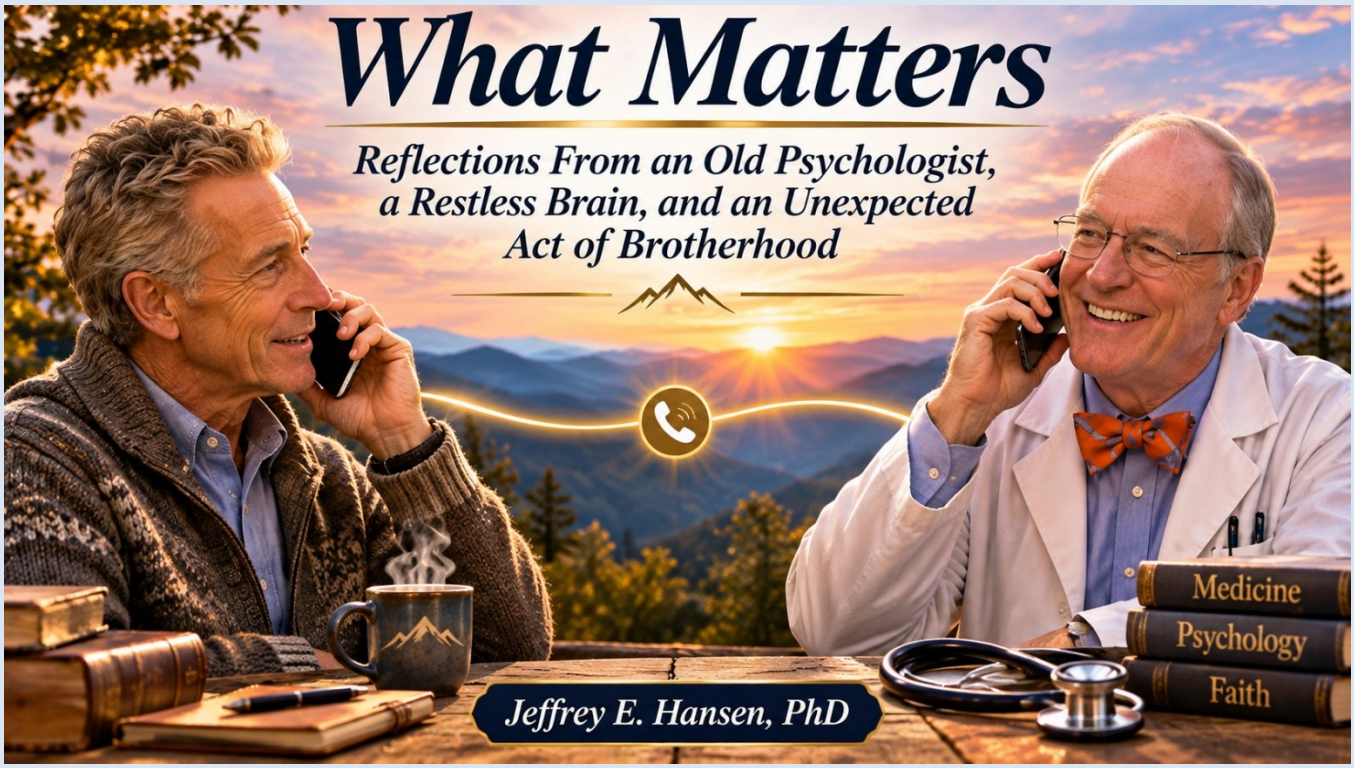
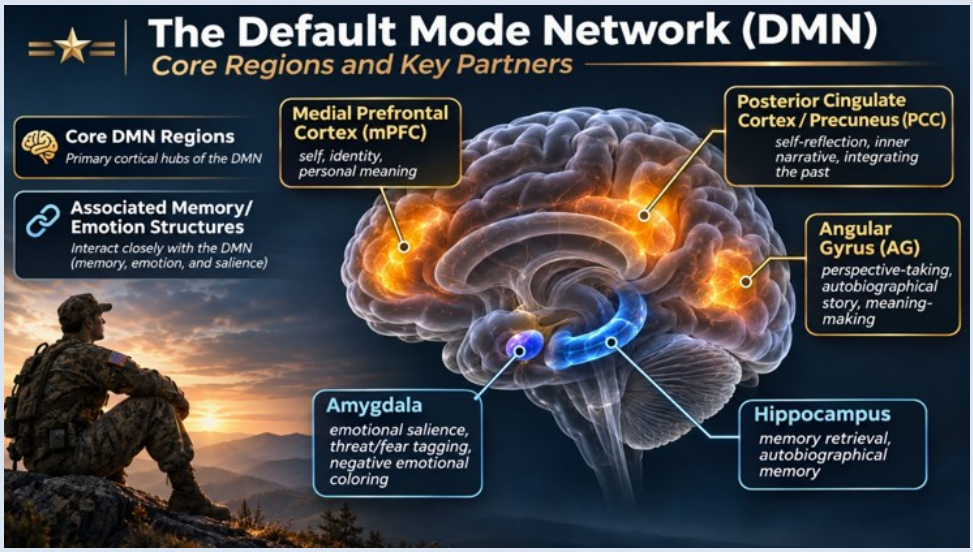


