

# When Silence Becomes Cowardice

## The Man I Decided to Become

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### A Friend's Caution, a Matter of Conscience

Several months ago, I wrote an essay about yellow-bellied cowards. It began with one of those curious questions that lodge themselves in my mind: Why yellow? Where did that expression come from? Before long, a question about the history of a phrase became a reflection on courage, sacrifice, and the responsibilities we sometimes prefer to leave to someone else.

But the word *coward* stayed with me.

As I reflect on the compromise in our world today, I find myself returning to it. And before anyone thinks I am placing myself above the crowd, let me say plainly that I have compromised too. I have made many mistakes, more than I care to count. This is not a flawless man telling everyone else how to live. It is a man remembering a decision he made when he was young, and the occasions when keeping that commitment cost him something.

One of my dearest friends recently cautioned me about my writing. "Jeff, you have to be careful. What you write can tick people off." He is one of the smartest people I know and someone I deeply respect. He has held positions of considerable rank and responsibility, and he has stepped forward himself when doing so carried consequences. His caution deserves my attention.

And he has a point. I can be hyperbolic. My intensity sometimes gets ahead of my wording, and perhaps that was what he was cautioning me against. I need to hear that. Strong convictions do not excuse careless language, and I want my words to convey what I actually mean.

But there are things I cannot leave unsaid. This is one of them. The conviction runs deep in me, reaching back to a decision I made as a young man long before I understood what it might cost.

My dear friend will probably read this. I hope he hears the heart behind it and knows that I have taken his counsel seriously. I can work to speak more carefully. I must still speak.

## A Question That Stayed With Me

I remember sitting in a social psychology class at the University of California, Berkeley, reading about the murder of Kitty Genovese. I was perhaps nineteen or twenty, still trying to understand the world and decide what kind of man I wanted to become. I still have that textbook to this day.

The account I read was horrifying: thirty-eight people had reportedly watched or heard a young woman being attacked while no one came to her assistance or called the police until it was too late. The original 1964 newspaper report described an assault lasting more than half an hour, with the killer returning repeatedly. That account became embedded in psychology textbooks and helped inspire John Darley and Bibb Latané's research on bystander intervention and the diffusion of responsibility—the tendency to leave action to someone else when other people are present.

I remember thinking, *How could anybody do that? How could people know another human being was being harmed and simply stand by?* Then the question turned inward: *What kind of man do I want to be?* I purposed in my heart that I would not become a man who recognized something terribly wrong and remained silent merely because getting involved might cost him.

A thoughtful correction belongs here. In 2007, psychologists Rachel Manning, Mark Levine, and Alan Collins examined the historical record and found that the familiar account was inaccurate. There was no reliable evidence that thirty-eight people watched the entire murder without acting. Some neighbors did respond: Robert Mozer shouted at the attacker, temporarily driving him away, and Sophie Farrar rushed to Kitty's side. The final attack occurred inside a building, out of view of most potential witnesses. The exact number of witnesses remains uncertain.

Those corrections matter. We should not condemn people for actions or omissions the evidence does not establish. Nonetheless, what happened was horrific. Kitty lost her life. Some responded, but others did not, and to my mind, far too many failed to respond. I suspect that a stronger response from more people might have encouraged still others to intervene. Together, they might have saved her. We cannot know that outcome, but the possibility is painful to contemplate.

The historical correction changes how we should describe that night. It does not change the commitment the account awakened in me. I did not yet know what keeping that promise would require. Life eventually gave me opportunities to find out.

## **When the Promise Became Costly**

During my military career, I was assigned to supervise another clinical psychologist who was struggling professionally. I will call him Captain Joe. He had genuine deficits that needed attention, and my responsibility was to help him address them. The purpose of our supervisory relationship was understood: identify the problems, provide guidance, and give him an opportunity to improve.

Then the assignment began to change. The hospital's Deputy Commander of Clinical Services (DCCS), second in command of the hospital and also my senior rater, wanted me to begin gathering damaging material against him. A relationship established to help a struggling psychologist was being turned into an effort to build a case against him.

