

From Tantra To Truth: Hard questions ... Real answers

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From Tantra

To

Truth

Hard questions ... Real answers

Sanjay Gupta

DEDICATION

To You

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It has taken me more than six battle-filled years to put this manuscript together. I give all my gratitude to all those people who have helped; I am in awe of their generosity and dedication. I have tried to mention the names of all who inspired me to think deeply on the most difficult questions of my life.

In my attempt to keep to the facts, I have cited and presented them in the References chapter. To anyone I have missed, my apologies in advance. These will be corrected as soon pointed out.

CONTENTS

[Prologue: Power of Truth](#)

[Part 1: Genesis](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Part 2: Exodus](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Part 3: Judges](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

Part 7:

Revelation

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Epilogue

Power of Truth

The truth will set you free.

John 8:32

In the beginning, life began with the truth. And the desire and constant search for truth has become the basis of learning—validating experiences and giving reason to studies and investigation. It is this very desire that drives science, education, and art to evolve.

I have spent my life pursuing knowledge and truth, starting in my hometown of Calcutta, India. Although I was always a curious child, my commitment to seeking a deeper understanding of my world began at the Calcutta Samaritans Office when I was in my late teens. I found myself in the middle of a group of counsellors and more than two dozen recovering drug addicts and alcoholics. I was introduced as a helper, working toward becoming a volunteer counsellor so I could help some of my dearest friends suffering from substance abuse.

I was always under the impression that addiction was driven by a simple need to wash away

physical, mental and emotional pain. Although I had long ago promised my mother to remain sober, I always assumed that when I was financially independent, I would inevitably encounter a pain that I would try to medicate with drugs and alcohol. I was naive. Listening to the stories floating around the room that day revealed a truth that I was not expecting—that addiction is not just a surface level attempt at satisfaction. Addiction was rooted much deeper than I ever thought.

As the session started, people began unearthing their pain, their struggle, their misery. They shared the circumstances that led them to the middle of the ocean of addiction. And they were drowning. Some people felt like their lives were meaningless and empty. Others struggled with suicidal thoughts, desperate to end it all. Together, they bombarded the counsellors with life's most difficult questions, many of which I had been asking myself for years. Questions that had been constantly burning at the back of my mind, never really extinguished.

Why do we suffer? Why is there so much pain in this world? Why are we lonely? Is life worth living? Why did my parents divorce? Why was I abused? Heavier still, age-old questions surfaced again and again: Who created us? What is our purpose in life? Is there life after death?

The anguish in their voices when they asked one particular question pulled at my heartstrings. "If you had to go through what I've gone through, what would you have done? What would you do now?"

My heart was constantly stirring there, burning with a desire to reach out after hearing their stories. Over time, I became an integral part of the team.

Working there, constantly inundated with so much brokenness, I needed to know more. I needed to know that there was more. That humankind can still achieve greatness and fulfilment, if only we try hard enough to find it. I was determined to find the true capacity of man. The truth behind what fulfils their needs and stretches their capabilities. I found that I kept returning to three fundamental questions:

- 1) What is the greatest power man can have?
- 2) The greatest desire?
- 3) The greatest treasure?

Thus my dedication to achieving a higher knowledge began. I started reading everything I could lay my hands on that might shed some light: psychology, philosophy, religion, metaphysics, meditation, hypnotism, martial arts, astrology, numerology and many other belief systems.

The search for answers took me on a spiritual journey I could never have anticipated, and I will share my journey with you here, starting from the beginning.

In no way has this book been written to discriminate against any persons, churches, organizations, and/or political parties. I humbly request therefore that you interpret this book in the same manner.

[Part One](#)

Genesis

[1](#)

There is nothing new under the sun.

Ecclesiastes 1:9

I was born in Calcutta, India, the product of an arranged marriage. My mother was only 12 years old when she married my father, 15 when she had my older brother, and 17 when I came along. We lived with our extended family who ran a business supplying food grains. It wasn't a very warm household. My grandparents ordered my mother and father around no end. My mum was forced to take care of three other children, as well as her own, and do virtually all the housework. My father was no stranger to regular beatings from overbearingly controlling parents, a legacy he would soon inherit. Added to those tensions was the unusual religious atmosphere, with my grandfather dabbling in Kali worship and my grandmother delving deep into black magic and witchcraft. It was, to say the least, not the most functional household.

