

A Shot in the Light

(A true story)

Lion Goodman

It was the summer of 1978. I was traveling through the Southwest as a jewelry and giftware salesman, selling a wide range of items from Austrian crystals to feather earrings. On the way to Los Angeles from Las Vegas, I stopped to help a motorist whose car had broken down in the Mojave Desert. He was down on his luck, had no plans and nowhere to go, so I let him travel with me.

His name was Ray, and he looked to be in his early twenties. He was small, muscular, wiry, and slightly gaunt, as if underfed. I felt sorry for him, and in the three days we were together, I grew to trust him. I even started sending him on errands while I visited stores to sell my wares. At one point, I gave him some of my clothes, and it pleased him to have something new to wear. He seemed calm and mostly satisfied.

The third night, we were camped out near Puddingstone Reservoir east of Claremont. I was sitting on the floor in the back of the large van, moving things around in the cupboards to make more room for the clothes, books, food, sample boxes, and my passenger's duffel bag and travel gear.

There was a loud explosion, and I felt a sharp, searing blow to the top of my head. Had the gas stove exploded? I looked up, but it was intact. Then I looked at Ray, sitting in the driver's seat, and I saw the black gun in his hand. His arm was resting on the back of the seat, aiming the pistol at my face. A bullet had hit me! At first, I thought he was warning me—that he was going to rob me. That suddenly seemed fine. Take it all, I thought. Take it all. Just leave me outside and drive away.

Another explosion shook me, and my ears rang with a terrible, high-pitched whine. I felt blood dripping down my face and the top of my head throbbed. He's not warning me, I realized. He's going to kill me. I am going to die.

There was no place to hide. I was stuck in an uncomfortable position surrounded by cabinets. There was nothing I could do. I heard myself whisper "Relax. It's out of your control. Breathe. Stay awake." My thoughts turned to death, and to God. "Thy will, not my will, be done." I let my body go, and I started to relax, to slump back. I watched my breath, in and out, in and out, in and out....

I began preparing for my death. I asked to be forgiven by anyone I had hurt and offered my forgiveness to everyone who had hurt me throughout my life. It was a full-color fast-reverse movie reel of my entire twenty-six years. I thought about my parents, my brothers and sisters, my lovers, my friends. I said goodbye. I said, "I love you."

Another explosion shook the van, and my body pulsed. I was not hit. The bullet missed me by a fraction of an inch, penetrating the cupboard I was leaning against. I

relaxed back into my reverie. My luck could not hold out. There were three bullets to go, if it was a revolver. I could only hope that the gun wasn't a semi-automatic.

Nothing mattered anymore but to be at peace. My van, my money, my business, my knowledge, my personal history, my freedom—all became worthless, meaningless, so much dust in the wind.

All I had of value was my body and my life, and that was soon to be gone. My attention was focused on the spark of light I called my Self, and my consciousness began to expand outward, extending my awareness in space and time. I heard my instructions clearly: STAY AWAKE AND KEEP BREATHING.

I prayed to my God, to the Great Spirit, to receive me with open arms. Love and light flowed through me, spreading out like a lighthouse beam, illuminating everything around me. The light grew inside me, and I expanded like a huge balloon until the van and its contents seemed small. A sense of peace and acceptance filled me. I knew I was close to leaving my body. I could sense the timeline of my life, both backward and forward. I saw the next bullet, a short distance into the future, leave the gun, jet toward my left temple, and exit with brains and blood on the right side of my head. I was filled with awe. To see life from this expanded perspective was like looking down into a dollhouse, seeing all the rooms at once, all the detail, so real and so unreal at the same time. I looked into the warm and welcoming golden light with calm and acceptance.

The fourth explosion shattered the silence, and my head was pushed violently to the side. The ringing in my ears was deafening. Warm blood rushed down my head and onto my arms and thighs, dripping onto the floor. But strangely, I found myself back in my body, not out of it. Still surrounded by light, love, and peace, I began looking inside my skull, trying to find the holes. Perhaps I could see light through them? I did a quick check of my feelings, abilities, thoughts, and sensations, looking for what might be missing. Surely the bullet had affected me. My head was throbbing, but I felt strangely normal.

I decided to look at my assassin, to look death in the face. I picked up my head and turned my eyes toward him. He was shocked. Jumping up from his seat, he shouted, "Why aren't you dead, man? You're supposed to be dead!"

"Here I am." I said quietly.

"That's too weird! It's just like my dream this morning! I kept shooting at him, but he wouldn't die! But it wasn't you in the dream, it was somebody else!"

This was very strange. Who was writing this script? I wondered. I began to speak slowly and calmly, trying to settle him down. If I could get him talking, I thought, maybe he wouldn't shoot again. He kept yelling, "Shut up! Just shut up!" as he peered out the windows into the darkness. He nervously walked closer to me, gun in hand, examining

my bloody head, trying to understand why the four bullets he had pumped into me hadn't finished me off.

I could still feel blood oozing down my face and could hear it dripping onto my shoulder. Ray said, "I don't know why you aren't dead, man. I shot you four times!"

"Maybe I'm not supposed to die," I said calmly.

