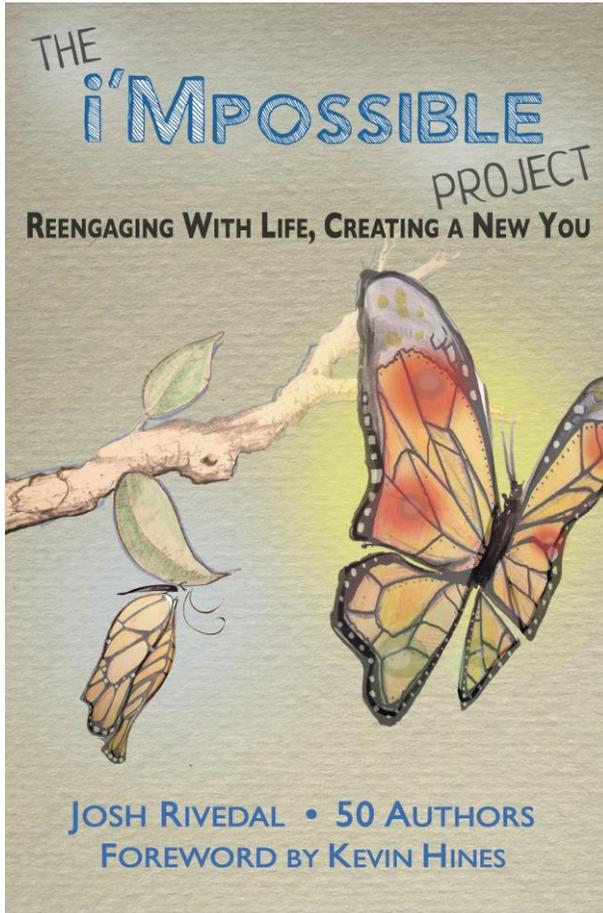


Sample Chapters
Mental Health Awareness



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My Inspiration for The i'Mpossible Project

FOR YEARS I'VE BEEN TELLING my personal story via an autobiographical thirty-character, one-man play *The Gospel According to Josh* (yes, I get along with the rest of the cast just fine). I've toured internationally with my *Gospel...* in theaters, high schools, universities, juvenile detention centers, and one unfortunate college biology lab. In my story, following my father's suicide in my early twenties, a lawsuit from my mother over my father's inheritance, and a break-up with my long-term girlfriend; all in the span of twenty months—I fell into isolation, silence, and melancholy that eventually had me hanging out of my fourth floor bedroom window contemplating taking my life.

But I pulled myself back inside and got help—first from my mom and then through trusted friends and professional counseling, all because I took a risk and shared my pain.

Now, after each presentation of my *Gospel...* I talk about my recovery process and how I found a way to reengage with life.

After nearly every show, incredible people, complete strangers who may feel voiceless or worthless or simply unheard confide in me powerful, personal stories on how they've overcome tremendous odds in their lives. These stories not only changed my life for the better, but also the life of the storyteller.

Josh Rivedal & 50 authors

At one point or another in our lives, I, along with millions of other storytellers took a chance on themselves and said “I am possible.” But why do a book about people’s stories?

STORIES PROVIDE A TEMPLATE FOR SUCCESS

Whenever I’m feeling particularly uninspired or low, one of my favorite activities is to read the biography of someone famous and look for the part of their life story where they had struggled. I find that I learn a lot more from a person’s low points—mine own included—rather than a highlight reel of their greatest achievements.

I’m deeply curious how people reengage with life after a difficult, traumatic, or tragic event. How did they get back on the horse? In what ways did they succeed? What did they do that was “unsuccessful?” Quick tangent: the word “fail” should be replaced in the English language with “lesson I learned on my way to success.” Boo-yah.

“If that woman can overcome her paraplegia to become a famous painter by using her teeth, then holy cow, I can do just about anything.”

“That guy lost his wife and daughter in a car accident and fell into tremendous grief, but then rebounded, found love again, and became the Vice President of the United States. If he can keep fighting on then, oh snap, I can keep on fighting too.”

When people give of themselves through the telling of their stories it makes the seemingly impossible in our lives tangible and attainable.

