

Praise for
How Plato and Pythagoras Can Save Your Life

“Nicholas Kardaras’s book recounts one of the greatest, most dramatic shifts that anyone could ever have experienced—not only from life at the top of the pyramid in New York’s big city nightlife to rejection, failure, and poverty, but from a life brimming with vitality and energy to the very portals of physical demise. This dramatic shift had an equally dramatic conclusion: he came out of it a bigger and better man, through the unusual and prima facie implausible stratagem of turning to philosophy for guidance—to classic Greek philosophy, to be exact. And guidance he received; a whole new sense of life, existence, and purpose. His is an amazing story that’s more than a personal tale: it’s a story with vast and direct application to everyone. To you and to me, who also need to experience a shift. I recommend reading this book both for the mind-boggling and highly entertaining story of someone who made it through the biggest rollercoaster ride anyone could imagine, but also for the pointers it gives for shifting, for being, in Gandhi’s celebrated words, ‘the change we want to see in the world.’”

—Ervin Laszlo, author of
Science and the Akashic Field and *Chaos Point 2012*

“Nicholas Kardaras has undergone a perilous, life-and-death journey and has emerged with a story that must be told. This riveting account reveals the timelessness of authentic wisdom, as well as the majestic, infinite reaches of the mind.”

—Larry Dossey, M.D., author of
Healing Words and *The Power of Premonitions*

“With wisdom and wit, this is an accessible account of Greek philosophy—not as a dry academic discipline, but as a lived practice of purification and enhanced awareness, with rich transformative potential for all of us. Readers will enjoy the balanced blend of science, philosophy, and practical and spiritual wisdom; and carrying out the experiential exercises can help improve bodily, mental, and spiritual health and well-being, allow greater access to a deeper and more meaningful life and worldview, and foster a fuller realization of our true human potential.”

—William Braud, Ph.D., Professor Emeritus, Institute of Transpersonal Psychology; co-author of *Transforming Self and Others through Research* and author of *Distant Mental Influence*

“A masterful integration of mystical Greek philosophy and contemporary, cutting-edge science. Kardaras’s lucid and engaging work brings to life the distilled wisdom of the ancient Greek sages and suggests practical ways for a saner and more fulfilled life.”

—Kyriacos C. Markides, Ph.D., author of *Fire in the Heart: Healers, Sages, and Mystics*

“Emerging phoenix-like from the glamorous, seductive—and destructive—world of the New York club scene where he mingled with the likes of JFK Jr. and New York’s rich and powerful, Dr. Kardaras discovers a powerful and transformative method towards wholeness based on the wisdom of his ancient ancestors. You’ll never look at reality—or yourself—in quite the same way after reading this book.”

—R. Couri Hay, former editor, *Interview* magazine; society editor and columnist, *Hamptons* magazine, *LA Confidential*, and *Gotham* magazine

How Plato
and Pythagoras
Can Save Your Life

The Ancient Greek Prescription
for Health and Happiness

Nicholas Kardaras, Ph.D.



Conari Press

First published in 2011 by Conari Press
An imprint of Red Wheel/Weiser, LLC
With offices at:
665 Third Street, Suite 400
San Francisco, CA 94107
www.redwheelweiser.com

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ISBN: 978-1-57324-475-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Kardaras, Nicholas, 1964-

How Plato and Pythagoras can save your life : the ancient Greek
prescription for health and happiness / Nicholas Kardaras.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-57324-475-6 (alk. paper)

1. Conduct of life. 2. Self-consciousness (Awareness)
3. Philosophy, Ancient. I. Title.

BJ1581.2.K335 2011

180--dc22

2010045333

Interior design by Kathryn Sky-Peck
Typeset in Adobe Jenson Pro
Cover design by Jim Warner

Printed in the United States of America
MV

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials Z39.48-1992 (R1997).

Philosophy begins in wonder.

—Plato

*Plato the Greek or Rin Tin Tin,
who's more famous to the Billion Millions?*

—“The Magnificent Seven,” The Clash

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Greece and its colonies, circa 550 BCE.