My mother's relationship with my grandparents was particularly argumentative. When I was around seven, my school choices were being discussed and, again, my mother and grandfather could not agree. My family was kicked out and cut off from the family business. For quite some time, we were essentially nomadic, moving back and forth between the family home and low budget houses—depending on when my grandfather felt like kicking us out again.

When we were in the family home, my grandfather took on the job of my religious instruction. He taught me about Kali, Tantrism, and transcendental meditation. Kali, the Hindu goddess of time and change, was a ferocious slayer of evil. But in her temper, she has a taste for blood and in exchange for a sacrifice, brings wealth to the poor, revenge to the persecuted, and children to the infertile.

He had numerous icons of Kali in a special chamber called the puja room or worship room. She had black skin and four arms wielding weapons, her body bedecked with severed arms and a garland of human heads. As a youngster, I visited the Kali temple in Kalighat on numerous occasions. But in spite of my grandfather's devotion and explanations, the experience always scared me.

One time I witnessed something there that stopped me going forever. My aunt was on a mission to gain Kali's favour. A large family party attended the temple together. As we entered, I saw the terrifying Kali idol with her many arms stretched out. A pungent smell of incense wafted around, overwhelming my senses. Suddenly, I heard the desperate bleating of goats. I was told they were a sacrifice. I felt my heart racing. I had never witnessed a sacrifice before.

A priest ushered us all into a small, fenced-in area at the back of the temple, where the sacrifice would take place. Silently, the priest, clad only in a white cloth around his waist, motioned to his assistants to bring two goats forward. The animals' hooves skidded on the bricks as they fought against their captor, but they found precious little purchase and were pulled forward.

In the meantime, the priest had picked up a large curved blade attached to a long pole. He led us all in a Tantric chant as he grasped the goat. Suddenly, he lifted the goat into the air, grotesquely bending the legs back before slamming its body onto the altar, all in one horrific motion. With a second swift move, the blood came down on the goat's neck, and its body was tossed to the other side of the square. The second goat quickly met the same fate, and the frantic bleating was silenced.

When it was over, the family went to the altar, dipped their fingers into the blood, and touched it to their foreheads. I felt sick. It was one of my earliest exposures to the power of religious leaders, and of how our earthly desires could drive us to destruction.

I vowed never to go to the Kali temple again.

*

During this emotionally taxing childhood, I attended a convent-run elementary school where the nuns called themselves "Daughters of the Cross". They were incredibly strict and conservative, running the place like a prison. The students were treated like sinners in dire need of redemption, as if there was nothing more to us than our wrongdoings. We were conditioned to follow orders without question and swiftly accept the most severe punishments for the smallest mistakes. No escape, no exceptions.

The most common punishment came in the form of a long, slender bamboo cane which was whipped against our backs and palms. The sharp thwack of the cane against skin resonated in the air, instilling terror in all the students. It seemed to me as though the teacher's urge to prove their dominance was restrained only by a prominent pity for the poor souls of the broken students. Pain

was handed out more frequently than praise or encouragement. I quickly came to learn that the school had only two rules: firstly, the teacher is always right; secondly, when in doubt, refer to rule one.

Though the heavy silence that lined the corridors of my school tainted my perception of it, I cannot deny that each day was an opportunity to learn valuable life lessons. I consciously made mental notes and eventually had diaries full of quotes, motivational poems, and ways to find meaning in life and the art of living.

At home and school, I was naive and therefore compliant when my devout Hindu mother—my first teacher—taught me that obedience and gratitude were the key to survival. As I journeyed through life, my understanding of this idea evolved, and I eventually learned that common sense was key. But as a young, impressionable boy, I respected and obeyed my parents, elders, and above all, my teachers. According to my mother, teachers have a special place in our lives and should always be followed.

She would always use anecdotes and ancient Hindu scriptures to put things into perspective for me. I remember the story about a poet who asks, “If God and your teacher are standing in front of you, whom should you address and admire first?” The “correct” answer was the teacher because they made God known to us. This confused me, as I’d always thought that I was not to bow down to anyone but God. But I took everything my mother taught me as absolute and concrete truth. And why shouldn’t I? She was my mother and my teacher.