STORIES BREAK DOWN STIGMA

The world becomes much smaller. “That black guy,” “that lesbian-chick,” “that snarky-writer-guy who talks about suicide,” they all now

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have a name. David. Jamie. Josh. Each of these people has wants and needs, to live, to love, to survive and thrive... just like every other human being.

But why include these particular stories in the book? Some of the topics inside this book are not ones typically found in an inspirational-style book: murder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and a transgender recording artist. Each story displays its own beauty and with each the author uncovers a piece of themselves, showing us a moment in their lives where they've overcome a tremendous obstacle, transformed, or changed for the better—and by doing so they allow us to peel back and examine a layer of our own soul.

STORIES ARE A DEMAND FOR OUR CIVIL RIGHTS.

Slow down, Rivedal. Don't get so preachy. It's only the second page of the book.

I know. I just get really excited about this idea.

Once stigma is broken down because of the courage of the “abnormal” person telling their story, they are now viewed as a human being—they now have a seat at the proverbial table of equality. Jim Crow is repealed. Women's suffrage is enacted. Mental health laws are passed that empower and aid people with illnesses rather than traumatizing or criminalizing them.

That's the kind of world that I want to live in. Bam.

A COUPLE OF THINGS TO NOTE

This book is not written entirely by polished authors—some are and some are not. (Some of the authors might want to kick me in the shins after reading that last sentence... but I'll take my chances) Each story is unique, powerful and inspirational; a love letter of sorts to you, the

Josh Rivedal & 50 authors

reader, on how they've dealt with a tremendous hardship and found a way to reengage with life in the aftermath.

I've edited each of the stories to a certain extent—not to fit my writing style, but rather to make sure the story arc of each is crystal clear. I hope I've done you a service with this.

Each story is no more than one thousand words. Sometimes we get bogged down in unnecessary details not imperative to the heart of what the story is actually about. The word limit is to give the story arc a laser-like focus and is for the reader with a short attention span (like me).

How should you read this book? Some of these stories are lighter and some are pretty heavy—take your time with it. Read it out of order. Focus on one story a week, and savor the deeper meaning, figuring out how it speaks to you... or not. Read it however you want. If one (or more) of the stories inspires you and you want to pass it along—go right ahead.

QUIT YOUR YAKKING, JOSH

I actually had ten more pages and a couple of haikus to share but fine... without further ado, I present to you forty fantastic authors and *The i'Mpossible Project: Volume 1—Reengaging With Life, Creating a New You*.

(Cue the thunderous applause)

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The Lessons of War

Jenny Pacanowski

The lessons of war I believe are different for everyone.

Often, I have heard that war/conflict stays with you, seeps into your soul, creates moral injury—a restlessness that is irresolvable even with time.

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is not curable.

Creating discourse between what I believed to be true before the War.

And the truth I have lived with every day after the War.

We bring the war home with us.

My lesson is even though the War is a part of us,

It does not have to define who we are as veterans, as people or as beings in this universe.

It will, however, affect our perceptions.

Ever since my return from Iraq I have felt that my experiences in War have controlled and conquered who I was, how I react to other people, how I view myself, and what my future would be.

From 2005 to 2011, I was a victim and prisoner to my emotions, my PTSD, my co-dependent relationships, and my addictions. Slowly, I dealt with my outbursts of anger instead applying the sledgehammer of rage to ALL situations. I started with a mallet of discussing what I

was angry about and not just destroying everything in my path. My rage was fueled by my pain and grief of what I had lost.

My Idealism

Of love

Of friendship

Of family

Of humanity

Of the value of life.

But in 2007 my will to live was waning. In an effort to avoid the VA psychiatric hospital, I made my mother a promise that if I decided on the method, time, and place of my suicide I would call her before taking action. However, this safety net would only save me from killing myself and not actually help me live. One day, my mother's friend Andrea asked if fostering a shelter dog might help me.

The moment I started fostering and training bullmastiffs I had a reason to wake up. The dog needed to be fed, to go outside, and to be loved. In 2008, I was invited to a veterans' retreat. At the last moment, I refused to drive because of the fear that I would flashback to convoying on the roads of Iraq. My mother stepped in and drove me from Pennsylvania to Martha's Vineyard. This was my first experience in a community of veterans talking, understanding each other, writing and creating combat paper.

