

JOSH RIVEDAL

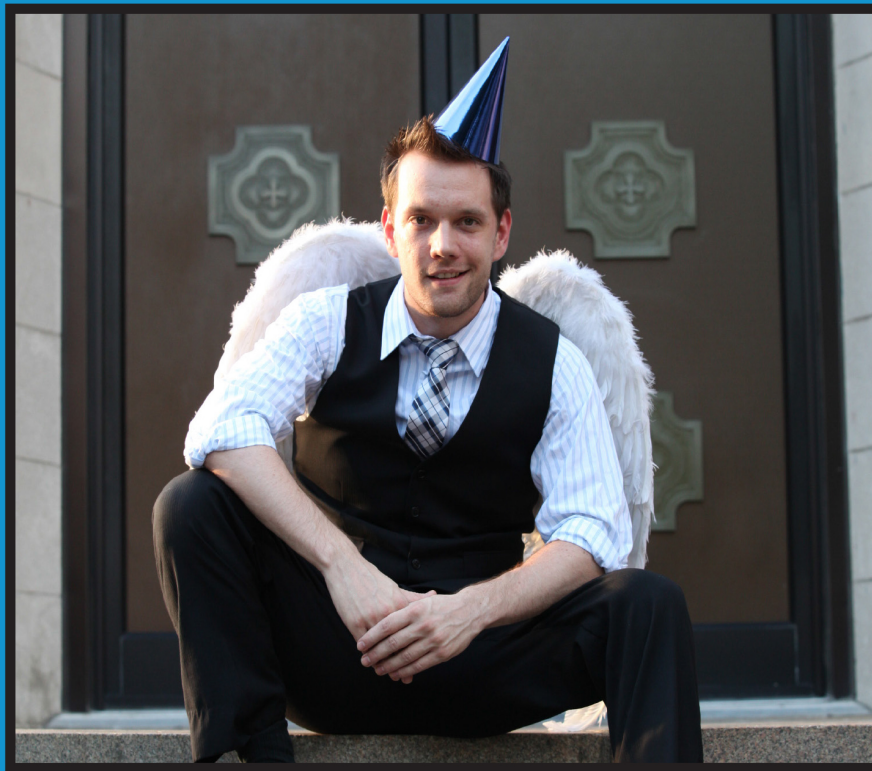
THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO

JOSH

A 28-YEAR GENTILE

BAR MITZVAH

A MEMOIR



Conscious Ageing Edition

*The Gospel According to Josh: A 28-Year Gentile Bar Mitzvah*

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Though you may hear me holler,  
And you may see me cry--  
I'll be dogged, sweet baby,  
If you gonna see me die.

Life is fine! Fine as wine! Life is fine!

Langston Hughes, - "Life is Fine"

## Synopsis

By the time Josh Rivedal turned twenty-five, he thought he'd have the perfect life—a few years singing on Broadway, a seamless transition to starring in his own television show, then cast alongside Will Smith in a summer blockbuster. After which, his getaway home in the Hamptons would be featured in *Better Homes & Gardens*, and his face would grace the cover of the *National Enquirer* as Bigfoot's not-so-secret lover. But instead, his resume was filled with an assortment of minor league theatre and one embarrassing reality television show. His career was sidetracked by his father's suicide—an event preceded by his grandfather's suicide forty years prior. In the aftermath of his father's death, his life is ripped at the seams. His mother has sparked legal action against him, his long-term girlfriend has left him, and his tortured thoughts have led him to the edge of a fourth floor window, contemplating jumping out to inherit his familial legacy. In turn he must reach out to the only person who can help him before it's too late—his mother. Based in part on his acclaimed one-man show, *The Gospel According to Josh* is a comedic and poignant true-to-life tale of love, loss, struggle, and survival, a gospel account of one young man's passage into manhood—his twenty-eight-year Gentile bar mitzvah.

