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Walking from East to West
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CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	9
<i>Preface</i>	11

PART 1: EAST

1. A Life Out of Nothing	15
2. Long Shadows	29
3. Hidden Gold	41
4. My Father's House	51
5. The Cricket Field	63
6. Wedding Crashers and Ashes	75
7. The Raj Path and the Assigned Way	85
8. The Longest Shadow	101
9. A Book on the Ash Heap	109
10. Extraordinary Men	123

PART 2: EAST TO WEST

11. The Girl in the Church	139
12. "I Am Called to This"	151
13. The Longest Journey	173
14. Veritas	195
15. One Destination	211

PART 3: WEST TO EAST

16. Returning: God in the Shadows	227
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PREFACE

SOME BOOKS ARE DIFFICULT TO WRITE; OTHERS BORDER ON THE ALMOST impossible. This one is in the latter category. Many friends and even strangers over the years have asked if I would pen such a story, and when Zondervan asked me to write a book of my memoirs, I concluded that the time had come. The difficulty lies on many fronts. First is that of accurate recall. How does one piece together all of the past? How does one be truly objective when one's own feelings are locked in to the situation? Then arises a very personal matter. How do you tell a story of such intimate issues and not at the same time make someone else look unduly bad or good? That was the toughest challenge of all. It is one thing for an individual to disclose his or her own heart, but to do so for someone else runs an unfortunate risk. If I have erred here, I sincerely hope it is not because of any personal ill will but only because I know the story did not end as it had begun.

As I struggled with these issues, the publisher agreed to have me tell the story to another writer, who would spend hours with me and others to cull the material and then write it in the way it unfolded. I took the narrative he penned and wrote the story line in my own words, along with his. Throughout this process, the publisher asked if I would keep it at a simple level of reach and not make it inaccessible in content and depth. The goal was simple: "Tell us your story in the simplest terms with your heart on your sleeve." I suppose being accustomed to writing on philosophical themes, this was a reminder to me as "a word to the wise."

So that has been the approach. Much more could have been said and said at a lofty level portraying all my philosophical struggles and so on. But we avoided that. Maybe some instances in the narrative

need not have been shared, but were in order to show the backdrop of what was shaping me all along. What I do know is that as I retraced steps and memories, some of them were hard to relive, while others brought a renewed sense of happiness; some memories brought the depth of tears to the surface, and yet others brought to mind cherished moments long forgotten. I have concluded that it is an exercise that is well undertaken by everybody—to journal and write down one’s thoughts at shorter intervals. Memories are good reminders of what God has done and where we could have done better. I remember the time an older man asked me when I was young, “Do you know what you are doing now?” I thought it was some kind of trick question.

“Tell me,” I said.

“You are building your memories,” he replied, “so make them good ones.”

If each reader would glean just that from the book, then it will have been worth it.

But there is something greater here, and it is this: as life progresses, you wish there were some safeguards you had taken along the way, and even some different decisions you had made along the way. For one, I wish I had talked more to my parents about their past and about my ancestors. What did they know? What were the stories of their lives? What made each one the way they were? Now it is too late for that, for my parents have both passed away. I nevertheless come away with the absolute certainty that God has ordered my steps and that God was there, even in the darkest moments of my life. I know this as surely as I know I exist. He never abandoned me and has brought me by His grace and mercy this far. This is the most certain truth I possess, and it is truly liberating.

One other great enrichment was to think back on my youth in India, even as now the West has become home. India gave me much that I can never repay. It really is an intriguing culture—weaknesses and ironies notwithstanding. Now living first in Canada and then in America, these countries have become home. I am so grateful to God for the privilege of living here. Beyond my residences, the heart has found its home in my faith and love for Jesus Christ. I sincerely hope and pray that as you read these pages, you will feel Him near to you and that you will be guided by His wisdom and kept by His grace.

Without Him, this story would not be worth telling or reading.