As the years passed I allowed myself to grieve the loss of my idealism. My youth that had been replaced with a hatred and resentment for everything I thought this country once stood for—honor, integrity, leadership, selfless service, loyalty, a fearless solidarity, and defense for what is right. Soberly, I grieved and cried for my betrayed youth and released the pain without feeling weak but empowered. Since then I have discovered an internal map to guide me. It started with throwing away the VA meds, the bottles of whiskey

and vodka. I put the needle down and ended the guilt of using my extensive medical knowledge to get high, escape, and be numb.

To finally walk away from my hope of death and trail-blaze a new path of not only learning for myself how to transition from war and the military culture but help others in their journey back.

I moved to Ithaca, New York to expand my comfort zone and embrace the future I never thought I would live long enough to see. I began working with the Veterans' Sanctuary, a non-profit organization that provides a holistic approach and artistic expression of healing for military veterans. I went to a “wellness chiropractor,” to adjust my attitude and increase the flow of ideas to my brain. The acupuncture flushed out the night sweats and minimized the nightmares. I ran and walked with my dogs in the sunshine, rain, and snow. I went to the park and festivals even though sometimes I didn't think I could breathe in the crowd. I farmed and celebrated potluck dinners. I educated college students about my experiences. We, the veterans and civilian allies, wrote, created art, and combat paper. But above all, I had a community—we created community. However, there are times that the reminder of failure still plagues me.

There is still more to be done.

The wars go on and the veterans continue to be misunderstood, lost, addicted, homeless, suicidal, homicidal, and traumatized by their communities and the system set up to help them, the VA.

Then, the Boston bombings validated my greatest fear of bombs blowing up on the streets in the USA.

For awhile it was like, *finally*, after searching all these years for bombs in the road, scanning and scanning, reliving convoy after convoy, after all these years, it happened... just like it used to every day in Iraq.

Now *my* war had truly come home. I thought my core broke.

But in my moment of despair, my core simply shifted to:

Josh Rivedal & 50 authors

A light shining on my map for hope.

The war *is* with me, a *part* of me but it does not have to consume me, it does not have to be a burden or weight to be carried.

The war can be a thought that drives me to create.

Or the war can disappear completely in those moments on the stage and in the dog park.

My lesson about war,

OUR LESSON TOGETHER.

Change your perception of trauma.

Challenge the mind to think differently about war, by channeling the emotion into something that works to help feel better—empowered—and not to follow the path towards self-destruction.

The lessons I learned after war are:

Healing is not a job,

Speaking the truth is an honor, especially if I can represent for those who cannot speak,

Writing is my gift,

Most of all I had to change the perception of my purpose...

I had to forgive myself for sacrificing my humanity to war.

To live and come home.

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The Secret Depression Club

Mae L'Heureux

Time is an odd thing, isn't it? One day we're 8, wide-eyed and optimistic and then suddenly we are 18, depressed in a college dorm room not sure if we'll survive the night. How does that happen? How do little girls and boys go from happy go-lucky spirits to sad, lonely, traumatized souls? I wish I knew. I so wish I knew.

I have depression. And anxiety. My whole pretty world was turned upside down my freshman year of college. I always thought anxiety was my primary problem but the dark wave of depression came over me in January 2011, as I was beginning my second semester of college. Until then, I had never really heard of depression. My life was consumed with social phobia, counting rituals, and the skin-crawling feeling that every person with severe anxiety experiences. It was what I was used to. I could handle it. I would even go as far to say that anxiety was my friend. Depression wasn't in my vocabulary—and even if it was, it couldn't happen to me. But it could, and it did, and I had no idea how to respond to it. It counter-acted my anxiety, which was everything I knew. I was comfortable with anxiety until depression came in like a bulldozer and tore me apart at my core. It ripped off my security blanket and left me raw and vulnerable. It was clear that the anxiety and depression weren't going to co-exist so I had to make room for depression, because it wasn't going anywhere.

It started slow. I was sleeping a more than usual, but nothing to cause significant alarm. Then it turned into skipping meals, and social activities, and studying. I did not care about a thing. Then, the disease

picked up speed and there was no turning back—I was the textbook definition of major depression, although I tried to fight that label with the little amount of energy I had left. Looking back on it now, I kick myself for not reaching out sooner. But when you're in it, when you're trying to swim away from the monster but end up only kicking in place, you can't get help. You can barely lift a finger, let alone begin to think that telling someone may be a good idea.