# Chapter I

## An Epilogue Part One—Sort of

There I was at William Woods University in the middle of Missouri, decked out in a long-sleeved, blue flannel shirt and faded boot-cut jeans, standing behind a podium under a warm spotlight in front of a few hundred wide-eyed college students and some anxious faculty members, vocally paralyzed and desperately wishing I could gather myself just enough to string together a few coherent sentences for this room full of academics.

I felt like I was living that awful nightmare—you know, the one where you're standing in front of a large group of people ready to say something epic and groundbreaking, except somehow you left your house not only forgetting to wear pants but your underpants as well, prompting the crowd to point, laugh, and throw rotten tomatoes at you with their free, non-pointing hand.

However, this moment of paralysis I was having on stage at William Woods University was all too real. I was definitely wearing pants, and this being November, tomatoes were out of season.

I had never gone stiff in front of a crowd in my entire life. By the tender age of six, I was already wooing handkerchief-waving old ladies and a church congregation of more than five hundred as a song and not-so-much dance man. Performing on stage was as second nature to me as breathing, eating, and sleeping.

But standing next to that podium and sweating under those lights, I began to experience what seemed like some kind of spiritual, out-of-body experience... which

would have been awesome if I were drinking peyote tea in New Mexico with Tommy Chong and a psychoactive Sonoran Desert toad. But God knows I'm not that lucky, and whatever transcendent experience I was having was happening at the worst possible time.

I could almost see a part of me floating above my head, finding its way to a seat in the front row—eagerly anticipating whatever was going to happen next. It was like that scene from *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* when Tom and Huck were sitting in the rafters watching their own funeral. Except this wasn't supposed to be my funeral. This was my resurrection party, and I desperately wanted to celebrate with the auditorium full of spectators in front of me.

But with every silent second that passed, my credibility and grip on mystique and intrigue loosened, especially with the younger students whose hands were reaching for the smartphones on their hips to fill the time being sucked away by the lifeless question mark of a man standing before them.

And it was here that the much-needed role of cheerleader was filled by the usually ornery and disapproving voices in my head. If my brain was put up to a sonar machine, these voices would sound much like a cacophony of a Bible-quoting ball of religiosity due to my evangelical formative years, a wannabe ghetto-fabulous street thug due to my affinity for early 1990's hip-hop, and a Spanglish mala palabra-spewing joker as a result of working in restaurants with Mexican and Ecuadorian line cooks.

(—Speak! Make a joyful noise unto the Lord...—)

(—You got this, my dude, for shizzle...—)

(—¡Sí se puede, güey!—)

Following this short bit of internal dialogue, my joints began to thaw and dexterity returned to my hands. I dabbed at my eyes with the knuckle of each forefinger, licked my lips, and couldn't help but reflect on everything that had happened to me in the last two years. I was lucky to be alive and standing on that stage. This trippy and reminiscent stupor was quite possibly the longest fifteen seconds of my life.

Just as I regained my ability to speak, I went into the front left pocket of my jeans and removed my wallet. Inside was a tattered piece of computer paper folded over four times, which I quickly unfurled and read to myself. Scribbled on that piece of paper were three things that kept me alive only ten months earlier. I crouched over, just slightly, to drop the paper into my book bag sitting at my feet behind the podium.

“How’s everybody doing?” I asked my audience while wiping small gobs of sweat mixed with hair wax from my temples. “So basically, you know, I’ve performed the one-man show you just saw, *The Gospel According to Josh*, outside of the college arena quite a bit. It all started as a piece of theatre in New York City, where people, like, really dug the comedy of it. But truthfully much of the initial response I heard was in whispers. People were talking about the end, about my father’s suicide, and what they thought they knew about him—and what they thought they knew about suicide. But I knew what they were saying wasn’t true. It was incorrect.

“What I was hearing—and bear with me—reminded me of how we as children first learned about sex. Which was how? On the playground, right? Sadly, my playground was particularly slow, bless our little hearts, and ‘till the age of twelve, I thought...”

(—Even a fool who keeps silent is considered wise...—)

(—Do not tell them that story, dawg...—)

(—They’re going to think you’re, como se llama? Estúpido...—)

“... a Fallopian tube was something people brought to a water park so they didn’t drown.”

