

# WHAT MY FATHER CARRIED

*A Son's Reflection on Strength, Wounding,  
Faith, and Redemption*

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## The Road That Brought Me Here

There is something about a solo motorcycle ride that I love. I enjoy riding with a small group, perhaps two or four bikes, but sometimes one is the sweet spot. Riding alone gives me time to reflect, to think, and to travel at my own pace. The road becomes more than a way of getting somewhere. It becomes a place where the mind clears and the heart begins to speak.

This particular journey carried me through Cortez and Durango, then along one of the most beautiful stretches of road in America, the Million Dollar Highway, through Silverton and Ouray, and finally into Grand Junction. Several members of my family live here, including one of my favorite people on this planet, my Aunt Eileen. She is not only someone I love deeply. She is one of my heroes.

I came to deliver two books I had written. One celebrates Aunt Eileen and the remarkable woman she is. The other honors Uncle Kenzie, who landed on the beaches of Tarawa. As Aunt Eileen and I sat together sharing stories, she asked me a simple question.

“Why haven’t you written about your father?”

In *My Special People in the Sandbox*, I wrote about so many of the people who shaped my life, but not my dad. I had always supposed that someday I would write a blog about him. But I waited. I tarried. Perhaps I knew that his story would be one of the hardest to tell.

Aunt Eileen was right. The book could not truly be complete without him.

So here goes.

My father's story is complicated. It contains brilliance and brokenness, courage and pain, wounds carried forward and wounds finally healed. It is not a simple story, but it is an incredible one.

And it is time for me to tell it.

## **A Legacy Beneath the Nebraska Sky**

My father was a complicated man.

He was born in Nebraska in 1933 into the Hansen family, descendants of immigrants who came largely from Sweden and Denmark. They were strong, determined people who possessed the courage to leave one world behind and build a life in another. By the time my father arrived, the Hansens had become Nebraska farmers, men and women accustomed to sixteen-hour days, unforgiving weather, and hard labor beneath an endless prairie sky.

They knew how to work. They knew how to persevere. They knew how to survive. What they did not always know was how to reach the heart.

In that time and culture, fathers often ruled their families with unquestioned authority. Compliance was mandatory. Respect was expected. Defiance was answered not with conversation, but with a belt or a stick. What may once have been called strict discipline, we would now name more honestly: abuse.

My grandfather had been savagely beaten by his own father. He carried those wounds into adulthood and, tragically, passed some of them to his son. My father sometimes went to school after being beaten. These were not mild corrections delivered in anger and quickly forgotten. They were brutal experiences that taught a boy that the world was hard, authority was dangerous, and safety could never be assumed.

Yet my grandfather was not simply an evil man, nor was my father's childhood devoid of good. Grandpa taught him the value of hard work, perseverance, loyalty, and refusing to surrender when life became difficult. But those lessons came wrapped in harshness. Tenderness was scarce. Vulnerability was dangerous. Being tough was not merely admired. It was required.

That is one of the terrible complications of generational trauma. A parent can give a child genuine strength while also giving him wounds. The virtues and the injuries become braided together so tightly that, years later, it can be difficult to know where one ends and the other begins.

## **The First to Go**

My father absorbed those lessons well. He was wicked smart, intensely disciplined, and driven to excel. He became the first person in his family to attend college and was accepted into

veterinary school at Colorado State University, one of the finest programs in the country. In a class of more than fifty students, he graduated at the top.

That was my dad. Being good was never enough. He had to be number one.

His father loaned him \$10,000 to complete his education, an extraordinary amount of money in the 1950s. People warned my grandfather that he would never see it again. My father repaid every dime within four years. The money mattered, but the repayment said something even larger about him. He would carry his own weight. He would honor his word. He would not allow anyone to say that he had failed to meet an obligation.

While attending Colorado State, he met my mother after she landed in a mud puddle and others stood laughing. My father reached down and pulled her out. Somewhere in that unlikely moment, their life together began.

Soon they had my older brother, Ken. Two years later came the twins, my brother Gregg and me. Somehow, my father carried a family of five through veterinary school. He took whatever work he could find. At one restaurant, he helped make the Friday soup from the week's leftovers. He changed light bulbs. Most infamously, he worked at a used-car lot turning back odometers, a practice apparently regarded with considerably less alarm in those days than it would be now.