PART 1
EAST

CHAPTER 1

A LIFE OUT OF NOTHING

ONE OF MY EARLIEST MEMORIES IS OF THE OLD MAN ON MY STREET, A MYSTIC who wore only a loincloth. He was tall, with matted hair and piercing eyes, quite fearsome to look at. Mud was caked all over his bony frame, his face was scarred by deep gashes that were self-inflicted from his religious devotion, and his skin was burned by constant exposure to the torrid heat of the midday sun. “How did he come to look like this?” I wondered as a boy. “What had he done to himself?”

I found out soon enough. Two or three times each week he would appear on our street; then, almost like a coiled rope unwinding, he would lie down on that filthy road and begin his routine. Cow dung and dog droppings littered the path, to say nothing of the stones or sharp objects that cluttered it as well, yet he would roll down the length of the street with a howl that sounded as if it came from the depths of a cavern.

“Govinda! Govinda! Govinda!”

I had no clue what his cry was about—I only knew it terrified me.

It was an astonishing sight to a five-year-old, and I recall scampering to my mother and asking her, “What is he doing? What is he doing?”

“He’s OK,” she replied. “Just ignore him.”

“But what is he doing?” I would implore. “Why is he doing?”

“He’s calling to his god!” she said.

That did not quench my curiosity. But I did not pursue it as long as he continued to roll away from me, and his voice became a faint but haunting sound in the distance: “Govinda!”

The old mystic was only one of the striking sights on our street, a place that teemed with life in my eyes. On that street, I believed I saw everything that living represented. The world there was filled with

sounds and screams and, yes, smells of different kinds. Silence was at a premium. Every morning at sunrise, any seeming quietness was broken by the shouts of the street vendors, hawking the items they were selling. “Onions! Milk! Vegetables! Knife sharpeners!” When these sellers came to our door, they would look through our open but barred windows. There was no privacy to speak of. We stepped outside onto the street, and the road itself was so narrow that a car couldn’t pass through but only hand-pulled or cycle rickshaws. Outside were stray animals and people, each about some pursuit. Sometimes it was a beggar at the door, sometimes a leprous hand reaching for a handout with a plea for compassion. Life with all its hurts and pains squinted at you, squatted before you, and stared you down daily. This was the street where I grew up.

Life in our neighborhood was lived out amid this jumble of sounds, sights, and scents. There, on the street every day, friends played soccer or cricket. Laughter, cries, angry outbursts—all the emotions were in evidence. Around the corner, a small shop sold potato-crisp snacks and spicy Indian treats, and the best thing you could do was go into the shop and have your uncle or your friend buy you a treat of some kind. Flavors were in the air—the smell of oil heated to its peak, frying food of some kind—and taking it all in was an all-day activity, with someone buying a morsel or two and munching on it as they went on their way. From sunrise to sunset, people of every stripe and need passed by.

Then at dusk, when the streetlamps came on, students came out of their homes to continue their studies under lamplight. In some homes, there was no electricity; in others, parents sent their children outside to study under the streetlamps to conserve electricity. There was often a tussle as to who claimed a lamppost first. Once that was settled, the fortunate student sat with his back resting against the post. Most of his scalp was shaved except for an area called the *bodi*, and he tied this part to the lamppost behind him. That way, whenever he began to doze off and nod forward, the pull on his hair kept him awake. This was the discipline of study in those days.

Now, more than a half century later, as I again walk the street where I was born, memories come alive with a wave of nostalgia. I find it hard to believe this is where I had my beginnings.

The narrow lane has been widened and paved. Still, it would be an adventure to try to wedge a larger car in here. Yet taxi drivers do

it regularly and intrepidly, and as you watch you wonder if the metal shrinks when they approach an object that seems too close to avoid a scrape. An Indian friend of mine says that whenever he's asked if India has a Disney World, he answers, "No, we just take a taxi ride. That is breathtaking enough."

The first time I brought my wife here, we couldn't get to the door of the house on this street where I was born and to which we returned to spend our vacations. A water buffalo had stopped in front of the door. That was twenty years ago, and I was completely overwhelmed then. The memories come flooding back so quickly and sharply: the neem tree in the backyard that we used as a wicket for our cricket games; the window to the room where my whole family slept; a kitchen with a clay coal fire in which to do all the cooking—the hot Indian flat-breads that would come out of the oven puffing fresh and make you hungry just by their smell, the curries that were lip-smacking good, the delicacies that to this day charm my imagination.

