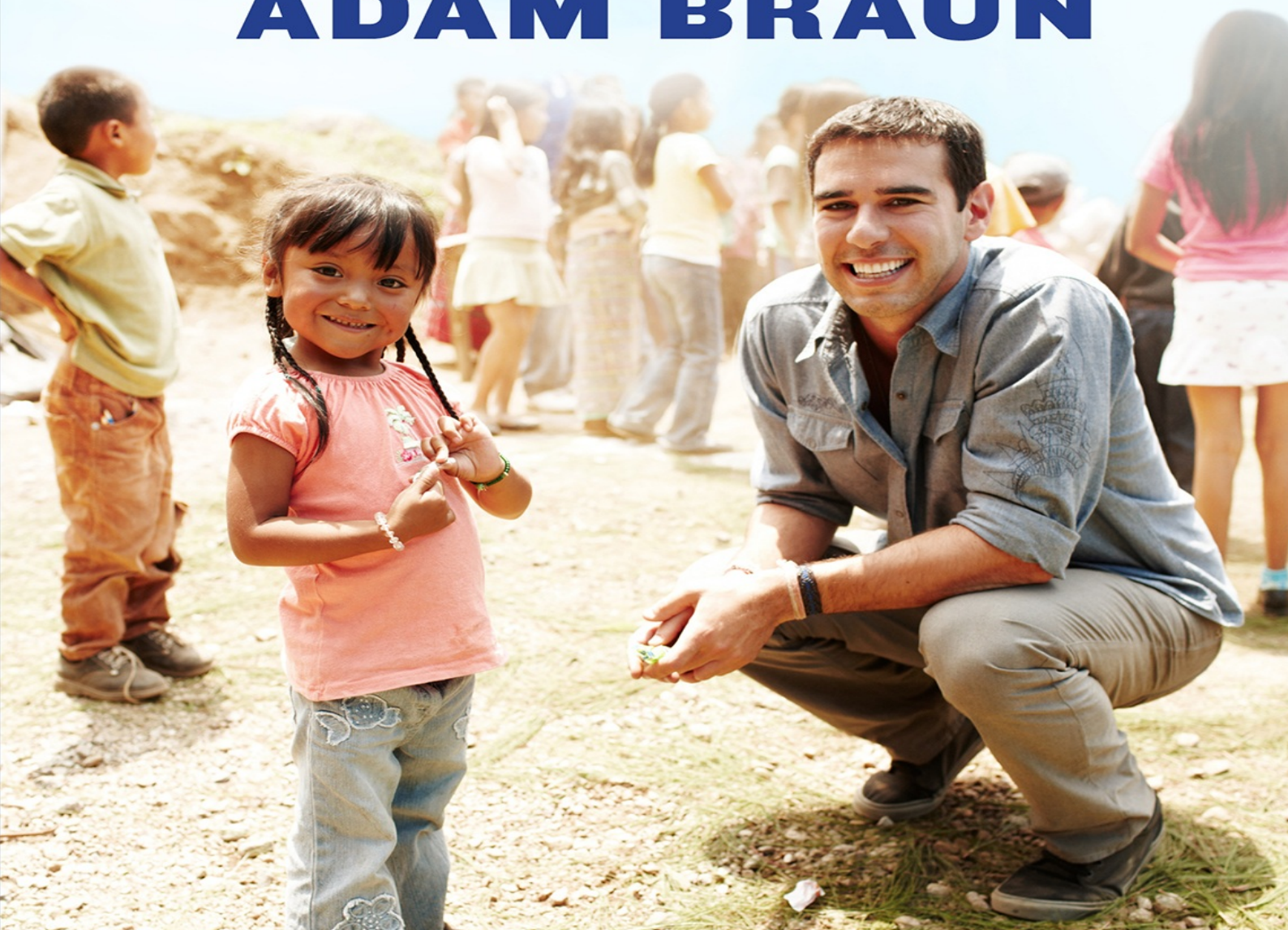


“For anyone with a big dream to transform the world, this book will show you how to get it done.” — **SIR RICHARD BRANSON**

# THE PROMISE OF A PENCIL

**How an Ordinary Person Can Create  
Extraordinary Change**

**ADAM BRAUN**



# THE PROMISE OF A PENCIL

“For anyone with a big dream to transform the world, this book will show you how to get it done.”

—Sir Richard Branson, founder and chairman of the Virgin Group

“A compelling and singular story filled with universal truths everyone needs to hear.”

—US Senator Cory Booker

“A remarkably inspiring story that shares the essential lessons to creating a life of meaning, passion, and purpose.”

—Deepak Chopra, founder of the Chopra Foundation

“Braun’s lessons are memorable, accessible, and powerful. This is a must-read, and a must-reread, and a must-keep-in-view-on-your-bookshelf kind of book.”

—Jessica Jackley, cofounder of Kiva

“An honest, compelling look at what it means to take the road less traveled and the rewards you will discover along the way. *The Promise of a Pencil* is a vivid, heartfelt account of the power of education and the ability of one person to impact the world.”

—Wendy Kopp, founder of Teach For America and cofounder and CEO of Teach For All

“Adam Braun is one of the most charismatic, energetic, forward-thinking people in the world today. This book is a perfect step-by-step guide to building the life you’ve always wanted on your own terms. Pay attention to the details and apply them to your passions. Go now! Start reading and don’t put the book down until you’re finished.”

—Gary Vaynerchuk, CEO of VaynerMedia and bestselling author of *Jab, Jab, Jab, Right Hook* and *Crush It*

“Braun takes you on a mesmerizing round-the-world adventure, while sharing the concrete steps necessary to turn your own ideas into reality. He has his finger on the pulse of what’s next and when he speaks you should be listening.”

—Keith Ferrazzi, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Who’s Got Your Back* and *Never Eat Alone*

“Adam represents exactly the shift our world needs—one where the brightest minds of our generation focus on addressing the most important problems of our time. The more people read his story, the more this shift will accelerate.”

—Ben Rattray, founder and CEO of Change.org

“Adam nails a truth we live by. The biggest difference between the person who lives their dream and the person who continues to dream is their decision to take the first step—even if the second step is unknown. Honest and entertaining. A great read.”

—Ben Nemtin, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author and cocreator of *The Buried Life*

“Adam’s story is iconic and riveting. *The Promise of a Pencil* will inspire the next generation of social entrepreneurs and persuade readers to lead lives of purpose.”

