The Seeker King
A Spiritual Biography of Elvis Presley

By Gary Tillery

Taken from the Introduction

The deluxe Dodge motor home thundered west on Route 66, chewing up the Arizona desert. Three passengers rode along in comfort inside the spacious vehicle, enjoying all the amenities the mid-sixties had to offer—including an eight-track tape deck, a stereo, and even a television. Two other men sat up front, the owner of the vehicle behind the steering wheel. Passing motorists who happened, out of idle curiosity, to crane their necks and glance at him received a jolt they would never forget.

Elvis Presley had delayed leaving Memphis until the last minute. He had seized every excuse to avoid departing. Now, since he hated to fly, he and his retinue of friends and assistants were forced to drive almost nonstop across the nation to be on the West Coast in time to begin production of his latest film.

Several years of trite scripts and lackluster soundtrack albums had stripped Elvis of any enthusiasm for starting a new movie. He was embarrassed by the mediocre quality of the films the Colonel kept committing him to make, and he was disenchanted with the Hollywood lifestyle. But as he headed west, that was not the worst of what was troubling him.

He found himself in the depths of a spiritual crisis.

Twelve hours earlier, during another turn in the driver's seat, his mental anguish had reached a tipping point. Approaching Amarillo in the early morning, with no word to the others, he abruptly pulled off the highway into a motel parking lot. The entourage in the motor home and two accompanying cars—known to the world as the Memphis Mafia—poured out of the vehicles to surround him and voice their objections. They worked for the King, but they knew that if they let him fall behind schedule they would hear from the
power behind the throne—Colonel Tom Parker. Elvis assured them that he had no
intention of a long stay. He merely wanted to take a few minutes to refresh himself.

That is what he told them. Actually, conflicted and agitated, he wanted to unburden his
spirit to the only person in the group he felt could appreciate his anguish. No sooner had he
taken refuge in his own room than he telephoned the room where the others had gathered
and asked for Larry Geller, the man in whom he confided about matters of the spirit.

When Geller arrived he found Elvis sitting on the side of the bed. The King immediately
stood up and began to stride around the room. He started letting out his frustration,
earnestly wanting to know what he was doing wrong. For over a year he had been studying
the books Geller had recommended—scores of books, hundreds of books—about spiritual
and metaphysical matters, yet he seemed no closer to finding any solace, any peace, any
answers. He kept hoping for some revelatory moment, some profound experience in which
he would suddenly grasp the essence of the teachings and gain insight into the meaning
and direction of his life. Instead, his voracious reading, day and night, seemed to be taking
him nowhere.

Geller sympathized with his exasperation. Well aware of Elvis’ obsessive nature, he
assured him that the problem was he was trying to force something that could not be
forced. He recalled and began to relate the centuries-old story of a discouraged Zen
student.

One day the pupil came to the master and poured out his heart. All of his years of
intensive study seemed to be pointless; he felt no nearer to enlightenment than when he
had started. The master listened patiently. Meanwhile, he began to fill the student’s cup
with tea. The liquid reached the rim and started to overflow, but instead of stopping the
master continued to pour more and more tea. It began to spill all over the table. The
student interrupted himself to ask the master why he did not stop—the cup was obviously
full.

The master said, “Exactly. And like the cup, you are running over, and nothing more can
come in. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

Geller drove home the point. “Forget the books, Elvis. Let go of your knowledge. Become
empty so God can have a place to enter.”

Minutes later they were back on the road.
They crossed Texas and New Mexico that day. In the afternoon Elvis was at the wheel again, unusually quiet and thoughtful ever since the brief stop at the motel. Billy Smith, Red West, and Jerry Schilling lounged in the rear of the vehicle. Geller sat up front with Elvis, and as they passed near the Painted Desert in northeastern Arizona, the two of them gazed at the stark but beautiful landscape.

Five years earlier, Geller had been driving along the same stretch of Route 66, but from the opposite direction. Having just turned twenty-one, he was in the midst of his own spiritual crisis. On that unforgettable day, and in the same area, he experienced an epiphany. He compared it to being struck by lightning, and could describe it no other way than as an awakening. After that moment his life changed. He undertook an earnest study of the Bible, and the works of Yogananda, Krishnamurti, and Gurdjieff.

Suddenly, Elvis broke the silence, “Whoa!”

Geller glanced at him. Presley was leaning back in his seat, arms straightened, struck with wonder. He was staring at the horizon, and when Geller turned his eyes in that same direction he observed a single cloud in a clear blue sky.

“Do you see what I see?” Elvis said.

Geller did. The solitary cloud had assumed a very specific, recognizable shape—a face—and there was no mistaking the person it resembled. Both Elvis and Geller clearly saw the features of that era’s epitome of evil—Joseph Stalin.

They sat enthralled as the cloud gradually lost its shape, distending, mutating.

Elvis abruptly hit the brakes. He guided the vehicle to a stop on the shoulder of the road and opened the door and jumped out. He called to Geller to come with him and went running across the desert sand.

When Geller caught up to Elvis he found him choked with emotion, his cheeks wet with tears. “It’s God. It’s love. God is love, Larry.” He hugged Geller and told him he loved him. “Now I know. Now I know. I’ll never have to doubt again.” More words poured out, anxious words, words with which he strained to express the inexpressible.

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Introduction

i Larry Geller and Joel Spector with Patricia Romanowski, “If I Can Dream”: Elvis’ Own Story (New York: Avon, 1990), 103-05.

ii Ibid., 18.