What a world that was for me as a youngster!



THIS HOUSE WHERE I SPENT MANY A SUMMER BELONGED TO MY UNCLE and was like our second home. It used to be number 7, but now it is number 13, and above the doorpost a large eye has been painted to ward off evil spirits. A Hindu family lives here now, a lovely couple with two young daughters, and I've made it a practice to visit them whenever I come back to Chennai (the historic city formerly known to the world as Madras in the state of Tamil Nadu, next to Kerala). The little girls have fallen in love with my Canadian wife, Margie. Every time she accompanies me, they giggle excitedly. They love her sandy-blond hair and delightedly say, "Oh, Auntie, Auntie, I love your blue eyes!"

This simple little house is like most others on the street, very small, made up of four rooms, each measuring about ten feet by ten. Even these small rooms are carefully compartmentalized. There may be a stove next to a bed, that sort of thing. In fact, when my family returned here to visit, your bed was a chair, a desk, or whatever you wanted to make it for the moment. During those long summer stays, there were twelve of us altogether, including our relatives, squeezed

into this tiny place. But we never once thought of complaining. This was life, and this is the way we grew up.

I am sitting with the present owners in a room that has been further divided into two. He and his brother have had a falling-out and have divided the house into these two compartments. Each family now uses two rooms. The girls probably sleep on the floor, just as my siblings and I did fifty years ago. Their mother offers me tea—there is always the beautiful custom of tea in India. This, too, takes me back. It is a marvel to sit here drinking tea with this family in the house that was my uncle's years ago. They plead with me to stay for a meal, but much to their disappointment I have an appointment elsewhere, a speaking engagement.

It is an August evening, and it is hot—around 100 degrees. I remember having ceiling fans that kept the air circulating, but there was little else to cool you. You simply got used to it. And there were various other ways to manage. We had thatched-straw drapes—called *khus-khus*—that were woven together. You could water these home-spun creations with a hose to moisten them, and then, as the breeze blew through the thatched straw, it cooled things somewhat.

I have brought the two girls of this family a bag full of gifts. Margie and I always prepare something for them at home before we come. And they're always appreciative that we think of them.

The father asks, "How was your trip? Why are you here this time?"

"I'm speaking in various places here in Chennai. Then I'll be going up to Delhi in a few days."

This man is a marketing director for a small firm, with a master's degree that he attained by going to night school. His English is broken, as is my Tamil, but between the two of us we make a sensible conversation. The girls do fairly well with English; the mother speaks none at all. They know I live in the United States, and one of the girls ventures to ask what city I live in.

"In Atlanta," I say.

They begin to tell me their dreams. One wants to be a teacher, the other a doctor.

"A doctor," I think, for I also was a premed student at one time.

The father tells me, in so many words, that his greatest burden is for his children to get an education, because none of his family did. Yet he doesn't have the wherewithal to send the two girls to college.

“Anything you can do to help them get the best education in America or Canada is my heart’s deepest desire.”

I tell him we could help. Our ministry provides scholarships toward education for families in need. His eyes get moist, hoping that this dream for his children might come true.

The last time I was here I tried to give the father some money, but he wouldn’t take it. He said, “You gave to me last time, sir. I am just honored you have come. That is enough for me, to see your face.”

So I handed it to one of the girls instead, telling her, “I want you each to have a bicycle to ride to school.” They beamed with gratitude, and now they ride those bikes to school every day.

Later, the father and I discover in our conversation that this house was sold to his father by one of my uncles. Family ties run deep here, coloring virtually every detail of life. I tell him that just a few doors down is the home that my mother’s family owned, the house where I was born.

That house was called “Dalmejiem.” The name was an acronym that included every member of my mother’s family: Devaram, the father; Agnes, the mother; Leela, the oldest daughter; Margaret; Elizabeth; James; my mother, Isabella; Ebenezer; and Manickam, the surname.

