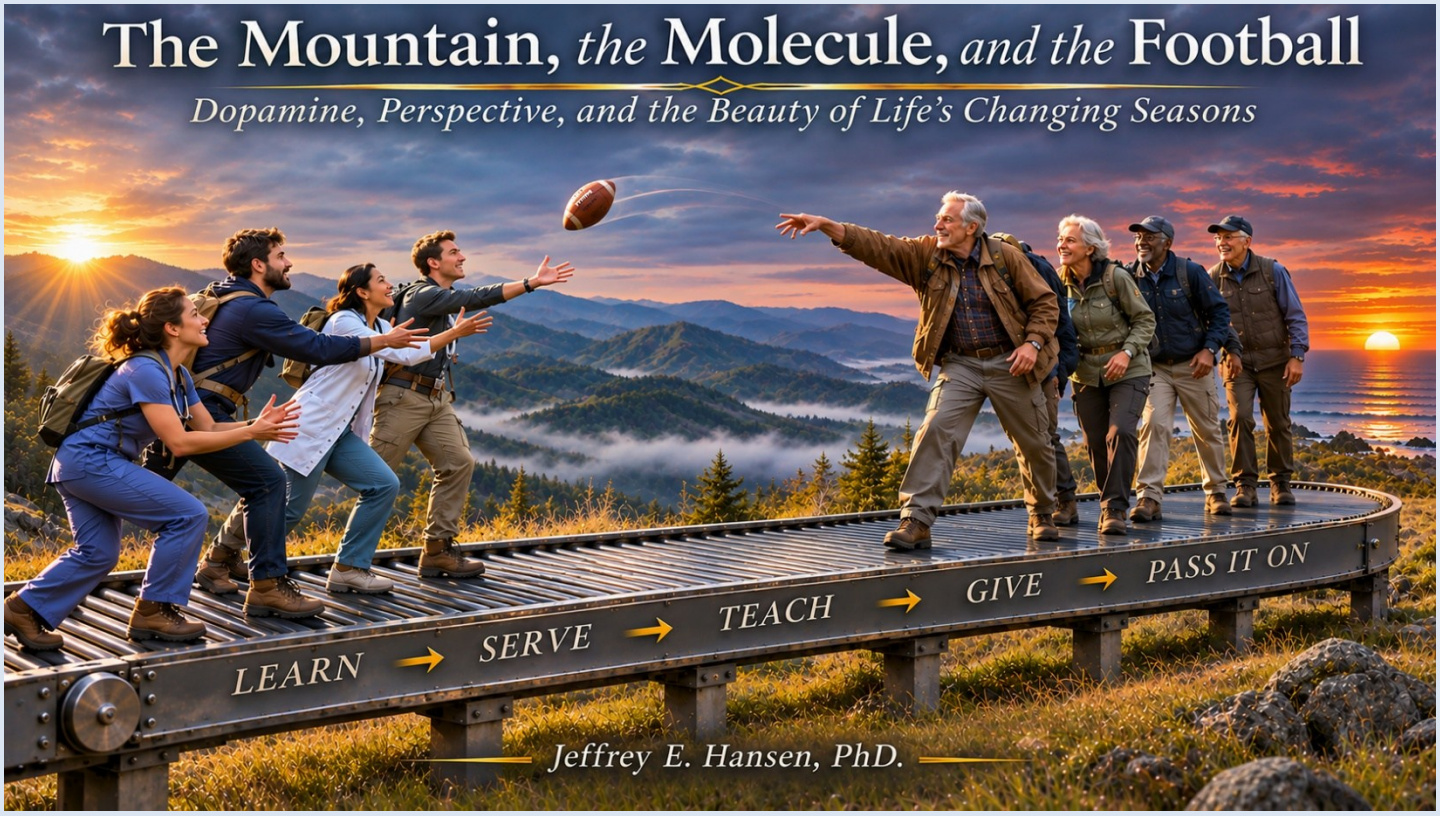


The Beauty of Growing Older

There is something rather wonderful about getting older. Things that once occupied enormous amounts of emotional real estate begin, almost without permission, to move out. The degrees, promotions, publications, speaking engagements, growing clientele, and coveted professional respectability. Even the questions we rarely admitted to asking—Do they like me? Am I respected? Did that colleague appreciate my presentation? What are they saying about me?—lose some of their authority. For much of our professional lives, we climb a mountain whose summit seems to keep moving. We reach one plateau, celebrate for perhaps fourteen seconds, and discover another peak waiting just beyond it. Good heavens. It is an exhausting way to spend a lifetime, even when it is a worthwhile one.