After relentless arguing with my roommate and friends, I decided it was time to end this and get help. So, I went to counseling. It sucked and made me feel worse. My roommate so badly wanted to tell someone who could help, but I made her swear that she wouldn't because I was so scared as to what would happen to me if an administrator found out how bad of a state I was in. I wasn't prepared for this to happen, so I didn't know what the consequences would be. After some terrifying nights and many scary moments, the semester was over and I was free. We kept the secret. I was still alive and no one except her and I knew how bad it was—it was like a secret depression club that we would forever have a membership for. That summer, the story emerged and my parents made me go to therapy. I think deep down I knew the fight wasn't over but I pretended everything was ok because I did not want college to be taken away from me. I had too much to lose—at the time I didn't realize it was my life that I was fighting for.

Through the grace of God, a loving family, supportive friends, and helpful mentors, I got through it. I don't say I beat depression, because I didn't. It's a disease and I got through one episode of it, and it took three years. There are days when getting out of bed is nearly impossible. There are meals that I still don't eat because I feel fat. There are moments when I don't want to participate in life because I feel worthless. And instead of getting overwhelmed and scared when those dark thoughts come back, I take care of myself. I have to be in

tune with how I'm feeling and now I know exactly what to do when life starts feeling like too much. People will say that I'm so strong for getting through this but I know that I survived that horrific time in my life because people cared when I didn't care about myself.

My experiences with mental illness were not something I appreciated until after I got through the worst of it. As I reflect on the past four or so years of my life, I am overcome with nothing but joy. Anxiety and depression taught me hope, love, and service. It strengthened my relationship with God and my bonds with family and friends. It showed me what matters in life and for that, I will be forever grateful.

Because of everything that happened, I better understand just how precious life really is. It's fragile and can be ripped any of us in an instant. But we don't live that way. We think we're invisible and that pain, suffering, and heartbreak can't touch us. The best way to use our God-given gifts is to approach each day with hope, love, and the faith that He is bigger than anything trying to bring us down. When the clock strikes 12 each night, we're given a fresh start. The goal of this life is to be better than we were the day before. My challenge for myself, and you, is to not accept mediocrity. You are strong and worthy, keep fighting.

Josh Rivedal & 50 authors

Eye of The Tiger

Jessica Gimeno

I was a junior in college. It was the second consecutive day that I spent in bed. I was on a steady diet of cereal and potato chips. A box of Kleenex and unopened textbooks were lying on my bed. If you added a pint of Ben and Jerry's, it would have been the post-breakup scene in any romantic comedy. But, in my case, nothing "happened." I did not go through a breakup or an argument with a friend or fail an exam. This was yet another sporadic episode of depression. Bipolar disorder does not care about your deadlines. I had homework to finish, and I was competing with my Speech Team at Nationals in a few days. We would be traveling to Long Beach, California. Realizing I would not get any work done, I turned on the television. AMC was running a *Rocky* marathon. I stumbled upon *Rocky III*. Apollo Creed was telling Rocky he needed to get the "eye of the tiger back." Clubber Lang KO'd Rocky in their first fight, and now they were training for the rematch. I always assumed Rocky was a "guys' movie." But, suddenly, it hit me like a bolt of lightning. I was Rocky and Rocky's opponents were my depression. Even though I was down, I was not out. That week, I did not win anything at Nationals, but I competed. And I finished my homework.

That bipolar episode happened two years after my diagnosis. My friend Dina's suicide precipitated my diagnosis. Dina had bipolar disorder. When she died, I realized I might have this disease and maybe that was why she understood my mood swings better than

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anyone else did. I went to the library and read up on the symptoms—recognizing half of them. Since my teen years, I fought inexplicable bouts of depression—marked by crying spells, difficulty concentrating, and suicidal thoughts. Those episodes could last anywhere from hours to weeks. And just as bizarrely as the episodes came, they disappeared and were replaced with happiness or periods of insomnia, racing thoughts, and great artistic inspiration. A week after Danielle's death, I saw the campus psychiatrist, who immediately diagnosed me with bipolar disorder. I also sought a second opinion, which confirmed the diagnosis. The diagnosis was the beginning of freedom after years of fighting a faceless, nameless enemy. But it was not a panacea for my problems.

