

CHAPTER ONE

Ticking Bomb

“Even a happy life cannot be without a measure of darkness, and the word ‘happy’ would lose its meaning if it were not balanced by sadness.”

—Carl Jung

Potato salad or coleslaw? The decision seemed impossible. I ran my eyes back and forth over the restaurant menu as though doing so would prompt the neurons in my frozen brain to start firing—but of course, they didn’t. For all intents and purposes, my brain had short-circuited. As my silence continued, the waitress grew more and more impatient, and my father looked on with helpless despair from across the table, silently willing me to give our server an answer. Their reactions didn’t make a bit of difference, though. I continued to sluggishly ponder my lunch choices with no real hope of coming to a decision.

Potato salad or coleslaw? At that point, you might as well have been asking me for the cure for cancer. Or for depression. You see, the year was 2001, and I, Todd Patkin—the driven golden-boy-in-business with the Midas touch—was in the midst of a crippling and all-encompassing breakdown. Depression had completely taken me over, and my life was more of a burden than a joy.

Although I couldn’t have conceived of such a thing at the time, my breakdown changed my life irrevocably for the better. It was one of the most crucial—albeit painful—steps in a lifelong journey that has helped me to understand the true nature of joy.

My unique and at times very painful path through life has shown me firsthand many of the reasons why people are so unhappy. It has given me an understanding, for example, of how we are subtly—even unconsciously and very often unintentionally—conditioned from the very beginning of our lives to focus on the wrong things, ratcheting up our anxiety and perfectionism. My life has also given me insights into how the brain—the center of our being—develops habitual moods (for example, anxiety or unhappiness), thus leading many of us to spend our lives in quiet despair, or even worse, debilitating depression.

This book is the story of how and why I found myself at rock bottom, and of how, from the very depths of my depression, I was able to find true hope and then happiness for the first time. Moreover, it is my prayer that this book, as it chronicles the ups and downs of my own life, will serve as a guide and an inspiration to others who are facing daunting obstacles of their own.