I certainly know the mountain. I spent ten years as an Army psychologist, another decade building and running a private practice, and roughly another decade in military medicine, teaching, supervising, and caring for patients. There were frightened parents, hurting children, struggling adolescents, traumatized service members, devoted physicians, remarkable colleagues, and students trying desperately to become the clinicians they hoped they could be. I collected a few degrees and titles along the way, made some good decisions, made others I would happily return for a refund, and learned that the patients who impressed me most often cared very little about the letters after my name. They wanted to know whether I would listen, whether I understood their suffering, and whether I could help. My professional mountains mattered, but the people I met while climbing mattered infinitely more.

There was, of course, a rather energetic neurochemical companion on that journey: dopamine. Oh, my goodness, dopamine. What a magnificent, meddlesome little molecule! Psychiatrist Daniel Z. Lieberman and Michael E. Long describe in The Molecule of More (2018) the powerful part dopamine plays in anticipation, motivation, and pursuit. It is not simply a chemical of pleasure; it helps orient us toward possibility, toward the thing that is not yet in our hands. Thank God for that circuitry. Without it, we might have continued contemplating the wheel instead of inventing it. But dopamine has one amusing shortcoming: it is very good at getting us to chase the next thing and considerably less interested in announcing that we have finally arrived. Another degree! Another mountain! Another opportunity to accomplish something! Our brains can resemble an enthusiastic golden retriever that keeps bringing us a tennis ball long after everyone else has gone inside.

Robert Lustig, in The Hacking of the American Mind (2017), offers a provocative distinction between pursuing pleasure and cultivating contentment. His discussion of dopamine and serotonin is a useful invitation to think, even though no thoughtful neuroscientist would reduce happiness to one transmitter or contentment to another. Our reward, mood, attachment, and stress systems interact in wonderfully complicated ways. Still, the distinction has stayed with me. There is a difference between the excitement of getting something and the quieter satisfaction of realizing that something already in our lives is enough. The thrill of applause fades. The knowledge that you helped a frightened child find a little safety, or watched a young psychologist become confident enough to help others, can remain with you for decades.

When the view begins to change

Arthur C. Brooks speaks beautifully to this transition in From Strength to Strength (2022). He describes the changing balance between fluid intelligence, the abilities we use to solve new problems and reason rapidly, and crystallized intelligence, the accumulated knowledge and understanding that experience can deepen. Neither category explains every person or every aspect of aging, and no birthday flips an automatic neurological switch. But the broad idea is liberating. What made us particularly effective at thirty-five may not be exactly what makes us valuable at seventy-two. If we pay attention, the years can give us perspective: the capacity to recognize patterns, to see a whole person instead of a presenting symptom, to ask a better question when everyone else is rushing to supply an answer.

These days I sometimes listen to a younger colleague explain a complex clinical situation and realize that I have seen something like it before. Not the same patient, of course, and not the same circumstances, but the familiar shape of fear, shame, grief, family conflict, or a medical system moving too quickly to notice a person. A younger version of me might have reached immediately for the newest technique. An older version is more likely to ask one more

question, tolerate a little more silence, and wonder whether the problem we are treating is actually the problem that needs our attention. That does not make me a sage. I have known enough foolish old men to know that birthdays alone do not produce wisdom. It means only that a lifetime can teach us something, provided we remain teachable.

Brooks returns to the broader search for purpose in The Meaning of Your Life (2026). That theme resonates with my own faith and with what patients have taught me: a life cannot be fully understood as a collection of achievements or pleasant experiences. We need love, belonging, responsibility, forgiveness, meaningful work, and some sense of what our lives are for. Those are not arguments against science; they are reasons to ask science better, more human questions. We are creatures of neurons and synapses, yes. We are also people who worry about our children, grieve our losses, pray when language fails us, and long to know that our lives mattered to somebody.