(—You see... they laughed.—)

(—At you. Not with you, homeboy.—)

“But fortunately with sex, we catch up and learn what we need to know in school. So by the age of fifteen, sixteen, we learn what we need to know, though some of you delinquents in the back still have no idea what’s going on. I’m just kidding; you guys are alright back there.”

## Get on with the Story, Brotha!

Right about now you might be wondering, “Why, Josh? Why are you telling me all this? What could you possibly gain by revealing yourself to the world, by choosing to tell this story?” And to that I say, “What story? I never promised to tell you a story.” But I’ll make a deal with you. If you finish all your dinner and wash your face, I will tell you a tale of struggle and survival, a gospel account of a young man’s passage into manhood—his twenty-eight-year Gentile bar mitzvah, a view into the life of a chronically unhappy artist and religious expat who wanted nothing more than to find the meaning in his father’s

suicide and his own “happily ever after”... only to go through three circles of hell and a near-death experience to get everything he had always wanted. Now put your arms and legs inside the vehicle. You’re in for a bumpy ride.

\* \* \*

°° Author’s note: Chapter 35 below is only a third of the entire chapter. Prior to this selected chapter, I lost my father to suicide, enrolled in college, pursued a career in show-business, my longterm girlfriend broke up with me, and my mother sued me and my siblings for our father’s inheritance. These events all happened within a span of twenty months, the occasions surrounding my father, my mother, my girlfriend, and not taking care of my mental health all leading to suicidal thinking and a near-suicide attempt, which is where we pick up in Chapter 35.

\* \* \*

## Chapter 35

### A Near-Death Experience

...So, I called my mother. The person who gave birth to me, raised me, and then completely betrayed me. But none of that mattered anymore. She knew my father and she knew me all too well. Maybe there was something she could do or say that would make it all better, like when I was a little boy. I just wanted my mommy.

#### THE DEATH OF A PRIDEFUL MAN

The phone must have rung fifteen times before her coworker picked up and told me she was out of the office. She asked if I wanted to leave a message.



“Yes, it’s her son and I’m thinking about killing myself. Would you please make sure she gets that?” There was no way I was leaving that message.

“No, I’ll call back later.”

Desperate and determined to talk to someone, I called my mother’s cell phone.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

Ring.

“Hi, Josh. This is a nice surprise. How are you?” my mother asked.

“Um hi... not so good,” I said in a hushed staccato voice.

“What’s going on Josh?”

“I don’t know how to tell you this... but I just need to talk to you. I need you to listen and please... I don’t even know if I want any advice but I’m in a bad place right now. All I can do is think of Lara and... all day and all night. I can’t eat and I can’t sleep. I’m obsessing over this girl. I messed things up with her and I messed up my life and I have nothing and nowhere to go and I think I might feel like Dad did. He couldn’t stop thinking about you...”

“Are you thinking of... are you thinking of suicide?” she asked. Her voice trembled in fear that her eldest boy was, in fact, very much her dead husband’s son—a boy who might end his life before he could produce another heir to enter into this wretched cycle of death.

I grew silent, not ready to admit the truth, fearful of whatever would come next if I did. But the mystery of the unknown wasn’t nearly as bad as the pain, sadness, and guilt that was wreaking havoc on my brain and the rest of my body.



“Yes. Yes I am. I think I might do what... Dad did. I don’t want to but all I ever do is lay on my floor and cry all the time. I need help. I don’t know what to do but I need you to say something.”

And she paused ever so briefly. I could hear her stifle tears.

“Joshua, I love you very much. You know your life is important to me. I know we don’t hold the same beliefs... but maybe this is God telling you that you need to come back to Him, to come back to church—”

“Mom, this ISN’T the time for that. I don’t need to hear that right now. I just need some practical advice. I need to know that I can call you and you won’t lecture me, or else I’ll hang up.”