—Charles Best, founder and CEO of DonorsChoose.org

“Grab a hot chocolate and read this book. No better feeling in the world than being inspired by a blazing story in one hand and hot cocoa in the other.”

—Nancy Lublin, CEO of DoSomething.org

“Adam Braun has built a wonderful organization that provides education and a solid start to children around the world. His journey captured here should inspire others to similarly follow their hearts and passions in making the world a better place.”

—Lauren Bush, founder of FEELGOOD

“*The Promise of a Pencil* is a great read for anyone who has ever felt a restless idea brewing inside but lacked the inspiration or know-how to take the next step. Adam Braun distills the key choices he made on the way to executing an idea in an extremely accessible way.”

—Scott Harrison, founder and CEO of charity: water

“Adam Braun is a leader among an emerging generation of change makers who are proving that every person can be a force for positive change. His inspiring work is truly giving children around the world hope and the opportunity for a better future.”

—Ann Veneman, former executive director of UNICEF

“With relentless optimism and the idealism of a seasoned traveler, Adam Braun tells an incredibly personal story about his journey from student to philanthropist. What’s so extraordinary about Braun’s story is how he built a simple gesture of kindness—on a pencil for one child—into a movement that has inspired and influenced a new generation of philanthropists and entrepreneurs. And he’s just getting started.”

—Jared Cohen, bestselling author and director of Google Ideas

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THE  
PROMISE  
OF A PENCIL

How an Ordinary Person  
Can Create Extraordinary Change

ADAM BRAUN

with Carlye Adler

SCRIBNER  
NEW YORK LONDON TORONTO SYDNEY NEW DELHI

*To my two greatest heroes, my mother and father*

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Don't ask yourself what the world needs.  
~~Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that.~~  
Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

—HOWARD THURMAN

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# INTRODUCTION

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On a sunny autumn afternoon just before my twenty-fifth birthday, I walked into a large bank in my hometown. At the time, I had everything I thought would make me happy—the job, the apartment, the life. My closet was full of impressive corporate clothing, and my business card carried the name of a prestigious company that garnered respect in every room I entered. I looked like a guy on the right path who was most likely walking into the bank to deposit his monthly paycheck.

But deep down inside, I was no longer enamored with the life I'd created. The only purpose I was serving was self-interest. While I rarely showed it to outsiders, my happiness waned day after day. A restless voice kept me up at night, telling me that until I found meaning, the money wouldn't matter. It told me that I'd find far more fulfillment if I measured my life in purpose, not profits. And that I didn't have to keep waiting, that now was the perfect moment to start chasing my biggest dreams.

It's strange how you can sometimes feel a yearning that seems bigger than your actual body. That's how I felt that day. I wanted to be a part of something that extended far beyond my two hands and the possessions they could hold. No matter how scared I was of getting off my safe path, I needed to see what would happen if I finally stepped into the uncharted territory where unbridled ambition and opportunity reside.

The scariest part was that I wasn't some successful businessman who'd built and sold big companies. I didn't have a lengthy career to prove I would succeed. Nor did I have millions of dollars in financial backing. I was just a regular guy with \$25 who wanted to prove that regardless of age, status, or location, every person has the capacity to change the world. So I used that small amount to open a new account in hopes of one day building a school. Everything that came after was a result of that first step. That leap of faith rippled outward, spanning cultures and continents.

Since then I've immersed myself in the field of global education. I believe that where you start in life should not dictate where you finish. And that no tool can more profoundly unlock a person's ability to change his or her place in life than access to quality education. The good news is that we have the ability to provide quality education to every child on earth right now. We are not looking for a miracle vaccine or drilling for a hidden resource that may not exist. We have all the tools necessary at this very moment. Yet we still have 57 million children out of school, and millions more who sit in classrooms each day but remain illiterate.

Education is a complex issue, which requires a complex set of solutions. There is no silver bullet answer to educating the children of the world, but the global education crisis remains the single most solvable and important human rights issue of our time. The knowledge that it *can* be solved gives me hope and purpose. But no individual can solve the world's problems alone. A collective effort is required, and we each have a unique role to play.

\* \* \*

This is the story about what happens when you acknowledge that there's more for you to become



and that you don't have to have enormous resources to make a difference in the world. It's a story about what can unfold when inspiration strikes and you realize that the rewards of living purposeful life are rich and lasting. It's the story of my life (although I have changed the names of several people at their request), but it's a story that can belong to anyone.

Each of the thirty chapters in this book is titled with a mantra. These mantras have served as my guideposts as I've faced decisions both large and small. They have become my essential truths. I've written them with the hope that they will be carried forward, shared with others, and adopted in ways that help you on your own journey as well. Each story stands on its own, but taken together they create a roadmap that I hope will enable you to turn your own dreams into reality.

If one of these stories ignites something within you, listen to that restless feeling that your head may tell you to ignore but your heart will tell you to pursue. The biggest difference between the person who lives his or her dreams and the person who aspires is the decision to convert that first spark of motivation into immediate action. Take the first small step, then chase the footprints you aspire to leave behind. Every person has a revolution beating within his or her chest. I hope that this book helps you find yours.



## WHY BE NORMAL

Although we never officially assigned the seats around our dinner table, we always knew our places on Friday nights. My dad sat at the head, with my brother and me to his right, my sister and my mom to his left. We usually had a few friends and extended family who joined too. Every week the cast of characters changed slightly, but the fervor of debate always remained the same. And more often than not, the heat came directly from the head of the table.

My father was known in my hometown as the intimidating dad. He coached and played nearly every sport with unmatched intensity: basketball, baseball, football—he dominated them all. He felt that kids in our town were coddled, and he would make sure they knew it: “Stop being such lily-white-bread pussies!” he’d scream at the twelve-year-olds on my basketball team. When he gave us praise, it was carefully delivered, and it meant something. He wanted us to earn it—through mental toughness and a tenacious work ethic. Because of this, most kids both loved and feared him. He was an old-school disciplinarian and didn’t mind letting people know it.