There is something almost impossible to imagine about a young man supporting a wife and three boys while completing one of the most demanding professional programs in the country, and not merely surviving it, but finishing first. That was the force of my father. Once he fixed his eyes on something, fatigue, poverty, and difficulty became obstacles to be crossed rather than reasons to stop.

## **The Doctor on the Wall**

After graduation, we moved first to Stockton and then to Point Reyes, where my father established a large-animal veterinary practice. Point Reyes became part of the landscape of my childhood and awakened in me a lifelong love for the ocean. It was achingly beautiful country, with green hills descending toward the sea and the smell of salt carried inland on the wind.

When I was seven years old, I sat in my father's office and stared at the diploma hanging on his wall: Doctor of Veterinary Medicine. I could not yet spell veterinary, but I could read the words. Sitting there, I made a decision. I wanted to be a doctor like my dad. Perhaps not a veterinarian, but a doctor.

More than twenty years later, I earned my PhD. That was my father's fault, or perhaps more accurately, my father's blessing. Before I knew anything about graduate school, clinical training, or what a psychologist actually did, he had given me a picture of what disciplined achievement looked like. His diploma became a kind of distant marker on the horizon, and I began walking toward it before I was old enough to understand the journey.

## Always Reaching

My father was rarely able to remain anywhere for long. He briefly returned to Colorado State to pursue another doctorate, then abandoned that path and moved us back to the Bay Area. There he built a highly successful small-animal practice. Over the course of his career, he would establish five or six veterinary hospitals. He was brilliant, entrepreneurial, and extraordinarily capable.

### **He was also restless.**

My father knew how to spell change forward and backward. He was forever reaching for the next opportunity, the next practice, the next place, the next life. Success never seemed to bring him peace. Whatever he found, he eventually began looking beyond it.

Yet there was something magnificent in that restlessness. He was never afraid of a new challenge. He possessed an uncommon courage to enter unfamiliar territory, teach himself what he needed to know, and attempt things other people would dismiss as too difficult or too risky.

He became a pilot, then an instrument-rated pilot, and eventually an aerobatic pilot. Later, he and my brother built an experimental airplane called a Long-EZ. It was a tandem aircraft, with the pilot in front and the passenger directly behind him, controlled with a small joystick.

One day I was sitting behind him when he decided to take that airplane through a loop. The Long-EZ was not built for aerobatics. As we pulled through the maneuver, I watched its front canards bend beneath the tremendous pressure. They came frighteningly close to breaking.

When it was over, my father said simply, "Jeff, I'm sorry I did that."

That was my dad. He knew where the limit was, and then he pushed beyond it. Sometimes that courage was exhilarating. Sometimes it was reckless. Often it was both.

Later, he decided he would become a sailor. He bought a boat and learned to navigate the waters of the San Francisco Bay, where the winds can turn wicked and unpredictable. I would never have attempted it. He did.

Even in retirement, he kept creating. He started a pet-store business, became involved with a health product called Transfer Factor, and experimented with numerous other enterprises. Some succeeded. Some did not. But still he reached, always hoping that the next venture might carry him closer to whatever distant star he was pursuing. He was never settled, but neither was he ever defeated.

## The Gift of Being Seen

There was another gift in my father, one that must not be lost beneath the harder parts of his story. My dad studied us. He noticed us. He paid attention not only to what we accomplished, but to who we were becoming.

He was remarkably good at affirmation. He told us what he saw in us, why it mattered, and how proud he was. He did not offer thin praise or empty encouragement. When he spoke from that place, he spoke with depth and great heart. His words landed because we knew he meant them.

I never grew up wondering whether my father was proud of me. I never doubted that he saw something of value in me. I became a performative workaholic much like him, driven to accomplish, to produce, and to do things exceptionally well. But that drive was never born from a need to prove my worth to my father. I did not have to earn his belief in me. He had already given it.

In this way, my father moved beyond what his own father had been able to give him. My grandfather could teach toughness, work, and survival, but he had difficulty reaching the heart. My father could reach it. As he moved toward greater healing, I could gain access to the depth of his heart, and he could gain access to mine.

I know now that this became a formative and foundational ingredient in the psychologist I would become. My father taught me to study people, to notice what lies beneath the obvious, and to name the goodness, strength, sorrow, and possibility I could see in them. He taught me, without ever calling it therapy, that being deeply seen can change a human life.