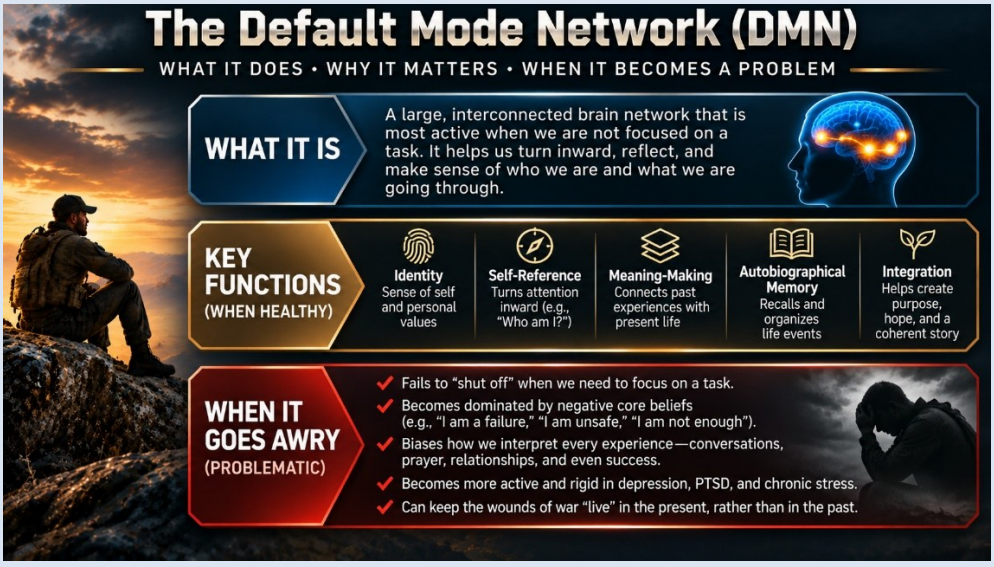
2:37 in the Morning

It was 2:37 in the morning. Not 2:30, not 3:00, but precisely 2:37. There I was, wide awake, staring into the darkness while my default mode network (DMN) apparently decided to convene an unscheduled meeting. No invitation, no agenda, and certainly no consideration for the fact that its host was a 72-year-old psychologist who would have preferred another couple of hours of sleep. But the brain has its own priorities, and mine had apparently decided that the middle of the night was an excellent time to wrestle with some rather uncomfortable questions. Where do I belong? What am I doing with the remaining chapters of my professional life? And beneath those questions, something more fundamental was beginning to stir. **What matters?**

For those unfamiliar with this remarkable neurological network, the DMN is an interconnected system of brain regions involved in autobiographical memory, self-referential thinking, identity, and our capacity to construct meaning from experience (Buckner et al., 2008; Menon, 2023). Among its principal players are the medial prefrontal cortex, involved in self-reflection; the posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus, associated with internally directed awareness; the angular gyrus, which contributes to integrating information into meaningful narratives; and the hippocampus, our extraordinary memory architect. The amygdala, although not generally classified as a core DMN structure, interacts with these systems and helps attach emotional significance to our experiences. It is a remarkable neurological orchestra, capable of producing beautiful music or, under the wrong circumstances, a rather dreadful performance at 2:37 in the morning.



The DMN is, in many respects, the brain's inner storyteller. It helps us connect yesterday with tomorrow, interpret our experiences, imagine our futures, and construct the narrative of who we believe ourselves to be. But there is a catch. When disappointment, uncertainty, or negative emotion dominate our thinking, that storyteller can become a relentless interrogator, recycling old wounds and searching for evidence that confirms our most troubling assumptions (Andrews-Hanna et al., 2014). A professional disappointment can become a question about our worth. An unanswered email can become evidence of rejection. A closed door can begin to look suspiciously like every other door that has ever closed in our faces. And because our minds are so gifted at constructing meaning, we can occasionally construct meaning that is not particularly helpful.