As my siblings and I entered adolescence, he developed code words for us, which he would use to warn us that we were about to go over a line we did not want to cross. He’d use these code words in conversation, at the dinner table, or in public to say, “This is your last warning, do not push my buttons anymore.” My older brother, Scott, is a typical firstborn son; he loved to challenge my dad’s authority. His code word was Cream. Mine was Ice, and my younger sister, Liza, was Sundae. If we were all misbehaving, upsetting my mother and about to catch a spanking, my dad just had to yell “Ice Cream Sundae!” and we would stop right away. But as I look back on it, being the guy furiously screaming “Ice Cream Sundae!” probably didn’t help to rid my father of his reputation among my friends of being “the scary dad.”

Even back then, we knew his crazy temper and strict discipline were just forms of tough love. He wanted to get the best from each of us—and he got it. As a coach, no one pushed me harder. He had me play three games on the final day of the 14-Year-Old State Championships with a raging fever because he knew how badly I wanted to win the tournament. He’d set up cones in the basement so that after dinner I could do dribbling drills in the dark. But the result was worth it. And when I consider what motivated my siblings and me most, it all boiled down to one phrase that my dad used constantly that gave us the permission and the directive to stand out. He loved to remind us, “Brauns are different.”

\* \* \*

My siblings and I knew that some of the parents in town rewarded their kids for good grades. This could mean up to \$100 for an A, \$75 for a B, \$50 for a C, and so forth. When I asked my parents for some form of compensation for my academic performance, my request was shot down immediately.

“Paul Mazza just got one hundred and fifty dollars for good grades. Can I get something?” I

ask.

“Brauns are different. You have our gratitude,” they’d say.

During Hanukkah, rather than receiving eight nights of gifts, we received gifts on only four nights, and the alternate four nights we selected a charity that my parents donated to in our names. When we’d ask why half of our Hanukkah gifts were charitable donations instead of presents, my parents would simply respond, “Because Brauns are different.”

Most of our friends had high-tech toys and video games, but my siblings and I were told to go read books or play outside. Our pleas and arguments were always met with the same response: “Brauns are different.” My dad didn’t think we were superior, he wanted us to hold ourselves to a higher standard.

This phrase was not only used to justify my mom and dad’s different approach to parenting, but to celebrate us when we displayed courage by taking the path less traveled. If we stood up for a classmate who was being bullied, they would applaud us by saying, “You know why you did that? Because Brauns are different.” Children want nothing more than their parents’ approval, and pretty soon we developed an inherent drive to live into the ideals they had defined for us.

Every night before we went out to parties in middle and high school, my dad would say, “Remember Dad’s Rules.” Dad’s Rules meant “Don’t do anything that you wouldn’t do if Dad were watching. Choose your actions as if Dad were next to you the whole time.”

These expectations of excellence became the tent poles that formed our values, and our values then guided the choices we made. They served as a constant reminder that to achieve exceptional things, you must hold yourself to exceptional standards, regardless of what others may think. My dad even went so far as to order license plates that read YBNML, which my scared middle school friends always assumed meant “why be an animal.” The real meaning was much more apt: “why be normal.”

\* \* \*

My dad’s intensity and belief in the power of nonconformity no doubt were born from his parents’ experiences. When she was fourteen, my grandmother Eva (known to us as Ma) and twenty-seven family members including her mother and twelve-year-old sister were forced from their home in Hungary and placed in a ghetto with the other Jews from their town. From there, they were transported in cattle cars to the most feared of concentration camps, Auschwitz. Upon their arrival, people were lined up before camp doctors and ordered to go left or right. Ma’s entire family was ordered to go left, but because she was of working age, the doctor insisted that she go to the right. As a scared young girl, she cried and refused to leave her mother and sister’s side. The Nazi guards beat her until she was unconscious. When she woke up, she pleaded with the other camp prisoners to tell her where she could find her family. With grim faces, they pointed to the smokestacks. Her entire family were sent to the gas chambers, killed, and cremated the day of their arrival in Auschwitz.

After six months in the camp, surviving brutal conditions and watching countless others die next to her each day, Ma was transported to a new concentration camp. In her words, “Bergen-Belsen camp was even worse than Auschwitz. You were only there to die.” But Ma believed that her father would be waiting for her when the war was over, and the belief that she needed to survive to make sure he had at least one other family member kept her spirit strong enough to go on each day. That sense of purpose enabled her to survive through conditions in which many

others perished.

After she spent eight months in Bergen-Belsen, the war ended and American GIs liberated her from the camp. She was so weak that she could not feed herself, which ultimately saved her life because others fed her slowly enough to allow her stomach to readjust to solid foods. She had nearly starved to death, and she would not allow that fate for her grandchildren. Later she became almost obsessed with watching us eat. She often spent days preparing chicken-noodle soup, brisket, ice-cream sandwiches, and chocolates for us to fill our bellies with on Friday nights. As soon as one plate was finished, another whopping portion appeared. "There's dessert too, my angels," she would say, nodding with approval.

Once recovered, Ma took that long-awaited ride back to Hungary to find her father. While others reunited with loved ones in tears of joy, she found herself alone at the train station in Budapest. Her father never came. He had been killed at a work camp in Russia. No one came. Devastated, she phoned the only other relative she thought might be alive, her uncle, and he offered to take her in.

A few years later, Ma's uncle offered to introduce her to a friend of his, Joseph, who was also a Holocaust survivor. He had lived through a year at the Dachau concentration camp, where both his younger brothers and his father were killed. Through his persuasion, persistence, and a shared understanding of loss, they created a profound bond. Joseph Braun soon asked Eva to marry him and after they were married, she gave birth to a girl and a boy. The boy, Ervin Braun, is my father. When the Hungarian Revolution broke out in 1956, they planned an escape across international borders to the safety of the United States. My grandfather (whom we called Apu) tested the route first, fleeing alone across the Hungarian border at night and then returning to gather his mother, sisters, wife, and children.

After they stowed away in a packed boat of immigrants, traveling thirteen days across the Atlantic Ocean to arrive in New York City, my father and his family spent their first nights on American soil in a Jewish refugee camp. With the assistance of a relief organization, they found a one-bedroom apartment in Crown Heights, Brooklyn. My grandfather worked as a dental technician making fake teeth, and my grandmother worked in a sweatshop. For ten years she worked for just \$1 per day, knitting garments in horrific conditions so that her children and future grandchildren could live a better life.

