

PREFACE

I was always different. I never had a casual thought in my life. I pondered mysteries of life and death when I was a child. As far back as I remember I wondered about death. I stared up at the huge amber lanterns hanging overhead in church at Sunday services and wondered what would happen if one just dropped on me. I secretly almost wished it would simply to find out. It seemed that nobody had the answer. I went to confirmation class because I thought Sally Meneely was cute; by then other things were beginning to occupy my mind. Still, from about the age of nine, it became my personal life challenge. What was it really? What actually happened? Could I find out before it happened? I reasoned if I started at ten, I might have it worked out before I died. I had to start early and keep going. I cried myself to sleep the night before my tenth birthday. I knew it was going to be a long haul.

My father was a Harvard wit who wrote light verse and managed the old family steel company, handling management while Maurice Roses ran the engineering. The firm began in 1857 as the stove works, "McKinney & Mann". It reincarnated as Albany Architectural Ironworks and won renown for cast iron store fronts in the 1880's. It assumed its third life as James McKinney & Son when my grandfather entered the firm. My father was born in 1891 and I arrived in his 54th year, the son of the son of the son of McKinney & Son and his wife, a 28-year-old ex-prep school girl who dropped out of Swarthmore to attend R.A.D.A. in prewar London. He wrote a Hasty Pudding show, was Albany's major culture maven, never made much money, and died at 77 of Hodgkin's disease. They named the library at the Albany Institute of History and Art after him. William Kennedy's trilogy, including *Ironweed* and

The Friends of Eddie Coyle, were researched at the McKinney Library. Dad got obits and editorials in the Times Union for a week or so. He was a hard act to follow, so I followed him to Harvard but settled in Cambridge. As a child, every night when he came home from the “plant” (I once thought my father worked with vegetables and not at an office) where he “made money” (from long strips of copper with a penny die-cut stamp, I assumed), he’d answer any three questions we had. Anything at all. “Where does paint get color?” “From pigments in a carrier base.” I imagined colored pigs frolicking in pens amid aircraft carriers at their naval base. He always had the answers.

Every spring the carnival came to town. James E. Strates Shows would arrive and pitch its tents in a huge field at the bottom of the Menands hill. They set up a midway, erected a fun house, the side show, the thrill riders, the coin tosses, cotton candy stands and rides that towered over our heads, each tethered to a snorting diesel generator with some wild kid at the controls. It was heaven to a ten-year-old with ten dollars to spend. It was the yogi that I will never forget. With a blowtorch he heated iron bars red hot and stepped on them. He blowtorched his own mustache and nothing singed. He stood on red-hot swords. The whites of his eyes were yellow. Too much heat, I figured. My mother stayed after the show. She wanted to know just how he did it. The yogi stepped forward. You could see he was weary. No, there was no trick; it was the result of a great deal of training. Here, he was just being paid to do it. “Of course,” he said, “It will do me no good, the money. I have used my gifts for financial gain; this should never be done. There is no hope for me.”

I looked into his tired eyes. They were like black marbles, shiny, lifeless, cold. A sudden chill gripped my mind. This man was telling me a truth. A gift like this was not bestowed for profit. Money made in this way is worse than no money at all. I had met my first Eastern adept, and we communicated just fine. He was working in the sideshow and faithful to a system which could both empower and undo. I was still in cotton candy land, but I knew he knew something I dearly wanted to know. If the mind could

protect this man from red-hot iron, how deep could I go and not get burned for sticking my nose in a little too far. Were these secrets locked beyond me? Worse, would unlocking them leave me, like the yogi at the sideshow, regretting a path of knowledge, condemned to travel from place to place like a carnival attraction playing to eager audiences clapping without a clue to his utter isolation?

Twenty-five years and many lifetimes later the chill came back to me as the theoretical basis for conscious chronology finally clicked together one day. If what seemed to be the case were in fact true it explained the perception of time. A tool such as that would generate some real insights into the major metaphysical rules underlying all the world religions. It all made sense but the conclusions were nearly frightening. I had stumbled onto some real knowledge. I knew for sure now what happened in death, and it completely rearranged my understanding of life. Was this a gift, or a curse? I wished my father were around to ask, but he had died when I was only 22.

My mother lived another twenty-six years. She was there when the firm went bankrupt and was sold to Mark Larner for the price of a parking lot. She taught natural childbirth in the forties, natural foods in the fifties, natural religion in the sixties; naturally always ahead of her time enough to be a natural amateur savant without the patience to stay with anything long enough to win professional respect. She was self-taught in medical matters, with several thousand dollars worth of medical textbooks filled with underlines, highlights and margin notes. Her last preoccupation was her eventual stroke, a subject which kept her both stressed and stressful. At 75, she agreed to try some powerful meditative techniques I had learned directly from the Dalai Lama, which included focused mental imagery. It worked, she said, and claimed her trusty Holter blood pressure monitor even recorded it. A year later, she was gone.

After her first severe stroke, I read her CAT scans and was appalled at the devastation. Fully three-fifths of her right hemisphere was gone for good. The attending neurologist said to expect the worst. No emotional affect and a foggy mind at best. The best thing, he said, would be another stroke. She was still

having difficulty opening her eyes. One side of her body was limp as a rag. She was speaking sometimes in French, memories of her vacations while a young woman in London, but she was coming back by the third day. I bent over her when she seemed lucid and said “I checked your scans, Mom. You’ve lost a big chunk in the middle of the right hemisphere but your prefrontal lobes are fine and the visual cortex is still there.” With her eyes still closed, she whispered feebly “Middle cerebral artery.”