Acknowledgments

I owe my eternal gratitude to the Greek philosophers of antiquity, whose wisdom gave my life texture, meaning, and a sense of purpose. It is my sincere hope that this book may do the same for others.

Yet this book exists only because of the love and support given to me by my wonderful wife, Lucy. Without that love, neither I nor this book would be here. I would also like to thank my parents, who continued to love me and believe in me even when things seemed to be at their darkest. I was not an easy son, so I thank them for their resilient love.

I owe the most thanks for much of the content of this book to my friend and mentor, Dr. William Braud; he was researching and exploring the parameters of consciousness and human potential while I was still a kid watching *Star Trek*. Our frequent and oftentimes mind-expanding conversations led to many of the insights contained within this book.

Critically instrumental in getting such a *different* type of book published was my ceaselessly resourceful literary agent, Adam Chromy. He too believed in me and in the importance of this project and was able to sell my vision in a dauntingly challenging publishing climate. Many thanks also go to my editor, Caroline Pincus, who is an extremely good egg and “got” what I was trying to accomplish. I am truly very grateful to her, as this book has benefitted immensely from her wisdom and experience.

Finally, I would like to thank my twin infant sons, Ari and Alexi. They teach me each and every day how to maintain my sense of wonder at the world; they remind me of the importance of looking up at the night sky and asking, *Why?* If I had a dollar for every time their eyes sparkle as they ask me *Yiati?* (“why?” in Greek), I’d be a very rich man today. But then again, thanks to everyone that I’ve mentioned here, I already am.

Introduction

Human alchemy—that's what this book is all about.

—N. K.

On March 15, 2001, during a beautiful spring afternoon, my heart stopped beating, and I died. Literally. Living a life of addictive excess had caught up with me. As paramedics and doctors furiously worked on my dormant heart, my life—or what had been left of it—drifted away.

Once upon a time I'd been a well-known New York nightclub owner caught up with all of the self-destructive ego candy that that world had to offer. From the late eighties until the mid-nineties, I'd been the young, Ivy League-educated owner of several of the hottest and hippest nightclubs in Manhattan and Southampton; these were much-publicized hotspots that were frequented by A-listers like John F. Kennedy, Jr., Tom Cruise, and Brooke Shields. It was heady stuff for a middle-class kid from Queens. I was written up in the tabloids as "New York's Youngest Nightclub Owner," while the flamboyant George Wayne of *Vanity Fair* included me on his list of New York's "50 Most Fabulous People."

But it was all fool's gold. That type of life comes at a very high price; it's your classic, boiler-plate Faustian deal—and the devil always gets his due. Several years of glamour and fun were followed by several years of addicted hell that had led to my almost demise.

Thanks to the feverish efforts of those above-mentioned doctors—and after over an hour without a heartbeat—I was able to pull a Lazarus. But I wasn't out of the woods just yet; I was in a touch-and-go coma as I clung to life via a respirator.

My god, what had happened to me? I had gone from the bright lights of the dance floor to the harsh lights of the intensive care unit, where I laid with tubes and catheters shoved into every orifice of my body. Glamorous it was not.

But just how *did* a nice kid like me from an honest and hard-working family wind up such a broken mess? And, more importantly, how did I—and how can anyone—heal?

Well, any challenge can be an opportunity for growth. Death—either physical or metaphorical—can begin the alchemical process of transfiguration, the most powerful type of spiritual transformation.

After my post-coma resurrection, I was desperate to better understand the universe and my purpose within it; I guess that a near-death experience will do that to a person. I would go on to embark on an amazing and transformative journey as I discovered—almost by chance—the way of ancient Greek mystical philosophy, a powerful wisdom tradition that embraced the notion of death as rebirth; in fact, Plato even described philosophy itself as a form of “death before dying.”

But what does that mean? What I learned was that the Greeks had discovered a method that can allow a person to “die before dying”—in effect, to shed the biological skin and achieve an expanded level of noetic awareness that can then lead to personal transformation—all without having to take dying to the literal extremes that I had.

Plato had even used “breaking the bird free from the cage” as a metaphor for the soul transcending the physical body via the holistic mind-body *purification* of philosophy.