\* \* \*

My dad learned to speak English without an accent by diligently studying the way American men pronounced words on television shows such as *The Lone Ranger* and *The Little Rascals*. He was a straight-A student, skipping eighth grade and attending Bronx High School of Science. His parents were so fearful of their only son's getting hurt, they wouldn't sign the permission slips to let him play on any local sports teams. Instead, he waited for his parents to go to work and then snuck out to play basketball and football on the city playgrounds.

For as long as my dad could remember, his parents wanted him to become a successful dentist. After completing college in three years, he chose to attend the University of Pennsylvania for dental school, where he'd meet a woman who would change the trajectory of his life: my mother, Susan, a country girl from a humble town in the Catskills. Her father, Sam, had escaped Poland to avoid persecution just before the Holocaust began, but passed away when my mom was eleven years old. Her mother, Dorothy, raised her with an emphasis on morality and civic responsibility.

My mother's favorite word is *integrity*, as it's the quality she was raised to value most.

During the first weekend of my mother's freshman year at UPenn, my dad went to a college party where he met her older sister, Lynn. The next day he thought he saw Lynn walking down some stairs and called her out by name. But it wasn't Lynn; it was my mother, Susan. She blew him off completely, which of course piqued his interest. He began to pursue her, and after their first date he told his friends, "I'm going to marry that girl." He even went so far as to write it on a piece of paper and place the message in an empty bottle on his mantel, where it stayed until he revealed it to her at their wedding.

Once my parents were ready to start their own practices as a dentist and an orthodontist, they put together a list of what they wanted most and rated each of the surrounding communities accordingly. Education was the most important criterion, and Greenwich, Connecticut, had the best public schools. The town also had a culture of volunteerism that my mother craved and growing diversity that my father wanted his children exposed to. They got a loan to buy property in Cos Cob, the historically blue-collar, Italian part of town that was inhabited by the service workers who built the town's mansions in the 1950s. We moved there when I was a young boy, and that's where my earliest memories were formed.

\* \* \*

By the time I reached high school, I played basketball year-round. One weekend, two tall African boys joined my team for a summer tournament in Albany. They towered over the others—Sam was six feet six inches and Cornelio six feet nine inches—but I immediately sensed their warmth and kindness. They were childhood friends from Mozambique who found themselves bound together on a journey to the States in search of education.

During the weekend tournament, we became fast friends. On the drive home from Albany, Sam and Cornelio asked if they could stay with my family for the five days until the following weekend's tournament. We readily agreed, considering we were always hosting teammates, friends, and family. But when the second tournament ended, they asked my dad, "Can we stay next week too?"

Sam and Cornelio were supposed to be living in Philadelphia, where they had been for the past eight months. But they were vehement about not going back—not even to pick up their stuff. When we asked why, they told us how they had been lured to America under the false promise of fantastic education. Their families put \$1,000 toward their flights, yet upon arrival in the United States, they were ushered into a makeshift apartment in the slums of South Philadelphia. The "school" they were supposed to be attending was a single classroom in the back of a run-down church. A teacher came in at the start of the day, passed out textbooks to the twenty-five boys there, and left. The school was simply a front for a scam-artist-turned-basketball-coach to recruit players. He lured them to the States and then sent them to colleges that were affiliated with shoe companies, based on whichever shoe company paid him more. If one of these players made it to the NBA, the sponsoring shoe company would have the inside track, but none of these kids received a real secondary education along the way.

In their second week staying at our house, my brother was home from college and drove Sam and Cornelio to Greenwich High School, the public school I now attended. Their eyes lit up. They had traveled thousands of miles to attend a great school. They saw the chance to realize their American dream and asked us to take them in as their legal guardians within the United

States so they could attend our local public high school.

~~Given my dad's background as an immigrant, the boys' story resonated with him deeply. We had hosted hundreds of kids overnight at our house, but something about Sam and Cornelio was unique. They were both so genuine and humble, and they embodied the kind of integrity my family valued so much. My mother and my sister were completely won over by them, and Scott, who was scheduled to return to Emory in Atlanta that fall, was especially hyped about the idea.~~

One night, my parents asked to speak with me privately. They told me about the boys' request for us to take them into our family and informed me that the final decision was up to me. "It's going to fall on you to chaperone them, tutor them, and assimilate them into school. You're also applying to colleges this fall, so we know you're under a lot of stress, and this decision is going to impact you the most right now. The rest of us are willing to take them in, but it's your choice."

When you come from a lineage of Holocaust survivors, you grow up with an understanding that everything was once taken away from your family. The only things that enabled them to survive and then radically change their lot in life were the strength of their willpower, the help of others, and a commitment to education. Sam and Cornelio had demonstrated willpower and a hunger for education in abundance. They just needed a little bit of help. People with nothing to gain had once stepped in to help my family, and now I had the opportunity to pay it forward.

Later that night I told my parents that I wanted us to take in the boys as well. My parents soon became Sam and Cornelio's legal guardians within the United States. They enrolled in Greenwich High School with my sister and me—and became our two new brothers.

Our Shabbat dinners on Friday nights looked a little different with two huge African kids towering over the table, but the real transformation that took place within our family was much more profound. While my parents gave these boys an incredible opportunity to change the trajectory of their lives, what they gave us was much more. They changed us. They certainly changed me.

For the first time, I began to fully understand that there was a vast world outside of the town and neighborhoods I had come to know. I started to think about what it would be like if our roles had been reversed and I had grown up in Mozambique rather than them. I wondered if I would have had their same courage to leave home and venture into unknown lands.

The more I learned about the challenges they had overcome, the more I grasped the quality necessary to change one's path. Sam and Cornelio were the only ones among their friends and family to depart from the life that was expected of them. They did not follow the norms of their peers. They chose to be different. And in doing so, they proved that through struggle, sacrifice, and service, staggering personal transformation is possible.



## GET OUT OF YOUR COMFORT ZONE

Wherever you grow up, your surroundings are your measuring stick. Although my parents were a dentist and an orthodontist, many of my friends' parents were investment bankers, hedge-fund managers, and CEOs. We knew as kids that among the parents in the crowd at our local football games, a handful of multimillionaires usually could be counted. Once I fully grasped that some of my friends' parents made tremendous amounts of money while others made very little, my love of competition and numbers soon morphed into a new obsession—Wall Street. By the time I was in middle school I was fixated on working in finance and becoming a billionaire.