"Yeah, but I shot you!" he said, with disappointment and confusion in his voice. "I don't know what to do."

"What do you want to do?" I asked.

"I wanted to kill you, man, to take this van and drive away. Now I don't know." He seemed worried, uncertain. He was beginning to slow down, becoming less jumpy.

"Why did you want to kill me?"

"Because you had everything, and I had nothing. And I was tired of having nothing. This was my chance to have it all." He was still pacing back and forth in the van, looking out the windows at the black night outside.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked.

"I don't know, man," he complained. "Maybe I should take you to the hospital."

My heart leapt at this chance, this opportunity—a way out. "Okay," I said, not wanting to make him feel out of control. I wanted it to be his idea, not mine. I knew that his anger sprang from feeling out of control and I didn't want to make him feel angry.

"Why were you so nice to me, man?"

"Because you're a person, Ray."

"But I wanted to kill you! I kept taking out my gun and pointing it at you, when you were asleep or not looking. But you were being so nice to me, I couldn't do it."

My time sense was altered. I realized that I had no idea how long it had been since the first bullet. After what felt like many minutes, Ray came up to me, still in my crouched, locked-in position, and said, "Okay, man, I'm going to take you to a hospital. But I don't want you to move, so I'm going to put some stuff on you so you can't move, okay?"

Now he was asking my permission. "Okay," I said softly. He began taking various boxes filled with samples and stacked them around me. "Are you okay?" he asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay. A little uncomfortable, but it’s all right.”

“All right, man. I’m going to take you to a hospital I know of. Now don’t move. And don’t die on me, okay?”

“Okay,” I promised. I knew I wouldn’t die. This light, this power inside me was so strong, so certain. Each breath felt like my first, not my last. I was going to survive. I knew it. Ray lowered the pop-top of the van, secured the straps, and started up the engine. I could feel the van backing up on the dirt road, finding the pavement and moving forward to my freedom.

He drove on and on—to where, I had no idea. Were we bound for a hospital, as he said, or toward some horrible fate? If he was capable of killing me with a gun, he was capable of lying, or worse. How did he know where to go? We were in Claremont. Los Angeles was over an hour away. I used that hour to re-play the scenes and analyze the past three days, trying to understand what had happened, and why.

Eventually, I felt the van slow, pull over and stop. The engine was turned off. Silence filled the space. I waited. It was still dark outside. We had not pulled into a driveway. There were no lights. This was not a hospital. Ray walked back toward me with his gun in his hand. He pulled away one of the boxes and sat down on the foam bed, facing me. He looked distraught, head hanging down. His words cut deep through my cloud of hope. “I have to kill you, man,” he said calmly.

“Why?” I asked quietly.

“If I take you to the hospital, they’ll put me back in jail. I can’t go back to jail, man. I can’t.”

“They wouldn’t put you in jail if you take me to the hospital,” I said slowly, still feigning injury, passivity. I knew that I might find an opening, a moment when I could surprise him, overpower him, and take away his gun. As long as he didn’t know I was okay, I had an advantage.

“Oh yes they would, man. They’d know I shot you, and they’d lock me up.”

“We don’t have to tell them. I won’t tell them.”

“I can’t trust you, man. I wish I could, but I can’t. I can’t go back to jail, that’s all. I have to kill you.” He seemed forlorn. This was not where he wanted to be. He wasn’t making any moves. His gun hung limply from his hand, pointed down toward the floor. The boxes were still stacked around me. I couldn’t judge how much strength I had, whether it would be enough to push out and wrestle him down. He was small but strong. Was he still full of adrenaline? That would make him even stronger. My strength lay in words, in verbal swordplay. If I could keep him talking, he wouldn’t take stronger action.

“Maybe I could go into the hospital alone, Ray. You wouldn’t even have to be there. You could get away.”

“No, man,” he said, shaking his head. “As soon as you told them, they’d come find me. They’d track me down.”

I was silent. That didn’t work, I thought.

He said, “Why aren’t you dead, man? I shot you *four times* in the head. How come you’re still alive and talking? You should be dead! I know I didn’t miss.” He looked again at my head, taking it in one hand and turning it to the left and right. “Does it hurt?” he asked. He seemed genuinely concerned.

“Yeah, it hurts,” I lied. “But I think I’m going to be okay.”

“Well, I don’t know what to do. I can’t take you to the hospital. I can’t just let you go, because you’ll go to the police. Why were you so damn nice to me, man? No one’s ever been that nice to me before. It made it harder to kill you. You kept buying me stuff, and giving me stuff. I just couldn’t decide when to do it.”

Not if, but when.

“What would you do with all this stuff if you had it, Ray?” I asked.

“I could go home and be somebody, I could do stuff. I’d have enough money to buy my way out of there, man.” Ray began to talk. He talked about his home in East Los Angeles, the poverty around him, his anger, the schoolteachers who made him feel stupid, his father who drank too much and beat him, and being tough on the streets. He talked about joining the army, how that was supposed to make it work, but he couldn’t stand being told what to do all the time, so he went AWOL. He talked about dealing drugs, and drug deals going bad, and how he ripped off his dealer buddies. That’s why he had to leave L.A., because they were looking for him. He talked about stealing his father’s gun and money before he left, then he realized there was no place to hide, so he decided to turn back. Maybe he could do one more rip-off and get rich. He just needed one hit, one sucker. If his target was rich enough, he could pay off the dealers and start over. So he decided to kill whoever stopped. Whoever came by to help him. Me.