And survival was critical. For many of my elementary school years, I was exposed to leaky roofs, mosquitoes, and all sorts of vermin. Even when we were allowed back into the family home, we were confined to a single bedroom that all four of us had to share. The living conditions, coupled with the increasingly controlling personality of my grandfather, took a serious toll on my dad’s mental health. He became less and less able to work, even to provide real parental care. My mother was such a strong person in these times, and I looked up to her so much for it. She picked up where my father was lacking and started teaching the Hindi language to contribute financially. And in the hopes of improving our situation.

*

One teaching of Hinduism is that a mother essentially takes the place of the Hindu concept of god in this world. We are to love, honour, and cherish her as long as we live. These morals were rooted so deeply in my psyche that the first poem I ever wrote in class was called “Mother”.

Mother, you are my goddess,

In this beautiful world,

Your love that cannot be described,

Your sacrifice that cannot be revised.

You will love me even if,

I'll be a dacoit or a thief,
Oh! Goddess Mother,
That I should pray,
May God be with you every night and day.
And all the happiness you gave me alone,
I shall consider them as a loan,
And all the loans I shall try to pay,
All my life with happiness and joy.

It was a reflection of my complete admiration for her. My mother taught me that I was born to be a good person, to make a difference in the world, and to make my family and country proud. She said the most important things for a man to earn were respect, honour, and love. Most importantly, she taught me to respect women. These principles stayed with me into adulthood as I interacted with my peers and friends.

With selflessness drilled into my mind and embedded in my heart, I learned very early in life that everyone saw the world through their own eyes. My grandparents showed this every day, insisting that they were the authority to be obeyed and that our survival was not an essential part of their plan. Everything they did was centred around self-preservation. In the end, family life was all about personal survival.

2

The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear.

H.P. Lovecraft

When I was nine, I had an extremely strict teacher called Mr Wells. He left a great impression on my life, with a cool and shrewd demeanour that always sniffed out the lies and excuses students tried to throw his way. There was no cutting corners with him—it was his way, and his way alone. He expected perfect compliance to his guidelines and anything less would earn intense punishment.

Mr Wells was the kind of teacher who could make a class fall absolutely still and silent the moment he walked into the room. He would inspect each of us as thoroughly as a military sergeant. If anything was even slightly out of order, students would be called to the front of class to be punished. Besides the usual caning and slapping, students had to stand, backs against the wall, knees bent as if sitting on an invisible chair. I remember the throbbing ache that would shoot up and down my legs until, eventually, I was shivering with pain. Most of us cracked within minutes and begged for mercy, but how long we were punished for was completely dependent on his mood. Occasionally, Mr Wells would use pressure points in our bodies to inflict as much pain as possible. No surprise then that my school life was plagued with fear: fear of making mistakes, fear of being wrong, and fear of the ruthless punishments.

The family home was run just as strictly and fearfully. We were whipped for the slightest of blunders, with my father flicking through my schoolwork, each red comment warranting a fresh thrashing. There was no room for discussion or reasoning. Even my uncles, when they came to visit, were quick to take their leather belts to our backs. For a long time, it seemed like my teachers and family had one purpose in raising me: to tame an animal through brutality. This is how they often addressed me, aiming to whip me into shape until I was, by their standards, a “proper human being”. With virtually no encouragement or edification from the people around me, life fast became a battle against fear, loneliness, and insecurity. With the exception of my mother, who was herself a victim of the violence at home, I did not have a good impression of authority.

School at least brought me respite through learning about the wider world, and I was an insatiable learner. While Mr Wells’s punishments could be severe, he found unique ways of opening up a world of knowledge to us. In our free periods, he would tell us all kinds of stories, and he was a gifted storyteller. Films were his specialty, recounting the stories of Dracula, The Bridge on the River Kwai, and The Great Escape, among others. His ability to bring these stories to life just with the way he spoke left students in a state of admiration and wonder.

The mix of amazement and fearful respect he attracted made a class known as “Question Time” much easier. Question Time allowed students, who would otherwise keep their lips sealed, to ask any questions about sensitive topics like love, sex, smoking, and alcohol. It worked because it was anonymous. Rather than awkwardly voicing our questions on these taboo topics, we could write them down and slip them into a box when no one was around. These classes were the highlight of my week.

Mr Wells was also eminently quotable. There were the usual, yet heavy, clichés like, “If you set your mind to something, don't stop until you've achieved your goals.” On the more humorous side, “Any donkey can write a book,” and, “Never trust a laughing man or a crying woman.”