I believe that depth and soul helped enable me to become not merely a good psychologist, but a great one. I say that not from arrogance, but from gratitude for the lives people have trusted me to enter and the healing I have been privileged to witness. My work has never been superficial because my father taught me that the most important truths are rarely found on the surface.

Graduate school taught me theories, diagnoses, research, and methods. Books taught me how others understood the mind. But no graduate seminar could teach me how to sit with another person's soul. No psychology text could teach me how to look into someone who is ashamed, frightened, or broken and recognize the part of him that is still strong. My father helped teach me that.

Coupled with his example of perseverance and his insistence on doing one's best, that depth became a powerful inheritance. Left unbridled, the drive to be the best can become exhausting and destructive. Tempered by compassion and guided by faith, it can become disciplined service. I have spent much of my life learning the difference.

## The Writer in Him

My father also possessed a remarkable gift for language. When I was young, I would sometimes read things he had written in his sprawling handwriting. His thoughts were brilliant, searching, and filled with depth. I did not fully appreciate that gift then. I do now.

He understood that a few carefully chosen words could carry enormous weight. When my son Gregg graduated from Marine Corps boot camp, my father was there, beaming with pride. Before Gregg left for Marine Combat Training, Dad handed him a short letter containing one sentence that has echoed through our family ever since:

**“Wear your responsibility well.”**

That was my father at his best. He did not need a page when one sentence would do. Those words were not simply advice about becoming a Marine. They were a charge to accept the weight entrusted to you, carry it honorably, and become worthy of the people depending upon you. Looking back, I cannot imagine wiser words or a better description of the way Gregg has lived his life.

My father’s gift for the spoken and written word also lives in me. His depth, his ability to see beneath the surface, and his instinct for finding language worthy of what he saw helped awaken the writer in me. I have written many books, but the roots of that calling reach back to those pages covered in his sprawling handwriting. I did not recognize the inheritance when he first placed it before me. Today, I credit much of whatever depth exists in my own writing to Dad.

## When the Wounds Came Home

The gifts were real. So was the pain.

The wounds my father carried eventually entered his marriage to my mother. The harshness did not visit only his sons. It visited her as well. His toughness, volatility, and forcefulness broke something between them. Eventually, she had enough, and rightfully so.

My father regretted losing her. He tried to save the marriage, but it was too late. He had broken her heart.

This truth belongs in his story, not because I wish to diminish him, but because the Hansens tell the truth. Love that requires us to deny harm is not love. Redemption does not begin with pretending. My father was wounded, and he also wounded others. Both things can be true at once.

He went on to marry three more times. I believe he was searching for something, trying to fill an emptiness formed long before any of those women knew him. But the emptiness created by childhood trauma cannot be filled by asking another person to complete us.

His first marriage after my mother was to Elan, a young nurse whom my brothers and I adored. She was beautiful, spirited, and perhaps a little overwhelmed by the complexity of the family she had entered. Yet she was good to us and helped Gregg and me navigate some difficult adolescent years. When their marriage ended, it broke my father's heart, and ours as well.

There was then a brief marriage to Christine, another nurse, followed by his marriage to Evelyn, a complicated woman who carried wounds of her own. Their relationship was often turbulent, and my father remained characteristically torn between staying and leaving.

Finally, I told him, "Dad, you're driving me nuts. I'm your son, and I'll remain loyal to you. If you stay with her, I'll support you. If you leave her, I'll support you. But for God's sake, pick a team."

**He stayed.**

## **A Different Kind of Fatherhood**

Together, he and Evelyn adopted two daughters from Japan, Konomi and Saya, each as an infant. My father became a good father to them. Some of the tenderness and steadiness he had been unable to give his sons, he learned to give his daughters.

I was not resentful of that. I was grateful.

There is a temptation in wounded families to ask why someone else received what we needed. But I saw something more hopeful. The story was changing. My father was changing. The love that had sometimes been blocked by his own wounds was finding a clearer path forward.

Konomi and Saya became lovely and remarkable young women. They now live in the family home, carrying forward another part of him. His decision to remain, to raise them, and to give them what he could was one of the ways he chose responsibility over restlessness. He did the right thing.