These were very new and shocking ideas for me: that philosophy was originally conceived of as a holistic *way of life* meant to purify an individual towards transcendence—that, indeed, Greek philosophy embraced a *metaphorical* death as a rejection of the illusory physical world and movement towards a more profound experience of a deeper level of reality.

I had always mistakenly thought that philosophy was some sort of dry intellectual endeavor, an arcane obsession with semantics, written in impenetrable language in dusty texts that were housed in the bowels of some university library. To be honest, I had perceived philosophy as something dead, not very vital.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

The *lived* practice of philosophy as purification—as, indeed, a way of life—had been originated by Pythagoras (with a little help from his friends, the Egyptians and Babylonians). And in what came to be known as the *Bios Pythagorikos* (the Pythagorean way of life) a healthy mind, body, and spirit were nurtured with rigorous physical exercise, a strict diet, daily meditational walks, and lessons on ethics and character, as well as deep contemplative meditations on math, music, cosmology, and philosophy.

But because philosophy has been hijacked by crypt-keeper philosophy professors, instead of staying the province of actual philosophers, this vibrant soul of ancient Greek wisdom—much to our detriment—has been lost. Alas, in our narcissistic, YouTube culture, most people are more inclined towards self-absorption than self-reflection. But that's exactly why we need the long-lost depth and soul of Plato and Pythagoras—perhaps now more than ever.

How Plato and Pythagoras Can Save Your Life is my very personal effort at resurrecting the long-lost soul of Platonic philosophy at a time when, I believe, our society needs it most. It not only



chronicles my journey of transformation, but also brings to life the powerful insights of the Greek mystical philosophers in a way that I hope is clear and accessible.

Even though I intend to make Pythagoras and Plato come alive and be accessible to anybody interested in living a more meaningful and more aware life, I won't reduce their wisdom to fortune-cookie philosophy. I can't; I can't reduce their method of transformation into bite-size fun. Don't get me wrong; the journey *is* a blast, but it is a journey. In other words, there are no shortcuts.

But, luckily, what Pythagoras and Plato did was give us a road map for that journey of consciousness expansion and personal transformation. In my efforts to honor that original road map, I'll explore and examine some of their core ideas (as well as some relevant background info and current scientific research that might actually validate their ancient worldview). I also include experiential exercises, at the end of most chapters, intended to help the reader go step-by-step on this cosmic journey.

What will you discover? Perhaps, as the Greeks had discovered, that there's more to the world than meets the eye; if you're lucky, you might even catch a glimpse "behind the veil."

And if that happens, then not only will the way that you experience the world change forever, but the way that you exist within that world will change as well. Because with that shift in perception comes a shift in *being*. And then—*presto!*—alchemical transformation can manifest as a personal reality.

What you might also experience (as I did), as a fortuitous byproduct of this transformation and newfound expanded perception, is a much *happier* and much more *meaningful* life.

And you know, that may not be such a bad thing.

PART ONE

My Personal Odyssey



*But it's no use going back to yesterday,
because I was a different person then.*

—Lewis Carroll,

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland



Tripping the Night Fantastic

We've all had pivotal turning points in our lives—those critical two or three game-changers that create an entirely different life trajectory: the job that we should have taken, the relationship that we shouldn't have quit, the opportunity that we should've seized.

My life-changing fork in the road came soon after I had graduated from college on a beautiful September evening in New York during the fall of 1986.

I had grown up in the gritty, pre-Rudolph Giuliani New York of the late seventies and early eighties, as the athletic, clean-cut, yet confused son of working class Greek immigrants from Queens. As a teenager attending the Bronx High School of Science, I felt trapped in the outer boroughs and insecure with my ethnicity. Frustrated, I searched for something *more* as I gravitated towards the liberating downtown Manhattan club scene. With the subway serving as my trusty chariot, I ventured into the brave new worlds of Danceteria, the Pyramid Club, and CBGBs. These dark and anonymous rooms, filled with throbbing music that made my ears ring and my heart skip, offered a magical escape from the tedious grays of my life in Queens with a strict father who worked too long and drank too hard.

