

Three days in the life of an unintentional guru

Chapter 1

Beware of people who try to sell you baloney

Al Salami, the Bronx Guru

We're on the 12.15 pm BA flight out of Heathrow to Chicago and meet in the lounge at 11. Gavin my chairman won't fly anything but BA. When he's travelling with me it's business class but when he's on his own it's first.

Out of the office and out of the UK means he's out of the suit. This involves cream moleskin trousers, Ferragamo loafers and a button down bright pink shirt with a smart single breasted blue blazer. No matter how long the trip the pink shirt comes out every day with no evidence to suggest that he has more than one of them. It's a standing joke with some of my international colleagues who chuckle as they tick off the days. After day three I avoid getting too close. For a man who prides himself on his sartorial elegance this is an aberration.

We clink our champagne flutes and chat about nothing. The next 12 hours will be our own and the timing gives us a few hours to enjoy a good lunch on board, neck some fine wine and get seven hours kip. Landing at 3 pm local time allows us to freshen up before cocktails and dinner.

The flight works like a ritual for me, preparing me to step through the window into Planet Spring where nothing is as it appears.

The Border Agency guys in Fast track get us through O'Hare in 30 minutes clutching leather suit carriers that don't have suits in them. My US counterpart Jed Rivera is there to greet us.

Jed and Bill Spring grew up together and Jed's mother provided some of the basic care that Bill's parents couldn't manage. He trained as an engineer and was well into his career when Bill asked him to join him when he set up SpringBoard Consulting twenty five years ago. Since then he's played big brother, nursemaid, policeman and business manager to Bill containing his manias and enabling his brilliance. With offices in 15 countries he's not done a bad job.

Gavin and I are staying in Bill's mansion in North Burling St on Lincoln Park that's worth over \$30m according to Bill. He and his wife Dorothy have lived there for fifteen years and it was their first screw you property officially cementing their elevated status. Up until then they thought of themselves as "having been poor". They say they're past that now but they're really not.

The other senior managers from around the world are staying in the Waldorf Astoria and if I had a choice I'd be there too. Close proximity to Bill and Dorothy for extended periods is exhausting. Still, it's a compliment and our colleagues know that.

The house is 30,000 square feet of ostentation with an acre of manicured gardens, multiple fountains, a reflecting pool and a hand forged antique pavilion. An air-conditioned basement houses his six cars including his Bentley Continental and a Bugatti.

Interior decorators were given free reign in the public rooms and a few bedrooms splattering more gold leaf and brocade than Versailles while the plumbing's been left to rot and the windows crumble.

I'm hoping to get a functioning bathroom.

Jed has brought his Lincoln Navigator which could transport a small village in case we have luggage. In the event we splay out in it's cavernous leather interior for the thirty minute drive to the house while Jed rattles through the agenda for the next five days.

Bill's an unintentional guru who eschews the term but embraces the accolades. He's deeply sincere with a naive passion to change the world but he's battered and bruised so much that he's morbidly hypersensitive.

I like his vulnerability and his knack of pulling off mastery in the face of comic absurdity. And he laughs at himself or at least he does with me.

The problem is he's surrounded by people who want him to stay the same. They feed from his trough so they're scared that if he changes the recipe it'll dry up. The irony is they've created a compulsive risk taker who diverts himself with ever more self-destructive indulgences. In the end it'll kill him. It'd be poetic if it wasn't so pathetic.

It's nearly four thirty when we drive through the wrought iron gates that part silently, round the curved driveway and pull up at the double height stone pillars that frame the heavy studded front door. Almost by magic Bill and Dorothy appear with arms around each other grinning like two proud hobbits.

At 55 Bill has a lot to be thankful for. From poor boy to guru; he's a valuable brand and living proof that anyone can do it despite his invidious imposter syndrome.