But one thing he would always say continues to echo in my mind years later: “If we do not stand for something, then we will fall for everything.” He drilled such a solid set of morals into the students in such a relatable way that I still look to them today. Persistence in the face of adversity could have been his personal motto. And he taught us that faith in God should always supersede

desire to please man. These two morals gave me the tools I needed to survive a challenging world. They are even now buried deep in my heart, seeing me through life's trials and temptations.

Morality was in fact built directly into the school curriculum. Besides the usual subjects, we had an obscure class called Moral Science where we were essentially taught how to be good people. "Love thy neighbor" was a particular favourite. I began to understand that everyone in this world is my neighbour. To make sure we applied it in the real world, we were given a length of thread and were told to tie a knot in it every time we helped someone. We had to present the thread to the class and show how many good deeds we had done and the difference we made. It was a great way to realise how much or how little we did and to look outside of ourselves. As part of our moral science studies, we also performed community service: visiting homes of the elderly, doing their shopping, bringing toys and books to disabled and disadvantaged children, and mentoring younger students in their weaker subjects.

One day, in class, we were told a fable. Two boys had feelings for the same girl. In an attempt to win her over, both boys dressed in their best clothes and went to approach her. She was standing on a footpath, across the road from them. As the boys were about to cross, a blind beggar asked if anyone would help him cross the road.

"I don't want to dirty my hands taking this filthy beggar across the road," responded one boy. "I want to hold the hand of the beautiful girl and ask her to be mine forever." Without saying a word, the second boy took the blind beggar's hand and guided him across the road.

Once they both reached the other side, the first boy audaciously declared, "You saw for yourself how I kept my hands clean to hold yours. You know how handsome I am. I should be yours!"

The girl looked past him and quietly took the hand of the second boy.

This story had a profound impact on me that I have come to appreciate more and more over time. It began to stir my mind to the question about man's greatest treasure.

We were created by God to love and help fellow human beings. Our actions do not go unnoticed. Our value as a person goes beyond looks and intelligence. We are called to radiate the love of Christ, and only after looking outside ourselves to the needs of people around us can we completely realise and fill the void in our hearts with the love of others.

But I hadn't yet learned all of that.

[3](#)

Those who stand for nothing fall for everything.

Alexander Hamilton

What is conscience? A whole Moral Science lesson was dedicated to this question as we tried to figure out what exactly dictated our behaviour. It was then that I learned the importance of listening to my inner voice to distinguish between right and wrong. I grew more dependent on my conscience and made every effort to listen to it all the time. I intentionally chose to respond to the little spikes of guilt that surged through my heart when I was doing something wrong. Of course, I didn't always get it right, but I was trying.

Honesty was held in very high regard both at school and at home. It became a keystone in dictating my actions, as there was so much emphasis on severe punishment for liars, cheaters, and thieves. While I did endure my fair share of harsh punishment, I strove for honesty. Like everyone else, I slipped up, made mistakes and found myself twisting the truth here and there. But I persevered and was determined to live as honestly as possible. There was just something about honesty that attracted my respect, goodwill, and trust.

But despite how often we were told to tell the truth, it seemed like no one actually wanted to hear it. People talked about the truth and intellectualised it, and eventually, I realised that everyone has their own interpretation of "truth", which defeats its the purpose. Everyone had moments of weakness, and their truth was often based on their own perceptions, agendas, and needs. I saw how a successful but lying politician could gain all the fame and admiration of the people and perhaps become very wealthy. But the moment they start being honest, they risk all of that. I learned at an early age that dishonesty could break friendships, and hearts. It wasn't worth it to me.

*

This mishmash of religious instruction I was receiving didn't help much as I tried to navigate morality. School always began with a compulsory morning assembly. We would all gather in the main hall and chant the Lord's Prayer. At such a young age, I didn't understand what it meant to be delivered from evil. But I did know that I wanted to be delivered from fear, loneliness, and insecurity. I was being bullied by both family and schoolmates, and the people I thought were meant to be my safeguard left me terrified and alone. I was young, desperate, and lost. If God is a God of love why are His followers so cruel? And if God cares for me so much, why doesn't He save me from them? I often felt despair.