At 72, those questions carry a different weight. I have enjoyed a wonderfully rich professional life as a military psychologist, clinician, teacher, writer, and advocate for children and families. I have worked alongside extraordinary professionals, published books and essays, and occasionally stirred up enough controversy to make a few institutional administrators reach for their blood pressure medication. I am proud of that work, and I have no intention of apologizing for challenging ideas I believe deserve to be challenged. But as I contemplate the remaining years of my professional life, I find myself increasingly unwilling to invest my time and energy in organizations where my contributions are welcomed only as long as I remain comfortably within the lines.

And I have some history there.

A Ph.D. in an M.D. World

Several years ago, I became involved with the Christian Medical & Dental Associations (CMDA), a wonderful organization I continue to regard as having an important mission. I contributed writing that challenged prevailing approaches in psychiatry and raised questions about practices I believed deserved serious professional scrutiny. Initially, my contributions were welcomed. But when my criticism drew objections from within psychiatry, the welcome changed. My posts were taken down, and I came away with the distinct impression that the physicians carried considerably more institutional weight than the psychologist who had dared to challenge some of their assumptions.

Perhaps I should have expected that. I am, after all, a Ph.D. in an M.D. world. I have tremendous respect for physicians, have spent much of my career working alongside them, and count some of the finest people I know among their ranks. But I am also rather fond of my doctorate, my clinical training, and the perspective that psychology brings to medicine. After decades of professional practice, I have little appetite for being treated as a second-class citizen simply because the letters following my name are arranged differently. The brain, as I have occasionally pointed out, does not seem particularly impressed by the credentials of the person attempting to understand it.

My experiences at Madigan Army Medical Center also taught me how painful it can be when institutional priorities collide with professional conscience. There are few things more discouraging than investing yourself in an institution, believing you share its fundamental commitments, and discovering that your voice becomes considerably less welcome when you challenge the prevailing narrative. Those experiences left their marks. Not the sort that necessarily show up on a résumé, but the kind that can quietly influence how we interpret the next professional opportunity.

So when I became involved with the American College of Pediatricians (ACPeds), I brought more than enthusiasm to the table. I brought history.

Another Table. Another Question.

I was genuinely excited about joining the ACPeds Adolescent Health Council and collaborating with physicians whose commitment to children, families, and principled medicine resonated deeply with my own. Among them were Drs. Michelle Cretella, Quentin Van Meter, and Russell Gombosi, colleagues for whom I have enormous respect. I had also been nominated for consideration for a nonphysician position on the organization's board, an opportunity that suggested there might be a meaningful place for a psychologist in this predominantly medical community.

One of the possibilities that particularly energized me was contributing to a developing ACPeds blog. I had already written numerous essays addressing issues affecting children, adolescents, parents, and the medical professions. Some were provocative, some deliberately uncomfortable, and nearly all reflected my conviction that scientific inquiry and professional integrity require the freedom to challenge fashionable assumptions. I was not looking for a place to publish pleasant little essays that would make everybody nod approvingly over their morning coffee. I wanted to contribute something substantial, something that might cause readers to stop, think, question, and perhaps reconsider what they believed they knew.

Then the picture began to change. It appeared that the blog was not going to move forward as I had anticipated, at least not in the immediate future. Perhaps my writing would find a home through an independent Substack. Perhaps there would be some organizational endorsement or another collaborative arrangement. None of those possibilities was inherently objectionable, and I understood that ACPeds had legitimate priorities competing for its attention. But I could feel an old question beginning to stir. Was this another situation in which I had been welcomed enthusiastically at the beginning, only to discover that my voice did not quite fit once the organizational machinery began turning?

I did not want another institutional fight. Frankly, I was tired of them. At 72, I have better things to do than spend my remaining professional years trying to persuade people that psychologists have something worthwhile to say in conversations dominated by physicians. I wanted to know whether there was genuinely a place for me, whether my contributions could make a difference, and whether these were colleagues with whom I could do meaningful work without constantly wondering when the welcome might wear thin.

And there I was, at 2:37 in the morning, with my default mode network enthusiastically connecting the dots between old disappointments and present uncertainties. Was it accurately

evaluating my circumstances, or was it allowing yesterday's wounds to write tomorrow's story? I knew enough neuroscience to recognize what might be happening. Unfortunately, recognizing a pattern and escaping it are two entirely different accomplishments.

