

Backgrounder/Article

TO BE ENLIGHTENED

BY

ALAN J. STEINBERG

In the late 1960s, college students around the world began to meditate in search of enlightenment. What if over 50 years later, some of them actually found what they were looking for? In his debut novel, *To Be Enlightened* (Adelaide Books, 2021), Alan J. Steinberg imagines the answer, drawing on his own life for inspiration.

A lifetime meditator, Steinberg has been practicing Transcendental Meditation (TM), including advanced techniques, for over 40 years. He is also a board-certified physician at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Group, where he practices internal medicine.

Debut novel is cosmic Love story meets philosophical treatise

He describes his debut novel as a “cosmic love story” and a “sort of philosophical treatise.” Told from the point of view of main character, Abe Levy, it takes us inside the mind and marriage of a philosophy professor, who longs to expand his consciousness—through knowledge of wisdom and through meditation practice. The method he uses is TM, which requires no special beliefs or leap of faith, but a mantra to bring the level of consciousness to subtler and subtler levels. “The closer we get to the Truth,” the character Abe says, “the closer we are to God.” The litmus test for success is a gut check, a direct experience more than an intellectual one, “When we discover a Truth, it resonates at our core, letting us know we are on the right path.” But for Abe’s longtime wife, Sarah, who enjoys the more ordinary joys of their home life, the path seems to be leading Abe away from her. Tensions rise as Abe’s quest gets more and more obsessive and begins to threaten the relationship and disrupt his classroom.

Consciousness, a birthright of everyone

What does Enlightenment mean in the novel? In a nutshell, a higher state of consciousness. “Every great tradition has this idea all the way back to Plato,” Steinberg says, “Plato talked about

a man of knowledge. And how people were able to pierce this cloud of understanding and actually understand the deeper Truth. ...it is not owned by any tradition. It is just inherent, a birthright of everyone, every sentient being. We all have the potential to experience it, to become aware of it.”

Philosophical leanings

Steinberg had started writing it in college while a philosophy major. “I was putting down ideas. I wanted my book to be in some ways a philosophical treatise.” But it wasn’t until years later, after he and his wife dropped off their youngest daughter to college that the idea emerged again out of the stillness of their newly empty nest. “We were actually quite depressed, and I wasn’t sure what my purpose was. Then the thought, what about that book you had wanted to write about in college?” The idea kept coming until he couldn’t ignore it any longer.

He was also compelled by powerful mystical experiences he had during a 10-day period when he explored various advanced practices of TM. The ideas are fictionalized in the novel, but he says, “I would not have written this book had I not had them.”

In addition to the Eastern influence, Steinberg brings in wisdom from all the main religious traditions and from quantum physics, symbolism, Sufi poetry and Western Romanticism to show that all paths lead to the same Truth. Through the writing of his book, he says that he was able to grapple with ideas, finding evidence for the hypothesis that “Vedic philosophy solves many of the problems that Western philosophy has been grappling with for thousands of years, way back to Plato.”

The result is an insightful commentary that makes these ancient ideas accessible and lets us into the intimate process of meditation.

Steinberg discovered TM in 1975

Part of the first wave of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) Movement brought to the West by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Steinberg first discovered TM through a *Time* magazine article about the Indian guru and a study that was conducted at the University of Hawaii. It showed how students who meditated got better grades. It caught Steinberg’s eye, because he would be leaving his Las Vegas hometown for Pomona college that same year (1975)—going early because he was skipping his senior year of high school—and he was a little worried about fitting in, since he was younger.

“I had always been interested in meditation,” he says, “but didn’t know which one was right. So I thought maybe this is a place to start.”

As things happen, not long after reading the article, he bumped into his mom putting on her coat in the hallway. When he asked her where she was going, it turned out that she was heading down the street to their temple for a lecture on TM. Steinberg jumped at the opportunity and went along. When they got there, they discovered it was a neighbor lady, Estee Russo, who was one of the TM teachers. “She was this calm, really wonderful woman,” remembers Steinberg.

Afterwards he went up to her and said, “Would you teach me?” She immediately said yes, and told him to stop by her house, whenever he would like. The next day he knocked on her door. He has been a meditator ever since.

A family of doctors

Alan J. Steinberg was born in Chicago, Illinois, but his parents moved to Las Vegas when he was still a toddler. His father escaped from Poland at 10 years old, just months before Hitler invaded. Steinberg’s father spoke no English, but soon learned and went on to become a medical doctor, the first residency trained radiologist in Las Vegas. “He started the first radiology department in the first real hospital there,” says Steinberg.

Following in his father’s footsteps, Steinberg became a doctor, too, but it wasn’t his first impulse. Throughout college, he had thought he wanted to be a philosophy professor. He had even taken the GRE, but his father was against the idea. “His feeling was, you know, his sons—he has three of them—they should be doctors. That’s a good thing for sons to do! And in the end, he won.” The choice ended being a good one, because it suited his temperament, but he does think he would have liked to work with students.

The novel brings out this teacher aspect of himself. “There is a lot of who I am,” Steinberg says, “what I wanted to be, my own self-doubts, my own self-reflection in the book.”

As a physician, he often recommends meditation as part of a treatment. “I’m almost forced by my patients to talk to them about meditation.... A lot of people will come to me and say, you know, I’m stressed, I’m anxious, I try to calm down, I don’t know how to calm down. I don’t want to take a pill. I read about relaxation and meditation, but I do it and it doesn’t seem to work. So we talk about it and I can help guide them in that way. I consider it one more tool in my toolbox.”

We all know that meditation has many benefits such as reducing stress and lowering blood pressure. Steinberg explains that it helps “purify and stabilize the body and the mind.” And

doing that helps get you to the goal of becoming “more of who you are.” The deeper benefits are that “you can see the world more clearly, you can live a more loving life,” he says. He believes we are all essentially “loving, kind, spiritual beings.”

“Find a good path and take it as far as it can go”

This optimism about human beings may be easy to characterize as a throwback to the ethos of the sixties, but the truth is it’s an impulse that goes a lot farther back than that—millenniums. In order to help heal our nation and our world, it’s the kind of thinking we need now more than ever. “We all come from different angles. We all are on different paths,” says Steinberg, “but the paths over time converge to what is really a higher version of ourselves.”

Through our own search for Truth and desire to experience it, we cultivate the possibility of adding our part to the whole. “The closer we get to the real Truth,” Steinberg says, “the closer we all get together.” The novel speaks to one’s potential and responsibility in this collective drama. If there was one message to his book, Steinberg says, it is “Find a good path and take it as far as it can go.”