The school badge was a constant reminder to Be a light. It was engraved with a candle with the words written across it. But it baffled me. How was I supposed to be a light when all that was in me was complete and utter darkness? I witnessed my mother praying day and night, fasting practically every other week, and yet still suffering under the tyranny of her in-laws. It honestly seemed like God—whoever that was—was too busy with other things to help her.

*

My grandfather would sit in front of Kali, goddess of empowerment, for four hours in the morning and another four in the evening every single day doing transcendental meditation, reciting Tantric mantras to gain power and wealth with the help of the spirits. I would watch him in a state of admiration and terror as he went through this daily ritual.

Once, I plucked up the courage to ask him questions about what he deemed the truths of life. He revealed to me that secrets of the occult were told only to those who were worthy. And he could make me worthy. He wanted to make me his successor—as long as I obeyed him without question and proved my worth. His promise kept me obedient and curious. I thought I might finally get the answers to the questions I had been asking my whole life.

My grandfather spoke much about love and goodness as he instructed me in our family religion. And yet, he was one of the most deceitful, heartless, short-tempered men I had ever known. He had a history of violence in the family, including against my dad, whom my grandfather beat whenever he disobeyed orders. But I still respected my grandfather. He seemed to know secrets that would save me from my own darkness, secrets that I was desperate to uncover.

I would question him at every opportunity. I needed to know who created us, what our purpose was in life, and what happens after we die and he gave me something I could hold onto, at least for a while. Hindus perceive Brahman as the creator, the life giver, the Lord of Love who created the world through self-projection out of ananda (pure delight). He is told to be the Hindu equivalent of the Christian God. Brahman has no beginning or end and is omniscient and ever present, the universal holiness manifested in prayer, priests, and sacrifice.

The soul is referred to as atama (breath, wind, air, and spirit). Being new to the depth of Hinduism, I asked my grandfather how he would describe atama. His response: "According to the Upanishads, atama is formless without blood, shadow, darkness; without wind, ether; not adhesive, not tangible; without smell, taste; eyes, ears, voice or mind; without a name; not ageing, not dying, without fear; immortal, dustless, with nothing before, nothing behind, nothing within. It consumes no one and is consumed by no one. It is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unknown knower. That is the infinity in which space is woven and which is interwoven with it."

My brain could not understand any of it. But rather than put me off, my ignorance only drove me to work and study harder to grasp all these concepts. With my grandfather's guidance, I was determined to attain a certain level of transcendental meditation and prayer. I learned all the mantras, all the specific sacred syllables to utter, in the hopes that my sincerity and pure thoughts would invoke supernatural, godly assistance in my life. I worked to achieve complete divine realisation through tantra, the ritualistic use of body and mind.

Hindus believe that humans are created when individual souls are separated from the undifferentiated One—Brahman—and that this soul continues to progress through different lives and consciousness. During this process, some souls journey back to Brahman through transformation of the matter (prakritii) in which they were hidden. Reuniting with that Oneness is the ultimate goal for each soul, ending the cycle of life and death. As my mentor, my grandfather directed my path to liberation from endless reincarnation, steering me away from obstacles believed to rob man of the knowledge of his True Being. There were six internal enemies that were particularly potent: Kama (lust and desire), Krodha (anger and hatred), Lobha (greed and narrow mindedness), Moha (delusory emotional attachment), Made or Ahankara (pride and stubbornness) and Matsarya (envy and vanity). I was instructed to rise higher, achieve more and to achieve the totality that is dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kaama (pleasure) and moksha (salvation). And this also meant chasing success, respect, and fame in work life.

These conversations with my grandfather were so fascinating, but I was always confused. It was incredibly difficult for me to make sense of it all, regardless of how much I tried. In my heart, I kept asking the same question: If our god is a god of love, then why is there so much pain, so much misery, so much suffering? The theory of reincarnation—that people were paying for their sins through the life and death cycle—partially appeased my curiosity and put a bandage on the gaping wound that this question created in me.

I was encouraged to meditate to open the chakra inside me, aiming for full enlightenment. But when I tried to meditate, a terrifying silence would enter my inner self. It was as if I was entering a black hole, my heart threatening to explode and a bright light engulfing me with such a strong force. I felt I was levitating. My body would involuntarily sway, my mind floating in the light. I often sensed darkness eclipse over my head, and fear overwhelmed me. Often, I had the urge to cut my palms and offer my blood to Kali, in front of whom I would meditate. More often than not, I would give into the urge, get into a frenzy, and take a blade to my hand.

