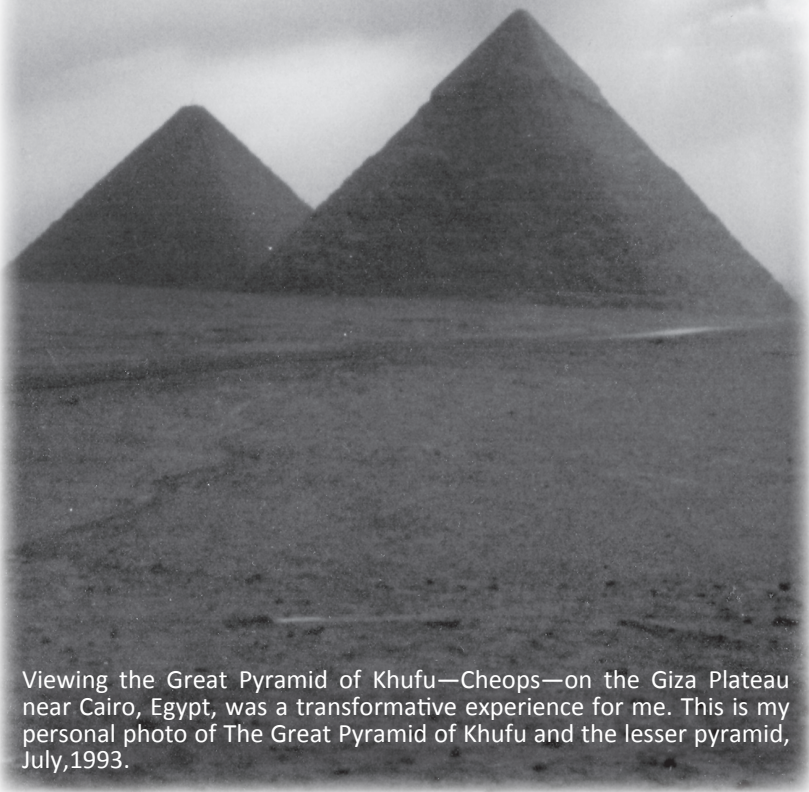


EYE TO THE SKY



Viewing the Great Pyramid of Khufu—Cheops—on the Giza Plateau near Cairo, Egypt, was a transformative experience for me. This is my personal photo of The Great Pyramid of Khufu and the lesser pyramid, July, 1993.

“Whether he's working on the stage or on the page, **Bobby Norfolk's** stories are always fun and full of life. From his antics as a 3-year old Superman to his experiences as a civil rights activist, it's interesting to see how stories have shaped his life, interests and pursuits.”

—**Susan O'Connor, festival director,
National Storytelling Festival (USA)**

"**Bobby Norfolk** has mined the ups, downs and sideways of his life to give us his story. It is from our trials and tribulations, as well our joys that we become. Bobby has invited us to take a ride on his roller coaster. Hold on tight!"

—**Michael D. McCarty, storyteller and prison counselor,
Los Angeles, California**

EYE TO THE SKY

STORYTELLING ON THE EDGE OF MAGIC

A memoir by three-time Emmy Award-winner

BOBBY NORFOLK



Parkhurst Brothers Publishers
MARION, MICHIGAN

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DEDICATION

To my parents, Pauline and Willie Floyd Norfolk, with gratitude for their jokes and memories of their childhood in West Tennessee and Arkansas,

To my son Damon, his wife Monique, and their cutie-pie-clever daughter Mikaylah,

To my wife, Sherry, for her loving kindness, energy, creativity, brilliance, and inspiration,

To my brothers, Wilbert, and Paul O'Neil,

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PREFACE

Growing Up

IN 1975, I WAS A SENIOR at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and facing a defining moment, a significant passage in my life. As a black militant and avid student of U.S. History, I was actively involved in consciousness-raising among black students and radical white students on the college and university campuses in the St. Louis area.