Now the girls are begging to show me the tree in their backyard. With their mother’s permission, they lead me to the very same neem tree that my cousins and I used as the wicket for our cricket games. The girls tell me they worship that tree for its antibiotic qualities. Every now and then, the mother lights a fire, and they hold a ceremony to pay homage. They tell me that she goes to the temple every day. “Every day, Uncle, she goes there,” they assure me, calling me by the affectionate term that Indian youths use to address their familiar elders.

Their mother’s eyes reveal the inner quest for piety, and my heart longs to tell her that God does not live in temples made with human hands. I trust that the time we spend together during my trips here will present the right moment.



IT IS NOT FOR SENTIMENTAL REASONS THAT I VISIT THIS FAMILY IN MY UNCLE’S former home. They are simply more of the beautiful people of my homeland with whom God has chosen that I cross paths. The truth is,

I'm happiest when I'm with people such as these, people with whom I'm at ease. Here in my homeland I am most free to be me, with no one to recognize me because of my profession. And I get to do what I love best—simply to be with people. It reminds me of my youth when I surrounded myself with friends.

But the reality is, in the next month I will be speaking before the United Nations on the opening day of their assembly. I have been asked to address the ambassadors on the subject of “Navigating with Absolutes in a Relativistic World.” The contrasts between where I am now, in this humble house, and where I am going to be in a matter of weeks are too vast to fully process. Yet, there is no doubt that God prepared me for this life I now lead, connecting the varied and ironic threads of my experience into a beautiful tapestry as He would see fit.

It is not a natural drive within me to appear in such a prominent place as the United Nations. Yes, it is a privilege I hold dear, and a sacred trust. But I never would have wanted to engineer something like this. That was my father's life. Because of the position to which he rose in the government of India, my siblings and I shook hands with prime ministers and presidents. We met and mixed with international leaders; we even entertained ambassadors and their entou-rages. The wealthy and the powerful are one side of India. Yet, I can't explain why today I shrink from such a public life. I can only say that it has to do with the way the Lord has framed me. I truly do feel for a world in need. And I relate with ease to the ordinary person.

Even so, the last time I came here to Chennai, to the very street of my birth, a man came running out of his house and called me by name. “Raviji! Raviji!” he cried, using a term of reverence. “What are you doing here?” He had heard me speak in Amsterdam some years before and now as I passed in front of him, speaking to someone in Tamil, he was shocked to know that I understand his language, indeed, that this was the very street where I was born.



INDIA IS A NATION WITH POLARITIES OF INCREDIBLE PROPORTIONS. SOME OF the world's greatest minds come from here, making great advances in medicine, philosophy, and in the world of the Internet and high technology. Yet in the midst of this, of course, is dire deprivation and longing for a better way of life.

In this subcontinent, the raw reality of life stares you in the face. For that very reason, it has always been easy for me to see Jesus on these streets. Any time I read the accounts in the Gospels, I can envision the Lord with the lame man in all his bare need on the side of the road, or the leprous body longing for a touch. After all, that's what I saw growing up, every day. Moreover, each time I read of the Lord walking in the streets of Bethany or Jerusalem and telling a parable, I see my Indian culture, which also deals in parables.

I see the tailor who sets up his machine in the open air on the street corner, wedged between other craftsmen and craftswomen, shoe shiners, fabric menders—all businesspeople who eke out a living from wherever they can find a small, square space. The people here know how to manage with very little. Yet, sometimes I wonder how they make a living out of it. Theirs are lives full of burdens and chores, and they're so very hard-pressed for money just to get by. Some are forced to set up home on the side of the road in a little shack. Others live on the streets in poverty, without even the advantage of a roof. And it's virtually impossible for the lower classes to rise upward.

This unvarnished reality must be one reason why India is the largest producer of movies in the world. The movies that are made here are the best barometer of humanity's gnawing need for an escape hatch. Through movies, you can escape to romance, to justice, to the fulfilling marriage you never had, to upholding the cause of the poor. Yet, in spite of the escapism that movies promise, you can never escape the sharp edges of life in India. It's always there to greet you as you exit the theater.

At the same time, there is also evident on these streets the very real resilience of the human spirit. People make a go of things with what they have. As I look from one side of the street to the other, I see those who will survive against all odds and who have learned to cope. India also is a deeply artistic culture. You see it even in this muddled-up, mixed-up, mishmash of a marketplace, in the way a merchant hangs beads or arranges his cushions with a pleasing aesthetic.