It felt to me then that there was no single path to enlightenment; we were all on our journeys alone. Practices that revealed an ultimate truth for my grandfather only obscured God for me. The feeling of loneliness and isolation in me would not abate.

There was some respite from these dark feelings when I was immersed in the arts. I found solace and a kind of soulful freedom in my music classes at school. But literature and the power of words was a revelation to me.

At the age of 14, I was studying Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. My first attempt to read it did not go well. It may as well have been in Latin for all I understood. Naturally, most of us, who grew up in non-English-speaking homes, found Julius Caesar extremely challenging to comprehend. To appease the teachers, we could only learn the passages by heart without really knowing what we were saying. The archaic text was incredibly difficult. My English teacher insisted that all the students carry a dictionary at all times so we could look up definitions for ourselves rather than question him. Unlike the other teachers, he preferred the hockey stick over the conventional cane to remind us of our lowly station.

After months of exhausting revision and rehearsal, I was eventually able to make a perfect delivery of Shakespeare. It was a big achievement for me personally, and I found that actually, in spite of the challenge—or maybe because of it—I loved speaking in front of people.

I grew to fully appreciate the power of words and the weight behind everything that leaves my mouth. Words have the ability to change lives—for the better and for the worse. I know that many of my insecurities as a child stemmed from the constant berating and lack of encouragement from my grandparents and teachers. Even storytelling can have a profound impact on our way of thinking.

For me, the stories my mother told me about courage and bravery became my main source of inspiration. Her words from the Ramayana painted pictures in my mind and illustrated the true gravity of powerful words.

You should be ready to sacrifice your life in order to honour your words.

Your words should be your law—whatever you promise should be honoured.

Two very bold statements that were repeated to me by the most influential people in my life, these quotes resounded in my mind, echoing across time and ringing loud and clear in my head—even now.

Part Two

Exodus

4

Courage is fire and bullying is smoke.

Benjamin Disraeli

As soon as I entered high school, I faced such dramatic changes. Everything was completely different to what I had known. The black and white life and its rules to which I had grown so accustomed didn't seem to apply anymore. The students had the freedom to do as they pleased; uniforms were not strictly regulated, nor were manners or language. My bubble-wrapped ears were roughened by crass words. Skipping or "bunking" class was a regularity that was celebrated.

The majority bullied and humiliated the few decent students—which, sadly, was the only part of high school that felt familiar for me. Any part of me that hoped a new school would maybe change how I felt was immediately crushed when I found I fell into the minority crowd. Once again, I endured perpetual teasing and humiliation from my fellow students, as well as constant peer pressure. My home life had not improved either, and once again I was drowning in a fear so deep, I was glaring down at a black abyss every time I tried to search within myself for a flicker of happiness. Loneliness pushed down on me, forcing me further into myself, allowing insecurity to manifest and control me. Clichéd as it sounds, amidst such a big group of people, I felt completely

alone.

One day, the “popular group” approached me and demanded that I skip school with them to go to the cinema. They laughed and mocked my immediate refusal and threatened me. I held firm to my convictions and continued to refuse. The next day, they caught me outside school and pulled me aside. My heart raced as the inevitable punishment drew nearer. I glanced around, trying to search for an escape or a saviour but none came. They pushed me to the floor trying to force me to crawl like a dog in front of everyone. My dignity was all but gone, knees and hands scraped from the rough concrete, but I would not obey them. My eyes burned with the whisper of a tear that I refused to let fall, and I was defiant.

I felt a pull on the back of my neck as I was made to stand. They told me to smoke a cigarette and when I blatantly refused, a mask of anger covered their face. How dare this kid be so stubborn? How dare he refuse a direct command? The threats continued and escalated until it became physical. I stood firm. I may have been humiliated, but I held onto my principles for dear life. I would fight to the death for them if I had to. It was all I had left of myself.

My defiance struck them with surprise, and, eventually, they were satisfied with the promise of future punishment. It was only the beginning. They continued to bully me, physically and psychologically. My high school years profoundly tested me. I found myself in the familiar cycle of surviving until the next day, scarcely daring to hope for better.

*

Loneliness! It's the most desolate word in all human language.

It is capable of hurling the heaviest weights the heart can endure.

