

# Jesus Shines Through

## A Lifelong Search Through Hippies, Communes, Rage, and Church Culture for the God Who Heals

By Phillip Cohen

## Introduction and Apology

In some ways my story is historical:

- I grow up in inner-city Chicago, Atlanta, and Miami in the 1950s and '60s in a violent and dysfunctional Jewish home in a hurting, anti-Semitic, post-World War II world.
- In the late '60s and early '70s I become deeply immersed in the hippie movement along with millions of people my age who are searching for peace and love, many of us saturating ourselves with drugs, loud music, sex, and violence.
- I spend twenty-six years in heavy-handed Christian fundamentalist communities, isolated from the rest of the world, beginning my married life in poverty in one of the poorest counties in the U.S.
- All of that has become the reason for my lifelong search for people who truly love each other and the journey inside myself to find healing from the inner pain that keeps me from knowing love.

I'm telling my story the best I can, asking God to help me write it. I'm not trying to conceal or excuse the role I've played in my own troubles. I see myself as a struggling, stumbling sinner, one who's trying to sort out the real, healing, and loving God from the many fake gods that offer much but deliver little.

Perhaps you'll discover parts of yourself or someone you know in this book.

I don't expect you to agree with everything here. Hey, I don't always agree with myself. I'm sure once this book is published, I'll still be trying to understand life more clearly from God's perspective.

Nothing written here is intended to harm anyone. I have no ax to grind. Although we spent twenty-six years in a conservative Mennonite church, what happened to us can happen in many other churches.

As Mark Bishop writes:

*God builds churches  
With broken people  
With hurting people  
With searching people*

*And somehow these imperfect people  
Find strength to make it through  
And the broken become brand new.*

(Lyrics are from “God Builds Churches with Broken People,” written by Mark Bishop. Copyright Possum Run Music, Chris White Music, Asheville Music.)

I’m trusting that, while my painful experiences have brought me closer to Jesus—whenever I’ve been willing to take his way through the pain—the right and wrong roles I’ve played in other people’s lives also are working to bring them come closer to Jesus.

This book has taken more than 10 years and hundreds of hours to write. A team of writers and editors have combed through every chapter, sentence, and phrase multiple times, to ensure the story is accurate and easy to read. To experience the greatest blessing, I invite you to start at the beginning and read all the way to the end.

One more thing: I’m writing my story in present tense. I’ve discovered that when I write in past tense, I’m telling my story as I remember it. But when I switch to present tense, I’m reliving the scenes of my life, as though I’m actually there. I see more details. I feel more feelings. I pray that’s your experience too.

So there’s my short introduction. Now welcome to my story. May your life be enriched.

*Phillip Cohen*  
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## Chapter 18: They Wouldn't Even Let Me Say Goodbye

The September before our wedding, I call Mom to let her know we've set the date.

"Mary and I want to invite both you and Dad to the wedding if you promise not to fight," I say.

"I can't make that promise," Mom insists. "If an argument starts, we're going to fight."

Although I beg her to commit to keeping our wedding peaceful, she refuses to promise.

"Ask your father," Mom snaps at me. Although I'm now reconciled with Dad and treasure the memory of his hug and kiss, he's still explosive, likely to erupt without provocation, and I feel helpless. Around midnight Mom and I end the conversation, and I go to bed frustrated.

The next night, a sharp knock on my bedroom door startles me awake.

"Phone for you," a sleepy voice says.

I shuffle into the kitchen and pick up the phone. It's Mom.

"Phil, your father's dead."

"What happened?" I whisper hoarsely.

"He was playing with a gun, showing off to some of his employees. No one is sure how or why it happened, but he shot himself in the head."

"When did this happen?" I ask.

"About five this afternoon."

My mind is reeling. Dad has been dead seven hours, and no one thought to let me know until now? Although our relationship has always been stormy and furious, the news of his death still shatters me. No longer can I cling to the hope that we'll grow closer or understand each other. Our story is over now, and nothing can change that.

Mr. Miller is now standing in the kitchen as Mom promises to call later with funeral details.

"What happened?" he asks as I softly return the phone to its cradle.

"My father's dead," I manage to say.

"Oh," he replies without emotion, then turns and shuffles back to bed.

I head back to bed also, but I can't sleep. My dad's dead! My father, whom I loved and feared and hated and ran from—he's dead! How is this possible?

Feeling desperate, I call the bishop at 1:30 AM to ask if I can come over and talk.

“Of course, come right over,” he says, and his kind voice gives me a ray of hope.

As I drive, waves of darkness engulf me. I try to pray, but my thoughts are an endless, despairing scream. The cool, clear night and twinkling stars should offer me comfort, but I’m too numb. The five miles to the bishop’s house seem long. I knock on the door. He’s dressed and waiting, holding the door open for me.