The night had turned to morning, the sky shifting slowly from indigo to blue. The sound of chirping birds made me grateful to be alive.

“I’m pretty stiff and sore, Ray, I’d feel better if I could get up and stretch.” I was still in the same position I had been in for six hours. Dried blood was plastered to my hair and face, my shins hurt from being pushed against the edge of a cupboard door, and my back was stiff and throbbing.

“Okay, man, I’m going to let you up, but don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“Okay, Ray. You just tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

Remind him that he is in control. Don’t let him feel out of control. Look for an opening.

He moved the boxes from around me, stepped back with the gun in his hand, and opened the door. I crawled slowly out of the van, stretching upright for the first time. How beautiful the world was to my new eyes. Everything shone as if made of sparkling crystal.

We had stopped on a residential street near a small pond at the bottom of an embankment. He gestured down the dirt trail that led to the water. As I walked down the steep incline I thought, “Is this death again, tapping on my shoulder? Will he shoot me in the back and push me into the water?” I felt weak and vulnerable, yet simultaneously immortal and impervious to his bullets. I walked erect and unafraid. He followed me to the water’s edge and stood by as I squatted down and rinsed my bloodied hands and face, splashing cool, fresh water on myself. I stood up slowly and faced Ray. He looked at me curiously.

“What would you do if I handed you this gun right now?” he asked, holding the gun out to me.

My answer was my first thought: “I’d throw it out into the water,” I said.

“Aren’t you mad at me, man?” he asked. He seemed incredulous.

“No, why should I be mad?”

“I shot you, man, you ought to be angry! I’d be fucking furious! You wouldn’t want to kill me if I gave you this gun?”

“No, Ray, I wouldn’t. Why should I? I have my life and you have yours.”

“I don’t understand you, man. You are really weird, really different than anyone I’ve ever met before. And I don’t know why you didn’t die when I shot you.” I stayed silent, this question was better left unanswered. As we stood at the water’s edge, I realized that Ray had undergone as profound a transformation as I had. We were both different people than we had been the day before.

“What should we do now, Ray?”

“I don’t know, man. I can’t take you to the hospital. I can’t let you go. I don’t know what to do.”

So we continued our talk, seeking a solution to his dilemma. We explored the possibilities—what could we agree to? I made suggestions; he told me why they wouldn't work. I made other suggestions. He listened, considered, rejected, and relented. We sought a compromise.

Ultimately, we found a bargain we could agree to: I would let him go, and he would let me go. I promised not to turn him in or report him to the police, but on one condition—he had to promise that he would *never* do anything like this again. He promised. What choice did he have?

As the sun was rising over the hills, we climbed back into the van. I sat in the passenger seat as he drove to a place that he knew. He parked, and I gave him all the cash I had, about \$200, and a couple of watches I thought he could pawn. We walked together across the street. The sun was shining. It was early in the day but already warm. He had his army jacket and sleeping bag under one arm, his duffel bag slung over his shoulder. Somewhere in the bundle there was a black gun.

We shook hands. I smiled at him, and he continued to look confused. Then I said goodbye and walked away.

In the emergency room of L.A. County Hospital, a doctor scraped away small bits of metal, skin and hair, and sewed stitches into my scalp. He asked me how it had happened, and I told him, "I was shot, four times."

"You're a lucky man," he said. "The two bullets that hit you both glanced off your skull. You have to report this to the police, you know."

"Yes, I know," I said.

I knew that I was lucky, but more than lucky – I felt blessed. I didn't go to the police. I had made a promise and had received a promise in return.

I kept my promise. I believe that Ray kept his.

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Lion Goodman is a successful entrepreneur, author, teacher, and workshop leader. He teaches workshops in cities around the world, including *Everyday Awakening*, a three-day intensive with practical techniques for waking up into your natural joy, and *Manifestation Through the Chakras*, a five-day training for turning your dreams into reality. This he teaches with his partner, author Anodea Judith. He is also a licensed teacher of the internationally acclaimed self-development program, *The Avatar© Course*.

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This story was first published in the book, I Thought My Father Was God...and Other True Tales from NPR's National Story Project, edited by Paul Auster (Henry Holt, October 2001), and is the basis for the short feature film, "The Kindness of Strangers," directed by Claudia Myers, which won "Best Film" at the Rosebud Film Festival. It debuted at the Hollywood Film Festival in 2004.

Lion's article, "Dorothy and the Very Bad Awful Disowned Feelings," was published in the book The Heart of Healing, co-authored by Deepak Chopra, Joan Borysenko, Dean Ornish, and other luminaries (Elite Books, July 2004). He welcomes feedback and comments. Email him at Lion@EverydayAwakening.com. Visit his website to learn more: www.EverydayAwakening.com.

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