After high school, I bounced around a couple of different colleges before miraculously landing at Cornell University, where, in the rarefied Ivy League air, I once again struggled with my humble roots. Still confused and full of self-doubt, I drifted without the requisite plan for post-college life that most of my classmates seemed to have securely in place. I remember seeing the *The Graduate* during my senior year and feeling a solemn kinship with Benjamin Braddock, the Dustin Hoffman character. I so palpably felt his ennui as he sank to the bottom of that pool in his scuba gear that I was tempted to jump up from my seat and shout, “I feel you, my brother! Stay down! Stay the hell down!”

Unsure what to do with my life, I interviewed for a job as an assistant buyer at Bloomingdales, the vocational default option for those of us who were aimlessly drifting. Surprised to be hired, I started work as an executive trainee right after my graduation in June, 1986. I quickly received a welcome-to-the-real-world indoctrination as I found myself folding slacks in the Designer Men’s department while getting yelled at by a short, nasal-voiced department manager.

God, I hated that job.

Adding to my malaise was the fact that I was living with my college sweetheart, a rather lovely young woman who didn’t miss an opportunity to remind me that I had yet to legitimize our union by giving her a ring.

It’s fair to say I felt trapped. Stultified. Smothered. Unable to breathe. It felt as if a nine-hundred-pound Sumo wrestler had plopped himself on my chest as he leisurely picked at his soba noodles.

It’s also fair to say that I was unhappy.

It was at just that depressing point in my life that I heard the Copacabana nightclub on East Sixtieth Street was hiring clean-cut martial artists to be doormen.

“That’s me! Clean-cut martial artist!” I thought to myself.

You see, back in 1986, I was still working a post-Cornell, young Republican look, but I also had a black belt and had been a national AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) karate champion. Martial arts had been another form of escape for me as a kid. When I first saw Bruce Lee in the exotic *Enter the Dragon*, I, along with millions of other young men looking for an identity, was sold. Karate classes followed soon after.

Escape was also the order of the day when I heard about the Copa job while dying a slow death at Bloomingdales. Now keep in mind that this was the original Copacabana that was featured in the movie *Goodfellas*. The same Copa of that infamous 1957 Yankees fight and the same Copa that Barry Manilow immortalized in that annoying song. But by 1986, the Copa had transitioned into a Latin dance club—a *violent* Latin dance club. In fact, I would later find out that the doorman I replaced had suffered a rather unfortunate occupational hazard: a bullet through the midsection, fired by an irate patron whom he’d barred from entering the club. The poor guy was now forced to take care of his private business by using a rather clumsy colostomy bag.

You’d think something like that—or the fact that since that shooting, the Copa’s doormen were issued bulletproof vests to wear underneath their suits and ties— might deter me, or at least give me pause to think. Hell, some of my friends thought that I was crazy to want that job. But I didn’t care; I just wanted out of the house and that damned Sumo off of my chest while maybe chasing a little excitement.

As I walked along East Sixtieth Street towards the Copa to interview for the shooting-induced doorman vacancy, I had no idea that I was at a crossroads in my life. I had no idea that I was about to embark on a ten-year odyssey through the surreal world



of New York nightlife—a journey replete with colorful wiseguys, flamboyant drag queens, self-absorbed glitterati, self-righteous literati, vacuous socialites, never-were wannabes, sleazy promoters, hard-partying musicians, synaptically challenged models, misguided misfits, corrupt lawyers, Haitian hit squads, and, of course, the ubiquitous drug dealers of all shapes and sizes.

Nor was I aware that it would also include drug addiction, overdoses, violence, death, betrayal, corruption, and back-stabbing.



I quit Bloomingdales soon after I started working at the Copa. Within three short years, after hustling and working to save enough money, I opened my own nightclub with two partners. Located on the fringe of the West Village and the as-yet ungentrified Meatpacking District, Horatio 113 quickly took off as a celebrity hotspot; we were booked solid for film premieres and record-release parties, as literally hundreds of people would clamor at our velvet ropes begging to get in. After our meteoric success at Horatio 113, we opened three more clubs in quick succession.