Bill's back story is his richest source of material and his biggest millstone. His father died when he was eight and his mother couldn't cope with five children. If Jed's parents hadn't intervened they'd have starved. He worked from the age of ten eventually graduating high school in Tampa and joining the local newspaper as a trainee journalist. Within a year he made local radio and 3 years later was a news anchor and commentator on the regional TV network.

Bill was voracious and the audience loved him so he quickly became a national celebrity with an opinion. As he became more successful he was convinced that God had called him. It was at this point he set up SpringBoard Consulting and started advising national government and global corporations on how to be great. Jed instinctively created proprietary packages to commoditize his message and made him rich.

When I'd been a consultant at SpringBoard for a year I met Bill when he came to London to address my clients. As we stood in the wings about to go on stage in the Central Hall in Westminster he froze. *"What...what do you want me to say to these people Stephen? I, I, I don't really know what'll make sense to them"* he stumbled. My heartbeat's hammering like a drill. *"What the fuck"* I was thinking

"Well, Bill" I started *"Em just be yourself – they're no different from the other audiences you talk to. They have issues, that's all – it's all learned so it can be unlearned."*

"Okay...okay" he said.

In the end he smashed it but I never forgot the raw insight. We bonded that day.

I sense Bill's complexity and need for validation. He's proud to be the confidant of senior politicians and CEOs but he's also drawn to villains who he parades like prize ponies at conferences. But it's the ordinary Joe that's special for Bill – that's his mirror and he needs to impress them to confirm that he's emerged from the darkness.

God and mammon are bedfellows. While God peppers his anecdotes, his profligacy has nearly bankrupted him. His advisors encourage the former and save him from the latter restructuring to staunch the bleeding and making side deals to buy silence.

Dorothy was his childhood sweetheart before gravitating to wife, business partner and mother figure. She gets Bill's demons and has the smarts to stop them from destroying him.

She creates a safe playground where he misbehaves but calls time before it gets serious seeing off piranha women and walking two paces behind to allow him the spotlight. Everyone in SpringBoard knows the score – Dorothy's the gatekeeper.

As we step out of the car, Bill let's out a whoop and they welcome us in like two long lost friends.

They show us to our rooms announcing drinks in the Library at 6. The others will join us at 6.30.

Chapter 2

"But I don't want to go among mad people," Alice remarked.

"Oh, you can't help that," said the Cat: "we're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad."

"How do you know I'm mad?" said Alice.

"You must be," said the Cat, "or you wouldn't have come here."

— Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland

Bill Spring loves to hold court and spread the love. Dorothy teases out his latest musings and helps craft them into insights that can be sliced and diced into new products to help leaders lead better and teams to out perform. The consultants sell them making sure clients know what they want to out perform so that they don't mistakenly just out perform themselves.

The fifteen international satellites are all fog-horned on our global website but not all are equal. Only two have chairmen and MDs, UK Europe and Asia Pacific, the others have General Managers. That's why we stay in the big house while the others stay in the Waldorf.

Our bi-annual strategy events are mysterious rites of passage where we all pretend to synchronize our market acumen to develop unique strategies. In the event they're a journey through Bill's moods swings where we guess the questions he's asking and the answers he's looking for.

I score with a functioning bathroom so I take that as a good omen and am in the library at 6 on the dot bright eyed and bushy tailed. The poor boy from Tampa wants to be an English gent so the library is a replica of an English country house but the chintz lets it down.

Our colleagues from Asia Pac are already sitting on one of the four oversized Trafalgar sofas being served drinks. Bernard Boothroyd, the Asia Pac chairman and his general manager Billy McNade get up and we exchange man hugs with grunting. Bill enters with Dorothy followed by Gavin and soon we're all congratulating each other for being there.

Bernard's nervous of Bill. He hates the unpredictability of these occasions and always complains to Gavin and I during late night brandies when Bill's gone to bed. All he wants is to be left alone to run his business and the more flighty ideas that Bill churns out the more he has to muzzle his troops.