In middle school I opened an E\*TRADE account to buy and sell shares of Gap and Nike. By the time I was sixteen I started working at a hedge fund during my summer break, trying to learn everything I could about the financial markets. When I was nineteen, I worked at a fund of funds and went to New York City, not to see a show or buy knockoff watches on St. Mark's Place, but to visit the New York Stock Exchange and spend time on the trading floor.

During those same years, I developed an entrepreneurial instinct and started a revolving door of small businesses. My first paid job at age twelve was manual labor, cleaning people's yards and moving their furniture for \$6 per hour. But I soon realized that with the rise of eBay, I could buy and sell rare CDs of live concerts for \$40 each. I immediately quit carrying lawn chairs into people's basements and was soon making thousands of dollars a year shipping CDs around the country. My parents made it clear to us that we weren't going to have any trust funds waiting for us one day. If we wanted something, we would have to work for it and pay for it ourselves. So I was never comfortable working just one normal job. If there was a small business to be started, I was constantly evaluating how to make it happen.

My desire to become an investment banker led me to study economics at Brown. I had been recruited to several schools to play basketball, but chose Brown because I could fulfill my dream of playing a Division I sport while also pursuing my academic interests. I immediately began taking courses in sociology, management, and entrepreneurship, including Engineering 90 (affectionately known as Engine 90) with Professor Barrett Hazeltine, the same class that gave rise to the juice company Nantucket Nectars. Each student was required to write a business plan for a potential company, and for the first time I started to learn the formal side of the management world.

My path toward a lucrative job in finance was progressing well; I was a student-athlete on my way toward the life I'd always dreamed of, filled with cars, boats, and a luxurious house. I was working multiple jobs on campus, the basketball team was on its way to one of the best seasons in school history, and I seemed to have everything on track. My family and friends thought my grand plan was aligning perfectly, but internally I was beginning to ask fewer questions about money and more questions about meaning.

As my sophomore year was coming to a close, I went to a nearby dorm to watch a movie called *Baraka* with my friend Luke. He'd told me, "This film is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen and will change the way you look at the world."

*Baraka* means "blessing" in many languages. The movie had no formal actors, no plot, and at first I had no idea what was going on, but I knew it was spectacular. The film was a series of scenes shot all around the world that showed stunning geographic wonders juxtaposed with ceremonies and customs of indigenous cultures. The film spanned twenty-four countries—the towering ruins in Indonesia, the killing fields in Cambodia, the chaos and color of India.

One scene in particular captivated me. It began with a mass of people wading in a river of dirty water, praying, giving oblations. A man was carrying something ornate on his shoulders with smoke rising from it. A woman cupped the river water in her trembling hands, clearly in reverence to its holiness. Fires burned all around the riverbanks. In the last seconds of the scene something charred appeared. It took me moments to recognize it, but then it hit me. At one end was a face; at the other end was a foot. It was a human being burned.

I felt as if I had been kicked in the stomach. I had no idea where this scene was filmed or why it was happening, but I knew it was real, and it was spiritually significant. All I could think was, *everything I'm seeing in this film is actually happening somewhere on the planet, right now, at this very moment while I'm sitting in this dorm room, then I need to go to these places and see this with my own eyes.* How could I grow up in Connecticut, attend college in Rhode Island, and then move to New York City without seeing other cultures besides my own?

I bought the movie and invited others over for viewing parties. Every time I watched it I discovered something new and felt a deepening desire to explore the vast expanses beyond my insular surroundings.

I searched the Web for the location of the holy-river scene and discovered it was in Varanasi, the spiritual capital of India. The city sits on the left bank of the Ganges River, the holiest water in India. The river is considered a god itself, and according to Hindu legend the area was founded by the god Shiva. Younger Hindus wash away their sins in the religious waters while the elderly and the sick hope to die in Varanasi as a way to achieve nirvana. I knew I needed to go there.

I left the basketball team knowing I needed some time to myself, and started to explore my spirituality and faith. I wanted to understand why I should believe in my religion over all the others, so I began to meet weekly with a rabbi to study the Torah. I also began intensely researching different faiths and spiritual beliefs, spending time in the library, where every month I would focus on reading the texts of a different religion: Taoism, Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and so on. Rather than assuming everything I had been taught was true, I reversed my approach to challenge all of my existing assumptions and only decided to adopt those which I could believe on my own.

While high school encouraged conformity, college taught me it was okay—even desirable—to question what I thought I knew. It was an awakening. For the first time, I began to explore and celebrate my quirks and unique interests. I read books like *On the Road, 1984*, and *Man's Search for Meaning*, each of which encouraged individuality and discovery of purpose. The music I listened to changed from modern pop acts to artists whose lyrics were just as powerful as the instrumentation, like Bob Dylan, Richie Havens, and Van Morrison. Their lyrics became my scripture. I began to see that success in life isn't about conforming to the expectations of other



but about achieving personal fulfillment. Your twenties are the time to both accept and fight your way into the person you're destined to become. Through the books I read, the music I obsessed over, and the late-night conversations I shared with friends and strangers, I began to craft my identity separate from the whims and expectations of others.

Going through so much personal change led me to explore the possibility of spending time abroad the next year. I looked at various locations in India as well as South Africa and Southeast Asia. Eventually my dad made an alternative suggestion: "You should look into Semester at Sea [SAS]. One of my patients just got back and raved about it."

Although at first I was skeptical, the more I looked into the program, the more impressed I was by the opportunity to travel to ten different countries and then backpack independently for the first time.

I wanted to be challenged. As strange as it sounds, I wanted to know what it's like to be truly uncomfortable. So many of the people I admired—the musicians, the artists, the writers—created their greatest works not during a period of happiness and contentment, but during a period of struggle. The majority of the songs I loved were anthems inspired by war, unrequited love, or civil revolt.

Many of us spend our entire lives in the same bubble—we surround ourselves with people who share our opinions, speak the way we speak, and look the way we look. We fear leaving those familiar surroundings, which is natural, but through exploration of the unfamiliar we stop focusing on the labels that define *what* we are and discover *who* we are.

The next month, I applied to SAS and was accepted. I didn't tell anyone besides my parents because I knew that some of my high school and college friends would want to join. I loved and respected those friends, but I wanted to be alone on this journey. I wanted to see how I would react without the familiarity of my past dictating the steps toward my future.

