

DR. ERICA MILLER

**DON'T
TELL ME
I CAN'T
DO IT!**



Living Audaciously in the Here and Now



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To the energetic, inspiring, and wholly committed activists of Austin and Los Angeles, my two homes full of incredible leaders. I had you in my heart as I wrote this book. Together, let's draw on each others' strengths and inspire the world around us to do good.

Throughout the process of writing this book, I have come to know many who work in civic leadership, children's advocacy, women's rights, LGBTQ support, critical food services, spiritual guidance, affordable housing providership, HIV planning, domestic violence care, drug rehabilitation, mental health services, and so many more areas of vital influence. My thoughts while drafting this book are reflective of your heartfelt actions. It's my hope that your inspiration to me, coupled with the lessons drawn from my life journey, are enough to spark action in others.

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INTRODUCTION

A facial is something you're supposed to enjoy. I was there to be pampered by my friend, who was studying to be a cosmetologist. But instead of feeling relaxed and quiet as she applied the mud mask, I felt constricted, out of control. Suddenly, I was seven years old again, struggling to breathe as my mother covered my mouth to prevent me from screaming.

The Germans had showed up unannounced. They were at my family's factory in relentless pursuit of a particular kind of prey: *schmutzige Juden* (filthy Jews) like us. Crammed into the small space of the factory attic, huddled together in the dark on the prickly hay, we listened as the soldiers and their menacing dogs drew closer and closer. We knew the horrible consequences of discovery. We would be beaten, herded together, then forced into boxcars on the train for deportation—unless they decided simply to shoot us on the spot.

I tried to calm myself. "You're not a child," I thought. "You're not in danger. You're safe." But it wasn't working. I began to hyperventilate.

"Eva! Eva, get this thing off of me! Get it off!"

Quickly my friend washed the mud off, delivering me back to the comfortably familiar world of the present. Amazing! In spite of my practiced cognitive abilities, I had been rendered helpless by a traumatic flashback I hoped never to relive again. Some memories cannot be extinguished, even when you live half a world away and are distanced from the events by decades of personal growth and achievement.

Yes, that childhood experience of being hunted like an animal is an indelible memory for me. At a time when I should have been learning to read and write, as destiny would have it, my "grammar school" education turned out to be a grotesque experiential life lesson in human cruelty and the outer limits of human suffering and stamina. No child should ever be subjected to the atrocities I witnessed as my family came under the persecuting rod of the Third Reich. Yet today I understand that it was meant to be part of my life experience. Despite the flashbacks, I'm at peace with the rocky road that has brought me to where I am. Maybe that seems unlikely, even impossible, for someone who has faced the kind of adversity I have. But it's true.

There is a poignant Jewish word I grew up with, a word for how we both shape and are shaped by our destiny: *beskert*, meaning "fate" or "destiny." There is a lot that has happened in my life that I had no control over. In one sense, my path was chosen for me. But in another, equally important sense, I have always determined for myself what to make of my life. No one—not the Nazis, not my parents, and certainly not the rules of society—chose the kind of person I would become as a result of traveling that path. Destiny may have charted my course, but I chose the pace. Destiny may have written much of the script for my life, but I'm still the executive producer.

I've spent my years marching to the beat of my own drum—audaciously living in the here and now. I know that destiny may hand me more than my share of sour grapes, but I refuse to let that be the determining factor in how I experience the precious gift of life. Not since my family's escape from the Nazi camp have I stood aside while someone else dictated the outcome of my future. I just turned eighty, and I shall not be defined by my age. I plan to continue living with gusto, till age one hundred-

plus, life “according to Erica.” I am evolving!

Let destiny have its way. My mantra is and always will be, “Don’t tell me I can’t do it,” whether because I’m a Jew, a woman, a wife, a mother, a grandmother, plain or gorgeous, short or tall. There may be things that don’t go my way, and there may be obstacles to overcome from time to time, but whether I experience adversity or prosperity, I expect to cherish life with all its challenges.