The conveyor belt and the football

For some time now I have pictured life as an enormous conveyor belt. Everyone steps onto it, and everyone moves. At one end are the newcomers, their pockets full of possibilities, their ambitions seemingly fueled by an unlimited supply of dopamine. Farther along are those building practices, raising families, tackling responsibilities, and running so vigorously that they barely notice the scenery. Farther still are those of us who have traveled a good distance. The belt has not slowed for our degrees, our reputations, our accomplishments, or our protests. It carries us forward with steady, impartial grace. And one day, for every one of us, the belt reaches its end and gently—or perhaps not so gently—drops us off.

I do not find that image morbid. It is an invitation to wake up to the beauty of our shared journey. The belt is moving whether we fight it or welcome it. What we can decide is how we travel: what we notice, whom we help, what we hold too tightly, and what we are willing to pass along. No one is standing still, including the young who imagine they have forever and the older among us who occasionally wish we could negotiate another decade at midcareer rates.

And that brings me to a football. Imagine those of us farther down the conveyor belt turning around toward the people just stepping on, and toward those somewhere between the beginning and where we now stand. We have carried a football of knowledge and experience for years. We have been tackled, dropped it a few times, recovered it, and occasionally made a respectable play. Are we supposed to clutch it to our chests until the belt deposits us at the end? What a colossal waste. I would rather throw it back. Here, young man. Here, young woman. This is something I learned, sometimes the hard way. Take what is useful. Question

what deserves questioning. Improve upon it. Carry it farther than I did. And when your own part of the belt begins to look a little different, turn around and throw it back again.

My challenge to younger colleagues is therefore a gentle one, offered with genuine affection. Run hard. Master the science. Learn the instruments and the protocols and the research methods. Ask difficult questions, especially of those of us who have grown comfortable with our conclusions. But do not mistake speed for understanding or credentials for character. A frightened parent is not a clinical puzzle placed before you to demonstrate your brilliance. A traumatized soldier is not an opportunity to show off your favorite treatment model. A struggling adolescent needs more than a diagnosis code and an efficient plan. Sit with people. Hear what they are actually telling you. Let them surprise you. And take an occasional football from an older colleague without assuming you must run precisely the same play.

Recently, I was honored to be invited to contribute essays to the American College of Pediatricians (ACPeds), whose stated mission centers on promoting children's physical and emotional well-being through ethically and scientifically sound guidance. I welcomed the invitation not as another trophy for the shelf but as another chance to throw the ball. After decades in pediatric and military psychology, I still have questions about how we practice medicine, how we care for families, and how easily systems can lose sight of persons. I hope my writing encourages thought, including thoughtful disagreement. I also confess that this old psychologist has retained a little mischievous energy. There are still sacred cows wandering through the pasture, and occasionally somebody ought to ask why we keep feeding them.

Be the age you are

But I have an equally tender challenge for those of us closer to the far end of that moving belt. I have told my students for years, 'Be the age you are.' I said it when they were young, impatient to be seasoned clinicians, anxious to possess tomorrow's confidence before living through today's uncertainty. I wanted them to appreciate the developmental season they were actually in. Learn, I told them. Be a beginner when you are a beginner. Do not apologize for having more questions than answers. And now, at seventy-two, I hear my own words coming back across the years, directed squarely at me. Be the age you are, Jeff. Well, isn't that an interesting assignment? Apparently, the professor has become the student.

I am learning that the advice applies at both ends of the journey. To be the age we are is not to surrender curiosity, vitality, or ambition. I still see patients, write, teach, exercise, ride my motorcycle, and find more than enough ways to get myself into intellectual trouble. But I no longer need to pretend I am thirty-five. I do not need to reproduce the pace of a younger career to justify the worth of this one. Seasons change. Careers change. Bodies change. What we are

needed for changes. Sometimes those shifts arrive with gratitude; sometimes they come with disappointment or the loss of something we deeply loved. We need not claim to understand every change to begin appreciating the season in which we find ourselves.