In the days leading up to my departure I nervously scribbled in my journal, "The experience of a lifetime begins. . . . I'm going to leave everything behind, my biases, my expectations, my comforts, my friends, and my family. I don't know exactly how these 100 days will affect me, but I know I'll be a changed man."

True self-discovery begins where your comfort zone ends, and mine was about to end far more quickly than I'd anticipated.



## KNOW THAT YOU HAVE A PURPOSE

Sunrise seeped into my cabin through a small porthole, where just hours earlier I watched thirty-five-foot swells rise like mountains in the distance. I'd woken up with my bed tossed diagonally across a room that I no longer recognized. My tiny dresser, with the drawers I had taped shut to keep from hearing them open and slam closed, open and slam, was flipped on its side. Clothes and textbooks carpeted the floor. My cherished Canon SD300, cracked, lay on the ground. I looked over at my roommate, Jaret, who was usually so upbeat and always writing furiously in his journal. He was pale and locked with fear. I couldn't figure out what was happening, but I knew it couldn't be good.

At least my headache was gone.

I'd forgotten to pack my Excedrin PM, so the night before when a horrific migraine took hold of me, I swallowed an Ambien to knock me out. I wasn't a stranger to sleep aids; I'd been taking them to battle bouts of insomnia since high school. Ambien didn't lull me to sleep; it pinned me in a deep slumber and held me there against all odds.

"What the hell happened in here?" I asked Jaret. I attempted to stand, and the room swayed to its side. We braced ourselves against our beds.

"The past few hours have been insane," he said with a panicked look. I didn't remember any of it, but he said he was awoken at 3:00 a.m. by heavy items sliding across our cabin—dressers, bed tables—so he went out into the hall, where he thought he'd be safest. Most of the other people on our hall did the same. After an hour, Jaret returned to the room to say a few prayers, write down some thoughts, and check on me. Apparently while the world was crashing down around us, my Ambien was functioning properly.

\* \* \*

Thirteen days earlier, I'd boarded the *MV Explorer* cruise ship in Vancouver, British Columbia, eager to start Semester at Sea. On the hundred-day trip we would circle the globe, opening our senses to cultures on four continents. It would be the trip of a lifetime.

But as soon as we left the port, bound for South Korea, we met rough seas. Low-pressure air currents swept across the icy northern rim of the Pacific, churning the waters around us. During winter the older Semester at Sea ships usually sailed the more expensive, but safer, east-to-west route, but our brand-new vessel would attempt a North Pacific crossing.

As the ship's swaying increased with each passing day, students began popping Dramamine like Skittles to quell their queasy stomachs. Nonetheless, spirits remained high. We stumbled from class to class and made bad jokes about "finding our sea legs." When lunch plates slid off the table during meals, we laughed with giddy excitement. This was an adventure. We were 650 college students aboard a twenty-four-hundred-ton vessel, powered by mighty twin engines. We were invincible.

We didn't have TV and the Internet was expensive and slow, so we created nightly diversions to entertain ourselves. We read Lonely Planet guidebooks, played board games from our childhood like Monopoly and Scrabble, and spent hours debating guitarists and G-d.

Day after day the storms grew worse, but we had complete confidence in the ship's leader, Captain Buzz, a gray-haired seafarer with a Southern drawl. When Captain Buzz gave directives we listened. And when he said we'd be fine powering through the rising storms, we believed him.

Every day, Captain Buzz gave us a weather update and a list of the ship's coordinates. Google Maps wasn't a part of our daily life yet, so students anxiously wrote down the longitude and latitude of our current position, then later used them to figure out the ship's location on an actual map. An administrator known as the dean of student life, whom we'd yet to meet, joined Captain Buzz on the intercom in the afternoon to provide a series of updates about ship procedures and happenings. Because of his soothing, late-night radio delivery, we started calling him the Voice. A loud tone sounded to get our attention—*bing bong*—and then the Voice echoed through the entire ship.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to your noon announcements," he crooned, though he could have been saying, *You're listening to the Voice, with more music and less talk radio. . . .* If Captain Buzz and the Voice weren't worried, neither were we.

\* \* \*

For nearly two weeks we endured clattering silverware and sliding chairs as the waters grew rougher. Just before sunrise on our thirteenth day at sea, about seven hundred miles off the coast of Alaska, as I was deep in an Ambien-induced haze, our ship sailed directly into three major storm systems. Shortly after I awoke, the Voice crackled across the speaker system.

*Bing bong.*

"Good morning." The Voice sounded as if he hadn't slept all night. "We are encountering severe weather, so we're asking everyone to put on your life jackets and stay in your rooms. We're experiencing extremely large swells, so this is merely a precaution to ensure the safety of all passengers. Once again, we are asking you to put on your life jackets and stay in your rooms."

Jaret and I looked at each other, smiled nervously, and searched the closet for our clunky, neon life jackets. The night we'd left Vancouver, all students had gathered for a drill at our assigned "muster stations," where we'd congregate in the event of an emergency. From there we practiced boarding the lifeboats hooked outside the ship walls. Dressed in our life jackets, we playfully turned on their blinking lights and poked one another, as we struggled to seem cool on the voyage's first night. It was like freshman year all over again, and nobody paid much attention to the instructions we were given.

This time it wasn't a drill, though we still didn't take the instructions seriously. Once Jaret and I strapped on our life jackets, we stood on our mattresses and watched through the porthole window as the waves rose higher and higher. We rode the ship's ebb and flow for an hour, like cowboys straddling a bucking bronco at the state fair—until we felt the entire boat shudder.

"Something's wrong," Jaret said.

We didn't know it yet, but the combined force of the three storms had created a sixty-foot rogue wave that charged across the ocean toward our ship. It smashed into the vessel head-on. As the wall of water rushed over the bow, it shattered the bulletproof windows of the ship's bridge and flooded the main power supply. The icy water shorted the electronic controls, which caused

the engines to die and the navigational equipment to shut down.

*Bing bong.*

The Voice sounded as if he'd just sprinted a marathon. He gasped for air between each urgent statement.

“Ladies and gentlemen. Get to the fifth floor or higher! Stay out of the elevators. Help the women and children up the stairs. Keep your life jackets on, *and get to your muster station immediately!*”

I coughed out a single breath as the weight of realization struck my chest. Bile from my stomach rose into my throat, my legs went wobbly, and I lost all strength to stand.

