

## From the Mean Streets to Self-Realization

### Find Your Walking Shoes

IN BROAD BRUSHSTROKES THEN ...



#### DHARMA

We yearn for the unknown; we fear the unknown; something has to give. In perspective we have depth. Although the Sanskrit word ‘dharma’ has no precise equivalent in English, an appropriate understanding of the word is from the French phrase: *raison d’être*, or reason for being, which is your ‘purpose in life’. Your dharma then is the reason for which you have come here.

A sage from India sets the stage:

“Wanting to reform the world without discovering your true self is like trying to cover the whole world with leather to avoid the pain of walking on stones and thorns. It is simpler to wear shoes.”

#### CHEATING THE REAPER

My parents were Holocaust survivors. After World War Two, I was born in a displaced persons camp, commonly called DP camps, outside Munich, Germany. As a toddler, I nearly died of dysentery while other children in the camp had perished from the disease. At eight years old, I found myself in the rocky and desolate Negev desert of the Holy Land where machine-gun-toting terrorists ambushed us, riddling our lone bus with sprays of bullets. I escaped death, but for many, blood and guts ensued.

Later, in the USA, I grew up into a responsible teenage son and a street fighter in the projects of the inner city: a battle zone of hate, gang warfare, murder, stabbings, and drugs. I quickly learned the ropes: be independent, inventive, run fast, and walk the talk knowing excuses were not an option for survival, or anything else. None of my middle-class friends from grade school and beyond ever visited me—an outsider, a denizen of hellish public housing. Eventually, I fought my way out of the mean streets toward what I believed would be a better world—no longer living in fear of getting my throat cut for sport.

## NEARLY DEAD AGAIN

In my freshman university year, providence intervened again—allowing me to disappoint the reaper once more. A car crash left me in a coma with a metaphysical side effect: a near death experience had opened a dimensional portal filled with visions from the other side. After a yearlong convalescence, I returned to my studies and worked my way through school. Afterwards, although I did well in whatever job I took on, I always felt something essential was missing. There had to be more than solely striving for material goods or having ‘he paid his bills on time’ etched onto my tombstone. But more of what?

I had a hunger that could not be satisfied by a life of rote. All the while, my intuition, not a muse, I would later learn, had been whispering the mantra: *go for it ... some day something of value will come*. Like the determined main character in the book *Shoeless Joe* by W.P. Kinsella (adapted into the film *Field of Dreams*), I too felt called to bet the ‘farm’ on a wanderlust and a disembodied voice that only I could hear. Fitting in was not my dharma. I knew that much on a visceral level.

## MAIDEN VOYAGE

Maybe it was because I flew my first kite, a birthday gift, at age thirty. I had never flown a kite as a kid. Maybe flying my first one as an adult allowed me to see through a child’s eyes. Maybe it was because a kite forced me to look up.

Feeling my kite ascend until it reached a comfortable soaring angle in the sky touched something deep inside me. I didn’t know what that thing was at the time. I did know there was something magical about this heavier than air flying invention that I had now discovered.

Lofting that first kite was a transcendental experience. While flying that kite I stopped thinking and was transported into a meditation of my own. That kite opened up a provocative possibility of something that was, at the time, beyond my reach. That kite was a catalyst, yet another unexpected door opener, a wedge into that domain of alchemy where passion and creation reign.

## NO RICH UNCLE

So, thirty years ago, with no net, guarantees, or a rich uncle, I gave up the ‘security’ of a promising Fortune 500 fast track position, health insurance, stock option plans, weekend brunches, and a doorman for what would become an unpredictable and daunting odyssey. Those close to me thought I was making a huge career mistake. To quote the Buddhist-leaning Yoda: “Do or do not ... there is no try.” I made the leap, uprooting body and soul from New Jersey to that distant realm far far away: California.

## STROKE OF LUCK

At one crucial crossroad in Los Angeles, I had to choose between days of dangerous luxury and that persistent inner voice that opted for another unknown path. I withdrew from a decadent lifestyle, taking the unmarked side street in front of me, not knowing then that this detour would lead me to a once in a lifetime opportunity with a master ZEN artist. Although my understanding about fine art was limited, I did recognize that he had magic in his paintbrush and his life. I wanted to know what he knew. Like all great teachers, he mirrored truth for those around him willing to see. He taught without teaching.

When the master asked me one late afternoon to join him for a life of art and ‘smog-free’ air in San Francisco, I didn’t hesitate. During our drive up from LA under a full moon, he had a stroke, and I was there to save his life. Months later, when his eyesight had returned, he confided: “I owe you.”