## **The Letter in Switzerland**

The deepest change in my father's life began with faith.

When I was about nineteen, I was traveling alone in Switzerland. My older brother Ken, my twin brother Gregg, and I had found faith, and that faith had saved me. Somehow, through my cousin Lor, a letter from my father reached me there.

I carried it into a church in Cortaillod, a place connected to my grandfather's childhood. I sat inside that church and opened the letter.

My father had found faith.

The God who had reached my brothers and me had now reached him.

I can still feel the holiness of that moment. In a church tied to the story of the generations before me, I read that the story was changing. The same family line that had carried harshness and injury was now carrying grace.

Faith did not erase my father's past or undo the damage he had caused. It did not magically remove every wound or settle every restless place within him. But it changed him. Over the remaining years, he and I grew closer. God softened parts of his heart that had once seemed unreachable. The wounds remained part of him, but they no longer had the same authority over him.

My father also reconciled with his own father. Grandpa found Christ, and father and son finally made peace. My father forgave the man who had wounded him so deeply. Forgiveness did not make the beatings acceptable. It released my father from having to remain bound to them.

Later in life, Dad also found a renewed relationship with his sister, my beloved Aunt Eileen. They talked, visited, faced their differences, and became part of one another's healing. After so many years of distance, they found each other again. That reconciliation remains one of the quiet miracles of our family.

## **With His Boots On**

My father's life ended suddenly. While visiting my brother, he went out to get some supplies from his car and was struck by a truck. He was terribly injured, but still fundamentally himself. Even in his own fear and pain, he tried to minister to my brother and reassure him. He believed he would survive the surgery.

### **He did not.**

His body was too broken, and his heart was already compromised. Sometimes I wonder whether, in ways medicine cannot fully measure, he died of a heart that had carried too much for too long.

And yet he died courageously. He died, as we say, with his boots on. Even at the end, broken in body and facing the unknown, he was reaching outward toward someone he loved.

## **What We Carry Forward**

My father was remarkable, wounded, driven, brave, and often painfully restless. He accomplished extraordinary things. He passed some of his wounds forward, but he also passed forward his strength, intelligence, courage, depth, affirmation, perseverance, and refusal to quit.

Trauma traveled through generations of our family. It wounded my grandfather. It wounded my father. It wounded my brothers and me. Sadly, some of those wounds eventually helped take

my brother Gregg from us, though that is a story I have told elsewhere. This story belongs to my father.

Trauma can move in more than one direction. It can consume us, or it can become the place where healing begins. We can allow it to take us, or we can face it, find faith, receive help, and choose to do better.

My brothers and I made a decision that the abuse would stop with us. I am the only one of the three who had children, and my children never knew the heavy hand that earlier generations had known. Was I a perfect father? By no means. But I did better.

That is how generational healing happens. Not through pretending the past was better than it was, and not through condemning wounded people as though their wounds were the whole of who they were. Healing begins when someone finally tells the truth, accepts responsibility, forgives what can be forgiven, and chooses not to pass the pain forward.

The trauma stopped in our family. Thank God, it stopped. The courage continued. The work ethic continued. The depth continued. The ability to see and affirm another person continued. The faith continued. We kept what was good and refused to hand down what had caused so much pain.

Dad, I hold you responsible for the mistakes you made. In the end, you took responsibility for many of them yourself.

**And I forgive you.**

**I love you.**

I carry the best of you forward, and there is so much worth carrying. Your determination lives in me. Your courage lives in me. Your depth of heart lives in the way I sit with wounded people and help them find their way home. The seven-year-old boy sitting beneath your veterinary diploma became a doctor because you showed him that it was possible.

You will live on through your children, your grandchildren, and the generations still to come.

Today, I believe you are with God. You are with your father, with whom you finally made peace. You are with Gregg. Perhaps that sounds sentimental, but it is how I see the world. This life, with all its terrible beauty and unbelievable pain, is only the beginning of the story.

We live in a fallen and broken world. But when we find God, we find a way through it. We find healing. We find redemption. We find hope.

**That is what my father ultimately found.**

The Hansens tell the truth. We do not hide the wounds, and we do not overlook the good.

**My father was a complicated man.**

**What My Father Carried**  
**-Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.**

**He was also my dad.**

**And I am thankful for him.**