

# A Shot in the Light

(A true near-death story)

## Lion Goodman



During the summer of 1978, I was working as a traveling salesman. I drove through cities and towns in the southwestern states, selling jewelry and giftware to stores along the way.

I had just completed a productive week in Las Vegas, where I made many sales. I felt good. My next destination was Los Angeles, just a few hours away.

In the middle of the Mojave Desert, I saw a motorist staring helplessly into the engine of his stalled car.

The sun was beating down on him in 100+ degree heat. I felt bad for him.

I knew what it felt like to be stuck in the middle of nowhere. I had been helped by the kindness of strangers in the past, and here was an opportunity to help another human being. I pulled over to the side of the freeway and offered him assistance.

He told me that his car was dead, expressing disgust and complete frustration. He had just put \$200 into the car, he said, and here he was, stuck, with no money and no way out of his situation.

Being a good citizen of the road, I offered him a ride into L.A. I had plenty of room in my van, and he had no other good options. He accepted my offer reluctantly. He gathered his things, including a sleeping bag and a full military duffle bag, and loaded them into my van. We drove off, leaving his car on the side of the highway.

He told me his name was Ray. He looked to be in his early twenties. He was small, muscular, wiry, and slightly gaunt, as if underfed. As soon as we started talking, I realized that we had nothing in common. This was going to be an uncomfortable ride with a stranger. When he offered to share a joint with me, I relaxed. He was okay. I would make the best of it, and drop him off as soon as I could.

He didn't seem to have a destination, and I was stopping in small towns to sell my wares to stores. He hung out with me, and over time, I grew to trust him. We traveled together for three days. I took him under my wing, like an apprentice. I gave him some of my clothes, and it pleased him to have something new to wear. I bought him food, since he had no money. I sent him on errands while I talked to potential customers. He seemed calm, and mostly satisfied with the exchange.

Selling on the road can be a lonely business. I was happy to have someone to talk to.

At night, we would find a place to park the van, sometimes talking, sometimes just listening to music. Ray slept outside the van, in his sleeping bag. I slept inside.

On our third day of travel, we came to Claremont, east of Los Angeles, a college town. I called on dozens of stores, and made a few sales. We asked around, and were pointed to Puddingstone Reservoir as a good place to camp for the night.

I was sitting on the floor in the back of the van, which was outfitted as a small RV. There was too much stuff piled up – my clothes, books, food, and boxes of samples, and Ray's duffel bag and travel gear. I was working to create more room by moving things around in the cupboards. Crouched down in a tight space, I was in a practical frame of mind, focused on my task, listening to the music that Ray was playing on the radio at the front of the van.

Suddenly, there was a loud explosion. 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.

He was behind the driver's seat, arm propped up on the back of the seat. A black gun was in his hand, aimed at my head. I realized that a bullet had hit me in the head! My first thought was, *"He's warning me – he's going to rob me."* That suddenly seemed just 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. 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 a soft voice in my mind say, *"Relax. It's out of your control. Keep breathing, and stay awake."*

I slowed my breath, assessing the situation. It didn't look good. I was a sitting duck in a shooting gallery.

My thoughts turned to the inevitable: my death. There was nothing I could do to change what was happening. Okay. What then?

I turned my attention to God. *"Thy will, not my will, be done,"* I thought.

I let go of my body, and let go of the tension and shock that filled me. I relaxed, slumping back against the cabinet. I watched my breath flowing in and out, in and out, in and out...

I began to prepare for death. I knew that I didn't want to die angry, upset, or incomplete. I began my preparation by asking for forgiveness from all those I had hurt during my 26 years of life.

This began a full-color fast-reverse movie reel of my life, back to my birth. I then offered my own forgiveness to everyone who had hurt me throughout my life. I thought about my parents, my brothers and sisters, my lovers, and my many good friends. I said goodbye. I said, "I love you."

Another explosion shook the van, and my body pulsed instinctively. I was not hit. The bullet missed me by a fraction of an inch, penetrating the wood cupboard to my right. I relaxed back into the reverie of my life review.

I knew my luck could not hold out. If the gun was a revolver, there were three more bullets. I hoped that it wasn't a semi-automatic with a full clip.

Nothing mattered at that moment but to be at peace. My van, my money, my business, my knowledge, my personal history, my ideas, my freedom — all became worthless, meaningless. In the face of death, it was just dust in the wind.

All I had of value at that moment was my body, and my life — and those would soon be gone. My attention became focused on the

spark of light I called my Self. My consciousness began to expand outward, extending my awareness in space and time. I heard those instructions again: Stay Awake and Keep Breathing.

I prayed to my God, the Great Spirit, to receive me with open arms. I reached up to that Source, and love and light flowed into me, filling me up to overflowing. It was shining outward from my heart like a lighthouse beam, loving and illuminating everything around me.

As the light grew inside me, my awareness expanded like a huge balloon, until the van and its contents seemed small and unimportant. A sense of peace and acceptance filled me. I knew I would soon be leaving my body.