And, of course, there was the requisite sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

I would stand at the front door, watching the frenzied crowds vying for our doorman's attention; I'd walk through the club, stopping to do shots with Uma Thurman or going to the office to do lines of coke with the celebrity du jour. When rock stars like Slash, from Guns & Roses, got out of hand (as he did), I had security unceremoniously throw him out on his head. When sports superstars like Michael Jordan showed up with their entourages, they would come to me—lord of my absurdly superficial little fiefdom—to ensure that their self-indulgent needs were taken care of.

My world was so glamorous that even some of my employees went on to megastardom. Before he became an action hero, Vin Diesel was one of my bouncers; before winning two Grammys, Moby manned my turntables as a DJ; and before winning a Tony on Broadway and making it in films, Liev Schreiber worked for me as a bartender.

For me, a basically insecure middle-class kid from Queens, it was all overwhelming—and intoxicating.



By the mid-nineties, my life was spinning painfully out of control. I was strung out on booze and drugs. My personal life was a disaster, as my womanizing had led to divorce and break-ups. I had several pissed-off wise guys looking to clear up certain “misunderstandings.” My business partners and I were fighting to keep local and state authorities from revoking our liquor licenses. And, the cherry on the cake, I had a Haitian drug-dealing gang called the Zo Zos put a contract out on my life over some rather unfortunate free-trade disagreements.

In 1995, New York State finally did revoke our clubs’ liquor licenses. When the state authorities let us know that it was last call, addiction really did a number on me. Without the semblance of an identity or job to keep me at least somewhat grounded, I drifted off into an abyss.

By 1999, I was human by only the most liberal of definitions. I was holed up in the isolating fortress of my shame as I sought the round-the-clock relief of my little powdered confection. I got high over and over and over again to temporarily numb my shame and self-loathing, because I just couldn’t stand—couldn’t accept—the reality of what had happened to me.

But what *had* happened to me?



My glamorous, velvet-roped, VIP lifestyle was long over, and I was now a broke, physically battered, and emotionally shot train wreck. My life consisted of an agonizing countdown towards my next dose of numbness. Tick tock, tick tock—time never moves as slowly as it does when you're anticipating the next hit. Tick tock, tick tock—I seemed to be in a strange universe where even though the seconds interminably dragged on, the years seemed to paradoxically fly by.

Worst of all, there just seemed to be no escape. It felt like I had blinked and somehow woken up in a nightmare—a horribly *repetitive* nightmare. Like some twisted version of Bill Murray's character in *Groundhog Day*, I'd regain consciousness and still be stuck in the same miserable place. There seemed to be no way out of the bottomless trap that I'd fallen into.

I eventually came to accept that I was unfixable, that I was destined to die in an addicted flame out. Hell, I'd even romanticized the idea; "live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse" became my delusional mantra.

While I had grown comfortable with the idea of dying, I couldn't handle accidentally bumping into old friends or acquaintances as I crawled along the Lower East Side, looking for this dealer or waiting for that one. God, I couldn't stand seeing the impossible-to-conceal frown or the look of pity. Even if they didn't say the words, I could hear their thoughts in my mind: "What's *happened* to him? He used to be on top of the world."

I was also beginning to go insane—I'm talking *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* crazy. I would wander the streets, disconnected with reality, sometimes talking to myself. I became consumed with Howard Hughes-type obsessive compulsions—repetitive behaviors, counting steps, avoiding sidewalk cracks, obsessively saving newspapers and highlighting various TV listings.

Worst of all, there were the times, when the high faded, that I would feel as if I were in a horrible free fall. But unlike the sense experienced by the parachutist whose chute won't open, my disorienting sense of plummeting was more than just physical—it was existential as well. I sensed that who or what I was falling, forever falling, into some kind of dark and dreaded abyss, disappearing into oblivion. My craziness, my compulsive repetitions—they were just my ways of maintaining some semblance of structure to reaffirm that I was real, that I was still here. But it was a losing battle.

I felt I was actually falling—or dissolving—into nothingness.



And then my parents reentered the equation.

They intervened with unconditional love just when I needed it the most. I had been so ashamed about the sad condition that I'd deteriorated into that I was avoiding them for months at a time. Eventually they figured out the truth, but rather than scorn me or judge me, they offered me love.