Then ... the movement died. African-American leaders had either been assassinated, exiled, imprisoned, seen their reputations ruined by the FBI, or had abandoned the movement to enter the mainstream business world. Malcolm X had been assassinated ten years earlier. Nelson Mandela was languishing in a South African jail. In 1963, Medgar Evers had been killed because he sought voting rights for blacks. In 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. had been shot at a Memphis, Tennessee, motel, a scene I was unable to erase from my active memory.

A young black radical, I was losing role models at an alarming rate. Where was I to look? Out of 537 members of the United States Congress, only *fourteen* were black. The governors of all fifty states were white. Colin Powell was still a student at the National War College that year. Outside of the U.S. Army, nobody had yet heard his name. Between 1932 and 1972, black men in Tuskegee, Alabama, had been secretly recruited to be treated like laboratory rats in a U.S. government test to determine the effects of the dreaded disease

syphilis. In the test, penicillin, the known cure, was withheld from them so scientists could observe the advanced stages of the disease. A TV sitcom, *The Jeffersons* premiered in the 1970s featuring a black man whose buffoonery bordered on *Amos & Andy*. It would run for the next eleven years, and then go into syndication. Then *Good Times*, a sitcom—a caricature—of black life in the Chicago projects premiered. It's somewhat relevant setting and situations were overpowered by the over-the-top comedy of J.J. Kid, *Dynomite!!!*

The only bright spot—only role model who stood out for black youth that year—was a black kid from Richmond, Virginia, named Arthur Ashe. Ashe surprised a whole lot of folks by winning a tennis tournament at Wimbledon in England. I later found out Ashe attended his senior year at Charles Sumner High School in St. Louis, Missouri, the school I would attend several years later. I did not aspire to make my way in the world banging little yellow balls around a green rectangle.

I was not a rebel without a cause, but it sure looked like I was a rebel without a future.



What followed was a fallow period for me. Where could I succeed? What direction might lead to success? Was even a modest happiness to elude me and my generation? A restlessness stirred within; something that had long been pushed down wanted to rise to the surface. What could a lost, lonely, discouraged kid from the low-rent blocks of St. Louis do with the rest of his life?

I took on the study of world religions, especially Catholicism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. I studied Krishna, Jesus, Moses, and spiritual mysticism. Going beyond religion, I also studied metaphysics, transcendental meditation, Hatha yoga, the martial arts, and vegetarianism. Given the dominant culture of mid-America, Jesus was



an odds-on favorite for my attention. Jesus had hair like lamb's wool, like me, and could turn water into wine to keep the party going! He was kind of radical, too. He had a sharp comeback for every slur the Pharisees threw at him, yet when facing Herod, Jesus showed that he was a gentle soul. That appealed to me. Jesus could work a big room. In fact, his best work was done in front of so many people, he had to do it on the side of a mountain. *That* was pretty cool.

Moses did some amazing stuff on a big stage, too, and I admired his style. If I could just get my hands on a walking stick and turn it into a serpent—at will—that would wow any crowd. Plus, Moses had a moral authority that I envied. When he talked, people listened.

Buddha was a curious model. His followers' teachings about states of consciousness appealed to a generation that wasn't real pleased with the conscious world it found itself inhabiting. Buddhist teachings of tranquility and mindfulness especially appealed to me, because I sensed that tranquility would be at a premium in the social turmoil around me. I wanted to develop an inner strength, not to impress others, but as a foundation for a life as (to use a phrase coined a generation or two later) a *change agent*.

Each spiritual tradition was appealing, in its own way. Obviously, I could not be a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and a Buddhist at the same time. But by studying each of these traditions, I became *aware*. I found that awareness would serve me well, whoever I became. As a spiritual person who sought unceasing awareness, I opened myself to learn from everyone around me. A brother, mother, janitor, off-duty police officer, barber, out-of-work artist—all of these and many more became my teachers. Awareness opened my eyes, and I finally realized that we as humans are so busy trying to make a living, we've forgotten how to live.