She was right, of course. Then she asked, “Should I do my *vipassana* now?” I was floored. I had taught her to recall an image from memory and study it in the mind with the eyes closed. Even with such destruction, the teaching was intact and so was her mind. I gave her hand a squeeze. “Wonderful, Mom, it’s great exercise for the visual cortex. That’s just what you need now.” Looking ahead, her eyes still closed, she said gravely, “What I need now are prayers.” She had read earlier drafts of this book and read what seemed to be simple scientific answers for a number of very basic human questions. She had taken the original chapter on death to the dying and had told me of tears, sometimes of relief, when someone realized that the end, when it came, was eternal comfort no matter what. My mother was religious, but for her the theories made sense and she shared them with those whom she knew needed some faith without the religion. Now, in the anticipation of her own death, my mother was slowly returning to the faith she had been born into.

She did not die of another stroke. She died a month later from bacterial and fungal infections which had been diagnosed but not adequately treated. It was as gentle a death as one could imagine as the pathogens slowly turned her brain to Cool Whip™ one cc. at a time. At the very end, the last day I knew she was there, she looked vacantly into my eyes. I looked deeply into hers. There she was, like a person at the very bottom of a swimming pool. She was looking up, letting me know she was there, deep inside, but very far away. It carried another message. “You were right; I’m in another place.” Late that evening, I could feel her soul sighing into the night with the sounds of the late night traffic traversing the long bridge

in the distance. The next day she was flatlined. Her pacemaker had Energizer bunny batteries, however, so she stuck around for curtain calls. She was an actress, and she had the whole stage to herself. Like my father, she lived a week on heart alone and died, like him, less than a month before her 77th birthday. During that week she showed up in four different people's dreams.

"She said she was satisfied with her life, and generally pleased with the way her sons were getting along," said Prabha, an Indian neurologist who had become a close friend and confidant during her last four years. "She said that there was one small disappointment, however; she was sorry that your book wasn't published." Even at her last level of mental attachment to this world, she'd known I was trying to cheer her up but she hadn't let on, an actress to the end. The next month, Mark Lerner finally gave up trying to stamp out pennies at the steel company he had bought for nickels and after 135 years, the doors at James McKinney & Son closed forever. It was over.

The book has been published now or you wouldn't be reading it. Like my father, I wanted to answer a question for all the people and by the time my mother died, the answers were in hand. At the end, she was comforted in her simple Christian faith and went, as Judy said, "to the arms of the Savior she knew and loved." I may well too; those are my earliest memories at Sunday school, long before I was interested in girls or metaphysics. I'm not going to try to modify them. I know where I'm going, and whether it's Buddha's endless lifetimes or Jesus' life everlasting, it's not a bad trip at all. My big question was answered as far as I was concerned, but the structure which had evolved to solve the problem had taken on a life of its own. It was almost a software tool for the mind, a form of mental utility. It turns out this is a what people call a philosophy, so I called up an expert to see what we had.

"Is it possible to describe a comprehensive metaphysical perspective on life that can answer the major questions in only six pages?" It was 1981, and I was still nervous about watching it all fall into place. "Sure," he said, "but you might need six hundred to explain just how you got there." It turns out if

we can agree to accept the concept of our personal consciousness, our mind, as a virtual reality, it leads to an entire systematic philosophy based on neuroscience. That begins to explain the two hundred and fifty pages and why *The Last 10 Seconds of Eternity* is a lot more than a probable explanation of what happens when we die. The last systematic philosophy that really influenced a people in the West was Thomas Aquinas' Thomism. On the other hand, almost all Asian philosophies are essentially systematic, but so is neuroscience and computer science. We may be dealing here, then, with a time when a synthesis true to both cultures is finally possible. In other words, a mind-based theology that works for Western Christians, Muslims, and Jews could do double duty as a "neuro-dharma" in the East.

The final manuscript was nearly complete when I spotted psychologist B.F. Skinner ambling through Harvard Square one day. I knew he was not well. It might be my last chance to ask him a good question so I caught up with him. "Dr. Skinner," I started, "I was also an English major who got caught up in brain science. You once considered writing as a career. What effect did it have on your later work?" He smiled, and there was a real twinkle in his eye. "I have lived a long and predominantly rewarding life," he said, his words flowing in precise intonation, "And I have always taken it for granted that a large measure of my success was simply due to the fact that I could write a great deal better than most of my colleagues." I shared a big grin with him. If you had a gift, the art was as important as the science. He died a few months later, so in honor of the craft of writing I wrote the whole thing over again just to polish it up. If I'd spent half my lifetime answering one question there's no reason not to be elegant about it and put on the best show possible. This is an easy-to-read deep book; it took every bit of my writing skill and nothing will ever be that hard to do, or so rewarding to see completed. Just drop it into your mind and watch it unfold.

The Last 10 Seconds of Eternity will make you think about things you never thought about before in ways you never thought you would think about them. That is my first promise. The second is that if someone gets the idea that this book unveils nothing that wasn't generally stated by the philosopher

Nagarjuna and further developed by Chandrakirti, Shantideva, and T'song Khapa, they're right. There is nothing new here; all real truths are ancient. Still, we always try to improve the explanations so that we can believe a little better whenever it's important to have a reason to believe. In these times, it's more important than ever.

The night I met the yogi, I rode the Ferris wheel up into the night, and at the top, it stopped for a moment to let on more riders. We were suspended between heaven and earth, slowly swaying in a cool evening breeze. If we looked down we could see the entire midway, sparkling and bustling, the games, the tents, the support trucks and supply vans; and behind them the fields, the highway beyond, the Menands hill, and the starry sky reaching over our heads. It was very big and vast and then, suddenly, the diesel gives a snort, the ride goes forward, and we're back to cotton candy land again. This is not a long book; but for some it will provide a new perspective, a Ferris wheel for the mind. At least that is my hope; and then back to the lights, the action, and all the games of life.