I could sense the timeline of my life, backward through my history to my birth, and forward to the moment of my death. I could see 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.

I floated above the van as a single point of consciousness. It was like looking down into a dollhouse, seeing all the rooms at once. Every detail was in sharp relief, both real and unreal at the same time. I looked into the warm and welcoming golden light with calm acceptance. I was going Home.

The fourth explosion shattered the silence, and my head was pushed violently to my right side. The ringing in my ears was deafening. Warm blood rushed down my head, into my eyes and onto my arms and thighs, dripping onto the floor. I found myself back in my body, feeling pain, and blood, discomfort and amazement. I was still surrounded by light, love, and peace.

"That's interesting," I thought. "I'm still alive." Wasn't I supposed

to be *out* of my body? I began to look around on the inside. I looked into my own skull. Perhaps I could find the holes, and see light through them?

I knew myself well, so I started an internal inventory. I scanned my feelings, thoughts, sensations, and abilities. I was looking for what might be missing. Surely the bullet had affected me. My head was throbbing, but I felt strangely normal.

At that moment, I realized that if I was going to die, I needed to look my killer in the eyes. I picked up my head and turned toward him, looking deeply into him, calmly observing the bringer of death.

He was shocked. He jumped up from the seat, shouting at me: "Why aren't you dead, man? You're supposed to be dead!"

I didn't know the answer to his question. "Here I am." I said quietly, still in my expanded state of consciousness.

"That's too weird, man! Too weird! This is just like my dream this morning!"

"What dream?," I asked.

He was still shouting. "In my dream, I kept shooting this guy, but he wouldn't die! But it wasn't you in the dream, it was somebody else!"

This was very strange. I wondered, "Who is writing this script?"

I knew that if I could keep him talking, he might not shoot again. I began to speak slowly and calmly, trying to settle him down.

Whenever I tried to speak, he yelled, "Shut up! Just shut up!" as he peered out the windows into the darkness of the night. As if someone who heard four gunshots would come to investigate.

He nervously walked closer to me, gun in hand, aiming at me. He examined my bloody head, trying to understand why four bullets hadn't finished me off.

Blood continued to ooze down my face. I could hear it dripping onto my shoulder. Ray said, confused, "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 more confusion in his voice. "Now 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 and uncertain. He was still on edge, but beginning to slow down, with less adrenalin coursing through his veins. A little less jumpy.

"Why did you want to kill me?" I asked.

"Because you have everything, and I have nothing. And I'm 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. I knew there would be no rescue from this situation. It was mine to work out, or not.

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

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

My heart leapt at this opportunity, this chance – a way out.

"Okay," I said, quietly, agreeing with his idea. I wanted him to

feel in control. It had to be his idea, not mine. I knew his anger sprang from feeling out of control, and I didn't want to make him more angry.

Ray looked at me curiously. "Why were you so nice to me, man?" he asked.

"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." He seemed forlorn, as if he was a little boy, disappointed in himself for failing. Ashamed.

My time sense was completely altered. I was floating in a zone of ultra-reality. I had no idea how much time had passed since the first bullet.

After what felt like many minutes, although it could have been seconds, Ray walked up to me. I was still in my crouched, locked-in position between cabinets. He looked down 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 stacking boxes, filled with my samples, around me. "Are you okay?" he asked. It felt like he actually cared.

"Yeah, I'm okay," I answered. "A little uncomfortable, but it's all right." He was expressing genuine concern. I quieted the hope springing out of me.

"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 strong, and 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 back up on the dirt road, find the pavement and move forward into the night – toward my freedom and salvation.

He drove on and on – to where, I had no idea. Were we bound for a hospital, as he said, or toward an even more 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 more than an hour away from Los Angeles.

I sat alone, uncomfortable, head pulsing, ears ringing, in the back of the dark van. I listened to the sounds of the highway. I replayed the scenes, one by one, analyzing the past three days. I was trying to understand what happened, and why. It didn't make any kind of sense. I had treated Ray only with kindness and respect, and he turned on me. I had invited a crazy person with a gun into my life.

It seemed I was there, thinking, feeling, contemplating and questioning, for about an hour. I felt the van slow, pull over and stop. The engine 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 sat down on the platform bed next to me, and turned toward me. He looked distraught. His head hung down.

His words cut deep through my cloud of hope. "I have to kill you, man," he said calmly. Oh shit. I tried to remain calm.

"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."

Back in jail? Not only was I with an armed madman, but an ex-con as well.

"They won't put you in jail if you take me to the hospital, Ray," I said slowly, still feigning injury and passivity. I hoped that there might be an opening, a moment when I could surprise him, overpower him, and take away his gun. If he didn't know I was okay and feeling strong, 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, Ray. 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 sad, and desperate. This was clearly 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, or whether it would be enough to push myself 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 might not 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. What could I do to escape? The only answer I could find was to stay present in the moment. Keep breathing. Be awake to everything.