It plays no favourites, yields no mercy, refuses all bargains,

Crowds only make it worse, activity simply drives it deeper.

Tears fall from our eyes as groans fall from our lips—but loneliness

The uninvited guest of the soul arrives at dusk and stays for dinner.[\[1\]](#)

During my high school years, my parents, brother, and I were still ostracised from the extended family because of the spat between my mother and grandfather. Though my mother's education was limited, she left the house in the early hours of the morning and returned late at night, still teaching Hindi to support us. For all of my schooling life, I saw very little of her. But my respect elevated as I watched her work so hard for us. I loved her with such boyish admiration, I would come home from school and just stare out the window, waiting for her return. I knew how much she invested into my life. How much sweat and tears she poured into supporting our family. I silently vowed to make her dreams come true when I grew up.

Yet, at the same time, there was a part of me that resented her absence. If she could be such a dedicated and nurturing teacher to so many students—strangers—why couldn't she be that for me? I knew that this feeling was completely irrational. My mum worked because she loved us so much. She threw herself into work to make sure my brother and I had a future. How could I be so selfish? And so my emotions became cyclical. I resented my mother, then I resented myself for resenting her. It's funny, sometimes, how our conscience works. But as I watched the sunset day

after day, the door never once opening to my mother's face, resentment brewed inside of me, writhing in my gut and manifesting into something bigger. It was a disease for which I had no cure.

At school, the confusion and resentment manifested in other ways. The lessons I had so eagerly learned in my elementary school had suddenly become arbitrary nonsense, redundant even. Personality and charisma were considered incredibly valuable, and a quick, sharp tongue got you further than integrity. A good character was distinguished by wealth and status—regardless of the means to obtain these things. Money, sex, and success were the priorities, principles were forgotten entirely. Friendships were forged for the sake of politics, with fake smiles buying the title of Alpha.

I felt out of place in this new culture, as though I was a leper desperately trying to feign health in the crowd. I managed to make friends with a group of boys from affluent families. In spite of being incredibly rich, they were very accepting of people from other castes and social classes. This privilege showed in their wild lifestyle. I'd often meet up with them and smell the alcohol and tobacco, eyes red from whatever drugs they had been taking. Not the best influence, but I couldn't fault them for lack of heart. They didn't pressure me to participate in any of these activities, nicknaming me "Young Gandhi" for upholding such strong principles. And some of them genuinely cared about me.

I joined them most Saturdays at posh social clubs where they danced, and I mostly sat watching. It was the kind of place where you wouldn't want to be seen dancing without a partner. It amazed me how smooth the words rolled off my friends' tongues as they approached girls, each touch of the face perfectly timed to compliment the sound coming out of their mouths. They were also constantly trying to outsmart one another. No part of me felt even remotely adequate to participate. I didn't have the eloquence or confidence these boys so easily exuded. I didn't know how to act with girls, and the thought of approaching one made my mouth dry.

One day at a friend's house party Pink Floyd's Time started playing. The lyrics speak of regret, wasting time away waiting on nothing and doing nothing in the meantime. It wafted into me and settled on my heart. The entire song left me in an existential crisis. It was a crude reminder that every breath takes you one second closer to death. It was the clichéd "Life is short" message but still, it struck me. If you asked teenage me why this song hit me so hard, I doubt I would have been able to answer you. All I knew was that there was a truth embedded in a simple rock song that I wasn't ready to face yet.

Not long after the party, one boy from the group, an arrogant, self-proclaimed karate champion, approached me.

"You know people are talking, right?" he said. "They say that I shouldn't be associating with people like you. You don't know how to talk or walk properly. You don't know how to behave in a civilised society. I walk and talk the part. I can dance and fight and be a proper member of the community. My English is much more refined than yours. You with your accent... and me with an American one. You're an insult to all of us."

His words were a dagger reflecting every insecurity and inadequacy I felt. I was numb. The strength of his words hurt more than any sword could. Not knowing how to respond, I simply ran. His words echoed in my mind as I ran further and further. Each step moving to the beat of his words, the sound of my feet creating a distinct thud on the ground.

Thud thud. Can't talk.

Thud thud. Can't walk.

I felt completely alone. I was no longer looking down into an internal abyss of self-loathing; I was looking up from inside it. Having been pushed in by the words of that boy, I felt trapped in myself, a dark pit without a flicker of light.