Each time I walk the streets in my homeland now, it's a matter of good news/bad news to me. The good news is, I am able to see clearly here—to behold life and all its pain. The bad news is, the pain is so overwhelming that I can get desensitized to it, and one has to be careful of that. It's why I keep telling my children to never forget from whence they ultimately came.

As I walk my home street now, I'm hit with the reality that my own life came out of nothing. By the time I was a teenager, when my family returned here on vacations to my mother's home in Chennai, in the South, from our home in Delhi in northern India, I realized how small her family's house was and how little my cousins had. I would ask my mother, "Why are they so poor?" By then, coming to Chennai always reminded me of the meager side of our existence.

Now, whenever I return, I have a yearning in my soul to be a solution to this. How can I help the very people whose blood is in my veins? Their food, their language, their ragtag existence from day to day, their struggle to survive—all of that is in me.

I always bring an envelope with money I've saved up or set aside. At the beginning of the week, that envelope is open to various needs. By the time I leave, everything in it will be gone. In a little over a week from now, I will go home to a steady income and a comfortable home, and, yes, a kind of sanitized life. But the ones I see struggling here I know cannot make it on their own. Sharing with these people some of what I have, and seeing the small bit of happiness it brings into their lives, is the privilege of a native son.

Sometimes we can convince ourselves that the answer to everything lies in economic well-being. Obviously, this is a very important facet of life. When you can afford a meal, a bed, a home for your family, you can be content. But it does not ultimately solve the deepest questions that haunt you. That is where religion is supposed to help, to offer answers.

Whether we like to admit it or not, many religions of the world are concocted to hold fear and control over people. Nobody likes to talk about this, but it's the way it is. The human psyche is vulnerable because of its built-in fear of failure, and becomes an easy prey.

That's the way I remember first experiencing religion—as something involving fear: A man rolling down the street, chanting the name of his god. Men and women with deep gashes in their faces. Tales of goats being sacrificed in temples to procure answers to prayers. Each time I asked my mother about these things, she explained, "They do it to worship their god."

Worship? It was an empty word to me, steeped in some mysterious expression that didn't make ordinary sense. It was a magic wand to ward off tragedy. The one thing I learned from observing such rituals was a palpable sense of fear. Everything had to follow a certain

sequence. If you didn't do it right, something bad was going to happen to you. If I didn't make my offering, what would befall me? If I didn't do this one thing correctly, what price would I have to pay to some sharp, implacable divine being? Was all that just superstition born out of fear, dressed up into a system, and embedded into a culture?

There was one wonderful aspect of the religious world I grew up in that held my fascination—and that was its stories. I loved the pictures; the mythologies; and the ideas of rescue, of winning wars, of magical potions, of how your mother could be saved by some god who came down and carried her away from harm. It was a bit of folklore here, a bit of drama there, a bit of religion, a bit of historical fact, all mixed together.

I used to go with my friends and their families to watch the religious plays at the festivals, and I became quite fond of them. To me, it wasn't so much religious as that it was part of a family's annual routine. Each year, when the Hindu god Ram's birthday came around, I went with my friends to see the plays that reenacted stories about Ram. I loved these dramas, because my little brother Ramesh was named after Ram.

My siblings and I got our first taste of Western religion when two Jehovah's Witnesses came knocking on our door one day. A Mr. and Mrs. Smith appeared, telling my father they wanted to teach us children to read and to know the Bible. They assured our dad how very important this was.

So the Smiths came to our home once a week, and for the next year and a half they sat in our living room and taught us for an hour or two at a time. I remember reading the Witnesses' book *Let God Be True* and the magazines *The Watchtower* and *Awake*. Most impressive, though, were the assemblies where they gathered groups and showed movies. One of these movies featured tens of thousands of people attending a Jehovah's Witnesses rally at Yankee Stadium in New York City. When my siblings and I saw that spectacle, we couldn't help being awed by it.

