album 23

THREE: A Taste of India 35

FOUR: The Dharma Hunter 41

Part Two

FIVE: When the Student Is Ready... 51

SIX: Journey Into Stillness 67

SEVEN: The Alchemy of Doubt 81

EIGHT: Sitting Close 87

NINE: First AIDS Course 105

TEN: Teacher Training 117

CONTENTS

ELEVEN: Surrender & Samadhi 133

TWELVE: The Diamond Cutter 149

THIRTEEN: Siddha, Buddha & the Amazing Tiger Swami 163

FOURTEEN: The Heart of Desire 187

FIFTEEN: A Fight at the Ashram 201

Part Three

SIXTEEN: The Caribbean King 217

SEVENTEEN: Coming Home 233

EIGHTEEN: The Way of Grace 253

Epilogue 259

Acknowledgments 277

Further Exploration 279

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Prologue

IT WAS 2006, AND IN A FEW DAYS I would be sitting on a dusty airstrip in Bangalore, India. But I wouldn't be alone. Over three days, more than 2.5 million people would be with me, and I would be sitting on the stage near a king of Ghana, the president of India, a Bollywood movie star, religious leaders from several faiths, a member of the European parliament, and several other cultural leaders. Sharing the stage would be more than a thousand leading musicians (who had barely rehearsed), and in the massive crowd, there would be people of all races and religions from more than a hundred countries.

All of these people would be there to celebrate the Art of Living Foundation's twenty-fifth anniversary and the fiftieth birthday of its founder, His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. It would certainly be nothing I'd expected when I met Sri Sri (*Shree Shree*) in 1988, when only a handful of people had even heard of him.

But now, I was rushing to catch a plane.

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

He looked up with a big grin. Removing his reading glasses, he extended his arm and gave me my ticket. I smiled back and nodded my

head, acknowledging that I knew I was lucky. But there was no time to explain. I needed to get to the plane.

Eventually, I was in my seat and could finally close my eyes. I was exhausted. Soon, I started drifting into a sort of half-sleep, thinking about the long and unlikely journey that had brought me to this moment.

But my reverie didn't last long. An attractive, middle-aged woman suddenly plopped herself in the seat next to me, banging my knee with her purse. Her perfume was sweet, and a bit overpowering.

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

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

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

She placed some pills on her tongue and washed them down with red wine. "I usually take Valium to help me relax when I fly," she explained. "You look very calm," she noted. "What do you do?"

"I help people relax and get rid of stress," I said, aware of the irony. But my answer felt incomplete.

I wanted to tell her I'd been part of one of the world's largest non-governmental organizations for the last twenty years, traveling around the world teaching breathing and meditation techniques. But even adding that would have missed a lot. In any case, her anxiety was making it hard for her to listen.

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

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

Prologue

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

Like many New Yorkers who identified themselves as belonging to the tribe of people known as the Jewish Middle Class, I believed my destiny had been written at birth. I would have a successful career as a lawyer or doctor, a home in the suburbs with a tree-dotted backyard, and maybe a swimming pool to relax in during the hot summer months. I'd have a beautiful wife who would shop at upscale malls, and two adorable children, each one the brightest and most popular in their class. Yet, over time, this destiny became increasingly less attractive.

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

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

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

I started writing this book as a way to share my story and to answer the many questions I've been asked about the early days around His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. As someone who had an intimate seat at

the beginning of a great spiritual movement, I wanted to convey some of the magic and mystery of those early years. But as I started looking back on the events that led me to Sri Sri, I began to see my life in a new light. I thought others might find value in knowing more of the story — the personal trials I faced and moments I'm not too proud of. Moments when jealousy, obsession, or self-centered emotions clouded my perception. And also the atmosphere of grace I stumbled into that has allowed me to be of service beyond any reasonable expectation.

In writing this story, different eras and their flavors came to life again for me — the world of Orthodox Jews I grew up in, the spiritual traditions of India that became so meaningful to me, and the atmosphere around the enlightened master I fell in love with.

I had been a seeker of knowledge throughout my adolescence and early adult life, believing, or hoping, that some truth existed that would resolve and melt away life's confusions and traumas. But on meeting Sri Sri, my life turned upside-down. Eventually, I came to the life-changing realization that love — infinite, Divine love — was more fulfilling and transforming than finding truth.

As I write this, I am president of the U.S. Art of Living Foundation. However, this book has been published independent of the Foundation, since I wanted to say things that would not be found in any official book.

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

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

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

Michael Fischman
Boca Raton, Florida, 2010

Part One



CHAPTER ONE

The Disappearance of Faith

ONE NIGHT, WHEN I WAS about three years old, while my parents and sister were asleep in our cramped, one-bedroom apartment in the South Bronx, I awoke before dawn and saw Grandpa. Transparent as a mist of smoke, he stood still in our bedroom doorway. He looked as though he wanted to talk to me but he appeared stiff, and I could tell that he couldn't speak.

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

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

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

Grandpa's passing made me aware that life was not forever.