“No, you’re right, Josh. You can call me anytime and I will listen,” she said with a trace of panic in her voice. “How serious are these thoughts you’ve been having?”

“I don’t know. I almost... I don’t really want to die, but I don’t know what else to do.”

“Do you... have pills in your apartment or anything else you can hurt yourself with?”

“No, no, of course not.” I hadn’t even thought about that. All I had was a radiator and slippers.

“Listen, maybe you should talk to a professional. Maybe a psychologist or something like that.”

Hearing her suggest a psychologist surprised me.

“You’re probably right. I’ve been meaning to look into talking to someone.”

“I know you’re thinking about, you know... but... is there any reason or reasons you might want to live?”

“I think so. I’m pretty sure now that you mention it.”

“That’s good Josh. Do you want to talk about them with me?”

“I think... I want to keep that private for a little while. I’d be too embarrassed...” I said, trailing off into pensive deliberation as to whether my potential reasons for living were even worth the trouble.

“Do you think after we get off the phone you could sit down and write out what those reasons might be?”

“Yes. Yes, I can do that,” I said. We were having a real conversation and she actually cared about me. The icicles that had formed over her place in my heart were thawing.

“That’s very good. I’m very proud of you.”

“Thank you. And thanks for listening.”

“Anytime, Josh. You know that you can call me anytime, day or night.”

“Yeah, thanks. Listen I’m gonna come down and see you and everyone this weekend. Okay? But I should let you go...”

“Okay. I love you Josh.”

“I... love you too.”

While sitting at my desk, I wrote out my reasons for wanting to live on a blank piece of white printer paper.

*1) I'll feel so guilty. If I kill myself, Erica and Jacob will probably be very upset. I can't let them lose their father and their brother... not like this.*

*2) There could be other adventures, many of them that I'll never experience... Macchu Picchu. Hawaii. Antarctica. Outer space.*

*3) A family of my own. A soul mate... a happily ever after, a fairytale ending...*

After reading and re-reading what I wrote, I folded the paper eight times till it fit into my wallet—a place where I could quickly find those reminders whenever my thoughts directed me to self-implode.

Finishing up at my desk, I staggered over to my bed to lie down, exhausted from all of the emotional and physical activity of the day. I had a lot to process: my three reasons to live, seeking professional help, and getting better. I wasn't going to die that day, not by my own hands. How I would live—that was another story.

\* \* \*

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This book describes the real experiences of real people. The author has disguised the identities of some but none of these changes has affected the truthfulness and accuracy of his story.

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## A Note from the Author

My grandfather was a Norwegian man who served in the 35th Squadron of the Royal Air Forces during World War II, and lived in the US for nearly his whole life. My book has reached English speakers in Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom. I came across Conscious Ageing Trust on Twitter and learned about the tremendous work they're doing for men who need a helping hand, like my dad needed before he lost his life in 2009. I was touched by their work and wanted to see if I could help them raise funding and awareness for their work.

## About the Author

Joshua Rivedal is an actor, playwright, and international public speaker. He has spoken professionally about suicide prevention and mental health awareness in more than twenty five U.S. states and two Canadian provinces. He previously served on the board of directors for the New York City chapter of The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and currently serves on the board of Elijah's Journey: A Jewish Response to Suicide Prevention.

He wrote and developed the play, *The Gospel According to Josh*, which has toured extensively throughout the United States and Canada, and opened Off-Broadway in New York City in May, 2014. He wrote the libretto to a Spanish language Christmas musical *Rescatando la Navidad*. He is curating and publishing a new inspirational compilation book series *The Good News Project*. Volume 1: *A New Point of You* will be published in February 2015. He writes for the blogs *The Arts Entrepreneur* and *The BLOGospel According to Josh*. As a voiceover actor, Josh has lent his voice to the role of Hippo in Scholastic's *Rabbit and Hippo In Three Short Tales*, the narrator of Julianne Moore's *Freckleface Strawberry* and the *Dodgeball Bully*, the narrator of *Cinderella Penguin*, and numerous other audiobooks and animated projects.