Yet, in retrospect, it shows how easily the human mind and heart can be manipulated. Ours was a small family with very little in comparison to most families in the West. And seeing that movie, with all those highly successful-looking people gathered in a magnificent

stadium, my siblings' hearts must have raced as my heart did. I'm sure they also thought, "This has to be true." It made us want to be part of such a great event, in a great city like New York.

So we continued to study with the Smiths until the day Mr. Smith came to the chapter on heaven in the book of Revelation. He stopped there and told us that, according to Jehovah's Witnesses' teaching, only 144,000 people were going to make it to paradise.

That hit me like a ton of bricks. Here my siblings and I had thought we were becoming very spiritual. These Western missionaries had sat with us each week, giving us homework and encouraging our studies. But now I scratched my head over this news. I asked Mr. Smith, "Only 144,000?"

"That's right," he said.

"Sir, how many people are there in your organization?"

"Oh, we have many."

"Do you have more than 144,000?"

"Oh yes."

"So even all of *your* people aren't going to make it to heaven?"

I thought of the Smiths' constant praying, of all their efforts to reach more and more people—and yet even *they* had no way of knowing where they were going after death. So they certainly couldn't assure me of where I might be going.

"Mr. Smith, before you came, I didn't know where I was going after I died," I said. "But now, after all this study, I *still* don't know where I'm going after I die."

They probably sensed they were up against something difficult at that point. Or perhaps my outright shock over this curious point of doctrine registered with them more deeply than normal. But not long afterward, the Smiths were succeeded by another couple, and when they sensed they were getting nowhere, they stopped coming to our house. Who knows, in another six or eight months, maybe we would have been convinced by them. But at that stage, I told myself, "I don't much care for this. I'm done with Christianity."

I didn't know that it wasn't Christianity I was rejecting, but I really had no idea how to distinguish one sect from another. At best, each of us was only thinking pragmatically, "What is it that's going to work for *me*?"



LIKE MOST OF INDIA, MY MOTHER WAS VERY SPIRITUAL AND AT THE SAME time very superstitious. In our home hung a picture of Saint Philomena, a Catholic saint, because of a commitment my mom had made after my sister Shyamala (Sham to us) was diagnosed with polio at five days old. The doctor gave Sham no hope of surviving, and in desperation my mother decided to send a gift to the Saint Philomena shrine in South India. She pledged that if my sister would get through this, my mother would give money to the shrine faithfully.

Sham survived. In her younger years she wore a crude knee brace from just above the knee to her ankle and walked with a bit of a hop. (Today, after a surgery, she has only a slight limp that is virtually undetectable.) But what was most important to my mother was that her daughter's life was spared. That is why, almost until the day Mom died, she faithfully sent money to the Saint Philomena shrine. It is also why my sister Sham was given the middle name Philomena.

After that ordeal, our family was brought to the brink again years later over our baby brother Ramesh. I especially was very close to him, so it struck me hard when little Ramesh, only six or seven years old, became ill with double pneumonia and typhoid. Very little could be done in those days for someone in his condition, and the doctors offered us no hope.

I remember the evening my parents decided to take us to the hospital to visit our brother in what we sensed might be our last time to see him. I was deeply shaken when I witnessed what had happened to Ramesh. He was shriveled down to a bag of bones. I barely recognized him; he looked like a picture of a starved child. After seeing him, we all expected that this would be the night he would die.

My mother stayed at the hospital with my brother while my dad took us home. We gathered for prayer in my parents' bedroom around a picture of Jesus that hung on the wall beside the picture of Saint Philomena. I recall that night clearly, on our knees in that room, my father's voice cracking as he prayed. I couldn't believe we were losing him. My little brother was really dying.

One of the people my dad had called to come and pray with us was a certain Pentecostal minister. Mr. Dennis had come to our house occasionally on his motorbike to talk with my dad and pray with him. We used to make a lot of fun of Mr. Dennis and to joke behind his back because he always sang when he prayed. He simply broke out into song, and it sounded so odd to us. We were unkind because we

had no clue what this was all about, and our Hindu servants in the house reprimanded us for making fun.