That said, one of the things I’ve come to realize is that life is never quite as complete as when it is shared in community with others—whether that be with family and friends we’ve known our whole lives or the brothers and sisters who, as yet, remain strangers to us. I firmly believe that we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. Perhaps it’s because I’ve seen and experienced the utter depravity of human potential that I’ve also become especially sensitive to, and appreciative of, the soaring heights to which human generosity can reach when people embrace one another as fellow travelers in a sometimes difficult but always exhilarating journey toward a glorious tomorrow. Life is most satisfying when our lives touch others’ lives as well, when we reach out beyond ourselves to do our part in making the world we’ve inherited a better, more harmonious place for all to live and to thrive.

That’s why I’ve decided to write this little book. It’s my gift to those who, like me, thirst to live their lives with passion and with purpose. In these pages I hope to inspire others to share the resolute optimism that allowed me to rise from the ashes of the camps, not merely to survive as a “marked person” in an unaccommodating world, but to genuinely thrive as one who cherishes life and determines to make the very most of the hand she has been dealt. I’m going to describe five core beliefs that frame the way I choose to live each day. Along the way, I hope my readers will come to appreciate how my life, though not always easy, has been blessedly beshert. Never mind the past. My here and now is good, very good, and I want others to see that theirs can be, too.

Life Is a Journey

I have always been intrigued by the paranormal, by psychic phenomena. My mother possessed the gift of premonition, and I was impressed by a psychic my sister visited when she first immigrated to Israel. Some of those predictions actually came true—including the death of one of my sister's close friends, a young man named Yidale. Needless to say, when my friends and I learned that a famous traveling psychic from Haifa would be coming to Tel Aviv, we booked appointments well in advance.

It was 1958. I was twenty-four and still single. Most of my companions were getting married and settling down, something my parents would have loved for me to do as well. But I was determined to see more of the world first. My sister had left Israel to live with her husband in Los Angeles, and I had decided to pay them a visit, with stops in Europe along the way. It was unheard of for a woman to travel alone in those days, but I had saved some money and felt more than capable of handling myself abroad.

The psychic arrived in town about two months before my departure. Seven of us went for readings, and we got together afterward to share what we had been told.

“You really want to live in this country,” the psychic told me. “This is where your heart is, but this is not where you are going to end up. You are going to live somewhere far away, over a long, long ocean. Before the end of this year, you will be on a boat sailing toward your destiny. You are going to marry a widower and you are going to have two children. Your future is not in Israel. It is over the ocean.”

I came out of my session and cried like a baby. The psychic's predictions were so far off the mark of my desires, yet a part of me that I didn't know or understand, something deep within, was touched. My devout Zionist instincts protested vehemently, but somehow I knew she was right.

It was difficult for me to get my travel visa because Israel was reluctant to issue them to single women. They tended to leave and never return. “Look at them, the traitors,” I thought. In those days I was firmly convinced that all Jews everywhere were duty-bound to settle in Israel. The thought of me leaving and never coming back was unfathomable. I told the American consul as much when he challenged my motives for leaving.

“You speak English,” he said, making it sound like a criticism. “If you leave, what's the guarantee that you will come back? You could teach Hebrew school. You could work for American Jewish agencies. You could get married, and you may never come back.”

“Why wouldn't I want to come back?” I retorted, looking the man straight in the eye. “Remember, I'm single. I'm working for the government tourist office. I meet a lot of American men visiting here. I could have my pick. If I just wanted to leave the country and live in America, I could have been married by now.” I maintained eye contact. “I believe very strongly that all Jews should live in Israel. I'm positive that my life is here in this country.”

I must have sounded confident. The consul signed my papers on the spot, which was

unprecedented, especially under my circumstances. At last, I was free to spread my wings and to explore the mystery of my new adventurous life journey.