It was the mid-1980’s; life in San Francisco was edgy, sexy, ripe, and turbulent. While adversity and I were very well-acquainted, the material and existential obstacles that I would face to find my reason for being often seemed insurmountable. Despite tough times, Hanna, my girlfriend, and I managed the rent for a cozy apartment at the top of a steep street that overlooked the Marina flats below.

## DEAR MOM

During my San Francisco days, I mailed this note to my remarkable mother, Adele, for her birthday. Undeterred by an early life of abuse and terror, she chose the light—being a compassionate spirit, a poet, and ever-present in the moment. My mother had a marvelous gift for listening, and I had been noticing that the older I got the smarter she became.

July 12<sup>th</sup>—Dear Mom: Well, here we are—you are 60—I'm 40. Hey, doesn't that add up to 100% percent. Good times ahead—success, joy ... fulfillment. Who knows what excitement the future holds for you ... and yours truly?

So, I didn't follow the American Dream. I'm following something else ... something inside, something that has to do with art, culture, integrity, and character. I trust you will continue to understand. I know it will pay off in many ways. I don't want you to worry. I want you to write down your feelings in poetry or prose. To help you get started, here's a small gift [a smart-looking journal and a pen] from Hanna and myself. I feel strong. I am confident. I will persevere ... and I will always love you. Thanks for being who you are.

Love, Eden

## CHASING RAINBOWS

In retrospect, that was a feisty letter considering my circumstances when I wrote it. I had given up much to follow a feeling, which I couldn't have told you was intuition at the time. My inner voice had led me on precarious journey and my odyssey was far from over. On top of sporadic bouts of self-doubt, things weren't going well on the monetary front. Fiscally, I was spiraling downward with no prospect for improvement in sight. To raise money, I had sold off what material items I could, including my car.

Culturally, I was immersed in art and spent nearly every day with the master ZEN artist; not only did I watch him create great art, our days and evenings together were about the art of living and family. The true self-realized artist doesn't relegate his art to some part of the day or night; his art is inexorably integrated into every facet of his life—from washing the dishes to walking the doggies.

While there were hardships, some dire, I remained resolute. Investing my time with the master who had found the wellspring of art was the right path—so my inner voice told me. To an outside, or even a familial observer, I was chasing rainbows and heading for disaster. After all, these were my formative professional moneymaking years that were seemingly going down the old drain.

## UP IN SMOKE

My unique behind the scenes of art experiences with the master artist were priceless, but that didn't pay the rent—that took cash. I was working faceless minimum wage odd jobs such as telemarketing, loading trucks, and taking inventory in department stores at midnight. One job was less anonymous. From 11:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. three days a week, I handed out samples of cigarette brands in various parts of the city. I had to say in a loud manner “Free Cigarette Samples” over and over.

As I walked those crowded and lonely streets of San Francisco, which was more of a town than a metropolis like Manhattan, it wasn't long before I began running into acquaintances. Although they didn't verbalize it, their thoughts were reflected in their eyes: ‘What is he doing here handing out cigarettes? The poor bastard. What a loser.’

Being exposed to the public in this fashion, I went through three stages. First, I felt embarrassed and dejected. Feeling awkward came next, and then, after a time, I simply thought: What difference does it make? I was naked, and I was hawking cigarette samples to make a few bucks. These were the facts; reality as it was: no back up, no trust fund, and still no generous long lost relative to bail me out.

No one looking at me on the street corner back then could have known I had embarked upon a larger purpose. I had a vague sense of direction but no destiny yet. Aside from that guiding voice inside my head, I had no assurance that I would ever discover anything of value. I was barefoot along a razor sharp tightrope with no safety net. Would a daredevil have it any other way?

### RUNNING ON EMPTY

Life as a day worker and laborer was a galaxy away from the self-esteem of my former life on the East Coast where I had been an executive making the big bucks that had leased all the outer manifestations of success. After moving to LA, I had landed a plum as editor-in-chief for a magazine where I negotiated an enviable package: a hefty salary, expense account, and a new Corvette as my company car.

Although I had been riding high on corporate perks in those days, I wasn't oblivious that my soul was running on empty. The past seemed to be a surrealistic side street off the boulevard of dreams.

Now, as people took cigarette samples from me, well, my life appeared to have taken yet another turn marked no exit, and that seemed to be a nightmare. Although I had made that choice to find my dharma, I was far from immune to doubt, fear, and anxiety. I was over a bottomless black chasm spanning the past into the future and my balance on that unforgiving tightrope was wavering.