Our thirty minutes with Bill and Dorothy before the others arrive are our reward for being the special ones and we show our appreciation. I congratulate Bill on a recent TV appearance with Jerry Springer. Bernard mentions how beautiful the gardens look and Gavin loves Dorothy's dress. Billy doesn't bother and looks on with a goofy smile. He's never understood all this shite.

The 30 minutes pass quickly and our colleagues start to drift in led by the uniformed staff. The room fills with laughter, clinking glasses and a cacophony of foreign voices straining to demonstrate their command of English, our corporate tongue.

Bill and Dorothy are at the centre of the storm doling out smiles and warmly patting eager sycophants like a Presidential cocktail party.

At seven a loud gong summons us to dinner in the ballroom.

The table plan is a map of how Bill sees the power play out in his territories. He's at the head and I sit on his left with Gavin on his right. Dorothy's at the other end bookended by Bernard and Billy. Jed and his wife Betsy control the centre and the general managers fill in the spaces.

Crisp linen napkins, heavy Sterling silver cutlery and crystal glasses dress the antique table that stretches the entire length of the massive ballroom. Silver candelabras compete with chandeliers and 6 staff glide under the watchful eye of the fierce black butler.

This first evening is the orientation where everyone offers something to set the scene for their contribution over the next three days.

After a sugary welcome from Bill, Gavin kicks off as the senior man among equals. Etiquette demands that he thanks Bill and Dorothy as our patrons on behalf of the international subsidiaries for yet another opportunity to learn at their feet. His opening gambit alludes to ground breaking work in the UK to enable the poor and dispossessed to thrive and the captains of industry to innovate.

We move around the table anti clockwise and our Korean general manager Mr Bark bows and promises news of an efficiency drive in the automotive industry. Ms Sukarno from Kuala Lumpur previews developments in Indonesian schools. Carlos Lopes from Honduras speaks elegantly about their painstaking work to counter the curse of the drug cartels on young people. By the time we get to Mr Phan the GM of Vietnam who's excited about a motorcycle factory, there are two more contributors before I have to speak.

I've drifted but Lars Johansen restores me up with an account of their work with Statoil and the Norwegian Sovereign Wealth Fund. One to go; the gorgeous Lua Ben Abdalla from Tunisia wriggles in her chair flirting outrageously with Bill across the table. Dorothy tolerates Lua and manages her access to Bill to avoid incidents but indulges him tonight. Lua comes from a wealthy family and has no real business to report but I suspect Bill bankrolls this folly at least in part. He's obsessed with the number of countries on the website.

I smile warmly at Bill before looking down the long table of expectant faces towards Dorothy. My short piece talks to our development of corporate strategies for our clients.

Now it's Bill's turn and the room's catching a breath. Bill has a new infatuation. It's an odd couple, a rabbi and a monk who're sweeping the States with an unorthodox partnership promoting how spirituality can be harnessed in organisations to make them more profitable. Bill's booked them as a star turn.

In prayerful manner Bill asks us to join him in thanking God that we're all safely here tonight and to bless our next few days and our great work to make the world a better place.

Chapter 3

“When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

— Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There*

I’ve anesthetized myself with just enough brandy and slip into a deep sleep. I dream of Dorothy catching Bill with Lua. She’s not happy. I wake with a start as my alarm screams at six. I’m in the antique rain-shower in minutes as it spits water in all directions scalding me one moment and freezing me the next.

It’s day two of the pink shirt and Gavin has recovered from last evening’s stupor. He’s a hardcore party animal and at sixty five he’s keeping his end up. Bill has a plateful of pancakes drenched in maple syrup and is on sparkling form.

The GMs start to trickle in at seven thirty and congregate in the ballroom by the coffee table piled high with doughnuts and sticky buns.

Bill’s loose fitting Hawaiian shirt drapes over his belly like a silk curtain. Jed is chair and calls the room to order. Each country leader will present pet projects, challenges and their numbers. Asia Pac starts followed by Jed for the Americas and the rest of the GMs. We will close.