I suppose I was unprepared for the wealth of opportunities I would encounter in Los Angeles—opportunities to fulfill lifelong dreams and to realize my full potential. I certainly never anticipated that I would have to leave Israel to do those things. Yet looking back, I also realize that it was an equally unanticipated set of circumstances that brought me to my Jewish homeland in the first place.

Liberation by the Russians brought an end to Nazi occupation, but it hadn't put an end to Jewish persecution in Romania. In those days my family had hoped to relocate to Palestine for safety and a better shot at prosperity, but Romanian emigration policy made it very difficult for Jews to leave. My sister Dita was the first, having completed her studies at the *hachsara* (a preparatory school for young adults preparing to enter Palestine). She was sixteen years old, one of the famous *Exodus* Jews whose boat was intercepted by the British, sent to Cyprus, and finally secreted into Palestine in 1948. Dita married a handsome Sabra (an Israeli native) and began inquiring when we would join her. We were ecstatic when, only a year later, a change in Romanian policy enabled us to do so.

Had it not been for the terrors of war, I might never have left the land of my birth. Had it not been for the persecution my family faced during those agonizing years, I might never have known the unimaginable joy of freely stepping foot upon Israeli soil. Equally truly, had destiny not "lured me" to LA, I might never have gained the life I've come to cherish in all my years since then. I can't say that mine is necessarily the life I would have planned for myself from start to finish, but today I can say with absolute confidence that it is the best life for me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. My sojourn in this world has taught me an axiomatic lesson: *Life is a gift, a journey, both smooth and rocky*. We don't always get to plot the course, and there are times when our paths will take us through turbulent waters, but all of it is precious, if we choose to receive it. I've found that the joy of living—really living—is discovering the surprises that destiny has in store for us, delighting in the unexpected twists and turns of our fate and claiming them as opportunities to become something more than we previously imagined.



In Jerusalem with family in May 2013.



When I first moved to Israel, my parents sent me off to a girls' agricultural academy called Ayanot in a small town southeast of Tel Aviv. I earned the balance of my tuition by working in the school and on the grounds. I remember delighting so much in that experience. Up to that point in my life, it was the most wonderful thing I could ever have imagined for myself. Milking the cows, picking oranges, cleaning out the horse stalls, working hard by the sweat of our brows in the hot Israeli sun, then singing poignant Israeli songs around the bonfire at night—it was all so intoxicating. I was an enthusiastic pioneer, throwing myself recklessly into my new existence, horse manure and all.

As a young Jewish immigrant plucked like a brand from the fires of the Holocaust, I had already learned to revel in the simplest things in life as profound gifts to be prized and savored. Like the time back in Romania, before we had been permitted to immigrate to Israel, when I stayed overnight at my friend Suri's house. While I slept, Suri's mother had my torn shoes repaired, and I remember proudly rushing home the next morning to share the news with my mother. In those days I still had very few material possessions, and though I might not have opted for that kind of life if I had had the choice, it certainly enabled me to experience the smallest gestures of kindness with authentic gratitude and to partake of simple things like shoes and a slice of fresh bread as though they were jewels from heaven. I hope I never lose that. I owe my ability to savor the little things in life to my war experience.

Ayanot brought the same kind of joy for me. I became convinced that the kibbutzim (communal farms) were the way forward for a strong Jewish nation, and I threw myself wholeheartedly into the endeavor. Unfortunately, my parents were not keen on the idea of me moving away from them permanently like that. They attempted to rein in my passion by forbidding me to join the kibbutz and discontinuing their payments toward my tuition. Forced to abandon my education and return to Tel Aviv, I was miserable and angry, very angry.