I moved back home with them for a period of time to try and regroup. It was very humbling having to be back in my childhood bedroom after all the fancy hotels and nice apartments that I'd lived in during my adult life. There I was, thirty-three years old and a once-upon-a-time big shot, sleeping in my old twin bed, between my childhood *Star Trek* sheets, which were adorned with the accusing, frozen stares of Kirk and Spock, looking up at me as I tried to make sense of my life. But being back home also felt very nurturing and safe. After all the champagne-soaked VIP rooms, the blurry after-hours clubs, the grimy drug dens with all the decaying humanity, seeing my sweet little mom's smiling face every morning as she held me tight and told me that she loved me—well, there was just something very healing in that.



My parents suggested that I get into rehab; I assured them that I could kick drugs on my own. As first-generation Greek immigrants, they didn't know much about the decidedly American concept of therapy, so at first it was relatively easy to talk them out of such a silly idea as rehab.

Don't get me wrong—by that point I really did want to stop using. And I did really try. I could always stop doing drugs for *brief* periods—like a few days—but I discovered that *staying* stopped was an altogether different matter, and I continued to relapse. At the same time, I found myself in a debilitating depression. I stayed in bed for months, watching *Jerry Springer* and *Chips* reruns around the clock (since I had insomnia).

Not only did I not have the first clue about how to stay clean and sober, but I also was still an empty, empty shell of a human being.

My parents eventually began to sense that they were losing me, that I was going to die. Unbeknownst to me, they educated themselves about rehabs and the therapy process and then, once again, brought up the idea of treatment. Only this time it was more than a suggestion: I had to go, or I had to leave.

I can't say how or why, but I finally became open to the idea of recovery. Towards that end, I really did some hard work in rehab, working with my counselors and honestly discussing my issues, as well as connecting with a twelve-step program.

After rehab, I moved into a sober house on the East End of Long Island. That was an experience: twelve life-hardened, overgrown men in five undersized bedrooms. They were a mishmash of humanity that were from everywhere—from prison to psych wards—as well as a couple of regular Joes, who were all struggling to get sober. Living in such cramped quarters with such a wacky crew and having curfews and mandatory house chores was all new for me,

but it was just what I needed. It reconnected me to the human race. Granted, it was the lunatic fringe subset of the human race, but it was a lot better than the addicted isolation that I'd been in.

It was while living in that sober house that I started reading again—voraciously. As a trying-to-recover alcoholic and addict, I began to realize that it was important for me to quench a deeper thirst. I was drawn towards books that helped me to make sense of things, and as I read books about philosophy and cosmology by Thomas Merton, Daisaku Suzuki, Ken Wilber, and Joseph Campbell, I began to realize that the emptiness I had felt inside was beginning to disappear and become filled with something deeper and more satisfying.



After a few months in the sober house, I moved back to New York City, where I reconnected with one of my dearest friends, Gary Lewis. Gary was a former bartender in my clubs and by far the best human being I have ever known.

Like so many others, he had moved to New York after college to pursue a creative dream, but wound up working in clubs and restaurants instead. A dead-ringer for Cleavon Little of *Blazing Saddles* fame, he was just the warmest, most genuine, most kind-hearted person that you could ever want to meet. He was also the only person—other than my parents—that hadn't turned his back on me during my descent. Even during the darkest period of my life, he constantly tried to reach out and offer his help.

Gary and I reconnected and became inseparable. During one of our many late-night coffee sessions, while trying to figure out the next phase in our lives, we decided to write a television series that would capture all the drama and pathos of the



downtown New York nightlife scene. I now had a dream again, as Gary and I met every day to work on our creative project. This was a wonderful period of growth for me, as I also continued my philosophical readings, attended daily twelve-step meetings, and regularly hit the gym. Drugs and alcohol became the farthest things from my mind, and I was able to put together just about a year of sobriety.

Around this time I also met (or re-met) Lucy, an old friend I hadn't seen in almost fifteen years. The last time that I had seen her, she was a young, sexy, Latina high school kid, dating one of my best friends while I was still working at Bloomingdales and moonlighting at the Copa. Since then, she'd blossomed into a mature and soulful schoolteacher who had traveled the world. The attraction between us was instant and magical. I happily reconnected with Lucy during Thanksgiving week of 2000.