It’s a mixed bag of achievement, aspiration and wacko dreaming. Lunch is in the garden in the antique pavilion. Salad, cold meats and soft drinks.. Bill takes Gavin and I down to the garage to admire the new E type Jag. Pillar-box red with cream leather interior and stainless steel wheels. If he doesn’t loose weight he’ll have a job getting into it.

My slot comes at four thirty and the group look like they've been through a forced march. Timezones are dragging them down so I get people out of their chairs with one of those awful energisers that I hate. Signs of life return so I run them through our new strategic approach. Gavin interjects like a dog marking his territory.

Bill closes the session. By five forty five we're on the lawn with cocktails. Dinner is at the quirky Calumet Fisheries on the South Side and a coach picks us up at six thirty. The Americans eat unreasonably early which confuses the group who don't normally start eating until nine or ten at home.

Dorothy has arranged a special tour of the smokehouse when we get there with cameras poised to capture the scene for the website. The table's lively and I sit between Korea and Norway across from Indonesia. Gavin and Bill are back with Tunisia surprise surprise. I avoid the eel and go for shrimp; we're done by nine and I peel off for a few drinks with some of group at the Green Door Tavern avoiding the stuffiness of the Waldorf.

As my cab takes me back to Lincoln Park past Cottage Grove I spot Mr Bark slipping in the door of a seamy massage parlour. Naughty Mr Bark. I'll pop that in the bank for later.

Breakfast day two. Gavin looks well rested and Billy does that goggle eye thing as the pink shirt makes another outing.

Today's our immersion in the spiritual hinterland of Rabbi Botbal and Father O'Connor a popular Dominican monk.

The first part of the morning is Jeb summarising our global revenues and the projections that he's canvassed us all separately on. Target growth for next year is twenty five per cent. I have no doubt that the figure is based on fallacious speculation.

Two eccentric looking figures join us for morning coffee. Rabbi Botbal is six ten, dressed in black and stick thin. He looks like a reed that would be snapped by a gust of wind with tiny round steel spectacles that make his head appear like it's perched on a stalk. His thick German accent confirms that he came over to the US from Frankfurt ten years ago.

At his side, in full flowing black cloak over a startling white tunic is Father Patrick O'Connor born in the Bronx to a family of shifty Irish immigrants. When he speaks he sounds like runner for Al Capone. He's rectangular and around five six.

The GMs swarm wanting to please Bill. Father O'Connor is a pro. He looks like a confidence trickster but I assume it's down to coming from the Bronx. Bill enjoys the clamour and smiles like a doting parent while Mr Bark mooches recovering from last night's exertions.

Jeb hands over to Bill who introduces both men. He starts with Father Patrick because he shares his faith and praises his work on death row helping the country's most violent offenders acknowledge their awful crimes and repent in their final hours. Father Patrick looks solemnly at his hands clasped across his ample belly and nods.

Onto Rabbi Botbal who looks as tall seated as he does standing up. The good rabbi, Bill says, is one of the most progressive Jewish theologians around who inspires a new generation to embrace their Jewish faith in a thoroughly contemporary way. His extraordinary work with the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission has introduced an ethical slant making America a safer place for everyone.

These two men came together by pure happenstance creating a powerful chemical reaction that's changing how we think about modern day leadership.

The room is silent with all eyes fixed on Bill apart from Lua who's filing her nails.

They rise and walk slowly to the front, stop facing the massive fireplace, turn to each other as if they were sumo wrestlers, bow and swivel to face us.

They're completely anarchic and masters of timing. Rabbi Botbal is the most surprising bending and twisting his reedy frame for emphasis while Father Patrick's bobs like a buoy in sympathy.

The thick German accent bouncing off the harsh Bronx brogue is hypnotic.

They begin with a history of spirituality drawing us in by asking us for our definition. They chart the main figures of the past – paint extravagant images and ideas - dissect periods and discuss how spirituality changed and developed over centuries. They explore the big themes with a bold clarity throwing in jokes to lighten them and explore historical and cultural events that changed people's attitudes and practices.