I could have impetuously rebelled against my parents, of course. I could have run away in the night, married some young man, and lived happily ever after in an agricultural commune my parents didn't even know about. Or I could have gone the opposite direction, succumbing to despair and giving up my dreams altogether. But I didn't. Somehow, even when it seemed that the odds were stacked against me, I was convinced that the way forward began with taking ownership of my here and now. And as it turns out, though life on a kibbutz was at that time the best thing I could imagine for myself, I had a better future yet to be revealed. But claiming that part of my destiny would mean having to do the unthinkable.



Choosing to leave Israel, my newfound ancestral homeland, was definitely an unexpected bend in the road of my life. Still, even as I made the choice, I knew there was a clear purpose for doing so. I intended to pursue a lifelong dream that had begun long before I had even arrived in the Jewish homeland—a dream that only seemed possible abroad.

Back at the camp in Mogilev, things had been so very cramped for our family and for countless others forced to live in tiny makeshift quarters. With so many people in such close proximity to one another, an army of lice made an endless feast of our emaciated flesh. I'll never forget the misery. They were everywhere. Our hair was constantly full of them. Fortunately, they were the "good" lice—the kind that don't carry typhoid. (This was no small blessing. A typhoid epidemic raged through Mogilev, leaving people dead in the streets, but we were miraculously spared. As with our ancestors in Egypt, the Angel of Death passed over us, and we survived.)

Hunting for the little bloodsuckers was one of my favorite tasks, oddly enough. I distinctly remember the noise they made—a little pop—whenever I squeezed a louse to death between two fingernails. The smell was awful, though. We deloused ourselves regularly, washing our hair in gasoline in a desperate attempt to keep the lice from multiplying. To this day, I can never put gas in my car without the odor reminding me of that. There was this one old woman whose face is forever branded in my memory. She had lost her whole family and was wailing in such terror and pain. I remember thinking, "My gosh, I would like to be able to help her. I wish I could make her feel better."

The memory of that wailing elderly woman's contorted features kindled in me a deep desire to enter one of the helping professions later on, when I was living in Israel. At that time, it seemed apparent that the best way to help other people was to become a medical doctor, but there was no medical school in Tel Aviv. The nearest one was a full-time institution in Jerusalem, and my family simply lacked the funds for me to go. Arriving in Los Angeles, seeing firsthand the many possibilities for making my professional dream a reality, I found the lure of staying irresistible. Like a tiger after its first taste of blood, I wanted more. So, as captain of my life, I navigated the storm of my thoughts and decided to anchor my future in the "land of the free."

I agonized for a long time over my treasonous decision, though. I had nightmares. For years, I refused to become a US citizen, even after getting married and having children. It was very difficult for me to finally surrender my guilt-ridden thoughts, but I came to believe that not all Jews do belong in Israel. I had come to see that Israel is stronger as a result of those, like me, who choose to avail themselves of the advantages of living in the Diaspora (outside the land of Israel), who keep a watchful, protective eye on her even if from a distance.



My United States of America Naturalization Certificate. I became an American Citizen in 1969.

It was definitely an unexpected leg of my journey, but today I'm thankful that I had the courage to receive it and the determination to realize it. I never did become a medical doctor, but here in America I did find a way to enter the helping profession as a counseling psychologist. My career has brought me tremendous joy as I've taken a very active role in helping clients put back together the shattered pieces of their personal lives. In Mogilev, I couldn't have envisioned that my desire to help that old woman and others like her would be realized in a future across the Atlantic, but I'm grateful that I never let my pride stand in the way of capitalizing on the opportunity destiny put before me. It was far from easy for me to live through those days, but when I look back over that whole process today, it seems remarkably beshert.

Perhaps that's because I wasn't as different from my new American neighbors as I originally expected to be. Jewish tradition teaches us to faithfully practice *tzedakah* (charity), to share of our abundance and to reach out to those less fortunate than ourselves. In America, I discovered a spirit of volunteerism that resonates deeply with this aspect of my heritage. Americans may insist on doing things according to their own peculiar whims and on their own personalized schedules, but they also show a remarkable desire to spend their time serving one another in ways that are meaningful to them as individuals. I like that, because I truly believe that giving *is* receiving. There's a natural high—almost like a drug—that comes from giving of ourselves for the benefit of others, a euphoria amplified by the voluntary nature of compassionate service. Embracing this facet of my new place in the Diaspora has certainly eased the transition.