That same week, on Thanksgiving Eve, Gary and I had just carried two loads of his laundry up to his fifth-story walk-up when I noticed that Gary was struggling to breathe. When we finally got to his landing, he dropped his bag with a big exhale and looked very flushed as he tried to laugh it off.

As he opened the front door of his apartment, he mentioned that he wanted to show me something on his computer. He was still red and breathing heavily as we sat side-by-side on his new wooden computer bench, but he managed a smile as he lifted his finger with an exaggerated arm motion.

"First we turn the computer on!" he said as he hit the power button.

Those were his last words.

Suddenly and without warning, his eyes started bulging, and he started to make a choking sound while furiously reaching with both hands towards his throat.

At first I thought that this was one of his pranks. “C’mon Gary, stop messing around! Stop acting like you’re choking on a chicken bone or—”

But then his whole body violently flipped so that his feet almost knocked over his computer, and he landed face down on the carpet, fully convulsing. It took me three or four seconds to fully comprehend what was happening. I mean, you don’t expect your young and healthy, thirty-six-year-old best friend to start having a massive heart attack!

Then I jumped into action: I flipped him onto his back and started administering CPR while calling 911 with my free hand. I had been certified years earlier in CPR, but it’s different when you actually have to apply it to your best friend. The way his face looked haunts me to this day. He was conscious and kept looking up at me, his eyes still bulging as he struggled to speak, yet no sound came out.

After maybe about a minute (but what felt like an eternity), his eyes fixed, and his body stopped convulsing.

I was in shock. I just couldn’t believe that Gary had died in my arms, right before my very eyes.

“Gary, don’t die! Don’t die! Please don’t die! Gary!” I kept yelling and pleading and crying as I desperately attempted to revive him.

But he was gone.



I relapsed at Gary’s funeral. It was one of those horrible open-casket affairs, and poor Gary lay there, shriveled and cold. When his parents asked me to say a few words to the hundreds of mourners gathered in the congregation, I thought that I might get sick. I stepped outside to compose myself and to breathe in some of the crisp, cold Cleveland air before I could perform the eulogy. As I

inhaled deeply trying to keep the vomit at bay, I glanced up and saw a red bar sign glowing on the horizon. Above the hypnotizing neon, I could make out the lettering of the cheap sign adorning the ramshackle building: The Wolf's Den. Perfect.

I quickly marched over and ordered three double shots of Jack Daniels. As the fiery brown liquid went down my throat, I instantly felt the warm embrace of an old friend. In seconds, my knees got the weak, rubbery feeling that used to let me know that I was feeling, as we used to say, *nice*.

My relapse would eventually lead me back to other, powdered forms of escape. I was determined to hide things from Lucy, but it was pretty hard to keep my little secret when she found me lying on the floor without a pulse two months after Gary's funeral.

I don't have any memory of what happened; I've been told that Lucy and our friend Robert found me unconscious and that by the time the paramedics arrived, my heart had stopped beating. After trying to revive me at the scene for ten or fifteen minutes, the medics didn't think that I was going to make it. By the time they brought me to Cornell Presbyterian—not only the same hospital, but also the same emergency room that Gary had died in two months earlier—my heart had been stopped for over forty-five minutes. When the ER doctor came out to the waiting room to tell Lucy that it didn't look good, she screamed at him to keep trying.

After about another fifteen minutes, the doctor came out again, exclaiming, "We have a heartbeat! I don't know how, but we have a heartbeat!" But he added that everybody needed to temper their enthusiasm because I had been a systolic (without a pulse) for over an hour; that meant that my brain had suffered significant oxygen deprivation. If I survived—still a very big *if*—there would very likely be significant brain damage.

They called in the neurologist, and I was worked on for the next several hours. The doctors said that I was very close to total organ shutdown, an always-fatal condition where all the organs just sort of turn themselves off and the person just fades away. Lucy was told that it was extremely questionable whether or not I would survive the night as I barely clung to life via a respirator.

I remained in a coma for several days, but eventually I slowly started to come out of it. I started recognizing family members and slowly started speaking—gibberish at first—but speaking nonetheless.