Learning how to manage bipolar disorder was a process. In fact, I missed a final exam when I was a transfer student at Northwestern University during my sophomore year. But slowly, I added more tools to my bipolar survival kit, including medication, talk therapy, building a support network of family and friends, sleeping on time, and maintaining a routine. And one of those tools was Rocky. When I would wake up depressed or get anxious before a test, I would watch Rocky's fights. I graduated *cum laude* from Northwestern with two majors. At the end of my college career, I was a National Quarter-Finalist in Extemporaneous Speaking and a State Champion and National Semi-Finalist in Impromptu Speaking.

Bipolar disorder was not my only foe. I was diagnosed with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS) at nineteen. When I was twenty-four, Myasthenia Gravis, (MG) a neuromuscular autoimmune hurricane disease invaded my life. MG attacked most parts of my body. Within four months, I went from practicing yoga five days a week to not being able to feel my legs. I underwent several medical procedures and was bedridden for over a year. I heard about MG

patients in wheelchairs, and I feared being paralyzed. Thankfully, that didn't happen. Today, I carry a cane.

For the past seven years, I have woken up tired and in pain every day. When I wake up, I play Survivor's "Eye of the Tiger," strap on my Rocky boxing gloves, and pray for strength. I tell myself, "I can do everything through Him who gives me strength." People often ask me what it is like to live with five illnesses. I see myself as Rocky and my five diseases as Rocky's different opponents. Bipolar disorder is my Apollo Creed. PCOS is Ivan Drago. MG is Mason Dixon. Asthma is Clubber Lang. And, finally, psoriasis is Tommy Gunn. God bless Sylvester Stallone for creating a film franchise that spanned four decades. Boxing has become a metaphor for my struggles. Much like chronic illness, boxing is brutal and barbaric. Fighting an illness (or five) is not a team sport. I can have people in my corner, but my body is the only one that absorbs the pain.

I am a writer and health activist. But, my day-job, is coaching high school debate. A few months ago, we were at the State Championship, which was held at a community college with a large campus. At one point, the other coaches and I reached an impasse. To get from one building to another, I had to climb a long flight of stairs. I closed my eyes and imagined the stairs were the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art that Stallone made famous. There was no Rocky victory dance when I got to the top but I made it. I realized that I had been using visualization as a coping tool for years. Until that moment, I never had a word for it. First, visualizing helped me fight depression and now, my physical disability. You can call it "eye of the tiger" or whatever you want, but visualization enables me to write my own story. Every day. As long as I can see victory, I can fight one more round.

Author Biographies

In Order of Appearance

Jenny Pacanowski is an Iraq veteran, writer, poet, and public speaker. She joined the Army in 2003 at age twenty-three and selected the M.O.S. of healthcare specialist/combat medic. In 2004, she was sent to Iraq. During her eleven-and-one-half-month deployment, she worked as a combat medic driving a military ambulance and serving as first-responder medical support for convoys in Iraq for the Army, Air Force, and Marines. Her poetry work has been published in *Remaking Sense*, *After Action Review*, and the *Warrior Writers' Fourth Anthology*. www.warriorwriters.org/Artists/jen

Mae L'Heureux is a twenty-something college graduate trying to find her way in the world. Passionate about diminishing the stigma surrounding mental illness, Mae speaks openly about her lived experience. Mae has recently started her career in the mental health field through nonprofit work. She loves spending time with her family and friends, traveling, reading, writing, and immersing herself in all things psychology.

Jessica Gimeno is a health activist, writer, and public speaker. Her website, *Fashionably Ill*, is about surviving pain with style and humor. Jessica is also a contributor to *The Huffington Post* and *Bipolar Out Loud*. She has spoken at conventions for organizations like the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI). Psych Central named Jessica a Mental Health Hero. MSNBC did a mental health documentary on Jessica's life. In her free time, she likes giving makeovers to women with different illnesses, spending time with her nieces and nephews, and all things *New Kids on the Block*. <http://jessicagimeno.com>

Josh Rivedal is an author, actor, playwright, and international public speaker. He has spoken about suicide prevention, mental health awareness, and diversity in more than ninety locations across the



U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Australia. He has served on the board of directors for the New York City chapter of The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. He wrote and developed the one-man play, *Kicking My Blue Genes in The Butt* (KMBB), which has toured extensively throughout the U.S., Canada, and the U.K. His memoir *The Gospel According to Josh: A 28-Year Gentile Bar Mitzvah*, based on KMBB and published by Skookum Hill in 2013, is on The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention’s recommended reading list. He writes for the Huffington Post. He is the founder and executive director of The i’Mpossible Project—a non-profit media company designed to entertain, educate, and engage on suicide prevention, mental health, diversity and social change. Coming soon in conjunction with The i’Mpossible Project: *Living Mentally Well and Crushing it While in College*, and *Winning the War on Depression and Living Mentally Well*.