When the Brain and Heart Get Into the Conversation

This is where another area of science becomes especially interesting to me: neurocardiology. Our brains and hearts are engaged in a continuous, bidirectional conversation through the autonomic nervous system. Research on neurovisceral integration has demonstrated important relationships among prefrontal regulatory systems, emotional regulation, and heart rate variability, or HRV, a useful indicator of aspects of autonomic flexibility (Thayer et al., 2009). These relationships remind us that our emotional experiences are not simply thoughts floating around inside our skulls. They are embodied experiences, influenced by physiological processes that both shape and respond to our interpretations of the world.

I have spent considerable time teaching patients how deliberate attention, regulated breathing, appreciation, and gratitude can help shift emotional states and interrupt unproductive patterns of thinking. We cannot simply order the DMN to shut down, but we can influence how we respond to its narratives. We can recognize when our minds have become trapped in repetitive negative thinking and gently redirect attention toward experiences that evoke appreciation, connection, and a greater sense of emotional balance. These practices do not erase difficult circumstances, but they can change our relationship to them.

That is the theory, anyway.

At 2:37 that morning, despite all my professional training and enthusiasm for these approaches, I was not having much success. My brain had apparently decided that my professional history deserved a comprehensive review, and it was not particularly interested in my suggestions for a more productive agenda. I could identify the neurological mechanisms, appreciate the physiology, and perhaps even have delivered a respectable lecture on the subject. But I could not manufacture an answer to the question that was troubling me.

Where did I belong? And was any of this worth the emotional investment?

I did not resolve those questions that night. Eventually, the morning came, as mornings have a habit of doing, and life continued. The uncertainty remained, although I had plenty of other things demanding my attention.

Then, several days later, something happened that I could never have engineered through another exercise in cognitive reframing.

A brother picked up the telephone.

Twenty Minutes That Mattered

Dr. Quentin Van Meter is a distinguished pediatric endocrinologist, a former Navy physician, and a man whose professional convictions and Christian faith I deeply respect. He is also one of my colleagues on the ACPeds Adolescent Health Council. During our conversation, Quentin shared something that touched me deeply. He told me that he had started to compose a text message to me but then thought better of it. He decided that what he wanted to communicate deserved something more personal, so he put the text aside and picked up the telephone. Think about that for a moment. In a world where efficiency so often takes precedence over genuine human connection, Quentin made a deliberate choice to reach out, not simply to convey information, but to have a conversation between brothers. He chose connection over convenience, and in doing so demonstrated something far more powerful than anything he could have written in a message. He probably had no idea how much that simple decision would mean to me, but it spoke volumes about the kind of man he is. Before he ever explained a single thing about ACPeds, he had already demonstrated what brotherhood looks like.

He called me.

We spoke for approximately 20 minutes. Quentin explained the circumstances surrounding the developing blog, the organization's competing priorities, and why this might not be the appropriate moment for the initiative I had envisioned. He helped me understand that there were larger organizational considerations at work, that the mission was still evolving, and that there might be other ways to contribute meaningfully. Perhaps a Substack would become part of the picture. Perhaps another publishing arrangement would emerge. Those were legitimate possibilities, and his explanation helped me better understand the circumstances.

But here is the extraordinary part: **the most important thing Quentin communicated had very little to do with the blog.**

He understood that I was not merely asking where I could publish another essay. I was asking whether there was a place for me among these colleagues, whether my voice was welcome, and whether I was once again heading toward a professional relationship in which my contributions might be valued only until they became inconvenient. He did not respond with a carefully polished institutional statement or a few reassuring sentences designed to close the conversation. He took the time to speak with me personally, to listen, to explain, and to treat my concerns as worthy of his attention.

At one point, I told him something that came straight from my heart: **"Your words do not fall on deaf ears. More importantly, they leave footprints in my heart."**

I meant every word.

Quentin may have regarded that telephone call as a simple act of professional courtesy. I experienced it as something considerably more profound. Here was a respected physician who had no need to defend my professional standing, no obligation to reassure me personally, and certainly no shortage of other demands on his time. Yet he recognized that a colleague was struggling and chose to meet him not with institutional authority but with genuine brotherhood.

He did not treat me as the psychologist who needed to be managed, the outspoken writer who needed to be contained, or the Ph.D. whose place at the physicians' table required special accommodation. He treated me as a brother whose contributions, convictions, and friendship mattered.

And suddenly, the question was no longer whether I had a seat at the table. It was whether the people around that table cared about one another.

Quentin answered that question without ever needing to put it into words.