The neurologist told Lucy and my parents that my recovery was a one in five billion event—regaining the level of cognitive functioning I did was nothing short of a medical miracle. The only permanent damage that I still carry with me is significant hearing loss in my left ear, accompanied by a loud ringing—what doctors call tinnitus. Lucy calls it my little reminder to listen more closely, to heed what the universe has to tell me.



I don't remember any of my time in the ER or the ICU; in fact, I don't remember any of my relapse. What I do remember begins almost two weeks into my hospital stay, when I had been transferred from the ICU to the cardiac unit. Even there, I was confused and disoriented. As I looked out my hospital window at the East River, I was convinced—really convinced—that I was on a cruise ship in either the Hong Kong harbor or the Rio Grande.

When the idea that I had really almost died finally began to sink in, I became angry—not just because I had almost killed myself, but also because I'd gone to the very brink of nonexistence and didn't have a white-light experience! It sounds childish,

I know, but my whole life, I'd been intrigued by the whole white-light thing. Now I finally had an honest-to-goodness near-death experience, and there was no freaking white light! Where was it?! Where was my long tunnel, with all my smiling dead friends and relatives getting ready to greet me into the great hereafter? I felt that God was playing the role of trickster. First he killed Gary, and then he allows me to *almost* kill myself. He lets me live, but what does he do? Knowing my obsession with death and what lay beyond, he teased me; he brought me right to the very freaking brink, but doesn't even give me a peek!

As the days progressed and I further emerged from my coma, I became more aware. I experienced a sense of expansion. I actually started experiencing what some might call a type of euphoria. Now whether that was some sort of neurochemical byproduct of my near-death experience—an endorphin rush—I don't know for sure. But I don't think so.

I'd always been an existentially curious kid—a science-fiction junkie if ever there was one—as I'd often look up at the night sky and try to make sense of things. After my coma, all of those existential and cosmological questions from my childhood flooded back: What is *life*? And what is *death*? What is my purpose? And more than that, what is my nature—my *true* nature. Am I just this skin-wrapped biological container? Or am I more?

I was thirsty for cosmological answers, and I had the very palpable feeling that if I didn't quench that thirst, I was destined to drift off and lose myself in the abyss of drug addiction again. Only this time, I wouldn't survive.

Exercise 1

Who—and What—Am I?

This first contemplative exercise deals with our own **self-understanding**. Oftentimes, people define themselves by their jobs or their familial or societal roles. But that's sort of relying on descriptive labels when we are actually trying to understand something on a much deeper level. **Yes, an apple is a fruit, and it may be red; but what is the essence of "appleness"?** What does it mean to *be* an apple?

When you ask yourself the question **"Who am I?" what are the responses that don't rely on superficial descriptions?** In other words, perhaps when you ask yourself "Who am I?" **you should instead ask "What am I?"**

For this exercise, you will be asked to take a few minutes to ask your inner self that question, and then allow your below-the-surface consciousness to respond. However, it's very important that this self-directed question and answer be done as a seated contemplative meditation and not just a perfunctory verbal prompt.

Take the opportunity to **sit in a chair in a room without distractions** (e.g., a room without any TV, computer, or music on) **or to go to a quiet place in nature**. Sit in a relaxed and comfortable position, with both feet on the ground and your hands relaxed on top of your thighs; keep your posture straight with your eyes loosely focusing on a point several feet in front of you.

Now center yourself; begin to breathe in slowly through your nose and then out through your mouth. **Gently try to still any turbulence that might be occurring in the ocean of your mind**. Visualize a still and calm body of water as the manifestation of this calm level of consciousness. As thoughts arise, try to gently push them away as you **focus on your breathing and visualize the glasslike calmness of the water**.



After several minutes of this relaxed breathing, you're ready to go contemplative deep-sea fishing in the calm blue water. **Now ask yourself the question "Who—and what—am I?" Sit still for several more minutes and become aware of what arises in your consciousness.**

When you're done, sit for several more moments and become aware of how you feel. Now look around the room again; do you experience it any differently? **Feel free to write down any of these initial thoughts and feelings**, as doing so will help you to process this experience.