I refused. I told him, in substance, "Sir, you asked me to help this man. That is the supervisory relationship I entered into with him, with full disclosure about its purpose. I cannot quietly turn that relationship into an effort to gather evidence against him."

That refusal did not make me popular. Comments began reaching my rater that I was not playing ball with the system. Meanwhile, the deputy commander and the chief of psychiatry began assigning Captain Joe tasks that, in my judgment, were designed to ensure his failure. I considered myself a competent psychologist, and I would not have been able to complete most of what they demanded.

Holding someone accountable for professional deficiencies is appropriate. Setting him up to fail is something else entirely. I believed I was watching the latter, and eventually I had enough.

I took my concerns to the Inspector General, the office responsible for investigating misconduct and abuses within the military. I was subsequently called to testify in the case, and the chief of psychiatry ultimately lost the position.

Was there a price attached to speaking? You bet there was. The deputy commander had influence over my career, and I knew he was already criticizing me. I did not know whether my refusal would appear in an evaluation or affect my future. There was no guarantee that doing what I believed was right would turn out well for me. I had to make the decision while those possibilities were still very real. The stress was enormous.

## **Different Circumstances, the Same Decision**

Years later, before an overseas deployment, I was asked to ignore regulations and remain responsible on paper for equipment I would not be present to oversee. I refused, and my refusal enraged my boss. Once again, cooperating would have been easier in the moment. It also would have required me to put my name behind something I could not honestly support. That decision led to a less than top tier officer efficient report (OER) and made promotion to lieutenant colonel less likely.

During my later work with the Department of Defense, a soldier and mother I treated was facing a court-martial over allegations that, based on my clinical findings, I believed were unfounded. Her command would not consider my input with an open mind. In my judgment, they had already decided to pursue her removal because of an aspect of her personal identity, and evidence that challenged their position was unwelcome.

My own leadership preferred that we stay out of these kinds of disputes, keep seeing patients, and stay in our lane. This kind of advocacy was frowned upon. But she was being hung out to dry, and if I did not step forward with what I knew, who would? Courtroom testimony is hardly a psychologist's favorite assignment, especially when it means challenging a command's position. I did it anyway. I served as an expert witness in her defense, and my testimony helped secure her exoneration.

There were also cases involving child protective services in which I believed soldiers were facing unfounded allegations. I wanted to testify, but command did not want me to do so. I had to fight for the opportunity to be heard, and on one occasion I was reprimanded for testifying.

My willingness to engage in this kind of advocacy within the DoD system carried a professional price. My then-boss, the best boss I ever had, told me that although many admired my advocacy, being that kind of maverick had cost me a promotion to GS-14—a position he believed I was fully competent to handle. He nicknamed me “Maverick” because I was known for challenging rules and expectations when they interfered with patient care or doing what I believed was right. Some admired that quality, but it apparently made me a less comfortable choice for advancement. I was not much of a game player when playing the game required too much compromise.

The promotion mattered. But so did the people whose futures were on the line. Staying in my lane would have been easier, but it would not have left me with the same peace of conscience. Some might call that foolish. Some might say I fell on my sword. I would say I maintained my integrity.

Later, I spoke and testified against what I regarded as the overmedicalization of children experiencing gender distress and the dangers of early affirmation. There were demands that my professional license be taken away because of that testimony. Those remain convictions I hold.

These situations differed, but each brought me back to the same question: **Would I speak, or would I protect myself by remaining silent?** The commitment I made in a classroom many years earlier had to survive rank, authority, professional pressure, and the possibility of retaliation.

Some would call that foolish. Why antagonize people who have power over you? Why put your career or your reputation at risk? I understand those questions. I have felt their weight. But there is another question that deserves at least as much attention: **What happens to us when preserving someone's approval requires us to betray what we know is right?**

## **When Silence Becomes Cowardice**

We often picture cowardice in dramatic terms: a man fleeing a battlefield, abandoning his post, or running away when someone needs him. But cowardice can sit comfortably in an office. It can attend a meeting, recognize an injustice, and say nothing. It can sign a document it knows is dishonest or watch a colleague being set up and decide that keeping the boss happy matters more than telling the truth.