The rock group, Earth, Wind & Fire, had come on the scene in 1973. By 1975, I was beginning to find messages in their music. They seemed to be saying that an entire way of thinking existed, one that I had not begun to explore. Their 1975 tune, “Reasons,” spoke to the emptiness I felt. When Phillip Bailey sang, “I can’t find the reasons,” he was addressing me, not about love lost, but knowledge and wisdom gained.

I was beginning to form a personal foundation for the way ahead. I decided to begin on a path to self-realization, even if it meant carving out a way that made sense only to me. I would determine my *purpose for being*. Some mystics say that through spiritual searching we awaken a sleeping giant within us. They say that once it is awakened, The Master Within cannot go back to sleep. To follow him, they seemed to say, we unleash an insatiable hunger for wisdom, knowledge, and illumination. Spiritually, I knew I was one hungry young man.

In 1975, I studied the Ancient Teachings of The Rosicrucian Order and learned about so-called hidden truths that rivaled the teachings of quantum physics and mechanics.

A writer and thinker I kept seeing on television shows, hearing on NPR, and having friends tell me about began to interest me. His books were about awareness, centering the soul, and deep knowledge. His name was Deepak Chopra. I was immediately engaged by his books and audio recordings, especially *The Way of the Wizard*. I was drawn to his writings about Merlin’s teachings to the boy, Arthur, with whom I identified. During Arthur’s apprenticeship to the wizard, Merlin, the old man taught that we humans start off as innocents. Merlin taught that we then develop in our spirit a thing called the ego. The ego can become big trouble. From there, he taught, we can continue in our development through several stages: first The



Achiever, then The Giver, The Seeker, and The Seer, until finally it is possible to become Pure Spirit. What follows in this book is my interpretation of that voyage of discovery as I have experienced it.

You will undoubtedly experience that voyage differently, but I hope that my experience will help open your eyes to possibilities and energies that may comfort you on your path.

CHAPTER ONE

Early Years and Building the Imagination

I WAS A SOLITARY CHILD. My toys were scraps of wood gathered from the alley. Empty cereal boxes were another favorite. I would take scissors and cut the cartoon characters from them to use as action figures in my play. Cereal boxes also became flat-top mesas from which toy cowboys could keep their eyes peeled for toy Indians who traipsed unsuspectingly below. I quickly devised a mountain peak from a triangular wood scrap. It added perspective to my elaborate battles between the toy cowboys and toy Indians that my parents bought at the nearby Woolworth's five and ten cent store. In the decade following World War II, when I was a preschooler, molded plastic soldiers shouldering M-1 rifles or bazooka anti-tank guns came in a variety of colors, two dozen to the dollar bag. Being a Pisces, I was capable of sitting on the living room floor and creating my own little world for two or three hours at a time. Human companionship was irrelevant; my nature fairies were right there with me.

A city kid, I was content to read comic books like *Casper the Friendly Ghost*, *Spooky The Tuff Ghost*, *Archie*, *Bazooka Bubble Gum* comics, and the funny papers from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*. Before attending public school, I had been introduced to books by the television shows *Captain Kangaroo* and *Romper Room*. I imagined adventures for my Lionel electric train set, its gleaming engine pulling a long chain of boxcars to remote parts



of Missouri, despite the steep grades of the mountains I knew lay somewhere to the west. I knew that somewhere beyond North St. Louis there grew beans whose stalks had been climbed by a fellow named Jack, even into the clouds. I had heard of a Corn Castle in a faraway land where a beautiful girl was stranded all alone in a tower, the location of which was kept secret by a mean old woman with a broken nose.

I spent hours sitting on the floor of my family's apartment, lost among the characters of books or making up crises for those characters in imaginative play. During those periods of wonder, I was actually hard at work as Captain of the Forces of Good, who struggled in a world repeatedly threatened by the Forces of Evil. As I later discovered, the work of children is play.