The Answer I Could Not Find at 2:37

I have thought about that conversation repeatedly, particularly in light of what we know about the DMN and our capacity to reconstruct meaning from experience. At 2:37 in the morning, my internal narrative was dominated by uncertainty, old disappointments, and the uncomfortable possibility that I might again find myself professionally marginalized. Several days later, the organizational circumstances had not fundamentally changed. The blog was still uncertain, the competing priorities remained, and nobody had handed me a guarantee about my future role.

But something important had changed.

I now had a new experience to place alongside the old ones. Instead of rehearsing previous disappointments, I found myself reflecting with genuine appreciation on the kindness of a colleague who had made time for me. Instead of questioning whether I was valued, I had encountered someone who demonstrated that value through his actions. My professional questions had not all been resolved, but the emotional meaning I attached to them had begun to change.

And there is something beautiful about that from both a neurological and a spiritual perspective. We often think of emotional regulation as something we accomplish independently through

disciplined thought, controlled breathing, or deliberate changes in attention. Those tools certainly have value, and I continue to believe in their importance. But we are also profoundly relational creatures. Our emotional lives are shaped by the people who surround us, and sometimes the experience that helps us find a more hopeful interpretation of our circumstances comes not from within ourselves but from another human being who cares enough to reach out.

Quentin had given me something to appreciate, something to hold in my heart, and something that challenged the old narrative my restless brain had been rehearsing. I could not force that shift at 2:37 in the morning. But several days later, through an ordinary act of human kindness, the story began to change.

Brotherhood Is Not a Slogan

And this is where my Christian faith enters the story, not as a religious decoration attached to an otherwise interesting psychological observation, but as its very heart. Jesus Christ did not teach us to measure people by their professional standing, institutional influence, or usefulness to an organization. He taught us to love one another, bear one another's burdens, and recognize the worth of those placed before us. His example was not one of distant admiration or carefully managed professional relationships. It was personal, inconvenient, sacrificial, and profoundly human.

There is a great deal of talk in Christian organizations about fellowship, community, and brotherhood. Those are beautiful words, but they become rather hollow when they remain words. It is easy to call someone a brother when everyone agrees, the organization is running smoothly, and nobody is asking uncomfortable questions. The real test comes when a colleague is disappointed, when his concerns are inconvenient, or when maintaining a relationship requires something more than another agreeable email.

Quentin did not deliver a sermon on brotherhood. He practiced it.

And perhaps that is why the call affected me so deeply. I have known plenty of professional organizations, sat through more meetings than any civilized person should reasonably endure, and encountered enough institutional politics to last several lifetimes. What I am increasingly hungry for is not another organization to belong to but genuine fellowship with people whose convictions are reflected in how they live. People who can disagree without dismissing one another, challenge ideas without devaluing the person holding them, and recognize that professional accomplishments mean considerably less if we lose our humanity along the way.

At 72, I still want to write, teach, challenge, advocate, and occasionally make people squirm a little when their assumptions deserve closer examination. There is plenty of fight left in this old

psychologist. But I am less interested in finding the biggest platform than in finding people who share a commitment to truth, integrity, faith, and one another. If I have to choose between professional recognition and genuine brotherhood, the decision is becoming increasingly easy.

What Matters

I cannot answer every question about what matters in a single sleepless night, and I would be suspicious of anyone who claimed he could. I still have questions about the future, about the work I hope to accomplish, and about how best to spend whatever years God chooses to give me. I suspect my default mode network will continue scheduling the occasional midnight conference, perhaps without consulting me about the timing. But I am beginning to appreciate that some of life's most important answers do not emerge from more thinking. They emerge from living, from loving, and from being loved.

Several days after that restless night, a distinguished physician took 20 minutes out of his day to call an old psychologist who was wondering where he belonged. He did not resolve every uncertainty, promise me a professional role, or guarantee that my writing would find a particular audience. Instead, he reminded me through his actions that I was more than a credential, more than a contributor, and more than another voice competing for space in an organization.

I was a brother.

And he was one, too.

I still do not know exactly where every essay I write will eventually find a home. Perhaps ACPeds will develop its blog. Perhaps a Substack will emerge. Perhaps the Lord has something entirely different in mind. I will continue doing the work I believe matters, challenging ideas that deserve scrutiny, and standing for principles I am unwilling to surrender. But I will also pay closer attention to the people who make that work worthwhile, because one day the publications will be forgotten, the professional titles will mean very little, and the organizations we worked so hard to influence will continue without us.

What I hope will remain are the relationships, the kindness we extended, the burdens we helped carry, and the love of Christ made visible through the way we treated one another.

At 2:37 in the morning, I was searching for an answer to the question, *What matters?*

Several days later, Quentin Van Meter picked up the telephone.

And I began to understand.

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