They bring us to today with a bump describing recent perceptions of spirituality and how they juxtapose with religion. They compare and contrast the plethora of isms that've emerged as people chase meaning and analyse their spiritual dimensions. They're devoid of dogma and I marvel at how they manage to make spirituality so accessible.

They pass the baton with quick fire perfection and take us to a cliff edge before executing a handbrake turn and suddenly we're onto business.

We race from eighth century BC India where early organisations called Shreni were the first firms that could trade. Onto 960 AD when partnerships and joint stock companies came into being in China's Song dynasty.

We're on a roll and it's 1500 AD with government backed firms like the Dutch East India Company and British East India Company building global trading empires with stocks and bonds on new exchanges as goods circumnavigate the world. The tea trade is the latter day dotcom boom that reshaped the world map.

You can hear a pin drop. They push onto the Industrial Revolution in 1790 when processes replaced people and companies relegated artisans to bit players. Mass manufacturing was born and we were branding and marketing to a new breed of consumers as we entered a continuous fifty years evolutionary cycle.

Father Patrick takes us into the 1830s where US railroad companies introduced modern management and grew ferociously. By 1870, with goods and data free flowing founder-led trusts emerged, creating monopolies that crushed the competition. Soon they were replaced by corporations, owned by investors and run by all powerful executives. He pauses and his audience doesn't know how to respond.

Rabbi Batbol picks up the narrative. By the 1960s, those career managers ran an expanding macrocosm of diverse entities but the chaos of the 70s brought a revolution in thinking. It was all about unlocking value in companies aligning the interests of investors and managers. Leveraged buyouts ensued focusing on short-term gain causing misery. We guess we should be angry.

Today, Father Patrick announces, we're nearing the end of the latest fifty year cycle and something has to give. This is where Rabbi Batbol and Father O'Connor see the convergence of spirituality with a new kind of business.

We've fucked around with every other selfish, myopic approach to making money, surely tapping into the cosmos and our inner beings creates a better way? They open the floor to questions.

Bill's sitting in the middle of the central window in the ballroom with the sunlight behind him looking like he's been beatified. He's energized by the whole concept and closes the session reflecting that we're entering a new age where the power of perception based on a pure spirit of

intent will trump the ugly truths that are being pumped out in the media and corrupting our thinking. I hope he's not saying what I think he might be saying.

Tonight's a Country and Western themed night and Dorothy's booked the VIP Loft Lounge at Joe's Bar in town. Maria Bill's PA excitedly informs us that country and western costumes have been delivered to our rooms at the house and the hotel.

It's our final day and it's Strategy Day, the day we agree how to deliver 25% growth. We'll work until lunchtime with the afternoon off for activities. The choices are golf, a trip to the shooting range to try some semi automatics or a tour around Chicago's churches. I choose the shooting range,

Breakfast is subdued. Gavin and Bernard overdid it last night. I switched to water at ten because I had some calls to make.

The pink shirt has stains around the cuffs and we're all giving Gavin space so we select chairs at the other side of the table.

Our spiritual pioneers joined us at Joe's Bar and Father Patrick got hooned. He does a mean jig like a man possessed. Lars observed dryly that he's taking the whole spiritual thing too far. Rabbi Botbal was more restrained and fell asleep on Mr Bark's shoulder who was too polite to move for two hours.

I've agreed to run the morning session with Jed. At the end of each forty five minute slot group leaders present their findings to the room; by lunchtime we've a plan that we call a strategy.

Bill leaves strategy to Jed and focuses on being inspirational. He and Dorothy join our last session where Jed and I summarise the outputs and get each country leader to make a public declaration. It's a solemn affair that's faintly ridiculous in most cases.

We're on the home run and the barbeque's throwing out amazing smells. The drinks are coming thick and fast. No soft drinks today, we're celebrating.