In spite of my parents' limited means, the apartment was not lacking in treasure troves. One treasure trove was my father's toolbox. Like all treasure chests, it had a lid that folded back once the nail was removed from the hasp on the front side. Once opened, it yielded not one but two layers of amazing implements suitable for imaginative play. As I lifted the first layer out by its handle, I was careful to keep it level. I couldn't have the glass-handled screwdrivers falling out on the floor! Underneath, I discovered a small saw, something called a "brace and bit" that rotated like a crank, and several tools whose names were unknown to me. Acting on impulse once when I was about seven, I borrowed my dad's ice pick from this tool box and carved an image of a cowboy on a horse into the cabinet of our Magnavox TV. When my mom saw it, she exclaimed, "Bobby, what is that?!"

Exasperated at having to state the obvious, I replied, "Art!"

A spanking and a fresh supply of butcher paper and crayons followed. Our butcher paper came out of an aluminum foil box that

had been demoted to holding non-shiny wrap. But butcher paper was far superior to aluminum foil for drawing. Turning my attention to the thin box of eight crayons supplied with the butcher paper, I escaped into a reverie of awe. Admiring the perfectly pointed crayon ends, I imagined the potential to make green apples in the hands of a freckle-faced Archie, or broadswords in the hands of medieval knights. I eyeballed the first length of butcher paper my mother separated from the box as she stretched it diagonally across a thousand tiny teeth on the box edge.

I loved to take walks on the grass of the vacant lots behind our house. The bushes, with their attendant bees, beetles, and butterflies challenged me to catch a flying or hopping critter. In short order, I discovered that most flying insects were more than a match for my quick arms and hands. Despite that realization, the chase occupied me happily for hours on end. In those days, parents encouraged kids to *go out and play!*

There was no concern about abductions and kidnappings. Out-of-doors was a luxury for parent and child. The only rule on weekday evenings or weekends was to be home by dinnertime.

Exhausted from chasing butterflies, I could lie down on my back and gaze up through the branches of an oak tree for extended periods of time. As the grass tickled my back, my eyes darted from the tree limbs above to nearby flowerbeds. There, liver-colored critters shaped like drinking straws moved like living accordions, peeked out of the soil, and inched along through the mulch. Before I knew anything about fishing, earthworms entertained me among the flowers and bedding plants.

Returning my gaze to the world of tangled tree limbs above, I observed feathered parents tending their fuzzy young. I witnessed noisy disputes between squirrels over an acorn within reach, while I



noticed a dozen similar acorns just a few branches away. The menagerie of squabbling squirrels, colorful birds, and winged bugs in those branches fed my curiosity. Watching them was all I needed to regenerate. Though I would not have known it at the time, immersing myself in that world also fed my spirit. Many years later, amid the stresses of career and relationships of adult life, I found myself returning to those childhood hours. At those times, I realized that my stage work benefited more than anything else by reliving that early awareness of the natural world. Communing with nature, whether observing competing eagles or staring at the stars, fed my soul and enlivened my storytelling.

CHAPTER TWO

Theatre of the Mind

MY EARLIEST EXPERIENCE of mass media was listening to the radio. We didn't get a television in our house until I was six. My family had settled on Kensington Avenue in North St. Louis, Missouri, in the mid-1940s. In 1951, when I was born, my daddy and mama moved with my older brother Wil and me all of two blocks away to 4545 Enright Avenue. The neighborhood had been romanticized in the movie *Meet Me in St. Louis* with Judy Garland, which was based on the 1904 World's Fair. We would see that movie many times in my childhood; it returned to local theatres again and again—whenever the new movies of the season had run their course.

What a fantastic opportunity for me to use my imagination as a *theatre of the mind* even though at that time I had no idea what I was

experiencing was *reality*. We had a Magnavox radio as big as a chest of drawers. Our apartment was in a tenement house with four units. We were on the second floor, facing south. It was a small four-room space where Mom, Dad, older brother Wil, newborn Paul, and I lived.

CHAPTER THREE

My Early World

DAD RAN THE ELEVATORS at the department store Stix, Baer & Fuller. Mom worked in a Jewish confectionery owned by Dave Bean. Mr. Bean gave Mom a sack of groceries every day, a daily feast that she brought home for us boys and Dad. Mr. Bean would allow us to walk freely through the food shop and get candy, ice cream, soda pop, potato chips, and fruit.