As a crisis of faith ate away at my core, my intuitive voice insisted that I was already more than halfway across. The question was this: Did I have the juice, the courage to complete my dharma quest or not?

There was no turning back.

### THE GIFT

I didn't realize or appreciate it at the time, but what seemed to me as hitting the skids, this ostensible degradation of my life, was my time for purging, for stripping away remnants of social conditioning, ego, what other people thought, and the insidious entrapments of society called security and status: trade-offs payable only by relinquishing your soul. Paying your dues whatever the cost is one of the mandatory tests in the school of man for shedding the false masks of personality; it was a compulsory requirement, not an elective. This hard-earned object lesson in catharsis was by no means part of a graduation exercise either.

Over the erratic and uncertain course of bleak times to come, proving my commitment to finding my dharma was the key to earning my authenticity. Then, after a decade with the master artist, I awoke one morning in a house high atop the Hollywood Hills. An 'overnight' miracle! I felt the magic pulse of art throbbing and flowing through me as bountiful energy and information. I knew what is art from the inside out directly, in the ZEN tradition, from infallible and instantaneous intuition. As the Buddhist proverb goes: When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.

Suddenly, organically, and remarkably, I was no longer in the audience; I was onstage; I was an artist from the soul, which was a gift I would never have predicted for myself. My euphoria was ephemeral, as finding my purpose in life was only the beginning. For my dharma to have meaning, I had to step up to the next challenge: an unwavering dedication to my passion for art, no matter what.

### SELF-TAUGHT

The irony was in place. I would come to value those early life-threatening confrontations in the hood, as they had indelibly forged my innate sense of self, a survival trait I needed then and now—to persevere over both the ups and downs of life with an immutable sense of purpose, generosity, and gratitude. I have trekked along many unexplored roads strewn with those 'stones and thorns' in my dharma walking shoes.

After a time in the volatile trenches of art-making, I became aware of an underlying truth. All great art is self-taught for good reason: no one can teach anyone how to be original.

Since my art epiphany on the mountain top decades ago, I have been painting each day, creating an ever-evolving and respectable body of work. Nowadays, I'm an artist, writer, and a kiteflier of some note living under the vast and glorious New Mexico sky—and, I'm pleased to report that my walking shoes exhibit no sign of wearing out.

As the master had said: genius is dedication.



## OVER THE RAINBOW

Eden's paintings are in private collections here and abroad. His art has been exhibited on both coasts, including his prize-winning flying sculptures at the World Trade Center and the Madison Square Garden Museum of Sport. Eden's work has been featured in the award-winning *Adobe Illustrator WoW Book* and by the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.

“Eden Maxwell's art is brilliant; he's the real thing, a true creator.”

—Mary Anne Bartley, Artist-in-Residence: Villanova University, WHYY, PBS

“Eden Maxwell's recent works on paper, suffused as they are with rich colors and intimations of the New Mexican landscape, are punctuated with abandon and reverentially irreverent allusions to myth—engaging us in an ever-deepening and mesmerizing reverie about our relationship to the land and ourselves.”

—Emanuel E. Garcia, MD, poet/author/psychoanalyst

## TOUR DE FORCE

An accomplished writer, Eden Maxwell is the bestselling author of *The Magnificent Book of Kites*, Sterling Publishing, NYC; and he has contributed to numerous publications, including: *Popular Science*, *Popular Mechanics*, *Omni*, *MacUser*, *Art Calendar Magazine*, *the Drachen Foundation Journal*, and the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Eden has also ghostwritten books for HarperCollins and Kensington publishers.

With a fire in the belly, Eden had embarked on a thirty-year-long walkabout to discover that his dharma (purpose in life) dwelt in the wellspring of art. He writes candidly about his adventure of self-discovery in his most recent book, *An Artist Empowered*—a tour de force for creators and art lovers now available through booksellers and amazon.com; ordering from lulu.com allows the author to support the Humane Society of the United States.

“This is a wonderful book that both encourages and surprises. Perfect for all creative people, wherever they may be along their path.”

—Eric Maisel, PH.D., Creativity for Life

“*An Artist Empowered* is an intriguing book that uses real-life anecdotes, thought-provoking reflections, and humorous insights to explore how to create and lead a life worth living. The powerful and timeless principles make this an evocative page-turner. Read it and reap.”

—Sam Horn, author of *POP! Stand Out in any Crowd* and *Tongue Fu!*

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