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Josh Rivedal & 50 authors

About the Book

It's finally ready.

I am excited to share that the first [i'Mpossible Project book *Reengaging With Life, Creating a New You*](#) (January 13, 2016) is available for pre-order... today. Like, right now (#word). At all the major outlets where books are sold (click the links):

Go to www.iampossibleproject.com/one to order an autographed paperback or an e-book at Barnes & Noble, iBooks (Apple), and Kindle (as of October 15).

I'll be honest: This is pretty big. I've been curating this book for more than two years—fiddling with the right combination of stories, authors, and concepts. If you've followed along on the [blog](#) then you know the truth already: I put my everything into this book. Absolutely everything. And you're getting a little of me and fifty incredible authors and stories when you get this book. It was exhausting and wonderful and a once-in-a-lifetime process to produce this book and I am just now getting the confirmation I hoped for: *It was all so incredibly worth it. Thank you for that.*

So Here's the Nitty McGritty

Pre-order sales matter a ton. They show booksellers and publishers that there is interest in what I and these 50 authors have written. It would mean the world to me and to these authors if you would [preorder a copy](#)

As a thank-you for pre-ordering, the first 200 people to pre-order will get a “thank you” in the book—forever, in the front where everyone can see.

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The i'Mpossible Project: Vol. 1—*Reengaging With Life, Creating a New You*

Not satisfied with a “thank you” in the book? I’ll also send you a free download of my first book *The Gospel According to Josh: A 28-Year Gentile Bar Mitzvah*—also on The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention’s recommended reading list.

#holylguacamole ... that’s some good readin’

All you have to do is send in a proof of purchase—a scanned receipt, a screenshot, a selfie with your receipt—to tony@skookumhill.com. You have no idea how much the fifty authors and I have been encouraged by your comments, your tweets, your emails, and letters. Thank you for inspiring me, and us, to keep pushing forward with this book. I’m so grateful to have you in this community and I don’t know if I say it nearly enough. Thank you... and thank you for helping make this “i'Mpossible” book, possible.

[Click here to preorder an autographed paperback copy or an ebook copy](#)

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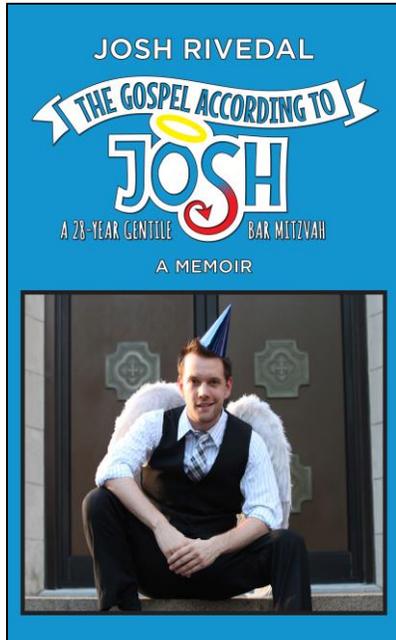
ALSO BY JOSH RIVEDAL

The Gospel According to Josh: A 28-Year Gentile Bar Mitzvah
(Based on the one-man show Kicking My Blue Genes in the Butt)

By the time Josh Rivedal turned twenty-five, he thought he'd have the perfect life—a few years singing on Broadway, followed by a starring role in his own television show. 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.

Instead, his resume is filled with an assortment of minor league theatre and an appearance on *The Maury Povich Show*—a career

sidetracked by his father's suicide, a lawsuit from his mother over his inheritance, and a break-up with his long-term girlfriend. Tortured by his thoughts, he finds himself on the ledge 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 before it's too late.



Available on Amazon, Kindle, at B&N.com and at

www.iampossibleproject.com/GATJ

On the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention's
Recommended Reading List for survivors of suicide loss

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