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. Again he was expressing real concern, as you would with a child who had fallen off a bike.

"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, weaving his sad tale.

I listened deeply as he talked about growing up in poverty in East Los Angeles, with poverty everywhere around him. He spoke of anger at his schoolteachers who made him feel stupid. He talked about his father, who drank too much and beat him. He told me about becoming a tough guy on the streets, and how he finally found a way out. He joined the Army. That was supposed to fix everything. 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. That's why he had to leave L.A., because they were looking for him, to kill him. He told me that he stole his father's gun, and some money, before he left. Then his car broke down, and he realized there was no place to hide.

He had decided to turn back. If he did one more rip-off, he could get rich, and pay off the dealer. He just needed one hit, one sucker. If his target was rich enough, he could start over and be somebody. So he decided to kill whoever stopped to help him.

I had volunteered to play the role of the victim.

As the night began to turn toward morning, the sky slowly shifted from black, to dark indigo, to deep blue. I heard the sound of chirping birds – the most beautiful sound I had ever heard. I was grateful to be alive.

“I’m pretty stiff and sore, Ray, I said, interrupting his reverie. I’d feel better if I could get up and stretch.” I had been sitting in the same crouched position for six hours, knees near my chest. Dried blood was plastered to my hair, face and clothing. My shins hurt from being pushed against the edge of a cupboard door. My lower back throbbed with a deep ache. My head felt like I had been hit hard with a baseball bat.

“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.”

I wanted to remind him that he was 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 was shining, as if made of sparkling crystal.

He had stopped on a residential street next to an embankment, which led down to a small pond. He gestured with his gun that I should walk down the dirt trail that led to the water. As I clambered down the steep incline, I wondered, “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 inside, yet simultaneously immortal, 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 him. 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 there, into the water." I pointed to the center of the pond.

"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! Are you sure you wouldn't want to kill me if I gave you this gun?" He held out the gun again, as if inviting me to take it, and kill him.

"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. I don't know why you didn't die when I shot you. You're like the weirdest person I ever met."

I thought to myself, "Yes. I am probably the weirdest person you will ever meet."

As we stood there at the water's edge, facing each other, I realized that Ray had undergone a profound transformation – as

profound as the one I had undergone. 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.”

We walked back up the hill to the van, where we sat together, and continued to talk. We were seeking a solution to this complex dilemma. We explored possibilities. What could we agree to? I made a suggestion, and he told me why it wouldn’t work. I made other suggestions. He listened, considered, and rejected them, one by one. We were both seeking a way out.

Ultimately, we came to an agreement, something we could both agree to: I would let him go, and he would let me go. I promised not to turn him into the police, or report the incident, under one condition – he had to promise that he would never do anything like this again.

He promised. We shook hands on the deal.

What choice did he have?

As the sun rose over the hills, and the heat of the day began, we climbed up to the front of the van. I sat in the passenger seat. He drove for about twenty minutes, in silence, to a place that was familiar to him. He parked, and turned off the engine. I gave him all the cash I had – about \$200 – and two watches I thought he could pawn. We got out of the van together and walked across the street to a bus stop.

The sun was shining down on us. 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 one final time. I smiled at him, and he look confused. 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 from my scalp, and sewed stitches. He asked me how it had happened. 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.

He said I was lucky, but I knew it was more than luck. I felt blessed. I was still full of love, and light, and a deep inner peace.

I didn't go to the police.

I had made a promise, and had received a promise in return.

I kept my promise.

And I believe that Ray kept his.

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## About the Author

Lion Goodman is a coach, healer, author, and teacher. He shares his wisdom about healing the human psyche in talks, workshops, and personal services. His [\*Clear Your Beliefs\*](#) program, and [\*iClearIt\*](#) smartphone app, have helped thousands of people delete their limiting and negative beliefs. He has taught his mind-clearing methodologies to hundreds of coaches and therapists through his [\*Clear Beliefs Coach Training\*](#).

He is the author of numerous books, including *Clear Your Beliefs*, *Creating On Purpose*, *Menlightenment*, and *The Narcissism Primer*.

Lion provides personal, transformational coaching to people worldwide, helping them clear whatever is in their way, so they can fulfill their dreams and manifest a better life. He works with entrepreneurs and business leaders through his [\*Luminary Leadership Institute\*](#), helping his clients hone their inner virtues, improve their relationships, and fully embody their True Self.

He loves working with young people who are seeking to create a better life. He is a frequent guest lecturer at San Francisco State University, Yale Summer Explo, and San Quentin Prison.

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).

The story was also used as the basis for an award-winning movie, "*The Kindness of Strangers*," directed by Claudia Meyers. It won "Best Film" at the Rosebud Film Festival. The 20-minute film, which tells the story from Ray's point of view, can be viewed [here](#).

Lion enjoys receiving feedback and questions. Feel free to write to him at [liongoodman@gmail.com](mailto:liongoodman@gmail.com).

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