From what I could remember from our drills, the dangling lifeboats were our only way off the ship. Given the conditions, there was no way we could get outside to board them, and any inflatable rafts would flip almost instantly. There was no good plan of escape.

*I'm going to die today*, I thought. *I'm going to drown in freezing waters within the next two hours*. I was in free fall. How was this possible?

*This ship is definitely going down*, I thought, *and there's nothing I can do to stop it*. I could feel the panic rising within me. *But why? Is this what my time here was meant for? For me to perish in the middle of the ocean?* I closed my eyes, asked those questions to the higher power I'd always prayed to, and suddenly a wave of calm washed over me.

With 100 percent conviction, I knew that it wasn't my time. It was a feeling unlike anything else I'd ever experienced. With perfect knowledge, I suddenly knew that I had more to do during my time here than to disappear into the frigid waters. “21-Year-Old Perishes at Sea” would not be my story. There would be no candlelight vigils or scholarship funds in my name. I wasn't sure what my purpose was, but I suddenly knew that it both existed and hadn't been fulfilled. As quickly as I thought I'd die, I was now certain that I would survive.

I just had to figure out how.

I looked through the porthole again to see what I was up against. We were nearly seven hundred miles from land, in the North Pacific, in winter—wildly thrashing against the waves. Hypothermia was a given, and one of the few tips I remembered from our drills was to wear warm, long-sleeved clothing if we had to evacuate into water. I threw on my Brown University basketball sweatpants and a hooded sweatshirt to stay warm. Just then, my friends Dave and Reed charged into my room.

Dave's father was a pastor, which made Dave a very, very religious dude. Reed, a Texas native, was a real Southern gentleman. And Jaret was a born-again Christian from Stillwater, Oklahoma. So not only was I in the company of a new band of brothers, but traditional, chivalrous ones at that.

“There's mass hysteria outside, prayer circles, and everyone thinks we're dying,” Reed said. He and Dave urged that no matter what happened, it was our duty to put on a strong front as we guided others up the stairs to the fifth and sixth floors.

“No matter how bad it gets,” Reed said, “the four of us need to seem totally calm and confident that we'll get through this. People will look to us for direction, so no matter how bad it gets, make sure you put on a strong face.”

Before facing the madness in the hall, I changed into a thin, long-sleeved fleece and the only pair of light khaki pants I'd packed. If I wanted to survive, I had to swim; and if I wanted to swim, I couldn't do it in absorbent, heavy sweats.

I looked directly into the mirror, lifting my shirt to reveal the tattoo on my chest. Two years

earlier I'd inscribed the words *Ani Ma'amin*, Hebrew for "I believe," in a reverse image over my heart so that I would read them correctly each day in the mirror. They're the first two words in a prayer that assures that if you have lived with the right deeds and actions in this life, you will be rewarded with redemption in the next. When I'd gotten the tattoo, I respected and believed in the power of faith to carry a person through his or her darkest moments, but now my faith in a higher power was truly my only lifeline.

*Ani Ma'amin.* I repeated the words, praying to those watching over me, and then walked outside to face the hysteria.

I joined Reed, Jaret, and Dave at our posts to help everyone get to higher ground while the boat swayed more violently. Once people were safely upstairs, I climbed to an enclosed area on the sixth floor and sat with my back to the elevators. Two by two, students began clinging to each other in tight bear hugs, hoping that amid the tossing the combined weight of their bodies would keep them in one place. I stayed close to Jaret and Reed as I locked arms with a girl nearby. To my left, a ship worker in his midforties who'd been traveling with the *MV Explorer* for years started hypnotically rocking and crying while clutching his Bible in one hand and rosary beads in the other. *If he's that terrified, this is really bad.* I closed my eyes and rubbed the letters on my chest.

*Bing bong.*

Captain Buzz. He said we'd need to endure the storm while the crew did its best to compensate for the damage done to the controls, which had shut the engines down. He did not mention that he'd also put out a distress call to the coast guard, and rescue crews were on their way.

Meanwhile, the crying, prayers, and screams continued as we waited for instructions. I stationed myself outside the dining hall. To keep from moving across the floor, students grabbed onto poles, railings, and each other—hoping the vessel wouldn't capsize entirely. The boat tilted to one side until we were practically parallel with the water, and then did the same on the other, as cutlery and broken dishes screeched ominously across the dining-hall floor. I'm not sure what was more frightening—knowing we were at the mercy of the sea, or watching the portholes fill with water or clouds based on which angle we leaned toward.

After several hours, a group of students decided that we needed to explore how we might abandon this death trap. We knew we had to get the boats down from the davits, which were outside. A wooden door opened to a ten-foot-wide walkway, with a sturdy railing. Maybe if we held on tightly enough, we could make our way to a lifeboat? Someone suggested we try. A shipman cracked the door, and the wind's brute force flung it wide open.

"Close the door! Close the door!" students screamed.

The ship was midtilt as this occurred. We were lifted into the air at a steep incline. The open door hung below us, like a gaping mouth to the deadly waters below. Students began sliding toward the door. If they fell, they'd slip into the freezing ocean waters. The screams got louder.

We grabbed each other to keep from falling, and when the *MV Explorer* rocked back onto the other side, a shipman was able to grab the door handle and close it. We collapsed, exhausted.

After several hours, the tossing eased, and Captain Buzz regained power to the first engine; five hours later, the second one began to work. The engines didn't exactly purr, but the shakes and shudders were progress. We grew optimistic. Ship workers began passing out dinner rolls, and the day-old bread helped settle our stomachs and our nerves. Finally, after we'd spent seven hours in our life vests, the Voice returned.

*Bing bong.*

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is now safe to return to your rooms. Please be patient with us as we

figure out what to do about today's events. The ship is badly damaged, so be careful around broken glass, and please stay tuned for further updates."

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Walking back to my room, I surveyed the wreckage in awe and apprehension. Library shelves that once held Frommer's travel guides and atlases of the world were empty or splintered in half. Tables were smashed to pieces, and jagged shards of glass covered the floor. The historic grand piano in the Main Hall had flipped over and shattered.

I had a fleeting vision of the shaken student body rising in mutiny—vandalizing their rooms, calling for Captain Buzz's resignation, and demanding an end to Semester at Sea. Instead the days' events brought us all closer together. Adversity bonds people more often than it breaks them.