My mind traversed closer and closer towards suicide, skirting its precipitous edges. I considered a number of different methods to find the most efficient one. Diving into a river seemed plausible, so did hanging. But both sounded excruciatingly slow and long. I even thought about swallowing a grenade. It felt like it would fix everything. I didn't know who to turn to or where to seek comfort because the very idea of comfort had escaped me. It just didn't seem possible anymore.

One day, I was with my mother when she looked at me with the softest eyes, her hand reached towards my face. Ever so slightly, she touched my cheek, the simplest act of love and appreciation. A warmth so fleeting yet so powerful radiated from her hand. I never thought such love could be communicated this way but it did. It was as if she had focused every part of herself that loved me into a feasible and tangible substance, transferring that to me in one swift movement. Who would look after her if I ever did the unthinkable?

"Mum? What would you do if I... went away?" I asked. Her composure shifted momentarily as she fumbled with the idea in her head.

"I... would quite honestly die with grief. You and your brother are the greatest gifts God has ever given me. I know you're going to make me proud one day and be a great man." The happiness on her face was genuine, and I fought back tears watching the woman I'd adored my whole life proclaim so much hope for my future.

With that simple exchange, I chose to fight. I wouldn't give up. I loved and respected my mother too much to let her down. I was determined to pull myself out of this rut and help anyone who was going through the same thing. With her support and love, there was no excuse in the way of achieving my goals. I would be the best version of me and find true and absolute happiness.

My hunger for knowledge grew substantially in such a short time. My desire to improve for my mother's sake had lit a fire in me. It was a small flame, but I fed it. I refused to let anybody have the power to humiliate me. I began reading English newspapers daily to learn and practise new words and phrases. I listened to BBC news and programmes on the radio, complementing that with English films that cemented the language in my head. Every spare moment I spent reading motivational books to fuel my fight. The more I read, the more I realised that the intrinsic value of a book did not lie in what the author put in, but what we, the readers, took from it.

I began attending debates and seminars on speaking to hear the experts themselves. I observed the people at each event I attended and mirrored their manners, adopting strategies for engaging people. I steadily added more and more patterns to my social arsenal, refining the public speaker in me and gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the world around me. I knew physical attraction and status were important. But they weren't everything. I was learning how to use my gift of speaking to gain the attention I wanted in my social life.

*

Enter the Dragon and Saturday Night Fever were the “it” films of my generation. Their popularity seeped into mainstream culture, with martial arts and disco-dancing clubs rising up all over the city. I was barely able to afford these luxuries, nor was I technically allowed; my mother was strictly against any manifestation of violence and thought that learning martial arts would encourage gang involvement and criminal behaviour. But I found a martial arts teacher who was willing to teach me at night after his work hours had concluded. As far as my mother knew, I was studying with friends, and I never bothered to correct her. It was difficult to keep a secret from her, and the guilt constantly gnawed at my conscience, but I was so determined to make something of myself, I pushed the guilt away.

In addition to martial arts, I taught myself some dance moves. I wanted to look cool, and it worked. I started getting the positive attention and acceptance I craved. I couldn’t help observing people’s reactions, noticing how they based their behavior on their first impression of a person. The slight shift in their facial expressions, steering conversations in certain directions. I was constantly discovering new things about how people’s minds worked. And about the potency of my own willpower. That little flame was growing bigger, and I was driven to learn ever more.

Soon I found that body language, public speaking, psychology, and personal development were essential ingredients to success. These skills combined into one fundamental quality: charisma. Having wealthy parents, being born with good looks are out of our control. But gaining an understanding of the world and self presenting I could learn. And they proved to be even more important in the long run.

[5](#)

Either I will find a way, or I will make one.

Philip Sidney

When I finally started university, I truly entered the dog-eat-dog world. If I had thought high school a challenge, I was naïve. All those “survival of the fittest” clichés proved to be true and relevant. At the core of every animal—including the human animal—is the innate desire to survive. And so, students congregated into groups of likeminded people where they were

comfortable. They were split based on their religious, cultural, economic, and political backgrounds.

Sanjay Gupta an earnest truth seeker's journey to uncovering real answers to some hard questions that life throws back at us. Like:

- • What is our greatest achievable power?
- • What is our greatest desire?
- • What is our greatest achievable treasure?

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- Is there life after death?
- What is our purpose in life?

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