But now, with my brother dying, I prayed as I never had, alongside Mr. Dennis and the others in the room that night. In a voice of deep reverence, this man asked God for a touch of healing, for a miracle. There was nothing funny now. I was moved to tears as he called on the Lord to have mercy on my brother.

Meanwhile, the doctor had come to my mother soon after we left the hospital. He uttered to her the worst news of her life. "Sometime between midnight and 5:00 a.m.," he said, "it will be over."

My mother had not slept for several days. She had sat by Ramesh's side the entire time. Now, as she faced the torturous hours ahead, she was overcome with exhaustion. She simply couldn't keep her eyes open. As the night wore on, she fell sound asleep at my brother's bedside.

Hours later, my mother suddenly shocked herself awake. When she realized what had happened, she feared the worst. The hour had long passed at which Ramesh was to have gone. Yet when she looked at my brother, she saw that he was still breathing. In fact, his chest now rose and fell with a stronger rhythm than before. Something had happened during the night.

When morning came, my mom sent a message to us that Ramesh was looking stronger and better. None of us were sure what this meant. But the same message came to us on the second day, then the third day, then the fourth. Our brother had made the turn, and his strength was restored.

In our family's collective memory, this was one of our most defining moments. I don't know to what degree Mr. Dennis's prayer consciously played a role in this monumental episode of our history. But to me, there was something of God in it.

I don't recall ever seeing Mr. Dennis again, though I have often thought of him. He was a missionary living on a meager salary, a living saint. Somebody must have supported him. Why did he pick our family to visit? Was this not God in the shadows, keeping watch over His own? I did not think of it then, but I see it now. I made an association with the life of prayer and calling in that man, and with the miracle we all had witnessed—my brother's life had been spared.



BEING BACK HERE IN MY MOTHER'S BROTHER'S HOME BRINGS ME CLOSER, I sense, to the reality of a sovereign God. I can never forget that sovereignty behind my life, and it brings to mind a great Indian custom.

If you travel to the north of India, you will see the most magnificent saris ever made, and Varanasi is where the wedding saris are handwoven. The gold, the silver, the reds, the blues—all the marvelous colors threaded together are spectacular. These saris are usually made by just two people—a father who sits on a platform and a son who sits two steps down from him. The father has all the spools of silk threads around him. As he begins to pull the threads together, he nods, and the son responds by moving the shuttle from one side to the other. Then the process begins again, with the dad nodding and the son responding. Everything is done with a simple nod from the father. It's a long, tedious process to watch. But if you come back in two or three weeks, you'll see a magnificent pattern emerging.

This is an image I always remind myself of: we may be moving the shuttle, but the design is in the mind of the Father. The son has no idea what pattern is emerging. He just responds to the father's nod.

Back here in my homeland, I see the threads. My family, my home city, my spartan beginnings, a life having come out of nothing—I'm reminded again that the threads are all being pulled together.

This is the only explanation for the great irony in my being here now. You see, of all five siblings in my family, I had the unhappiest childhood. Yet I am the one who is most drawn to come back.

It's unexplainable. All of my siblings are natural leaders, and all live in Toronto today. Each had the beginnings of his or her success and happiness sown here, in India. Ajit, the oldest, was an engineer with IBM in the 1970s who later went on to his own commercial success as an entrepreneur. You would think he'd want to come back to the place where his mind was shaped, where all his dreams and hopes and promises were formed. You would think the same of my younger brother, Ramesh, now a successful surgeon, and my two sisters, Sham and Prem. I have no doubt they have this desire, but not one shares the deep, soul-wrenching, unshakable tug that I feel. Ramesh does tell me, "I want to go back sometime. But I want to do it with you, Ravi."

I'm the one who keeps coming back—and who wants to keep coming back. I have maintained the language and the contacts, mainly by walking these streets. When I return and see the buildings and the

beauty and the people, I reminisce, “This is where my life was shaped. This is where my calling began. And this is where I very nearly ended it all, out of my own despair.”

The sound of a voice crying out to God, a voice that once spelled terror in my heart, is now the very cry to which I respond with a sense of privilege all over the world. Still, to me, coming back is a dip into an ocean too deep for me to fully fathom. The full story only the tapestry can explain.