To my contemporaries, especially those who spent a lifetime caring for others, I want to say this with all the tenderness I can muster: please do not mistake a changing role for a diminished life. The retirement announcement, the empty office, the younger colleague stepping into your position, or the telephone that rings less often can sting. It is natural to grieve pieces of work that shaped our identity. There is no virtue in denying that grief. But neither must we build our remaining years around it. What you learned is still yours to give. Your patience may bless a new clinician. Your perspective may steady a frightened family. Your willingness to sit beside someone in suffering may do more good than any impressive professional title ever did. If you are able, mentor somebody. If your health or circumstances limit what you once did, let your contribution change shape. A thoughtful letter, a phone call, a prayer, a listening ear: these, too, are gifts.

And to the young, please remember that older people are not merely repositories of old information waiting to be replaced by an updated edition. They are people still becoming. Ask them what surprised them, what they wish they had understood earlier, where they were wrong, and what finally mattered. You may receive a piece of wisdom no textbook could have offered. To those of us who are older, return the kindness. Ask younger colleagues what they are discovering. Listen without immediately interrupting with a war story. We do not have to compete for ownership of the truth. The younger bring energy, innovation, and fresh eyes; the older may bring perspective, memory, and the patience to recognize which questions are worth asking. Both generations are traveling on the same belt. We need one another.

It takes intention to live this way. It takes humility to let a season be what it is rather than spending our days mourning one that has passed. And it takes love to give away something we worked so hard to acquire without demanding control over what happens next. I suspect that is part of the difference between merely surviving the later years and inhabiting them beautifully. The question becomes less, 'How do I keep my place?' and more, 'Whom can I bless with the place I have been given?'

The last light over Westport

When I think about the beauty of a season, my mind returns to Westport, Washington, where Leah and I once had a condominium and watched some of the most spectacular sunsets I have ever seen. The sun would move toward the wide Pacific, and the ocean seemed to reach out to receive it. Gold spread across the water, then orange and crimson, then colors I have never

quite found words to describe. We would sit together and watch the enormous glowing circle descend, slowly, slowly, slowly, until it touched the horizon and then, with a final delicate sliver of light, disappeared. A good day's work, and a magnificent goodbye.

But the disappearance was not the end of the beauty. The clouds held the colors. The water carried the last reflections. For a little while the entire sky seemed to remember the sun, even after the sun itself was gone. And somehow the memory of those evenings settled into Leah and me as well. We were not there to accomplish anything, impress anyone, or gather another credential. We were simply together, fortunate enough to watch something beautiful that asked nothing of us except our attention. I can still feel the tenderness of those moments.

We make so much of sunrises, and rightly so. Who does not love the promise of morning? The fresh light, the anticipation, the marvelous sense that there is a whole day ahead, ready to be lived. But who could watch a Westport sunset and call it a lesser thing? A sunset is not a failed sunrise. It does not apologize for arriving later in the day. It has its own radiance, its own purpose, its own astonishing generosity. Perhaps the evening even teaches us something the morning cannot: beauty need not last forever to be real, and significance is not measured by how long we remain visible.

I want to be the age I am. I want to enjoy this particular light, not spend it wishing for noon. I want to continue doing work that matters, loving the people God has given me, and offering whatever experience might help someone a little farther back on the belt. I want to bless younger colleagues without burdening them with the demand that they become replicas of me. And I want to encourage my fellow oldsters to look at the evening sky with gratitude rather than suspicion. We do not need to rush toward the end, and we do not have to pretend it is not there. We can live this season fully, faithfully, with humor, and with open hands.

That is what I hope our lives might leave behind. Not merely awards, titles, published pages, or a long list of things completed, though some of those may have been worthwhile. I hope we leave people who felt heard, young professionals who felt encouraged, families who found a measure of hope, and loved ones who knew they were loved. Perhaps somewhere behind us on the conveyor belt a younger colleague will catch a football we tossed, run with more courage than before, and one day turn around to pass it along. We need not witness every touchdown to be grateful we helped make the play possible.

And when my own sun finally slips below the horizon, I hope there will be something of that Westport evening in the farewell: no frantic demand for another noon, no bitterness toward the coming night, only the gratitude of having lived a day worth living and loved people worth loving. I think of Leah beside me, the Pacific turning gold, the last light lingering across the

water, and the extraordinary quiet that follows. The sun has gone, but its beauty has not vanished. It has left an impression that stays with us, a gentle signature upon the soul. May we be granted the grace to do the same.



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