Bill waves me over to sit with him and Dorothy. We joke about the highlights and lowlights of the last few days and he asks my opinion of his guest speakers. I don't bullshit him. For all his bravado he wants the truth from the people he trusts.

I say that being in touch with your spiritual side is good and stopping companies slashing their competitors and sometimes their own people is critical because it's so corrosive. The art will be selling it sensibly and avoiding the wackos.

He listens carefully, thinks for a while and smiles.

I have demob fever and drift over with a beer and a burger to the ornate pond and watch the carp fighting over food. Reminds me of my consultants back home. Jed sits down next to me and thanks me for this morning's session. We work well together and I trust him.

"So how are things with you and the family Jed" I ask

"Great thanks. Betsy's doing good and she's such a great mom – we're very lucky. Don't know what I'd do without her and don't know how she puts up with me!" he trails off "Look I've been wondering whether to tell you this" the colour's drained from his face "Bill's got cancer..... we heard last week. Only other person who knows is Dorothy and she's on a mission to get him the best treatment possible."

"Jesus Jed, how bad is it" I ask.

"It's bad" says Jed "It's in his stomach but he's going for tests. He didn't want to disrupt this week so he starts tomorrow. We're keeping it quiet until we know the whole story – don't let Bill know I've told you. Can you tell Gavin but not until you're on the plane? Bill doesn't want any fuss."

I skip the shooting range and go for a walk. I head for the shops vacantly thinking that I'll pick up some gifts for my wife Caroline and the kids. I stroll along Oak Street and head south toward the river. I'm trying to compute the news.

I find myself in Michigan Avenue staring in the windows of The Drake Hotel at the sparkly jewellery. I walk on past Louis Vuitton crossing towards the monolithic Hancock Building and into the Fourth Presbyterian Church. It's like Tunbridge Wells with its Gothic stone exterior and flower-filled courtyard. I breathe the cool air torn about what to worry about. Bill's the firm, it's built around him. If he dies what will it mean for me? I hate myself and make myself to think about him and his family.

I look at my watch, just past three, I'd better get a move on. I buy an overpriced bag in Armani next to the Water Tower for Caroline and candy from Hershey's for the kids. I hail a cab and am back in Lincoln Park at ten to four.

Bill and Dorothy are in the library having tea with Gavin and Bernard. They all look exhausted and I wonder for a minute if they've told them but I doubt it. We chat for twenty minutes in that aimless way where everything's been said and we need to fill space.

I excuse myself and pack, Todd will be here soon and I spotted Gavin's luggage in the hall.

Our departure's like reversing a film only Bill doesn't woop, he just smiles softly and we all promise to meet up soon on their next trip to London in a few months time. I wonder if it'll happen.

I wave out of the back of the Navigator as Todd edges it slowly out of the gates into the traffic. Two bedraggled hobbit like figures waving from the giant portico.

Todd's trying hard to make conversation and I'm glad I sat in the back leaving Gavin to suck up the drivel in front. The buildings, the cars and the people merge into one as I try to visualise my conversation with Gavin. What if he's upset that Jed didn't tell him directly? I'll say he just couldn't find the right time in the crowds but we'll both know he could have if he wanted to. The fact was he told me so I'm the messenger.

We pull up at Departures and say goodbye with man hugs and more drivel before pushing through the crowds to the business class check in and some quiet. The queue's not bad so we're through passport control and in the lounge in 30 minutes

Gavin looks beat and the pink shirt is on it's last legs. I get us glasses of Sancerre and sit him down. He twitches when I tell him, physically twitches both his cheek and his shoulder. I wasn't expecting that and have to stop myself gaping. He's too proud to ask why Jed told me and didn't tell him but I mumble something about the right moment which he shrugs off. Better not pursue that; we both know it's shite.

He's thinking the same as me I can tell. What about the firm? We agree to sleep on it and talk back in the office. He looks white as a sheet. Maybe's he's relieved that it wasn't him.