It often comes with explanations that sound reasonable. We have careers to consider. We have bills to pay. We do not want to get involved in someone else's trouble. Perhaps someone else will handle it. Perhaps speaking will accomplish nothing anyway.

Sometimes there are legitimate limits to what we know and what we can responsibly do. Courage requires judgment. We should examine the evidence, treat people fairly, and remain willing to discover that we have misunderstood. Being loud or confrontational does not automatically make us courageous, and feeling certain does not automatically make us right.

Silence can reflect patience, discretion, or the humility to listen before speaking. There are times when waiting is wise and speaking prematurely can cause harm. But there are also moments when we know enough. We recognize the dishonesty. We see the person being harmed. We understand what is being asked of us, and we know that cooperating would violate our conscience.

Silence becomes cowardice when we recognize a serious wrong, have an opportunity to respond, and choose our own protection over our responsibility to act.

That is the dividing line I have wrestled with throughout my life. The question is whether conscience requires me to speak, even when I would rather avoid the consequences. And speaking is only part of it. Sometimes the necessary response is to refuse an order, decline to sign a document, offer testimony, or stand beside someone whom others have decided to abandon.

Institutions depend on people who will tell the truth, including truths their leaders would rather not hear. When loyalty becomes an expectation that we conceal wrongdoing or help carry it out, something has gone badly wrong. Our participation does not become honorable simply because someone above us requested it.

## **The Man in the Mirror**

I have not gotten everything right. Oh, my gosh, have I made mistakes. There are words I wish I had chosen more carefully, situations I wish I had handled differently, and decisions I would change if I could. I have no interest in presenting myself as a model of unblemished virtue.

But this is one thing for which I thank God: something took hold of me in that classroom at Berkeley. I understood that another person's suffering should not become an opportunity for me to practice looking away. And in some of the moments when keeping that conviction mattered, I kept it.

I think men need to wrestle with this. What kind of men are we becoming? What are we teaching our sons when they watch us accommodate something we know is wrong? What does our faith mean if it never reaches the moment when obedience becomes costly?

Convictions are easy to profess when everyone around us applauds them. The test comes when those convictions threaten our comfort, standing, income, or the approval of someone whose favor we would like to keep. Then we discover whether our beliefs govern our conduct or merely decorate our conversation.

I would not tell another man, "Be like me." I have too many failings for that. But I would ask him to take seriously the question that confronted me as a young student: *What kind of man do you want to be, and what are you willing to endure to become him?*

We cannot answer that question once and assume the work is finished. Life keeps asking it. Sometimes it arrives in a major confrontation. Sometimes it arrives quietly, in a conversation, a document, or a moment when another person is being treated unfairly and everyone is waiting to see whether anyone will object.

## **Outer Wounds, Inner Peace**

Speaking may cost you. You may be criticized, lose opportunities, or find that an institution you served faithfully has turned against you. People may question your motives rather than address what you have said. Doing the right thing does not guarantee a gracious response.

I know something about those wounds. I also know something about walking out the door with your head held high because you did not surrender your conscience to make the day easier.

The biblical phrase "speaking the truth in love" has stayed with me too (Ephesians 4:15). It brings me back to my friend's caution. I need to consider how I speak, whether my words are accurate, and whether my intensity is serving the truth or getting in its way. I can accept that responsibility while remaining willing to say something difficult. Careful words can still be firm words.

A clear conscience does not remove the pain of what an organization can inflict. It gives you a place to stand while you endure it. You can carry outer wounds and still have inner peace. You can be bruised professionally and still know that you did not betray the person who needed you to speak.

**When Silence Becomes Cowardice**  
*-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.*

As I look back, was it worth it? **Yes.** It was worth it. Thank God that young man in a social psychology classroom understood something important, and thank God that understanding stayed with him.

Our imperfections do not relieve us of the responsibility to act. We do not have to be flawless before we can refuse dishonesty, defend someone being mistreated, or tell the truth. We have to be willing, and we have to remain accountable for how we do it.

Someone may need your voice, your testimony, or your refusal to cooperate. When that moment comes, you will have to decide what matters more: avoiding the wounds others might inflict or preserving the conscience you must live with.

You may walk away wounded because you spoke. But there is a deeper wound in knowing you should have spoken and did not.