If we wanted sandwiches, he would reach into the cold meats case, remove a log-shaped piece of bologna, salami, cheese, or whatever we wanted, turn on the slicer and cut off a few slices. The next thing we knew, he would be stacking everything between slices of bread and layering it up with mustard, lettuce, and tomato! What we could not eat in the store, he wrapped in butcher paper for us to take home.

Mom was a clerk at the food shop and waited on the customers. Mr. Bean tended the bar in the next room. Folks would come into the shop to buy groceries—or step into the bar for a tall, cold glass of beer there, before heading home for dinner. Kenneth Bean, Mr. Bean's son, always came into the shop after he got off work. I wasn't sure of his day job, but I did notice that he carried a pistol in a shoulder



holster, half-hidden inside his suit coat.

Buddy Bean was the grandson who we envied as heir to the salami-and-beer fortune. We could not know then that just a few years later Buddy would set out on an adventure with his teenaged friends in a canoe on the Meramec River in St. Louis County, and never return. On that sad day—then still in the future—Buddy would tumble over the gunwale of the canoe, and be lost forever in the turbulence of the river below. Drowned in one of the infamous sinkholes where the river swirled back upon itself, Buddy lost his luck and his life. For weeks afterward, Mr. Bean’s usual cheer was absent, and he went about his work in uncharacteristic silence.



My brothers and I often hopped the trolley car at The Ville and rode as it lumbered bumpily out Easton Avenue, now Martin Luther King Drive, to the village of Wellston. It was a three-mile adventure to the Bean confectionary. The trolley fare was five or ten cents, depending on your age.

From the trolley stop in Wellston Loop by KATZ Drugstore, we skipped the six blocks through the neighborhood of Craftsman-style bungalows to Mr. Bean’s candy, salami, bologna, and beer emporium. Little brother Paul would dance on the bar for nickel tips, doing his imitation of vaudeville tap dancers while patrons chanted encouragement. It wasn’t long before Paul perfected a tip-worthy routine, sure to elicit audience response, and end with a bulging pocketful of coins. Jabbing the air with elbows as he swayed first to the left, then to the right, along the bar, Paul bounced his knees with a lively rat-a-tat-tat. The sound effects were supplied by his shiny black shoes onto which a cobbler had nailed kidney-shaped metal “taps.”

With no skills to demonstrate, Wil and I were envious of Paul’s leaden pocketful of coins after his act.

The elevator that Dad operated at Stix, Baer & Fuller

Department Store (now Dillard's) seemed like a room to me then, large enough to contain four overstuffed easy chairs. Of course, it had no chairs, just a fold-down piano-stool kind of round seat on which dad could sit if he became weary navigating the four floors of the department store on Washington Boulevard. The elevator's double doors opened slowly as it settled at each floor. Its shining brass outer doors opened lazily to reveal an accordion-style screen inner door that Dad opened by hand, leaning across from his position at the button-studded control board on the side wall.

Always jovial and gregarious with a joke or witty line for customers, Dad beamed a big-toothed smile, announcing the floor number and its departments. If he disliked the routine nature of his work, Dad never expressed any disappointment to his boys. However, he did encourage us to perform at our best in studies and our extra-curricular activities.

At home in his easy chair, Dad loved Cardinal baseball on KMOX radio! Even though I did not particularly like professional baseball, I vividly remember Dad listening to the legendary Harry Caray and Jack Buck do their commentaries. When a member of the Cardinals would solidly connect with a ball, Harry Caray would say, "There it goes—waaaaay back. ... It could be—IT IS—a home run!" Dad loved *The Sporting News* baseball paper and read it religiously. It was his constant companion—that newspaper and a bottle of Budweiser. The paper would rustle as he opened it grandly, settling into a Sunday afternoon game, his cold drink standing at the ready on a side table at his elbow. Dad knew all the statistics of the players in both leagues. After a game, Dad would migrate to the front porch where I heard him discussing stats with friends, fathers of my friends who lived on our block.