I step inside the doorway and say, “My father’s dead.”

“Oh, Phillip, I’m sorry!” Compassion glistens in his eyes.

I feel far away. Dad lived a wild life. I’ve mentally rehearsed his death many times. Now here it is, and I don’t know how to act. Dad’s dead. I need some way to deny it. *Maybe Mom just said the words, I tell myself, but he’s really alive. . . . No, he’s dead. He’s really dead. My own father’s dead. How does a person act when his father dies?*

The bishop and I talk awhile, and then we kneel for a long time. My mind tosses and tumbles, but I’m too tormented to pray.

I try desperately to conjure some happy memories, but I can’t recall any. Then I remember my recent visit with Dad and his welcome hug and kiss. I desperately cling to that one happy memory.

The bishop and I stay up all night. Just before dawn I drive to the deacon’s house where Mary is staying. She’s sitting on a wooden chair in the kitchen.

“My father’s dead,” is all I can say.

Tears trickle down her cheeks.

The deacon’s wife, shocked to see me talking to Mary without their consent, sternly snaps, “What are you doing here?”

“His father’s dead,” her husband gently explains, reassuring her that we’re not acting inappropriately.

But because of their strict courtship rules, Mary and I remain stiffly apart, unable to comfort each other in our grief.

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A few days later, several people from the church drive to Atlanta with Mary and me for Dad’s funeral. Our old-fashioned clothes appear out of place at a liberal Jewish funeral, but I don’t care.

We step into the room where Dad is. I ask the others to give me a few minutes alone with him. The family respectfully files out, and I ask Mary to remain with me.

Dad looks as handsome as always. His hair and mustache are neatly trimmed. He wears an expensive-looking suit and tie. His hands, neatly folded over his stomach, are slightly raised in the air, probably due to rigor mortis. I search for the bullet hole in his head, but it's apparently been skillfully patched with skin-colored wax.

I always thought death happened to other people. Uncle Bert and Grandpa Jim died, Scotty accidentally killed himself, and my best friend Wally had been murdered. But that was always *someone else*. This is different. This is my dad, and he's dead. Dad, whom I feared, ran away from, rebelled against, and loved so much because he's the only father I've ever had. He's part of me.

A strange sensation engulfs me. Seeing Dad in the coffin, I imagine myself dead.

Mary kneels next to me, and we try to pray, but our prayers feel awkward and meaningless.

I hear clamoring in the background. Loud stomping on the wooden floor. Shouting voices. Dad's second wife and my grandmother, Dad's mother, are fighting, shoving, and punching. Then Mom jumps into the fray. More fighting, shouting, pushing, running. Suddenly it stops! All is silent.

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The next morning, I call the funeral home to confirm the funeral starts at 10 o'clock.

"No, it starts at 9:30."

It's almost 9:30 already. We won't make it on time.

"But I'm his son!" I nearly shout. "I'm supposed to be a pallbearer!"

"Sorry. We can't wait for you."

We skip the funeral service and head straight to the cemetery, but we get lost on the way. As we enter the cemetery, my family is leaving.

My sister rolls down the back window of the black limousine and says, "You're too late. It's over."

It's over! Mary and I park the car and climb the hill to Dad's grave. The earth is marked with a fresh dirt mound and a few scattered flowers. A floral arrangement, propped by the grave,

has a picture of a clock stopped at five minutes till twelve. I wonder, *Is it five minutes till death for me or someone I know?*

Hot tears roll down my cheeks. Life is so unfair!

“Dad, I’m sorry. They wouldn’t even let me say goodbye.”

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Back in Tennessee, when I enter the kitchen where I had taken Mom’s phone call a few days before, the tears start to flow. I hurry outside and sink into a chair on the side porch.

As I’m weeping uncontrollably, Mr. Miller comes out and silently stares at me.

“What’s the matter with you?” His voice is cool and even.

“My father died.” I look up, searching his face for understanding and compassion.

“Oh,” he says flatly and walks away, as he had the night Mom called about Dad’s death. It’s adding up now: these people disapprove of strong emotions. We must accept whatever happens as God’s will. Strong emotions come from our old sinful self, which must be suppressed. I thought my dad’s death would be an exception. It isn’t.

Everything inside me shuts down. I want to release the pain of my sorrow, but that would lead to disapproval and rejection. My pain and stormy emotions aren’t welcome here. As a loyal church member, I’ve separated myself from my family and friends because they’re supposed to be heathen sinners. Drugs, music, sex, and primal screaming are also forbidden now, so I have no release.

And now my host’s reaction shows that even tears aren’t acceptable for a devout Christian.

So I shut down inside and buy into the whole thing with black hats, black cars, and black suspenders. I do my best to look and act like a good church member, and that’s enough.

As I’ve done since childhood, once again I’m grieving and raging inside.