Nobody talked much about the storm in the twenty-four hours that followed. We fell into a state of silent introspection. If someone started crying, another would stop to comfort him. Some students quietly self-organized to repair the library and collect the broken glass. Others wrote in their journals or called home on satellite phones to make sure their parents knew they were safe. The following day, I passed two guys playing a board game and heard the person ahead of me say, "Are you fucking kidding me? You're playing Battleship? Seriously?!" I laughed harder than I had in weeks. It was such a relief to let the anxiety go.

\* \* \*

Days later we docked in Honolulu, since the engines were too damaged to reach our initial destination of South Korea. As soon as my feet touched land, I dropped to my knees and kissed the hot pavement. My heart leapt at the sight of waving families and beaming hula dancers. I was safe.

But I was also forever altered because I now knew that my life had purpose. Out of catastrophe emerged clarity. When faced with the prospect of death, something deep within me fought back. I was here for a reason. I rubbed my tattoo again, this time in thanks, as the *MV Explorer* bobbed in the distance—battered, but still afloat.



## EVERY PENCIL HOLDS A PROMISE

Through a miraculous effort of administrative coordination, the Semester at Sea front office was able to ensure that our semester abroad wasn't canceled and arranged for us to continue onward while they repaired the *MV Explorer*. As we traveled from one stop to the next, staying in hotels and guesthouses, many of the students collected souvenirs from each country. Some saved sunglasses with the names of cities etched on them in local languages. Others bought a hat or saved a beer bottle. A few took pictures of Beanie Babies in front of famous landmarks. We were collegial kids, each finding trinkets to document where we'd been and remember something we gained there.

Although I didn't want junky souvenirs, I did want to collect something I could recall and cherish later. Before I got on the ship, I had decided I would ask one child per country, "If you could have anything in the world, what would you want most?" This would give me a chance to connect with at least one kid in every country. I would have the kids write down their answer, and when I returned, I would create a map of their responses. I expected to hear "a flat-screen TV," "an iPod," or "a fast car." I thought I'd gather a series of responses that sounded like the things I wanted as a child—the latest toy, a shiny car, or a big new house.

When an adorable girl in Hawaii approached me and asked if we could be friends, I said yes without hesitation. "But first, I have something very important to ask you," I said. "If you could have anything in the world, what would you want most?"

She put her finger to her chin and glanced knowingly at her mom. "To dance," she replied with a confident nod.

I laughed. "No, I meant if you could have absolutely anything in the entire world, what would it be?"

She smiled, now fully understanding my question. "To dance!" she replied again with delight. "Wow, that's beautiful," I said with a massive grin. Her answer was disarming in its honesty. I thought back to the happiest moments of my life and realized that many of them involved dancing without any inhibition—at my first Michael Jackson concert, at my dad's surprise fortieth birthday party, at our annual Homecoming Dance, and the list went on. The purest joys are available to all of us, and they're unrelated to status, recognition, or material desires. I clearly had a lot to learn from the unsullied perspective of those I would encounter while traveling, so I decided that for the rest of my trip I would spend more time asking questions than trying to provide answers. Listening intently is a far more valuable skill than speaking immensely.

In Beijing, I asked a girl near the entrance to the Forbidden Temple what she most wanted in the world, and she said, "A book."

"Really? You can have anything," I urged.

"A book."

Her mother explained that the girl loved school, but didn't have any books of her own. The

child's dream was to have something I took for granted every single day.

In Kowloon, Hong Kong, I asked a young boy what he wanted. His older brother translated my question, then translated the response: "Magic."

Alongside the Mekong River in Vietnam I asked a shy six-year-old girl what she would want most. She spoke in a quiet voice as she stared at the muddy, brown soil below. "I want my mom to be healthy. She is sick in bed all day, and I just want her to hold my hand when I walk to school."

Thirty days after we began the trip, I awoke to a blazing red sun rising over the port of Chennai, India. My mind was on getting to Varanasi.

The Ganges River in Varanasi is one of the dirtiest rivers in the world—heavily polluted with industrial and human waste—but is also the most sacred. I'd wanted to walk along its banks ever since I saw that scene in *Baraka*, and the experience with the Wave only heightened my desire. During those long hours when it seemed unclear whether we would survive, I prayed more than ever had before. The feeling that I had more to do—a purpose—only became more powerful. Now, I just had to find out what exactly it was. I thought I might find some answers at the Ganges, the holiest body of water in Hinduism and one of the most spiritually devout places in the world.

\* \* \*

My first night in India, I came down with a terrible fever. By the time we arrived at the airport the next morning, I was covered in a cold sweat and running a 103-degree temperature. I let everyone pass through the security checkpoint while I gathered my strength, afraid that if others knew how sick I was, they wouldn't let me go on the trip. With a heavy backpack on my shoulders, I struggled to see straight, and when it was my turn to walk through the metal detector, I looked down to see my feet zigzagging.

The next thing I knew, I was on my back, looking up at Indian security guards shouting. I had fainted. Two guards each grabbed one of my arms and lifted me. Delirious, I thought they were taking me to prison. Instead they removed my backpack, placed it on the X-ray belt, and walked me through the metal detector. On the other side, they strapped the backpack to my shoulder and pointed me to a boarding gate ahead.

When I arrived at the gate, another student came over and shouted, "Where were you? The whole group was looking everywhere for you! And what's up with your face? You look like a ghost. You're sweating through your shirt."

I told him I had just fainted. "Don't tell anyone," I pleaded. Nothing was going to stop me from getting to Varanasi. Because I was so sick, I decided I would cleanse myself in the Ganges when we got there. I figured I couldn't feel any worse, so the holy waters could only help.

In the days that followed, my fever abated. At night we went to the train station outside the city of Agra, where I witnessed something I had never before seen in my life: hordes of barefoot children, covered in dirt from head to toe, begging for money and food. They were so incredibly young to be alone. I saw four-year-olds begging with six-month-olds in their arms. The pain on their faces was devastating.

We were forewarned that giving child beggars money makes them effective workers for the gang lords that put them on the streets and perpetuates the cycle that keeps them there. Some of us bought the children food to eat, but we still felt helpless and dejected. I didn't know how to help. I stayed up the entire night thinking about what I'd seen.

The next morning we went to Agra Fort, a stunning red temple within view of the Taj Mahal.



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