Of course, not everything has gone swimmingly. Having to close down Miller Psychological Centers in 1994 comes to mind. Like so many mental health practices receiving private insurance fees in exchange for their services, our once-successful chain of counseling centers was forced to shut down by the industry's shift to managed health care. Things looked very bleak for us, but, as always, my defense mechanisms came to my rescue. It is what it is, I thought. Life is unpredictable. Ups and

downs, twists and turns of our destiny just happen. I had a choice: I could either receive this new bend in the road with grace as I had with the decision to leave Israel, or I could bemoan the way destiny was taking me down yet another unfamiliar path. My husband, Jerry, thought I should probably just quit and fold my tent, but I said, “No way! I’m not about to cave in to the pressure of the changing tide of private mental health services.” I decided to cut our losses and refocus on the one part of our practice that was still viable: the nonprofit addiction counseling program we had begun years earlier in an effort to meet a wider range of client needs. We downsized, and I made my substance abuse coordinator the new program director, while I remained the administrative CEO. The arrangement worked well for both of us, enabling us to continue building on what we had left. Once more the tide began to rise. We were hanging in there! There was hope. There’s always hope.

Don't tell me it can't be done!



Like me, Jerry’s mother was intrigued by the occult. Shortly after our wedding, she told us about the Reverend Badger, a medium in the Santa Monica area who conducted séances. We decided to check him out. The man would go into a trance and then move through the room from one person to another, bringing messages from the “Above” as they were relayed to him by his departed sister in the spirit world.

I was impressed. On the night we visited him, he stopped in front of a woman and said, “You have a daughter, and she rides horses. Make sure that on Sunday the eighth she doesn’t get on a horse—to avoid an accident waiting to happen.” The woman he was addressing had been nodding her head in obvious agreement.

Stopping in front of Jerry, the Reverend Badger said, “She can finally rest in peace. She and the baby are happy. You have finally found somebody to live your life with.” Jerry’s mouth dropped open. His first wife had died suddenly of complications from pregnancy, only nine months into their marriage. They had purchased a house and were looking forward to their first child. Everything had been so wonderful for them. Then one day she was rushed to the hospital and died before Jerry could even get there. He was devastated, and though the tragedy occurred several years before we met, he was far from over it when we first met. The medium’s message that day must have given some peace to his troubled soul, helping him recognize and receive the new life path destiny was tracing for him in our marriage.

When my turn came, the Reverend Badger was even more specific. “I smell the aroma of stuffed cabbage,” he said. (It was something Dita had taught me to cook, one of the very few things I knew how to cook at all, and so we ate a lot of stuffed cabbage.) “I see a warm home,” Badger continued. “By the end of the year you will have an addition to your family.” I was pregnant at the time with Diana but didn’t know it yet.



Fun at the beach, 1963.

I could never have imagined what a winding path I would have to travel to reach that point in my life— living in the United States; comfortably married to a handsome, admirable man; and preparing to set out for still more unfamiliar territory as a new parent. Even then, I could not imagine the winding path that still lay before me. But thanks to a simple belief that had sustained me through the bends in my life up until that point, I could face the uncertainty of my future with grace and determination.



A FINAL NOTE ON THIS CHAPTER:

Life is an Amazing Journey

Your life is a mystery unfolding. You are the lead character in the process of your evolution! No rehearsal is required or desired. You are the creative, authentic author and producer of your life script. Embrace your uniqueness with courage and positive anticipation. Face ALL challenges head on, as well as the opportunities life has to offer. When you do this, you shall be a “hit”! There’s no mystery to it! Go for it! YOU CAN DO IT!